

DEMOCRACY AS A SECURITY ASSET

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May 2026

Global evidence review



WFD

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FOREWORD

Investing in security is investing in democracy

In the face of authoritarian aggression, multifaceted security challenges, and geopolitical instability, investing in security is a priority. Investing in democracy is an essential part of that.

Democracy strengthening and security are often treated as separate spheres, even competing priorities. This essential new report shows us why that is a mistake.

This independent literature review commissioned by Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) presents clear evidence that democracy and security affect one another.

This global evidence review synthesises thirty years of high-level academic evidence showing that democratic states are more resilient to crises, harder to destabilise, and less likely to go to war. It finds that accountability, transparency, treating people equally and respecting their rights act as security infrastructure. When institutions are seen as fair, people trust them more, social tensions and divisions are lower, and democratic resilience is stronger.

So, democracy is a security asset, not just a value we cherish. Our adversaries attack it because they know this. Disinformation, interference and support for populist actors who corrode democracy are their tactics. The intent? To make us less democratic, less resilient, less united, less stable and less secure.

That is why we must be vigilant against security threats and challenges eroding

democracy – be that our own or our partners. As the report makes clear, the risk is not dramatic breakdown, but a slow erosion of democracy through expanding executive powers, challenges to judicial independence, and increasing polarisation.

As members of WFD's Board and the UK delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, we see clearly how democracy and security reinforce one another. WFD has supported democracy around the world since 1992. And since its inception in 1955, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly has upheld the values of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law. We know that our security depends not only on defence capability, but on the strength of democratic institutions and cultures at home and abroad – assets that you cannot buy. Our partnerships and alliances are stronger for this too: NATO's strength lies not just in collective defence commitments but in the shared democratic values that make those commitments credible and durable.

We hope this report closes the false divide between democracy and security once and for all. Supporting democracy is supporting security. And it makes economic sense: IMF research has found that conflict prevention is 100 times less costly than crisis response. Rebuilding public trust and strengthening democracy are essential to long-term security. That means investing in the institutions, processes and norms that make democracy function – at home and abroad.

Yasmin Qureshi MP

Chair, WFD Board of Governors

Member, UK Delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly

Rt. Hon. Sir Alec Shelbrooke MP KBE

Member, WFD Board of Governors

Vice-President, NATO Parliamentary Assembly

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study Background

This study examines the relationship between democracy and security in a rapidly changing global security environment characterised by renewed interstate conflict, shifting and intensifying geopolitical rivalry, and increasing emphasis on defence preparedness, militarisation, and protection against external threats. As state security concerns increasingly dominate internal and foreign policy agendas, political attention to and funding for democracy support have declined in many donor states, reflecting a growing assumption that democracy is secondary to more immediate state security priorities. This review revisits that assumption. It examines whether and how democratic governance itself can function as a security asset, while also illustrating how democratic systems can come under pressure in securitised political environments.

Rather than approaching democracy as a normative aspiration, the review treats the relationship between democracy and security as an empirical question. It synthesises findings from a large body of peer-reviewed research and major comparative datasets across multiple disciplines spanning over three decades, including political science, economics, and security studies. The analysis draws on studies employing a range of rigorous empirical and counterfactual approaches, including cross-national statistical analysis, panel data methods, quasi-experimental designs, experimental research on political behaviour, and comparative historical analysis. By integrating evidence from these diverse methodological traditions, the study seeks to identify what the most robust global academic evidence suggests about the relationship between democracy and security outcomes. The ultimate aim of the review is to situate democracy more clearly within contemporary security debates, focusing on integrated security encompassing state, human, and environmental dimensions, rather than older approaches limited to state security alone.

KEY FINDINGS

PART 1: HOW DEMOCRACY FUNCTIONS AS A SECURITY ASSET

Across multiple domains of security, the evidence consistently shows recurring patterns in which democratic systems tend to be associated with lower risks of violence, stronger crisis management capacity, and greater societal resilience.

The table below synthesises these findings by highlighting the core empirical relationships identified in the literature, the assessed strength of evidence, and the institutional or societal mechanisms through which democratic systems influence security outcomes.

INTERNAL POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT DYNAMICS

Core finding Consolidated democratic institutions are associated with lower risks of civil war onset, particularly compared to hybrid regimes.	Strong evidence	Main security-relevant mechanism Democratic institutions channel conflict into predictable political competition, inclusion, and lawful dispute resolution rather than violent contestation.
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STATE COERCION, REPRESSION, AND CIVIL-MILITARY STABILITY

Core finding Democracies are associated with lower levels of state repression and more stable civil-military relations, including lower coup risk.	Strong evidence	Main security-relevant mechanism Accountability, oversight, and civilian control constrain arbitrary coercion and reduce the political autonomy of armed forces.
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DEMOCRATIC CONSTRAINTS ON INTERSTATE ESCALATION

Core finding Democratic systems do not eliminate interstate violent conflict, but they raise the political and procedural thresholds for the use of force.	Moderate-Strong evidence	Main security-relevant mechanism Legislative oversight, opposition scrutiny, and electoral accountability increase the costs of risky escalation and encourage restraint.
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INFORMATION INTEGRITY AND POLITICAL POLARISATION

Core finding Democracies are more exposed to manipulation and disinformation, but also show resilience when institutional trust, plural media, and contestation remain strong.	Moderate evidence	Main security-relevant mechanism Open debate, competing information sources, and institutional credibility enable correction and limit systemic destabilisation.
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CYBER CONFLICT BEHAVIOUR AND CYBERSECURITY GOVERNANCE

Core finding Democracies tend to show more restraint and accountability in cyber operations, but cyber resilience depends more on governance capacity than regime type alone.	Emerging-Moderate evidence	Main security-relevant mechanism Oversight and legal constraints shape cyber behaviour; administrative coordination and state capability drive cyber preparedness.
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CRISIS RESPONSE, INSTITUTIONAL ADAPTATION, AND LONG-TERM RESILIENCE

Core finding Democracies are better able to manage crises and long-term risks, reducing the likelihood of escalation into major instability.	Moderate evidence	Main security-relevant mechanism Information transparency, accountability-driven response, public compliance, and institutional learning support effective crisis management and adaptation over time.
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DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND WOMEN'S SAFETY

Core finding Democracies are more likely to develop institutional responses to violence against women and to treat such violence as a public policy concern.	Moderate evidence	Main security-relevant mechanism Political openness, civil society mobilisation, and public scrutiny increase recognition of violence and policy responsiveness.
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GENDER EQUALITY AND BROADER SECURITY OUTCOMES

Core finding Higher gender equality tends to coincide with more stable and peaceful political systems, though the relationship appears correlational rather than causal.	Moderate evidence	Main security-relevant mechanism Gender equality acts mainly as an indicator of broader inclusion, rule-bound governance, and constraints on violence.
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CITIZEN-TO-CITIZEN TRUST AND SOCIAL COHESION

Core finding Higher trust among citizens is associated with lower violence, stronger democratic attitudes, and greater societal cooperation, especially where trust is broad and bridging.	Moderate evidence	Main security-relevant mechanism Social trust lowers incentives for violence and strengthens cooperation, compliance, and resilience under stress.
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ECONOMIC INEQUALITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

Core finding Democratic institutions can be associated with more inclusive economic distribution and stronger perceptions of distributive fairness, conditions that support institutional trust and political stability.	Moderate evidence	Main security-relevant mechanism Perceived fairness sustains trust in institutions and reduces the political destabilising effects of insecurity and exclusion.
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The cumulative evidence shows that consolidated democratic systems reduce security risks not by eliminating conflict or strategic rivalry, but by structuring and containing them. Democratic systems shape the institutional and societal conditions under which insecurity is managed and make the use of violence more costly. They also provide channels for non-violent political competition, oversight of coercive power, and mechanisms for accountability that reduce the likelihood that political disputes escalate into violence. These dynamics are further reinforced by transparency, plural information environments, and institutional trust, which support cooperation, voluntary compliance, and adaptive crisis management. At the inter-state level, a substantial body of literature finds that democracies are significantly less likely to engage in violent conflict with one another, reinforcing the broader security implications of democratic governance.

While democracies face vulnerabilities, particularly to disinformation and hybrid forms of instability, their core strengths lie in transparency, accountability, and pluralism, which underpin crisis responsiveness, institutional learning, and societal compliance. These features also enhance the capacity to manage long-term pressures, sustain trust, and enable adaptive responses — conditions that contribute to more stable, cooperative, and less violent political orders. Taken together, the evidence suggests that democratic governance contributes to security by strengthening societies' capacity to manage conflict in non-violent ways, constrain the misuse of force, and respond effectively to shocks. In this sense, democratic processes can be understood not only as normative political arrangements but also as an important structural security asset.

PART 2: HOW SECURITY PRESSURES RESHAPE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS

While democratic institutions can strengthen security outcomes, the relationship also runs in the opposite direction. A substantial body of research shows that sustained threat environments, securitisation processes, and militarisation can reshape democratic governance itself, in some cases contributing to processes of democratic erosion. These dynamics affect public attitudes, political competition, institutional balances of power, and information environments, often making governance systems more centralised and restrictive, and weakening transparency and democratic accountability.

The table below summarises the main patterns identified in the literature, highlighting how various forms of security pressure influence democratic institutions and practices.

The cumulative evidence indicates that sustained security pressures can erode democratic systems in subtle but consequential ways. Threat environments rarely undermine democracy through abrupt institutional breakdown. Instead, processes of

securitisation and militarisation can gradually recalibrate democratic governance from within. Strategic competition and persistent insecurity tend to increase the political salience of protection and authority, strengthen incentives for executive concentration of power, and expand security governance into domains such as information regulation and surveillance.

These dynamics are amplified in polarised environments, where identity-driven politics lowers resistance to norm violations and further concentrates power. At the same time, core democratic features such as openness and pluralism can create exploitable entry points for manipulation, particularly when civilian oversight is weak, allowing security institutions or external actors to erode accountability from within. In this sense, contemporary threat environments do not simply challenge democratic states externally; they can also place internal pressure on democratic institutions, making the resilience of democratic governance an increasingly important dimension of long-term security.

DEMOCRATIC PREFERENCES UNDER THREAT

Core finding

Perceived insecurity (e.g. terrorism, geopolitical risks, migration) increases public support for strong leadership, restrictive security policies, and limits on civil liberties.

Strong evidence

Main security-relevant mechanism

Threat perception shifts democratic priorities toward protection and authority, increasing acceptance of exceptional measures.

SECURITISATION OF DEMOCRATIC COMPETITION

Core finding

Security crises increase the electoral salience of protection, sovereignty, and leadership strength, strengthening actors who frame politics through threat narratives.

Moderate-Strong evidence

Main security-relevant mechanism

Security framing reshapes political incentives and voter expectations, altering the logic of democratic competition.

EXECUTIVE EXPANSION AND EXCEPTIONAL GOVERNANCE

Core finding

Security threats often lead to gradual expansion of executive authority through emergency powers, counterterror legislation, and exceptional administrative frameworks.

Moderate evidence

Main security-relevant mechanism

Legal and institutional adaptations to security pressures shift authority toward executive decision-making.

INFORMATION GOVERNANCE AND DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE

Core finding

Heightened security concerns (e.g. terrorism and geopolitical risks) are associated with expanded digital monitoring and greater state involvement in regulating online information environments.

Moderate evidence

Main security-relevant mechanism

Surveillance infrastructures and platform-based content governance shift control over information flows toward executive authorities and private actors, reducing transparency and traditional democratic oversight.

CIVIL-MILITARY BALANCE

Core finding

The democratic consequences of militarisation depend primarily on institutional positioning and the strength of civilian oversight over security institutions.

Moderate evidence

Main security-relevant mechanism

Weak civilian oversight allows military institutions to accumulate organisational autonomy and political influence, increasing risks of political intervention and weakening democratic accountability.

POLARISATION AS AN AMPLIFIER OF DEMOCRATIC VULNERABILITY

Core finding

Security threats interact with existing political polarisation, increasing tolerance for norm violations and weakening democratic restraint.

Moderate-Strong evidence

Main security-relevant mechanism

Identity-based competition reduces cross-party tolerance and increases acceptance of executive expansion.

STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITIES UNDER SECURITY COMPETITION

Core finding

Core democratic features such as openness, pluralism, and legal constraint can create exploitable vulnerabilities in contemporary security competition.

Emerging-Moderate evidence

Main security-relevant mechanism

Adversaries exploit democratic openness, fragmented information environments, and institutional dispersion.

OVERARCHING CONCLUSION

Overall, the evidence reviewed in this study indicates that democracy and security are closely interconnected and mutually shaping. Democracy can be understood as a structural security asset, providing sources of resilience while also generating specific vulnerabilities under sustained threat. The evidence shows that democratic systems contribute to security by structuring political competition, constraining the use of coercive power, and enabling societies to manage crises, conflicts, and long-term risks more effectively. At the same time, sustained security pressures and processes of securitisation can gradually erode these institutional arrangements by shifting political incentives and public preferences, expanding executive authority, and increasing tolerance for exceptional measures. Democracy and security are not in tension, but their relationship is complex and dynamic and cannot be treated as separate domains. Strengthening democratic institutions can contribute to more resilient and stable security environments, while effective security policy must also account for the institutional pressures that prolonged threat environments can place on them. Maintaining security without degrading democratic integrity therefore depends on preserving oversight, managing securitisation pressures, and sustaining trust and institutional balance under stress.

“Democracy and security are closely interconnected and mutually shaping”

INTRODUCTION

This study is situated against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting global security environment marked by renewed interstate warfare, deepening geopolitical rifts, and intensified strategic competition. A decline in global peacefulness, reflected among other developments in Russia’s war in Ukraine, ongoing conflicts and instability in the Middle East, and intensifying competition in the Indo-Pacific, has heightened tensions among major powers.

“The central question isn’t whether democracy is normatively desirable, but whether it is strategically consequential”

At the same time, the growing securitisation of trade and technology has contributed to a broader shift in international politics, in which defence preparedness, geopolitical rivalry, and resilience against external threats increasingly shape policy agendas. In parallel, democratic backsliding has continued, while political attention to, and funding for, democracy strengthening have declined in many donor states. This shift is partly driven by the prioritisation of defence spending, which increasingly dominates policy agendas across Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Oceania. It also reflects an implicit assumption that democracy strengthening is either a secondary priority in an era of military confrontation or a luxury that can be deferred in the face of acute security challenges.

This review examines this assumption by approaching the relationship between democracy and security as an empirical question. The central concern is not whether democracy is normatively desirable, but whether democratic processes shape security outcomes in ways that are strategically consequential. At the same time, the study finds that the relationship between democracy and security is two-directional. While democratic systems may influence the stability and conflict behaviour of states, security pressures can in turn reshape governance by altering political incentives, shifting institutional and policy priorities, and recalibrating the balance between liberty and security within political systems. By synthesising existing empirical research across these domains, the review seeks to identify where consistent evidence exists, where findings remain contested, and which aspects of democratic governance appear most relevant for shaping security outcomes.

The report forms the first stage of a broader analytical process. Subsequent regional studies covering Europe (including the Eastern Partnership countries), Africa, the Middle-East and Asia will examine how the dynamics identified in this global evidence review manifest within specific political, institutional, and security contexts. These studies will explore where the relationships between democratic governance and security outcomes are particularly consequential, and how they interact with regional threat environments, political institutions, and geopolitical pressures. Building on the empirical patterns identified here, the regional analyses will focus in particular on the implications for effective security and democracy policy, examining how democratic institutions can strengthen resilience in different contexts while also identifying the institutional vulnerabilities that may emerge under sustained security pressures.

