



The Myth of Democratic Resilience

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In light of the two-decade-long global democratic recession, which continues to deepen, scholars of democracy along with policymakers and activists have become increasingly focused on the need to build democratic resilience. Following the work of political scientist Wolfgang Merkel, we now commonly understand democratic resilience as having two critical components: first, the ability of a political system to withstand authoritarian threats; and second, the capacity of that system to adapt and become both more durable and more democratic.¹ The idea underpinning this framing is that true resilience is about more than simply preventing authoritarian collapse. It also involves the capacity in the aftermath of an authoritarian turn not just to bounce back but to fortify the political system on the basis of core democratic principles—essentially future-proofing democracy.²

This broader, more transformative framing of democratic resilience makes sense. There are numerous reasons why a simple return to the state of play prior to an authoritarian episode will not safeguard global democracy, not least because many countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as well as some in Europe, were at best flawed democracies to begin with. Yet the heavy and optimistic emphasis on so-called democratic U-turns, bolstered by seemingly positive recent examples such as Poland and Senegal, obscures an uncomfortable truth: In reality, since 1994, many of the political systems that supposedly returned to democracy after an authoritarian

episode did not manage to reverse the damage done to their democracies, and in fact subsequently experienced another period of democratic decline within less than five years.

The case of Brazil illustrates the fragility of democratic turnarounds. In the 2022 presidential election, the right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro (2019–23) lost to former president Luiz Ignácio Lula da Silva, despite employing a range of undemocratic strategies. Two years on, Lula's return to power has yet to erase the legacies of Bolsonaro's leadership, let alone build a stronger democratic system. Brazil remains a polarized country, with many citizens still believing Bolsonaro's (false) claims of a rigged election that inspired some supporters to attack federal government buildings in the wake of his defeat. Clear-eyed analyses of other countries regularly cited as having recently demonstrated resilience, including Bangladesh and Zambia, tell a similar story.

More broadly, our analysis of all countries that experienced a democratic turnaround—that is, to have gone from being democratic to authoritarian and back again—since 1994 reveals that nearly 90 percent failed to sustain the level of democracy they returned to for at least five years following the end of the turnaround.³ Rather than a victory for democracy, the temporary nature of these U-turns may simply reflect ongoing patterns of political volatility. We must therefore ask why countries that appear to bounce back so often fail to redemocratize.

A review of a database of 30 cases between 1990 and 2022 suggests three important and widely shared factors. First, even short bouts with autocratization can have a lasting impact on democracy. Legal changes that introduce repressive legislation may be difficult to reverse, especially when combined with personnel changes that place antidemocratic individuals in key positions, inserting autocratic veto players into the political system. These kinds of authoritarian

holdovers have complicated efforts to strengthen democracy in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Poland, and Sri Lanka.

The second key factor is the desire—not to mention the motives and incentives—of prodemocratic political leaders, parties, and coalitions to stay in power once they have won election. Prodemocracy alliances are often broad churches, with some members determined to promote democratic norms and others more interested in using the coalition to strengthen their own chances of taking power. It is therefore not surprising that the new governments they form often resist relinquishing the extensive powers inherited from the previous autocratic regime. This issue is particularly acute in contexts where political institutions are fragile and public trust in politics is low. In these kinds of political contexts—which tend to be particularly pronounced in Africa, Asia, and South America—even leaders with democratic intentions may find little motivation to foster a more durable, accountable regime. In Zambia, for example, the government of President Hakainde Hichilema (2021–present) has begun to roll back its commitment to strengthen democracy in the wake of his predecessor Edgar Lungu’s more authoritarian rule (2015–21).

Finally, the conditions for strengthening democracy globally have deteriorated over the last thirty years. Social polarization around identity, a greater willingness among citizens to tolerate authoritarian interventions if civilian leaders fail to deliver on promises, and cross-border misinformation and propaganda campaigns—spread, for example, by Russia in parts of Eastern Europe and West Africa—have proliferated alongside rising anti-elite and anti-rights narratives. We have seen various combinations of these factors stymie attempts to deepen democracy in Mali, Malawi, Mexico, Moldova, and elsewhere.

