

INTRODUCTION

Democracies face threats that can weaken or even dismantle their political systems. Although classification of democracies into various types might offer some insights into understanding their retreat, it fails to account for the multi-layered factors that underpin democratic resilience. In reality, all democracies, regardless of types, are exposed to exogenous threats, such as global economic depression, emergence of radical extremists, and charismatic demagogues. These exogenous threats are not unique to democracies; they can destabilize any regime and are often uncontrollable. This universal inevitability suggests that the strength of constitutional foundations, not exogenous threats, determines resilience. Robust constitutional foundations provide the mechanisms necessary to absorb, adapt to, and ultimately overcome such exogenous challenges, ensuring the continuation of democracy in the faces of adversity. Therefore, this essay asserts that while exogenous forces may trigger autocratization, it is ultimately a nation's constitutional foundation that determines democratic resilience.

Throughout this essay, I will first define the concept of democratic resilience and explain why it is useful to distinguish between two distinct types. I will then examine the external factors that influence each type of resilience, drawing on comparative cases from the Weimar Republic and the United States to highlight both similarities and differences. Next, I will analyze factors of constitutional foundation that underpin democratic resilience in these two contexts, again comparing their respective impacts. Finally, I will draw conclusions from these analyses to underscore the primacy of constitutional design over external pressures in determining democratic resilience.

DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE: ONSET RESILIENCE AND BREAKDOWN RESILIENCE

Democratic resilience is the ability to prevent significant decline in democratic institutions. Boese et al. distinguish two stages: onset resilience, which prevents autocratization from starting, and breakdown resilience, which prevents full democratic collapse once autocratization begins. This two-stage framework is crucial because factors influencing each stage differ, making resilience a process rather than a single event. It allows

precise analysis without assuming future democratic reactions.¹ This essay compares the Weimar Republic and the U.S. to explore how external and constitutional factors shape democratic resilience.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

External (exogenous) forces are influences and pressures that originate outside the formal design or direct control of a nation's institutions. These include factors like economic stability, democratic stock, and civic education, which primarily alters democracy's onset resilience. Constitutional foundations, in contrast, are institutional structures deliberately created through constitutional design. These are mechanisms within the state's capacity to shape and control. Critically, while external forces may trigger democratic backsliding, they do not determine its ultimate outcome. Once autocratization begins, whether a democracy collapses or survives depends not on these external threats, but on the robustness of its constitutional foundations.²

Economic instability is a classic trigger for democratic backsliding. In the Weimar Republic, hyperinflation from 1921 to 1923 destroyed savings and upended daily life, leading to poverty, malnutrition, and widespread riots. Public trust in democratic institutions eroded as many Germans blamed the Weimar government for their hardship, making them susceptible to extremist promises. This economic collapse paved the way for the Nazis, who exploited the crisis to gain power and ultimately dismantle democracy. In contrast, the United States faced the Great Depression, with GDP falling by 29% and unemployment peaking at 25%.³ Although public trust declined and populist movements gained traction, the crisis did not result in autocratization. Instead, the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal restored confidence and helped to stabilize the economy.⁴ The key difference was not the absence of economic turmoil, but the presence of constitutional safeguards that insulated the U.S. from democratic breakdown.

¹ Vanessa A. Boese et al., "How Democracies Prevail: Democratic Resilience as a Two-stage Process," *Democratization* 28, no. 5 (April 27, 2021): 885–907, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1891413>.

² See footnotes 1

³ "How Bad Was the Great Depression?," March 28, 2025, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/the-great-depression/curriculum/economic-episodes-in-american-history-part-3>.

⁴ Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: Depression Years, 1933-40* (New York: Red Globe Press, 1989), 150

Democratic Stock – the accumulated experience with democratic institutions– also affects onset resilience.⁵ Weimar inherited a powerful authoritarian tradition from the Bismarckian era, where military and administrative power was deeply embedded in the Kaiser, not by the Reichstag.⁶ Weimar’s abrupt transition from autocracy weakened its institutions, rendering society vulnerable to polarization and extremism. By contrast, the United States’ long history of constitutional practice since 1783 and gradual evolution of democracy fostered a resilient political culture. Even during severe crises, Americans were more likely to seek solutions within democratic frameworks, reinforcing onset resilience.

