

outcomes, we also hope to provide a better understanding of how readers can participate in the fight for gender equality” (vii). Indeed, having spent the book arguing that judicial appointments, executive agency personnel, and legislators matter both federally and at the state level in the pursuit of policies that promote gender equality, their conclusion highlights the vital role of elections at all levels. Whom we elect has consequences for who serves in all kinds of capacities throughout our government—and therefore for who makes these important policy decisions.

Despite their obvious political commitments, the authors do a wonderful job of explaining both the intentions and perspectives of those historical advocates of gender equality and their opponents. One example is an in-depth discussion of religious objections to the inclusion of birth control coverage under the Affordable Care Act. The authors include quotes from religious leaders during the negotiations and the compromises offered by the Obama administration. Further, through media accounts, they show divisions within the camps between people who fear the opponents are not asking for enough and those who think the president is giving too much away.

In describing various lower court and Supreme Court decisions, the authors offer digestible feminist legal analysis in the vein of Martha Chamallas, whose 2003 *Introduction to Feminist Legal Theory* remains a classic in its second edition. In particular, Chamallas’s first chapter, “Thinking like a Feminist,” would be a great pairing with this book. Those who have lamented the lack of an updated women’s policy text will be pleased that Mezey and Sholar end their historical deep dive with a conclusion that discusses the most up-to-date status of each policy, thereby bringing us to Biden’s administration and the *Dobbs* decision.

Sensitive to an intersectional understanding of the distinctive modes of oppression inflicted on women of various racial and sexual orientations, Mezey and Sholar demonstrate how advancement for some women may be a step back for others. This uneven progress creates difficulty in organizing across groups of women. These divisions among women’s advocates due to historical racial and sexual divides, among other factors, further compound

the decentralization of power within a federalist system to yield a reality where gender equity is elusive.

Although the book is rich with real-time accounts of various policy debates, at times these historical records become too repetitive without adding much analysis. More importantly, however, Mezey and Sholar do not offer a strong defense for why they chose these case studies. Historically, feminist scholarship has been criticized for focusing primarily on the challenges faced most frequently or exclusively by white women. As researchers, what we choose to make our main object of analysis suggests what and who is important in these debates. Alternative case studies might have included criminal justice reform, election law, or immigration law, which would have allowed for the consideration of how intersectionality complicates advocacy and leaves the responsibility for policy making within these domains to political elites frequently marginalized by their own racial identity. Although they perhaps focus too much on policies considered important to white feminists, the authors do take great care in demonstrating how economic injustice, healthcare access (including to both contraception and abortion), and educational inequities are, of course, exacerbated by race. Instructors interested in a clear discussion of the racial divides within successive waves of feminism will find an easily understandable and honest accounting in this book.

This text would be ideal not only for policy courses but also for modern US history courses that reckon with recent battles in gender politics. Courses that focus on either the legislative or judicial branch of government are an obvious fit for this text, and courses on the executive branch may also find a few vignettes particularly relevant. The creation of policy through government regulation is a recurrent theme, allowing *Chasing Equality* to provide a good introduction to the less democratic aspects of executive policy making. The authors take seriously not only the role of specific branches of the federal government and the increasing role of the states in determining US women’s autonomy today but they also demonstrate how various instruments of public policy—including administrative rules, legislation, and court precedent—continue to shape women’s opportunities for economic, educational, and bodily equality.

---

## COMPARATIVE POLITICS

### **Democratic Backsliding in Africa? Autocratization, Resilience, and Contention.**

Edited by Leonardo R. Arriola, Lise Rakner, and Nicolas van de Walle. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 297p. \$115.00 cloth.  
doi:10.1017/S1537592723003080

— Rachel Beatty Riedl , Cornell University  
rbeattyriedl@cornell.edu

There is a raging debate today in political science and policy circles about the extent and depth of democratic backsliding across the globe. Arriola, Rakner, and van de Walle take up this important question with theoretical and empirical precision in the African context, offering a compelling answer and a counter-question: Why have most African countries not achieved greater political liberalization?