Taken together, the combined effect of these factors means that countries are unlikely to improve their democracies after an authoritarian episode—or even to maintain the level of democracy they had beforehand for very long. Instead, there is a risk that after every authoritarian episode, the likelihood that a country will rebound to its previous level may diminish. We must therefore critically evaluate U-turns and claims of democratic resilience in order to develop a more realistic understanding of the danger that authoritarian episodes pose to global democracy.

Separating Aspirations from Reality

Perhaps the most thoroughly operationalized understanding of democratic resilience comes from ongoing work at the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, which has identified and measured three different kinds of resilience: 1) onset resilience, where autocratization is prevented altogether; 2) breakdown resilience, where autocratization occurs but regime change is avoided; and, finally, bounce-back resilience—where democracies recover after a short period of autocratization.⁴ Resilience as recovery manifests in two ways: Democratic U-turns occur when a country returns to roughly the same level of democracy it had before the backsliding episode on V-Dem’s Electoral Democracy Index (EDI), while J-turns are turnarounds that surpass the prior level of democracy. Between 1900 and 2022, nearly 70 percent of all turnaround episodes were U-turns.⁵

The frequency with which democracies have historically rebounded have led some to claim that U-turns are the “hope for democratic resilience.”⁶ The data generated by V-Dem is extremely useful, and the project has contributed greatly to our understandings of democracy, but this conclusion is overly—and dangerously—optimistic. For one, “U-turn” is a descriptive label

denoting when a decrease in the level of democracy is followed by and linked to a subsequent and (roughly) equal increase. In practice, this means that a nondemocratic regime can exhibit a “democratic” turnaround while remaining a nondemocracy. Indeed, of the 68 U-turns between 1900 and 2022, 36 (52 percent) started and ended as nondemocracies.⁷ Two more (3 percent) began as democracies but made only partial reversals, ending as nondemocracies. A process that does not result in a country becoming democratic is weak evidence of resilience.

A second limitation with this approach is that it treats all democratic turnarounds as substantively similar. While allowing us to identify valuable trends in the extent and magnitude of democratic turnarounds, doing so can obscure vital contextual differences over the 122-year period and thus risks conflating highly different turnaround processes—mainstream democratization in Costa Rica (1948–54), liberation after wartime occupation in the Netherlands during and after World War II (1940–49), military coups followed by transitions back to democracy in Argentina (1966–74), and executive encroachments in South Korea (2008–17). Each of these countries experienced similar U-like changes in their levels of democracy. Yet recovering from a coup surely represents quite a different challenge for democracy than postwar liberation or the concentration of executive power. We know that democracies die differently today.⁸ The strategies that enable turnaround are therefore undoubtedly different.⁹

Finally, and perhaps most worryingly, a deeper look at the substance behind democratic turnarounds reveals that they are increasingly fleeting in nature. Let us focus on those turnarounds that returned countries to a state of democracy after an authoritarian episode and consider *enduring turnarounds* to have taken place only when that level of democracy is maintained for at least five years.¹⁰ This leaves 19 turnarounds before 1994, and 21 after (Table 1). Before 1994, most U-turns (81.8 percent) were enduring. After that, however, only two (10.5

percent) reached the five-year mark.¹¹ This is a remarkable decline of almost 70 percent, and begs the question of why contemporary U-turns are so much less durable than their predecessors.

TABLES 1 AND 2 HERE

Even where turnarounds have lasted five years, progress toward stable democracy has often been slight. Take, for example, Mali and Malawi (Table 2), the only two cases of enduring democratic turnarounds since 1994. Malawi maintained a consistent, if low, level of democracy for the first five years after the U-turn, but in the sixth year became nondemocratic once more. Mali's progress has been even less auspicious. The country remained stably democratic, if weakly so, for five years. But by year six, it too had become nondemocratic, suffering two coups in 2020 and 2021.

A brief examination of U-turns since 1994 therefore suggests that they are poor evidence of a lasting victory for democracy. At best, they reflect something more akin to regime volatility. At worst, they presage another multiyear downturn. This empirical reality calls for caution in terms of how such episodes are interpreted. True resilience is rare. Durable democratic turnarounds are practically nonexistent in the contemporary world.

