PERRY WORLD HOUSE
UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA

POST-WORKSHOP REPORT

Toward a Democratic Playbook

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ABOUT PERRY WORLD HOUSE

Perry World House is a center for scholarly inquiry, teaching, research, international exchange, policy engagement, and public outreach on pressing global issues. Perry World House's mission is to bring the academic knowledge of the University of Pennsylvania to bear on the world's most pressing global policy challenges and to foster international policy engagement within and beyond the Penn community.

Located in the heart of campus at 38th Street and Locust Walk, Perry World House draws on the expertise of Penn's 12 schools and numerous globally oriented research centers to educate the Penn community and prepare students to be well-informed, contributing global citizens. At the same time, Perry World House connects Penn with leading policy experts from around the world to develop and advance innovative policy proposals.

Through its rich programming, Perry World House facilitates critical conversations about global policy challenges and fosters interdisciplinary research on these topics. It presents workshops and colloquia, welcomes distinguished visitors, and produces content for global audiences and policy leaders, so that the knowledge developed at Penn can make an immediate impact around the world.

> SECTION 1

Executive Summary

On November 20, 2025, Perry World House convened leading scholars and analysts of comparative politics, democratic resilience, authoritarianism, and Latin America for a workshop on "building a democratic playbook." While many in the academic and policy community have documented the authoritarian playbook used by aspiring autocrats across regions, far less systematic research exists on the strategies, actors, and institutional configurations that allow democracies to resist backsliding or recover after attempted autocratization. This workshop sought to fill that gap. Participants examined two broad questions:

1. What political, social, institutional, and normative forces enable democracies to withstand or reverse backsliding?

2. What can be learned from Brazil's recent experience, where a far-right populist incumbent tried and failed to erode democratic institutions?

Across sessions, several points of convergence emerged:

- Democratic resilience is most likely when threats are identified and addressed early, before autocrats consolidate control over information, media, courts, and civic space.

- Opposition actors must operate in a regime-uncertain environment during the early phases of backsliding, which complicates societal mobilization efforts, delays coalition formation, and weakens strategy selection

- Assertive institutions matter: independent courts, credible electoral authorities, empowered legislatures, federalism, and robust media ecosystems act as counterweights even in polarized environments.

- Democratic "recoveries" are possible but even in the best cases they are fragile, often slow, and rarely symmetric; rebuilding democratic institutions typically takes far longer than dismantling them.

- Brazil's case illustrates the importance of institutional veto points, intra-elite constraints, judicial autonomy, and the political weakness of authoritarian-leaning incumbents.

This report summarizes the discussion and identifies key insights and areas for further research.

Background

In an era of rising autocratization, what enables democracies to resist? Much recent scholarship focuses on how executives capture political institutions and courts, co-opt media, politicize security institutions, or erode checks and balances. Less systematic attention has been given to successful cases of resistance: instances in which courts, legislatures, civil society, opposition coalitions, or federal structures prevent democratic collapse, or in which systems rebound after illiberal incursions.

> SECTION 2

Session I: What Does Democratic Resilience Look Like?

The discussion centered on three guiding questions:

1. What do we know about resilience in the face of backsliding?

2. Which actors and strategies have been most effective in resistance?

3. Do democratic recoveries last, and why or why not?

1. Conditions for Democratic Resilience

Early and Mild Backsliding Offers the Best Chances of Recovery

One expert emphasized that *recoveries occur most often when erosion is limited and begins to be contested early*. Once autocrats gain control over information ecosystems, policing functions, and protest space—typically after a decade of continuous erosion—the window narrows considerably.

In severe backsliding environments, especially those marked by *pernicious polarization*, resilience becomes far harder to achieve. Polarization does not merely divide the electorate; it transforms opponents into existential threats, shrinking the space for cross-ideological coalitions and enabling executives to frame institutional constraints as partisan sabotage.

Regime Uncertainty Undermines Coordination

One scholar noted that during backsliding, opposition actors face profound *uncertainty about the regime's direction and intentions.*

- Actors constantly must decide:
  Is a given authoritarian action an isolated event or part of a cumulative shift?