Civic education affects onset resilience by shaping public responses democratic threats. In the Weimar Republic, civic education was formally introduced in the 1920s to foster loyalty to the fledgling republic. The 1919 Constitution mandated schools to teach “morality, citizenship, and vocational skills in the spirit of German nationhood.” However, these programs prioritized nationalism and obedience over critical thinking or democratic engagement. For example, the 1924 establishment of the Commission for Citizenship Education institutionalized a curriculum designed to cultivate “useful citizens” who would support the regime and national harmony. This superficial approach reflected a continuation of Germany’s long-standing tradition of “subject-oriented” political culture that had historically aimed to produce disciplined, obedient subjects loyal to the state.⁷ In the U.S., civic education has emphasized participation and critical thinking, from New Deal cultural projects, like the Federal Theatre Project and Federal Writers’ Project, which indirectly fostered civic awareness and solidarity during national hardship.⁸ This foundation helped citizens escape economic despair, supporting FDR’s New Deal reforms. However, civic education alone does not ensure breakdown resilience.

CONSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS

⁵ Amanda B. Edgell et al., “Democratic Legacies: Using Democratic Stock to Assess Norms, Growth, and Regime Trajectories,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, January 1, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3595957>.

⁶ Amanda B. Edgell, Matthew C. Wilson, Vanessa A. Boese, and Sandra Grahn, “Democratic Legacies: Using Democratic Stock to Assess Norms, Growth, and Regime Trajectories,” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (January 1, 2020): 149–150, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3595957>.

⁷ “The Enlightenment of the Development of Citizenship Education in Germany to the Promotion of Ideological and Political Education in China,” *Yu Junyi* 8, no. 4 (December 2022): 318, <https://doi.org/10.18178/ijlll.2022.8.4.369>.

⁸ Karen E. Gellen, “‘Propaganda for Democracy’: The Vexed History of the Federal Theatre Project,” CUNY Academic Works, n.d., https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/1990/.

Democratic resilience depends not on external factors alone but on constitutional design—specifically, the strength of judicial constraints on executive power, electoral systems, rule of law, and separation of powers. External factors may trigger democratic backsliding by increasing vulnerability at the onset, but they do not determine whether a democracy ultimately survives once autocratization begins. Instead, robust constitutional foundations provide the mechanisms for resisting, surviving, and recovering from crises. These institutional safeguards are decisive in upholding both onset and democratic breakdown even under severe external pressures, as evidenced by the comparison.

First, judicial constraints on executive power are crucial for both onset and breakdown resilience. After 1919, the Weimar Republic's judiciary was largely composed of holdovers from the German Empire who were hostile to the new democracy and often sympathized with right-wing extremists.⁹ For example, Hitler served only nine months of a five-year sentence for the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch due to judicial leniency.¹⁰ Courts systematically imposed lighter sentences on right-wing violence (such as Freikorps paramilitaries) while harshly prosecuting leftist dissent.¹¹ Judges rarely challenged President Hindenburg's abuse of Article 48 emergency powers, invoked 60 times in 1932 to bypass parliament.¹² This normalized authoritarian governance and enabled Hitler's legal rise. Ultimately, the lack of judicial independence allowed Hitler to dismantle democratic institutions, accelerating the collapse of democracy. Conversely, in the United States, judicial constraint on the executive has served as a vital safeguard during crises. Between 2017 and 2021, federal courts blocked 64 executive actions, including travel bans and funding reallocations for border walls.¹³ In the 2020 election, courts dismissed all 62 lawsuits challenging election results, thereby preventing the executive from fully dominating

⁹ "Munro, Tom --- 'Hitler's Justice: The Courts of the Third Reich by Ingo Muller' [2000] AltLawJl 20; (2000) 25(1) Alternative Law Journal 48," n.d. <https://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AltLawJl/2000/20.html>.

¹⁰ Carl Landauer, "The Bavarian Problem in the Weimar Republic: Part II," *The Journal of Modern History* 16, no. 3 (1944): 205–23, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1871460>.

¹¹ Matthew McIntosh, "Hitler's German Judiciary: The Destruction of Legal Autonomy Under the Third Reich," Brewminate: A Bold Blend of News and Ideas, June 10, 2025, <https://brewminate.com/hitlers-german-judiciary-the-destruction-of-legal-autonomy-under-the-third-reich/>.

