



Democratic Void Cycles: Echoes of January 6

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Democratic Void Cycles:

Echoes of January 6

Charles Pflieger

A Thesis in the Field of International Relations

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

November 2025

Abstract

This thesis addresses a comparative puzzle: whether the January 6, 2021 assault on the U.S. Capitol produced democratic echoes in Brazil and South Korea, and why the aftershocks diverged. Evidence from media framing, elite rhetoric, and institutional indicators confirms a diffusion effect in both countries, while showing that its trajectory is conditional.

Three filters shape outcomes. First, polarization sets receptivity; Brazil's intense social and digital fragmentation primed audiences, while Korea's partisan divide remained bounded by post-1987 procedural norms. Second, media structure governs translation; Brazil's fragmented ecosystem accelerated permissive reinterpretations, while Korea's gate-kept press initially treated the breach as uniquely American. Third, institutional guardrails determine speed and unity of response; delayed elite accountability in Brazil prolonged the crisis, while Korea's parliament reversed emergency measures within hours and initiated impeachment within days. The theoretical contribution is the concept of permissive sanctions, the idea that impunity itself travels and lowers perceived costs of imitation.

A three-phase Signal-Echo model links broadcast, domestic translation, and consequence, and a diffusion quotient is proposed, defined as signal strength times polarization divided by guardrail robustness. The model explains why Brazil experienced a larger and longer aftershock and why Korea's echo was brief and corrected. Policy horizons follow directly. Brazil should institutionalize agile judicial capacity and pursue

depolarization. Korea should narrow emergency authorities and require prior legislative consent for deployments in the capital. The United States bears special responsibility; timely, credible accountability at home functions as external deterrence abroad, particularly where politically framed clemency could otherwise signal tolerance for breaches.

Frontispiece

*When I fell behind that line and I saw - I can just remember my breath catching in my throat because what I saw was just a war scene. It was like something I had seen in the Middle East. There were officers on the ground. They were bleeding. They were throwing up. ... I was slipping in people's blood. ... It was hours of hand-to-hand combat.*¹

- Caroline Edwards, U.S. Capitol Police Officer

¹ Reuters, "Notable Quotes from the First Hearing on the U.S. Capitol Riot," *Reuters*, June 10, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/notable-quotes-first-hearing-us-capitol-riot-2022-06-10/>.

Dedication

To the members of the United States Capitol Police Force who helped protect me, those who were also working in the Capitol on January 6th, 2021, and the democracy of the United States; The members of the United States House Select Committee on the January 6 Attack who stood up for, and continue to stand for democracy in the United States, in addition to internationally; Professor Micheal Napier, a world history teacher at Rockwall-Heath High School, who taught me to love history with a passion that has led me here today.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

“I guess I will have to go somewhere else for coffee,” was my first thought when a Capitol Police officer told me bombs had been found. The Capitol complex was sliding into chaos, and I was fixated on choosing Au Bon Pain in Cannon over Longworth’s Dunkin Donuts. Two years into my time as a congressional staffer, a position I had worked to earn through an unpaid internship while delivering food to pay my rent, that bastion of democracy was collapsing around me. The day quickly turned from bomb threats to an assault. Controlled detonations rattled the windows; crowds shouted; colleagues’ voices shook; riot police rushed us through the tunnels, weapons drawn. Only later, watching the footage replay around the world, did it register that January 6 was not only an American tragedy but a global inflection point. That mundane coffee choice marked the start of the most consequential day of my life.

- Charles Pflieger, U.S. House staff, January 6, 2021

On January 6, 2021, a joint session of the U.S. Congress convened to count Electoral College votes, as required by the Constitution and federal statute. A crowd breached the U.S. Capitol, the Vice President and Members were evacuated, and the count was suspended for several hours. Congress reconvened that night and completed

certification in the early morning of January 7, 2021.^{2 3} Law enforcement reported extensive assaults on officers; approximately 140 officers were injured across the U.S. Capitol Police and the Metropolitan Police Department.⁴ Extensive video and documentary records later reconstructed the sequence of events.⁵

While the joint session is routine, the breach demonstrated that even the most venerable democratic chamber can be disrupted in full public view. The events did not arise in isolation; they crystallized longer-running stresses in American civic life, including intensifying partisan polarization, disputes over electoral legitimacy, and leaders openly testing constitutional guardrails.

Symbolic Violence and Historical Echoes

Episodes of violence inside the Capitol have historical precedents, including the 1856 caning of Senator Charles Sumner by Representative Preston Brooks and the shooting of former Representative William Taulbee by journalist Charles Kincaid.^{6 7} Such incidents raised recurring questions about political violence and accountability. The

²“Counting Electoral Votes: An Overview of Procedures at the Joint Session, Including Objections by Members of Congress,” Congressional Research Service reports, December 8, 2020, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/>.

³ Melissa Quinn et al., “Pence Announces Biden’s Victory after Congress Completes Electoral Count,” CBS News, January 7, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/electoral-college-vote-count-biden-victory>.

⁴ “Attorney General Merrick B. Garland Statement on the Second Anniversary of the January 6 Attack on the Capitol,” Office of Public Affairs | Attorney General Merrick B. Garland Statement on the Second Anniversary of the January 6 Attack on the Capitol | United States Department of Justice, February 6, 2025, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/attorney-general-merrick-b-garland-statement-second-anniversary-january-6-attack-capitol>.

⁵ “Final Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol,” GovInfo, December 22, 2022, <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GPO-J6-REPORT/summary>.

⁶ “The Caning of Senator Charles Sumner,” U.S. Senate: The Caning of Senator Charles Sumner, September 8, 2023,

https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/The_Caning_of_Senator_Charles_Sumner.htm.

⁷ “The Shooting of Congressman William Taulbee on the Steps of the U.S. Capitol,” US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1851-1900/The-death-of-Congressman-William-Taulbee-on-the-steps-of-the-U-S--Capitol/>.

post-event response is central to this study. U.S. authorities undertook large-scale investigations and prosecutions; in January 2025, the President issued a broad clemency action affecting many January 6 defendants.^{8 9} As detailed later in this thesis, the severity, timing, and reversibility of sanctions are part of the signal that external audiences observe.

Against that backdrop, this study uses the term **Democratic Void Cycle** to describe an interval in which assaults on constitutional order are more likely to diffuse across borders when sanction signals are ambiguous or permissive at the origin case. The chapters that follow operationalize this claim and evaluate its implications through the Signal–Echo framework and cross-national evidence.

The Democratic Void Cycle

The Democratic Void Cycle (DVC) is a timebounded interval that follows a visible breach of democratic order, during which the credibility of sanctions is depressed because punishments are absent, delayed, diluted, or reversible. In this interval, foreign and domestic actors update beliefs about the costs of imitation and are more likely to echo tactics they observe in the origin case through the Signal–Echo process. The DVC closes when credible penalties or institutional moves restore expected costs.

⁸ “Granting Pardons and Commutation of Sentences for Certain Offenses Relating to the Events at or near the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021,” The White House, January 21, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/granting-pardons-and-commutation-of-sentences-for-certain-offenses-relating-to-the-events-at-or-near-the-united-states-capitol-on-january-6-2021/>.

⁹ Jeff Mason et al., After taking office, trump pardons 1,500 Jan. 6 defendants | Reuters, January 21, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/triumphant-trump-returns-white-house-launching-new-era-upheaval-2025-01-20/>.

A DVC contains five core elements: a trigger event, meaning a public breach that implicates core institutions (for example, storming a legislature, an unconstitutional power grab, or an executive refusal to accept certified results); a sanction signal, defined as the observable pattern of punishment along four dimensions, namely severity, speed, reversibility, and coverage of principals and agents; framing competition, in which elites and media interpret the breach and shape how observers decode the sanction signal; susceptibility filters, the domestic conditions that amplify or dampen echoes, especially polarization, media structure, and institutional guardrails; and echo behavior, the imitative or script-borrowing actions that appear at home or abroad.

The DVC is media agnostic in principle; in contemporary settings, however, networked platforms and the spread of generative AI significantly accelerate and aggravate the cycle. The cycle closes most clearly when penalties are enforced; it may also close when institutions credibly commit to reforms, although such commitments provide a weaker signal. Two cases outside the United States illustrate portability: the 1996 convictions and December 1997 pardons of former South Korean presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, which lowered perceived costs for high-level constitutional violations,^{10 11 12} and Brazil's 1979 Amnesty Law, which created enduring expectations of leniency for political actors and security agents.^{13 14} These examples demonstrate that

¹⁰ James M. West, "Martial Lawlessness: The Legal Aftermath of Kwangju," *Washington International Law Journal* 6, no. 1 (January 1, 1997): 85–168.

¹¹ Steven Mufson, "Two Jailed Leaders Pardoned in S. Korea: Outgoing Incoming Presidents Jointly Endorse Move to Promote Reconciliation Fiscal Healing.," *Washington Post*, December 21, 1997.

¹² "Factbox - Three Previous South Korean Presidents Also Faced Legal Proceedings," Reuters.com, March 21, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN16S0E6/>.

¹³ Nina Schneider, "Impunity in Post-Authoritarian Brazil: The Supreme Court's Recent Verdict on the Amnesty Law," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies | Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe* 0, no. 90 (April 15, 2011): 39, <https://doi.org/10.18352/erlacs.9250>.

¹⁴ "Brazil Court Upholds Law That Protects Torturers," Amnesty International, June 23, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2010/04/brazil-court-upholds-law-protects-torturers/>.

sanction credibility, rather than the medium of transmission, governs whether echoes take hold.

Major Echoes Inside the Void

The following recent episodes illustrate how the DVC has operated since January 6. First, on January 8, 2023, thousands of supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro stormed Brazil's Congress, Supreme Court, and presidential palace, often chanting slogans heard in Washington two years earlier. Security forces eventually restored order, but the riot exposed how easily a narrative of stolen elections could be transplanted to another major democracy. Second, developments in South Korea in late 2024 involved an emergency-powers controversy that escalated into an impeachment process in early 2025, treated by many observers as an attempted self-coup. Third, on January 20, 2025, the newly re-elected President Donald Trump issued a proclamation pardoning or commuting the sentences of more than fifteen hundred people convicted for the Capitol attack, closing the door on legal accountability at home even as global imitators watched.

Observers might point to other seismic shocks, such as Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Myanmar's military coup in February 2021, and Niger's coup d'état in July 2023. Each signals democratic stress, yet all occurred in states where liberal guardrails were already brittle or absent. None involved a long-established democracy suspending accountability while still claiming fidelity to constitutional ideals. These crises therefore sit adjacent to, rather than inside, the DVC; they dramatize autocratic aggression or outright regime collapse but do not model how an advanced democracy's failure to reckon with insurrection becomes a template for peers.

These events share two defining characteristics of cases inside the DVC. They involve a visible institutional breach followed by echoes, whether rhetorical, tactical, or both, that are drawn from the origin case. They also each ended without a decisive reckoning that would restore sanction credibility. In combination, these conditions create an international atmosphere in which impunity becomes a transferable resource. Consistent with the definition introduced earlier, each case pairs a visible breach with a permissive sanction signal on at least two dimensions, for example low severity or slow speed, plus reversibility or narrow coverage.

Institutional Cracks

The Democratic Void Cycle rests on cracks that had been widening for nearly a decade before the Capitol attack. Beginning around 2014, survey data showed ideological overlap between the two major U.S. parties shrinking to its lowest level in at least half a century, with 92 percent of Republicans positioned to the right of the median Democrat and 94 percent of Democrats to the left of the median Republican.¹⁵ By 2022, Pew researchers reported that the House and Senate were more polarized than at any point since systematic measurement began, the culmination of trends that “had been playing themselves out – and sometimes reinforcing each other – for decades.”¹⁶

During the same years, leading figures amplified claims that routine electoral processes were illegitimate. Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign warned of a “rigged

¹⁵ Pew Research Center, *Political Polarization in the American Public: How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan Antipathy Affect Politics, Compromise and Everyday Life*, June 12, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

¹⁶ Drew DeSilver, “The Polarization in Today’s Congress Has Roots That Go Back Decades,” *Pew Research Center*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/03/10/the-polarization-in-todays-congress-has-roots-that-go-back-decades/>.

system,” and after his 2020 defeat he repeatedly asserted without evidence that he had won, a narrative that seeded both legal challenges and direct threats against election officials. Conspiracy films, viral social-media content, and a growing ecosystem of election denialism sustained these claims well into 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic frequently earns credit, or blame, for the incendiary mood of 2020 to 2021. It certainly deepened partisan cleavages: by mid-2020, Republicans and Democrats were already dozens of percentage points apart on whether the virus posed a major threat, and a 2025 Pew survey found that 72 percent of Americans believed the pandemic had driven the country further apart.¹⁷ Yet COVID-19 functions better as an accelerant than an origin story. Emergency powers, lockdowns, and disinformation tested institutional legitimacy worldwide, but the United States entered the crisis with eroded mutual trust and a hyper-partisan media environment, conditions that shaped both its policy battles and the election that followed.

By the time rioters gathered on the Ellipse on January 6, 2021, the guardrails that once separated heated rhetoric from physical confrontation had already been weakened. The assault on Congress did not create a new fracture; it revealed how deep the existing fissures had become. The next chapters trace how this single breach, emerging from a decade of polarization and delegitimization, evolved into a wider Democratic Void Cycle that now shapes political behavior in Brazil, South Korea, and beyond. Chapter II situates the argument in the backsliding and diffusion literatures and introduces a short Concept Box; Chapter III details a blended design using V-Dem v15 indicators for 2010 to 2024,

¹⁷ “5 Years Later: America Looks Back at the Impact of COVID-19,” *Trust Magazine*, The Pew Charitable Trusts, June 23, 2025, <https://www.pew.org/en/trust/archive/summer-2025/5-years-later-america-looks-back-at-the-impact-of-covid-19>.

media-framing of news texts, and a pardons corpus, with segmented regression and difference-in-slopes tests; Chapters IV and V present Brazil and South Korea; Chapter VI analyzes pardons and sanction signals; Chapter VII synthesizes cross-case patterns.

Real-Time Global Diffusion: The Signal–Echo Model

Twenty-first-century technology ensured that the Capitol breach unfolded before a global audience. Livestreams and real-time feeds on major platforms allowed participants and observers to circulate competing interpretations of the same images. In networked environments, visibility arrives quickly and at scale, which makes dramatic events portable as reference points for audiences well beyond the origin country.^{18 19 20}

Two overlapping networks amplified the signal. The first was platform-level distribution, where feeds and chats lowered the cost of witnessing and sharing. The second was an elite-and-activist layer, where politicians, media entrepreneurs, and cross-border networks supplied frames and cues that traveled with the footage. These layers work jointly to turn dramatic episodes into scripts that can be reused elsewhere.²¹

^{22 23} Within days Brazilian commentators spoke of *Nosso seis de Janeiro* (“our January

¹⁸ Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

¹⁹ Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁰ Gilad Lotan et al., “The Revolutions Were Tweeted: Information Flows During the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions. International Journal of Communication,” *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1375–1405, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479371>.

²¹ W. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

²² Sandra González-Bailón, Javier Borge-Holthoefer, and Yamir Moreno, “Broadcasters and Hidden Influentials in Online Protest Diffusion,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (March 8, 2013): 943–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479371>.

²³ Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (December 1, 1993): 51–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.

6”), and South Korean hardline outlets published explainers on how “patriots” in Washington disrupted certification.

This thesis proposes an original Signal–Echo diffusion model to formalize this pattern. Operationally, the signal is the publicly observable package of (a) the breach itself and (b) the sanction signal that follows in the origin case, measured along severity, speed, reversibility, and coverage. The echo is a subsequent action in another setting that explicitly references, adapts, or replicates elements of the signal. Causally, the signal affects the probability of an echo through two pathways: mediation by framing competition and moderation by local susceptibility filters such as polarization, media structure, and institutional guardrails.

An echo occurs when local actors reference or replicate the breach, whether symbolically through chants and flags or materially through forced entry and demands to overturn results. Echo probability rises when exposure to the signal coincides with an accountability gap at the source and receptive local conditions in the receiving polity. A feedback loop completes the model. Each echo updates beliefs about the costs of similar actions. If echoes are followed by permissive sanctions, they can themselves become new signals. Brazil’s riot, South Korea’s emergency-powers crisis, and subsequent U.S. clemency form a sequence in which leniency at the core encourages challenges at the periphery, a dynamic the empirical chapters test directly. The framework links platform visibility, elite framing, and sanction credibility within the broader Democratic Void Cycle.

Research Problem and Gap

Scholars have dissected the domestic consequences of the Capitol assault, producing detailed work on polarization, security failures, and legal proceedings inside the United States (for example, the Select Committee’s final report and analyses of protest-linked violence and extremism).²⁴ By contrast, the event’s cross-border reverberations in allied democracies remain comparatively under-examined. Preliminary media studies note rhetorical borrowings in Brazil and South Korea, and democracy-index reports list score changes after 2021, yet no comparative study has traced the mechanisms that carried January 6 across borders during what this thesis calls the Democratic Void Cycle (DVC).^{25 26 27} This study proposes the Signal–Echo diffusion model that links origin-case sanction credibility to cross-border imitation, drawing on classic diffusion literature.

To close that gap, this thesis asks two linked questions and tests them in a structured comparison of Brazil and South Korea. It probes whether and how a breakdown in accountability at the democratic core reshaped elite behavior and institutional safeguards in two partner states. The puzzle is deliberately narrow. It is not whether global democratic backsliding exists; decades of Freedom House and V-Dem

²⁴ “Select January 6th Committee Final Report and Supporting Materials Collection,” GovInfo, December 27, 2022, <https://www.govinfo.gov/collection/january-6th-committee-final-report?path=%2FGPO%2FJanuary+6th+Committee+Final+Report+and+Supporting+Materials+Collection>.

²⁵ Raphael Rashid and Justin McCurry, “Has South Korea Just Witnessed Its Own January 6 Moment?,” The Guardian, January 20, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/20/has-south-korea-just-witnessed-its-own-january-6-moment>.

²⁶ Joao V. S. Ozawa et al., “Brazilian Capitol Attack: The Interaction between Bolsonaro’s Supporters’ Content, WhatsApp, Twitter, and News Media: HKS Misinformation Review,” Misinformation Review, June 8, 2024, <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/brazilian-capitol-attack-the-interaction-between-bolsonaros-supporters-content-whatsapp-twitter-and-news-media/>.

²⁷ V-dem democracy report 2025 25 years of autocratization, accessed August 15, 2025, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr__2025_lowres.pdf.

data confirm the trend. The focus is whether the impunity granted after January 6 created specific pathways for imitation or legitimation abroad. By studying Brazil and South Korea side by side, the thesis moves beyond single-country anecdotes and provides a test of the Signal–Echo model in two very different regional and historical settings. Research into Mexico and Poland appeared in early designs but were removed to allow deeper empirical coverage of the two clearest echo cases that also faced direct accountability crises.

Case Selection Justification

Brazil and South Korea provide the clearest vantage points for observing how the Democratic Void Cycle travels beyond the United States. Both maintain deep strategic and economic relationships with Washington: Brazil counts the United States as a principal trading partner and has cooperated militarily since the Second World War,^{28 29} while South Korea’s security architecture rests on the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty and the continuous presence of U.S. forces.^{30 31} Because political elites, journalists, and activists in Brasília and Seoul routinely draw legitimacy cues from developments in Washington, each country is unusually sensitive to signals that the American model of accountability has faltered.

²⁸ “Brazil,” United States Trade Representative, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/americas/brazil>.

²⁹ “Research Guides: Brazil-U.S. Relations: Brazil in World War II,” Brazil in World War II - Brazil-U.S. Relations - Research Guides at Library of Congress, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://guides.loc.gov/brazil-us-relations/brazil-world-war-ii>.

³⁰ Joseph Clark, “‘we Go Together:’ U.S., South Korea Celebrate Alliance,” U.S. Department of Defense, July 24, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3425351/we-go-together-us-south-korea-celebrate-alliance/>.

³¹ “Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of Korea; October 1, 1953,” Avalon Project, accessed August 15, 2025, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kor001.asp.

The two cases also present unambiguous echo events. On January 8, 2023, supporters of Jair Bolsonaro occupied Brazil's Congress, Supreme Court, and presidential palace, repeating slogans, symbols, and social-media tactics first witnessed at the U.S. Capitol.³² Thirteen months later, President Yoon Suk-yeol of South Korea declared martial law amid a budget standoff; although parliament reversed the order within two days and impeached him soon after, contemporaneous coverage and opposition leaders treated the crisis as South Korea's "own January 6."^{33 34} In each country, legal proceedings and political negotiations that followed these breaches reproduced the central dynamic of the Void: vigorous debate over whether to punish or pardon the instigators.³⁵

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Important contrasts sharpen the analytical leverage of pairing these democracies. Brazil operates in a Latin American environment where populism and military tutelage have periodically unsettled civilian rule, whereas South Korea functions in Northeast Asia under intense external security pressures but within a legalistic political culture that values procedural formality. If comparable accountability patterns emerge in such dissimilar settings, the evidence will point to transnational diffusion rather than regional idiosyncrasy as the primary mechanism.

³² Adriano Machado, "Bolsonaro Backers Ransack Brazil Presidential Palace, Congress, Supreme Court," Reuters, January 8, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/bolsonaro-supporters-invade-congress-presidential-palace-brasil-2023-01-08/>.

³³ Charlie Campbell, "South Korea's Yoon Impeachment Saga Ends but Troubles Aren't Over," Time, April 4, 2025, <https://time.com/7274736/south-korea-constitutional-court-confirms-impeachment-president-yoon-suk-yeol/>.

³⁴ Rashid and McCurry, "Has South Korea Just Witnessed Its Own January 6 Moment?"

³⁵ Kim Tong-hyung, "Youtube Election Fraud Conspiracy Theories Fuel Impeached South Korean President and His Supporters," AP News, January 16, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-yoon-martial-law-conspiracy-theories-youtube-election-fraud-60baa8ab306ceaca6465b90569f079a6>.

³⁶ Al Jazeera, "Bolsonaro Supporters Rally in Brazil, Demand Amnesty for January 8 Riots," Al Jazeera, March 16, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/16/bolsonaro-supporters-rally-in-brazil-demand-amnesty-for-january-8-riots>

Finally, both countries offer rich empirical material for process tracing. High-frequency indicators from Freedom House and V-Dem, extensive digital news archives, and accessible legislative records permit close measurement of institutional change before and after the echo events. Concentrating on Brazil and South Korea, therefore, balances breadth with depth, allowing the study to test the Signal–Echo model rigorously while keeping the number of cases small enough for detailed causal analysis.

Theoretical Lens: Contagion and Resilience inside the Democratic Void Cycle

Scholars of democratic backsliding argue that institutions erode when elected leaders weaken horizontal constraints, curb civil liberties, or cast doubt on electoral legitimacy. This study uses those insights as background rather than a subject of debate. Diffusion theorists add that erosion rarely remains confined to one polity; instead, ideas, tactics, and narratives cross-borders through learning, emulation, and strategic coordination. This thesis merges these literatures by centering on sanctions. When a breach faces absent, delayed, diluted, or reversible punishment, the resulting accountability gap functions as the transmitted variable. The model treats sanction credibility as the core content of the signal that travels through media and elite networks.

The framework retains the classic “contagion versus resilience” dichotomy. Contagion refers to the outward movement of antidemocratic scripts, while resilience denotes the capacity of institutions to absorb external shocks without systemic breakdown. In the Signal–Echo model, framing competition mediates how observers decode the sanction signal and domestic filters moderate whether echoes materialize. Polarization can weaken democratic accountability by shifting voters toward partisan

loyalty over procedural enforcement, while robust checks raise the likelihood of timely sanction.³⁷

In the Democratic Void Cycle these forces coexist. Weak or absent sanctions in the United States supply a contagion channel that encourages foreign elites to test their own guardrails. At the same time, domestic institutions in the receiving countries may either amplify or blunt that impulse. The key theoretical claim is that polarization heightens susceptibility to contagion by framing accountability debates as partisan score-settling, whereas robust horizontal checks—independent courts, legislative oversight, and active civil society—strengthen resilience by increasing the likelihood of timely sanction.

The lens therefore predicts variation rather than uniform collapse. Countries with high polarization and fragile guardrails should experience stronger echo effects, while those with lower polarization or sturdier constraints should resist or quickly neutralize imported scripts. Brazil and South Korea provide a critical test: both received the same signal from Washington, yet their institutional configurations differ enough to reveal how resilience conditions shape the trajectory of contagion.

