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Weaponising the past: An extended SIMCA model for how social identity and collective memory shape variation in collective action responses to democratic backsliding

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Democratic backsliding is accelerating globally, yet societal responses to this trend vary drastically, ranging from mass resistance to widespread indifference or active support. To explain this divergence, this paper investigates how social identity and collective memory shape responses to democratic backsliding, focusing on collective action and proposing an extension of the SIMCA-model. It draws on three case studies from Russia, Israel and the United States. All of these cases are situated within a proposed extension of SIMCA to democratic backsliding. In Russia, identity and collective memory may legitimise Putin's rule and prevent large-scale collective action. In Israel, secular Jews, Arabs, and religious Jews' identities and collective memories produce different perceptions of democracy. This may explain why these groups engage in varying degrees and types of collective action. In the United States, affective polarisation, Trump's use of nostalgia, and a declined salience of historic totalitarian threats may weaken democratic commitment. Undemocratic collective action on January 6th may represent these processes. The paper then discusses how social media and Large Language Models may increasingly manipulate identity and collective memory to legitimise authoritarianism and hinder collective action. Finally, future psychological interventions that could counter manipulations of identity and collective memory are discussed. By integrating psychological theory with global political developments, this paper offers a potential explanatory framework for why some groups resist democratic backsliding, while others remain indifferent or support it.

Keywords: democratic backsliding, social identity, collective memory, authoritarianism, collective action

1. INTRODUCTION

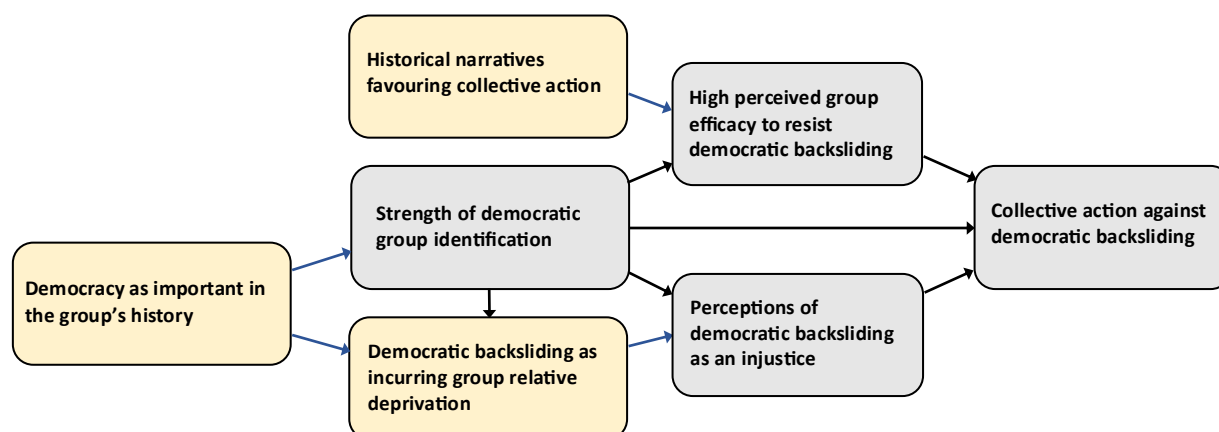
Democratic backsliding – the “state-led debilitation or elimination of the political institutions sustaining an existing democracy” (Bermeo, 2016, p. 1) – has become one of the defining trends of the 21st century (Druckman, 2024). Decades after the fall of the Soviet Union prompted declarations of the final victory of liberalism (Fukuyama, 1992), such optimism now appears naive. By 2023, around 71% of the world lived under autocratic rule, up from 48% ten years prior (Nord et al., 2024). While this trend is global, societies vary in their degrees of collective action – actions taken by groups with the goal of improving their conditions (van Zomeren, 2013) – in response to perceived democratic backsliding. For instance, despite eroding democracy, Vladimir Putin remains largely popular in Russia (Frye et al., 2017; Statista, 2025). By contrast, Benjamin Netanyahu’s attempts to weaken Israel’s judiciary in 2023 sparked mass collective action and a drop in support for his government (Lubell, 2023; Medina, 2023). What explains such differences? While structural factors, such as media freedoms, are important, this paper will explore the specific role of the interaction between social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2000) and collective memory (Halbwachs, 1950/1992). The assumption that democracy is worth defending through collective action is not universal. Instead, we will argue, it is shaped by whether a group’s identity, informed by its collective memories, promotes perceptions of democratic backsliding as an injustice incurring group relative deprivation. The varying importance of democracy to a group’s identity and history, as well as their historical ability to collectively achieve desired outcomes, may impact their willingness to engage in collective action. These ideas are in line with the social-identity model of collective action (SIMCA; van Zomeren et al., 2008). Drawing these points together, this paper advances a theoretical adaptation of SIMCA to democratic backsliding. The final section of the paper outlines directions for empirically testing this model.

We use the SIMCA model (van Zomeren et al., 2008) as a core theoretical framework for this paper because it offers one of the clearest and most extensively researched (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2018) psychological frameworks for explaining the psychological processes which contribute to collective action. At its core, SIMCA proposes that people are most likely to politically mobilise when they (a) strongly identify with a relevant group, (b) believe this group is being treated unfairly (injustice), and (c) expect that collective action can realistically achieve change (group efficacy). These proposals may plausibly extend to collective action responses to democratic backsliding. Given that democracy is fundamentally socially constructed (e.g., Cheneval & Nicolaidis, 2017), it appears reasonable to expect that collective action in relation to democracy may similarly be driven by such social identity-based psychological constructs. In this paper, social identity is understood not merely as group membership, but as the part of the self-concept derived from belonging to an ingroup and from comparing that ingroup to outgroups in ways that sustain positive distinctiveness (Tajfel & Turner, 2000). This comparative dimension is central to the analyses that follow. For example, the paper will discuss cases in which undemocratic actors redefine the criteria of intergroup comparison to legitimise authoritarianism.

The core SIMCA components retained here – and later highlighted in grey in Figures 1–6 – are strength of group identification, perceived injustice, perceived group efficacy, and collective action. We extend the SIMCA model in two key ways: by applying it to democratic backsliding, where collective action may defend or undermine democracy, and by including collective memory – widely held memories of community members that bear on their collective identity (Hirst & Manier, 2008). Specifically, we argue that collective memory may shape whether democracy becomes central to a group’s identity, whether democratic backsliding is perceived as unjust, and whether a group can resist (group efficacy). We also more explicitly depict the role

Figure 1

Proposed extension of SIMCA to the role of social identity and collective memory in collective action against democratic backsliding.



of group relative deprivation in predicting injustice appraisals, applied to the context of democratic backsliding. Our extended model is first illustrated in Figure 1.

As evidence for the model, the paper presents three case studies from Russia, Israel and the United States. The material for each was drawn from a review of relevant academic literature, historical analyses, and journalistic sources. This approach reflects a secondary case study design (Awasthi & Gopakumar, 2023). A case study is generally defined as “an examination of a real-world phenomenon within its naturally occurring context, without directly manipulating either the phenomenon or the context” (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999, p. 372). Although this method limits causal inference, it can allow for theory exploration, hypothesis development, and analytical generalisation (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999; Yin, 2013). Further, case studies are well-suited for exploring complex sociopolitical phenomena that often cannot be ethically or practically studied in experiments or surveys, especially in authoritarian contexts.

Beyond this practical advantage, we believe the case study approach offers unique methodological benefits. The ability to develop new theoretical premises through case studies gives them an advantage when complex ideas are initially difficult to establish using standard

quantitative, qualitative, or computational methods (Starman, 2013). The potential role of collective memory and social identity underpinning collective action in response to democratic backsliding is sufficiently complex as to warrant a “detailed consideration of contextual factors” (Starman, 2013, p. 37) before more standardised methods. A systematic literature review would also be limited, given the relative absence of literature directly addressing the interaction between these constructs and democratic backsliding. A case study approach better allows for the integration of more dispersed existing insights into a coherent explanatory framework. This approach is therefore used here to explore how the mechanisms proposed in the model may operate in different sociopolitical contexts. Evidence of varying empirical strength – including analysis of political rhetoric, survey data, and experiments – is interpreted through the lens of the pathways specified in our extended SIMCA model. While we draw on some empirical data, many of our claims are subjective interpretations of sociopolitical events, grounded in psychological principles. We believe this approach can inspire future empirical work.

Given the relative lack of this approach in political psychology, much of the literature discussed here is taken from non-psychological sources and integrated with psychological

theory, since each case study explores historical developments in each society. This integration supports growing calls to combine psychological explanations of cultural variation with insights from history and other disciplines (Knights, 2012; Muthukrishna et al., 2021).

Because randomisation is not feasible in case study research (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), our diverse case studies adopt a theory-driven approach to critically examine cases. These cases were selected because of their diversity in representing the variable of interest (i.e., democratic backsliding). We focus on these three societies because each uniquely illustrates how identity and collective memory may interact to shape responses to democratic backsliding. Moreover, each has experienced varying degrees of democratic backsliding and historic levels of democracy (World Population Review, n.d.). This difference allows for an exploration of the similarities and differences in the role of identity and collective memory across political contexts. These examples could then inform psychological approaches to democratic backsliding in contexts beyond those explored here.

Russia was selected as a case where democracy has been associated by Putin with Western outgroups. Modern Russian identity, by contrast, is portrayed as being built upon the foundations of a strong, authoritarian state, which is relatively superior to democracy. Further, a negative collective memory of the economic crises of the 1990s, which directly followed failed attempts to democratise post-Soviet Russia, has allowed for Putin to associate democracy with chaos. Limited historical examples of successful collective action (e.g., the failure of historic revolts to end autocratic rule in Russia) and a sanitised, selective memory of the Soviet era (e.g., prioritising victory in WW2 over examples of repression) may have also helped limit collective action against Putin.

