

U-turns – The Hope for Democratic Resilience

Top-Level Insights

- **Contemporary democracies are fairly resilient to the onset of autocratization: Since 1994, 54% have not experienced backsliding.**
- **Yet, democracies rarely survive if autocratization sets in: Roughly 80% break down.**
- **Breakdown does not prevent a return of democracy. Recovering of democracy in U-turn episodes – or “bounce back” resilience – is the most common type of democratic resilience. Since 1994, 42% of democracies affected by autocratization have rebounded after a democratic breakdown.**

Threats to Democracy are Growing

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

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

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

Contemporary autocratization in democracies is often a gradual process that happens from within and under a legal façade (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). The main drivers of this process are democratically elected leaders who deliberately dismantle democratic norms and institutions. Gradually, political power is concentrated in one party or in one person (Bermeo 2016).

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

DEFINITIONS

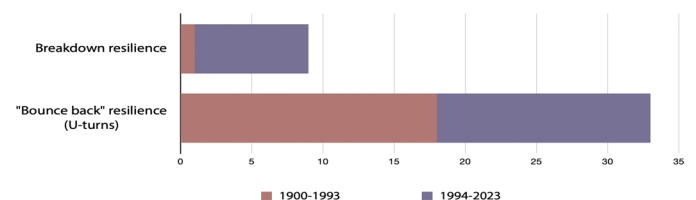
Autocratization is a process of regime transformation in which a country becomes significantly less democratic.

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

Democracies Rarely Survive Autocratization

If autocratization begins in a democracy, the fatality rate is distressingly high. Democracy broke down in roughly 80% of all these autocratization episodes since 1900 (Boese et al. 2021). The fatality rate for democracy continues to be high also since 1994: Democracy broke down in 40 out of 49 episodes for which the outcome is known: almost 82%.

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



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

Two Types of Democratic Resilience

Democracies can be resilient to autocratization in different ways.

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

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

Notably, breakdown resilience is becoming more common (22% of all episodes from 1994 to 2023). Some contemporary examples include Brazil, Poland, and the United States.

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

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

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

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

How Democracies Revert Autocratization

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

When democratic breakdown is averted – the agents of backsliding are typically thrown out of power in democratic elections, as in Brazil in 2021 or in Poland in 2023. Judicial processes can also stop backsliding such as in South Korea in both 2019 and again right now in 2025. By contrast, attempts to remove the autocratizing incumbent through irregular means are most likely to result in a democratic breakdown (Clearly and Öztürk 2022).

In general, a strong judiciary and more democratic experience also make democratic breakdown less likely (Boese et al. 2021). Legislatures, by contrast, can do very little to halt autocratization once it has started (Lührmann 2021).

For “*bounce back*” resilience, combining large-scale mobilization against the incumbent, organized by the unified opposition coalescing with civil society and the judiciary, and pressure from international actors seem to have been important in many cases where autocratization was reversed. Coordinating around elections or other critical events is often key to success (Wiebrecht et al. 2023).

In conclusion, whilst autocratization is common, consolidating authoritarian rule is becoming a lot more difficult than in the past. Democratic resilience is unprecedented in historical terms, and opposition to anti-democratic incumbents might increase in the future.

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



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