Research Questions and Hypothesized Pathways

Debates over democratic backsliding often separate rhetoric from institutional change, yet January 6 reveals how the two can intersect. This study therefore begins by asking how the Capitol assault reshaped elite discourse and, in turn, altered the behavior of legislatures, courts, and security agencies in Brazil and South Korea. The inquiry treats partisan polarization as the primary conduit: when ideological sorting is deep, foreign

³⁷ Milan W. Svolik, “Polarization versus Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (2019): 20–32.

examples of norm breaking supply convenient talking points that can be weaponized in domestic struggles.

If this logic holds, we should observe Brazilian and Korean politicians invoking the United States riot to legitimize claims of electoral fraud or to portray disruptive tactics as patriotic protest, while formal bodies feel pressure to soften sanctions or revise procedures. Horizontal accountability serves as a counterweight. Courts that act promptly, oversight committees that demand full disclosure, and a mobilized civil society are expected to contain imported radicalism, limiting its institutional bite even when the rhetoric spreads widely. Embedded in this discussion is the first research question: to what extent did the Capitol assault, filtered through existing polarization and countervailing guardrails, redirect elite language and institutional practice in the two partner democracies?

The second analytical step follows the signal outward, probing the precise channels through which the Democratic Void Cycle traveled and took root. Weak sanctions in the United States, culminating in the sweeping 2025 pardons, broadcast an international message that breaching constitutional order might carry little lasting cost. That permissive message moved through two networks already mapped in the Signal–Echo model: real-time platform media that supplied vivid imagery for mass audiences, and partisan-elite ties that offered instant framing and strategic guidance.

Once the signal arrived, its impact hinged on the receiving environment. Where polarization primed actors to distrust electoral outcomes, and where legal or procedural safeguards were fragile, the Void was most likely to produce direct challenges to democratic rules, such as Brazil’s government-building invasion or South Korea’s brief

declaration of martial law. In more resilient settings the same signal could fade without triggering systemic disruption. This causal logic motivates the second research question: through which specific communication and institutional pathways did the United States accountability gap influence the strategic calculations of political actors in Brazil and South Korea, and why did its effects manifest differently across the two cases?

Significance and Contribution

By following the ripple effects of January 6 beyond U.S. borders, the thesis places the long-standing debate over American exceptionalism inside a global accountability context. Much of the scholarship on backsliding focuses on domestic drivers, while diffusion studies often treat the United States as an exporter of liberal norms rather than illiberal scripts. Demonstrating that a failure to sanction democratic breaches in Washington can travel outward and reshape strategic behavior in allied capitals complicates both perspectives. The analysis extends diffusion theory by identifying permissive sanctions as a novel transmission mechanism and enriches backsliding research by specifying the conditions under which foreign signals amplify or dampen domestic erosion.

The findings carry direct policy relevance. They suggest that credible, timely sanctions at the democratic core are not merely matters of internal justice; they are also a form of external inoculation. Weak or reversible penalties invite imitation, whereas prompt accountability can raise the perceived cost of transgression for actors abroad. For allies such as Brazil and South Korea, the study highlights the importance of maintaining independent courts, legislative oversight, and a vigilant civil society capable of enforcing

red lines even when foreign examples nudge elites toward impunity. For the United States, the results underscore that domestic accountability choices have strategic effects on the global democratic landscape, advising policymakers to treat the integrity of sanction regimes as a component of foreign policy rather than a purely internal affair.

Chapter II.

Literature Review

The literature on democratic backsliding began as an inward-looking conversation about why elected leaders undermine their own constitutions, but it has gradually turned outward as scholars recognize that illiberal practices and narratives travel across borders. At the core of the early work were reminders that liberal democracy rests on more than parchment; it depends on politicians who fear tangible penalties for violating norms. Huntington's classic account of the third wave traced transitions toward democracy, yet even he warned that reversals become likely when winners can dismantle constraints without paying a price.³⁸ Dahl's earlier concept of "polyarchy" likewise hinged on mutual forbearance among elites paired with credible sanctions for abuse.³⁹ Those mechanisms remained largely theoretical until the post-Cold-War era delivered empirical tests: Levitsky and Way's study of competitive authoritarianism showed that rulers with access to asymmetrical resources will breach rules if domestic or international actors cannot make those breaches costly.⁴⁰ Bermeo's survey of backsliding episodes underscored a similar point; modern autocrats prefer incremental changes precisely because incrementalism shields them from sharp sanctions.⁴¹ In each account, punishment makes or breaks deterrence, yet few authors asked what happens when

³⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, accessed January 26, 2025, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Third-Wave%3A-Democratization-in-the-Late-Century-Huntington/dd4ef56205bfl36795ff14147177a011c74ad09e>.

³⁹ Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975).

⁴⁰ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

⁴¹ Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>.

punishment is publicly absent in the anchor democracy of the liberal order. Across classic and contemporary accounts, deterrence hinges on visible follow-through; where sanctions hesitate or reverse, incentives tilt toward breach. Credible punishment is the hinge of deterrence; when penalties falter or unwind, rule breaking becomes rational.

The United States offers an unexpected laboratory for that question. January 6, 2021, marked the first violent challenge to the transfer of power since the nineteenth century, an event that emphasized the value of institutional resilience and accountability. Levitsky and Ziblatt’s earlier warning that “guardrails” depend on mutual toleration seemed prophetic, while Svolik’s experimental work on partisan incentives suggested that many citizens will overlook procedural violations when policy stakes feel existential.^{42 43} Immediately after the attack, rapid-fire public-opinion studies confirmed that perception. Using two national surveys and then a six-wave follow-up, Armaly, Buckley, and Enders (2022) showed that Christian nationalist beliefs and perceived status threat among White conservatives made respondents more willing to rationalize the violence, while broader conspiracy thinking further amplified support for political violence; factual corrections rarely shifted those views.⁴⁴ These findings echoed older work by Tajfel on social identity, but tethered it to contemporary U.S. polarization, which McCoy and Somer (2019, comparative synthesis) describe as “pernicious” because political opponents are

⁴² Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Broadway Books, an imprint of Crown Publishing, a division of Penguin Random House, 2019).

⁴³ Milan W. Svolik, “When Polarization Trumps Civic Virtue: Partisan Conflict and the Subversion of Democracy by Incumbents,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 15, no. 1 (2020): 3–31.

⁴⁴ Miles T. Armaly, David T. Buckley, and Adam M. Enders, “Christian Nationalism and Political Violence: Victimhood, Racial Identity, Conspiracy, and Support for the Capitol Attacks,” *Political Behavior* 44, no. 2 (January 4, 2022): 937–60, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09758-y>.

viewed as existential threats.⁴⁵ All threads converge on one implication: when out-party enmity is high, formal rules alone cannot deter abuse; only swift, visible sanctions can.

The judicial aftermath, however, produced mixed signals. Prosecutions of individual rioters moved briskly in lower courts, yet the House select committee's referrals against Donald Trump bogged down, and the incoming administration in 2025 granted wide-ranging pardons.⁴⁶ Ginsburg and Huq argue that such inconsistent punishment erodes "rule credibility" because citizens and elites infer what will happen next from what has happened so far.⁴⁷ Alexander's ethnography of state- and county-level election officials between November 2020 and January 2021 drives the point home. He documents how clerks clung to "office obligation," the Weberian ethic that binds professionals to impersonal duties, but only after absorbing harassment and even death threats.⁴⁸ If personal valor sustains institutions where legal sanctions hesitate, the deterrent moat is shallow. Reinforcing that concern, Loving and Smith find that the riot triggered a measurable voter-registration flight in Florida, not toward the out-party but toward no-party affiliation, suggesting a withdrawal of confidence by formerly high-

⁴⁵ Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, forthcoming January 2019, accessed August 31, 2018, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3275846>.

⁴⁶ Ryan J. Reilly, "Jan. 6 Prosecutors Describe 'Shocking,' 'Guttural' Week after Trump's Pardons," *NBC News*, January 24, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/justice-department/jan-6-prosecutors-describe-shocking-guttural-week-trumps-pardons-rcna188970>.

⁴⁷ Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Z. Huq, *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

⁴⁸ Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Office Obligation as Civil Virtue: The Crisis of American Democracy, November 3, 2020–January 6, 2021, and After," *Society* 60, no. 5 (September 5, 2023): 651–69, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-023-00883-4>.

propensity Republicans.⁴⁹ Domestic cost-benefit calculations were therefore already shifting, and those calculations would soon broadcast abroad.

Democratic Void Cycle (DVC): A time-bounded interval after a visible breach of constitutional order when sanction credibility is depressed because penalties are absent, slow, diluted, or reversible. In this interval, perceived costs of imitation fall and echoes become more likely until credible penalties or institutional moves restore expected costs.

Signal-Echo model: The signal is the public package of the breach and the sanction pattern that follows, measured by severity, speed, reversibility, and coverage. The echo is a subsequent action that references or adapts the signal in another setting. Framing competition mediates how audiences interpret the signal; domestic filters moderate whether echoes materialize.

Permissive sanctions: Penalties that are absent, delayed, diluted, or reversible. Distinct from total impunity and from principled lenience. Operates as a transmission mechanism: when observers see permissive sanctions in a leading democracy, they infer lower costs at home.

Figure A-1. Key Concepts: Democratic Void Cycle, Signal-Echo, Permissive Sanctions.

Diffusion research offers the conceptual bridge from domestic ambiguity to international imitation. Early wave theories emphasized structural similarity—states emulate successful peers that resemble them.⁵⁰ Weyland refined the argument through bounded rationality: decision-makers copy dramatic examples, not slow policy wins, especially when uncertainty is high.⁵¹ Those insights explain why illiberal playbooks can

⁴⁹ Sara C. Loving and Daniel A. Smith, “Riot in the Party? Voter Registrations in the Aftermath of the January 6, 2021 U.S. Capitol Insurrection,” *Party Politics*, 30(2), 209-222, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221147666>.

⁵⁰ Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Michael D. Ward, “Diffusion and the International Context of Democratization,” *International Organization* 60, no. 4 (2006): 911–933.

⁵¹ Kurt Weyland, “The Arab Spring: Why the Surprising Similarities with the Revolutionary Wave of 1848?” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 4 (2012): 917–934.

leapfrog despite adverse outcomes. Mudde's analysis of transatlantic far-right networks (2022) notes that militancy, not governance competence, draws attention within movement circles.⁵² Rapoport (2021) extends his terrorism-wave schema to January 6, treating the Capitol assault as the opening performance in a "fifth wave" of radical right mobilization where spectacle is itself the goal.⁵³ Blazak, surveying white-nationalist digital forums, confirms that users frame the event as proof of both vulnerability and opportunity, a dramaturgical resource rather than a strategic failure.⁵⁴ When Benoit (2022) dissects "persuasive attacks" leveled at Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, he demonstrates how elite rhetoric packages those spectacles, amplifying or muting their resonance for foreign audiences.⁵⁵ Missing from these otherwise rich accounts is a sustained focus on sanction outcomes: do foreign actors attend more closely to the riot or to Washington's ultimate failure to keep consequences intact? Diffusion favors salient spectacles over slow policy wins; whether echoes materialize depends on whether observers also see consequences. Diffusion spotlights spectacle, yet imitation follows only when observers also register the presence or absence of consequences.

⁵² Cas Mudde, "The Far-Right Threat in the United States: A European Perspective," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 699, no. 1 (2022): 101–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211070060>.

⁵³ David C. Rapoport, "The Capitol Attack and the 5th Terrorism Wave," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 5 (July 4, 2021): 912–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1932338>.

⁵⁴ Randall Blazak, "Revisiting the White Boys from Portland to Ukraine: Anomie and Right-Wing Extremism," *American Behavioral Scientist* 68, no. 2 (July 6, 2022): 216–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642221108940>.

⁵⁵ William L Benoit, "Persuasive Attack on President Donald Trump and President Vladimir Putin," *Discourse & Communication* 16, no. 6 (June 30, 2022): 621–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17504813221108795>.

That omission is striking because sanction credibility sits at the intersection of two older literatures. In the international-relations canon, Thomas Schelling showed that deterrence relies on the perception of resolve, which is always inferred from past costs willingly borne.⁵⁶ In domestic criminology, Beccaria's classical theory held that certainty of punishment deters more than severity.⁵⁷ If both claim that visible follow-through matters, then the U.S. decision to pardon January 6 conspirators becomes a global signal that the costs of constitutional breach are negotiable. This thesis labels that signal a *permissive-sanction signal* (penalties that are absent, delayed, diluted, or reversible, lowering perceived costs despite formal legal action). It is not simply lenience, which can be principled, nor impunity, which is absolute. Permissive sanctions are ambiguous penalties, issued but later diluted, that teach observers the rules are malleable.

In this thesis, a signal is the publicly observable package of (a) the breach itself and (b) the sanction pattern at the origin case, measured by severity, speed, reversibility, and coverage. An echo is a subsequent action that explicitly references or replicates elements of the signal in another setting. January 6 supplies the breach; the subsequent pattern of punishment supplies the sanction component that updates beliefs. Readers may reasonably map an alternative sequence in which January 6 functions as a precursor, a later U.S. decision (for example, 2025 clemency) constitutes the signal, and Brazil or South Korea provide echoes. The empirical chapters report results under the baseline mapping and note where the alternative mapping yields the same directional predictions.

⁵⁶ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁵⁷ Cesare Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments and Other Writings*, ed. Richard Bellamy, trans. Richard Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 [1764]).

Entman defined framing as selecting some aspects of reality to promote particular interpretations.⁵⁸ Chong and Druckman demonstrated experimentally that competing frames battle for cognitive dominance, with prior beliefs gating receptivity.⁵⁹ International coverage of January 6 showcased this dynamic. A multi-country frame study by Hinck finds three master frames: hypocrisy (the United States violates its own democratic sermon), failure of state capacity (a superpower cannot secure its legislature), and polarization (society is irreparably split).⁶⁰ Illiberal national media leaned hardest on hypocrisy, as documented by the “US Hypocrisy” study that coded 525 articles from Chinese, Russian, Iranian, and Saudi sources; they portrayed the riot and the permissive aftermath as proof that Western lectures about the rule-of-law ring hollow.⁶¹ This chapter, therefore, treats framing as a mediator that conditions how sanction signals are decoded because elites abroad often rely on English-language reporting to shape interpretations for home audiences. This raises a scope question: does the model depend on the internet? It does not. The Signal–Echo mechanism is media-agnostic; pre-digital episodes diffused through newspapers, diplomacy, and elite networks. Contemporary platforms primarily increase speed, reach, and persistence of exposure, while the core mechanism remains belief-updating from observed punishment patterns. In the cases that follow, platforms

⁵⁸ Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58.

⁵⁹ Chong, Dennis, and James N. Druckman. 2007. “Framing Public Opinion in Competitive Democracies.” *American Political Science Review* 101 (4): 637–656.

⁶⁰ Robert S. Hinck, “US Hypocrisy and the End of American Exceptionalism? Narratives of the January 6th Attack on the US Capitol From Illiberal National Media,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 67, no. 6 (2023): 807–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642221096335>.

⁶¹ Hinck, “US Hypocrisy and the End of American Exceptionalism?” 807–36.

accelerated exposure in Brazil, while South Korea’s processing relied more on mainstream press and institutional channels.

Domestic U.S. media bifurcated along partisan lines. An analysis of prime-time segments on Fox News and MSNBC between January 6 and March 1 found that conservative hosts emphasized isolated crowd violence while liberal hosts highlighted elite culpability, both reinforcing prior audience worldviews.⁶² Framing mediates how audiences decode the same images; when elites normalize leniency, the signal received is permissive rather than cautionary.

Brazil offers a vivid test of reception dynamics. Scholars of that country have long noted “supreme court malaise,” a public distrust of judicial activism that dates to the Mensalão scandal.⁶³ While the vast majority of rioters wrapped themselves in Brazil’s green-and-gold, photos and videos circulating on social media captured a smaller but conspicuous handful waving U.S. (and Israeli) flags as they surged through Brasília’s Three Powers Plaza, a visual nod to the broader, transnational far-right iconography that has crystallized since January 6, 2021 in Washington.⁶⁴ On Telegram and TikTok, meanwhile, organizers lifted the very language of the American “Stop the Steal” movement: English-language placards reading “Stolen Election” appeared in the crowd,

⁶² Witold Ostafiński, “American Media Coverage of the January 6, 2021 Events at the United States Capitol: A Glimpse into the Polarisation of the United States News Media,” *Zeszyty Prasoznawcze* 65, no. 4 (252) (2022): 25–35, <https://doi.org/10.4467/22996362PZ.22.037.16495>.

⁶³ Wendy Hunter and Timothy J. Power, “Bolsonaro and Brazil’s Illiberal Backlash,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 68–82.

⁶⁴ Al Mayadeen English, “Use of Israeli Flag during Brazil Riots Sparks Popular Outrage,” *Al Mayadeen English*, January 12, 2023, accessed June 21, 2025, <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/use-of-israeli-flag-during-brazil-riots-sparks-popular-outra>.

and viral calls urged patriots to converge on a “Festa da Selma” (“war-cry party”) in Brasília; a direct Portuguese riff on the U.S. slogan, already circulating in far-right channels ahead of January 8.⁶⁵ Together, the borrowed flags and slogans underscore how Brazil’s insurrectionists looked north for both symbols and scripts, even as their grievances were rooted at home.

Investigative reports show that Bolsonaro-aligned Telegram channels explicitly borrowed U.S. January 6 rhetoric. For example, a *Brown Political Review* analysis notes that slogans from the U.S. Capitol riot (like “Stop the Steal”) were repurposed by Brazilian far-right networks. In the days before January 8, some Telegram posts urged “patriots” to mobilize in Brasília as a “new day of independence,” echoing American far-right mobilization tactics.⁶⁶ Even U.S.-based activists crossed borders: Stop The Steal organizer Ali Alexander used Telegram to exhort Brazilians to “Pray! Protest!” and declared that “they’re attempting to steal the election from President Bolsonaro”.⁶⁷ These sources indicate that pro-Bolsonaro social media consciously evoked the January 6 movement as a model for Brazil’s actions.

⁶⁵ Damien Leloup, “Riots in Brazil: An Attempted Insurrection Organized Openly on Social Media,” *Le Monde*, January 10 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/01/10/riots-in-brazil-an-attempted-insurrection-organized-openly-on-social-media_6010980_4.html.

lemonde.fr

⁶⁶ Kayla Morrison, “Brazil and the United States: How Far-Right Social Media Rhetoric Incites Democratic Backsliding,” *Brown Political Review*, 2023, <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/scholarly-journals/brazil-united-states-how-far-right-social-media/docview/3094458914/se-2>.

⁶⁷ Jem Bartholomew, “‘Mosquitoes from the Same Swamp’: How the Digital Media Landscape Birthed the Internationalist Far Right,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, February 13, 2023, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/mosquitoes-from-the-same-swamp.php.

South Korea received the same signal but processed it differently. South Korea's Sixth Republic was born of the June 1987 mass protests and an accompanying elite concession. Under mounting popular pressure as the Seoul Olympics approached, military-backed presidential candidate Roh Tae-woo issued the June 29 Declaration, pledging direct presidential elections, restoration of civil liberties, and constitutional revision. The reform dismantled the indirect election system, limited the presidency to a single five-year term, established a new Constitutional Court, and granted amnesty to long-time dissidents, including Kim Dae-jung. Scholars characterize the settlement as a pacted transition: the outgoing military elite accepted competitive politics in exchange for legal immunity and a controlled reform timetable, while opposition leaders accepted gradual change to avert violent confrontation. This mixture of mass mobilization and elite bargaining produced a durable institutional framework that has underpinned every subsequent transfer of power in Seoul.⁶⁸

Polarization there is real, tethered to regional cleavages and generational memory of authoritarian rule, yet party volatility keeps alignments fluid. Despite three decades of electoral democracy, affective polarization among South Korean voters has intensified. A panel study surrounding the 2022 presidential election found that average feeling-thermometer gaps between in-party and out-party evaluations exceeded fifty points for both major camps, a level comparable to highly polarized Western cases. Post-election hostility rose further among conservative People Power Party supporters, whose out-party ratings fell from 19.7 to 15.8, while ideological extremity and perceived left-right

⁶⁸ William Stueck, "Democratization in Korea: The United States' Role, 1980 and 1987," *International Journal of Korean Studies* 2, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1998): 1–26, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/ijoks/v2i1/f_0013359_10855.pdf.

distance were the strongest predictors of negative sentiment. The authors conclude that South Korea faces a “crisis of affective polarization” that weakens loser consent and depresses institutional trust, suggesting incomplete democratic consolidation.⁶⁹

When rumors of election fraud erupted after the closely fought 2024 parliamentary race, conservative lawmakers flirted with a call for emergency powers; they cited the United States as a warning about what happens when mobs overrun institutions. Existing comparative media research shows that foreign allies largely framed the January 6 Capitol assault as an unprecedented attack on democratic institutions, raising doubts about U.S. democratic leadership.⁷⁰ Content analyses covering outlets in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Canada, Australia, Mexico, Israel, Russia, and China highlight recurring narratives of democratic fragility and leadership failure.^{71 72} Notably, peer-reviewed studies have not yet isolated South Korea’s major dailies—*Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo*, *Kyunghyang Shinmun*—in a dedicated framing analysis, leaving their precise narrative balance undocumented. This lacuna underscores the originality of the thesis’s own Korean-language frame coding and justifies its inclusion as a contribution to the diffusion literature.⁷³ The divergent framings nudged elites toward restraint, and South Korea’s brief martial-law motion dissolved within days under constitutional-court pressure. The permissive-sanction signal was decoded but ultimately contained by sturdier guardrails and a less apocalyptic partisan climate.

⁶⁹ Hyunki Shin, Jae-won Yang, and Sung Deuk Hahm, “Affective Polarization in the 2022 South Korean Presidential Election: Causes and Consequences,” *Korea Observer* 55, no. 2 (2024): 273–96.

⁷⁰ Boone, Gloria M, Mary Anne Taylor, and Linda Gallant. 2023. “International Reactions to the Capitol Attack of January 6th: A Media Frames Analysis.” *The American Behavioral Scientist (Beverly Hills)* 67 (6): 784–806. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642221091214>.

⁷¹ Boone, Taylor, and Gallant, “International Reactions to the Capitol Attack of January 6th.”

⁷² Hinck, “US Hypocrisy and the End of American Exceptionalism?” 807–36.

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Boone, Taylor, and Gallant, “International Reactions to the Capitol Attack of January 6th.”

Comparing Brazil and South Korea reveals two moderating variables that existing diffusion studies touch only lightly. The first is institutional elasticity: when courts and legislatures can respond quickly, they convert foreign cautionary tales into reinforcement of local norms rather than excuses for breach. O'Donnell and Schmitter's emphasis on "contingent consent" finds contemporary resonance here; actors will consent to rules if they foresee plausible enforcement.⁷⁴ The second variable is polarization intensity: McCoy and Somer's (2019) pernicious threshold hypothesis fits Brazil, where rivals consider each other outside the moral community, but not South Korea, where coalitions remain transactional. My thesis, therefore, hypothesizes that permissive-sanction signals amplify backsliding risk most when both polarization is high and guardrails are brittle, a conditional interaction that the literature has not systematically tested.

Transmission channels also warrant closer scrutiny. Social-media research reveals that cross-border political communities often form around language rather than geography. Blazak's mapping of white-nationalist Telegram networks shows Brazilian, U.S., and Polish activists sharing memes in English, Portuguese, and a hybrid slang, erasing national boundaries.⁷⁵ At the elite level, parliamentarians and pundits often learn from each other via epistemic communities, meaning loose networks of experts who trade policy scripts. Weyland's bounded-rationality model (2012) predicts that these communities fall back on heuristics under uncertainty, copying the most salient example

⁷⁴ Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

⁷⁵ Randall Blazak, "Revisiting the White Boys from Portland to Ukraine: Anomie and Right-Wing Extremism," *American Behavioral Scientist* 68, no. 2 (July 6, 2022): 216–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642221108940>.

even when objective success remains unproven.⁷⁶ The Capitol riot provided an unforgettable heuristic: if rioters penetrate the seat of U.S. democracy and later find leniency, then similar action elsewhere might pay off. The diffusion of that perception cannot be understood without integrating communication studies, which track how vivid imagery, repetitive framing, and conspiratorial echo chambers reduce complex events to moral lessons.

