When Democratic Decline Comes Through the Post Room, Not the Barricades, Recognition and Reaction are Vital

When people imagine a democracy being undermined, they often picture something dramaticâ€"soldiers in the streets, a leader refusing to leave office, or a sudden suspension of elections. But democracy rarely collapses in a single dramatic moment. More often, it is worn down slowly, through legal changes, administrative pressure, and the reshaping of public perception.
The Brennan Center for Justice, a respected non-partisan institute based at New York University School of Law, has documented this process in the United States since the last Presidential election with unusual clarity. Its Timeline of the Trump Administration's Efforts to Undermine Elections traces a series of actionsâ€"rule changes, personnel pressure, centralisation, and the rewarding of those who cast doubt on electionsâ€"that together show how democratic norms can be bent long before they break.

The story it tells is unsettlingly familiar. It's not about America being uniquely vulnerable; it's about how any modern democracy can be reshaped from within. And when you place this alongside earlier moments in historyâ€"from the slow unravelling of the Weimar Republic to more recent examples in Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuelaâ€"the pattern becomes unmistakable.
This is not a story about America alone. It is a story about how democracies erode, and how even the UKâ€"long seen as a stable democracyâ€"contains structural vulnerabilities that could, in the wrong hands, be exploited.

The Slow Turn of the Screw

The Brennan Center timeline begins with administrative tweaks to voting rulesâ€"technical, bureaucratic, easy to overlook. In the early months of the administration, the changes seemed dull. New rules were proposed for voter registration. Identification requirements were tightened. Agencies that once helped expand access to voting began to retreat from that mission. None of these actions made front-page news in Britain. They barely made front-page news in the United States.
But these small changes made it harder for certain groups to vote. Not by banning them

outright, but by adding frictionâ€"a form of democratic sandpapering. Taken together, they marked the beginning of a pattern: the rules of participation were being rewritten.
History shows how powerful such "minor" adjustments can be. With the weakness of the Weimar Republic in Germany early in the 1930s, emergency decrees under Article 48 slowly restricted civil liberties and political participation. None of these measures ended democracy outright. But each one narrowed the space in which democracy could function. The Weimar parliament finally passed the Enabling Act on March 23, 1933, by securing a two-thirds majority through the forced exclusion of 81 Communist deputies, intimidation of remaining members by the SA/SS, and a strategic coalition with conservative parties and the Catholic Centre Party. The Act, which allowed Hitler to enact laws without parliament, passed 441â€"94.
In the UK, similar levers exist. Mandatory voter ID, new ministerial powers over the Electoral Commission, and broad delegated powers that allow ministers to amend laws without full parliamentary scrutiny are all legal tools that could, if misused, tilt the playing field. These measures are not inherently anti-democratic. But history teaches us that the tools of erosion are often built long before anyone misuses them.
And today, unlike in the 1930s, these changes unfold in an environment where social media influencersâ€"some genuine, some automatedâ€"can instantly frame them as necessary, harmless, or even heroic. Narratives spread faster than scrutiny. When Iran shut down its internet recently, several Scottish independence-aligned sites and accounts went dark at the same moment, raising uncomfortable questions about where some online voices originate and whose interests they serve. Influence can be manufactured, rented, or borrowed from abroad.

Pressure on the Referees

As the Brennan Center timeline moves forward, the tone shifted. Election officials in the United Statesâ€"the people who run polling stations, count ballots, and keep the process neutralâ€"found themselves in the spotlight. Some were publicly criticised by senior figures in government. Others faced accusations of disloyalty or incompetence, often without evidence. Many left their posts. The system became easier to influence simply because the people who protected it were worn down.
In the UK, we tend to think of election administrators as invisible, almost anonymous. In the U.S., they suddenly became targets. The message was unmistakable: those who did not align with the administration's narrative risked being singled out.
This tactic has deep historical roots. In 1930s Germany, local officials who resisted the ruling party's agenda were replaced or sidelined. More recently, civil servants in Hungary, Turkey, and Brazil have faced similar pressures. But the modern twist is the online chorus that follows: influencers repeating accusations, bot networks amplifying them, and coordinated campaigns creating the illusion of widespread outrage.
The UK has seen its own versions of this dynamic. Senior judges, civil servants, and independent watchdogs have been targeted online by waves of criticismâ€"sometimes organic, sometimes suspiciously synchronised. Even when the criticism is unfounded, the effect is real: it chills independence.

Centralising Power, One Decision at a Time

Traditionally, U.S. elections are run by individual statesâ€"a decentralised structure that acts as a safeguard against national interference. But the timeline shows a series of moves by the federal government to assert more control over how elections were conducted. None of these steps amounted to a takeover. But each one nudged the balance of power away from local authorities and toward Washington. It was centralisation by accumulation, not decree.

