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Labor Unions Are Not the "Bulwark of Democracy"

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Abstract

In the face of contemporary democratic backsliding, are labor unions the "bulwark of democracy" that some have claimed? We decompose this into two analytically distinct phases: prevention and resistance. We argue that unions' traditional structural, associational, and social power has declined to the point where their preventive influence is quite weak. As structural and associational power has declined, institutional power is vulnerable, even where union membership remains high. Empirically, we show that union density and coverage are uncorrelated with antidemocratic party vote shares across the OECD. In looking at resistance, we examine 11 episodes of twenty-first century democratic backsliding. In none of those cases were existing labor unions key players in resisting democratic erosion. In some instances, major unions were willing to capitulate to or even collaborate with increasingly undemocratic governments. Unions are not currently a reliable bulwark against backsliding, although they can and should be important parts of broader pro-democracy coalitions.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding, Labor unions, Bulwark of democracy, 2024 U.S. presidential election, Varieties of democracy

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Where will resistance to creeping authoritarianism come from? Meaningful opposition is, in part, a coordination problem across individuals and groups. It requires relationships, organizational infrastructure, aligned incentives, a compelling vision, and the ability to communicate that vision in an increasingly fragmented and polluted information environment. Many scholars, pundits, activists, and workers are looking to organized labor to play this coordinating role. Many union leaders and rank-and-file members are deeply committed to defending both democracy and the interests of working people as part of the same struggle. Unions, we are told, are the "bulwark of democracy" (Golden 1944; Katzian 2025; Kochan n.d.; Podhorzer 2024; Roethig 2024; Smiley and Gupta 2022; Ståhl 2025).

The unions-as-bulwark metaphor appears almost exclusively in the service of arguments for revitalizing organized labor.[1] As such, the "bulwark" arguments tend to conflate two analytically distinct functions: *prevention* and *resistance*. The preventive function concerns whether unions, through their normal operations and embedded position in civil society, reduce the likelihood that antidemocratic political entrepreneurs capture state power. The resistance function concerns whether unions mobilize coordinated opposition once democratic backsliding has begun. These functions are mutually endogenous in practice. Separating them clarifies both the mechanisms through which unions might matter for democratic stability and how we should look for evidence.

The "bulwark" claim has appeal. Dictators of various stripes regularly repress independent unions (although so do democracies). Organized labor was critical to twentieth-century democratic transitions in Brazil, Spain, Poland, South Africa, South Korea, and Uruguay and workers played important roles in several others (Collier 1999). Within hours of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law in December 2024, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) coordinated with political parties and civil society groups to mobilize a general strike and turn back one of the most dramatic coup attempts in recent decades. In the United States, some unionists have taken visible roles in coalitions defending the integrity of the 2020 election and resisting the Trump administration's domestic deployment of paramilitary forces to round up suspected immigrants. The half-century of union decline across the developed world has coincided with democratic erosion in several OECD countries, most notably the United States.

These events notwithstanding, we are skeptical that organized labor is now a reliable bulwark against democratic backsliding in advanced economies. We do not adjudicate whether union decline *caused* backsliding nor are we suggesting that workers should be content with how existing democratic institutions are delivering for them. Rather, we

[1] It is worth noting that, among those diagnosing our current polycrisis in democracy and charting plans for confronting democratic erosion, labor unions appear very little, certainly not as a "bulwark".

argue that the structural, associational, and societal foundations of union power have eroded across the OECD—though in different ways and at different rates—to a point where organized labor's defensive capacities are now slight. Unions today are heavily dependent on institutional subsidies secured during earlier periods of labor strength. Such subsidies are vulnerable in a backsliding scenario, creating incentives to accommodate rather than resist. This logic is especially pronounced among public sector workers, who make up a near-majority of union members in some countries, including the United States.

Empirically, we pursue two complementary strategies and exploit both macro cross-national and micro-level evidence. We examine the preventive phase by analyzing the relationship between aggregate measures of union strength and vote shares for antidemocratic parties. We find no correlation at all in recent elections. Zooming in on the important cases of the 2025 German and 2024 US elections, we show that blue collar union members are no different from nonmembers in their willingness to vote for explicitly antidemocratic actors. If strong unions act as a preventive bulwark against democratic backsliding, recent elections in rich democracies show that the unions are no longer strong enough to maintain these defenses.

Second, we examine the resistance phase through a systematic review of eleven episodes of twenty-first-century democratic backsliding. For each case, we assess whether unions played a meaningful role in coordinating opposition to the backsliding governments. The results are sobering. In *no* case were labor unions recognized as major parts of the opposition to backsliding. In some countries, such as Poland, unions became a core part of the coalition *supporting* the backsliding regime.

We are not claiming that unions have been inert nor are we denying that things could have been worse without their actions. Nevertheless, our findings carry uncomfortable implications for those looking to unions to stem democratic backsliding. Unions today are simply not able to consistently "deliver the goods" for most workers in OECD democracies. As a result, unions are less reliable in delivering working-class votes and mobilizing less-engaged citizens around pro-democracy actions. Unions' preventive function is eroded. The resistance function is fragile and contingent: it depends on organizational resources and networks of communication and trust across civil society that are attenuated and difficult to observe (Chenoweth and Marks 2022). Once backsliding is underway, unions can still be important parts of broader pro-democracy coalitions, but their strategic calculations can also favor accommodation over confrontation. Rebuilding workers' organizations is important for long-term democratic resilience, but, in our current crises, unions' role in preserving democracy is more aspirational than operational.

Definitions and scope

Democracy, for our purposes, requires not only regular opportunities for citizens to choose their leaders through elections but also rule of law, constraints on arbitrary executive action, and the various civil freedoms needed to participate.[2] Following the well-known definitions from Haggard & Kaufman and Bermeo, democratic backsliding occurs when duly elected governments operating within the letter of the law undermine these elements of democratic governance to entrench themselves in office (Bermeo 2016; Haggard and Kaufman 2021). While voters may tolerate or even re-elect backsliding governments, the erosion itself is a top-down process of concentrating power in the hands of the executive and reducing accountability (Bartels 2023; Stokes 2025).

"Unions" are formal, independent organizations through which workers collectively bargain as sellers of their labor. The democratic potential of unions depends on their capacity for autonomous action. Unions vary enormously in their organizational forms, ideological orientations, sectoral bases, and relationships to states and parties. We focus on organizations of workers—people who sell their labor for wages—rather than professional associations of the credentialed or self-employed. The working class, particularly those without a university degree, is a target constituency for contemporary authoritarian populists. If unions are to serve as bulwarks, they must engage and represent this population. The bulwark operates *before* democracy scores visibly decline. By the time retrospective indicators blink red, such as when election losers attempt to overturn results, the bulwark has already been breached.

