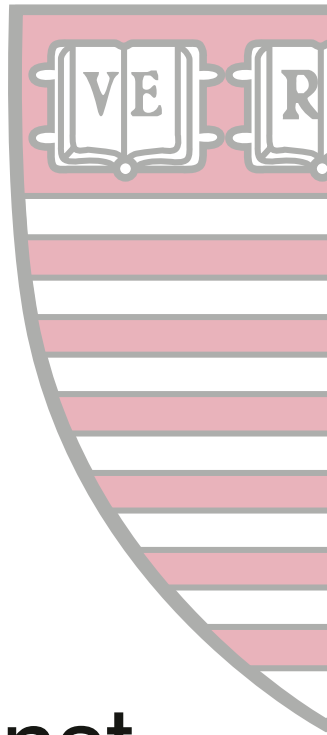




Nonviolent Action Against Democratic Erosion: The United States in Comparative Perspective

Matthew Cebul

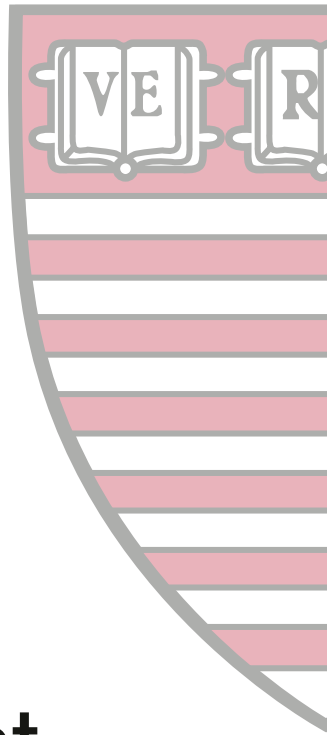
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for Democratic Governance
and Innovation



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About the Ash Center

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Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, global *autocratization* has accelerated. Many of the world's democracies are under stress, and authoritarian illiberalism is in the ascendant—including in the United States.

This trend is troubling, but it has not gone unanswered. Pro-democracy activists waging *nonviolent action* campaigns have risen to resist democratic erosion in many cases. Nonviolent activism played a crucial role in the global democratic transformations of the 20th century, liberating many formerly entrenched autocracies. Now, pro-democracy movements continue to be a vital source of democratic resilience against illiberal corrosion.

Yet combating democratic erosion is not easy. The post–Cold War era of triumphant democracy promotion has ended, and the erosion era presents new challenges for pro-democracy campaigns. Those seeking to preserve and revitalize democracy must understand these changing dynamics. In this, Americans have much to learn from nonviolent pro-democracy movements in other eroding democracies, which are grappling with the same core challenges that US activists face today.

This report is a conceptual guide for activists, civic organizations, elected officials, and concerned readers of all stripes devoted to liberal democracy. It first reviews the essential strategic logic of nonviolent action and the hallmarks of democratic erosion. It then identifies three challenges that nonviolent pro-democracy movements often face in eroding democracies and considers how severely these challenges have manifested in the US. It concludes with implications for pro-democracy campaigns, both in the US and abroad.

- **Nonviolent action is a cornerstone of democratic resilience.** From Indonesia to Ecuador, pro-democracy movements have been the last defense against democratic breakdown. Nonviolent activism can spotlight abuses of executive power, mobilize against attempts to cripple democratic institutions, and energize pro-democracy political coalitions to beat illiberalism at the ballot box.
- **Three challenges for nonviolent action.** That said, politics in eroding democracies create challenges for nonviolent pro-democracy campaigns. These challenges echo those that activists face in fully authoritarian settings but subtly differ in important ways, implicating distinct elements of nonviolent action's core theory of change.
 1. *Repression and closing civic space.* Illiberal leaders in eroding democracies are clamping down on civil society, adopting techniques of administrative and pre-emptive repression pioneered by their autocratic counterparts. As repression worsens, nonviolent activism grows more dangerous and difficult to organize.
 2. *Obstacles to mass pro-democracy coalitions.* Big-tent coalition building is key to successful nonviolent campaigns. Yet in eroding democracies, the combination of poor democratic governance, illiberal populism, and severe

polarization can make it difficult to mobilize broad pro-democracy coalitions. Illiberal leaders are often popular, and polarization dissuades voters from crossing partisan divides—indeed, some may see illiberal populism as a form of majoritarian democracy.

3. *Preserving democratic institutions.* Extra-institutional activism outside the normal democratic process may combat erosion, but it can also undermine the institutions that activists must restore. Channeling movement energies into the electoral process requires collaboration between activists and political parties, which can be elusive.
- **The US pro-democracy movement.** In his first six months, President Trump has abused executive powers to sidestep Congress, repress civil society, and line his own pockets. In response, a pro-democracy movement of historic proportions has mobilized against Trumpian illiberalism. While the movement faces state repression, its biggest obstacles are impediments to a broad pro-democracy electoral coalition. As the movement must ultimately gain political power to succeed, movement-party cooperation is a strategic necessity. But the Democratic Party is both historically unpopular and resistant to change, and movement-party fissures are severe. Repairing this coalition requires 1) a transformed Democratic Party (likely precipitated by civic pressure) committed to a pro-democracy agenda and 2) a commitment among activists to set aside differences and quickly build as broad a coalition as possible despite the highly polarized climate.
- **Looking ahead.** This report identifies three key takeaways:
 - *Democracies need defenders.* Even the most well-designed democratic institutions are not unassailable, and institutions do not stand apart from the societies they govern. Civil society may not be universally pro-democracy, but democracies are far more likely to survive when strong civil societies are engaged in their defense.
 - *Thinking beyond repression.* Repression is not the only problem for nonviolent pro-democracy movements. Activists can struggle to build broad national coalitions against popular illiberal leaders and must ultimately work within the democratic process to preserve key institutions, even if these institutions are somewhat dysfunctional. Healthy linkages between pro-democracy activists and political parties are important but are an underdeveloped area of both research and practice.
 - *Reasons for optimism in America.* US activists face real challenges, but they still enjoy relatively strong civil liberties protections and democratic institutions, and Trump remains unpopular. Pro-democracy movements have prevailed in far worse circumstances. US activists should resist cynical defeatism, even as they remain clear-eyed about the difficult road ahead.

Introduction

Global democracy is under unprecedented stress. Episodes of *autocratization*—the “substantial de facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy”¹—have roiled countries across the globe, with worldwide democracy levels on a steady decline since their 2006 peak.² Autocratization in democratic states, also called *democratic erosion*, has preyed upon younger or weakly institutionalized democracies, such as Mexico, Nicaragua, Niger, the Philippines, Serbia, Thailand, and Tunisia. But democratic erosion has also degraded more mature democracies, such as Bolivia, Brazil, Greece, India, Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela—in some cases, past the point of democratic breakdown.

Until recently, Western liberal democracies appeared resistant to erosion stressors, leading some to argue that liberal institutions and strong democratic traditions would immunize mature democracies against severe erosion.³ Yet in just a few short months, the second Trump administration has brought the global autocratization crisis crashing home to the United States, with Trump waging a norm-shattering campaign of illiberal executive aggrandizement, corruption, and suppression of dissent.⁴ The stubborn myth of “American exceptionalism” has again run aground on reality’s rocky shoals.

However, this global democratic decline is *not* inevitable. Democracy can be defended, most of all by its own citizens. *Nonviolent action campaigns*—unarmed civilians using extra-institutional tactics such as protests, strikes, and boycotts to press for change without the use or threat of violence⁵—are historically linked to durable democratization.⁶ True to this legacy, nonviolent pro-democracy campaigns have delayed or reversed democratic erosion in countries such as Ecuador, Georgia, Guatemala, Slovakia, and South Korea. In other cases, however, pro-democracy movements have struggled or failed outright, as in El Salvador, Hong Kong, Israel, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Venezuela, and others.

A pro-democracy campaign is now urgently mobilizing in the United States, spearheaded by determined civic activism.⁷ The movement includes national-level movement organizations like Indivisible and 50501, which have coordinated major demonstration days with millions of participants, as well as innumerable local organizations responsible

1. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019).

2. Diamond (2015, 2021); Lührmann and Lindberg (2019); Alizada (2021); Papada et al. (2023); Nord et al. (2024); Nord et al. (2025).

3. Weyland (2020).

4. Levitsky et al. (2025); Carrier and Carothers (2025).

5. Chenoweth (2021).

6. Bayer et al. (2016); Celestino and Gleditsch (2013); Lambach et al. (2020); Pinckney (2020); Teorell (2010).

7. For a strategic assessment of priorities for US pro-democracy organizing, see Chenoweth and Marks (2022).

for thousands of decentralized resistance events across the country.⁸ Their actions both support and are supported by established civil rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), a strong judiciary system, and liberal state governments, all of which are working to resist Trump's lawlessness and abuse of power.

This struggle for liberal democracy is not new to America. The US has a fraught history of racialized national and subnational authoritarianism, particularly in the Jim Crow South.⁹ Trump has resurrected demons from the US's all-too-recent illiberal past, and Americans must now relearn (and for some, relive) hard-earned lessons from the civic movements that first made US liberal democracy possible. Just as importantly, Americans also have much to learn from modern pro-democracy activism in the world's other democracies as they endure similar erosion crises. How does democratic erosion typically progress? What are the strengths and weaknesses of nonviolent activism against democratic erosion, and how do these dynamics differ from those in fully authoritarian contexts? How have other pro-democracy movements tried to navigate these dynamics?

To that end, this report presents a comparative assessment of nonviolent action against democratic erosion. I provide condensed primers on democratic erosion and nonviolent action, integrating scholarship on civil resistance, democratization, democratic erosion, and democratic resilience. I use this review to identify three practical challenges that nonviolent pro-democracy movements often face during erosion episodes: worsening repression, impediments to broad pro-democracy coalitions, and inadvertent harms caused by extra-institutional protest. These challenges diverge in important ways from the dynamics of nonviolent activism in fully authoritarian contexts, and understanding these differences can help activists better exploit their comparative strengths and avoid vulnerabilities.

I then consider the US in comparative perspective, assessing whether and how severely these challenges may manifest. Briefly, I find that challenges for nonviolent activism have worsened under Trump 2.0 but that the US remains a favorable environment for mass mobilization—democracy-loving Americans should not overstate illiberalism's strength, even as they remain clear-eyed about the determination they will need to succeed. I conclude by distilling key implications and recommendations for activists working to rejuvenate liberal democracy and turn the tides of global democratic erosion.

