



Strengthening Institutions: A Plan for Trust, Democracy and the Rule of Law, Seen from September 2026

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This plan is an initial draft prepared with AI models. It is open for review by subject-matter experts and will be revised as they join the work and as world and national events change.

Introduction

Institutions are the rules and organisations through which people settle disputes, choose and remove leaders, raise and spend public money, and hold officials to account. When they fail, the failure usually shows up under another name: a famine that a free press might have exposed, a war that a legislature might have checked, aid money that disappears between the treasury and the village. Amartya Sen argued that famines do not occur in functioning democracies, and a review by Raffael Hueberli for the World Peace Foundation of 22 famine events in post-colonial Africa found that 59 percent occurred under closed autocracies, 36 percent under electoral autocracies and one, Nigeria in 2016, under an electoral democracy, in a northeast cut off by armed conflict ([World Peace Foundation](#)).

Weak institutions belong among species-level problems because they govern how well every other problem on this site is handled, from [ending war](#) and [ending starvation](#) to [ending poverty](#). This essay sets out a plan that people of different political views could support, tests it against events of 2025 and 2026, and ends with revised priorities. Where the evidence or the values are contested, it states each position as its holders would.

Where things stand

Every major index of democratic quality shows more countries getting worse than getting better, although the indices differ in method and in how much decline they find.

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute at the University of Gothenburg counts 92 autocracies and 87 democracies at the end of 2025, with 74 percent of the world's people living in autocracies, and reports that for the average person the level of democracy is back to where it was in 1978. Only 18 countries were democratizing, among them Brazil and Poland ([V-Dem](#)). For the first time, six of the ten newly autocratizing countries were in

Europe and North America, including Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States; V-Dem found that the United States' score on its Liberal Democracy Index fell 24 percent in one year and its rank dropped from 20th to 51st of 179 countries ([V-Dem press release](#)).

Freedom House recorded a 20th consecutive year of net decline, with 54 countries worse and 35 better, and 21 percent of the world's people in countries rated Free, down from 46 percent two decades earlier. Guinea-Bissau, Tanzania, Burkina Faso, Madagascar and El Salvador had the largest falls in 2025, while Bolivia, Fiji and Malawi moved from Partly Free to Free. The United States dropped three points to 81 of 100, its lowest score since Freedom House began publishing 0 to 100 scores in 2002. Of the 87 countries rated Free in 2005, 76 have stayed Free throughout ([Freedom House](#)).

International IDEA finds that 94 of 174 countries declined on at least one measure of democratic performance over five years; rule of law is the weakest area, and press freedom declined more widely than at any time since IDEA's data begin in 1975 ([International IDEA](#)).

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2025 put the global average at 42 of 100, the lowest in more than a decade. Only five countries score above 80, against 12 a decade ago, and high-scoring democracies including the United States (64), the United Kingdom (70) and Canada (75) slipped ([Transparency International](#)).

The OECD's survey of 30 member countries found that 44 percent of people have low or no trust in their national government, against 39 percent with high or moderately high trust; the trust gap between people who feel they have a say in what government does and those who feel they do not is 47 percentage points, and only about 30 percent believe their government can resist corporate influence ([OECD](#)). In the United States, Pew Research Center found in September 2025 that 17 percent of adults trust the federal government to do what is right always or most of the time, against 73 percent in 1958. The figure depends heavily on who holds power: 26 percent of Republicans and 9 percent of Democrats expressed trust in 2025 ([Pew Research Center](#)). The 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer, a survey of nearly 34,000 people in 28 countries, found that seven in ten are unwilling or hesitant to trust someone with different values, backgrounds or information sources ([Edelman press release](#)).

On economic inequality, which shapes both trust and political influence, the World Inequality Report 2026 estimates that the top 10 percent of the world's adults receive 53 percent of global income and hold three-quarters of global wealth, while the bottom half receive 8 percent of income and hold 2 percent of wealth ([World Inequality Report](#)). World Bank figures show a different trend: the global Gini index fell from 70 in 1990 to 62 in 2019 as incomes in poorer countries, China above all, grew faster than in rich ones, before rising sharply in the pandemic ([World Bank](#)).