Our analysis focuses primarily on advanced democracies since 2000, during the current wave of democratic backsliding. Although we make passing reference to several middle-income and developing countries and twentieth-century democratization episodes, our core empirical claims concern advanced industrial democracies where union movements have historically been strongest and where the unions-as-bulwark argument has the greatest plausibility.

[2] This is "Democracy III" in Ost's (2022) terminology.

Preventing and resisting democratic backsliding

Prevention concerns unions' capacity to reduce the probability that antidemocratic forces capture state power while raising the costs to would-be authoritarians for attacking democratic institutions. For example, Rau & Stokes (2025) argue that economic inequality is a major driver of backsliding. Higher levels of unionization and greater cross-union coordination in collective bargaining produce less economic inequality, higher incomes in the middle and bottom of the income distribution, stronger welfare states, and less poverty (Ahlquist 2017; Farber et al. 2021). In so doing, unionization can enhance perceived fairness and legitimacy of the political system while channeling more resources to working-class voters, thereby supporting political participation.

Unions mobilize lower-information, low-engagement citizens for better economic conditions and against arbitrary treatment at work (Ahlquist 2017; J. Rosenfeld 2014). This may channel grievance into economic considerations and reduce conflict over racial, ethnic, or religious differences (Frymer and Grumbach 2021; Kerrissey and Schofer 2013). Unions provide less-engaged citizens with both the information and the opportunity to participate in political life, serving as "schools of democracy" where members develop political skills and the expectation that they will have a say in the conditions of their lives (Sinyai 2006). Some unions succeed in mobilizing workers around broader issues of political and economic justice and democracy (Ahlquist and Levi 2013; Hertel-Fernandez 2024; Wu and Paluck 2020). Unions also engage directly in politics, increasing voter turnout among working-class constituencies and affecting the structure, platforms, and policies of political parties (See citations in Ahlquist 2017). Strong unions, it is argued, produce the economic conditions and the socio-political infrastructure that makes a polity less fertile for antidemocratic forces.

Resistance, on the other hand, concerns whether unions will serve as an organizational lynchpin for coordinated opposition once backsliding is underway or authoritarianism has taken hold. The resistance function is episodic and strategic: it activates under crisis conditions and involves deploying resources and activating alliances with other groups. Unions can convene diverse actors and coordinate expectations across regions and industries. Unions have industrial power, financial resources, political connections, and tactical experience that can be shared. All this requires organizational readiness—especially deep ties with other organizations such as opposition parties and civic groups that may have quite different goals and constituencies. It also requires a reservoir of trust and credibility with both union members themselves and the broader public, enabling tactical flexibility and eliciting a willingness to bear significant costs.

This distinction between prevention and resistance matters; mechanisms differ. Prevention operates through long-term economic processes, information transmission, socialization, and gradual shifts in economic management, public policy, party structure, and political culture. Resistance operates through collective action, strategic coordination, and targeted economic disruption. The effectiveness of prevention can depend on *expectations* about resistance, should a leader start down the path to backsliding. Effective resistance might emerge even if some of the unions' preventive capacities have declined.

The scope conditions also differ. Prevention requires ongoing success in collective bargaining as well as social embeddedness with broad organizational presence industrially and geographically. A union movement concentrated in a few cities representing workers in the single digit percentages is unlikely to have the industrial influence, visibility, resources, and social networks to affect macro political and economic outcomes. Resistance, by contrast, can potentially activate even with lower organizational density—a strategically positioned union in key industries might wield disproportionate disruptive power in a crisis.

Third, the temporal dynamics differ. Prevention operates over years or decades; its effects are cumulative and diffuse. If unions matter through prevention, then union decline has already eroded the democratic bulwark. Reforming labor law to facilitate union organizing may constitute long-run investment in democratic resilience, but it does little for the current crisis. Resistance operates in compressed time under crisis conditions. If unions matter through resistance, even organizationally weakened unions retain value as potential coordination points, and pro-democracy actors should focus on building and maintaining strong communications, trust, and tactical flexibility for collective action. In this way, the prevention/resistance distinction mirrors the organizing vs. mobilizing arguments among labor organizers and strategists (McAlevey 2016).

When assessing unions' capacities in prevention and resistance, evaluation criteria differ. Assessing prevention requires attention to cases where democracy has *not* eroded: do union strongholds exhibit lower support for antidemocratic parties, higher civic engagement, reduced receptivity to authoritarian appeals? Assessing resistance requires attention to moments of democratic crisis: did unions mobilize? Did their actions have sufficient impact to impose costs or shift outcomes?

Union power resources and their erosion

Our argument draws on the "power resources" framework, developed by Erik Olin Wright and extended by Beverly Silver and others (Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster 2018; Silver 2003; Wright 2000). We connect four interrelated bases of labor power—structural, associational, institutional, and social—with unions' ability to backstop political democracy.

Structural and associational power

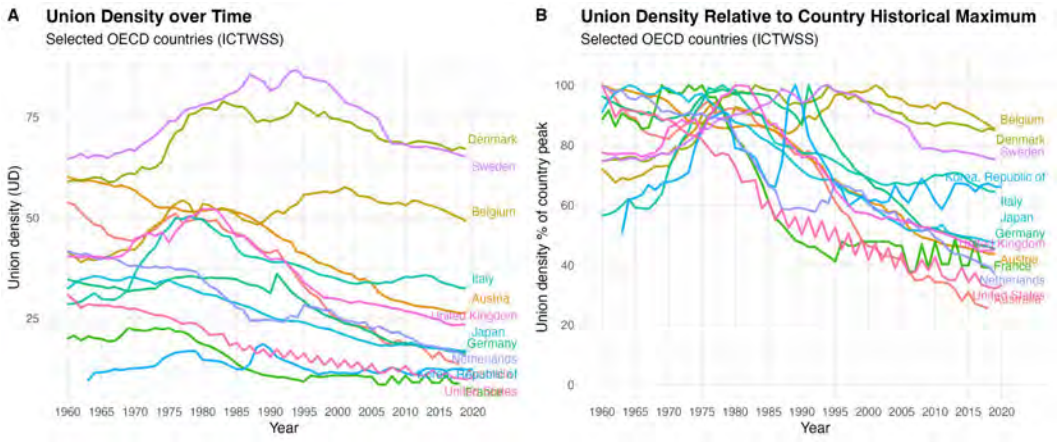
As its name suggests, *structural power* derives from workers' position in the economic system, undergirding other sources of strength. It reflects the ability of workers in particular industries, firms, or occupations to disrupt production through strikes and other collective action. Workers in capital-intensive industries, at key chokepoints in supply chains, or at key logistical hubs possess greater structural power. It also reflects labor market conditions: low unemployment and possession of scarce skills give workers more leverage individually and collectively.

