

Elite Buy-In Revisited: The Relevance of Ziblatt's Thesis in an Era of Democratic Backsliding

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1. Introduction

What explains the successful transition to democracy in some European countries but not others? In *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy in Europe*, Daniel Ziblatt provides a compelling answer rooted in the institutional choices of the political right. His central thesis is that powerful and well-organized conservative parties—capable of reflecting the interests of precious elites—were essential for stabilizing democracy in 19th- and early 20th-century Europe. “Durable democratic transitions,” Ziblatt writes, “depend on the buy-in of groups opposed to democratic changes. And robust political parties representing old regime successors can serve this role” (Ziblatt 2017, xii). By organizing around political parties rather than attempting to repress or sabotage democratization, conservative elites found institutional vehicles to negotiate their place within the new order. Specially, central to this argument is the concept of “elite buy-in”, which Ziblatt defines as the willingness of previously dominant groups— “upper-class propertied economic elites or political elites” including landed aristocrats, monarchists, high civil servants, state clergy, and military officers—to accept and participate in democratic institutions rather than reject them. He demonstrates that the formation of political groups served as a structured innovation that allowed these elites to defend their positions pragmatically through electoral means, facilitating a more peaceful and gradual transition (Ziblatt 2017, 26–31).

Today, European democracies face new threats—not from aristocrats or monarchs, but from right-wing populist movements, democratic erosion, and illiberal political entrepreneurs (Jäger 2019). In this context, it is worth asking whether the logic of “elite buy-in” remains relevant—can conservative parties still play a stabilizing role? By addressing Ziblatt’s limitations and using contemporary case studies of various European states, this paper argues that while Ziblatt’s core insight still holds, it must be reinterpreted through a multi-level lens. Nowadays, “elite buy-in” involves a broader range of actors beyond traditional conservative parties and operates in vastly different contexts, and safeguarding democracy in 2025 requires cross-sectoral elite coordination that explicitly rejects national populist capture, reinforces institutional guardrails, and recommits to pluralistic norms both nationally and transnationally.

2. Ziblatt: Summary and Critiques

Ziblatt (2017) focuses on the long-term historical development of political parties in his study, contrasting two distinct paths of democratization. For example, in Britain, the Tory party transformed into a mass organization (e.g. through networks like the Primrose League) that appealed to middle- and working-class voters via nationalist and religious themes. This party-building gave British conservatives a vested interest in playing by democratic rules, so they tolerated expansions of the franchise and refrained from anti-democratic backlash (Friedman 2017). By contrast, in the Weimar Republic, conservative parties like German Conservative Party (DKP) and German National People's Party (DNVP) remained organizationally weak—reliant on local notables and electoral manipulation rather than a strong nationwide apparatus. Lacking an incentive to embrace true mass politics, German conservative elites resisted democratic changes, and their disorganization left them vulnerable to more extreme right-wing forces (Soloman 2017). Thus, Ziblatt characterizes Britain's path as a "settled" democratization—a relatively direct transition with no major reversals—versus Germany's "unsettled" path, marked by protracted stalemate and eventual democratic breakdown. The key explanatory factor, he argues, was when Europe's aristocratic elites incorporated themselves—with earnest—into contested elections; once they became institutionalized and constrained by democratic norms, democracy gained powerful allies. When they failed to do so, they often undermined democracy or turned to authoritarian alternatives (Mottironi 2018).

Overall, Ziblatt's argument is a useful corrective to overly romantic narratives of democratization as a purely bottom-up triumph of the masses. He shifts the analytical focus to elites' strategic choices and capacities, meanwhile "usefully critiqu[ing]" theories that put primary emphasis on economic development or working-class mobilization as drivers of democracy. His perspective acknowledges that mass enfranchisement alone was not enough—the rules of the game only became self-enforcing when the privileged decided they could win (or at least survive) (Gunitsky 2019, 493). Nevertheless, some scholars argue that Ziblatt may over-credit the impact of conservative organizations alone and understate how broader constellations of party politics and social consensus affect democratic stability. For instance, Ziblatt "comes up short in treating religious cleavages" in Europe, as the anti-democratic influence of Catholic

