CAMBRIDGE GOVERNANCE LABS

The Eight Steps to Tyranny

How democracies die — a data-driven guide to institutional erosion, from norm collapse to constitutional capture

Political Topology Project

38 backsliding episodes · 91 countries · 225 years

February 2026

INTRODUCTION

The Pattern Behind the Collapse

Democracies do not die in a single dramatic event. They are dismantled piece by piece, institution by institution, in a sequence so consistent that it can be mapped, measured, and — crucially — detected before it is too late.

Analysis of 38 backsliding episodes across 91 countries reveals that autocratization follows an eight-step progression. The ordering is consistent in 84% of observed cases. Each step disables a specific democratic function. Each has measurable leading and lagging indicators. And each has a quantifiable probability of reversal.

> *The sequence matters because it defines the window for intervention. By Step 3, the judiciary has been captured and the last institutional veto point is gone. By Step 5, the event horizon has been crossed. After that, recovery from within drops to 3%.*

This report describes each step, provides empirical calibration from the Political Topology dataset, and illustrates the pattern with country case studies spanning Hungary, India, El Salvador, Poland, and the United States.

THE MODEL

Eight Steps: The Sequence of Democratic Erosion

Norm Erosion

1

Liberty Band: 80–100 · ABOVE Event Horizon · Avg. onset: Year 0 · Reversal: 82%

82%

Democratic forbearance and mutual tolerance collapse. Political opponents are treated as enemies rather than rivals. Norms of restraint — not exploiting procedural loopholes, respecting the spirit as well as the letter of the law — erode. The formal institutions are still intact, but the informal guardrails that make them work are crumbling.

Leading indicators: Partisan media ecosystem, declining trust in institutions, "us vs. them" political rhetoric, executive norm violations without consequence. **Lagging:** Formal complaints to constitutional courts, international observer downgrades.

Information Capture

2

Liberty Band: 70–85 · ABOVE Event Horizon · Avg. onset: 1.2 years · Reversal: 71%

71%

Independent media comes under pressure. Ownership is concentrated in regime-friendly hands. Critical journalists face legal harassment, tax investigations, or physical threats. State media expands. Social media platforms are co-opted or manipulated. The goal is not total censorship but creating an information environment where the regime's narrative dominates.

Leading indicators: Media ownership changes, advertising boycotts of independent outlets, regulatory pressure on tech platforms, journalist arrests/harassment. **Lagging:** Press Freedom Index declines, media outlet closures.

Judicial Capture

3

Liberty Band: 55–70 · AT Event Horizon · Avg. onset: 2.4 years · Reversal: 45%

45%

Courts are packed, expanded, or politically captured. The judiciary — the last institutional veto point — ceases to function as an independent check on executive power. This is the most consequential step, because once the courts are neutralized, there is no domestic institution that can enforce constitutional constraints.

Leading indicators: Court-packing proposals, forced retirements, attacks on judicial independence, executive non-compliance with court orders. **Lagging:** Court decisions systematically favoring the executive, dissenting judges resigning or being removed.

> **Critical juncture:** Step 3 is where the event horizon is crossed. Before this point, institutional self-correction is possible. After it, recovery requires external intervention or elite rupture.

Legislative Subordination

4

Liberty Band: 45–60 · BELOW Event Horizon · Avg. onset: 3.8 years · Reversal: 28%

28%

Parliament becomes a rubber stamp. The legislature either loses its independent deliberative function or becomes dominated by the ruling party/coalition to the point where opposition is decorative. Legislative oversight of the executive — budgets, appointments, investigations — ceases to be meaningful.

Leading indicators: Supermajority control, opposition walkouts or boycotts, legislation by executive decree, procedural manipulation (shortened debate, omnibus bills). **Lagging:** Legislative approval rates >95%, opposition party splits.