Israel is selected as a contrasting example. Democracy is a more contested issue in Israel than Russia, shaped by different identities and interpretations of collective memories. For

example, secular and religious Jewish Israelis disagree on whether Israel being democratic is more important than the country's Jewish character, leading to competing identity drivers. Arab citizens of Israel, meanwhile, may feel indifferent to a democracy that they deem to primarily represent a Jewish outgroup; Israel is a self-defined Jewish state, and most Arabs do not identify primarily as Israeli. For each of these groups, different collective memories, including of Israel's political history or the Holocaust, contribute to such differing perceptions of Israeli democracy. These differences may help explain varying group reactions, including collective action, to events such as the Netanyahu government's proposed weakening of the Israeli judiciary's independence.

Finally, the United States was selected as a case where increasing affective polarisation (i.e., increased hostility across political divides) has increased tolerance for undemocratic behaviour by one's political ingroup. For example, affective polarisation helped fuel undemocratic collective action, through attempting to overturn a democratic election appraised as unjust, when supporters of Trump stormed the Capitol building on January 6th, 2021. This growing affective polarisation is coupled with Trump's allusions to the United States' historical greatness and recent decline. We argue that the decline in perceived outgroup threats internationally, while the collective memory of 21st century totalitarianisms fade, has also helped foster these processes through reducing superordinate national identification amidst the threat of conflict.

We will also examine how social media and Large Language Models (LLMs) may intensify the identity and collective memory processes that could contribute to democratic backsliding and limit pro-democracy collective action. Our case studies all occur before these technologies have reached their full potential and may be considered preludes for the future if relevant psychological insights are not utilised for effective interventions.

Lastly, then, this paper will consider potential psychological interventions for counteracting these trends and propose future research directions, including experiments priming particular identities and collective memories. Understanding and targeting such psychological dynamics may be crucial for safeguarding democracy.

1.1 Conceptual Framework: Social Identity and Collective Memory

According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2000), individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from group membership. Individuals are motivated to engage in social comparison (Hogg, 2000), which involves comparing their ingroup (the group they identify with) with outgroup (groups with which they do not identify). As part of this social comparison tendency, groups are also motivated to view their group as positively distinct – that is, in possession of uniquely positive traits compared to other groups (Mummendey, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

Politics, then, is never merely a battle over policies, but also a struggle between identities (e.g., Greene, 1999; Huddy, 2001; Parker & Lavine, 2025). Different identities motivate different types of engagement and collective action – defined as “any action that individuals undertake as psychological group members... with the subjective goal to improve their group’s conditions” (van Zomeren, 2013, p. 1). The role of identity is outlined in the social identity model of collective action (SIMCA; van Zomeren et al., 2008). As discussed in the Introduction, SIMCA proposes that collective action is driven by group identification, perceived injustice, and group efficacy. To unpack these components in greater theoretical detail, perceptions of injustice tend to be rooted in group relative deprivation – the impression that the ingroup is undeservingly worse off than other groups (Pettigrew et al., 2008; van Zomeren et al., 2008; Walker & Pettigrew, 1984).

It is worth noting, however, that being worse off than others or experiencing inequality does

not always produce feelings of unfairness. System justification theory (Jost et al., 2004) suggests that individuals may be motivated to see existing systems as fair, even when they are disadvantaged (Osborne & Sibley, 2013). A key factor, then, is deservedness: relative deprivation is appraised when groups believe they deserve better outcomes (Feather, 2015; Smith et al., 2012). These perceptions can concern material factors, such as income inequality, as well as more subjective appraisals of, for instance, political power (Smith et al., 2012).

Another key determinant is the strength of group identification – meaning the degree to which individuals identify with and feel attached to a group. As van Zomeren et al. (2018) state, “group identification lies at the heart of the SIMCA...as it predicts collective action directly and indirectly” (p. 4). Supporting this premise, injustice perceptions, group efficacy and the frequency of collective action are predicted by group identification (Thomas et al., 2020). Moreover, strength of group identification may prompt appraisals of group relative deprivation (Tropp & Wright, 1999).

If collective action is shaped by these factors, it may follow that distinct groups respond to democratic backsliding differently. For example, one group might perceive democratic backsliding as incurring group relative deprivation. On the one hand, this relative deprivation might be perceived internally (for example, relative to internal outgroups) or externally (for instance, social comparison with Western democracies). By contrast, in some cases, authoritarianism may be framed as positively distinct from liberalism and met with little resistance. Given this variety of potential responses, research on how different groups react to democratic backsliding is highly relevant. However, a global framework for understanding democratic backsliding is lacking in social psychology (Druckman, 2024). Our cross-cultural case studies will aim to help address this gap.

While SIMCA specifies psychological mechanisms underlying collective action, it does not

fully address why certain groups perceive injustice and group efficacy differently. Here, collective memory becomes critical too. A collective memory is the socially constructed narrative of a group's past, providing a framework for interpreting current events (Halbwachs, 1950/1992; Hirst & Manier, 2008). Because collective memories are socially constructed, the same memories can be interpreted differently by different groups (Nicholson, 2017; Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). Their socially constructed nature also makes them strongly interlinked with identity – for instance, informing interactions with historically hostile outgroups (Babinska & Licata, 2025).

Collective memory both shapes and is shaped by identity. It helps form identities by helping to define group norms (e.g., Wang, 2018). Conversely, identity influences collective memory. For example, groups tend to overemphasise historic achievements and downplay negative events, which reflects identity-based drives such as a need for collective pride (Hilton & Liu, 2017). Further, collective memory plays a crucial role in shaping how societies respond to contemporary issues (Liu & Hilton, 2005; Power, 2016). In Germany, for instance, the collective memory of Nazism has produced a taboo against militarism (Liu & Hilton, 2005). While the past clearly informs the present, the present also reshapes our understanding of the past. Because collective memories are socially constructed, different memories are emphasised in accordance with changing social norms (Jovchelovitch, 2012; Liu, 2018).

From a SIMCA perspective, the entanglement of collective memory and identity has direct implications for collective action. How may these implications extend to democratic backsliding? Collective memory and identity may determine whether democratic backsliding is perceived as unjust through the strength of group identification. A group's identity may be considered a democratic identity – for instance, it may be grounded in collective memories of the dangers of historic undemocratic groups

(e.g., Probst, 2003). By contrast, the strength of other types of identities such as religion may at times overshadow democracy. Collective memories of historic group resistance may also determine perceptions of group efficacy. For instance, crediting the Black civil rights movement to a select few leaders may weaken ordinary African Americans' perceived group efficacy (Freel & Bilali, 2022).

Moreover, progress narratives (the present is the best time in a group's history) may be less likely to lead to injustice appraisals and collective action compared to regress narratives (the group's condition has declined over time; Freel & Bilali, 2022).

In the context of democratic backsliding, the absence of relevant collective memories which position democracy as important may legitimise 'progress narratives' even amidst autocratisation. It may not appear contradictory in such cases for leaders to claim that they have reduced group relative deprivation whilst attacking democracy. This idea could reduce perceptions of injustice, thereby hindering the prospect of collective action. Additionally, without historical examples of successful collective action, group members may have low perceptions of their group efficacy to resist democratic backsliding.

Figure 1 presents a model of how collective memory and identity may interlink to predict collective action against democratic backsliding, extending the SIMCA-model. Incorporating this relationship into the model, which currently does not account for them, may advance our understanding of the processes motivating collective action.

1.2 Predictors and Mediators in our Extended SIMCA Model

In the model represented in Figure 1, the grey nodes with black arrows represent the core components of SIMCA, adapted to the context of democratic backsliding. Strength of democratic group identification is an upstream predictor with direct effects on perceived injustice,

perceived group efficacy, and collective action, consistent with prior evidence on the role of strength of group identification (e.g., Thomas et al., 2020). Perceived injustice and perceived group efficacy, in turn, independently predict collective action against democratic backsliding and thus function as mediators of the relationship between strength of democratic group identification and collective action. In addition, strength of democratic group identification predicts the extent to which democratic backsliding is construed as incurring group relative deprivation.

The yellow nodes with blue arrows in the model represent new incorporations of collective memory and identity into the model. Perceiving democracy as important in the group's history is expected to increase the strength of democratic group identification, which in turn predicts collective action both directly and indirectly via perceived injustice and perceived group efficacy. Accordingly, strength of democratic group identification mediates the relationship between collective memory and collective action, yielding both direct and indirect effects.

Perceiving democracy as important in the group's history is also expected to increase the likelihood that democratic backsliding is construed as incurring group relative deprivation. In turn, perceived group relative deprivation predicts perceptions of democratic backsliding as an injustice. Thus, perceived group relative deprivation mediates the relationship between a historical importance of democracy and perceived injustice. Furthermore, because strength of democratic group identification predicts perceived group relative deprivation, an additional indirect pathway from historical importance of democracy to perceived injustice operates via sequential mediation through these variables.

Moreover, historical narratives favouring collective action (e.g., historical examples of successful collective action; Freel & Bilali, 2022) are expected to increase perceived group efficacy to

resist democratic backsliding. Perceived group efficacy, in turn, predicts collective action, implying an indirect effect of these historical narratives on collective action, mediated via perceived group efficacy.

We note the possibility of reverse causality between the collective memory and identity variables here (e.g., strength of democratic group identity increases the salience of collective memories which position "democracy as important in the group's history"). However, we include unidirectional arrows between collective memory and identity in our model (see Figure 1) because the ability of identity to increase the salience of collective memories presupposes that those collective memories exist, ultimately giving collective memory a primary role in the relationship.

Next, in our first case study, we discuss how Putin's Russia may provide real-world evidence for this model.

2. CASE 1: THE EXPLOITATION OF IDENTITY AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY TO BUILD ACQUIESCENCE TO DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN RUSSIA

In 2007, while lambasting NATO's eastward expansion, Putin stated in his Munich Security Conference speech that "incidentally, Russia – we – are constantly being taught about democracy. But for some reason those who teach us do not want to learn themselves" (Putin, 2007, p. 2). The speech was a haunting pretext for Putin's later justifications for invading Ukraine (Smirnova et al., 2023). The speech's phrasing alone illustrates how Putin mobilises identity to legitimise authoritarianism. By contrasting "we" with "those who teach us", he casts calls for Russia's democratisation as a patronising imposition from Western outgroups.

