

A TWO-PAGE INTRODUCTION

Trust and Participation

The synthesis

Participation alone is not enough to rebuild trust in democracy. The four regional forums, academic evidence, and practical case studies all point to the same conclusion: trust in democracy and democratic renewal depend on whether civic energy can be translated into meaningful institutional response and lasting reform. While citizens are organising through local initiatives, youth movements, community networks, and digital platforms, trust declines when institutions fail to listen, respond, or act on public demands. Research shows that people judge democracy less by opportunities for participation than by whether institutions provide representation, accountability, rights, and fair treatment. Likewise, experiences from Guatemala and Nepal demonstrate that mobilisation can achieve important political breakthroughs, but without durable civic ecosystems, responsive institutions, and pathways into governance, moments of citizen action often fade before they produce lasting change. Together, these findings suggest that strengthening democracy requires more than fostering participation; it requires building the relationships, institutions, civic capacities, and information systems that make citizen voice consequential and transform collective action into sustained democratic progress. What the four regions share is not a single model but a common threshold: participation begins to rebuild trust at the point where citizens can see their voice produce a visible institutional response.

Questions for Athens

MORNING WORKING QUESTION - Why does civic energy exhaust itself in advocacy cycles without converting into institutional change, and what would allow it to?

AFTERNOON ACTION QUESTION - What conditions have allowed, in specific contexts, citizen participation to convert into real institutional change?

What the regional forums found

The Americas Forum in Asunción found that trust in democratic institutions is declining across the region, driven by polarisation, disinformation, shrinking civic space and institutional fragility, but that civic participation has not disappeared. New forms of engagement are emerging through youth leadership, community organising, local initiatives and cross-sector coalitions, and many of the most promising innovations are coming from communities and territorial networks rather than from top-down reform. The challenge participants returned to most often was conversion: the gap between active citizen engagement and the capacity of institutions to listen, respond and act. Citizens trust institutions more when they can see that their participation has a visible impact. The Forum also insisted that democratic innovation is not only technological, and that rebuilding democracy requires rebuilding social trust, care and collective hope alongside mobilisation.

Across the other three forums, the same conversion problem appeared in different forms. Nairobi described public participation as increasingly tokenised: young people may be present without being heard, while campaign finance, prolonged incumbency and the lack of pathways from activism into governance block the movement from civic energy to formal power. Prague located the problem in institutions that have failed to adapt to changing generations, while pointing to participatory budgeting, youth councils and sustained local engagement as ways to make participation meaningful between elections. Seoul framed participation more structurally, asking whether political parties still provide the route from mobilisation to democratic consolidation at a time when many youth-led movements are explicitly non-partisan. Seoul also heard that, after Bangladesh's youth-led uprising, only a few young leaders reached parliament, while established parties were seen as taking much of the credit. Read together, the forums suggest that the problem is not simply whether citizens participate, but whether democratic systems can convert participation into influence.

What the research says

Participation is essential to democracy, but participation alone does not generate trust. Evidence from the 2026 Pulse of Democracy suggests that citizens judge democracy not simply by whether they have opportunities to participate, but by whether democratic institutions are responsive to their needs and provide rights, fair treatment, and meaningful representation.

Across the Americas, support for democracy has begun to recover after more than a decade of decline, yet it remains historically low. Improving material conditions have helped restore some democratic goodwill, but persistent dissatisfaction with governance and representation continues to hold it back. Citizens also associate democracy more strongly with law enforcement, equality, and freedom than with

participation or elections themselves, underscoring that opportunities for voice are unlikely to strengthen legitimacy when institutions fail to respond credibly to what citizens demand.

