Repairing Democratic Backsliding: Six Strategies for Higher Education

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Executive Summary

DURING A PERIOD OF GLOBAL DEMOCRATIC DECLINE, the democratic purposes of higher education are a matter of increasing urgency. Recognizing that fact, many colleges and universities have sought to repair democracy, for instance, by creating democracy institutes or initiatives. Yet this nascent field has yet to coalesce around a common understanding of its key theories of change. How can colleges and universities most impactfully protect, repair, and improve democracy? In this report, we seek to answer that question, blending findings from the growing research field on democratic backsliding with research on potential interventions.

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We first highlight the character of twenty-first-century democratic backsliding. Backsliding emerges slowly and is often not fully recognized as such until late in the process. Its initial opening is declining public faith in democratic political systems, but its key actors are political elites who take advantage of this declining faith to rise to power through populism and pernicious political polarization. These elites then undermine institutional constraints, tilt political competition in their favor, and finally attack and undermine independent civil society. As backsliding progresses, it becomes more difficult to repair. Thus, effective intervention should aim to reverse the backsliding process and repair democracy as early as possible.

Universities' unique social position makes them one key player among the many who together can facilitate this reversal and repair. Our examination of the literature indicates six empirically grounded interventions that universities are uniquely positioned to pursue: to *diagnose, defend, deliberate, develop, dispel,* and *draw together.* Some can be initiated rapidly and have the potential to yield immediate results, while others will require longer-term investments and may only bear fruit over years:

- **Short Term**

– Democratic backsliding is enabled by ignorance of the authoritarian playbook and a lack of understanding of the importance of institutional constraints in sustaining democracy. Only a relatively small percentage of the population of even the most highly educated countries attend institutions of higher education. Thus, to impact discourse beyond the campus, colleges and universities can leverage the expertise of their faculty and affiliates to ***diagnose*** the problems of democratic backsliding for the public through effective social science communication.

– Universities are also critical free spaces for the conversations and discussions that lead to civic mobilization, particularly among their students, and such mobilization is crucial for pushing back against democratic backsliding. Universities should thus ***defend*** their campuses against attempts to censor or squelch free expression and civil mobilization, including student protest (provided such protest follows basic norms of nonviolence).

- **Medium Term**

– Democratic backsliding is a predominantly elite phenomenon, and colleges and universities are the formative environments for most future political elites. They can thus ***develop*** democratic dispositions among both present and future elites through socialization into interpersonal networks with democratic norms and through personal incentives that appeal to their careers.

– Democratic backsliding is often fueled by "us-versus-them" polarization, which can blind supporters to the antidemocratic actions of their leaders. Colleges and universities are well positioned to establish spaces for people in their communities to ***deliberate*** across differences. A growing evidence base suggests such deliberation reduces polarization and can spark personal civic awakenings.

- **Long Term**

– Colleges and universities can shape the long-term views of their students through redesigning the curricula they teach. A robust civic education initiative that focuses on building understanding of how democratic backsliding works can ***dispel*** incomplete, majoritarian views of democracy and inform students of the importance of institutional constraints. This in turn can increase their sensitivity to the early stages of democratic backsliding, creating greater structures of accountability.

– Finally, almost all current rigorous research on repairing democratic backsliding focuses on individual or short-term outcomes. Yet democratic backsliding is a systemic trend taking place over extended periods at the state or national level. Even the best individual-level changes may have little impact when those individuals are embedded in a backsliding democratic system. Thus, colleges and universities should sponsor, fund, and conduct research that ***draws together*** individual interventions with local, state, and national-level outcomes over the long term to provide more robust evidence on what interventions are most effective in actually changing these larger political trends.

These intervention strategies come with varying risk-reward profiles and resource requirements. We conclude by highlighting some of the key questions for colleges and universities to consider when developing their mix of democracy-repair strategies, as well as how the constraints and affordances of different institutions may make varying strategies more or less appropriate and i mpactful.

Introduction

The world's democracies currently face a time of challenge.

The scale of this challenge has caught by surprise not just the optimists who proclaimed history over with the end of the Cold War (Fukuyama 1992), but many leading scholars of democracy. Long-standing scholarly consensus held that democracies became the "only game in town" after a certain amount of time and economic development (Linz and Stepan 1996; Svolik 2015). One particularly influential piece of research argued that, above an annual income threshold of $6,000 per capita, "democracies are impregnable and can be expected to live forever" (Przeworski et al. 1996, 41). The last decade of politics in places as diverse as Hungary, Turkey, Poland, and the United States has revealed the overconfidence of such predictions.[1]

This decline in democracy threatens higher education. There is a mutually reinforcing relationship between academic free thinking and free societies, and academic freedom is often an early casualty of democratic backsliding (Pelke 2023). As evidenced by attacks on Central European University by the authoritarian government of Hungary—"the most serious attack on academic freedom in Europe since the expulsion of German and Italian antifascist academics in the 1930s" (Ignatieff 2024, 201)—new authoritarians represent a direct challenge to the academic and institutional freedom of universities.

This threat has been widely recognized across higher education, sparking many wide-ranging conversations about the democratic purposes of higher education and the specific role of universities in protecting, repairing, and advancing democracy (Daniels, Shreve, and Spector 2021; Tierney 2021). However, the field has yet to develop shared understandings about what interventions will most impactfully leverage universities' unique social position to help repair democracy.

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Furthermore, while the unqualified optimism about democracy in the 1990s may have been unfounded, the current moment often sees an equally unfounded pessimism. There is often a sense that the forces driving democratic decline are so vast and systemic that their triumph is inevitable. Yet, after nearly twenty years of flat or declining levels of global democracy, today a robust scholarly literature across the social sciences understands much better the process of democratic backsliding and, critically, the processes through which such backsliding can be reversed and repaired.

Colleges and universities play many important social roles separate from their democratic purposes, from generating technological breakthroughs that transform our daily lives to providing insights

[1] There is significant debate about the global scale of democratic decline. For more optimistic takes on the current state of global democracy see Little and Meng (2024) or Treisman (2023).

into the core questions of the human condition that enrich our souls to serving as economic engines for impoverished communities. Yet it is critical to recognize that, while all these activities have value, they do not necessarily advance every socially desirable goal. We leave it to the specific college, university, and institute of democracy to consider how best to balance their limited resources across these various desirable outcomes. However, abundant research demonstrates close connections between democracy and most of these outcomes. For instance, democracies have better economic growth and less economic volatility (Colagrossi, Rossignoli, and Maggioni 2020; Knutsen 2021); better protection of human rights, including freedom of academic and artistic expression (Davenport and Armstrong 2004); and better public health outcomes than non-democracies (Lake and Baum 2001; Gerring, Knutsen, and Berge 2022). Thus, we encourage an Aristotelian line of thinking that considers that the advancement of any human endeavor, including the production and dissemination of knowledge at the heart of the mission of higher education, relies on a conducive social and political context, and democratic backsliding fundamentally undermines that conducive context. The authors of the influential Kalven Report from the University of Chicago express this idea as follows:

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> From time to time, instances will arise in which society, or segments of it, threaten the very mission of the university and its values of free inquiry. In such a crisis it becomes the obligation of the university as an institution to oppose such measures and actively defend its interests and its values. (Kalven et al. 1967, 2)

In this report, we apply the findings of the literature on democratic backsliding to generate actionable recommendations for colleges and universities seeking to defend those interests and values and to advance the democratic purposes of higher education. We base these recommendations on a wide-ranging review of the most influential studies on democratization, democratic backsliding, and democratic repair, with a particular focus on studies with rigorous, replicable methodologies (such as randomized controlled trials) or on systematic reviews that comprehensively analyze state-of-the-art knowledge. Since our topic is broad, our process was open-ended and iterative rather than strictly bound to a pre-specified set of search criteria or academic journals, as in a formal systematic review or meta-analysis.

