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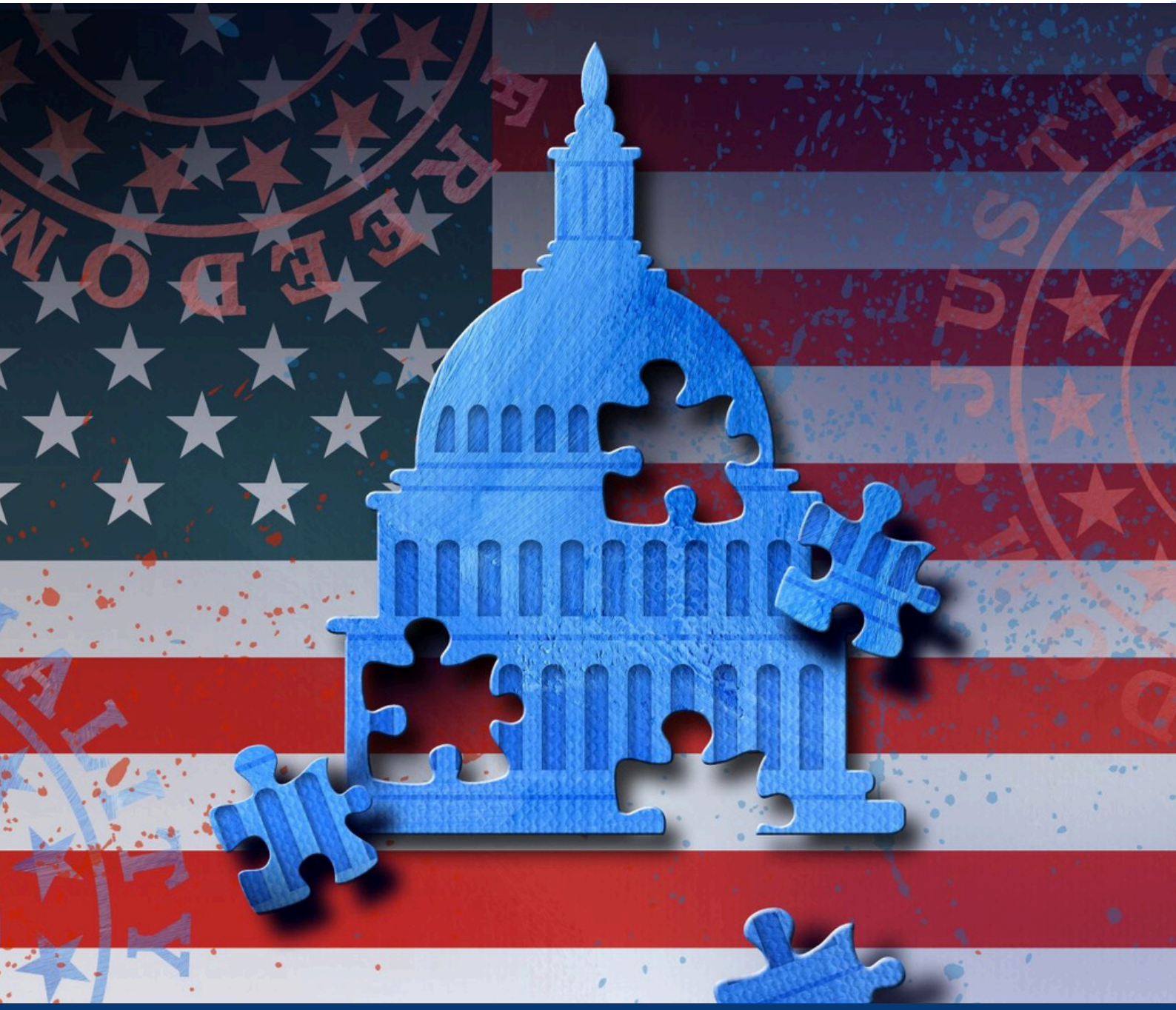

AFTER DEGRADATION: A ROADMAP FOR U.S. DEMOCRATIC REPAIR

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Abstract

Democratic repair must be prepared before political conditions improve, not improvised after a transition begins. This report assesses democratic degradation in the United States as President Trump's second term marks its first anniversary and proposes a framework for recovery grounded in the sequencing logic of post-conflict peacebuilding. Because established frameworks for re-democratisation in advanced democracies remain underdeveloped, the report adapts insights from a field that has systematically addressed phased institutional reconstruction under conditions of contested authority and diminished public trust. The purpose is not to claim equivalence between contexts, but to address a shared problem: how to rebuild legitimate institutions when authority is disputed and confidence in governance is profoundly eroded. The result is a three-phase roadmap: preparation under constraint, action during transition windows, and long-term civic renewal. The framework may offer insights for other democracies facing institutional erosion. By applying peacebuilding's phased approach to democratic recovery, the report reflects Toda Peace Institute's commitment to strengthening the institutional foundations of peaceful governance.