hierarchies in 19th-century Southern Europe is largely outside Ziblatt's analysis of "unsettled" democratization. Likewise, critics also note that the electoral strength and non-violent strategies of labor and socialist parties are underplayed in the "settled" framework. (Soloman 2017). Relatedly, Ziblatt's under-theorization of bottom-up democratic pressures and broader external factors causes multiple reservations. For instance, Beck (2019), Markoff (2019), and Møller (2019) suggest that Ziblatt's framework may lack sufficient explanatory power when mass mobilization and international forces are involved. These critiques bring the first set of questions: Does the consolidation of democracy require "buy-in" or impetus from groups other than domestic conservative elites? If so, who are they in 2025? Has European integration changed the underlying mechanism of "elite buy-in"?

Further, the applicability of Ziblatt's theory in 2025 has to be contested considering the ongoing radicalization of the European right. Ziblatt's "unsettled" framework appears overly focused on turbulent historical cases, limiting its ability to explain contemporary instances of gradual democratic backsliding, in which illiberal reforms enable national conservative elites to downplay democratic erosion as mere "efficiency improvements" or "anti-elite corrections" in legal, populist language (Kremnitzer and Shany 2020). As Günther (2019) argues, Ziblatt's focus on internal elite decisions "whisks away" deeper questions about what drives anti-democratic forces in the first place—that is, Ziblatt pays minor attention to economic shifts and social disillusionment with party politics, ignoring that party weakness may not be a root cause but rather a reflection of deeper political and cultural fractures. This leads to the second set of questions: What factors genuinely contribute to the breakdown of elites' trust in democratic institutions? Can conservative parties still gatekeep democracy in light of populist challenges from the far right?

To assess how contemporary European democracies diverge from Ziblatt's historical framework and whose "buy-in" else may gatekeep European democracy, the rest of the work will examine 4 European states where right-wing populist reforms or movements have eroded institutional safeguards or present potential threats through elite collusion, highlight the complex roles of conservative parties today, and distinguish the socio-political fractures fueling contemporary far-right challenges that require broader commitment to democracy by different parties and organizations both domestically and abroad.

3. Modern Conservatives: Guardians or Gravediggers?

In the past decade, two European democracies have experienced significant erosion of liberal institutions under national conservative governments. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz (2010–) openly declared the aim to build an “illiberal state” and used legal reforms to capture independent institutions while redrawing electoral rules to cement dominance (Shah 2025). Hungary's status plummeted from “Free” to “Partly Free” on Freedom House's index, and by 2019 the V-Dem Institute had downgraded it to “electoral autocracy”, as the ruling party's stranglehold over media and civil society has hollowed out pluralism. Formally a centralist party, Orbán's Fidesz has been described as “the poster child for democratic backsliding” in Europe—using conservative nationalist rhetoric to legitimize the erosion of liberal institutions (Chin and Hibbert 2025). Poland, under the Law and Justice (PiS) party (2015–2023), followed a similar path. The government installed loyalists throughout the state apparatus in its eight years in office, transforming Poland into a “legal black hole” for the rule of law (Ambroziak, Sitnicka, and Wójcik 2023).

Scholars thus challenge Ziblatt's optimistic theorization of conservative parties as democracy's institutional “guardians” by highlighting how Fidesz and PiS weaponized their conservative credentials to undermine democratic norms. Gunitsky (2019) points out that in countries like Hungary and Poland, conservative parties are not institutionally fragile or disorganized. Rather, they are highly centralized, electorally dominant, and capable of reshaping institutions to entrench power. In this way, today's conservative authoritarianism is not merely a re-run of Ziblatt's “unsettled” paths—it reflects an over-consolidated and ideologically radicalized right operating in the absence of viable partisan competition and democratic norms. It is clear that, in 2025's Europe, organizational strength alone does not imply democratic commitment; certain elites use robust parties to capture the state, manipulate electoral rules, and hollow out checks and balances (Veljanov 2020).