We recommend six interventions that build on the strengths of colleges and universities. These interventions range from short-term changes that can be implemented quickly and yield fruit relatively immediately to longer-term initiatives whose impact may not be apparent in the short term but that will help transform the long-term political environment in a democratic direction.

In the short term, colleges and universities can ***diagnose*** the problems of democratic backsliding

through effective social science communication and can ***defend*** against attempts to repress free expression, particularly student activism, which is crucial for resisting democratic backsliding.

In the medium term, they can ***develop*** democratic attitudes among current and future political elites through programming that embeds students and alumni in social networks with democratic norms or that provides personal and professional incentives for democratic behavior. They can also help local communities ***deliberate*** to reduce pernicious polarization by hosting "deliberative minipublics" that bring people together across differences.

Finally, over the long term, colleges and universities can develop civic education curricula for their students that ***dispel*** incomplete majoritarian views of democracy and alert students to the dynamics of democratic backsliding. And they can fill a critical gap in the literature on democratic backsliding by ***drawing together*** research on short-term, individual-level interventions with state- and national-level trends.

How Democratic Backsliding Works

What is democratic backsliding, and how does it work? To understand why certain strategies may be more or less effective in repairing democracy, we must have a clear perspective of what the common processes of backsliding look like.

Numerous popular texts such as *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019), *On Tyranny* (Snyder 2017), and *Twilight of Democracy* (Applebaum 2020) have highlighted trends associated with democratic backsliding, often by drawing parallels to the historical breakdown of democracy in places such as Germany or Italy before the Second World War. These historical examples carry important and relevant lessons. Yet the academic literature on democratic backsliding highlights several ways in which twenty-first-century democratic backsliding is distinct from these historical examples (Bermeo 2016; Lührmann 2021; Jee, Lueders, and Myrick 2022). In particular, democracy's ideological dominance across most countries and the lack of viable ideological alternatives mean that most would-be authoritarians cloak their actions in the language of democracy, and rather than quickly and immediately seeking to overthrow and replace a democratic system (for instance through a violent coup d'etat), they move more slowly and subtly, laying the groundwork for their continued power.

This more gradual process typically progresses in five stages.[2] If democratic backsliding is not repaired at one stage, then a country moves to the next. With each stage, repair becomes more challenging. We briefly walk through these stages before turning to the question of higher-education strategies to repair democratic backsliding.

[2] This schema of democratic backsliding, while necessarily a simplified model of the process, follows the most common and influential perspectives in the contemporary literature, drawing particularly heavily on Lührmann (2021) and Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev (2023). While most of the literature adopts a similar, relatively linear perspective, see Wunsch and Blanchard (2023) for an alternative perspective highlighting the complexity of democratic backsliding.

Stage 1: Faith in a Democratic System Declines

The first stage in democratic backsliding is a political opening for antidemocratic elites through declining faith in and support for democracy or a country's current democratic system. Some critical mass of citizens feels disillusioned with the workings of the current democratic system and begins to seek alternatives.

While some scholars have argued that recent years have seen a general decline in support for the very idea of democracy around the world (Foa and Mounk 2016), this does not appear to be generally the case. Across most democratic countries, and even in countries that have gone through significant democratic backsliding, citizens still rate the importance of democracy as quite high (Svolik 2019; M. H. Graham and Svolik 2020; Hopkins 2023) and express strong opposition to explicitly antidemocratic actions (Frederiksen and Skaaning 2023). Instead, what tends to lose support is a country's specific democratic system: the political parties, laws, and institutions that make up a country's actual day-to-day politics.

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The sources of disillusionment vary, and research across cases identifies few common precipitants. High-profile political and economic corruption and rising crime have been important precipitants in some cases (Fernandez and Kuenzi 2010; Carothers and Hartnett 2024). Differences between one's personal conception of democracy and the specific democratic institutions in one's country are another (Landwehr and Steiner 2017).

Economic factors appear to have mixed effects on undermining faith in democratic systems. Economic crises often significantly reduce faith in democracy (Bernhard, Nordstrom, and Reenock 2001; Svolik 2015). But longer-term economic trends, such as rising economic inequality, do not appear to play a major role, despite pundits and some scholars frequently pointing to them as destabilizing factors. Inequality does poorly in explaining democratic backsliding (Haggard and Kaufman 2012; Waldner and Lust 2018). Most countries that have recently experienced democratic backsliding did so following periods of *declining* economic inequality (Carothers and Hartnett 2024), and the constituencies most supportive of antidemocratic politicians have not tended to be those most disadvantaged by economic inequality but rather those who have seen a decline in their *relative* status due to the rising fortunes of others (Meléndez and Kaltwasser 2021).

For example, the sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2016) documents how the rhetoric of the antidemocratic far right appealed to the emotional needs of people in the American Deep South. Hochschild documents in particular how these people understood politics through the lens of a "deep story" in which new ethnic and gender groups were "jumping the line" ahead of them in their progress towards the American dream through unfair government assistance.

Stopping democratic backsliding at this stage requires addressing the underlying factors that have led to disillusionment with the democratic system. In some cases, this may mean institutional reforms

to better address specific needs, such as countering corruption or reducing crime. In others, it may mean greater civic education and dialogue across differences to change the "deep stories" that are fueling disillusionment with democracy.

Stage 2: Anti-Pluralists Seek to Rise to Power

If a period of declining faith in the democratic system is not addressed, then it provides the opening for stage 2: an attempt by would-be authoritarian elites to seize control of state power.

Often these authoritarians adopt the language of populism, claiming that the sources of dissatisfaction from stage 1 are due to the actions of a corrupt elite or a sclerotic system of checks and balances (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). The authoritarian populist leader or party promises simple solutions to address these problems, typically by sweeping aside existing institutional constraints or exacting extra-institutional punishment on the elites.

"Pernicious polarization" often serves as a major acceleration force during this stage of democratic backsliding (Somer, McCoy, and Luke 2021). Some form of ideological polarization between political parties is healthy for democracies, providing meaningful electoral choices to citizens. Pernicious polarization moves from significant differences in policy vision to seeing one's political opponents as inherently and iredeemably corrupt, evil, or dedicated to the destruction of one's own way of life (Mason 2018; Iyengar et al. 2019). When politically polarized identities overlap with other axes of social discrimination, such as race, ethnicity, or gender, identity-based prejudice can super-charge the polarization process (Mason 2016; Bradley and Chauchard 2022).