Part I: The plan

1. Protect the machinery of elections

National legislatures should place election administration in bodies whose members are appointed with cross-party agreement and cannot be dismissed for their rulings. Elections should produce voter-verifiable paper records that are audited routinely after each vote, domestic and international observers should have access to every stage, and disputes, including over presidential results, should go to courts that must rule within fixed deadlines. Regional bodies such as the African Union, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Organization of American States and the OSCE should observe elections, with donor funding, and treat the exclusion of major candidates as grounds for withholding recognition.

In Tanzania in 2025, for example, SADC's observers objected that the electoral commissioners are appointed by the president, who was also a candidate, and that the constitution bars any court from hearing a challenge to a presidential result (IOL).

2. Keep courts, auditors and prosecutors independent

Judges, supreme audit institutions and anti-corruption prosecutors need secure tenure and budgets, and appointment rules that require broad agreement. Audits work best when they are frequent, unpredictable and public. In a randomized experiment across more than 600 village road projects in Indonesia, Benjamin Olken found that raising the probability of a central government audit from 4 percent to 100 percent reduced missing expenditures by about 8 percentage points, while community monitoring reduced only missing wages and had little overall effect (Olken, NBER). In Brazil, the federal comptroller (CGU) has chosen municipalities for audit by public lottery since 2003. Claudio Ferraz and Frederico Finan found that publishing the audit reports cut the re-election chances of mayors with two reported violations by 7 percentage points, and by 16 points where three violations were reported and a local radio station carried the news (J-PAL, summarising Ferraz and Finan, *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123(2), 2008).

3. Follow the money

Governments should keep registers of the real (beneficial) owners of companies and trusts, open to law enforcement and, with privacy safeguards, to banks and journalists. They should publish public contracts in open, machine-readable form and enforce foreign bribery laws against their own companies. Ukraine's ProZorro system is the leading example. Since 2015 it has placed all public procurement, worth about 15 percent of GDP, online with electronic auctions as the default. Monitoring data show the share of procurement value awarded competitively rising from 24.5 percent in 2015 to 70.3 percent in 2017, and a study by researchers at the Kyiv School of Economics and the

Center for Global Development found evidence that the system increased the number of bidders, produced cost savings and shortened contracting times ([Center for Global Development](#)).

4. Defend a free press and an open information space

Early warning of famine, abuse and graft depends on reporters who can work safely. Transparency International counts 150 journalists killed since 2012 while covering corruption, more than 90 percent of them in countries scoring below 50 on its index ([Transparency International](#)). Legislatures should protect journalists against abusive defamation suits, fund local news through arm's-length bodies that ministers cannot direct, require disclosure of who pays for political advertising, and require large platforms to disclose how their ranking systems treat political content. The plan does not give any government the power to declare what is true, because that power would pass to whoever holds office next.

5. Make government visibly work, and give people a real say

In the OECD survey, 66 percent of recent users were satisfied with administrative services and 57 percent with education, but only about 30 percent thought the political system let them have a say ([OECD](#)). Governments should publish service standards and results, fix the failures citizens can see, and use structured, deliberative forms of participation for divisive questions. Ireland's Citizens' Assembly of 99 members, chaired by Ms Justice Mary Laffoy, recommended in April 2017 removing the constitutional ban on abortion; 64 percent of members supported allowing abortion without restriction up to 12 weeks, and in the May 2018 referendum 66 percent of voters chose repeal. Anti-abortion campaigners argued that the assembly was biased and unrepresentative ([Irish Times](#)). Assemblies of this kind are advisory, and their credibility depends on transparent member selection and a balanced choice of expert witnesses.

6. Keep emergency and war powers under legislative control

The [Ending War](#) essay argues that leaders who do not bear the costs of war start more of them. Legislatures should set time limits on declared emergencies, require affirmative votes to extend them, and exercise their constitutional role in decisions to go to war and to impose taxes, including tariffs. Where a legislature's only tool is a resolution the executive can ignore or veto, it should adopt procedures that bind, such as automatic expiry of emergency authority unless renewed by vote.