A companion policy brief, “Electoral Integrity and the 2026 Midterm Elections” (Toda Policy Brief No. 267), provides more detailed analysis of the electoral administration themes addressed in Section 1.4 of this report.

Introduction: One year in

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.[1]

As this report goes to publication, the United States has just marked the first anniversary of President Trump's second inauguration. The country is also in the year of its 250th anniversary, a milestone that invites reflection on both its constitutional origins and the current condition of democratic governance.

President Lincoln's appeal was not a call for reassurance. It was a warning that inherited assumptions, once stabilising, can become liabilities when circumstances change. His demand to "disenthrall," to break free from self-imposed illusions, was both moral and political. It required citizens to see damage clearly and to abandon habits of thought that had normalised dysfunction. The United States faces a different historical moment today, but the underlying challenge is similar. Democratic degradation does not reverse itself through sentiment or the passage of time. It requires deliberate preparation for reconstruction.

This report asks a practical question: should Americans wait for a future election to begin the work of democratic repair, or can preparation start now? Its logic is intentionally procedural rather than ideological. The focus is on how democratic recovery might be sequenced, not on which political coalition should lead it. This report is written from the vantage point of January 2026. Whilst some developments described herein have already occurred, others are projected based on current trajectories and stated policy intentions. The analysis that follows traces institutional trajectories to inform preparatory action.

The past year has brought substantial institutional change. The federal civil service has contracted sharply. Oversight mechanisms have been weakened. Executive authority has expanded. The information environment has fractured further. These developments are documented in Section 1.

[1] Abraham Lincoln, Annual Message to Congress, 1 December 1862, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 5, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 537.

As this report was being finalised, the human cost of institutional degradation became starkly visible. On January 7, 2026, Renée Nicole Good, a 37-year-old American mother, was shot and killed in Minneapolis by an ICE agent while sitting in her car. Seventeen days later, on January 24, Alex Pretti, also 37, an ICU nurse at the Minneapolis VA hospital serving as a legal observer, was pepper-sprayed, wrestled to the ground by federal agents, and shot dead while surrounded by six officers. They are named here because democratic erosion becomes real only when its consequences are attached to identifiable lives.

In both cases, senior administration figures publicly invoked the language of “domestic terrorism” to justify the use of lethal force, despite the absence of any charges or judicial findings to that effect. Video footage reviewed by multiple news organisations contradicts key elements of the official accounts. These were US citizens, killed by masked federal agents operating in an American city. The institutional erosion documented in this report is no longer an abstraction. It has a body count.

The question this report addresses is not whether degradation has occurred—that is now a matter of record—but what can be done in response, and when.

Peacebuilding ... provides a structured way to think about how to rebuild legitimate institutions when authority is disputed and confidence in governance is profoundly eroded

The challenge is that frameworks for democratic recovery in mature democracies barely exist. The literature on democratic erosion is extensive; the literature on successful re-democratisation is thin. A handful of cases offer partial lessons: South Korea's judicial accountability for presidential abuse, Poland's ongoing efforts to restore judicial independence, Brazil's post-Bolsonaro institutional rebuilding. None provides a proven template.

This report proposes that one of the few fields to have systematically addressed the sequencing problem of institutional reconstruction under conditions of contested legitimacy is post-conflict peacebuilding. The framework is borrowed not because the United States resembles a war-torn society, but because peacebuilding offers a developed body of practice on phased institutional repair that other literatures lack. It provides a structured way to think about how to rebuild legitimate institutions when authority is disputed and confidence in governance is profoundly eroded.

A note on scope: This report does not claim that the United States is equivalent to either a post-conflict state or a consolidated autocracy. The comparative references that follow illuminate mechanisms and sequences, not equivalence. The argument is conditional: if democratic repair is to succeed, then certain institutional foundations must be prepared in advance.

The report proceeds in three parts. Section 1 documents the institutional changes of the past year. Section 2 examines the problem of democratic recovery and explains why peacebuilding's phased approach may be relevant. Section 3 proposes a roadmap for democratic reconstruction, adapted from peacebuilding practice to the distinct circumstances of an advanced democracy facing institutional decline.

Section 1: The first year

The scale of institutional change during President Trump's second term has been substantial. This section documents key developments across five domains: the civil service, oversight institutions, executive authority, executive interference in electoral administration, and the information environment. The purpose is not to catalogue grievances but to establish the factual baseline from which any discussion of democratic repair must proceed.