For a UK audience, imagine if Whitehall began quietly overruling local returning officers, or if ministers started dictating how councils must run polling stations. It wouldn't look like a crisis at first. But it would feel like something important was shifting.
In 1930s Germany, centralisation happened through emergency powers. In modern Poland and Hungary, judicial and electoral bodies were gradually brought under executive influence. The UK's constitutional structure contains similar pressure points. Henry VIII powers allow ministers to rewrite legislation with limited scrutiny. A government with a large majority can reshape constitutional norms quickly. Expanded police powers over protests can narrow the space for dissent. And the absence of a codified constitution means that many democratic safeguards rely on convention rather than law.
What's new is how social media can soften public resistance. Influencers can frame centralisation as "efficiency," "common sense," or "cutting red tape." Bot networks can drown out critics. The digital environment can make sweeping changes feel normal.
Rewarding Those Who Undermine Trust
Alongside these administrative changes, the administration elevated individuals who cast doubt on the integrity of elections. Some were appointed to advisory roles. Others were praised publicly. Their common trait was a willingness to question or challenge the legitimacy of established electoral processes. This corrodes trust from within.
History offers many parallels. In the 1930s, voices attacking the legitimacy of the Weimar system were amplified. In more recent years, misinformation about elections has been politically rewarded in several countries.
Today, however, the megaphone is vastly larger. Influencers can reach millions instantly. Bots can simulate consensus. Algorithms reward outrage and doubt. Fringe narratives can become mainstream within hours. In the UK, public trust in institutions has been strained by online campaigns targeting the judiciary, the civil service, the Electoral Commission, and independent regulators. These campaigns do not automatically erode democracy. But they can soften the ground for future misuse.
In a democracy, trust is a fragile currency. Once spent, it is hard to replenish.
The Quiet Withdrawal of Protection
Perhaps the most subtle change documented in the timeline is the federal government's retreat from its traditional role as a guardian of voting rights. In the U.S., federal agencies have stepped back from protecting voting rights. The protections still existed on paper, but enforcement weakened. This wasn't a dramatic reversal. It was more like a light being slowly dimmed. The protections were still technically there, but they were no longer being actively enforced.
For voters already facing barriers, this meant fewer avenues for help. For the system as a whole, it meant one less safeguard.
This pattern appears throughout history. In Weimar Germany, the state gradually stopped enforcing protections against political violence. In modern Hungary, watchdogs were not abolishedâ€”they were simply weakened.
In the UK, similar vulnerabilities exist. Regulators depend on government funding. Judicial review reforms have narrowed oversight. Local government cuts have reduced administrative capacity. And in the age of social media, such withdrawals can be obscured by noise. Influencers can distract, deflect, or reframe. Bot networks can flood the zone with unrelated controversies. The erosion becomes harder to see.
What This Story Tells Us About Democracy
The Brennan Center's timeline doesn't describe a single moment when democracy broke.

Instead, it describes a series of decisionsâ€”legal, bureaucratic, administrativeâ€”that collectively reshaped the environment in which elections take place. Democratic backsliding rarely announces itself. It arrives through paperwork, personnel changes, and policy tweaks. It is slow, procedural, and often entirely legal.

The story is not about America alone. It is about how modern democracies can be bent without ever appearing to snap.

How Democracies can Fight Back

Yet the story does not end with erosion. Democracies can strengthen themselvesâ€”if they recognise the risks early and act deliberately. And resilience is not abstract. It is built by specific people, in specific institutions, taking specific actions.

Parliamentary Vigilance

In the UK, Parliament plays a central role. When MPs insist on rigorous scrutiny of legislation that affects elections, civil liberties, or constitutional norms, they reinforce the guardrails. Select committees can demand evidence, call witnesses, and publish cross-party reports that resist executive overreach. The judiciary, applying judicial review robustly, ensures that ministers act within the law. Civil servants, upholding the Civil Service Code, can document concerns and escalate them through formal channels. Local authorities, who actually run elections, can invest in training, transparency, and public communication to maintain trust.

Digital Transparency

Resilience also depends on transparency in the digital sphere. Ofcom, now responsible for enforcing the Online Safety Act, can require platforms to identify automated accounts, label political advertising, and remove covert influence operations. Platforms themselves can publish transparency reports on political content and coordinated campaigns. Civil society watchdogs can track malign influence and publish public alerts. And citizens can learn to pause before sharing, check sources, and treat anonymous accounts with caution.

Education and Media Literacy

Education plays a quiet but powerful role. Schools can integrate media literacy into the curriculum. Libraries can run workshops on spotting misinformation. Broadcasters can produce accessible explainers on how elections work and how to verify information. Community groups can host discussions that bring people together across political divides. Families can talk openly about navigating online information.

Protecting the Vote

Protecting the right to vote is another pillar of resilience. Councils can ensure voter ID rules are applied consistently and fairly. Registration officers can run outreach campaigns to groups at risk of disenfranchisement. Charities can monitor the impact of electoral changes and publish evidence. Parliament can require impact assessments for any new voting rules. And citizens can check their registration status, help neighbours navigate ID requirements, and volunteer as poll workers.

Democratic Culture

Above all, resilience depends on culture. Political parties can enforce internal standards that reject misinformation and respect independent institutions. MPs can model respectful debate. Journalists can challenge false claims without amplifying them. Civil society can celebrate democratic valuesâ€”fairness, accountability, pluralismâ€—through campaigns and education. And citizens can reward integrity at the ballot box and in public life.

A Final Reflection

Democracy is not self-maintaining. It is a living system that depends on the daily actions of

institutions, leaders, and ordinary people. The Brennan Center's timeline shows how erosion can begin quietly, through legal mechanisms and administrative pressure. History shows how such patterns can accelerate. The UK's own structures contain strengthsâ€”but also vulnerabilities.

Resilience is built when institutions defend their independence, when citizens stay informed, when digital influence is transparent, when voting is accessible, when communities stay engaged, and when political culture values truth and restraint.

Democracy is not protected by tradition alone. It is protected by peopleâ€”acting deliberately, consistently, and together.

The Brennan Center's Timeline of the Trump Administration's Efforts to Undermine Elections is available at: https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/timeline-trump-administrations-efforts-undermine-elections

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