

The Democratic Erosion Feedback Network

A Weighted, Falsifiable Systems Model of Democratic Backsliding in the United States

T. Collins Logan

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Abstract

This paper presents a systems-based model of democratic erosion in the United States, framing it as a self-reinforcing feedback network of mutually amplifying factors. The model identifies five interconnected layers: **(A)** primary structural vulnerabilities; **(B)** secondary cascading chain reactions; **(C)** amplification levers; **(D)** documented outcomes that feed back into the system; and **(E)** counter-pressures — the balancing loops that dampen, redirect, or reverse erosion. Most factors in the network carry a *weight* — a structured judgment about severity and scope, offered as orientation (and not as a definitive metric). Which factors actually *drive* decline, as against carrying mass within it, is a question about the network's edges. So this model poses that question, sets out those edges for audit in an appendix, but doesn't resolve it. This analysis is centered on U.S.-specific evidence from 2016 through mid-2026 — a period that now includes the unprecedented institutional stress of 2025, when the Varieties of Democracy Institute downgraded the United States from a liberal democracy to an electoral democracy for the first time in more than half a century — and draws on global parallels (Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, Poland, India) to illustrate broader patterns. In contrast to narrative accounts of decline, this model commits to falsifiability: it describes the observations that would weaken it, engages the evidence that already does, and concedes where its own criteria are not yet met. The paper closes with two forward hypotheses — *institutional hysteresis* and *the attention economy of erosion* — offering implications for diagnosing and disrupting these feedback loops.

Introduction

This has been a challenging model to build — on the one hand because the data seems to point in directions that are both counterintuitive and contradictory, and on the other because anyone who assembles a framework like this has to confront an uncomfortable question: *am I mapping out a legitimate system, or am I just curating my own distress and disillusionment?* The inclination to collect every data point that confirms decline, and to quietly pass over whatever complicates it, is the cognitive failure this paper's subject matter warns about. So this project has mainly become an attempt to identify the most productive questions to ask, rather than confidently declaring answers. Also, this model attributes intent only where intent has been verifiably expressed by the acting institution or individual; everywhere else, it describes function rather than motive, because any structural weakness can be exploited *opportunistically, negligently, or deliberately*, and the system behaves similarly in all three cases. Additionally, the model includes an entire layer of counter-pressures — the balancing feedback loops that, to my understanding, an accurate systems analysis should contain. A network composed solely of reinforcing loops predicts inevitable collapse, and on any unbounded timescale such a model would become practically unfalsifiable, where every moment of non-collapse can be recoded as “not yet.” And before its conclusion, the paper identifies observations that genuinely weaken the model — and it states, without hedging, the criterion its own evidence doesn't yet satisfy.

Where to begin? The decline of democratic norms and institutions in the United States can be, and has been, described as a series of discrete events — the 2016 election, the January 6th

insurrection, the 2024 immunity ruling, the mass clemency of January 2025, the domestic troop deployments of that summer, and so on. But I think these are better understood as expressions of a larger, interconnected system in which structural vulnerabilities, cascading reactions, and amplification mechanisms reinforce one another — *and in which outputs then become inputs*. This paper therefore aims for a systems thinking approach,¹ modeling democratic erosion as a feedback network rather than a timeline. This distinction becomes quite useful: a timeline invites us to ask “what happened next?”, while a feedback network invites us to ask “what is feeding what?” — and it seems the latter question reveals where interventions might actually work.

Some definitions to kick things off. By **democratic erosion** I mean what Nancy Bermeo calls ‘democratic backsliding’: the state-led debilitation or elimination of political institutions that sustain democracy, typically incremental and legal in form rather than sudden and violent². Whether this definition fits with the 2025 evidence is examined in the conclusion, because the pace of the recent record strains any sense of ‘incremental.’ By **vulnerability** I mean a structural feature of the U.S. system that now accelerates erosion — in some cases a feature designed for stability in an earlier era, and whose original function has been repurposed or degraded; in others an original design flaw whose costs have compounded. The distinction matters more for repair than diagnosis: a repurposed feature can sometimes be restored to its function, while a design flaw can only be amended, and the two carry very different price tags. By **lever** I mean a tactic or tool — a repeatable practice — that intensifies the effect of a vulnerability or cascade. By **counter-pressure** I mean any institution, statute, practice, or mobilization that functions as a balancing loop, absorbing or reversing erosive energy. And by **feedback** I mean the process by which a documented outcome of the system re-enters the system as a new input...the tendency this paper is really all about.

Those terms, in turn, inform the five layers that organize the proposed model:

Layer A: Primary Exploited Vulnerabilities — structural weaknesses in the U.S. system that are exploited, whether deliberately or opportunistically.

Layer B: Secondary Cascading Chain Reactions — immediate and downstream effects that become new inputs.

Layer C: Amplification Levers — tactics and tools that intensify the effects at each stage.

Layer D: Documented Outcomes — empirical evidence of feedback loops that sustain the cycle.

Layer E: Counter-Pressures — balancing loops that dampen the cycle, and which are themselves targets of erosion.

A further methodological note, because everything relies on it.

Most nodes in this network carry a **weight**. Each is scored for *severity* (how much damage it does when active, 1–3) and *scope* (how much of the system and the population it touches, 1–3),

summed into a composite from 2 to 6. In the figures, a node's circle is scaled by *area* to that composite value.

Now: what the weights are, and the rules they answer to.

The weights are structured expert judgment: ordinal scores, assigned by a single coder, under coding rules stated here in full. I need to be exact about that status. The external instruments this paper relies on most — V-Dem, Freedom House, the EIU — are themselves expert-coded indices: informed judgments aggregated under published procedures. That is the epistemic genus these weights belong to, minus the multi-coder aggregation that lends those indices their reliability (this single coder's rules are laid bare to compensate). So: subjective in the sense that all expert coding is subjective, and disciplined in the one way that separates a structured judgment from an intuition — the judgment sits on the page with its grounds elaborated, *where you can take issue with it*.

Now...that job comes with some rules: what a weight is licensed to do in this paper, and what it is forbidden to do.

Licensed: an **ordinal** claim — this concern outranks that one. A **category** claim — these nodes sit at the scale's ceiling. And a **coverage** claim — this reform touches more of the model's stated concern than that one.

Forbidden: a **cardinal** claim — a 6 is not “twice” a 3, and the only arithmetic this scheme performs is the severity-plus-scope sum inside a single node. A **summation** across nodes or layers — including, especially, adding up the erosive weights, adding up the balancing weights, and declaring a winner; Layer E shares the scale's appearance, not its unit. A **driver** claim — weight is a property of a node, driving is a property of an edge, and a factor can be heavy while sitting entirely downstream: for example, *polarization as identity* is heavy and is downstream of *partisan polarization* by definition. And a **leverage** claim — Meadows's entire argument is that the largest elements of a system are usually the worst places to intervene, which makes mass and leverage different properties no matter how tempting the conflation. Therefore, if you catch a sentence in this paper asking a weight to do a forbidden job, that sentence is in error.

Two properties of the scale itself are important. First, the composite adds severity to scope, and addition is doing something there that I can only defend as convenience: it treats depth and breadth as interchangeable. They aren't. A 5 scored as 3+2 is a deep harm with limited reach; a 5 scored as 2+3 is a shallow harm touching nearly everything — different problems, inviting different responses, wearing the same number. The composite hides that difference, which is why the parenthetical is always there: read past the total to the split. Second, the scale saturates. Several nodes score the maximum, and a ruler on which everything important comes out the same length isn't really measuring anymore — it's gesturing at a category. I accepted both defects to keep the tables readable at a glance. But they're also part of why the weights hold the status they do, and nothing more: a scale this coarse can rank concerns and mark a ceiling, and it shouldn't be trusted past that.

One further dimension, because magnitude and evidence are different questions. Each weight travels with a **confidence** marker — the strength of the record behind the judgment, independent of the judgment's size. The default is high and goes unmarked; where the marker reads *medium* or *low*, the table says so. A node can be heavy and uncertain at once: *normalization of extremism* (D5) keeps its 5 because that is the judged magnitude if the mechanism is operating as described — and it carries low confidence, because the survey instruments beneath it are credibly contested, as the dissents engaged at *partisan polarization* (A3) and among the weakening observations spell out. The two dimensions answer different questions — *how bad, if real?* and *how sure that it's real?* — and collapsing them is how a model ends up either dismissing what it can't yet prove or asserting what it hasn't. So when this paper credits a dissent, the concession shows up here, in the tables themselves: a critic who lands a real objection moves the confidence marker, not just the prose around it.

One more thing the weights are for: they are predictions as much as summaries. I am setting them down now, in the open, so that the network analysis proposed under Future Research has something specific to test. If that analysis confirms them, good; if it overturns them, better — because then we will know exactly where my judgment failed, and by how much. Committing to the numbers before the test is what makes either outcome worth having. And since this project's organizing commitment is to ask productive questions rather than declare answers, that is how the weights should finally be read: as the questions I most want to explore, written in the one form that better methods can actually answer.

A limit of the scoring is that each weight measures the damage of a single node, one event at a time. But some mechanisms do their damage by accumulation: an individual instance may not amount to much, but the total transforms everything. A scheme that scores events one at a time cannot see that kind of harm: it records a hundred small numbers and misses what they add up to. Scandal fatigue is the clearest case in this network; gaslighting and algorithmic amplification likely share the problem. The tables flag these nodes where they occur, and the attention hypothesis near the end of the paper is, in part, an attempt to describe what this blind spot may conceal.

Another exposure is that the weights are visible: you can see them, and argue with them, and that is kind of the point. *Selection* is invisible. So a factor entered into this network if, on the evidence available, its *expected impact* on the system cleared a threshold — probability of occurrence times depth of effect. That is the same judgment the weights express at finer grain; inclusion and scoring are not independent operations, but the same style of estimation performed twice.

There are two other gates.

The first is *granularity*. Many patterns that clear the impact threshold on any reading do not appear here by name — the filibuster, financialization and shareholder primacy, Christian nationalism — because they were folded into parents: structural minority rule, economic inequality and precariousness, populist scapegoating. These were judgment calls about resolution rather than verdicts about importance, and every one of them could have gone the other way. A critic who thinks Christian nationalism deserves its own node rather than a berth

inside gaslighting can make a defensible argument about aggregation, but they aren't catching an omission.

The second is *measurability*, and this one has a bias. The decline of civic education, and the broader anti-intellectual turn, were left out because I could not score them cleanly — the correlational record is thin because, at least in my estimation, the phenomenon resists the kind of measurement this method requires. That is the streetlight problem: the model searches where the light is. It is entirely possible that what was excluded for being unmeasurable sits upstream of half of Layer A, and really nothing in this method can rule that out.

Returning to the overarching frame: *scope* is the reach of an effect. *Severity* is its accomplished depth — and here one clarification carries most of the method's weight. As already alluded to, *I do not score intent*. However, between *intended* and *accidental* there is a third category the law has always recognized: the *foreseeable consequence* — the outcome that was predicted, on the record, before the action was taken. Where a contemporaneous warning exists — an inspector general's finding, a comment-period objection, an expert letter, a dissent memo — that was dated prior, the consequence that followed is scored as severity without any claim about what anyone wanted. To be clear about the mechanics: severity scores the damage whether or not it was foreseen; the *foreseen on the record* tag marks where the warning exists, and changes what the damage means, but not how it is measured. So *not accidental*. Foreseen, warned, and accomplished anyway. Much of what follows in Layers B and C is severe in exactly this sense, and the tables indicate where such warnings are in play.

Two additional admissions about the whole apparatus, both of which might appear to undermine this project. A recurrence-and-impact filter is biased toward *old* patterns — new ones are thinly evidenced by construction. *Algorithmic amplification* is the newest factor in this network and, applied strictly, my own threshold might have delayed its admission for years; but I kept it, and you are entitled to know this exception runs in the direction of my argument. The data that properly fix a node's *scope* and *severity* generally arrive *after the fact* — by months, often by years. Which means the weights in these tables are estimates of effects whose evidence may not yet fully exist, and no amount of fussing over the scale can fix that. I think it is worth sitting with the implication and not invoking it as a caveat: after all, no analyst can score the damage until it is done. And this applies equally to a court, a congressional committee, an inspector general, or a voter. So the measurement lag in this paper's method really isn't a flaw in the method. It's the same lag that runs through the very system the paper is describing, and we are all inside of it.

Which points us toward the actual gap: *a network is its edges*. The *weights* are the part of this model that looks quantitative and matters least; the *edges* are the part that carries the argument. Appendix A therefore sets them out: source, target, sign, and the basis on which each was drawn. It is the least readable thing in this paper, but it is probably the first place a serious critic should go.

A. Primary Exploited Vulnerabilities

The U.S. political system contains systemic, structural weaknesses that are exploited — sometimes deliberately, sometimes opportunistically, sometimes through simple neglect — in ways that accelerate democratic erosion. Many of these were designed for stability in a different era; others are recent arrivals, born of technological and economic change. What unites them is function: each one lowers the cost of anti-democratic action or raises the cost of democratic response. The table below carries the rest of the network, and it rewards a slower read. *(Once again: weights are expressed as a composite of **Severity + Scope**; the exogenous input at the end of the table sits outside the system boundary but injects energy into it.)*

Factor	Weight	Description	U.S. Evidence	Global Parallel
A1. Electoral System Flaws	6 (3+3)	First-past-the-post voting, the Electoral College, and gerrymandering create unrepresentative outcomes and disproportionate power. The Electoral College is an original design feature operating as designed — its costs compounded rather than repurposed.	The 2000 and 2016 presidential elections were won by candidates who lost the popular vote; ³ post-2020 Census maps locked in legislative majorities in several states despite near-even statewide votes. ⁴	Hungary: Orbán’s Fidesz redrew districts to help secure supermajorities — machinery that proved indifferent to its owner when the same seat–vote disproportionality handed the 2026 challenger 71 percent of seats on 53 percent of votes.
A2. Weak Guardrails	6 (3+3)	Few enforceable constraints on conflicts of interest, self-dealing, or ethical violations in the executive branch.	Emoluments litigation against the first Trump administration produced no enforced consequences; ⁵ Freedom House found that in 2025 the administration “disregarded conflicts of interest and weakened both anticorruption safeguards and enforcement practices.” ⁶	Brazil: Bolsonaro flouted pandemic-era norms with impunity. ⁷
A3. Partisan Polarization	6 (3+3)	Identity-based sorting (race, religion, geography) outweighs policy preference, making compromise structurally costly.	Pew (2022): 62% of Republicans and 54% of Democrats hold <i>very unfavorable</i> views of the other party; 72% and 63% respectively describe the other side as “more immoral” than other Americans. ⁸ Kalmoe and Mason find majorities of strong partisans perceiving the other party as a threat to the country ⁹ — though Westwood and colleagues argue that survey measures of support for partisan violence are substantially inflated by inattentive respondents, and that true rates run far lower; the dissent is engaged directly under D5. ¹⁰	India: the BJP has polarized voters along religious lines. ¹¹

