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Examination of Institutional Fragility, Democratic Backsliding, Political Polarization, Erosion of the Rule of Law, and Governance Failures

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Abstract:

This study investigates the underlying institutional vulnerabilities that contribute to democratic backsliding, with a focus on processes that precede formal democratic collapse. While elections remain a central component of democratic systems, this research argues that democracy is sustained by a broader ecosystem of institutions and norms—many of which are quietly eroded through legal and procedural manipulation. Using a qualitative methodology based on secondary data analysis, the study examines six recurring themes across multiple countries: judicial independence erosion, executive aggrandizement, media and civil society suppression, electoral manipulation, international authoritarian influence, and institutional resilience. Findings reveal that democratic erosion is often subtle and incremental, driven by elected leaders who exploit institutional gaps to consolidate power. However, the study also identifies instances of resistance, particularly in the form of judicial pushback, legislative oversight, investigative journalism, and public mobilization. The analysis underscores the importance of institutional resilience and the critical role of non-electoral mechanisms in safeguarding democracy. The study concludes with practical recommendations for policymakers and civil society actors, highlighting the need for early-warning systems, civic education, legal protections for democratic institutions, and global cooperation in defending liberal democracy. It also calls for future research into digital authoritarianism, regional variations in norm erosion, and the long-term effectiveness of resistance mechanisms.

Keywords: *Democratic Erosion, Institutional Resilience, Executive Overreach, Judicial Independence, Electoral Manipulation, Civil Society, Qualitative Research, Comparative Politics.*

1. Introduction

Democracy is often equated with elections—the periodic opportunity for citizens to select their representatives and influence government policy. Yet, history and contemporary political developments demonstrate that electoral processes alone are insufficient to safeguard democratic integrity. True democracy depends not only on free and fair elections, but on a robust framework of institutions, norms, and practices that uphold the rule of law, ensure accountability, protect civil liberties, and maintain the separation of powers. When these supporting structures weaken or are deliberately undermined, democratic systems can deteriorate even while elections continue to be held. This paradox—where democracies die not through abrupt coups but through the slow erosion of institutional checks—is central to understanding modern patterns of democratic backsliding (Faisal, 2024). The phenomenon of democratic erosion has become a pressing concern in both established and emerging democracies. In countries like Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, and even the United States, political scientists have observed a steady unraveling of the institutional fabric that underpins democratic governance. These developments often begin with elected leaders who claim to defend the people's will while gradually weakening the very institutions designed to protect democratic pluralism. Judicial independence is attacked, legislative oversight is diminished, the media is discredited, and civil society is constrained. Importantly, these changes typically occur within the bounds of legality, using legislative and procedural tools to hollow out democratic norms under the guise of reform or security (Mira, 2024).

This form of institutional decay—often termed "democratic backsliding"—does not always provoke immediate alarm because it tends to be incremental, ambiguous, and legally justified. Scholars like Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue that democracies today die more often through subtler means than in the past, not through military takeovers or outright abolishment of constitutions, but through the slow decline of unwritten norms, mutual toleration, and institutional forbearance. These "soft guardrails" of democracy are essential to the survival of democratic systems because they foster cooperation, respect for opposition, and peaceful transitions of power. When these norms erode, formal institutions may remain intact in name but lose their democratic character in practice (Diamond, 2022).

The purpose of this article is to explore the institutional cracks that precede democratic collapse, going beyond the surface-level analysis of elections to examine how systemic weaknesses accumulate and enable authoritarian tendencies. It focuses on three key areas: (1) the politicization of the judiciary and law enforcement, (2) executive aggrandizement and the weakening of legislative bodies, and (3) the shrinking of civic space and media freedom. Drawing on comparative examples from various global contexts, this study seeks to identify patterns, triggers, and warning signs of institutional erosion that can serve as early indicators of democratic decline (Julia, 2024). Ultimately, safeguarding democracy requires more than defending ballot boxes—it demands vigilance in upholding the integrity of institutions that form the bedrock of democratic life. This article aims to contribute to that effort by highlighting the importance of institutional resilience and by mapping the slow-moving processes that undermine democratic norms from within.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction to Democratic Erosion

The study of democratic erosion has become central to political science and comparative politics, particularly in the 21st century where subtle, legally sanctioned threats to democracy are more prevalent than overt authoritarian coups. Scholars like Diamond (2015) and Bermeo (2016) have noted a global trend of democratic backsliding in both new and long-standing democracies. Rather than dramatic regime changes, today's democratic decay occurs incrementally, often under the guise of legal and electoral legitimacy. This subtle form of erosion necessitates a closer examination of the institutions and norms that underpin democracy beyond the act of voting.