METHODOLOGY

The approach taken in this review is explicitly empirical, comparative, and mechanism-focused. It draws on a structured synthesis of high-quality, cross-national quantitative studies, quasi-experimental analyses, panel datasets, and experimental research where available. The underlying evidence base spans a wide temporal range, from long-run historical panel data beginning in the early 19th century to contemporary studies using data from the 2010s and 2020s, with the majority of analyses drawing on post-1945 and especially post-1960 cross-national datasets. The objective is not to assemble illustrative examples, but to identify recurring empirical patterns. Across domains, the review examines whether findings converge when tested using alternative datasets, time periods, and measurement strategies.

The review prioritises peer-reviewed academic research and does not systematically include grey literature. This reflects a focus on studies that provide transparent methods, replicable data, and clearly specified empirical strategies, which are necessary for assessing robustness across datasets, timeframes, and measurement approaches. While policy reports and other grey literature can offer valuable contextual insights, they often rely on case-based evidence or lack sufficient methodological detail to support systematic comparative analysis and consistent evaluation of causal claims.

Evidence is assessed separately for (1) the impact of democratic processes and institutions on security outcomes and (2) the impact of security pressures on democratic governance. To capture these relationships more precisely, the review disaggregates both democracy and security into their component dimensions rather than relying solely on aggregate regime or security indices.

Democracy is examined through specific institutional and societal features, including the rule of law, judicial independence (both de jure and de facto), legislative oversight, media freedom, accountability mechanisms, civil-military relations, political participation, inclusion, and gender equality.

Security is treated as a multi-dimensional concept encompassing internal conflict and political violence, state repression, terrorism, interstate hostility, cyber operations, hybrid interference, crisis governance, and broader dimensions of human and societal security such as social cohesion, gender-based violence, and environmental security.

This disaggregation allows for a more precise identification of the institutional and societal mechanisms linking democracy and security and helps avoid overgeneralisation from broad regime categories.

Causal inference:

The review distinguishes between different levels of causal inference across the studies included in the evidence base. Experimental studies are treated as providing the highest level of internal validity, although such designs are rare in research on macro-institutional and cross-national political phenomena. Where relevant, experimental studies conducted within individual country contexts are included because they can provide insights into behavioural mechanisms. Quasi-experimental designs, such as natural experiments, instrumental variable approaches, and difference-in-differences analyses, are treated as providing the second-highest level of causal inference. Panel analyses with fixed effects are used to identify recurring cross-national patterns while accounting for country-specific characteristics over time, though they cannot fully eliminate concerns about omitted variables or simultaneity. Purely observational cross-national correlations are included where theoretically relevant but are not interpreted as causal without supporting theoretical justification. Where the direction of causality remains uncertain, this uncertainty is explicitly acknowledged.

Evidence Grading Framework

Evidence Type	Research Design	Strength of Causal Inference	Key Strengths	Main Limitations	Treatment in This Review
Experimental studies, Systematic Reviews, Meta Analysis	Randomised controlled experiments (including lab, survey, and field experiments), systematic reviews, and meta-analyses of experimental evidence	High	Strongest identification of causal mechanisms; isolates behavioural responses to specific treatments	Rare for macro-institutional and cross-national questions; limited external validity	Treated as strongest causal evidence where available; primarily used to identify behavioural mechanisms
Quasi-experimental studies	Natural experiments, difference-in-differences, instrumental variables, regression discontinuity	Moderate-High	Addresses endogeneity; approximates experimental conditions using real-world variation	Dependent on assumptions about identification strategy; context-specific	Given substantial evidentiary weight when identification strategy credibly addresses reverse causality
Panel analyses with fixed effects	Cross-national or longitudinal panel models controlling for unit and time effects	Moderate	Controls for unobserved heterogeneity; captures temporal dynamics across countries	Cannot fully eliminate omitted variable bias or simultaneity	Used to identify robust cross-national patterns and conditional relationships
Observational cross-national analyses	Cross-sectional regression; correlational comparative studies	Low-Moderate	Broad coverage across countries and long time periods; useful for pattern detection	Vulnerable to endogeneity and reverse causality	Included where theoretically grounded and supported by converging evidence; not interpreted as causal on their own

Assessment of Evidence Strength:

Studies included in the review are first assessed individually according to the evidentiary framework outlined above, with detailed results presented in the evidence tables in Annex A, and then considered collectively when evaluating the strength of evidence for specific relationships examined in the review. Rather than relying on single studies, the analysis focuses on patterns across the body of literature, examining whether

findings converge across different datasets, research designs, time periods, and measurement strategies. The strength of evidence for each domain is therefore determined by the cumulative weight of available research, including the number of studies addressing the relationship, the methodological rigour of those studies, and the degree of consistency in their findings.

HOW DEMOCRACY FUNCTIONS AS A SECURITY ASSET: WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

This part of the review examines whether and how democratic institutions and processes influence security outcomes. The analysis focuses on identifying recurring patterns across cross-national quantitative studies, quasi-experimental research designs, and comparative analyses in order to

evaluate the strength and consistency of the evidence linking democratic governance to security outcomes.

1. Internal Political Violence and Conflict Dynamics

Headline finding:

Consolidated democratic institutions are associated with lower risks of civil war onset and more constrained and less violent conflict dynamics, particularly compared to hybrid or weakly institutionalised regimes.

Strength of evidence: Strong

A large body of comparative conflict research examines whether democratic political institutions influence the risk and trajectory of organised political violence. Across datasets, modelling strategies, and historical periods, the cumulative finding is not that democracy universally prevents internal conflict and violence, but that consolidated democratic systems are systematically associated with lower risks of civil war onset than regimes characterised by institutional incoherence or restricted political participation. One of the most consistently replicated findings in comparative conflict research is a curvilinear relationship between regime type and conflict risk. Fully institutionalised democracies exhibit significantly lower probabilities of civil war, whereas intermediate regimes combining partial political openness with weak institutional constraints face the highest instability (Hegre et al. 2001; Vreeland 2008). Political liberalisation without accompanying institutional consolidation can increase uncertainty over power distribution, intensify elite competition, and weaken credible guarantees of political survival, thereby raising incentives for violent contestation.

The stabilising association between democratic governance and internal security appears to operate primarily through institutional mechanisms rather than normative restraint, though the latter also plays an important role. Electoral competition and representative institutions structure political contestation by providing predictable and, in principle, non-violent procedures for leadership turnover and policy bargaining, thereby reducing incentives for elites and organised groups to pursue extra-institutional strategies such as armed mobilisation (Reynal-Querol 2002; Hegre et al. 2001).

“Democracy reduces violence not by eliminating grievances, but by institutionalising how conflict is managed”.

A closely related strand of research emphasises the role of political inclusion in mitigating conflict risk, particularly in ethnically divided societies. Analyses drawing on the Ethnic Power Relations dataset show that politically excluded ethnic groups are significantly more likely to initiate rebellion, while democratic institutional arrangements that expand access to executive power reduce exclusion over time and create institutional arenas for bargaining and representation (Cederman, Wimmer and Min 2010; Cederman, Hug and Krebs 2010). In this sense, democracy contributes to internal security less by eliminating underlying grievances than by transforming how those grievances are expressed and managed within the political system.

Evidence also indicates that democratic governance influences how conflicts evolve once violence begins. Democratic institutions tend to raise the political costs of sustained warfare through electoral accountability, opposition scrutiny, and reputational

pressures, encouraging leaders to pursue mediation and negotiated settlement rather than prolonged escalation (DeRouen and Sobek 2004). Cross-national analyses show that conflicts occurring in democratic contexts are associated with shorter duration and reduced risks of renewed violence following settlement, partly because participatory political systems provide former combatants with legal pathways to pursue influence after fighting ends (DeRouen and Sobek 2004, Joshi and Mason 2011). Democratic governance therefore contributes not only to lowering the probability of large-scale conflict but also to shaping how conflicts unfold when they occur, making violence more likely to remain bounded in duration and intensity while preserving routes back to political competition.

At the same time, the literature highlights an important qualification: the security benefits of democratic governance depend heavily on institutional capacity. Studies of civil war onset identify state capacity, particularly administrative reach and coercive capability, as one of the strongest predictors of conflict risk (Fearon and Laitin 2003). Democratic institutions appear to enhance stability most clearly when embedded within capable state structures able to administer territory and enforce authority. Weakly institutionalised democratisation alone does not guarantee stability, and in contexts where state authority is limited, political liberalisation may temporarily increase instability until institutional rules become established and widely accepted. Overall, the cross-comparative evidence suggests that democracy contributes to internal security primarily by structuring political competition through predictable institutional rules, inclusive representation, and lawful dispute resolution, reducing incentives for violent contestation while facilitating negotiated pathways for managing conflict.

2. State Coercion, Repression, and Civil-Military Stability

Headline finding:

Comparative research consistently finds that democratic institutions and processes are associated with lower levels of state repression and more stable civil-military relations, primarily because accountability and oversight mechanisms constrain the use of coercive power.

Strength of evidence: Strong

A substantial body of cross-national research examines whether democratic institutions influence how states deploy coercive power against their own populations. Across diverse datasets, measurement strategies, and modelling approaches, the cumulative empirical finding is consistent: higher levels of democracy are associated with lower levels of state repression, particularly violations of physical integrity rights such as torture, political imprisonment, and extrajudicial killing (Poe and Tate 1994; Poe, Tate and Keith 1999; Davenport and Armstrong 2004; Davenport 2007). Democratic systems do not eliminate coercion, as governments retain security institutions and may employ force in response to internal threats. The difference lies in how coercive authority is governed and in what it is used for. Competitive elections, opposition activity, and open media increase the political costs associated with indiscriminate repression by exposing abuses and enabling political sanction against leaders who rely excessively on coercive force. These institutional constraints limit executive discretion and create incentives to

rely on legal and procedural mechanisms rather than systematic violence to maintain political order.

“Democracy constrains coercive power by embedding it within systems of oversight and accountability”.

Subsequent research refines this relationship by showing that what influences the degree of repression is not simply whether a government is formally democratic, but whether it constitutes a consolidated democracy. Statistical analyses indicate that only consolidated democracies consistently display lower levels of physical integrity violations, whereas hybrid or partially liberalised regimes do not reliably exhibit similar restraint (Davenport and Armstrong 2004). Synthetic assessments of the repression literature likewise conclude that democracies repress less on average because accountability mechanisms increase the political risks associated with coercive rule (Davenport 2007). Institutional design also appears to shape leaders’ incentives to protect human rights. Electoral rules and constitutional arrangements affecting executive accountability influence the protection of physical integrity rights by shaping expectations about monitoring and sanctioning by voters, legislatures, and courts (Cingranelli and Filippov 2010). Overall, the evidence suggests that democracy contributes to internal security not by eliminating coercive capacity but by embedding it within institutional frameworks that constrain arbitrary violence and increase the likelihood that abuses will be detected and punished.

The relationship between democratic governance and security also extends to the organisation of civil-military relations. Cross-national coup datasets show that coups occur significantly less frequently in institutionalised democratic regimes than in authoritarian or weakly institutionalised political systems (Powell and Thyne 2011). Where coups do occur, they are also less likely to succeed in democratic contexts, partly because electoral legitimacy and constitutional constraints raise the domestic and international costs of unconstitutional seizure of power (Marinov and Goemans 2014). Electoral turnover provides a lawful mechanism for leadership change, reducing the strategic rationale for military intervention in politics. These institutional features reshape the incentive environment facing military actors, making unconstitutional intervention less attractive and less viable.

Research on civil-military relations clarifies the mechanisms through which democratic governance supports stability. Professionalised armed forces operating within rule-bound institutional structures are less prone to political intervention, particularly where civilian authorities maintain effective oversight over promotions, doctrine, and defence governance (Belkin and Schofer 2003; Pilster and Böhmelt 2011). Civil-military scholarship conceptualises this dynamic as a principal-agent relationship in which civilian monitoring reduces the risk that military institutions pursue autonomous political agendas (Feaver 1999). Democratic institutional arrangements further reinforce these constraints by dispersing authority across multiple branches of government rather than concentrating power within personalised leadership structures (Croissant, Kuehn and Chambers 2013). By embedding coercive institutions within systems of constitutional authority, democratic governance reduces the likelihood that military organisations become independent political actors capable of destabilising political order.

3. Democratic Constraints on Interstate Escalation

Headline finding:

Democratic institutional arrangements strengthen interstate security by embedding decisions on the use of force within systems of scrutiny, accountability, and shared authority that raise the political costs of unnecessary escalation.

Strength of evidence: Moderate-Strong

A substantial body of comparative research examines how democratic institutional arrangements influence decisions to initiate and escalate interstate conflict. Building on the broader democratic peace literature, which finds that democracies are significantly less likely to engage in violent conflict with one another, this research moves beyond regime type comparisons to investigate how domestic political structures shape executive decision-making under conditions of crisis and uncertainty. Across cross-national and dyadic analyses, democratic systems are associated with higher procedural and political thresholds for the use of force (Reiter and Tillman 2002; Palmer, London and Regan 2004). Legislative oversight and active political opposition embed security decisions within systems of scrutiny and contestation, making rapid or unilateral escalation less likely (Howell and Pevehouse 2007; Dieterich, Hummel and Marschall 2015). Democratic institutions do not eliminate conflict behaviour, but they alter how leaders calculate risks by requiring broader political support for military action and by exposing security decisions to public debate.

One of the central mechanisms identified in this literature is the role of domestic political competition in revealing information during international crises. Research on coercive diplomacy shows that opposition actors in democratic systems can publicly challenge executive claims about threats or military necessity, thereby signalling domestic constraints to foreign adversaries and reducing incentives for bluffing or miscalculation (Schultz 1998; see also Prins 2003; Prins and Sprecher 1999). Political competition therefore functions as an information mechanism that encourages more cautious escalation strategies. When leaders must justify security policies to both domestic audiences and political rivals, they face greater scrutiny regarding the credibility of threats and the potential costs of military action, which can slow escalation and create additional opportunities for diplomatic bargaining.

“Democratic institutions raise the political costs of war by subjecting decisions on the use of force to scrutiny and accountability”

Evidence from studies of military intervention behaviour further supports the importance of institutional constraints in shaping external security policy. Cross-national analyses indicate that democratic leaders tend to exercise greater selectivity when initiating military conflicts and face higher political thresholds for the use of force (Reiter and Tillman 2002; Palmer, London and Regan 2004). Electoral accountability plays a central role in this dynamic. Leaders operating within democratic systems must anticipate the domestic political consequences of military failure, which increases the risks associated with poorly justified or unsuccessful military interventions. Legislative involvement in

authorising the use of force can further increase the political costs of escalation by requiring executives to secure approval from additional veto players before initiating military action (Howell and Pevehouse 2007; Dieterich, Hummel and Marschall 2015).

A related strand of research highlights how political institutions shape the incentives facing leaders themselves. Comparative studies show that leaders' decisions regarding war and peace are strongly influenced by the political environments in which they operate, with authoritarian leaders facing different constraints and incentives for risk-taking than their democratic counterparts (Weeks 2012). Research on leader characteristics similarly finds that individual traits such as prior experience can influence conflict behaviour, but that these effects are conditioned by broader institutional contexts that shape how leadership decisions translate into policy outcomes (Horowitz and Stam 2014).

Taken together, this literature suggests that democratic institutions influence interstate security behaviour not by eliminating geopolitical competition but by structuring the decision-making environments in which leaders operate. Political competition, legislative oversight, and public scrutiny raise the political costs associated with risky military behaviour and embed security decisions within broader processes of deliberation and accountability. Leadership behaviour therefore constitutes one of the channels through which democratic institutional constraints translate into observable security outcomes, shaping patterns of crisis escalation, conflict initiation, and the strategic use of military force.

