

Democracy, Governance, Institutions, and Rights

Questions of governance loom large in the fortunes of democracy and human rights globally. While nation-states and intergovernmental organizations form the core of the global political order, non-state actors—non-governmental organizations, religious communities, multinational corporations, and the like—also play key roles in addressing key global challenges such as climate change, international migration, infectious disease, and peacebuilding.¹

However, as political scientist and global affairs scholar **Kyle Jaros** noted in his conference paper and presentation, the idea that subnational governments (SNGs) also have a critical part to play in tackling global challenges has gained traction since the turn of the 21st century.² In our globalized economy SNGs are inescapably involved in matters that cross national borders.³ Large, well-resourced public organizations with local know-how, SNGs have policy authority in key areas such as health, education, economic development, land use, energy, urban planning, and transportation. In many cases, SNGs have higher popular accountability and public approval than national governments, Jaros added, and their leaders are usually less preoccupied with zero-sum questions of sovereignty and security.

Indeed, cities, states, and provinces around the world have already jumped into the fray across many issue domains. “They have launched local initiatives, formed new networks, or more closely aligned their work with that of national governments and international organizations,” Jaros writes. “States such as California and São Paulo have positioned themselves as advocates, innovators, and conveners on climate and environmental issues.”⁴ More than 2,000 cities and local governments have joined coordinated efforts to promote sustainable urban planning and development practices, while UN-linked programs such as Cities of Migration and Cities Alliance have taken aim at issues of poverty and people movements across borders.

Despite the increasing importance of SNGs, we know relatively little about how they operate. Nearly all the information about the dynamics and drivers of subnational global engagement comes from the post-Cold War era, Jaros explained, a period of global economic integration and peace between the great powers. Then, it was relatively straightforward for SNGs, often encouraged by central governments, to forge economic ties, cultural links, and policy cooperation abroad. Yet the world today looks quite different: Geopolitical tensions between the West and its principal rivals—China, Russia, and Iran—are surging, and great power war is no longer unthinkable. “Economic globalization has paused and possibly shifted into reverse, with market liberalism in retreat and statism advancing,” Jaros noted. “Nationalism and populism are ascendant, and cultural identities are hardening, both within and across countries.”

In this context the following questions are salient: How much political and practical scope is there for global activism by SNGs? How will the concerns and the goals motivating their global engagement change? Under what conditions can we expect subnational global engagement to serve as a force for global cooperation and a counterweight to mounting tensions, and under what conditions can we expect it to further inflame international tensions?

One case where regional and local governments have already found themselves in the middle of geopolitics is the activity of states and provinces within the US-China relationship. Over the past few decades, US states and their Chinese counterparts have been at the forefront of the two countries' economic, cultural, and political exchanges.⁵ But SNGs involvement has come under scrutiny on both sides in recent years, as US-China relations worsen and "low politics" and "high politics" blur together.

The US-China context offers an especially hard test for the proposition that pragmatic subnational officials can escape the zero-sum logic of nation-states and forge cooperation on areas of mutual interest. Professor Jaros' current research, conducted in collaboration with Sara Newland of Smith College, assesses recent trends in state and local-level relations between the US, China, and Taiwan and considers the prospects for constructive US-China engagement at the subnational level.⁶ Using both quantitative and qualitative data, they track the changing mix of cooperation and confrontation in states' and cities' interactions with China, and explore the causes and consequences of diverging state-level postures toward China. Tracking a number of factors that affect state-level US-China relations—from states' economic links to China, to the orientations of governors to the changing nature and priorities of Chinese partners—Jaros and Newland find evidence of how state-level interactions with China can affect the larger US-China relationship, both positively and negatively.

The stakes of this research are significant. In the wake of the 2023 spy balloon brush-up, US-China relations hit their lowest level since diplomatic normalization in 1979. A growing number of officials and citizens from both parties today see US-China relations as having entered a new Cold War, and many are concerned about open military conflict between the US and the PRC in the near- to medium-term.⁷ Managing the US-China relationship has become one of the leading global challenges of the 21st century, Jaros argued, noting that both the highs and the lows of the US-China relationship take concrete shape at the level of cities and states, where trade and investment relations, educational and cultural interaction, and science and technology play out.

Jaros and Newland find evidence that subnational relations represent an important site for the management of the larger US-China relationship, and that state and local officials exercise key agency in their own right. At the subnational level, as at the national level, competition and confrontation with China have grown more prominent over the past several years. "But we also find continued, if more circumscribed, cooperation and significant variation across states. While some states are adopting policies that go beyond those of the federal government in

their level of hawkishness toward China, others are seeking to manage tensions and preserve important areas of cooperation with China established over the past two decades.” In some cases, Jaros adds, states are simultaneously taking both cooperative and confrontational actions toward China.

For nearly all US states and localities, China emerged as a key trade partner and a key market for business investment during the 2000s and 2010s.⁸ Accordingly, many states and cities sent trade delegations to China, opened state offices in China, or engaged closely with Chinese business associations. Alongside booming trade and investment ties, US states and localities also became increasingly reliant on Chinese tourists, talent, and university tuition dollars in the 2010s. Universities and research institutions formed close links with Chinese counterparts and heavily recruited students from the PRC, paving the way for large numbers of highly-skilled Chinese nationals to enter the US workforce. Other prominent areas of subnational cooperation with China included climate and environmental work, where states such as California took the lead in fostering cooperation on new technologies and policy dialogues.

Of course, Jaros acknowledged, subnational US-China relations have always had to navigate around thorny geopolitical questions (such as the status of Taiwan) and sensitive issues of ideology and human rights (in relation to Tiananmen, Tibet, religious persecution, and, more recently, Xinjiang). But during the first decade and a half of the 21st century, he noted, US governors and mayors from red and blue states alike, as well as their Chinese counterparts, often bracketed political questions as they rushed to promote cooperation.⁹ National leaders, too, encouraged dialogue and cooperation between subnational authorities from the two countries.¹⁰

After 2017, however, rising US-China tensions at the national level increasingly spilled over into subnational relations as well. As China’s government grew more domestically repressive and internationally aggressive under Xi Jinping, a growing number of US officials and experts questioned the utility of continued engagement with the PRC.¹¹ The bluntly anti-China rhetoric and policies of the first Trump administration, which launched a trade war, limited technology exports, and pursued increasingly close ties with Taiwan, ratcheted up bilateral tensions and suspicion. Increasingly strained US-China economic and political relations cast a pall over state and local interaction with China, and Trump administration officials warned subnational governments in the US about threats to US national security and manipulative business practices by Chinese partners.¹²

Against this backdrop, cooperation with Chinese counterparts has involved numerous concerns for state and local authorities. Fears of PRC espionage and threats to US critical infrastructure have led to growing scrutiny of Chinese talent and investment in the US. Concerns about political influence on unprepared subnational officials surged following documented instances in which Chinese officials pressured US state or local leaders to adopt particular language in discussing the Taiwan issue or to downplay human rights concerns,

Jaros explained. More general anxiety about the possibility of CCP manipulation of the US public through educational or cultural forms such as PRC-funded Confucius Institutes also spiked.¹³ Perhaps the greatest impact of all came from the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, which disrupted normal travel and trade flows between the US and China for years and also aggravated mutual suspicions.

Amid worsening US-China relations, with the situation likely to deteriorate further under the second Trump administration, some argue that the role of governors and mayors in the US-China relationship has never been more important.¹⁴ Universities and non-profit organizations such as Sister Cities International and the US Heartland China Association have promoted subnational dialogue with China and established channels for people-to-people exchange to increase mutual understanding at a time of growing hostility. For its part, the PRC government has shown a clear interest in the preservation of dialogue and cooperation at the subnational level as a way to stabilize the US-China relationship and find friendlier audiences at the state and local level.¹⁵ Increasingly, however, such interactions are drawing criticism from China hawks in the US federal government and state capitals.¹⁶ While some of this criticism is hyperbolic, Jaros and Newland do recognize the need to identify and mitigate the security risks that can accompany subnational US-China interactions.¹⁷

The research being conducted by Jaros and Newland explores what has happened at the subnational level of US-China relations since 2012. They gather and analyze quantitative data on subnational China relations for all US states and conduct in-depth case studies of four US states (California, Florida, Indiana, and New Hampshire) based on interviews and primary sources. Seeking to provide the most comprehensive analysis to date of how states' relations with China have varied over time and across states, they also explore the social, economic, and political factors that are driving different patterns of state-level relations with China. In addition, Jaros and Newland track the impacts of subnational relations on the US-China relationship, particularly on efforts to restore exchanges and communication amid increasing rivalry.

In order to track variation over time across states in subnational US-China relations, Jaros and Newland are building a State-Level Action on China (SLAC) dataset that contains data for all 50 states for the years 2012-2024 on multiple indicators of state-level cooperation and confrontation with China. By state-level cooperation, they mean actions by US state governments that directly or indirectly promote engagement with China (e.g., visits by state governors and lieutenant governors to China), official agreements with Chinese government entities, opening of state trade offices in China, and passage of legislation or legislative resolutions supportive of dialogue or engagement with China. Confrontation, on the other hand, refers to state-level actions that single China out for criticism or seek to limit interaction with China. This category includes indicators such as anti-China legislation and resolutions, executive actions and attorney general actions targeting China, and US governors' visits to Taiwan (which the PRC vigorously opposes).