Associational power derives from collective organization itself: union membership, financial resources, organizational coherence, and the capacity to coordinate action across firms, industries, and regions. Greater associational power means unions can augment and exercise whatever structural power exists. But associational power depends on structural power as well as workers' abilities to identify a basis for shared interest. Workers must then develop the important inputs for successful collective action: ongoing relationships, longer time horizons, selective incentives, and mechanisms for communication, deliberation, and conflict resolution.

Structural power eroded as employer resistance grew, large manufacturing conglomerates fragmented into internationally distributed supply chains, employment shifted to services and precarious arrangements, and technology altered both production and communication. Associational power has declined along with it. As Figure 1 displays, union members as a percentage of the employed workforce (density) has fallen dramatically across the OECD since the 1980s. In the United States, private sector union membership has collapsed from roughly 35 percent at mid-century to under 6 percent today; overall density stands at approximately 10 percent, sustained by unions of public sector workers. In other countries, union membership has similarly collapsed, even as institutional prerogatives like coordinated bargaining and contract extension give unions a larger say on economic outcomes. In Germany and the Netherlands—both places with proud union histories—unionization rates are now well below 20 percent.

The right panel of Figure 1 displays a less remarked upon fact: we are on the downhill side of peak union density everywhere, including in the strongholds of European social democracy. A union density of 30 percent and growing reflects a very different industrial and political context than one with a union density rate of 30 percent that is flat or declining. The basic source of labor power—the strike—is relatively rare. Days lost to strikes has declined markedly across the OECD since the 1990s, reflecting declining militance and increased restrictions on unions, rather than greater satisfaction with working conditions (OECD 2019, 2025).

Figure 1. The evolution of unionization since 1960 across select OECD countries



Aggregate density and strike figures do not reflect all relevant considerations. Shifting production, growing employment in services and knowledge industries and reconfigured industries have altered the nature of work and employment. The workplace—the locus of union organizing and the site where workers developed shared identities and collective capacities—has become harder to identify and organize, undermining the preconditions for associational power (Kaplan and Naidu 2025; Naidu 2022). As one example, German unions long resisted a legislated minimum wage, insisting that it was their job to set a wage floor through collective bargaining. In 2015, this position fell by the wayside, as the major unions recognized that they were in no position to set conditions for vulnerable workers in several sectors, paving the way for a federal minimum wage (Meyer 2016).

As employment has shifted, so too has the composition and coherence of the labor movement. Unions in some countries are organized into strong and coherent “peak associations” but in others, unions are small, fragmented, and heterogeneous. Across the OECD, the trend has been to decentralization and fragmentation in bargaining (Dahl, le Maire, and Munch 2013; Waddington, Müller, and Vandaele 2023).

This combines with the disproportionate shares of union members in the public sector, a disparity that grows even larger if we count workers in state-owned enterprises and sectors with high levels of government involvement, such as healthcare.

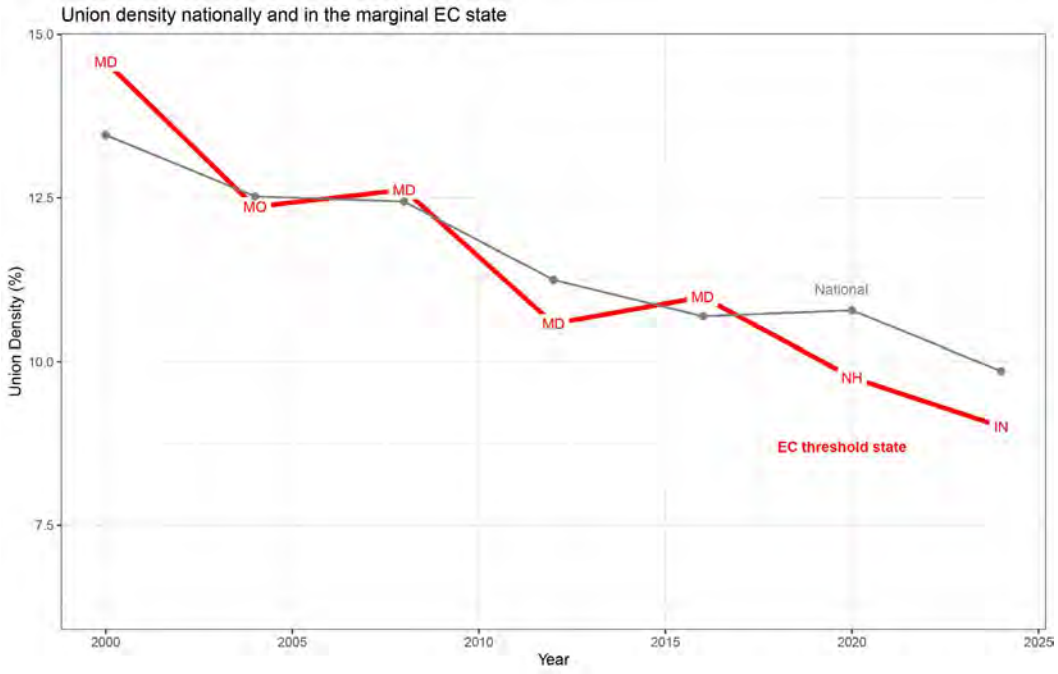
Associational power has declined with membership. Fewer members means lower dues revenue, smaller staffs, and reduced organizational capacity, including around information technology and communications. Union members are relatively old and getting older; in both Europe and the United States, union membership skews toward workers over 45, with each successive age cohort less likely to join than the last (Vandaele 2019; Waddington, Müller, and Vandaele 2023).[3]

Aggregate density estimates mask subnational variation in unionization relevant for any democracy-defending role. In the United States, fast-growing parts of the country such as Arizona, Florida, North Carolina, and Texas operate virtually union-free, even while some major cities like New York, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Chicago still have robust union membership in certain sectors. Figure 2 shows this starkly. The red line indicates the union density and identity of the marginal state needed to secure the presidency in the Electoral College. The union density in this marginal state shrank from nearly 15 percent in 2000 to under 8 percent in 2024, exceeding the decline in the overall rate of union membership (dark line). The 2024 election marks the first time that the marginal state, Indiana, was a "right-to-work" state with anti-union laws on the books. It is increasingly possible to secure the US presidency with votes from regions with almost no union presence. The geographic concentration of union members alongside their shrinking percentage of the workforce makes them less able to block candidates they oppose.