¹² "Article 48," n.d., <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/article-48>.

¹³ R. Ghosh, "Lower Courts Blocking Trump's Executive Orders at Higher Rate Than All His Recent Predecessors Had in Their Entire Presidencies," *International Business Times*, Singapore Edition, March 24, 2025, <https://www.ibtimes.sg/lower-courts-blocking-trumps-executive-orders-higher-rate-all-his-recent-predecessors-had-79141>.

the government.¹⁴ Compared to Weimar, where courts strongly aligned with a particular political ideology, this record demonstrates continuous judicial independence and effective checks and balances.

Secondly, the design of electoral systems shapes both onset and breakdown resilience. The Weimar Republic's proportional representation (PR) system fragmented governance and enabled extremist parties. By 1930, PR had split the Reichstag into 14 parties, paralyzing coalition-building and governance.¹⁵ This inability allowed the Nazi Party to exploit public disillusionment, rising from 2.6% of the vote in 1928 to 37.3% in 1932 by capitalizing on economic despair and legislative gridlock.¹⁶¹⁷ The lack of electoral thresholds meant even marginal parties gained representation, eroding Weimar's onset resilience and prompting its collapse. By contrast, the United States' first-past-the-post (FPTP) system limits fragmentation by favoring two dominant parties. In 2020, 90% of U.S. House races were won by margins exceeding 10%, reducing opportunities for extremist parties to gain traction.¹⁸ However, FPTP risks polarization, as parties focus on entrenched supporters instead of seeking broad consensus. While this system enhances onset resilience by curbing fragmentation, it can weaken breakdown resilience by deepening societal divides, as seen in rising partisan hostility post-2020.

Thus, both systems highlight a trade-off: PR's inclusivity weakens governance during crisis, while FPTP's stability may entrench division. Constitutional resilience depends not only on electoral design but also on complementary safeguards to address systemic flaws.

¹⁴ Tina Davis, "Trump's Election Lawsuits: Where the Fights Are Playing Out (5)," *Bloomberg Law*, November 7, 2020,

<https://news.bloomberglaw.com/us-law-week/trumps-election-lawsuits-where-the-fights-are-playing-out>.

¹⁵ Alpha History, "The Weimar Reichstag," Weimar Republic, October 28, 2023, <https://alphahistory.com/weimarrepublic/weimar-reichstag/>.

¹⁶ Eberhard Kolb, *The Weimar Republic* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005 [1984]), 224–25.

¹⁷ Museum of Jewish Heritage — a Living Memorial to The Holocaust, "The Rise of the Nazi Party and the Third Reich," Museum of Jewish Heritage — a Living Memorial to the Holocaust, July 11, 2023, [https://mjhny.org/blog/the-rise-of-the-nazi-party-and-the-third-reich/#:~:text=Hitler%20lost%20the%20Presidential%20election,in%20the%20Reichstag%20\(parliament\)](https://mjhny.org/blog/the-rise-of-the-nazi-party-and-the-third-reich/#:~:text=Hitler%20lost%20the%20Presidential%20election,in%20the%20Reichstag%20(parliament)).

¹⁸ "Election Results, 2020: Congressional Elections Decided by 10 Percentage Points or Fewer - Ballotpedia," Ballotpedia, n.d., https://ballotpedia.org/Election_results,_2020:_Congressional_elections_decided_by_10_percentage_points_or_fewer.

The rule of law and separation of powers further reinforce democratic resilience. Where the law is politicized or selectively applied, as in Weimar, democracies become vulnerable to both gradual erosion and collapse. Where legal institutions remain independent and robust, as in the United States, they serve as critical defenses against autocratization at every stage.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while external factors — such as economic instability, democratic stock, civic education, and demographic inclusivity — may trigger autocratization by weakening onset resilience, they do not ultimately determine whether a democracy survives. Instead, it is the strength of constitutional foundations — judicial independence, effective checks and balances, a resilient electoral system, the rule of law, and separation of powers — that decisively shape both onset and breakdown resilience. The contrasting outcomes of the Weimar Republic and the United States illustrate that robust institutional design, rather than the absence of external threats, is the true determinant of democratic resilience.

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