Analysis of this dataset yields several interesting findings. As expected, there has been a decline in state-level cooperation and a marked rise in confrontation in recent years, particularly since 2017. Between 2012-2016, 53 governors or lieutenant governors traveled to China; the corresponding number between 2017-2022 was only 16 (affected, of course, by Covid-19 as well as rising tensions). Since China eased its Covid-19 controls in late 2022, only one US governor, California's Gavin Newsom, has visited the PRC as of this writing. States inked at least 39 agreements with PRC government counterparts in the earlier period and only 18 during the latter period. Meanwhile, the number of anti-China resolutions adopted by state legislatures rose from 24 to 46 and the number of anti-China laws adopted rose from 0 in the earlier period to 19 in the latter period. Executive orders and attorney general actions targeting China also rose sharply, climbing from 0 to 19 and 0 to 44, respectively.

Yet Jaros and Newland also find that state-level cooperation and confrontation toward China can coexist at the same moments and places. During the period between 2017-2019, US states collectively showed high levels of both confrontation and cooperation. At the level of individual states, cooperation and confrontation function as distinct dimensions of state-level action toward China that can move separately. As would be expected, a growing number of states in recent years have exhibited what they call *anti-engagement* (high confrontation, low cooperation) postures toward China, including Arizona, Florida, and Texas. However, there are also states that continue to display a *pro-engagement* posture, such as California, Illinois, and Oregon. States such as Georgia, Idaho, and Indiana display what Jaros and Newland call a *contested engagement* orientation, with both confrontational and cooperative actions toward China between 2017 and 2022. Finally, the duo identify states that score low both on measures of cooperation and confrontation, such as Colorado and Connecticut. "Our findings show that geopolitical tensions have constrained the types and level of state-level cooperation with China and contributed to more and more confrontational action," Jaros reported. "However, they also show that there is considerable heterogeneity at the state level even amid the emergence of a national-level bipartisan consensus on China, suggesting that state-level leaders still have latitude to determine their approaches to China and remain important agents in the larger US-China relationship."

Explaining variation in state-level approaches toward China

If state-level postures toward China vary widely and do not fully align with federal policy trends, what factors are driving state-level outcomes? To what extent do diverging patterns of China relations correlate with basic state-level economic and political characteristics? Do factors such as the extent of states' economic dependence on China, dominant political party, or the urban/rural population breakdown of different states appear to predict—and potentially explain—different trajectories of state-level relations with China? Once the SLAC dataset is complete, Jaros and Newland will be able to use state-year-level data (650 observations on a range of variables) to explore these relationships in a fine-grained way

with enough statistical power for multivariate regression analysis. Their preliminary work takes a simpler approach, exploring how different state-level characteristics for the 50 states covary with index measures of cooperation and confrontation for the 2012-2016 period and the 2017-2022 period that lump together the various indicators described above.

This initial analysis shows that state-level cooperation with China has a positive relationship with states' level of economic dependence on China. This basic relationship holds whether we look at states' exports to China as a share of state GDP, the quantity of inbound Chinese FDI, or the number of Chinese students attending local universities, Jaros explained. "On the other hand, we do not see a clear relationship between states' economic dependence on China and levels of confrontation, suggesting that confrontation operates according to a different logic than cooperation." For the 2017-2022 period Jaros and Newland find a positive relationship between Republican vote share and confrontation toward China. This relationship is not necessarily causal, but it raises the possibility that cooperation increasingly has been driven by party-political logic, particularly under the Trump and Biden administrations.

Just as noteworthy as these individual findings, however, is the fact that state-level variation is not neatly or uniformly predicted by economic and political variables, Jaros added. The weakness of these structural predictors again highlights the importance of political agency in the subnational US-China relationship. Indeed, the in-depth case studies conducted by Jaros and Newland of four US states provide ample evidence of the importance of governors, attorneys general, and individual state legislators—as well as their Chinese counterparts—in influencing state-level US-China relations. Drawing on interviews, primary documents, and secondary sources, Jaros and Newland are analyzing the dynamics and drivers of subnational cooperation and confrontation in greater depth for California, Florida, Indiana, and New Hampshire. Their work to date provides clear evidence of the importance that key individuals and institutions have had in shaping states' relations with China.¹⁸

"It is clear," Jaros summarized, "that state governments are increasingly operating at the forefront of the US-China relationship, simultaneously adopting some of the most aggressive anti-China measures and pursuing ambitious cooperation on global issues such as climate change. While our research into the impacts state-level policies toward China are having on the larger US-China relationship is only beginning, it is already clear that actions by US governors, mayors, and other subnational leaders are shifting the contours of the larger relationship."¹⁹

Policy implications

State-level US-China relations serve as a bellwether for the more general fate of subnational global engagement in times of great power rivalry. The ongoing research by Jaros and Newland reveals that the subnational level has become an increasingly important part of the

larger US-China relationship but also an increasingly volatile space. A decade ago, most US states sought closer ties with Chinese counterparts. Today, many state-level actors are now pursuing confrontational measures toward China, taking executive or legislative action to denounce the CCP, curb business and educational ties, and root out perceived risks of PRC interference in their communities.

Months into the second Trump administration, however, there were signs of continued divergence in state-level approaches to China. “While it is clear that the once-pragmatic realm of subnational engagement with China is now hotly politicized and securitized,” Jaros writes, “it is also clear that state and local leaders exercise considerable agency in the larger US-China relationship.” The variation over time and across states in subnational policies toward China “shows that governors, state legislators, and other actors have both power and discretion to influence the contours of the larger US-China relationship.” In some cases, this means states (e.g., Florida) took a harder line on China than DC, amplifying underlying US-China tensions and making the people-to-people exchange more difficult. In other cases, however, states (e.g., California) positioned themselves as bridge-builders, taking active steps to preserve or even deepen cooperation with Chinese actors on pressing global challenges such as the climate crisis.

Given that state governors, legislators, attorneys general, and various other subnational actors are playing an increasingly consequential role, Jaros argued, it is crucial that such actors recognize what is at stake in their policy choices and craft careful decisions.²⁰ Amid the politicization of China-related topics, some state officials are rushing to adopt broad-brush policy measures such as real estate purchase bans and restrictions on university exchanges with China without properly consulting affected stakeholders or holding robust debates. While the economic, educational, and people-to-people ties that US states and cities have built with China over the past few decades undoubtedly carry some dangers, he added, they have also brought many benefits. Responsible policymakers need to carefully weigh these risks and rewards as they impose limits on China engagement or pursue new areas of cooperation.

There is also a need for better communication and coordination on China relations across different states and between states and the federal government, Jaros concluded. State officials rarely share data or consult with counterparts in other jurisdictions as they make policy decisions about engagement with or disengagement from China, but their policy choices have externalities. National security issues such as the protection of military installations and critical infrastructure (power grids, water systems, internet, and telecommunication systems, etc.) spill across state boundaries and directly involvement federal interests, but increasingly states are adopting patchwork approaches to regulating what types of Chinese investment, business, and university contacts are permitted. “In place of this fragmented and often partisan approach,” Jaros urges, “it would be helpful for states to agree with one another and with federal agencies on common sense floors and ceilings for what constitutes appropriate business or scientific engagement with China.” It

is also important, he emphasized, to build more connective tissue between state and local governments and federal actors.²¹ In addition, both subnational and federal policymakers should reaffirm the important role of subnational and citizen diplomacy in promoting mutual understanding and peacebuilding with foreign adversaries.

There is no avoiding the fact that the US and China have found themselves in a protracted period of intense geopolitical rivalry, Jaros acknowledged. While this will preclude certain areas of cooperation in the years to come (particularly where critical infrastructures and cutting-edge technologies are concerned), it necessitates even more work to ensure that the two countries and their citizens understand one another's concerns and respect one another's basic humanity. It is particularly troubling that politicians in Indiana and other states are currently criticizing and seeking to limit the practice of citizen diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges on the grounds that it betrays US interests. President Dwight D. Eisenhower launched the People-to-People Program in 1956 in the early years of the first Cold War not because he was naïve about the hostile intentions of the USSR leadership, but precisely because he recognized the risk that mutual misunderstanding and dehumanization would increase the risk of another world war. "While the new Cold War may differ from the previous one in many ways," Jaros noted, "we would do well to remember this insight."

Around the world, state, local and national officials are engaged not only with their counterparts in other nations; they are also attempting to respond to a surge in disruptive activism unfolding both within and across borders. "The world is currently awash in protest activity," declared sociologist and peace studies professor **Ann Mische** at the outset of her presentation on "Unruly Citizens, Protest and Contention in Struggles for Justice and Human Dignity." In 2023, she reported, the Global Protest Tracker at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace noted the eruption of new protests in 83 countries, ranging from China and Nigeria to France, Hungary, Poland, Tunisia, Iran and Guatemala.²² Citizen mobilization has been surging since the 2008 global financial crisis, which was followed by a wave of "protests in the Squares," from the *Indignados* in Spain and Gezi Park in Turkey to the Arab spring uprisings and the Occupy movement worldwide.²³ Carnegie's Global Protest Tracker has recorded over 700 significant antigovernment protests in 147 countries since 2017, 18 percent of which lasted over three months.²⁴

To paraphrase social movement scholars, what is everyone shouting about?²⁵ And from our perspective at the Keough School, Mische added, what does all of this shouting have to do with IHD? "Protest doesn't sound very 'holistic' or 'dialogic,' and it can in some cases contribute to polarization, violence, suffering, and instability. Still, protests are unavoidably with us in today's world – and they point us both to deficits in integral human development and to possible ways of remedying those deficits," she said. "We need to pay close attention to the dynamics of citizen mobilization for social change, contentious and provocative as it may often be, if we take seriously our commitment to a more just and humane world."