1.1 CIVL SERVICE

The federal workforce has experienced its most substantial contraction in decades, driven not by a single policy decision but by a layered strategy combining formal reductions with sustained pressure on employees to exit. The Trump administration's efforts to reduce staffing across agencies resulted in the departure of more than 317,000 federal employees government-wide, a gross reduction of 13.7 per cent compared with September 2024 workforce levels, according to data from the Office of Personnel Management. During the same period, 68,000 new federal employees joined the civil service. The net effect was a workforce reduction of approximately 10.8 per cent. [2]

Losses were especially acute in departments that depend heavily on specialised professional expertise. The Department of Education's workforce was reduced by 42 per cent. The Treasury Department saw a reduction of nearly 28 per cent. At the Department of Housing and Urban Development, an estimated 23 per cent of the workforce has left since January 2025. [3]

A substantial share of these departures involved probationary employees who, under normal circumstances, would have transitioned into long-term public service roles. The mass termination of early-career staff severed a critical pipeline of institutional renewal at a moment when demographic turnover was already placing pressure on agency continuity.

A year-long investigation by *The Washington Post*, based on interviews with more than 1,200 current and former federal employees, documents how this transformation unfolded through overlapping mechanisms: a deferred resignation programme that incentivised early exit, mass termination of probationary staff, and formal reductions in force. Implementation was frequently chaotic. Agencies scrambled to rehire personnel they had mistakenly dismissed, including engineers responsible for nuclear weapons maintenance and staff operating the Veterans Crisis Line. [4]

In parallel, the administration revived and expanded Schedule F-style classifications, redefining large categories of civil servants as policy-determining roles subject to removal at will. This shift blurred the long-standing boundary between political leadership and professional administration, a distinction embedded in the US civil service system since the Pendleton Act of 1883. [5]

[2] Drew Friedman, "How Staffing Cuts in 2025 Transformed the Federal Workforce," *Federal News Network*, 1 January 2026.
[3] Emily Badger, Francesca Paris, and Alicia Parlapiano, "220,000 Fewer Workers: How Trump's Cuts Affected Every Federal Agency," *The New York Times*, 9 January 2026.
[4] Hannah Natanson and Meryl Kornfield, "The Year Trump Broke the Federal Government," *The Washington Post,* 21 December 2025.
[5] Donald Moynihan, "The Risks of Schedule F for Administrative Capacity and Government Accountability," Brookings Institution, 12 December 2023.

Cross-country research on similar workforce transformations, particularly cases of executive-led institutional hollowing, suggests a consistent pattern. Short-term gains in political responsiveness are purchased at the cost of long-term state capacity. Governments become more directive from the centre, but progressively less capable of effective implementation, policy learning, and crisis response. [6] The loss of professional expertise has already produced operational failures across multiple agencies. The Washington Post investigation illustrates how this erosion has translated into specific breakdowns. At the Social Security Administration, the closure of the Office of Civil Rights and Equal Opportunity left 150 employees who handled harassment cases and disability accommodations without a role. At NASA, an employee who emailed the agency's equal employment contact received an automated reply that the recipient "wasn't found at nasa.gov." [7]

The net result is not simply a smaller state, but one that is more politically compliant and less professionally resilient. Rebuilding capacity will require not only rehiring but also reconstituting professional cultures, institutional knowledge, and public trust. This work takes far longer than the erosion itself.

1.2 OVERSIGHT

Internal oversight mechanisms have faced systematic weakening. In 2025, inspectors general were dismissed, sidelined, or left unfilled across multiple agencies. As reported by the Project on Government Oversight and the Associated Press, the administration removed inspectors general at the Department of Defense, the Intelligence Community, the State Department, and other agencies, often without the advance notice to Congress required by statute.[8]

This neutralisation of internal watchdogs is not merely a personnel issue; it represents a fundamental disruption to the sequence of accountability. Inspectors general exist to provide contemporaneous accountability inside agencies, precisely because external oversight often arrives after harm has occurred. As internal oversight has weakened, accountability pressure has shifted toward slower, retrospective processes. In April 2025, the Government Accountability Office informed Congress that it was conducting thirty-nine investigations into potential violations of the Impoundment Control Act. This underscores how weakened internal oversight transfers accountability burdens onto external mechanisms ill-suited to prevention. [9]

The erosion of internal oversight creates compounding accountability deficits over time. When early warning systems for waste, fraud, and abuse are dismantled, failures compound without contemporaneous documentation. This creates blind spots that cannot be fully repaired during a later recovery. Future accountability efforts will confront evidentiary gaps rather than usable records, transforming processes of repair into polarised political theatre. The loss of institutional memory and the normalisation of irregular practices that accompany the decay of oversight functions are far more difficult to reverse than the initial act of dismissing an inspector general.