A focus group with Russian participants (Sharafutdinova, 2022) suggested that this type of social comparison with the West may explain support for Putin – for instance, as indicated in the statement of one respondent who noted

that “we are respected; the West is afraid of us” (p. 7). Putin’s exploitation of identity is explored further by Evans (2015). Given that groups strive for positive distinctiveness (Hornsey, 2008), members of negatively distinct groups may cope through social creativity. This is when a group downplays the importance of dimensions where it is disadvantaged and emphasises dimensions where they excel (Crocker & Major, 1989; van Bezouw et al., 2021). For example, groups of low socioeconomic status may emphasise moral integrity (Elbæk et al., 2023), perhaps as a substitute for financial success. Putin potentially engages in a similar method by attempting to transform the basis upon which Russia is judged relative to Western nations (Evans, 2015). In the face of economic and democratic inferiority, Putin emphasises Russia’s “traditional ethical norms” (Evans, 2015, p. 4) and national sovereignty (Lomagin, 2007) against Western liberalism (Agadjanian, 2017; Tsygankov, 2016).

The promotion of such identity-driven narratives may fuel a progress narrative. Russia is portrayed as being better than ever since its increasing illiberalism, such as through its increased sovereignty (Malinova, 2022). By redefining the criteria on which intergroup comparisons are made, Putin’s rhetoric may reshape perceptions of deservedness. Russia’s relative disadvantage on liberalism’s dimensions may be interpreted as merely the legitimate consequence of pursuing sovereignty and traditionalism. Citizens may then perceive Russia as receiving the best outcomes for its national path, reducing perceptions of group relative deprivation compared to Westerners on the domain of political freedom (Smith et al., 2012).

Moreover, by defining Russian identity in terms of sovereignty and traditionalism, Putin may

help construct a Russian identity built on statist ideals (e.g., Cannady & Kubicek, 2014). As explored by Blackburn (2021), modern Russian identity is built on a concept of “state-civilization” (p. 1). Here, Russian identity is defined by its unity under a strong state. Strength of group identification in this case could thus impede collective action against democratic backsliding (see Figure 2).

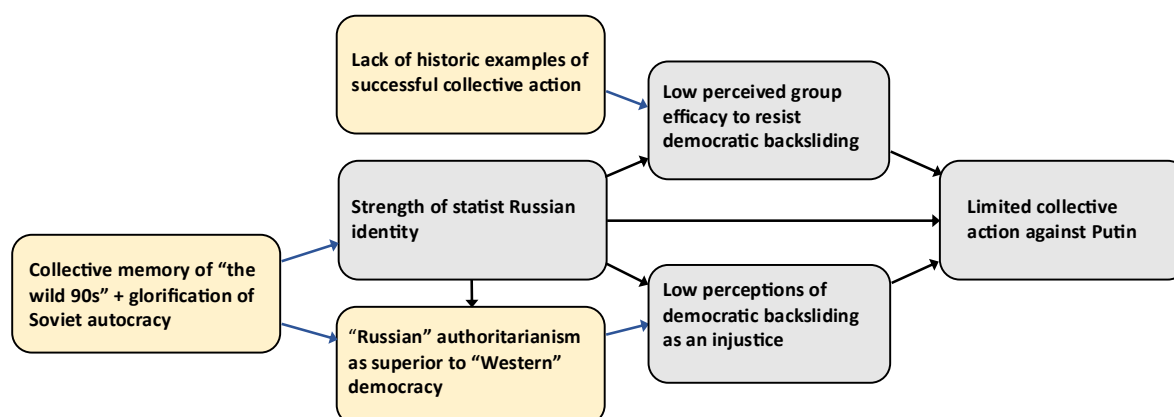
On the whole, Putin’s persuasive rhetoric may help explain the fact that dialling back on democracy (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021b) has not prevented him from enjoying majority support (Frye et al., 2017), nor being particularly threatened by collective action¹, given that appraisals of injustice may be key to triggering collective action (see Figure 1).

In an essay, Putin (1999) wrote: “It will not happen... that Russia will become the second edition of, say, the US or Britain in which liberal values have deep historic traditions...For Russians a strong state is not an anomaly.” To understand Putin’s identity-based rhetoric’s appeal, it is helpful to consider Russia’s collective memory. We have proposed that the strength of democratic group identity and perceptions of democratic backsliding as unjust are also informed by a perceived historical importance of democracy (see Figure 1). Russian collective memories are unlikely to produce this effect (see Figure 2). In recent experimental data, Russians primed to recall the 1990s were less likely to endorse democratic values (Alexeev et al., 2025). In this period, following the fall of the Soviet Union, there was an attempt to democratise Russia, which had practically never been democratic (Gill, 2002) – for instance, through the introduction of competitive elections, in contrast to the one-party Communist rule which had characterised the Soviet Union.

¹ We note that there have been examples of collective action against Putin’s democratic backsliding in Russia, such as the 2011 protests over electoral fraud (Enikolopov et al., 2020). However, these have involved a very small fraction of the Russian population (disproportionately from large cities such as Moscow), and our focus in this case is the question of why Putin’s democratic backsliding has occurred with relatively little resistance by-and-large.

Figure 2

SIMCA extended to the role of social identity and collective memory in limiting collective action against Putin's democratic backsliding in Russia



Western economists simultaneously promoted 'shock therapy' – rapid reforms to restructure Russia's economy on free-market principles such as deregulation and privatisation (Murrell, 1993).

However, while these economic policies were more successful in other formerly communist states such as Poland (Ther, 2025), in Russia they largely backfired. The consequences in Russia included hyperinflation and many falling into poverty and unemployment; meanwhile, a small group of Russian oligarchs massively increased their wealth and influence (Belyakov, 2019).

Following this negative experience with attempted liberalisation (Vasilenko et al., 2022), Putin's reassertion of state dominance (Burrett, 2020; Sakwa, 2008) seemed attractive to many Russians. A 2001 survey found that most Russians were willing to trade human rights for order and public safety (Gerber & Mendelson, 2002). As stated earlier, collective memories shape how groups make sense of current events (Halbwachs, 1950/1992; Hirst & Manier, 2008). Exploiting this phenomenon, Putin has associated liberalism with "the wild nineties" (Sykes, 2023, p. 6; see also Malinova, 2021) to present contemporary illiberalism as being a remedy to the injustice of oligarchy. This conceptualisation of the 1990s can diminish the

perceived importance of democracy in Russia's history and thus provide further grounds for a modern Russian identity based on "state-civillisation" (Blackburn, 2021, p. 1). Such associations also reinforce the claim that "Russian" authoritarianism is superior to "Western" democracy (see Figure 2).

Another factor contributing to these processes may be Russia's engagement with its Soviet past (see Figure 2). A 2010 survey found that Russians with greater nostalgia for the Soviet era were more likely to support authoritarianism (White, 2010). The valorisation of historic authoritarianism may help make democracy appear relatively inferior as a political system (see Figure 2). Soviet oppression has not become central to Russia's mainstream collective memory (Khazanov, 2008) – there has never been a Nuremberg trial-level reckoning, as in post-Nazi Germany (e.g., Morozov, 2008). In fact, Putin persistently bemoans the Soviet Union's collapse (Sherlock, 2016). Events from this era emphasised instead include victory in WW2 (Tumarkin, 2003) and narratives of order and stability (Khazanov, 2008).

The sanitisation of Soviet autocracy reinforces the idea that collective memories disproportionately emphasise positive events (Hilton & Liu, 2017). Even Stalin has seen his image increasingly rehabilitated under Putin (Shkliarov

et al., 2022). Likely linked with increasing hostility to the West and the Ukraine War (Ferraro, 2023), these examples reflect the fluidity of collective memories in response to changing social demands (Jovchelovitch, 2012; Liu, 2018).

Finally, alongside these collective memories is the relative absence of historically successful Russian collective action (see Figure 2). Russia only achieved emancipation from serfdom in the 1800s (Nafziger, 2012), in part because of the Russian monarchy's fear of increased collective action among Russian serfs (Finkel, 2015). However, while emancipation granted new rights to Russia's majority serf population, many do not appear to have felt that their conditions substantially improved (Finkel, 2015). After all, emancipation still did not free most Russians from exploitation by a landed gentry and an oppressive monarchy. Russia then experienced a revolution against that monarchy in the early 1900s (Fitzpatrick, 2017), yet this collective action ultimately substituted an oppressive monarchy for an oppressive communist dictatorship. These relative historical failures of collective action likely limit Russians' perceived group efficacy (see Figure 2; Freel & Bilali, 2022).

2.1 Predictors and Mediators in our Model, Applied to Limited Collective Action Against Putin's Democratic Backsliding in Russia

Summarising the points we have discussed in this case, our extended SIMCA model (see Figure 1) can be applied to the context of democratic backsliding in Putin's Russia (see Figure 2). "Statist Russian identity" (see Figure 2) is defined by a modern Russian identity built on the importance of a strong, unified state (Blackburn, 2021). In keeping with SIMCA, strength of this identity may exert direct effects on low perceptions of democratic backsliding as injustice, low perceived group efficacy to resist democratic backsliding, and limited collective action. These injustice and efficacy perceptions may also independently predict limited collective action against Putin. Moreover, strength of statist identity may predict low perceptions of

group relative deprivation on the political domain (i.e. "Russian authoritarianism as superior to Western democracy"), which then in turn predicts low appraisals of democratic backsliding as unjust.

The collective memories of Russia's failed attempted democratisation in the post-Soviet "wild 90s" and the glorification of Soviet autocracy are expected to reduce the perceived historical importance of democracy. This, in turn, predicts a stronger statist (rather than democratic) group identification. These collective memories are also expected to predict endorsement of the belief that "Russian" authoritarianism is superior to "Western" democracy – limiting perceived group relative deprivation on the domain of political freedoms and subsequent injustice appraisals.

In addition, a lack of historical examples of successful Russian collective action is expected to predict lower perceived group efficacy to resist democratic backsliding.

These processes may be relatively homogeneous in Russia, where Putin remains largely unthreatened by collective action. However, other societies have seen a more multifaceted response to democratic backsliding, also anchored in identity and collective memory. The next section discusses Israeli society as an example.

