

# Democratic decline is a global phenomenon, even in wealthy nations

January 17 2024, by James Dean,

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Democratic backsliding is occurring in an unprecedented number of wealthy countries once thought immune to such forces—the United States among them, finds a new [analysis](#) led by Cornell political

scientists and published in *World Politics*.

To inform debates about where backsliding is happening—and to highlight strategies for resistance—the researchers identified episodes of decline in nearly 40 countries since 1990, from Armenia to Zambia. Half exceeded the wealth threshold above which social scientists have previously believed advanced, industrial democracies could not break down, including most of the countries the scholars classified as exhibiting "severe" backsliding.

Increasingly, the researchers said, threats to democracy are emerging not from dramatic coups, military aggression or civil war, but from autocratic leaders leveraging [democratic institutions](#)—[election officials](#), legislatures, courts and the media—to consolidate executive power. Such processes are incremental and harder to recognize in real time, they said, and may exacerbate polarization that further weakens trust in democracies.

"Globally and in the United States, we see a new pattern of democratic erosion using institutions to restrict democratic rights and participation," said Rachel Beatty Riedl, director of the Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies at Cornell. "With record numbers of people expected to participate in elections around the world this year, now is the time when resistance strategies need to be practiced to buttress and safeguard democracy."

Riedl, the Einaudi Center's John S. Knight Professor of International Studies and a professor in the Department of Government, in the College of Arts and Sciences (A&S), and in the Cornell Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, is the first author of "Democratic Backsliding, Resilience, and Resistance."

Co-authors are Kenneth Roberts, the Richard J. Schwartz Professor of

Government (A&S) and the faculty fellow leading Einaudi's democratic threats and resilience research initiative; Paul Friesen, Einaudi's democratic threats postdoctoral fellow; and Jennifer McCoy, professor of political science at Georgia State University. The article is a part of a symposium to mark the 75th anniversary of World Politics, where Riedl is a member of the editorial committee and Roberts is a member of the editorial board.

Recently, debates among scholars have centered on the extent and nature of democratic backsliding globally, with some warning that long-standing, affluent democracies are at risk while others argue such fears are overblown. Conclusions are heavily shaped by coding decisions around thresholds that establish where and when backsliding begins, the degree of decline and when episodes recede or end—critical moments when resistance factors may be identified, the scholars said.

"Even where backsliding does not cause democracy to break down or be replaced by some form of dictatorship, it involves a significant erosion in the quality and stability of democratic governance," Roberts said. "It degrades democratic citizenship and undermines the ability of citizens to use democratic institutions to hold rulers accountable."

Based on the 38 cases categorized as experiencing minimal (a group including the U.S.), moderate or severe decline—the team identified four pathways of backsliding. The most dominant one was "executive aggrandizement," where an incumbent executive and [political party](#) exert control over democratic institutions, weaken checks and balances and limit opposition. Archetypal cases include Benin, Hungary, Nicaragua and Turkey.

A second pathway is "elite collusion," where incumbents, allied officials and corporate leaders work to co-opt opposition leaders and independent media through patronage and spoils, a process observed in Indonesia,

Guatemala and Peru. A third pathway, seen in Tunisia, involves a "self-coup," in which executives close or neutralize democratic institutions like courts and legislatures to centralize power and eliminate accountability. A final set of cases demonstrates democratic resilience and recovery, where institutions and mobilized citizens hold backsliding in check—as in Malawi, Moldova and South Korea.

The threshold analysis and case studies highlight several sources of resilience and strategies for resistance, the researchers determined. Opposition parties are particularly important to resisting autocratic incumbents, they said, and must set aside policy differences to unify around the goal of defending democracy.

"Timing is also key," Riedl said. "If you can identify threats to [democracy](#) and respond to them in the early stages, you're much more likely to be able to resist backsliding. If erosion goes too deep and too far, it's much more difficult to recover."

Turkey and Hungary are examples of the latter scenario, she said, while Poland represents a more optimistic case, having bounced back from severe democratic decline. The researchers said the democratic character of civil society, courts, legislatures, bureaucracies and the media should never be taken for granted.

"Democracy is never consolidated but has to be continually practiced and improved," Riedl said. "Contestation of ideas and priorities within shared rules is at the heart of democratic citizenship and leadership; in order to effectively contest the ideas, we have to uphold the rules in spirit and in practice. This research helps identify who is doing that and how."

**More information:** Rachel Beatty Riedl et al, Democratic Backsliding, Resilience, and Resistance, *World Politics* (2024). [DOI:](#)

[10.1353/wp.0.a917802](https://arxiv.org/abs/10.1353/wp.0.a917802)

Provided by Cornell University

Citation: Democratic decline is a global phenomenon, even in wealthy nations (2024, January 17)  
retrieved 28 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2024-01-democratic-decline-global-phenomenon-wealthy.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.