4. Information Integrity and Political Polarisation

Headline finding:

Democratic institutions strengthen information resilience by enabling contestation, transparency, and institutional trust, limiting the security impact of information manipulation despite greater exposure to influence operations.

Strength of evidence: Moderate

A growing body of comparative research examines how democratic systems perform under conditions of information manipulation and foreign influence operations. Democracies are structurally more exposed to such activities because openness, civil liberties, and competitive elections create accessible entry points for external actors seeking to influence public debate. Open media systems allow rapid dissemination of information, while plural political competition increases the strategic value of shaping narratives and political agendas. Conceptual and empirical work therefore consistently identifies democratic societies as attractive targets for influence operations and coordinated disinformation campaigns (Bradshaw and Howard 2019; Whyte 2020). Exposure, however, does not automatically translate into systemic destabilisation.

Empirical research across multiple countries and platforms finds limited evidence that foreign disinformation produces large-scale persuasion or durable shifts in political attitudes.

“Plural media and political competition make information systems more resilient to manipulation”

Linked survey and social media data analyses show that exposure to foreign propaganda typically affects relatively small subsets of politically engaged users and remains marginal compared with the influence of domestic political communication (Bail et al. 2020; Eady et al. 2023). Large-scale systematic reviews similarly conclude that robust causal evidence for widespread persuasion effects remains limited, with disinformation campaigns more reliably affecting political attention, agenda-setting, and polarisation dynamics than deeply held beliefs (Lorenz-Spreen et al. 2023). These findings suggest that the primary risks posed by information manipulation lie less in wholesale opinion change than in the amplification of existing political divisions, increased distrust in institutions, and shifts in public attention that can intensify polarisation within democratic societies. Comparative research also indicates that vulnerability to misinformation depends heavily on social and cognitive factors rather than regime type alone. Cross-national measurement studies show substantial variation in susceptibility to misinformation across individuals and countries that cannot be explained simply by differences in democratic institutions (Maertens et al. 2024; Kyrychenko et al. 2025). Institutional trust emerges as a key mediating variable.

Comparative surveys find that lower levels of trust in democratic institutions are associated with greater willingness to share misleading information, while higher levels of institutional confidence correlate with more accurate information evaluation and reduced misinformation sharing (Humprecht et al. 2023; Hameleers, Brosius and de Vreese 2022). Behavioural evidence further suggests that belief in false information tends to be concentrated among politically engaged minorities rather than diffused across entire populations (Guess et al. 2020).

The relationship between democracy and information security is therefore characterised by a dual dynamic. Democratic openness increases exposure to manipulation attempts, but democratic institutions also generate important resilience mechanisms. Open media, plural political competition, and public scrutiny create environments in which misleading information can be contested and corrected. The stability of democratic information environments depends heavily on the credibility of institutions and the level of trust citizens place in them. When institutional legitimacy remains high, open public spheres can function as self-correcting systems in which competing sources of information limit the long-term influence of manipulation campaigns. In this sense, democracy does not eliminate informational threats but shapes how societies respond to them, balancing structural exposure with institutional resilience.

5. Cyber Conflict Behaviour and Cybersecurity Governance

Headline finding:

Democratic institutions shape patterns of cyber conflict by encouraging restraint and accountability in offensive operations, while cybersecurity capacity depends primarily on governance effectiveness and institutional capability rather than regime type alone.

Strength of evidence: Emerging-Moderate

Emerging research on cyber conflict extends the democracy–security relationship into domains characterised by persistent strategic competition below the threshold of conventional warfare. Cyber operations allow states to conduct espionage, signalling, and disruption without triggering open armed confrontation, making them a particularly revealing arena for examining how political institutions shape security behaviour. Comparative studies do not suggest that democracies abstain from cyber competition. Instead, the evidence indicates that democratic systems display distinct patterns in the initiation, targeting, and escalation of cyber operations that reflect institutional accountability, legal constraints, and reputational considerations. Cross-national quantitative analyses show that states with higher levels of political rights are less likely to initiate publicly observable cyberattacks, even after controlling for cyber capability and geopolitical context (Hunter, Albert and Garrett 2021). Panel analyses similarly find that democratic governance remains associated with lower probabilities of cyber initiation once differences in power, technological capacity, and external threat

environments are taken into account (Hunter et al. 2022).

Institutional constraints appear to shape cyber behaviour primarily by raising the political and legal costs of authorising offensive operations. Democratic governments typically operate within systems of bureaucratic oversight, legal review, and legislative scrutiny that increase the risk of political backlash if cyber operations produce unintended escalation or civilian harm. As a result, democratic states tend to employ cyber capabilities selectively and often favour limited operations designed for signalling, intelligence gathering, or disruption rather than large-scale destructive effects. Comparative analyses of global cyber incident datasets suggest that cyber operations are frequently structured to remain bounded and reversible, limiting escalation risks and maintaining plausible deniability (Valeriano, Jensen and Maness 2018). Research examining cyber activity during armed conflict likewise finds that cyber tools are often used to complement rather than escalate conventional operations, serving signalling and intelligence functions rather than triggering uncontrolled military confrontation (Lindsay 2013; Kostyuk and Zhukov 2019). Evidence at the dyadic level suggests that democratic restraint in cyberspace operates conditionally rather than universally. Democracies do conduct cyber operations, yet they rarely target other democracies, mirroring patterns observed in conventional democratic peace research and peace theories. Dyadic quantitative analyses identify significantly lower levels of cyber hostility between democratic pairs, while cyber competition remains directed primarily toward authoritarian or mixed-regime adversaries (Hunter et al. 2024; Geiger 2021). Democratic cyber behaviour also differs in the domain of attribution and public signalling. Decisions to publicly attribute cyber incidents are often shaped by domestic audience costs and reputational concerns, leading democratic governments to frame cyber

responses through legal narratives and coalition-building rather than relying exclusively on covert retaliation (Poznansky and Perkoski 2018).

“Cyber operations in democratic states are more likely to be politically constrained and strategically calibrated”

A related but analytically distinct literature examines whether democratic governance influences cybersecurity capacity itself. In contrast to cyber conflict behaviour, comparative evidence suggests that regime type alone is a weak predictor of national cyber resilience. Cross-national analyses consistently show that cybersecurity outcomes correlate more strongly with governance effectiveness, administrative coordination, regulatory coherence, and sustained investment in technical expertise than with democratic participation alone (Creese et al. 2021; Chen et al. 2023). Institutional stability and state capacity appear to be decisive factors shaping national cybersecurity preparedness, with both consolidated democracies and stable authoritarian systems often outperforming hybrid or weakly institutionalised regimes (Kleiner 2025). Studies of national cybersecurity strategy adoption likewise highlight the importance of international cooperation and institutional diffusion mechanisms, including membership in international organisations and participation in global governance networks (Kostyuk and Sidorova 2026). Cybersecurity therefore illustrates an important qualification within the democracy–security nexus: democratic institutions influence how cyber competition is conducted, but effective cyber resilience depends primarily on governance capability and institutional performance rather than regime type alone.

6. Crisis Response, Institutional Adaptation, and Long-Term Resilience

Headline finding:

Democratic institutions strengthen security by reducing the risk that crises escalate into large-scale instability, through greater transparency, politically incentivised response, and societal compliance.

Strength of evidence: Moderate

A substantial comparative literature examines how political institutions shape the ability of states to manage both acute shocks and slower-moving structural pressures that can generate security risks, including natural disasters, pandemics, environmental degradation, and resource scarcity. Across these domains, the most consistent finding is not that democracies prevent crises, but that they alter the pathways through which crises unfold. Democratic governance reduces the probability that emerging risks escalate into severe humanitarian or political breakdown by embedding political competition, public scrutiny, and institutionalised accountability into decision-making processes. These features shape how information about risks is generated and contested, how governments respond to emerging pressures, and how the political costs of inaction are distributed. In particular, democracies tend to operate in more transparent information environments, disclosing more economic and governance-relevant data and reducing incentives to conceal adverse developments (Hollyer, Rosendorff and Vreeland 2011; Williams 2015). Independent media and political opposition

further increase the visibility of emerging risks, making them more likely to become publicly salient at earlier stages, when intervention may still be feasible. While these dynamics do not guarantee early detection, they strengthen the informational basis for policy responses and increase the likelihood that emerging threats are subject to scrutiny and debate rather than suppressed or ignored.

These informational conditions translate into distinct political incentives for crisis response, particularly where failure to act produces visible human costs. Comparative evidence from disaster governance shows that democracies experience significantly lower mortality from natural disasters, even after controlling for income levels and geographic exposure (Kahn 2005), while research on famine demonstrates that no substantial famine has occurred in a functioning democracy, a pattern widely attributed to the interaction of electoral accountability and press freedom (Sen 1981; 1999). In these contexts, the causal mechanism lies in the political consequences of inaction: leaders subject to electoral competition face direct risks when crises become visible, while opposition actors and media institutions amplify failures of response. These pressures encourage earlier intervention, investment in mitigation and preparedness, and more effective mobilisation during crises (Keefer, Neumayer and Plümper 2011; Raschky 2008). Similar incentive structures operate in environmental governance. Democracies are more likely to participate in international environmental agreements and adopt climate-related policies, reflecting the influence of electoral incentives, public scrutiny, and organised civil society actors (Neumayer 2002; Bättig and Bernauer 2009). Political competition can increase the costs of environmental degradation, encouraging governments to adopt regulatory frameworks that address long-term risks even where short-term economic incentives favour

inaction (Fredriksson 2005). At the same time, the relationship between democracy and environmental outcomes remains conditional. While some studies identify associations between democracy and improvements in environmental quality, these effects vary according to pollutants, levels of development, and enforcement capacity (Li and Reuveny 2006; Bernauer and Koubi 2009). This variation reflects the complexity of environmental governance, which involves long time horizons, diffuse costs, and collective-action problems. Democratic institutions do not consistently produce superior environmental outcomes, but they shape the processes through which environmental risks are managed by facilitating regulatory adoption, sustaining public debate over trade-offs, and enabling policy adjustment over time.

A further mechanism operates through societal compliance and cooperation, which are critical for effective crisis management. Empirical evidence shows that higher levels of political trust are associated with greater voluntary compliance with government directives. Mobility data from Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that higher political trust is associated with stronger adherence to mobility restrictions (Bargain and Aminjonov 2020), while observational studies show that higher social trust is associated with stronger compliance with mitigation measures (Goldstein and Wiedemann 2021). These dynamics are directly relevant to both acute and long-term risks, including environmental governance, where mitigation and adaptation depend heavily on sustained public cooperation. Democratic legitimacy, by increasing trust in institutions and the perceived fairness of policy decisions, enhances governments' ability to mobilise such cooperation without relying exclusively on coercion. Evidence from

the COVID-19 pandemic further illustrates how democratic institutions shape crisis dynamics through transparency and accountability. Cross-national analyses show that democracies exhibited higher reported mortality in the early stages of the pandemic, partly due to more transparent reporting and differences in exposure and policy timing (Cepaluni, Dorsch and Branyiczki 2020), while differences in reported mortality between regime types are partly driven by underreporting in less democratic systems (Annaka 2021). Early cross-national analyses based on first-wave data found no consistent regime-type advantage in pandemic containment effectiveness (Cheibub, Hong and Przeworski 2020), while later cross-national studies using excess mortality similarly find that differences between regime types are limited and strongly mediated by reporting practices and state capacity (Annaka 2021). Some evidence further indicates that democratic accountability may be associated with lower mortality when accounting for reporting differences and broader measures of mortality, reflecting the role of public scrutiny in encouraging policy adjustment over time (Frey, Chen and Presidente 2020).

Overall, the comparative evidence indicates that democratic governance contributes to security primarily by reshaping how crises, both sudden and slow-moving, are managed over time. Democratic institutions increase the likelihood that emerging risks become visible, that governments face incentives to respond, and that societies comply with measures required to mitigate harm. They also enable policy correction and institutional adjustment, reducing the probability that initial failures escalate into systemic instability. The security advantages of democracy therefore lie less in preventing shocks altogether than in strengthening the capacity of political systems to manage, absorb, and adapt to crises without triggering large-scale humanitarian or political breakdown.

7. Gender, Democracy, and Security

Headline finding:

Democratic institutions strengthen institutional responses to violence against women, while higher gender equality tends to coincide with broader societal stability and lower levels of conflict, though the latter relationship appears correlational rather than causal.

7.1 Democratic institutions and women's safety

Strength of evidence: Moderate

Comparative research suggests that democratic governance is associated with stronger institutional responses to violence against women and greater policy attention to threats affecting women's safety. Cross-national analyses show that democratic states are more likely to adopt legislation addressing domestic violence, sexual violence, and other forms of gender-based violence, as well as institutional mechanisms designed to support victims and prosecute perpetrators (Htun and Weldon 2012; Donno and Kreft 2019).

These patterns reflect broader institutional features of democratic political systems, including electoral accountability, media scrutiny, and the presence of active civil society organisations capable of mobilising public attention around violence and discrimination. Open political systems also create opportunities for advocacy groups and women's movements to influence policy agendas and demand institutional reform,

increasing the likelihood that violence against women becomes a recognised public policy issue rather than remaining invisible or unaddressed.

"Open political systems make violence against women visible and politically actionable"

The mechanisms linking democracy to women's safety therefore operate primarily through political responsiveness and institutional openness. Competitive elections increase incentives for governments to respond to social concerns, while open media can expose abuses and amplify public debate about violence against women. Comparative research shows that organised women's movements play a particularly important role in shaping policy responses to gender-based violence, often acting as catalysts for legislative reform and institutional change (Htun and Weldon 2012). Democratic political systems facilitate this mobilisation by providing legal protections for association, freedom of expression, and participation in public debate. Although democratic institutions do not automatically eliminate violence against women and substantial variation exists across democratic countries, the evidence indicates that democratic governance increases the likelihood that such violence is recognised, reported, and addressed through formal institutional responses.

7.2 Gender equality and broader security outcomes

Strength of evidence: Moderate

A separate strand of research examines whether broader patterns of gender equality across societies are associated with political stability and security outcomes. Cross-national statistical analyses frequently identify correlations between higher levels of gender equality and lower levels of armed conflict, militarised disputes, and political violence (Caprioli 2005; Caprioli and Boyer 2001). Large comparative datasets analysing women's status across countries similarly find that societies characterised by high levels of gender inequality are more likely to experience state fragility, authoritarian governance, and internal instability (Hudson et al. 2012). These studies typically measure gender equality through indicators such as women's access to education, economic participation, legal rights, and protection from violence, using these variables to capture broader patterns of inclusion and social hierarchy within societies.

"Gender equality often signals deeper institutional patterns linked to stability"

Most scholars interpret these findings not as evidence that gender equality itself produces peace or democratic governance, but rather as reflecting deeper institutional and social dynamics that influence both gender relations and security outcomes. Societies that systematically exclude women from political and economic life often exhibit broader patterns of hierarchical authority, weak legal institutions, and greater tolerance for violence as a means of resolving disputes. Conversely, societies characterised by higher levels of

gender equality tend to display institutional features associated with democratic governance, including stronger rule-of-law institutions, greater social inclusion, and more extensive constraints on arbitrary power. Within the democracy–security nexus, gender equality therefore functions primarily as a structural indicator of inclusive and rule-based governance that tends to coincide with more stable and peaceful political systems rather than as an independent causal driver of security outcomes.

8. Citizen-to-Citizen Trust and Social Cohesion

Headline finding:

Citizen-to-citizen trust supports democratic stability and reduces violence, though its effects depend on whether trust is inclusive or group-bounded.