Factor	Weight	Description	U.S. Evidence	Global Parallel
A4. Media Fragmentation	5 (2+3)	Collapse of local journalism plus rise of partisan media erodes shared factual ground.	Roughly 2,100 local newspapers were lost between 2004 and 2020 — closures and mergers combined — leaving expanding “news deserts”; ¹² partisan cable and streaming ecosystems now sort audiences by identity.	Italy: Berlusconi’s media concentration shaped public opinion for decades.
A5. Judicial Politicization	5 (3+2)	Courts perceived as partisan instruments lose their capacity to arbitrate.	Confirmation battles and 5-4/6-3 rulings on voting, campaign finance, and abortion (<i>Shelby County, Citizens United, Dobbs</i>) have tracked the appointing party; ¹³ Gallup’s approval measure for the Court fell to a record-low ~40% in the early 2020s. ¹⁴	Poland: PiS restructured the Constitutional Tribunal and Supreme Court (2015-2020). ¹⁵
A6. Economic Inequality	5 (2+3)	Wealth concentration enables elite capture of politics.	The top 1% hold roughly 31% of household net worth; ¹⁶ networks of large donors have spent billions shaping elections, legislation, and judicial selection. ¹⁷	Russia: oligarchic wealth and state power fused under Putin. ¹⁸
A7. Federalism Asymmetries	4 (2+2)	State-level control of election administration can override national norms — in either direction.	Georgia’s SB 202 (2021) restricted ballot access and restructured election oversight; ¹⁹ nineteen states enacted restrictive voting laws in 2021 alone. ²⁰	Hungary: Orbán centralized power to override local governments. ²¹
A8. Civic Capacity Decline	5 (2+3)	Thinning associational life and eroding interpersonal trust — treated here as one construct, since organized membership and the social capital that sustains it decline together — reduce the capacity for coordinated resistance.	Union membership fell from 20.1% of workers in 1983 to 10% in 2023; ²² long-run declines in generalized trust and membership-based civic association have been documented since the mid-20th century. ²³	Russia: an atomized independent associational sphere eased consolidation under Putin. ¹⁸
A9. Algorithmic Amplification	6 (3+3)	Engagement-optimized platforms reward outrage, tribal signaling, and falsehood at machine speed — a vulnerability distinct from, and multiplicative with, media fragmentation.	Platform-disclosure reporting and internal research have repeatedly shown recommendation systems amplifying divisive and false content; ²⁴ election-year information environments are now substantially machine-curated.	Myanmar: the UN Fact-Finding Mission and Meta’s own commissioned assessment found platform amplification contributed to atrocity-enabling propaganda. ²⁵
A10. Majoritarian Distortions	4 (2+2)	Senate malapportionment and the filibuster allow shrinking minorities to block majority-supported repair — and Article V’s amendment threshold, among the world’s most	Senators representing a minority of the population routinely block legislation — including democracy-reform bills — supported by national majorities; no structural constitutional	(Structural; few direct parallels — most peer democracies lack an equivalent chamber, and most amend their

Factor	Weight	Description	U.S. Evidence	Global Parallel
		demanding, locks the deepest structural flaws beyond ordinary politics.	amendment has been ratified in over half a century.	constitutions far more easily.)
A12. Demographic Status Threat	4 (2+2) <i>. medium confidence</i>	Perceived loss of group status supplies durable grievance fuel for anti-democratic mobilization.	Mutz found status threat, more than personal economic hardship, predicted 2016 vote switching ²⁶ — a finding Morgan’s reanalysis contests on the same data, arguing the economic interpretation survives; ²⁷ the weight here assumes only that the grievance is real, not that its origin is settled. Replacement narratives circulate widely in right-leaning media.	Europe: nativist parties mobilize equivalent anxieties.
A13. Legislative Capacity Decline	4 (2+2)	The long fade that made the collapse of legislative constraint (D4) cheap: a legislature that has ceded the habit of legislating has little practice at the harder work of confronting.	Congressional enactments have declined for four decades — from 713 laws in the 100th Congress (1987–88) to 276 in the 118th — though the honest version is less dramatic than raw counts suggest: excluding ceremonial, commemorative, technical, and appropriations measures, the decline runs from 388 substantive laws to 164, roughly half the fall the headlines report. ²⁸ The prior record low was set in 2011–12, under ordinary divided government, by both parties’ hands. By late 2024, post-office namings were on track to account for more than a third of new laws — not because namings increased, but because everything else stopped. ²⁹	Broadly observed: legislative output has declined across many established democracies as executives expand.
A14. Presidential System Rigidity	4 (2+2)	Fixed terms, winner-take-all executive power, dual democratic legitimacy, and the absence of any routine confidence mechanism — Linz’s classic case that presidentialism is the more brittle democratic form, with the U.S. long cited as the exception that had not yet failed. ³⁰	The Constitution offers two mid-term exits, and partisan alignment has closed both. Impeachment has been rendered inert (two acquittals, 2020 and 2021). Section 4 of the 25th Amendment exists on paper, but it displaces powers rather than removing the officeholder, must be initiated by the president’s own vice president, and requires two-thirds of both chambers to sustain.	The comparative caution runs both ways: Hungary and Poland — this paper’s most-cited parallels — are parliamentary systems, so their erosion mechanics may transfer imperfectly to a presidential one. Latin American presidentialism supplies the closer analogues.

Factor	Weight	Description	U.S. Evidence	Global Parallel
X1. Foreign Interference <i>(exogenous input)</i>	4 (2+2)	Hostile-state information operations inject energy into the network from outside its boundary.	The Senate Intelligence Committee’s bipartisan reports documented sustained Russian active measures targeting U.S. elections; ³¹ such operations exploit A9 and feed B4.	Global: comparable operations documented across Western democracies. ³²

When reviewing this table, I think a few things surge to the foreground. First, the heaviest weights cluster where structure meets identity: electoral distortion, polarization, weak guardrails, and algorithmic amplification each score the maximum, because each touches nearly every downstream process in the network. Second, notice that the same structural feature can carry opposite valences — federalism (A7) enables state-level suppression *and*, as we shall see in Layer E, state-level refuge. Any model that codes federalism as purely erosive is telling only half the story. Third, the exogenous input of foreign interference (X1) is deliberately drawn outside the system boundary: foreign interference did not create these vulnerabilities, but it studies them more attentively than most domestic observers do. And fourth, the boundary is now open in both directions — Layer E carries a benign exogenous input (X2) for the same reason X1 appears here. A boundary that admits only hostile energy is not a boundary; it’s a thumb on the scale.

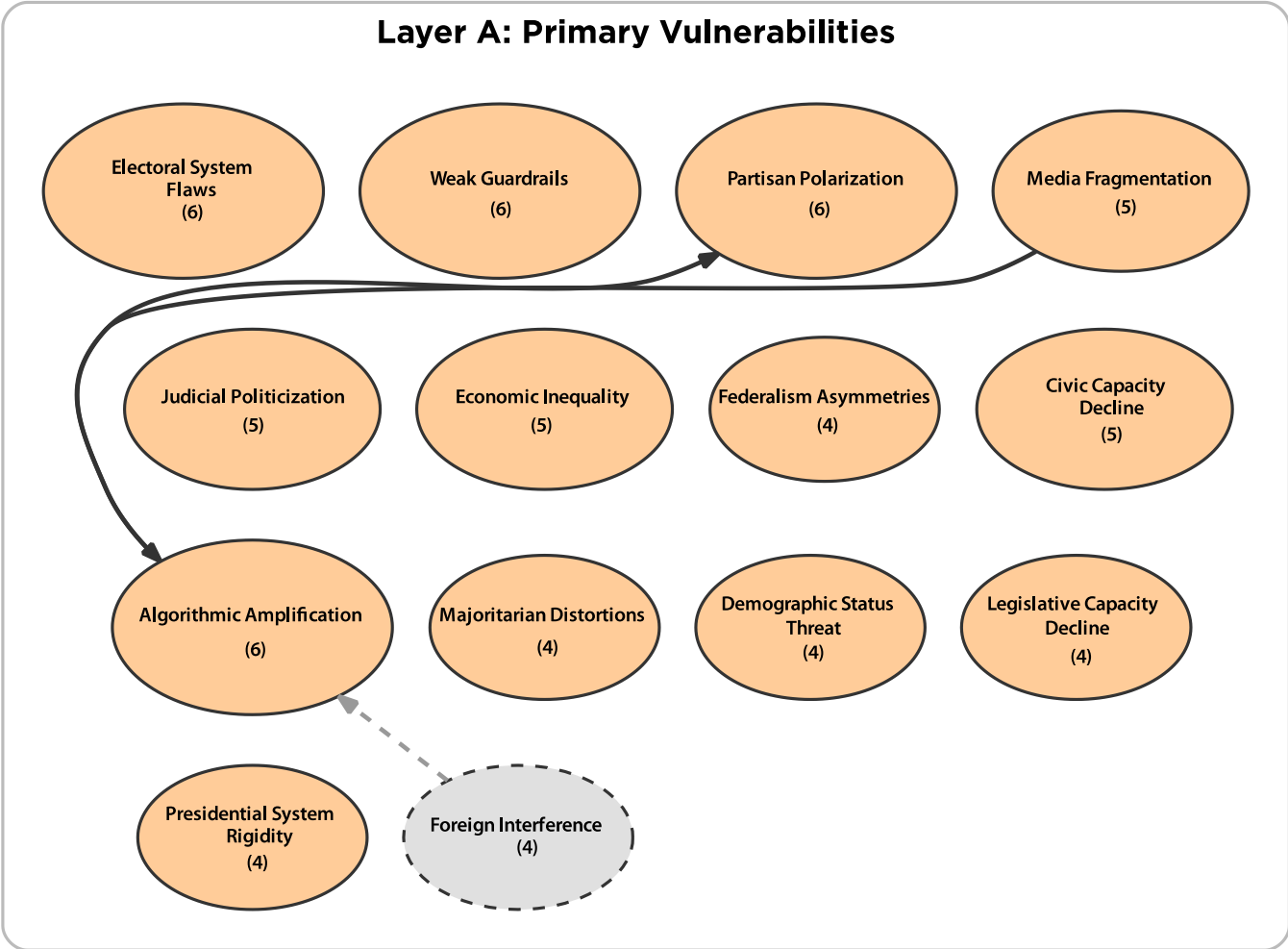


Figure 1: Primary Exploited Vulnerabilities. Circle *area* is proportional to composite weight (severity + scope). The gray dashed node is an exogenous input entering the system from outside its boundary.

B. Secondary Cascading Chain Reactions

Once primary vulnerabilities are exploited, secondary chain reactions emerge — downstream effects that become new inputs, creating a multiplier effect. And therein lies the central difficulty of reform: by the time a cascade is visible, it has usually already become a cause.

Chain Reaction	Weight	Trigger	U.S. Evidence	Amplification Effect
B1. Norm Erosion	6 (3+3)	Elites tolerate or reward norm violations.	The measure of toleration is career outcomes: officials who objected to norm violations were removed or sidelined while participants were promoted, renominated, and — on January 20, 2025 — pardoned, when more than 1,500 people convicted for the January 6th attack received	A new baseline: violations that once ended careers now signal strength.

Chain Reaction	Weight	Trigger	U.S. Evidence	Amplification Effect
			clemency, an act Freedom House flagged the next day as casting “a shadow over democracy,” and which 68% of Americans opposed in late-2025 polling. ³³ Two impeachment acquittals (2020, 2021) established that no violation would carry a partisan price.	
B2. Institutional Capture	6 (3+3)	Loyalists installed in, and professionals purged from, key agencies.	First-term examples included EPA rollbacks under industry-aligned leadership and DOJ interventions in cases involving presidential associates; ³⁴ in 2025 the pattern escalated sharply — inspectors general removed <i>en masse</i> , entire agencies (including USAID) shuttered, and large-scale reductions in force across the civil service. ³⁵ <i>Foreseen on the record</i> : the removals were executed without the 30-day advance notice and case-specific rationale required by the Securing Inspector General Independence Act of 2022; the chair of the inspectors-general council objected in writing within a day that the dismissals were not legally sufficient, and a bipartisan Grassley–Durbin letter demanded the statutorily required rationale days later. ³⁶	Agencies become instruments of the incumbent rather than the state.
B3. Policy Sabotage	4 (2+2)	Deregulation, defunding, or administrative reversal of disfavored policy.	ACA enrollment outreach was defunded; ³⁷ the U.S. twice withdrew from the Paris Agreement; ³⁸ and the Economist Intelligence Unit attributed the 2025 U.S. decline mainly to worsening scores for the functioning of government — the period of DOGE’s dismantling operations — and civil liberties. ³⁹ Reversal is asymmetric in a specific way examined in the conclusion: statutes and memberships restore quickly; expertise and trust do not.	Dismantling is fast where the destroyed asset was never written down.
B4. Public Distrust	5 (2+3)	Scandal, corruption, and perceived bias corrode confidence.	Public trust in the federal government has hovered near record lows — below 20% — for years; ⁴⁰ by March 2026, 68% of Americans said U.S. democracy “used to be a good example for other countries to follow but has not been in recent years.” ⁴¹	Distrust breeds disengagement, which breeds impunity, which breeds distrust.
B5. Populist Mobilization	5 (3+2)	Charismatic leadership channels grievance against institutions.	The MAGA movement’s sustained mobilization since 2015 has restructured one of the two major parties around personal loyalty.	The base rewards escalation, punishing moderation in primaries (see C13).
B6. Authoritarian Legalism	6 (3+3)	Legal instruments	The 2019 border-wall emergency declaration previewed the method; ⁴² 2025 brought its full flowering — emergency powers invoked for	Each accepted use becomes precedent for

Chain Reaction	Weight	Trigger	U.S. Evidence	Amplification Effect
		are used for illiberal ends.	sweeping tariffs, wartime authorities invoked for peacetime deportations, and unilateral impoundment of appropriated funds, with the V-Dem Institute concluding that Congress effectively ceded “the power of the purse.” ⁴³ <i>Foreseen on the record</i> : by September 2025 the Government Accountability Office had issued six formal determinations that the administration violated the Impoundment Control Act — highway, library, Head Start, school-energy, NIH, and FEMA funds — with dozens of investigations pending; in August a divided D.C. Circuit held that only GAO may sue to enforce the Act, narrowing the remedy even as the violations accumulated. ⁴⁴	the next — in either party’s hands.
B7. Security State Co-optation	5 (3+2)	Law enforcement, military, and intelligence functions bend toward the incumbent’s political interests.	First-term pressure on the DOJ to investigate rivals ⁴⁵ escalated in 2025 to the indictment of prominent critics at the President’s public urging, and to National Guard and Marine deployments against domestic protest in Los Angeles and other cities — a use of the military the Economist Intelligence Unit cited in downgrading the U.S. score. ⁴⁶	Career officials self-censor; the chilling effect outruns the actual coercion.
B8. Economic Precariousness	4 (2+2) · low confidence	Insecurity supplies recruits for anti-establishment politics.	Federal Reserve survey data (SHED, 2024): 63% of adults would cover a hypothetical \$400 emergency expense exclusively with cash or its equivalent; 37% would not — and within that group, 13% could not pay by any means. ⁴⁷ Fragility is real and bounded.	Anxiety feeds populism, which feeds policies that deepen anxiety.

How should we read the weights here? As records of where the 2025 evidence landed. Norm erosion, institutional capture, and authoritarian legalism sit at the ceiling because the year supplied direct evidence of their capacity to transform the state itself, and not just its policies — the record carries that claim on its own, and the weights simply mark where it settled. Economic precariousness carries a lower weight and the lowest confidence in the layer. The Federal Reserve data show fragility that is real but, from my reading, bounded. Beyond that, the evidence divides: one body of work locates the grievance in status and cultural displacement, another in material loss, and the strongest versions of each seem to survive the other’s best objections. Weighting precariousness lower is a judgment made under that uncertainty.