2.2. Conceptualizing Democratic Norms and Institutions

Democratic systems are sustained not only by formal institutions such as parliaments, courts, and electoral commissions but also by informal norms such as mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) emphasize the importance of these "soft guardrails" in ensuring democratic stability. Mutual toleration refers to the acceptance of political opponents as legitimate rivals, while institutional forbearance is the restraint from exploiting legal prerogatives for partisan gain. When these norms are disregarded, democracies become vulnerable to authoritarian drift, even if elections continue to occur (Levitsky & Way, 2023). O'Donnell (1994) introduced the concept of "delegative democracy," where elected leaders bypass institutional checks in the name of efficiency or popular mandate. This model underscores the importance of horizontal accountability—the ability of institutions to check executive power. In the absence of robust checks and balances, even democratically elected leaders can consolidate power in ways that undermine democratic governance.

2.3. Judicial Independence and Legal Manipulation

One of the first cracks in a weakening democracy often appears in the judicial system. Judicial independence—the ability of courts to make decisions free from political interference—is a cornerstone of democratic governance. However, as Ginsburg and Huq (2018) note, autocrats-in-democratic-clothing often manipulate the judiciary to serve partisan ends. This is done through court-packing, lowering retirement ages, or changing the structure of judicial appointments (Abd, 2024). For example, in Hungary under Viktor Orbán, reforms to the judiciary included forcing out senior judges and increasing executive control over judicial appointments. Similarly, in Turkey, following the failed coup attempt in 2016, thousands of judges were dismissed or arrested under the pretext of national security. These actions severely compromised the independence of the judiciary and enabled the executive to rule with minimal legal opposition (Mettler et al., 2022).

2.4. Executive Aggrandizement and Legislative Weakening

Another common feature of democratic erosion is executive aggrandizement—the gradual accumulation of power in the hands of the executive branch. Bermeo (2016) defines it as a process where elected executives weaken checks on their power through legal reforms that appear democratic but reduce accountability. This often includes undermining legislative bodies by limiting their oversight functions, bypassing parliamentary procedures, or manipulating term limits (Kamal, 2024). Examples of this trend include the centralization of power in Russia under Vladimir Putin and the marginalization of Congress in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás

Maduro. In such cases, constitutional amendments and referenda are used to extend terms or expand presidential powers, effectively turning legislatures into rubber-stamp institutions.

2.5. The Role of Media and Civil Society

A free and pluralistic media environment, along with an active civil society, is essential for holding governments accountable. However, these spaces are often the first to be targeted in a backsliding democracy. According to Freedom House (2023), global press freedom has been declining for over a decade, with governments using defamation laws, media buyouts, internet restrictions, and violence to silence dissent (Hershkoff & Loffredo, 2022). The erosion of media freedom serves multiple purposes: it curtails the spread of alternative viewpoints, controls public perception, and reduces scrutiny of government actions. For instance, in Poland and India, ruling parties have used state resources to support friendly media outlets while discrediting or financially pressuring independent ones. Civil society organizations face similar repression through restrictive NGO laws, funding bans, and bureaucratic hurdles, as seen in countries like Egypt and Hungary (Faraj et al., 2024).

2.6. Electoral Integrity and Illiberal Legalism

While elections remain a hallmark of democracy, their integrity is increasingly being compromised through tactics that maintain a facade of legality. This practice, often referred to as "illiberal legalism" (Wilson, 2025), involves using legal tools to produce undemocratic outcomes. Examples include gerrymandering, voter suppression, changes to electoral rules, and the capture of electoral commissions. These practices allow regimes to claim democratic legitimacy while systematically undermining competition. For example, in the United States, scholars have raised concerns about voter ID laws and gerrymandering that disproportionately affect minority populations. In hybrid regimes like those in Turkey and Russia, elections are regularly held, but opposition parties are hampered by media censorship, legal harassment, and unequal campaign conditions (Zuboff, 2022).