The challenge, then, is not simply to generate more participation, but to make citizen voice consequential. Participation can strengthen democratic trust when people can see a credible connection between expressing their preferences and institutions listening, responding, and acting. The outcome need not always be a policy victory or material benefit: responsiveness can also take the form of accountability, fair treatment, protection of rights, greater representation, or a visible institutional response. Indeed, the 2026 AmericasBarometer finds that citizens who see democracy as better able to protect civil liberties are consistently more committed to democratic principles, while perceptions of democracy's economic performance have a much weaker relationship with democratic commitment. When the link between voice and institutional response repeatedly breaks, civic engagement can remain vibrant while trust erodes. Rebuilding that link requires institutions that do more than create opportunities to participate: they must demonstrate that participation can matter.

What practice shows

Key findings from [The Carter Center's 2025 convenings on the future of the Democracy, Rights and Governance sector.](#)

As mentioned in the academic frame, civic energy often exhausts itself in advocacy cycles without converting into institutional change, leading citizens to become sceptical about the value of participation, and sometimes, of democracy itself. The Carter Center's convenings found that civic mobilisation is most effective when it is linked to institutions capable of absorbing citizen demands and translating them into reform. Case studies show that institutional change is more likely when participation is embedded in resilient civic ecosystems rather than isolated organisations. Trust also grows when civic action connects to people's lived experiences and is supported by information systems that let citizens access credible information and hold leaders accountable.

The case of Guatemala illustrates both the power and limitations of civic mobilisation for institutional change. In 2015, the exposure of a presidential corruption network triggered the #RenunciaYa ("Resign Already") movement. What began as a social media call to gather in public plazas quickly evolved into 21 consecutive weeks of demonstrations involving urban professionals, students, small business owners, and indigenous communities. Social media served as both a coordination tool and a powerful amplifier, helping convert public outrage into mass action. The mobilisation ultimately contributed to the resignation and prosecution of President Otto Pérez Molina, a clear reflection of citizen demands converting to institutional change, at least in the short term. However, the movement lacked durable institutions capable of translating protest energy into lasting governance reforms. In the years that followed, anti-corruption institutions were dismantled, judicial independence weakened, and many journalists and prosecutors faced exile or criminalisation. This reflects a broader pattern. Mobilisation can outpace institutional change, particularly when counter-elites retain control over coercive and legal systems.

The Nepal case offers similar lessons in a different context. Following a government ban on 26 social media platforms in September 2025, a Gen Z-led uprising emerged around widespread frustration with unemployment, inequality, and elite privilege. Young people used digital platforms not only to communicate and mobilise but also to deliberate, coordinate, and build alternative forms of legitimacy. Discord communities with hundreds of thousands of participants became hubs for political discussion and even leadership selection. The movement helped reshape the country's political landscape and contributed to the electoral success of a digitally connected outsider party, showing how citizen participation can be consequential for institutional change. Yet the case also revealed challenges. Decision-making remained concentrated among urban, digitally connected participants, and the speed of mobilisation outpaced the ability of formal institutions to respond and incorporate new voices. This case study shows the importance of moving beyond traditional youth engagement models and investing in the ecosystems, skills, and structures that enable young people to translate rapid mobilisation into inclusive, durable, and institutionally anchored political change. Taken together, these cases demonstrate that participation is most



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effective when it extends beyond moments of protest and is connected to durable civic structures and pathways into governance. Digital tools can accelerate participation, but lasting democratic change depends on institutions and civic networks capable of converting citizen energy into sustained influence and reform.

A TWO-PAGE INTRODUCTION

Trust and Algocracy

The synthesis

The regional forums, the research and the practical evidence converge on a single point: the deeper challenge is not how AI is reshaping information, but who controls the infrastructures through which democratic participation increasingly happens, and what that concentration does to citizens' access to information, agency, potential for deliberation, and trust. In Europe, that control sits with platforms and AI systems that face the least scrutiny precisely where it matters most, in smaller-language and under-resourced ecosystems. Algocracy names the underlying pattern: algorithmic systems substituting for human deliberation while producing the appearance of accountability without its substance. In Bangladesh, a nationwide internet blackout showed that this infrastructure can simply be switched off, and young people rebuilt information flows through alternative digital, interpersonal and offline networks. None of the three locate the fix primarily in outpacing AI technically or in regulation alone, since vendor transparency and audit-trail efforts remain reactive against private-sector power. The shared answer is instead what this evidence calls civic immunity and community resilience: recovering democratic control requires both real transparency and accountability from those who design these systems, and sustained investment in the civic, community, and youth-led networks, including decentralised and peer-to-peer channels, that let citizens keep communicating, organising, and holding power accountable when the infrastructure fails, is manipulated, or disappears. This is ultimately a question of trust: the strongest democracies will be those that rebuild it before crises hit, not those with the most sophisticated tools.