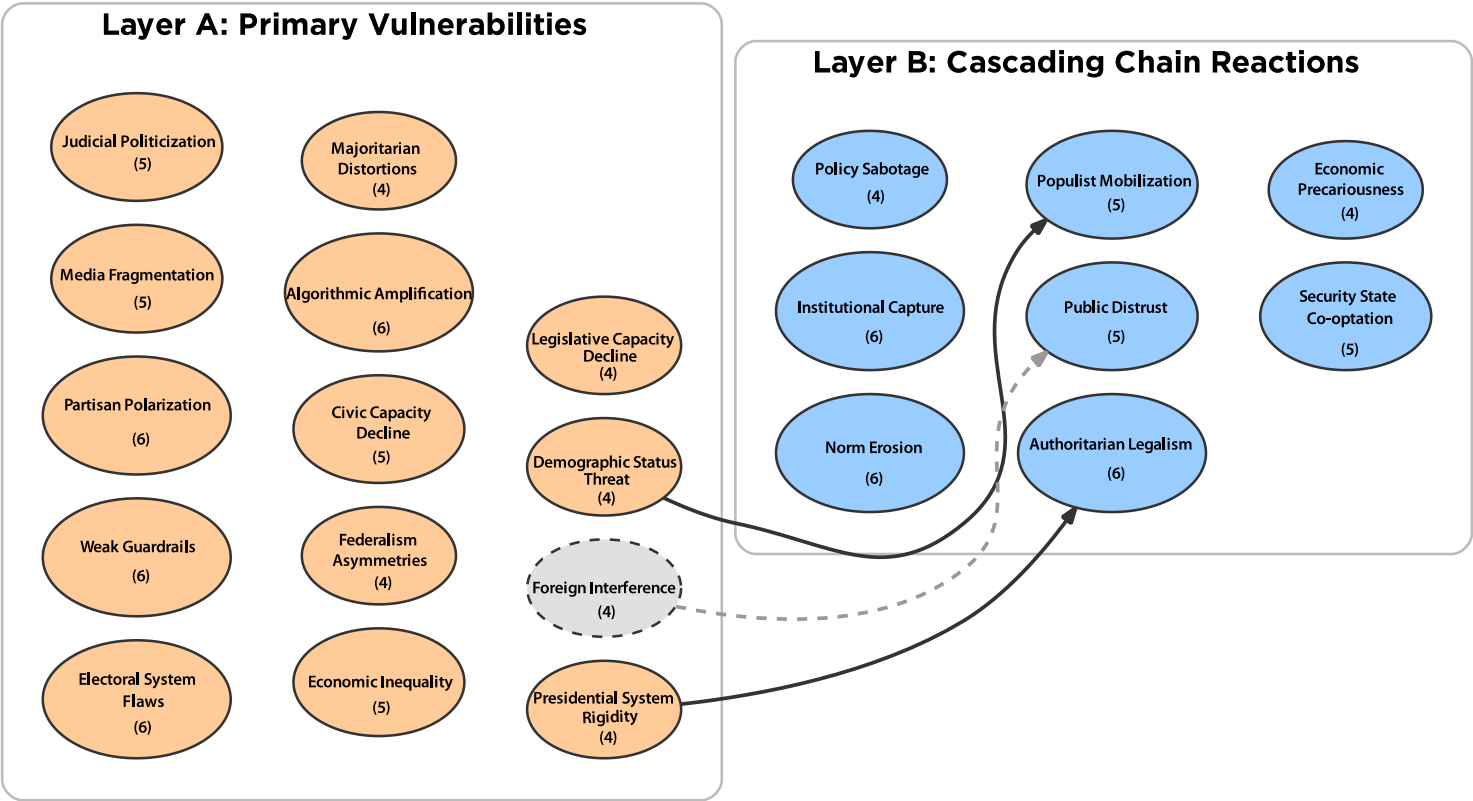


Figure 2: Secondary Cascading Chain Reactions. Circle area proportional to composite weight.

C. Amplification Levers

Amplification levers are the tactics and tools that intensify effects at each stage of the feedback loop. Here — and only here — the language of intent is sometimes warranted, because several of these levers were described by their own architects as deliberate strategy: the REDMAP redistricting project publicly advertised its aim of converting a minority of votes into a majority of seats,⁴⁸ and the 2016 blockade of a Supreme Court nomination was defended openly as a power calculation.⁴⁹ Where no such record exists, the table describes function, not motive.

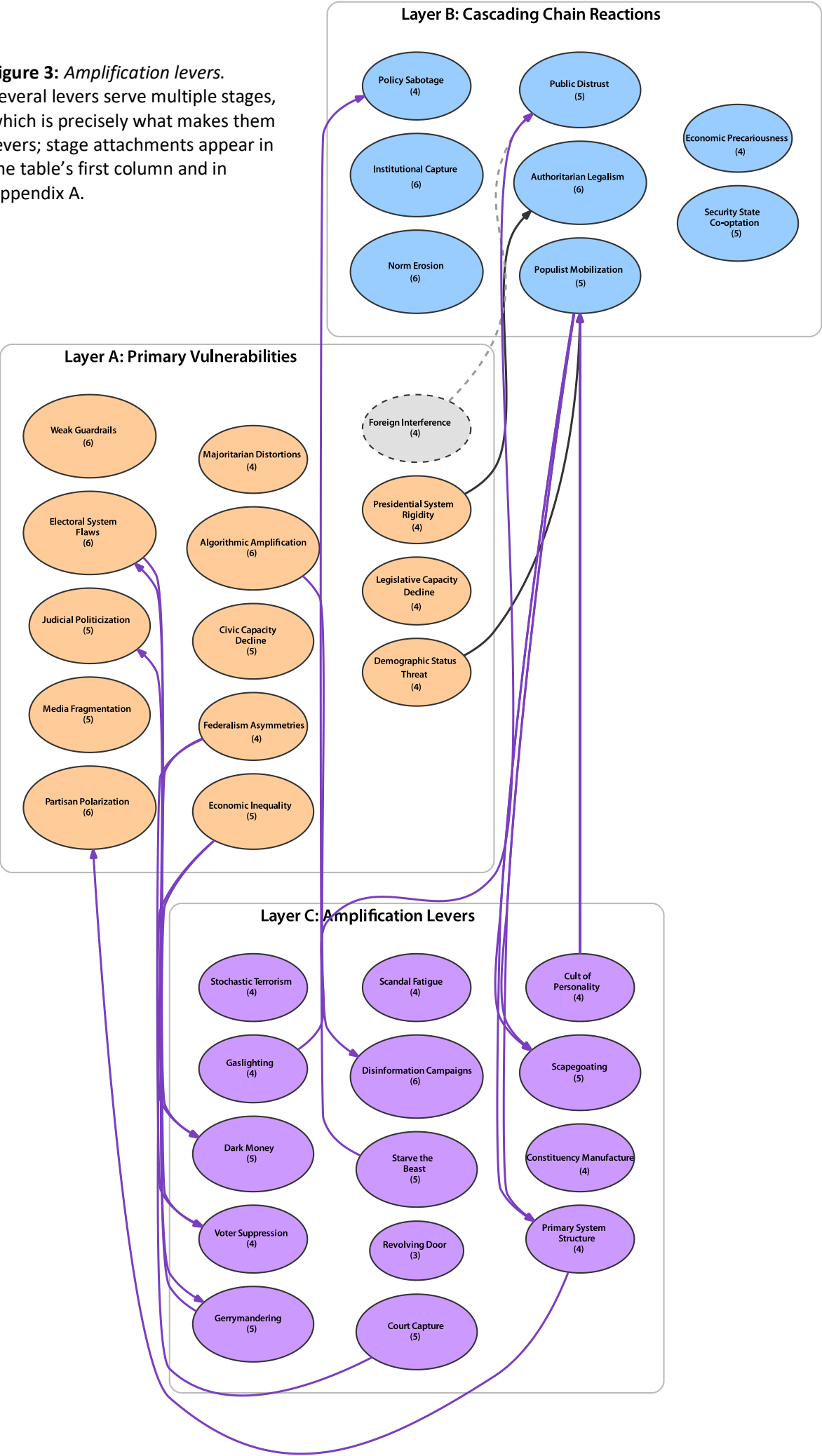
Stage Amplified	Lever	Weight	Description	U.S. Examples	Global Examples
Electoral flaws	C1. Gerrymandering	5 (3+2)	Redrawing districts to manufacture majorities.	REDMAP (2010); ⁴⁸ the 2025 mid-decade redistricting wars, in which Texas redrew its congressional map at the President’s urging and California answered with a voter-approved counter-map — an arms race the Economist Intelligence Unit cited in lowering the U.S. score, and	Hungary: district engineering under Fidesz. ⁵¹

Stage Amplified	Lever	Weight	Description	U.S. Examples	Global Examples
				which this model codes as erosive <i>on both sides</i> , since reciprocal escalation degrades the same representational function regardless of who moves second. The counter-map's distinct <i>channel</i> — referendum authorization with a sunset — is treated separately, in E9. ⁵⁰	
Electoral flaws	C2. Voter Suppression	4 (2+2)	Raising the cost of voting for opposition constituencies.	Georgia SB 202 (2021) restricted absentee access and criminalized line relief. ¹⁹	Brazil: 2022 attempts to invalidate ballots cast on older voting machines. ⁵²
Weak guardrails	C3. Dark Money	5 (2+3)	Unlimited, undisclosed political spending.	<i>Citizens United</i> (2010) opened the channel; ⁵³ donor networks have directed billions through it. ¹⁷	UK: the Electoral Commission found Vote Leave exceeded spending limits and channeled funds through BeLeave in the Brexit referendum, and separately investigated Leave.EU's funding. ⁵⁴
Norm erosion / polarization	C4. Gaslighting	4 (2+2)	Denying observable reality to erode shared truth.	"Fake news" and "deep state" framing of adverse facts. ⁵⁵	Russia: "foreign agent" designations to discredit critics. ⁵⁶
Polarization	C5. Stochastic Terrorism	4 (3+1)	Rhetoric that invites violence while preserving deniability.	"Stand back and stand by" (2020); ⁵⁷ the January 2025 mass clemency retroactively validated political violence for its beneficiaries. ³³	India: official silence amid the 2020 Delhi riots. ⁵⁸
Judicial politicization	C6. Court Capture	5 (3+2)	Controlling courts through blockade, acceleration, and selection.	The Garland blockade followed by three appointments in four years. ⁴⁹	Poland: forced turnover on the Supreme Court via retirement-age manipulation. ⁵⁹
Institutional capture	C7. Revolving Door	3 (1+2)	Regulated industries staff their own regulators.	Fossil-fuel lobbyists drafting environmental rollbacks at EPA. ⁶⁰	Brazil: agribusiness appointees over environmental agencies. ⁶¹
Policy sabotage	C8. Starve the Beast	5 (3+2)	Defunding or dismantling agencies to justify their elimination.	First-term budget assaults on EPA, IRS, and State; ⁶² in 2025 the method went kinetic — DOGE	UK: austerity's hollowing of public services. ⁶³

Stage Amplified	Lever	Weight	Description	U.S. Examples	Global Examples
				dismantled agencies outright rather than merely defunding them. ³⁵	
Media fragmentation / distrust	C9. Disinformation Campaigns	6 (3+3)	Coordinated falsehood at scale, foreign and domestic.	Russian active measures (2016); ³¹ Fox News’s broadcast of election-fraud falsehoods, for which it paid Dominion Voting Systems \$787.5 million in settlement (2023). ⁶⁴	Myanmar: military disinformation surrounding the 2021 coup. ²⁵
Norm erosion	C10. Scandal Fatigue	4 (1+3)	Overwhelming the public’s capacity for outrage.	A near-daily cadence of controversies since 2017 has converted scandal from notable event to weather. ⁶⁵ The composite weight understates this lever if the attention hypothesis advanced near the end of this paper is right — its severity registers per event, while its mechanism operates on the aggregate; the forward-hypothesis section returns to it.	South Africa: hundreds of corruption counts against Zuma produced numbness rather than accountability.
Populist mobilization	C11. Scapegoating	5 (3+2)	Blaming marginalized groups for systemic problems.	Anti-immigrant rhetoric from “the wall” through the 2025 mass-deportation campaign and its wartime-authority removals. ⁶⁶	Hungary: the state-sponsored anti-migrant and anti-Soros campaigns of 2015–2018, run through captured public media. ²¹
Populist mobilization	C12. Cult of Personality	4 (2+2)	The leader as sole remedy.	“Only I can fix it” (2016); ⁶⁷ loyalty as the organizing principle of the second-term executive branch. ⁶⁸	North Korea: the terminal case. ⁶⁹
Polarization / electoral flaws	C13. Primary System Structure	4 (2+2)	Low-turnout partisan primaries make the most extreme voters the only electorate that matters — and, more fundamentally, the post-1970s direct primary removed the party organization’s gatekeeping function, the screening of candidates for basic democratic commitment that Levitsky and Ziblatt	The overwhelming majority of congressional seats are decided in primaries, where a small, unrepresentative electorate selects for confrontation. ⁷¹	(Structural; parallels weak — most democracies do not select candidates this way, retaining party gatekeepers.)

Stage Amplified	Lever	Weight	Description	U.S. Examples	Global Examples
			identify as the first line of defense. ⁷⁰ Turnout math explains who wins primaries; gatekeeping loss explains why no institution stands between the winner and the nomination.		
Cascade stabilization	C14. Constituency Manufacture	4 (2+2)	The new arrangement enlists its own beneficiaries — appointees, contractors, pardoned allies, industries favored by discretionary tariff exemptions — creating a defensive constituency for the eroded state of affairs. This is the mechanism by which erosion, once accomplished, acquires protective inertia.	Loyalty-vetted appointments across the civil service replacement pipeline; discretionary tariff-exemption and enforcement decisions creating dependent industry constituencies; the pardoned January 6th cohort as a mobilized beneficiary class. ³⁵	Hungary: the patronage economy — state contracts, media ownership, EU-fund distribution — is the consolidation mechanism the literature identified as central to Orbán's sixteen-year durability. That it sustained four supermajority cycles and still failed against a unified landslide in April 2026 bounds the mechanism's power without retiring it. ²¹

Figure 3: Amplification levers.
Several levers serve multiple stages, which is precisely what makes them levers; stage attachments appear in the table's first column and in Appendix A.



D. Documented Outcomes and Feedback Loops

The documented outcomes of the network are empirical evidence of the system sustaining itself. These outcomes feed back into the primary and secondary layers — and 2025-2026 supplied, for the first time, formal external measurement of the system’s state. Three independent assessments converged: the V-Dem Institute downgraded the United States from liberal democracy to electoral democracy — the first such loss of status in more than fifty years — with its liberal-democracy score falling from 0.75 to 0.57 in a single year, dropping it from roughly 24th to 51st among 179 countries, a pace the authors call “unprecedented in modern times” and faster than the first years of Orbán, Modi, or Erdoğan;⁷² Freedom House recorded one of the largest single-year declines among free countries (84 to 81) for the U.S., citing escalating unilateral executive authority, reprisals for political speech, and weakened anticorruption enforcement — while notably declining to remove America from the “free” category;⁶ and the Economist Intelligence Unit marked the lowest U.S. score since its index began in 2006 (7.65, down from 7.85, falling six places to 34th) — in a year whose global headline was that democracy had *stabilized* after eight years of decline, with the United States named the one exception.³⁹ These are the same instruments this literature has long used to measure Hungary and Turkey; that they now register the United States is itself a soundly documented outcome.