Strength of evidence: Low- Moderate

Comparative institutional research shows that higher levels of interpersonal trust are closely linked to the presence of impartial, high-quality institutions and low levels of corruption, while broader theoretical and comparative work highlights the importance of equality and perceived fairness in fostering generalised trust across society (Rothstein and Stolle 2008; Uslaner 2002). These findings suggest that interpersonal trust is not simply a stable cultural trait, but is shaped by how political and social systems enforce rules and treat citizens. Where institutions are perceived as impartial and predictable, individuals are more likely to expect that others will also comply with shared rules, reducing the perceived risks associated with cooperation. Similarly, where social and economic inequalities are less pronounced, individuals are more likely to extend trust beyond narrow networks defined by family, ethnicity, or other forms of group identity. In this sense, interpersonal trust emerges from a broader institutional and social equilibrium in which fairness, predictability, and inclusion reinforce expectations of cooperative behaviour. This has direct implications for democratic governance, as these same institutional characteristics — impartiality,

rule of law, and inclusiveness — are central to the functioning of effective democratic systems, even if they are not exclusive to them.

“Broad social trust lowers incentives for violence by strengthening expectations of cooperation”

A growing body of comparative research examines how such trust shapes political stability and security outcomes by influencing incentives for cooperation and violence. Cross-national statistical analyses show that societies characterised by higher levels of interpersonal trust tend to exhibit lower rates of violent crime, even when controlling for economic and institutional variables (Lederman, Loayza and Menéndez 2002), while survey evidence indicates that individuals with higher levels of trust are less likely to support or justify political violence (Alcorta, Smits and Swedlund 2020). These patterns suggest that trust operates as an informal mechanism of social regulation that complements formal institutions by reducing uncertainty about others’ behaviour and lowering incentives for opportunistic or coercive action. In low-trust environments, individuals may anticipate exploitation or non-compliance by others, increasing the perceived benefits of pre-emptive or defensive behaviour, including violence. By contrast, in high-trust environments, shared expectations of rule-following behaviour make cooperation more stable and reduce the need for coercive enforcement. This dynamic is particularly relevant for security governance, as it shapes whether social order can be maintained primarily through voluntary compliance and mutual expectations or requires more extensive reliance on coercive capacity.

A central strand of the literature further links interpersonal trust to democratic attitudes and the functioning of democratic institutions, highlighting its role in sustaining rule-based political systems. Comparative survey research finds that higher levels of interpersonal trust are associated with stronger support for democratic norms and greater acceptance of democratic procedures, including electoral outcomes and institutional constraints on power (Zmerli and Newton 2008). When citizens believe that others are likely to respect shared rules, they are more willing to accept political decisions even when outcomes are unfavourable, reducing incentives for extra-institutional contestation or destabilising behaviour. In this sense, interpersonal trust reinforces the normative foundations of democratic governance by supporting compliance with collectively agreed rules and facilitating cooperation across political and social divisions. It also lowers the transaction costs of political interaction by making it more likely that agreements will be honoured and that conflicts can be managed within institutional frameworks rather than through confrontation or coercion.

At the same time, the relationship between democracy and interpersonal trust remains indirect and conditional rather than automatic. The evidence suggests that trust is more consistently associated with institutional quality, perceived fairness, and social inclusion than with regime type alone (Rothstein and Stolle 2008; Uslaner 2002). Democratic systems are more likely to sustain higher levels of interpersonal trust where they deliver impartial governance, uphold the rule of law, and maintain relatively inclusive social arrangements, but they do not generate trust in the absence of these conditions. This distinction is important for the democracy–security nexus. It implies that trust should be understood as a mediating factor that can strengthen the stabilising effects of democratic institutions when those institutions function effectively, rather than as

a direct product of democratic rule. In contexts where democratic institutions are weak, politicised, or perceived as unfair, levels of interpersonal trust may remain low despite the presence of formal democratic structures, limiting the cooperative benefits typically associated with high-trust societies (Zmerli and Newton 2008).

Overall, the comparative literature indicates that interpersonal trust constitutes an important social dimension of the relationship between democracy and security, but one that operates through indirect and conditional pathways. High levels of trust support stability by reinforcing cooperative norms, reducing incentives for violence, and strengthening the social foundations on which rule-based governance depends. However, these effects are not uniform. Trust contributes most strongly to stability when it is broadly distributed across society and underpinned by institutional fairness and social inclusion, rather than confined to narrower networks or undermined by inequality and perceived injustice. Democratic systems appear most resilient when they are able to sustain these underlying conditions, allowing interpersonal trust to function as a complementary form of social capacity that supports both security and democratic stability

9. Economic Inequality, Social Justice, and Institutional Trust

Headline finding:

Democratic institutions can be associated with lower levels of extreme economic inequality and stronger perceptions of distributive fairness, conditions that contribute to institutional trust and political stability.

Strength of evidence: Moderate

Comparative political economy research has long examined whether democratic institutions influence patterns of economic inequality. Some studies suggest that democratic systems, particularly those with competitive elections and representative institutions, tend to generate incentives for governments to adopt redistributive policies or invest in broadly distributed public goods (Ross 2006; Lindert 2004). Electoral competition encourages political leaders to respond to the preferences of wider constituencies rather than narrow elites, potentially strengthening perceptions of fairness within society. At the same time, the empirical relationship between democracy and inequality is not uniform across countries or historical periods. Institutional design, welfare state development, and economic structure all shape how democratic politics influences economic distribution. Comparative research shows, for example, that democracies with proportional representation systems tend to redistribute more than those with majoritarian systems (Iversen and Soskice 2006), while historical analyses indicate that major expansions in redistribution have often been driven by mass mobilisation rather than democracy alone

(Scheve and Stasavage 2009). Other work suggests that democratisation itself does not necessarily lead to redistribution, as it may reflect shifts in elite competition rather than broad-based demands for equality (Ansell and Samuels 2014). More broadly, the relationship between democracy and redistribution depends on political coalitions and institutional context, rather than regime type alone (Haggard and Kaufman 2008). The literature therefore suggests that democracy can contribute to more inclusive economic outcomes under certain institutional and policy conditions, but democratic governance does not automatically eliminate inequality.

“Electoral competition encourages political leaders to respond to the preferences of wider constituencies, rather than narrow elites”

A second and more consistent strand of research examines how economic inequality affects citizens' attitudes toward democratic institutions. Cross-national survey analyses show that lower levels of income inequality are associated with stronger public support for democracy and higher confidence in representative institutions (Andersen 2012). Panel analyses of European democracies similarly find that rising inequality is associated with declining trust in national governments and political institutions (Palmisano et al. 2024), while longitudinal research suggests that both persistent inequality and increases in inequality over time weaken trust in representative institutions (Bienstman 2023). These findings indicate that citizens often interpret unequal economic outcomes as evidence of institutional unfairness or policy failure, linking distributive outcomes directly to perceptions of institutional legitimacy. Research on political behaviour further highlights the importance of perceived distributive fairness in shaping these dynamics.

Comparative survey studies show that citizens' perceptions of fairness mediate the relationship between inequality and institutional trust (Bobzien 2023). When economic outcomes are perceived as procedurally fair or justified, inequality has weaker effects on political confidence. Conversely, when inequality is interpreted as evidence that political institutions favour particular groups or fail to represent the broader population, trust in democratic governance declines. These perceptions can influence political behaviour by weakening citizens' confidence in the legitimacy of democratic institutions and increasing openness to anti-system political movements.

Evidence also suggests that economic insecurity and perceived unfairness can contribute to political polarisation and support for actors who challenge democratic institutions. Comparative analyses indicate that citizens experiencing economic vulnerability report lower levels of trust in government and are more likely to support populist or anti-system parties (Ivanov 2023). These dynamics do not automatically translate into political instability, but they can erode the institutional trust on which democratic governance depends.

The comparative literature therefore indicates that economic equality and perceptions of social justice form part of the broader institutional environment in which democratic security operates. Democratic institutions may contribute to more inclusive economic outcomes in some contexts, but their most consistent contribution lies in sustaining institutional legitimacy. Where economic systems are widely perceived as fair and inclusive, citizens are more likely to trust democratic institutions and support democratic governance. These conditions strengthen the political stability and cooperative norms that enable democratic systems to manage crises and security challenges effectively.

CONCLUSION

A central question underlying this review is whether democracy promotion should be understood only as a normative political objective or also as a factor with strategic relevance for security policy. The comparative literature reviewed across the preceding chapters suggests that democratic governance can be understood as a structural security asset. Democracies do not eliminate conflict, geopolitical rivalry, or societal instability. However, the cumulative evidence across multiple research traditions indicates that democratic institutions are associated with lower risks of several forms of insecurity. Rather than preventing conflict altogether, democratic governance influences how political competition, coercive power, and societal grievances are managed. By embedding political contestation within institutional rules, constraining the discretionary use of force, and enabling mechanisms of accountability and adaptation, democratic systems tend to reduce the likelihood that political tensions escalate into sustained violence or systemic instability. In this sense, democratic governance shapes the structural conditions under which insecurity emerges and the institutional pathways through which societies respond to it.

Key Institutional Mechanisms Linking Democratic Governance to Security

Across the domains examined in this review, the relationship between democracy and security operates through a set of recurring institutional and societal mechanisms.

Accountability and oversight. Democratic institutions subject the use of political and coercive power to scrutiny by legislatures, courts, media, and voters. These mechanisms raise the political costs of repression, military adventurism, and policy failure.

Institutionalised political competition. Regular elections and predictable procedures for leadership turnover provide non-violent channels for political contestation, reducing incentives for coups, rebellion, or other extra-institutional struggles for power.

Inclusive political representation. Representative institutions create arenas through which diverse social groups can articulate grievances and negotiate policy outcomes, reducing the likelihood that excluded groups resort to violent mobilisation.

Transparency and open information environments. Open media and open information systems improve early detection of crises and expose policy failures, strengthening governments' ability to respond before risks escalate.

Public debate and policy contestation. Plural political competition allows policies and threat assessments to be challenged and scrutinised, reducing the likelihood of miscalculation and poorly justified escalation.

Institutional trust and legitimacy. When political institutions are perceived as fair and responsive, citizens are more likely to comply with policies and cooperate in managing collective security challenges.

Social trust and cooperative norms.

Higher levels of trust among citizens strengthen cooperation and reduce incentives for violence, contributing to societal resilience during crises.

Adaptive governance and institutional learning. Democratic systems embed feedback mechanisms — such as investigative institutions, opposition scrutiny, and electoral accountability — that enable governments to revise policies and adapt to new risks.

Institutionalised management of structural pressures. Representative institutions provide arenas for negotiating the distributional consequences of economic shocks, environmental pressures, and social change, reducing the likelihood that these pressures escalate into political instability.

Together, these mechanisms illustrate that democratic governance contributes to security through institutional arrangements that structure political competition, constrain the use of force, and enable societies to manage conflict and crisis without systemic breakdown.

PART 2

HOW SECURITY PRESSURES RESHAPE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS : WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

While the preceding chapter examined how democratic institutions and political processes influence security outcomes, this chapter approaches the relationship from the opposite direction. In particular, the chapter reviews the empirical literature on how security threats, processes of securitisation, and the expansion of military and security institutions influence democratic governance. The analysis focuses on whether and how these dynamics shape political preferences, patterns of political competition, institutional balances of power, and the broader quality of democratic institutions.

In examining these dynamics, the review distinguishes between two closely related processes: militarisation and securitisation. Militarisation refers to the expansion of military institutions, capabilities, and organisational influence within state governance and public policy, including increased defence spending, the growth of force structures, and a greater role for security actors in political decision-making. Securitisation, by contrast, describes a political and discursive process through which policy issues are framed as existential security threats, legitimising exceptional measures such as accelerated decision-making, expanded executive authority, and the prioritisation of security considerations across policy domains. While militarisation captures material and institutional shifts toward greater reliance on military instruments, securitisation operates primarily through political framing that redefines policy challenges as matters of security rather than routine political debate (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998; Balzacq 2011).

1. Democratic Preferences Under Threat

Headline finding:

Perceived insecurity shifts democratic preferences toward stronger executive leadership, more restrictive security policies, and greater acceptance of limits on civil liberties by shaping both policy preferences and the cognitive and emotional processes through which democratic judgement is formed.

Strength of evidence: Strong

A large and methodologically diverse body of research shows that perceived security threats systematically reshape democratic preferences. Across survey analyses, experimental studies, quasi-experimental designs, and comparative research, the consistent finding is not that citizens abandon democracy as a regime ideal, but that insecurity alters the balance they strike between liberty and protection. Under conditions of perceived threat, publics in democracies tend to place greater weight on order and the state's protective capacity, while showing greater openness to restrictive security measures and reduced procedural restraint. This pattern appears across different democratic settings and threat types, including terrorism, political violence, and heightened perceptions of insecurity, suggesting that the effect is not limited to a single country context or institutional setting. The evidence therefore indicates that security pressure can reshape democratic preferences from within, not by generating outright rejection of democratic rule, but by shifting the criteria through which citizens evaluate

leaders and acceptable trade-offs within democratic systems. The strongest evidence in this area comes from political psychology and experimental research, which provides unusually direct insight into the mechanisms through which insecurity affects democratic attitudes. Studies in the United States show that higher perceived terrorism risk is associated with greater willingness to trade civil liberties for security, particularly where trust in government remains high (Davis & Silver 2004).

Experimental work similarly finds that threat exposure increases support for decisive leadership and security-oriented responses, while anxiety and fear alter how citizens assess risks and policy alternatives (Huddy et al. 2005; Merolla & Zechmeister 2009). Subsequent studies refine this picture further by showing that threat does not simply activate pre-existing authoritarian preferences in a mechanical way. Rather, anxiety often changes how citizens process information, increases reliance on elite cues, and encourages heightened attention to questions of protection and vulnerability (Gadarian 2010; Gadarian & Albertson 2014). Research also suggests that individuals who are not normally predisposed toward authoritarian responses may become more supportive of restrictive or order-oriented policies under perceived threat, while those already inclined toward hierarchy and order show less movement because their baseline preferences are already more security-oriented (Hetherington & Suhay 2011). The democratic significance of this literature lies in showing that insecurity affects not only policy preferences but the cognitive and emotional processes through which democratic judgement is formed.

Comparative evidence indicates that these dynamics are not confined to the United States. Studies in Europe show similar shifts in preferences following terrorist attacks and periods of heightened insecurity. In France, major attacks were followed by increased

support for stronger security measures and greater valuation of leadership authority (Brouard, Vasilopoulos & Foucault 2018), while cross-national survey evidence from several European democracies finds that terrorism threat perception is associated with stronger backing for restrictive counterterrorism policies (Kossowska et al. 2011). Other studies highlight the importance of emotional pathways, showing that fear and anger generated by terrorism can intensify support for harder-line political actors and polarised political positions (Vasilopoulos, Marcus & Foucault 2019). At the same time, the literature also points to important limits. Insecurity does not always produce direct or durable support for every illiberal measure. Quasi-experimental research in Western Europe suggests that threat perception may rise without automatically generating sustained support for restrictive policy change (Finseraas & Listhaug 2013).

“Threat environments change what citizens expect from democracy”

Similarly, some attacks produce short-term “rally” effects that increase trust in governing institutions rather than immediate democratic rejection (Dinesen & Jæger 2013). These qualifications matter because they suggest that the effect of insecurity is not a simple or uniform authoritarian backlash. What appears more robust is a broader recalibration of democratic priorities: citizens become more attentive to protection, more accepting of strong leadership, and more willing to tolerate exceptional measures when they perceive the threat environment to be acute.