The Barriers to Building Resilience

There are three main reasons that democratic turnarounds tend to be fleeting. First, authoritarian holdovers from the previous government often prove harder to reverse than expected. Second, prodemocracy parties and coalitions are complex in nature, and often include leaders driven more by short-term political interests than a commitment to democracy. Third, the context for democratization is much more challenging today due to changes in both global politics and popular attitudes. Especially when all three factors play out in a single country, the

prospects for democratic renewal are severely constrained. Not only are previous authoritarian losses unlikely to be compensated for by democratic gains, but the democratization project is likely to be vulnerable to subversion or even defeat, triggering another authoritarian episode.

Dealing with Authoritarian Holdovers. Autocratizing leaders do not just work around the rules. They often seek to exploit existing weaknesses and rewrite, or even break, the law to suit their purposes. Three main strategies enable autocrats to change both the rules of the game and the referees overseeing it. First, they use existing powers to place loyalists in powerful positions throughout the political system, including key institutions such as the judiciary. In the United States, President Donald Trump had three opportunities to fill Supreme Court vacancies during his first period in office (2017–21), effectively producing a 6-3 conservative majority. Similarly, in Brazil, Bolsonaro used his appointment powers to foster political and bureaucratic militarization: The former military officer put army generals in charge of some key ministries, including defense and health; during his presidency, the number of military personnel in senior national- and state-level roles increased by 438.¹²

The second key tactic is to introduce new legislation that weakens democratic checks and balances and facilitates authoritarian rule. Often called lawfare,¹³ such legislation may weaken the security of tenured judges, impose stringent restrictions on civil society and the press, and empower the government to enforce censorship online in the guise of promoting cybersecurity. In Poland, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) moved quickly after winning power in 2015 to pass legislation giving it control over the media, beginning with a January 2016 law that empowered the treasury minister to hire and fire the heads of public-radio and -television stations without oversight by independent media councils. In the following months, dozens of journalists, editors,

and managers deemed insufficiently loyal to the ruling party were dismissed or pressured to resign and replaced by figures aligned with or openly supportive of PiS's agenda.¹⁴

Meanwhile in India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party amended the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) in 2010 and again in 2020 to put tighter limits on the foreign funding that NGOs are allowed to receive and stripped thousands of NGOs, including many human-rights and minority-rights groups, of their operating licenses. Many surviving organizations have since been raided by the Income Tax Department, the Enforcement Directorate (the financial-crimes agency), and the Central Bureau of Investigation.¹⁵ India is just one example of a much broader trend: Between 1990 and 2024, 130 countries enacted laws or policies restricting NGO operations, with a particular focus on those engaging in democracy and human-rights work.¹⁶

Finally, autocratizing leaders have an inherent advantage over their democratic counterparts: They may simply break the rules to achieve rapid political change. The recent military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are blatant examples of this. In all three countries the coupmakers not only suspended the constitution but also political parties. Rule-breaking regularly appears in other less-extreme variants. To return to Poland, the PiS bypassed due process to stack the Constitutional Tribunal, the country's highest court with the power of judicial review. In doing so, PiS refused to recognize judges appointed by the outgoing government, even though the Supreme Court had upheld their appointments, and used its legislative majority to replace them with loyalists. Finally, PiS installed Julia Przyłębska—a judge sympathetic to the party—as president of the Tribunal in 2016.

Taken together, these strategies allow autocratizing leaders to cause considerable harm even in just one or two terms in office. By changing the legal or constitutional framework

governing politics and appointing allies to key oversight institutions, autocratizers leave an authoritarian legacy that can be extremely difficult to overturn. In Brazil after Bolsonaro, for example, efforts to indict high-ranking civil and military officials involved in the attempt to overturn the 2023 election have worsened civil-military relations while doing little to overcome the deep political polarization that threatens to undermine Brazilian democracy.