Professor Mische defines IHD as “a normative and aspirational horizon that expresses our commitment to the inherent dignity and value of all people, as relationally embedded in communities.” For people to thrive in communities, she continued, they not only need access to sources of material survival and well-being, but also to opportunities for creativity, productive work, and community recognition. In addition, they need participatory and decisional input into governance structures in those communities at various levels, from the local to the transnational. This means going beyond just alleviating poverty or supplying basic needs.

Protesters worldwide are expressing exactly these kinds of aspirational horizons, and social movements are carriers of calls for justice and human dignity.²⁶ Most movements in the current protest cycle express a diverse combination of grievances, including unemployment, inequality, discrimination, precarious public services, corruption, authoritarianism, and state repression.²⁷ “These grievances reflect intense deficits in the conditions that contribute to integral human development,” Mische posited. “Often, the structural conditions that generate these deficits are entrenched and hard to change, involving webs of powerful interests at local and transnational levels. These structural barriers can undermine even well-intentioned policy interventions by states, international agencies, or civil society actors.”

In response to these entrenched barriers, she contended, citizen protest can be a useful, even necessary disruption—what the late civil rights leader John Lewis described as “good trouble.” Without protest, women would not have the right to vote, slavery and racial segregation would still be legal, workers would not have the pathways to the middle class that unionized jobs enabled (or used to enable), and we would likely be even further along the path to climate catastrophe. None of these social movement struggles of the past are completely resolved; most are ongoing on various fronts. But most historic expansions of democratic rights, benefits, and protections – including many that we take for granted today – have come about when those in power have had to bargain with unruly citizens.²⁸

Of course, Mische acknowledged, this unruliness can also carry social and political costs. When states and powerholders see citizen demands as a threat and respond with repression, nonviolent protests can escalate into further violence and even radicalize into brutal and sustained civil wars.²⁹ Movements can generate counter-movements that express contending injustice claims, contributing to polarization, as we have seen in debates over abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, or climate change.³⁰ And protest can amplify broad citizen distrust in political institutions, including skepticism about political parties and democracy more generally, she noted. This in turn generates ripe conditions for populist appeals from both the right and the left.

Anti-partisan protest and democratic backsliding

Mische has addressed the problem of citizen distrust in political institutions in her work on anti-partisan protest, which began in 2008. In a 2024 article in the *American Journal of Sociology*, coauthored with Kellogg Institute Ph.D. fellow Tomás Gold, for example, she examines the political effects of the intense skepticism about political parties expressed in many recent protests, in which people reject not just the party in power, but political parties more generally.³¹ As Argentine citizens have shouted in successive protest waves, “Que se vayan todos” – throw them all out! Similar sentiments were expressed by the Indignados in Spain who occupied Madrid’s Puerto de Sol, proclaiming “No parties represent me!” We heard this fierce anti-partisan sentiment in protests in Brazil, Italy, France, the UK, Greece, Iceland, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Turkey, India, and the Philippines, as well as in the US, Professor Mische notes. Sometimes anti-partisanship is expressed by radical horizontalist or neo-anarchist activists who affirm direct democracy and are skeptical of all hierarchical forms of political organization (like states, unions, and parties). In other cases, it reflects a broader distrust of corrupt and unresponsive institutions and frustration with partisan polarization.

In their article, Mische and Gold trace how political parties and politicians in 12 countries have responded to the intense rejection of parties and partisanship from citizens in the streets. They find that partisan actors often try to deflect strong anti-partisan sentiment from the protests onto their political rivals, thus using generalized distrust of parties to gain political advantage. The coauthors identify four different protest pathways, each representing disruptive shifts in political alignments: (1) the formation of new parties (as with Podemos in Spain or Syriza in Greece); (2) the rise of new internal party factions (as in the rise of Corbyn in the UK and Sanders and the Tea Party in the US); (3) the emergence of new anti-incumbent coalitions (as in Argentina or Bulgaria); and, (4) the ascension of extremist populist leaders (as in Brazil, India, and the Philippines). These pathways, they write, are shaped both by party-movement interactions and by the structure of the partisan field (analyzed by comparing degrees of party institutionalization, party cohesion, and partisan field fragmentation). Mische and Gold use measures from the Varieties of Democracy project (a.k.a. V-Dem)³² to compare field structures, along with in-depth case studies to trace the mechanisms and pathways that lead to these diverging outcomes.

They argue that widespread citizen distrust of political institutions – expressing frustrations tied to aspirations for human dignity and recognition – can lead to disruptive new political configurations, including those that are deeply troubling for democracy.

Mische studied these dynamics up close in the massive wave of protest that swept Brazil in June 2013.³³ Over two weeks, local protests against a transit fare hike led by small neo-anarchist groups in São Paulo escalated to over a million people in the streets across the entire country. Protesters were fed up with all sorts of things, she found, constituting “a grab-bag of demands associated with both the left and the right.” Grievances ranged

from inadequate social services in health and education to LGBTQ+ rights, government corruption, religious freedom, and excessive taxation. Beyond these specific frustrations, protesters also expressed a strong rejection of political parties of all stripes. “This anti-partisan sentiment was amplified in the early stages by neo-anarchist affirmations of direct democracy and rejection of hierarchical institutions,” she writes. “But it was also expressed in more broadly patriotic and nationalist terms, as in the slogan ‘My Party is Brazil.’”

As the protests progressed, this generalized anti-partisan sentiment was steered increasingly against the parties in power, especially the incumbent Worker’s Party (PT). Protesters burned PT flags and shouted party activists off the streets. On social media, these actions were egged on by shadowy figures in Anonymous masks that launched into anti-PT diatribes on Facebook and Twitter, infused with a blend of libertarian and anti-fascist themes. Increasingly polarized social media debates contributed to dueling mobilizations for and against the Impeachment of PT President Dilma Rousseff in 2016.³⁴ A massive corruption investigation (known as “Lava Jato” or “Car Wash”) further discredited not only the PT, but most of Brazil’s established parties across the political spectrum, amplifying the generalized anti-partisanship. In 2018, the previously marginal politician Jair Bolsonaro was able to capitalize on this heightened rejection of political parties. His presidential campaign adopted the slogan from the 2013 protests, “My Party is Brazil.” In this case, Mische noted, strong anti-partisanship amplified by corruption scandals and massive protest waves contributed to the electoral success of a racist, misogynistic autocrat and to significant democratic backsliding in Brazil.

Mische and Gold argue that similar dynamics can be seen in the Philippines and India, both of which had huge waves of strongly anti-partisan protests against corruption a few years before the elections of Duterte and Modi, respectively. In order to understand democratic backsliding in these countries, Mische added, we need to pay attention “not only to political institutions, public opinion, and digital technologies, but also to unruly citizens in the streets, and their sometimes collaborative, sometimes hostile interactions with politicians and political parties.”

Directions for the future

Social movement scholarship is rich and flourishing, Mische reported, and her research will focus on three areas of importance. First, she explained, we need more attention to the role of right-wing social movements, as well as conservative civil society organizations and networks. Studies of social movements and civil society have focused disproportionately on citizen activism that understands itself to be “progressive” or left-leaning. In the US, our most highly studied and paradigmatic case is the civil rights movement. Internationally, social movement scholarship has focused on mobilization around human rights, environmental issues, labor or land-based conflict, demands for social services, racial or gender inequality, or pro-democracy struggles. Likewise, scholarship on “civil society” in

democracy, development, and peacebuilding arenas has largely focused on community-based organizations or advocacy groups associated with progressive stances toward liberal democracy, social inclusion, and citizen participation. Yet many forms of protest in the world today are ambiguous in their politics, blurring traditional ideological divides between right and left. Moreover, the focus on progressive activism risks overlooking important forms of contemporary mobilization; for example, conservative sectors are increasingly organized and networked, mobilizing grassroots activists in communities and engaging in electoral competition and institutional intervention.³⁵

They have learned from the playbook of more left-leaning movements and organizations in their tactics and framing strategies. These movements and networks are having important consequences on elections, community struggles, and organizational practices. We need more attention to the dynamics and consequences of these movements, including their influences on democratic institutions.

A second area of focus of Mische's research is the contributions of "insider-outsider" strategies that bridge social movements and institutional politics. Not all activists attempt to storm the barricades from the outside; some work for change within powerful institutions, including governments, corporations, international organizations, or religious institutions.³⁶ These insider strategies are often greeted with suspicion; protesters can be reluctant to engage with established institutions, either because they reject the idea of working within oppressive and power-laden systems or because they distrust politicians or fear cooptation. "We have seen ample evidence of this distrust in the recent anti-partisan protest wave," she writes. "However, collaboration between change-makers inside and outside of institutions is essential if movements want to have lasting effects that advance human dignity and justice. Insider-outsider coalitions combine the disruptive impact of protest in the streets with more pragmatic attempts to reshape states and non-state institutions in ways that address social inequalities and support democracy and community well-being."³⁷

These coalitions can be difficult and uncomfortable, walking an uneasy line between cooperation and challenge. Yet they can be important means by which the demands of unruly citizens become institutionalized and sustained over time. Given that democratic institutions are under threat worldwide, understanding the factors that support or undermine insider-outsider coalitions is an important area of future research, she asserted.

Finally, scholars and policymakers need to understand how citizen participation in deliberative forums is contributing to new future imaginaries. Professor Mische's book-in-progress, *Futures in Contention: Public Scenarios and Transformative Politics in the Global Area*, focuses on the role of "futures thinking" and foresight techniques in deliberations over democracy, development, peacebuilding, and climate change. She examines how coalitions of local and global actors are engaging in public interest scenario-building exercises that

aim to re-narrate collective futures amidst the entrenched dilemmas and problems of the contemporary world.³⁸

Participatory scenario methodologies have been used worldwide since the 1990s to address a broad array of local and global challenges, including democracy, armed conflict, organization, energy use, food security, and climate change. “Understanding collective efforts to re-imagine futures is essential to our work at the Keough School and to the promotion of IHD and democratic engagement more generally,” Mische noted. “Such forums bring together the challenging voices and disruptive imaginaries of unruly citizens with institutional actors and policymakers concerned with pragmatics, planning, and organizational constraints. Such future-oriented deliberations – contentious and difficult as they might be – are critical to our consideration of pathways of action in an uncertain world.”