The wider implication is that insecurity tends to influence democratic outcomes not primarily through abrupt rejection of democratic institutions, but through more gradual shifts in what citizens expect

democratic governance to deliver. As security becomes more salient, democratic legitimacy itself can become more closely tied to perceived competence in protection and threat management. This reorientation may then create political conditions in which expanded executive authority, stronger security legislation, and reduced tolerance for procedural constraints emerge with democratic consent rather than coercive imposition. In this sense, threat environments do not usually undermine democracy by displacing democratic politics altogether. They do so by changing the weight democratic publics assign to liberty, restraint, and accountability relative to order, authority, and security. The evidence base in this domain is comparatively strong because it combines experimental evidence on mechanisms with cross-national and quasi-experimental studies showing that these shifts can extend into voting behaviour, institutional trust, and support for security-oriented governance.

2. The Securitisation of Democratic Competition

Headline finding:

Security crises and perceived insecurity reshape democratic competition by increasing the electoral salience of protection, national resilience, and decisive leadership, strengthening actors who frame politics in terms of threat and security.

Strength of evidence: Moderate-Strong

A substantial body of comparative political research indicates that insecurity affects democratic systems not only through shifts in individual preferences but also by altering the competitive logic of democratic politics. Rather than suspending democratic institutions, threat environments tend to reorient electoral competition around security, protection, and national resilience. In these contexts, political legitimacy becomes more closely associated with the capacity to defend the nation, manage threats, and maintain order. Political actors therefore increasingly frame policy debates through the language of security, sovereignty, and identity defence. The empirical literature suggests that such securitisation does not necessarily undermine democratic procedures directly; instead, it reshapes the incentives within which democratic competition operates, gradually changing what voters expect from political leaders and what strategies parties adopt to remain electorally competitive.

Research on populist and radical-right parties provides one of the clearest illustrations of this dynamic. Comparative studies show that these parties frequently mobilise narratives

centred on national threat, cultural insecurity, and the need for stronger authority, often combining nativist identity claims with law-and-order or protection-oriented policy platforms (Mudde 2007). Cross-national survey evidence similarly finds that perceptions of cultural threat and status loss among majority populations are strongly associated with support for authoritarian-populist actors in democratic systems (Norris & Inglehart 2019). These findings suggest that insecurity can shift the evaluative standards through which voters judge political actors. Rather than prioritising procedural competence, policy expertise, or coalition-building capacity, voters in threat environments may increasingly reward leaders who emphasise strength, protection, and decisiveness. Economic and structural crises appear to reinforce these dynamics.

“Security framing can quietly redefine the terms of democratic competition”

Long-run historical panel analyses covering advanced economies since the late nineteenth century show that severe financial crises are systematically followed by electoral gains for extremist and populist parties, particularly on the far right (Funke, Schularick & Trebesch 2016). Cross-country econometric studies likewise find that economic insecurity combined with declining trust in mainstream political parties increases support for anti-establishment or populist movements (Guiso et al. 2017). Research examining the local political effects of globalisation shocks shows similar patterns: regions exposed to intensified import competition have experienced increased electoral support for nationalist and radical-right parties (Colantone & Stanig 2018). Although these studies examine economic rather than purely

military threats, they demonstrate how perceived vulnerability and insecurity can reshape democratic competition by increasing the political attractiveness of actors who promise protection from external disruption.

A complementary strand of research focuses on the strategic behaviour of political actors themselves. Qualitative comparative work on populist political communication shows that leaders frequently construct crisis narratives that portray politics as an existential struggle between “the people” and threatening elites or outsiders (Moffitt 2015). Such narratives can transform routine policy disagreements into moralised conflicts over national survival, thereby raising the political rewards associated with strong leadership and uncompromising positions. When these frames resonate with voter anxieties about security or identity, they can alter the strategic incentives facing other political actors. Mainstream parties may adopt similar rhetoric or policy positions in order to remain electorally competitive, gradually shifting the overall discourse of democratic politics toward protection, sovereignty, and security.

The literature therefore suggests that securitisation often affects democracy upstream of formal institutional change. Constitutional rules and electoral procedures may remain intact, yet the competitive environment in which they operate evolves as security narratives become electorally advantageous. Political success becomes increasingly linked to perceived capacity to defend the nation or restore control in uncertain environments. Over time, this transformation can narrow the space for pluralist and procedural appeals, as compromise and institutional restraint risk being portrayed as weakness in the face of threat. Democratic competition thus becomes more strongly organised around claims of protection and authority. Insecurity does not eliminate democratic politics, but it can recalibrate the standards through which political actors gain legitimacy, gradually shifting the centre of democratic competition toward securitised narratives of leadership and national resilience.

3. Executive Expansion and the Normalisation of Exceptional Governance

Headline finding:

Security threats often lead to the gradual expansion of executive authority within democratic systems through legally embedded emergency powers, counterterror legislation, and exceptional governance frameworks.

Strength of evidence: Moderate

A substantial body of comparative research examines how security threats reshape institutional balances within democratic systems. Across different regions and time periods, the literature shows that insecurity frequently leads to an expansion of executive authority, particularly in the domains of internal security, surveillance, and counterterrorism. This expansion rarely occurs through abrupt institutional breakdown or suspension of democratic constitutions. Instead, institutional change tends to unfold through incremental adjustments within existing legal frameworks. Emergency provisions, counterterror legislation, and exceptional administrative powers are often introduced through ordinary legislative procedures and justified as necessary responses to evolving security risks. Democratic institutions therefore remain formally intact, but the distribution of authority within them can shift as executive actors acquire broader discretionary powers in the name of protection and crisis management.

Cross-national panel analyses provide evidence that heightened security threats are associated with measurable changes in governance practices. Studies examining global patterns of terrorism find that higher levels of terrorist activity correlate with deterioration in physical integrity rights and human rights protections, even within democratic systems (Dreher, Gassebner & Siemers 2007). Other comparative analyses show that counterterror legislation adopted through democratic procedures can expand executive discretion, particularly when oversight mechanisms are weak or when judicial review remains limited (Shor 2016). These findings suggest that the institutional consequences of securitisation are not limited to authoritarian contexts. Democratic governments may also expand coercive and administrative powers when responding to sustained threat environments.

Research on emergency governance further illustrates how these dynamics unfold. Large cross-national datasets tracking democratic institutions over time indicate that states of emergency and similar exceptional measures are frequently associated with reduced executive constraints and declines in certain dimensions of democratic quality (Lührmann et al. 2021; Edgell et al. 2021). Constitutional emergency provisions, designed to enable rapid response during crises, can also weaken protections for civil liberties when activated repeatedly or for extended periods (Bjørnskov & Voigt 2018). Studies examining the use of international human rights derogations reveal similar patterns. Governments invoking treaty escape clauses during emergencies often display higher levels of repression and reduced compliance with rights commitments during the period of derogation (Hafner-Burton, Helfer & Fariss 2011; Neumayer 2003). In these cases, exceptional governance measures operate through legally recognised mechanisms rather than through outright suspension of law.

Sequencing analyses of democratic backsliding suggest that the gradual weakening of institutional constraints on executive authority often precedes broader democratic erosion. Comparative studies drawing on long-run governance datasets identify the erosion of judicial independence and oversight capacity as common early features in trajectories of democratic decline (Sato et al. 2022). These developments rarely emerge as single decisive institutional ruptures. Instead, they reflect cumulative adjustments in the balance between executive responsiveness and institutional constraint as governments adapt governance structures to persistent security pressures.

“Exceptional powers introduced for crises can gradually become part of ordinary democratic governance”

The evidence therefore points to a recurring institutional dynamic. Security threats tend to produce gradual recalibration of authority within democratic systems, expanding executive discretion through legal and administrative instruments designed to manage risk and respond rapidly to crises. Because these changes are typically introduced through lawful procedures and framed as necessary for public protection, they may attract broad political support at the time of adoption. Over longer periods, however, repeated reliance on exceptional governance mechanisms can shift the operational balance of democratic institutions toward more centralised and executive-driven forms of decision-making.

4. Information Governance and Digital Surveillance

Headline finding:

Security-driven governance of information environments increasingly reshapes democratic public spheres through expanded digital monitoring, surveillance capacities, and hybrid public-private regulation of online communication.

Strength of evidence: Moderate

A growing body of comparative research shows that contemporary security governance increasingly operates through the regulation and monitoring of information environments. Rather than relying primarily on emergency rule or overt censorship, governments influence political communication through digital monitoring systems, surveillance technologies, and regulatory interventions affecting online platforms. These developments reflect a broader shift in how security governance is exercised in technologically mediated societies. Information infrastructures have become central arenas of political contestation, and responses to perceived threats increasingly involve shaping the circulation of information, monitoring political activity, and regulating the digital systems that structure public debate. In democratic systems these measures are typically introduced through legal and administrative mechanisms justified as necessary to address disinformation, extremism, foreign interference, or cyber threats, rather than through explicit suspension of civil liberties. Cross-national research on digital repression

documents the expanding use of monitoring technologies and online control tools in response to political and security concerns. Comparative analyses show that the adoption of digital surveillance systems often coincides with shrinking civic space and increased constraints on political opposition (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, Wright & Xu 2020). Research syntheses similarly highlight how governments deploy online monitoring, content moderation requirements, and algorithmic filtering mechanisms to manage perceived threats emerging within digital communication environments (Earl, Maher & Pan 2022). These instruments allow authorities to influence political communication without necessarily imposing direct censorship, embedding control practices within routine technological and administrative systems.

Digital monitoring also changes the operational dynamics of political control. Empirical studies demonstrate that internet surveillance reduces informational asymmetries between governments and citizens by enabling authorities to track communication patterns, monitor political mobilisation, and identify potential dissent networks (Rød & Weidmann 2015; Weidmann & Rød 2019). Rather than relying on indiscriminate repression, governments equipped with digital monitoring tools can apply more selective and targeted interventions. This transformation alters the modality of control, shifting from reactive repression toward preventive governance. Because monitoring and intervention can occur at early stages of mobilisation, authorities may influence participation and political organisation without resorting to highly visible coercive measures.

A further dimension of contemporary information governance concerns the redistribution of regulatory authority between states and private technology companies.

Comparative governance research shows that regulation of online speech increasingly occurs through hybrid arrangements in which governments rely on digital platforms to implement moderation policies, remove harmful content, and manage the visibility of political communication (Gorwa 2019). Studies of modern censorship systems likewise demonstrate that control over political discourse often operates through infrastructural design, filtering systems, and algorithmic visibility management rather than explicit prohibition (Roberts 2018/2019). These arrangements shift significant decision-making authority away from traditional democratic institutions such as courts and legislatures toward executive agencies and private actors operating within regulatory frameworks justified on security grounds.

“Digital surveillance allows governments to shape political communication without overt censorship”

The cumulative effect of these developments is a gradual transformation of the democratic information environment. Political communication increasingly unfolds within digitally mediated infrastructures subject to monitoring, algorithmic curation, and platform governance. These mechanisms do not eliminate democratic contestation, but they can alter the conditions under which it takes place by shaping visibility, participation, and information flows. In this sense, contemporary security governance in the digital domain operates less through dramatic institutional rupture than through the progressive integration of surveillance and information management into routine administrative practice.

5. Militarisation, Resource Allocation, and Civil–Military Balance

Headline finding:

The democratic implications of militarisation depend less on defence spending alone than on how military institutions are positioned within state governance and the strength of civilian oversight over coercive authority.

Strength of evidence: Moderate

A substantial comparative literature examines how militarisation affects democratic governance through fiscal pressures, institutional balance, and civil–military relations. Militarisation can influence democratic systems in several ways: by altering government spending priorities, by reshaping the distribution of authority between civilian and security institutions, and by affecting the organisational autonomy of the armed forces. Evidence across these domains suggests that the democratic consequences of militarisation are conditional rather than automatic. Expanding defence capacity does not inherently undermine democratic institutions, and many consolidated democracies maintain large and capable military establishments. The key question in the literature is therefore not simply how large military institutions become, but how they are integrated into broader systems of civilian governance and political accountability.

Research on public finance identifies a persistent trade-off between defence expenditure and other forms of public spending. Cross-national panel analyses across both global and OECD samples show

that increases in military spending are frequently associated with reductions in social expenditure, lower levels of civilian public investment, and shifts in the overall composition of government budgets (Mintz & Huang 1990; Deger & Sen 1995; Albalade 2014; Bove & Rivera 2015). These fiscal dynamics reflect the reality that defence spending competes with other policy priorities within finite budget constraints. In some contexts, particularly in lower-income countries, sustained defence burdens have also been associated with lower investment rates and weaker long-term economic growth (Dunne, Nikolaidou & Smith 2005; Hou & Chen 2013). While the magnitude of these effects varies across countries and institutional settings, the general pattern suggests that militarisation can narrow the policy space available for civilian investment and social programmes. These fiscal pressures may indirectly influence democratic governance by affecting distributive legitimacy and the capacity of governments to respond to social demands. The political implications of militarisation depend strongly on institutional design and civilian control over security institutions. Comparative research on coups and civil–military relations demonstrates that the organisational structure of armed forces and their relationship to civilian authorities are critical factors shaping political stability. Cross-national analyses show that coup risk is associated with structural characteristics of military organisations and state institutions that influence the armed forces' capacity to coordinate and intervene politically (Belkin & Schofer 2003). Other studies emphasise the strategic interaction between governments and military institutions, demonstrating that military spending and coup risk are jointly determined as political leaders attempt to balance external security needs with internal threats from the armed forces themselves (Collier & Hoeffler 2007). Governments may adopt “coup-proofing” strategies that fragment command structures or redistribute authority among security forces to reduce the risk of military intervention in politics,

although such measures can also weaken military effectiveness in interstate conflict (Powell 2012; Pilster & Böhmelt 2011).

“Civilian control, not military size, determines whether militarisation threatens democratic stability”

The broader civil–military relations literature reinforces the importance of institutional balance. Comparative analyses show that stable democratic governance depends heavily on effective civilian oversight over promotions, doctrine, and defence policy (Croissant, Kuehn & Chambers 2010). Where armed forces retain significant organisational autonomy or independent political influence, the risk of political intervention increases. Historical evidence further demonstrates that coups can alter regime trajectories in heterogeneous ways, sometimes producing temporary political liberalisation but more often leading to prolonged instability or authoritarian rule (Thyne & Powell 2016). These findings highlight that militarisation becomes politically consequential not simply when military capacity grows, but when institutional arrangements allow coercive institutions to operate outside civilian authority.

The empirical literature therefore suggests that militarisation affects democratic governance primarily through institutional positioning rather than through defence spending alone. Military establishments embedded within robust systems of civilian control and democratic oversight rarely threaten political order. Risks emerge when security institutions acquire autonomous organisational power or when civilian oversight mechanisms weaken. Under such conditions, shifts in the balance between civilian authorities and coercive actors can alter the functioning of democratic institutions even when formal constitutional structures remain intact.

6. Polarisation as an Amplifier of Democratic Vulnerability

Headline finding:

Security threats rarely undermine democratic institutions directly. Their political effects are mediated through existing patterns of polarisation, which can transform democratic competition into identity-based conflict and weaken institutional restraint.

Strength of evidence: Moderate–Strong

A growing body of comparative research identifies political polarisation as a central mechanism linking insecurity to democratic vulnerability. While earlier scholarship often focused on economic crisis or institutional weakness as primary drivers of democratic erosion, more recent work shows that severe polarisation can fundamentally alter how democratic systems function. Under conditions of perceived threat—whether related to national security, cultural change, or economic disruption—political competition may shift from programmatic disagreement toward identity-based confrontation in which political opponents are increasingly viewed as illegitimate or dangerous. Comparative analyses describe this dynamic as “pernicious polarisation,” a condition in which politics becomes organised around mutually exclusive social or partisan identities that erode norms of mutual toleration and institutional restraint (McCoy, Rahman & Somer 2018; Somer & McCoy 2019). In such environments, democratic institutions may remain formally intact while the informal norms that sustain their effective operation weaken.