The experience of Sri Lanka illustrates how difficult it is to rebuild institutions once they have been hollowed out from within. During his ten years in office, President Mahinda Rajapaksa weakened judicial independence, consolidated executive authority, and enacted systematic repression against journalists and opposition figures. In 2015, Rajapaksa lost the presidency to Maithripala Sirisena, who promised to limit presidential powers through constitutional amendments, reconstitute oversight bodies, and restore the autonomy of key state institutions.

Despite initial momentum, however, Sirisena's reform project encountered significant structural and political barriers. Many of the institutions targeted for reform remained populated by Rajapaksa loyalists, while public trust in government had deteriorated to such an extent that efforts to entrench new democratic norms lacked a solid foundation. In the absence of a comprehensive restructuring of the state apparatus, authoritarian-era actors could still obstruct reform from within.

The legacy of PiS has cast a similar shadow in Poland since the party's defeat in 2023. The Constitutional Tribunal has stymied efforts by the new prime minister, Donald Tusk, to depoliticize the media. Partly as a result, Tusk's government pushed two bills designed to overhaul the Tribunal through the legislature. The reforms, intended to foster the court's independence and restore its credibility, have also faced challenges. Most notably, President

Andrzej Duda, a PiS ally, has used his veto power and the Constitutional Tribunal's authority to try and quash the bills.

As these cases demonstrate, democrats seeking to “make good” after an authoritarian episode face a number of profound challenges. Transforming authoritarian institutions into democratic ones will take time if the new leaders observe the democratic rules of the game, including following due process to remove authoritarian holdovers. In the meantime, efforts to promote democratic reforms may flounder given the number of potential authoritarian veto players. Conversely, breaking the rules to rapidly purge authoritarian allies offers the prospect of a quicker democratic revival. But transgressing the rule of law risks stirring controversy while also weakening respect for legal regulations and institutions and potentially facilitating further bouts of autocratization.¹⁷

“Prodemocratic” Parties and Coalitions. Prodemocratic political parties and coalitions play an important role in resisting authoritarian practices and promoting democratic reform.¹⁸ These alliances often take the form of temporary pacts among political leaders or parties and like-minded civil society groups to pool efforts and resources in pursuit of shared goals. For example, a broad alliance called Brazil of Hope, which included a range of leftist and center-left parties, backed Lula’s successful 2023 reelection campaign. Large opposition coalitions formed amid democratic backsliding also prevailed in Senegal in 2000, the Maldives in 2018, and Honduras in 2021, to name just three cases. Sometimes prodemocracy alliances are more informal, with one main opposition party benefiting from the efforts of civil society groups to ensure that elections are credible, as in Zambia in 2021.

While these cases demonstrate the continued relevance of coalition-building for democratic resistance, the record of the governments they put in power is mixed. This is for two

main reasons. First, opposition parties often use prodemocratic language to rally broader support, even if their primary goal is to secure power. Second, in unstable political systems, leaders face strong incentives to retain the exaggerated authority and control conferred on the government during authoritarian episodes, no matter their party.

To return to Sri Lanka, Sirisena won the 2015 presidential election by building a broad coalition on an antiauthoritarianism platform. Yet Sirisena's victory did not result in straightforward democratic gains. In addition to the authoritarian holdovers from the previous administration, internal divisions within the governing coalition, compounded by Sirisena's own political ambitions, fractured the forces that had driven the democratic transition in the first place. In 2018, Sirisena set off a constitutional crisis by dismissing the prime minister and installing former president Rajapaksa in the role, deepening the ongoing political turmoil in the country.¹⁹ Although ultimately reversed, the failed power-grab inflicted lasting damage, paving the way for the victory of Rajapaksa's brother, Gotabaya, in the 2019 presidential election and demonstrating the enduring resilience of authoritarian networks.

In Zambia's 2021 presidential election, Hichilema and his United Party for National Development defeated President Lungu. Hichilema, who had been imprisoned on trumped-up treason charges by his predecessor, spoke powerfully about the need for rule-bound, democratic government, and a wide range of civil society groups mobilized to ensure that the election was credible. Yet after an initial burst of reforms that included decriminalizing criticism of the president, Hichilema's democratization agenda stalled while the country's economic woes persisted. In response to widespread popular frustration, Hichilema's government has shown intolerance toward dissident voices, prevented opposition parties from organizing, and introduced "intrusive" new legislation on cybercrimes that prompted the U.S. embassy to issue a

warning to its citizens in the country. In Zambia, as in so many cases of democratic U-turns, the political logic of survival has proved more powerful than prodemocratic promises.