Other OECD countries show major geographic divides in union penetration, whether north/south as in Belgium, Italy, and Spain or east/west in Germany. Geographically isolated union movements are hampered in both preventive and resistance roles as they are organizationally and electorally ineffective in whole sections of the country.

[3] But see Ahlquist et al. (2024) for evidence that this is not for lack of interest among younger workers today.

Figure 2. The declining relevance of unions in US federal elections. Union density from Unionstats.com (Hirsch and Macpherson 2003)



Institutional and societal power

Institutional power accrues from laws, regulations, and governance arrangements that give unions valuable recognition, prerogatives, and even policy-making roles. These vary by country but examples include union contract extension laws (extending union-bargained contracts to cover all workers in a region or industry), employer-paid time for union meetings, automatic union dues collection, tax deductions for union dues, the "Ghent system" whereby unions administer unemployment insurance programs, and codetermination laws that give workers seats on corporate boards. Crucially, unions extracted institutional concessions during periods of structural and associational strength, with their labor party allies leading the way. Where union membership remains high today unions enjoy the most extensive institutional support. Without structural and associational foundations, however, these institutional subsidies are subject to revision by hostile governments (Rathgeb and Klitgaard 2022).

To the extent there have been changes, they have largely been to reduce unions' institutional support. Examples include the spread of "Right to Work" legislation across US states; changes to the tax treatment of union dues in the United States and Finland; erosion of the Ghent system in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden; and the gradual diminishing of industry and sectoral bargaining in Denmark, Germany, and Sweden.

This creates a structural vulnerability: unions dependent on institutional subsidies have strong incentives to accommodate rather than resist leaders who might threaten those prerogatives once in power.

Societal or *coalitional power* is the hardest to observe and measure, as it emerges from unions' social embeddedness, cooperative relationships, and public reputations. Societal power is built over time. It reflects unions' centrality in members' lives and the density of relationships with other civil society organizations, such as religious and educational institutions, neighborhood and cultural associations, and political advocacy groups. It reflects whatever reservoir of trust and credibility unions managed to earn among both members and nonmembers. Importantly, it also reflects their ability to consistently get their message through to members and the broader public in the face of opposition.

This matters because unions' purported preventive function depends on regular engagement: frequent interactions in both social and work settings that build dense interpersonal relationships; meetings where members argue and vote; communications that frame political and economic issues; and "bridging" relationships with workers at other firms or in other regions. It is these networks that are called upon when mobilizing resistance.

Any attempt to evaluate societal power at scale is necessarily speculative, but available evidence from key cases suggests that societal power has atrophied considerably. For example, Hertel-Fernandez et al. (2024) conducted a survey of US union members during the dramatic and highly contested 2024 election. They find that fully 56 percent reported receiving *no political mobilization* from their union. Between 20 and 25 percent received no information about government policy from their union. A remarkable 88 percent received no information about the economy from their union. Only 15 percent report attending union social events at least monthly (Hertel-Fernandez, Kiefel, and Yan 2025).

The problem is compounded by the contemporary media environment. Unions must compete for members' *and nonmembers'* attention in an internationalizing media ecosystem designed for engagement and increasingly dominated by sources hostile to both labor and democracy. Even if unions attempted sustained economic and political education—and many do not—they would struggle to penetrate an information environment saturated with alternative messages. Many unions seem to have become organizations that negotiate wages and handle grievances as opposed to core social institutions that connect workers to each other and broader civic life.

Another area is coalitional power. In the large literature on union renewal, especially in the United States, there has been extensive discussion about how unions must build connections with a variety of civil society groups. What stands out from this discussion, however, is the focus on what unions can *get* from their alliances to other groups: moral and financial support during organizing drives and strikes, etc. What is rarely discussed is what unions will *give* to these coalitions when called upon. Are unions prepared to draw on their resources in support of voting rights, legal due process, or press freedom?

This leads us to organized labor's relationships with political parties. With the United States as the major exception, developed democracies have produced powerful, union-based social democratic and labor parties. These parties regularly held cabinet-level and executive office all through the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Union-party linkages made organized labor key power brokers in intra-party competition while providing a career pathway for working-class citizens from the shop floor to political office.

Organizational ties with political parties have weakened almost everywhere, as erstwhile labor parties have broadened to include urban educated professional classes (Abou-Chadi and Hix 2021; Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty 2022; Rennwald and Pontusson 2021). Politicians with working-class backgrounds have become rarer (Carnes and Lupu 2023). Unions' relationships with political parties have become fraught, with unions as junior partners or mere "interest groups," with reduced influence on a restricted set of issues.

This weakened coalitional power has proven damaging for labor's associational power in politics. Unions remain visibly tied to specific parties while simultaneously exerting far less influence over those parties' goals, actions, and candidates. Unions have less to show their members to justify their continued partisan alignment while at the same time, declining structural power means unions are delivering less through collective bargaining.

Conventional wisdom holds that unionized workers are not only more politically engaged than their nonunion counterparts, but they also tend to vote more for parties of the left and are less prone to support the radical right (Ahlquist 2017; Mosimann, Rennwald, and Zimmermann 2019). But newer research is showing that this is no longer the case. As unions have weakened, average union "effects" on political attitudes, racial attitudes, and party identification are now weak or nonexistent in the United States (Yan 2025). In Europe, union effects appear to largely due to selection; even in Sweden the relationship between union membership and left voting is breaking down (Hadziabdic 2023; Hadziabdic and Baccaro 2020; Mosimann and Pontusson 2017; Ray and Pontusson 2025).

Although there remains important variation in union organization and strength across countries, they are everywhere weakened in structural and associational terms. Institutional power is therefore vulnerable. Societal power is harder to measure but existing evidence suggests it too has weakened. All of this points to the conclusion that unions are neither effective preventive bulwarks in defense of democracy nor promising engines of resistance to backsliding.

Evidence

We present evidence from multiple, reinforcing levels that speaks to the purported preventive and resistance functions that unions play in confronting democratic backsliding. On the prevention side, we examine both cross-national, organizational, and individual-level data on the relationship between unionization and support for parties that risk backsliding. On the resistance side, we look at all the episodes of post-2000 democratic backsliding in the OECD and exploit aspects of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project's expert coding scheme to identify whether unions have been important in resisting backsliding.