Questions for Athens

MORNING WORKING QUESTION - Who controls the infrastructure democratic participation depends on, and what do those power asymmetries mean for citizens' trust in the system?

AFTERNOON ACTION QUESTION - What strategies are concretely working to recover democratic control over the systems that govern public information?

What the regional forums found

Discussions at the GDC Europe Forum in Prague in May 2026 highlighted a profound shift in the democratic information environment. Control over the infrastructure through which citizens access information increasingly rests with a small set of largely unaccountable actors: social media platforms, AI-powered search engines and chatbots, and, increasingly, gaming and messaging platforms that receive far less scrutiny despite their growing political influence. This creates a fundamental asymmetry: those shaping what citizens see and engage with operate with limited transparency and accountability, especially in under-resourced, smaller-language ecosystems. The consequence, as participants of the Forum stressed, is an erosion of shared factual reality. Citizens are uncertain about what and whom to trust, and that uncertainty itself corrodes democratic participation. Importantly, the Forum concluded that AI did not create this problem; rather, it has amplified existing vulnerabilities, including declining institutional trust and rising polarisation, which make citizens more susceptible to whoever controls the infrastructure they depend on.

The strategies participants pointed to as genuinely working were less about outpacing AI technically and more about rebuilding trust before crises hit. Prebunking and civic education initiatives, sustained institutional communication between citizens and institutions beyond election cycles, and continuous local engagement through community organising, youth councils and face-to-face dialogue were all identified as the most effective antidote to polarisation. Examples shared by EDYN members showed young leaders already doing this work through election observation, journalism, and civic initiatives. Encrypted messaging and decentralised, peer-to-peer networks were also seen as counterweight to centrally controlled or surveilled algorithmic feeds. The Forum's clearest recommendation was to invest in long-term community resilience and youth leadership over short-term awareness campaigns, paired with cross-border cooperation to close the transparency and accountability gaps.

The other three forums widened the lens. Seoul raised a possibility no other forum considered: in low-trust environments, an algorithm may be offered not as a threat to trust but as a substitute for it.

Albania's appointment of an AI system to decide public procurement, justified by corruption in human decision-making, was debated in exactly those terms, with the objection that algorithms can optimise efficiency but cannot arbitrate between competing values. Seoul also stressed that civil society needs to become AI-ready, using these tools to monitor hate speech, strengthen fact-checking and protect activists. Nairobi recalled that digital democracy has an access problem before it has an algorithm problem: only 38% of Africans use the internet, against 68% globally, and recent elections, including in Uganda and Tanzania, saw shutdowns, surveillance and censorship used to limit civic engagement. Asunción described digital political violence falling hardest on women and emerging leaders, producing fear and self-censorship. Across the four regions, the same digital infrastructure appears as both a tool of accountability and an instrument of control.

What the research says

Algoocracy describes a governance system and infrastructure of democratic participation organised around algorithms that collect and organise data for decision making, limiting human participation and dialogue (Danaher 2016). Research can be organised around four domains where algorithms affect control of that infrastructure: information (access to, veracity of and impact on the public square, including transparency, accountability and participation); electoral institutions (manipulation and micro-targeting to suppress participation or limit oversight); participatory institutions and representation (algorithmic shortcuts that bypass deliberation, embedding automation rather than choice); and bureaucracy and governance (automated analysis and targeting, with efficiency gains alongside surveillance, deepening the power asymmetry between state and citizen).