3. CASE 2: IDENTITY AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY AS THE CATALYST FOR VARIATION IN INJUSTICE PERCEPTIONS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION ACROSS DIFFERENT ISRAELI GROUPS

3.1 The Judicial Reform Protests: Collective Action Against an Attack on the Identity and Collective Memory of Secular Jewish Israelis

In 2023, Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government introduced a plan to reduce the powers of the Israeli judiciary and expand control over the Supreme Court (Dotan, 2023). The plan triggered mass collective action (Roznai & Cohen, 2023). At its peak, around 7.5% of the

country's population protested (Medina, 2023), and key aspects of the reform were ultimately reversed.

This picture contrasts with the comparatively muted societal response in Russia, where similar reforms have been implemented (Partlett, 2021). While structural factors help contextualise this difference, such as higher legal risks of dissent in Russia (Easter, 2021), they do not fully explain it. Israel's socio-political landscape has made it more difficult for Netanyahu to secure comparable acquiescence to Putin. While Israel broadly encompasses the identity of "Jewish", it is politically divided by different types of Jewish identities, such as religious vs secular (Zeedan, 2024). A majority of secular Jewish Israelis prioritise the state's democratic character over its Jewish character (Bitton, 2023) – illustrating its crucial importance to their identity. Secular Jewish Israelis' strength of democratic identity may account for their collective action, in line with the strength of democratic group identification pathway (see Figures 1 and 3).

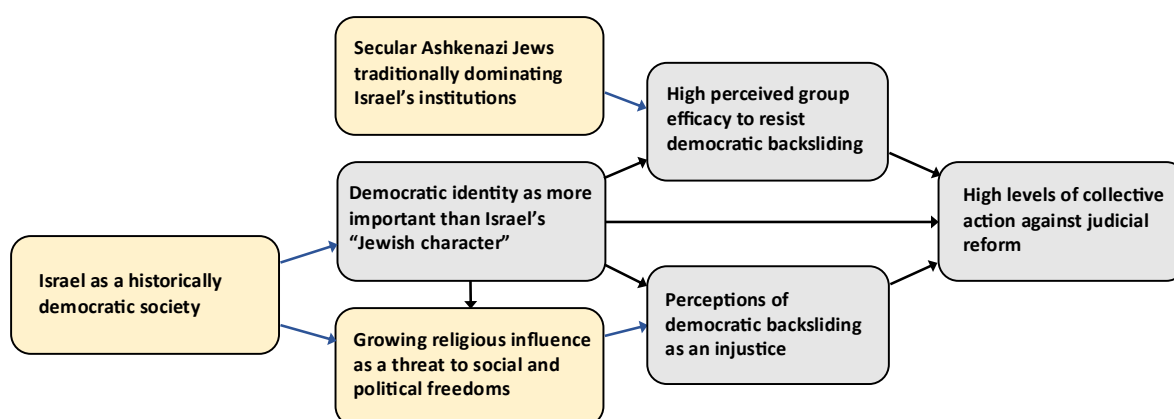
This strong democratic identity likely has roots in Israel's historical development as a rare Middle-Eastern democracy (Medding, 1990), having held democratic elections since its formation, which can also foment a sense that democracy is historically important and fragile

(see Figure 3). The attack on a mostly secular judiciary by a largely religious government was appraised by many of this demographic as a threat to democracy (Porat, 2023; Simunovic et al., 2024). The supreme court has historically impeded the goals of religious fundamentalists (e.g. Hackner, 2024). One aspect of this perceived threat to democracy, then, was a fear that the undoing of the court's powers could eventually lay the groundwork for theocracy (Jaffe, 2023). This perceived threat manifested in 70% of secular Jewish Israelis expressing fear that they would not be able to maintain their lifestyle (Hermann & Anabi, 2023). Unlike in Russia, secular Jewish Israelis thus seemingly detected a threat of group relative deprivation concerning political and social freedoms relative to religious Jewish Israelis. This threat may have motivated appraisals of the reform as unjust, and the subsequent collective action.

Moreover, a majority of secular Jewish Israelis are of Ashkenazi descent (Pew Research Center, 2016). Ashkenazis have historically comprised the elite of Israel's democratic institutions (Ben Porat & Filc, 2022). These collective memories may promote a greater belief in their group efficacy, fuelled by their nostalgic collective memories of dominating Israel (e.g., Yadgar, 2022; see Figure 3). Groups benefiting from a political system may also often believe that

Figure 3

SIMCA extended to the role of collective memory and identity in secular Jewish Israeli collective action against Netanyahu's judicial reform



their advantages are deserved (e.g., Jost et al., 2004; Pratto et al., 2000).

3.2 Predictors and Mediators in our Model, Applied to Secular Jewish Israeli Collective Action Against Netanyahu's Judicial Reform

Figure 3 has extended our proposed extended SIMCA model (see Figure 1) to secular Jewish Israeli collective action against Netanyahu's judicial reform. The strength of democratic identity (see Figure 3) is reflected in this demographic's prioritisation of Israel having a democratic character over its Jewish character. Strength of this identity may exert the associated direct and indirect effects on perceived injustice, perceived group efficacy, and collective action against judicial reform. The relationship between strength of democratic identity and injustice appraisals may also be mediated by perceptions that the growing religious influence constitutes a threat of group relative deprivation on political and social freedoms

The collective memory of Israel as a historically democratic society is expected to foster a perception of democracy as historically important and thus predict a stronger democratic identity, as well as also directly predicting a perceived threat of group relative deprivation through religious influence. These perceptions, in turn, predict higher perceptions of

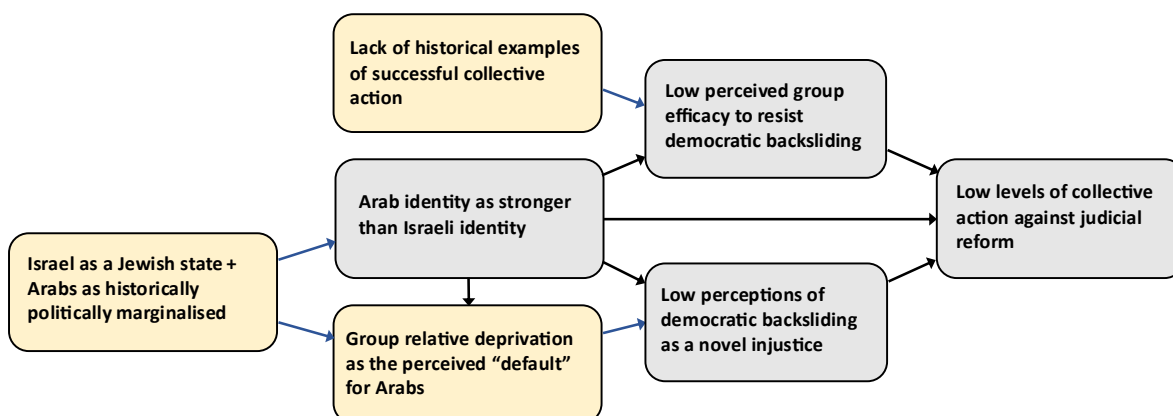
democratic backsliding as an injustice. Furthermore, the historical dominance of secular Ashkenazi Jews in Israel's institutions is expected to predict higher perceived group efficacy to resist democratic backsliding.

3.3 Arab-Israeli Indifference to the Reform: A Reflection of Identity and Collective Memory

By contrast, a majority of Arab citizens expressed an unwillingness to engage in collective action (Mada al-Carmel Center, 2023), resembling Russians' response to democratic backsliding. The apathy of Arabs may partially reflect the unique entanglement of identity with Israeli politics (Smootha, 2002) – most Arab citizens do not identify primarily with the Israeli identity (Paul-Binyamin, 2024). While Putin associates democracy with external Western outgroups, for Arabs, it may be more internal. Israel, throughout its historic and contemporary existence, has always been a self-defined Jewish state (Harel, 2021). This definition is perhaps just one reason for Arabs' weak group identification with Israel, which may limit their collective action in the name of Israeli democracy (see Figures 1 and 4). Israel's historic status as a Jewish state may also limit the perceived historical importance of democracy for Arabs (see Figure 4): Smootha (2002) defined Israel as an ethnic democracy, where democratic

Figure 4

SIMCA extended to the role of social identity and collective memory in the lack of Arab collective action against the judicial reform



institutions primarily serve the majority ethnic group.

Furthermore, AboJabel and Ayalon (2025) found that Arab apathy is partially because of a collective memory in which “Arabs have always suffered discrimination, long before the reform” (p. 11). This collective memory might also lead to a low identification as Israeli and low perceived historical importance of Israeli democracy (see Figure 4). While Arab citizens could always vote, they lived under military administration for the first 18 years of Israel’s existence (Rudnitzky, 2014). Moreover, an Arab party has only briefly joined an Israeli government once in 77 years (Ali, 2024). The typical lack of Arab representation in Israeli governments could further foster a sense that democracy is historically futile (e.g., Atmor et al., 2025). Similarly to Russians, there are also limited examples of successful collective action by Arabs, likely limiting perceived group efficacy (see Figure 4).

Overall, given these collective memory and identity factors, Arabs may feel that group relative deprivation on every domain relative to Jews is their default (see Figure 4) experience (e.g., Moore, 2003). By and large, then, the reform does not appear to have been conceptualised as a unique injustice for Arabs, which may explain their limited collective action.

3.4 Predictors and Mediators in our Model, Applied to the Lack of Arab Collective Action Against the Judicial Reform

Figure 4 applies our proposed extended SIMCA model (see Figure 1) to the limited collective action against Netanyahu’s judicial reform amongst Arab citizens of Israel. Because the judicial reform ignited tensions concerning Israeli democracy and the future of Israel, low identification with the Israeli collective is expected to foster greater apathy towards the issue. As such, strength of Arab identification relative to Israeli identification may predict low injustice (mediated by the normativity of group relative deprivation for Arabs) and efficacy

perceptions which, both directly and indirectly, predict low collective action against the reform.