Outcome	Weight	Evidence	Feeds Back Into	Current Example
D1. Erosion of Trust in Elections	5 (3+2)	Consistent majorities of Republican voters have told pollsters since 2020 that the election was stolen or illegitimate. ⁷³	→ A2 (less accountability for subversion) and B1.	Election-fraud claims remain a mobilizing staple entering the 2026 midterms, which V-Dem calls “a critical test” of U.S. election quality. ⁷²
D2. Judicial Legitimacy Crisis	4 (2+2)	Record-low public approval of the Supreme Court; ¹⁴ the 2024 immunity ruling granted absolute immunity for core constitutional acts and presumptive immunity for other official acts. ⁷⁴	→ A5 (further politicization).	The Court’s 2025 emergency docket sided with the administration in the large majority of at least two dozen applications. ⁷⁵
D3. Polarization as Identity	5 (3+2)	Partisanship now functions as moral identity (see A3 evidence). ⁸	→ A3.	Election-denying candidates continued winning primaries in 2022 ⁷⁶ — though see Layer E for what happened to them in November.
D4. Collapse of Legislative Constraint	6 (3+3)	Not gridlock, and not low productivity — those are older stories, told in A13, and they belong to both parties. This is narrower and newer: the legislature’s abandonment of its <i>constraining</i> functions against a same-party executive. V-Dem’s measure of legislative constraints on the executive lost one third of its value in 2025	→ A2 and B6 (a vacuum the executive fills).	Sweeping 2025 policy changes proceeded almost entirely by executive action, litigated rather than legislated. ⁷⁸

Outcome	Weight	Evidence	Feeds Back Into	Current Example
		alone, reaching its lowest level in over one hundred years — the single steepest institutional decline recorded anywhere in this paper, in a dataset reaching back to 1789. ⁷⁷ And the mechanism is concrete: appropriated funds impounded without meaningful objection from the appropriators; emergency and tariff authorities exercised without the legislative review their statutes contemplate; oversight requests unenforced. The power of the purse turned out to be normative — it binds only when the majority prefers institutional power to partisan alignment, and in 2025 it did not. <i>Foreseen on the record</i> : six GAO Impoundment Control Act violation determinations in 2025 alone, with 39 investigations pending by spring — and, in August, the first pocket rescission in roughly fifty years, unilaterally canceling billions in appropriated foreign aid, which the Supreme Court allowed to proceed without reaching the merits. ⁴⁴		
D5. Normalization of Extremism	5 (3+2) · low confidence	PRRI (2023): 33% of Republicans agreed “true American patriots may have to resort to violence to save our country.” ⁷⁹ The Westwood critique (see A3) argues such measures overstate true support substantially — a dissent this model credits, and which converges with the regime-contingency finding among the weakening observations below.	→ A2 and B1.	The January 6th pardons converted the norm violation into official policy — though public opinion pushed back hard (see Layer E and the model-weakening observations below). ³³
D7. Press Freedom Decline	5 (3+2)	Major networks settled presidential lawsuits under regulatory pressure; broadcast licenses and merger approvals were publicly linked to coverage; the EIU cited “attempts to muzzle the media” in its downgrade. ⁸⁰	→ A4.	Press-freedom indices now register the U.S. as a country of concern rather than a benchmark. ⁸⁰
D8. Contested Election Administration	4 (2+2)	Post-2020 laws in multiple states shifted election authority toward partisan bodies. ²⁰	→ A7.	The 2025 redistricting arms race extended the contest from administration to map-making itself. ⁵⁰
D9. Institutional Brain Drain	4 (2+2)	Mass departures from the civil service via deferred-resignation offers, reductions in force, and terminations — with the Supreme Court staying an injunction against large-scale RIF planning. ⁸¹	→ B2 (expertise leaves; loyalty remains).	Scientific, statistical, and diplomatic capacity visibly degraded through 2025, including the summary firing of the BLS commissioner after an unwelcome jobs report. ⁸¹

Outcome	Weight	Evidence	Feeds Back Into	Current Example
D10. Federal–State Legal Confrontation	4 (2+2)	Guard federalization and deportation operations produced direct legal collisions between Washington and the states. ⁸²	→ A7 (asymmetries deepen as each side entrenches).	More than 530 legal actions against federal measures were filed in 2025 by one count — several times the pace of prior administrations (186 in the first hundred days, against fewer than 50 under Biden and roughly 30 under Obama in the same window), though totals vary with counting methodology. ⁷⁸
D11. Compliance Erosion at the Margins	4 (2+2)	The balancing power of courts (E1) assumes rulings are obeyed. That assumption is now a variable: 2025-26 brought documented episodes of slow-walked compliance, contested readings of injunctions, and removals or deportations executed in the window before orders issued — defiance at the margins rather than the center. ⁸³	→ B6 (each unpunished non-compliance is precedent) and E1 (its gain falls as compliance becomes discretionary).	Litigation over compliance itself — motions for contempt and enforcement — became a distinct 2025 docket category. ⁷⁸

Figure 4 is available as an interactive HTML file at this link. Screenshot below.

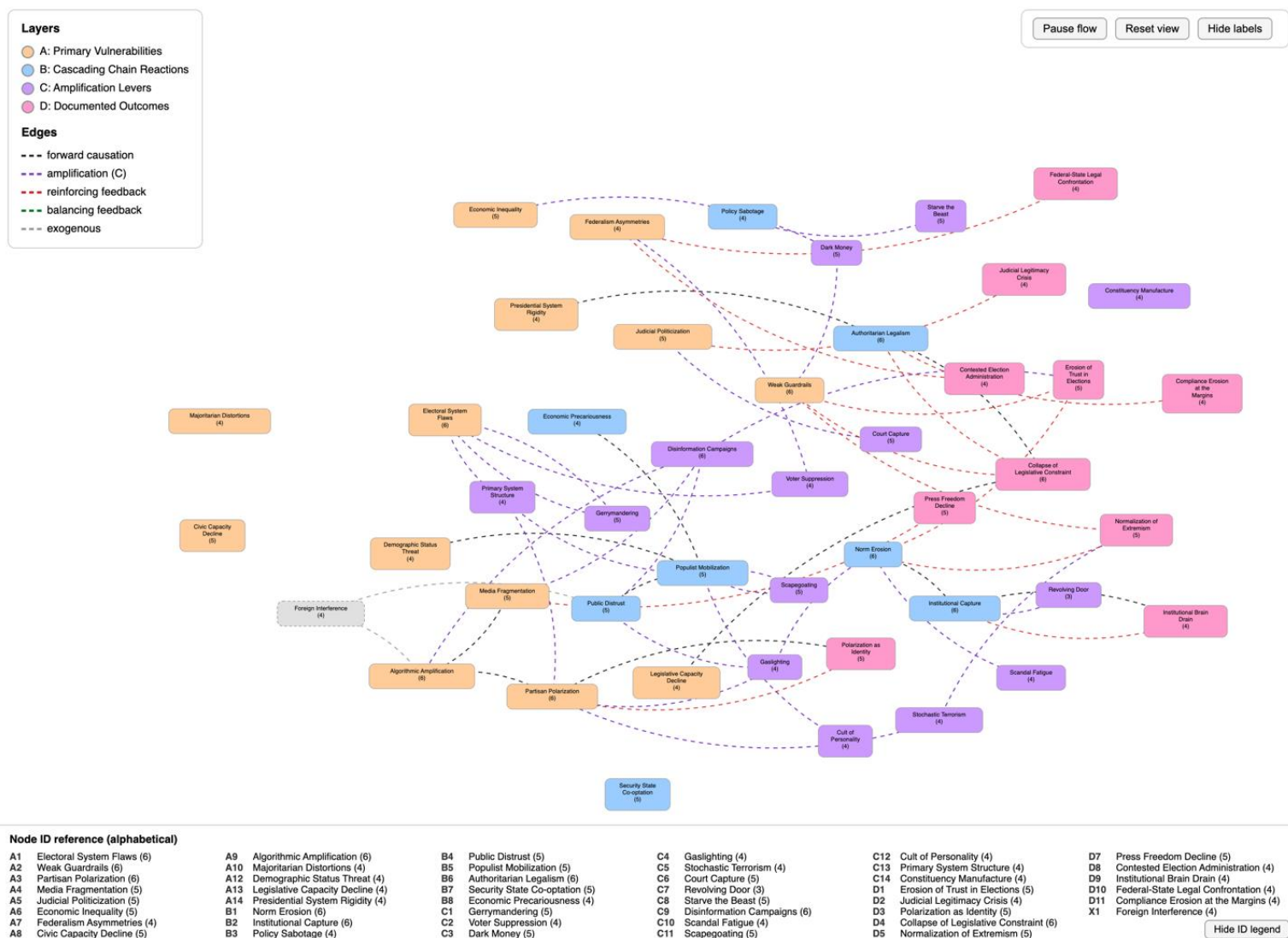


Figure 4: Layers A through D. Dashed red lines are reinforcing feedback — documented outcomes re-entering the system as inputs (representative edges; the full set is in Appendix A). This is the picture that, standing alone, would predict inevitable collapse. *But it does not stand alone.*

E. Counter-Pressures: The Balancing Loops

Here is where this model departs most sharply from purely narrative accounts of decline — and where, I would argue, it becomes an actual systems analysis rather than a prolonged lament. Every real-world system contains balancing loops. A model of democratic erosion composed solely of reinforcing feedback predicts irreversible collapse, but that is not what the evidence shows: it shows a system under severe, accelerating stress that is nonetheless *pushing back* along identifiable channels. The *Financial Times'* comparative analysis captured the duality

precisely — in 2025, at the same time that U.S. backsliding was steeper than the first years of Orbán, Chávez, Putin, or Erdoğan, U.S. institutions proved themselves more resilient *and* resistant than those in other countries.⁸⁴ Both halves of that sentence are true, so an accurate and useful model must hold both.

Counter-Pressure	Weight	Mechanism	Evidence	Dampens
E1. Judicial Independence Residuals	5 (3+2)	Courts still rule against power.	More than sixty 2020 election challenges failed in courts of both parties' appointees; ⁸⁵ <i>Moore v. Harper</i> (2023) rejected the strong independent-state-legislature theory; ⁸⁶ lower courts blocked birthright-citizenship and deportation orders throughout 2025, all four executive orders targeting law firms were struck down, and the tariff litigation reached the Supreme Court with the administration losing below. ⁷⁸ The load-bearing assumption — that rulings are obeyed — is scored separately, at D11.	B6, B2
E2. Statutory Guardrail Repair	3 (2+1)	Congress can still fix what it studies.	The Electoral Count Reform Act (2022) closed the “failed election” loophole exploited in the 2020 subversion attempt. ⁸⁷ Its passage mechanics — a lame-duck omnibus division, essentially without a discrete public vote — turn out to carry a lesson of their own, taken up in the forward-hypothesis section.	A2
E3. Electoral Accountability	5 (3+2)	Voters punish overreach when they can see it.	Election-denying candidates for governor and secretary of state lost in essentially every 2022 battleground; ⁸⁸ the November 2025 elections delivered sweeping opposition victories, including the Virginia and New Jersey governorships. ⁸⁹	B5, D1
E4. State Constitutional Backstops	4 (2+2)	State courts and constitutions constrain what federal doctrine permits.	State supreme courts have struck partisan gerrymanders under state constitutions; independent redistricting commissions spread by initiative.	C1
E5. Federalism as Refuge	4 (2+2)	The same asymmetry that enables suppression enables sanctuary.	State attorneys general filed coordinated litigation across dozens of 2025 federal actions; state-level data, health, and election infrastructure operated as redundancy against federal capture. ⁷⁸	B7, B3
E6. Free Press Persistence	4 (2+2)	Accountability journalism survives its own decline.	The Dominion settlement demonstrated that defamation law still prices lies; ⁶⁴ nonprofit and local news models grew even as legacy outlets settled or self-censored.	C9, D7
E7. Civil Service Resilience	3 (2+1)	Professionals resist, document, and litigate.	Whistleblower disclosures, inspector-general findings, and employee litigation slowed or reversed multiple 2025 purges; courts reinstated some removed officials. ⁷⁸	B2
E8. Mass Mobilization	5 (2+3)	Sustained, peaceful, large-scale protest and	The June 2025 “No Kings” demonstrations drew between two and five million people across roughly	B6, D5

Counter-Pressure	Weight	Mechanism	Evidence	Dampens
	· <i>medium confidence</i>	noncooperation — the factor V-Dem identifies as the single most effective brake on autocratization worldwide, ⁹⁰ and the strongest participation-linked correlate of campaign success in the quantitative civil-resistance literature. ⁹¹	2,100 locations — organizers claimed five million; the Crowd Counting Consortium’s independent range is 2 to 4.8 million — among the largest single-day protest actions in U.S. history, followed by larger waves in October 2025 (organizers: nearly seven million; independent estimates: 5 to 6.5 million across some 2,700 sites) and March 2026 (organizer estimates around eight million across some 3,300 sites). ⁹²	
E9. Direct-Democracy Repair Mechanisms	4 (2+2)	Roughly half the states permit citizens to legislate or amend constitutions directly, bypassing captured or gridlocked legislatures.	As a repair channel this is scoped exactly as unevenly as federalism itself — available in Michigan, absent in Texas — and is scored accordingly. But where it exists, it has done what no other channel in this layer reliably has: it moved <i>structural</i> reform past the actors who benefit from the structure. Michigan’s independent redistricting commission (2018), Arizona’s (2000), and two decades of anti-gerrymandering and voting-access initiatives share one signature — incumbent legislatures would never have enacted them, and didn’t have to. The channel is content-neutral, which is its limit and its integrity: California ran an escalatory payload through it in 2025, and the same process could entrench as easily as repair. What the channel guarantees is not virtue but <i>revocability and authorization</i> — a voter-approved map exists because voters said so and lapses at its sunset, and both properties distinguish it from the legislative maps it answers. The mechanism’s own vulnerability is scored across the aisle: initiative processes are themselves targets, through signature-threshold increases, supermajority requirements, and legislative override, and several states have narrowed the channel after it produced results the legislature disliked. A balancing loop that can be legislated away is a guardrail of the same normative kind this paper has been describing all along.	C1 (structural, where available), A1 (partially), D7
E10. Market and Economic-Elite Discipline	4 (2+2)	Capital constrains what courts and voters cannot reach in time.	Bond-market and currency reactions disciplined tariff maximalism; business coalitions litigated the IEEPA tariffs to the Supreme Court; corporate counsel and major firms resisted executive orders targeting the bar. ⁷⁸ Economic actors appear in Layer A as erosive (A6, C3); coding an entire class of actors as unidirectional would be exactly the asymmetry	B3, B6 (fiscal instruments)

Counter-Pressure	Weight	Mechanism	Evidence	Dampens
E11. Security-Force Professionalism	5 (3+2) · <i>low confidence</i>	The civil-resistance literature's central finding is that campaigns succeed by inducing defection among a regime's pillars of support — security forces above all. ⁹¹ The counter-pressure here is not defection but its precondition: a professional ethic, oath-to-Constitution culture, and JAG/legal review apparatus that raises the cost of unlawful orders.	this model criticizes elsewhere. Both codings are true of different actors at different moments — which is what makes this a node and not a constant. Reported episodes of narrowed, delayed, or legally reviewed directives during the 2025 deployments, and public statements by retired senior officers against domestic use of force. ⁹³ This node is where separating the two dimensions earns its keep. Scored for magnitude-if-operating, professional refusal at scale is a high-severity dampener — a pillar of support declining to fall — which is why the weight now reads 5 rather than the 3 that thin evidence alone would once have set. The evidentiary doubt has not vanished; it has moved to where it belongs, the low-confidence marker. The mechanism is untested at scale and the record is thin, and its absence from a model built on Sharp's pillars framework would be a structural hole; the weight states what this would matter if real, and the confidence states how far that is from shown.	B7
X2. External Democratic Anchors (exogenous input)	3 (2+1) · <i>medium confidence</i>	Benign energy entering from outside the boundary: allied-democracy coordination, treaty and trade frameworks, international courts and election observation, diaspora networks.	Trade partners' retaliation calculus constrained tariff escalation; allied intelligence-sharing frameworks created costs for politicized intelligence; international press coverage sustained stories domestic outlets settled away. ⁸⁴ The boundary now admits energy in both directions — see X1.	B3, B6, D7 (weakly)

Three observations about this layer. First, the counter-pressures are themselves targets: courts face defiance at the margins (now scored at D11) and delegitimization at the center; the press faces regulatory reprisal; the civil service faces the purge directly; and Congress — the constitutional counter-pressure of first resort — has largely removed itself from the field (D4). A balancing loop under attack is still a balancing loop, but its gain is attenuating.

Second, the temptation at this point is to summarize the asymmetry as one of speed — executive action in days, correction in years. The record complicates that slogan considerably: the courts' *response* stage was in fact historically fast in 2025. What differs between the loops is not their speed but *the shape of time inside them*, and the conclusion takes this up with the most current stats in hand, because this changes what reform should target.