Across the four arenas, the through line is the tension between opacity and transparency, surveillance and efficiency, automation and participatory deliberation. The private sector and state deployment of “black box” technologies corrodes legitimacy and contestability, increasing the sense of “delegative democracy” (O'Donnell 1994) in a new era (Sparrow 2026). Public-sector AI partial disclosure produces the appearance of accountability without substantive guarantees, making the public responsible without the visibility needed to exercise it (Alnemr 2023).

Strategies to recover democratic control and deliberation include political attempts to require vendor-level transparency for the private sector developing and supplying AI tools (Knight First Amendment Institute), and audit-trail requirements such as those in the EU AI Act. While significant in potential breadth and scope, the political processes are often reactive and hampered by power asymmetries with the private sector. Other innovations attempt to harness technology for deliberative and consensus-based digital platforms, and develop new platforms for prebunking or debunking information (Costello, Pennycook and Rand 2024).

What practice shows

Practice shows that the question of who controls democratic infrastructure is not abstract: control over information infrastructure can determine citizens' ability to participate, organise, verify information and make themselves heard. Bangladesh's youth-led uprising of July-August 2024 provides a striking example. Digital platforms became an important public square for young people to organise, document events, challenge dominant narratives and mobilise. Yet the nationwide internet blackout exposed the fragility of this civic space, disrupting access to timely information, communication and verification. At the same time, young people adapted, recreating information flows through alternative digital, interpersonal and offline networks. This demonstrated both the concentration of infrastructural power and citizens' capacity to reclaim agency when established channels are restricted: who controls the algorithm, who controls the switch, and who can rebuild the network when both fail?

This experience suggests that democratic resilience cannot depend on technological solutions alone. It requires what we describe as civic immunity: the capacity to critically navigate information, verify claims, engage across differences and remain active participants in democratic life. Building this resilience means investing before crises occur: in media and information literacy, civic education, trusted verification mechanisms, independent information ecosystems and sustained spaces for dialogue, particularly for young people who increasingly shape as well as consume political information.

Information resilience must ultimately connect with meaningful democratic influence. Experience with youth councils and structured citizen-government dialogue shows the value of creating a visible pathway from information → voice → deliberation → institutional response → accountability. Recovering democratic control therefore means reducing dependence on any single platform or information channel while strengthening open, rights-respecting digital spaces and community-rooted civic infrastructure. The goal is not only to make the systems governing information more transparent, but to ensure that citizens retain the capacity to communicate, organise, deliberate and hold institutions accountable, both online and beyond the algorithm.



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A TWO-PAGE INTRODUCTION

Trust and Delivery

The synthesis

Trust is impacted by both perceived and actual delivery. Effective delivery can build trust, but that trust erodes when citizens believe that leaders favour other elites, when votes do not translate into voice and representation, or when governments withhold information. The same disconnect shows up institutionally: new anti-corruption strategies and alliances often mean little when formal compliance doesn't translate into practice, a gap that fuels protest movements and declining trust seen across Europe.

Distrust deepens when the gap between what governments promise and what they deliver is rife with exclusion: when democratic processes exclude the voices of youth and women, when delivery outcomes favour particular groups over others, and when elites engage in corruption with impunity. These dynamics reinforce each other and generate deep distrust in and dissatisfaction with democracy. Yet young people and many civil society groups have responded, not by disengaging but by rebuilding participation outside of these traditional channels, through civic tech, election observation, and decentralised organising.

Questions for Athens

MORNING WORKING QUESTION - When does the gap between what democracy promises and delivers become irreversible distrust, and what does the evidence show?

AFTERNOON ACTION QUESTION - What has democracy concretely delivered that no other system could, and how do we use that to rebuild trust?