Democratic Erosion Primer

Recent years have seen a frenetic expansion of research on global democratic erosion. Descriptively, scholars have collected new datasets to record how the substantive elements of liberal democracy beyond competitive elections (e.g., universal suffrage, freedom

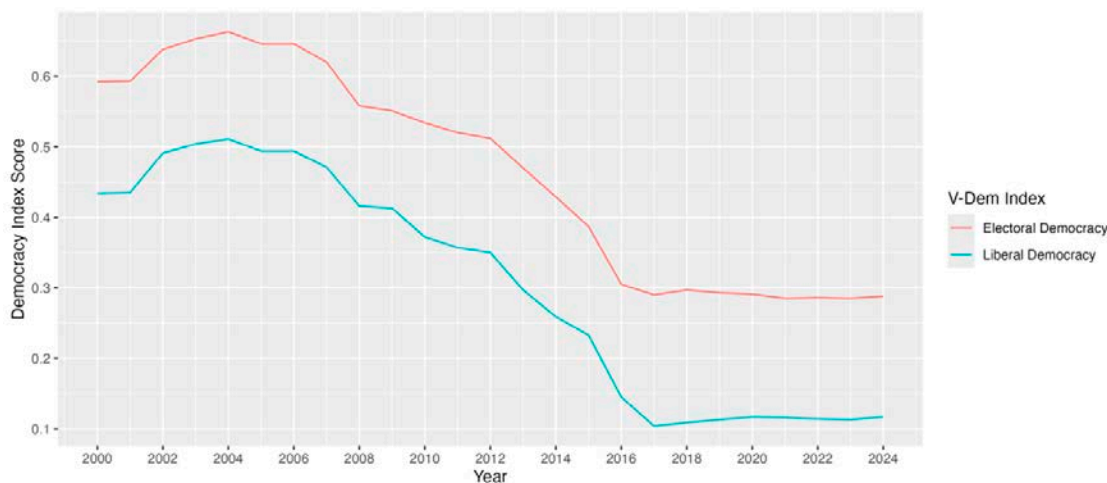
8. See the [Indivisible](#) and [50501](#) websites for examples.

9. Mickey (2015); Grumbach (2023).

of expression and association, independent media)¹⁰ are degrading across countries and over time. For instance, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset¹¹ now provides annual, expert-coded measurements on a huge range of variables related to democratic quality, while the Democratic Erosion Events Dataset¹² (DEED) compiles monthly events data on “symptoms” of democratic erosion and various forms of resistance.

To demonstrate, Figure 1 depicts democratic erosion in Turkey from 2000 to present. Figure 1 visualizes V-Dem’s “Electoral Democracy” score, a composite index composed of variables measuring freedoms of association and expression, executive and legislative appointments via fair popular elections, and the extent of suffrage (countries that score above 0.5 are conventionally deemed electoral democracies). The figure also displays V-Dem’s “Liberal Democracy” score, an index including protections for civil liberties and minority rights as well as judicial and legislative checks on executive power, that is, the guardrails of limited, liberal government.¹³ As the figure shows, democratic erosion in Turkey began several years after Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s rise to power in 2003, with major inflection points in 2008 (after the 2007 elections), 2013 (when Erdogan repressed the Gezi Park protests, bringing Turkey past the point of democratic breakdown), and 2016 (a failed coup d’état and Erdogan’s purge of state institutions). Declines are especially pronounced on the liberal democracy index—while elections remain quasi-competitive, Erdogan has obliterated restraints on executive power and severely constrained civil liberties.

Figure 1. V-Dem Democracy Scores, Turkey



10. Dahl (1972).

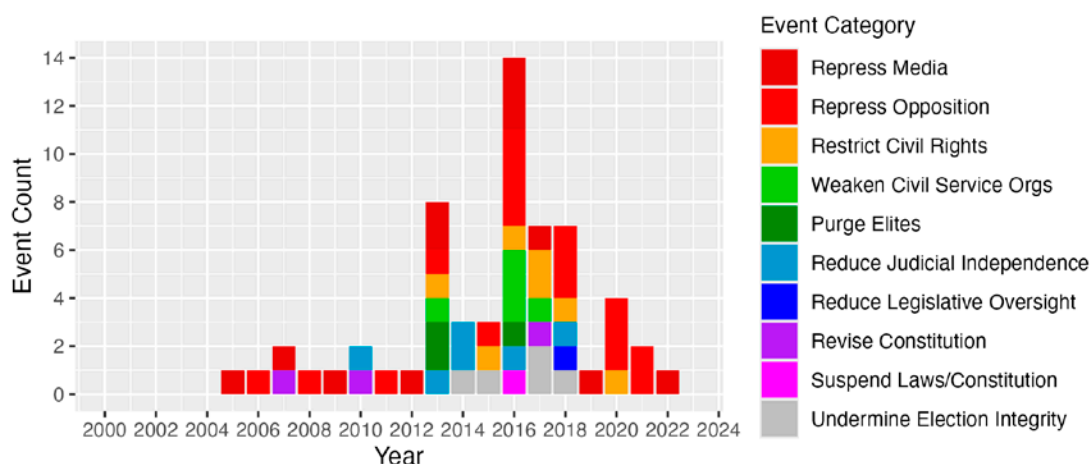
11. Lüthmann and Lindberg (2019). See also Alizada (2021), Papada et al. (2023), and Nord et al. (2024). V-Dem data are available [here](#).

12. Democratic Erosion Consortium (2023).

13. For a precise description of these variables, see the [V-Dem codebook](#).

DEED's events data offer a more detailed look at how democratic erosion unfolded in Turkey over time. Figure 2 displays yearly counts of different types of “symptom” events for democratic erosion.¹⁴ The data reveal that attacks on media and the political opposition are a hallmark of erosion in Turkey, occurring consistently throughout the period. They also show that attempts to undermine key institutions did not truly begin until a decade into Erdogan's rule, with a wave of elite purges and judiciary manipulation in 2013–2014, and another major civil service purge in 2016. Attacks on electoral integrity are comparatively infrequent and late to emerge, mostly around the 2018 presidential election. The DEED data track with changes in the V-Dem indices and also reinforce the intuition (discussed further below) that democratic institutions become more vulnerable after civil society has been repressed.

Figure 2: DEED “Symptoms” of Erosion, Turkey



As the erosion era has come into focus, scholars have sought to pinpoint the causes of democratic decline and sources of democratic resilience.¹⁵ Democratic erosion is a multidimensional process, and no two cases are the same. Scholars have identified many interrelated causal factors, including declining global support for democracy and the rise of autocratic competitors;¹⁶ poor economic conditions, including stagnant development,¹⁷ inequality,¹⁸ and acute crises;¹⁹ dysfunctional democratic

14. For a precise description of “Symptom” variables, see Democratic Erosion Consortium (2023).

15. Carothers and Press (2022); Diamond (2021); Ginsburg and Huq (2018); Haggard and Kaufman (2021); Polyakova et al. (2019); Riedl et al. (2025); Waldner and Lust (2018).

16. Carothers (2016); Diamond (2021); Hyde (2020); Levitsky and Way (2020).

17. Alemán and Yang (2011); Boix and Stokes (2003); Przeworski and Limongi (1997).

18. Acemoglu and Robinson (2006); Boix (2003); but see also Slater et al. (2014).

19. Kapstein and Converse (2008).

governance;²⁰ populism;²¹ severe polarization;²² weak democratic norms;²³ and declining popular support for democracy.²⁴

Although a comprehensive assessment of these factors is beyond the scope of this report, I ground this discussion in a brief review of some general features common to many cases of democratic erosion.

Eroding from the Top Down

Some recent democratic breakdowns have come via military coups, as in Egypt, Thailand, Myanmar, Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Niger. But a hallmark of democratic erosion is that coups are the exception, not the rule. Instead, erosion generally occurs via “executive aggrandizement,” in which democratically elected leaders work to centralize power and hollow out democracy from within, under the facade of democracy itself.²⁵

Put bluntly, then, democratic erosion is a story of elite institutional sabotage.²⁶ In some cases, voters enable this process by repeatedly voting for illiberal leaders or policies. Yet voters are not the primary architects of erosion. Leaders could pursue liberal democratic solutions to national problems but opt to dismantle democracy instead. Moreover, voter support for illiberal rulers is not necessarily opposition to democracy *qua* democracy. Autocratization can be gradual and subtle, and it may not be evident to voters that leaders promising major reforms intend to undermine democracy until the final blows are struck.²⁷

What motivates and enables elites to undermine democracy? Asserting that elites are committed to illiberal or authoritarian ideologies is insufficient, though this is certainly true in some cases (e.g., Hungary, where Victor Orbán famously proclaimed his new “illiberal state” in 2014). Instead, scholars have worked to illuminate the political circumstances that facilitate elite attempts to subvert democratic rules and norms.²⁸ I review four such contextual features: poor democratic performance, illiberal populism, worsening polarization, and diminished global democracy support.

20. Diamond (2022); Foa (2021); Fukuyama (2015).

21. Foa (2021). On populism, see Diamond (2021), Galston (2018), Grzymala-Busse et al. (2020), and Slater (2013).

22. Iyengar et al. (2019); Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018); Somer et al. (2021); Svobik (2019, 2020).

23. Carothers (2002); Haggard and Kaufman (2016); Levitsky and Way (2002); Zakaria (1997).

24. Foa and Mounk (2017a, b).

25. Bermeo (2016). On executive consolidation and democratic corrosion from within, see also Carothers and Press (2022), Haggard and Kaufman (2023), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), and Lührmann and Lindberg (2019).

26. Bermeo (2003); Carothers and Press (2022); Bartels (2023).

27. Bartels (2023); Ginsburg and Huq (2018); Haggard and Kaufman (2021); Luo and Przeworski (2023).

28. Lührmann (2021).

Poor Democratic Performance

One oft-cited driver of democratic erosion is inept, impotent, or otherwise failed democratic governance—as Diamond (2022) writes, “Badly governed, poorly performing democracies are accidents waiting to happen.”

Democracies can fall painfully short along a number of dimensions. They may struggle to generate consistent economic growth, as with Venezuela’s economic malaise in the late 20th century and Tunisia’s stagnation in the 2010s, or to respond effectively to acute economic crises, as with Peru’s 1980s hyperinflation before Alberto Fujimori’s presidency, or the 2001 Turkish economic crisis that brought Prime Minister Erdogan to power. They may be marred by corruption that distorts government services and implicates elites in outrageous abuses, as in Brazil, where an anti-corruption probe revealed systemic bribery, triggering the 2016 impeachment of President Rousseff and paving the way for Jair Bolsonaro’s 2018 victory. Or they may fail to protect their citizens from violent crime or to preserve the rule of law, as in the Philippines, where Rodrigo Duterte rose to power on the promise to end drug crime, or in El Salvador, which was victimized by years of astronomical homicide rates before Nayib Bukele’s authoritarian crackdown.

Whatever the failure, chronic popular frustration with democratic performance delegitimizes the political establishment and stimulates demands for alternatives. Unfortunately, many new Third Wave democracies were characterized by lackluster governance, helmed by weak states lacking strong bureaucracies and political parties, prior democratic experience, and even de facto territorial control.²⁹ The resulting governments tended to become clientelist and corrupt, serving more as shoddy patronage vehicles than as public goods providers.³⁰ Mired in scandal and unable to resolve economic stagnation, corruption, and crime, poorly performing governments discredit democracy by association.

Poor socioeconomic performance does not characterize all cases of democratic erosion. As Carothers and Hartnett (2024) argue, countries like Poland, Nicaragua, India, and the US elected illiberal rulers in the absence of major governance crises. In these cases, the *perception* of poor performance may matter more than reality, as would-be rulers skillfully enflame public sentiment around narratives of state failures.³¹

Illiberal Populism

Democratic dysfunction opens the door for anti-establishment, illiberal populism. Both left- and right-wing populists have won office by vowing to restore power to the masses and launch transformative reforms. In the process, they aggressively sideline corrupted elites, bypass democratic institutions that would restrain their actions, and quash

29. Diamond (2022).

30. Foa (2021); Fukuyama (2015).

31. See also Bartels (2023).

dissenters, all deemed hostile enemies of the people.³² Populists invoke nationalist and anti-elitist language to cement their patriotic credentials, often infusing this rhetoric with aggressive nativism along racial, ethnic, or religious lines. Although they, too, may ultimately fail to deliver, this populist vision can fuel highly energizing outsider campaigns, as evidenced by populist electoral victories in Thailand (Thaksin Shinawatra), the Philippines (Rodrigo Duterte), Hungary (Victor Orbán), Venezuela (Hugo Chávez), and others.