Third, E8's weight deserves more evidentiary scaffolding than a single cross-national finding, because the quantitative literature behind it is both the strongest support in this layer and a

demonstration of why this model insists on stating counter-evidence. Chenoweth and Stephan's analysis of over three hundred maximalist resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2006 found that nonviolent campaigns succeeded roughly twice as often as violent ones, that participation scale was the decisive variable, and — the finding that escaped into popular circulation — that no campaign in the dataset failed after mobilizing 3.5% of its population in a peak event.⁹¹ The caveats matter as much as the headline, though. Chenoweth's own cautionary update describes the 3.5% figure as descriptive rather than prescriptive; at least one movement (Bahrain, 2011–14) has since failed despite exceeding 6% participation; and the factors that actually generate success — organization, momentum, strategic leadership, sustainability — typically *precede* mass participation rather than follow from it, which in this model's terms means E8's participation numbers are partly endogenous: a symptom of a balancing loop already gaining, not a switch that produces the gain.⁹⁴ Tufekci's study of networked movements reaches the same conclusion from the opposite direction: digital mobilization achieves mass scale precisely by skipping the organizational work that scale used to signal, and it is more brittle because of it.⁹⁵

More sobering, the success rate of nonviolent campaigns has fallen from roughly 65% in the 1990s to below 34% since 2010, as regimes have learned, coordinated, and hardened their security forces against defection⁹⁴ — which is not an anomaly for this model but a confirmation of its grimmest observation: the falling gain of balancing loops is a global phenomenon, not an American one. Two implications, then, for how E8 should be read. The mechanism, as Sharp's foundational analysis established, is the withdrawal of cooperation from a regime's pillars of support — and public demonstration is only one of three method classes, historically the least decisive next to noncooperation (strike, boycott, refusal), which is why the mechanism cell above names both.⁹⁶ And the scale question should be stated in domestic terms: 3.5% of the United States is roughly twelve million people — two to three times the June 2025 peak — a gap that quantifies exactly how much headroom this counter-pressure has, in either direction. One applicability caution binds all of it: the NAVCO cases are maximalist campaigns against consolidated regimes, whereas the American landscape remains erosion within a still-partially-competitive system; the closer historical analogues are the democratic-context struggles — the Nordic labor mobilizations of the 1920s–30s among them — where disciplined noncooperation forced structural change *through*, and not around, electoral institutions.

Figure 5 is available as an interactive HTML file at this link. Screenshot below.

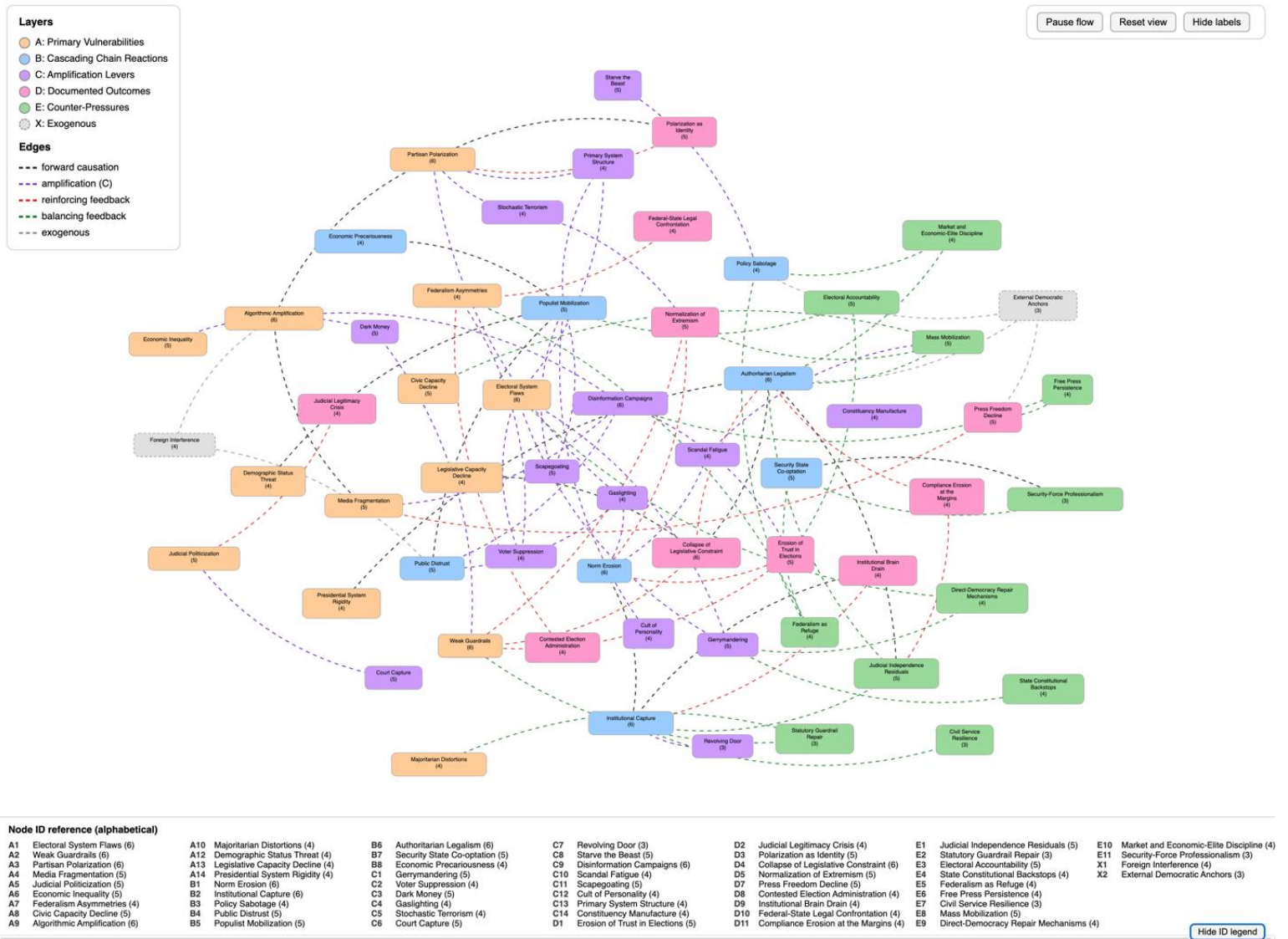


Figure 5: The full feedback network, Layers A through E. Dashed green lines are balancing (dampening) feedback; dashed red lines are reinforcing feedback, including attacks on the counter-pressures themselves. Node area remains proportional to weight. Representative edges only; the complete edge list is Appendix A.

For anyone who finds the full network of *Figure 5* a bit overwhelming (a reaction I think reinforces the point) *Figure 6* below aggregates the same system to layer-level flows.

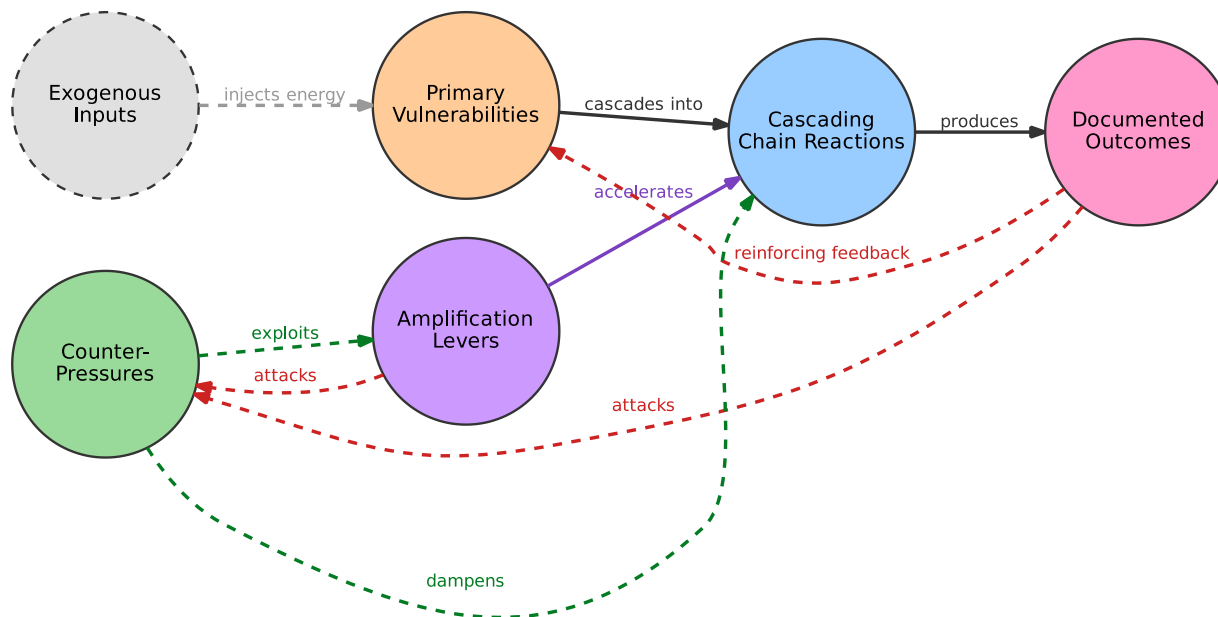


Figure 6: Aggregate layer-level flows of the same network. The system’s essential shape: vulnerabilities cascade, levers accelerate, outcomes feed back, and counter-pressures push against the cycle while absorbing attacks themselves.

Observations That Weaken the Model

Is a framework that can’t be wrong more useful than one that can? Conviction answers no. So I’ll describe the evidence that genuinely works against this model — with each item constraining what the model may legitimately claim.

1. Attitudes toward political violence have been regime-contingent, not monotonic. If the network were a simple ratchet, support for political violence should climb as norms erode. It did not. PRRI’s tracking shows Republican agreement that “patriots may have to resort to violence” ranging from 27% to 35% across the Biden years (33% in late 2023) — and then falling to 19% by December 2025, once the movement held power, while Democratic agreement rose to 17%: a near-convergence.⁹⁷ One caution, however: in the same December 2025 survey, the share of Americans who *completely* disagree with political violence fell to 41%, a series low. The partisan polarity tracks power; the total floor under the norm is quietly softening. This strongly suggests that much of what the model codes as “normalization of extremism” is better described as *grievance that tracks power*, which is a meaningfully different — and more reversible — phenomenon. The Westwood critique of violence-survey inflation (see A3)

compounds the caution: so D5 may be overstated at the level of measurement as well as interpretation. This dissent is recorded in the apparatus itself, as D5's low-confidence marker.

2. The legislative record is lumpier than a decay curve. The 117th Congress (2021–22) was among the most productive in decades — infrastructure, semiconductors, climate investment, and, most tellingly for this model, the Electoral Count Reform Act, a guardrail *repair* passed with bipartisan votes in the immediate aftermath of an attempted subversion.²⁸ And the long-run productivity decline itself is about half as steep as raw counts suggest, once ceremonial and administrative bills are excluded — a correction that softens A13 even as it leaves D4 untouched, since constraint and productivity are different constructs. Legislative abdication is real and severe, but it is not a law of nature; it has been interrupted within the model's own study period.

3. Voters have repeatedly punished the most direct threats. The 2022 defeat of election-denying candidates for the offices that administer elections, in essentially every battleground, is exactly the observation a pure-ratchet model cannot accommodate;⁸⁸ the November 2025 results extended the pattern.⁸⁹ Electoral accountability is degraded — gerrymandering and primaries see to that — but it has not been annulled.

4. External assessors themselves registered improvement in early 2026. Bright Line Watch's expert index, having fallen to 53 in April 2025, *rose* to 57 by early 2026, with experts crediting reasserted judicial checks — including the tariff litigation — and the end of domestic military deployments.⁹⁸ A model of pure reinforcing feedback has no vocabulary for that data point. This model accommodates it through Layer E — and that accommodation carries a price which should be articulated rather than celebrated: a dedicated explanatory layer for disconfirming observations is also a standing temptation to explain them away. The falsifiability criteria below are written to remove that exit.

5. The comparative endpoint is more likely stabilization than collapse — and this model adopts that as its base-case prediction. The Hungarian parallel this literature leans on did not terminate in totalitarianism; it settled into what Levitsky and Way call 'competitive authoritarianism'⁹⁹ — a degraded equilibrium in which elections continued but the playing field tilted — and held that shape for sixteen years before ending, in April 2026, the only way the concept ever said it could: the opposition won anyway. *The margin is the instructive part* — and it is instructive precisely because of what it cannot show. Turnover arrived, in the one exit we have observed, at the largest vote total in Hungary's free-election history, behind a unified challenger, with a mandate too large to litigate against. Whether a narrower win would have survived the post-electoral instruments is exactly what this case can't tell us — the landslide answered the question before it could be asked, which is why the falsifiability criterion below has to be calibrated around it. What the case does show is consistent with the concept's own prediction: the equilibrium doesn't make turnover impossible; it appears to raise the threshold at which turnover occurs, from a plurality toward a landslide — and the district engineering that once manufactured Fidesz supermajorities proved content-neutral in the end, converting the challenger's 53 percent of votes into 71 percent of seats. A caution before the parallel comforts us too much: Hungary's exit ran through a parliamentary system, where a single

national vote replaces a whole government. The U.S. presidential architecture this paper describes doesn't have an equivalent path. One additional caution as well: Fidesz now holds unilateral constitution-amending power and the intact machinery of the state, so whether April was a restoration or a change of tenant will be a question to answer in the coming years.

Regarding the V-Dem episodes data, it reinforces the point from the other side: most regime-transformation episodes end without a regime transition at all.¹⁰⁰ The modal trajectory this model predicts, then, is neither collapse nor recovery but a contested slide toward — and a contested resistance against — a competitive-authoritarian equilibrium, with C14 (constituency manufacture) as the stabilization mechanism to watch: once the new arrangement enlists its own beneficiaries, the same protective inertia that once defended democratic institutions begins defending their replacement. That V-Dem's own 2026 report (published just a month before Hungary's election) finds ten nations, including Brazil and Poland, also currently *reversing* autocratization, with sustained mass mobilization as their common denominator, defines the counter-trajectory.⁹⁰

Falsifiability Criteria

A criterion is only useful if it tests for something the model actually predicts. If that sounds too obvious, I think it is remarkably easy to violate. The tempting criterion here — clean elections, cleanly certified, losers conceding — tests for a mechanism this paper has already said we can't expect. The reason runs deeper than the definitional question we've already flagged. Whatever the 2025 record does to Bermeo's incrementalism — and the conclusion argues it does real damage — the criterion problem survives on Levitsky and Way's ground alone: competitive authoritarianism is defined by a *tilted field*, not a stolen count, and that property doesn't depend on how fast the tilting happened. Hungary, the parallel we keep returning to, administers elections whose counts nobody seriously disputes — including, as of April 2026, a count that ended the regime administering it. The absence of a stolen count is what 'competitive authoritarianism' *looks like*.

The criteria below are therefore built to separate recovery from degraded equilibrium — not collapse from normalcy, which is not the distinction this model is drawing.

So...the model should be substantially revised or abandoned if we observe:

(a) Turnover under forbearance. An opposition wins national power and is permitted to exercise it, in circumstances where the incumbent coalition held the instruments to obstruct — emergency authority, litigation, administration of the count, federal force — and declined to use them. Not “the election was clean,” which is compatible with everything described here, but “the tools were there and went unused.” That would suggest the guardrails are self-enforcing in Weingast's sense after all,¹⁰¹ and that A2 has been badly mis-weighted. Hungary, in April of this year, supplied a live calibration of this criterion — and a reason to refine its wording. The count was administered and honored, the concession came on election night, and the transfer completed within a month; none of the post-electoral instruments were engaged. But the pre-electoral instruments — captured media, engineered districts, state resources —

were deployed in full, *and lost anyway*; forbearance at the count says nothing about the field before it. What the margin means for this criterion — and why it turned out to test less than it first appeared to — is taken up where the case is examined at greater length, among the weakening observations above. Restated with that limit in view, the criterion is turnover under forbearance *at close margins* — which is precisely what Hungary, by winning really big, didn't test.

(b) Recovery through a quiet Layer E. V-Dem, Freedom House, and EIU scores recovering substantially toward their 2016 baselines *while the counter-pressure channels sit observably idle* — litigation volumes ordinary, protest participation unremarkable, state attorneys general uncoordinated, Congress inert. This is the criterion the model is most tempted to fudge about, so let me shut the exit now. If the scores recover and Layer E is visibly working, that *confirms* the model, and I will say so rather than claim vindication from both directions. If they recover while Layer E is quiet, then the erosion was administration-specific, the vulnerabilities were not load-bearing, and this paper is a description of just one presidency with a system's window dressing.

(c) Congressional reassertion against a same-party executive. Recovery of appropriations and war powers from a president of the majority's own party. D4 says this will not happen. If it happens, D4 is wrong, and so is a great deal that rests on it.

(d) Symmetric restoration. If institutional expertise, professional norms, and bureaucratic autonomy restore at roughly the rate statutes do — if a hollowed agency staffs back up to competence on the timescale of a re-enacted law — then the hysteresis argument in the conclusion is wrong, and with it the distinction between tacit and codified assets on which the reform priorities depend.