Regulatory Capture

5

Liberty Band: 35–50 · BELOW Event Horizon · Avg. onset: 4.0 years · Reversal: 12%

12%

Independent agencies — the central bank, electoral commission, anti-corruption bureau, civil service, statistical agencies — are politicized. The technocratic infrastructure that provides impartial governance is colonized by regime loyalists. Data itself becomes unreliable.

Leading indicators: Firing of agency heads, merger of independent agencies under executive control, budget cuts to oversight bodies, political appointment to non-partisan positions. **Lagging:** Central bank independence erosion, election commission credibility collapse.

> **Structural break:** The audit identified a critical shift in Stage 5 dynamics. Pre-2006, +38% of countries at Stage 5 recovered. Post-2006, −23.3% recovered. The global environment for democratic recovery has deteriorated dramatically.

Civil Society Suppression

6

Liberty Band: 25–40 · BELOW Event Horizon · Avg. onset: 4.5 years · Reversal: 8%

8%

NGOs, trade unions, universities, religious organizations, and civic groups are restricted, defunded, or co-opted. The space for organized opposition outside the political system shrinks. Foreign-funded organizations are particularly targeted (the "foreign agent" playbook pioneered by Russia and now adopted globally).

Leading indicators: "Foreign agent" legislation, NGO registration requirements, university autonomy restrictions, protest bans. **Lagging:** CIVICUS Monitor downgrades, mass organizational closures.

Electoral Manipulation

7

Liberty Band: 15–30 · BELOW Event Horizon · Avg. onset: 5.0 years · Reversal: 4%

4%

Elections continue to be held — this is the signature of modern authoritarianism — but they are no longer free or fair. Gerrymandering, voter suppression, opposition candidate disqualification, media blackouts, and outright fraud ensure that incumbents cannot lose. The appearance of democracy is maintained while its substance is eliminated.

Leading indicators: Electoral law changes favoring incumbents, opposition candidate prosecutions, election observer restrictions, media blackout during campaigns. **Lagging:** Incumbent winning margins >70%, international observer criticism, opposition boycotts.

Constitutional Consolidation

8

Liberty Band: 0–15 · BELOW Event Horizon · Final stage · Reversal: 2%

2%

The regime rewrites the constitutional order to make power transfer impossible. Term limits are abolished. Emergency powers become permanent. The security apparatus is fully loyal to the leader rather than the state. The distinction between party, state, and leader collapses. The transition from democracy to consolidated autocracy is complete.

Leading indicators: Constitutional amendment proposals, term limit changes, emergency power extensions, military leadership purges. **Lagging:** De facto one-party state, hereditary succession planning, complete media control.

CASE STUDIES

The Pattern in Practice

Hungary: The Textbook Case (15 years, L=89 → L=52)

2010–2025 · Velocity: −2.5/yr · Current Stage: 5–6

Viktor Orbán's deconstruction of Hungarian democracy is the canonical case of incremental erosion. After winning a two-thirds parliamentary supermajority in 2010, Orbán moved through the steps in order: captured media (2010-12), packed the Constitutional Court (2012-13), subordinated Parliament through supermajority rules (2013-14), colonized regulatory agencies and universities (2014-17), restricted NGOs via the "Lex CEU" and "Stop Soros" laws (2017-18), and gerrymandered elections (2018-22). Each step was individually defensible as a legitimate exercise of democratic power. Collectively, they built what Orbán himself calls an "illiberal democracy." The National Cooperation System (NER) now controls approximately 90% of Hungarian media.

India: Silent Erosion at Scale (8 years, L=77 → L=62)

2017–2025 · Velocity: −1.9/yr · Current Stage: 4

India's erosion is distinctive because it proceeds under the cover of the world's largest electoral democracy. V-Dem downgraded India to "electoral autocracy" in 2017. The sequence: Hindu-nationalist media ecosystem (Step 2 from 2014), judicial pressure through appointment delays and "favorable" bench assignments (Step 3), parliamentary bulldozing via voice votes and limited debate (Step 4). Steps 5-6 are underway: the Election Commission's independence is questioned, the FCRA (foreign contribution) act is used to shut down NGOs, and academic freedom is restricted. India demonstrates that erosion can be compatible with large voter turnout and apparent electoral competition.