Two aspects of this populist appeal are especially important. First, populism is not merely a superficial rhetorical strategy, as it is usually grounded in real popular grievances. Those grievances are not always economic, as they may also stem from inter-related sociocultural tensions produced in part by structural changes in post-industrial societies.³³ For instance, one cross-national study suggests that right-wing populism is rooted in the status anxiety and both cultural and economic displacement experienced by uneducated men in developing democracies.³⁴ In Poland, economic growth was strong in the 2010s, yet the populist Law and Justice Party won by campaigning on nationalist opposition to immigration and anti-elitist hostility to European Union (EU) integration.³⁵ While some voters may find nativism distasteful, such populism may still appeal to the middle class through the promise of restored law and order.³⁶ And for those frustrated by corruption, the populist performance of vehement anti-elitism can be an important end in itself.

Second, populism and “democracy” are not so easily distinguished. Populism clearly threatens liberal democracy by promoting a vision of majoritarian rule “by the people” that divorces democracy from its foundations in civil liberties and limited government.³⁷ Indeed, populists have wielded power to degrade democratic institutions in numerous cases—Hungary, Turkey, and Bolivia are three instructive examples among many. But the initial populist appeal is not so much a rejection of democracy as it is an endorsement of majoritarian democratic principles, which emphasize *vertical* accountability between citizen and state, as opposed to *horizontal* checks and balances via institutions.³⁸ In this vein, most populist candidates do not campaign on illiberalism outright, instead downplaying their undemocratic aspirations or even asserting their role as saviors of democracy. This helps to explain why voters support illiberal power grabs by charismatic populists—they perceive their goals and actions to be democratic.³⁹

32. Diamond (2021); Galston (2018); Grzymala-Busse et al. (2020). Focusing on Latin America and Europe, Weyland (2024) identifies 40 cases of populist governments rising to power between 1985 and 2020.

33. Margalit (2019); Norris and Inglehart (2019); Riedl et al. (2025).

34. Gidron and Hall (2017).

35. Fomina and Kucharczyk (2016); Polyakova et al. (2019).

36. Foa (2021). On the importance of law and order, see Linz and Stepan (1978).

37. Galston (2018).

38. Slater (2013); Ding and Slater (2021).

39. Albertus and Grossman (2021); Bartels (2023); Carothers and Hartnett (2024).

Polarized Societies

Societies experiencing democratic erosion can suffer from high *polarization*, or “the process through which political elites and mass publics become increasingly divided over public policy, ideology and ultimately partisan attachments.”⁴⁰ Some degree of polarization is necessary for a healthy democracy, as polarized parties develop competitive policy platforms that provide voters with meaningful choice—the alternative is corrupt elite cartels, as in Indonesia,⁴¹ or apathetic unity governments, as in Tunisia during the 2010s.⁴² Yet as polarization grows severe, party loyalties become defining features of partisans’ social identities. Political competition transforms into struggles between these opposing identity groups, generating mutual distrust and hostility between entrenched political camps.⁴³

This “pernicious polarization” fuels democratic erosion.⁴⁴ Most importantly, heightened divisions between political parties turns politics into a zero-sum game. As voters grow more fearful of electoral losses, they become less likely to punish illiberal co-partisans for abuses of power.⁴⁵ In addition, polarization often comes hand in hand with legislative gridlock. Policy paralysis in the face of political crises further incentivizes voters to abandon democratic institutions in favor of strongman rulers that actually “get things done.”

Affective polarization characterizes eroding democracies such as India, Hungary, Thailand, and the United States and is associated with declines in V-Dem’s liberal democracy scores.⁴⁶ Polarization is both *cause* and *effect* of democratic erosion: polarization opens political space for wannabe autocrats to ascend to power, and once in office, illiberal rulers may deliberately stoke latent societal cleavages to polarize and lock in voters for subsequent elections. For instance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has wielded Hindu nationalism like a cudgel, exacerbating existing societal tensions between India’s Hindu and Muslim communities to keep the former closely aligned with the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Fading Democracy Promotion

A final contributor to global democratic erosion is a changing international environment. As the Cold War ended, the world saw a dramatic rise in democracy promotion—the US unipolar moment brought democracy into the ascendancy, with outspoken democratic solidarity from Western liberal societies underwriting the global spread of democratic

40. Haggard and Kaufman (2023, 6).

41. Slater (2018).

42. Grewal and Hamid (2020).

43. Iyengar et al. (2019); Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018); Somer et al. (2021).

44. McCoy and Somer (2019); McCoy et al. (2018).

45. Svobik (2019, 2020); Albertus and Grossman (2021).

46. Somer et al. (2021).

norms.⁴⁷ These pro-democracy forces are now weakening, as Western democracies' interest in democracy promotion dims. Mired in their own domestic problems and home-grown illiberal streaks, the US and other Western democracies have backed away from strident democracy promotion agendas. And as geopolitical pressure from authoritarian great power competitors grows, these nations may also face starker trade-offs (or at least perceived trade-offs) between democracy assistance and other foreign policy priorities, such as defense or alliance stability.⁴⁸

At the same time, democracy advocates now face more determined authoritarian headwinds.⁴⁹ Aspiring autocrats have begun to emulate successful erosion strategies. For instance, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa copied Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's strategy to sidestep the legislature with a constituent assembly,⁵⁰ and versions of Russia's 2012 foreign agent law have proliferated to many other countries. Illiberal rulers also engage in direct cooperation, as autocratic patrons like China and Russia provide technical, financial, and diplomatic support to help allies repress pro-democracy activism and resist Western democratizing pressure. For instance, Russia, Iran, and Venezuela have all cooperated through various mechanisms to circumvent global economic sanctions.⁵¹

Waning global support for democracy has accelerated democratic erosion. As external punishments for undemocratic behavior decrease, illiberal rulers can corrode democracy with impunity. Levitsky and Way (2020) cite erosion in Hungary, Honduras, and Nicaragua as evidence of enfeebled democracy promotion even within the EU's and the US's spheres of influence, let alone in countries in China's or Russia's orbit. Likewise, Hyde (2020, 1193) stresses decreased global support for civic activism, arguing that "prodemocracy citizen movements are now more likely to face leaders who are willing to engage in blatant targeting of political opposition and willing to commit violence against citizen demonstrations, and these movements are receiving less support from foreign allies."⁵²

Nonviolent Action Primer

Nonviolent action, often called civil resistance, unarmed insurrection, or "people power," has long been one of the sharpest instruments in the pro-democracy toolkit. Nonviolent action involves strategic, coordinated action intended to cultivate widespread popular support for change and shift power away from status quo defenders, without the use

47. Hyde (2011); Diamond (2015).

48. Carothers and Press (2021).

49. von Soest (2015); Carothers (2020); Levitsky and Way (2020); Applebaum (2021).

50. Scheppele (2018).

51. Tarasenko (2022); *Reuters* (2022). On China's role in Latin America, see Berg and Ziemer (2024).

52. See also Hyde's entry in Bartels et al. (2023).

or threat of violence.⁵³ Nonviolent activism has notched numerous victories, including prominent episodes of democratization,⁵⁴ and cross-national studies show that nonviolent action is much more effective than violent resistance at achieving transformative goals.⁵⁵ In fact, nonviolent activism is strongly associated with democracy—nonviolent campaigns not only power initial transitions to democracy but also increase the likelihood that robust and durable democratic systems emerge in their wake.⁵⁶

How does nonviolent action work? Gene Sharp’s seminal work on the strategy of nonviolence articulates a simple but powerful theory of nonviolent change.⁵⁷ All political systems are sustained by overlapping institutional and socioeconomic relationships, which themselves depend on the people’s routine acceptance. Aggrieved masses can withdraw consent for unjust systems by peacefully disrupting these relationships—for instance, by refusing to work until their employer ends support for politicians implicated in human rights violations. Employing a diverse tactical repertoire, activists steadily pressure existing political structures and build momentum for change. To extend our running example, a labor strike can drive a wedge between an oppressive government and its corporate benefactors while also rallying public support against human rights abuses.

As activists convert opponents to their cause, the ties that bind the system’s key “pillars of support”—especially business interests, religious organizations, civic groups, and security forces—begin to fray.⁵⁸ At this point, opponents may offer concessions to avoid further costs. If opponents refuse to compromise, nonviolent campaigns can ratchet up the peaceful disruption until the status quo coalition buckles, with core pillars like the military or party elites abandoning intransigent hardliners and facilitating reforms.

Scholars have identified several attributes associated with successful nonviolent campaigns. Large and diverse participation is critical, providing safety in numbers and signaling widespread public support, which helps movements recruit allies and convince opponents to defect.⁵⁹ Another key quality is nonviolent discipline—audiences strongly prefer nonviolent to violent resistance, and whereas violence delegitimizes movements and justifies repression, sustained nonviolence in the face of repression elicits popular outrage and magnifies support for the campaign.⁶⁰ Successful nonviolent movements are also creative, adapting their tactical repertoire to their own local context and to changing

53. For core contributions to the nonviolence literature, see Ackerman and Kreugler (1994), Ackerman and DuVall (2000), Bartkowski (2013), Bunce and Wolchik (2011), Chenoweth (2021), Chenoweth and Stephan (2011), Nepstad (2011), Pinckney (2020), Roberts and Ash (2009), and Schock (2005).

54. For examples of nonviolence in action, see Roberts and Ash (2009).

55. Chenoweth and Stephan (2011).

56. Bayer et al. (2016); Lambach et al. (2020); Pinckney (2020); Teorell (2010).

57. Sharp (1973, 2010). This discussion draws extensively on Jackson et al. (2022).

58. This grouping of key pillars draws on Pinckney and Trilling (2025).

59. Chenoweth and Stephan (2011).

60. Dahlum et al. (2023); Francisco (2004); Hess and Martin (2006); Lupu and Wallace (2019); Muñoz and Anduiza (2019); Pinckney (2016); Wasow (2020).

circumstances.⁶¹ Last, triggering security force defections is a priority for nonviolent campaigns, which can be vulnerable to overwhelming repression—security force defections are often the final nail in the coffin for violent rulers clinging to power.⁶²

Some may question whether nonviolent action remains an effective tool for social change. It is true that success rates for nonviolent campaigns have declined in the recent era of global democratic erosion. Chenoweth (2020) argues that this is most likely because modern movements are smaller; overly reliant on disruptive street protests and digital organizing, as opposed to other forms of movement and in-person network building; and more likely to feature violent flanks than past nonviolent campaigns. Chenoweth also notes that illiberal opponents have grown more adept at quashing nonviolent movements.

