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Concept and Varieties of Illiberalism

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Abstract

This article discusses various conceptualizations of illiberalism and adopts a definition that equates the concept with the negation of three liberal democratic principles: limited power, a neutral state, and an open society. The second part of the article explores the implications of this definitional strategy for empirical research, describes the relationship between populism, authoritarianism, and illiberalism, and identifies nine distinct routes to illiberalism: authoritarian, traditionalist, religious, libertarian, nativist-nationalist, populist, paternalist, materialist-technocratic, and left-wing.

Keywords

authoritarianism; illiberalism; liberal democracy; open society; populism; state neutrality

1. Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, one of the foremost challenges in the social sciences has been to come to terms with democratic backsliding. The coming to terms-task is to be taken literally, meaning the identification of the right terms that describe and explain these phenomena. The concept many scholars are converging on is illiberalism. The term's sudden prominence is well illustrated by the fact that two leading academic publishers, Routledge (Sajó et al., 2021) and Oxford University Press (Laruelle, 2024), have almost simultaneously issued their own *Handbook of Illiberalism*, showcasing the research of about 100 academics on the subject.

The studies within this rapidly growing field present a bewildering variety of definitions of illiberalism and its relationship to other relevant concepts, particularly authoritarianism and populism. This article aims to select some of the most prominent approaches, evaluate their merits, and propose adjustments to arrive at a conceptual toolbox that can guide empirical applications. After reviewing and critically examining the chosen conceptualizations, I argue for a definition of illiberalism centered on power concentration, a partisan state,

and a closed society, in response to the three principles that govern liberal democracies: limited power, a neutral state, and an open society. This framework captures most (though not all) existing meanings of the term. It is specific yet adequately broad to differentiate various types of illiberalisms. The broad scope is crucial since the intent is to grasp an internally heterogeneous ideological and political syndrome. To illustrate the term's potential for bringing together different ways of questioning liberal democracy, I conclude the article by introducing nine distinct varieties of illiberalism.

2. Alternative Approaches

Given its relative novelty (for occasional references dating back to the 17th century, see Fawcett, 2024), many idiosyncratic usages of the term "illiberal" exist. Most of them imply opposition to constitutional freedoms and constraints on power. These fundamental characteristics are frequently complemented with additional features. For example, in Diamond's account, illiberal states are characterized not only by weak rule of law but also by high levels of corruption (Diamond, 2021, p. 33). Pappas (2019, pp. 35–37, 265) associates illiberalism with a particularly long list of attributes: disregard for individual liberties, minority rights, and the rule of law; political polarization; the idea of an oversoul people; adversarial politics; majoritarianism; patronage politics; charismatic leadership; political moralism; and contagiousness. Kauth and King (2020, p. 367) define illiberalism through two clusters of phenomena: "disruptive practices" that undermine fair competition (e.g., restriction on media freedoms, packing state bureaucracies with loyalists) and "ideological illiberalism," meaning practices that "defy basic liberal criteria, such as equal treatment vis-à-vis outsiders without necessarily attempting to undermine the quality of democracy for insiders" (Kauth & King, 2020, p. 377).

Most of these approaches emphasize that illiberalism is found in political systems that select leaders through elections. The close association of illiberalism with democratic contexts stems from Zakaria's (1997) seminal work, wherein he coined the term "illiberal democracy" to describe democratic regimes marked by violations of liberal and constitutional principles, uneven political playing fields, and unfair elections. The growing interest in illiberalism is largely due to the increasing number of such countries, that is, states that cannot be unequivocally classified as dictatorships or democracies, in the first decades of the 21st century (Nord et al., 2024).

Thus, the term illiberal typically appears as a qualifier of democracy. Ruzha Smilova reverses the expression and defines "democratic illiberalism" by the promotion of unrestrained popular sovereignty, ethno-nationalist "common good" anti-individualism, anti-pluralism, and anti-liberal anti-globalism within electoral regimes (Smilova, 2021, p. 193). Along very similar lines, Guasti and Bustikova understand illiberalism as a set of principles opposed to pluralism, minority accommodation, and ideological heterogeneity, emphasizing that illiberalism "calls for hetero-normative sexuality and ties of solidarity formed around a communitarian view of nationhood and sovereignty" (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023, p. 131).