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Whether authoritarian elites successfully rise to power at this stage depends on three factors: the degree of popular support they are able to mobilize, the level of mobilization opposing them, and the filtering process through which political institutions translate popular support into government control (Lührmann 2021). Ironically, given their frequent rhetoric of representing "the people," in most cases authoritarian populists have only been able to mobilize a minority of the population. They have only then achieved power either through divisions among their opponents (enabling them, for instance, to achieve a plurality of votes in a "first past the post" election) or through political institutions that disproportionately represent their constituencies (such as the electoral college in presidential elections in the United States).

Stopping democratic backsliding at this stage thus requires undermining support for would-be authoritarian elites; defusing the appeal of populism and pernicious polarization; increasing prodemocratic electoral mobilization, typically through forming cross-ideological coalitions large enough to shut authoritarians out of power; and reforming political institutions that provide authoritarians with openings.

Stage 3: The Attack on Institutions

If unchecked in the second stage, once in power, authoritarians seek to remain in power indefinitely through initiating the third stage of democratic backsliding: attacking the institutional forces that could constrain them. The most powerful of these is typically the judiciary, though regulatory agencies, electoral commissions, media authorities, the legislature, and universities may also serve to check antidemocratic impulses.

These "groundwork" actions for dismantling democracy typically receive little backlash because most ordinary citizens do not understand them or perceive them as antidemocratic (C. Clayton 2022; Van Lit, Van Ham, and Meijers 2023). This is in part due to polarized partisanship, which skews perceptions and makes supporters more forgiving of antidemocratic actions by leaders on "their team" (Ahlquist et al. 2018; M. H. Graham and Svolik 2020). Demonization of one's opponents can also make partisans more willing to forgive antidemocratic actions by their leaders because they believe their opponents are also willing to destroy democracy (Braley et al., 2023). Yet partisanship is only part of the issue. Across many democracies, most citizens have a "majoritarian" misunderstanding of democracy that views popularly elected leaders' actions as inherently possessing democratic legitimacy (Grossman et al. 2022; Mécs 2024). This means that even those who oppose an antidemocratic leader on partisan grounds may fail to understand the urgent implications of the leader's actions.

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The most effective means of countering democratic backsliding at this stage is through empowering and supporting institutional constraints. Effective judicial constraints on the executive, in particular, have a strong association with the protection of democracy during backsliding (Boese et al. 2021; B. A. T. Graham, Miller, and Strøm 2017). Political oppositions that attempt, on the other hand, to stop democratic backsliding at this stage with extra-institutional strategies (particularly any form of political violence or illegal seizure of power) run the risk of destroying democracy in order to save it. Their actions give credence to the anti-democrats' narrative, can mobilize the anti-pluralists' supporters, and can legitimize future government crackdowns against them (Gamboa 2017, 2023).

Stage 4: The Political Struggle

Once institutional constraints have been effectively removed, authoritarians are free to manipulate the organs of government to attempt to destabilize and eliminate their political opposition (Wunsch and Blanchard 2023). Unlike in the early twentieth century, in most backsliding democracies this does not typically involve the outright banning of all political opposition or widespread state-sanctioned political violence, because such actions risk making democratic backsliding explicit and undermining popular support. Instead, this typically involves measures to tilt the electoral playing field such that an opposition victory is near-impossible.

For example, in Hungary, soon after coming to power in 2010, the right-wing Fidesz party under Prime Minister Viktor Orban used their dominant position in parliament to significantly restructure the country's electoral system. They redrew district lines to advantage Fidesz candidates and made the proportional aspects of the country's electoral system more disproportional. The result was a system "tailored for the incumbent" that has allowed Fidesz to maintain a two-thirds majority in parliament until today despite failing to win a majority of votes in two subsequent elections (Maškarinec and Charvát 2023; Mécs 2024).

Thus, effective strategies for countering democratic backsliding involve coalition-building across political forces, mobilizing civil society, and facilitating defections in the ruling party.

Defeating democratic backsliding at this stage has typically required a massive political mobilization by anti-regime forces in a "negative coalition" (Beissinger 2013), often supplemented and supported by widespread pro-democracy mobilization from civil society and defections from the ruling party (Bunce and Wolchik 2011). Thus, effective strategies for countering democratic backsliding involve coalition-building across political forces, mobilizing civil society, and facilitating defections in the ruling party (Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev 2023).

Stage 5: The Civic Struggle

If authoritarians are successful at so drastically tilting the electoral playing field that even a massive pro-democracy coalition is unable to oust them, we are very close to approaching a full-fledged authoritarian regime where it is no longer meaningful to speak of democratic backsliding since the country is no longer a democracy. However, there is one last line of defense before democracy is fully eliminated: civil society.[3]

Civil society groups, including universities, play important roles at all stages of democratic backsliding. What distinguishes civil society's role at this stage is that, with the progression of authoritarian consolidation of power, it now stands essentially alone (Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev 2023). Institutional channels, including electoral channels, have been closed to meaningful political competition. Dissent, if it exists, may be criminalized or subject to widespread harassment and preventive repression (Sullivan 2015).

To reverse democratic backsliding at this stage is the most difficult of all. But the toolkit of civil resistance provides the best chance of doing so. Civil resistance is nonviolent, extra-institutional mobilization by unarmed civilians using tactics such as protests, strikes, and boycotts (Chenoweth 2021). Civil resistance is best known as a tool for countering dictatorships but has also been a powerful tool in countering democratic backsliding. Civil resistance campaigns during periods of

[3] While the role of civil society in democratic backsliding is generally positive, see Lorch (2021) for a discussion of cases in which civil society has been captured by political elites and then facilitates democratic backsliding.

democratic backsliding significantly increase the probability of protecting democracy (Pinckney and Trilling 2024). In movements as diverse as South Korea's "Candlelight Revolution," Ukraine's "Euromaidan" movement, or Senegal's "Don't Touch My Constitution" movement, ordinary citizens joined together in mass mobilization and protected democracy against breakdown (Yun and Min 2020; Rakner 2021; Pop-Eleches, Robertson, and Rosenfeld 2022).

Civil resistance is no panacea for democratic backsliding. In a study examining civil resistance in a random sample of democratic-backsliding spells, only 45 percent of civil resistance campaigns resulted in the protection of democracy (Pinckney and Trilling 2024). Civil resistance by excluded racial or ethnic minority groups comes with additional challenges, as such groups may lack political leverage over elites or be perceived as more violent than they actually are (Thurber 2019; Manekin and Mitts 2022).

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Strategies to halt democratic backsliding at this stage thus involve mobilizing civil resistance movements that can overcome the key challenges that separate successful and failed movements. Successful civil resistance movements are able to mobilize large numbers of people across identity-based barriers (Manekin, Mitts, and Zeira 2024), remain both resilient and nonviolent in the face of government repression (Pinckney 2016), and induce antidemocratic supporters to shift their loyalty (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Nepstad 2011). Building such movements is challenging, particularly since fear of the government in such repressive environments often makes ordinary citizens hesitant to express dissent (Kuran 1991; Kasuya and Miwa 2023). "Free spaces" for expressing social and political opinions without fear of negative consequences are often critical for mobilization in the early stages of such movements (Polletta 1999; Nepstad 2015), as is "protecting institutions" that have some leverage with the government and provide some safeguards to opposition (Amat 2018)—a point with particular relevance for universities, which we return to in our strategies for repairing democracy.