7. Sustain democracy and governance support abroad, cheaply and locally

Donor governments, including newer donors in Asia, the Gulf and Latin America, should give flexible, multi-year core funding directly to local organisations, coordinate to avoid duplication, and simplify reporting, as the Global Democracy Coalition recommends

([Global Democracy Coalition](#)); recipient organisations should diversify their funding. The sums involved are small by the standards of national budgets: the United States appropriated \$315 million for the National Endowment for Democracy in fiscal 2026 ([USGLC](#)).

8. Broaden opportunity and protect the tax base

Governments should cooperate against profit shifting, exchange tax information automatically, and invest in education, where spending gaps are large: the World Inequality Report puts education spending per child at €220 in sub-Saharan Africa against €9,020 in North America and Oceania ([World Inequality Report](#)). The rate and shape of taxes on high incomes and wealth belong to national politics. The report's proposed global minimum tax on billionaires and centi-millionaires, which it estimates could raise 0.45 to 1.11 percent of world GDP, is contested; the plan requires only a tax base that the largest firms and fortunes cannot opt out of.

Sequencing

In the first two years the priorities are the inexpensive ones: election administration and observation ahead of scheduled votes, randomized and published audits, open procurement, and protection for journalists. Over five to ten years, governments can raise service performance, build deliberative participation into policymaking and settle the terms of international tax cooperation.

What makes it stick

Reforms tend to last when each side expects to be in opposition at some point. Independent election commissions, audit offices and courts protect whichever party is out of power, and the case for them is most persuasive when a governing party makes it about itself. Reforms also last when they produce visible savings, as open procurement did in Ukraine, and when citizens and journalists can use the data directly, as Brazilian voters used published audits.

Where reasonable people disagree

How much decline is real. Andrew Little and Anne Meng argue that expert-coded indices overstate backsliding: objective measures, such as how often incumbents lose elections, show little aggregate decline over the past decade, and they suggest that coders may be influenced by news coverage ([Little and Meng, PS: Political Science & Politics](#)). Carl Henrik Knutsen and nine V-Dem colleagues reply that “objective” measures also rely on judgment, that V-Dem's methods guard against systematic coder bias, and that the balance of evidence shows genuine backsliding ([Knutsen et al., PS: Political Science & Politics](#)).

Whether inequality matters in itself. The authors of the World Inequality Report, among them Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty, hold that concentrated wealth is a problem in its own right and call for progressive taxation “all the way to the top” and public investment in education ([World Inequality Report](#)). The philosopher Harry Frankfurt argued that the moral obligation is to eliminate poverty, so that everyone has enough for a decent life, and that reducing the gap between rich and poor matters only insofar as it serves that end ([Princeton University Press](#)). Holders of both views can accept the plan’s focus on opportunity and a fair tax base while disagreeing about wealth taxes and top rates.

Who should police information. The European Commission, citing Russian influence campaigns, has proposed an EU body to detect and counter foreign information manipulation ([Eunews](#)). US Vice President JD Vance, speaking at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, argued that European “misinformation” rules and Romania’s annulment of its presidential election were suppressing speech and that a democracy that can be undone by a few hundred thousand dollars of foreign digital advertising “wasn’t very strong to begin with” ([American Presidency Project](#)).

How far the executive branch should be insulated from elected leaders. In *Trump v. Slaughter*, Chief Justice John Roberts wrote for the Supreme Court that officers who exercise executive power must be removable by the president if they are to remain accountable to him. Justice Sonia Sotomayor, in dissent, wrote that Congress and presidents had for more than a century placed some functions, such as monetary policy and product safety, at a distance from partisan control, and that the Court had discarded that practice ([Supreme Court of the United States](#)).

Whether to promote democracy abroad. Supporters, including the Global Democracy Coalition, which has documented the effects of the 2025 US cuts, want other donors to replace the lost funding with flexible support for local organisations that monitor elections, spending and abuses ([Global Democracy Coalition](#)). Representative Eli Crane, who sponsored a 2026 amendment to defund the National Endowment for Democracy, argued that it had strayed from its 1983 mission into what he called censorship campaigns and regime-change politics, and that taxpayers should not pay for it ([Office of Rep. Eli Crane](#)).