The collective memory of Israel as a Jewish state throughout its history, and of Arabs as a historically politically marginalised group, is expected to foster a sense of Israeli democracy as historically unimportant for Arabs. This perception may thus predict a stronger Arab (relative to Israeli) identity. It may also predict the perception that group relative deprivation constitutes the default condition for Arabs in Israeli society. These perceptions, in turn, may predict lower perceptions of democratic backsliding as a novel injustice against Arabs. Finally, the lack of historical examples of successful Arab collective action is expected to predict lower perceived group efficacy.

3.5 Support for the Reform Among Religious Jews: Jewish Identity as More Important Than Democracy

A separate tension concerning Israeli democracy arises among religious Jewish Israelis, from which Netanyahu’s government largely draws its support (Sorek & Ceobanu, 2022). Unlike secular Jewish Israelis, a majority of religious Jewish Israelis consider democracy to be less important than Israel’s Jewishness (Bitton, 2023). Peffley et al. (2024) distinguish these differences as representing an ethnocultural identity on the Israeli right versus a civic identity on the left. They found that stronger identity attachments among rightists increased intolerance to Arab citizens, but increased tolerance among leftists.

The priority of Jewishness over democracy may reflect religiosity being a particularly strong identity, unparalleled in cognitive and emotional benefits (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). If strength of democratic group identification fuels collective action in favour of democracy (see Figure 1), collective action may be less likely whenever religious identity conflicts with democracy. There is, at times, a tension between liberalism and Jewish theology. For example, orthodox Jewish law includes laws distinguishing the rights of Jews and gentiles in Israel (Mazeh, 2024). Add

to this the aforementioned phenomenon of the supreme court representing the historical dominance of secular Ashkenazi Jewish Israelis (Ben Porat & Filc, 2022), and there is perhaps greater context for religious Jewish Israelis' support for the reforms (Yakir, 2023). The reforms were framed as correcting the group relative deprivation and injustice many religious Jewish Israelis, often of Mizrahi origin (Jews hailing from Islamic countries), have perceived relative to the secular Ashkenazi elite on political and economic domains (e.g., Lehman-Wilzig, 2023; Weingrod, 2018). Historically, it was secular Ashkenazi left-wing ruling parties whom Mizrahi Israeli Jews appraised as discriminatory towards them. The Israeli right first ousted these left-wing parties from power in the late 1970s, in part by appealing to Mizrahi Jews as a more inclusive alternative (Kaplan, 2018). Similarly to Russians' collective memories of the 1990s (see Figure 2), their greater support for the reform is thus likely partially rooted in collective memories of negative experiences with elites under democracy.

These examples further illustrate that identity and collective memory can be manipulated to justify democratic backsliding, with judicial independence traditionally regarded as key to democracy (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021a). Notably, though, supporters of the reform believed

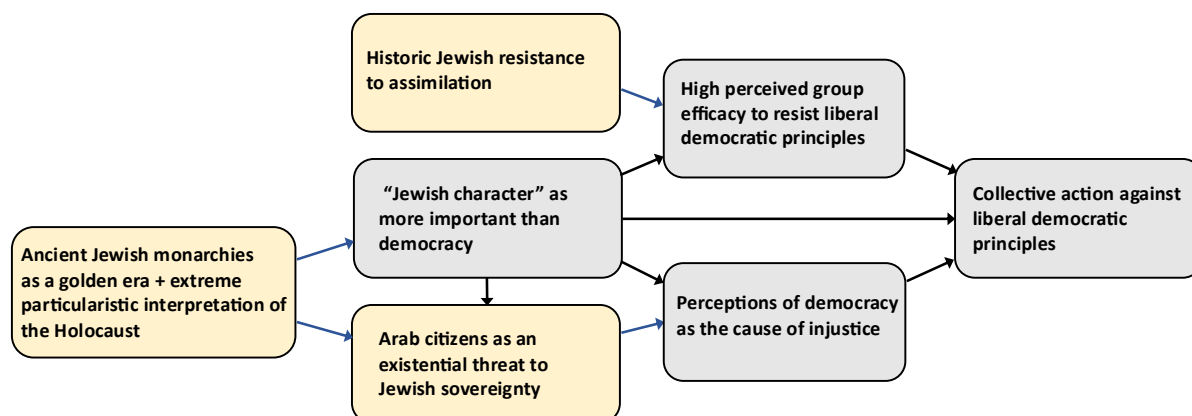
increasing an elected government's powers over unelected judges strengthens democracy (Gidron, 2023; Simunovic et al., 2024). This perception constitutes majoritarianism (Wunsch et al., 2025).

3.6 Kahanism: An Identity and Collective Memory-Based Driver of Collective Action Against Liberal Democratic Principles

Returning to the tension between liberal democracy and religion, there are, however, more clear-cut examples of opposition to democracy in Israel. It should be clarified that only some Jewish sects interpret religious laws concerning governance as applicable to the State of Israel (e.g., Yadgar & Hadad, 2023). Among them was the late extremist Rabbi Meir Kahane, who inspired followers known as Kahanists (Szendro, 2025). These followers include some settlement movements (Hanauer, 1995) as well as the leader of a far-right minority party in the current government (Gidron, 2023). Kahane opposed democracy (Heschel, 2022), in contrast to his aspiration for theocracy. Specifically, he believed democracy threatened his conceptualisation of Jewish identity in which Jews have a divinely ordained deservedness of sovereignty in Israel (e.g., Hanauer, 1995). This belief is another example of how strength of religious identity can trump Western, egalitarian

Figure 5

SIMCA extended to the role of social identity and collective memory in Kahanism-fuelled collective action against liberal democratic principles



concepts of democracy (see Figure 5). In Kahane's view, democracy could make Jews deprived of this sovereignty relative to Arabs, who could eventually use democracy to vote away Israel's Jewish status (Kahane, 1981). These ideas turn the role of perceived group relative deprivation and subsequent injustice appraisals in our model (see Figures 1 and 5) upside down.

Kahane also cast democracy as a gentile creation (Sprinzak, 1985), likening pro-democracy Jews to the collective memory of ancient Jews adopting Greek customs (Cohen-Almagor, 1992), which the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah celebrates a victory against. Such framing harkens back to Putin's presentation of democracy as Western. Further, he promoted a regress narrative in which the secular, democratic State of Israel was inferior to ancient Jewish monarchies. These ancient Jewish monarchies were previous historic examples of Jewish rule in the territory of modern-day Israel, prior to the exodus of Jews and eventual mass return of Jews to the region 2,000 years later (e.g., Fuks, 1990). Kahane considered this period, which featured often violent Jewish resistance to assimilation, to represent a Jewish golden age (Bar, 2024; Magnusson, 2021). Akin to Putin's glorification of the Soviet era, this glorification may diminish the perceived historical importance of democracy. Meanwhile, the emphasis on historic resistance may increase Kahanists' perceived group efficacy (see Figure 5). Moreover, the glorification of monarchical Jewish sovereignty may lead to further sensitivities to the threat of Arabs undoing Jewish sovereignty through democracy (see Figure 5). Finally, this approach further reflects a selectively positive interpretation of collective memories (Hilton & Liu, 2017). Kahane did not, for instance, emphasise the intense sectarianism of these monarchies (Geller, 1979).

Such exploitations of identity are also interlinked with another collective memory. Kahane also called upon the Holocaust (Bar, 2024), influential for all Israeli Jews (Canetti et al., 2017).

While the Holocaust functions as a universalist warning against fascism in Western Europe (Verovšek, 2021), Israeli Jews often interpret the event's implications to be incumbent on Jews specifically. In Israel, the collective memory is distinguishable between particularistic and universalistic interpretations (Ariely, 2020), reinforcing the subjective nature of collective memories (Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). In the particularistic interpretation, the Holocaust reflects gentiles' inherent animosity towards Jews (Hadar et al., 2021; Liu, 2024). In the universalist version, the Holocaust warns against Jews being passive bystanders while others are persecuted (Klar et al., 2013). These interpretations align with two of Klar's (2016) theorised four moral obligations that victimised groups adopt – the need not to be a victim again and the need not to be complicit (see also Vollhardt & Twali, 2019; Vollhardt et al., 2024).

While liberals may sympathise with the universalistic interpretation, Kahane emphasised an extreme particularistic interpretation (see Figure 5). Kahane's belief that Arabs were a threat to Jewish sovereignty went beyond mere politics. Drawing upon this collective memory, he also believed Arabs were preparing a new holocaust (Kahane & Kahane, 2015; see Figure 5). Additionally, he spoke of a "spiritual Auschwitz" (Bar, 2024, p. 2) caused by the assimilation of Jews with non-Jews. Further, he likened Israel's secularism to a second holocaust (Cromer, 1987). Fueled by such interpretations, Kahane promoted illiberal ideas such as segregation between Jews and minorities (Baskin, 2021). In his conception, the holocaust weakened the perceived historical importance of democracy, since it requires egalitarianism with outgroups aiming to reenact historic persecution.

Identity and collective memory-fueled hostility towards liberal democracy may lead to liberal democratic principles becoming the perceived injustices spurring collective action (see Figure 5). One example is the Kahanist organisation Lehava engaging in patrols aimed at preventing Jews and Arabs from socialising (Engelberg,

2017) and protesting at mixed weddings (Burton, 2015). Further, Kahanist collective violence has directly confronted Israel's institutions, including attacks on soldiers (Eiran & Krause, 2018). Though not generally Kahanist, there are also demonstrations by ultra-orthodox Israelis against secular rights such as permissions to work on the Sabbath (Hitman, 2022).

Thus, while our model (see Figure 1) may account for collective action in relation to democratic backsliding, this case (see Figure 5) illustrates that its direction – defending or undermining democracy – may depend on how identity and collective memory shape perceptions of democracy.

3.7 Predictors and mediators in our model, applied to Kahanism-fuelled collective action against liberal democratic principles

Figure 5 extends our proposed extended SIMCA model (see Figure 1) to the context of collective action against liberal democratic principles in Israel by followers of the Kahanist ideology. Such religious groups prioritise Israel's Jewishness over democracy, reflecting the strength of religious Jewish identity. Strength of religious Jewish identity can then produce the associated direct and indirect effects on the perceived injustice of (mediated by a threat of group relative deprivation from Arabs), perceived group efficacy to resist, and collective action against liberal democratic principles (see Figure 5).