The most elaborate departure point for defining illiberalism is provided by Marlène Laruelle. She takes the radical position of divorcing the term from regime literature. According to her, illiberalism is a "new ideological universe," a "backlash against today's liberalism in all its varied scripts—political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, civilizational—often in the name of democratic principles." It is "majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favouring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity," it is focused on

cultural issues, and "is post-post-modern in its claims of rootedness in an age of globalization" (Laruelle, 2022, p. 304). This definition posits illiberal ideas as possible causes and facilitators of democratic backsliding while emphasizing that such ideas emerge out of democracies. It conceptualizes illiberalism as a "realist" reaction to the fluid, relativist, postmodern era that promotes liquid boundaries in general and cosmopolitanism in particular. The five liberal scripts that illiberals reject are: classical political, economic, cultural, and geopolitical liberalisms, and liberal colonialism. Political liberalism (individual freedoms, checks and balances, etc.) is attacked by illiberals in the name of electoral majoritarian democracy. The economic script of liberalism is lambasted as irresponsible and greedy neoliberalism. Cultural liberalism is questioned from a traditionalist angle. Geopolitical liberalism is criticized because it promotes unjust, unipolar, and US-dominant international configurations. Finally, liberal colonialism is rejected in the name of "multiple modernities."

I turn now to the critical consideration of the innovative ideas in Laruelle's (2002) complex definition. First, it is important to welcome the emphasis on ideas instead of institutions. Narrowly institution-centered approaches are inadequate for grasping the 21st century setbacks in democratization. The widespread mimicry of the formal institutions of liberal democracies shows that they can be used for multiple purposes (Magyar & Madlovics, 2020).

A somewhat more questionable decision is to narrow the temporal scope of illiberalism to the post-1970s period, and primarily to the decades that followed the Cold War. Narrowing the temporal scope aligns with conceptualizing illiberalism as a backlash to contemporary liberalism but has considerable costs. First, if understood rigidly, it makes it impossible to note structural parallels across various eras, for example, to observe that because it lacked constitutional rights, protection of minorities, and proper checks and balances, the classical Athenian democracy was of an illiberal sort. Second, it assumes too much discontinuity. The conflicts around "liquidity" predate the postmodern era as liberalism—a robust ideological framework dating back to the first decades of the 19th century—has consistently advocated for the loosening of traditional social bonds in favor of promoting individual autonomy and choice. The criticisms of liberalism in the 2020s typically echo those of the 1920s. Those who rejected the liberal experiment in the early 20th century (including most of the European governments) deserve to be considered illiberal.

Laruelle's proposal to restrict the concept of illiberalism to societies that have experienced liberalism seems unnecessarily limiting as well. In the integrated global media environment, the products of liberalism and the various features of liberal democracy can trigger a backlash in any corner of the world, irrespective of direct experience. Hamid (2014), for example, finds the illiberal label fitting for Islamist movements particularly well. Admittedly, there is less analytic utility in calling the Iranian or the Chinese leadership illiberal than in calling the Hungarian one so, but the motives and arguments behind questioning liberal standards may be very similar in these cases.

Obviously, relaxing the scope limitations implies more heterogeneity. But if actors from advanced knowledge economies, impoverished societies, emerging democracies, and even authoritarian contexts are part of the same global conversation, then they need to be analyzed together, despite the differences in local contexts.

One of the further specificities of Laruelle's (2002) definition is that it identifies liberalism as the opposite of illiberalism, the target to which it reacts. Thinking of illiberalism as the opposite of a particular ideology can

have problematic consequences. It may be interpreted, or misinterpreted, as creating a stark divide between liberalism and other ideologies such as social democracy, Christian democracy, conservatism, environmentalism, and so forth. But these latter traditions are integral constituents of liberal democratic regimes. While they react negatively to several scripts of liberalism, they embrace many of the values once championed primarily by liberals. Therefore, we need a definition that keeps them explicitly outside of the illiberal box.

A further question concerns the scripts listed as representing liberalism. Some of them, like the neoliberal and liberal colonialist scripts, belong to the periphery of the liberal ideology and not to its core (Freeden, 2009), and are rejected by many liberals. Without any doubt, these scripts emerged out of classical liberalism, and, even more importantly, illiberal actors often consider these aspects as inherently tied to political liberalism. Therefore, Laruelle (2002) is right that the attacks against them need to be part of the research agenda of illiberalism. But because many, perhaps even most, contemporary liberals repudiate them, they are better kept separate from the definition of liberalism/illiberalism itself.