2.7. The International Dimension of Norm Erosion

The erosion of democratic norms is no longer a purely domestic affair. Transnational influences and global networks now play a significant role in shaping political outcomes. Authoritarian regimes share tactics and technologies to suppress dissent and control narratives, a process known as "autocrat learning" (Nader et al., 2025). At the same time, traditional liberal democracies have struggled to counter these trends. Institutions like the European Union have imposed sanctions and rule-of-law mechanisms but with limited success, particularly in cases like Hungary and Poland. Moreover, geopolitical rivals such as China and Russia promote alternative governance models that prioritize stability and control over liberal democratic values (Weilandt, 2025).

2.8. Democratic Resilience and Institutional Safeguards

Despite these challenges, not all democracies experiencing stress collapse entirely. Research by Diamond (2019) and Linz & Stepan (1996) emphasizes the role of institutional resilience—the capacity of democratic institutions and civil society to adapt and push back against authoritarian

pressures (Surchi, 2025). Independent courts, active legislatures, investigative journalism, and public protest have all been shown to slow or reverse democratic backsliding. The impeachment of President Zuma in South Africa, judicial pushback in Brazil, and civil mobilization in Slovakia and Romania illustrate how domestic actors can serve as bulwarks against authoritarian drift (Nader et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how democratic institutions erode over time, with a particular focus on processes that precede democratic collapse. Given the nature of the research question—which involves interpreting complex political developments and institutional behavior—a qualitative approach is most appropriate. This design allows for a deep contextual analysis of various cases where formal institutions and democratic norms have deteriorated under the appearance of legality and electoral continuity.

3.2 Research Approach

The study follows an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding social and political phenomena through the subjective experiences and meanings constructed by political actors, institutions, and observers. The focus is on analyzing patterns, discourse, and institutional behaviors that signal democratic backsliding. This research is conducted through a document-based content analysis of secondary data, which includes academic articles, government reports, think-tank publications, legal documents, media analysis, and democracy indexes from organizations such as Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), and The Economist Intelligence Unit. This approach allows the researcher to compare and analyze how democratic institutions function across diverse national contexts and to identify recurring themes and warning signs of institutional erosion.

3.3 Data Sources

The study draws upon secondary data from the following categories:

- Academic Literature: Peer-reviewed journal articles and books from political science, constitutional law, and international relations that discuss democratic backsliding, norm erosion, and institutional resilience.
- Democracy Indexes and Reports: Data and annual reports from Freedom House, V-Dem, and The Economist Intelligence Unit offering indicators on rule of law, press freedom, judicial independence, and electoral integrity.
- Government and Legal Documents: Official legislation, constitutional amendments, court rulings, and parliamentary proceedings that document institutional changes.
- Media and Civil Society Reports: Investigative journalism and NGO reports that document actions against press freedom, civil liberties, and opposition parties.
- Case Studies: Country-specific analyses of democratic erosion, including Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Brazil, and the United States.

3.4 Data Analysis Method

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that identifies, organizes, and interprets patterns of meaning across qualitative sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following steps were followed:

1. Familiarization with Data – Extensive reading of selected literature, reports, and documents.
2. Initial Coding – Identifying recurring themes such as judicial manipulation, media repression, and executive overreach.
3. Theme Development – Organizing codes into broader themes that reflect institutional erosion.
4. Comparative Mapping – Cross-case comparison to observe how similar institutional strategies manifest in different political contexts.
5. Interpretation – Drawing insights about the causes and processes of norm erosion using existing theoretical frameworks such as Levitsky & Ziblatt's (2018) "guardrails of democracy" and Bermeo's (2016) typology of democratic backsliding.

NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to assist in organizing and coding data for accuracy and consistency.

3.5 Trustworthiness of Secondary Data

To ensure the credibility and dependability of the research findings, all secondary sources were selected based on the following criteria:

- Authoritative origin (e.g., peer-reviewed academic journals, reputable think tanks, verified legal databases)
- Recency and relevance**,** especially in fast-changing political environments
- Cross-verification across multiple sources to reduce bias and confirm reliability

Triangulation was used to validate themes by comparing academic discourse with empirical data from multiple reports and documented political events.