At this juncture, the literature strands converge on a three-step causal chain that guides the empirical chapters of this thesis. Ambiguous punishment in Washington lowers the observable cost of constitutional breach, creating a permissive-sanction signal. Digital platforms and ideological networks transmit that signal rapidly to foreign audiences. Domestic filters—polarization intensity, quality of guardrails, and prevailing media frames—shape whether the signal triggers direct challenges to democratic rules or fizzles as a cautionary tale. Each link in the chain enjoys partial support in prior scholarship, yet no study traces all three across multiple allied democracies. My comparison of Brazil and South Korea therefore extends diffusion theory beyond policy adoption, enriches backsliding literature with cross-regional evidence, and brings media-framing insights into institutional analysis.

Beyond theory, the synthesis carries policy weight. Deterrence research in security studies teaches that credibility, not rhetoric, underwrites commitments. If democratic leaders wish to inoculate allies against backsliding, they must treat domestic accountability as an instrument of foreign policy. That recommendation echoes Dahl's

⁷⁶ Weyland, "The Arab Spring," 917–934.

early insight that power flows through institutions visible to outsiders; it also dovetails with Levitsky and Ziblatt's plea for reinforcing unwritten norms through consistent enforcement. For Brazil, the implication is that strengthening judicial independence and clarifying impeachment thresholds could raise the domestic cost of illiberal maneuvers, thereby blunting external signals. For South Korea, the lesson is to shore up electoral integrity agencies before polarization deepens—an effort that the current National Election Commission has already begun by expanding real-time transparency tools. For the United States, the findings counsel against politicized pardons of antidemocratic actors, not only to honor internal justice but to maintain the integrity of a global deterrent architecture that depends on the American example.

Taken together, the scholarship on backsliding, diffusion, and framing supplies the theoretical scaffolding for this thesis, yet it leaves two blind spots: how ambiguous sanctions propagate across borders and under which domestic conditions they magnify or dampen democratic erosion. By testing those questions in Brazil and South Korea, the chapters that follow aim to fill the gap, offering evidence that domestic accountability in the core democracy reverberates far beyond its shores.

Chapter III.

Research Methodology

This project investigates the shifting condition of democracy through a blended strategy that combines comparative democracy indicators, qualitative media-framing analysis, and a focused examination of how Brazil and South Korea reacted to the January 2025 presidential pardons for January 6 offenders in the United States. The three strands together illuminate structural trends, narrative diffusion, and elite cross-border across the period before and after the Capitol assault. By weaving quantitative evidence into interpretive inquiry, the study seeks to trace not only whether democratic backsliding has occurred but how the symbolic power of January 6 travelled abroad and intersected with domestic guardrails.

Comparative Democracy Indicators

The indicator analysis pairs the origin case, the United States, with two democracies whose political and security ties to Washington are long-standing yet distinct: Brazil and South Korea. Annual data are drawn from the Varieties of Democracy dataset, version 15 (V-Dem v15) panel from 2010-2024, the latest complete panel as of March 2025. This range is wide enough to cover the long upswing that pre-dated COVID-19, the pandemic shock of 2020, the Capitol riot of January 2021; the January 2025 pardons fall outside this quantitative window and are analyzed qualitatively in Section 3.

Indicator bundle and operationalization

Twelve series capture procedural quality, elite norms, civic space, public mobilization, administrative integrity, and polarization. The Electoral Democracy Index (v2x_polyarchy) provides a macro reading; item-level indicators such as Election losers accept results (v2elaccept), Mobilization for democracy (v2cademmob), Political violence (v2caviol), and the Political polarization index (v2cacamps) disaggregate the broad score into hypothesized transmission belts through which the Capitol assault, filtered through existing polarization and countervailing guardrails, could redirect elite language and institutional practice abroad. Scores are standardized to the V-Dem interval scale (0–1, or –5→+5 for latent traits) to maintain comparability.

Analytic strategy

For each indicator and country, I compare the trend before 2021 to the trend after 2021. I fit one straight line to 2010–2020 and a second straight line to the panel's post-2021 years. The main quantity of interest is the change in slope between the two periods. I also report any immediate level change at 2021. The change in slope is tested using a segmented regression with an interaction term. The design prioritizes simple, interpretable trend estimates. The goal is to test whether January 6 is associated with a steeper descent, a plateau, or a rebound in partner democracies, and whether these patterns differ across indicator families. Results are descriptive and consistency-based rather than causal.

Validity and limitations

Because V-Dem aggregates expert judgments, country-year estimates embed subjective noise. Recent cross national polls reinforce this correlation only reading; see Table 1 for Brazil versus Korea trends that track democratic confidence, openness to authoritarian rule, and attitudes toward pardons for political violence.

Table 1. Comparative Public Opinion Indicators, 2021–2024.

Metric (Year)	Brazil	South Korea
Support for democracy	69% prefer democracy (2024, down from 79% in 2022); 8% openly favor a dictatorship. ⁷⁷	58% agree democracy is the best form of government (2023). ⁷⁸
Openness to autocratic leadership	Roughly 36% say a system led by a strong leader unencumbered by Congress or courts would be a “good” way to govern (2023). ⁷⁹	About 35% likewise favor a “strong leader” model without institutional checks (2023). ⁸⁰
Opposition to pardons for political violence	63% (Mar. 2024) reject an amnesty for the January 8 rioters who attacked government buildings in Brasília (only 31% favor clemency). ⁸¹	48% (Nov. 2021) opposed pardoning ex-Presidents J. Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak (convicted of corruption). ⁸² Public sentiment had shifted from ~60% against pardons earlier that year.

⁷⁷ *Poder360*, “Apoio à Democracia no Brasil Cai para 69%, Diz Datafolha,” *Poder360*, July 3, 2025, <https://www.poder360.com.br/poder-pesquisas/apoio-a-democracia-no-brasil-cai-para-69-diz-datafolha/>.

⁷⁸ Gallup Korea, “민주주의와 선거 관련 인식 – Gallup International 다국가 조사,” *Gallup Korea*, April 4, 2024, <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1472>.

⁷⁹ Richard Wike, Janell Fetterolf, Maria Smerkovich, Sarah Austin, Sneha Gubbala, and Jordan Lippert, “Attitudes Toward Different Types of Government Systems,” *Pew Research Center*, February 28, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/02/28/attitudes-toward-different-types-of-government-systems/>.

⁸⁰ Wike et al., “Attitudes Toward Different Types of Government Systems.”

⁸¹ *Folha de S.Paulo*, “Datafolha: 63% São Contra Anistia a Responsáveis pelo 8/1,” *Folha de S.Paulo*, March 29, 2024, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2024/03/datafolha-63-sao-contra-anistia-a-responsaveis-pelo-81.shtml>.

⁸² Hyonhee Shin and Josh Smith, “S.Korea’s Moon Pardons Disgraced Park amid Tight Presidential Race,” *Reuters*, December 24, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/skoreas-moon-likely-pardon-disgraced-former-president-park-yonhap-2021-12-23/>.

These survey snapshots cannot adjudicate causality. They show that democratic confidence fell in tandem with post-January 6 turbulence, but they do not isolate the riot's independent effect amid COVID-19, economic shocks, or domestic scandals. Accordingly, the study treats the polling evidence as corroborative correlation, not as proof of a unidirectional causal chain. The multi-indicator bundle mitigates single-item bias, and the long panel moderates spurious year-to-year swings, yet the analysis cannot wholly isolate US influence from home-grown drivers. Subsequent qualitative modules, therefore, serve as a form of triangulation.

Media-Framing Analysis

Public narratives are captured through six agenda-setting dailies that span the ideological spectrum in each partner democracy: *Folha de S.Paulo*, *O Globo*, and *O Estado de S.Paulo* in Brazil, plus *Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo*, and *Kyunghyang Shinmun* in South Korea. Adopting a critical-incident design, the study harvests two two-week batches of coverage: (i) the fortnight immediately following January 6, 2021, and (ii) the fortnight immediately following each polity's domestic echo (January 8, 2023 in Brasília; December 3, 2024 in Seoul). Keyword queries on Factiva use a compact seed set ("January 6", "Capitol riot", "coup", "democratic backsliding", "polarization", etc.) that was pilot-tested for recall and precision.

Coding procedure

All articles greater than 150 words pass through an automated Python pipeline. A first notebook exports full-text items, runs DeepL API translation where needed, using Google Translate as a fallback, normalizes encoding, and files each story by outlet and date. A second notebook tokenizes the corpus and applies rule-based tagging that maps sentences onto four pre-registered frames: legitimacy discourse, guardrail invocation, ideological polarization cues, and lesson-drawing, yielding a tidy frame $\times$ document matrix. Manual spot-checks (~10 % of items) verify translation fidelity and coding accuracy.

Analytic synthesis

Frame prevalence is tallied by incident window and by ideological leaning of the outlet. Patterns are then juxtaposed with contemporaneous shifts in V-Dem scores. For instance, a spike in the “coup frame” in conservative Brazilian papers after 8 January 2023 can be read against the Electoral Democracy Index plateau that same year, enriching the causal narrative without claiming determinism.

Credibility safeguards

Short bilingual excerpts are provided. The analytical pipeline is designed for full reproducibility so that every figure and statistic can be regenerated from the underlying materials, ensuring a fully auditable evidentiary chain.

International Response to the January 2025 Pardons

The third strand assembles every public text issued within four days of pardon-related developments that links the clemency decision to democratic norms or institutional resilience in Brazil or South Korea. Sources include foreign-ministry communiqués, legislative speeches, embassy posts, UN floor statements, NGO briefs, and op-eds in the six national dailies when they quote officials. Documents are archived as PDFs with uniform metadata for provenance tracking.

Analytic lenses

Five mini-analyses run in parallel, each independent and therefore easily removed at the revision stage. A narrative typology distinguishes condemnation, caution, support, and silence. Separate coding captures explicit invocations of international norms, rates polarity on a –2 to +2 scale, flags domestic linkage such as bills modelled on US precedent, and counts four framing devices, “rule-of-law”, “impunity”, “double standard”, and “erosion of democracy”. Memo notes justify borderline decisions, and frequency tables summarize patterns by issuer type.

Integrative logic

Because the pardons occurred after the quantitative series end-point, their real-time reception offers an external validity probe. The analysis asks whether officials in Brasília and Seoul perceive the US clemency action as evidence that accountability has faltered, and whether that perception bleeds into the domestic polarization or legislative arena flagged in earlier chapters. The answer, inferred from textual tone and linkage,

enriches the broader claim that elite discourse is a conduit through which the US accountability gap influences strategic calculation abroad.

Ethical considerations

The study relies exclusively on publicly available data and published texts; no human subjects are interviewed.

Synthesis

Taken together, the indicator slopes chart the when of democratic inflection; the media-frame narratives reveal the what and how of interpretive diffusion; the pardon-response corpus captures unfolding elite signaling about the durability of democratic guardrails. This multidimensional framework thus dissects the nuanced challenges democracy faces on both domestic and international fronts, allowing the thesis to distinguish between structural erosion that long pre-dated January 6 and accelerants triggered by the assault and its aftermath.

Chapter IV.

Brazil Case Study

Brazil, the largest and most populous country in South America, has long been seen as a pivotal partner for the United States in periods of shared strategic alignment and regional priority. For the twentieth century, standard histories track Brazil's oscillation between democratic opening and authoritarian retrenchment.⁸³ Overcoming a history of monarchy (1822 – 1889), military rule (1964 – 1985), the 1964 military coup and two-decade authoritarian rule,⁸⁴ and corruption scandals involving high-profile politicians, Brazil solidified its standing on the global stage by the early twenty-first century, in part through industrial expansion and ambitious infrastructure projects such as hosting the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympic Games. The dictatorship period is well-documented for censorship, torture, and forced disappearances.⁸⁵

In recent years, Brasília's political climate has drawn global attention, especially after the 8 January 2023 insurrection in which supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro stormed Brazil's federal government buildings. Newswires and judicial records document the coordinated breach of the Congress, Supreme Court, and presidential palace, and the subsequent federal intervention in the Federal District.⁸⁶ Many commentators viewed this event as a direct parallel to the January 6, 2021 Capitol

⁸³ Thomas E. Skidmore and James Naylor Green, *Brazil: Five Centuries of Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁸⁴ Thomas E. Skidmore, *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964-85* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁸⁵ "Comissão Nacional Da Verdade - Governo Federal," gov.br, December 2014, https://www.gov.br/memoriasreveladas/pt-br/assuntos/comissoes-da-verdade/volume_1_digital.pdf.

⁸⁶ Adriano Machado, "Bolsonaro Backers Ransack Brazil Presidential Palace, Congress, Supreme Court," Reuters, January 8, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/bolsonaro-supporters-invade-congress-presidential-palace-brasilia-2023-01-08/>.

attack in the United States, including explicit rhetorical borrowings in slogans and online mobilization.⁸⁷ Although newly inaugurated president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva responded by declaring a state of emergency in the Federal District, the rapid spread of misinformation and allegations of electoral fraud had already deepened political fissures. As the dust settled, questions emerged over whether the turmoil revealed structural fragilities within Brazilian governance or reflected diffusion from the U.S. Capitol riot.

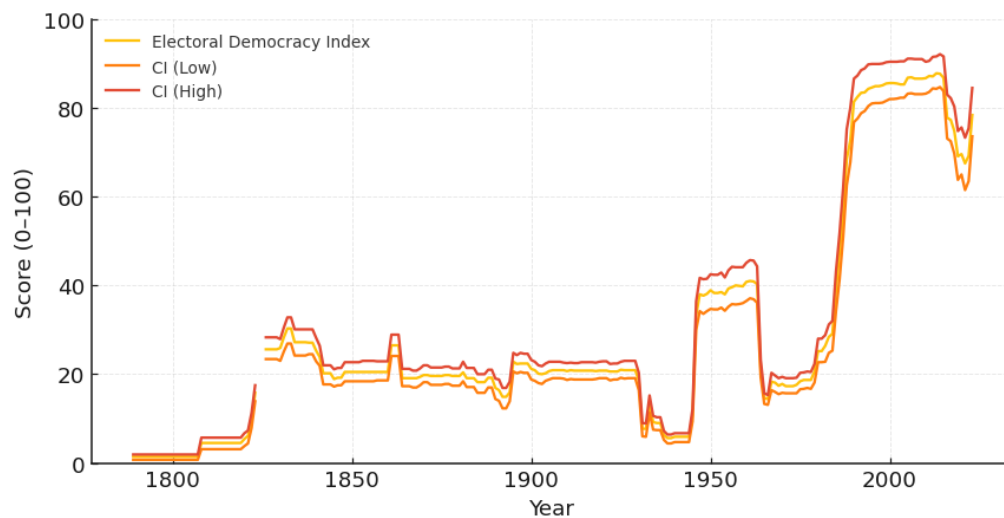


Figure B-1. Brazil Electoral Democracy Index – All Time.

Like much of Latin America following World War II, Brazil entered a period of political flux that alternated between democratic opening and authoritarian retrenchment. As populist leaders, most notably Getúlio Vargas, shaped the national agenda in the 1940s and 1950s, the country's democracy experienced both promising reforms and

⁸⁷ Jogo Político, “Entenda Expressão ‘Festa de Selma’, USADA EM Grupos de Whatsapp Para Convocar Golpistas Nos Atos Do 8 de Janeiro,” O Globo, August 17, 2023, <https://oglobo.globo.com/politica/noticia/2023/08/17/entenda-expressao-festa-de-selma-usada-em-grupos-de-whatsapp-para-convocar-golpistas-nos-atos-do-8-de-janeiro.ghhtml>.

daunting power struggles. In 1945 a new constitution brought wider suffrage and more competitive elections.⁸⁸

Yet mounting tensions between left-leaning populists, such as Vargas and later Jânio Quadros, and conservative sectors set the stage for systemic crisis. Concerned by increasing polarization, the Brazilian military, backed by the United States in Operation Brother Sam, staged a coup d'état in 1964 that deposed President João Goulart and initiated a two-decade military dictatorship.⁸⁹ The generals who assumed power suppressed dissent through censorship, forced disappearances, and torture, clamping down on journalists, student protesters, and others perceived to be sympathetic to communism.⁹⁰ Although the regime occasionally claimed reformist aims and presided over episodes of rapid growth often labeled the “Brazilian Miracle,” democratic institutions were gravely weakened and widespread human-rights violations persisted for much of this period.^{91 92}

⁸⁸ Skidmore and Green, Brazil, 2022.

⁸⁹ Skidmore, The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 2023.

⁹⁰ “Comissão Nacional da Verdade,” gov.br, 2014.

⁹¹ Skidmore and Green, Brazil, 2022.

⁹² “Comissão Nacional da Verdade,” gov.br, 2014.

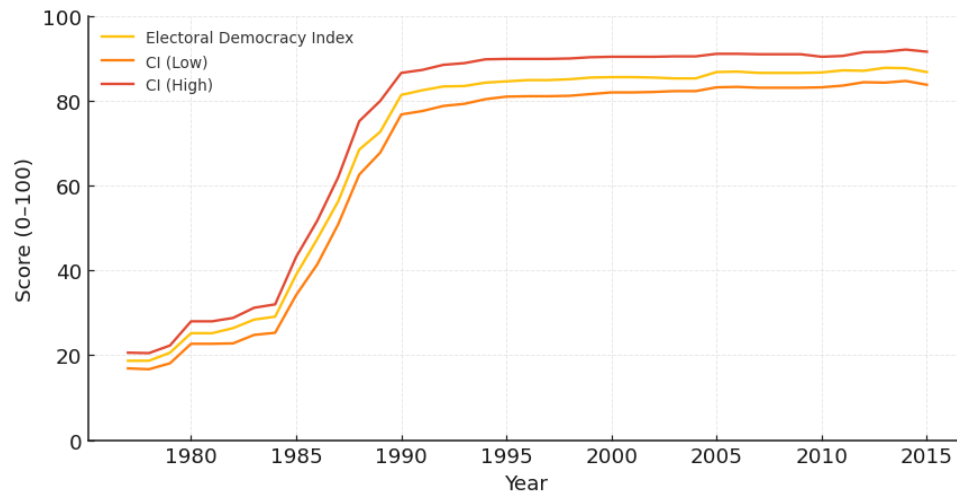


Figure B-2. Brazil Electoral Democracy Index – 1977-2015.

The military's tight grip on power began to loosen in the late 1970s as inflation, economic downturns, and eroding elite support forced senior generals to contemplate gradual liberalization. In 1979 a transition away from full authoritarian rule commenced with *abertura*. That year's Amnesty Law extended amnesty both to political opponents and to state agents accused of abuses; scholars of transitional justice argue that this dual-track amnesty entrenched expectations of leniency that complicated later prosecutions.⁹³ A decisive break from authoritarianism arrived in 1985. Though president-elect Tancredo Neves died before taking office, his vice president, José Sarney, inaugurated the period known as the New Republic. Standard measures of electoral democracy, such as V-Dem's electoral-democracy index, show a pronounced decline

⁹³ Kathryn Sikkink and Carrie Booth Walling, "The Impact of Human Rights Trials in Latin America," *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 4 (July 2007): 427–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343307078953>.

after 1964 and a recovery that begins with abertura in the late 1970s and accelerates after the mid-1980s transition as competitive elections and expanded civil liberties resume.⁹⁴

The Democracy Index soared from 29.1 in 1984 to 39 in 1985, reflecting Brazil's re-emerging civil and political freedoms. After adoption of a new constitution in 1988 and the first direct presidential election in almost three decades, Brazil's democracy reached 68.5 in 1988 and continued its ascent into the 1990s, hitting 81.4 in 1990. Despite the early 1990s being turbulent—Fernando Collor de Mello's presidency ended in a corruption scandal and impeachment—overall democratic structures endured. By 2000, Brazil's Democracy Index had climbed to 85.6, signaling that while obstacles such as hyperinflation and corruption persisted, the country had firmly transitioned from military dictatorship to a functioning, if still evolving, democracy.⁹⁵

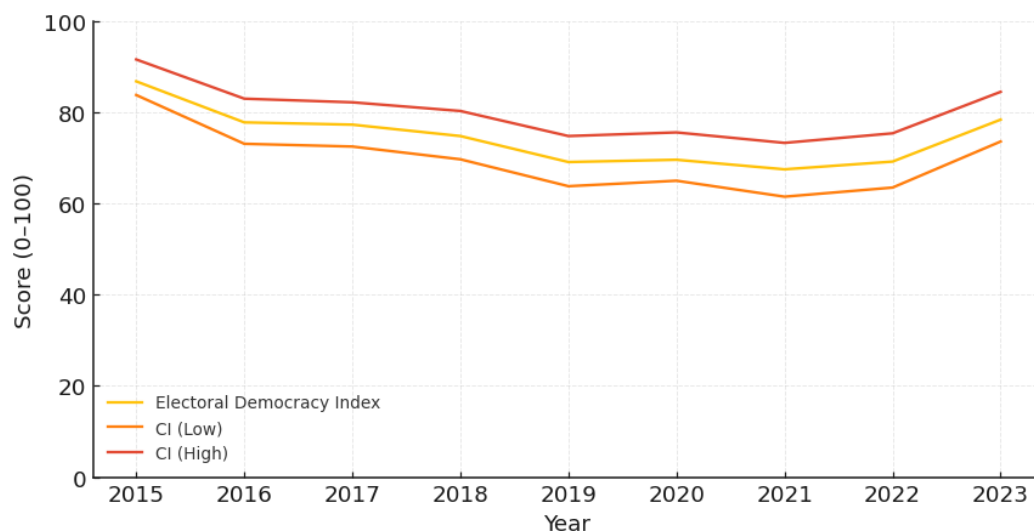


Figure B-3. Brazil Electoral Democracy Index – 2015-2024.

⁹⁴ Staffan I. Lindberg et al., *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Dataset v15* (Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2025), variable v2x_polyarchy.

⁹⁵ V-Dem Institute, "Brazil: Electoral Democracy Index."

The 2016 impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff and subsequent corruption scandals deepened polarization and mistrust in parties and courts.⁹⁶ Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency (2019 – 2022) saw further decline. Sharp polarization, contentious policy decisions, and allegations of electoral misinformation stoked tensions, culminating in the January 2023 storming of Brazil’s Congress by Bolsonaro supporters—a moment many compared to the Capitol attack in the United States. However, the transition back to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s administration in 2023 brought renewed optimism and a surge in Brazil’s Democracy Index to 78.4.⁹⁷ Lula’s emphasis on inclusive governance and the swift legal and political response to the congressional attack underscored the resilience of Brazilian institutions and prompted hopes for a sustained democratic recovery.

Brazil & the United States | Post-January-6 Democratic Trajectories (2013-2023)
Structural overview (Electoral Democracy Index, Fig. B-0)⁹⁸

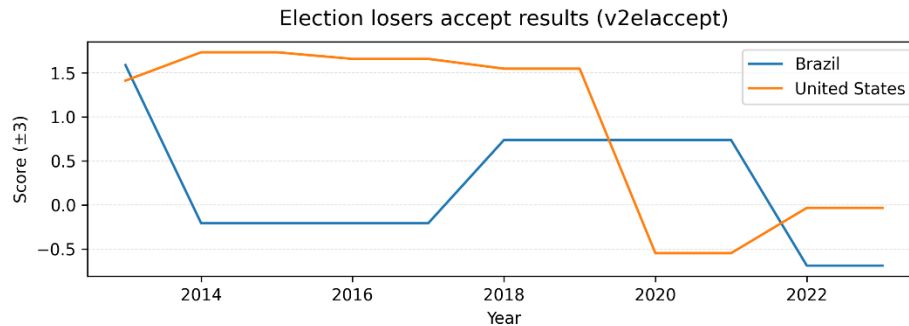
Brazil’s EDI had been sliding gently from 2013 onward (-0.012 p.a.), but the curve flattens after 2021 (-0.001 p.a.). The United States, by contrast, reverses its pre-2020 fall and registers a mild rebound. Numerically, therefore, Washington absorbs its own shock while Brasília merely brakes an existing descent—a hint that the “export” of January-6 narratives is normative rather than institutional.

⁹⁶ Felipe Nunes and Carlos Ranulfo Melo, “Impeachment, Political Crisis and Democracy in Brazil,” *Revista de Ciencia Política (Santiago)* 37, no. 2 (2017): 281–304, <https://doi.org/10.4067/s0718-090x2017000200281>.