Finally, the most controversial decision is to exclude the possibility of leftist illiberalism. This follows from identifying illiberalism with the support for traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity. "These two features exclude today's leftist movements, which almost systematically defend cultural liberalism and largely advance an inclusive definition of the nation" (Laruelle, 2022, p. 318). On this issue, three points can be raised. First, quite a few leftist actors, like Slovak politician Robert Fico, the Czech Communists, or the Bulgarian Socialists, have made peace with cultural homogeneity and traditional hierarchies. Second, while radical leftist projects typically stay away from demanding ethnocultural homogeneity, their occasional insistence on ideational, class-based, or behavioral homogeneities follows a similar approach, equally at odds with liberal democratic values. Therefore, treating them together may help the analysis. Finally, a conceptual apparatus that excludes Leninist and Maoist movements, the Venezuelan regime under Chavez and Maduro, the South African Economic Freedom Fighters, or Western progressive activists, who promote deplatforming their opponents from the scope of the illiberal concept would be, simply, one-sided.

In fact, the leftist critique of liberalism is almost indistinguishable from the conservative one in certain areas: both oppose rational-universalistic and individualistic worldviews, complain about the liberals' readiness to insulate the legal system from social influences, and identify liberal economic policies as the main causes of social malaise (Blokker, 2021; Holmes, 1993). Empirical research may show leftist illiberalism to be less consequential than its right-wing variety, but to build typologies and map the varieties of illiberalism, its inclusion in the overall framework is essential.

3. Recalibrating the Definition

Building on previous definitions, but also departing from them, I propose to define illiberalism as the rejection of the underlying principles of liberal democracy. While liberal democracy is conceptualized in various ways, most of its features can be subsumed under three principles: (a) limited power, (b) neutral state, and (c) open society.

Among these, the demand for limited power is the least controversial. The fight against the arbitrary and unconstrained rule, the defense of the rule of law, is the oldest concern of those who wish to enhance freedom

and the rule of the people. The importance of this principle is also reflected in the fact that the essence of liberal democracy is typically framed in terms of the rights of citizens, accountability, and limitations on rulers, features that are less central to other conceptions of democracy.

In contrast, state neutrality is a more disputed principle. For current purposes, neutrality refers to overlapping concepts of impartiality, evenhandedness, non-discrimination, and inclusiveness. The Rawlsian demand that the state should be impartial vis-à-vis alternative conceptions of the good and that it must justify its actions in a way acceptable from all reasonable points of view, whether correct or mistaken, is debated by some supporters of liberal democracy (Arneson, 2003; Raz, 1986), but others consider it to be both a leading value of liberalism and an operational feature of democratic arrangements (Dworkin, 1985; Kis, 2012; Patten, 2012). The principle of state neutrality limits the scope of state interventions by assigning the task of selecting which ways of life are valuable and which are worthless to the cultural marketplace of civil society rather than to governments. But it does not equal moral relativism and it permits state actions that support the existence of an adequate range of options—in other words, pluralism (Kymlicka, 1989).

Lastly, open society is a somewhat less commonly used category in academic literature to denote a fundamental principle of liberal democracy, but it appears suitable for identifying the nature of socio-cultural conditions presupposed by liberal democratic systems. Building on the original understanding of the term (for Henri Bergson it meant moral universalism and for Karl Popper rational individualism), open society is understood here to refer to forms of communication and social relations based on universalism, free-thinking, tolerance, individual autonomy, and moral equality, as opposed to inherited and uncritically accepted collective loyalties and antagonisms. Support for an open society does not imply denigrating in-group norms, but it does allow for their critical review.

Accordingly, a political system is liberal democratic if (a) the political institutions constrain the leaders, (b) the state treats all its citizens as equals and does not favor or disfavor anyone based on their conception of the good life or group membership, and (c) it is underpinned by dispositions and social practices such as argument-based public discourse, tolerance, pluralism, universalism, and respect for the individual.

It follows that the term illiberalism should primarily apply to efforts aimed at power concentration, partisan state, and closed society. These efforts can consist of political actions and their justifying ideas, but because ideas provide coherence, the emphasis will be on the latter.

Each aspect of illiberalism can unfold in the following distinct ways (see also Figure 1):

- Power concentration is advanced firstly by rejecting constraints on executive power, typically by attacking or undermining counter-majoritarian institutions. Secondly, it can be facilitated by advocating for the curtailment of political rights. The first implies opposition to horizontal accountability and the second to vertical accountability.
- Attacks on state neutrality imply either the authoritative imposition of cultural standards on non-mainstream groups or the prioritization of the dominant group in distributive conflicts, depriving specific individuals or entire groups of the resources needed for participation in democratic deliberations. The use of state administration as the instrument of a political party is evidently part of the "partisan state" syndrome, just as the use of public broadcasting to promote particularistic worldviews.