Nevertheless, recent developments in Poland portrays a more complex relationship between backslidings and domestic elites. The decisive factor may be whether the radical populist right has become pathologically normalized among conservative organizations—a phenomenon that Orbán's Hungary has

severely undergone but has not fully materialized in Poland. As long as disciplined pro-democracy elites are able to react, the checks against centralization still function (Mudde 2010). In the October 2023 Polish parliamentary elections, an opposition coalition led by former European Council President and Christian democrat Donald Tusk narrowly defeated PiS. The new government has since begun undoing PiS's media capture and controversial legal changes. However, in 2025, conservative politician Nawrotsky won the presidential election as an independent with the support of the PiS. As the Minister of Justice Adam Bodnar (2025) stated, the Polish political circles are uncertain about whether the new executive will again help carry out illiberal reforms, revealing the ongoing divisions and power struggles within the elites. The Polish case underlines both sides of elite behavior: PiS's national conservative leadership methodize their populist penchant and acted as a "gravedigger" of liberal democracy by undermining checks and balances, but Poland's pro-democratic elites (in opposition, media, and civil society) ultimately mobilized to defend the constitution and are now attempting to restore democratic norms—suggesting that "guardians" of democracy can re-emerge even after a period of backsliding (Csaky 2024).

As Gunitsky (2019) marks, unlike Ziblatt's analysis of Weimar DNVP which collapsed due to internal fragmentation and radical capture, today's autocratizing parties in Hungary and Poland successfully absorb or co-opt radicals from within, allowing illiberal leaders to hijack state institutions with little internal resistance. It is therefore worthwhile to assess other European states (especially Western ones) in which conservative parties have not been completely swept up in the wave of right-wing populism and see whether their role as "guardians" persist. For instance, France has not yet experienced outright institutional backsliding, but the rise of the populist far-right has put its democratic guardrails to the test. Marine Le Pen's National Rally has grown from a fringe extremist force into a mainstream contender for power. In the 2022 presidential election, Le Pen won 41.5% of the national vote in the runoff—an unprecedented result for the French far-right, signaling that ideas once confined to extremists have become increasingly acceptable to a large segment of voters (Leicester 2022). Over the past decade, Le Pen's anti-immigrant, anti-EU messaging has pressured traditional center-right parties (Les Républicains and their predecessors) to make a strategic choice: either hold the line as pro-democratic "guardians" of liberal values, or drift

rightward to retain voters. Historically, France's establishment undoubtedly maintained a "cordon sanitaire" (Republican Front) to keep the far-right out of power; for instance, left and right united to overwhelmingly defeat Le Pen's father in 2002, and oppositions reluctantly backed centrist Emmanuel Macron to block Le Pen in 2017 and 2022 (Houard-Vial 2022). The question now is whether that commitment holds. Indeed, moderate conservatives in France have copied hardline nationalist agendas (especially on immigration) in an often-futile effort to win back far-right voters; even centrist figures have adopted alarmist rhetoric, as a Macron-allied politician warned of people feeling "submerged" by immigration—a remark hailed by Le Pen's party as proof that "it had won the ideological battle" on this issue (Henley 2025).

Similarly, Germany's postwar democracy has long been upheld by its moderate conservative force, the Christian Democrat CDU/CSU, which positioned itself as a bulwark against extremism. However, the emergence of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) since 2013 has created new tensions. The AfD came second in federal elections in February 2025, winning a record 152 seats in the 630-seat parliament with 20.8% of the vote, right behind the CDU/CSU faction (Kirby 2025). The CDU officially maintains a "Brandmauer" (firewall) policy of no cooperation with the AfD, viewing it as incompatible with democratic values—an approach akin to a guardian role (Frymark 2024). Yet as AfD's popularity surges (often polling second nationally and dominating some eastern regions), cracks in that firewall have appeared. In late 2024, CDU leader Friedrich Merz broke a taboo by relying on AfD votes in the Bundestag to pass a nonbinding anti-immigration motion—the first-time national legislation passed with AfD support. AfD leaders rejoiced at this "historic day" and validation. At the subnational level, pressure to cooperate is growing in several eastern states: AfD is either leading polls or has won local races, tempting some regional CDU politicians to consider understandings with the far-right (CIVICUS 2025).