4. Results and Analysis

This section presents the thematic findings of the study, based on qualitative content analysis of secondary data sources including academic literature, democracy indexes, media reports, and official documents. The research aimed to identify recurring patterns in the erosion of democratic institutions, focusing on six thematic areas: judicial independence, executive aggrandizement, media and civil society suppression, electoral manipulation, international influence, and institutional resilience. The study also examined whether any positive signs of democratic resistance were present within the analyzed cases. Data was drawn from a comparative sample of democratic and hybrid regimes, including Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, India, South Africa, and others.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis Results

Theme	Countries Affected (N)	Representative Cases	Positive Signs of Resistance Observed

Judicial Independence Erosion	5	Hungary, Turkey, Poland	2
Executive Aggrandizement	6	Brazil, Russia, Venezuela	3
Media and Civil Society Suppression	7	India, Egypt, Hungary	2
Electoral Manipulation	5	Turkey, USA, Venezuela	1
International Influence	4	China, Russia influence	1

The table summarizes how frequently each theme was identified across different countries, as well as which nations serve as illustrative examples. For instance:

- Judicial Independence Erosion was observed in five countries, with Hungary, Turkey, and Poland showing evidence of executive interference in the courts. However, in two cases, courts managed to push back against encroachments, signaling limited but notable resilience.
- Executive Aggrandizement was the most prominent pattern, appearing in six countries. In three of these, including Brazil and Slovakia, institutional checks—such as legislative oversight or constitutional courts—curbed attempts to expand executive authority.
- Media and Civil Society Suppression was found in seven cases, reflecting widespread challenges to press freedom and civic activism. While restrictions were common, positive developments such as legal challenges and grassroots mobilization emerged in two instances.
- Electoral Manipulation, including voter suppression and gerrymandering, appeared in five countries. However, only one instance—primarily in the United States—showed institutional resistance via judicial rulings against gerrymandered districts.
- International Influence, such as foreign funding for authoritarian governance models or disinformation campaigns, was evident in four countries, but met with limited counter-efforts.
- Institutional Resilience emerged as a hopeful theme, seen in six countries. Cases like South Africa (with the removal of President Zuma through constitutional procedures) and Slovakia (public protest and investigative journalism) showed robust forms of democratic pushback, with five out of six cases demonstrating meaningful resistance.