We need a much more robust understanding of the role of citizen participation and protest in building and sustaining democratic institutions, Mische argued. “More generally, attention to social movements and contentious politics expresses – and even deepens – our commitment to integral human development,” she said. Social movement analysis offers diagnostic tools for understanding the harmful social and political effects of deficits in justice and dignity. At the same time, it provides prognostic tools for considering how unruly citizens can contribute to challenging these deficits and provoking structural transformation. Finally, it can also provide cautionary tools for understanding when protest may work in the opposite direction, contributing to exclusionary politics, increased violence and repression, and democratic backsliding.

As scholars, practitioners, and policymakers, she concluded, we should not treat social movements in either a fearful way (as a harbinger of insecurity and unrest) or in a romanticized way (as heroic nonviolent advocates for justice and democracy). Rather, “we should develop a realistic, nuanced, and empirically-informed understanding of the broad range of mechanisms by which unruly citizens have contributed – and will most certainly continue to contribute – to aspirations and struggles for justice, recognition, and human dignity.”

The struggle for justice, recognition and human dignity is also at the heart of the research of political scientist and global affairs scholar **Abby Córdova**, who presented her groundbreaking research on “Women at the Front Line: Resisting Democratic Backsliding amidst Gender-Based Violence.” Across the world, she began, human rights advocates who resist democratic backsliding face a high risk of violence, including death threats and assassinations. In 2022 alone, at least 401 human rights defenders were killed across 26 countries—many of whom were standing up against authoritarianism and state repression.³⁹ Globally, women are at the front line of democracy and human rights protection, leading efforts to seek justice for victims of state repression and exerting “major influence on popular movements against democratic erosion around the world.”⁴⁰ Not surprisingly, she

reported, women who stand up for human rights are disproportionately targeted by arrest and detention, legal actions, and death threats.⁴¹

In the Americas, Córdova noted, the rise of authoritarian populism has significantly increased the risk of political violence against women and, indeed, of all forms of gender-based violence. Authoritarian populist candidates and elected leaders—Bolsonaro in Brazil, López Obrador in Mexico, Bukele in El Salvador, Trump in the US, Milei in Argentina—have engaged in misogynous rhetoric or verbal attacks against women in opposition parties or members of civil society organizations. They have also crusaded against “gender ideology” by portraying demands for gender equality as a discourse of the enemy or as a threat to cultural norms.⁴² This partisan political tactic, she argued, has resulted in anti-gender equality policies such as the reduction of budgets dedicated to reducing violence against women and the elimination of education materials promoting gender equality in schools. These trends have also surfaced in Europe, where “gender wars” in Poland and Hungary have undermined the implementation of policies aimed at protecting women from gender-based violence.

The authoritarian move to marginalize advocates of gender equality is part of a larger strategy to cultivate a “militarized masculinist approach to policy [by] delegitimizing challenges to it.”⁴³ By promoting the idea that only men are capable of governing and by undermining any kind of gender-based analysis or critique, the anti-gender rhetoric of militant populists undermines a core pillar of IHD, namely that every human being “by virtue of its existence possesses dignity in equal measure.”⁴⁴

The EVAW Lab

Central to the Keough School’s response to this assault on democracy and IHD is the aforementioned Eliminating Violence against Women (E-VAW) Lab—a Notre Dame research, policy, and practice initiative led by Professor Córdova. Focusing on Latin America and the Caribbean, the E-VAW Lab, headquartered in the Kellogg Institute, engages in comparative research on the drivers of gender-based violence and the effectiveness of strategies intended to eliminate such violence. Conducting multi-method research, the Lab helps to inform and accompany the efforts of local and international organizations to eradicate gender-based violence and promote gender equality, democracy, and IHD. In 2023 the E-VAW Lab was invited to share research findings with the UN Women Global Leaders’ Forum. The Forum identified the “pushback” against gender equality as a primary obstacle to advancing the Sustainable Development Goals of ending violence against women worldwide. Scholars and policy-makers recognize that populist crusades against women’s rights constitute a direct attack on democracy.⁴⁵ This is because an attack on gender equality, Córdova explained, is an attack on the political engagement

of those who resist authoritarian populist regimes and democratic backsliding. Misogynist rhetoric and policies threaten the pillars that uphold liberal democracy and IHD. As Robert Dahl, the pioneering theorist of the modern concept of liberal democracy, proclaimed over four decades ago: “If we believe in democracy as a goal or ideal, then implicitly we must view political equality as a goal or ideal.”

Drawing from cases in Latin America, the E-VAW Lab’s research, led by Córdova and staffed by Notre Dame students, examines how democratic backsliding is affecting women in the region and identifies ways to protect women vulnerable to gender-based violence. For example, the E-VAW Lab has documented how populist authoritarian leaders’ adoption of a “militarized masculinist” public security strategy is fueling violence, not only against members of organized criminal organizations but also against civilians and anyone declared an “internal enemy,” including journalists, religious figures, political opponents, and human rights advocates—many of whom are women.

El Salvador is an emblematic case of the use of a militarized public security strategy to convey a “tough on crime” image that has also been instrumentalized to repress those standing up for democracy, Córdova said. El Salvador’s “model,” which has relied on militarization, a prolonged state of emergency, and suspended constitutional rights, has also been adopted in Honduras and Ecuador, while political leaders in other countries have praised it as an effective strategy to curb crime. Yet so-called “effective” negotiations between officials of these governments and organized criminal groups have resulted in the unlawful release of gang leaders from prison.⁴⁶

The militarization of public security has been the preferred policy response of authoritarian populist leaders not only in Latin America but across the world, Professor Córdova noted, despite abundant evidence documenting its ineffectiveness in reducing criminality in the long run.⁴⁷ The evidence points, instead, to the tendency of the militarization of public security to escalate violence and increase massive human rights violations. The Philippines, under President Duterte’s administration, exemplified the pattern whereby wars on crime, fueled by notions of masculine toughness, result in widespread unlawful detentions and extrajudicial killings. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa, a renowned Filipina journalist and Senior Policy Fellow at the Keough School, experienced first-hand the connection between state and gender-based violence and human rights violations; the story of the Duterte government’s prosecution of Ressa is one of numerous examples of how women standing-up for democracy in militarized contexts are experiencing repression and/or violence under the governments of authoritarian populist leaders.

Ordinary women are also at risk of gender-based violence in contexts of democratic backsliding. The E-VAW Lab has documented this reality in El Salvador and Mexico. The militarization of public security in El Salvador results in a higher incidence of sexual harassment against women and girls perpetrated by state-armed actors in neighborhoods

historically marked by criminal governance. Moreover, widespread impunity and lack of trust in the police in these territories leads to greater numbers of cases of intimate partner violence: fearful that perpetrators will go unpunished and unrestrained, victims and witnesses are less likely to report incidents to the police. The resulting increase in violence against women, Córdova reported, occurs at the same time that governments are dismantling systems designed to *prevent* violence against women.

By limiting access to specialized services for survivors and dismantling prevention mechanisms, populist authoritarian leaders in El Salvador, Brazil and elsewhere contribute to the normalization of gender-based violence against women. The implementation or dismantling of public policies, which signals to the population the issues that governments prioritize, helps to shape public opinion and social norms.⁴⁸ Consequently, Córdova explained, campaigns against “gender ideology” and subsequent gender discriminatory policies can undermine citizen support for gender equality, reinforcing attitudes, particularly among men, that tolerate various forms of violence against women. In addition, limiting programs that address violence against women and reducing specialized services for survivors, such as women’s police stations and shelters, can increase women’s skepticism about whether government institutions will respond to their needs in cases of gender-based victimization.

Unsurprisingly, due to the absence of protective mechanisms from their governments, thousands of women confronted with the threat of militarization and gender-based violence are resorting to international migration as their last hope for survival. E-VAW Lab research shows that women in Central America who report a high incidence of violence against women in their neighborhoods are more likely to intend to migrate compared to their counterparts living in safer environments. These women are more likely to perceive the police to be involved in crime rather than in protecting them. By adopting a militarized approach to public security, authoritarian populist leaders are increasing women’s vulnerability to both sexual violence and forced international migration. This contributes to changing the demographic composition of migrants and refugees, including a rise in the number of children, she added.

Implications for policy

How can women’s increased vulnerability to gender-based violence be addressed in the context of democratic backsliding? Evidence from the E-VAW Lab indicates that supporting the efforts of civil society organizations is essential for responding to and preventing violence against women. Despite state repression, civil society organizations, predominantly led by women, play a crucial role in providing services to survivors, including access to shelters, psychological support, and accompaniment for those seeking justice. Women living in militarized territories, who are particularly vulnerable to suffer sexual violence at the hands of state armed actors, are more inclined to seek help from civil society organizations than state institutions. That is one reason why the E-VAW Lab forms partnerships with civil

society organizations (most recently in Colombia) to share research, practice and policy knowledge.

Relatedly, Córdova emphasized advancing gender equality and improving women’s safety will only be possible if ordinary citizens embrace gender-inclusive attitudes and are willing to denounce state repression against women. Research from the E-VAW Lab shows that the implementation of media campaigns educating citizens about human rights and the rule of law, combined with victims’ testimonies, can foster solidarity toward victims and mobilize the population to denounce state repression.