As Henley (2025) argues, this is part of a broader Western European pattern: mainstream conservatives increasingly adopt or collaborate with far-right agendas, breaking decades of precedent. In France and Germany, as in Austria, Sweden, and elsewhere, segments of the center-right believe adopting tougher nationalist positions might stem the loss of voters to extremists. Political scientists warn this approach creates a "vicious cycle"—normalizing the far-right and legitimizing their discourse without

actually winning back voters. Western Europe's experience underlines the stakes of Ziblatt's thesis: if the principal center-right party resists the lure of national populism and stands firm on democratic norms, it continues acting as a guardian of liberal democracy. However, what matters here is not only the extent of elites' institutionalization, but also strategic interests affecting their commitment. While Poland's resilient opposition highlights the potential for democratic recovery, Western Europe's creeping normalization of far-right collaboration reveals a broader mechanism: conservative parties, when prioritizing electoral survival over democratic guardrails, risk enabling illiberalism.

Whether in Hungary and Poland, where conservative elites have actively driven democratic backsliding by absorbing the far-right, or in France and Germany, where they still contain extremism but risk tentative accommodation, the lesson is clear: conservative "buy-in" alone is no longer sufficient to safeguard democracy. As elite commitment grows more fragile, relying solely on restraint from the top is inadequate. What's needed is a broader, societal normalization of democratic values—embedding liberal norms across institutions, parties, and civic culture—to restore democratic resilience.

4. Elite Buy-In Today: Who Matters?

A recurring theme in contemporary European backsliding is the crisis of political representation triggered by socioeconomic upheavals. Economic crises, rising inequality, and austerity have eroded public trust in mainstream democratic institutions, creating a vacuum that populist forces eagerly fill (Kriesi 2014). Society's distrust in democratic institutions—whether among alienated citizens or cynical elites—often originates from these material grievances and governance failures. As Heise and Khan (2019) observe, the retrenchment of welfare states under neoliberal policies left many feeling insecure and betrayed, a fertile ground for nationalist "anti-elite" appeals. Similarly, comparative surveys show a dangerous gap between elites' confidence in institutions and public perceptions of institutional failure. Globalization and cultural change constrained traditional elites and fueled voter resentment, producing a representation gap that mainstream parties struggled to address. In other words, elites frequently overestimate the legitimacy of the status quo even as citizens grow disillusioned—a disjunction that anti-establishment movements exploit

(Kotzé and García-Rivero 2017). All these factors have enabled far right and illiberal populists to portray themselves as the true voice of “the people” against a corrupt liberal order (Mudde 2010; Campati 2020). Once in power, however, these populist actors often worsen the very governance problems they decry, by undermining horizontal accountability and expertise.

Technocratic elite “buy-in” has thus become increasingly important to prevent an authoritarian turn during crises. Where elected politicians pursue short-term nationalist or clientelist fixes, independent technocrats—central bankers, civil servants, regulatory agencies—can provide stability and resist extreme measures. Choi’s (2012) study shows that autonomous technocratic institutions helped democracies survive economic shocks by maintaining policy stability and public confidence. If expert bodies like supreme audit offices, central banks, or public health agencies retain professional integrity, they can buffer democratic institutions against populist manipulation. Yet populists try to politicize or discredit technocratic elites, accusing them of being part of an unaccountable “deep state” (Queiroz 2019). In Hungary and Poland, for instance, ruling parties have systematically hollowed out independent bureaucratic and regulatory posts, understanding that neutral experts might constrain their power (Kremnitzer and Shany 2020). This episode underscores that during periods of public anger and crisis, democracies depend on a cadre of elite professionals committed to impartial governance. When these technocratic elites retain public trust and cooperate with reform-minded politicians, they can address socioeconomic grievances in ways that blunt the appeal of anti-democratic demagogues. Conversely, when economic shocks go unmanaged or technocrats lose credibility, the resulting institutional distrust becomes tinder for would-be authoritarians.