Polarisation alters the incentives facing both political elites and voters. When political competition becomes strongly identity-based, parties face pressure to prioritise mobilisation over compromise. Institutional constraints that might limit executive authority or protect minority rights can become politically costly if they are perceived to benefit opposing groups. Experimental research illustrates how these dynamics influence citizen attitudes. Survey experiments conducted in the United States show that voters are often willing to tolerate democratic norm violations when these actions advantage politicians from their preferred party (Graham & Svobik 2020). Partisan identity in these contexts can override abstract commitment to democratic procedures, increasing the likelihood that norm violations are accepted when they serve perceived political or security interests. Polarisation also conditions how societies respond to security crises.

“In polarised systems, partisan loyalty can outweigh commitment to democratic rule”

Threat environments can intensify identity divisions by encouraging political actors to portray opponents as security risks or existential threats. Comparative research shows that highly polarised systems exhibit lower levels of cross-party cooperation, weaker legislative oversight, and greater tolerance for executive expansion when leaders claim exceptional authority to respond to perceived dangers (Somer & McCoy 2019). Studies of affective polarisation similarly demonstrate that emotional hostility toward political out-groups reduces willingness to compromise and increases support for restrictive measures against perceived adversaries (Iyengar et al. 2019).

Under these conditions, securitised narratives and polarisation reinforce one another. Threat narratives intensify political division, while polarisation lowers resistance to institutional changes justified in the language of security.

The literature therefore suggests that insecurity often interacts with existing political divisions rather than operating as an independent cause of democratic decline. Highly polarised democracies appear particularly vulnerable because political actors and voters increasingly prioritise partisan victory and perceived protection over procedural constraints and institutional balance. Democratic erosion in such contexts does not usually occur through abrupt authoritarian rupture. Instead, it unfolds through gradual weakening of informal democratic norms as political competition becomes organised around identity conflict and perceived existential stakes.

7. Structural Vulnerabilities of Democratic Systems under Security Competition

Headline finding:

Democratic institutions possess structural characteristics — such as openness, pluralism, dispersed authority, and legal constraints — that strengthen legitimacy and accountability but can also create specific vulnerabilities in contemporary security competition.

Strength of evidence: Emerging-Moderate

Recent research on hybrid conflict, information warfare, and grey-zone competition highlights that contemporary security threats increasingly target democratic processes rather than territorial integrity or conventional military capabilities. Democratic governance is characterised by institutional openness, pluralistic media environments, competitive elections, and legal protections for political participation. These features are central to democratic legitimacy and accountability, yet they can also create entry points that external actors exploit to influence political discourse and undermine institutional trust. In open communication environments, adversarial actors can introduce disinformation, amplify polarising narratives, or manipulate digital information flows in ways that would be more difficult in tightly controlled information systems. Comparative analyses of computational propaganda document how coordinated influence operations frequently target democratic societies with fragmented media environments and open digital

communication networks (Bradshaw & Howard 2019). Such campaigns rarely seek direct persuasion alone; they often aim instead to increase confusion, distrust, and polarisation, thereby weakening confidence in democratic procedures and institutions (Rid 2020; Tucker et al. 2018). Institutional dispersion within democratic systems can create additional coordination challenges in security governance. Democratic political systems intentionally distribute authority across legislatures, courts, executive agencies, and subnational governments in order to prevent concentration of power.

This institutional architecture strengthens accountability and protects civil liberties, but it can also slow decision-making during rapidly evolving security crises. Research on crisis governance shows that democratic policy responses frequently involve extended processes of deliberation, coalition negotiation, judicial review, and public scrutiny (Boin, 't Hart & McConnell 2009; Ansell, Sørensen & Torfing 2021).

“Adversaries increasingly target democratic processes rather than territory or military power”

These processes can improve policy quality and legitimacy over time, yet they may generate short-term delays in responding to fast-moving threats such as cyber operations or coordinated information attacks. In domains where speed and ambiguity are decisive, even limited coordination delays can create opportunities for adversaries to exploit institutional fragmentation.

Electoral responsiveness introduces a further asymmetry in security competition. Because democratic leaders depend on public support for political survival, adversaries can attempt to influence policy indirectly by shaping domestic political incentives rather than applying overt coercion. Research on foreign election interference and information operations highlights how external actors may seek to influence voter perceptions, alter issue salience, or undermine confidence in electoral procedures (Nye 2018). These strategies aim to affect the domestic political environment in which democratic leaders operate, thereby exploiting the responsiveness of democratic systems to public opinion. When domestic political actors amplify or adopt externally generated narratives for partisan advantage, the boundary between foreign influence and internal political competition can become increasingly blurred.

Legal constraints embedded in democratic governance can also produce strategic asymmetries in certain forms of security competition. Constitutional protections for privacy, due process, and proportionality impose limits on the surveillance and coercive tools that democratic governments can deploy. These legal constraints are foundational to liberal democratic governance, yet they may restrict the speed and scope of certain security responses when confronting adversaries that operate without comparable legal or political limitations. In grey-zone conflicts characterised by ambiguity and actions below the threshold of conventional warfare, such asymmetries can complicate defensive strategies (Mazarr et al. 2018).

The literature therefore suggests that democratic vulnerability in contemporary security competition does not arise primarily from institutional weakness but from the very institutional features that underpin democratic governance. Openness, pluralism, dispersed authority, and legal constraint enhance accountability and legitimacy, yet they can also create opportunities for disruption, influence, and strategic exploitation. These structural characteristics do not make democratic systems inherently unstable, but they do shape the types of challenges democracies face when operating in increasingly contested geopolitical and informational environments.

Part 2: How Security Pressures Reshape Democratic Systems

CONCLUSION

The evidence reviewed across this section indicates that security threats rarely undermine democracy through abrupt institutional breakdown. Instead, insecurity tends to influence democratic governance gradually by reshaping political incentives, public preferences, and institutional practices. Threat environments can increase demand for strong leadership, elevate the political salience of protection and national resilience, and encourage the expansion of executive authority through lawful institutional processes such as emergency legislation or security frameworks. These dynamics often unfold within existing democratic rules rather than outside them. As a result, democratic institutions frequently remain formally intact even as the balance between liberty, oversight, and executive discretion evolves in response to sustained security pressures.

Key Mechanisms Linking Security Pressures to Democratic Outcomes

Shifts in democratic preferences. Perceived insecurity increases public support for strong leadership and security-oriented policies, as citizens place greater weight on protection and order during periods of perceived threat

Securitisation of democratic competition. Security narratives can reshape electoral incentives by making protection, sovereignty, and national resilience central criteria of political legitimacy and electoral success. Expansion of executive authority. Security crises often lead to emergency powers,

counterterror legislation, and expanded executive discretion, gradually shifting the balance between executive authority and institutional oversight.

Information governance and digital monitoring. Security concerns increasingly extend into the governance of information environments, including expanded digital monitoring, surveillance capacities, and regulatory influence over online communication.

Fiscal and institutional effects of militarisation. Increased defence spending and the expansion of security institutions can reshape budget priorities and alter the institutional balance between civilian governance and coercive actors.

Polarisation and democratic vulnerability. Threat environments can intensify political polarisation, weakening cross-party tolerance and increasing acceptance of institutional norm violations justified in the language of security.

Structural vulnerabilities in security competition. Institutional features that strengthen democratic governance — such as openness, plural media systems, dispersed authority, and legal constraints on state power — can also create entry points that adversaries exploit in contemporary forms of hybrid and informational competition.

Together, these mechanisms illustrate that security pressures influence democracy primarily through incremental institutional adaptation rather than sudden democratic breakdown. Democratic systems respond to threat environments by recalibrating how authority, accountability, and political competition operate within existing institutional frameworks. Whether these adjustments remain compatible with democratic stability depends largely on the strength of institutional oversight, levels of political trust, and the capacity of democratic systems to manage security challenges without eroding the procedural safeguards that sustain democratic governance over the long term.

DISCUSSION: THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND SECURITY

The evidence reviewed in this report suggests that the relationship between democracy and security is reciprocal and structurally embedded rather than unidirectional. While policy debates often present democratic governance and national security as competing priorities, particularly in periods of geopolitical tension or acute threat, the literature points to a more complex interaction. Democratic systems do not eliminate external threats or social conflict, but they shape the institutional conditions under which these challenges are managed. Mechanisms such as electoral accountability, legislative oversight, open media and political competition embed decision making within systems of scrutiny that raise the costs of repression, arbitrary violence and poorly justified military action. At the same time, transparency and open information environments support earlier detection of crises and policy failures, while representative institutions provide arenas through which grievances can be negotiated without recourse to violence. These institutional features are reinforced by societal factors such as higher levels of trust and cooperation, which facilitate collective responses to risk. Taken together, these dynamics operate cumulatively and tend to become visible over longer time horizons, meaning that the security contribution of democratic governance is best understood in terms of institutional resilience rather than rapid or coercive crisis response.

At the same time, the literature shows that security pressures can shape democratic systems from within. Perceived insecurity tends to shift public priorities towards order, protection and decisiveness, increasing acceptance of stronger executive authority and constraints on civil liberties when framed as necessary responses to threat. These shifts can alter electoral competition by elevating the salience of security and favouring actors who frame political debate in

terms of sovereignty, risk and protection. Institutional consequences typically follow through gradual adaptation rather than abrupt rupture. Emergency powers, counterterror legislation, surveillance frameworks and expanded executive discretion are usually introduced through established legal procedures and justified as proportionate responses to evolving threats, allowing democratic institutions to remain formally intact while the balance between liberty and security shifts incrementally over time. These dynamics are shaped in important ways by levels of political polarisation. In highly polarised contexts, security narratives can deepen identity based divisions, weaken cross party cooperation and increase tolerance for institutional norm violations when they benefit partisan allies. By contrast, democracies characterised by higher levels of trust and lower polarisation tend to be more resilient to such pressures.

The literature also highlights a structural tension within democratic governance. Institutional features that underpin democratic legitimacy, including openness, plural media systems, dispersed authority and legal protections for participation, can simultaneously create entry points for external interference in contemporary forms of security competition. Disinformation campaigns, cyber operations and other forms of hybrid influence increasingly target democratic processes rather than conventional military capabilities. Open information environments and competitive elections can be exploited to shape public discourse, amplify polarisation and undermine trust, while dispersed authority can complicate timely responses to ambiguous or low visibility threats. At the same time, this openness can itself be a source of resilience when it is broadly valued and trusted, enabling exposure of manipulation and strengthening public awareness. Viewed collectively, the evidence points to a dynamic interaction between institutional resilience and institutional

pressure. Democratic governance contributes to security by embedding political power within accountable and rule based systems that reduce incentives for violent conflict and support collective responses to risk, while persistent insecurity can gradually reshape these same systems by shifting political incentives towards protection and executive authority. The implication for policy is that the commonly assumed trade off between democracy and security is likely misleading. Democratic institutions contribute to long term stability not primarily through normative appeal, but because they structure power in ways that limit violence and strengthen resilience. Maintaining these advantages requires careful management of the security pressures that can, over time, alter democratic governance from within, making it essential to recognise the reciprocal nature of the democracy and security relationship.

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Part 1

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
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Internal Political Violence and Conflict Dynamics

DeRouen & Sobek (2004)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	Civil conflict termination	Democratic regimes are more likely to reach negotiated settlements and less likely to prolong civil conflict	Political institutions shape incentives for bargaining
Hegre et al. (2001)	Global	Moderate – panel regression	Civil war onset	Civil conflict risk follows an inverted-U relationship with regime type; intermediate regimes face the highest risk, while consolidated democracies exhibit lower risk than partially democratic systems	Stable democratic institutions reduce uncertainty over leadership turnover and provide institutionalised dispute resolution
Hegre (2014)	Global	Moderate – panel forecasting model	Civil conflict onset risk	Consolidated democracies are associated with lower long-term risks of civil conflict, while transitional regimes face higher risk	Stable democratic institutions provide more predictable and institutionalised political competition, reducing incentives for violent conflict
Vreeland (2008)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	Civil war onset	Hybrid regimes (“anocracies”) face the highest probability of civil conflict; consolidated democracies comparatively more stable	Institutional incoherence increases elite competition and incentives for violent contestation
Gates et al. (2006)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	Conflict onset and recurrence	Institutional inconsistency is associated with higher risks of conflict onset and instability	Inconsistent institutional arrangements weaken credible commitments and increase uncertainty
Reynal-Querol (2002)	Global	Low–moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Civil conflict onset	Democracies are less prone to civil war than intermediate regimes, particularly in ethnically divided societies	Democratic competition provides peaceful mechanisms for political change

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Buhaug, Cederman & Rød (2008)	Global	Moderate – spatial panel analysis	Civil war onset	Political exclusion, especially when combined with geographic concentration and peripheral location, increases the risk of rebellion	Exclusion and geographic concentration raise both the motivation and feasibility of territorial rebellion
Cederman, Wimmer & Min (2010)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	Ethnic civil war onset	Politically excluded ethnic groups are significantly more likely to initiate conflict; inclusion in state power reduces conflict risk	Political inclusion lowers grievance mobilisation and incentives for rebellion
Cederman, Hug & Krebs (2010)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	Ethnic conflict onset	More inclusive political institutions are associated with lower risks of ethnic conflict	Representation creates institutional bargaining arenas that substitute for violence
Fearon & Laitin (2003)	Global	Low–moderate – cross-national regression	Civil war onset	State capacity is the strongest predictor of civil war onset, while regime type, including democracy, has limited explanatory power once these factors are controlled for	Effective governance constrains insurgent mobilisation and reduces feasibility of rebellion

State Coercion, Repression and Civil-Military Stability

Regan & Henderson (2002)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	State repression	Democracies less likely to rely on coercive repression	Political accountability constrains coercive responses
Poe & Tate (1994)	Global	Low–moderate – cross-national regression	Physical integrity rights violations	Higher levels of democracy associated with fewer violations of physical integrity rights	Institutional constraints and public scrutiny limit executive coercion
Poe, Tate & Keith (1999)	Global	Moderate – pooled time-series cross-national analysis	State repression	Democratic institutions associated with reduced repression controlling for conflict and economic factors	Checks and balances constrain coercive state behaviour

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Davenport (2007)	Global	Moderate – synthetic review of comparative repression research	State repression levels	Democracies exhibit lower levels of repression on average than autocracies	Electoral accountability increases political costs of coercion
Cingranelli & Filippov (2010)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	Physical integrity rights protection	Democracies with electoral systems that increase political accountability exhibit lower levels of repression	Electoral rules shape leaders' incentives to avoid repression.
Davenport & Armstrong (2004)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	State repression	Only highly democratic regimes show consistently low levels of physical-integrity violations	Democratic constraints become effective only at high levels of democracy.
Powell & Thyne (2011)	Global	Moderate – cross-national dataset analysis	Coup incidence	Coups occur significantly less frequently in democratic regimes than in authoritarian or weakly institutionalised systems	Electoral legitimacy and institutionalised leadership turnover reduce incentives for military intervention
Marinov & Goemans (2014)	Global	Moderate – statistical analysis of coup outcomes	Coup success	Coups are less likely to succeed in democratic contexts due to higher domestic and international costs of unconstitutional power seizure	Domestic legitimacy and international constraints increase the costs and reduce the viability of coups
Belkin & Schofer (2003)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Civil-military relations, coup risk	Professionalised militaries in democracies are less likely to intervene in politics, reducing coup risk	Professional norms and institutional separation reduce military politicisation
Pilster & Böhmelt (2011)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	Military autonomy, coup risk	Strong civilian oversight of the military in democratic systems reduces the likelihood of military intervention in politics	Civilian control over promotions, doctrine, and resources limits military autonomy