The decision of supposedly prodemocratic parties and coalition members to prioritize the acquisition and exercise of governmental power over the restoration of any sort of democratic status quo is not surprising. Opposition elites are often products of and therefore endogenous to the same system that brought autocratizing leaders to power. Especially if they are able to coopt civil society groups into power—a common feature of democratic transitions in countries like Zambia—new leaders may face few barriers to consolidating their rule. And they often have few incentives to act otherwise, especially if the political system is weak and volatile.

Peru, for example, has long struggled to establish a stable democracy, due in no small part to the political elite's historically ambiguous relationship with democratic values. Most notably, elected leaders have used (and abused) institutional mechanisms, such as presidential impeachment and dissolution of Congress, for their own interests and have been implicated in numerous corruption scandals. It therefore appeared to be a positive development when a broad coalition of leaders emerged in 2022 to prevent then-President Pedro Castillo from dissolving Congress and ruling by decree. This event, however, did not signify a strengthening of Peruvian democracy. Rather, it underscored the dynamics of what Paolo Sosa-Villagarcia, José Incio, and Moisés Arce call “legislative authoritarianism.”²⁰

Although fragmented, Congress subsequently mobilized to concentrate power via the expansion of its budgetary functions and the use of political oversight, and also to restrict control by coopting independent bodies, such as the Constitutional Court and the office of the ombudsman, and shielding congresspeople from accountability.²¹ This legislative coalition seems united less by a commitment to democracy and more by a shared determination to

advance their personal interests, rolling back reforms, and protecting themselves from corruption probes. The current president, Dina Boluarte, has remained in office largely by accommodating this congressional dominance, further weakening the executive branch.

To be sure, prodemocracy coalitions often comprise many brave and determined groups who take great risks to resist authoritarianism, and in some cases their efforts do result in genuine democratic gains, as in the Gambia. But in many countries, leaders who took power promising reform have ended up retaining and indeed extending the mechanisms of repression and censorship that they inherited. Political elites who are not deeply committed to democratic norms may only give away their power when the costs of *not* doing so become prohibitive. We must therefore ask: At what point does it become in the interest of elites to pursue redemocratization.²² The answer will depend on the strength and independence of domestic civil society, citizen pressures from below, and the policies and priorities of external partners, including individual donors and multilateral institutions.

The International Context for Redemocratization. It is widely accepted that the conditions for democracy promotion have deteriorated in recent decades. This has been attributed variously to the emergence of a more complex, multipolar international landscape, the West's retreat from supporting democracy, and the destabilizing effects of cross-border influence and destabilization operations. While the international community was never a cohesive or consistent force for democracy, diplomatic pressure on authoritarian governments as well as international funding for civil society groups and democratic processes such as elections helped to facilitate political liberalization in the 1990s. By 2015, it was estimated that funds for democracy assistance from countries including the United States and United Kingdom and multilateral organizations such as the United Nations and European Union totaled more than

US\$10 billion annually.²³ The outcomes of such interventions were uneven depending on the degree of international linkage and leverage in a given country,²⁴ but they nonetheless helped to both protect and sustain domestic prodemocracy groups.

This picture has changed rapidly in recent decades due to two main trends. First, some Western governments no longer view international democracy promotion as central to their own national interests. As a result, democracy-assistance funding has dropped substantially, often from donors experiencing challenges of their own, as has diplomatic pressure on governments around the world to respect the democratic rules of the game.²⁵ Second, authoritarian states such as China and Russia, as well as middle powers like India, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, have provided alternative political models and sources of foreign aid, thereby weakening the leverage of states and institutions that back democracy, and worked within multilateral bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council to water down global commitments to democratic and human-rights standards.