External oversight has faced parallel constraints. Congressional oversight capacity has been weakened by partisan division, restricted access to information, and expansive assertions of executive privilege. The Government Accountability Office continues to function but faces delays in obtaining agency cooperation. The cumulative effect is an executive branch operating with markedly reduced accountability.

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[6] Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016).
7] Natanson and Kornfield.
[8] "Trump Uses Mass Firings to Remove Independent Inspectors General at a Series of Agencies," April 2025; Project on Government Oversight (POGO), "President Trump's Firing of Inspectors General Threatens Government Accountability," *Associated Press,* 2025.
[9] U.S. Government Accountability Office, notification to Congress regarding investigations into potential violations of the Impoundment Control Act, April 2025.

1.3 EXECUTIVE AUTHORITY

The concentration of decision-making authority within the executive branch has accelerated through multiple channels. The administration has delayed, redirected, or withheld funds appropriated by Congress. Statutory limits on the dismissal of agency heads have been tested and, in some cases, ignored. Enforcement of existing laws has been selectively suspended in areas ranging from environmental protection to civil rights. Independent agencies, deliberately structured by Congress to operate with insulation from direct presidential control, have faced increasingly aggressive assertions of White House authority over their decision-making.[10]

This consolidation has extended beyond policy direction into the administration of law enforcement itself. In January 2026, the Department of Justice confirmed it had opened a criminal investigation into Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell, following months of public criticism by the President. [11, 12] Legal analysts warned that such actions risk transforming prosecutorial authority into an instrument of political leverage rather than impartial law enforcement. The investigation represents a departure from post-Watergate norms that established the institutional independence of the Federal Reserve and limited presidential influence over prosecutorial decisions targeting perceived political adversaries.

The implications extend beyond individual cases. When prosecutorial discretion becomes politically contingent, enforcement decisions across the federal system are reshaped in advance, as officials anticipate executive reaction rather than apply neutral legal standards. Officials whose authority depends on independence—central bankers, regulators, senior civil servants—operate under implicit threat. The effect is chilling rather than spectacular, shaping behaviour in advance rather than through visible sanction. The killings in Minneapolis in January 2026 made clear that this threat is no longer merely implicit.

Independent regulatory agencies have faced parallel pressures. The Federal Trade Commission, designed to function as a bipartisan body insulated from direct presidential control, has experienced sustained interference that has undermined its ability to operate effectively. Leadership instability, litigation against commissioners, and challenges to statutory independence have constrained the agency's capacity to pursue enforcement actions consistently. The result is not simply policy disagreement, but functional degradation of a regulatory institution whose statutory independence has historically insulated it from partisan command.

Judicial developments have reinforced this consolidation. The Supreme Court's 2024 decision in Trump v. United States established sweeping criminal immunity for acts falling within the presidency's core constitutional powers and presumptive immunity for other official conduct. Although the case involved a former president, the doctrine reshapes accountability for the office itself, substantially weakening legal constraints on executive power. [13] Beyond the Supreme Court, the federal appellate courts have emerged as an enabling mechanism for executive consolidation. A quantitative analysis by *The New York Times* found that appellate judges appointed during President Trump's first term voted overwhelmingly in favour of his administration's positions, at rates exceeding those of judges appointed by other Republican presidents.[14]

The administration has also made extensive use of emergency authorities, invoking them for immigration enforcement, trade policy, and domestic deployment of military resources. As emergency governance expands beyond its original legal scope and becomes routine rather than exceptional, ordinary legislative processes are bypassed and authority concentrates in ways that prove difficult to unwind. [15]

Institutional capacity has been selectively reallocated. Resources have shifted toward politically salient enforcement functions, particularly immigration, while less visible functions have eroded: public health surveillance, disaster response, scientific research, and regulatory enforcement. The state has not shrunk uniformly; it has been reshaped to serve political priorities at the expense of broader public functions.

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[10] Lauren McFerran and Celine McNicholas, "Trump's Assault on Independent Agencies Endangers Us All," Economic Policy Institute, 22 October 2025.
[11] "Statement from Federal Reserve Chair Jerome H. Powell," Federal Reserve, 11 January 2026.
[12] Ana Faguy and Osmond Chia, "US Fed Chair Jerome Powell under Criminal Investigation," *BBC News,* 12 January 2026.
[13] Trump v. United States, 603 U.S. 593 (2024).
[14] Adam Liptak, "Trump's 'Superstar' Appellate Judges Have Voted 133 to 12 in His Favor," *The New York Times,* 11 January 2026.
[15] Bruce Ackerman, *Before the Next Attack: Preserving Civil Liberties in an Age of Terrorism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

1.4 EXECUTIVE INTERFERENCE IN ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION

A particularly acute form of executive consolidation has been the multi-front campaign to reshape the administration of the 2026 midterm elections before any ballots are cast. This represents a qualitative change in the pattern of democratic degradation, moving from post-hoc challenges of unfavourable results to the pre-emptive manipulation of electoral infrastructure, personnel, and rules.