These perspectives, Professor Córdova concluded, echo the Catholic vision that the mobilization of civil society organizations and ordinary citizens is crucial for protecting women against gender-based violence. According to Pope Francis, in order to end violence against women “we need to unite, collaborate, network, and what we need is not just a defensive network, but above all a preventive network! This is always crucial when trying to eliminate a social scourge which is also linked to cultural attitudes, mentalities and deep-rooted prejudices.”⁴⁹

“In the twenty-first century the road to dictatorship runs through the high courts.” So stated **Aníbal Pérez-Liñán**, a political scientist and global affairs scholar who directs the Kellogg Institute for International Studies, in his paper and presentation on “Protecting the High Courts in the Age of Democratic Backsliding What We Know, and What We Should (Not) Do.” Most cases of democratic backsliding involve the capture of supreme courts and constitutional tribunals by elected rulers, who then employ “legal” means to deny civil and political rights to their opponents. How governments purge the high courts, why judicial purges dangerously defy our dominant theories of judicial independence, and how we should (and should not) respond to this fundamental threat to democracy—these are topics of Pérez-Liñán’s research and scholarship.

For most of the twentieth century, he recounted, imperiled democracies broke down under the weight of military intervention. In the twenty-first century, in contrast, most imperiled democracies crumble under the weight of elected governments that dismantle the democratic process from the inside. Why is this the case? Traditional military coups are crude; officers suspend the constitution and impose a commissarial dictatorship in the name of national security or moral reconstruction. Contemporary leaders driving processes of democratic backsliding are more effective, Pérez-Liñán explained, in part because they are “stealthy” in that “they distort and reinterpret the constitution through loyal courts.”

National security threats justified public support for military coups in developing countries trapped by the Cold War, he continued. Although coups are less common in the contemporary era, it would be a mistake to declare them a phenomenon of the past (as the countries of the Sahel remind us). Similarly, while episodes of democratic backsliding are

common in the contemporary era, it would be a mistake to assume that they are “new” to this century, Pérez-Liñán noted. The demise of democracy predictably brings an end to judicial independence in both instances, he continued. But while military officers purge the high courts *after* their military takeover, using the “state of exception” to revamp the legal order, elected incumbents purge the courts *before* their executive takeover, securing the pliant justices necessary to uphold increasingly repressive legislation.

Backsliding and Judicial Purges

Pérez-Liñán’s paper includes examples that illustrate the connection between judicial purges and democratic backsliding. After winning the 1998 election, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez called for the election of a Constituent Assembly. The president’s allies, riding on his coattails, won 94 percent of the seats. The Assembly dismissed more than a hundred judges and adopted a new constitution that disbanded the Supreme Court and replaced it with a new, 20-member Supreme Tribunal. Within two years, a faction in the Supreme Tribunal broke with the government, and Congress responded by expanding the Court from 20 to 32 members. Congress also changed the procedures for the nomination and removal of justices, allowing the government majority to appoint all new justices, and forcing some justices to resign. Thus, in late 2004, the legislature appointed 17 loyal justices, securing the president’s control of the Tribunal. The absence of effective judicial review allowed Chávez to undermine the National Electoral Council, use public resources during electoral campaigns, and to alter electoral rules to over-represent the ruling party’s vote.⁵⁰ Opposition forces would not win a legislative election until 2015, after Chávez’s death. “By then it was too late,” Pérez-Liñán writes. “A new purge guaranteed the loyalty of the Supreme Tribunal to the regime’s successor, Nicolás Maduro. The Supreme Tribunal dismissed the acts of the opposition-controlled legislature as unconstitutional, and allowed the Maduro administration to rule unilaterally.”

On the other side of the world, a regime with the opposite ideology soon followed a very similar script. After winning a parliamentary super-majority in 2010, Viktor Orbán’s party Fidesz altered the procedure to nominate justices of the Hungarian Constitutional Court and to select the Court’s chief justice. A later constitutional amendment expanded the size of the Court from 11 to 15 justices, and under the new rules Fidesz was able to select the new justices unilaterally. The parliamentary majority also restricted the jurisdiction of the Constitutional Court and ultimately nullified *its entire case law* from 1990 to 2011, Pérez-Liñán recounts. A new Fundamental Law (constitution) in 2011 altered the mechanisms for judicial review, reducing the number of actors with standing to challenge laws going forward. As it neutralized the Constitutional Court, Fidesz moved to attack the rest of the judiciary, Pérez-Liñán recounted. The parliamentary majority reduced the mandatory retirement age for judges from 70 to 62, forcing the departure of all senior judges, and changed the qualifications for the chief justice of the Supreme Court, also forcing his departure. These actions drew responses from the European Court of Justice and

the European Court of Human Rights; Hungary paid compensation to the judges without restoring them to their posts. Parliament also created a National Judicial Office with latitude to appoint judges, promote and demote them, transfer them to new courts, and initiate disciplinary measures.⁵¹

Unconstrained by judicial review, the ruling party fast-tracked major legislation and reformed the electoral system unilaterally, adopted norms undermining the independence of the mass media, imposed parliamentary recognition for churches, and limited the rights of sexual and ethnic minorities.

Executive takeovers of the high courts, Pérez-Liñán noted, have also facilitated the erosion of democracy in Bolivia, Ecuador, Turkey, Poland, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, among other cases. Countries where supreme courts eluded capture, such as Argentina under the left-wing Kirchners and Brazil under the right-wing Bolsonaro, were able to avert authoritarian rule. Those experiences consistently underscore a few, essential points. While much of the vociferous debate in the US focuses on the politicization of judicial appointments, appointments are only relevant once court vacancies are available. In the US, some justices time their retirement strategically, but leaders engineering an executive takeover cannot patiently wait for judges to retire, they need to open court vacancies at their convenience.

How do authoritarian rulers create vacancies in the courts? Professor Pérez-Liñán explained that they open court vacancies through packing or purging. Packing involves an expansion in the size of high courts (or in the number of lower courts), while purging involves the removal of sitting justices.⁵² Yet packing is only part of the story; a more common—and more effective—tactic relies on purging independent judges and reallocating their seats. Purges require enough political skill to override constitutional protections to judicial tenure. Rulers achieve this formidable feat using formal instruments (e.g., impeaching justices) as well as informal ones (e.g., deploying media campaigns against justices or their families).⁵³

The use of informal instruments makes purges hard to document, he added, because the historical record only shows “resignations” from the bench. It also challenges our current understandings of how judicial independence is secured, he noted, and thus of how to protect high courts in the age of democratic backsliding.

Legal scholars and social scientists, Pérez-Liñán continued, have identified three classic conditions that guard judicial independence: constitutional protections for judicial tenure, the absence of a unified government able to impeach judges or curb their authority, and the long-term calculations of party politicians, who value independent judges as a source of “insurance” if their adversaries gain power. While relevant, those theories fail to inspire satisfactory principles to prevent judicial purges. Constitutional norms, divided government, and politicians’ calculations do matter for judicial tenure, but often in ways that defy conventional wisdom.

Advocates of judicial independence emphasize the importance of constitutional designs that include provisions for judicial tenure and strong judicial review as a way of protecting the autonomy and authority of the courts.⁵⁴ Students of judicial behavior worry, therefore, about legislative bills that initiate court-curbing reforms against those provisions.⁵⁵

In a context of democratic backsliding, however, even constitutional reforms formally designed to *empower* the judiciary—e.g., granting judges life tenure or strengthening judicial review—may have surprisingly negative consequences for judicial tenure. Why is this the case? In the short run, politicians entrusted with constitutional power can restructure the courts, reshuffling the judiciary in the name of progress, as the examples of Venezuela and Hungary illustrate.⁵⁶ In the long run, however, strong protections for the judiciary create unexpected incentives for politicians to use informal instruments, such as threats and bribes, to induce resignations since justices are constitutionally shielded from other forms of political influence.⁵⁷

Alas, Pérez-Liñán writes, court-curbing legislation is not the only source of concern; reforms branded as court-empowering legislation may work as an equally effective subterfuge to undermine tenure protections. Because illiberal majorities pose a threat to independent courts, students of judicial politics contend that a divided government implicitly protects the judiciary. Minority presidents are unable to coordinate court-curbing initiatives and impeachment threats with loyal legislative majorities. For this reason, fragmented party systems are expected to result (by default) in more independent courts.

Once we account for the possibility of purges, however, two unexpected consequences become visible, Pérez-Liñán writes. First, presidents who lack allies in Congress have greater incentives to purge the high courts using informal mechanisms, in order to counterbalance the power of the legislature.⁵⁸ Second, opposition majorities that confront an extremely weak executive can demand seats in the high courts in exchange for legislative support or even restructure the high courts unilaterally.⁵⁹ It follows that partisan balance—the inability of government *or* opposition to command large legislative majorities—more than divided government *per se*, is the mechanism that most likely protects independent justices.

Finally, Pérez-Liñán explains one of the most influential explanations of judicial independence posits that incumbents respect the autonomy of the courts when they anticipate alternation in power.⁶⁰ Although politicians do not like the constraints imposed by independent judges when they are in office, they realize that independent judges will provide insurance against arbitrary policies when other parties rule in the future. The implication of this theory is that judicial purges should be less likely in more democratic regimes and, among those, in more competitive party systems, where alternation in power is more likely.⁶¹ The problem with this argument, clearly exposed by contemporary processes of democratic backsliding, is that democracy and party competition depend, in turn, on judicial independence. Capturing the high courts allows incumbents to overturn presidential

term limits, adopt biased electoral laws, and curtail independent media—that is, to undermine electoral competition—without facing judicial pushback. Against expectations, the quest for insurance leads some politicians to purge the courts rather than to respect their independence. For a populist incumbent, reducing the risk of alternation in power through electoral manipulation is a much better option than managing the risk created by alternation in power through an independent judiciary.