Part II: The plan in the world of September 2026

Element 1, elections: a peaceful transfer in Hungary, closed contests in Tanzania and Guinea-Bissau

On 12 April 2026, Péter Magyar’s centre-right Tisza party won 53.6 percent of the vote to 37.8 percent for Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz, on a turnout that set a post-communist record, and took 138 of 199 seats, a two-thirds majority. Orbán, in power for 16 years, conceded on

election night ([Al Jazeera](#)). V-Dem had classified Hungary as an electoral autocracy ([V-Dem](#)). The votes were nonetheless counted and the incumbent accepted the result, which is the minimum that element 1 protects.

In Tanzania, before the election of 29 October 2025, the main opposition party, Chadema, was barred after refusing to sign an electoral code of conduct, and its leader, Tundu Lissu, was charged with treason ([Al Jazeera](#)). The electoral commission declared President Samia Suluhu Hassan the winner with 97.66 percent. SADC's observer mission concluded that the vote fell short of SADC's principles for democratic elections, citing the prosecution of Lissu, the harassment of observers and signs of ballot stuffing ([IOL](#)). The death toll from the crackdown on protests remains disputed and unverified. The UN human rights office cited credible reports of at least 10 deaths; Chadema put the figure at about 800; a diplomatic source spoke of hundreds and perhaps thousands; the government denied using excessive force and released no figures ([Al Jazeera](#)).

In Guinea-Bissau the main opposition party, the PAIGC, was barred from the presidential election of 23 November 2025 after missing a filing deadline. When both the incumbent, Umaro Sissoco Embaló, and the opposition-backed candidate, Fernando Dias, claimed victory, soldiers seized power on 26 November, the day before results were due, and installed General Horta Inta-A as transitional leader ([Al Jazeera](#)). A decree in January set presidential and legislative elections for 6 December 2026 ([Anadolu Agency](#)). On 30 August voters approved a constitution that strengthens the presidency and cuts parliament from 102 to 65 seats; the PAIGC urged a boycott, while supporters said it would end conflict between president and government ([Africanews](#)). In both countries the exclusion of major candidates came before the breakdown, as the plan warns.

Elements 3 and 5, visible corruption and failing services: the youth protest wave

In Nepal, protests that erupted in September over a ban on 26 social media platforms and over posts showing the luxury lives of politicians' children ended the government of K.P. Sharma Oli ([Council on Foreign Relations](#)). In Madagascar, protests that began over persistent water and power cuts ended in mid-October when parliament impeached President Andry Rajoelina and an army unit under Colonel Michael Randrianirina took power and suspended the constitution ([Associated Press via News Tribune](#)).

Nepal then held elections, and in March 2026 Balendra Shah, a 35-year-old former mayor of Kathmandu, became prime minister and had the former prime minister and interior minister placed in custody. Madagascar's interim government contains no protest figures, and Colonel Randrianirina has promised elections by late 2027. In Bangladesh, youth-led parties won little in the February 2026 election, and in Morocco about 2,000 protesters remained imprisoned in April 2026 ([France 24](#)). Where elections followed quickly, protest produced a government with a mandate; where soldiers took over, it did not.

Elements 2 and 6, courts and legislatures: the limits of executive power in the United States

The US Supreme Court decided three major separation-of-powers cases in 2026, and they did not all point the same way. On 20 February, in *Learning Resources v. Trump*, the Court held 6 to 3 that the International Emergency Economic Powers Act does not authorise the president to impose tariffs. Chief Justice Roberts wrote for a majority that included Justices Gorsuch, Barrett, Sotomayor, Kagan and Jackson; Justices Kavanaugh, Thomas and Alito dissented ([Supreme Court of the United States](#)). The administration turned to other statutes, imposing a temporary tariff under Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974 while tariffs under Sections 232 and 301 stayed in force ([WilmerHale](#)).