The strategy operates across at least four interconnected tracks simultaneously. First, federal election security infrastructure has been dismantled, most notably through the hollowing out of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and the termination of its Election Security Programme. This has left state and local election officials, particularly in smaller jurisdictions, without critical federal support for threat monitoring and technical services.

Second, the Department of Justice has pursued an unprecedented campaign to construct a de facto federal voter database by suing numerous states for their complete voter files. Critics argue this effort is designed to enable purges of voter rolls or to pre-position claims of electoral fraud.

Recent scholarship on state-level democratic backsliding underscores how sustained partisan strategies have targeted election administration itself, particularly through the capture of state and local governing bodies

Third, the administration has successfully pressured several Republican-controlled states to undertake unusual mid-decade partisan redistricting. This has triggered a redistricting ‘arms race’, with states like California responding in kind, eroding the norm of politically neutral, decennial line-drawing.

Fourth, individuals who promoted false claims about the 2020 election have been appointed to key operational positions with authority over voting rights enforcement and election security at the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security. This has poisoned the cooperative relationship between federal and state election officials, making the entire system more vulnerable.

Recent scholarship on state-level democratic backsliding underscores how sustained partisan strategies have targeted election administration itself, particularly through the capture of state and local governing bodies. [16]

The primary constraint on this campaign has been the constitutional assignment of election administration to state and local governments. This ‘federalism firewall’ has been tested by a barrage of lawsuits and political pressure, but state officials from both parties and the judiciary have, in several key instances, successfully resisted federal overreach. Whether this firewall can hold through the 2026 election cycle remains a critical and uncertain question.

{16] Patrick Marley and Yvonne Wingett Sanchez, "Trump Is Trying to Change How the Midterm Elections Are Conducted," *The Washington Post,* 12 January 2026. On CISA, see Carrie Levine and Jessica Huseman, "CISA Halts Support for States on Election Security," *Votebeat,* 11 March 2025. On voter file litigation, see Brennan Center for Justice, "Tracker of Justice Department Requests for Voter Information," updated January 2026; Jacob M. Grumbach, *Laboratories Against Democracy: How National Parties Transformed State Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

1.5 THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

The final domain of institutional change is the information environment itself, which can be understood as the epistemic infrastructure of democratic accountability—the shared basis of facts, evidence, and verification that makes public deliberation possible. The past year has accelerated trends that were already well-established: the decline of local news, the polarisation of national media, and the proliferation of disinformation.

What is new is the scale and coordination of efforts to delegitimise fact-based journalism and replace it with state-aligned narratives. The administration has used the White House press briefing not as a forum for public information but as a platform for attacking journalists and media organisations. It has selectively de-platformed critical outlets while granting privileged access to friendly media. It has also expanded the use of government-produced content that mimics the format of independent news, blurring the line between public information and propaganda. [17]

This strategy has been amplified by a network of allied media organisations and online influencers who systematically echo and reinforce the administration's narratives. The result is a closed information ecosystem that insulates a portion of the population from countervailing facts and perspectives. This is not simply a matter of media bias; it is the deliberate construction of an alternative public sphere in which the standards of evidence and verification that underpin professional journalism no longer apply. This fragmentation is not accidental. It is reinforced by platform algorithms optimised for engagement, which reward outrage and conflict over verification, accelerating polarisation and eroding shared public understanding. [18]

The erosion of a shared factual basis for public debate is perhaps the most difficult form of degradation to reverse. When citizens inhabit separate realities, the common ground required for democratic deliberation disappears. Without a shared epistemology, the core functions of democratic accountability—oversight, judicial review, and electoral accountability—cannot function. Rebuilding trust in media and restoring a shared understanding of facts is a long-term challenge that extends far beyond institutional reform.

Section 2: The problem of democratic recovery

A THIN EVIDENCE BASE

As documented in Section 1, democratic degradation in the United States has not occurred through isolated abuses or episodic departures from democratic norms, but through a system-wide process affecting state capacity, oversight and accountability, executive authority, electoral administration, and the information environment simultaneously. The challenge this creates is not only political but analytical: while the literature on democratic erosion is extensive, the record of successful democratic recovery in consolidated democracies is limited.