Strategies for Higher Education to Repair Democracy

Having laid out the stages of democratic backsliding, we now turn to the key question of this report: what can colleges and universities do to protect, repair, and advance democracy? The social and political role of universities is unique, and thus we root our recommendations in the functions universities serve. Different recommendations would be appropriate for civic activist groups, political elites, bureaucrats, religious leaders, or legal professionals.

Thus, we do not, for instance, focus on specific policy prescriptions for changing antidemocratic political institutions, as Levitsky and Ziblatt (2023) do in their book *Tyranny of the Minority*, or on general recommendations for movement-building and changing voting behavior, as Rachel Kleinfeld (2022) does. Instead, we focus on the core functions of universities and highlight what the literature tells us about how those core functions may be leveraged for repair across the democratic backsliding process.

Short-Term Interventions

Diagnose Democratic Backsliding

As we described above, one of the key characteristics of democratic backsliding in the twenty-first century is its self-obscuring nature. This means it can be difficult, even for well-informed citizens, to understand the antidemocratic implications of elite actions or the stage of democratic backsliding in which a country finds itself (and thus the most important steps to take at that moment).

Colleges and universities have a critical role to play in ***diagnosing*** and proposing solutions for democratic backsliding. This is partially a research function to understand the impact of particular policies and practices. Yet it is primarily a public engagement function. Universities that have faculty or affiliated fellows with the expertise to perform this diagnosis should speak clearly and powerfully about the impact that antidemocratic policies and practices will have and about the dangers of rising authoritarianism.

Pernicious polarization makes such speaking out challenging. In an age of rising misinformation, many experts are concerned that correcting misperceptions or sharing information about threats to democracy may be ineffective at best or provoke backlash at worst. And a popular discourse about the "death of expertise" in a "post-truth" era has led to skepticism that the public still trusts expert opinion or that presenting factual information has any effect (Nichols 2017; McIntyre 2018). Yet research indicates such concerns are at least somewhat overblown. In a review of cross-national survey data in Europe, Dommett and Pearce (2019) find that there is insufficient evidence to come to general conclusions about public perceptions of experts, but that what evidence does exist suggests generally positive public views of academic and scientific expertise. And in broader reviews of evidence across developed democracies, including the United States, Thunert (2021) says simply, "there is no across-the-board, uniform decline in trust in expertise" (71), while Nyhan (2020) says "claims that we live in a 'post-truth' society with widespread consumption of 'fake news' are not empirically supported" (222).

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Presenting facts, even on politically polarized issues, is often effective in correcting mistaken beliefs (Porter and Wood 2019; Coppock et al. 2023). While one highly influential study identified a "backfire effect," in which providing correct information on political issues strengthened false beliefs (Nyhan and Reifler 2010), other research has shown this effect to be "elusive" at best (Haglin 2017; Wood and Porter 2019; Nyhan et al. 2020; Swire-Thompson, DeGutis, and Lazer 2020; Walter et al. 2020). Even the original "backfire effect" study's authors have more recently argued that the consensus in the literature is that providing factual information on political issues does lead to modest improvements in the factual basis of political beliefs (Nyhan 2021). If communication from

experts can effectively shape public opinion and correct mistaken beliefs, why do such beliefs persist? The field identifies two key limitations: first, the efficacy of expert messaging decays rapidly over time as people get conflicting messages from other sources, typically political elites; and second, expert public messaging tends to be poorly targeted, only reaching audiences that are already sympathetic and interested in political information rather than those who are most in need of it (Tesler 2018; Druckman 2022; Nyhan 2021; Nyhan, Porter, and Wood 2022).

A growing research field has also identified the types of information that most effectively correct false political beliefs, reduce support for antidemocratic actions, and increase support for democracy, typically by examining small, rapidly scalable online interventions. The most significant of these studies, Voelkel et al. (2022), examined twenty-five possible messages aimed at reducing partisan animosity and antidemocratic attitudes in a sample of over thirty thousand Americans. They identified numerous interventions that reduced partisan animosity but found only two interventions that were particularly effective in changing antidemocratic attitudes: (1) providing survey takers with accurate information showing that members of the other political party support democracy more than they thought and (2) providing them with information on the devastating consequences of democratic backsliding. Numerous other studies have examined similar interventions, and while most research has been done in the United States (e.g. Braley et al. 2023; Mernyk et al. 2022), there is a rigorous cross-national evidence base as well (e.g. Finkel, Neundorf, and Rascón Ramírez 2024)

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The literature thus suggests that public messaging by the subject-matter experts housed in colleges and universities to diagnose how actions by antidemocratic politics negatively impact democracy can be effective in changing public attitudes and repairing democratic backsliding. However, such public engagement should be carefully strategized, with attention paid to the problem of decaying message efficacy from one-off interventions, the need to reach audiences unlikely to seek out political information on their own, and the specific types of messages that are likely to change attitudes about democratic backsliding. As an immediate first step, we thus recommend that colleges and universities develop public engagement strategies that consider these problems and begin to experiment in particular with various approaches in reaching hard-to-access audiences. Engagement with marketing departments, innovative approaches to sharing content on social media, and collaborating across partisan lines are all possible approaches that could help address these problems.

Defend against Attempts to Restrict Free Expression or Repress Student Protest

To combat democratic backsliding, universities should provide wide latitude to free expression and political organizing on their campuses, including student protest, and strenuously *defend* against attempts to repress or restrict the free discussion of ideas and the campus activism that emerges from those free discussions. This recommendation connects to current debates on student activism and the role of the university and generally follows arguments from free speech advocacy groups such as the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) and foundational documents advocating for the strenuous defense of free speech in college and university settings such as the Kalven Report or Chicago Principles. Where our recommendation differs is on the rationale for defending student organizing and free expression on campus. Not only is defending students' free expression against restriction or repression an important expression of a university's commitment to free and open inquiry, but it is also a strategic way of fostering a vigorous civil society to protect democracy.

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There is robust literature showing a close association between universities, student-led protest, and democracy. Student activists were core to the US civil rights movement, particularly the lunch-counter sit-ins (Biggs and Andrews 2015; Hale 2016); to the global anti-Apartheid movement (Soule 1997); and to almost all the major antiauthoritarian movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including the wave of nonviolent revolutions that brought down the Communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and brought those countries into the global market economy (Ash 2014; Nikolayenko 2007; Ghonim 2012). Student movements around the world today are at still at the forefront of advancing freedom and democracy—for instance, in Venezuela students have organized against socialist dictators Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro (Brading 2012; Puyosa 2019), and in several countries across sub-Saharan Africa, student groups have played a key role in movements against presidential power grabs (Rakner 2021). As we wrote this report, student protesters took to the streets in Bangladesh against the backsliding regime of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, successfully ousted her from power, and have initiated a democratic transition led by Nobel Peace Laureate Muhammad Yunus. Universities' presence is associated with more widespread peaceful protest, and movements led by students are more likely to be peaceful than other movements (Dahlum 2019; Dahlum and Wig 2021; Zeira 2019).

