

U-turns – The Hope for Democratic Resilience

Top-Level Insights

- **Contemporary democracies are fairly resilient to the onset of autocratization: Since 1994, 54% have not experienced backsliding.**
- **Yet, democracies rarely survive if autocratization sets in: Roughly 80% break down.**
- **Breakdown does not prevent a return of democracy: Roughly 50% recover shortly after a democratic breakdown in a U-turn episode.**
- **Recovering of democracy in U-turns – or "bounce back" resilience – is the most common type of democratic resilience.**
- **Active, stiff, and coordinated resistance against autocratization from pro-democracy actors and institutions is key to making a U-turn.**
- **Acting in early stages of autocratization seems critical – within one electoral cycle (4-6 years) after the onset.**

Threats to Democracy are Growing

From 1900 to 2023, there were 99 episodes of autocratization that originated in democracies. Only 35 of those episodes took place from 1900 to 1993.

Two-thirds of all recorded autocratization episodes affecting democracies occurred in the last 30 years, from 1994 to 2023: 64 episodes of backsliding in 54 countries.

As of 2023, a record number – 42 countries – are in ongoing autocratization (Angiolillo et al. 2024). 28 of these countries had democratic regimes when autocratization started. Democracy has already broken down in almost half of them – 13 out of 28. The other 15 are also at risk.

Contemporary autocratization in democracies is often a gradual process that happens from within and under a legal façade (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

The main drivers of this process are democratically elected leaders who deliberately dismantle democratic norms and institutions. Gradually, political power is concentrated in one party or in one person (Bermeo 2016).

Media freedom and civil society spaces are typically attacked first and the most. Attempts to make constitutional changes that undermine the democratic process are common (Williamson et al. 2024).

Democracies Rarely Survive Autocratization

If autocratization begins in a democracy, the fatality rate is distressingly high. Democracy broke down in roughly 80% of all these autocratization episodes since 1900 (Boese et al. 2021).

The fatality rate for democracy continues to be high also since 1994: Democracy broke down in 41 out of 49 autocratization episodes for which the outcome is known: almost 84%.

DEFINITIONS

Autocratization is a process of regime transformation in which a country becomes significantly less democratic (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

Onset of autocratization is when a regime starts to register negative changes that eventually become substantial and significant (Maerz et al. 2023).

Democratic breakdown is when the regime seizes to uphold democratic qualities and becomes an electoral or closed autocracy (Maerz et al. 2023).

Democratic resilience is the ability for a democracy to withstand external and internal stressors or rebound after facing a threat from within (Croissant and Lott 2024).

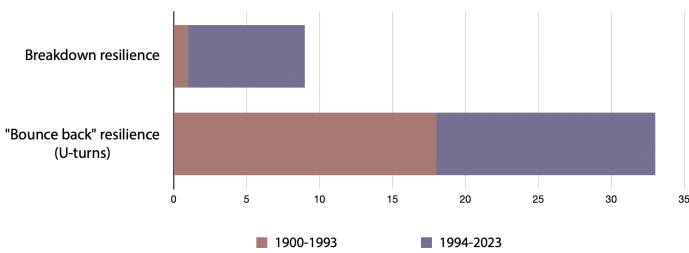
Two Types of Democratic Resilience

Democracies can be resilient to autocratization in different ways.

First, democracies can be *resilient to the onset of autocratization*, meaning that they prevent autocratization altogether. Contemporary democracies are fairly resilient to onset. More than half of all democracies (54%) have stayed democratic without any backsliding since 1994. Costa Rica, Japan, and Switzerland are contemporary examples.

Second, if autocratization is underway, democracies can still be *resilient to breakdown*, meaning that they avoid a regime change. Such cases are rare – 11% (N=9) from 1900 to 2023 – but most of them (N=8) happened during the last 30 years.

FIGURE 1. DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE, BY TYPE, 1900-1993 VS. 1994-2023



Note: The calculations are based on data coming from Nord et al. (2025). There is some uncertainty for the 1994-2023 period due to large number of ongoing episodes. Onset resilience is not shown on the graph.

Accordingly, breakdown resilience is becoming increasingly more common. Some recent examples include Brazil, Poland, and the United States.

... and the Third – Most Common – Type: U-turns

The third type of democratic resilience – “bounce back” resilience – manifests in the ability for a democracy to recover after a short period of autocracy turned around in a period of re-democratization (Croissant and Lott 2024). Democracy “bounces back” in a U-turn episode, in most cases to more or less similar level of democratic quality of its political institutions (Nord et al. 2025). Maldives and Zambia are recent examples.

U-turns are the most common type of democratic resilience, by far. From 1900 to 2023, 46% of all processes of autocratization that originated in democracies were reversed in U-turns, after a democratic breakdown. In most of such cases, autocratization was halted and reversed relatively swiftly, on average, within 5 years after its onset (Nord et al. 2025).

“Bounce back” resilience (in the U-turn form) is becoming increasingly more common. In the last 30 years, democracy was restored in a U-turn episode in 54% of all breakdown cases (or 42% of all autocratization episodes in democracies).

How Democracies Survive

In the rare cases of *breakdown resilience*, aspiring autocrats typically make critical errors, such as economic mismanagement or high-level corruption (Williamson et al. 2024). This erodes their legitimacy and makes removal through elections or impeachment easier. South Korea is one example.