The cases of successful democratic recovery from erosion in consolidated democracies are few and recent. South Korea offers perhaps the clearest example. Mass civic mobilisation, judicial accountability for presidential abuse, and sustained institutional reform helped restore democratic norms after periods of authoritarian drift. But South Korea's success depended on specific conditions: a mobilised civil society, an independent judiciary willing to prosecute former presidents, and new political leadership that prioritised democratic stability. [19]

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[17] Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[18] Jordan Ryan, "When Algorithms Rewrite History: Governing the Digital Erosion of Democratic Memory," Global Outlook, Toda Peace Institute, 6 December 2025.
[19] Sunhyuk Kim, *The Politics of Democratization in Korea: The Role of Civil Society* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

Poland is currently attempting recovery after years of rule by the Law and Justice party. The effort has been partially successful but remains contested, with ongoing struggles over judicial independence and the legacy of institutional capture. Brazil under President Lula has sought to rebuild democratic institutions after the Bolsonaro years, but the process is incomplete and faces resistance. [20] These cases offer partial lessons, but none provides a template. Unlike the democratic transitions of the 1980s, recovery from erosion in mature democracies lacks a developed playbook.

This gap in the literature is not accidental. Democratic erosion in advanced democracies is a relatively recent phenomenon at scale. For much of the post–Cold War period, the prevailing assumption was that consolidated democracies had crossed a threshold beyond which serious backsliding was unlikely. That assumption has proven incorrect. But because the phenomenon is recent, the evidence base for recovery remains thin. We know more about how democracies erode than about how they repair themselves. Moreover, erosion in established democracies carries wider systemic effects: it relaxes pressures on authoritarian regimes and reduces incentives for democratic reform.

WHY PEACEBUILDING?

This report proposes that the phased approach developed in post-conflict peacebuilding may offer insights for democratic recovery. The contribution is methodological rather than contextual. Peacebuilding provides a framework for thinking about staged institutional repair, not an analogy to war-torn societies.

Why peacebuilding specifically, rather than constitutional reform literature, administrative law, or democratic theory? Peacebuilding is one of the few fields that has systematically addressed the sequencing problem. It asks how legitimate, functional institutions should be rebuilt under conditions of weak public confidence, disputed authority, and fragile coalitions—and in what order. The core insight of peacebuilding practice is that institutional reconstruction must be sequenced. Reforms attempted too early fail for lack of capacity or political support. Reforms attempted too late are blocked by entrenched interests that have consolidated during the interim. Effective transitions depend on groundwork laid in advance, followed by sustained consolidation. This phased logic, rather than the specific content of post-conflict interventions, is what transfers to the challenge of democratic repair.

Peacebuilding also offers hard-won lessons about what does not work. Maximalist reform agendas that attempt to transform everything at once typically fail. Accountability processes that prioritise punishment over institutional rebuilding can destabilise fragile transitions. External actors who impose solutions without local ownership rarely achieve durable results. These cautionary lessons are as relevant to democratic recovery as the positive prescriptions.

Three elements of peacebuilding practice seem particularly relevant to the challenge of democratic repair.

Preparation under constraint. The groundwork for reconstruction often must be laid before conditions are favourable. Documentation, coalition-building, and normative clarification can proceed even when political space is limited.

Limited transition windows. Experience from post-conflict transitions suggests that meaningful reform is possible only within limited windows, typically eighteen months to two years after a political opening. These windows close quickly as political capital dissipates and opposition reorganises.

The long horizon of consolidation. Peacebuilding distinguishes between immediate stabilisation and long-term consolidation. Institutions can be rebuilt relatively quickly; the norms and practices that sustain them develop over years. A new oversight body can be established in months, but the professional culture that makes it effective takes much longer.

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[20] Wojciech Sadurski, *Poland's Constitutional Breakdown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Thomas Carothers and McKenzie Carrier, "Democratic Recovery After Significant Backsliding: Emergent Lessons," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 April 2025.

It is important to be clear about what this framework does not assert. It does not claim that the United States is a failed state or a post-conflict society. It does not predict inevitable decline or assert that democratic recovery is impossible without external intervention. The United States retains institutional assets that many societies facing institutional stress lack: federalism, an independent judiciary, professional associations, civil society, and (still) a free press.

This comparison does not rest on equivalence, but on transferable institutional logic. Peacebuilding's staged approach to institutional reconstruction offers a useful framework for thinking about democratic repair in a context where no established framework exists.

There is also a violence-prevention dimension that connects this analysis directly to peacebuilding's core concerns. Countries are most vulnerable to violence during transitions, when authority is contested and institutions are unstable. Preparing the ground for eventual recovery is not only about restoring democratic function; it may also reduce the risk of instability and violence during that future transition. In this sense, democratic repair is a form of conflict prevention.

The three-phase framework proposed in the next section adapts these insights to the distinct circumstances of democratic repair in an advanced democracy. Phase I addresses preparation under constraint, drawing on peacebuilding's emphasis on groundwork laid before conditions are favourable. Phase II focuses on the limited transition window, informed by evidence that meaningful reform must occur within narrow timeframes. Phase III addresses long-term consolidation, recognising that institutional rebuilding and cultural renewal operate on different timescales.