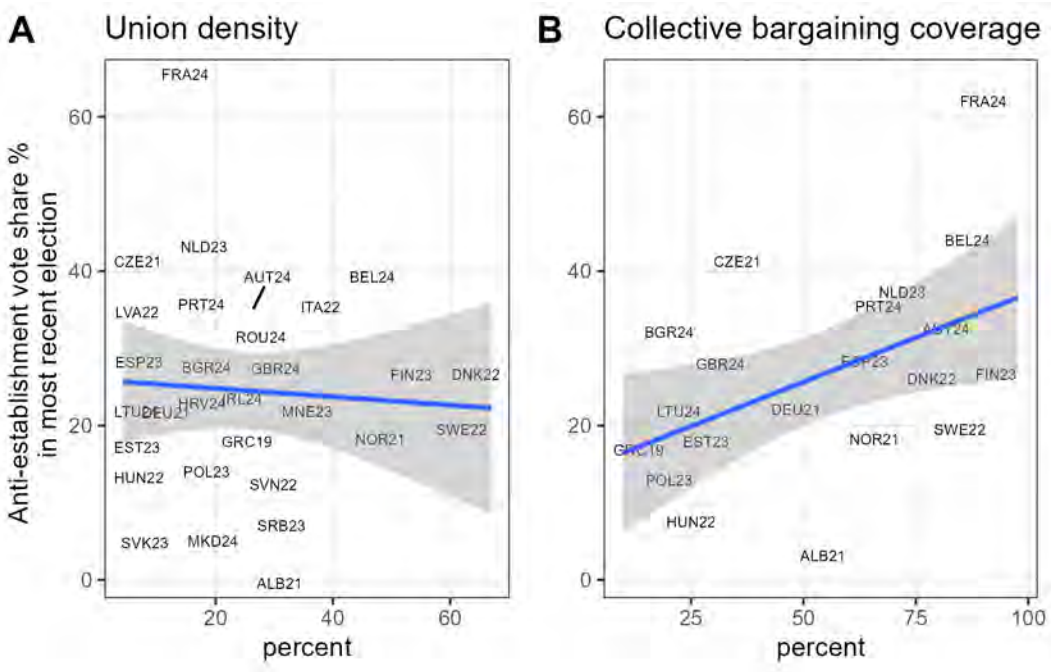
Prevention

Where the preventive mechanism operates, antidemocratic actors should find less fertile ground: lower vote shares and a working-class electorate less susceptible to their appeals. We view the substantial variation in unionization rates across rich democracies as a plausible indicator of macro-level union strength while vote shares for antidemocratic parties suggest the underlying risk of backsliding. If unions in the current environment function as preventive bulwarks, then we should observe a negative correlation between union strength and support for such parties across countries.

In Figure 3, we take a wide lens and look at all the most recent parliamentary elections among 34 European parliamentary democracies. As an indicator of backsliding risk, we use the Casal Bértoa (2025) coding of "anti-establishment" parties, as this data has the broadest and most recent coverage. We plot this against both union density and union coverage (percentage of workers covered by union-negotiated contracts).[4]

[4] Note that Casal Bértoa's anti-establishment coding does *not* count Hungary's Fidez, Poland's PiS, or Italy's 5-Star movement as "anti-establishment" presumably because these three parties were in government, notwithstanding their antidemocratic positions and actions. Re-coding those cases does not alter conclusions. In the online appendix, we repeat this exercise with 5 other plausible identifiers of "anti-democratic" political parties: Rooduijn et al. (2023); Lindberg et al. (2022), and Lehmann et al. (2025). We also looked at within-country changes using fixed effects panel regression on vote shares since 1990. Cross-sectional plots from recent elections show null or even positive relationships between union density and antidemocratic vote share. Appendix available at https://johnahlquist.net/files/unions_democracy_appendix.pdf.

Figure 3. Union density (L) and Coverage (R) as a predictor of party vote shares for "anti-establishment" parties in the most recent parliamentary elections in 34 European countries. "Antiestablishment" coding from Casal Bertoa (2025). Vote shares from https://politicaldatayearbook.com/



Our key finding is that union strength, whether measured as union density or coverage, is essentially u*ncorrelated* with vote shares for anti-establishment, populist, and far-right parties in recent parliamentary elections. On average, there is a reservoir of voters on the order of 20 percent of the electorate who are happy to cast ballots for parties that could threaten liberal democracy. This finding is bolstered by data from individual surveys and cross-country and within-country panel regression analyses.[5]

USA and Germany

Although some voters may be willing to trade off democratic commitments for promises they like, most politicians do not campaign on platforms or reputations for overturning democracy (Graham and Svolik 2020; Svolik 2019). The recent American and German elections present unambiguous cases. In both, major candidates and parties made explicit their contempt for existing democratic norms and institutions while calling into question the political equality of some fellow citizens. In the 2024 US federal election, Donald Trump was re-elected president and his party took majorities in the US Congress after a campaign in which he defended the attempted subversion of the 2020 election,

[5] See Hovermann et al. (2025). Our panel regression analysis in available in the appendix.

threatened political adversaries with extra-legal retribution, rejected the rule of law, called into question the rights of the press and political opposition, and called for immediate, wholesale detention and deportation of millions of residents. In the 2025 German federal elections, the AfD (Alternative for Germany) doubled its vote share and seats in the Bundestag, receiving the second most of any party, even though its connections with far-right militant groups were widely known; the German federal authorities labeled AfD an extremist organization, and several far-right and antidemocratic foreign actors actively and publicly supported the AfD campaign.

How did unions respond? In the United States, most unions, including the AFL-CIO union federation, opposed Donald Trump in all three of his presidential campaigns. In 2020, the AFL-CIO managed to join with the US Chamber of Commerce and religious leaders in calling for patience and respect for the election results. Nevertheless, in 2024, one of the largest and most powerful US unions, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, refused to endorse a political candidate even as its president spoke at Trump's nominating convention while several of its regional bodies campaigned for the Democratic candidate, Kamala Harris.

What about members? Of those voting for a major party candidate, an estimated 43 percent voted for Trump in 2024, *higher* than in 2016 (39 percent) or 2020 (34 percent) (American National Election Studies 2025; Fine and Schlesinger 2024). In Figure 4, we examine voting behavior by union membership and education. Once we account for whether someone has a college degree, we see that unionists and non-members are indistinguishable in their support for Trump. Among unionists without a college degree who cast a vote for a Democrat or Republican, *55 percent* voted for Trump in 2024, about the same as the 54 percent of their nonunion counterparts.