One concession we can't ignore. By this model's own signature, a systemic claim (rather than a claim about a leader) requires erosion that persists or deepens *across administrations of both parties*. That has not yet been observed. With one exception and one echo — legislative capacity decline (A13), whose forty-year, both-party evidence is the one cross-partisan trend line in the network; and Freedom House's two-decade, twelve-point U.S. decline, which that organization itself attributes to administrations of both parties — nearly every piece of evidence assembled in these pages concerns one party and one administration. So it has to be said without equivocation: **on its own criterion, the systemic thesis of this paper is not yet supported.** What is supported is narrower and still worth the trouble — that vulnerabilities exist, that they were available, and that they were used. Whether they constitute a system or a weapon that one movement happened to disproportionately utilize is a question the next decade answers. Though clearly, I have a view on that.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a weighted, five-layer systems model of democratic erosion in the United States: primary vulnerabilities that are exploited; cascades that become causes; levers that accelerate; outcomes that feed back; and counter-pressures that push against the whole.

The 2025–2026 evidence transformed this from a largely predictive framework into a partially measured one: the United States has now been formally reclassified by the world’s largest democracy-measurement project, at a speed that project calls unprecedented, even as its institutions demonstrate more resistance than anything prior we can compare it to.

The inclination, surveying this network, is to assert the destabilizing loops are simply *faster* — executive action moves in days, correction in years. *But the record will not support that*, and we need to be clear about why, because the true version is stranger and more useful.

The correction was not slow. A federal district court universally enjoined the birthright-citizenship order within two weeks of filing. Between late January and late June of 2025, courts issued thirty-four nationwide injunctions — against eighty-six across the *entire* first term, twenty-eight under the previous administration, twelve under the one before that.¹⁰² The balancing loop’s detection-and-response stage was firing at several times its historical rate. Whatever is failing, it’s not our institutional reflexes.

Again, what differs is not the speed of the loops but the *shape of time inside them*. The reinforcing loop completes when the act is done — the funds impounded, the workforce separated, the data deleted, the office closed. The balancing loop completes only at finality: restraining order, then preliminary injunction, then appeal, then certiorari, and only the last of these binds. The destabilizing work happens in the gap between response and resolution — and in June 2025 the Supreme Court widened that gap by law, holding in *Trump v. CASA* that universal injunctions likely exceed the equitable authority Congress conferred on the federal courts, so that relief now assembles class by class and state by state where a single order once sufficed.⁷⁵

And beneath that asymmetry sits a second one, which this paper adopts as its most exposed hypothesis rather than a settled finding. Some of what is destroyed restores at the speed of legislation: a statute repealed is a statute re-enactable, a treaty exited is a treaty rejoinable — the Paris agreement can be left in a year and rejoined in thirty days. But some of what is destroyed was never written down. Carpenter’s account of how agencies acquire autonomy — middle-tier officials building reputations across diverse coalitions over decades — is an account of an asset no statute can re-enact, because it was not made of law in the first place.¹⁰³ The hypothesis, then: *codified* assets restore roughly as fast as they were destroyed; *tacit and relational* assets — expertise, institutional memory, professional norms, earned trust — restore slowly or not at all. We might call this institutional hysteresis: the path back in is not simply the path out in reverse.

That said, the strongest evidence in the retrenchment literature appears to run *against* this claim. Pierson showed that dismantling entrenched programs is often harder than building them — constituencies defend what benefits them, which is why the welfare state survived Reagan and Thatcher and why the 2017 repeal of the Affordable Care Act failed against unified government.¹⁰⁴ Destruction is not generally easier than construction, despite what seems to be popular conceptions to the contrary. So the hypothesis survives only in its narrower version: what is easy to destroy and slow to rebuild is the ***tacit, accreted, constituency-poor asset*** — and 2025’s demolitions concentrated, with what looks like selectivity, on exactly that class.

Whether the concentration is strategy or coincidence, the falsifiability criteria above stake the model on the distinction: if hollowed agencies restaff to competence at the pace of re-enacted statutes, the hypothesis is wrong, and the reform priorities built on it will fall with it.

The model's central claim is therefore neither that collapse is inevitable nor that resilience will suffice. It is that the system degrades in the gap between response and remedy, that some of what it loses there does not come back on any legislative timescale — and that this *shape-of-time* problem, not any single actor or event, is the strategic challenge. One consequence for the paper's own foundations should be noted: Bermeo's definition, adopted in the introduction, describes backsliding as *incremental*, and the third-wave literature treats that incrementalism as the phenomenon's signature.¹⁰⁵ The 2025 record — a one-year decline V-Dem could match only against coups and invasions — strains that description considerably. Either the American case is an outlier to the field's defining assumptions, or the field's assumptions described an era that has ended. This paper cannot settle which.

A Forward Hypothesis: The Attention Economy of Erosion

Everything above treats this network's currency as power. Before turning to reform, I want to offer another hypothesis this paper can't yet test — a companion to the hysteresis argument above: that the scarcer currency may be *attention* itself, and that several of the network's stranger features become more legible if this substitution is made.

The asymmetry appears to be structural. An eroding actor chooses the target and the moment, while the defense must defend everything at all times. While attack can be characterized as a directed act, defense presents as an attention-allocation problem under scarcity. Political systems, as Jones and Baumgartner demonstrated across fifty years of agenda data, behave as serial processors in a parallel world: they attend to one thing at a time while problems arrive all at once.¹⁰⁶ A defender with finite collective attention and thirty simultaneous fronts is not thirty times slower. It is structurally incapable of thirty simultaneous responses...at any speed.

And if that is the operative constraint, three predictions might follow.

First, destruction would proceed in ascending order of salience — the invisible things first, while attention is elsewhere, with each early success cheap because no constituency activates. The 2025 sequence is at least consistent with this: inspectors general, statistical commissioners, and grant-administration offices before anything with a mailing list.

Second, the earliest targets would tend to be the attention-manufacturing institutions themselves — the bodies whose function is to notice things regardless of whether the public is watching. Auditors. Statistical agencies. Disclosure regimes. The press's access. This is the reading under which the firing of a labor-statistics commissioner over a jobs report stops being anomalous — the node this paper's own weighting scheme scores as minor, because its severity is modest and its scope is one office — and becomes something closer to a type specimen. An attention framework and a magnitude framework do disagree about that case, but the disagreement is testable.

The dismantling of USAID may offer the cleanest single instance for evaluation. The agency held nearly every property this hypothesis associates with early targeting: low domestic salience, a beneficiary population that cannot vote, statutory protections on paper, and no organized domestic constituency positioned to activate quickly. If salience and net constituency predict survival better than statute does, USAID is where the prediction is most cleanly testable — one case, fully documented, with every variable legible.

Third, saturation would tend to outperform suppression. A violation that can't achieve focal status can't be punished — this is Weingast's coordination logic in reverse. Citizens punish transgressions they can jointly recognize as transgressions; a scandal environment dense enough that nothing stays focal for the length of a news cycle can disable the punishment without censoring a word.¹⁰¹ Under this framing, C10 — scandal fatigue, weighted a modest 4 in the tables above — may be among the most consequential levers in the network, and the weighting scheme structurally cannot see it, because its severity registers per event while its mechanism operates on the aggregate. Downs observed half a century ago that public attention to any problem traces a cycle — alarmed discovery, then a gradual decline into boredom — regardless of whether the problem was solved;¹⁰⁷ if defensive attention decays on something like that curve while the eroding agenda doesn't, the asymmetry would compound with time.

I'll offer one retrospective observation, because it inverts a lesson this paper drew earlier. The Electoral Count Reform Act — Layer E's clearest case of statutory repair — passed as Division P of a year-end omnibus, in a lame-duck session, essentially without a discrete public vote.⁸⁷ The repair succeeded *in an attention trough*. Meanwhile the reforms that command the most public attention are, reliably, the ones that never pass: high salience appears to convert a solvable problem into a position-taking opportunity, as Arnold's traceability logic predicts.¹⁰⁸ If that generalizes, the two balancing loops in this network may want opposite conditions — mobilization requires attention, codification is poisoned by it — and a reform strategy that fails to distinguish them would spend its scarcest resource on exactly the wrong thing.

Two tests would move all of this from hypothesis toward finding, and both are feasible against public records. The first: code the 2025-26 agency actions by target salience and net constituency at the time of attack, and test whether those variables predict survival better than statutory protection does. The second: compute the full latency distribution — action to filing to restraining order to injunction to finality — across the year's litigation docket, and locate precisely where the time is lost. Neither has been done. For now, this section is a lens only.

Implications for Reform, with Attention in Mind

The obvious move is to rank reforms by weight: attack the heaviest nodes. But this paper's methodological anchor resists that. Meadows' argument about leverage points is that the largest elements of a system are usually the *worst* places to intervene, and that rules, information flows, and goals sit far higher on the list than mass does.¹ To rank reforms by node weight would be to cite her and then do the opposite of what she says — and, worse, to make a leverage claim out of an instrument that measures magnitude without addressing position.

So this list isn't ordered by leverage. I don't know the leverage ordering; establishing that is what the network analysis under Future Research is for. Instead it is ordered by **tractability against coverage** — what could plausibly be done, ranked by how much of the model's stated concern it would touch. Coverage is one of the jobs the weights are licensed to perform, and it is the only one this list asks of them.

One consequence is that I suspect the information-layer nodes are more central to this network than the electoral ones. The electoral reforms lead this list anyway, because they are the ones with a route: commissions, ballot initiatives, and state constitutions are available in a way that platform regulation is not. But that is an argument about what is possible, not about what would work best. If I am right about centrality, this list leads with the second-best thing because the best thing has no door.

Electoral structure (touching A1, C1, C13). Independent redistricting commissions, ranked-choice or top-four primaries, and — where the initiative process exists (E9) — voter-enacted structural reform that incumbent legislatures would never pass. The 2025 redistricting arms race demonstrates the cost of leaving this to unilateral disarmament. That said, Electoral College mitigation runs through either Article V, whose amendment threshold has not been met for structural change in over half a century, or the interstate compact route with its own unresolved legal vulnerabilities — so it belongs on the list as a direction, but not an expectation.

Guardrail codification (touching A2, B6). The Electoral Count Reform Act is proof of concept: norms that failed as norms can be rebuilt as statutes. Emergency-powers reform, impoundment enforcement, inspector-general protection, and enforceable ethics law convert the executive's least-reviewable instruments into litigable ones. Two lessons from this paper's own analysis attach to this. Codification's deeper value is coordinative — a precise written rule creates the unambiguous violation event around which Weingast-style joint punishment can organize;¹⁰¹ a statute without a constituency prepared to punish its violation is a speed bump, which is why this block and the mobilization implication below are one strategy, not two. Interestingly, the ECRA's passage mechanics suggest a tactical corollary with our latest hypothesis in mind: codification succeeds in attention troughs — omnibus vehicles, lame ducks, low-salience windows — so the instinct to attach maximum publicity to guardrail bills may be exactly wrong.

Algorithmic and information reform (touching A9, C9, C10). Platform transparency mandates, amplification audits, and sustained support for local journalism address the newest maximum-weight vulnerability — the one the original erosion literature, written for a broadcast era, largely could not see. If the attention hypothesis is right, this block also addresses C10, and its centrality to the whole network is greater than any weight in these tables records.

Judicial legitimacy (touching A5, D2, D11). Term limits and binding ethics rules for the Supreme Court are less about any ruling than about restoring the court's capacity to function as counter-pressure E1 — which the whole network needs it to be. Compliance (D11) adds a second front: enforcement mechanisms for judicial orders against the executive — inspector-general referral, fee-shifting, personal contempt exposure for officials — are guardrail codification applied to the courts' own output.

Economic and civic foundations (touching A6, A8, B8). Labor protections, antitrust enforcement, and investment in associational life work on generational timescales — which is exactly why they cannot wait.

Restating an implication that moves us in the other direction. Mass mobilization holds a special place in this network, because the popular version of the 3.5% literature states it wrong. The number describes participation at *peak* — and participation at peak is the visible end of a long, mostly invisible process. Organization precedes turnout. Leadership, coalition infrastructure, legal support, communications discipline: these accrete for months or years before the day the crowds are counted, which is why Layer E scored the crowds as partly *symptom* — evidence of a balancing loop already gaining, not a switch that produces the gain (E8). The most succinct formulation, then, is: mobilization is a slow loop with a fast-looking output. What appears in the street in a weekend was built on a timescale closer to the courts' than to executive orders'. This is less comforting than the version in which the people can always move faster than the state — but I think it is more useful, as it relocates the work. If the loop's speed is set by its invisible staging, then the reform priority is not turnout, which arrives late and largely takes care of itself, but the standing infrastructure that makes turnout possible: the organizations that persist between emergencies, hold the coalitions, and keep the capacity warm. By the time a system finds itself waiting for the crowd, the question has already been decided — in the preceding years, when the infrastructure that makes a crowd possible was either being built or wasn't.¹⁰⁹ And the literature specifies what keeps this loop's gain high: scale beyond anything yet assembled, nonviolent discipline maintained under provocation — the evidence is unambiguous that violence on a movement's flank reduces its odds⁹¹ — and a repertoire that extends past demonstration into organized noncooperation. None of these is spontaneous; all are trained, organized capacities that exist only where they were built before they were needed, *which places movement infrastructure alongside statutes and litigation as a reform priority in its own right.*

Lastly, I'd like to reference another project that stands separately from this one, but was influenced by it: ***A Progressive Agenda for Democratic Renewal***, which approaches many of these questions through an admittedly politicized lens, but nevertheless offers what I believe to be tactics and strategies that are both innovative and comprehensive. Currently this can be found in draft form at http://www.tcollinslogan.com/resources/Progressive_Agenda-DRAFT-ALL.pdf.

Future Research

This model provides a framework for empirical testing. Future work should: quantify the network formally, estimating edges from data and testing whether the assigned weights survive centrality analysis; compute the full stage-latency distribution of the 2025–26 litigation record (action → filing → TRO → injunction → finality), locating where time is lost rather than assuming it; run the salience-and-constituency survival test described in the forward-hypothesis section (with USAID as the anchor case); test the hysteresis hypothesis directly against the V-Dem Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset — 680 coded episodes of autocratization and

democratization since 1900, built explicitly to permit asymmetric analysis of decline and recovery rates — asking whether erosion is in fact systematically faster than repair across cases, and controlling for the expert-coding and ceiling-effect artifacts that could manufacture the asymmetry;¹⁰⁰ compare the U.S. trajectory against the ten currently re-democratizing states in that data to identify which counter-pressures actually preceded reversal; test whether the participation thresholds in the civil-resistance data behave as thresholds at all, or as lagging indicators of organizational capacity and elite defection already underway (a distinction with opposite strategic implications); and simulate interventions through agent-based modeling — what happens to the network, for instance, if C1 is eliminated but A9 is not? Two methods are flagged as right-idea-wrong-data for now: critical-slowness analysis of democracy time series would test whether the system's recovery rate from perturbation is lengthening, but the available series (annual V-Dem; quarterly Bright Line Watch since 2017) are too coarse or too short for reliable estimates. My suspicion, offered here as hypothesis only, is that the information-layer nodes will prove more central than the electoral ones. I would be glad to be wrong, because the electoral ones are easier to fix. And a note on where to look first: the low-confidence nodes flagged in the tables (B8, D5, A12, E8, X2, E11) are, by construction, where these priors are most exposed — the places the network estimation is likeliest to revise or embarrass, and therefore the most productive places to begin.

Additionally, the Hungarian transition now underway offers the nearest thing to a natural experiment for the hysteresis hypothesis: a successor with the constitutional numbers to restore codified assets at legislative speed, facing tacit assets — a plural media ecosystem, an independent civil service, earned institutional trust — that no supermajority can re-enact. If codified restoration outpaces tacit restoration there over the coming years, criterion (d) gains a comparative benchmark; if the two move together, the hypothesis loses one of its strongest remaining supports.