Collective memories glorifying ancient Jewish monarchies, alongside an extreme particularistic interpretation of the Holocaust, may minimise the perceived historical importance of democracy and hence predict the strength of Jewish over democratic identity. These collective memories may also predict a perception that Arabs citizens of Israel pose two threats of group relative deprivation: their potential to undo Israel's Jewish status (historically represented in ancient monarchies), and their desire to enact another Holocaust. These perceptions may then predict a perception of Israeli

democracy as a source of injustice, since it grants democratic rights to Arab citizens. Collective memories emphasising historic Jewish resistance to assimilation may also predict higher perceived group efficacy to resist liberal democratic principles.

3.8 Summary

Overall, the divided perceptions of democracy in Israel reflect its tribalism. Secular Jewish Israelis, whose identity and collective memory centre on democracy and institutional dominance, mobilised in collective action against Netanyahu's judicial reform. Further, they feared backsliding would lead to group relative deprivation relative to religious Jewish Israelis, which may strengthen injustice appraisals. Moreover, their collective memories of institutional dominance likely promoted perceived group efficacy. By contrast, Arab citizens, who hold weak identification as Israelis, showed relative apathy. This apathy may also be contextualised by Arabs already feeling relatively deprived due to Israel's historic emphasis on Jewishness and their historical political marginalisation – the reform was seemingly not appraised as a unique injustice. The lack of collective memories of successful Arab collective action may also reduce perceived group efficacy.

Meanwhile, for religious Jewish Israelis, whose religious identity often trumps democratic identity, the reform was more welcomed. In its extreme form, the tension between religious identity and democracy manifests in Kahanist ideology. Here, democracy has been presented as the eventual cause of group relative deprivation and injustice through granting liberties to a hostile outgroup (Arabs), and as incompatible with religious Jewish identity. Glorifications of ancient Jewish monarchies and particularistic interpretations of the Holocaust have contributed to this ideology. Some have taken collective action in support, potentially fuelled by increased perceived group efficacy through narratives of historic Jewish resistance.

This case therefore extends the earlier analysis of Russia by suggesting that identity and

collective memory also prompt varying degrees of collective action both against and for democratic backsliding within the same society. Next, in our final case, we explore the role of identity and collective memory in the United States' recent democratic backsliding.

4. CASE 3: THE ROLE OF IDENTITY AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN AFFECTIVE POLARISATION-DRIVEN DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND UNDEMOCRATIC COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE UNITED STATES

Thus far, we have presented an account for apathy about or support for democratic backsliding within three non-Western populations: Russians, Arab citizens of Israel and religious and secular Jewish Israelis. Yet, similar dynamics appear today in Western societies (e.g., Cole, 2025; Foa & Mounk, 2019). The Western country which raises the greatest alarm bells among liberal academics currently is likely Trump's United States (e.g., James, 2025). This period has witnessed attempts to overturn an election (Ntontis et al., 2024), an unlawful mobilisation of the national guard (Queen & Knauth, 2025), and attacks on scientific institutions (Halabi et al., 2026). An even more defining feature, though, might be increased affective polarisation – i.e., hostility between Republicans and

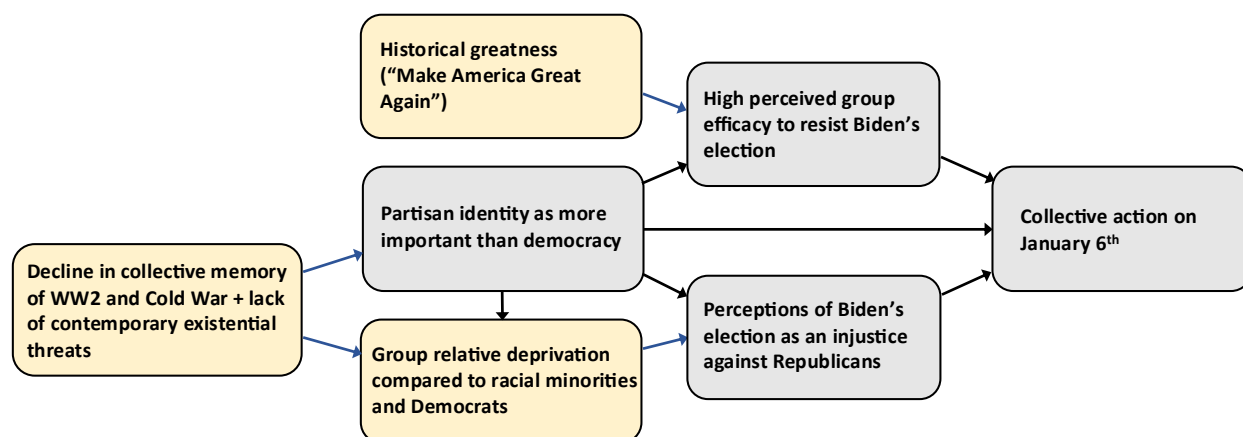
Democrats (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Druckman, 2024; Whitt et al., 2021). For example, an increasing number of Republicans and Democrats say the other party's supporters are immoral since Trump's first election (Pew Research Center, 2022)

From an SIT perspective, these developments can be understood as partisan identity overshadowing democratic principles. In evidence of this, most Americans would not withdraw support from a candidate of their party openly violating democratic principles (Graham & Svobik, 2020). Similarly, Republicans regard abuses of power as less unethical when performed by Trump (Davies et al., 2022). Here again, as with religious Jewish identity in Israel, the strength of a separate ingroup identity can trump support for democracy. Orhan (2022) demonstrated that rising levels of affective polarization are strongly associated with increased risks of democratic backsliding across 77 countries.

Relatedly, affectively polarised individuals may become convinced that political outgroups wish to relatively deprive the ingroup, justifying authoritarianism (Braley et al., 2023; Cox et al., 2025). This calls to mind the January 6th insurrection (see Figure 6). Trump claimed that Democrats had stolen the 2020 election

Figure 6

SIMCA extended to role of social identity and collective memory in collective action against Biden's election on January 6th



(Arceneaux & Truex, 2023). He then encouraged collective action, declaring: “if you do not fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore” (Hamed, 2022, p. 10). Trump, akin to Netanyahu’s government, has also called on perceptions amongst his supporters of group relative deprivation relative to “less deserving” (Pettigrew, 2017, p. 5) groups such as immigrants (Goethals, 2018; Kukharkin et al., 2026). These perceptions, present on January 6th, have political and economic dimensions. The most overt example was the apparent need to “stop the steal” (Bartels & Carnes, 2023, p. 2; Grofman & Cervas, 2024) of Republicans’ deserved position in power. However, participants and supporters may have also been motivated by a perceived demographic replacement of white people (Barreto et al., 2023; Rush et al., 2025). For example, participants were disproportionately from areas that have experienced rapid demographic change (Pape, 2024). The tipping of the demographic balance is conceptualised as posing both a political and economic threat of undeserved relative group deprivation among some Republicans (Finley & Esposito, 2020). This conceptualisation can stem, in part, from a belief that White Americans deserve to maintain their historically dominant status (Geiger & Reny, 2024).

Once again, these perceptions are aided by rose-tinted collective memories of the ingroup faring better in society, fueling a regress narrative in which Trump voters have become more relatively deprived over time (Lammers & Baldwin, 2020). In particular, Trump has promoted a narrative in which his support base was historically better off prior to the imposition of globalist economic and immigration policies,

which led to them being left behind and forgotten about (Kiely, 2021). This is yet another example of the selectively positive nature of collective memories (Hilton & Liu, 2017). “Make America Great Again”, Trump’s signature slogan, exemplifies this perception (Wohl & Stefaniak, 2020), which may increase Republicans’ perceived group efficacy (see Figure 6).

These ideas again reverse the proposed role of group relative deprivation in our model (see Figure 1). As in Netanyahu’s judicial reforms, this undemocratic collective action (Smith & Tindale, 2022) was construed as protecting democracy (Haslam et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the prioritisation of partisan identity may drive these motivated interpretations. The case thus further suggests that identity and collective memory may foster undemocratic collective action.²

However, the phenomenon of partisan identity trumping democracy likely only reflects wider societal developments. One such development concerns another fusion of identity and collective memory: the relative absence of a major international outgroup threat. Neither China nor Russia are generally regarded as existentially threatening today in the way the Soviet Union once was in the United States during the decades-long cold war between the two countries (Fagan et al., 2025; Wike et al., 2025). The Soviet threat had been a more salient one, with the United States having directly participated in more than one high-casualty proxy war during the Cold War, perhaps most famously in the Vietnam War (Katz, 1980). The absence of such a salient threat today may weaken superordinate national identities (e.g., Mounk, 2018). External threats often temporarily activate a shared

² Other groups fearing that the Trump administration will cause them to experience group relative deprivation – such as liberal women – have engaged in collective action against Trump (Pressman et al., 2022). Other examples include protests against the deportation of immigrants (Drenon & FitzGerald, 2025), the No Kings Protests (Wise & Duster, 2025), and demonstrations against ICE (Amatulli & Simmonds, 2026). Growing affective polarisation may also be driving collective action against Trump, since partisan animosity is linked with protest participation (Warners, 2025). However, we chose to focus on undemocratic collective action here as a natural follow-up from the discussions of Kahanist collective action in Israel, to illustrate that similar examples can appear in Western societies.

national identity and reduce partisan divisions – notably following 9/11 (Lambert et al., 2011). More recently, Ukrainian social media posts expressing ingroup solidarity following Russia's invasion received more engagement than outgroup hostility (Kyrychenko et al., 2024).

That the absence of external threats can reduce national unity is discussed by political theorists (e.g., Huntington, 1996), but can also be informed by SIT. When an identity is no longer externally validated by distinction from a common enemy, individuals may be more likely to seek positive distinctiveness through subgroup identities. Moreover, the lack of an external threat of group relative deprivation through subjugation may lead groups to focus on internal relative deprivation, reflecting the general tendency of social comparison (Hogg, 2000; see Figure 6). This idea also aligns with the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner et al., 2000), which proposes that intergroup bias decreases when subgroups adopt a superordinate identity. Research shows that priming American national identity reduces affective polarisation (Levendusky, 2018). Further, experimentally priming Americans with Russia's invasion of Ukraine reduces affective polarisation (Pilgaard Kaiser & Seier, 2025).