On 29 June, in *Trump v. Slaughter*, the Court ruled 6 to 3 that the Federal Trade Commission's protection against removal without cause is unconstitutional, overruling *Humphrey's Executor* (1935) ([Supreme Court of the United States](#)). The same day, in *Trump v. Cook*, a 5 to 4 majority of Chief Justice Roberts and Justices Sotomayor, Kagan, Kavanaugh and Jackson held that Federal Reserve governors keep their for-cause protection, and that the president must give a governor notice and a hearing before removal ([Supreme Court of the United States](#); [CRS via EveryCRSReport](#)). In each case the courts decided and the other branches responded through lawful means, which is what elements 2 and 6 require.

Congress has tested its war powers over the war with Iran that began on 28 February 2026. On 19 May the Senate voted 50 to 47 to discharge a war powers measure from committee, a procedural step ([PBS NewsHour](#)). The House voted 215 to 208 on 3 June for House Concurrent Resolution 86, directing the removal of US forces from hostilities against Iran unless Congress authorises them, and on 24 June the Senate adopted it 50 to 48, with Republican Senators Cassidy, Collins, Murkowski and Paul voting in favour and Democratic Senator Fetterman against ([Al Jazeera](#)). On 24 September the Senate rejected another concurrent resolution, passed by the House in July, by 49 to 50, with Senator Tillis in place of Senator Cassidy among the Republicans in favour; it was the 14th time the Senate had considered a war powers measure on Iran ([Stars and Stripes](#)). Concurrent resolutions are not presented to the president and do not carry the force of law; a binding joint resolution would need the president's signature or a two-thirds override, and no war powers resolution has ever overcome a veto ([PBS NewsHour](#)).

Element 3, following the money: narrower disclosure in the largest economy, a split tax regime

Beneficial ownership disclosure has narrowed in the United States. In March 2025 the Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) issued an interim rule removing the requirement for US companies to report their beneficial owners under the Corporate Transparency Act, and a final rule made the exemption permanent from 14

August 2026; only companies formed abroad and registered to do business in a US state must still report ([FinCEN](#)). Supporters of the change regard the reporting duty as an undue burden on small businesses; critics argue that anonymous domestic companies remain open to misuse by money launderers. Enforcement of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, paused by executive order on 10 February 2025, resumed on 9 June 2025 under guidelines that focus on large bribery schemes, cartel links, national security and harm to US companies' competitiveness ([Paul, Weiss](#)).

International tax cooperation, part of element 8, has moved on two tracks. On 5 January 2026 the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework agreed a "side-by-side" arrangement that exempts US-parented multinationals from the income inclusion and undertaxed profits rules of the 15 percent global minimum tax for fiscal years from 2026 ([EY](#)). Business at OECD, the organisation's business advisory body, welcomed it for giving companies certainty and averting retaliatory tax measures ([Business at OECD](#)). The FACT Coalition, a US transparency group, argues that it weakens the minimum tax because US rules let companies blend high- and low-tax profits across countries, while agreeing that the minimum tax remains a large step forward ([FACT Coalition](#)).

The second track is at the United Nations. In August 2024, 110 countries voted for the terms of reference for a UN framework convention on international tax cooperation; eight, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan and Argentina, voted against, and 44, including all EU members, abstained ([ICIJ](#)). The United States left the negotiations in February 2025, calling their goals inconsistent with US priorities and an "unwelcome overreach" ([ICIJ](#)). The committee held its fifth session in August 2026 and meets again from 30 November, with a convention and protocols on cross-border services and dispute resolution due before the General Assembly in 2027 ([IISD](#)).

Element 4, information and trust: record lows and a contested European response

The Reuters Institute's 2026 Digital News Report found trust in news at 37 percent across 48 markets, the lowest since 2015, and 25 percent in the United States; 62 percent of respondents worry about telling real from fake content online ([Reuters Institute](#)). In November 2025 the European Commission proposed a European Democracy Shield, including a European Centre for Democratic Resilience to counter foreign information manipulation, a fact-checking network, and a media resilience programme to fund independent and local journalism. The EU's foreign policy chief, Kaja Kallas, presented it as a defence against Russian campaigns to polarise citizens; Italian MEPs from the Five Star Movement called the centre "highly dangerous" and said the Commission has no authority to decide what is fake news ([Eunews](#)).