On the other side, democratic backsliding today typically begins not with tanks in the streets, but with the slow legal erosion of liberal institutions. Illiberal leaders exploit constitutional mechanisms and law to weaken checks and balances in a gradual, often legalistic, manner. In this process of “executive aggrandizement”, elected governments methodically tilting the playing field by amending constitutions, manipulating electoral rules, and subjugating independent courts (Bermeo 2016). Crucially, the judiciary is usually the first target. In both Hungary and Poland, for example, incoming conservative governments used their mandates to pack constitutional courts, force retirements of independent judges, and create loyalist

judicial councils (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała 2021). By sidelining legal professionals and rule-of-law watchdogs early, populist regimes remove the referees who might block unconstitutional power grabs. In these backsliding democracies, formal legality often masks authoritarian content: illiberal regimes pass a flurry of laws and constitutional amendments to give their power concentration a veneer of legitimacy (Kremnitzer and Shany 2020). This abusive legalism makes democratic erosion harder to counter, because each step appears procedurally proper even as it subverts liberal norms.

The importance of elite “buy-in” among legal professionals cannot be overstated in this context. When judges, prosecutors, and lawyers uphold democratic norms, they form a formidable bulwark against autocracy. Hungary and Poland’s cases demonstrate that when judicial elites “buy-out”—i.e. capitulate to illiberal rulers or get replaced—backsliding accelerates. By contrast, where the legal community resists, it can slow or even halt democratic erosion. For instance, Israel’s recent struggle over judicial reforms saw massive pushback from legal professionals and other elites, suggesting that broad-based elite opposition can deter would-be authoritarians (Kremnitzer and Shany 2020). This serves as a strong example for Europe: preserving liberal democracy requires the fidelity of judges and lawyers to constitutional norms. Their professional ethos and networks need to align with democratic principles, so that courts serve as immune systems responding early to anti-democratic infections.

Further, while Ziblatt’s thesis emphasizes conservative party elites as pivotal gatekeepers of democracy, emerging research shows that elite “buy-in” must be cross-sectoral to effectively safeguard liberal regimes. Modern democratic backsliding is orchestrated not just through parties, but through coordinated assaults across multiple power networks (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Thus, in response, democratic stability today hinges on whether pro-democratic elites can maintain coordination across sectors. Domhoff’s (2014) four-network theory of power underlines that economic and ideological elites (business leaders, financiers, media owners, intellectuals) wield tremendous influence alongside political officeholders. If those economic and media elites throw their lot in with illiberal regimes—for example, Hungary’s oligarchs acquiring media outlets on behalf of Orbán, or Poland’s state-owned companies sponsoring partisan narratives—they amplify authoritarian trends. Conversely, if they stand independent or

oppose anti-democratic moves, they can restrain a populist government's reach (Bodnar 2025). Historical and contemporary cases alike demonstrate the importance of elite coordination and unity. Berman's (2019) survey of Europe's turbulent democratic history finds that when liberal and democratic-leaning elites were fragmented, progressive movements failed, and old regimes reasserted themselves. A similar pattern is visible today: in Hungary, the fragmentation and infighting of the opposition and civil society enabled Fidesz's virtually unopposed domination (Halmai 2019). By contrast, when disparate elites set aside differences to defend democracy, backsliding can be averted. Recent examples include the broad coalition of parties and civic groups in the Czech Republic and Slovakia that united to oust corrupt populist governments, demonstrating cross-sector collaboration.

Nevertheless, coordination must also bridge the elite–mass divide. Kotzé and García-Rivero (2017) warn that elite consensus “above” will not hold unless it resonates with public sentiment; otherwise, it is dismissed as an out-of-touch cartel. In Germany, for instance, the grand-coalition consensus of mainstream parties successfully navigated the Eurozone crisis, but its overly expert-driven style alienated many voters and fed into the narrative of the far right (Vogel 2018). This suggests that elite coordination, to be a sustainable bulwark, should not mean insular decision-making. It must instead be coupled with responsiveness and communication that rebuild trust with citizens (Campati 2020; Vogel 2018). In short, democratic resilience depends on who coordinates (the broader the better) and how they do so (transparently and accountably rather than purely top-down).