There is an extensive evidence base showing positive effects of nonviolent activism at the individual, local, and national level. At an individual level, studies have found positive effects of participation in activism on feelings of belonging, personal efficacy, self-confidence, and general

mental health (Klar and Kasser 2009; Vestergren, Drury, and Chiriac 2017). Peaceful protests on rights or democracy-related issues significantly shift vote shares toward political candidates who are more supportive of those issues (Wasow 2020; Caren, Andrews, and Nelson 2023; Pinckney 2024). They can also lead to long-term prodemocratic changes in political attitudes. Mazumder (2018) finds that peaceful civil rights protests in the 1960s in the United States still reduce racial prejudice almost sixty years later. And at a national level, large, diverse nonviolent movements have significantly improved democracy in some of the most challenging political environments (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Celestino and Gleditsch 2013; Pinckney 2020) and helped protect against democratic backsliding (Pinckney and Trilling 2024).

In the final stage of democratic backsliding, mass nonviolent action that brings millions to the streets is the crucial last line of defense before authoritarianism. However, these mobilized masses rising to defend democracy do not come out of nowhere. They are built on the back of years, sometimes decades, of free discussion about social and political challenges, as well as the organizing and mobilizing work to turn those discussions into political power (Han, Baggetta, and Oser 2024). Rosa Parks's decision to not give up her seat on a segregated Montgomery bus only sparked a mass movement because the NAACP and Black churches had the organizational capacity to lead that movement (King 1958). And the mass mobilizations of the 2011 "Arab Spring," though often imagined as rapid, spontaneous uprisings, actually followed and built upon years of organized protest on labor issues, student rights, electoral fraud, the invasion of Iraq, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Ghonim 2012; Roberts et al. 2016).

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While institutional and political elites play more prominent roles in the earlier stages of democratic backsliding, civic activism to mobilize opposition and exert pressure on antidemocratic elites is crucial throughout the process (Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev 2023). Having a pro-democracy movement that is as broad, energized, and empowered as possible is a critical aspect of reversing democratic backsliding. And a pro-democracy movement without student activists will be a severely weakened, disempowered movement. Leaders in higher education thus play an important role in protecting and fostering such a movement.

The example of the American civil rights movement is instructive here. Sit-ins led by college and university students played a key role in jump-starting the second wave of civil rights activism in 1960. Such sit-ins were more likely to thrive and succeed when sympathetic university administrators, such as Fisk University President Stephen Wright, resisted pressure from influential donors and public figures to crack down on the movement (Turner 2010). This success in turn helped reinvigorate the civil rights movement at a critical moment, with a direct line to the movement's judicial and legislative successes in the mid-sixties.

Such sympathetic decisions by administrators were far from easy. While the civil rights movement has today assumed an almost mythical stature in American public life, when it was underway its leading activists were subject to critiques very similar to those that opponents often level at student activists today. Student sit-ins were deeply unpopular across the country, and even when entirely nonviolent, they were widely condemned as disruptive, offensive, or even "riotous" (Franklin 2003, 207). Many colleges and universities listened to these condemnations and expelled hundreds of leading Black student activists, typically justifying expulsions by claiming that student activism violated student conduct policies or disrupted the institution's normal educational functions (Turner 2010). Among those expelled was the late Rev. James Lawson, one of the central architects of the civil rights movement's strategy of nonviolent resistance and most influential trainers of nonviolence. Vanderbilt University expelled Rev.
Lawson in 1960, only to welcome him back as a distinguished professor in 2006. Colleges and universities considering their approaches to free expression and democratic political mobilization should consider their actions in the light of this historical example.

There are reasonable bounds to the latitude we recommend. Engaging in physical violence or threats of violence is always unacceptable. Violent protest is both antidemocratic in character and strategically counterproductive, undermining support for its goals (Wasow 2020; Abbs and Gleditsch 2021). However, universities should resist attempts to paint student protest as violent due to disagreement with student protesters' objectives or distaste for their confrontational rhetoric or tactics.

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More complicated are questions of how universities should respond to forms of protest that interfere with others' rights to free expression, genuinely disrupt core university activities, or violate university rules. Civil disobedience, in which protesters intentionally violate rules or regulations to more powerfully express their dissent, is an important part of the protest toolkit, and thus we argue should still be extended latitude. Yet the value of disruption and dissent, while significant, must of course be weighed against the larger mission of the university. Archon Fung (2024) lays out one framework that recognizes both the value of student civil disobedience and the challenges that come with disruption. Building on an earlier set of forty-nine recommendations from a University of California system report (Edley and Robinson 2012), Fung provides a series of thoughtful questions for universities to consider when facing disruptive protest, including considering what level of disruption necessitates police action, how much force would be appropriate in response to that action, and what other nonviolent, non-police options are available to resolve campus protest.

It is beyond the scope of this report to offer specific policy guidelines for where the individual college or university should place these bounds of latitude. Yet, based on the evidence presented

above, we encourage colleges and universities to push towards greater openness to free expression generally, and student activism in particular. In their student bodies, colleges and universities already have one of the most powerful forces for protecting, repairing, and advancing democracy. All they need to do for this powerful force to operate is to maintain themselves as a free and open space.

Medium-Term Interventions

Deliberate to Combat Pernicious Polarization

Pernicious polarization is critical both for facilitating authoritarians' rise to power in the second stage of democratic backsliding and for ensuring their supporters continue to support their actions once they are in power in later stages. Thus, combating pernicious polarization is an important part of combating democratic backsliding. Colleges and universities can play a role here by fostering *deliberation* in their local communities. There is a lengthy academic literature examining deliberative democracy, in which political questions are decided through intensive discussion motivated by a desire for the public good (Elstub 2018; Dryzek et al. 2019), and participatory or "open" democracy, in which ordinary citizens play a more prominent role in making decisions about public policy (Landemore 2020). Mainstream political science has often been skeptical that deliberation can be effective in countering the strong, polarized identities of modern politics (Achen and Bartels 2016). However, a growing, rigorous evidence base challenges that longstanding opinion.

Numerous studies have found that "deliberative minipublics," in which groups of citizens engage in an intensive deliberation process about matters of public concern with structured facilitation by experts, can lead to several positive outcomes for democracy (J. S. Fishkin 2009; Grönlund, Setälä, and Herne 2010; Grönlund, Herne, and Setälä 2017; Setälä and Smith 2018). Participating in such deliberative exercises increases understanding among those who disagree, increases empathy toward out-groups, and tends to move political opinion closer to consensus (Andersen and Hansen 2007; Niemeyer and Dryzek 2007; Farrar et al. 2009). Many of these effects, though not all, also endure for weeks, months, or even years after the minipublic (van der Does and Jacquet 2023).