The editors, along with the chapter contributors, argue that there is no generalized trend of unidirectional

democratic retreat in Africa today. Instead, varied and distinctive country trajectories point to high levels of ongoing contention around democratic rights, practices, inclusion, representation, and accountability. Just as many incumbents deploy tools of manipulation to maintain themselves in power, individual citizens, civil society groups, and political parties have sporadic and intense periods of contestation to mobilize for their rights and representation through accountable democratic governance.

In this way, the book underscores some of the core *mechanisms* highlighted in the new attention to democratic backsliding around the world: elected incumbents using the institutional levers of executive, legislative, judicial, and administrative control to limit contestation and participation through technically democratic—and potentially legitimating—processes. From Kenya's constitutional bargaining to Zambia's legal and legislative restrictions on opposition mobilization, the chapters demonstrate the processes through which elected political elites *use institutions* to maintain democratic stagnation or forms of competitive authoritarianism while they tilt the playing field and concentrate power.

At the same time, Arriola, Rakner, and van de Walle also emphasize that these mechanisms result in stagnation, rather than further autocratization, because of the significant, if sporadic, mobilization for democracy through civil society, electoral mobilization of opposition parties, and the electorate. Voters remain committed to democracy in theory and practice. Protests against autocratic overreach create constraints for greater executive aggrandizement and bolster judiciaries in some cases to overturn flawed elections, such as in Malawi. The significant contestation between would-be autocrats and those pushing for greater democratic reform leads to a kind of stasis, a stagnation of the democratic trajectory in Africa that is underpinned by continuing struggle.

When we compare the findings of the book to the global trends, we find that, empirically, Africa in aggregate has not experienced dramatic downturns in democracy rankings like in Hungary, Turkey, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and others that are driving the trendlines. As the authors make clear, this is in part a function of the starting point: democratic backsliding measures require the country to start clearly above a threshold of electoral democracy. Only a few countries across the continent have reliably been classified as such, and so the starting point matters when we are discussing the number of countries that are experiencing democratic backsliding. It is also true that even where autocratization has occurred in Africa over the last decade, the level of democratic decline has been attenuated. Autocratization has solidified several countries' position as competitive authoritarian regimes, but they have not experienced the kind of extreme closing of political space and hard autocratization that we observe in Nicaragua or Hungary.

It is important not to lose sight of what the underlying and ongoing contestations between pro- and antidemocratic forces can tell us, even while they average out in aggregate to what appears to be a steady state. In this respect, the authors provide three key takeaways that accord with the broader emerging literature on democratic backsliding. First, the autocratizing political elite are generally institutionalists who use legal mechanisms to try to consolidate power and tilt the playing field.

Second, international factors weigh heavily in old and new ways. The traditional role of donors, political conditionalities, and international linkage is still apparent but is less significant in the current geopolitical context with the War on Terror and the emergence of China as a significant regional actor. Economic growth and the emergence of international remittances and foreign direct investment have decreased the macroeconomic dependence on donor aid and, therefore, donor leverage. The new twist on the international is that incumbents also use ideational resources and marshal sovereignty claims against external agents to defend themselves and stymie the opposition. Here again, the preexisting factors are leveraged in new ways as pro- and antidemocratic actors continue to evolve in their contestation strategies.

Third, African citizens continue to care about democracy, and voters and opposition parties mobilize around elections and protest points. Yet, resource constraints and the co-optation of civil society and leading elites have weakened democratic actors. The opposition has to work harder just to maintain ground in the face of incumbent institutionalized power concentration.

In sum, the book's conclusions are inspiring and troubling, paralleling the ongoing forms of contestation. Democratization in Africa has stalled and often stagnated; incumbents have successfully honed tools to limit the further deepening of democracy but have not necessarily completely derailed pro-democracy actors. Across the continent, we see a great deal of struggle and ongoing contention: the fate of democracy may still be in citizens' hands as they demand and practice it.

*In memory of Nicolas van de Walle.*

**Propaganda in Autocracies: Institutions, Information, and the Politics of Belief.** By Erin Baggott Carter and Brett L. Carter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

526p. £26.99 cloth.

doi:10.1017/S1537592724001233

— Haifeng Huang , *The Ohio State University*  
huang.5457@osu.edu

This is an ambitious book on the use and impact of propaganda in authoritarian regimes. Previous research on propaganda has primarily been single-country studies. Carter and Carter instead constructed an impressive global