These two trends have played into and exacerbated each other. Most notably, European and North American states are increasingly silent about instances of electoral manipulation and repression, fearing that imposing stringent democratic standards could push countries into the arms of China or Russia. At the same time, authoritarian powers have been using cross-border funding and disseminating disinformation in increasingly blatant ways to promote their interests abroad.

Russia's failed attempts to thwart the reelection in 2024 of Moldova's pro-Europe president, Maia Sandu, is a case in point. The Kremlin invested millions of dollars to launch cyberattacks, spread disinformation, and fund rival candidates to try and keep Sandu from winning. Last year in neighboring Romania, the country's Constitutional Court annulled the first

round of the presidential election due to evidence of Russian interference. As Ryan Berg has shown, Russia and China have also employed similar strategies in Latin America to sow mistrust in democratic institutions and promote their own influence.²⁶

Along with the easy spread of false information and propaganda comes a wider set of challenges associated with social media, including online attacks on women politicians and the rise of authoritarian echo chambers. There is growing evidence that exposure to social media can erode trust in government and politics in general and exacerbate polarization in part by consolidating in-groups and out-groups based on racial, ethnic, and other types of differences.²⁷ Given all this, plus the economic difficulties such as rising inflation that many countries have experienced in recent years, it is not surprising that citizens' commitment to democracy has fallen dramatically. Around the globe, levels of trust in representative institutions, and especially parliament and government, have been declining for decades.²⁸ In Latin America, for example, support for democracy fell by 15 percent in the last thirteen years. In Africa, where support for democracy has been higher, the last decade saw a 7 percent drop.²⁹

Some aspiring autocrats have used this rising popular dissatisfaction with democracy to catapult themselves into office. Take El Salvador's Nayib Bukele, who rose to power in 2019 promising to neutralize the powerful gangs terrorizing communities across the country. Calling himself "the coolest dictator in the world," Bukele enacted a still-ongoing state of emergency in 2022, allowing him to imprison alleged gang members and collaborators without due process. The crackdown has put 2 percent of the population behind bars and included sometimes severe human-rights abuses. Despite this and other blatant encroachments on the legislature and judiciary, Bukele's approval ratings are astonishingly high, exceeding 80 percent since he became president.

When both domestic public opinion and the international community become more accepting of authoritarian politics, the incentives for political leaders to democratize are significantly reduced.

Authoritarian Spirals and Future-Proofing Democracy

The idea that the high number of U-turns demonstrates a degree of global democratic resilience is overly optimistic and contradicted by the evidence. On the one hand, many U-turns return countries to a state of poor-quality democracy that remains vulnerable to future autocratization. On the other, the vast majority of democratic U-turns since 1994 have not lasted. Put differently, countries that experience an authoritarian episode today struggle to bounce back.

The difficulties of building an enduring democratic recovery are rooted in three structural factors that apply across a wide range of countries: The challenges posed by authoritarian holdovers, the mixed motivations and political incentives facing opposition parties and prodemocracy coalitions in unstable political environments, and a global context that has made it harder to rally support for redemocratization.

The implications of this argument for the future of democracy are troubling. Because most countries that have rebounded from authoritarian episodes have not demonstrated true resilience, they remain vulnerable to further autocratization. Worse still, in many cases, the institutional challenges facing new governments may prevent them from delivering on a wide range of election promises. That failure to deliver, in turn, especially in highly polarized societies, can leave prodemocratic parties vulnerable to electoral defeat, sometimes by the very authoritarian forces they so recently overturned. It is therefore possible that these political

systems will experience a gradual and uneven, but nonetheless deeply damaging, authoritarian spiral.

In Brazil, candidates supported by President Lula suffered bruising defeats in the October 2024 municipal elections, suggesting that a coalition including figures aligned with Bolsonaro could be victorious in 2026. Meanwhile, opinion polls in Poland suggest that far-right parties are once-again gaining ground, making another PiS-led right-wing coalition government a real possibility. In the presidential election of 2 June 2020, for example, the PiS supported right-wing historian Karol Nawrocki emerged victorious in a tight contest, dashing hopes that a win for Rafal Trzaskowski – a more liberal candidate and the Mayor of Warsaw – would result in the presidency no longer acting as a brake of the re-democratization process.³⁰ Should the PiS also re-capture the legislature in future, Tusk’s victory in 2023 will not have represented the beginning of a lasting recovery from an authoritarian episode but instead just one moment in a period of oscillation between more autocratically and democratically minded governments.