Section 3: A phased roadmap for democratic repair

This section proposes a three-phase framework for democratic repair, adapted from peacebuilding practice to the circumstances of an advanced democracy facing institutional degradation. The phases are not rigid compartments; they overlap and reinforce one another. But each has a distinct purpose, and treating them as interchangeable would repeat errors observed in other recovery efforts.

PHASE I: PREPARATION UNDER CONSTRAINT

The first phase begins now, before political conditions are favourable. Its purpose is not to enact reform but to preserve capacity, document harm, and clarify norms so that future reform efforts are grounded in fact and readiness rather than improvisation. This preparatory logic draws on scholarship concerning transitional sequencing and the documentation of institutional change. [21]

Much of this work is already happening, though in fragmented form. Civil society organisations are documenting institutional changes. State attorneys general are mounting legal challenges. Professional associations are articulating ethical boundaries. Academic researchers are preserving records. The challenge is not to start from scratch but to coordinate, legitimise, and deepen efforts already underway.

Defensive resilience. Remaining pockets of professionalism and independence must be protected. At the federal level, this means defending career civil servants where statutory protections still apply and supporting oversight bodies where they retain legal standing. At state and local levels, it means strengthening legal protections for election administrators, judges, and public officials exposed to intimidation.

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[21] Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 5–21; Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths,* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011).

Systematic documentation. Democratic erosion thrives on contested narratives and institutional amnesia. Without a credible factual record, future accountability processes become polarised theatre rather than instruments of repair. Universities, professional associations, civil society organisations, and investigative journalists must document abuses of power, institutional changes, and normative violations. Documentation of how executive orders reclassified civil service positions, how oversight officials were removed, and how enforcement priorities shifted will be essential to any future accountability process.

Normative clarification. When emergency governance and executive overreach become normalised, citizens and officials lose clarity about what democracy requires. Leaders across political, civic, legal, and professional domains have a responsibility to articulate boundaries consistently and publicly.

Legislative and institutional preparation. Successful transitions do not improvise reform in real time. They enter transition windows with draft legislation, agreed frameworks, and coalitions already in place. In the US context, this means developing reconstruction-ready packages in several priority areas: civil service protection, oversight independence, emergency powers, and executive accountability.

PHASE II: THE TRANSITION WINDOW

Meaningful democratic repair occurs within limited windows that follow major political openings and close quickly as opposition reorganises and political capital dissipates. Phase II is defined by urgency and restraint in equal measure.

Restoring institutional guardrails. The first priority is reversing measures that politicised the civil service, re-establishing the independence of oversight officials, and reaffirming statutory limits on executive authority. Specific early actions might include rescinding executive orders that reclassified career positions, reinstating dismissed inspectors general, reaffirming the independence of the Department of Justice, and restoring scientific advisory committees. [22]

Calibrated accountability. Addressing past abuses without triggering cycles of retribution is among the most difficult challenges in democratic repair. The evidence from other recovery efforts suggests several principles: using independent commissions of inquiry to establish factual records; differentiating between political responsibility and criminal liability; ensuring any prosecutions are evidence-based, limited in scope, and insulated from political direction; and focusing on institutional as well as individual accountability. [23]

Coalition-building. No single party or faction can successfully reform a broken system alone. New administrations must actively build coalitions across partisan lines, including state governments from both parties, professional associations, business leaders concerned with rule of law, and civil society.

Discipline in agenda-setting. The temptation during transition is to pursue maximal reform across all domains simultaneously. Successful transitions prioritise reforms that lock in democratic guardrails—oversight, accountability, electoral integrity—before pursuing broader policy transformation. [24]

Yet even the most disciplined transition agenda addresses only the immediate institutional damage. The deeper work of democratic repair requires a longer horizon. Restoring guardrails and pursuing calibrated accountability are necessary but insufficient. They address symptoms of degradation without rebuilding the civic foundations that make democratic institutions resilient over time. This is where the transition from immediate repair to sustained renewal becomes essential.