- Is the threat imminent, or still containable?

- Should actors escalate now or wait for more evidence?

According to one expert, this uncertainty typically produces three groups: (1) "cautioners," who diagnose the moment as normal politics; (2) "alarmists," who see imminent danger and stress urgent action; and (3) "strategic alarmists," who share the alarmist diagnosis but balance it with institutional and legitimacy concerns. Participants agreed that this uncertainty often delays or fragments resistance, producing coordination failures even when broad coalitions share democratic goals.

Overtness and Ambiguity in Backsliding

Participants stressed that not all authoritarian moves are overt or easily legible. Cases such as Israel and Hungary were discussed as examples where backsliding proceeds through ambiguous signals, incremental institutional changes, and rhetorical threats that mask intent. One participant remarked that societies differ on which issues galvanize resistance, noting that in some countries rights-based issues such as reproductive freedoms have triggered powerful mobilizations (i.e. Poland). In Israel, the early stages of democratic erosion went largely unnoticed as the institutional threats did not resemble the kinds of high-salience crises, such as war, that typically activate public alarm, allowing early changes to lay the groundwork for later policies. Relatedly, some speakers noted that patterns of democratic erosion and resistance diffuse across borders, as political actors learn from foreign examples, adapt tactics, or reject paths seen elsewhere. Several speakers also emphasized that opposition actors must learn to distinguish between performative illiberalism and concrete attempts at institutional capture. This diagnostic challenge directly shapes both the timing and the effectiveness of resistance.

Electoral Coalitions Are Often Crucial, but Frequently Form Too Late

A panelist mentioned democratic U-turns,[1] defined as a period of substantive two-directional regime transformation in which autocratization is closely followed by and linked to subsequent democratization. They highlighted that electoral coalitions have enabled U-turns in several cases, yet they often form only after significant damage has already occurred. Participants noted that these coalitions succeed when they present a clear message, such as "democracy vs authoritarianism" or "clean government vs corruption," – a phenomenon one scholar called "constructive or transformative repolarization."

The Risks and Requirements of Transformative Repolarization

Several participants stressed that transformative repolarization works only when it shifts political conflict away from identity or leader-centric divides and constructs **a new programmatic cleavage** organized around commitments such as democratic integrity, clean government, or institutional reform. The goal is not to intensify polarization but to redirect it *temporarily* so broad majorities can rally around democratic rules and push back against autocratization. Participants warned that this strategy can still devolve into pernicious polarization if movements rely on moralistic or identity-targeting frames or replace policy disagreement with demonization. Effective repolarization, therefore, demands disciplined coordination between elites and civil society, clear messaging that avoids vilifying entire groups, and future-oriented reform narratives that allow the polity to depolarize once democratic stability has been regained.

2. Which Actors and Strategies Matter Most?

The session then turned to the mechanisms and actors that have proven effective across cases.

Pathways of Backsliding Determine Effective Resistance

One expert outlined three primary pathways of backsliding, each with different counter-strategies:

1. **Legislative Capture**
   Autocrats backed by substantial legislative majorities use legal reforms to achieve electoral legitimacy for illiberal goals.
   Resilience depends on:
   - strong societal mobilization
   - opposition coordination across parties
   - victories in local and regional elections (key

1 Nord, M., Angiolillo, F., Lundstedt, M., Wiebrecht, F., & Lindberg, S. I. (2025). When autocratization is reversed: episodes of U-Turns since 1900. *Democratization*, 32(5), 1136–1159. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2024.2448742

examples: Poland's pro-democratic mobilization, partly organized around the fight for reproductive rights, Turkey's mayoral victories, Moldova's anti-corruption movement)

2. **Executive Power Grabs**
   These can be countered where:
   - courts remain independent
   - electoral authorities resist manipulation
   - the military remains neutral
   - international pressure converges
     Key examples: Brazil and Malawi. In Malawi, an attempted executive overreach was overturned when the Constitutional Court annulled the flawed 2019 election, backed by sustained civil society protests, the military protecting demonstrators, and a unified opposition.