- Support for a closed society is expressed in two ways. First, it manifests through resistance to social changes perceived as externally generated and non-organic, and through opposition to norms that extend beyond group identities and individual societies. The norms of universal human rights and international governance are cases in point. Second, it is represented by the advocacy for non-rational and uncivil forms of decision-making, including the demonization of political opponents and opposition to the culture of skeptical scrutiny (the rejection of the "liberal ethics of controversy"; Main, 2021, p. 59). While opposition to state neutrality primarily involves favoring one group and its norms through state actions, support for a closed society centers on intolerance toward non-mainstream ideas and behaviors in social relations.

To qualify as a liberal democracy, all three listed characteristics—limited power, neutral state, and open society—must be present, constituting a coherent vision. This is not the case with illiberalism, as there are multiple ways to attack these principles, and not all need to be attacked at once. The Wittgensteinian family resemblance logic applies: there may be no single attribute that illiberals share except that they all question some essential aspect of liberal democracy.

The existence of "many roads to Rome" (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019) does not mean that quantification can play no role in empirical investigations of illiberalism. One may rank discourses or policy profiles by considering the centrality of the above claims, the uncompromising nature of the positions, or the comprehensiveness of the attacks against liberal democratic principles.

By juxtaposing illiberalism with the principles of liberal democracy, I steer clear of two alternative options. Firstly, I avoid opposing it to liberal ideology, preventing the implication that all critics of liberal ideas, whether democratic or not, embody illiberalism. Secondly, I refrain from defining illiberalism solely as the negation of checks and balances, constitutional rights, independent judiciary, and free and fair elections. While the rejection of these institutional aspects eminently deserves the illiberal label, it is more fortunate to contrast illiberalism with a broader understanding of liberal democracy. This broad understanding (the liberal democratic vision) must include those moral fundamentals and cultural value orientations without which the political institutions would not survive. Illiberalism is opposed to these principles, regardless of whether institutional alternatives are proposed.

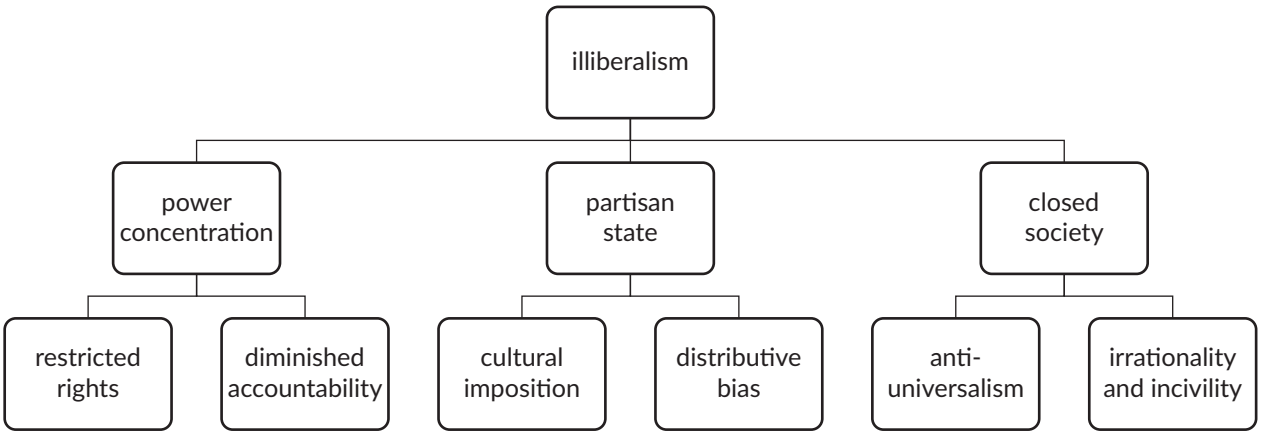

Figure 1. Components and manifestations of illiberalism.

While this approach implies, similarly to Laruelle (2022), an emphasis on ideas and culture, it is important to see that the cultural references are kept thin. This is necessary to allow for legitimate disagreements within liberal democracy on important issues such as gender relations, specific rights of sexual minorities, border openness, or reproductive rights. Equality is also considered here in a thin way: the illiberal label is assigned only to those who question the political and moral equality of community members or support depriving them of resources necessary for participation in democratic deliberations. The definition does not promote the exclusion of non-citizens into the very center of the concept as the approach of Kauth and King (2020) does.