Given the multifaceted nature of backsliding, stabilizing liberal democracy will require contributions from several institutions. A strong, impartial bureaucracy and robust watchdog agencies (anticorruption bodies, ombuds offices, electoral commissions) can stabilize democracy by ensuring that governance remains rule-bound even when political winds shift (Choi 2012; Queiroz 2019). In new democracies, these institutions often lack full insulation from politics, which is why populists target them early. Strengthening their professionalism and autonomy—and securing the “buy-in” of the civil servants who run them—can prevent would-be authoritarians from exploiting the state machinery for partisan ends. Civil society and independent media are another pillar of stabilization. As Kremnitzer and Shany (2020)

describe, civil society organizations (NGOs, activist groups) and free media act as “secondary gatekeepers,” monitoring government abuses and rallying public awareness. However, populist regimes have become adept at marginalizing these actors—cutting their funding, smearing them as foreign agents or elitists, and flooding the information space with propaganda. Hungary’s government, for example, demonized critical NGOs and passed laws to restrict their activities, while also orchestrating takeovers of major media by regime-friendly businessmen (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała 2021; Halmai 2019). These tactics weaken the very societal networks that might counterbalance executive power. The takeaway is that civil society alone cannot save democracy if political and economic elites are aligned against it (Mudde 2010; Queiroz 2019). But when civil society groups, journalists, and academia coordinate with segments of the elite that remain loyal to democratic norms, they can significantly raise the costs of authoritarian behavior. Large-scale citizen protests, investigative reporting on corruption, and NGO legal challenges have all, at times, forced illiberal governments to pause or retract draconian measures (Bermeo 2016; Kremnitzer and Shany 2020). Thus, empowering these institutions—through legal protections, public funding, and inclusion in policymaking—is part of any strategy to shore up liberal democracy.

The European Union (EU) and other international organizations also factor into the equation, though their role is double-edged. In the post-Cold War period, the EU’s leverage (through membership conditionality and normative pressure) was credited with anchoring East-Central European countries to democracy. Berman (2019) reminds us that a robust postwar international order helped enforce democratic norms during Europe’s “Golden Age,” but that order has weakened since the 2008 financial crisis. Indeed, the EU’s ability to discipline backsliding members has proved limited. Even as Hungary and Poland blatantly breached rule-of-law principles, the EU’s responses—Article 7 proceedings, court cases, withholding of some funds—have been slow and often toothless in altering those governments’ behavior (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). One reason is that autocratizing leaders cloak themselves in the mantle of national sovereignty and enjoy domestic electoral legitimacy, making external pressure look like meddling (Kremnitzer and Shany 2020). Another reason is internal to the EU: transnational party networks have shielded their illiberal members (a prime example being the European

People's Party's long reluctance to expel Orbán's Fidesz), prioritizing partisan alignment over principled defense of democracy (Halmai 2019; Mudde 2010). Nonetheless, international actors are not irrelevant. They can provide resources and moral support to domestic democratic forces – for instance, EU institutions and courts have upheld the rights of NGOs and independent media under pressure and threatened to condition funds on adherence to rule-of-law. Such external conditionality can slow the erosion (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), even if it rarely stops it outright. Furthermore, as Heise and Khan (2019) argue, the EU could bolster democracy more effectively by coupling its economic governance with social investment—easing the austerity and inequality that feed populist resentment. In sum, international organizations and alliances of democratic states have a part to play in stabilizing liberal democracy, but ultimately, they cannot substitute for domestic elite commitment. The fate of democracy still hinges on choices made by each country's key elites in government, parties, courts, business, and civil society.

5. Conclusion

Recent wave of democratic backsliding shows that elite “buy-in” remains essential—but it must be both broader and deeper than before. Elite coordination is no longer sufficient unless it is explicitly committed to liberal democratic norms like pluralism, rule of law, and minority protections. Today's elites must reject not just authoritarian actions, but also the gradual normalization of illiberalism. Moreover, elite “buy-in” must extend beyond party leaders to include legal professionals, technocrats, economic actors, media figures, and civil society leaders. Only cross-sector coordination can provide the institutional and normative guardrails needed to constrain executive overreach.

At the same time, elite legitimacy must be restored through responsiveness to public concerns, including economic insecurity and social inequality. Ultimately, democracy's survival depends on a renewed consensus among elites—one that defends liberal values, resists authoritarian temptations, and rebuilds public trust. Elite “buy-in” in our time must mean more than procedural compliance; it must embody principled, transparent, and inclusive democratic leadership. Without such commitment, institutional safeguards alone will be too fragile to withstand the pressures of populism and polarization.

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