Below, I consider at length how the strategic dynamics of nonviolent action fare in eroding democracies, which present unique challenges for nonviolent activism. For now, I emphasize that there is little reason to think that other methods of resistance to democratic erosion would consistently bear greater fruit. Violent rebellion has also grown less effective over time and still underperforms compared to nonviolence.⁶³ Violent rebellion is even less appropriate in eroding democracies. After all, democracy is fundamentally a way to compete over political power *without* violence, and democratic publics tend to strongly disapprove of violence related to nonviolent activism.⁶⁴ Nonviolent action may have its difficulties, but like democracy itself, it remains better than the alternatives.

Nonviolent Action in the Erosion Era

How has nonviolent resistance shaped the course of democratic erosion, and how does erosion complicate the strategic dynamics of nonviolent action? After reviewing the importance of pro-democracy activism as an antidote to erosion, I identify three challenges that democratic erosion poses for pro-democracy nonviolent campaigns. These challenges are related to those that activists typically face in repressive authoritarian regimes, but they differ in important ways. Understanding these unique opportunities and constraints is necessary if movements are to adapt and succeed in the erosion era.

Defenders of Democracy

That democratic erosion is largely driven by elites does not mean that civil society is irrelevant. Indeed, an active civil society has, in numerous cases, proven to be an indispensable barrier to autocratization.⁶⁵

61. Schock (2005); Bunce and Wolchik (2011).

62. Nepstad (2011, 2013).

63. Chenoweth (2020).

64. Dahlum et al. (2023); Orazani and Leidner (2019); Abbs and Gleditsch (2021); Cebul and Pinckney (2025); Lupu and Wallace (2019); Wasow (2020).

65. Croissant and Haynes (2021); Laebens and Lührmann (2021); Merriman, Quirk, and Jain (2023).

An energetic pro-democracy movement can combat democratic erosion in several ways. Grassroots mobilization provides a vertical check on erosion via electoral politics—get out the vote campaigns can stop illiberal rulers from reaching power or oust them in subsequent elections. Moreover, mass mobilization provides a vital backstop for institutions of horizontal accountability, such as the judiciary, legislature, and electoral commissions, that aspiring autocrats seek to co-opt or marginalize. A vigilant civil society can reinforce democracy by mobilizing against illiberal attempts to cripple these institutional safeguards. Civic mobilization can also kickstart horizontal accountability mechanisms, as popular pressure emboldens hesitant elites to fight back against illiberal abuses. As Diamond (2008, 310) stresses, “Horizontal accountability needs to be stimulated and reinforced by vertical pressures from civil society.”⁶⁶

Recent history is replete with examples of civil society rising to defend democracy. In Indonesia, civil society has repeatedly policed corrupt elite overreach since the student-led movement toppled Suharto in 1998, leading Slater (2023, 102) to argue that “it is almost impossible to overstate just how important popular pressure and urban protests have been in keeping Indonesia’s cozy political elite in line.”⁶⁷ In South Korea, mass protests in 2016 motivated a reticent Parliament to impeach President Park Geun-hye for corruption and abuse of power, and December 2024 protests again pushed Parliament to impeach President Yoon Suk Yeol after his aborted declaration of martial law.⁶⁸ In Senegal, the 2011 June 23rd Movement forced President Wade to abandon a constitutional amendment to lower the electoral threshold for a first round victory—he ran for a third term in 2012 but was defeated in a runoff.⁶⁹ In Guatemala, a grassroots Indigenous movement prevented corrupt elites from reversing reformist candidate Bernardo Arévalo’s surprise victory in the 2023 presidential elections.⁷⁰ In Georgia, protesters swarmed Tbilisi in 2023 in response to a draft “foreign agent” NGO law, forcing the government to withdraw the bill (the law did ultimately pass in May 2024 despite renewed protests).⁷¹ And in Serbia this year, student activists have mobilized an extraordinary campaign against President Aleksandar Vucic’s corrupt government despite repression, which may force him to hold snap elections.⁷²

It is important to acknowledge that civil society is not always enamored with democracy. Civil society has thwarted democracy in cases like Thailand, where royalist activists repeatedly mobilized in favor of military interventions that toppled democratically elected

66. See also Bernhard et al. (2020); Haggard and Kaufman (2021); Laebens and Lührmann (2021).

67. See also Mietzner (2021).

68. Croissant and Haynes (2021); Laebens and Lührmann (2021).

69. Rakner (2021); Yarwood (2016).

70. Schwartz and Isaacs (2023). See also Del Aguila and Speck (2023).

71. Nechepurenko (2023).

72. Chin (2025).

(albeit abusive) governments in 2005 and 2014.⁷³ And even if elites drive erosion, illiberal rulers often reach and retain power via the ballot box.⁷⁴ It is therefore a mistake to idealize the mass public as universally pro-democracy.

Still, the democratic rewards of a robust civil society generally outweigh these risks. Democratic breakdown in countries like Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela make clear that even mature democratic institutions are insufficient safeguards against illiberal rulers determined to destroy them. Institutions are not invincible—ultimately, they depend on popular support. Cross-national data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) institute illustrate that robust pro-democracy movements have played a critical role in recent “U-turn” cases where erosion has been reversed.⁷⁵ Thus, an active citizenry committed to democratic accountability is the last and most essential defense democracies have against democratic breakdown.⁷⁶ As Haggard and Kaufman (2016, 358) conclude, “Viewed over the long run, the key to more stable democratic regimes may depend less on institutional design than on the social organizations in which they are nested.”

At the same time, nonviolent action against democratic erosion is not easy and does not always succeed. Below, we identify three challenges that can frustrate nonviolent activism in eroding democracies. These are worsening repression; obstacles to pro-democracy coalition formation; and collateral damage to democratic institutions.

Challenge 1: Worsening Repression

One familiar challenge for nonviolent activism in the erosion era is worsening repression. Illiberal rulers are proactively stifling civil society to counteract mobilization from below and have developed enhanced tools and competencies to do so.

A global repressive backlash to democracy promotion has been building since the mid-2000s.⁷⁷ It began with the rise of pseudo-legal architectures that illiberal governments use to restrict democracy assistance funds, impose onerous bureaucratic hindrances on advocacy groups, and otherwise harass or intimidate activists. That trend is best exemplified by Russia, but others eagerly emulate the Russian model. For instance, Egypt conducted a major crackdown on foreign-funded NGOs, expelling Western NGOs and arresting their local partners;⁷⁸ in Turkey, President Erdogan has wielded anti-terrorism laws to prosecute journalists and silence independent media;⁷⁹ recent revisions to India’s Foreign Contribution Regulation Act isolate local NGOs from international benefactors;⁸⁰ and in 2024, Georgia passed an NGO “foreign agent” law based on the Russian model.

73. Lorch (2021); Sombatpoonsiri (2020).

74. Svolik (2019).

75. Papada et al. (2023); Nord et al. (2024).

76. Acemoglu (2017).

77. Carothers (2006); Carothers and Brechenmacher (2014); Rutzen (2015); Chaudhry (2022).

78. On Egypt, see Brechenmacher (2017).

79. Human Rights Watch (2016).

80. On India, see ICNL’s project [page](#) on the FCRA and related civil society restrictions.

A similar shift is unfolding in the digital arena. Digital technologies initially advantaged civil society, as bewildered autocrats were unprepared for the internet's transformative potential.⁸¹ But illiberal rulers have since adapted digital technologies to their own ends, employing censorship, surveillance, and disinformation to penetrate and disrupt pro-democracy organizations.⁸² The clearest examples of digital authoritarianism are China and Russia, but the problem now extends beyond early autocratic adopters to eroding democracies.⁸³ In the Philippines, President Duterte produced a torrent of disinformation around his crime crackdown;⁸⁴ India conducts more internet blackouts than any other country, and Indian dissidents have been arrested for online speech; Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro tried to bar social media companies from removing malicious disinformation about COVID-19 (Brazil's Supreme Court nullified the order);⁸⁵ and in Mexico, Pegasus spyware has been used to target activists, journalists, and lawmakers.⁸⁶

More effective repression can stifle nonviolent pro-democracy campaigns. Although the worst offenders do so freely, wannabe autocrats need not rely on brute force. Instead, they suffocate civil society under the guise of legal reform. Governments are getting better at preemptively identifying and repressing dissidents, and as Cebul and Pinckney (2021) contend, enhanced preventive repression short-circuits key dynamics of nonviolent action derived from mass protest events, especially security force defections.

Worsening repression in eroding democracies has clear parallels to fully authoritarian settings, where nonviolent activists routinely contend with violent oppression. Activists in eroding democracies often enjoy important advantages: even imperfect democracies provide some civic freedoms, and repression is often less severe in early stages of erosion, granting civil society critical time and space to mobilize a defense. Yet this window can close quickly, and even moderate levels of repression can seriously constrain civil societies unaccustomed to repression. In these settings, pro-democracy forces may need to acquire proficiencies in underground organizing, security, and resilience exemplified by pro-democracy activists in more repressive states.

Challenge 2: Obstacles to Broad Pro-Democracy Coalitions

A second major challenge concerns activists' ability to forge broad pro-democracy coalitions. Mass participation is a priority for nonviolent campaigns, which are most

81. On digital media and nonviolent activism, see Castells (2012), Earl and Kimport (2013), and Shirky (2011).

82. Feldstein (2021); Morozov (2011); Tufekci (2017); Weidmann and Rød (2019). On the implications of digital authoritarianism for nonviolent action, see Cebul and Pinckney (2021, 2022).

83. Earl et al. (2022).

84. Feldstein (2021).

85. See Freedom House's 2022 reports on net freedom in [India](#) and [Brazil](#).

86. On Pegasus surveillance in Mexico, see [this series](#) of Citizen Lab investigative reports.

successful when they draw widespread and diverse support.⁸⁷ However, the sociopolitical circumstances in which democratic erosion often occurs can make building these mass pro-democracy coalitions especially difficult.

To start, many illiberal leaders responsible for democratic erosion are genuinely popular. This is an important contextual difference from how we typically understand pro-democracy movements in fully authoritarian settings. Although autocrats can also be popular, it is often assumed that mass grievances against repressive autocrats are abundant—the main challenge for activists in autocratic settings is the threat of repression and corresponding collective action problems, not whether the public supports democracy. In eroding democracies, however, the preceding *democratic* government is often the primary source of popular ire, and the illiberal rulers who replace establishment Democrats can be very popular by comparison. Indeed, many democracies show evidence of declining credibility among establishment parties, which have grown disconnected from the societies they govern and are therefore hemorrhaging popular support.⁸⁸ This makes it difficult to mobilize large-scale pro-democracy movements in response to erosion episodes—illiberal leaders enjoy their own healthy bases of popular support, and the pro-democracy narrative does not resonate as strongly when it comes directly on the heels of democratic failure. Put differently, whereas the 20th-century Third Wave democratization movements were buoyed by autocracy’s failures and the ascendant liberal international order, now *illiberalism* is in the ascendant—pro-democracy movements are fighting the current rather than riding it.