In contrast to the earlier discussed approaches, the proposed definition does not exclude the possibility of leftist illiberalism. Furthermore, it avoids incorporating phenomena better considered as possible correlates of illiberalism, such as corruption, charismatic leadership, or polarization. While disrespect for open-ended debates and adversaries frequently entails polarization and the lack of constraints on power often facilitates corrupt practices, illiberals tend to project unity onto community members and can be effective against corruption if it is not needed for their economic or cultural hegemony.

Furthermore, this definition does not contain direct references to ideas central to Laruelle's (2022) and Smilova's (2021) conceptualizations, such as traditionalism, nation-centrism, realist reaction to post-modernity, "common good" anti-individualism, etc. I consider these as possible applications of the illiberal logic, not as part of the definition. Moving the definition to a higher level of abstraction increases its ability to travel through space and time. Empirical investigations may very well prove that in contemporary politics illiberalism indeed manifests itself through the applications identified by Laruelle (2022) and Smilova (2021). But rather than viewing these orientations as defining characteristics of illiberalism, it is more useful to consider them as its most significant contemporary themes. This also means that one allows for significant changes across time and space in the array of topics addressed by illiberalism. For example, the international liberal order can become a central target of criticism for a while and then fade away, replaced by other tropes, without necessitating a change in the fundamental definition.

A further consequence of the proposed definitional strategy is that specific topics or positions belong to the illiberalism syndrome only if a direct negative link between them and liberal democratic principles can be established. For example, traditionalism is illiberal only to the extent it conflicts with individual autonomy and universalism. Opposition to the America-dominated, international liberal order is illiberal only if it can be shown to contradict support for an open society, limitations on power, or international cooperation.

The literature tends to emphasize that illiberalism is compatible with elections, it may respect specific democratic mechanisms, and it often emerges from democratic contexts. I agree, which is why illiberalism means something other than anti-democracy. But to conclude that one can speak of illiberalism only in competitive electoral regimes is another unnecessary restriction, forcing one to counterintuitively abandon the term whenever the degree of competitiveness falls below a certain threshold even if all the players and their ideologies remain the same. To put it differently, while the term illiberalism may be most useful in electoral regimes, the presence and endorsement of elections should not be a definitional matter.

Finally, it follows from the approach that one does not need to oppose every single principle of liberal democracy to be illiberal. Since all the listed principles are essential and consequential, violating any of them implies a departure from liberal democratic norms and a rejection of the liberal democratic vision. This

amounts to understanding illiberalism as a broad, umbrella concept that accommodates radically different arguments. In other words, illiberalism is not a specific ideology but a syndrome whose common core is the questioning of liberal democracy.

The proposed definition attempts to optimize the eight principles of concept formation proposed by Gerring (1999): familiarity, resonance, parsimony, coherence, differentiation, depth, theoretical utility, and field utility. It incorporates as many of the term's standard meanings as possible (familiarity and resonance), it is structured around three components (parsimony), these components all refer to the liberal democratic vision (coherence), the concept is sufficiently distinct from terms like anti-democratic orientation or traditionalism (differentiation), it identifies six different manifestations (depth), it helps map the intersection between ideologies and political regimes (theoretical utility), and it can be used without damaging neighboring concepts used to capture aspects of this area (field utility).

Not all these objectives can be maximized, however, some trade-offs are necessary. Since we need a broad concept, the definition is most challengable in the aspect of differentiation. The two terms that overlap most with illiberalism are authoritarianism and populism. Therefore, I now turn to the question of how to differentiate illiberalism from these two concepts.

4. Relations to Other Concepts: Authoritarianism and Populism

Authoritarianism is perhaps the concept closest to illiberalism. Delineating the two is challenging due to the compartmentalized nature of the authoritarianism literature, which includes socio-psychological, political behavioral, and political regime sub-literatures, each with diverging definitions (Waller, 2023). Existing regime classifications typically define authoritarianism as either the opposite of democracy or an intermediary regime between democracy and autocracy. Juan Linz's typology (Linz, 1975) describes authoritarianism as a regime that is less ideological, less oppressive, and more traditionalist than totalitarianism. Pappas's glossary, on the other hand, defines authoritarianism as a political system "of limited pluralism and low social mobilization run by an interventionist and ideological state; it occasionally allows unfair elections" (Pappas, 2019, p. 365).

