

# What are the most effective interventions focused on public institutions to reverse democratic backsliding and/or support greater democratization?



The Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance's (DRG) 2021-2023 learning agenda seeks to answer five learning questions, including this question on democratic backsliding. More on the DRG Learning Agenda can be found [here](#). In this case, a team of researchers, including Paul Friesen, Jennifer McCoy, Rachel Beatty Riedl, Kenneth Roberts, and Murat Somer, conducted an extensive literature review on democratic backsliding and case studies of 15 countries that have experienced a process of democratic backsliding since 2000, with analysis of the opportunities for opening democratic spaces in these contexts.



## Opening Up Democratic Spaces

The erosion of democratic governance in many countries in recent decades has sparked debate among scholars and policymakers. This literature review examines the nature and sources of "democratic backsliding" and proposes strategies to protect democratic norms and institutions from autocratic forces.

Unlike abrupt forms of democratic breakdown, contemporary backsliding is characterized by **gradual erosion, with elected officials playing a central role** in subverting democracy from within. Backsliding is observable in both high and low-income countries and is often linked to **political polarization** and the **rise of populist leaders**.

Countries varied in democratic resilience and the success of autocratic incumbents in suppressing opposition parties, media, and civil society organizations. Backsliding typically unfolded incrementally through interactions between incumbents and opponents, with very few cases starting with military coups.

Opportunities for democratic opening are present throughout different forms and degrees of backsliding. Democratic recovery is often facilitated by opposition coalitions, autonomous courts, fragile ruling coalitions, media oversight, civil society mobilization, and popular protests. Early identification of Autocratizing strategies can empower pro-democracy agents to propose effective countermeasures, including supporting institutional checks and balances, preserving independent media, and mobilizing citizens through democratic means.

## Key Findings

While context matters in designing a toolkit to autocrats, sites of successful resilience with strategies are detailed below:



**Electorate:** Depolarization and strengthening democratic support through responsible media consumption, positive social contacts, involvement in pro-democracy civil society, and local political engagement.



**Civil Society:** Pushing back against anti-democratic leaders while minimizing further polarization through non-violent protest, alliance building, seeking accountability through legal channels, mass mobilization in response to anti-democratic actions, and focusing on valence issues and shared identities.



**Political Parties:** Seeking redress and accountability through "democratic enclaves," building pro-democracy platforms in partnership with civil society, forming broad electoral coalitions, avoiding aggressive actions, and engaging previously excluded voters.



**Media:** Protecting media freedoms and widespread access to information through reducing polarization, managing social media fragmentation, increasing publicly-funded media, media literacy efforts, and transparency from social media companies.



**Judiciary:** Maintaining independence through a strong judicial support network, peer-controlled appointment processes, limiting new auxiliary court systems, and grounding judicial autonomy in the constitution.



**Legislature:** Executive accountability through opposition control of legislative chambers, internal divides in the ruling party, mass public movements against the executive, and a history of institutional independence in the legislature.



**Bureaucratic Agencies:** Providing a check on autocratic ambitions through professionalism, financial and administrative autonomy, procedural creativity, high performance for public support, and possibly outsourcing policy implementation.



**Electoral System:** Systems that reduce polarization, extremism, and violence may help block or minimize backsliding. Majoritarian systems with single-round rules tend to be associated with a higher likelihood of backsliding due to increased polarization and violence.

## Key Resources

Check out the Literature Review, the 15 case studies and summary report. The original research summary report and case studies cover case studies of 15 countries experiencing democratic backsliding since 2000, focusing on opportunities to restore democratic political violence.