What the regional forums found

Across the Africa Regional Forum's four panels, one line kept recurring: distrust hardens not when democratic delivery is simply slow or uneven, but when participation itself curdles into what panellists called "tokenisation", the moment citizens stop believing that voting, speaking up, or engaging civically changes anything. Panel 1 traced this to the disconnect between elections and improved livelihoods, and to prolonged incumbency that shuts younger generations out of decision-making; Panel 2 linked it to unimplemented gender and inclusion policies that exist on paper but not in practice; and the Global Panel pointed to state interference in media and the absence of real avenues to contest election outcomes. Participants were also clear that what blocks delivery is less administrative capacity than state capture, political patronage and money-driven politics, which distort both who reaches office and what governments then do. Once citizens conclude that democratic channels are procedural rather than functional, the Forum's discussions suggest the erosion becomes self-reinforcing: civic space shrinks further, digital repression rises, and disengagement deepens. Yet the Forum's most striking finding cuts the other way: young people across every panel were not abandoning democratic participation but re-engaging with it on their own terms, building civic-tech platforms, sustaining election observation, and organising decentralised movements, which suggests that even where delivery has failed, the underlying legitimacy of democratic participation itself has not.

The other three forums reached this frame from different directions and did not agree on what delivery failure is. Asunción treated it as a political economy question: failure to deliver opens the way for authoritarian options that win elections and then dismantle institutions from within. It also heard that Brazil's electronic voting system, among the most secure in the world, coexists with a public in which 43% do not trust the voting machines, an erosion that grew over a decade from a false fraud claim rather than from any failure of the system. Prague treated delivery as communication as much as output, citing research showing that election bodies which announce a likely delay in advance retain more public confidence than those that stay silent. Seoul found election administration in the region technically competent, with the real exposure lying in public trust in the administrators. Together they leave Athens a sharp question: is the trust deficit driven by what institutions fail to do, or by what they fail to explain?

What the research says

Trust in government (often measured as satisfaction with democracy or support for anti-system movements or parties) tends to be higher in states that reliably produce outcomes such as economic growth, public service delivery, and security.

Trust is also shaped by the extent to which governments “deliver” inclusive democratic political and governing processes and control of corruption. Recent global declines in trust are more acute in states’ representative institutions such as parliaments, executives, and political parties than in implementing institutions such as civil service, legal systems, and security forces. Corruption scandals can significantly reduce trust in public officials and systemic corruption is associated with lower levels of social trust.

Importantly, perceptions of government delivery often shape public trust more than empirical outcomes. However, perceptions themselves are also shaped by pre-existing levels of trust, suggesting the importance of understanding how perceptions form and the types and sources of information that influence people’s views of government delivery. For example, media coverage is frequently more influential than objective indicators in shaping public perceptions of economic performance. Today’s highly fragmented and polarised social media environments can impact perceptions of government delivery and democracy, such as by overstating the frequency of corruption. One study found that people who use social media more frequently are less likely to see democracy as the best form of government.

Democratic governments tend to perform better than authoritarian regimes in many policy areas, but not necessarily in reducing economic inequality or providing jobs. However, democracy has important intrinsic value, such as fostering self-efficacy, social and political deliberation, and capability development.

What practice shows

The evidence gathered through the work of UNCAC Coalition, encompassing over 400 anti-corruption civil society organisations across the world, supports a direct link between how governments deliver on corruption prevention and repression, and the level of public trust in democratic institutions.

Healthy democracies can deliver a government that is open, transparent, participatory and accountable in a way closed systems cannot: institutions and policies that are shaped not only by the most powerful, but through public scrutiny and the meaningful inclusion of different social groups. When these principles work in practice, public decisions are more responsive to citizens’ needs and demands, more legitimate, and ultimately more trusted.

However, in Europe, despite the adoption of anti-corruption strategies, new specialised institutions and international alliances, the European Commission’s 2026 Rule of Law Report found uneven progress across justice systems, anti-corruption frameworks and institutional checks and balances, while analysis in the Western Balkans points to a gap between formal compliance and governance outcomes. Where this gap between reform on paper and reform in practice persists, political and social tension follows, and public discontent has translated into larger protest movements in several countries across the continent.