Element 7, democracy support abroad has shrunk

A Global Democracy Coalition study found that almost 70 percent of US government-funded democracy, rights and governance awards, more than 1,600 grants worth over \$14 billion in more than 120 countries, were terminated in 2025. Nearly half of the organisations surveyed had relied on the United States for at least half their budgets ([Global Democracy Coalition](#)). Congress preserved part of the base. The fiscal 2026 appropriations, enacted in early February 2026, provided \$51.3 billion for international affairs, 16 percent below 2025 but \$20.4 billion above the administration's request. It kept the National Endowment for Democracy at \$315 million, after the House rejected Representative Crane's amendment to defund it by 291 to 127, and cut the State Department's Democracy Fund by 41 percent to \$205 million ([USGLC](#); [Office of Rep. Mario Díaz-Balart](#)). The House vote showed support for the Endowment in both parties. Together with the 2025 reductions in food aid described in the [Ending Starvation](#) essay, the cuts fell on countries such as Sudan, which Freedom House scores at 1 out of 100 ([Freedom House](#)).

Element 8, inequality: sharper data, a continuing debate

The World Inequality Report 2026 found that the wealth share of the top 0.001 percent, fewer than 60,000 people, rose from about 4 percent of global wealth in 1995 to more than 6 percent in 2025 ([World Inequality Report](#)). The Edelman survey links economic anxiety to insularity: 54 percent of low-income respondents expect generative AI to leave them behind ([Edelman press release](#)). Those who put absolute gains first point to the World Bank's long decline in global inequality. The OECD finding that only about 30 percent of people think their government can resist corporate influence identifies the ground both sides share: a tax base that large firms and fortunes cannot opt out of.

Part III: Revised priorities for the next 6 to 12 months

1. **Fund observation and election administration for the votes ahead**, above all Guinea-Bissau's elections on 6 December 2026, and press through ECOWAS, SADC and the African Union for contests in which barred parties can compete and detained opposition figures are released.
2. **Replace part of the lost democracy and governance funding** with flexible, multi-year grants to local organisations, with European, Asian, Gulf and Latin American donors sharing the cost.
3. **Scale open contracting and randomized, published audits**, particularly for reconstruction spending in Ukraine, Syria and Gaza, where large sums may move quickly.
4. **Close the anonymous-company gap by other means** where national registers have narrowed, for example through bank due-diligence rules and cooperation

between financial intelligence units.

5. **Protect journalists and publish political advertising data** before major elections, and prefer disclosure obligations on platforms to state determinations of truth.
6. **Use the UN session opening on 30 November and the OECD process** to agree practical information exchange and dispute resolution that high- and low-income countries can both accept.
7. **Give legislatures binding tools on war and emergency powers**, such as automatic expiry of emergency authority, since the Iran votes showed the limits of non-binding resolutions.

Conclusion

The events of 2025 and 2026 support the plan's emphasis on elections and accountability. Hungarian voters replaced a long-serving government because the votes were counted and the loser conceded, while the barring of opposition candidates in Tanzania and Guinea-Bissau was followed by deadly unrest in one case and a coup in the other. Youth movements angered by visible corruption and failing services brought down governments in Nepal and Madagascar, with better results in the country that moved quickly to elections. In the United States, the Supreme Court decided major questions of executive power in both directions, Congress recorded its votes on the Iran war, and the other branches worked within the results.

The plan has fared worst on money and information: democracy support has been cut sharply, beneficial ownership disclosure has narrowed in the world's largest economy, international tax cooperation has split into two tracks, and trust in news is at a record low. The indices disagree about the size of the decline, and citizens disagree about inequality and the reach of the state, but agreement is wider on honest vote counts, published audits and traceable public money, and policymakers of any party can adopt a plan built on those rules.

Events are moving quickly; this essay reflects reporting available as of 28 September 2026.

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