Regardless of the approach, authoritarian regimes oppose virtually all principles of liberal democracy. In this regard, they qualify as illiberal. Furthermore, in contemporary politics, they have no choice but to oppose these principles consciously. Therefore, in the realm of modern regimes, we are speaking of a subset relationship, with illiberalism being the superset.

This understanding contrasts with Waller's (2023) perspective, which considers authoritarian (non-democratic) regimes distinct from those supporting illiberal ideas. Waller argues that authoritarian regimes can be based on various ideological tenets, including liberalism. While I agree, I contend that the source of specific policies or official discourse is secondary to whether the principles of liberal democracy are respected. For example, Singapore's current regime may embody many liberal elements, but its violations of liberal democratic principles make it both illiberal and authoritarian.

When examining attitudes and values, however, the differences between illiberalism and authoritarianism become more pronounced. In social psychology, authoritarianism typically denotes a combination of

submissiveness, conventionalism, and aggression, along with a morally absolutist desire for the coercive imposition of particular beliefs (Altemeyer, 1981; Duckitt, 2022). The term is also often narrowly applied to social conservative preferences and law-and-order concerns. Cas Mudde defines authoritarianism as a belief in a strictly ordered society where breaches of authority are met with severe punishment (Mudde, 2007, p. 23).

Most definitions in the socio-psychological and political behavior literature position conformity, support for hierarchical relations, strict penalization of rule-breakers, and opposition to bottom-up democratic mechanisms at the core of authoritarianism. But none of them are essential for illiberalism. While some illiberal projects may rely on such preferences, others are rather structured around very different ideas and sentiments, including revolutionary, anti-establishment, or eschatological attitudes and beliefs.

Populism, the other key concept, neighbors illiberalism from the opposite side. Simply put, while authoritarianism attacks liberal democracy from above, populism attacks it from below. Existing populist regimes, such as Venezuela's, may be managed from the top, but they fit the classical populist narrative where the homogenous people's general will is threatened by corrupt elites (primarily the local rich and their international allies in Venezuela's case).

Populism asserts that the will of the people, often operationalized as majoritarianism, must prevail without compromise due to the logic of popular sovereignty (Abts & Rummens, 2007) and the moral superiority of the people (Meijers & Zaslove, 2021; Mudde, 2007; Urbinati, 2019). While authoritarianism focuses on hierarchical relations, populism emphasizes boundless majoritarian decision-making. Accordingly, Sajó (2021) views populism as limitless majoritarianism, a totalitarian version of democracy.

Populism overlaps with authoritarianism and illiberalism in its hostility towards power-limiting institutions. Its illiberal and authoritarian potential stems from its insistence on the homogeneity of the people, rejection of compromise, and opposition to representative institutions and constitutional constraints (Calhoun, 2020).

Understandably, many scholars associate populism closely with illiberalism, sometimes even equating the two. Takis Pappas, for instance, defines populism as democratic illiberalism (Pappas, 2019). This parsimonious definition highlights a salient characteristic of many populist movements. However, this approach is problematic. Many actors, such as Spain's Podemos or the historical American Populist Party, are widely acknowledged as populist without being illiberal. Moreover, Pappas projects anti-elitism onto illiberalism:

> Illiberal politics is motivated by a monochromatic rather than pluralist view of a world, in which the body politic in societies can belong to one of only two camps—one composed of the "people" and another comprising some "establishment," that is, the people's foes. (Pappas, 2019, p. 58)

It is unclear why pro-establishment forces should be excluded from the scope of illiberal politics.

Other scholars rather emphasize the differences between populism and illiberalism. Laruelle (2022), for instance, aligns with those who view populism as a "discursive frame that juxtaposes the people against the elite, characterized by immediate and direct communication that intentionally disregards the norms of polite speech and behavior" (Laruelle, 2022, p. 317). Consequently, populism is seen as distinct from ideological

opposition to liberalism. She draws attention not only to the existence of populist movements that are not illiberal but also to the fact that many actors, e.g., Vladimir Putin, are illiberal but not populist. Such actors, instead of propagating popular sovereignty, believe in some other ultimate authority, for example, in state sovereignty.

There is further room for differentiating the two concepts. Illiberalism does not inherently oppose intermediaries between leaders and the people, while populism does. Populism politicizes society in its search for the volonté générale, whereas illiberalism does not necessarily do so. Public opinion-based justifications are optional for illiberalism but essential for populism. Both are compatible with majoritarianism, but non-majoritarian populism is a contradiction in terms, while non-majoritarian illiberalism is conceivable.