Several examples illustrate these problems. Although Tunisia emerged from the Arab Spring as a beacon of hope for the Middle East, its democratic experiment floundered in the 2010s. After years of economic malaise, unemployment, and terrorism crises, popular support for the new democratic establishment cratered. In 2019, independent populist presidential candidate Kais Saied, who derided Tunisia’s impotent party system, swept to power with over 70% of the vote. Saied’s 2021 decision to suspend Parliament was clearly undemocratic yet indisputably popular, and Saied has met little popular resistance since.⁸⁹

Likewise, in 2016, populist Rodrigo Duterte was elected president of the Philippines in a landslide, following explicit campaign promises to execute drug addicts. Duterte fulfilled that promise with vigor, killing more than 30,000 suspected criminals in a no-holds-barred crackdown on drug trafficking. Duterte’s violent methods were clearly illiberal, but he remained hugely popular, and his handpicked successor was elected in 2022 (Duterte has since been arrested by the International Criminal Court but remains popular).⁹⁰ A similar story can be told for El Salvador, where populist president Nayib Bukele rose to

87. Chenoweth and Stephan (2011).

88. Quirk and Surotchak (2022); Grzymala-Busse (2019).

89. On Tunisia’s post-transition experience, see Grubman (2022).

90. *The Economist* (2021); Calimbahin (2025).

power in 2019 on the promise to end rampant gang violence. In 2022, Bukele declared a state of emergency, launching a nationwide crackdown that has jailed over 80,000 El Salvadorans for suspected gang membership, the highest per capita incarceration rate in the world. Yet Bukele is immensely popular—he went on to win reelection in 2024 with over 80% of the vote.⁹¹

A related obstacle to pro-democracy coalition building is that eroding democracies are often highly polarized. Severe polarization can frustrate activists' attempts to bridge political divides and build a broad popular movement, as polarized partisan allegiances outweigh voters' concerns about undemocratic behavior. Indeed, aspiring autocrats often deliberately stoke polarization to ensure that their voters stay loyal.⁹² Among others, Hungary is the quintessential example of a highly polarized society with “zero-sum” politics; Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has unapologetically played illiberal hardball without losing much support from his base. Depending on electoral rules, illiberal leaders may only need to win a plurality of votes to gain power, which can be achieved with a relatively narrow polarized base. For instance, in 2015 Poland's Law and Justice Party won a plurality of votes (38%, representing 18.6% of eligible voters) but wound up with an absolute majority of seats in Parliament due to high vote thresholds for party entry.⁹³

Together, then, popular populists and severe polarization can thwart pro-democracy coalition building. Audiences may not be receptive to protests against popular illiberal leaders, associating pro-democracy movements with the old, corrupt elites responsible for their problems—mass movements may wind up confronting even more massive countermobilization.⁹⁴ And while these leaders' popularity may wane over time, polarization dissuades dissatisfied supporters from joining big-tent coalitions for democracy.

These obstacles are not deterministic. Cases such as Ecuador (where President Correa was dissuaded by popular pressure from running for reelection), Brazil (where President Bolsonaro was defeated at the ballot box in the 2022 elections), Poland (where the Law and Justice Party was defeated in 2023 despite high polarization), Turkey (where President Erdogan was only narrowly reelected in 2023), and the United States (where President Trump was defeated in 2020) all provide evidence that illiberal populists can be beaten by determined pro-democracy movements. Understanding how pro-democracy activists achieved these successes—and how they might avoid subsequent relapses⁹⁵—is an important question. Initial studies suggest the importance of coalition building among pro-democracy forces, as well as efforts to transform political polarization to focus on more positive axes of competition,⁹⁶ but the issue requires further study.

91. Flores-Macías (2024).

92. Carothers and Press (2022).

93. Fomina and Kucharczyk (2016).

94. Hellmeier and Bernhard (2023).

95. Bianchi et al. (2025).

96. Somer and McCoy (2023); Somer et al. (2021). On the importance of big-tent coalitions, see Feldman and McCoy (2024).

Challenge 3: Collateral Damage to Democratic Institutions

A final challenge for nonviolent activism in eroding democracies is that mass mobilization can inadvertently undermine the very democratic institutions that activists hope to save.

In entrenched authoritarian systems, extra-institutional resistance is often the only real avenue for change, as electoral and other institutional paths are either nonexistent or hopelessly corrupted. In most cases of democratic erosion, however, democracy enjoys at least partial institutional foundations. Elections are routine and largely fair (and may remain so even as leaders aggressively undermine civil liberties and other elements of liberal democracy⁹⁷), legislatures are not merely rubber stamps for the executive, and legal systems offer some essential civil liberty protections. In some cases, these core democratic institutions have developed over decades.

Aspiring autocrats seek to undermine all of the above. Yet contesting erosion by mobilizing outside of established institutional channels may only further delegitimize democracy. Protesting for a leader's removal via extraordinary means may be done in good faith, but it is also an inherent rejection of the electoral process. Boycotting legislative elections to oppose fraud may also undermine the legislature as a legitimate governing body. And in highly polarized settings, aggressive extra-institutional resistance may accentuate the sense that politics is "zero-sum," undermining norms of democratic tolerance. Perversely, these actions can allow illiberal rulers to claim the mantle of democracy over "extremist" and "undemocratic" opponents, even as they cynically gut democratic institutions.⁹⁸

Failed extra-institutional resistance also comes at a heavy price. As Gamboa (2022) describes, electoral boycotts may signal government illegitimacy, but they simultaneously surrender the legislative keys to illiberal rulers, who can use control of the legislature to consolidate power. Unsuccessful attempts to bring down autocratizing governments via non-democratic means can also provide illiberal rulers with a convenient justification for repressive crackdowns that hasten democratic breakdown.⁹⁹ And even if military intervention ousts illiberal rulers, promissory coups may ultimately do little more than entrench military supremacy over civilian rule.

These dynamics are exemplified by several prominent cases. In Venezuela, opponents repeatedly attempted to depose President Chávez via mass protests, a coup attempt, a strike campaign, and an electoral boycott. All failed. Instead, they enabled Chávez to purge key military and oil sector elites, imprison political opponents, and dominate the 2005 parliamentary elections, effectively sealing Venezuela's fate.¹⁰⁰ Likewise, in Turkey, a 2016 coup attempt backfired horrifically, consolidating Erdogan's

97. Ding and Slater (2021).

98. Cleary and Öztürk (2022); Gamboa (2017, 2022).

99. Cleary and Öztürk (2022); Gamboa (2017, 2022).

100. Cleary and Öztürk (2022); Gamboa (2017, 2022).

popular support and enabling far-reaching bureaucratic purges.¹⁰¹ In Thailand, 2006 protests successfully ousted Thaksin Shinawatra by way of a promissory coup, but this only opened the door to sustained military interference, culminating in a 2014 coup from which Thai democracy never recovered.¹⁰² And in Egypt, protesters aligned with the military to remove Mohamed Morsi in 2013, only to cement a military dictatorship.

None of this is to say that movements should *not* mobilize against democratic erosion. But the “how” matters. One solution, proposed by Gamboa (2022) and others, is for pro-democracy forces to pursue a strategy that works within and ultimately reinforces democratic institutions. This entails using available government channels to stall democratic erosion, nonviolent activism to spotlight executive abuses, and eventually rallying voters around pro-democracy candidates in future elections. This electoral strategy worked in Colombia, Brazil, and Poland, though it has not yet succeeded in places like Turkey or Hungary. Seen in this light, the goal for nonviolent activism is less about putting an abrupt halt to democratic erosion and more about preserving liberal democratic values during hard times and eventually revitalizing popular majorities for democracy.¹⁰³

That said, cultivating effective linkages between pro-democracy activists and parties is easier said than done. Activists may recoil from institutional politics, as they often perceive parties to be corrupt or impotent.¹⁰⁴ This tension is not new, and there are important lessons in activist-party linkages to be drawn from the “electoral model” of democratization that characterized democratic transitions in Eastern Europe.¹⁰⁵ The key insight is that mounting an effective electoral response to democratic erosion requires coordination between institutional and extra-institutional modes of resistance. Unfortunately, scholars have generally studied social movements separately from party politics, a knowledge gap that democratic erosion is now exposing.¹⁰⁶

In short, nonviolent activists must think strategically about the institutional consequences of extra-institutional mobilization. If they do not, they may wind up doing more harm than good.

101. Cleary and Öztürk (2022); Polyakova et al. (2019).

102. Slater (2013); Sombatpoonsiri (2020).

103. I am indebted to Dan Slater for this latter insight.

104. On distrust of establishment politics, see Krastev (2014).

105. Bunce and Wolchik (2011). On party-movement linkages, see also McAdam and Tarrow (2010).

106. For exceptions, see Kitschelt (2006) and McAdam and Tarrow (2010).

Democratic Erosion and Nonviolent Activism in the US

I now consider how democratic erosion and pro-democracy activism in the United States compare to global trends in the erosion era. I recount events in the US as they stand as of this writing and then assess each of the three challenges identified above in turn.

The Imperial Presidency

The United States is undeniably in the throes of an erosion crisis.¹⁰⁷ The clearest indicator is President Trump's maneuvering to consolidate federal and even state powers in the presidency. This executive aggrandizement has included the unconstitutional impoundment of congressionally authorized spending;¹⁰⁸ the unlawful firing of federal employees and elimination of congressionally mandated agencies, including key oversight roles;¹⁰⁹ the abuse of "emergency" powers to enact sweeping tariff and deportation schemes without congressional approval and in egregious violation of basic due process rights;¹¹⁰ the unprecedented abuse of federal law enforcement to reward criminal allies (e.g., pardons for January 6 rioters and corrupt Republican politicians), threaten opponents (e.g., the targeted investigation of Miles Taylor and prosecution of Rep. LaMonica McIver and James Comey), and extort compliance (e.g., the conditional pardon of New York Mayor Eric Adams);¹¹¹ and the flagrant corruption of the presidency for personal gain via bribery and various pay-to-play schemes, including investments in \$TRUMP cryptocurrency and a gifted Qatari airliner.¹¹² Most recently, Trump has pushed the bounds of his "emergency" authority to wield the military for domestic law enforcement, including National Guard deployments to Los Angeles and Chicago that were not approved by their respective state governors, and an attempt to commandeer the Washington, DC, police and impose an indefinite National Guard presence in the city.¹¹³

Simultaneously, Trump has seriously abused presidential powers to punish civic dissent. He has retaliated against the press, wielding a weaponized Federal Communications Commission and defamation lawsuits to extract settlements and muzzle news outlets.¹¹⁴ He has targeted universities that do not promote his ideological agenda with unlawful and indiscriminate funding cuts and is openly attempting to cripple universities that resist his extortion.¹¹⁵ He has aggressively targeted international students for unlawful detention and deportation based solely on constitutionally protected political

107. For a comparative discussion of US democratic erosion so far, see Carrier and Carothers (2025).

108. Bikales and Scholtes (2025).

109. Hsu (2025).

110. Romm and Swanson (2025); Feuer et al. (2025).

111. Thrush (2025); Wire (2025).

112. The Editorial Board (2025).

113. Savage et al. (2025); Associated Press (2025).

114. Wheeler (2025); Flint (2025).

115. Schmidt and Bender (2025).

speech.¹¹⁶ He has used executive orders to target law firms and former officials for abuse, especially those that opposed his efforts to overturn the 2020 elections,¹¹⁷ and has threatened to revoke the tax-exempt status of hundreds of nonprofit organizations that may oppose his agenda.¹¹⁸ And he is willing to violently suppress protest against his rule, mobilizing the National Guard to confront largely nonviolent protests in Los Angeles, Portland, and Chicago.¹¹⁹

The US Constitution grants Congress ample power to restrain presidential overreach. Congress could pass laws restricting presidential powers over tariffs and deportations, conduct oversight of government corruption, or impeach the president for gross abuses of power. Thus far, however, the Republican-controlled Congress has declined to defend its institutional prerogatives. Meaningful congressional oversight appears unlikely unless Democrats regain control of Congress, in January 2027 at the earliest.