A last word on what this framework is for. Whether these factors constitute a system or a weapon one movement disproportionately used is, by this paper's own criterion, a question the next decade answers — and nothing in these pages should be read as pre-empting it. But the work also shouldn't wait on the verdict. The vulnerabilities are *demonstrated*; they were available, and they were used; and every reform canvassed above addresses something real. What a feedback model adds — weighted, falsifiable, and clear about its own counter-currents — is not a settled claim that a system exists, but a discipline of asking where one would show itself, and what would disrupt it. Moving from cataloguing decline to interrogating it is, in the end, the entire purpose of a systems approach — and the more productive questions were always the point.

Appendix A: Edge List

A network is its edges; the weights orient, but the edges argue. The table below states every directed relationship asserted anywhere in this paper — in the “Feeds Back Into,” “Dampens,” and “Stage Amplified” columns, and in the figures. Sign **R** marks reinforcing (erosive) feedback; **B** marks balancing. The *basis* column states the grounds on which the edge is drawn: **doc** (documented sequence in the cited evidence), **mech** (mechanism argued in the text), or **def** (definitional — the target is constructed partly from the source). Edges marked *mech* are the ones most open to challenge, and challenging them is the intended use of this table.

#	Source	Target	Sign	Basis
1	A1	C1	R	def — gerrymandering operates on the electoral structure
2	A3	D3	R	def — identity polarization is measured polarization deepened
3	A4	A9	R	mech — fragmentation supplies the audiences algorithms sort
4	A6	C3	R	mech — concentrated wealth funds the spending channel
5	A7	C2	R	doc — state administration enacted the restrictions
6	A8	E8	B(weakens)	mech — thinned associational life lowers mobilization capacity
7	A9	C9	R	doc — amplification is the distribution system for disinformation
8	A9	A3	R	doc — platform research ties amplification to affective polarization
9	A12	B5	R	doc — status-threat findings on 2016 mobilization (contested; see A12)
10	A13	D4	R	mech — capacity loss precedes constraint collapse
11	A14	B6	R	mech — concentrated executive power invites legal-instrument abuse
12	X1	B4	R	doc — Senate reports on operations targeting trust
13	X1	A9	R	doc — operations exploit amplification
14	B1	B2	R	mech — tolerated violations lower the cost of capture
15	B2	D9	R	doc — purges produced departures
16	B4	B5	R	mech — distrust supplies populist recruits
17	B5	C11	R	def — scapegoating is populism’s method
18	B5	C13	R	doc — primary electorates reward escalation
19	B6	D4	R	doc — unreviewed instruments displaced legislation
20	B6	E1	R(attack)	doc — legal instruments turned on courts’ remedies (CASA)
21	B7	E11	R(attack)	mech — co-optation pressures the professional ethic
22	B8	B5	R	doc/contested — precarity-populism link (see B8 commentary)
23	C1	A1	R	def — lever intensifies its stage

#	Source	Target	Sign	Basis
24	C4	B4	R	mech — reality denial corrodes trust
25	C5	D5	R	doc — validated violence normalizes it
26	C6	A5	R	doc — capture deepened politicization
27	C8	B3	R	def — starve-the-beast is sabotage's method
28	C9	D1	R	doc — Dominion record ties broadcast falsehood to election distrust
29	C10	E8	R(attack)	mech — fatigue suppresses the mobilization trigger (attention hypothesis)
30	C12	B5	R	def — personality cult organizes the movement
31	C13	A3	R	mech — primary selection hardens polarization
32	C14	D-layer stability	R	mech — beneficiaries defend the eroded arrangement (see obs. 5)
33	D1	A2	R	mech — distrust lowers subversion's cost
34	D1	B1	R	mech — stolen-election belief licenses violation
35	D2	A5	R	doc — legitimacy loss deepens politicization
36	D3	A3	R	def — the loop that makes polarization self-sustaining
37	D4	A2	R	mech — abdication removes the enforcement backstop
38	D4	B6	R	doc — the vacuum executive instruments filled
39	D5	B1	R	mech — normalized extremism resets the baseline
40	D7	A4	R	doc — settlements and reprisals thinned the press
41	D8	A7	R	doc — partisan administration deepens asymmetry
42	D9	B2	R	doc — expertise out, loyalty in
43	D10	A7	R	doc — confrontation entrenches both sides
44	D11	B6	R	mech — unpunished non-compliance is precedent
45	D11	E1	R(attack)	mech — discretionary compliance lowers judicial gain
46	E1	B6	B	doc — injunctions halted instruments
47	E1	B2	B	doc — reinstatements reversed purges
48	E2	A2	B	doc — ECRA closed the certification loophole
49	E3	B5	B	doc — 2022/2025 defeats punished escalation
50	E3	D1	B	mech — administered-by-losers elections rebuild trust
51	E4	C1	B	doc — state courts struck maps
52	E5	B7	B	doc — state litigation contested deployments
53	E5	B3	B	doc — state redundancy absorbed sabotage
54	E6	C9	B	doc — defamation liability priced falsehood
55	E6	D7	B	mech — nonprofit models offset decline
56	E7	B2	B	doc — disclosures and suits slowed purges
57	E8	B6	B	doc — V-Dem's cross-national mobilization finding
58	E8	D5	B	mech — mass nonviolence delegitimizes violence
59	E9	C1	B	doc — commissions enacted by initiative

#	Source	Target	Sign	Basis
60	E9	A1	B(partial)	mech — structural repair where the channel exists
61	E10	B3	B	doc — market discipline constrained tariff sabotage
62	E10	B6	B	doc — business litigation reached the Court
63	E11	B7	B	doc — refused and narrowed directives
64	X2	B3/B6	B	doc — retaliation calculus and allied frameworks
65	X2	D7	B(weak)	mech — international coverage sustains stories

Edges 6, 20, 21, 29, 32, and 45 deserve particular attention: they are the network's *cross-valence* edges — erosive forces attacking balancing loops and balancing capacity weakened from within — and they are where this model's claim to be describing a system, rather than just a list, actually lives.

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- ¹ Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008); on leverage points specifically, Meadows, “Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System” (Sustainability Institute, 1999).
- ² Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19.
- ³ Edward B. Foley, *Ballot Battles: The History of Disputed Elections in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2016).
- ⁴ Brennan Center for Justice, “Extreme Maps” and subsequent redistricting analyses of the 2021–22 cycle, brennancenter.org.
- ⁵ Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW), conflict-of-interest and emoluments tracking reports, 2017–2021, citizensforethics.org.
- ⁶ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026: The Growing Shadow of Autocracy* (March 2026), and the accompanying United States country report, freedomhouse.org. The U.S. score fell from 84 to 81 — the sharpest single-year decline among countries rated Free (matched only by Bulgaria), and its lowest score since the survey adopted the 100-point scale in 2002 — citing escalating assertions of unilateral executive authority (including more than 220 executive orders in 2025 and the first pocket rescission in roughly fifty years), a multiyear rise in threats and reprisals for political speech, weakened anticorruption safeguards and enforcement, and congressional dysfunction culminating in the longest government shutdown in U.S. history. Freedom House attributes the cumulative two-decade, 12-point U.S. decline to administrations of both parties. Notably, the U.S. remains classified Free.
- ⁷ Human Rights Watch, *World Report* chapters on Brazil, 2020–2021, hrw.org.
- ⁸ Pew Research Center, “As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System” (August 9, 2022), pewresearch.org.
- ⁹ Nathan P. Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason, *Radical American Partisanship* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).
- ¹⁰ Sean J. Westwood, Justin Grimmer, Matthew Tyler, and Clayton Nall, “Current Research Overstates American Support for Political Violence,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119, no. 12 (2022): survey estimates of support for partisan violence fall dramatically once inattentive and disengaged respondents are accounted for.
- ¹¹ Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2021).
- ¹² Penelope Muse Abernathy, “News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?” (UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media, 2020), usnewsdeserts.com. The figure of roughly 2,100 papers lost between 2004 and 2020 includes both outright closures and mergers.
- ¹³ *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529 (2013); *Citizens United v. FEC*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010); *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, 597 U.S. 215 (2022).
- ¹⁴ Gallup, Supreme Court job-approval trend data, 2021–2023, gallup.com. Approval reached a then-record low of approximately 40% in September 2021 and remained near that level thereafter. (Figure characterized from Gallup’s published trend; readers should consult the current series.)
- ¹⁵ European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), “Opinion on the Act on the Constitutional Tribunal” (Poland), 2016, venice.coe.int.
- ¹⁶ Federal Reserve Board, Distributional Financial Accounts, 2024 releases, federalreserve.gov. The top 1% of households held roughly 31% of aggregate household net worth.
- ¹⁷ Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (Doubleday, 2016).
- ¹⁸ Karen Dawisha, *Putin’s Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (Simon & Schuster, 2014).
- ¹⁹ Brennan Center for Justice, “Georgia’s SB 202” analyses, 2021, brennancenter.org.
- ²⁰ Brennan Center for Justice, “Voting Laws Roundup” series, 2021–2023, brennancenter.org. In 2021, nineteen states enacted 34 laws restricting voting access.
- ²¹ Kim Lane Scheppele, “The Rule of Law and the Frankenstate: Why Governance Checklists Do Not Work,” *Governance* 26, no. 4 (2013): 559–562; on the Hungarian patronage economy and state-media campaigns, Scheppele, “Autocratic Legalism” (note above).
- ²² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Union Members Summary,” annual releases, bls.gov.

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- ²³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000).
- ²⁴ Jonathan Haidt and Tobias Rose-Stockwell, “The Dark Psychology of Social Networks,” *The Atlantic* (December 2019); see also the internal platform research disclosed in the 2021 “Facebook Files” reporting (*Wall Street Journal*, 2021).
- ²⁵ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar*, A/HRC/39/64 (2018); BSR, *Human Rights Impact Assessment: Facebook in Myanmar* (commissioned by Meta, 2018); on the 2021 coup period, Human Rights Watch reporting, hrw.org.
- ²⁶ Diana C. Mutz, “Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 19 (2018): E4330–E4339.
- ²⁷ Stephen L. Morgan, “Status Threat, Material Interests, and the 2016 Presidential Vote,” *Socius* 4 (2018): a reanalysis arguing Mutz’s data do not support the priority of status threat over material interests.
- ²⁸ Congress.gov legislative statistics: the 118th Congress (2023–24) enacted 274 public laws, against 362 in the 117th (2021–22); the prior post-WWII low was 283, in the 112th (2011–12). On the substantive-versus-ceremonial adjustment: Lindsey Cormack and William Bianco, “Congressional Lawmaking,” *Everything Policy* (2026), analyzing Library of Congress data 1987–2024 — total enactments fell from 713 (100th) to 276 (118th), but excluding ceremonial, commemorative, technical, and appropriations measures the decline runs from 388 to 164. (Counts of 274 vs. 276 reflect minor differences in counting convention across sources.)
- ²⁹ NOTUS, “‘Postal-Naming Destruction’: The Least Controversial Thing Congress Does Is Becoming Controversial” (December 2024): postal-naming legislation was on track to account for more than a third of all laws enacted by the 118th Congress — not because naming bills increased, but because other legislating declined.
- ³⁰ Juan J. Linz, “The Perils of Presidentialism,” *Journal of Democracy* 1, no. 1 (1990): 51–69.
- ³¹ U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election*, vols. 1–5 (2019–2020).
- ³² Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President* (Oxford University Press, 2018).
- ³³ Presidential clemency proclamation of January 20, 2025, covering more than 1,500 people convicted in connection with the January 6th attack; Freedom House, “United States: Clemency Actions Cast Shadow over Democracy on Inauguration Day” (January 21, 2025), freedomhouse.org; PRRI, “Political Violence in America: Public Perceptions, Polarization, and Accountability” (January 2026), prri.org (68% of Americans oppose the pardons). On the two impeachment acquittals: 166 Cong. Rec. (Feb. 5, 2020); 167 Cong. Rec. (Feb. 13, 2021).
- ³⁴ Nadja Popovich, Livia Albeck-Ripka, and Kendra Pierre-Louis, “The Trump Administration Is Reversing 100 Environmental Rules,” *The New York Times* (2020); Devlin Barrett, “Barr’s DOJ Intervened in Cases Involving Trump Associates,” *The Washington Post* (2020); Isaac Arnsdorf, “Postal Service Changes Slow Mail, Alarming Voters,” *ProPublica* (2020).
- ³⁵ For the 2025 chronology of inspector-general removals, agency closures (including USAID), and civil-service reductions, see Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026*; V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2026*; and “‘This Is a Coup’: Trump and Musk’s Purge Is Cutting More Than Costs, Say Experts,” *The Guardian* (February 17, 2025).
- ³⁶ The January 24, 2025 removals of at least 17 inspectors general defied the Securing Inspector General Independence Act of 2022 (enacted in the FY2023 NDAA), which requires 30 days’ advance written notice to Congress with “substantive rationale, including detailed and case-specific reasons”; no notice or rationale was provided. Hannibal “Mike” Ware, chair of the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, objected in writing on January 24 that the actions were not “legally sufficient”; Senators Grassley and Durbin jointly demanded the statutory rationale on January 28; the New York City Bar Association concluded the removals were “illegal and invalid.” For the strongest contrary view — that the notice requirement is itself unconstitutional even though the replacement restrictions are not — see Jack Goldsmith, “Trump Fired 17 Inspectors General — Was It Legal?” *Lawfare* (January 27, 2025).
- ³⁷ Sarah Kliff, “How the Trump Administration Sabotaged Obamacare,” *Vox* (2018), vox.com.
- ³⁸ Lisa Friedman, “Trump Will Withdraw U.S. from Paris Climate Agreement,” *The New York Times* (2017); the withdrawal was repeated by executive order in January 2025.
- ³⁹ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2025* (2026). The U.S. score fell from 7.85 to 7.65 — its lowest since the index began in 2006 — dropping it six places to 34th and deeper into the “flawed

democracy” category it has occupied since 2016, with the decline attributed mainly to worsening scores for the functioning of government and civil liberties. The report’s global finding makes the U.S. case starker, not softer: EIU’s 2025 headline was that democracy *stabilized* worldwide after eight years of decline, with the United States called out as “one glaring exception.”

⁴⁰ Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2024,” trend series, [pewresearch.org](https://www.pewresearch.org).

⁴¹ Pew Research Center, “Multiple Indicators Show a Decline in the Health of America’s Democracy in 2025” (April 15, 2026), [pewresearch.org](https://www.pewresearch.org), including the March 2026 survey finding that 68% of Americans say U.S. democracy used to be a good example but has not been in recent years.

⁴² Peter Baker, “Trump Declares National Emergency at Border to Build Wall,” *The New York Times* (2019).

⁴³ V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2026* (notes 70 and 75); on the tariff emergency powers, *Learning Resources v. Trump* and related IEEPA litigation, 2025–26; on wartime deportation authority, Amanda Taub, “‘This Is Worse’: Trump’s Judicial Defiance Veers Beyond the Autocrat Playbook,” *The New York Times* (March 20, 2025).

⁴⁴ GAO Impoundment Control Act violation determinations in 2025: Federal Highway Administration EV-charger funds (May); Institute of Museum and Library Services (June); Head Start (July 23); Department of Energy Renew America’s Schools (July 31); NIH grant funding; and FEMA food, shelter, and housing programs (September) — the sixth finding of the year, with Comptroller General Gene Dodaro testifying in April that 39 impoundment investigations were pending. In August 2025 a divided D.C. Circuit panel held that only GAO may sue to enforce the Act (Roll Call, August 13, 2025). On the August 2025 pocket rescission — the first in roughly fifty years — see Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026*, United States country report.

⁴⁵ Katie Benner, “Trump Pressured Justice Dept. to Investigate His Rivals,” *The New York Times* (2021).

⁴⁶ On the 2025 indictments of former FBI Director James Comey and New York Attorney General Letitia James following the President’s public demands, see Associated Press and Reuters reporting, September–October 2025, and Freedom House’s 2026 findings on “reprisals for political speech”; on the Los Angeles National Guard and Marine deployments of June 2025 and subsequent city deployments, see Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2025*, and *The Guardian* (June 2025).