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Feaver (1999)	Conceptual / cross-national application	Conceptual framework (principal-agent theory)	Civil-military relations	Civilian monitoring and accountability reduce the risk of military agency loss and political intervention	Principal-agent dynamics: monitoring and sanctioning constrain military deviation from civilian authority
Croissant, Kuehn & Chambers (2013)	Comparative (multi-country)	Moderate – comparative institutional analysis	Civilian control of the military	Democratic institutional arrangements that disperse authority strengthen civilian control and reduce military politicisation	Institutional dispersion of authority and checks and balances constrain military influence

Democratic Constraints on Interstate Escalation

Schultz (1998)	Global	Moderate – dyadic statistical analysis	Crisis escalation and war initiation	Democracies with active legislative opposition are less likely to escalate crises	Opposition reveals information and constrains executive discretion
Howell & Pevehouse (2007)	Primarily United States (comparative perspective)	Moderate – institutional and quantitative analysis	Military intervention initiation	Legislative oversight associated with fewer and shorter interventions	Approval requirements raise political costs of force
Reiter & Tillman (2002)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Conflict initiation by democracies	Democracies with stronger public, legislative, and executive constraints are less likely to initiate conflict	Multiple domestic veto players increase political costs and constrain executive risk-taking
Palmer, London & Regan (2004)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	Military intervention behaviour	Institutional constraints shape conflict initiation	Domestic checks increase decision thresholds
Prins & Sprecher (1999)	Global	Low-moderate – cross-national analysis	Interstate crisis escalation	Institutional constraints reduce escalation probability	Oversight slows escalation dynamics
Dieterich, Hummel & Marschall (2015)	Democratic states (Europe focus)	Moderate – comparative analysis	Military deployment decisions	Parliamentary veto powers affect deployment participation	Authorisation requirements constrain intervention

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Prins (2003)	Global	Moderate – TSCS analysis	Conflict escalation	Stable democratic institutions shape crisis escalation dynamics by increasing the credibility of audience costs	Audience costs and public scrutiny discourage escalation
Weeks (2012)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Conflict initiation by regime type	Authoritarian regimes vary in their propensity to initiate conflict depending on internal constraints; more constrained regimes behave more like democracies	Variation in elite constraints and accountability structures shapes leaders' risk-taking incentives
Horowitz & Stam (2014)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis (leader-level data)	Conflict behaviour and use of force	Leader characteristics, such as prior military experience, influence conflict behaviour	Institutional and strategic contexts condition how leader traits translate into policy decisions
Horowitz, Stam & Ellis (2015)	Global	Moderate – dataset development with empirical applications	Leader attributes and conflict behaviour	Leader-level attributes provide systematic variation in conflict behaviour across states	Institutional environments mediate the effects of individual leader traits on decision-making

Information Integrity and Political Polarisation

Whyte (2020)	Global	Primarily conceptual	Democratic vulnerability to information operations	Democratic openness creates structural exposure to information manipulation	Open media systems and electoral competition create accessible informational targets
Bradshaw & Howard (2019)	Global	Low-Moderate – comparative mapping study	Organised information manipulation campaigns	Disinformation campaigns widespread globally; democracies frequent targets	Information operations serve political control and strategic influence objectives
Bail et al. (2020)	United States (global implications)	Moderate-high – linked survey and platform data	Attitudinal effects of foreign propaganda exposure	Limited measurable persuasive effects of foreign disinformation	Effects mediated by prior beliefs and partisan environments

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Eady et al. (2023)	United States (global implications)	Moderate-high – large-scale platform data analysis	Exposure to foreign disinformation	Exposure concentrated among small subsets of users and marginal relative to domestic content	Disinformation operates within existing partisan ecosystems
Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023)	Global	High – systematic review and meta-analysis	Effects of digital misinformation	Limited causal evidence for large-scale persuasion effects	Attention and mobilisation effects appear more consistent than belief conversion
Maertens et al. (2024)	Global	Moderate-high – validated measurement study	Misinformation susceptibility	Cross-national variation independent of regime type	Cognitive skills and information environments shape susceptibility
Humprecht et al. (2023)	Europe and US	Moderate-high – cross-national survey	Willingness to share misinformation	Lower institutional trust associated with greater misinformation sharing	Institutional trust correlates with more cautious information behaviour
Hameleers, Brosius & de Vreese (2022)	Europe	Moderate – comparative survey analysis	Political misperceptions	Trust in democratic institutions correlates with lower misperception	Public-service media and institutional credibility aid evaluation
Guess et al. (2020)	Europe and US	Moderate-high – panel survey with behavioural data	Belief in false information	Misbelief concentrated among politically engaged minorities	Polarisation shapes exposure and belief patterns

Cyber Conflict Behaviour and Cybersecurity Governance

Hunter, Albert & Garrett (2021)	Global	Moderate – cross-national quantitative analysis	Initiation of state-sponsored cyberattacks	States with higher political rights less likely to initiate publicly observable cyberattacks	Domestic accountability and oversight raise political costs of authorising cyber operations
Hunter et al. (2022)	Global	Moderate-high – panel analysis	Initiation of state-sponsored cyber operations	Democracies less likely to initiate certain types of cyber operations controlling for power and capability	Legal constraints and reputational concerns discourage escalation
Hunter et al. (2024)	Global	Moderate – dyadic quantitative analysis	Dyadic cyber operations	Democracies rarely initiate cyber operations against other democracies	Democratic peace dynamics extend into cyberspace

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Geiger (2021)	Global	Low-moderate – cross-national regression	Presence of cyber hostilities in interstate dyads	Cyber hostilities less likely between democratic dyads	Normative restraint and institutional constraints reduce targeting among democracies
Valeriano, Jensen & Maness (2018)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	Cyber conflict escalation	Democracies participate in cyber operations but tend to display restrained escalation patterns	Legal oversight and risk sensitivity constrain coercive use
Lindsay (2013)	Global	Low-moderate – case-based comparative analysis	Cyber-attack effectiveness and escalation	Cyber operations typically remain below armed conflict thresholds	Attribution risks and legitimacy concerns encourage calibrated cyber behaviour
Poznansky & Perkoski (2018)	Global	Moderate – theory-driven empirical analysis	Public attribution of cyber incidents	Domestic political incentives shape decisions to publicly attribute cyber operations	Audience costs and reputational considerations influence response behaviour
Kostyuk & Sidorova (2026)	Global	Moderate-high – panel analysis	Adoption of national cybersecurity strategies	International organisational membership strongest predictor of cyber strategy adoption	Policy diffusion and international cooperation drive cyber governance development
Creese et al. (2021)	Global	Moderate – cross-national quantitative analysis	Cybersecurity capacity outcomes	Cybersecurity capacity associated primarily with institutional quality and state capacity rather than regime type alone	Administrative coordination and governance effectiveness enable sustained cyber resilience
Chen et al. (2023)	Global	Moderate – large-scale empirical analysis	Cybercrime prevalence	Governance capacity and law enforcement effectiveness more important than democratic participation for cybercrime outcomes	Enforcement capability and regulatory effectiveness drive deterrence
Kleiner (2025)	Global	Moderate-high – cross-national quantitative analysis	National cybersecurity preparedness	Democracies and autocracies outperform anocracies in preparedness	Institutional stability and regulatory coherence more important than regime label

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Crisis Response, Institutional Adaptation and Long-term Resilience					
Hollyer, Rosendorff & Vreeland (2011)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Economic and governance data transparency	Democracies are more likely to disclose economic and governance-relevant data	Electoral accountability and opposition scrutiny increase incentives for transparency
Williams (2015)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	Fiscal transparency	Democratic institutions are associated with higher levels of transparency	Political competition increases the costs of information suppression
Kahn (2005)	Global	Moderate – cross-national regression	Disaster mortality	Democracies are associated with lower disaster mortality controlling for income and geography	Accountability and media scrutiny encourage early response and mitigation
Sen (1981; 1999)	Global historical comparison	Low-moderate – comparative historical analysis	Famine occurrence	No substantial famine has occurred in a functioning democracy	Free media and electoral accountability compel governments to respond to food crises
Keefer, Neumayer & Plümpner (2011)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	Disaster mortality and preparedness	Political incentives and accountability structures influence disaster preparedness and mitigation investment	Political incentives influence government responsiveness to disaster
Raschky (2008)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Disaster fatalities	Higher institutional quality is associated with lower disaster mortality	Effective governance and administrative capacity improve crisis management
Neumayer (2002)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	International environmental commitment	Democracies are associated with higher participation in environmental agreements	Electoral accountability and civil society pressure increase responsiveness
Bättig & Bernauer (2009)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Climate policy commitment and emissions outcomes	Democracies are more likely to adopt climate policies, though emissions effects are less consistent	Democratic institutions facilitate policy adoption, but implementation constraints remain

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Fredriksson (2005)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Environmental policy stringency	Democratic participation and competition are associated with stronger environmental regulation under certain conditions	Political competition raises costs of weak regulation; lobbying mediates outcomes
Li & Reuveny (2006)	Global	Moderate – cross-national panel analysis	Environmental degradation indicators	Democracy is associated with lower levels of some forms of environmental degradation, with variation across contexts	Accountability and participation strengthen regulatory attention and enforcement
Bernauer & Koubi (2009)	Multi-country (city-level data)	Moderate – panel analysis	Air pollution (SO ₂ concentrations)	Higher levels of democracy are associated with lower urban air pollution levels	Democratic institutions improve public goods provision and environmental regulation
Bargain & Aminjonov (2020)	Europe	Moderate – empirical mobility analysis	Compliance with mobility restrictions	Higher political trust is associated with stronger voluntary compliance	Trust facilitates cooperation without coercion
Goldstein & Wiedemann (2021)	Europe	Moderate – observational behavioural analysis	Social distancing behaviour	Higher social trust is associated with stronger compliance with COVID-19 mitigation measures	Credible information and legitimacy drive anticipatory compliance
Cepaluni, Dorsch & Branyiczki (2020)	Cross-national	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	COVID-19 mortality	Democracies exhibited higher reported mortality in early stages due to reporting differences	Transparency increases observed cases and deaths; policy timing varies
Annaka (2021)	Cross-national	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	COVID-19 deaths per capita	Differences in reported mortality between regime types are partly driven by underreporting in less democratic systems	Transparent reporting increases observed case and death counts
Cheibub, Hong & Przeworski (2020)	Cross-national	Moderate – cross-national analysis	Pandemic containment effectiveness	No consistent regime-type advantage in containment success	Outcomes depend on compliance and state capacity rather than regime type alone

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Frey, Chen & Presidente (2020)	Cross-national	Moderate – cross-national regression	Pandemic mortality	Some evidence suggests democratic accountability is associated with lower mortality when accounting for reporting differences and later-stage outcomes	Accountability may encourage policy adjustment and more accurate reporting
Annaka (2021)	Cross-national	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	COVID-19 mortality and excess mortality estimates	Differences in reported mortality between regime types are partly driven by systematic underreporting in less democratic systems, reducing apparent variation in outcomes	Transparency and data reliability in democratic systems increase observed case and death counts, while weaker reporting incentives in less democratic contexts lead to underestimation of mortality

Gender, Democracy and Security

Htun & Weldon (2012)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Adoption of policies on violence against women	States with stronger feminist movements and more open political systems are more likely to adopt policies addressing violence against women	Civil society mobilisation and institutional openness increase policy responsiveness to gender-based violence
Donno & Kreft (2019)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Government action on violence against women	Democracies are more likely to adopt and implement policies addressing violence against women	Electoral accountability, international pressure, and civil society advocacy increase incentives for institutional response
Caprioli (2005)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Interstate conflict and militarised disputes	Higher levels of gender inequality are associated with greater likelihood of interstate conflict and militarised disputes	Gender inequality reflects hierarchical social structures associated with greater acceptance of violence

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Caprioli & Boyer (2001)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Internal conflict and political violence	States with higher gender inequality are more likely to experience internal conflict	Social exclusion and inequality increase propensity for political violence
Hudson et al. (2012)	Global	Moderate – cross-national dataset analysis	State stability, governance, and conflict risk	Higher levels of gender inequality are associated with state fragility, authoritarian governance, and internal instability	Gender inequality reflects broader patterns of exclusion, weak institutions, and tolerance of violence

Citizen-to-Citizen Trust and Social Cohesion

Rothstein & Stolle (2008)	Comparative democracies	Low-moderate – comparative institutional analysis	Interpersonal trust	Higher-quality, impartial institutions are associated with higher levels of interpersonal trust	Institutional fairness and low corruption increase generalised trust across society
Uslaner (2002)	Comparative	Low-moderate – theoretical and comparative analysis	Interpersonal trust	Higher levels of equality and perceived fairness are associated with higher levels of interpersonal trust	Equality and social fairness foster generalised trust
Zmerli & Newton (2008)	Europe (comparative survey data)	Moderate – cross-national survey analysis	Democratic attitudes and political support	Higher levels of interpersonal trust are associated with stronger support for democratic institutions and norms	Trust reinforces cooperative expectations and strengthens the legitimacy of democratic rules
Lederman, Loayza & Menéndez (2002)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Violent crime rates	Higher levels of interpersonal trust are associated with lower levels of violent crime	Trust facilitates informal social regulation and reduces incentives for opportunistic or violent behaviour
Alcorta, Smits & Swedlund (2020)	Sub-Saharan Africa	Moderate – cross-national survey analysis	Support for political violence	Higher levels of interpersonal trust are associated with lower support for political violence	Broad social trust reduces willingness to engage in or support violent mobilisation

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
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Economic Inequality, Redistribution, and Democratic Institutions

Ross (2006)	Global	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Economic inequality, redistribution	Democratic institutions may create incentives for redistribution, but there is no consistent evidence that democracy reduces inequality	Electoral competition may encourage redistribution, but effects are mediated by institutions and economic structure
Scheve and Stasavage (2009)	Advanced economies (historical)	Moderate – historical panel analysis	Redistribution, taxation	Major expansions in redistribution are driven primarily by mass mobilisation (e.g. war), rather than democracy alone	Shared sacrifice and political mobilisation increase support for progressive taxation
Ansell and Samuels (2014)	Global / historical	Moderate – comparative historical and statistical analysis	Inequality and democratisation	Democratisation is often driven by rising inequality among elites and does not necessarily lead to redistribution	Elite competition and asset diversification shape democratisation without guaranteeing redistribution
Iversen and Soskice (2006)	OECD countries	Moderate – comparative statistical analysis	Redistribution, income inequality	Democracies with proportional representation systems redistribute more than majoritarian systems	Electoral systems shape coalition formation and incentives for redistribution
Lindert (2004)	OECD countries (historical)	Moderate – historical panel analysis	Social spending, redistribution	Democracies tend to spend more on social programmes, though effects on inequality are not uniform	Electoral incentives increase public spending on broadly distributed benefits
Haggard and Kaufman (2008)	Latin America, East Asia, Eastern Europe	Moderate – comparative historical analysis	Inequality, welfare state development	The relationship between democracy and redistribution depends on political coalitions and institutional context	Distributional outcomes are shaped by coalition structures, not regime type alone
Andersen (2012)	Cross-national	Moderate – cross-national survey analysis	Support for democracy, institutional confidence	Lower levels of income inequality are associated with stronger support for democracy and higher confidence in institutions	More equal societies are perceived as fairer, increasing legitimacy of democratic governance