This leaves the judiciary as the only real site of institutional resistance to democratic erosion. Federal judges have suspended or reversed many of Trump's more sweeping violations of the law.¹²⁰ Yet judicial remedies are often months delayed, and the interim damage can be difficult to undo—Trump is exploiting the presidency's inherent initiative to create authoritarian facts on the ground. The Trump administration has also proved willing to stonewall judicial proceedings in bad faith, intimidate judges (e.g., the arrest of Wisconsin Judge Hannah Dugan), and defy judicial orders.¹²¹ And the courts are themselves partly to blame for democratic erosion, especially the Supreme Court, which has done much to enable Trump's executive aggrandizement. In particular, *Trump vs. the United States* (2024) effectively insulated the presidency from any real risk of criminal prosecution, a fateful ruling that promptly blessed the most nakedly corrupt presidency in American history.¹²²

That said, how much US democracy has degraded thus far is a matter of debate. Noting the shocking speed at which Trump is consolidating executive power, Levitsky et al. (2025) argue that the United States has already crossed the line into competitive authoritarianism: "When citizens must think twice about criticizing or opposing the government because they could credibly face government retribution, they no longer live in a full democracy." Other experts contend that the US remains a democracy, albeit a troubled one.¹²³ Regardless, the future is highly uncertain—whether American democracy continues to implode or experiences a liberal democratic revival depends in large part on how Americans respond to the crisis at hand.

116. Florido (2025).

117. Barrett (2025).

118. Schouten (2025).

119. Savage et al. (2025).

120. Bonica (2025).

121. Feuer (2025).

122. Jurecic and Wittes (2024).

123. Beauchamp (2025).

The US Pro-Democracy Movement

As Trump's second term began, the dominant media narrative held that mass resistance to Trump was dead.¹²⁴ Whereas Trump's first inauguration was followed by the largest single-day protest in US history (the Women's March on Washington),¹²⁵ "the resistance" felt conspicuously absent in early 2025. Democratic politicians, grappling with defeat, spent the postelection interregnum attempting to pivot toward a less confrontational strategy. The business community also hunkered down, with many companies abandoning commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to deflect federal pressure.¹²⁶

While this narrative largely persisted through Trump's first 100 days, the empirical reality is starkly different: a pro-democracy movement has mobilized to confront Trumpian illiberalism.¹²⁷ Participants have engaged in both institutional and extra-institutional advocacy. On the former, constituents have flooded Congress with phone calls and packed town halls, demanding answers from Republican officials and commanding Democrats to actively resist Trump's agenda.¹²⁸ They have also organized to vote in numerous special elections, where Democrats have dramatically outperformed their 2024 benchmarks.

US civil society is also pouring energy into extra-institutional activism. Mobilization began with the "Tesla Takedown" protests and consumer boycott, targeting Tesla CEO Elon Musk for his corrupt leadership of the "Department of Government Efficiency" (DOGE). A similar boycott against Target for abandoning DEI policies seriously damaged the company.¹²⁹ April 5 saw nationwide "Hands Off" pro-democracy protests with over a million participants; hundreds of thousands joined similar protests on April 19; and the June 14 and October 18 "No Kings" protests drew millions nationwide, approaching the largest single-day national mobilization in US history.¹³⁰ These concentrated days of demonstrations have been accompanied by many forms of civic organizing, including mutual aid networks, city watches to monitor and confront suspected Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) patrols, and university defense compacts.

Activists have yet to organize a single-city demonstration as large as the 2017 Women's March, which drew over 500,000 people to Washington, DC. Yet the 2025 pro-democracy movement is distinguished by the tremendous volume of discrete protest events. Data from Harvard's Crowd Counting Consortium record almost 1,400 protests with at least "hundreds" of participants in April 2025 alone (see Figure 3), and

124. Barkan (2025).

125. Chenoweth and Pressman (2017).

126. Murray (2025).

127. Chenoweth, Pressman, et al. (2025); Chenoweth et al. (2025a; 2025b; 2025c).

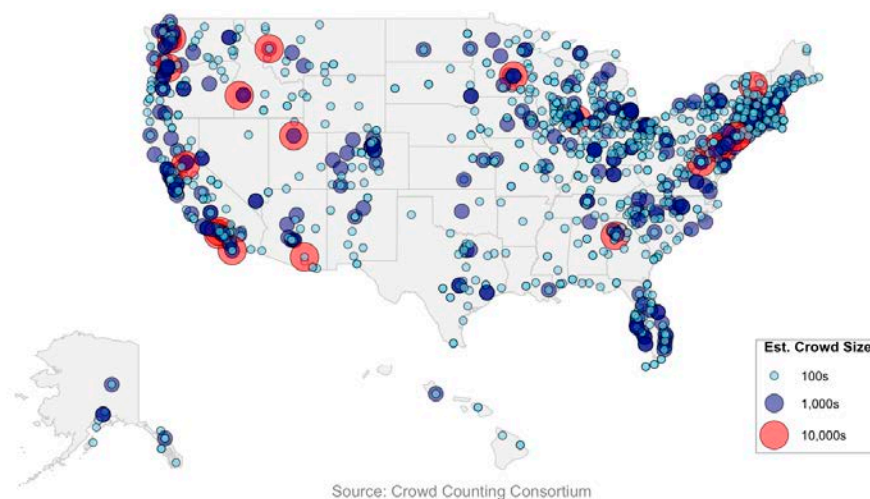
128. Miller (2025).

129. Boudette (2025); D'Innocenzio (2025).

130. Chenoweth, Pressman, et al. (2025); Chenoweth et al. (2025a; 2025b; 2025c). Crowd Counting Consortium data available [here](#).

the October 18 “No Kings” protests reported more than 2500 discrete protest events in a single day—including events in more conservative areas that do not typically witness protests.¹³¹ This decentralized pattern reflects an intentional effort by organizers to reach broader swaths of Americans, beyond urban centers that heavily oppose Trump.¹³² It may also reflect popular learning from the first Trump administration that resistance is a marathon, not a sprint, and that their problems will not be solved by a protest or two on the National Mall.

Figure 3: US Protests, April 2025, >100 Participants (1,382 Confirmed)



Blithe assertions that the US pro-democracy movement is missing in action are therefore mistaken. Yet it would also be a mistake to dismiss the movement’s weaknesses. Activists have thus far been unable to elicit substantial support from the business community, which remains quiescent—CEOs may privately resent Trump’s capricious tariffs, but most are avoiding criticism for fear of retribution. Pro-democracy activism has also struggled to attract sustained attention in a 2025 media ecosystem dominated by Trump, with even sizable protests receiving meager attention. Further, the Democratic Party remains an anemic force, with elected Democrats reluctant to commit to stiff institutional resistance. In part for this reason, the Democratic Party is historically

131. Chenoweth, Pressman, et al. (2025); Chenoweth, Hammam, et al. (2025a; 2025b). Note that this is likely a sizeable undercount, as the figure excludes reported demonstrations that have yet to be manually confirmed, as well as hundreds of confirmed events with unclear participation numbers.

132. Benner (2025).

unpopular and increasingly divorced from its pro-democracy base, a concern I discuss further below.

Despite these shortcomings, a grassroots pro-democracy movement is alive and active in the US. What challenges will that movement face in the years ahead?

Repression: Worsening, but Limited

The most immediate concern involves the Trump administration's efforts to stifle civil society. Trump has strong-armed bedrock institutions of civic life, including media organizations, universities, businesses, lawyers and judges, and even private individuals against whom Trump holds personal grudges. Even if targeted groups win in court, they face real costs for dissent. Trump also relishes repression and appears eager to provoke violent confrontations with protesters to justify militarized crackdowns in liberal cities. As Republican elites have proven unwilling to rebuff Trump's antidemocratic and vindictive instincts, pressure on US civil society is unlikely to abate anytime soon.

The truth, then, is plain: the president of the United States is deliberately attempting to repress dissent through lawful measures at the very extremities of his authority as well as nakedly lawless political persecution. And at least some chilling effect has taken hold, as evidenced by many accounts of self-censorship and behavioral changes.¹³³ This is especially true for foreign nationals, who are vulnerable to punitive harassment and detention by ICE, or the termination of student visas on the wafer-thin pretense of "support for terrorism."¹³⁴ Trump has likewise co-opted the business community and neutered much of legacy media, reflecting corporate concerns that companies will face retaliation for opposing Trump. For instance, Paramount has come under fire for settling a transparently groundless lawsuit that Trump filed against CBS (essentially, paying a bribe) and for suppressing critical coverage of Trump on CBS's *60 Minutes* while the company pursued government merger approvals.¹³⁵

Nevertheless, repression in the United States is—at least for now—not nearly as extreme as in many other eroding democracies. US civil society enjoys deeply entrenched civil liberties protections, including constitutional rights to speech and assembly and defense against warrantless arrest, along with strong judicial institutions to defend these rights. Indeed, the judicial system is working (albeit retroactively) to redress Trump's abuses against civil society, and judges have grown increasingly strident in their defense of the rule of law.¹³⁶ And although the Democrats do not control Congress, they can still obstruct illiberal legislation that would further enhance Trump's ability to repress civil society.

133. Bumiller (2025).

134. Pamuk (2025).

135. Folkenflik (2025).

136. Houghtaling (2025). See also Savage et al. (2025).

Beyond the mere letter of the law, Americans are also long habituated to their essential civil rights and liberties. Polls consistently show that broad majorities of the American public believe that the executive branch should obey court decisions and that their foundational civil rights are extremely important (though there is some observable partisan bias).¹³⁷ Aggressive disregard of these obligations will pit Trump’s authoritarian project against core American cultural values, likely increasing mass opposition to his presidency.

Indeed, early evidence demonstrates the real risk of popular backlash to Trumpian illiberalism. Worsening repression may have deterred some movement participation, but many Americans are still speaking out forcefully against Trump’s abuses of power, and the June 14 and October 18 No Kings demonstrations generated enormous turnout. Trump’s militarized deportation spree and defiance of court orders have depressed popular support for his immigration agenda, formerly his signature issue.¹³⁸ And even if Trump has muzzled some critics, hidden popular preferences can safely reveal themselves at the ballot box or through decentralized resistance actions like consumer boycotts that cannot be repressed.

None of this is to downplay the seriousness of Trump’s unfettered will to power. His threats to higher education and the nonprofit funding landscape are unprecedented, as is the lawless cruelty of his anti-immigration crackdown. These repressive measures will cause lasting damage if not reversed. But as of this moment, US civil society remains overwhelmingly free. Repression cannot contain the US pro-democracy movement, and determined nonviolent activism remains an eminently viable strategy.

Coalition Building in a Divided America

Another challenge for the US pro-democracy movement is to coalesce a broad pro-democracy coalition that can defeat illiberalism at the ballot box. As discussed above, scholars argue that “big tent” pro-democracy movements that transcend major societal cleavages have the best chance of ousting illiberal rulers and restoring consensus around democratic norms. Yet forming such a coalition in the US is easier said than done.