We have already discussed Trump's use of nostalgia (see also Behler et al., 2021). In this case, however, a decline in perceived external outgroup threats may also reflect an erosion of collective memories which historically promoted democracy. That is, the collective memory of twentieth-century totalitarianisms – namely the Nazis and Soviet Union, as alluded to with the Cold War example. A 2020 poll found that only 38% of American teens know that six million Jews died in the Holocaust (Pew Research Center, 2020). Moreover, favourability of communism among American generations increases with temporal distance from the Cold War (Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, 2020). Relatedly, support for democracy declines generationally in the United States (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023). The diminished

salience of democracy-promoting collective memories may pave the way for polarisation, diminishing the perceived historical importance of democracy (Misztal, 2005). As Hertwig and Lewandowsky (2025) state: "one might speculate that collective historical memory of autocracy begins to fade away after about 25 years and is not sufficient to protect citizens...from authoritarian populism" (p. 2).

However, attributing a declined salience solely to temporal distance may be simplistic. As discussed in the preceding case studies, events such as the Holocaust may shape national identities today. A more relevant predictor for collective memories diminishing in salience may be when they are no longer deemed relevant to prevailing social conditions (Knapp, 1989). In this regard, the absence of intergroup conflict post Cold-War may have diminished the relevance of collective memories of conflicts.

4.1 Predictors and Mediators in our Model, Applied to Collective Action Against Biden's Election on January 6th 2021

To summarise, Figure 6 applies our proposed extended SIMCA model (see Figure 1) to the act of undemocratic collective action in the form of the attack on the Capitol Building by Trump supporters on January 6th, 2021. Strength of partisan (in this case Republican) identity can supersede commitment to democracy. It thus may produce direct and indirect effects on the perceived injustice of, perceived group efficacy to resist, and collective action against Biden's democratic election (see Figure 6). The relationship between strength of partisan identity and injustice appraisals may also be mediated by a perceived threats of group relative deprivation relative to racial minorities and democrats.

The declining collective memories of World War II and the Cold War may reduce the perceived historical importance of democracy and thereby predict stronger partisan identities over superordinate, democratic ones. The absence of a contemporary external threat mirroring the historic existential threats posed by

adversaries such as the Soviet Union may fuel this effect. As the decline in external threats could shift social comparison inward, it may predict perceptions of group relative deprivation vis-à-vis racial minorities and political opponents (in this case, democrats). These perceptions, in turn, may predict perceptions of Biden's election as unjust. Moreover, narratives emphasising past greatness ("Make America Great Again") may predict higher perceived group efficacy to resist the election outcomes.

Together, these dynamics may help create the conditions in which even a long-established liberal democracy grows susceptible to democratic backsliding. The next section discusses the risks of such cases being fuelled by new technological developments.

5. FUTURE RISKS

The above case studies have discussed the potential role of identity and collective memory in shaping responses to democratic backsliding. Several emerging developments threaten to further accelerate the interlinking of these processes with democratic backsliding.

5.1 Social Media as the Arena for Identity-Based Hostility and Glorification of Historic Authoritarian Regimes

One such threat concerns social media. Already, young Westerners exhibit high levels of reliance on social media for news (Orth & Bialik, 2025), likely to increase with time (Tomasik & Matsu, 2025). Concerningly, these platforms often reinforce outgroup hostility. Rathje et al. (2021) found hostile posts about (political) outgroups in the United States were shared or retweeted about twice as often as posts about ingroups. This reinforcement could produce harmful effects along the 'strength of democratic group identification' pathway in our model (see Figure 1), similarly to those described in the United States (see Figures 6).

The amplification of negative content is further fuelled by online misinformation (Dunaway, 2021), which young people show a higher susceptibility to (Kyrychenko et al., 2025). Such

misinformation often exaggerates images of the political outgroup as dangerous. Piccardi et al. (2025) found that exposure to partisan animosity on social media increases hostility to political outgroups, perhaps through making extremist positions seem normative (Robertson et al., 2024). Misperceiving the normativity of extremism could heighten perceptions that undemocratic measures are necessary to prevent group relative deprivation from an outgroup (Braley et al., 2023; Pasek et al., 2022; see Figures 5 and 6).

Consistent with the interlinking of identity and collective memory in our model (see Figure 1), social media's amplification of hostility may be assisted by the reconstruction of collective memories (Adriaansen & Smit, 2025). Akin to Putin's romanticisation of the Soviet era (see Figure 2), revisionist glorification of authoritarianism is rife on social media (e.g., Talamayan & Candelaria, 2025). These developments may diminish the perceived historical importance of democracy so that contemporary manifestations of authoritarianism face less collective action (e.g. see Figure 2). For instance, pro-Hitler content received over fifty million views across social media platforms in 2024 (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2024). Such content can reduce the collective memory of WW2's function as a shield against autocracy (see Figure 6).

Additionally, social media is littered with Russian influence operations (Lavie-Driver & van der Linden, 2025). These influencers exaggerate historical injustices committed by the West and downplay Soviet crimes (Arribas et al., 2023), reinforcing the regime's exploitation of identity and collective memory (see Figure 2).

5.2 Large Language Models (LLMs) as Manipulators of Core Components of Our Model

Beyond the risks on social media, new risks along our model's pathways (see Figure 1) can be anticipated with the continuing

development of LLM-based chatbots³. Regarding strength of democratic group identification, LLMs already reproduce identity biases. LLMs amplify partisan-based hostility after being fine-tuned with social media content (Hu et al., 2024). Such biases are troubling given that chatbots may be preferred as information sources over traditional search engines (Caramancion, 2024). LLMs may also reflect ideological biases (Hartmann et al., 2023), and may be effective political persuaders even when biased (Fisher et al., 2025; Hackenburg et al., 2025). These capabilities, in combination, create future risks. Chatbots could gain users' trust through responsive dialogue, while reproducing identity-based delegitimisations of democracy (e.g., Lazovich, 2023; Wack et al., 2025) such as those discussed in our case studies (e.g., Figure 2). Given the sycophantic tendencies of LLMs (Sun & Wang, 2025), they could validate prompts promoting identity-linked undemocratic ideas – for instance, that democratic principles are the source of injustice (e.g. see Figure 5).

Recently, Grok promoted antisemitic conspiracy theories (Gold, 2025). Another chatbot – DeepSeek – is in the hands of China's authoritarian regime. When prompted about Taiwan, it produced the response: "We firmly believe that...the complete reunification of the motherland... is an unstoppable force..." (Koopman, 2025). The phenomenon of Chatbots controlled by authoritarians is likely to increase. The Putin-affiliated Wagner group recently used a chatbot to recruit individuals for illegal activity in Britain (Gardham 2025).

Unlike a single political figure, LLMs can repeatedly produce narratives – enhancing persuasiveness (Udry & Barber, 2024) – while also fostering a sense of personal connection with users (Schroeder et al., 2026; Zimmerman et al., 2024). These capabilities may lead to growing

attempts to manipulate chatbots to exploit components of our model. For example, a chatbot could tell users that democracy has been unimportant in a group's history, or that an authoritarian regime has reduced their group relative deprivation.

Additionally, as LLMs increasingly reflect competition between states (Buyl et al., 2026), they may also reflect the type of internal identity-based divisions seen in Israel. For example, chatbots could be tailored to religious groups (e.g., Salaam world – Islamic AI assistant, n.d.). Religious chatbots could potentially be trained to reinforce the strength of religious identity exceeding democratic identity, as in Kahanism (see Figure 5).

Moreover, LLMs may reproduce historical inaccuracies (Mak & Luo, 2025). DeepSeek refuses to discuss the Tiananmen Square massacre, in which the Chinese government and army violently repressed peaceful protestors in 1989 (Ng et al., 2025). However, DeepSeek reproduces China's narrative on the Korean War – namely, that China's intervention in the war on the side of North Korea was justified (Whong & Zhang, 2025). Such selective omissions constitute a digital collective memory (Yasseri et al., 2022), reflecting collective memories' identity-based selectivity (Hilton & Liu, 2017) and mirroring Russia's approach to the Soviet era (see Figure 2). Chatbots may continue to be exploited for this purpose in the future. For example, they could selectively exclude historical examples of successful collective action, reducing perceived group efficacy.

In sum, digital technologies represent a new frontier in the dynamics proposed by our model. Social media algorithms boost content that fuels identity-based hostility, heightening the risk of strength of group identification superseding democratic commitment. The

³ Other emerging AI tools, such as deepfakes, also threaten to disrupt democracy (Pawelec, 2022). However, given the examples of rhetorical justifications of undemocratic moves by politicians in the preceding case studies, we focus on LLMs here as an example of how AI tools could reproduce such rhetoric.

unprecedented freedom to challenge mainstream accounts of collective memories on social media also leads to an increased romanticisation of historic authoritarian regimes, which can make democracy seem historically unimportant. As chatbots have sycophantic tendencies and reflect the ideological biases of their training data, they risk reinforcing autocrats' exploitation of group identification and injustice appraisals. Further, by shaping a selective "digital collective memory", chatbots could further diminish the perceived historic importance of democracy or reduce perceived group efficacy. Operating at unprecedented scale, they stand to become potential tools for eroding democracy and preventing collective action if relevant interventions are not implemented.

On that note, the next section discusses future research pathways for intervention against the fusion of identity and collective memory to justify democratic backsliding.

6. PATHWAYS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND INTERVENTION DEVELOPMENT

Our model (see Figure 1) offers a new research direction to conduct studies directly investigating its proposed pathways. For example, experimental studies could test how perceptions of democratic backsliding as unjust and collective action are influenced by the identity framing of democratic narratives. Such studies could build on our proposed role of democratic group identification and perceived group relative deprivation, and previous work testing identity priming effects on political attitudes (Klar, 2013). Drawing from our Russia case study, one example of a manipulation could be using terms such as "western democracy" versus "democracy" on a sample from a population traditionally hostile to the west. We would hypothesise that the former would lead to lower injustice perceptions and support for pro-democracy collective action. We would also expect this main effect to interact with strength of national group identification and

pre-existing perceptions of authoritarianism as relatively superior to liberal democracy.