This pattern is not confined to Europe. Across UNCAC Coalition global network, members consistently identify access to information, transparency and civic space as their shared top priority, because this is where citizens can directly test whether anti-corruption commitments translate into tangible and sustainable reforms. Where this process is obstructed, for example through unanswered information requests, unaccountable governments, or the capture of institutions and public policies by private, vested interests, citizens experience a failure of governments to deliver, feeding the same erosion of trust visible in civic movements.

The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) offers a framework for understanding why this link between corruption, public service delivery and trust in democracy is structural. Article 5 requires States Parties not only to adopt anti-corruption policies but to implement them effectively and periodically assess whether they work, while Articles 10 and 13 tie implementation directly to transparency, access to information and civil society participation.

Seen through this framework, civil society is more than a source of pressure on governments; it is a crucial actor in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies and commitments. The Coalition’s annual survey conducted in 2026 found that many groups in Europe focused on defending democratic institutions. This places specialised anti-corruption CSOs in a particularly important, and sometimes difficult, position between civic mobilisation and institutional reform.



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The synthesis

The regional forums, the research and the practical evidence gathered here point to one conclusion: democratic trust is far easier to lose than to recover, and resilience is decided before a crisis rather than after it. The regional forums show that the warning signs of rupture are visible years in advance, and that resilience takes different forms where the threat is informational, physical or relational. The research explains why recovery is so hard: nearly nine in ten democratic turnarounds do not hold, the capacities that prevent backsliding do not predict recovery, and governments that repair institutions can still fall into a trust trap when citizens do not feel represented. The practical evidence shows that movements can defeat autocrats and fill the streets, yet only the political surface moves unless the conditions beneath it change. What sustains democratic change is therefore less the moment of victory than what surrounds it: warning signs acted on while trust is still high, institutions that deliver visibly after a transition, the memory of how earlier struggles were won, and movements that protect and sustain their own people. Resilience cannot be a burden that communities absorb alone. It is work that institutions, coalitions and funders share.

Questions for Athens

MORNING WORKING QUESTION - What makes democratic trust recover after a crisis rather than keep eroding, and what can movements that held onto change teach us?

AFTERNOON ACTION QUESTION - What have movements that sustained democratic change actually done, and what from that can be brought forward?

What the regional forums found

Seoul approached resilience through the experience of democratic transitions, and its clearest contribution was on early warning. The recent youth-led uprisings in the region were widely reported as sudden, yet participants showed that they were preceded by years of measurable decline on democratic indicators, above all in civic space, with accumulated surveillance and harassment. The signals were in the data long before the rupture. Seoul also gave democratic memory a role no other forum developed: memorialisation, archiving and storytelling, so that later generations know what was lost, how it was recovered and by whom. And it named an uncomfortable paradox. The region has never had so many democracy organisations and networks, what one participant called a golden age, yet this is happening at the very moment democracy is losing ground. The question Seoul left open is not how many networks exist, but what they actually achieve.

Across the four forums, resilience meant four different things, shaped by four different threat environments. In Prague it was institutional and informational, built between elections through trust and civic participation rather than activated during campaigns. In Nairobi it was physical and legal: protecting people, data and organisations on a continent where CIVICUS rates 44 of 49 countries as obstructed or repressed, and where activists face cross-border abductions. In Asunción it was relational, with the care and sustainability of activists treated as part of democratic strategy rather than as welfare, on the argument that a movement that exhausts its people is not resilient however well organised it is. The four readings share one conviction: resilience cannot be an emergency response. It has to be built while trust still exists.

What the research says

Democratic recoveries rarely hold. Of the turnarounds since 1994, nearly 90% failed to sustain this same level of democracy for five years (Bianchi, Cheeseman and Cyr 2025). The conditions that prevent a backsliding crisis do not appear to be the same as those that produce recovery from one. Croissant and Lott (2025) find that resilience capacity predicts whether a democracy avoids backsliding and whether it avoids breakdown once backsliding begins, but it doesn't predict recovery at all.