Regardless of their intent, unions in the United States have reduced capacity. Figure 5 shows how unions have become less powerful in US federal elections over time. For each presidential election since 2000, we plot the state-level vote share for the Republican presidential candidate (after accounting for state-level racial and educational demographics) against the state-level unionization rate. Anti-union "Right to Work" states are in red, with state markers proportional in size to the state's votes in the Electoral College (and the size of their congressional delegation). As the curve indicates, state-level union density is negatively correlated with Republican presidential vote share in the early 2000s, but this relationship has weakened, especially in 2024.

Figure 4. Union membership, education, and Trump voting in the 2024 US Presidential election. Data from the ANES (2025)

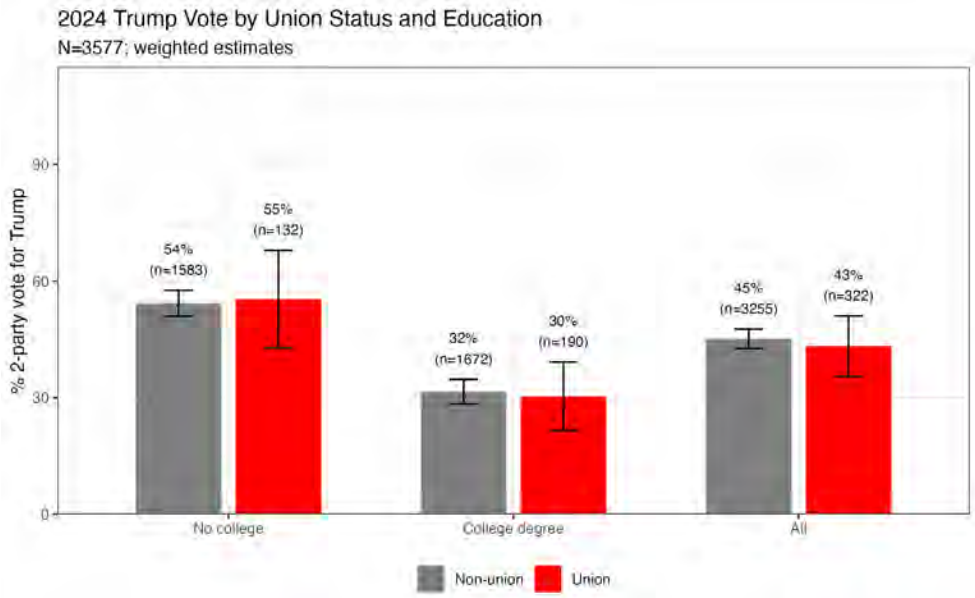
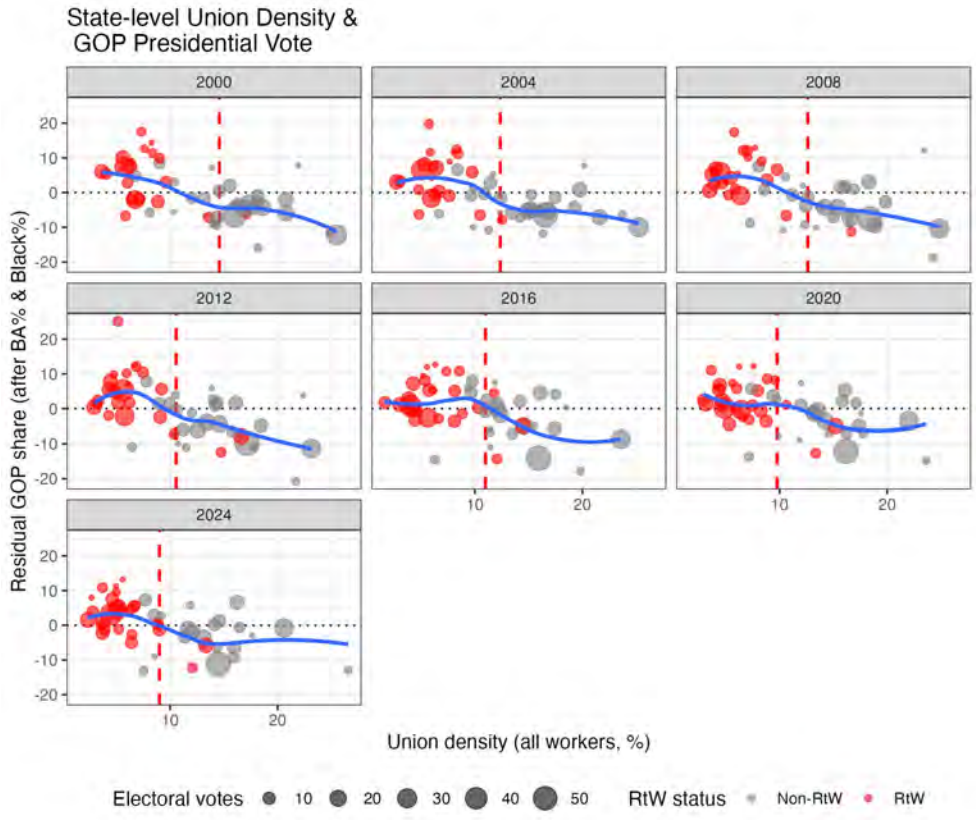
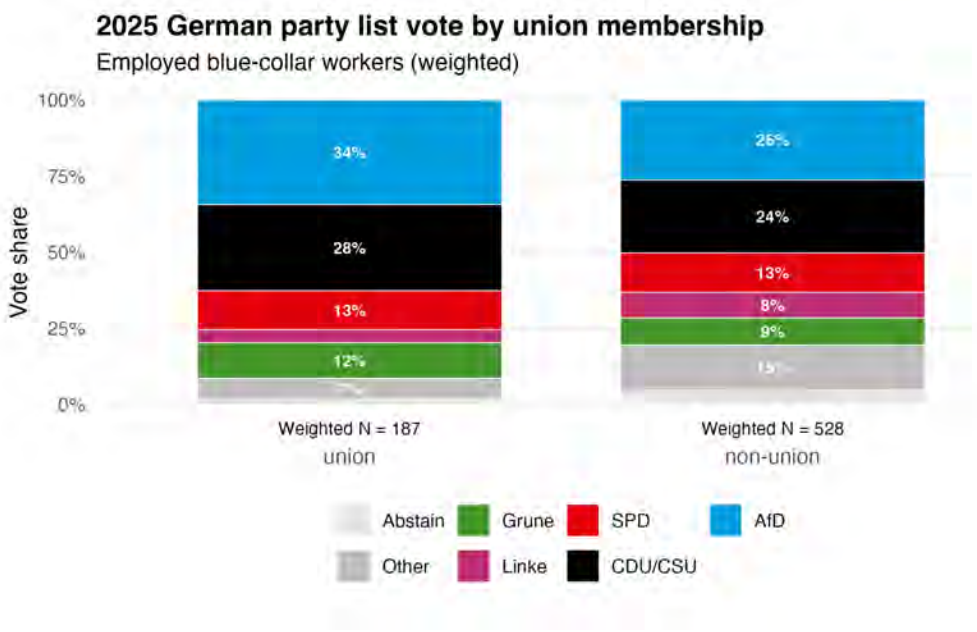