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[22] Bruce Ackerman, *We the People: Foundations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991).
[23] Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Kathryn Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011); Tricia D. Olsen, Leigh A. Payne, and Andrew G. Reiter, *Transitional Justice in Balance* (Washington, DC: USIP Press, 2010).
[24] Nancy Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

PHASE III: LONG-TERM DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

Institutions can be rebuilt within years; democratic culture takes longer to restore. Phase III focuses on civic renewal, understood not as moral exhortation but as sustained institutional investment. This is where democratic repair aligns most closely with peacebuilding's emphasis on long-term consolidation. Durable stability depends not on institutional engineering alone, but on the slow cultivation of norms, practices, and civic capacities that enable institutions to function as intended. In the contemporary context, this work must engage directly with the power of social media and algorithmic systems, which now shape how citizens form political identities, encounter information, and relate to one another. [25]

The phased logic that governs earlier stages applies here as well, though over a longer horizon. Some civic investments, such as curriculum reform or campaign finance restructuring, require the political capital and legislative capacity that only a successful transition can provide. Others, such as supporting independent local journalism or expanding media literacy programmes, can begin during Phase I and scale during Phase III. The following priorities draw on broader democratic renewal literature alongside peacebuilding insights, and represent areas where sustained investment could strengthen democratic resilience over time.

Civic education. Rebuilding democratic culture requires a national commitment to civic education, not as a partisan exercise but as a core function of public schooling. Curricula should focus on constitutional principles, the history of democratic struggles, and the skills of civil discourse.

National service. Expanded national service programmes can rebuild social trust by bringing together young people from different backgrounds in common purpose. Service can be linked to tangible national needs, from infrastructure renewal to environmental conservation.

Media and information literacy. A healthy democracy requires citizens who can distinguish credible information from propaganda. This requires a multi-pronged effort: supporting independent local journalism, investing in public media, and integrating media literacy into school curricula. But it also requires confronting the role of platform algorithms that systematically reward outrage, polarisation, and misinformation. Long-term democratic renewal will depend not only on individual literacy, but on reforms to the design and governance of digital platforms so that they favour dialogue, exposure to shared facts, and mutual understanding rather than division. [26]

Campaign finance reform. The corrosive influence of money in politics is a long-standing vulnerability. Meaningful reform is politically difficult but essential for restoring public trust. This could include constitutional amendments to overturn decisions like Citizens United, public financing of elections, and stronger disclosure requirements.

Strengthening electoral integrity. Beyond immediate repairs, long-term renewal requires strengthening the infrastructure of elections: automatic voter registration, non-partisan redistricting, and federal protection for voting rights.

These are not quick fixes. They represent a sustained commitment to the work of rebuilding democratic culture from the ground up. The goal is not to restore a lost past but to build a more resilient and inclusive democracy fit for the political, technological, and social realities of the twenty-first century.

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[25] Jordan Ryan, “Reclaiming Attention: From Digital Conflict to Democratic Dialogue,” Policy Brief No. 263 (Tokyo: Toda Peace Institute, January 2026), drawing on Lisa Schirch et al., research on polarisation dynamics and prosocial technology design.
[26] Ibid.

Conclusion

Democratic repair is not a single event but a sustained process. It begins with preparation under constraint, moves through a limited window of opportunity for decisive action, and extends into the long-term work of civic renewal. The framework proposed in this report, adapted from peacebuilding's phased approach, is offered not as a rigid blueprint but as a conceptual map for navigating this complex terrain.

Focused on the United States, this framework nonetheless speaks to a broader challenge facing democracies worldwide. The emphasis on sequencing, the distinction between transition windows and long-term consolidation, and the focus on preparation under constraint are transferable principles. Poland, Brazil, and other societies attempting recovery from democratic erosion face similar sequencing dilemmas. The specific content of reforms will differ across contexts, but the underlying logic of phased repair may prove useful wherever democratic institutions have been weakened by executive overreach, institutional capture, polarising politics and the erosion of accountability.

President Lincoln's call to "disenthrall" was a warning that the most significant barriers to renewal are often the assumptions we are unwilling to question. In 1862, those assumptions concerned the permanence of the Union and the impossibility of emancipation. In 2026, they concern the self-correcting nature of American democracy, the indestructibility of its institutions, and the belief that repair can be improvised after the fact. These are dogmas of a quiet past. The present is not quiet.

The 2026 midterm elections will occur in less than ten months. As Section 1 documented, the campaign to reshape electoral conditions before ballots are cast is already well advanced across multiple fronts. Whether the federalism firewall can hold through November remains uncertain. This is not a hypothetical scenario for future consideration. It is the immediate context in which Phase I preparation must occur.

The work of thinking and acting anew cannot wait for more favourable conditions. Documentation must begin now, whilst institutional memory is intact and records are accessible. Defensive resilience must be strengthened now, before the next wave of dismissals and intimidation. Normative clarification must happen now, whilst the boundary between normal politics and democratic degradation is still visible. Legislative preparation must advance now, so that future transition windows are not wasted on improvisation.

The question is not whether Americans will eventually need to repair their democracy, but whether they will have prepared the ground to do so effectively when the opportunity arrives. This preparation is the work of this generation. It cannot be deferred.

FURTHER READING

Democratic Erosion and Recovery

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