To conclude this section, authoritarianism, populism, and illiberalism can be given different meanings, even if specific actors and regimes frequently use some cocktail of the three. From the perspective of illiberalism, authoritarianism and populism are separate angles from which liberal democracy can be questioned. The populist angle means to criticize liberal democratic principles as alien from the popular will, while the authoritarian angle means to reject these principles because they place freedom above order.

5. Variants

Illiberalism has been introduced as an umbrella concept encompassing various ideas and practices that challenge the fundamental principles of liberal democracy. The next logical step would be to build an elaborate typology. Unfortunately, this is not currently feasible. A full typology can only be created through dialogue with empirical material, as many relevant dimensions may emerge from issues politicized in particular contexts. Therefore, the units and dimensions of the typology are likely to differ across time and space. For example, attitudes towards environmentalism or technological changes, while not currently major divides, are likely to become polarizing dimensions in the future, defining separate ideological templates. Specific issues such as immigration, gender politics, tariffs, or attitudes towards supranational institutions like the European Union can easily become sources of significant differences, even collisions, among illiberal actors. For instance, understanding why various right-wing illiberal initiatives do not coalesce into one large bloc in the European Parliament may require considering attitudes towards Russia as a major dividing line. Similarly, attitudes towards Israel or the United States can play a significant role in certain periods and places. Furthermore, different dimensions may be relevant at different levels of analysis, depending on whether one studies the work of intellectuals, party programs, governmental actions, or citizens' attitudes.

In other words, a one-size-fits-all typology is unlikely to emerge. Nevertheless, I propose nine distinct versions of illiberalism, or nine "roads to Rome" (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019), to illustrate the concept's wide coverage. These varieties are based on intuitive guesses rather than pure logic or systematic empirical investigation. Due to space constraints, only the most essential characteristics and some straightforward empirical manifestations are sketched.

5.1. Populist Illiberalism

In fact, by identifying populism and authoritarianism as two separate angles, the first step towards creating a typology has already been completed. Accordingly, a major way of questioning the principles of liberal democracy is the populist way. This approach is characterized by assertions of the absolute authority of the ordinary people's will, devoid of compromise, and accompanied by sweeping critiques of elite establishments. This is perhaps the most thoroughly mapped variety of illiberalism, given the extensive research on populism, which has produced several scales for both mass and expert surveys.

5.2. Authoritarian Illiberalism

The second approach is the authoritarian way. Giveaways include calls for unrestricted police power, nostalgia for compulsory military service as a means of instilling discipline in youth, rejection of bottom-up democratic mechanisms that limit leaders' authority, demands for harsher punishment of rule-breakers, and opposition to the political involvement of the "undeserving" or "unfit" groups such as the uneducated.

5.3. Traditionalist Illiberalism

The third route to attacking liberal democracy is the traditionalist route. This is probably the most visible version of illiberalism today. It includes criticisms of the emancipation of women and sexual minorities and calls to resist the spread of egalitarian moral codes. Traditionalist illiberals aim to defend patriarchal family models and hierarchical gender roles, often at the expense of principles such as non-discrimination, freedom of speech, the autonomy of educational institutions, or the right to challenge inherited taboos.

5.4. Religious Illiberalism

A related but distinct angle is provided by religious approaches. Arguments that question liberal democratic principles using explicit references to religiosity, either as a value or as a focus of collective identification, belong here. Building political programs on fundamentalist adherence to religious dogmas, providing privileged positions to members or leaders of particular religious organizations, and demanding symbolic recognition of specific religious traditions are examples.

5.5. Paternalist Illiberalism

The fifth type of challenge to liberal democracy comes from paternalist arguments (Enyedi, 2024a, 2024b). Paternalist illiberalism calls for state guidance and intervention in both economic and non-economic realms. It places the responsibility of protecting and educating citizens on a select group of actors who are supposed to have intimate access to historical traditions, revolutionary knowledge, or moral excellence. This approach intersects with traditionalism but focuses on individuals' perceived inability to navigate life without guardianship. It underscores the state's responsibility to promote valuable lifestyles while discouraging those it views as lacking worth.

5.6. Libertarian Illiberalism

The sixth way, perhaps the least self-evident, is the libertarian approach. Although freedom is the most fundamental value of the liberal democratic vision, liberal democracy involves limited government, meaning some government. Libertarian illiberals reject even those state actions aimed at mitigating blatantly exploitative social relations and condemn interventions meant to secure basic human dignity, safety, health, and freedom. Such interventions are perceived as state overreach, as exemplified by many anti-vaccine movements during Covid-19.