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Palmisano et al. (2024)	Europe	Moderate – panel analysis	Trust in government and institutions	Rising inequality is associated with declining trust in national governments and political institutions	Increasing inequality signals institutional unfairness and reduces perceived responsiveness
Bienstman (2023)	Comparative (longitudinal)	Moderate – longitudinal analysis	Institutional trust	Persistent and increasing inequality weaken trust in representative institutions over time	Citizens interpret unequal outcomes as evidence of institutional failure or bias
Bobzien (2023)	Comparative (survey data)	Moderate – cross-national survey analysis	Institutional trust, perceived fairness	Perceptions of distributive fairness mediate the relationship between inequality and institutional trust	Perceived procedural fairness reduces the negative impact of inequality on political confidence
Ivanov (2023)	Comparative	Moderate – cross-national statistical analysis	Trust in government, support for populism	Economic vulnerability is associated with lower trust in government and greater support for anti-system political actors	Economic insecurity increases dissatisfaction with institutions and openness to alternative political options

Part 2

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Democratic Preferences					
Davis & Silver (2004)	United States	Moderate – national survey analysis	Civil-liberty attitudes	Higher perceived terrorism risk associated with greater willingness to trade civil liberties for security	Threat perceptions shift citizen evaluations toward protection priorities, moderated by political trust
Huddy et al. (2005)	United States	High – experimental survey research	Counterterrorism attitudes	Perceived threat increases support for retaliatory and security-oriented responses, while anxiety shapes risk perceptions and policy preferences	Emotional responses to threat structure policy attitudes rather than uniformly increasing authoritarian preferences
Merolla & Zechmeister (2009)	United States	High – experimental political psychology study	Leadership evaluations	Terrorism threat increases public preference for decisive and strong leadership traits	Threat environments heighten demand for leaders perceived as capable of managing security crises
Gadarian (2010)	United States	High – experimental political communication study	Information processing and policy attitudes	Anxiety increases reliance on elite cues and information seeking when evaluating security policies	Threat alters political cognition by increasing heuristic reliance under uncertainty
Gadarian & Albertson (2014)	United States	High – experimental study	Political information behaviour	Anxiety about security and immigration threats increases information seeking and responsiveness to political messaging	Emotional threat responses reshape how citizens process political information rather than directly reducing democratic commitment

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Hetherington & Suhay (2011)	United States	Moderate – survey political psychology analysis	Authoritarian predispositions	Threat primarily shifts low-authoritarian individuals toward more restrictive and security-oriented attitudes	Security threat activates authoritarian responses among otherwise libertarian citizens
Brouard, Vasilopoulos & Foucault (2018)	France / Europe	Moderate – panel survey analysis	Security policy attitudes	Terrorist attacks increased support for stronger security policies and leadership authority	Perceived threat produces protection-oriented shifts in democratic preferences
Vasilopoulos, Marcus & Foucault (2019)	France	Moderate – political psychology analysis	Emotional responses and political attitudes	Anger and fear following terrorist attacks increase support for hardline and far-right political positions	Emotional reactions to threat mediate political radicalisation and security-oriented voting
Kossowska et al. (2011)	UK, Spain, Belgium, Poland	Moderate – cross-national comparative survey	Support for anti-terror policies	Terrorism threat perception increases support for restrictive counter-terror measures	Threat heightens preference for social order and collective security
Dinesen & Jæger (2013)	Spain / Europe	Moderate-High – quasi-experimental natural experiment	Institutional trust	Terrorist attacks generated short-term increases in institutional trust (“rally effect”)	External threat increases reliance on governing institutions for protection
Finseraas & Listhaug (2013)	Western Europe	Moderate-High – quasi-experimental comparison	Fear and policy attitudes	Terror attacks increased perceived threat but produced limited or no systematic change in support for illiberal policies	Emotional reactions to insecurity do not automatically translate into policy preference change
Berrebi & Klor (2008)	Israel	Moderate-High – electoral quasi-experimental analysis	Voting behaviour	Local exposure to terrorism increased electoral support for right-wing parties rather than incumbents generally	Security voting rewards actors perceived as tougher on security issues
Canetti et al. (2017)	Israel	Moderate – panel political psychology analysis	Extremism and security attitudes	Exposure to political violence increases threat perceptions and support for hardline political positions	Psychological stress pathways link violence exposure to security-oriented political attitudes

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Dreher, Gassebner & Siemers (2007)	Global	Moderate – cross-national panel analysis	Human rights protections	Higher terrorism levels associated with deterioration in physical integrity rights and human rights protections	Security threats legitimise coercive practices and expanded state authority
Shor (2016)	Global	Moderate – cross-national panel analysis	Human rights practices	Counterterror legislation associated with weaker human rights outcomes under certain conditions	Legal security frameworks expand executive discretion with heterogeneous effects across regimes
Mudde (2007)	Europe (comparative)	Moderate – comparative political analysis	Populist radical right party development	Populist radical right parties mobilise nativist, law-and-order, and anti-elite frames that resonate with voter insecurity	Perceived cultural and identity threat create demand for exclusionary and order-oriented politics
Norris & Inglehart (2019)	Global / Western democracies	Moderate-High – cross-national survey analysis	Support for authoritarian-populist parties	Cultural backlash and perceived societal threat strongly predict support for populist parties	Perceived loss of cultural dominance and insecurity shift legitimacy toward authority and national protection
Funke, Schularick & Trebesch (2016)	Advanced economies (1870–2014)	High – historical panel analysis	Electoral outcomes after financial crises	Severe financial crises systematically increase vote shares for extremist and populist parties	Crisis environments weaken mainstream incumbents and reward anti-establishment actors
Guiso et al. (2017)	Europe	Moderate-High – cross-country econometric analysis	Populist voting and turnout	Economic insecurity and declining trust in traditional parties increase support for populist movements	Economic shocks and institutional distrust generate demand for anti-establishment alternatives
Moffitt (2015)	Global comparative cases	Moderate – qualitative comparative political analysis	Populist political style	Populist leaders construct and perform crisis narratives to frame politics as existential struggle	Crisis framing transforms routine democratic contestation into moralised “people vs elite” conflict

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Colantone & Stanig (2018)	Western Europe (AJPS study)	High – quasi-experimental trade-shock analysis	Electoral support for nationalist/ radical-right parties	Exposure to import competition associated with increased support for nationalist and radical-right parties in affected regions	External economic shocks heighten perceived vulnerability and shift voting toward protection-oriented actors
Dreher, Gassebner & Siemers (2007)	Global	Moderate – cross-national panel	Human rights / physical integrity rights	Higher terrorism levels associated with deterioration in human rights protections	Security threats legitimise coercive practices and expand state authority under threat conditions
Shor (2016)	Global	Moderate – cross-national panel	Human rights practices after counterterrorism laws	Counterterrorism legislation associated with weaker human rights outcomes under certain institutional conditions	Legal security frameworks may expand executive discretion with heterogeneous effects
Lührmann et al. (2021)	Global	Moderate – V-Dem panel analysis	Executive constraints / democratic quality	States of emergency associated with executive aggrandisement and democratic decline	Emergency rule concentrates executive authority and weakens institutional checks
Edgell et al. (2021)	Global	Moderate – V-Dem panel analysis	Democratic standards / rule of law	Emergency responses frequently associated with violations of democratic standards	Crisis governance can normalise executive expansion beyond temporary emergencies
Bjørnskov & Voigt (2018)	Global	Moderate – cross-national panel	Human rights / civil liberties	Constitutional emergency provisions linked to weaker rights protection during crises	Legal emergency clauses expand executive discretion within lawful frameworks
Hafner-Burton, Helfer & Fariss (2011)	Global	Moderate – panel analysis	Human rights performance	Treaty derogations during emergencies associated with increased repression	Legal derogation mechanisms reduce external accountability constraints

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Neumayer (2003)	Global	Moderate – cross-national panel	Human rights violations	States invoking treaty derogations during emergencies exhibit higher repression levels	Security justification weakens domestic and international accountability pressures
Earl et al. (2022)	Global	Moderate – research synthesis (Science Advances)	Digital repression practices	States increasingly deploy digital surveillance and online control tools in response to political threats	Security concerns and regime survival incentives drive expansion of digital monitoring and repression tools
Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, Wright & Xu (2020)	Global	Moderate – cross-national quantitative analysis	Civic space / digital repression	Expansion of digital repression tools associated with shrinking civic space	Digital monitoring capacity enhances state control over opposition actors
Feldstein (2021)	Global	Moderate – comparative mapping (Oxford University Press)	Adoption of surveillance technologies	Diffusion of digital surveillance technologies correlated with democratic backsliding trends	Low-cost digital surveillance expands state monitoring capacity and coercive reach
Rød & Weidmann (2015)	Global	Moderate – cross-national quantitative analysis	Targeted repression	Internet monitoring enables more selective and strategic political repression	Reduced information asymmetry allows preventive governance rather than indiscriminate repression
Weidmann & Rød (2019)	Global	Moderate – quantitative panel analysis	Political repression patterns	Digital communication monitoring associated with strategic repression	Surveillance facilitates precise political control while limiting visible coercion
Gorwa (2019)	Global	Moderate – governance analysis (policy and platform studies)	Platform speech governance	Growing delegation of speech regulation to private platforms	Hybrid public-private governance creates accountability gaps and shifts power away from courts

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Roberts (2018/2019 book)	China (comparative relevance)	Moderate – qualitative institutional analysis	Censorship architecture	Modern censorship often operates through infrastructural and design mechanisms rather than overt bans	Information architecture shapes political discourse indirectly
Frantz, Kendall-Taylor & Wright (2020)	Global (autocracies focus)	Moderate – V-Dem working paper / cross-national analysis	Digital repression practices	Autocracies increasingly adopt digital repression tools to monitor and constrain opposition	Digital technologies enhance regime capacity for surveillance and control
Feldstein (2021)	Global	Moderate – comparative mapping (Oxford University Press book)	Adoption of surveillance technologies	Widespread diffusion of digital surveillance tools documented across regime types, with patterns linked to democratic backsliding	Low-cost digital surveillance expands state monitoring capacity and strengthens executive control
Rød & Weidmann (2015)	Global	Moderate – cross-national quantitative analysis	Repression patterns	Internet monitoring capacity associated with strategic repression in authoritarian contexts	Reduced information asymmetry enables targeted rather than indiscriminate repression
Weidmann & Rød (2019)	Global	Moderate – book-based empirical analysis (Oxford University Press)	Internet use, protest, repression	Digital communication technologies reshape protest and repression dynamics, facilitating strategic state responses	Surveillance and monitoring tools allow authorities to anticipate and manage mobilisation
Howard, Agarwal & Hussain (2011)	Global	Moderate – cross-national analysis (Brookings / SSRN study)	Internet shutdowns and network interference	Governments deliberately disrupt digital networks during political crises	Digital control tools are used as instruments of regime defence under perceived threat
Mintz & Huang (1990)	Global	Moderate – time-series cross-national analysis	Government expenditure composition	Military spending often associated with reductions in non-military expenditure categories	Classic “guns-butter” trade-off reflects competition for finite fiscal resources

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Deger & Sen (1995)	Developing countries	Moderate – cross-national econometric analysis	Investment and economic growth	High military burdens associated with lower investment and slower growth in many developing economies	Defence spending crowds out productive capital formation and development expenditure
Dunne, Nikolaidou & Smith (2005)	Global	Moderate – panel econometric analysis	Economic growth	Defence spending shows heterogeneous growth effects, frequently negative in lower-income contexts	Opportunity costs of military expenditure depend on institutional and economic conditions
Albalade (2014)	OECD and global sample	Moderate – panel analysis	Public expenditure composition	Higher defence spending associated with shifts in expenditure composition away from civilian sectors in some contexts	Security prioritisation reallocates fiscal resources across policy domains
Bove & Rivera (2015)	Global	Moderate – panel regression analysis	Government spending and growth	Defence burdens associated with fiscal trade-offs and context-dependent growth effects	Governments balance security spending against welfare and development priorities
Heo (2010)	OECD	Moderate – panel analysis	Welfare spending effort	Military spending linked to variation in welfare effort across advanced economies	Defence spending competes with welfare budgets for limited fiscal resources.
Belkin & Schofer (2003)	Global	Moderate – cross-national quantitative analysis	Coup incidence	Structural characteristics of militaries and states shape variation in coup risk	Organisational features of armed forces influence coordination capacity for coups
Collier & Hoeffler (2007)	Global	Moderate – cross-national regression analysis	Coup risk	Military spending and coup risk are jointly determined rather than mechanically linked	Governments balance defence resources against coup threats and security needs

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Powell (2012)	Global	Moderate – cross-national panel analysis	Coup attempts and success	Coup-proofing strategies influence likelihood of coup attempts and their outcomes	Institutional arrangements affect military coordination and regime vulnerability
Pilster & Böhmelt (2011)	Global	Moderate – quantitative analysis	Military effectiveness (interstate war)	Coup-proofing reduces military effectiveness in warfare	Measures designed to prevent coups fragment command structures and weaken operational cohesion
Thyne & Powell (2016)	Global	Moderate – cross-national panel analysis	Democratic outcomes after coups	Coups have heterogeneous political consequences, sometimes followed by democratisation but often instability	Military intervention reshapes regime trajectories rather than uniformly ending democracy
Croissant, Kuehn & Chambers (2010)	Comparative	Moderate – comparative institutional analysis	Civil-military relations / democratic consolidation	Effective civilian control is central to democratic consolidation	Autonomous militaries weaken civilian supremacy and institutional accountability
Biddle & Zirkle (1996)	Global	Moderate – comparative analysis	Military effectiveness and civil-military relations	Civil-military organisation influences military performance and political stability	Organisational structure of armed forces affects political as well as military outcomes
McCoy, Rahman & Somer (2018)	Global comparative	Moderate-High – cross-national comparative analysis	Democratic erosion	Severe political polarisation strongly associated with democratic decline	Identity-based polarisation undermines mutual toleration and institutional restraint
Somer & McCoy (2019)	Global	Moderate – comparative theoretical and empirical synthesis	Democratic stability	Pernicious polarisation transforms political competition into zero-sum conflict	Polarisation weakens informal democratic norms and increases institutional hardball

Study	Region	Strength of empirical evidence	Dependent variable	Core finding	Mechanism / interpretation
Graham & Svobik (2020)	United States (experimental)	High – survey experiment	Support for democratic norms	Voters tolerate democratic norm violations by co-partisan politicians	Partisan identity overrides commitment to democratic procedures
Iyengar et al. (2019)	United States / comparative relevance	Moderate – research synthesis	Affective polarisation	Rising partisan hostility reduces willingness to compromise politically	Emotional animosity toward opponents erodes democratic cooperation
Boxell, Gentzkow & Shapiro (2020)	Advanced democracies	Moderate-High – comparative empirical analysis	Polarisation trends	Polarisation driven more by elite and institutional dynamics than technology alone	Political and institutional incentives amplify identity conflict
Rid (2020)	Global	Moderate – historical and strategic analysis	Information conflict	Modern conflict increasingly targets information environments rather than territory	Open societies provide accessible arenas for influence operations
Bradshaw & Howard (2019)	Global	Moderate-High – comparative dataset analysis	Computational propaganda	Organised disinformation campaigns operate across democratic states	Open digital ecosystems enable manipulation at scale
Pomerantsev (2019)	Europe / Global	Moderate – comparative analysis	Information warfare	Adversaries exploit democratic media pluralism to undermine trust	Disinformation aims to confuse rather than persuade
Boin, 't Hart & McConnell (2009)	Comparative democracies	Moderate – crisis governance research	Crisis response effectiveness	Democratic decision-making processes can slow crisis response	Institutional checks increase deliberation time
Ansell, Sørensen & Torfing (2021)	Comparative	Moderate – governance analysis	Crisis coordination	Collaborative democratic governance creates coordination challenges under urgency	Distributed authority complicates rapid response
Tucker et al. (2018)	Global	Moderate – interdisciplinary synthesis	Social media and political behaviour	Social media amplifies political polarisation and susceptibility to manipulation	Digital openness lowers barriers for influence operations

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