

Carnegie Council Activity on Illiberal Narratives and Democratic Backsliding (30-45 minutes)

Overview

This interactive activity introduces students to the concepts of democratic backsliding and illiberal narratives. Students begin by identifying the core features of a healthy democracy and then examine how these democratic norms can be gradually weakened without the formal collapse of democratic institutions. Working in groups, students will identify these narratives in a real-world scenario, connect them to specific democratic values being undermined, and evaluate how such framing contributes to democratic erosion. Finally, students will design and justify resilience strategies that respond to these narratives and strengthen democratic institutions under pressure.

Learning Outcomes

As a result of engaging in this activity, students will:

- Identify key features of a healthy democracy and the ways in which these can be gradually undermined.
- Recognize the role narratives play in supporting or undermining institutions through the concept of illiberal narratives.
- Explore resilience strategies for different areas of a society facing anti-liberal pressures.

Carnegie Council principles that the activity addresses:

- **The defense of democracy in the U.S. and globally** requires confronting autocrats who discriminate based on ethnicity, gender, and religion, and who deny basic freedoms to their citizens.
- **Fidelity** means honesty, integrity, and a good-faith effort at serving the truth. Rhetoric certainly matters, and in an age of disinformation, leaders must fight against lies, willful deception, and deliberate misrepresentation of facts.

Pre-reading and videos:

- [Defining Democracy](#), Carnegie Council (PowerPoint)
- [“Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy, with William A. Galston,”](#) Carnegie Council, March 29, 2018 (Event Recording & Transcript)

1. Pre-Activity and Set-up (10 minutes)

Divide the class into small groups of three to five students. Once divided, ask them the following question (5 minutes of brainstorming with peers, 5 minutes of sharing answers with the class):

What does a healthy democracy look like?

Below are some answers to help start the conversation:

- Free and fair elections with independent oversight.
- Checks and balances such as an independent judiciary that can check the power of the executive.
- A free press that can investigate and report without government interference.
- Civil society organizations that can operate freely.

What are the warning signs that democracy is in trouble?

- Leaders attack courts, journalists, or election observers as biased or corrupt.
- Laws restrict the activity of civil society.
- The erosion or disappearance of checks and balances.

2. Activity (20 minutes)

Country X is a developing democracy. Over the past two decades it had progressed towards democracy through strengthening civil society institutions, holding regular elections, and establishing protections for a free press.

However, over the last three years, the ruling party has taken several controversial steps.

First, the government passed a law requiring non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to register with a special state-controlled database and provide information about foreign funders. Officials said the law promoted transparency and protected national sovereignty from foreign interference. Civil society organizations argued that it was meant to weaken opposition.

Second, recent elections have been marred by criticisms of fairness. Independent international observers have questioned the integrity of recent elections, with reports of voter intimidation and irregular vote counts. The government dismissed these accusations and outlawed several NGOs that promoted fair elections from operating in the country. In these elections, the ruling government has received strong majorities which has allowed it to change its constitution in notable ways, such as making it harder for opposition candidates to appear on ballots.

A third major change in the country has been attacks on the free press and a growing state media. The government has prosecuted independent media outlets for minor offenses. Government officials often describe independent journalists and critical media organizations as “foreign-influenced” or “anti-national.” In response, the government has expanded state media coverage, which promotes the ruling party’s message and narratives, such as the risk posed by migrants. While covering anti-government protests and elections, pro-government media portrayed opposition groups and peaceful participants of the protests as agents of outside powers trying to destabilize the country. Independent reporters have faced pressure, limited access to officials, online harassment, and legal threats.

After reading the case study students are divided into four groups focusing on:

- Media and press freedom
- Civil society
- Members of opposition parties
- International observers

Each group discusses following questions:

- In what ways does the government’s actions reflect democratic backsliding rather than open authoritarianism?
- Which democratic institutions or norms are being weakened through this narrative (e.g., media independence, civil society, elections, checks and balances)?
- How is democratic language being used to legitimize or disguise this weakening of democracy?
- Why is democratic backsliding often harder to recognize and respond to than outright authoritarianism?

Activity:

Your group represents a domestic organization that is responding to democratic backsliding in X. You will analyze how the government is framing its actions by identifying key democratic values and institutions that are being undermined by the illiberal narratives and decide how your group should respond publicly and strategically. Prepare a short strategy presentation (2-3 minutes) that includes:

- Target audience
- Key message
- Framing approach

3. Post activity discussion (15-20 minutes)

Each group picks one person to present on their findings.

Once every group has gone, ask the students about their thoughts after engaging in the activity.

Below are a few key takeaways you can leave the students with after the activity:

- Can a government weaken democracy while still using democratic language? How does that change what we recognize as “authoritarianism”?
- Does democratic backsliding always represent a “rapid turn,” or can it go undetected as long as the country’s economic or security conditions remain stable?
- What is more dangerous for democracy: open rejection of democratic values or their strategic misuse?
- What are the first signs that democracy is starting to erode?
- Who has the most responsibility to defend democratic norms: the state, institutions, or citizens?
- What tools do ordinary citizens have to counter democratic backsliding?

Additional Resources:

- [*Illiberal Narratives and Shifting Values: Examining Competing Visions of the U.S. and its Role in the World*](#), James Ketterer & Kevin Maloney, Carnegie Council, August 5, 2025 (Report)