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Nor are the impacts of deliberative minipublics limited to their participants. Evidence on "spillover" effects from deliberative minipublics is mixed, largely because little rigorous research has been done on it. Yet a recent systematic review finds that minipublics can both change the minds of nonparticipants on some policy issues and stimulate more informed political discussions (van der Does and Jacquet 2023). Learning about a minipublic's conclusions increases empathy toward one's political opponents (Suiter et al. 2020). And publicizing the deliberative process and recommendations of minipublics may be particularly impactful in countering the appeal of antidemocratic populists. In a survey following the public release of recommendations on a new voting system from a deliberative

minipublic in the Canadian province of British Columbia, populists were more likely to support the recommendations because they believed the participants were "ordinary citizens like me" (Cutler et al. 2008, 179–80).[4]

One particularly prominent experiment in deliberative democracy happened in 2019, when the "America in One Room" (AI1R) study gathered a representative sample of around six hundred Americans for a long weekend in Dallas. The AI1R participants engaged in facilitated discussion on five public policy topics that polling had identified as particularly crucial in the 2020 election. The study had striking results, significantly improving feelings toward members of the other party, with the strongest effects observed among those who had previously had heavily polarized opinions (J. Fishkin et al. 2021). In addition to identifying short-term effects immediately after the long weekend, AI1R also conducted follow-up surveys before and after the 2020 election (over a year later), which showed an enduring "civic awakening" among many participants that led to significant changes not just in attitudes but in voting behavior (J. Fishkin et al. 2024).

What makes for effective deliberation? The research has settled on a few key characteristics. First, the makeup of groups should be diverse and representative to prevent polarization and groupthink (Mercier and Landemore 2012; Caluwaerts et al. 2023; Dryzek et al. 2019; Setälä and Smith 2018).[5] Second, deliberative processes should begin with group-building exercises, particularly ones that allow group participants to formulate and come to consensus on their own behavioral standards (Niemeyer et al. 2024). Third, discussion should be actively facilitated such that participants must listen to the opinions of others and publicly justify their viewpoint to those who disagree with them, which can help prevent confirmation bias (Caluwaerts et al. 2023; Spada and Vreeland 2013). Fourth, facilitation by nonpartisan experts can help ensure that deliberation is well-informed and that no participants feel that they are being targeted or judged for their political opinions (J. Fishkin et al. 2021). Fifth and finally, while research in this area is ongoing, recent systematic reviews indicate that reductions in polarization are much more likely with in-person deliberation rather than online deliberation (Caluwaerts et al. 2023).

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Colleges and universities are ideal environments in which to scale up deliberative minipublics. In cities and towns across most of the world's democracies,

[4] Though see Doyle and Walsh (2021) for a critique of deliberative minipublics' capacity to counter populist narratives.

[5] Though Strandberg, Himmelroos, and Grönlund (2019) find that, even when groups are ideologically polarized, the careful introduction of discussion rules that embody deliberative norms and a neutral facilitator who enforces those discussion rules can alleviate polarization.

institutions of higher education are anchoring social settings that are well known, respected, and relatively neutral. The academic setting can naturally prime participants towards thinking in more deliberative terms. Most colleges and universities with departments of political science or government already have subject matter experts to facilitate deliberative conversations; almost all have experts in pedagogy to assist in facilitation; and all have physical classroom spaces of various sizes that can be repurposed for special deliberative events.

Develop Democratic Dispositions among Elites

Much of the discourse on repairing democratic backsliding focuses on changing the perspectives or attitudes of average citizens. Yet, while citizen attitudes may provide an opening in the initial stage of democratic backsliding, it is the actions of political, social, and economic elites that are primarily to blame for dismantling democracy (Applebaum 2020). Elites run on populist platforms and mobilize based on pernicious polarization. Once in power, it is elites who attack constraining institutions and change the rules to eliminate political competition. Most antidemocratic actions remain unpopular, and they typically only succeed because they start out obscure and poorly understood, or because elites frame them in highly partisan terms or cloak them in disinformation.

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Improving citizens' understanding, as described above, may help repair democratic backsliding by reducing demand for antidemocratic policies. But there is abundant research that the vast majority of people tend to follow elite cues in how they interpret political issues (Achen and Bartels 2016; K. Clayton et al. 2021; Tappin 2022). Efforts that ignore the elite component of democratic backsliding are thus unlikely to work. Even a massive investment in civic education for all will likely fail if political elites continue to behave in antidemocratic ways. Thus, democratic dispositions among elites must be ***developed.*** Political elites must be disposed to not take advantage of positions of power to undermine democracy, or when facing antidemocratic actions by their copartisans, to behave in courageous, self-sacrificial ways.

How can such dispositions be developed? We are not aware of any systematic research investigating attempts to change political elites' dispositions in the context of democratic backsliding. But there is an extensive literature on how elite socialization has impacted transitions to democracy. A unified political elite that agrees on democratic politics is often considered a prerequisite to democracy (Higley and Burton 1989). Positive attitudes toward democracy among elites increase the more elites spend time in environments where democracy is valued, such as international institutions (Freyburg 2015), or even with time spent living and working in democracies (Grewal 2020).

Universities in democracies have been important environments that foster these pro-democracy attitudes among future elites in non-democracies. Countries become more likely to democratize as

more of their youth study abroad in democracies (Spilimbergo 2009). Countries are also more likely to transition to democracy and less likely to engage in military conflict when a leader educated in a Western university is in power (Gift and Krcmaric 2017; Barceló 2020). This effect in fostering prodemocratic attitudes among future leaders is particularly pronounced in universities that are autonomous from the state and have more egalitarian classroom structures, and among leaders who studied humanities or social sciences (Nieman and Allamong 2023).

Thus, we have good reason to believe that just as universities have socialized elites in nondemocratic countries toward democratic attitudes, so they may help change elite attitudes toward democratic backsliding. Across most democratic countries, universities, particularly top universities, provide the crucial formation ground in which future political, social, and economic elites are forged and around which many of the most powerful elite social networks revolve. They often remain sites to which future leaders retain strong emotional bonds.

To counter democratic backsliding at the elite level, universities can leverage this position as sites of socialization and central nodes in influential social networks. Two types of programs to change elite incentives would likely be most influential: programs that change social norms through keeping future elites embedded in environments that value democracy, and programs that provide direct personal incentives that increase the appeal of standing up for democracy and reduce potential harms from doing so.

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The first type of program could, for instance, involve identifying students and alumni who are moving into positions of political, social, or economic leadership either domestically or internationally (for instance, outstanding students in political science, economics, or law), and creating professional networks with regular meetings focused on reinforcing democratic values. Building such networks, particularly across political, racial, or ethnic divides, could help facilitate the emergence of shared value systems that make antidemocratic action normatively unacceptable.

The second type of program could include interventions such as providing competitive and prestigious awards to elites who take courageous actions standing up for democracy, or programs that give elites who have taken such stands visiting scholar or research fellow positions from which they can relaunch political or professional careers.