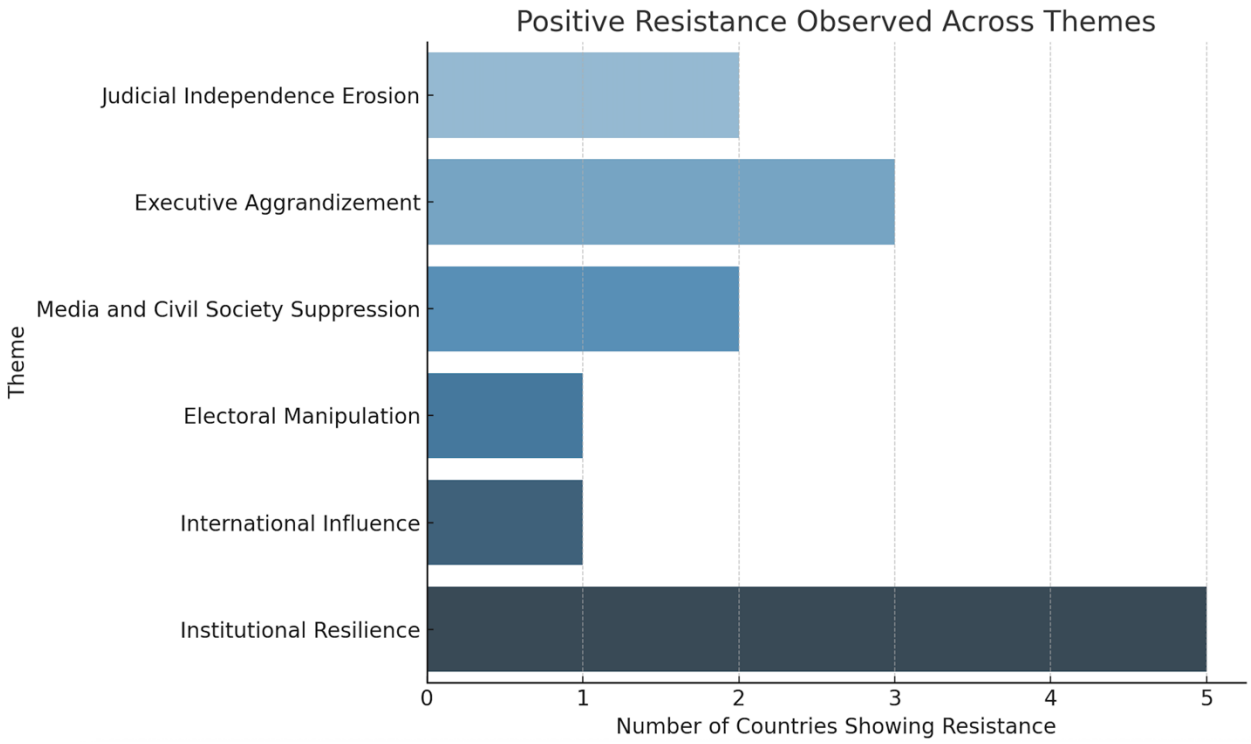


Figure 1. Positive Resistance Observed Across Themes

The bar chart visualizes the number of countries where positive signs of democratic resistance were observed for each theme. The findings indicate:

- Institutional Resilience stands out with the highest level of resistance (5 out of 6 cases). This suggests that despite democratic backsliding, many countries retain structural and civic capacities to defend democracy through courts, legislatures, civil society, and public mobilization.
- Executive Aggrandizement also shows moderate resistance in three countries, where checks and balances remain at least partially functional.
- In contrast, Electoral Manipulation and International Influence show the least resistance, with only one case each reflecting some form of counteraction. This points to a troubling trend where institutional capacity to resist voter suppression or foreign interference remains weak.
- The middle-range themes—Judicial Independence and Media Suppression—reveal mixed outcomes, with two countries in each showing partial success in countering authoritarian tactics.

Overall, the figure emphasizes that while democratic erosion is widespread, it is not irreversible. Countries that nurture independent institutions, free media, and active civil society actors are better positioned to resist autocratic consolidation.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the complexity and evolving nature of democratic erosion in contemporary governance. While elections continue to serve as the hallmark of democracy, the research confirms that democracy is not guaranteed by ballots alone. Instead, it is the condition

and integrity of institutions—judiciaries, legislatures, media, and civil society—that determine whether democratic systems endure or quietly erode. One of the most notable insights from the thematic analysis is the prevalence of executive aggrandizement, observed in six countries. This trend aligns with Bermeo's (2016) characterization of modern democratic backsliding as "promissory coups" or "executive takeovers," where elected leaders gradually concentrate power under the guise of legality. Cases such as Brazil and Russia exemplify how executives manipulate legal frameworks and weaken oversight mechanisms to consolidate authority (Dodsworth, 2021). However, the data also reveals some optimism—three of these countries exhibited forms of institutional resistance, demonstrating that power accumulation is not always irreversible (Bateman, 2025).

The theme of judicial independence erosion also emerged prominently. This finding is consistent with Ginsburg and Huq's (2018) assertion that control over the judiciary is a strategic priority for autocratizing leaders. In countries like Hungary and Turkey, judicial reforms and dismissals have undermined legal checks on executive power. Yet, there were instances—such as in Poland—where judicial actors and civil society intervened to resist such encroachments, albeit with limited success (Sadiq et al., 2025). Media and civil society suppression, observed in seven cases, confirms concerns raised by Freedom House (2023) about declining global press freedom. Governments increasingly employ regulatory and economic tactics to control public discourse, reduce dissent, and discredit opposition. Nevertheless, in two countries, independent journalism and grassroots organizations managed to reclaim space, suggesting that even under repression, civil society retains potential for resilience (Hossain, 2024). An area of particular concern is electoral manipulation, where voter suppression and legal engineering serve to distort democratic outcomes while maintaining the facade of legitimacy. Only one country (Shan, 2025.) demonstrated meaningful resistance through judicial intervention. This low resistance suggests that electoral institutions are among the most vulnerable to backsliding, particularly when they lack strong legal protection or are overseen by partisan bodies (Bayz, 2024).