Although this conclusion is concerning, it should inspire activism and engagement—not despondence. In particular, the enduring impact of authoritarian episodes should serve as an urgent reminder of the imperative to strengthen democratic institutions and practices that might prevent them in the first place. Key steps in this regard include measures to prevent the subversion of electoral systems, public broadcasters, and the judiciary. In July 2024, for example, Germany amended its constitution to protect the Federal Constitutional Court from political manipulation. The measure enshrines the Court’s structure as sixteen judges with twelve-year terms and a mandatory retirement age of 68; this can now be overturned only by a two-thirds parliamentary majority. Norway has gone even further, passing constitutional

amendments to protect judicial independence and promulgating a new electoral law in 2023 to promote transparency in ballot counting and ensure the impartiality of election workers.³¹

These are common-sense measures that could help to future-proof democracy. Democratic governments around the world should be considering similar innovations. Yet strikingly few have undertaken a systematic review to strengthen the legal foundations of their political systems. The best time to fix the roof is in the calm *before* the storm. Complacency—along with populist challengers, outside interference, and authoritarian holdovers—is a powerful enemy of democratic resilience.

NOTES

¹ Wolfgang Merkel, “What Is Democratic Resilience and How Can We Strengthen It,” Toda Peace Institute Policy Brief No. 169 (August 2023), 1–15.

² Nic Cheeseman et al., “How to Strengthen Democratic Resilience,” European Democracy Hub (2024), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Manoel-Gehrke/publication/386869962_How_to_Strengthen_Democratic_Resilience_Five_Lessons_for_Democratic_Renewal/links/6759a82805bf5b3e924ec73e/How-to-Strengthen-Democratic-Resilience-Five-Lessons-for-Democratic-Renewal.pdf.

³ Marina Nord et al., “When Autocratization Is Reversed: Episodes of Democratic Turnarounds Since 1900,” Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, Working Paper 147 (January 2024).

⁴ Marina Nord and Staffan I. Lindberg, “U-turns—The Hope for Democratic Resilience,” Policy Brief No. 42, January 2025, V-Dem Institute, https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/PB_42.pdf. For more on onset and breakdown resilience, see Vanessa A. Boese et al., “How Democracies Prevail: Democratic Resilience as a Two-Stage Process,” in *Resilience of Democracy: Responses to Illiberal and Authoritarian Challenges*, ed. Anna Lührmann and Wolfgang Merkel (London: Routledge, 2023): 17–39.

⁵ Democracy levels are measured using V-Dem’s Electoral Democracy Index (EDI), which is coded on a continuous scale from 0 to 1. See Nord et al., “When Autocratization Is Reversed: Episodes of Democratic Turnarounds Since 1900.”

⁶ Nord and Lindberg, “U-turns—The Hope for Democratic Resilience.”

⁷ Defined as below 0.5 on the EDI.

⁸ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

⁹ Rachel Beatty Riedl et al., “Democratic Backsliding, Resilience, and Resistance,” *World Politics* 77, no. 1 (2024): 151–77.

¹⁰ Countries whose EDI does not decrease by more than 0.05 in five years are defined as stable.

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- ¹⁶ Nic Cheeseman and Susan Dodsworth. "Defending civic space: when are campaigns against repressive laws successful?." *The Journal of Development Studies* 59, no. 5 (2023): 619-636.
- ¹⁷ Svitlana Chernykh. *The Dilemma of Compliance: Political Parties and Post-Election Disputes*. University of Michigan Press, 2024.
- ¹⁸ NDI and the Oslo Center, “Coalitions: A Guide for Political Parties” (2015), https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Coalitions_A_percent20Guide_percent20for_percent20Political_percent20Parties_percent20_percent281_percent29.pdf.
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- ²⁰ Paolo Sosa-Villagarcia, José Incio, and Moisés Arce, “The Rise of Legislative Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 36 (April 2025): 106–17.
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