⁴⁷ Federal Reserve Board, *Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2024* (May 2025), [federalreserve.gov](https://www.federalreserve.gov): 63% of adults would cover a hypothetical \$400 emergency expense exclusively with cash or its equivalent; 37% would not, and 13% could not pay by any means.

⁴⁸ David Daley, *Ratf**ked: The True Story Behind the Secret Plan to Steal America’s Democracy* (Liveright, 2016). REDMAP’s architects publicly described the strategy’s aims, which is why intent language is warranted here.

⁴⁹ Adam Liptak, “How Merrick Garland’s Nomination Was Blocked,” *The New York Times* (2016); the Senate majority leader publicly stated the rationale.

⁵⁰ On the 2025 Texas mid-decade congressional redistricting and California’s responsive Proposition 50 (approved November 2025), see Associated Press election reporting, November 2025, and Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2025* (“efforts to redraw electoral boundaries”).

⁵¹ Kim Lane Scheppele, “Autocratic Legalism,” *University of Chicago Law Review* 85, no. 2 (2018): 545–584.

⁵² Brian Winter, “Bolsonaro’s Election Gambit,” *Americas Quarterly* (2022). Bolsonaro’s party petitioned to invalidate ballots cast on certain older-model electronic voting machines; the electoral court rejected the petition and fined the party.

⁵³ *Citizens United v. FEC*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010).

⁵⁴ UK Electoral Commission, “Vote Leave fined and referred to the police for breaking electoral law” (July 2018), [electoralcommission.org.uk](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk): the Commission found Vote Leave exceeded its spending limit and channeled funds through the BeLeave campaign; the Commission separately investigated Leave.EU’s funding and reporting.

⁵⁵ Brian Stelter, *Hoax: Donald Trump, Fox News, and the Dangerous Distortion of Truth* (Atria Books, 2020).

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch, “Russia: ‘Foreign Agents’ Law” reporting, 2021, [hrw.org](https://www.hrw.org).

⁵⁷ Philip Bump, “Trump’s ‘Stand Back and Stand By’ Remark,” *The Washington Post* (2020).

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch, “‘Shoot the Traitors’: Discrimination Against Muslims Under India’s New Citizenship Policy” (2020), [hrw.org](https://www.hrw.org).

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- ⁵⁹ Venice Commission, “Opinion on the Act on the Supreme Court” (Poland), 2017, [venice.coe.int](https://www.venice.coe.int). The 2017–18 laws lowered the mandatory retirement age to force turnover of sitting justices; the Court of Justice of the EU subsequently ordered the measure suspended.
- ⁶⁰ Eric Lipton, “E.P.A. Chief Scott Pruitt’s Calendar: A Lobbyist’s Dream,” *The New York Times* (2018).
- ⁶¹ Dom Phillips, reporting on Bolsonaro-era environmental governance, *The Guardian* (2019–2021).
- ⁶² Russell Berman, “Trump’s Budget Cuts Target Science, Diplomacy,” *The Atlantic* (2017).
- ⁶³ Mark Blyth, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (Oxford University Press, 2013).
- ⁶⁴ *Dominion Voting Systems v. Fox News Network*, settled April 2023 for \$787.5 million, Delaware Superior Court; widely reported.
- ⁶⁵ The Washington Post Fact Checker, “Trump’s False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 Over 4 Years” (January 2021), [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com) — cited here for the cadence and density of the record rather than as a measure of elite toleration, which B1 documents separately.
- ⁶⁶ Dara Lind, “Trump’s Immigration Policies, Explained,” *Vox* (2020), [vox.com](https://www.vox.com); on the 2025 campaign, see Taub, “This Is Worse” (note above) and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026*.
- ⁶⁷ “Transcript: Donald Trump’s Speech at the Republican National Convention,” *The New York Times* (July 2016).
- ⁶⁸ On loyalty vetting as the organizing principle of second-term staffing, see Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026*, and the 2025 civil-service chronology at note 36.
- ⁶⁹ Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (Spiegel & Grau, 2009).
- ⁷⁰ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Crown, 2018), chs. 1–2, on party gatekeeping as democracy’s first line of defense and the post-1968 McGovern–Fraser reforms as its removal.
- ⁷¹ Unite America Institute, “The Primary Problem” (2021), uniteamerica.org.
- ⁷² Marina Nord, Ana Good God, and Staffan I. Lindberg, *Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling the Democratic Era?* (V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg, March 2026), v-dem.net: the United States was reclassified from liberal democracy to electoral democracy for the first time in more than fifty years; its liberal-democracy score fell from 0.75 to 0.57 in one year, dropping it from roughly 24th to 51st among 179 countries; “the scale and speed of autocratization under the Trump administration are unprecedented in modern times,” exceeding the first-year pace of Orbán, Modi, and Erdoğan; and the 2026 midterms are identified as “a critical test.”
- ⁷³ Monmouth University Polling Institute trend data, 2020–2024, monmouth.edu; multiple national surveys (CNN, Washington Post–University of Maryland) found comparable majorities of Republican voters describing the 2020 result as illegitimate throughout the period.
- ⁷⁴ *Trump v. United States*, 603 U.S. 593 (2024): absolute immunity for acts within the president’s core constitutional powers and presumptive immunity for other official acts.
- ⁷⁵ *Trump v. CASA, Inc.*, 606 U.S. 831 (2025), decided June 27, 2025 (6–3, Barrett, J.): universal injunctions likely exceed the equitable authority Congress granted federal courts under the Judiciary Act of 1789. The holding is statutory rather than constitutional; the Court did not reach the merits of the birthright-citizenship order, and left open universal relief where necessary to afford complete relief to parties, along with class-action and state-plaintiff routes. On the emergency docket record, SCOTUSblog, “Looking Back at 2025: The Supreme Court and the Trump Administration” (January 2026): the Court sided with the administration in the large majority of at least 24 emergency-docket rulings.
- ⁷⁶ Nathaniel Rakich, “Election Deniers Are Still Winning GOP Primaries,” *FiveThirtyEight* (2022), fivethirtyeight.com.
- ⁷⁷ V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2026*: the legislative-constraints measure was “the worst affected” component of U.S. democracy, “losing one third of its value in 2025 and reaching its lowest level in over 100 years”; the report concludes Congress effectively ceded the power of the purse, with major 2025 policy set by executive order.
- ⁷⁸ David L. Nevins, “Trump Administration Faces Record 530 Lawsuits in 2025 — Far Exceeding Biden, Obama, and Bush,” *The Fulcrum* (November 19, 2025), with the first-hundred-days comparison (186 actions, against fewer than 50 under Biden and roughly 30 under Obama) from *The Fulcrum*’s April 22, 2025 analysis. Counting methodology matters: the Just Security Litigation Tracker and Lawfare consolidate related filings (Lawfare counted 253 active cases at year-end by that method), so tallies legitimately range from ~250 to 530 depending on rules. On the Supreme Court’s emergency docket in 2025, SCOTUSblog, “Looking Back at 2025” (January 2026): the Court sided with the administration in the large majority of at least 24 emergency rulings.

⁷⁹ PRRI, *Threats to American Democracy Ahead of an Unprecedented Presidential Election* (2023 American Values Survey, October 2023), prri.org: 33% of Republicans, 22% of independents, and 13% of Democrats agreed that “true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.”

⁸⁰ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2025* (“attempts to muzzle the media”); Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026* (“a multiyear rise in threats and reprisals for political speech”); on the 2025 network settlements of presidential litigation and regulatory pressure on broadcasters, CNN, “US Downgraded in Democracy Index as Press Freedom Concerns Grow” (March 2026).

⁸¹ On 2025 civil-service departures via deferred resignation, reductions in force, and terminations, see *Trump v. American Federation of Government Employees* (Supreme Court stay permitting large-scale RIF planning, 2025, per SCOTUSblog’s year-end review); on the August 2025 removal of the Commissioner of Labor Statistics following an unfavorable employment report, see Associated Press and Reuters reporting, August 2025; umbrella documentation in V-Dem, *Democracy Report 2026*, and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026*.

⁸² State litigation over 2025 National Guard federalization and deployment (California, Oregon, Illinois, among others) is summarized in The Fulcrum’s 2025 litigation review and reflected in Bright Line Watch’s early-2026 finding that domestic deployments had ended (note 96).

⁸³ On slow-walked and contested compliance with 2025 injunctions, including removals executed before orders issued, see Taub, “This Is Worse” (note 43), and the contempt and enforcement motions catalogued in the Just Security Litigation Tracker. The anchor episode is *Abrego Garcia v. Noem* (D. Md. 2025): after the Supreme Court ordered the government to facilitate the return of a man deported in defiance of an existing court order, Judge Paula Xinis found a “willful and bad faith refusal” to comply with the court’s orders and discovery obligations and opened the path to contempt proceedings — the clearest documented instance of executive noncompliance moving from the margins toward the center. See Talking Points Memo (April 22, 2025) and CNN (June 8, 2025) on the contempt posture.

⁸⁴ *Financial Times* comparative analysis (2026) using a 30-point, ten-domain index: first-year U.S. backsliding under the second Trump term exceeded the equivalent periods of Orbán, Chávez, Putin, and Erdoğan, while U.S. institutions proved more resistant to backsliding than in those countries.

⁸⁵ More than sixty post-2020 election challenges were rejected by state and federal courts, including judges appointed by the incumbent; comprehensively documented in the public record of *Texas v. Pennsylvania* and related litigation summaries.

⁸⁶ *Moore v. Harper*, 600 U.S. 1 (2023).

⁸⁷ Electoral Count Reform and Presidential Transition Improvement Act, Pub. L. 117-328, Div. P (2022) — enacted as a division of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, in the December 2022 lame-duck session.

⁸⁸ Associated Press and national election-result reporting, November 2022: election-denying candidates for governor and secretary of state were defeated in effectively every battleground state contest for offices with authority over election administration.

⁸⁹ Associated Press election results, November 2025: opposition-party victories in the Virginia and New Jersey governorships, among others.

⁹⁰ V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2026*: sustained mass mobilization is identified as the most common factor among the ten countries currently reversing autocratization, including Brazil and Poland.

⁹¹ Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), analyzing the NAVCO dataset of maximalist campaigns, 1900–2006; success defined as full achievement of stated goals within one year of peak mobilization, as a direct result of the campaign.

⁹² “No Kings” demonstrations of June 14, 2025, October 18, 2025, and March 28, 2026. June: organizers estimated ~5 million across ~2,100 locations; the Crowd Counting Consortium’s independent estimate is 2–4.8 million (Jeremy Pressman, CCC, as reported by USA Today, October 2025). October: organizers estimated nearly 7 million across ~2,700 sites (Axios, October 18, 2025); an independent estimate by G. Elliott Morris and The Xylom placed participation at 5–6.5 million. March 2026: organizer estimates of ~8 million across ~3,300 sites (Britannica; PBS NewsHour, March 2026). Organizer and independent counts diverge and are reported here side by side; even the conservative estimates place these among the largest protest mobilizations in U.S. history.

⁹³ On refused, narrowed, or legally reviewed directives during the 2025 domestic deployments, and on retired-officer and military-bar statements, see the deployment litigation record at note 80. This node is

scored low precisely because systematic evidence does not yet exist; the deployment litigation, and any pattern of narrowed or refused orders within it, is the record to watch, and the weight should be revised in either direction as that record develops.

⁹⁴ Erica Chenoweth, “Questions, Answers, and Some Cautionary Updates Regarding the 3.5% Rule,” Carr Center Discussion Paper 2020-005 (Harvard Kennedy School, 2020): the figure is “descriptive... not necessarily prescriptive”; Bahrain 2011–14 failed despite exceeding 6% peak participation; organization, momentum, strategic leadership, and sustainability are “as important as large-scale participation... and are often precursors to achieving 3.5% participation.” On declining efficacy and regime adaptation: Chenoweth, *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2021), documenting the fall in nonviolent campaign success rates from roughly 65% in the 1990s to below 34% since 2010. On armed flanks: Chenoweth’s subsequent findings that organized armed violence reduces otherwise-nonviolent movements’ prospects, while unarmed collective violence has more ambiguous effects.

⁹⁵ Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (Yale University Press, 2017).

⁹⁶ Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 3 vols. (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973): the consent theory of power (vol. 1, *Power and Struggle*) and the catalogue of 198 methods across three classes — protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention (vol. 2, *The Methods of Nonviolent Action*).

⁹⁷ PRRI, *Political Violence in America: Public Perceptions, Polarization, and Accountability* (January 2026, fielded December 2025; N=5,547), prri.org: Republican agreement with the “patriots may have to resort to violence” item stood at 19% in December 2025, down from 29% in September 2024, having ranged from 27% to a high of 35% (August 2021) during the Biden presidency; Democratic agreement rose to 17%. The same survey found the share of Americans who completely disagree with the item at 41% — the lowest in the series’ fifteen askings since March 2021 (previous low: 49%, September 2025). See also PolitiFact, “Are Democrats growing more accepting of political violence?” (May 2026).

⁹⁸ Bright Line Watch, expert survey report (March 2026), brightlinewatch.org: roughly 600 political scientists rated U.S. democracy at 57 on a 0–100 scale, up from 53 in April 2025 but far below the 67 recorded in December 2024 and the 60–70 band that held through the first Trump term and the Biden years — “stabilized,” in the report’s words, at lower levels than any period since the series began in 2017. The recovery from the April low is attributed by the surveyed experts to improved judicial checks on the executive (including the tariff litigation) and the end of domestic military deployments. Secondary account: Perry Bacon, *The New Republic* (March 24, 2026).

⁹⁹ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁰⁰ Seraphine F. Maerz, Amanda B. Edgell, Matthew C. Wilson, Sebastian Hellmeier, and Staffan I. Lindberg, “Episodes of Regime Transformation,” *Journal of Peace Research* 61, no. 6 (2024): 680 episodes coded 1900–2019, with onset and termination dates and magnitudes, constructed to avoid assumptions of symmetric effects between democratization and autocratization; roughly 32% of episodes culminate in a regime transition. Dataset: github.com/vdeminstitute/ERT.

¹⁰¹ Barry R. Weingast, “The Political Foundations of Democracy and the Rule of Law,” *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 2 (1997): 245–263: constitutional limits bind when they serve as focal points enabling citizens to coordinate joint punishment of transgressions; constitutional precision is a prerequisite for the generalized consensus such coordination requires.

¹⁰² Congressional Research Service, *Nationwide Injunctions: Recent Developments* (2025): 34 nationwide injunctions issued between January 20 and June 27, 2025 (roughly 25 in the first hundred days), against 86 across the full first Trump administration, 28 under Biden, 12 under Obama, and 6 under George W. Bush. On the birthright-citizenship injunction issued within two weeks of filing (D. Md., February 2025), see the case record consolidated in *Trump v. CASA* (note 73).

¹⁰³ Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862–1928* (Princeton University Press, 2001): agencies achieve autonomy when middle-tier officials build reputations for unique competence across diverse coalitions — an accretion measured in decades, and a caution in both directions, since Carpenter also documents how few New Deal creations survived to 1950.

¹⁰⁴ Paul Pierson, “The New Politics of the Welfare State,” *World Politics* 48, no. 2 (1996): 143–179; Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment* (Cambridge

University Press, 1994); and on the 2017 ACA repeal failure, Pierson, “The Dog That Almost Barked: What the ACA Repeal Fight Says about the Resilience of the American Welfare State.”

¹⁰⁵ Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New About It?” *Democratization* 26, no. 7 (2019): 1095–1113.

¹⁰⁶ Bryan D. Jones and Frank R. Baumgartner, *The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems* (University of Chicago Press, 2005); the punctuated-equilibrium foundation is Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹⁰⁷ Anthony Downs, “Up and Down with Ecology: The ‘Issue-Attention Cycle,’” *The Public Interest* 28 (1972): 38–50.

¹⁰⁸ R. Douglas Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action* (Yale University Press, 1990).

¹⁰⁹ The companion document to this analysis develops that infrastructure in detail: T. Collins Logan, *A Progressive Agenda for Democratic Renewal* (2026), Parts III.A (civil resistance readiness as standing community infrastructure), V.A (statutory protection of assembly rights), and VII.C (the civil resistance doctrine and its evidentiary basis).