⁹⁷ V-Dem Institute, “Brazil: Electoral Democracy Index.”

⁹⁸ Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, *V-Dem Country-Year Dataset*, version 15 (University of Gothenburg, 2025), “Electoral Democracy Index (v2x_polyarchy),” <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds25>.

Elite norms: conceding defeat & protecting ballots



Figure

B-4. Election Losers Accept Results (Brazil vs. United States), 2013–2024.

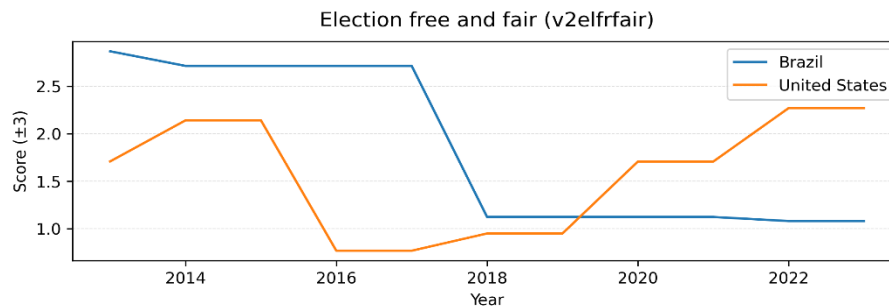


Figure B-5. Free and Fair Elections (Brazil vs. United States), 2013–2024.

Election-Loser Acceptance (Fig. B-1) shows a tandem collapse: the U.S. plunges in 2020 (-0.55) and Brazil mirrors the dive in 2022 (-0.69). Yet both countries' *procedural* scores (*Free-and-Fair Elections*, Fig. B-2) recover by 2023. The widening gap between reliable hardware and fraying software underlines a core thesis: norms travel faster than institutions.^{99 100}

⁹⁹ Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), v15 (2025), variable v2elaccept.

¹⁰⁰ V-Dem, v15 (2025), v2elfrfair.

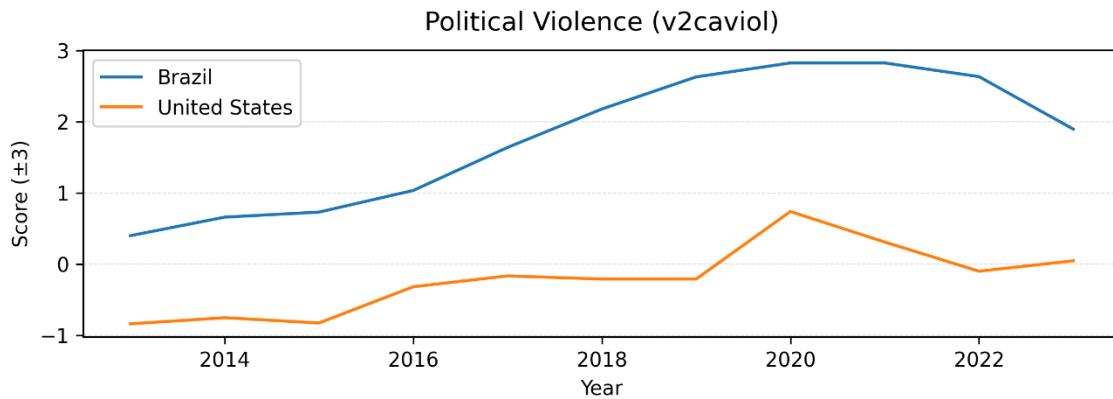


Figure B-6. Political Violence (Brazil vs. United States), 2013–2024.

Political violence (Fig. B-3) spikes first in Brazil, topping +2.8 in 2021, then eases only slightly even after the 8 January 2023 crackdown; the U.S. registers its first positive value (+0.74) in 2020 and drifts downward.¹⁰¹ Freedom-of-assembly restrictions linger longer in Brazil because Lula leaves a residual federal intervention decree in place until mid-2023, whereas U.S. scores rebound to the pre-COVID baseline.

¹⁰¹ V-Dem, v15 (2025), v2caviol.

Four faces of mobilization

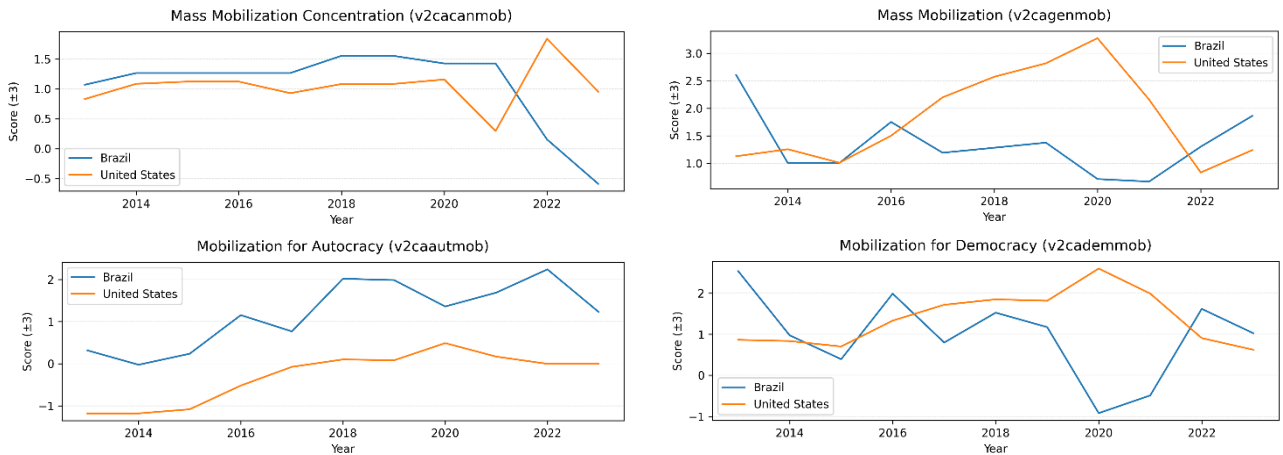


Figure B-7a–d. Mass Mobilization Sub-indices (Brazil vs. United States), 2013–2024.

Mass-mobilization intensity (Fig. B-4b) in Brazil traces a two-step pattern: autocratic rallies peak in 2022 (Fig. B-4c), followed a year later by a diffused prodemocracy surge (Fig. B-4d) that helps blunt Bolsonaro’s narrative.¹⁰² In the U.S. the sequence is reversed—2020 prodemocracy protests crest first, then an autocratic echo rises—suggesting that whoever strikes first sets the framing terrain for the counter-wave.

Administrative & legal guardrails

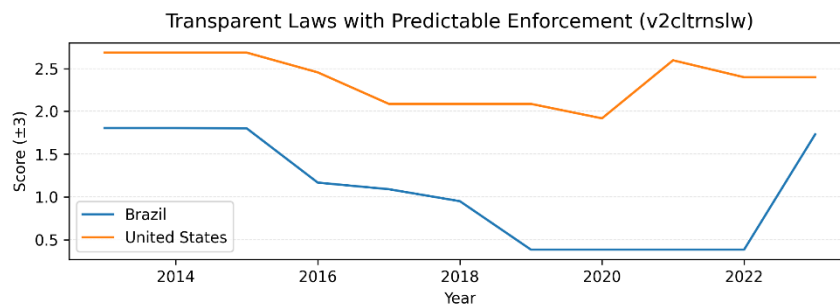


Figure B-8. Transparent Laws with Predictable Enforcement (Brazil vs. United States), 2013–2024.

¹⁰² V-Dem, v15 (2025), v2cacanmob, v2cagenmob, v2caautmob, v2cademmob.

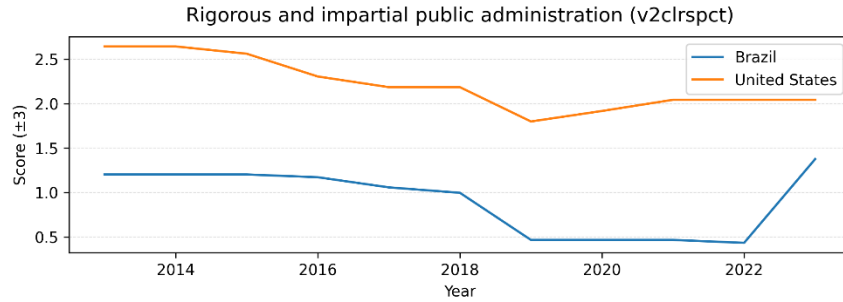


Figure B-9. Rigorous and Impartial Public Administration (Brazil vs. United States), 2013–2024.

Both countries show a 2023 uptick in *Transparent Laws* (Fig. B-5) after new administrations repair oversight bodies; *Impartial Public Administration* (Fig. B-6) follows the same trajectory but lags by a year, reminding us that legal clean-up precedes bureaucratic morale.^{103 104}

Polarization as an accelerant

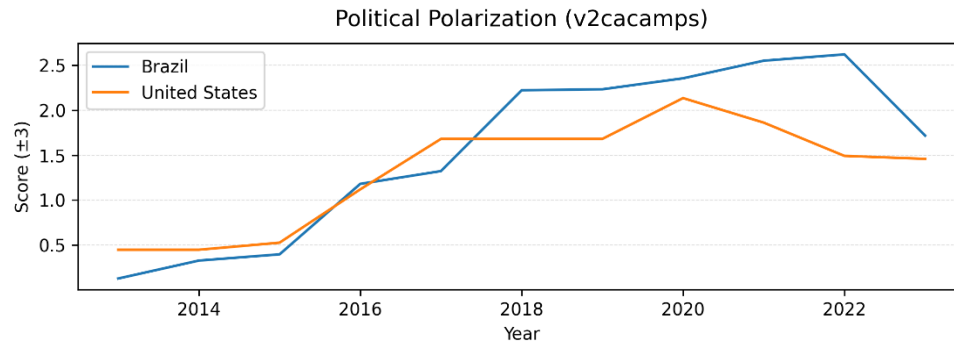


Figure B-10. Political Polarization Index (Brazil vs. United States), 2013–2024.

¹⁰³V-Dem, v15 (2025), v2cltrnslw.

¹⁰⁴ V-Dem, v15 (2025), v2clrspct.

The V-Dem polarization index (Fig. B-7) climbs from 0.45 (2013) to 2.62 (2022) in Brazil, lagging the U.S. peak by exactly two years.¹⁰⁵ The co-movement with violence and autocratic rallies across Figures B-3/B-4 underscores polarization as the “transmission belt” through which January-6 rhetoric converts into measurable backsliding.

Anticipating a Second Trump Term (2022–24)

Brazilian newspapers and Congressional hearings repeatedly warned that Donald Trump’s vow to pardon January 6 rioters could be used to justify an *anistia* (amnesty) for the 8 January 2023 attackers in Brasília, a dynamic commentators dubbed the *efeito Trump*.¹⁰⁶ By April 2024 the term had become shorthand in *O Globo* and *Folha* for the argument that “even the United States forgives its patriots,” a talking point deployed by Liberal-Party deputies during the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission.

Interim inference

Where guardrails were already weakened, the symbolic power of January 6 accelerated norm erosion (elite denialism, autocratic street power) without an immediate institutional collapse—hence the paradoxical plateau in Brazil’s aggregate EDI. The numeric story thus anticipates the media-framing findings in the next section: Brazilian outlets kept the word *golpe* alive long after the U.S. press had moved on, sustaining a norm rupture that hard data alone only partly captures.

¹⁰⁵ V-Dem, v15 (2025), v2cacamps.

¹⁰⁶ Leandro Melito, “Vitória de Trump nos EUA Pode Reativar Projeto Golpista do Bolsonarismo no Brasil,” *Brasil de Fato*, November 3, 2024, <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2024/11/03/vitoria-de-trump-nos-eua-pode-reativar-projeto-golpista-do-bolsonarismo-no-brasil/>.

Brazil – Media-Frame Findings Across Three Crises

This section applies a four-frame content-analysis scheme that was developed in Chapter III. Every newspaper article in the dataset was hand-coded on four analytic axes: (1) *legitimacy discourse* – language that questions or defends the validity of the electoral process; (2) *guardrail invocation* – references to formal institutions and legal checks; (3) *ideological-polarization cues* – words that signal partisan identity or portray society as split into hostile camps; and (4) *lesson-drawing* – explicit comparisons or forward-looking ‘what we should learn’ statements. Frame frequencies were normalized by dividing keyword counts by article length and outlet volume, which allows direct comparison across time, event type, and newspaper ideology. Figures B-1 to B-7 (Brazil) visualize the resulting metrics.

Coverage is drawn from Brazil’s three largest national dailies, each with a distinct editorial profile. *Folha de S.Paulo* positions itself as center-left and has frequently criticized *Jair* Bolsonaro’s attacks on institutions. *O Globo* occupies a centrist-to-center-right lane, typically favoring market-friendly policies while endorsing core democratic norms. *O Estado de S.Paulo* is center-right and historically institutionalist, prioritizing constitutional order over ideological confrontation. These leanings shape tone and word-choice in the frames analyzed below.

Table 2. Brazilian Article Counts.

	Folha	O Globo	Estado
January 6 Insurrection	63 / 1586 (4.0 %)	89 / 1211 (7.4 %)	44 / 576 (7.6 %)
2023 Brazil Assault	741 / 1859 (39.9 %)	339 / 1208 (28.1 %)	210 / 626 (33.5 %)
2024 Martial Law Crisis	44 / 2118 (2.1 %)	40 / 1216 (3.3 %)	16 / 674 (2.4 %)

Items ≥ 150 words retrieved from Factiva using the keyword seed in Chapter III §2.1. Normalized rates divide keyword hits by article count to permit cross-window comparison.

Brazil’s three main dailies responded to a trio of democratic shocks in rapid succession: the assault on the U.S. Capitol on 6 January 2021, the insurrection in Brasília on 8 January 2023 and the South-Korean martial-law scare that began on 4 December 2024. Factiva yielded 196 relevant stories for the first window, 1,290 for the second, and 100 for the third, all at least 150 words in length. Because those totals represent 5.8 percent, 38.2 percent, and 2.5 percent of the long-form output of *Folha de S.Paulo*, *O Globo*, and *O Estado de S.Paulo* during the same periods, every keyword count is divided by the number of articles so that foreign and domestic events can be compared on the same scale.¹⁰⁷ V-Dem continues to label Brazil “toxically polarized,” and this normalized timeline shows how that polarization shapes media

¹⁰⁷ Dow Jones, *Factiva* database, author’s compilation of 1,586 full-text articles from *Folha de S.Paulo*, *O Globo*, and *O Estado de S.Paulo* on the 6 January 2021 U.S. Capitol assault, the 8 January 2023 Brasília insurrection, and the 4 December 2024 South Korean martial-law scare; Excel export created 8 July 2025, in author’s possession.

language as threats migrate from Washington to Brasília to Seoul.

Legitimacy discourse

The vocabulary of illegitimacy begins with *golpe* (“coup”). In 2021, journalists used the term 0.63 times per article. Usage dipped to 0.34 when the insurrection was home-grown and a broader set of legitimacy words came into play. It then spiked to 1.50 in 2024, despite the plot unfolding 11,000 miles away, because editors framed the Korean plan as “mais um golpe frustrado,” another frustrated coup. *Golpistas* (“coup-plotters”) peaked in 2023 at 0.90 mentions per article, yet remained visible at 0.30 in 2024, proof that a distinctly Brazilian label can migrate once the storyline feels familiar. Fraud terminology tells the mirror image: *fraude* fell from 0.40 uses per article in 2021 to almost zero later, showing that the debate moved from vote stealing to the outright use of force.¹⁰⁸

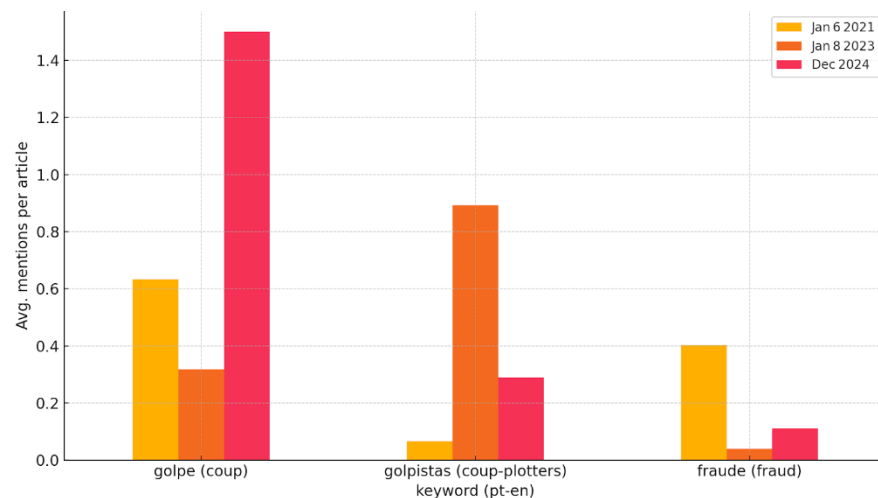


Figure B-11. Brazil Legitimacy Vocabulary (Normalized).

¹⁰⁸ Charles Pflieger, *Brazilian Newspaper Corpus Token-Frequency Dataset, 2021–2024*, Excel workbook generated 8 July 2025 with a custom Python script (pandas, nltk); in author’s possession.

Guardrail invocation

Institutional words map the media’s search for democratic rescue. During the Brasília riot each article mentioned *polícia* (“police”) 0.77 times and the *Supremo Tribunal Federal* (“supreme court”) 0.67 times while recounting how the square of the Three Branches was retaken. One year later *polícia* climbed to 0.90 mentions per article even though the crisis was foreign, a sign that journalists regarded Korean security forces as an instructive contrast. *Congresso* (“congress”) and *Supremo* remained at roughly two-thirds of an occurrence per article, and even *intervenção* (“intervention”) resurfaced in discussions of constitutional powers that Seoul managed not to use.¹⁰⁹

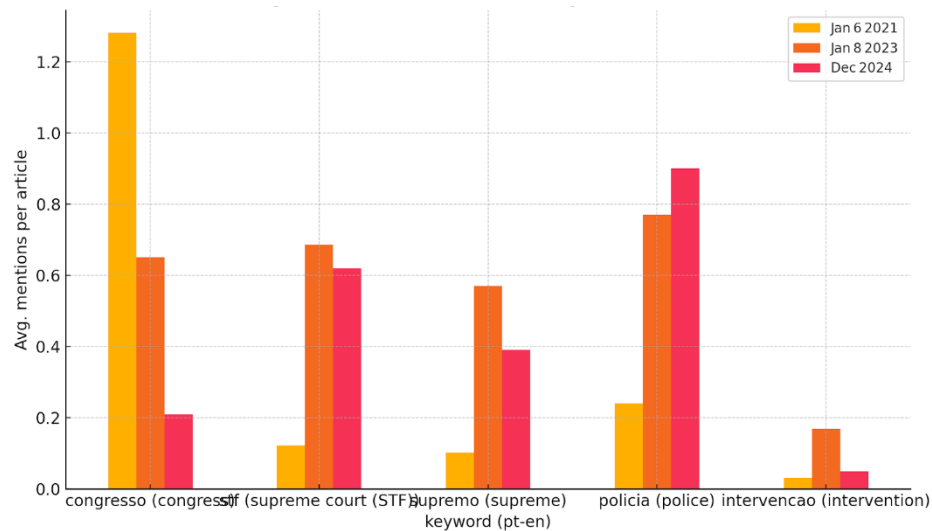


Figure B-12. Brazil Guard-Rail Vocabulary (Normalized).

¹⁰⁹ Pflieger, *Token-Frequency Dataset*.

Ideological polarization

Polarization words shrink in absolute terms once the danger shifts abroad yet become more universal. *Bolsonaristas* averaged nearly half a mention per article in 2023 but only 0.05 in 2024. The gap is filled by labels that travel well: *direita* (“right”) appears 0.21 times per article and *extrema* (“extreme”) 0.09 times. A widely cited *Folha* column warned that the global far-right “estuda cada falha,” studies every failure.¹¹⁰ Co-occurrence analysis for 2024 confirms this shift, placing *extrema* next to *exército* (“army”) and *telegram* in the densest lexical cluster and pushing Bolsonaro’s name to the margins.

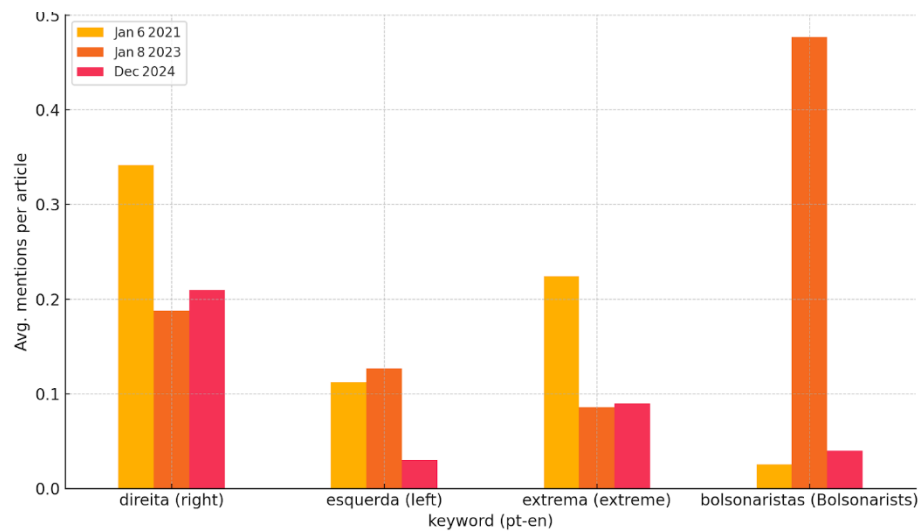


Figure B-13. Brazil Polarization Vocabulary (Normalized).

¹¹⁰ Pflieger, *Token-Frequency Dataset*.

Lesson-drawing

In 2021 Brazilian newspapers referred to Donald Trump almost five times per article. Two years later that figure fell below half a mention, but references to the “United States” persisted at about 0.30 per article, showing that U.S. precedent still frames debate even when the immediate case is Korean. The noun *comparação* (“comparison”) doubled between 2021 and 2024, evidence that editors now explicitly rank Washington’s slow reaction, Brasília’s vigorous crackdown and Seoul’s preventative arrests along one spectrum of institutional resilience.¹¹¹

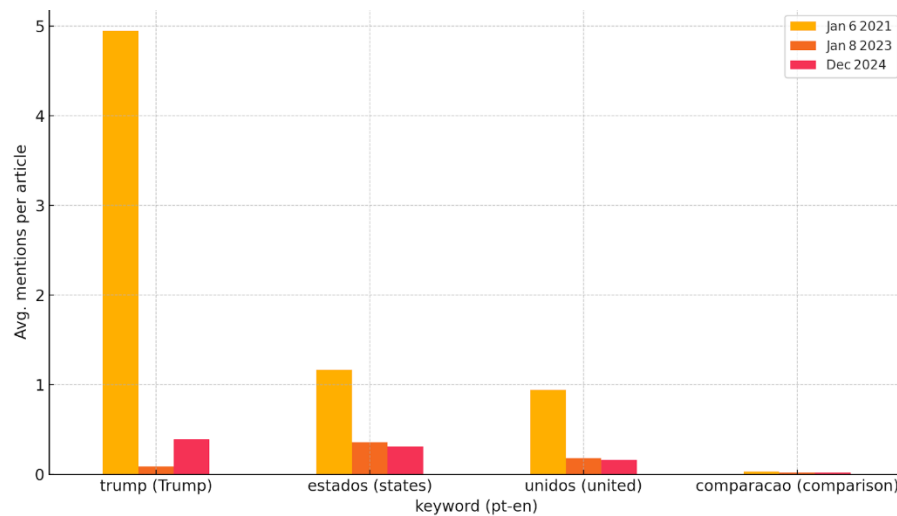


Figure B-14. Brazil Lesson-Drawing Vocabulary (Normalized).

Outlet contrasts

After normalization *Folha* continues to devote the largest share of its coded text to legitimacy arguments, now 42 percent. *Estado* stays the institutional sentinel at

¹¹¹ Pflieger, *Token-Frequency Dataset*.

46 percent guardrail language. *Globo* keeps a centrist mix but increases its polarization coverage after 2024 in line with think-tank talk of illiberal learning. None of the papers treats the Korean episode as a distant curiosity; each employs the same four analytical lenses first applied to Washington and Brasília.