To start, US politics is severely polarized. Polarization has been worsening for years, driven both by asymmetric ideological polarization among right-wing elites (who are far more extreme than their left-wing colleagues) and by “political sectarianism” among the mass public, with Democrats and Republicans growing increasingly hostile to one another.¹³⁹ In Congress, genuine bipartisanship has faded into legend. Cross-party relationships are rancorous, true legislative cooperation is rare and ephemeral, and the Senate is paralyzed by filibusters. Among the mass public, partisan animosity is bitter. Trump’s Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement is a potent cult of personality, fueled by white racial resentment and an insular right-wing information environment that

137. Ebs (2025); Adeoson (2025); Ekins (2024).

138. Howard (2025).

139. Finkel et al. (2020).

demonizes their opponents and espouses a zero-sum political ideology.¹⁴⁰ This naked partisan hostility maps onto and exacerbates gaping societal divisions between those with and without a college education (aka “the diploma divide”) and between rural and urban America.¹⁴¹

Political polarization is reinforced by undemocratic structural features of the US electoral system. The Senate features a sizable conservative bias due to its inherent population disproportionality as well as Democratic voter clustering in urban coastal states. Moreover, many House districts are gerrymandered to be wholly uncompetitive, providing safe havens for illiberal extremists even in tough election years.¹⁴² At Trump’s urging, Republican states are currently enacting aggressive mid-decade gerrymanders, and the Supreme Court is poised to limit Section 2 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act next year, likely empowering Republican states to further disempower minority communities who tend to vote for Democrats.¹⁴³ These structural features insulate right-wing extremists from electoral accountability, making it relatively easy for Republicans to ignore Trump’s authoritarian abuses and dismiss appeals for moderation.

In turn, it may be challenging for the pro-democracy movement to convert Trump supporters to the movement, no matter how obscene Trump’s democratic violations become. In this respect, erosion dynamics in the US are analogous to those faced by pro-democracy movements in Hungary, Turkey, Poland, and Brazil, countries where illiberal rulers enjoyed strong and highly polarized bases of support and pursued structural reforms to suppress opponents and cement electoral power.

Yet these difficulties should not be hyperbolized. Unlike some populist leaders who enjoy widespread support, Trump is one of the least popular presidents in US history at this stage in a presidential term. Trump expanded his electoral base in 2024, but polls suggest that his gains are evaporating, with new Trump voters suffering from buyer’s remorse, including Latino voters integral to his 2024 success.¹⁴⁴ In addition to the roughly 30% of Americans who identify as Democrats, well over 40% identify as independents, and 35% of the electorate did not vote in 2024.¹⁴⁵ These groups represent a vast reservoir of potential support for a nationwide pro-democracy campaign. Even within the GOP, many Republican voters do not identify as MAGA loyalists.¹⁴⁶ Trump has cowed Republican elites, but this does not imply universal support for his antidemocratic agenda—moderate Republicans may simply fear social or political punishment for defying Trump.¹⁴⁷

140. Iyengar et al. (2019); Abramowitz and McCoy (2019).

141. Mettler and Brown (2025).

142. Baiz et al.(2023); Li et al. (2024).

143. Cohn (2025).

144. Gabbatt (2025); Paz (2025a, b).

145. Cerrone (2024).

146. Frankovic (2025).

147. Morgan (2025).

All of these groups may prove receptive to pro-democracy appeals. Centrist conservative voters who disapprove of Trump's tyrannical excesses could be brought into a broad coalition calling for renewed congressional oversight and restraints on presidential powers. Defections from Republican Party elites are unlikely, given their electoral incentives. But a pro-democracy movement can weaken those incentives by defeating the GOP in the 2026 midterms, discrediting Trump's brand of far-right extremism, and then wielding congressional accountability powers to expose the Trump administration's lawless behavior to the public. Trump may also become less able to demand subservience from moderate Republicans as his presidential term winds down, as has been the case with past "lame duck" presidents. He could attempt to run for a third term despite constitutional prohibitions (discussed below), but this would only offer further opportunities to attract independents and moderate Republicans into a broad pro-democracy coalition.

In short, a US pro-democracy movement could command support from a large majority of Americans. Whether the movement will successfully build such a broad coalition remains unknown. But the point remains: polarization complicates coalition building, but the situation is far from untenable. Recall that populist parties lost polarized elections to pro-democracy coalitions in both Poland and Brazil, and Trump himself lost in 2020. American political divisions are real, but they are surmountable, and the pro-democracy movement should not abandon efforts to broaden its base of support.

Democrats for Democracy?

Setting aside polarization, another problem for pro-democracy coalition building comes from *within* the pro-democracy front. If pro-democracy coalitions are to succeed, movement energies must eventually be channeled into electoral politics. US electoral rules powerfully incentivize voters to choose between one of two major political parties, and Trump currently dominates the Republican Party. This leaves the Democratic Party as the primary opposition actor available to constrain democratic erosion. Yet a schism now grows between pro-democracy activists and their institutional Democratic counterparts that, if left unaddressed, could become debilitating. I believe that this is one of the greatest risks that the US pro-democracy movement faces today.

Scholars have argued that cooperative activist-party strategies are important to reversing democratic erosion. Grassroots activism can energize popular demands for reform, and channeling popular energy into electoral politics ultimately strengthens democratic institutions.¹⁴⁸ However, activist-party linkages are often bedeviled by animosity. Activists may distrust parties, believing them to be corrupt or intent on co-opting movements to preserve power without delivering on movement goals.¹⁴⁹ For their part, parties may bemoan activists as intransigent rabble-rousers who ignore politicians' electoral constraints and who are unwilling to compromise or moderate their positions to achieve

148. Bunce and Wolchik (2010); Gamboa (2022).

149. Gershman (2004).

incremental gains. Put differently, social movements and political parties operate according to different motivating logics, and activists and party officials sometimes lack the established relationships and trust needed to engage productively with one another.¹⁵⁰

These dynamics seem to be at play in the US. American political parties have long been permeated by social movements, with the Democrats historically anchored in labor organizing (though less so in recent decades) and the Republicans enmeshed with the Christian Right.¹⁵¹ Yet while the Democrats embraced pro-democracy rhetoric during the first Trump presidency, the party was slow to do so in 2025. Instead, Democrats initially pursued accommodation with Trump 2.0, moderating on immigration and “playing dead” despite Trump’s illiberal abuses.¹⁵² Democrats have become more strident as Trump’s abuses of power have escalated, but the party’s elder statesmen still consistently downplay threats to democracy—which they label as “distractions”—and instead focused on “kitchen table” issues that they believe matter more to voters.¹⁵³ While US civil society decries Trump’s lawlessness, the Democrats have avoided discussion of impeachment, let alone criminal accountability. Faced with an urgent political crisis, the Democratic Party appears visionless and impotent—or as one voter put it, “like deer in the headlights.”¹⁵⁴

This listlessness has engendered a stunning degree of public ire toward the Democrats. The party is historically unpopular and struggling to salvage its party brand.¹⁵⁵ Pro-democracy activists are disillusioned, believing that Democratic Party elites are either too corrupt or too irresolute to be trustworthy.¹⁵⁶ In turn, progressive Democrats are calling for a wave of primary challenges to empower a new generation of leaders committed to an assertive pro-democracy agenda.¹⁵⁷ Despite all this, Democratic congressional leadership has largely disregarded movement calls for rigid institutional opposition or a commitment to major democratic reforms, leaving others (most notably, Democratic state governors) to promote these themes and fill the gaping void at the top of the party.

Thus, the 2026 elections will likely prove a crucial inflection point for American democracy, with both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, primary turnover of “old guard” Democrats could help to transform the party into a more ambitious and courageous vehicle of liberal democratic rejuvenation, one that is united in purpose with the grassroots pro-democracy movement and that proactively seeks out genuine collaboration with it. Closer grassroots ties would help the Democrats to channel movement

150. For more on movement-party overlaps, see Goldstone (2003).

151. For more on this, see Schlozman (2015).

152. Carville (2025).

153. McCarthy (2024).

154. Goldmacher (2025).

155. Bowman et al. (2025).

156. For instance, recent polling suggests that despite Trump’s historic corruption, voters still see Democrats as less trustworthy on corruption than Republicans. See Stuart (2025).

157. Shiner (2025).

enthusiasm and organizing efforts into electoral campaigning, powering them to victory against illiberal opponents up and down the ticket.

On the other hand, prolonged and bitter factional infighting among Democrats risks a fatally divided coalition. Building a big-tent pro-democracy coalition requires the Democratic Party to successfully triangulate between the need to energize the party's base, and the need to expand their coalition to include a wider range of voters, especially those beyond liberal urban cores. Failing to respond to activists' furious demands to defend democracy and pursue real institutional reforms could widen the activist-party schism, souring activists' support for the party and their faith in change through electoral politics. Yet a Democratic Party that caters exclusively to pro-democracy activists may be unable to entice other voters, who may care more about other issues, prefer moderate policies, or seek a less confrontational brand of politics. In either case, a divided opposition at war with itself is less able to convert mobilized public activism into electoral power.

Big-tent electoral coalitions are a difficult balance to strike even in normal times. Yet democracy's allies likely have no alternative: for now, at least, the Democratic Party is the only institutional vehicle available to rescue an American democracy in freefall, and a broad democratic electoral coalition is an overriding priority. Whether this coalition is successful will depend heavily on the Democratic Party's ability and willingness to change. The Democrats face an existential crisis of credibility, and must urgently transform into a more responsive, broad-based, and energetic party. Democrats should seek to incorporate democratic reforms into a bold governance agenda, restore frayed ties with the pro-democracy movement, and proactively build public confidence in their reform initiatives and in the party's leadership more broadly. This transformation will likely require constant external pressure from civil society, with pro-democracy activists holding sclerotic policymakers' feet to the fire and mobilizing primary challenges to empower more stalwart leaders (perhaps including activists themselves).¹⁵⁸

At the same time, however, the pro-democracy movement will need to make accommodations of its own. First and foremost, the movement cannot abandon electoral politics. Whatever their government's past failures may have been, activists must resist political cynicism and commit themselves to empowering elected officials who are committed to a pro-democracy agenda, even if they do not agree on every issue.

This does not mean that activists should stifle policy debates or abandon their demands, as their principled advocacy is crucial to building support for sorely needed democratic reforms. It does mean that activists should make peace with two related principles. First, at the end of the day, the overriding need for a successful pro-democracy coalition outweighs factional interests or policy disagreements. Second, given the plain reality of structural conservative advantages in Congress—which are only growing over time—a successful and enduring pro-democracy coalition must earn support from voters

158. On mobilizing activism “inside” versus “outside” the state, see Banaszak (2005).

across the ideological spectrum. This point bears emphasis: in terms of both electoral strategy and long-term stability, democratic systems require broad-based popular support. The pro-democracy electoral coalition should therefore expand the tent to welcome principled moderates, independents, and conservatives into the democracy movement fold, uniting under a non-partisan “democracy” banner even as the Democratic Party serves as the movement’s current route to political power.

Coalition building is not easy. It requires good-faith cooperation despite real policy disagreements (and perhaps even past enmities), and for all involved to make difficult compromises for the greater good. Yet the path is clear: America’s pro-democracy coalition simply cannot afford to let the perfect become the enemy of the good.

Preserving Democratic Institutions

Last, in the US context, it is unlikely that the extra-institutional pro-democracy movement would inadvertently undermine core democratic institutions.