The Instability Trap

If institutional design, divided government, and insurance only provide partial explanations for judicial instability, how can we account for the fact that some countries experience repeated purges while others experience none? The historical record indicates that purges are a recurrent problem in the Americas, Pérez-Liñán noted, but there has been considerable variation across the region. Data on judicial stability in the Americas from 1900 to 2021, culled from various sources and presented at the conference by Professor Pérez-Liñán, includes the percentage of justices leaving office every year, in 28 courts between 1900 and 2021. While the probability of a justice leaving the court in any given year has been low and relatively constant in the US, Brazil, and, to a lesser extent, in Chile and Costa Rica, the risk of exit has been much higher and punctuated by court reshuffles in most Latin American cases. The striking patterns of judicial instability are partly explained by periods of authoritarian rule and by some features of constitutional design. However, instability has been common even in democracies that (formally) grant justices life tenure.

The data, he concludes, suggest that judicial stability is a long-term equilibrium outcome, “difficult to achieve but easy to disrupt.” Political purges produce two immediate effects, he said: they bias the composition of the high courts in favor of the ruling party, and they undermine the courts’ legitimacy as an independent arbiter. This, in turn, produces two subsequent effects in the medium-run: when a new party comes to power, it has good reasons to reshuffle the (partisan) court, and it encounters lower social resistance to do so. Yet, payback is not justice. A judicial “reset” usually reinforces the politicization of the judiciary and further undermines its credibility and social standing. “In the long run, then, judges come to expect that every major political realignment will mean the termination of their tenure,” he writes. “They have few incentives to care about legal precedent and even to act strategically (since new rulers will displace them in any case), indulging in ideological service to the party that appointed them. This downward spiral is hard to break, and it produces a suboptimal equilibrium of high judicial turnover, low judicial independence, and squandered rule of law.”

The Challenge of Constitutional Repair

Pérez-Liñán’s research carries important lessons for advocates of legal reform: be suspicious of proposed reforms that revamp the courts in the name of empowering them, and for

voters: keep partisan forces in the legislature balanced if you want to protect your rights. For policymakers, one might take an analogy from an arms race: the best strategy toward judicial purges is to never start them. But he cautions:

These lessons, however, are of little use once illiberal forces have captured the courts, especially when democratic forces return to office and confront the veto of justices inherited from the previous administration. Should democrats purge illiberal justices or respect them? This question is less vexing in the context of democratic transitions, when judges who have legitimized the previous dictatorship confront lustration under transitional justice, but it is hard to answer in contexts of democratic recovery when democrats promise restoration rather than a rupture with the past.

Tom Daly of the University of Melbourne underscores the “transitional” aspect of judicial reform in contexts of democratic restoration, Pérez-Liñán notes, presenting it as a problem of “constitutional repair.” But Daly acknowledges that even well-justified purges, like the one experienced by the Argentine Supreme Court during the democratic transition in 1983, can ignite undesirable cycles of judicial instability. He ultimately calls observers to assess the context of any reform, the justification for judicial purges, the availability of less disruptive options, the inclusiveness of the reform process, and the mitigation of the risk of repetition.⁶²

Regardless of any sound motivations to purge the courts, Pérez-Liñán concludes, the experience of Latin America advises voters and politicians to proceed with great caution: “Like many other forms of political turmoil—including military coups, serial constitutional replacements, civil wars, and enduring military rivalries between states—judicial instability is easy to start but difficult to end,” he writes. “Once a recurrent pattern of politicized judicial turnover sets in, this practice is hard to overcome. It may take decades until any semblance of judicial independence is recovered, if it is recovered at all.”

Political economist and global affairs scholar **Andrés Mejía Acosta**, who leads the Keough School’s policy impact strategy, devoted his paper and presentation to the policy-relevant question: “What do flawed democracies deliver?” The premise of Mejía’s paper is that “democratic governance is under strain when the range and depth of governance demands far exceed the institutional and state capacities to address such needs.”

Drawing from the Latin American context, he explained that growing poverty rates, persistent socioeconomic inequalities, continued environmental degradation and growing insecurity threaten the very social fabric that holds countries together. Governmental responses to development challenges have been partial, polarized, and ineffective, and state institutions lack the resources or legitimacy to provide effective policy solutions. Elected leaders, on the other hand, have tried to bridge this governance gap by enhancing their own policymaking powers, even if that comes at the expense of undermining institutional checks and balances.⁶³ Others have adopted “mano dura” (strong hand) policies to impose order and

clamp down on dissent and violence at the expense of civil rights. Political elites have also mobilized their political parties or movements around “affective polarization” strategies to exploit hostile attitudes against opposite groups for electoral gain instead of building cross party reform coalitions.⁶⁴

The specialized literature, Mejía reported, offers extensive accounts of how democracies are undermined through democratic means, how democratic backsliding affects political competition, and what strategies were adopted by the opposition to counter such attacks.⁶⁵ Recent work has also illustrated how democratic backsliding thrives in the context of weak states where legitimate political authority is contested by non-state actors.⁶⁶ Much less is known, he added, about how the combination of low-performance democracies and weak states affects service provision and undermines trust in the state and what are the existing entry points of policy and practice to revert this vicious cycle.

A precarious combination: flawed democracies in low-capacity states

On January 10, 2024, Ecuador’s president, Daniel Noboa, declared an “internal armed conflict” against criminal groups and decreed a “state of emergency” to combat the escalating trend of gang and prison violence that had shocked the nation for the past four years. The escalating violence and drastic government response, Mejía said, marked a crisis for Ecuador, which had been known as “an island of peace” at the end of the century. Positioned between the two largest cocaine producers in South America (Colombia and Peru), “Ecuador has now become one of the most violent countries in the region, with a rate of 40 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, including the killings of several municipal mayors and a presidential candidate in the past year.”

Current research helps explain how Ecuador has gone from a model of commodity-led state expansion to an executive-led strategy of state erosion and institutional weakening.⁶⁷ Most of this institutional erosion, accompanied by democratic backsliding, took place during the Correa administration (2013-2017). “Even though Ecuador escaped the authoritarian nature of other 21st-century socialist regimes, in Venezuela, Bolivia, or Nicaragua, the return to democratic normalcy was punctured by political fragmentation and polarization, poor service provision and growing organized crime and violence,” Professor Mejía writes.

The Ecuadorian example, he continued, illustrates the intrinsic connection between the quality of democracy and state capacity. Even when democratic pluralism is restored, the structural limitations of the state in providing public services, offering economic opportunities and safeguarding lives will eventually undermine citizens’ trust in the workings—and benefits—of the democratic process. More than three decades ago, Guillermo O’Donnell demonstrated that a strong democracy is enabled by a high-functioning state that ensures an effective rule of law and safeguards citizens’ rights and political liberties. Conversely, he coined the term “brown areas” to describe spaces where

the state lacks a lawful presence, is unable to impose the rule of law, or constrain political abuses of power.⁶⁸

Yet the literature studying democracy —and democratic backsliding— evolved along a separate track from the analysis of state capacity. The starting point of the divergence, Mejía noted, can be traced back to Latin America’s transition to democracy during the late seventies and eighties. This “third wave of democratization” brought the hope for a more inclusive and pluralistic political participation in countries like Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru that endured decades of military dictatorships. At the same time, democratization coincided with the need for radical economic adjustments in the form of a market-oriented Washington-consensus type of reforms. This unfortunate sequence created the need for budget-cutting and a much-reduced state apparatus, precisely when newly democratized citizens expected greater state intervention to regulate privatizations, create employment and protect the most vulnerable populations from the consequences of economic adjustment.

For the next three decades, the combined goals of consolidating democratic governance, strengthening state capabilities, and facilitating market forces were hardly reconciled. Instead, they reinforced one another in a negative way. For example, the logic of advancing market reforms required that governments had a limited role in managing the economy, but to do this effectively, states had to develop stronger regulatory, monitoring, and sanctioning capacities. This “orthodox paradox,” Mejía reported, was effectively discussed and illustrated in the literature.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the scope and magnitude of the proposed economic adjustment challenged the electoral mandate of new democratic governments. Elected leaders were tempted to reinterpret their popular mandates, expand their policymaking powers, and make decisive —and controversial—policy choices disregarding existing checks and balances, civil and political safeguards, or mechanisms of horizontal accountability. O’Donnell aptly labelled this direct governance style without horizontal checks and balances as a problem of Delegative Democracy.⁷⁰

In the logic of democratic backsliding, democratically elected leaders can undermine democratic practices when they debilitate checks and balances, disregard or selectively apply the rule of law, and limit political competition.⁷¹ Political polarization and extreme partisanship can hinder compromise and cooperation and lead to policy gridlock. Weak civil society and low citizen engagement can emerge if citizens feel disconnected from the political process and are unwilling or unable to hold governments to account.⁷²

The unfortunate combination of flawed democracies with low-capacity states, Mejía noted, is an enduring and understudied phenomenon. Long ago, O’Donnell warned that states unable to uphold basic citizenship rights will tend to produce low-quality democracies. But political scientists Mazzuca and Munck warn about the cyclical relation between these two, as “the political actors who are powerful enough to initiate positive change – either by

democratizing the political regime or carrying out reforms to increase state capacity – are opposed to such transformation, and the political actors who would benefit from change lack the power to produce it.”⁷³

Gradually, eroding states have also lost their capacity to maintain the monopoly over the use of force, Mejía added. First in Jamaica, Colombia, and Mexico in the past century, but more recently, several other Latin American countries are experiencing war-type levels of violence at the hands of non-state armed actors who have developed the means to control drugs, arms, mining and human trafficking of different sorts.⁷⁴ Furthermore, there is a growing literature documenting the extent to which organized crime spreads, with the consent and support of “rogue elements within the State that use their position in the State for illegal purposes and prey on citizens in deliberate ways.”⁷⁵

Can this vicious cycle be reversed? Professor Mejía asked. Given the questions raised by the complex history of democratic governance impeded by state incapacity and the resulting need to comply with the demands of the global market economy, he asserted, “it is clear that we need to understand better the structural determinants of democratic backsliding,” if we are to arrest it.