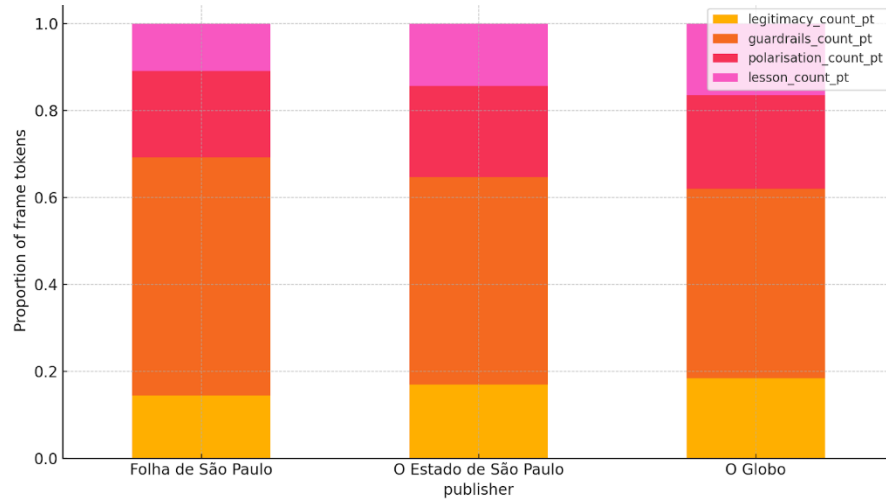


Figure B-15. Brazil Frame Emphasis by Newspaper.

Temporal synthesis and V-Dem link

The per-article curve for *golpe* tracks swings in V-Dem’s Clean Elections index. Institutional word counts move in tandem with the rebound in judicial constraints after 2023. Most importantly, the 2024 window shows that lesson-drawing is cumulative. Every shock feeds a growing bank of cautionary tales and best practices, a dynamic that simple trend lines would miss but frame analysis captures with clarity.

Brazil Case Study Summary

The Brazil case shows how a visible institutional breach combined with contested sanction signals can sustain high-salience frames of golpe and anistia in national debate even as procedural indicators stabilize. Media discourse tracked institutional moves closely, amplifying “guardrails” when courts and federal authorities acted and reviving “illegitimacy” frames when amnesty proposals surfaced. This pattern matches the thesis claim that permissive-sanction signals travel quickly through elite and media networks and are filtered by polarization and institutional capacity. The next chapter turns to South Korea, a U.S. ally with a different party system and stronger judicial constraints, to test whether similar signals produce shorter or weaker echoes when domestic guardrails are thicker.

Chapter V.

South Korea

South Korea's extensive military and diplomatic ties to the United States—ranging from early Cold War support after the Korean War to significant troop dispatches in the Vietnam War—heighten the potential resonance of the Capitol insurrection in Washington. Seoul has long looked to the U.S. as both a security guarantor and a model for democratic governance, making destabilizing events in America particularly impactful on South Korean political discourse.¹¹² Despite formal independence in 1948, the country's early decades were characterized by authoritarian rule, with leaders such as Syngman Rhee and Park Chung-hee maintaining strict control over political life.

Major economic gains and modernization took hold during this period, but entrenched military influence consistently stymied efforts at genuine democratization.¹¹³ By the late 1970s, rising civil unrest and growing calls for reform signaled a nation at a crossroads—setting the stage for the defining democratic struggles of the 1980s. Generational patterns also matter: Pew Research Center (2025) reports clear age-cohort differences in South Korean views of China, and Seoul National University Asia Center (2020) traces long-standing gaps between younger and older Koreans in perceptions of Japan, even as attitudes toward the United States remain broadly favorable.^{114 115}

¹¹² Victor D. Cha, "Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia," *International Security* 34, no. 3 (Winter 2009): 158–96, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400883431-006>.

¹¹³ Kyung Moon Hwang, *A History of Korea: An Episodic Narrative* (London: Red Globe Press, 2022).

¹¹⁴ Laura Silver, "How Global Public Opinion of China Has Shifted in the Xi Era," Pew Research Center, September 28, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/09/28/how-global-public-opinion-of-china-has-shifted-in-the-xi-era/>.

¹¹⁵ "Seoul National University Asia Center 2020 Annual Report," Seoul National University Asia Center, 2020, https://snuac.snu.ac.kr/2015_snuac/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/2020-

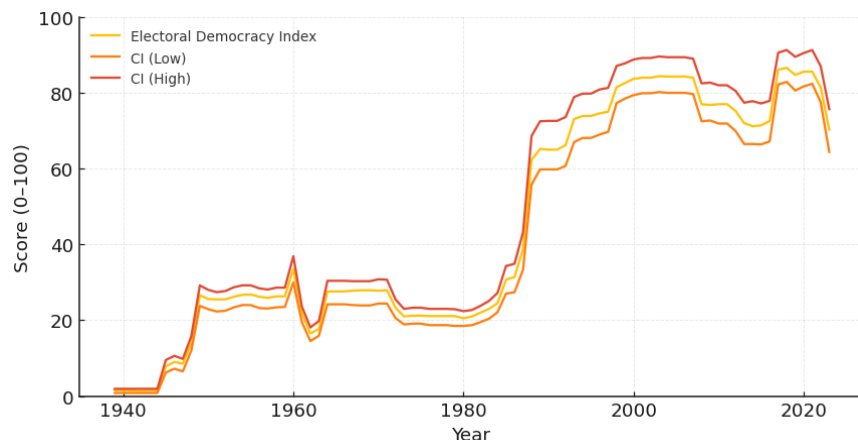


Figure K-1. South Korea Electoral Democracy Index – 1940-2024.

During the 1980s, sustained popular protests and key constitutional revisions paved the way for more competitive elections. The Gwangju Uprising of May 1980 became a touchstone for the democracy movement, and the death of student activist Park Jong-chul under police interrogation in January 1987 catalyzed mass mobilization.¹¹⁶ Building on these shocks, the June Democratic Struggle in 1987 drew workers, students, and the middle class into sustained demonstrations demanding direct presidential elections and an end to military tutelage.¹¹⁸ The regime conceded, issuing the June 29 Declaration that promised direct presidential elections and expanded civil liberties; direct

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¹¹⁶ William Stueck, “Democratization in Korea: The United States Role, 1980 and 1987,” *International Journal of Korean Studies* (1998), 1998, 1–26.

¹¹⁷ Linda Sue Lewis, *Laying Claim to the Memory of May: A Look Back at the 1980 Kwangju Uprising* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press : Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawai‘i, 2002).

¹¹⁸ Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2016).

elections followed that year, marking a formal transition to electoral democracy.¹¹⁹ Through the 1990s and early 2000s, civil liberties expanded, courts strengthened, and civil society deepened, producing a more resilient, if still evolving, liberal democracy.

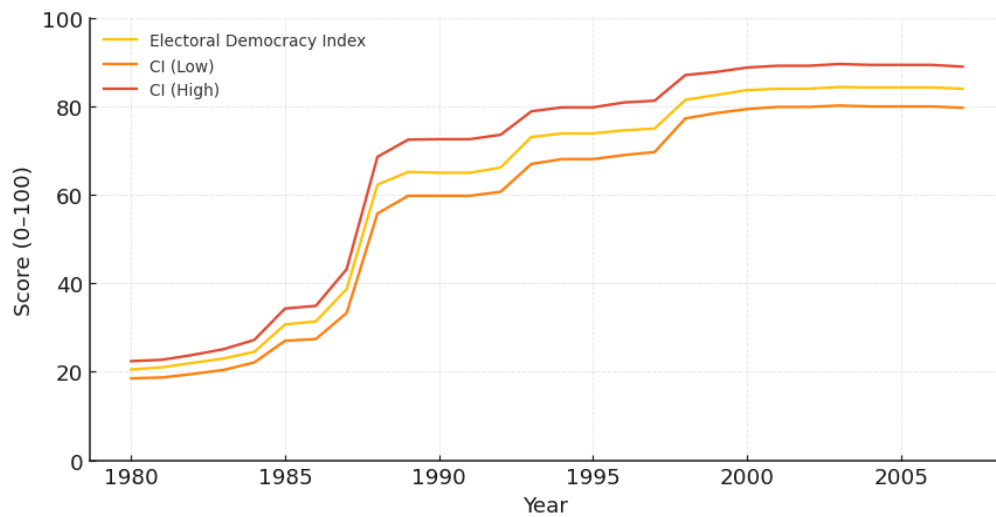


Figure K-2. South Korea Electoral Democracy Index – 1980-2007.

From the mid-1980s onward, South Korea consolidated democracy. Varieties of Democracy's Electoral Democracy Index shows sustained gains through the 1990s and early 2000s, consistent with expanded competition, civil society growth, and media pluralism.¹²⁰ Yet periods of strain remained, including corruption controversies and debates over national security laws. Multiple accountability channels experienced pressure at various moments: vertical accountability during election-related scandals,

¹¹⁹ Sun-gi Kim, *Korea's Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹²⁰ V-Dem Institute, "EDI (v2x_polyarchy)."

horizontal accountability as judicial independence was contested, and diagonal accountability when media and civil society faced state pressure.¹²¹

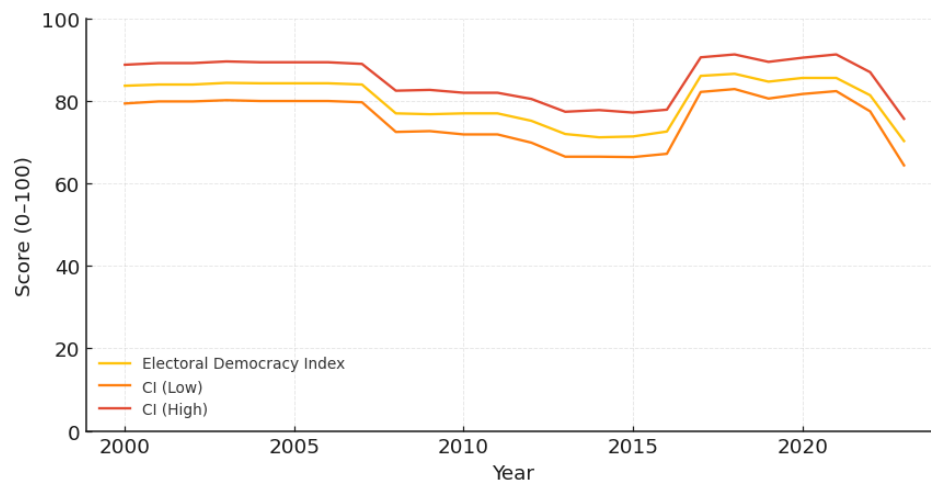


Figure K-3. South Korea Electoral Democracy Index – 2000-2024.

The mass mobilization that culminated in President Park Geun-hye’s removal in 2016 reaffirmed the system’s capacity for self-correction. Large street protests helped drive her impeachment and removal, ushering in the Moon Jae-in presidency.¹²² Notably, South Korea weathered the initial COVID-19 period with comparatively limited democratic backsliding.¹²³ After the 2022 election, however, concern about democratic stress returned. The consolidated indicators in Chapter III show a decline after 2021, and a brief martial-law crisis in December 2024, quickly reversed by the National Assembly

¹²¹ V-Dem Institute, “South Korea: Electoral Democracy Index.

¹²² Erik Johan Moberg, *Top-down Democracy in South Korea* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2019).

¹²³ Anna Lüthmann et al., “Pandemic Backsliding: Democracy During Covid-19 (PanDem), Version 6,” Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, 2020, www.v-dem.net/en/our-work/research-projects/pandemic-backsliding/.

and then reviewed by the Constitutional Court, raised debates about Article 76's emergency-powers provisions and their practical limits.¹²⁴

South Korea & the United States | Post-January 6 Democratic Trajectories (2013–2024)

South Korea edges upward through 2020, then turns downward under President Yoon (-0.021 p.a. after 2021). The U.S. again rebounds. At macro scale, then, Korea—not the U.S.—exhibits the post 2021 inflection.

Elite norms & ballot legitimacy

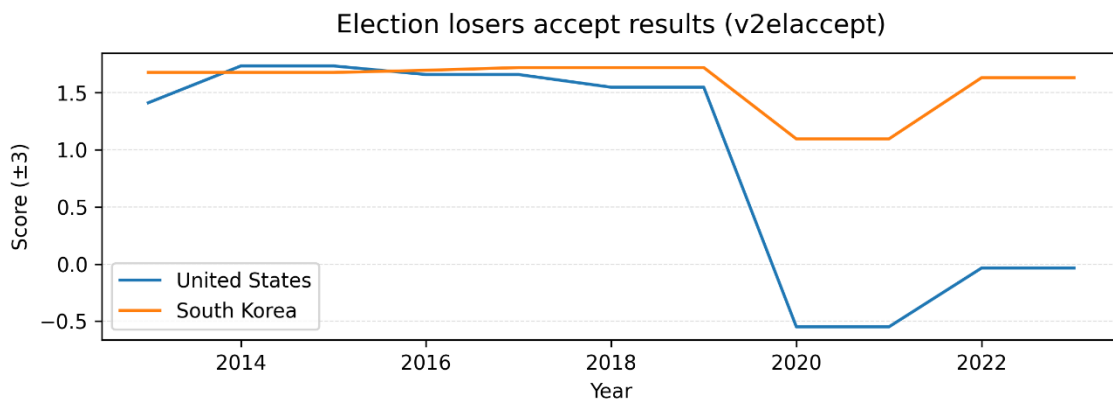


Figure K-4. Election Losers Accept Results (v2elaccept), 2013–2024.

¹²⁴ V-Dem Institute, “EDI (v2x_polyarchy).”

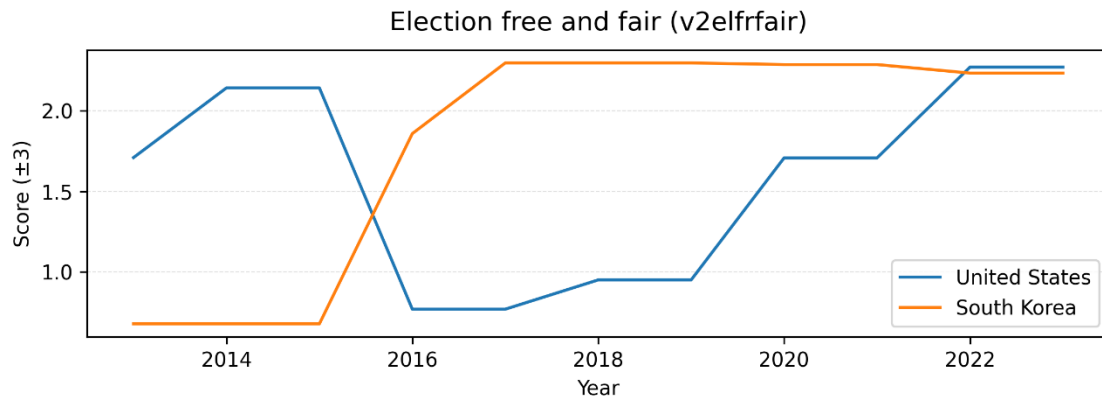


Figure K-5. Free and Fair Elections (v2elfrfair), 2013–2024.

Unlike Brazil, Korea’s *Election-Loser Acceptance* (Fig. K-1) stays positive: elites concede even in 2022–23. Procedural quality (*Free-and-Fair Elections*, Fig. K-2) remains high, verifying V-Dem’s judgment that legal hardware is intact.¹²⁵ ¹²⁶ The gap here is *between* Washington and Seoul, not within either polity.

¹²⁵ V-Dem Institute, “Loser Acceptance (v2elaccept).”

¹²⁶ V-Dem Institute, “Free and Fair (v2elfrfair).”

Violence & emergency politics

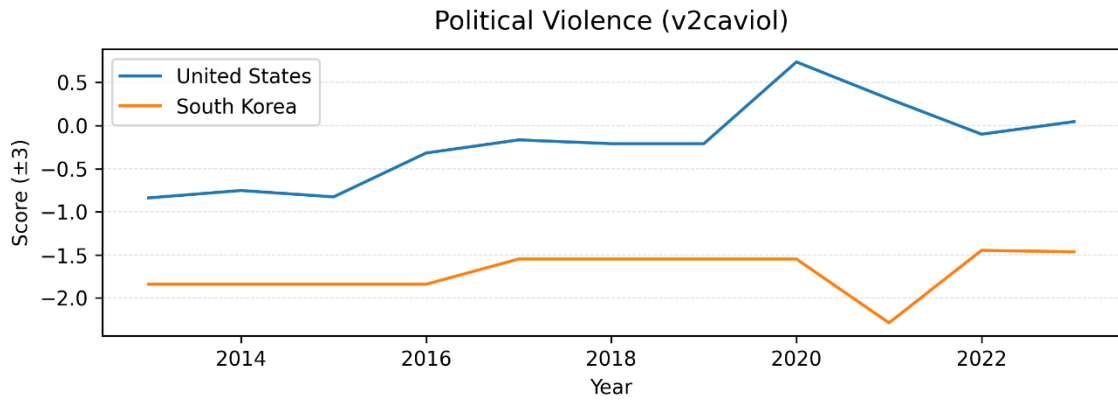


Figure K-6a. Political Violence (v2caviol), 2013–2024.

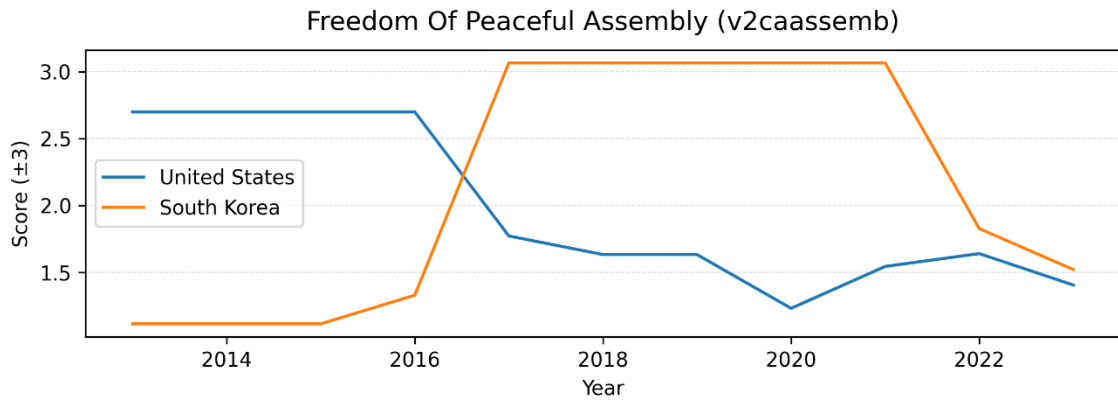
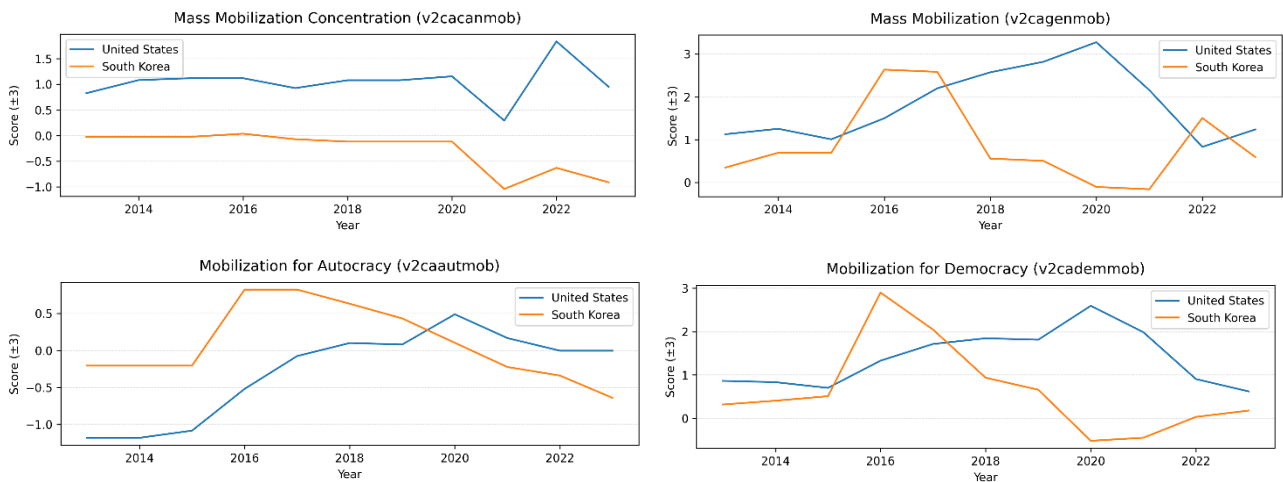


Figure K-6b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly (v2caasemb), 2013–2024.

Political violence stays negative for Korea through 2023 (Fig. K-3), but the 2024 martial-law scare (outside the numerical window) looms in public discourse, foreshadowing a potential break. Assembly freedoms (Fig. K-3b) never return to

pre-COVID highs, reflecting lingering crowd-control norms developed during the pandemic.^{127 128}

Mobilization pattern



K-7a–d. Mass-Mobilization Sub-indices (v2cacanmob; v2cagenmob; v2caautmob; v2cademmob), 2013–2024.

Mass mobilization in Korea is cyclical (Fig. K-4b): a sharp democratic crest in 2016, dissipation by 2019, and only a muted rise after 2021. Autocratic rallies (Fig. K-4c) remain mostly sub-zero, illustrating that dense civil-society networks still penalize illiberal appeals.^{129 130 131}

¹²⁷ V-Dem Institute, “Political Violence (v2caviol).”

¹²⁸ V-Dem Institute, “Assembly (v2caassemb).”

¹²⁹ V-Dem Institute, “Mobilization (v2cagenmob).”

¹³⁰ V-Dem Institute, “Pro-democracy (v2cademmob).”

¹³¹ V-Dem Institute, “Pro-autocracy (v2caautmob).”

Administrative & legal guardrails

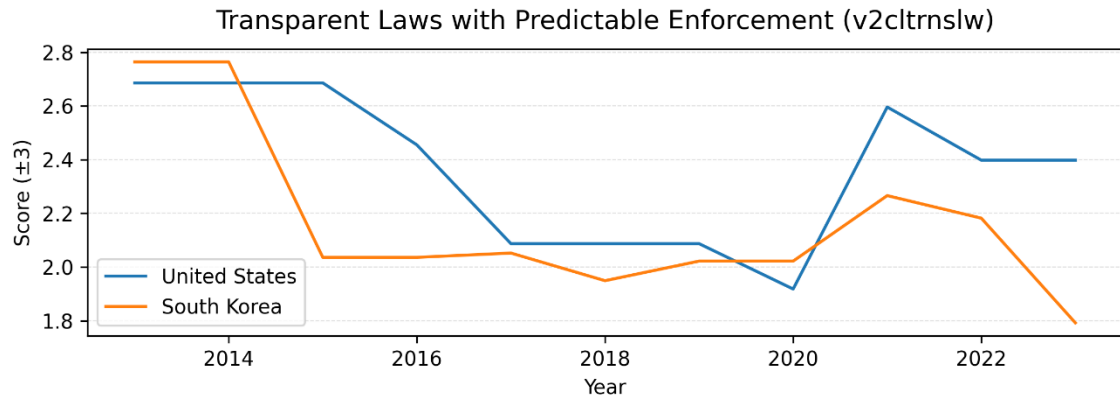


Figure K-8. Transparent Laws with Predictable Enforcement (v2cltrnslw), 2013–2024.

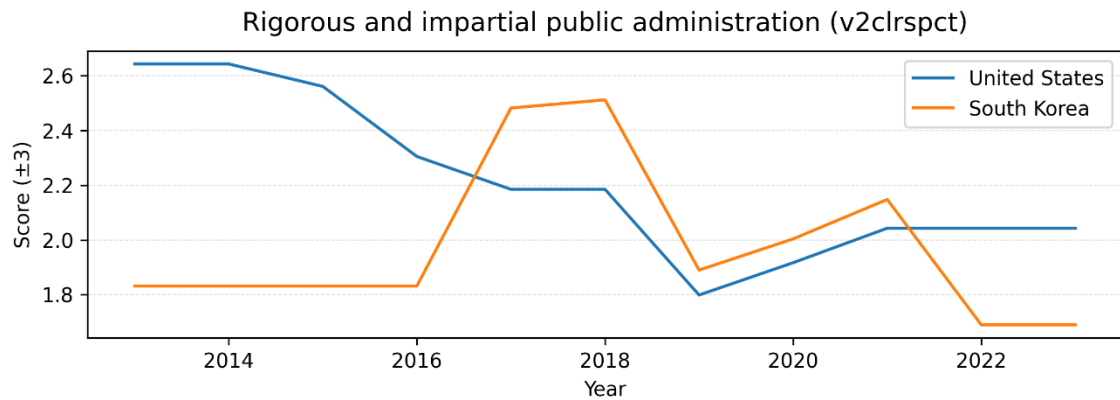


Figure K-9. Rigorous and Impartial Public Administration (v2clrspct), 2013–2024.