It should be stated clearly that the evidence base for these recommendations on developing democratic dispositions among elites, while resting on well-researched principles and having clear connections to other research areas, is limited at best. While much excellent research has been done on other aspects of elite politics (e.g. Teles 2008), studying elites in a systematic, rigorous way comes

with many challenges (Semenova 2017), and little to no research has been done specifically looking at interventions in the context of democratic backsliding. Thus, in addition to carefully researching impact, institutes of democracy should be open to trial and error and experimentation when it comes to their strategies for shifting elite dispositions. This uncertain evidence base should not dissuade institutes of democracy from attempting elite-level intervention, though, as such interventions likely represent one of the most likely means of directly influencing national-level protection of democracy.

Long-Term Interventions

Dispel the Majoritarian Myth through Civic Education

Perhaps the most-proposed intervention for higher education to counter democratic backsliding, at least in the United States, is expanded civic education. Bridgeland, Muñoz, and Allen (2024) argue that "to maintain a free society, Americans have to understand democratic norms, values, and the role of institutions" and thus call for university faculty to "creat[e] required civic curricula." Daniels, Shreve, and Spector (2021) similarly argue that "colleges and universities…should ensure that every student they teach is required to engage in some training in democratic citizenship." Significant resources have been invested in such efforts, both in the United States and around the world.

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What does the evidence say about civic education, particularly its capacity to impact processes of democratic backsliding?

Civic education, both in the United States and internationally, has been abundantly studied, with most studies finding some form of positive effect on outcomes such as increased political knowledge, political engagement, or civic feeling among the individuals who receive it (Galston 2001; Bratton et al. 1999; Finkel and Ernst 2005; Jerome et al. 2024).

The literature on civic education has also settled on some generally well-accepted and understood best practices. For example, civic education tends to increase political knowledge and civic engagement when it takes place in an open classroom environment focused on discussions rather than lectures, when it allows students to directly wrestle with controversial issues of the day without censorship, and when it provides opportunities for students to engage in democratic practices (Martens and Gainous 2013; Lee, White, and Dong 2021; Clark 2023; Jerome et al. 2024).

However, much of the literature to date has been interpretive or qualitative, and even quantitative studies have rarely incorporated rigorous methods for identifying impact, such as random assignment of treatment or comparison to a control group (Campbell 2019; Jerome et al. 2024). Much of it also focuses on high-school civic education rather than university-level civic education. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis limited to rigorous experimental studies came to more sobering conclusions, finding on average no effect on support for democracy in twenty-five adult civic education interventions across several countries (Finkel et al. 2023).

Furthermore, almost no studies on civic education seek to measure outcomes beyond the individual, and few look beyond the immediate aftermath of the civic education intervention. This means that anything we can say about the impacts of civic education on national-level democratic backsliding relies on several logical leaps that the data does not directly support.

One exception is Fesnic (2016), who compares high-school civic education in Poland and Hungary, two countries that both democratized in 1989 and established civic education initiatives at the same time. They argue that differences in civic education practice across the two countries (for instance, that in Poland civics is its own subject while in Hungary it is taught as a component of history) help explain higher levels of support for democracy in Poland and the greater resilience of democracy there. Yet this study is purely correlational.

Thus, while increased civic education may have positive effects on preserving democracy, particularly in countries like the United States where civic education has received declining resources, its national-level impact on democratic backsliding is uncertain. Significantly more rigorous research is required to establish whether comprehensive civic education programs can significantly impact democratic backsliding (a theme we return to below).

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A further complication comes from the character of democratic backsliding. While there is an intuitive connection between having a high level of political knowledge and support for democracy, this intuitive connection is not necessarily borne out. Indeed, some studies show a strong correlation between political knowledge and the pernicious polarization that fuels democratic backsliding (Clark 2023; Suk et al. 2022). Even a high degree of political knowledge and political engagement is unlikely to reduce the appeal of populist leaders following the stages of democratic backsliding laid out above, since such leaders hide their antidemocratic objectives.

Where we recommend civic education efforts should focus is on the specific toolkit of democratic backsliding. Citizens' critical knowledge gap during democratic backsliding lies not in their general understanding of or approval for the idea of democracy (which, as mentioned previously, has tended to remain high), but rather in not correctly identifying authoritarian leaders' actions as antidemocratic. As mentioned previously, research shows that many citizens of democracies believe a "majoritarian myth" that views popularly elected leaders' actions as inherently possessing democratic legitimacy (Grossman et al. 2022; Mécs 2024), and do not understand how the attacks on institutions or political opposition characteristics of democratic backsliding undermine the vitality of democracy.

Thus, to effectively inoculate citizens against authoritarians' appeal, civic education efforts should aim to ***dispel*** this majoritarian myth, helping citizens understand not just how democracy works or why it matters, but how it is undermined. Universities should approach this aspect of course design with care and ensure that critiques of democratic backsliding do not simply slide into critiques of

politicians or political parties with which the instructor happens to disagree. One way to approach this is through carefully rooting content in the broad, cross-national literature on democratic backsliding described earlier in this report and encouraging students themselves to consider how these frameworks may or may not apply to their own country's politics.

Draw Together Research Across Levels of Analysis

The final intervention area is research. We close our recommendations with research because discussion of the prior recommendations should make clear that, while there is interesting and growing evidence in many of these intervention areas, significant research work remains to be done to better understand them. We understand the phenomenon of democratic backsliding well, and understanding the phenomenon well lends intuitive support to the interventions we have described here, but much more evidence needs to be collected.

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In particular, there is a major gap between research on the problem of democratic backsliding, which focuses on the national or state level, and that on the strategies for repair, the most rigorous of which focuses on the individual level and typically examines relatively short timeframes. This is driven by the possibilities of what is easy, inexpensive, and quick to study. A survey experiment priming people to think about democracy can be run online with just a few thousand dollars, and results can be ready for analysis and write-up in weeks. Given the "publish or perish" incentives facing academics—particularly junior academics—in a highly competitive job market, this focus is unsurprising.

Yet this focus also significantly limits our capacity to say useful things about how to repair democratic backsliding. Democratic backsliding is a systemic problem whose roots go deep. Even the best-studied interventions do not fully address this systemic level or rely on tenuous inferential leaps. To believe that dispelling majoritarian myths through civic education, diagnosing the phenomenon, or deliberative minipublics can impact democratic backsliding requires assuming that, if scaled-up, the individual-level effects previously identified would hold relatively constant and lead to population-level shifts in attitudes and behaviors. This is a huge jump away from the current evidence base. We do not really know if what works in changing small numbers of individuals will, if scaled up, change the political trajectories of states and nations.

Thus, to repair democratic backsliding, colleges and universities should focus on developing a robust, rigorous evidence base that bridges this divide, taking the best-understood individual-level, short-term interventions and scaling them so their impacts can be measured on a local, state, or even national scale and can be traced over longer time horizons. Such studies would be expensive and difficult to implement. Yet, with sufficient time and resources, they would provide perhaps the greatest value added for colleges and universities in protecting and repairing democracy.

What might such research look like? On civic education, implementing a requirement that all

students complete a course in democratic citizenship (with a focus on understanding and dispelling the majoritarian myth) should be combined with a rigorous, long-term evaluation strategy that includes a component looking beyond individual-level effects. Randomly assigning a required course would likely be impractical, but students in the cohort immediately before the requirement's implementation could easily be a reasonable control group for a multiyear (or multidecade) study tracking civic engagement, voting behavior, and support for democracy using a difference-in-difference study design. By keeping track of the places where students who have completed this course later live, future studies could also examine whether the individual-level effects of civic education spill over to local-level political outcomes.