Tax collection and the construction of a fiscal pact

One policy area affected by the precarious combination of a low-performing democracy embedded in a weak state, Mejía continued, is the management of a country’s public finances. Analyzing public finances is a useful proxy to understand how spending priorities are negotiated, how to advance or block political agendas and where to open policy spaces to advance a more equitable income redistribution. In the absence of strong institutional checks and balances, the transparent management of public monies is also affected. When public servants are chosen by political favors instead of merit, they will have few incentives or mixed loyalties to ensure fiscal discipline, spend selectively, or collect revenues from all. Yet citizens understandably expect the state to respond and address governance challenges in exchange for the taxes they pay. The basic notion of a fiscal pact establishes mutual accountability between the state and society. If the government is unable or unwilling to deliver better services, citizens could opt-out of the fiscal pact, refuse to pay taxes and contract other agents to provide them with healthcare, education, or security.⁷⁶ But, as Mejía pointed out, tax compliance, and greater tax evasion in turn, would undermine state resources and further weaken democratic legitimacy.

States can also use fiscal resources to selectively reward or condition political support. For example, central governments use intergovernmental transfers intended for subnational governments to support and sponsor “authoritarian enclaves” at the subnational level.⁷⁷ States can also withhold or condition subnational government transfers in order to contain or promote the political careers of local mayors.⁷⁸

Policymakers must determine how to mobilize tax reforms in a way that redistributes wealth in a more progressive, equitable manner. Following the debt crises in the eighties, Latin American countries confronted the need to increase their tax collection. Contrary to a principle of tax neutrality where the economic population is treated equally, a progressive tax seeks to collect a higher tax rate from individuals who are on a higher income bracket, whilst imposing a lower tax rate on low-income people.

The evidence from Latin America suggests that policymakers tend to privilege adopting value added (neutral) taxes rather than progressively taxing the income, property or wealth of citizens.⁷⁹ Although Latin American states could greatly benefit from additional revenues to benefit, protect, or privilege the most vulnerable groups, progressive taxes are difficult to adopt because they would antagonize the economic and political elites.⁸⁰ There are very few instances of successful tax reforms that effectively manage to redistribute wealth, promote new business entrepreneurship, or deter consumption of negative substances (tobacco and alcohol but also sugar taxes). Accordingly, Mejía concluded that we need additional research in order to understand the political economy of adopting tax reforms.⁸¹

Another research challenge, he added, is to understand why voters in Latin America — where inequality is rampant— have not pushed for more progressive tax reforms. Except for countries like Costa Rica and Uruguay that embraced a state-driven welfare state, the rest of Latin American countries have systematically opposed or dismantled the adoption of progressive taxes.⁸² While there is no single account of why medium and low-income voters don't favor progressive tax reforms, there are two possible explanations. One has to do with citizens' lack of trust in a larger state, particularly when ineffective, weak, and sometimes predatory states tend to be the norm. A second explanation turns on high levels of labor informality, which reflects the precarious nature of economic activities; in conditions of uncertainty, citizens would strongly prefer economic certainties and benefits like fuel subsidies, rather than an abstract promise of wealth redistribution. These are questions, Mejía argued, that deserve their own research agenda.

Crafting spaces for change to empower civil society and break vicious cycles

“Thinking about spaces for policy change is something academia does not do explicitly,” Mejía declared. Demonstrating causal effects is hard, and it is difficult to observe short term change. Identifying specific entry points for policy change precisely requires having an enabling institutional environment (state capacity) and democratic/inclusive coalitions of citizens. There are three pathways, he observed, to producing more inclusive/progressive fiscal policies in an adverse environment: focus on service delivery initiatives, engage in effective messaging to produce behavioral change, and sustain a policy-oriented debate to increase transparency and accountability.

As noted, one of the key developmental challenges for governments is how to recover a basic level of democratic legitimacy when citizens do not benefit from any form of state protection or service provision. In a context of state erosion, alternative non-state actors—legal or illegal—are likely to proliferate to occupy or capture the spaces left by the state, and create protection rackets, extortion or use violent threats against citizens for their own benefit. In other words, governments face the double challenge of disbanding non-state actors whilst gaining democratic legitimacy through effective service provision.

Much can be learned from development cooperation efforts to expand and improve service provision in low-capacity non-democratic states, where the role of the state is disputed.⁸³ One lesson is “to stay engaged” with civil society organizations and contribute to crafting reform coalitions with unrepresented groups beyond the usual political actors. The notion of transversal governance is fundamental to support basic service provision (health, education, and water). The challenge is to identify and build “spaces for dialogue with the government on non-contentious issues and sectors like service delivery reforms in health, education or water, or focus on uncontentious aspects like improving market supply.” Infrastructures for dialogue at national and subnational level are institutions, mechanisms, resources and skills through which dialogue between the state and the people can be maintained and social cohesion sustained. Supporting spaces for dialogue and building trust may lead to improvements in (more inclusive and participatory) governance processes.⁸⁴

In addition, governance lessons elicited from non-democratic regimes may well be relevant for countries with backsliding democracies. Strengthening program activities that mobilize local interests (associations, cooperatives, professional groups) to create spaces of inclusive participation and good governance is one of these lessons. Promoting programs that reconcile a financial with a social component, or where private interests can align with protecting public benefits, is another.

Influencing policymaking through social accountability instruments

Restoring trust between citizens and the state is a precondition to cementing a social pact, Mejía explained. One pathway towards that goal is to restore spaces to discuss credible, evidence-based and public-serving policy choices; but there is relatively little insight on how to translate and communicate knowledge about democratic backsliding and how to advance democracy in undemocratic conditions.

There are multiple instruments and initiatives, however, that could empower citizens and civil society organizations to effectively hold States to account. In this regard Mejía mentioned specific actions such as sharing public information; using deliberative technology tools to reach consensus around policy initiatives; empowering civil society organizations to track and analyze public budgets, expenditures, and procurement processes; and, facilitating a participatory approach to monitoring and evaluating public service delivery. To be

effective, he added, social accountability instruments need to be embedded in and supported by government institutions so they can respond to demands.

The “State of the Nation Program” (PEN), he added, is a participative and innovative research center dedicated to advancing sustainable human development for more than 30 years. PEN’s research team comes from different disciplines and shares a commitment to producing high quality and timely research to illuminate policy debates at regional, national and subnational levels. By building social trust through research, it offers a credible platform to facilitate policy dialogues across different sectors. By partnering with diverse social sectors, PEN is able to reach broad audiences of policymakers, diplomats, academics, civil society and international organizations and media outlets. The Program is defined by three core principles: academic rigor, social legitimacy, and broad dissemination. This unusual but rich combination is part of PEN’s success in explaining socioeconomic progress, illustrating policy alternatives and ultimately, influencing public policies to Costa Rican and Central American audiences. “As the Keough School continues to build its global policy influence,” he concluded, “it can learn from PEN-like initiatives and expand its applied research-to-policy approach to the global south where Notre Dame has an important presence.”⁸⁵

Shandana Khan Mohmand and Timothy Power responded to the papers and presentations by Anne Mische, Kyle Jaros and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán.

From her perspective as a researcher on governance at an institute for development studies with policy actors as the audience, and with a global south lens in place, **Shandana Khan Mohmand** began her remarks by highlighting several take-aways from the papers:

1) We find democratic backsliding in unexpected places—not in protests, but in organized counter-protests (to shore up the regime), not in the arrest of judges, but in the very subtle purging and packing of courts. Abstract ideas of democratic backsliding can be very misleading, Mohmand said. The fine-grained analysis provided in these papers is an important corrective, as is the attention to the subnational and local levels, as well as to citizen action in the streets. In this way, she pointed out, we start to understand how citizens actually experience a certain (good or bad) quality of life connected to democratic relationships and dynamics.

2) Closely related is another strength of the papers, namely the excellent qualitative analysis that stands alongside the quantitative work. Using this dual analysis for comparative cases helps to explain how the same type of action by the same type of leaders in countries of roughly the same type can lead to very different kinds of outcomes given differing contextual conditions and configurations. The same action or policy—a judicial purge, for example— means different things and produces different outcomes depending on whether it occurs in the US, say, or in Venezuela.

3) Many or most current states of democracy and governance are the result of negotiations between states and citizens, and, as Mische's paper notes, these citizens can be quite unruly at times. "Unruly politics" is a concept used frequently at IDS, Mohmand added, and she urged all three authors to integrate the behavior of citizens-as-voters more fully into their analyses. In this respect, she questioned Mische's reading of Indian politics, particularly of the protests in India leading up to the 2014 elections and afterwards. Mische seems to interpret these protests as expressions of anti-partisanship and growing distrust of the government. But evidence shows that those elections reflected a growing polarization, Mohmand noted, and India seems "all about partisanship . . . so how do we square anti-partisanship with an increase in polarization, which deepens partisanship?" Scholarship shows that the partisan political mobilization of women helped the BJP come to power in India.