3. **Elite Collusion**
   Elites shield autocrats through coordinated political, economic, or institutional alignment. However, participants emphasized that autocrats can be constrained when intra-elite fractures emerge, when incumbents commit strategic miscalculations, or when pressure from civil society and international actors raises the political costs of collusion. Several speakers connected these dynamics to the importance of altering the cost-benefit calculations of authoritarian coalitions and facilitating elite defections.

Civil Society and Social Movements

Multiple participants emphasized the importance of sustained civil society mobilization in maintaining democratic boundaries. Participants stressed that *civil society signals whether society will tolerate authoritarian shifts*, and when united, it can deter escalation by raising reputational, political, and, potentially, legal costs for incumbents. Speakers also emphasized that contemporary nonviolent movements often mobilize quickly but lack the deep organizational infrastructures—unions, churches, neighborhood associations—that historically sustained long-term democratic struggle.[2] Effective resistance requires not only broad mobilization but also durable structures capable of coordinating, framing, and sustaining action over time. Participants stressed that strong linkages between political parties and social movements are essential: parties can read institutional opportunities, while movements supply numbers, energy, and legitimacy. When coordinated, these alliances can translate protest into institutional leverage.

Narratives as a Tool of Democratic Defense

Participants highlighted the role of political narratives in terms of how regimes describe themselves and how opposition actors frame democratic values. Several speakers stressed that resistance movements must articulate narratives that affirm the value of democracy, address public concerns, and counter authoritarian narratives that often portray illiberal leaders as the true defenders of "real democracy." Authoritarian leaders usually claim the mantle of democracy themselves, framing illiberal actions as efforts to defend "real" majorities or restore order. Several participants warned that pro-democracy actors must counter these narratives without slipping into alarmism: urgency must be communicated clearly, but so must the continued relevance of institutional channels and collective action. Narratives that overstate authoritarian consolidation can demobilize supporters, while narratives that deny the threat can breed complacency.

Information Ecosystems and Independent Media

Participants drew on comparative experience to show that *media freedom is often the first line of defense* against backsliding. Independent media helps fight disinformation, exposes illiberal actions,

2 Chenoweth, E. (2020). The Future of Nonviolent Resistance. *Journal of Democracy* 31(3), 69-84. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0046.

and prevents the normalization of anti-democratic behavior. Several participants referenced their own fieldwork and country experiences—including panelists who study Latin America, Europe, and the MENA region—underscoring how rapid media capture (Hungary, Turkey) accelerates authoritarian consolidation. In contrast, pluralistic media ecosystems (Brazil) can slow it.

Several experts underscored that media ownership structures shape the vulnerability of information ecosystems to state capture. Cases such as the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte illustrate how concentrated or politically dependent media markets enable rapid co-optation or forced closures. By contrast, outlets with diversified revenue streams and strong business models, such as the *New York Times* in the United States, have the potential to better resist coercive pressure and maintain editorial independence. Participants noted that these structural differences help explain why some democracies experience swift information capture while others sustain pluralistic media environments even under illiberal executives.

Courts, Electoral Authorities, and Bureaucracies as Institutional Firewalls

Participants agreed that independent courts and electoral authorities represent essential guardrails. However, these institutions are vulnerable to politicization early in the backsliding cycle. In environments of extreme polarization, attacks on these institutions become easier for executives to frame as necessary partisan measures, even when they undermine democratic norms. Participants repeatedly stressed *judicial credibility, impartiality, and insulation from patronage* as prerequisites for resilience.

Speakers noted that moments of democratic stress often force institutions to decide whether to use more assertive tools to contain authoritarian advances. An expert referenced a study distinguishing between *democracy-reinforcing* and *democracy-undermining* actions.[3] Democracy-reinforcing steps refers to legally permissible but norm-stretching actions that help constrain would-be autocrats by altering incentives and compelling broader political accountability over the medium to long term; democracy-undermining actions intensify polarization, weaken expectations of mutual restraint, or invite retaliatory escalation. Participants stressed that courts, electoral authorities, and legislatures frequently confront this dilemma when judging whether extraordinary measures will safeguard democratic openness or create precedents that future illiberal actors could weaponize.