When democratic breakdown is averted – the agents of backsliding are typically thrown out of power in democratic elections, as in Brazil in 2022 or in Poland in 2023. Building a broad electoral coalition of pro-democracy opposition during the pre-election period seems to be key to success (Wiebrecht et al. 2023).

The Brazilian 2022 election also underscores the importance of fighting disinformation (Nord et al. 2024a: 36). The independent Electoral Management Body and active civil society are key actors in this regard. Civil society initiatives to detect disinformation, to fact-check in real

time, and to make reliable data accessible are particularly important, as aspiring autocrats are known to use the state apparatus to spread disinformation in order to remain in power.

Judicial processes can also help stop backsliding such as in South Korea in both 2019 and again right now in 2025. In general, a strong judiciary and more democratic experience make democratic breakdown less likely (Boese et al. 2021). Legislatures, by contrast, can do very little to halt autocratization once it has started (Lührmann 2021), and attempts to remove the autocratizing incumbent through irregular means are most likely to lead to a democratic breakdown (Cleary and Öztürk 2022).

How Democracies Rebound after a Breakdown

A lot of research still needs to be done to answer why some democracies exhibit “bounce back” resilience (e.g., Zambia) while many others get trapped in authoritarianism (e.g., Türkiye).

Early research findings suggest that in rare cases, re-democratization can result from autocrats making some critical mistakes, like calling for referendum while overestimating popular support; alternatively, democratic revival can stem from international intervention, typically after a (civil) war or a military coup (Nord et al. 2025).

The vast majority of contemporary U-turn cases, however, seem to be characterized by varying combinations of *institutional safeguards* (courts, elections), and *societal collective action* (parties, civil society, media, and people) resisting the stabilization of autocracy and leading to a re-democratization (Wiebrecht et al. 2023; Nord et al. 2025).

Among institutional safeguards helping to lay the ground for U-turns, an *independent judiciary* that withstands efforts at derailing democracy, is key. Aspiring dictators often seek to weaken checks on the executive power during the process of “executive aggrandizement”, and independent judiciary can provide important veto points (Bermeo 2016). Preventing reforms of judicial institutions during autocratization, as well as supporting actors who oppose such reforms can thus be decisive.

Protecting *electoral integrity*, most notably the Electoral Management Body (EMB) autonomy and the free- and fairness of elections, is another important aspect. It played a role in turning autocratization around in almost half of all U-turns, from 2000 to 2023 (Nord et al. 2024b).

KEY FACTORS BEHIND U-TURNS

Institutional safeguards: An independent judiciary and electoral integrity (including fighting disinformation during the pre-election period).

Societal collective action: A unified opposition coalescing with civil society, mass pro-democracy protests, international democracy support.

Timing: Acting in early stages of autocratization is key to success.

Among societal collective action strategies, *broad opposition coalitions*, often including coalescing with *civil society*, allowed for unified electoral challenges to aspiring autocrats in many contemporary U-turn episodes (Wiebrecht et al. 2023). A divided and fragmented opposition, by contrast, plays into the autocrats' hands. There is also some evidence that opposition coalitions work best when constructed during the early stages of autocratization (Riedl et al. 2023).

Another societal collective action that is often effective is a *large-scale, unified, and sustained mass mobilization* against an aspiring autocrat. It has played an important role in reversing backsliding in many U-turn instances (Wiebrecht et al. 2023). Mass protests, however, can also backfire and lead to the increase of repression of civil society and opposition parties (Riedl et al. 2023).

In many U-turn cases, *international involvement with democracy support and protection* and diplomatic pressure contributed to successful reversals (Wiebrecht et al. 2023). External actors and incentives are, however, only facilitating if there are strong pro-democratic forces on the ground (Riedl et al. 2023). Support for domestic pro-democracy forces detailed above is thus key for developing "bounce back" resilience.

Finally, *acting in early stages of autocratization* seems to be of paramount importance. In successful cases of democratic revivals, autocratization was halted and reversed, on average, within 4 and 6 years

from the start, respectively – which corresponds to one electoral cycle (Nord et al. 2025).

With the possible exception of Bolivia (where the U-turn process is now ongoing and the outcome is yet unknown), no democracy has managed to revert democratic breakdown and "bounce back" to its previous levels if autocratization episode lasted for more than a decade. After 10 years, autocratization tends to consolidate autocratic rule and reversing the process becomes close to impossible.

It is thus particularly important for international democracy support and protection actors to raise awareness among domestic pro-democracy actors about the gradual nature of contemporary autocratization and the importance of acting fast.

Democratic Resilience is Growing

In conclusion, whilst autocratization is common and threats to democracy are real, U-turns are also on the rise (Angiolillo et al. 2024). This suggests that consolidating authoritarian rule is becoming a lot more difficult than in the past. Democratic resilience is unprecedented in historical terms, and opposition to anti-democratic incumbents might further increase in the future.

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Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) is a unique approach to conceptualization and measurement of democracy. The headquarters – the V-Dem Institute – is based at the University of Gothenburg with 14 staff. The project includes a worldwide team with 5 Principal Investigators, 22 Project Managers, 33 Regional Managers, 134 Country Coordinators, Research Assistants, and more than 4,000 Country Experts. The V-Dem project is one of the largest ever social science research-oriented data collection programs.



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