To start, even a highly disruptive nonviolent civil disobedience campaign is unlikely to endanger democratic institutions in the US. US constitutional design has produced a sclerotic system that is slow to reform.¹⁵⁹ Yet by the same token, bedrock US democratic institutions cannot be easily swept aside, and US electoral, legislative, and judicial processes remain far older and more strongly entrenched than those under assault elsewhere. Moreover, civic mobilization and mass protest is itself a widely recognized tradition in American politics that regularly co-exists alongside core democratic institutions. If anything, protest has historically provided the necessary impetus for reforms that helped to make US democratic institutions so enduring.

One clear instance of extra-institutional activism reinforcing the democratic order could occur if Trump attempts to run for a third term. The US Constitution imposes a clear two-term limit for the presidency. If Trump were to run in 2028 anyways, the pro-democracy movement could mobilize in rejection of his illegitimate candidacy, and their actions would be clearly aligned with the defense of US democratic institutions. Globally, protest movements against attempts to evade constitutional term limits have been effective, as demonstrated by cases like Senegal (2011) and Burkina Faso (2014), among others.¹⁶⁰

We might also consider possible risks from Trump’s premature removal from office. Promissory coups have occurred in other eroding democracies, and some have expressed related concern about Trump’s efforts to politicize the military and use armed soldiers to repress protests.¹⁶¹ Trump’s deployment of 200 marines to Los Angeles, and his more recent threats to invoke the Insurrection Act, suggest that this scenario is not as far-fetched as it may have seemed even a few months ago—it is easy to imagine soldiers refusing

159. Balz and Morse (2023).

160. Yarwood (2016); Versteeg et al. (2019).

161. Kilgore (2025).

to obey an unlawful order to use violence against American citizens, which could provoke mass resignations and an internal military crisis. Still, an actual coup seems extraordinarily unlikely. US norms of civilian control over the military and the electoral process are very strong and, unlike in other cases of democratic breakdown, at no point has the US pro-democracy movement sought military intervention to depose Trump.

A more realistic premature removal scenario involves mass mobilization for impeachment. Trump was impeached twice in his first term in office, though the Senate failed to convict him both times, and Trump has already committed numerous abuses of power in his second term. Impeachment proceedings will almost certainly not occur in a Republican-controlled House, but if the Democrats regain the House in 2026, popular clamor for impeachment will grow.

Demands for impeachment and Trump's early removal from power do carry some risks. An impeachment trial might further enflame the US's deeply polarized politics, signaling the pro-democracy movement's fundamental intolerance of Trumpism and a "zero-sum" attitude toward control of government. Yet while mass mobilization for impeachment may struggle to bridge hardened partisan divides, it is unlikely to seriously threaten democratic institutions. Impeachment is an explicitly lawful process, and is the appropriate congressional remedy for presidential misconduct. More critically, the two-thirds conviction threshold in the Senate cannot be met without substantial Republican support—if Trump were to be successfully impeached, it would be by his own party.

Key Takeaways

This report has depicted the role that nonviolent resistance has played in countering democratic erosion, both at home and abroad. I conclude by distilling three broad implications for pro-democracy activism in the democratic erosion era.

Democratic Institutions Need Civic Defenders

First, resilience to democratic erosion requires more than strong institutions. Institutional strength is an important part of democratic resilience. Democracies that fail to deliver are more vulnerable to takeovers by illiberal outside candidates, and good governance requires competent and efficient institutions. Well-established institutional constraints on executive power stymie the erosion process, providing pro-democracy movements with the time and space they need to mount a defense.

However, even the best-designed democratic institutions cannot survive indefinitely without a civil society committed to protecting them. Recent episodes of democratic erosion show that even healthy democratic institutions ultimately depend on an engaged and democratically minded citizenry—given enough time and leeway, illiberal leaders will discover or invent ways to cripple horizontal accountability institutions. Routine civic oversight is necessary to raise public awareness of these threats, and mass mobilization may prove necessary to contest them. Unsurprisingly, the evidence shows that both

strong institutions and strong civil society are associated with democratic resilience.¹⁶² Indeed, this is part of the reason US democratic institutions remain as strong as they are today—for decades, they have been buttressed by a highly engaged civil society that values responsive government and is accustomed to holding leaders accountable.

Some readers may worry that encouraging “disruptive” civic activism will undermine fragile democratic governments. Yet even in mature democracies with highly professionalized institutions, civic advocacy plays a vital role in ensuring democratic transparency and accountability.¹⁶³ High-quality democratic institutions cannot develop without routine popular engagement and civic pressure, which compels institutions and the elites who occupy them to abide by democratic norms. Ultimately, then, the foundations of democratic resilience during crises depend on the initiative that citizens take to jealously guard their rights to participate freely in democratic life.

If this civic commitment to democracy has degraded, it is an important priority for pro-democracy movements in eroding democracies to revitalize it. To do so, democracy’s allies should seek to expand and strengthen the links between democratic institutions and civil society, fostering transparency and accountability. There are innumerable possibilities for these types of engagements, including community forums with various officials in the judiciary and legislature, more active investments in atrophied local-level media and political organizations, and the promotion of basic civics education as a bedrock cultural obligation of a democratic citizenry. The goal is deeper and richer integration across the democratic ecosystem such that democracy’s constitutive elements can better support one another through erosion crises.

Repression Is Not the Only Challenge

Nonviolent activism in eroding democracies is not quite like civil resistance against full-blown authoritarian regimes. The basic strategic principles of nonviolent action remain the same, and movements confront some of the same challenges, particularly rising costs of repression and closing civic space. Yet repression is not the only problem for activists in eroding democracies, and it may not even be the most important one. Elected illiberal rulers can be wildly popular and maintain very loyal domestic constituencies; cross-cutting pro-democracy coalitions can be difficult to build when dissatisfaction with past democratic governments is high; and movements must urgently confront abusive illiberal rulers while remaining faithful to the democratic processes that brought them to power.

These dynamics are well exemplified by the US. State repression under Trump is worsening, but it is (for the moment) not a debilitating impediment for nonviolent activism, with courts emphatically rejecting the most egregious instances of repressive

162. Bernhard et al. (2020); Boese et al. (2021).

163. On the relationship between social movements, political parties, and democracy, see Goldstone (2003).

overreach. The greater challenge by far is big-tent electoral coalition building in a highly polarized electorate with a remarkably unpopular opposition party. Responding to democratic erosion, then, looks a lot like the standard democratic politics of coalition building and management, with parties making the adjustments in candidates, policy platforms, and messaging necessary to more effectively compete for votes.

Yet for precisely this reason, it is all too easy to be lulled into complacency; politics in eroding democracies can seem “normal” right up until erosion is too far along to stop. Research tells us that democratic erosion becomes more difficult to reverse as it progresses, with illiberal leaders chipping away at institutional guardrails and installing loyalists into key positions, and that most cases of substantial erosion ultimately produce democratic breakdown.¹⁶⁴ Illiberal leaders’ first reelection campaign is often a major inflection point—if they succeed, further erosion is likely, and the opposition may feel pressured to adopt more radical responses as democratic breakdown approaches.¹⁶⁵ Moderate pro-democracy forces therefore have a relatively narrow window to organize an effective response. In this respect, both activists and Democratic Party officials are right: the art of electoral politics must continue, yet the Democrats must proceed with a greater sense of urgency and purpose, in clear recognition of the authoritarian threat they face.

Stepping back from the US case, a general lesson is that pro-democracy forces must strive to foster collaboration between movement activists and political parties. Activist-party linkages remain highly understudied in political science and are likely to be a fruitful area of research in the erosion era. For the moment, it is easy to recommend that party officials and movement activists find ways to routinely engage with one another, working to build the interpersonal rapport and connections they need to defend democracy, even if they disagree with one another on substantive policy issues. The plain truth is that neither movement nor party can defeat democratic erosion alone.

Chin Up, America

The US pro-democracy movement undoubtedly faces real challenges. Activists must endure repression from an unapologetically illiberal president, with particular vehemence directed toward immigrants and foreign nationals. Trump’s belligerence is backed by a Republican Party wholly unmoored from the norms required to sustain pluralist liberal democracy. The US is highly polarized around entrenched partisan lines, and thus far, Congress has proven willfully impotent against abuses of executive power.

But these are not unprecedented threats, and in the grand scheme of things, the United States remains a comparably hospitable environment for nonviolent pro-democracy activism. American institutions are hardly perfect, but Americans still enjoy an entrenched array of constitutional rights and liberties enforced by a robust court

164. Boese et al. (2021); Lührmann and Lindberg (2019).

165. Cleary and Öztürk (2022); Luo and Przeworski (2023).

system. Congressional gridlock via filibuster is a general detriment to US democracy, but it will prevent Trump from pushing dramatically undemocratic changes through Congress. Trump is also broadly unpopular, and recent mass protests reveal an American public that is frustrated with his leadership. And with midterm elections on the horizon, Trump's opponents will soon have the opportunity to regain control of Congress and conduct aggressive oversight. These are the conditions of possibility for a sustained and potent nonviolent pro-democracy campaign.

Crucially, this is *not* to say that American democracy is invulnerable or that Trump is merely a blip on the radar. Democratic institutions cannot survive in perpetuity if their citizens grow weary of or disinterested in democracy—an active citizenry is the whetstone of accountability that keeps democratic institutions honed and honest. And the longer the US goes without recommitting itself to liberal democratic norms, the greater the risk that some facet of its democratic institutional ecosystem cracks. Government oversight mechanisms could be sabotaged beyond repair, judges and media organs threatened into submission, endemic corruption normalized, or political opponents intimidated with impunity, even up to targeted assassinations, as exemplified by the recent and tragic murder of Minnesota state Rep. Melissa Hortman.¹⁶⁶

Americans must remain clear-eyed about these threats, but they need not indulge cynical fatalism. Pro-democracy movements have succeeded against far worse odds than those Americans face today—indeed, they have done so *in the United States*, in the not-so-distant past. True liberal democracy is a relatively recent achievement in US history, the product of persistent nonviolent activism for civil rights pitted against an inherently conservative political system determined to deny equality along both gender and racial lines. The US women's suffrage and civil rights movements both faced far greater degrees of political exclusion and repression, and their victories remain in many respects incomplete. Yet they did win, and their achievements transformed America for the better.

Anxiety—perhaps even panic—is an understandable response to the most antidemocratic government America has faced in generations. But democracy-minded Americans are already rolling up their sleeves and getting to work. I expect that at the end of the day they will prevail, and I remain guided by the conviction that democracy's best days, in both the US and around the world, have yet to come.

166. Swanson and Premo (2025).

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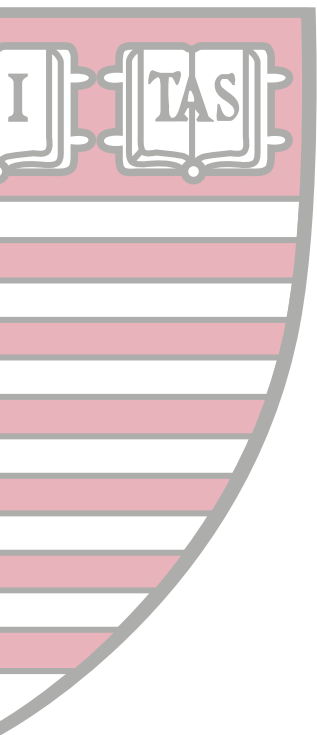
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