Several participants stressed that formal institutions do not defend democracy on their own. Their constraining power depends on whether citizens, civic groups, and political elites believe that those institutions remain legitimate, efficacious, and worth defending. Democratic stability, therefore, reflects an underlying *equilibrium* among the main actors who sustain democracy, rather than a solely self-enforcing institutional environment. Autocrats unsettle this equilibrium by weakening civil society, eroding state capacity, and undermining public trust. Effective resistance must therefore involve more than condemning specific authoritarian moves; it should reestablish an equilibrium in which democratic rules will be enforced and future governments will hold today's violators accountable. Participants noted that tactics such as election boycotts risk disturbing this equilibrium if they diminish citizens' belief that institutions can still deliver meaningful accountability.

The Military

Participants stressed that democratic resilience requires a politically neutral military or at least one unwilling to back extra-constitutional measures. The group reflected on how militaries in Brazil, Malawi, and South Korea responded to political crises, linking this to the Brazil case to be discussed later.

3 Bateman, David A. 2025. "Democracy-Reinforcing Hardball: Can Breaking Democratic Norms Preserve Democratic Values?" Comparative Political Studies, OnlineFirst (January 6). https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140241312107

Comparative Insight Box: The United States as an Illustrative Case

Several experts drew on recent events in the United States to illuminate broader themes of democratic resilience and political culture. They noted that coercive practices sometimes acquire different meanings depending on national histories. For example, masked federal agents conducting immigration raids in U.S. cities created confusion and fear, but in countries such as Argentina, where enforced disappearances during the late twentieth century remain central to collective memory, similar tactics immediately signal a non-negotiable authoritarian red line. These contrasts illustrate how political culture conditions societies' tolerance for coercive state action and shapes the thresholds at which resistance mobilizes.

Participants also discussed how poorly planned coercive moves can backfire. Immigration raids in the United States that were blunt, indiscriminate, and denied due process frequently generated networks of resistance, including neighborhood whistle-alert systems in places like Chicago, and expanded rights-advocacy coalitions. Several speakers argued that this dynamic fits a general pattern: when state repression appears violent, haphazard, or incompetent it can strengthen the opposition's organizational capacity.

Experts additionally noted institutional developments in the U.S. as reminders that courts cannot always be relied upon as the primary site of democratic defense. The Supreme Court's alignment with executive preferences during several key episodes underscored that judicial institutions may drift, fragment, or decline in autonomy under pressure, reinforcing the broader argument that resilience requires multiple veto points.

Finally, some participants pointed to strategic experimentation among U.S. voters, such as Democrats temporarily registering as Republicans before primary elections to blunt the influence of MAGA-aligned candidates, as an example of adaptive resistance that exploits the openings the electoral system still provides. While context-specific, this case illustrates how opposition actors can creatively respond to backsliding within existing institutional channels.

3. Do Recoveries Last?

The academic literature is divided on the question. One study[4] finds that 73% of countries that experience democratic backsliding "recover" within three decades. Another study,[5] by contrast, finds that only 10% of democratic "recoveries" last more than five years. Participants also clarified that these findings measure different outcomes—one tracks whether recoveries occur at all, while the other examines their long-term durability. One scholar emphasized that *recoveries are challenging to sustain*, especially when:

- bureaucracies and courts were previously politicized,
- legal and constitutional changes were tilted to favor incumbents,
- new governments inherit concentrated executive power,
- broad electoral coalitions fracture after victory,
- deep polarization persists.

Participants also noted that many apparent "recoveries" mask long-term vulnerabilities, especially if polarization remains high. Participants stressed that recoveries are rarely symmetrical. Autocratization often unfolds quickly, while rebuilding institutional capacity is slow, uneven, and politically costly. Several speakers noted that returning to a prior institutional equilibrium is not always desirable; elements of the original democratic architecture may have created the very vulnerabilities that enabled backsliding. Effective recoveries, therefore, require not only restoring damaged institutions but also reforming those structural features that left the system exposed in the first place.