However, these studies may be looking in the wrong place. Croissant and Lott's civil society indicators record civil society repression and the participatory environment, but do not measure what organisations do or movement strategy.

As Holloway and Manwaring (2023) argue, resilience “by whom” remains among the least developed questions in the literature: who resists autocratisation, with what strategies, and in which arenas.

What can movements do to aid democratic rebound? Turkey shows what this looks like when the national election is tilted in the regime's favour. The opposition built outward from municipal government, winning six of the seven largest cities in 2024 and delivering services under central obstruction. In Istanbul, this included dormitories, kindergartens and targeted relief. After the Istanbul mayor's arrest in March 2025, it opened its presidential primary to anyone eligible to vote, drawing 13.8 million non-members, and took weekly rallies deep into the governing party's heartland. The opposition also gathered close to fifteen million signatures and called a one-day national boycott (Esen and Gumuscu 2025). And yet, Poland shows the limits of these approaches. Civic movements pressed divided opposition parties into cooperation, turnout reached 74.4%, and the coalition won. But then dysfunction and stasis produced very few tangible results: Twelve of a hundred campaign promises were delivered, approval turned negative within seven months, and the presidency returned to the right (Bill and Stanley 2025). Repairing an institution is not the same as convincing people it represents them, and trust does not return if people do not believe the individuals in those bodies represent their interests or the common good. This is why governments working to recover after an autocratic episode face a “trust trap.” For example, anti-corruption campaigns can raise the perceived prevalence of corruption even as they work to reduce it. In Brazil, the Lava Jato prosecutions effectively penalised corruption but generated high levels of cynicism among citizens, who then voted for Jair Bolsonaro (Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. 2023).

We note, however, that the goals of keeping an organisation alive and keeping a democracy on track are different tasks. All three of these cases show that attempts at democratic bounce-back come at a cost to pro-democracy movements, and the resilience vocabulary tends to obscure the decisions and burdens movements endured in these moments. A “resilience” emphasis can shift responsibility from autocrats onto communities asked to absorb a cost someone else created, and can risk making those same communities responsible for the success or failure of democratic recovery. Thus, perhaps the most appropriate place to continue discussion is what is meant by “success.” While none of these three cases above produced durable recovery yet, movements have built processes, arguments, and strategies that can cascade into future wins. Truly resilient movements therefore require a deeper understanding of sustainability, care and local connection, reaching beyond the short term and the electoral cycle.

What practice shows

In its 2026 State of Civil Society Report, CIVICUS documents that despite a deepening crisis of democracy, civil society around the world has responded, “standing up for dignity, justice and hope.” The report highlights protests against arbitrary power, corruption and executive overreach in dozens of countries in 2025, with Generation Z-led uprisings shaking several governments. Yet the report asks whether these protests can “coalesce into sustained pressure for democratic renewal.”

Earlier democratic movements point to another form of resilience: sustaining democratic capacity when immediate political victory is not possible. Reflecting on life under communist rule, Ivan Vejvoda describes how civil society created small “oases” where democratic relationships, ideas and hope could survive over time.

In her studies of pro-democracy movements, including the US civil rights movement, the South African anti-apartheid movement, and the Polish Solidarity movement, Maria Stephan identifies organised noncooperation, defections within key pillars of support, and especially broad-based, cross-sector collective action as key to success.

In December 2024, South Koreans “turned resistance into inclusive, joyful cultural energy,” writes Se-Hyoung Yi, an associate professor of political science. The “blend of civic action and popular culture provided the new generation with a platform to express vision and hope, bridging generational, ideological, gender, and socioeconomic divides among protesters.”

At the same time, writing after Orbán's 2026 electoral defeat in Hungary, Kristóf Szombati, a Hungarian political anthropologist, wrote that defeating an autocrat is only the first step. “Democratic renewal begins there: not with the comforting belief that democracy's immune system has kicked in, but with the more difficult recognition that the social, institutional, and symbolic conditions that made illiberalism durable must themselves also be transformed.”



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