Poland: The Recovery Story (L=72 → L=82)

2023–2025 · Velocity: +5/yr (since transition) · Recovering from Stage 4

Poland proves that the sequence can be reversed — if intervention comes before the event horizon. After 8 years of PiS-led erosion (judicial capture, media politicization, electoral manipulation), the 2023 election brought the Tusk-led opposition to power. The recovery is real but incomplete: restoring judicial independence requires navigating constitutional constraints, and President Nawrocki (PiS-aligned) creates institutional friction. Key lesson: reversal required (a) unified opposition, (b) high voter turnout (74.4%), (c) EU external pressure, and (d) the erosion not having reached Stage 5.

El Salvador: The Security Bargain (L=62 → L=35)

2019–2025 · Velocity: −4.5/yr · Current Stage: 6–7

Nayib Bukele demonstrates that democratic erosion can be enormously popular. His "war on gangs" achieved 91% approval while suspending due process, imprisoning 83,000+ under a state-of-exception, and abolishing term limits (July 2025). El Salvador skipped steps — moving directly from Step 2 to Step 6 — because the population actively endorsed the trade. This is the hardest case for democratic theory: what happens when the people choose unfreedom?

ASSESSMENT

Where Key Countries Stand on the Staircase

COUNTRY	LIBERTY	STAGE	VELOCITY	REVERSAL PROB.	KEY RISK
Finland	100	S1: Stable	0.0	n/a	None identified
France	78	S2: Early Warning	−0.3	71%	Far-right normalization
Poland	82	S2: Recovering	+0.8	71%	Presidential veto, institutional friction
Israel	60	S3–4	−0.7	45%	Judicial overhaul + war cover
India	62	S4	−1.5	28%	Scale, media capture, Hindu nationalism
United States	**48**	**S5**	**−3.1**	**12%**	**Regulatory capture, judicial realignment**
Hungary	52	S5–6	−1.8	12%	NER system fully embedded
Turkey	18	S7	−2.3	4%	Opposition prosecuted, media fully controlled
El Salvador	35	S6–7	−4.5	4%	Popular mandate for autocracy
Russia	13	S8	−0.5	2%	Fully consolidated

The Window for Action

The eight-step model's most important implication is about timing. The reversal probabilities decline steeply and non-linearly:

STEP	REVERSAL PROBABILITY
1. Norm Erosion	**82%**
2. Information Capture	71%
3. Judicial Capture	**45%**
4. Legislative Subordination	28%

STEP	REVERSAL PROBABILITY
5. Regulatory Capture	**12%**
6. Civil Society Suppression	8%
7. Electoral Manipulation	4%
8. Constitutional Consolidation	2%

The lesson is clear: intervention at Steps 1–2 succeeds more than two-thirds of the time. By Step 5, the odds have dropped to 1 in 8. By Step 7, to 1 in 25. The cost of early action is always less than the cost of late action. The eight-step model is, above all, an argument for vigilance.

Audit Note

The eight-step model was assessed as **"Partially Valid"** by the independent audit. The sequential ordering is consistent in 84% of cases (strong). The stage-specific reversal probabilities are directionally correct but add only +5 percentage points over a simple persistence baseline. The structural break at 2006 (pre-2006 recovery: +38%, post-2006: −23.3%) is a genuine and important finding. The model's primary value is as a diagnostic and early-warning tool rather than a precise predictive instrument.

Political Topology · Cambridge Governance Labs
38 backsliding episodes · 91 countries · 225 years · 1,656 observations
For methodology, replication code, and interactive visualizations: cgl-cambridge-governance-labs-political-topology.local