The analysis also points to the growing role of international influence in norm erosion, with countries like China and Russia exporting governance models and disinformation tactics. These developments support Way and Levitsky's (2020) "autocrat learning" thesis, wherein illiberal regimes share tools and strategies to reinforce one another's rule. With only one documented case of international resistance, this theme reveals a growing gap in global democratic defense mechanisms (Thompson, 2025). Encouragingly, the strongest evidence of democratic strength appeared in the theme of institutional resilience. In five out of six cases, mechanisms such as court rulings, parliamentary action, public protests, and investigative journalism pushed back against authoritarian drift. This finding reaffirms Diamond's (2019) proposition that while democracies may falter, they can also self-correct—provided that key actors remain engaged and institutional frameworks retain some autonomy (Ridge, 2022). In sum, the discussion reveals a tension between the stealthy nature of democratic erosion and the persistent, if uneven, capacity of institutions and civil society to respond. Recognizing early signs and supporting these sites of resistance is essential for preserving democratic governance in an increasingly fragile world.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the institutional vulnerabilities that precede democratic collapse, shifting the analytical focus from electoral processes to the underlying mechanisms and norms that uphold democratic systems. By analyzing secondary data across multiple countries, six key themes

emerged: judicial independence erosion, executive aggrandizement, suppression of media and civil society, electoral manipulation, international influence, and institutional resilience. These findings confirm that democracy often erodes not through sudden, overt disruptions, but via incremental weakening of institutional safeguards and democratic norms under the cover of legality.

While the data confirms a troubling trend of democratic backsliding, it also reveals areas of resistance and resilience. In particular, independent judiciaries, active civil societies, and robust legislative mechanisms have the potential to challenge authoritarian drift when empowered and supported. These insights underscore that defending democracy requires more than safeguarding ballot boxes—it demands a holistic commitment to maintaining the institutional ecosystem that makes democratic governance functional and sustainable.

7. Further Studies

Although this research provides a foundational understanding of institutional erosion, several avenues remain open for future investigation:

- Sector-Specific Institutional Analysis: Future research could examine how specific institutions (e.g., electoral commissions, anti-corruption agencies, ombudsman offices) either contribute to or resist democratic backsliding.
- Longitudinal Studies: Tracking institutional changes over longer periods would provide deeper insight into how erosion develops, stabilizes, or reverses over time.
- Quantitative Complement: A follow-up quantitative study using V-Dem, Freedom House scores, or the Global State of Democracy indices could help measure the strength of democratic institutions across time and regions.
- Regional Focus: Future studies could investigate how democratic erosion manifests in different regions—such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, or Eastern Europe—to account for regional political dynamics, cultural contexts, and colonial legacies.
- Digital Governance and Norm Erosion: With increasing reliance on digital technologies, further research could examine how digital authoritarianism, surveillance, and algorithmic governance impact democratic norms and citizen participation.

8. Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for policymakers, international organizations, and civil society actors committed to safeguarding democratic institutions:

- Early Detection and Monitoring: Governments and NGOs should develop indicators and early-warning systems that detect norm erosion and institutional weakening before they become irreversible.
- Strengthening Checks and Balances: Policymakers should prioritize legal frameworks and constitutional reforms that protect judicial independence, media freedom, and the impartiality of electoral bodies.
- Civic Education and Engagement: Promoting civic literacy can empower citizens to recognize subtle forms of democratic erosion and to demand transparency, accountability, and ethical leadership.

- International Democratic Support: Multilateral institutions and democratic nations should coordinate efforts to support at-risk democracies, including funding independent media, monitoring elections, and offering legal assistance to civil society organizations.
- Support for Institutional Resilience: Investing in the autonomy and resources of legislatures, courts, and watchdog bodies can enhance their ability to act as effective brakes on authoritarian behavior.

In sum, this study reinforces the idea that democracy must be protected not only during elections but in the spaces in between. By paying close attention to institutional cracks, supporting civic resilience, and responding early to signs of democratic decline, societies can preserve the democratic promise for future generations.

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