Figure 5. State-level GOP presidential vote share and state-level union density since 2000, with "Right to Work" states indicated in red. Red vertical line indicates the union density of the marginal state in the Electoral College.



In Germany, the shift of unionized workers to the right is even more pronounced, despite a concerted effort from union leaders to steer members away from AfD. Figure 6 displays survey data from the 2025 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) survey for the *Bundestagswahl*. Among blue collar workers (*Arbeiter*), union members voted for the AfD at a *higher* rate than their nonunion counterparts. The traditional social democratic home for unionists (SPD) was a distant third. As in the United States, there also appears to be important geographic differences in union membership and support for antidemocratic parties, with AfD support higher in the East, including among union members (Hovermann 2025). Union membership does not appear to inoculate German workers against far-right voting.

Figure 6. 2025 party list vote among blue collar workers in Germany by union status. Data from GLES.



Resistance

Even if the bulwark is breached, are unions active and relevant in resisting democratic erosion? We examine all six backsliding episodes that Carrier & Carothers (2025) and Carothers & Hartnett (2024) identify among OECD democracies (Greece, Hungary, Israel, Mexico, Poland, and the USA) since 2000. We also include the five non-OECD cases that Carrier & Carothers explicitly compared to the United States (Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, India, and Turkey). Seven of these episodes are currently ongoing. We date backsliding episodes based on Carrier & Carothers and by identifying the election of the government that initiates an episode of regime transformation based on the Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset (Maerz et al. 2024).

The first iterations of the Netanyahu and Orban governments in Israel and Hungary, as well as the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee in India are not coded as cases of backsliding. The first Trump administration is included as a backsliding episode, as it ended with the January 6 attack on the US Capitol, setting the ground for the radical erosion of US democracy under Trump II.

These cases span a wide range of institutional and economic conditions. Greece, Hungary, the United States, and Poland are all high-income democracies with deep ties to the liberal international order. Brazil and India are middle-income federations with high ethnic heterogeneity. Brazil, El Salvador, and the United States are all presidential systems that have experienced dramatic executive aggrandizement. In addition, there is wide variance in the length of democratic experience in these countries, with the two extremes being the United States as the oldest, and Hungary and Poland as the youngest democracies.

Rather than provide mini-narratives for each of these cases, we leverage the country experts who contribute to the V-Dem project (Coppedge, Michael et al. 2026). V-Dem reports the proportion of expert coders picking various social actors, including labor unions, as important supporters of the regime and the proportion identifying unions as meaningful regime opponents.[6] Coders may disagree and they need not select unions as important players one way or another, so these proportions do not sum to one. The number of coders for each country-year ranged between 3 and 20, with a median of 10.

We display these proportions over time for each country in Figure 7. Green and orange lines indicate the proportions selecting labor unions as opposing or supporting a regime, respectively. Gray shaded regions denote backsliding episodes.

[6] Specifically, we use the V-Dem variables *v2regsupgroups* and *v2regoppgroupsact*. For the former, the V-Dem instructions to coders state "Which groups does the current political regime rely on in order to maintain power? (Check all that apply.)…Consider which group(s) is supportive of the regime, and, if it/they were to retract support would substantially increase the chance that the regime would lose power." For the latter, instructions state "Which (if any) groups include a significant share of individuals who explicitly and actively mobilize against the regime in a particular year? (Check all that apply.)…Consider which group(s) include a significant share of individuals who engage in active and explicit opposition to the regime to promote its removal. These actors make explicit statements of dissent from the regime, publicly voice their preference for regime change, and may possibly engage in other actions intended to further the removal of the regime such as anti-regime demonstrations, sit-ins, boycotts, strikes, the formation of anti-system parties, acts of sabotage, or armed rebellion." The relevant responses are whether a coder selected "Urban working classes, including labor unions."

Figure 7. Coding the importance of labor unions in supporting and opposing backsliding governments among select backsliding episodes. Data from V-Dem, ERT, Carrier & Carothers.

When considering supporters and opponents, V-Dem coders do not appear to disentangle the institutional *regime* from the *incumbent government.* For example, the is a notable jump in the proportion of coders for Greece selecting unions as regime supporters during the left-wing SYRIZA governing period (2015–19). In both the United States and Brazil there are sharp changes in coders' propensity to identify unions as regime supporters at the Trump-Biden and Bolsonaro-Lula transitions.[7] V-Dem coders appear to indicate whether unions are actively working to oust the incumbent (oppose) or are a major part of the coalition that keeps the incumbent in power (support).

As a first major take away, during backsliding episodes, V-Dem coders do not view unions as particularly important. In none of the backsliding cases do a majority of experts identify unions as source of major opposition, especially in the crucial first few years of a backsliding episode. In Hungary, a famous example of backsliding, country experts seem to view unions as largely irrelevant, with very low proportions of coders mentioning unions one way or another. A similar pattern is visible in India.

In Brazil, El Salvador, Greece, and the United States we see that, as backsliding begins, coders become less likely to select unions as regime supporters and more likely to select unions as opposers than before. But even then, the coders are *still* more likely to view unions as regime supporters than as resisters. In none of these cases do a majority of coders identify unions as important one way or another.

In Poland, Ecuador, and Mexico, we see coders becoming *more* likely to view unions as regime supporters under backsliding than before. In the Polish and Mexican cases, a majority of coders did in fact select unions as supporters of the backsliding regime, consistent with detailed studies of those cases (Ackerman 2026; Bondy 2025; Ost 2022). In Turkey and Israel, a near-majority of coders was willing to select unions as regime supporters both before and during backsliding episodes, with very small proportions viewing unions as significant regime opponents, again consistent with case studies (Alpaslan and Villalon 2025; Bondy 2025).