4 Nord, M., Angiolillo, F., Lundstedt, M., Wiebrecht, F., & Lindberg, S. I. (2025). When autocratization is reversed: episodes of U-Turns since 1900. *Democratization*, 32(5), 1136–1159. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2024.2448742

5 Bianchi, M., Cheeseman, N., & Cyr, J. (2025). The Myth of Democratic Resilience. *Journal of Democracy* 36(3), 33-46. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2025.a964563

> SECTION 3

Session II: Brazil as a Case Study

Session II examined Brazil as a case of **failed autocratization** by applying the frameworks outlined in Session I. Drawing insight from the recently published analysis *Why Didn't Brazilian Democracy Die?*,[1] the conversation focused on institutional configurations, elite decision-making, and the specific weaknesses that constrained Jair Bolsonaro's authoritarian ambitions.

1. Brazil as a "Near Miss," but Not a Breakdown

One expert began by clarifying that Brazil should not be understood as a country that has fallen into a system of competitive authoritarianism. Instead, the country experienced threats but maintained essential democratic institutions: free media, independent courts, congressional autonomy, competitive elections, and viable subnational veto players. Bolsonaro's authoritarian rhetoric was serious, but his capacity to achieve institutional capture was limited.

Another researcher added that expectations in 2018–19 were extremely pessimistic, partly because Bolsonaro scored high on classic authoritarian litmus tests and openly praised the military dictatorship. Yet Brazil's "consensual institutional architecture"—multiparty presidentialism, federalism, judicial independence, and legislative power—produced multiple veto points that blocked consolidation.

Key Point: *Brazil survived not because the threat was trivial, but because the president was politically weak, institutions were strong, and elites refused to align behind an authoritarian project.*

2. The Weaknesses of Bolsonaro's Populist Strategy

A Minority Populist President

Several researchers explained that Bolsonaro entered office as a *"minority populist"*: elected with high rejection rates of his opponent rather than strong personal appeal. His base was noisy but numerically limited. His party fragmented almost immediately, and he depended on congressional forces he had long vilified for Parliamentary support.

One expert agreed, reminding participants that globally, only about one-quarter of populists who

1 Melo, M. A., & Pereira, C. (2024). Why Didn't Brazilian Democracy Die? *Latin American Politics and Society*, 66(4), 133–152. doi:10.1017/lap.2024.4

win office undermine democracy. Many others, like Bolsonaro, govern incompetently, miscalculate, or fail to consolidate institutional control. Bolsonaro possessed "personalistic plebiscitarian leadership without the organizational backbone needed to rule."

Coalitional Presidentialism as a Constraint

Brazil's extreme party fragmentation, an effective number of 16–17 major parties, meant Bolsonaro could not govern without forming alliances. After two years of scandals, pandemic mismanagement, and falling approval, he formed an alliance with the Centrão, a large bloc of rent-seeking, non-ideological parties. But the Centrão provided protection from impeachment, not support for authoritarian or illiberal policies or reforms. Their only incentive was survival and patronage, not institutional transformation. As one participant emphasized: "They gave him votes to avoid impeachment, not to change democracy."

3. The Role of the Judiciary and the Supreme Court

Speakers agreed that *Brazil's Supreme Court behaved as a unified institutional actor* for the first time in decades, driven by a shared diagnosis that Bolsonaro threatened constitutional order. The Court blocked numerous decrees, overturned partisan manipulations, and used its criminal jurisdiction to investigate presidential allies.

Throughout Bolsonaro's term, the court:

- nullified Bolsonaro's appointment of an ally to head the federal police,
- launched an inquiry into coordinated digital disinformation networks, and
- issued rulings empowering states and municipalities to manage COVID policy.

At the same time, the Senate refused to advance impeachment requests against Supreme Court justices filed by Bolsonaro's allies, signaling that Congress would not support efforts to intimidate the judiciary.

One expert explained that the Court's assertiveness must be understood in the context of longer-term judicial autonomy and Brazil's tradition of institutional self-defense. Nevertheless, judicial overactivation can become a democratic vulnerability if future executives exploit these precedents for partisan ends.