Deliberative minipublics would be an intervention more amenable to a traditional randomized controlled trial (RCT), with outcomes measured at the local or state level. Colleges and universities could host a series of deliberative minipublics for participants from specific cities, towns, or counties, with the locality randomized. Electoral, behavioral, or local-level attitudinal outcomes could then be measured to see whether the effects of the deliberative minipublic affect local-level politics. While a national-level RCT in a country the size of the United States would almost certainly be beyond the resources of any single college or university, such a national-level study might be possible in a smaller country. Even in the United States, collaboration between institutions could approach national-level outcomes.

Research that bridges interventions at the elite level with long-term or national-level outcomes would be more difficult to conduct. Yet here too there is room to develop interesting or innovative research designs. Programs that seek to socialize elites into more prodemocratic behavior through embedding them in pro-democracy social networks could employ waitlist control group designs, where those who participate in the program are compared with those who sought to participate but were unable to do so. Similarly, the effects of providing an award or other special recognition to elites who take costly actions to protect democracy could be compared to the follow-on behaviors of finalists for the recognition or award. Given the disproportionate impact of elites in both undermining and protecting democracy, drawing inferences from these individual-level comparisons to national-level outcomes would be more defensible.

There is a risk that, after a huge investment of time and resources, they might not work! The difficulty of publishing research with negative results looms large for many social scientists, making them hesitant to pursue ambitious research projects.

Such large, ambitious research programs come with risks. In particular, there is a risk that, after a huge investment of time and resources, they might not work! The difficulty of publishing research with negative results looms large for many social scientists, making them hesitant to pursue ambitious research projects. The foundations and grant agencies that fund research similarly are hesitant to invest time and resources in bold experiments. Yet knowing what does not work in

repairing democratic backsliding is just as crucial as knowing what works! Colleges and universities should thus think carefully about how they can change the cultural norms, academic promotion standards, and criteria for grantmaking that reward safe and easy research and instead shift their standards to reward ambitious, rigorously designed research with the possibility of shedding more light on the national-level dynamics of democratic backsliding.

The open science movement has made several innovations that are helpful in changing this mindset, for instance by providing avenues to publish "registered reports" where a journal evaluates the importance and rigor of a research design and conditionally accepts a manuscript for publication prior to data being collected or results being known. Yet, while such innovations have been widely accepted in the physical sciences, they remain peripheral to most of the social sciences, where most research relevant to democratic backsliding takes place. Bringing these norms to the mainstream by making them a key part of their own research practice would be another value added for institutes of democracy.

Conclusion

Democratic backsliding in the twenty-first century, while initially an "unwelcome surprise" (Waldner and Lust 2018), is now a well-understood process with predictable steps.

This report presents a menu of actionable interventions for colleges and universities to consider in response to this well-understood process. Table 1 summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of these interventions, based on three core considerations of any organizational strategy: risk, reward, and timeframe.

Both civic education to dispel the majoritarian myth and deliberation to reduce polarization are low risk, since there is a solid evidence base supporting their individual-level effects. These are positive interventions unlikely to lead to significant organizational backlash and likely to successfully achieve their individual-level goals. However, they are also low reward, because so much of democratic backsliding comes from choices by elites that are not directly affected by interventions focused on the general public, because changing national-level trends would require these interventions to reach a likely impractical scale, and because we do not know, even if these interventions reached that scale, if they would have a national-level effect. And both interventions are best thought of as medium- to long-term investments because, if they affected national-level trends at all, they would likely only do so on a lengthy time horizon. Civic education efforts, in particular, are likely to be time consuming to design and implement, and can only be directed at a limited number of students at a time, meaning any national-level effects likely require a lengthy time horizon.

Table 1: Intervention Strategies

Intervention	Risk	Reward
Short-Term		
Diagnose Democratic Backsliding	High	High
Defend Campus Activism	High	High
Medium-Term		
Develop Democratic Dispositions Among Elites	High	High
Deliberate to Reduce Polarization	Low	Low
Long-Term		
Dispel the Majoritarian Myth	Low	Low
Draw Together Levels of Analysis	High	High

Our four other interventions are all high risk / high reward, though for varying reasons. Diagnosing democratic backsliding is high risk because publicly exposing the antidemocratic character of would-be authoritarians may cause backlash against universities or undermine confidence in their position as neutral experts on politics. Yet, given how crucial obscuring the antidemocratic nature of democratic backsliding is to democratic reversal, an effective public communication strategy that reveals these strategies has the potential for major national-level transformation. Diagnosing democratic backsliding is also a strategy that, if successful, can yield immediate short-term benefits.

Disposing elites to protect democracy is risky both because the evidence base on its impact is currently indirect and weak and because efforts to pressure elites toward more democratic behavior may also cause backlash, since it may be perceived as a partisan intervention in the political system. However, successfully shifting elite norms and incentives and changing elite behavior is likely the quickest and most impactful avenue for repairing democratic backsliding, given the phenomenon's elite roots.

Defending against attempts to restrict free expression or repress student activism comes with high risks because student activism is often initially unpopular and polarizing. Protecting the university as a free space for disruptive political expression comes with costs and is one way in which colleges and universities have directly sparked the ire of rising authoritarians. However, it is also high reward due to the extensive evidence documenting the power of student protest as a force in maintaining robust civic opposition to authoritarian and would-be authoritarian leaders. Its impacts are best thought of as a long-term investment in maintaining a healthy civic ecosystem that can be mobilized for civil resistance against democratic backsliding.

Research that draws together the individual and national levels of analysis is high risk not because it is likely to be particularly controversial, but because to succeed it will require bold thinking and a willingness to accept long-term experiments that may fail and whose results, even if successful, may not be apparent for years. But it is also high reward because, if uncovered, new interventions that

successfully link individual-level interventions with national-level outcomes could provide a much clearer and stronger roadmap for effectively repairing democratic backsliding. It is a long-term strategy because, by the nature of the kinds of research we are proposing, meaningful results are likely to only become apparent after years of study.

We do not recommend that every college or university seek to implement every one of these recommendations. Institutional leaders should carefully consider how their specific mission, risk profile, geographic location, and organizational strengths and weaknesses make these strategies more or less feasible. Developing democratic dispositions among elites, for example, is likely to be most effective for institutes housed in high-profile colleges or universities from which many elites have emerged. Deliberation, on the other hand, may be most impactful for institutions that have deep connections not to national-level political elites but to their local communities, such as liberal arts colleges in small cities or towns. Ideally, such consideration of strengths and weaknesses should be done in collaboration with other institutions such that efforts can be strategically combined (particularly when it comes to large, national-level research efforts). Thus, regular meetings to compare strategy and brainstorm areas of collaboration are an important avenue to explore.

In conclusion, we reiterate that the overwhelming finding from the literature on democratic backsliding is that the longer it continues, the harder it is to reverse. To adapt an old saying, the best time to repair democratic backsliding was twenty years ago. The second-best time is now.

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