Of course, this analysis is at a very high level of aggregation. Our argument should not be interpreted as saying that *all* union leaders or unionists within a particular country were personally apathetic or supportive of aspiring autocrats. We can conclude, at best, unions' opposition to democratic backsliding has been insufficiently powerful to register among expert political observers. In actual backsliding episodes, existing unions have not been a political force leading the resistance.

[7] This is consistent with other evidence that some individual V-Dem coders are swayed by current political conditions in some of their ratings (Little and Meng 2024; Weidmann 2024).

The strategic dilemma

The unions most able to resist are those with structural and associational power that is not wholly dependent on institutional subsidies—unions that can credibly threaten economic disruption regardless of state support. Unfortunately, such unions are increasingly rare. The KCTU represents a union movement that is not large in overall density, but it does have deep roots in key industries and a tradition of militant independence from the state. The KCTU's contributions to Korea's democratic transition are still part of living memory. Moreover, the 2024 threat to Korean democracy was not one of incremental backsliding but rather a dramatic, visible autogolpe. Unions may mobilize more effectively against sudden, high-profile, extra-constitutional threats to democracy than they do in response to incremental backsliding.

Elsewhere, attempts at democratic reversal are more subtle and the erosion of unions' structural, associational, and societal power leaves institutional power exposed. This creates a fundamental strategic dilemma when confronting would-be authoritarians. A weakened union movement is less likely to succeed in resistance, while mobilizing resistance against a would-be autocrat puts unions' remaining institutional subsidies at risk; a government willing to erode democratic norms is unlikely to balk at revoking the privileges of weak unions. Thus, union leaders interested in preserving their own organizations and protecting the existing members' immediate interests face a tradeoff that favors accommodation with the backsliding regime.

Unions of public sector workers are at an extreme end of this spectrum, as their existence depends nearly entirely on state-granted institutional prerogatives and they are typically more limited in their ability to strike and disrupt the economy. Public sector workers tend to have weaker outside options than in the private sector. Thus, public sector unions are vulnerable to pressure and retaliation, putting them in a weak position to resist aspiring autocrats. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we see that public sector workers are important parts of the coalitions underpinning several autocracies in and around Europe (B. Rosenfeld 2021). Union movements heavily dependent on the dues and other resources from public sector workers are even more vulnerable than their aggregate membership numbers would suggest.

Finally, union members are themselves heterogeneous, exhibiting divisions between members and leaders that mirror their larger society. Politics is unpopular and political engagement risks further union rupture, a risk that is heightened when unions are struggling to deliver gains that members expect. This dynamic helps explain why, in some cases of democratic backsliding, unions have failed to resist or even collaborated.

In Poland, Solidarity—the union movement that helped bring down communism—became a key supporter of the antidemocratic Law and Justice (PiS) party. In Israel, the Histadrut accommodated successive Netanyahu governments; it was Israeli employers who demanded that unions participate in a general strike against Netanyahu's attempt to neuter the judiciary (Bondy 2025). None of this is new: the General German Trade Union Federation (ADGB), key in orchestrating the 1920 general strike to save the Weimar Republic, was much weakened by the early 1930s. When the Nazis took power, the ADGB declared itself "neutral" and "non-political", even participating in the 1933 Nazi workers' parades. Nevertheless, the SA (Sturmabteilung) stormed union offices and seized union leaders and assets the next day (Gordon 1933; Thomas 1936).

Conclusion

Looking to organized labor as a democratic bulwark rests on real historical experience. But it is aspirational, not a description of present capacity. We provided evidence that unions' capacity to prevent backsliding has atrophied, even where union membership is relatively high. Examining actual backsliding episodes, we found no evidence of labor unions serving as the engines of resistance. Once backsliding is underway, unions have been bit players in the resistance or even collaborators.

This matters because it affects how we understand and respond to the present moment. If unions are less able to mobilize and influence members' political understanding, then election strategies that rely on union endorsements and mobilization will miss large segments of union members, not to mention the much larger population of nonunion workers. Looking to unions to coordinate opposition once backsliding begins is a recipe for delay and perhaps defeat.

For union leaders, the starting point is underused capacity. There remain unions with deep reservoirs of tactical and organizational experience, physical infrastructure, financial resources, and, in many cases, trusted relationships with workers that no other civic institution can replicate. Many unionists see the threat of nascent authoritarianism and want to act. As a practical first step, unions across the OECD must develop strategies to "harden" their member-facing communication systems in ways that can be activated quickly, including under digital surveillance and internet blackouts or when paramilitary agents invade cities, as was occurring in Minneapolis, USA. Second, make explicit, public commitments to members and to partners about what the union stands for and what it will do under defined conditions: when they will mobilize, what forms that mobilization will take, and what resources they will contribute. Now is as good a time as any to strengthen ties beyond the labor movement and the usual political channels. In so doing, the question cannot be "how can these relationships help the

union?" but rather, "what can we, as a union, contribute when the time comes?" It means offering resources to broader pro-democracy efforts without requiring control: meeting space, communication channels, legal support, trained organizers, security during marches, etc. It means embedding union actors inside cross-organizational coalitions prior to any crisis, accepting roles that are sometimes supportive rather than leading. And it means emphasizing the defense of democracy and rule of law and opposition to state violence and corruption over the narrow interest of existing members.

The labor movement is more than just incumbent union leaders. Workers, whether members or not, can press their fellow unionists and union leaders to adopt clear democratic commitments. If the union itself is less-engaged, union members can still build the local ties that make rapid coordination possible. Unionists with organizing backgrounds will need to direct those skills inward.

For pro-democracy actors outside the labor movement, the task is to meet unions where they are. Do not assume they will lead or even that they are on your side, but neither assume that unions are uniformly risk averse and conservative. They are complex and politically heterogeneous organizations facing real threats. Ask how they can contribute and construct opportunities to absorb and use union resources without requiring them to be the financial or organizational backbone. In the run-up to elections, that means coordinated outreach on a small number of concrete items—clean election administration, judicial independence, constraints on executive power—using multiple channels, not just union ones. After elections, it means preparing for distributed resistance that does not hinge on any single actor's participation.

Rebuilding organizations that give workers an independent and meaningful voice at work remains essential for long-term democratic resilience, not to mention sustained, broadly shared prosperity. But it is not a near-term solution to democratic backsliding. The immediate task is to deploy the capacities that exist, align them with a broader defense of democratic rules, and organize across fragmented publics without hoping for a single collection of groups to carry the burden.

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