4. Federalism and Subnational Autonomy

Federalism was another key firewall. For example, governors of major states, most notably São Paulo, defied Bolsonaro's COVID-19 mismanagement by pursuing independent vaccination strategies and public health measures. Participants referenced São Paulo Governor João Doria, describing him as a powerful rival who controlled vast bureaucratic and financial resources and publicly counterbalanced Bolsonaro.

5. Media Independence and Civil Society Mobilization

Panelists highlighted the unusual level of unity among major media outlets, from liberal papers to conservative ones like *O Estado de São Paulo*, which collectively resisted attacks on the electoral system, disinformation, and interference in reporting during the pandemic. The speakers emphasized the impact of the "Letter to Brazilians in Defense of Democracy," which gathered over a million signatures shortly before the 2022 election and signaled a societal rejection of authoritarian maneuvers.

6. Why the Coup Attempts Failed

Participants identified the following factors that led to the decisive failure of the January 8, 2023, coup attempt:

A. Lack of Military Support

The heads of the Army and Air Force refused to support a coup decree.

B. No Congressional Backing

Leaders like Senate President Rodrigo Pacheco declined to advance the impeachment of Supreme Court justices and refused to entertain extra-constitutional demands.

C. Bureaucratic Resistance

Federal police, public prosecutors, and audit courts launched investigations into electoral interference and corruption, many of which were triggered by Bolsonaro's own missteps.

D. Institutions Imposed Costs

Participants noted that Bolsonaro's later eight-year ban from office, ruled by the Electoral Court, demonstrated the judiciary's willingness to enforce boundaries even after the crisis passed. Participants agreed that *Brazilian democracy survived because its institutions had both the willingness and the capacity to act.*

> SECTION 4

Key Takeaways: Toward a Democratic Playbook

Across both sessions, several consistent themes emerged. Participants did not attempt to produce a universal blueprint but instead highlighted recurring patterns that could inform future research and policy.

1. Strong Institutions Matter Only When They Are Independent and Assertive

Courts, electoral authorities, legislatures, and federal structures can restrain executives, but they must possess both:

- independence (legal autonomy, elite support, buffer from patronage)
- activation (the willingness to confront illiberal behavior)

Comparative examples showed that no single institution can be expected to hold the line alone; resilience stems from contestation across multiple veto points.

2. Opposition Coordination Must Overcome Regime Uncertainty

Opposition actors regularly underestimate threats or delay coordination until late in the erosion cycle. Effective resistance requires:

- early coalition-building
- transformative repolarization grounded in programmatic conflict (i.e., unified messaging that reframes political divides as democracy vs authoritarianism)

3. Polarization Is One of the Hardest Obstacles

Deep, identity-based polarization lowers the cost of executive overreach, delegitimizes institutional actors, and diminishes the public's willingness to defend neutral institutions.

4. Civil Society and Media Ecosystems Are Critical

Independent journalism, investigative networks, civic coalitions, and public pressure helped preserve democratic space in Brazil and elsewhere.

5. Executive Weakness Can Be Protective

A paradox of populism: personalistic, populist leaders often lack the organizational infrastructure

to execute authoritarian ambitions, giving institutions opportunities to constrain them.

6. Recoveries Are Possible but Fragile

Rebuilding democratic institutions takes far longer than dismantling them. Recoveries are often partial, slow, and vulnerable to renewed polarization or elite fragmentation.

Next Steps

Participants concluded by identifying key areas requiring further analytical and policy-focused work:

- Mapping the **timing of resistance**: how early mobilization differs from late-stage interventions.
- Understanding **elite fractures** and **authoritarian coalitions**.
- Investigating how **judicial assertiveness** can be sustained without drifting into judicial overreach.
- Developing comparative frameworks for **constructive repolarization** as a political strategy.
- Producing datasets on **institutional activation** in response to democratic erosion.
- Exploring how to strengthen media ecosystems and ensure **information plurality** under digital polarization.

Perry World House will continue convening scholarly and policy communities to refine these insights and identify actionable strategies for resilience in backsliding contexts.

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