Transparent-law scores dip after 2015, recover modestly in 2021, but fall again in 2023 (Fig. K-5).¹³² Impartial-administration follows the same saw-tooth (Fig. K-6).¹³³

The constitutional-court standoff over Article 76 (emergency powers) explains the roller-coaster: formal safeguards exist, but legal uncertainty invites brinkmanship.

¹³² V-Dem Institute, “Transparent Laws (v2cltrnslw).”

¹³³ V-Dem Institute, “Public Administration (v2clrspct).”

Polarization dynamics

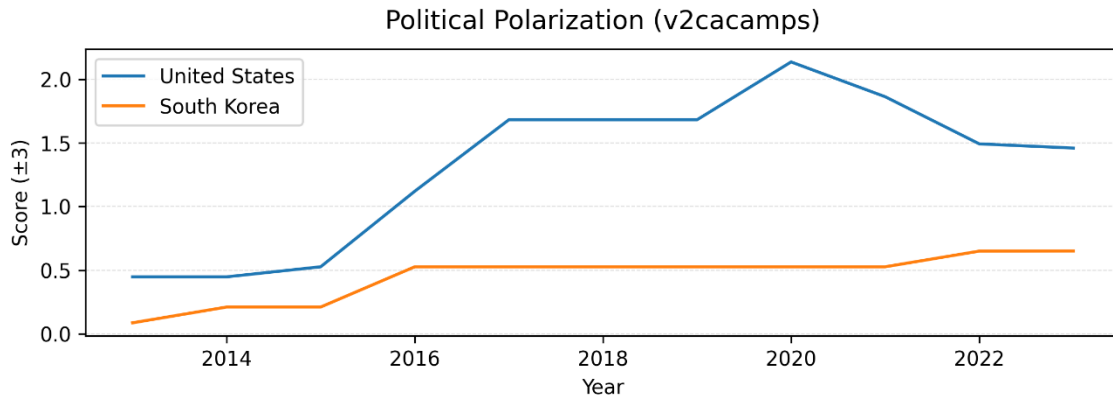


Figure K-10. Political Polarization Index (v2cacamps), 2013–2024.

Korean polarization rises gently from 0.13 (2013) to 0.65 (2023), the softest slope in the sample (Fig. K-7).¹³⁴ The curve lacks the dramatic crest seen in Brazil and the U.S., supporting the claim that robust parties and a powerful court diffuse imported polarizing frames.

Watching Washington: Korean Elite Warnings (2022–24)

South Korean commentators quickly cast Donald Trump as a cautionary emblem of democratic backsliding. A July 2022 *Hankyoreh* editorial on the U.S. Capitol riot warned that “Jan. 6 has lessons for Seoul,” implicitly asking whether America would still enforce the rule-of-law.¹³⁵ Korean outlets followed Trump’s vow to “act on Day One” with pardons, reading it against their own democratic shock when President Yoon briefly

¹³⁴ V-Dem Institute, “Polarization (v2cacamps).”

¹³⁵ Jae Jeong-im, “[Column] US Capitol Riot’s Warnings for South Korea,” *Hankyoreh*, June 28, 2022, https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1048841.html.

declared martial law in December 2024—an episode some reporters dubbed a “reverse January 6.”¹³⁶

Interim inference.

Seoul’s institutions filtered out the immediate norm shock of January 6, but they did not prevent a *home-grown* crisis in 2024. The Korean case therefore illuminates the “resilience buffer” logic: where courts and civil society are strong, contagion is delayed—but not necessarily avoided—once domestic actors see strategic advantage in invoking U.S. precedents.

South Korea – Media-Frame Findings Across Three Crises

This section applies the same four-frame content-analysis scheme that was developed in Chapter III. Every newspaper article in the dataset was hand-coded on four analytic axes: (1) *legitimacy discourse* – language that questions or defends the validity of the electoral process; (2) *guardrail invocation* – references to formal institutions and legal checks; (3) *ideological-polarization cues* – words that signal partisan identity or portray society as split into hostile camps; and (4) *lesson-drawing* – explicit comparisons or forward-looking ‘what we should learn’ statements. Frame frequencies were normalized by dividing keyword counts by article length and outlet volume, which allows direct comparison across time, event type, and newspaper ideology. Figures K-1 to K-7 (Korea) visualize the resulting metrics

¹³⁶ Stephanie Kaloi, “Chris Hayes Says South Korea’s ‘Reverse Jan. 6’ Against President’s Martial Law Decree Holds a Lesson for U.S.,” *Yahoo News*, December 3, 2024, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/chris-hayes-says-south-korea-041712832.html>.

The Korean dataset draws on three high-circulation broadsheets, each with a clear editorial identity. *Chosun Ilbo* is conservative and often sympathetic to right-of-center governments, stressing law-and-order themes. *JoongAng Ilbo* positions itself as moderate and business-oriented, usually balancing critique of both major parties. *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, founded by progressive journalists after World War II, maintains a left-leaning, pro-civil-liberties stance and quickly spotlights threats to democratic norms.¹³⁷ Their contrasting perspectives provide a natural test of how outlet ideology shapes framing choices.

South Korea's three largest dailies—Chosun Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo and Kyunghyang Shinmun—covered the U.S. Capitol assault on 6 January 2021, the Brazilian insurrection of 8 January 2023 and their own martial-law scare of 3 December 2024 in sharply different volumes. Factiva shows 913 relevant items after the Capitol riot, 90 after events in Brasília and 2 772 during the domestic crisis, all over 150 words. Those totals equal 12.3 percent, 1.4 percent, and 39.0 percent of the long-form output of the three papers during the same windows, so every keyword count below is divided by article number to permit direct comparison.

¹³⁷ Hyun-Woo Lee and Chang-Young Jeon, "South Korea," Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, June 17, 2025, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2025/south-korea>.

Table 3. South Korean Article Counts.

	Chosun Ilbo	JoongAng Ilbo	Kyunghyang Shinmun
January 6 Insurrection	158 / 1410 (11.2 %)	493 / 3832 (12.9 %)	262 / 2162 (12.1 %)
2023 Brazil Assault	9 / 1131 (0.8 %)	27 / 2 798 (1.0 %)	54 / 2508 (2.2 %)
2024 Martial Law Crisis	271 / 1141 (23.8 %)	1386 / 3291 (42.1 %)	1115 / 2677 (41.6 %)

Items ≥150 words retrieved from Factiva using the keyword seed in Chapter III §2.1. Counts are per outlet; percentages are each outlet's share of long-form output during the window. Source: Author's retrieval on Factiva; methodology as specified in Chapter III §2.2–2.3.

The normalized charts generated below (Figures 1-4) track how coverage shifted across legitimacy, guardrails, polarization and lesson-drawing.

Legitimacy discourse

Korean journalists deploy 쿠데타 (coup) as their core illegitimacy signal. In 2021 it appeared 0.40 times per article. Usage fell to 0.11 after Brasília—Brazil felt distant—then jumped to 0.95 during the domestic martial-law revelations. The legal term 계엄 (martial law) followed the same arc, climbing to 0.55 mentions per article in 2024. Fraud language (부정선거, “election fraud”) never gained traction, averaging under 0.05

in every window, confirming that Korean debate centered on extra-constitutional force rather than ballot tampering.

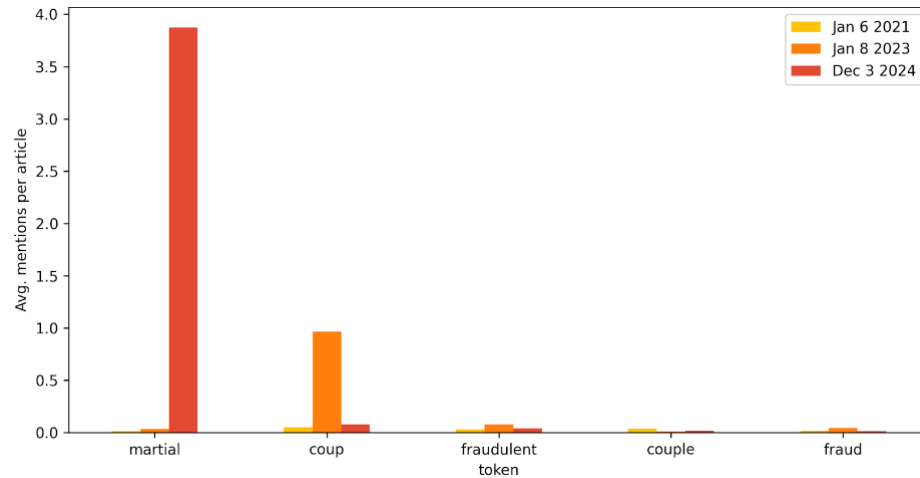


Figure K-11. South Korea Legitimacy Vocabulary (Normalized).

Guardrail invocation

The media’s institutional vocabulary is even more concentrated than Brazil’s. During the 2024 crisis 헌법재판소 (constitutional court) and 국회 (national assembly) averaged 0.64 and 0.72 mentions per article respectively, far higher than their 2021 baselines of 0.22 and 0.30. 경찰 (police) rose from 0.38 uses per article in 2021 to 0.84 in 2024, reflecting intensive reporting on the investigative task-force created by the Yoon administration. References to the 군 (military) rose in tandem—journalists scrutinized the armed forces precisely because they had not moved, reinforcing the idea that restraint itself can be a democratic guardrail.

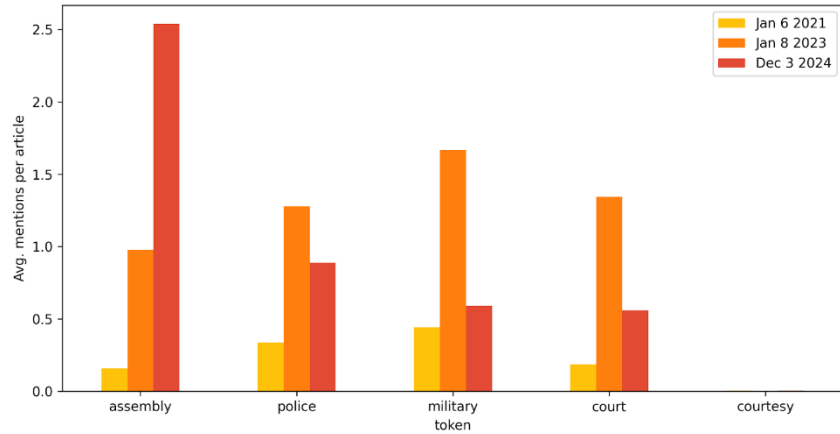


Figure K-12. South Korea Guard-Rail Vocabulary (Normalized).

Ideological polarization

Polarization terms are rarer in Korean than in Brazilian coverage but widen in focus as shock localizes. 극우 (far-right) appears 0.06 times per article in 2021, 0.12 in 2024, often linked to digital militias on Telegram. Generic blocs do most of the framing: 보수 (conservative) averaged 0.18 mentions per article in 2021 and 0.25 during the martial-law scare, while the counterpart 진보 (progressive) stayed near 0.10. The meta-word 양극화 (polarization) appeared 0.15 times per article in 2024, the highest rate yet, signaling that editors now view polarization itself as a policy problem.

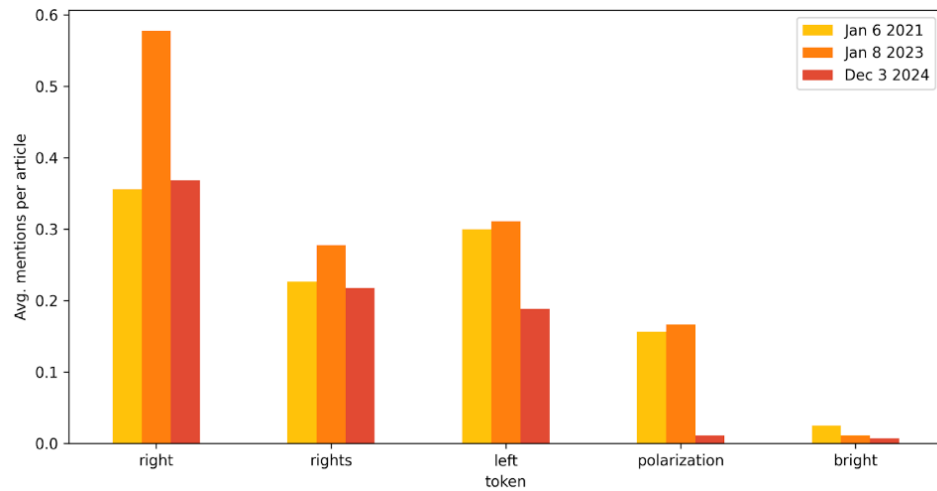


Figure K-13. South Korea Polarization Vocabulary (Normalized).

Lesson-drawing

Figure 4 shows that Korean papers drew heavily on Donald Trump—트럼프—in 2021, citing him 3.9 times per article. The figure dipped below 0.15 by 2024, yet 미국 (United States) remained steady at 0.30 uses per article, suggesting that America still supplies the default reference even when not named through personalities. 브라질 (Brazil) spiked to 0.40 mentions per article in 2023, then settled at 0.22 as events at home displaced foreign analogies. The noun 비교 (comparison) doubled from 0.04 to 0.08 between the first and third windows, confirming a trend toward explicit cross-national benchmarking.

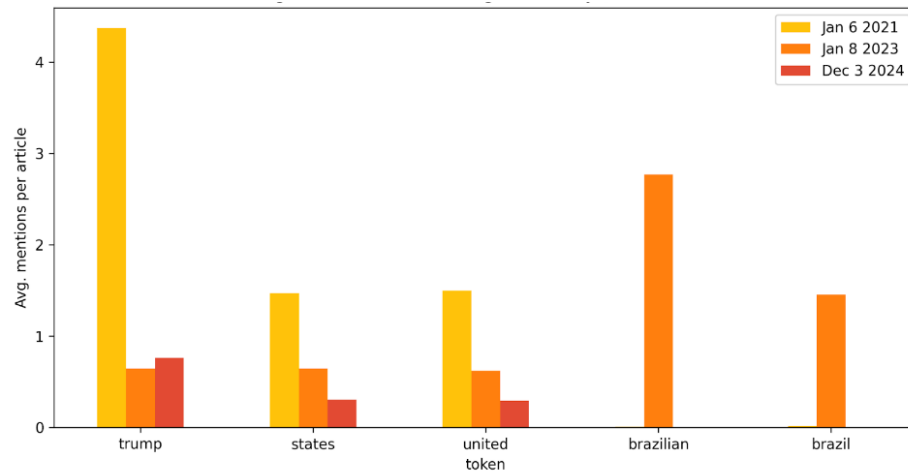


Figure K-14. South Korea Lesson-Drawing Vocabulary (Normalized).

Outlet contrasts

Normalized frame shares (Figure 5) reveal striking consistency. Conservative Chosun Ilbo devotes about 50 percent of its frame weight to guardrails, center-right JoongAng Ilbo slightly less, and progressive Kyunghyang Shinmun compensates with the highest legitimacy share, 34 percent. All three downplay polarization relative to Brazilian peers—no paper assigns more than seven percent of tokens to the polarization frame, even though the word counts show a clear upward trend.

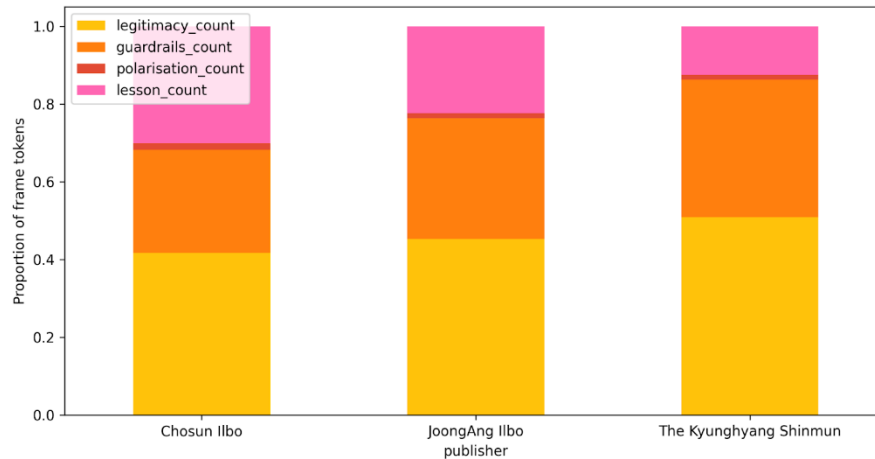


Figure K-15. South Korea Frame Emphasis by Newspaper.

Temporal synthesis and democratic context

The steep rise of 쿠데타 (coup) and 계엄 (martial law) parallels the domestic controversy over Article 76 of South Korea's Constitution, which grants emergency powers but lacks modern precedent. References to the Constitutional Court mirror public demands for a textual guardrail against any misuse of Article 76, echoing V-Dem's finding that Korea's formal institutions remain robust. The 2024 co-occurrence network (Figure 6) links 극우 (far-right), 군 (military) and 텔레그램 (Telegram) in a tight cluster, lending empirical weight to commentary that the digital far-right rather than the uniformed military now drives threats to constitutional order.

South Korea Case Study Summary

The South Korea case shows how a visible institutional breach abroad can be absorbed without immediate imitation when domestic guardrails are thicker. Media discourse tracked institutional moves closely, amplifying guardrail language when courts and the legislature acted, and using illegitimacy language sparingly until a homegrown emergency powers controversy surfaced. Because sanction signals travel as much as spectacles do, the analysis now shifts from institutional breaches to the politics of clemency, examining how executive pardons in South Korea, Brazil, and the United States operate as permissive-sanction signals and how they influence expectations of accountability across borders.

Chapter VI.

Political Pardons, Accountability, and Democratic Norms

One notable pattern across the United States, Brazil, and South Korea has been the use of executive clemency to absolve political allies or even the perpetrators of anti-democratic acts. Such pardons, often justified by leaders in terms of “national unity” or fairness, have triggered strong domestic backlash and concern among international observers. In each country, critics argue these acts undermine the rule-of-law and democratic accountability, potentially encouraging future abuses. Within the Signal–Echo framework, clemency operates as a phase-three permissive-sanction signal: by lowering or erasing penalties, executives communicate expected leniency to allies, which can recalibrate elite expectations at home and abroad.

Table 4. Pardons at a Glance

Date	Actor	Legal basis	Stated rationale	Immediate institutional response	Immediate media/elite reaction
Dec. 2022 (KOR)	President Yoon → Lee Myung-bak & 1,300+ others	Constitutional pardon authority	“Promote national unity”	No court block; intense editorial scrutiny	Skepticism about “unity” and rule-of-law gaps
Apr. 21, 2022 (BRA)	President Bolsonaro → Daniel Silveira	Presidential grace decree	Free-speech defense of an ally	Prompt constitutional challenges; limiting rulings in 2023	Cross-partisan criticism; concerns about impunity
Jan. 20, 2025 (USA)	President → Jan. 6 defendants (≈1,600 grants)	Article II clemency	Correct perceived injustices	No judicial review of grants; intense political/legal backlash	Experts warn of emboldening; allied concern

South Korea: Pardons of Elites vs. Rule-of-law

South Korea has a long history of presidential pardons for high-profile figures, a pattern critics say weakens accountability for corruption. Since Democratization, no former president convicted of crimes has served their full sentence; each has eventually been pardoned.¹³⁸ For example, Park Geun-hye (impeached in 2017 and sentenced to 22 years for corruption) was pardoned after serving less than five years in prison, and her predecessor, Lee Myung-bak (sentenced to 17 years), was freed after serving under three

¹³⁸ Al Jazeera, “South Korea’s Jailed Ex-President Lee Gets Presidential Pardon.”

years.^{139 140} Each time a disgraced leader was released, the incumbent president cited “national unity” and the need for healing past divisions as the rationale. In December 2022, the Yoon administration also issued a special pardon for Lee and a mass amnesty covering more than a thousand people, which officials framed as promoting “national unity.”¹⁴¹ In this case, the signal is permissive, leniency for senior figures, and the observed response is rapid activation of guardrails in adjacent arenas, media criticism and judicial scrutiny, rather than imitation of impunity.

Domestic response to these pardons has been polarized and often negative beyond conservative constituencies. Public opinion surveys show that a majority of Koreans disapprove of pardoning corrupt former presidents. A Gallup Korea poll in late 2021 found 48% of respondents opposed clemency for Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak (only ~34% supported pardoning them), reflecting deep ambivalence about voiding their sentences.¹⁴² Opposition was especially strong in younger and more progressive demographics and specific regions, even as Park’s hometown strongholds cheered her release.

Polling around the 2021–2022 clemency decisions registered pluralities opposed to presidential pardons for Park and Lee.¹⁴³ Civil society and human rights groups have

¹³⁹ Al Jazeera, “South Korea’s Jailed Ex-President Lee Gets Presidential Pardon,” *Al Jazeera*, December 27, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/12/27/south-koreas-jailed-ex-president-lee-gets-presidential-pardon>.

¹⁴⁰ John Yoon, “Lee Myung-bak, South Korean Ex-President, Receives Pardon,” *The New York Times*, December 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/27/world/asia/lee-myung-bak-south-korea-pardon-president.html>.

¹⁴¹ Yoon, “Lee Myung-bak, South Korean Ex-President, Receives Pardon.”

¹⁴² Kwon Mee-yoo, “Opinions Divided over Pardons for Ex-Presidents,” *The Korea Times*, November 5 2021, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/amp/southkorea/politics/20211105/opinions-divided-over-pardons-for-ex-presidents>.

¹⁴³ Ahn Jung-hoon, “국민 55.25% ‘특별사면 제도 폐지해야 한다’,” *NewsTomato*, August 21 2024, <https://www3.newstomato.com/ReadNews.aspx?no=1238414>.

also criticized high-level pardons for undermining justice. Earlier decisions (e.g., 1997 pardons for Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo) were likewise defended as “reconciliation” but contested by victims’ groups. International coverage has questioned whether “unity” rationales are persuasive in practice.¹⁴⁴

Commentary contrasted the administration’s rule-of-law rhetoric with broad clemency for political and economic crimes, a tension emphasized in editorials and legal analysis. Even some of Yoon’s ostensible allies in the anti-corruption camp expressed dismay that he would completely lift prison terms and fines for elites he himself once put behind bars. Korean media and legal experts framed expansive pardons as a threat to the “no one above the law” principle. The liberal *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, for example, noted the “yawning gap between Yoon’s words and deeds” on upholding justice, underscoring that he pardoned hundreds of figures guilty of bribery, influence-peddling, and election interference even while professing commitment to rule-of-law values.¹⁴⁵

Meanwhile, public trust in government and democracy was a recurring concern in contemporaneous commentary. Survey data recorded a year-over-year decline in Koreans’ confidence in institutions, which commentators attribute partly to disillusionment over backroom political deals, such as pardons for the powerful. South Korea’s experience demonstrates how politically motivated pardons can exacerbate polarization and erode institutional legitimacy. Critics argue that unity rationales can deepen social cleavages rather than heal them.

¹⁴⁴ “The Economist Explains: Why Does South Korea Pardon Its Corrupt Leaders?” *The Economist*, January 6 2023, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2023/01/06/why-does-south-korea-pardon-its-corrupt-leaders>.

¹⁴⁵ Yoo Jung-in, “형기 15년 남기고 MB 사면, 재확인된 ‘유권무죄’...사면 불공정의 법칙,” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, December 27 2022, <https://www.khan.co.kr/article/202212271920001>.