5.7. Nativist Illiberalism

The seventh form of illiberalism is the nativist or ethnic nationalist type. This approach insists on the privileged position of the dominant cultural-ethnic group. The imposition of particular cultural standards on every citizen is justified by claims of cultural superiority or the assertion that the dominant group's survival depends on the social and political system identifying with that group. This orientation is most often expressed through opposition to the inclusion of ethnic minorities and immigrants, particularly those from different cultural-religious traditions. The empirical measurement of nativist illiberalism can rely on routinely applied indicators of prejudice, discrimination, and ethnocentrism. Criticism of cosmopolitans and globalists may also belong here, but only if associated with a demand for a closed society. In Europe, the nativist-nationalist orientation has recently been complemented by a supra-ethnic civilizationist logic (Brubaker, 2017), bringing distinct ethnocultural units together against perceived rival civilizations, incorporating anti-traditionalist and pro-gender equality arguments against cultural outsiders.

5.8. Materialistic Illiberalism

The eighth, and perhaps the least obviously ideological perspective, is the materialistic-technocratic type. This approach rejects efforts to uphold the principles of liberal democracy because they come with costs. For materialist illiberals, the scope of legitimate politics is narrowed to the efficient management of the status quo. Reforms aimed at maximizing values such as freedom or equality are seen as unnecessary virtue-signaling or harmful interventions. Various versions of Ronald Inglehart's well-known postmaterialism scales can serve as indicators of this orientation but reversed.

5.9. Left-Wing Illiberalism

The final type is left-wing illiberalism. This category covers anti-capitalistic, egalitarian, and collectivistic criticisms of liberal democratic principles. Positions that express a willingness to sacrifice freedom of expression, pluralism, neutral state, limited government, or privacy in return for social justice, equality, and progress belong here.

It is the job of empirical investigation to verify the existence of these and potentially other varieties of illiberalism. Many of these types may overlap in practice and are better merged for certain domains. It is also clear that some types are relevant only in specific environments. Euroscepticism, for example, may be a robust and consequential orientation in certain European Union countries, meriting a separate type. Public opinion surveys, elite surveys, expert surveys, focus groups, policy analyses, and text analyses of party

manifestos, political speeches, social media conversations, legacy media products, and even novels could provide information on different levels. Such analyses could reveal differences between political actors with otherwise relatively similar profiles (e.g., the traditionalist but non-nativist Recep Tayyip Erdoğan vs. the traditionalist-nativist Viktor Orbán vs. the non-traditionalist but nativist Geert Wilders), while also showing how these actors converge in their opposition to the liberal democratic vision.

6. Conclusions

The article argued for conceptualizing illiberalism not as a stage between democracy and dictatorship, nor as a specific ideology, but as a complex, internally differentiated ideational syndrome that inspires action against liberal democracy. Through a critical analysis of recent conceptual innovations, I propose a fine-tuned definition of illiberalism that focuses on the rejection of three main principles of liberal democracy: limited power, a neutral state, and an open society.

The proposed definition is less thick than some other conceptualizations. While acknowledging the importance of the criticism of post-modernity to contemporary Western illiberal projects, I recommend not identifying illiberalism solely with this criticism. Although illiberalism is often accompanied by corruption, charismatic leadership, or polarization, and is most fruitfully applied in electoral political regimes, I suggest leaving these phenomena outside the concept's boundaries. This strategy allows for a wider temporal and geographic scope while keeping the definition anchored in the concept of liberal democracy, rather than treating it as a summary of empirically observable trends.

Liberal democracy is a homogeneous concept in the sense that its principles are interrelated, providing an integrated political vision. Illiberalism, on the other hand, is not. Power concentration, a partisan state, and a closed society can be promoted in multiple ways, based on different logic and arguments. Illiberalism research should cover all these logic and arguments, even if they attack only one fundamental principle of liberal democracy. Therefore, illiberalism is best understood as an umbrella concept, that leaves room for distinct sub-types. Some types proposed in this article (e.g., the authoritarian, traditionalist, religious fundamentalist, libertarian, and nativist-nationalist types) are more commonly found on the right, while others (e.g., the populist, paternalist, and materialist-technocratic types) are open to both leftist and rightist interpretations. The definition also allows for the emergence of a distinctly left-wing variety. The exact relations and prominence of the individual orientations should be a matter of empirical investigation.

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