This study could also include conditions making different collective memories salient (for instance, via video), both in isolation and in combination with the identity-framing manipulation. As discussed earlier, Alexeev et al. (2025) found that priming the collective memory of the 1990s reduced Russian support for democracy. These conditions could further examine priming impacts, including direct measurements of its effect on perceived group efficacy. We would expect that being primed with collective memories of successful ingroup collective action would strengthen perceived group efficacy. By contrast, we would predict that being primed with historic failures would weaken perceived group efficacy. We would also expect that the lowest injustice perceptions and support for collective action would be found in conditions combining the framing of democracy as Western with the priming of negative collective memories of democracy or collective action. In essence, we would expect collective memory and identity to interact here in the mutually reinforcing ways proposed in our model. This could be tested longitudinally with a random intercept cross-lagged panel model.

Drawing on our Israel case study, each of these experiments could include ethnicity and religion as potential moderating variables. We would expect, for instance, to see smaller main effects among minority groups when identity-framing and priming concerns a national group with which the minority does not strongly identify. The experiments could also adjudicate between competing explanations by measuring alternative factors influencing collective action and holding them constant, such as perceived legal risks (as noted for Russians).

In addition, taking from our United States case study, the finding that priming Americans with the Russian threat reduced affective polarisation (Pilgaard Kaiser & Seier, 2025) can be built on. Experiments can test the hypothesis that priming an external threat of authoritarian

states increases support for democracy and collective action and reduces perceptions of group relative deprivation relative to political outgroups. We would expect this main effect to be stronger among participants with stronger partisan identities. Moreover, we would expect it to be stronger for participants with a lower awareness of WW2 and the Cold War.

While these experiments could potentially boost attitudes to democracy and collective action, another important line of research can concern how existing attitudes can be shielded from manipulations of identity and collective memory. Inoculation theory is presented as a potentially effective intervention for this purpose below.

6.1 Inoculation Theory Against the Manipulation of Identity and Collective Memory

Voelkel et al. (2024) investigated 25 interventions against partisan animosity and undemocratic attitudes, and found that interventions such as correcting exaggerated stereotypes about political outgroups reduced both. However, to our knowledge, no research has tested the effectiveness of prebunking or inoculation-based interventions (McGuire, 1964; van der Linden & Roozenbeek, 2024) for directly countering democratic backsliding, which could be more effective than post-hoc corrections (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; van der Linden et al., 2020). Inoculation theory proposes that preemptively exposing individuals to weakened versions of persuasive arguments, along with strong refutations, can build immunity to future persuasion attempts (Barbati et al., 2021; McGuire, 1964; Traberg et al., 2022).

Inoculation studies can target components of our model (see Figure 1). For example, an inoculation experiment could prebunk the idea that a group's history shows it cannot resist democratic backsliding (low perceived group efficacy), using examples of successful collective action. We would expect prebunking to

improve attitudes towards pro-democracy collective action. Inoculation experiments could also prebunk the idea that authoritarian leaders have reduced group relative deprivation, where there is evidence (e.g., statistics) to the contrary. We anticipate that this would increase injustice perceptions and support for collective action. However, this main effect would likely vary for different groups. Individuals already exhibiting support for authoritarianism may have internalised the arguments justifying it. Inoculation would likely be less effective here, given its pre-emptive nature.

6.2 The Gateway Belief Model: Consensus-based Nudging Towards Democratic Norms

Other potential interventions could draw on the Gateway Belief Model (GBM; van der Linden et al., 2015, 2017, 2019). The GBM builds on the idea that people's beliefs are influenced by their perception of the degree to which there is consensus on an issue (see Cialdini et al., 1999). While GBM research has primarily focused on expert consensus messaging (e.g., van der Linden, 2021), priming social consensus in GBM models can be strongly persuasive (Kobayashi, 2018; van der Linden et al., 2016). GBM-based experiments could prime consensual agreement around democratic values, boosting the strength of democratic identification. For example, 78% of Americans believe democracy is the best political system (Helmstetter & Fraser, 2023). We expect that this priming would reduce perceived threats of group relative deprivation regarding political freedom, thereby reducing injustice perceptions and support for undemocratic collective action. Once more, this main effect would likely be stronger among those with stronger partisan identities and partisan hostility.

6.3 AI-based Interventions Against Democratic Backsliding

Finally, despite the potential risks posed by AI highlighted in our section on LLMs, they also present the potential to be used for successful interventions. LLMs can simulate interactions

with political opponents, potentially reducing debate hostility and lowering affective polarization (Argyle et al., 2023; Dingler et al., 2018). Experiments could be conducted exposing participants to such simulated interactions. We would hypothesise that exposed participants, especially those exhibiting higher partisan identification and hostility, will report reduced partisan hostility and injustice perceptions. Further, we would expect such exposure to increase identification with a superordinate identity and reduce support for undemocratic collective action.

Moreover, AI models can potentially be used to reshape how collective memories are transmitted to support democracy. For example, AI increasingly presents the possibility of virtual interactions with survivors of events such as WWII (Hoskins, 2024; Shur-Ofry & Pessach, 2019). This possibility can potentially be used to activate pathways in our model. Experiments could be carried out with the hypothesis that, for example, participants exposed to the testimony of virtual survivors highlighting the achievements of collective action will exhibit greater perceived group efficacy.

6.4 Summary

In summary, this section has proposed new avenues for testing our model's proposals. Future work can experimentally prime particular collective memories, identity narratives, or perceptions of group efficacy and measure its impact on attitudes towards collective action and injustice appraisals. Drawing on these insights, frameworks such as inoculation theory and the Gateway Belief Model may offer promising ways to strengthen psychological resistance to manipulative narratives. AI, while having the potential to exacerbate the risks of democratic backsliding in other cases, may also provide new opportunities for reducing manipulation.

7. CONCLUSION

Perhaps due to complacency following decades of liberal hegemony, the phenomenon of democratic backsliding still takes many

academics aback (Friedman, 2023; Hertwig & Lewandowsky, 2025). Social psychologists still grapple with the question of how to research democratic backsliding (Druckman, 2024). In part, this lack of a clear research framework may reflect the WEIRD problem (Henrich et al., 2010). A more global approach to this issue may be insightful, particularly as democratic backsliding has been most pronounced in non-Western settings.

This paper has argued that two dynamics, social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2000) and collective memory (Halbwachs, 1950/1992), are central to understanding variation in responses to democratic backsliding. Both have been integrated into a proposed extended SIMCA-model (van Zomeren et al., 2008) to collective action against democratic backsliding. In this model, strength of democratic group identification and the perceived historical importance of democracy interlink to inform collective action motivators. Specifically, they predict the degree to which democratic backsliding is perceived as an injustice (fuelled by appraisals of group relative deprivation). Moreover, a group's perceived group efficacy to resist democratic backsliding may be driven by the degree to which its historical narratives feature, for instance, examples of successful collective action (Freel & Bilali, 2022).

We have attempted to illustrate the relevance of a global approach by drawing on case studies from different countries to advance this argument. Specifically, the cases of Russia, Israel, and the United States have been explored as examples of how identity and collective memory shape varying levels and types of collective action in relation to democracy. In Russia, the two may combine to strengthen a statist Russian identity and enable the reframing of democracy as a Western political system which is relatively inferior to Russian authoritarianism. This conception may reduce perceptions of group relative deprivation due to the absence of democracy, hence limiting collective action against Putin. The relative lack of contemporary

Russian collective action may also reflect the limited examples of historically successful Russian collective action, reducing perceived group efficacy.

While relatively homogeneous in Russia, Israel's contrasting identities and collective memories shape diverging attitudes to democracy and variations in collective action. These divergences include varying influences of strength of group identification, perceptions of group efficacy, and injustice appraisals across Israel's different religious and ethnic groups. For instance, while for secular Jewish Israelis democracy is considered more important than Israel's Jewish identity, for religious Jewish Israelis it is typically the opposite. Arab citizens, meanwhile, tend to identify more strongly with the "Arab" identity than Israeli identity and may be apathetic about democracy in a historically and contemporary self-defined Jewish state. Such differences may contextualise varying degrees of collective action across these groups in relation to democracy, grounded in different collective memories such as the Holocaust.

Finally, in the United States, democratic backsliding is increasingly fuelled by affective polarisation, which has led to partisan identity trumping democracy. An aspect of this polarisation is the perception that political opponents and minorities will relatively deprive Republicans and White Americans, allowing for undemocratic collective action on January 6th to be framed as correcting an injustice. Trump's drawing upon nostalgia for America's historical greatness likely fuelled perceived group efficacy amongst his supporters. A reduction of perceived existential threats, as collective memories of the Cold War and WW2 fade, may also deepen the issue of affective polarisation and weaken the perceived historic importance of democracy.

Alongside the case studies, this paper has highlighted how emerging technologies may create new risks. Social media algorithms amplify partisan hostility (Rathje et al., 2021), and may

enable the reconstruction of collective memories that legitimise democratic backsliding. Further, as LLMs increasingly reproduce ideological and historical biases, they may shape collective memory and reinforce identity-based divisions in favour of authoritarianism and against pro-democracy collective action.

However, despite these risks, future research may uncover effective interventions. Experimental work can examine how priming collective memories, identity narratives, or group efficacy influences injustice appraisals and attitudes towards collective action. Psychological frameworks such as inoculation theory and the Gateway Belief Model also offer promising tools for counteracting manipulative narratives. Meanwhile, AI tools may both mitigate and magnify risks to democracy. If ethically used, they could foster constructive intergroup contact and preserve democracy-supporting collective memories. Ultimately, the most effective interventions for reducing democratic backsliding may be those that address the deeper identity and collective memory dynamics shaping how groups respond – a premise this paper has sought to establish.

8. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no competing interests.

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10. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

N.L.D. drafted the paper and S.V.D.L. provided critical revisions and feedback. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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