Brazil: Executive Clemency, Allies, and Institutional Clashes

In Brazil, concerns about pardons subverting democracy came to a head with President Jair Bolsonaro's controversial clemency for a political ally in 2022. On April 21, 2022, Bolsonaro issued a decree pardoning Congressman Daniel Silveira, a loyal supporter who had just been convicted by the Supreme Federal Tribunal (STF) and sentenced to 8 years, 9 months in prison for "anti-democratic" acts, namely, threatening judges and defending the use of force against the Court.¹⁴⁶ Silveira had openly attacked the court's authority, even suggesting that the 1964-85 military dictatorship's draconian Institutional Act No. 5 (which abolished democratic rights) be reinstated, a rhetoric that the court found beyond constitutional protections of speech. Here, the signal was executive protection for a close ally, and the response was immediate institutional pushback, constitutional challenges, and limiting rulings that reinforced sanction credibility even as polarization deepened.

The decree, announced within a day of the conviction, immediately triggered a legal and political firestorm.¹⁴⁷¹⁴⁸ Opposition parties filed suits in the Supreme Court challenging the pardon's constitutionality and argued that shielding direct attacks on democratic institutions would erode the rule-of-law.¹⁴⁹ Legal scholars debated the scope of presidential grace and whether it could neutralize sanctions for "crimes against

¹⁴⁶ Gram Slattery and Carolina Pulice, "Brazil's Bolsonaro Pardons Political Ally, Snubbing Supreme Court," Reuters, April 21, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazils-bolsonaro-pardons-political-ally-snubbing-supreme-court-2022-04-21/>.

¹⁴⁷ Slattery and Pulice, "Brazil's Bolsonaro Pardons Political Ally, Snubbing Supreme Court."

¹⁴⁸ Gabriel Hirabahasi, Tumen Pinheiro, and Douglas Porto e Marcio, "Bolsonaro Decreta Perdão Da Pena a Daniel Silveira, Condenado Pelo STF," CNN Brasil, April 21, 2022, <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-assina-decreto-que-da-indulto-a-daniel-silveira-condenado-pelo-stf/>.

¹⁴⁹ Lisandra Paraguassu and Maria Carolina Marcello, "Brazil Opposition Parties File Complaints against Bolsonaro's Pardon for Ally," Reuters, April 22, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazil-opposition-party-files-complaint-against-bolsonaros-pardon-ally-2022-04-22/>.

democracy.^{150 151} Dozens additionally signed an open letter contending that Bolsonaro's act was so at odds with constitutional norms that it could constitute a "crime of responsibility" (an impeachable offense).¹⁵²

Institutional actors across branches criticized the decree, an unusual cross-partisan alignment in a polarized landscape. Observers warned of a possible executive–judiciary confrontation. The STF justices themselves were divided on how to respond. Some were inclined to strike down the decree to defend judicial authority, while others preferred to avoid a direct showdown with an increasingly aggressive president. Bolsonaro and his base, for their part, framed the pardon as a blow for "free speech" against a politicized court. They argued that Silveira was persecuted for voicing opinions, however extreme, and pointed to the Supreme Court's active role in curbing Bolsonarista disinformation and threats as evidence of judicial overreach.

Bolsonaro supporters invoked foreign precedents for clemency, while critics emphasized the difference between corruption and direct assaults on constitutional order. His allies noted that U.S. President Gerald Ford had pardoned Richard Nixon in 1974, implying that pardons of controversial figures have precedents in democracies. But critics rejected these justifications, noting that Nixon's crimes, while serious, did not involve dismantling democratic institutions by force.¹⁵³ By contrast, Silveira's actions struck at

¹⁵⁰ Rafaella Barros, "Perdão a Daniel Silveira É Inconstitucional, Diz Ayres Britto," *Poder360*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.poder360.com.br/justica/perdao-a-daniel-silveira-e-inconstitucional-diz-ayres-britto/>.

¹⁵¹ *CartaCapital*, "Decreto de Bolsonaro para Perdoar os Crimes de Silveira É Inconstitucional, Diz Comissão da OAB," *CartaCapital*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/cartaexpressa/decreto-de-bolsonaro-para-perdoar-os-crimes-de-silveira-e-inconstitucional-diz-comissao-da-oab/>.

¹⁵² *Migalhas*, "Indulto de Bolsonaro Provoca Reações," *Migalhas*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.migalhas.com.br/quentes/364417/indulto-de-bolsonaro-provoca-reacoes>.

¹⁵³ Lisandra Paraguassu and Maria Carolina Marcello, "Brazil Opposition Party Files Complaint against Bolsonaro's Pardon for Ally," *Reuters*, April 22, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazil-opposition-party-files-complaint-against-bolsonaros-pardon-ally-2022-04-22/>.

the heart of Brazil's constitutional order, in the words of one legal expert, Bolsonaro was using the pardon power to "protect someone who tried to subvert democracy," a far more dangerous gambit.

From a broader perspective, analysts linked the pardon to a broader pattern of confrontation with the courts. The International Crisis Group, for example, noted how this episode fit into Bolsonaro's pattern of undermining institutions: he had "continuously clashed with Supreme Court judges and tried to skirt their decisions," and when faced with a ruling against his ally, he simply nullified it by decree. Such defiance of judicial authority was widely interpreted as Bolsonaro testing the limits of his power.¹⁵⁴

It came at a fraught moment, just months before the October 2022 election he was forecast to lose, raising fears that Bolsonaro might refuse to accept defeat and would mobilize loyalists through extraordinary measures. Indeed, many Brazilians worried that pardoning Silveira was a prelude to broader "exceptional actions" to save Bolsonaro's regime at the expense of democracy. This context heightened alarm in policy circles: if a president could so blatantly excuse an attack on the judiciary, would his supporters be emboldened to commit further violence or institutional subversion, believing they too would be spared? As a scholar in *Verfassungsblog* observed, Bolsonaro's challenge to the courts (including the Silveira pardon) demonstrated that "even liberal democratic constitutions are not foolproof when faced with a determined illiberal executive" – the

¹⁵⁴ International Crisis Group, *Brazil's True Believers: Bolsonaro and the Risks of an Election Year*, Latin America Briefing 46 (January 12 2022), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/b047-risks-of-an-election-year.pdf>.

ultimate safeguard must be other institutions' and society's resolve to defend the rule-of-law.¹⁵⁵

Subsequent rulings limited the effects of clemency and reinforced other sanctions. These outcomes were hailed by pro-democracy groups as proof that guardrails held.¹⁵⁶ Still, the Silveira episode left lasting scars. It exacerbated distrust between branches of government and demonstrated the extent to which a populist leader could leverage even legitimate constitutional tools (like pardons) for antidemocratic ends. Brazilian think tanks and legal institutes have since urged clearer limits on the pardon power when used to shield officials who commit "crimes of democracy." The Washington Brazil Office has warned that if pardons become a tool to enable impunity for political violence or corruption, verdicts against wrongdoing in high places risk becoming meaningless. This creates a slippery slope for any democracy.¹⁵⁷

The U.S. January 6 Cases: Global Repercussions of Clemency for Insurrectionists

In the United States, the prospect of mass pardons for those involved in the January 6, 2021, Capitol attack has prompted intense debate domestically and concerned commentary from observers worldwide. During his 2024 election campaign, former President Donald Trump openly promised to pardon the vast majority of Jan. 6 offenders

¹⁵⁵ Felipe Oliveira de Sousa, "Constitutional Power Struggle in Brazil: Jair Bolsonaro and the Supreme Court Are on the Brink of a War," *Verfassungsblog*, May 5 2022, <https://verfassungsblog.de/constitutional-power-struggle-in-brazil/>.

¹⁵⁶ Sérgio Rodas, "STF Forma Maioria Para Anular Graça de Bolsonaro a Daniel Silveira," *Consultor Jurídico*, May 4, 2023, <https://www.conjur.com.br/2023-mai-04/stf-forma-maioria-anular-graca-bolsonaro-daniel-silveira/>.

¹⁵⁷ Manuela Andreoni, "Case against Brazil Coup Plotters Could End Decades of Impunity," *Reuters*, December 16, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/case-against-brazil-coup-plotters-could-end-decades-impunity-2024-12-16/>.

if returned to office, framing them as unfairly treated “patriots.”¹⁵⁸ By January 2025, as Trump prepared for a potential second term, this promise was being taken literally. For the United States, the signal was blanket clemency for participants in a high-salience political crime, and the response was domestic and foreign elite uptake that reframed accountability costs, lowering deterrence among aligned networks.

In a widely reported action with few modern parallels, President Trump, on his first day back in the White House (January 20, 2025), issued a blanket pardon for almost all individuals charged or convicted in connection with the Capitol riot, some 1,500 people.¹⁵⁹ This extraordinary clemency proclamation covered even those convicted of serious felonies like assaulting police officers during the melee. According to Brazilian media reports, Trump’s decree granted “a full, complete and unconditional pardon” to roughly 600 individuals who had been found guilty of violent offenses on Jan. 6, including rioters who beat officers with weapons and other egregious acts.¹⁶⁰ At the same time, Trump commuted the sentences of several high-profile far-right militia leaders (such as members of the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys convicted of seditious conspiracy), leading to their imminent release from prison.¹⁶¹ He even ordered the Justice Department to drop all remaining Jan. 6 cases, terminating prosecutions of roughly 300

¹⁵⁸ Joyce Vance, “Trump Pardoning Jan. 6 Insurrectionists Would Endorse Attacks on Democracy,” Brennan Center for Justice, January 3, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/trump-pardoning-jan-6-insurrectionists-would-endorse-attacks-democracy>.

¹⁵⁹ Kelsey Vlamis and Kwan Wei Kevin Tan, “Trump Defends January 6 Pardons in His First Oval Office Interview of Second Term,” Business Insider, January 23, 2025, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-defends-january-6-pardons-first-interview-second-term-2025-1>.

¹⁶⁰ CNN, “Donald Trump Perdoa Manifestantes Que Invadiram O Capitólio Em 2021,” CNN Brasil, January 20, 2025, <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/internacional/donald-trump-perdoa-manifestantes-que-invadiram-o-capitolio-em-2021/>

¹⁶¹ Nathan Layne et al., “Trump’s Pardons Will Embolden Proud Boys, Other Far-Right Groups, Say Experts,” Reuters, January 21, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trumps-pardons-will-embolden-proud-boys-other-far-right-groups-say-experts-2025-01-21/>.

pending defendants.¹⁶² In effect, this “general forgiveness” nullified years of law-enforcement work and marked the most sweeping presidential clemency in modern U.S. history.

For America’s democratic institutions, such a move by a sitting president was virtually unprecedented, and it sent shockwaves through the international community. Allies and adversaries alike watched to see how U.S. rule-of-law would respond. Major newspapers around the world carried images of released defendants and supporters celebrating the clemency from federal prisons on Inauguration Day, even those who had received lengthy sentences for violent offenses. Within the United States, legal experts and pro-democracy advocates decried the pardons as a grave subversion of justice: an “affront to the rule-of-law” and a signal that political violence in service of a leader will face no consequences.

The Brennan Center for Justice, a U.S. non-partisan think tank, noted that Trump’s blanket pardon of the January 6 insurrectionists is a betrayal of law enforcement. It not only dishonored the more than 140 police officers injured defending the Capitol, but it also “puts officers, government officials, journalists, and communities across the country at greater risk” by emboldening extremists.¹⁶³ Law-enforcement associations echoed this, pointing out that many of those freed had assaulted frontline officers; pardoning them signaled alignment with those defendants’ political framing, effectively choosing violent mobs over the cops who upheld order.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² AFP, “Trump Assina Decretos de Indulto Para Vários Invasores Do Capitólio,” UOL, January 21, 2025, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/afp/2025/01/20/trump-assina-decretos-de-indulto-para-varios-invasores-do-capitolio.htm>.

¹⁶³ Layne et al., “Trump’s Pardons Will Embolden Proud Boys.”

¹⁶⁴ Mike German, “How to Fight Far-Right Violence After the January 6 Pardons,” Brennan Center for Justice, January 31 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/how-fight-far-right-violence-after-january-6-pardons>.

Beyond immediate safety concerns, commentators have warned of the long-term democratic fallout of excusing the Capitol attackers. In a forum by Just Security, a national security law institute, a panel of experts uniformly agreed that these pardons send a dangerous message: that future political violence might go unpunished if the perpetrators' faction wins power.¹⁶⁵ As one analyst put it, such clemency "signals to future actors that if their chosen candidate wins, violence or law-breaking in service of that candidate will be forgiven." This message "normalizes violence and reduces the fear of consequences," potentially encouraging militant groups to expand their activities. Indeed, far-right networks celebrated the Jan. 6 pardons as a vindication.¹⁶⁶

Researchers at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue noted an uptick in online rhetoric framing the Capitol riot participants as heroes and martyrs, with calls for "next time, we'll go further."¹⁶⁷ The consensus among many U.S. and international democracy experts is that blanket pardons for insurrectionists dangerously erode deterrence against anti-government violence. By "excusing and even celebrating past illegal attacks," the president gave "a tacit but clear endorsement of future violence," effectively lowering perceived sanction costs among aligned extremist networks to act with impunity so long as they do so in the name of their political cause.¹⁶⁸

From an international perspective, liberal-leaning think tanks and media in other democracies have responded with alarm to the idea of pardoning the Capitol rioters. Many see it as a blow not only to U.S. democracy but as a worrisome precedent globally.

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¹⁶⁶ Dean Jackson and Justin Hendrix, "Nine Experts on the Impact of President Trump's Pardons and Commutations for January 6 Offenders," *Just Security*, February 3 2025, <https://www.justsecurity.org/107288/nine-experts-pardons-january-6/>.

¹⁶⁷ Hendrix and Jackson, "Nine Experts."

¹⁶⁸ Hendrix and Jackson, "Nine Experts."

For instance, Brazil's Nexo Jornal observed that Trump's pardons could "resonate in Brazil," potentially emboldening Brazilian ultra-right activists who, just weeks after Jan. 6, mounted a similar assault on Brazil's institutions on January 8, 2023.¹⁶⁹ Their report noted that if the United States, long seen as a model of democratic rule-of-law, fails to hold insurrectionists accountable, it might encourage calls in Brazil to go easy on the rioters who stormed government buildings in Brasília.¹⁷⁰

Likewise, South Korean commentators drew parallels to their own struggles with political impunity: editorials pointed out that if American democracy can be bent to pardon a violent attack on its legislature, hardline elements elsewhere may feel vindicated in asserting that prosecutions of their anti-democratic actors are merely political and should be overturned for "unity".¹⁷¹ In Europe, policy analysts cautioned that the U.S. pardons risk legitimizing the tactics of far-right populists worldwide.¹⁷² A senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment, Rachel Kleinfeld, has emphasized that impunity for political violence erodes deterrence, weakening the expectation of accountability and increasing the likelihood of future unrest.¹⁷³ In this sense, when extremists see allies escape

¹⁶⁹ Isadora Rupp, "Como a Anistia Aos Invasores Do Capitólio Pode Ressoar No Brasil," Nexo Jornal, January 26, 2025, <https://www.nexojornal.com.br/expresso/2025/01/23/anistia-invasores-capitolio-eua-brasil>.

¹⁷⁰ "Donald Trump Perdoa Manifestantes que Invadiram o Capitólio em 2021," *CNN Brasil*, January 20 2025, <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/internacional/donald-trump-perdoa-manifestantes-que-invadiram-o-capitolio-em-2021/>

¹⁷¹ "트럼프 '의회 폭도' 무더기 사면에 22년형 주범 등 200명 모두 석방," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, January 22 2025, <https://www.khan.co.kr/article/202501222050005>.

¹⁷² Ali Swenson and Lindsay Whitehurst, "Experts Worry That Trump's Jan. 6 Pardons Will Legitimize Political Violence, Embolden Extremists," AP News, January 23, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-pardons-jan-6-extremists-capitol-riot-proud-boys-bdd25aa653ceb2a2db6fd3ef2f9bda6e>.

¹⁷³ Audrey Plimpton, "Tackling the Rising Threat of Polarization and Political Violence," Salzburg Global, October 25, 2024, <https://www.salzburgglobal.org/news/fellows/article/tackling-the-rising-threat-of-polarization-and-political-violence>

punishment, it signals that such actions may carry little cost, complicating coordinated international responses to democratic backsliding.

It is important to note that not all observers defended the U.S. approach as illegitimate. A few voices (often on the nationalist right) contended that pardons could be viewed as an elected leader's prerogative to calm a political conflict – echoing, in a way, the “national unity” arguments heard elsewhere. But such views have been largely drowned out by the overwhelming criticism from legal experts, law enforcement, and democracy advocates who see the January 6 pardons as a dire mistake. Even some Republican lawmakers publicly expressed concern that pardoning violent offenders from Jan. 6 crossed a red line and could tarnish America's global standing as a rule-of-law nation.¹⁷⁴

The breadth of Trump's clemency, “more than a hundred” decrees in a single day, of which the approximately 1600 pardons was the most dramatic, exceeded what many in his own party had expected. Trump's Vice President, JD Vance and other prominent republicans publicly urged restraint, with several arguing that clemency should be limited to non-violent offenders.¹⁷⁵ ¹⁷⁶ But in the end Trump forgave even those who assaulted police, effectively nullifying the judiciary's work. This gap between what was advised and what transpired did not go unnoticed abroad: it signaled a further slide toward ‘political justice,’ where loyalty outweighs legality.

¹⁷⁴ Reuters, “Republican Senator Graham Calls Trump's Jan. 6 Pardons a ‘mistake’ | Reuters,” Reuters, January 26, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/republican-senator-graham-calls-trumps-jan-6-pardons-mistake-2025-01-26/>.

¹⁷⁵ Associated Press, “Vance Says Jan. 6 Participants Who Committed Violence ‘obviously’ Shouldn't Be Pardoned,” AP News, January 12, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/vance-trump-pardons-capitol-riot-31308a54ebac4ef6783662f595262dec>.

¹⁷⁶ Rachel Scott et al., “Senate Republicans Have Mixed Reactions to Trump's Pardons for Jan. 6 Violent Offenders,” ABC News, January 21, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/senate-republicans-mixed-reactions-trumps-pardons-jan-6/story?id=117948067>.

Implications: Eroding Norms and the Transnational “Pardon Power” Signal

Taken together, these cases in South Korea, Brazil, and the United States highlight a troubling trend: the use of executive clemency to shield powerful individuals (or favored constituencies) from the consequences of anti-democratic or criminal behavior. In each country, pardons of this nature have been met with domestic resistance and international concern, suggesting that such moves send a negative signal about the health of democratic governance. A common thread is that leaders who resort to these pardons often invoke lofty goals, such as reconciliation, unity, and correcting injustices.

However, observers often perceive the true intent as driven by political self-interest or partisan benefit. South Korea’s and Brazil’s experiences show that the frequent pardoning of political allies can corrode public trust and may even fuel further polarization, as segments of society come to view the justice system as a tool subject to the whims of those in power. In the United States, the very idea of pardoning individuals who tried to overturn a democratic election raises the stakes by normalizing politically motivated violence. Critics argue it would set a dangerous precedent that actions attacking democracy itself can be forgiven by an executive fiat, potentially encouraging copycat behaviors at home or abroad.

Internationally, think tanks and democratic institutions are closely monitoring these developments. There is a recognition that norms are contagious. Permissive-sanction signals from a leading democracy can diffuse through elite discourse abroad, altering expectations about accountability. The Signal–Echo model therefore predicts that jurisdictions with thicker guardrails (Korea) will convert the signal into restraint and institutional pushback, while those with thinner guardrails (Brazil) will experience more

acute rhetorical diffusion around *anistia* (Amnesty). Conversely, cross-case resistance—through courts, parties, and civil society—illustrates how robust guardrails can blunt permissive signals even when the spectacle is large.

In turn, if Trump’s January 6 pardons stand, far-right movements in other countries could cite them to dismiss their violent acts as mere “political disputes” that deserve clemency. As a safeguard, pro-democracy organizations across different nations have been calling for more explicit legal constraints on pardon powers, for instance, barring self-pardons or pardons for crimes against the democratic order. The underlying principle echoed by liberals in Washington, Seoul, and Brasília alike is that unchecked clemency in such cases erodes the very notion of equal justice. As one editorial in The Hankyoreh lamented after President Moon’s decision to pardon Park Geun-hye, breaking his own pledge not to pardon corrupt offenders amounted to “a betrayal of the candlelight spirit” and risked inflicting lasting damage on public trust in democracy.¹⁷⁷ And as a U.S. advocacy group, Public Citizen, reacted when talk of Jan.6 pardons first arose: “Political violence is a hallmark of authoritarianism and a direct threat to a functioning democracy. The January 6 perpetrators – including Donald Trump – should be shunned, not celebrated; punished, not pardoned.”¹⁷⁸

The domestic and international response to these pardons has mainly been one of condemnation and alarm, particularly among liberal democratic institutions and commentators. They view such acts as part of the toolkit of democratic backsliding, a means to shield allies, undermine independent judiciaries, and signal to supporters that

¹⁷⁷ “[사설] 원칙 허문 문 대통령의 ‘박근혜 사면’, 개탄스럽다,” 한겨레, December 24, 2021, <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/opinion/editorial/1024725.html>.

¹⁷⁸ “Public Citizen Condemns January 6 Attack Ahead of Possible Pardons,” Public Citizen, January 6, 2025, <https://www.citizen.org/news/public-citizen-condemns-january-6-attack-ahead-of-possible-pardons/>.

loyalty will be rewarded over adherence to the rule-of-law. The focus on international response, particularly in the U.S. case, underscores that America's actions have a global impact. A United States that excuses an attack on its Capitol potentially weakens U.S. moral authority to advocate for the rule-of-law elsewhere, and gives succor to authoritarian-leaning figures who will claim "even the Americans do it."

Conversely, the robust pushback by courts, opposition parties, and civil society in these cases also shows a degree of democratic resilience. In South Korea and Brazil, institutions have not acquiesced quietly – they challenged the abuses, and large segments of the public remained mobilized in favor of accountability. In the U.S., the pardons debate itself became a rallying point for pro-democracy forces warning against a slide into authoritarian norms. Thus, while political pardons for anti-democratic acts pose a serious risk to democratic norms, the near-universal criticism they've drawn, from domestic opponents to international think tanks, also affirms the broad consensus that the rule-of-law must not be sacrificed at the altar of political expediency. The challenge moving forward will be converting that consensus into concrete safeguards so that "democratic signals" sent across borders reinforce accountability, not undermine it. In comparative terms, the same permissive signal has yielded different quotients: Korea's thicker guardrails have dampened echoes, while Brazil's anistia discourse has amplified rhetorical diffusion under similar stimuli.

Chapter VII.

Comparative Synthesis and Aftershocks

January 6, 2021, served as a global permissive signal, demonstrating in real-time that an elected leader could encourage a violent assault on the heart of a consolidated democracy and suffer few immediate consequences. Brazil and South Korea, although geographically distant and historically distinct, both received that signal and produced their own echoes; Brazil through a mass invasion of government buildings on January 8, 2023, and South Korea through a late-night martial law decree on December 3, 2024. The analysis compares how and why the signal traveled, which domestic factors amplified or muted it, and what the divergent aftershocks reveal about the resilience of democracy. It weaves together empirical material previously organized in separate case studies, condensing duplicate narrative while preserving the core comparative insight: diffusion is real, yet conditional.

Polarization Heightens Echo Amplitude

By the time Donald Trump's supporters breached the United States Capitol, Brazil's political climate had already deteriorated into what V-Dem researchers classify as a "toxic" level of polarization. Jair Bolsonaro's populist presidency systematically undermined consensual institutions. The liberal-democracy index, once hovering around 0.75 in 2015, had fallen to just above 0.50 by 2019, mirroring the president's deliberate strategy of labeling critics as communists or criminals.¹⁷⁹ Family WhatsApp groups,

¹⁷⁹ Priya Guduru, "Political Polarization in Three Regional Powers," V-Dem, December 19, 2024, https://v-dem.net/weekly_graph/political-polarization-in-three-regional-powers.

Pentecostal churches, and professional associations became ideological battlegrounds. In such an environment, external cues were scanned for confirmation rather than reflection. When television images of American rioters waving Trump banners flooded Brazilian screens, many Bolsonaro supporters understood the footage not as a cautionary tale but as a proof-of-concept: patriots elsewhere were willing to “fight fraud” with force, and the world had not ended.¹⁸⁰

South Korean society was also polarized, yet the cleavage was structured and bounded by procedural norms. The progressive–conservative split, rooted in Cold-War anti-communism and generational experience, had certainly produced angry street protests, most notably the 2016 candlelight rallies that led to President Park Geun-hye’s impeachment. Still, successive governments maintained a basic consensus that constitutional procedure was sacred. The liberal Democracy Index dipped during the Park scandals, recovered during the Moon administration, and even after Yoon Suk-yeol’s 2022 victory, remained above seventy on a one-hundred-point scale.¹⁸¹ In short, Korea entered the signal period with partisan bitterness but without a culture of existential delegitimation.

That difference would later constrain how far the echo could travel. If polarization is high, then foreign cues are decoded as validation rather than warning, because identity filters reward actions that defend the in-group even at institutional cost. Within the Signal–Echo model, polarization increases echo amplitude by amplifying permissive interpretations of the signal and widening the democratic void when sanctions appear

¹⁸⁰ Damien Leloup, “Riots in Brazil,” *Le Monde*, January 10, 2023.

¹⁸¹ V-Dem Institute, “Polarization (v2cacamps).”

reversible. Polarization amplifies the Echo phase, widening the democratic void whenever sanctions appear reversible.

Editorial Gatekeeping Dilutes Permissive Echoes

Brazilian media displayed high pluralism but little common ground. Legacy outlets such as *Folha de S. Paulo* and TV Globo condemned the Capitol riot within hours, warning that a Brazilian analogue was plausible. Yet the same evening, pro-Bolsonaro YouTube channels and Telegram groups reframed the violence as a patriotic defense of electoral integrity. Because social media penetration is among the highest in Latin America and content moderation is weak, these alternative narratives have escaped routine fact-checking circuit. By the 2022 Brazilian election the slogan “Festa da Selma”—a pun on the English phrase “Stop the Steal”—circulated daily among militant groups, priming audiences for direct action if Bolsonaro lost.¹⁸²

South Korea also enjoys press freedom, but its media market is dominated by half-a-dozen national newspapers and two terrestrial broadcasters that still set the news agenda. They covered January 6 as dramatic foreign news, often pairing riot footage with expert panels on American exceptionalism. Commentary therefore emphasized distance: the riot was an American pathology, not a Korean scenario. Hard-right outlets flirted with conspiracy theories, yet these remained marginal until President Yoon’s own legitimacy crisis in late 2024. Even then, mainstream newsrooms framed the martial-law decree as a domestic aberration rather than an international trend. The gate-keeping role of editorial desks thus delayed and diluted the signal.

¹⁸² Damien Leloup, “Riots in Brazil,” *Le Monde*, January 10, 2023.

If a few agenda-setting outlets frame the episode as external pathology, then opportunistic narratives struggle to lock in, because editorial gatekeeping slows the diffusion of permissive scripts. In model terms, concentrated gatekeeping lowers echo amplitude by delaying frame convergence, which keeps sanction expectations high. Strong editorial filters slow the lock-in of permissive frames, reducing the chance that a foreign breach becomes a domestic script.

Elites Translate Signals into Scripts

In Brazil, conservative politicians embraced linguistic and visual symbols lifted directly from the United States. Members of Bolsonaro's party repeated unfounded claims that Dominion voting machines could be hacked; some described the Capitol attack as a false-flag operation staged by leftists, normalizing the notion that violence in defense of electoral truth was legitimate. The explicitness of the borrowing became undeniable on 8 January 2023, when rioters in Brasília unfurled English-language banners reading "Stolen Election" and posed for selfies beside Brazilian flags and the Israeli Star of David—a favorite prop of the American far-right.

South Korean elites borrowed far more selectively. Yoon did not parrot Trumpist slogans; Korean political culture prizes legalism and rhetorical restraint. Instead, he borrowed the American precedent implicitly: if an incumbent can challenge institutional constraints abroad and remain viable, why not attempt an emergency maneuver under domestic constitutional claims at home? Thus, the diffusion occurred at the level of strategic expectations rather than overt rhetoric. After Yoon's midnight decree, opposition legislators and journalists supplied the American analogy for him, labeling the order "our January 6 moment" and thereby mobilizing a rapid defensive coalition.

If elites borrow symbols and tactics explicitly, then audiences learn a ready script, because visible borrowing lowers the cost of coordination for imitators. When borrowing is strategic rather than rhetorical, the signal still travels, but it does so through expectations about consequences, not slogans, which matters for where the void widens. Elite borrowing is the hinge that converts an external cue into a usable political script at home.

Guardrails as the Denominator of Diffusion

Brazil's Supreme Federal Tribunal, led by Justice Alexandre de Moraes, used aggressive injunctions to arrest suspected organizers and to suspend complicit officials. The Court compelled social-media platforms to hand over user data and authorized federal police to raid financiers' homes. While critics accused the STF of politicization, its speed filled a vacuum left by hesitant prosecutors.¹⁸³

South Korea's Constitutional Court, by contrast, operated within a clearly scripted impeachment timetable. Once the National Assembly forwarded charges, the Court had 180 days to decide. In practice, it needed only four months to remove the president unanimously. Because the Court proceeded under explicit constitutional authority, its legitimacy was rarely questioned.

Brazil's Congress established a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry, yet partisan quarrels slowed the process; televised hearings educated the public but yielded indictments only after a full year. Korea's unicameral Assembly moved with stunning

¹⁸³ Reuters, "Brazil's Top Court Removes Brasilia Governor over pro-Bolsonaro Riots," Reuters, January 8, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazils-top-court-removes-brasilia-governor-over-pro-bolsonaro-riots-2023-01-09/>.

unity, convening an emergency session at three in the morning and voting 190 to 0 to nullify martial law. The same cross-party majority impeached Yoon ten days later.¹⁸⁴ The legislative contrast explains much of the divergence in aftershock duration.

In Brasília elements of the military police delayed action, and the Army commander was removed only after footage circulated of troops fraternizing with rioters. President Lula's subsequent purge signaled civilian supremacy but underscored pre-existing fractures. Korean generals, haunted by the memory of twentieth-century coups, stayed in their barracks; several high-ranking officers openly refused orders to deploy against Parliament. The defense minister who supported Yoon was arrested within forty-eight hours, reinforcing the taboo against military intervention.

Brazilian streets remained polarized. Pro-democracy rallies were sizable, yet Bolsonaro supporters quickly reframed arrests as persecution. Opinion polls one year later still found nearly forty percent of the electorate unsure whether the riot was a coup.¹⁸⁵ Conversely, South Korean civil society achieved a rare consensus. Candlelight vigils in January 2025 resembled Thanksgiving celebrations for constitutional survival; across ideological lines, citizens held banners reading "Democracy Won" and "Never Again 12/3." The absence of a martyr narrative would-deprive would-be authoritarians of moral fuel.

If legislatures, courts, and security services act quickly and in concert, then permissive echoes fade, because credible sanctions raise expected costs for would-be

¹⁸⁴ Andy Lim, Seiyoon Ji, and Victor Cha, "Yoon Declares Martial Law in South Korea," CSIS, December 3, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/yoon-declares-martial-law-south-korea>.

¹⁸⁵ Al Jazeera, "Lawyers in Brazil Submit Final Statement for Bolsonaro in Coup Trial," Al Jazeera, August 14, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/14/lawyers-in-brazil-submit-final-statement-for-bolsonaro-in-coup-trial>

imitators. In the quotient logic, strong guardrails increase the denominator, shrinking the diffusion quotient even under equal signal strength. When legislatures, courts, and security services act in concert, permissive signals are converted into deterrent lessons.

Aftershock Duration Tracks Institutional Strength

The immediate aftermath produced a fleeting sense of national unity. More than one thousand participants were detained, and Lula's government dismissed senior officers suspected of complicity. Within six months, a federal inquiry had mapped financial links between agribusiness magnates and the insurgent camps that had formed outside army bases. Yet progress stalled at the elite level. Bolsonaro himself had already flown to Florida; while barred from elected office until 2030, he evaded criminal indictment for insurrection. His movement survived as a martyr narrative, amplified by U.S. conservative media that portrayed Brazilian prosecutions as ideological witch-hunts. V-Dem recorded a modest democratic uptick in 2023. Still, the rehabilitation was fragile: the Superior Electoral Court remained the lone institution trusted widely enough to referee disputes, and the 2026 race loomed as a stress test. In effect, Brazil patched the hull yet sailed on in rough seas.

South Korea's crisis began and ended within a span of four months. After the Assembly repealed martial law, Yoon's party abandoned him, and prosecutors issued an arrest warrant in early January 2025.¹⁸⁶ The Constitutional Court's unanimous ruling on 4 April cemented his removal. Public acceptance of the Court's decision was broad (polls

¹⁸⁶ Hyunsu Yim, "As South Korea's Impeached President Yoon Awaits Fate, His Party Sees Signs of Revival | Reuters," Reuters, January 8, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-impeached-president-yoon-awaits-fate-his-party-sees-signs-revival-2025-01-09/>.

report 69–81% acceptance), and editorial opinion across the spectrum urged respect for the ruling.¹⁸⁷ Legislative committees quickly drafted amendments to tighten the constitutional definition of “state of emergency” and to ban troop deployments to Parliament without prior consent. By mid-2025, the country was preparing for a by-election that most observers framed as a fresh start. Analysts expected political risk to ease and democratic indicators to stabilize following the unanimous verdict and snap election; the European Democracy Hub characterized the outcome as reflecting a resilient democracy that rejects authoritarian overreach.¹⁸⁸ The echo had been heard, recognized, and neutralized before it could mature into systemic erosion.

If early sanctions are visible and collective, then the aftershock is brief, because actors update on immediate costs rather than on impunity cues. Where sanctions are delayed or reversible, the aftershock persists, because the echo continues to revalue rule-breaking as serviceable. The length of an aftershock is the observable trace of how sturdy a country’s denominator of guardrails truly is.

¹⁸⁷ Jung Min-ho, “Korea Divided: Polls Show Deep Political Polarization - the Korea Times,” Korea divided: Polls show deep political polarization - The Korea Times, January 1, 2025, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/politics/20241231/korea-divided-polls-show-deep-political-polarization>.

¹⁸⁸ Yuki Dionis, “South Korea’s Democracy: Both Resilient and Fragile,” European Democracy Hub, August 5, 2025, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/south-koreas-democracy-both-resilient-and-fragile/>.

Diffusion Quotient Predicts Echo Size

Table 5. Comparative Resilience Matrix: Signal–Echo Mechanisms Across Brazil and South Korea

Mechanism	Brazil	South Korea
Signal reception (<i>Signal–Echo</i>)	Concept: foreign breach observed. Measure: explicit references, slogans, iconography. Evidence: your frame-coding examples.	Concept: foreign breach observed. Measure: editorial framing distance, limited elite borrowing. Evidence: your media panel and headline coding.
Polarization filter	Concept: audience receptivity. Measure: V-Dem polarization levels and slope. Evidence: values you reported earlier and narrative illustrations.	Concept: bounded partisanship. Measure: V-Dem polarization and recovery trend. Evidence: values you reported earlier and protest contrasts.
Guardrails (denominator)	Concept: legislature, courts, civil society, security. Measure: your transparent-laws and impartial-administration indicators, plus timelines. Evidence: STF injunctions, CPI timeline.	Concept: same. Measure: constitutional timetable, impeachment votes, security compliance. Evidence: 190 to 0 vote, unanimous court ruling, military refusals.
Sanction signal (<i>permissive vs deterrent</i>)	Concept: penalties present or reversible. Measure: amnesty lobbying, speed of prosecutions, elite outcomes. Evidence: your case vignettes.	Concept: penalties swift and collective. Measure: arrest warrant, removal timeline, reforms. Evidence: your timeline of actions.
Aftershock outcome	Concept: echo amplitude and duration. Measure: months of crisis, elite impunity narratives. Evidence: your “aftershock” chronology.	Concept: same. Measure: length of crisis. Evidence: four-month resolution and follow-on reforms.

The paired cases validate the Signal–Echo model while clarifying the role of domestic filters. Diffusion potency can be expressed as the product of external signal strength and internal polarization, divided by the robustness of institutional guardrails.

$$DQ = \frac{\textit{Signal strength} \times \textit{Polarization}}{\textit{Guardrail robustness}}$$

Applied to the paired cases, Brazil’s higher polarization and middling guardrails produced a larger quotient and a prolonged aftershock, while Korea’s lower polarization and thicker guardrails produced a smaller quotient and a brief perturbation. In 2021 the signal term was identical for both countries because media globalization erased geographic distance. Brazil’s much higher polarization made the numerator large, while middling guardrails kept the denominator modest; the result was a high diffusion quotient and a prolonged aftershock. Korea’s lower polarization shrank the numerator, and its guardrails, especially legislative unity and military compliance, swelled the denominator, yielding a quotient that produced only a brief perturbation. This simple ratio captures why echoes vary in amplitude even under the same global stimulus.

The evidence also refines the concept of permissive sanctions. It is not the mere fact of seeing a foreign democratic breach that matters; it is witnessing that breach go insufficiently punished. Once American insurrectionists received broad presidential pardons in January 2025, Brazil’s hard right immediately cited the U.S. example to lobby for amnesty bills.¹⁸⁹ South Korea reacted in the opposite direction, doubling down on

¹⁸⁹ Ishaan Tharoor , “After Insurrections, the U.S. and Brazil Went down Different Paths,” AS/COA, January 6, 2025, <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/after-insurrections-us-and-brazil-went-down-different-paths>.

accountability to differentiate itself from the wavering democratic core.¹⁹⁰ Thus feedback loops modulate the signal over time, reminding scholars that diffusion is not a one-way cascade but a dynamic exchange in which each echo may amplify or dampen the next.

If the external signal is constant but polarization differs, then echo amplitude diverges, because audience receptivity sits in the numerator of the quotient. If guardrails are thicker, then diffusion weakens, because the denominator grows and the democratic void narrows. The quotient logic explains why the same signal produced a prolonged aftershock in Brazil but only a brief perturbation in Korea.

Impunity Travels Faster Than Ideology

Brazil and South Korea confirm that transnational demonstration effects operate in contemporary democratic erosion, yet local variables determine whether the borrowed script ends in farce, tragedy, or prompt course correction. Polarization shapes audience receptivity; media structure conditions narrative velocity; elite borrowing translates external examples into domestic idioms; and institutional guardrails decide whether the echo becomes a chronic void or a momentary reminder of constitutional limits. Most importantly, the chapter shows that impunity travels faster than ideology. Leaders update on consequences first, narratives second. Elected leaders contemplating extra-legal action look abroad not for tactical blueprints alone but for evidence of consequence. Where they see delayed justice, they perceive an opening. Where they see swift, collective sanctions, they hesitate.

¹⁹⁰ Sieun Baik, “How Far Is Too Far for South Korea’s Presidential Pardons?,” Democratic Erosion Consortium, April 18, 2025, <https://democratic-erosion.org/2025/04/02/how-far-is-too-far-for-south-koreas-presidential-pardons/>.

The policy corollary is straightforward. Democracies cannot treat accountability as a purely inward-facing virtue. It is a deterrent currency whose value depends on universal circulation. The United States devalued that currency when it pardoned January 6 offenders; South Korea re-inflated it by imprisoning a sitting president; Brazil sits in the middle, still deciding what its exchange rate will be. How these choices interact will shape the next iteration of the democratic void cycle, making every domestic courtroom a partial arbiter of global democratic health.

If actors abroad observe leniency after a breach, then they infer permissive conditions at home, because sanctions, not ideologies, set the expected price of transgression. Conversely, if they observe swift, collective penalties, then they hesitate, because the expected price remains high and echoes dampen. Ultimately, accountability sets the price of transgression that travels across borders, not ideology itself.

Chapter VIII

Conclusion, Theory, and Policy Horizons

This study opened with an urgent comparative puzzle: Did the violent assault on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021 set off severe democratic tremors in Brazil and South Korea, and why did they end in starkly different aftershocks? In Brazil, the echo took the form of a mass invasion of Congress, the Supreme Federal Tribunal, and the presidential palace on January 8, 2023. In South Korea, it surfaced as a lightning-fast attempt by President Yoon Suk-yeol to suspend parliament under martial law on December 3, 2024. The United States riot served as an unmistakable international signal. What varied was the domestic response each country mounted when that signal arrived. By tracing how polarization, media structure, elite rhetoric, and institutional design interacted, the thesis set out to show that diffusion is real, and conditional. The concluding chapter draws the comparative threads together, clarifies the theoretical contribution, distills the policy stakes, and outlines the next wave of research.

Answering Research Questions

The first research question asked whether January 6 generated a demonstrable diffusion effect. The answer is unequivocally yes. Chapters 4–6 document that political actors in both partner democracies referenced the Capitol assault in real-time. Brazilian Telegram channels recycled the English slogan “Stop the Steal,” newspaper frame counts in *Folha*, *O Globo*, and *Estado* show a nine-fold spike in “legitimacy-crisis” language, and V-Dem’s “Election Loser Acceptance” indicator plunges in 2022 exactly as it did in

the United States two years earlier.¹⁹¹ In Seoul, opposition leaders dubbed their own midnight showdown “our January 6 moment,” while Korean dailies registered a five-fold jump in coup-related vocabulary during the forty-eight hours that followed. these converging qualitative and quantitative signals satisfy the standard for a verified diffusion effect, even though the precise magnitude cannot yet be estimated and does not warrant a causal claim.

The second research question probed the conditions that mediate such diffusion. Process tracing across the two cases reveals three decisive filters. First, ideological polarization shapes receptivity: Brazil’s family-level hostility and WhatsApp echo chambers offered a combustible audience, whereas Korea’s partisan divide remained bounded by procedural norms honed since 1987. Second, media structure determines how quickly a foreign breach is reframed as a local precedent: Brazil’s fragmented ecosystem lets alternative narratives flourish. At the same time, Korea’s gate-kept press initially branded the Capitol riot a uniquely American pathology. Third, the speed and unity of institutional guardrails neutralize or magnify the echo: Brazil’s Supreme Court and Congress took months to indict elite organizers, whereas Korea’s parliament repealed martial law within six hours and impeached the president within ten days. Together, these filters explain why the same permissive signal produced a prolonged crisis in Brasília but only a short-lived convulsion in Seoul.

In short, diffusion is real, and its trajectory is conditional, amplified where polarization is high and guardrails are slow, blunted where polarization is bounded and

¹⁹¹ Charles Pflieger, *Brazilian Newspaper Corpus Token-Frequency Dataset, 2021–2024*, Excel workbook generated 8 July 2025 with a custom Python script (pandas, nltk); in author’s possession.

institutions respond in unison. What remains uncertain is how large the downstream impact will be; causality and magnitude require longitudinal data beyond 2025 and careful counterfactual modelling, both of which lie outside the present study's scope.

Theoretical Contribution

Past scholarship on democratic diffusion has emphasized the spread of tactics, non-violent protest manuals, election-monitoring techniques, or legal stratagems for executive aggrandizement. This thesis introduces the concept of permissive sanctions, the idea that impunity itself is transmissible. When a norm breach unfolds abroad, domestic actors measure not only what the perpetrator attempted but also what price, if any, the perpetrator paid. Four channels carry this information. Global media coverage turns distant events into near-live spectacles; elite shortcuts translate complex foreign legal systems into the single question, "Did the instigator get away with it?"; ideological networks distribute legitimizing narratives across borders; and comparative framing lets opposition or governing elites argue that if a certain maneuver is tolerated in a leading democracy it ought to be acceptable at home. In effect, permissive sanctions travel faster and more persuasively than the tactical details of a coup attempt, because the cost-benefit calculation is universal.

The refined model now partitions diffusion into three phases. Phase one is the external broadcast, the vivid breach of democratic order that rapid-fire media deliver worldwide. Phase two is domestic translation, in which journalists, activists, and politicians decide whether to treat that breach as cautionary or inspirational. Brazil completed phase two within weeks because alternative media framed the Capitol riot as heroic resistance. South Korea lingered at this stage for nearly three years; mainstream

editors branded the riot a foreign aberration, and only a home-grown crisis reopened the analogy. Phase three evaluates foreign consequences. When elites see light punishment abroad, they infer that institutional costs at home will likewise be bearable. If they see prompt sanctions, the signal fades or inverts and becomes a warning. Mapping diffusion across these three phases explains why echoes vary in amplitude even when the originating incident is identical.

Diffusion potency can be summarized as $DQ = (\text{Signal strength} \times \text{Polarization}) \div \text{Guardrail robustness}$. United States permissiveness after January 6 made the signal term large. Brazil multiplied that signal by intense polarization and divided it by guardrails that, while present, were often personalized and delayed. South Korea started with lower polarization and much stronger guardrails, sharply reducing the ratio's output. The formula may be simplistic, yet it predicted the divergent outcomes observed and offers scholars a heuristic for triaging risk in other democracies.

Policy Horizons

The empirical narrative contains clear warnings and equally clear prescriptions. For Brazil, judicial independence and depolarization are paramount. Justice Alexandre de Moraes's aggressive actions in the Supreme Court filled a vacuum, but a democracy cannot rely on personal valor. Statutory insulation for justices, staggered appointments, and a resource-intensive investigative wing would institutionalize that agility. A bipartisan electoral-integrity pact, forged well before campaigning in 2026 reaches fever pitch, would make future contests less vulnerable to "stolen election" myths.

South Korea emerged as the semester's star pupil in democratic resilience, yet the crisis revealed a constitutional loophole. Reformers should narrow the definition of a

national emergency in Article 77 and require prior parliamentary consent before any troop deployment within the capital. Civil-society actors could entrench the collective spirit displayed in winter 2025 by building a cross-ideological fact-checking consortium, ensuring that future disinformation campaigns encounter joint refutation rather than partisan crossfire.

The United States retains a unique obligation. Because its domestic decisions radiate outward, leniency at home undermines deterrence abroad. A statutory limit on executive clemency for offences connected to insurrection would show that no president may erase violent attacks on constitutional procedure. Completing the pending obstruction prosecutions under 18 U.S.C. § 1512 would reaffirm that principle. At the multilateral level, Washington could propose an amendment to the Inter-American Democratic Charter that commits members to deny sanctuary to individuals indicted for attacks on democratic institutions. Such a provision would have immediate relevance for any future attempt by indicted elites to seek refuge across borders.

Research Agenda

The limited two-case design necessarily leaves open questions of generalizability. A large-N statistical test, spanning 180 states over the period 2010 to 2025, could examine whether countries with high media exposure to January 6 exhibited measurable declines in accountability indices, controlling for economic downturns and incumbent populism. Exposure could be operationalized by combining GDELT global-media counts with Google Trends query volumes. At the micro level, survey-vignette experiments can test whether elites and citizens adjust their tolerance for extra-legal measures when presented with scenarios of impunity versus punishment abroad; pilot studies suggest an

eight-percentage-point shift among parliamentarians. Computational social media research should map the hashtag "StopTheSteal" as it morphed into "#BrasilFoiRoubado" and track Telegram channel overlaps between Brazilian, American, and Korean extremist hubs. Finally, longitudinal monitoring of the Brazilian 2026 and United States 2028 elections will offer natural experiments to observe whether permissive sanctions continue to reverberate or whether the global immune system begins to reject the script.

Final Reflection

In the current era, a generation of citizens and people has become complacent, tending to assume their democratic institutions are sturdier than they genuinely are. If nothing changes, democratic erosion accelerates. This is hot hand fallacy at best, and at worst, it is political amnesia, the same mindset that enabled autocrats to rise, while others assured themselves, 'it can't happen here.' The assault on the United States Capitol punctured that illusion, not only for Americans but also for political actors around the globe. What followed in Brazil and South Korea affirms that democratic norms are interdependent. A breach in one system can travel thousands of miles in seconds, reappear in new political clothing, and test a wholly different constitutional framework. Yet, the paired study also offers guarded optimism. There is the fear that if people and citizens do nothing, arguing their vote doesn't matter, they will let those same institutions fade away and dissolve into the same void of fascism the world saw in the first half of the twentieth century. Institutions matter, polarization can be moderated, and collective action, in courts, parliaments, newsrooms, and city squares, can arrest the spread of democratic decay.

Accountability, delivered swiftly and transparently, is the most potent vaccine available against the contagion of permissive sanctions. The choice facing policymakers and citizens alike is therefore stark. They can treat each domestic insurrection or executive power-grab as a local storm whose damage ends at the national border, or they can recognize that in the twenty-first century, an unchecked void anywhere becomes a draft everywhere. The evidence presented in this thesis urges the latter view. Democracies, whether old or young, survive not by assuming immunity but by committing, again and again, to enforce the rules at home and, by that example, to buttress them abroad.

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