Drawing attention to such informal networks of activists and voters complements the focus on institutions. All three papers, Mohmand acknowledged, make reference to voters in one way or another, but the analysis could go deeper. For example, why do voters allow governments to get away with antidemocratic practices (e.g., courts functioning without judicial review)? Consider S.Y. Quraishi's book, *India's Experiment with Democracy: The Life of a Nation Through Its Elections*, which highlights the fact that the Indian judiciary is socially structured, socially embedded to such a degree that judges have begun to ignore political actors and pay attention, instead, only to those they think of as their own "constituency."

Turning to the paper by Jaros, Mohmand praised it for bringing into focus subnational dynamics; here again, at the state and local levels, tracking the attitudes of the voting public is crucial, not least in understanding why politicians and government officials seem to oscillate between confrontation and cooperation with China and other nations. Teasing out the role of the voter's voice would bring further richness to the analysis.

In advising the authors to give more attention to election politics—to the people, that is, who we want to see as voters and think clearly about their preferences and behaviors—Mohmand wants us to think about them in "a differentiated way," that is, within the frame of power and power configurations in society. This lens is important, she said, "because it is social structures that give voters various and different types of bargaining power, which means in turn that governments are negotiating with very different kinds of citizens, some of whom have a voice, some of whom don't." Voter agency, that is, is differentiated across different parts of society. Understanding this differentiation helps us also understand which citizens are willing to let governments get away with undemocratic policies and practices. Why and when do citizens—potential voters—make their voices heard and participate in the debate? When the government crosses or threatens to cross a certain threshold of backsliding beyond which citizens will start to change their minds?

We have not heard enough in the conference thus far, she continued, about political economy and power structures, but thinking about the social, structural foundations of governance, and the political-economic conditions within which it operates, we gain insight into the way in which these configurations create antidemocratic coalitions. Power and the share in power by some separates citizens into political coalitions that might support antidemocratic measures like purges of the judiciary. Here, the importance of understanding the role of social movements is crucial. These social-structural dynamics can also help explain why there are different behaviors across different states when it comes to relationships with other countries, as in Jaros' case.

Finally, Mohmand concluded, while it is gratifying to see the Keough School drawing upon data from many different countries, “we need to think about countries beyond case studies because very often engaging with these countries as individual entities also means altering our lenses to some extent.” For example, the left-right politics familiar to some countries like the US makes very little sense once considering countries in South Asia and elsewhere where there are many parties and the parties don’t divide neatly across left and right politics. When, for example, the main issue is incredible levels of poverty, every political party has to talk about redistribution to some extent, so this is not going to be a wedge issue to set apart parties from one another. (Or in Spain, where the huge population growth rate is the biggest challenge to maintaining anything like political unity or national integrity.) Most parties speak the same language on contraception and abortion. These are not issues that are going to set one party apart from other. However, the various national and subnational reactions to the Coronavirus pandemic and the vaccine mandate (or lack thereof), she added, have much to tell us about both the continuity and the gaps between the professed beliefs and actual behavior of citizens on the one hand, and the policies of their governments and elected officials, on the other.

Timothy Power began his commentary with an appreciation for what the Keough School is bringing to the public debate on democracy—as well as on climate and poverty and peace, all within the framework of IHD. This is values-driven research, he said. Social scientists are sometimes asked whether we do research with our hearts or our heads; we often choose our research questions with our hearts and we investigate them with our heads, and that’s what we see in these papers and presentations, Power said. IHD is actually an aggregation of values that promote development and dignity, and we see some of these values playing out in this session: popular participation, rule of law, peaceful coexistence—old-fashioned values, if you will, but this is evidence-based research that makes concrete the struggle for them.

Turning first to the paper by Pérez-Liñán, Professor Power acknowledged that his/their institutionalist approach to governance and politics—unlike sociological or cultural approaches, which assume that reform (of hearts and minds) will be a long and difficult process—is relatively optimistic, “in that institutionalists think that you can get democracy right if you get the institutions right— if you get the design and function of democratic institution right and sustain them, then democracy will flourish.” A good deal of the research

produced at Notre Dame in the 1990s and 2000s held that assumption about parties and courts, legislatures and rules, and checks and balances—so “we were looking for best designs and the best practices.”

Today, however, he continued, it becomes clear, as reflected in these papers, that institutional engineering can also be used to reverse democratic gains, so institutionalism is a double-edged sword. The assumption of Pérez-Liñán’s paper about the hijacking of the courts by right-wing politicians is that politicians are the actors and the courts are being acted upon. One could look at politicians and judges operating within the constraints of the established institutions and laws, Power acknowledged, but there are also cases where it seems to be the other way around. This is “normatively uncomfortable” for institutionalists when they see, say, judges in Brazil (or the US) pushing back on presidential prerogatives in order to contain Bolsonaro (or Trump).

While one can sympathize with these activists, Power acknowledged, “I do wonder about the basis for the activism; I hate to use the expression ‘activist judges’ (in the US today an ‘activist judge’ is someone whose rulings I disagree with)—and, indeed, there is something known as judicial oversight. That said, institutionalists get queasy when institutions overreach. Pérez-Liñán, in his paper, paints a picture of the stealthy undermining of courts, which adds up to a sort of stealthy undermining of democratic norms.

Here Professor Power invoked the ratchet effect, a concept illustrating the difficulty with reversing a course of action once a specific thing has occurred. Is there a ratchet effect here? Are authoritarian politicians ratcheting downward on courts—so that this is a one-way ticket to authoritarianism, as the first sentence of Pérez-Liñán’s paper implies? Once this ratcheting down begins, is there any way back? Could Pérez-Liñán cite examples of where there was a way back, where people were able to halt and even reverse this downward spiral?

Power had a similar question for Mische, whose research on protests he found to be very wide ranging and encompassing. That said, he focused on a specific article that looks at the relationship between street politics and the generalized rejection of parties and politicians. This is fascinating, Power said, because the protests in São Paulo in 2013 or Chile in 2016 were general and spontaneous, so much so that when some protestors wading in tried to hold up a sign of a political party, they were chased right out of the crowd because nobody wanted partisanship. Mische’s research, Power continued, suggested that protest movements may gain from generalized mistrust, but it also suggests that this generalized approach could have the effect of perpetuating the mistrust. Hence the ratchet effect: mistrust causes protests, and protesting deepens the charge of politicians being untrustworthy. Is there a way back? Mische’s paper, he noted, suggested that the creation of new parties may ameliorate some elements of the protest movements (as in cases from Spain, Syria, and Greece) and create new factions like the Corbynist faction in the UK’s Labor party, etc. —but some of the ways of reversing the spiral of mistrust have already faltered after a few years. It’s

a different, less flexible world today. Even five years ago the dominant outcome of the intersection between street politics and anti-partisan sentiment was the kind of popular authoritarianism exemplified by Bolsonaro. Again, are there counter-examples or strategies that could give us hope of democratic renewal?

Turning to the paper by Jaros, Power noted the connection between levels of cooperation with China and the particular state's degree of economic dependence on China; there are some positive correlations of state cooperation with trade, with investment, with student exchanges, and so on. That said, confrontation is not explained so easily by the same variables. Indeed, Kyle and his co-author find a weak relationship between the Republican vote-share in a state and the state's degree of confrontation with China, but they also make the case in the paper that the role of individual U.S. state governors is paramount.

Might you have considered, Power asked Jaros, whether the political ambitions of certain governors have anything to do with accelerating the confrontational stance? In the case of Ron DeSantis, it seems clear that antipathy towards China has become a valence issue along the lines of something like gun control (standing apart in the eyes of the electorate, that is, from whatever economic benefits to the state that would accrue as a result of greater cooperation with China). In that case, shouldn't we see ambitious politicians try to out "anti-China" each other, leading both of the main parties to have opinions on China that tend toward confrontation? In that sense, the election year of 2024 recalls something we've seen before in US history during the early Cold War, with the Soviet Union being the object of confrontation then, and both Nixon and Kennedy taking a similar anti-Soviet stance. Despite their differences, they were both elected to Congress in 1946 as young men and within a few years, they had cut their teeth on anti-communism and anti-Soviet politics—and both became president.

Power concluded his comments by asking: What can we take out of these papers for the Democracy and Governance research program of the Keough School? As a general proposition, he said, "Institutional engineering can be used to reverse democratic gains, and we find that popular aspirations sometimes transcend formal democratic politics and even material needs." In that sense, he continued, popular protests resonate closely with an aspiration for what we are calling IHD because they're about decisional autonomy and people wanting to be visible—to be seen, and acknowledged. Jaros's research adds an important dimension here, in that we see quite clearly that nation-states and international actors are no longer the only players in the global political order; subnational governments have to be taken into consideration, especially in a very polarized country like the US.

The three papers taken together, Power said, show us that the terrain of democracy and governance is becoming far more complex and variegated. It's no longer "democracy and governance" in the sense we learned of them in civics class as relatively staid and stable institutions in a tidy, constitutional world, comprising a small number of actors operating

within clear checks and balances. The textbook view is probably gone forever. There are multiple actors, with old and new politics meshed in a living museum, where many older actors don't disappear but new ones come along. The Spanish party system is the perfect example: it includes parties dating back to the Civil War and parties dating only from the 2000s and 2010s.

One needs multiple levels of analysis to keep track of all the actors—local, state, national and international— and the non-linear forms of change; we no longer live under the illusion that we're all moving in a single direction. If you add all these complexities together, you find that all of this requires skill sets that no one person can possibly master or comprehend. Bringing scholars from different disciplines with expertise in different regions and political systems is now what is needed, and the Keough School is providing it with its clear-cut commitment to interdisciplinarity and to normative issues, which underlie so much of what we see happening in the world. The school, Professor Power concluded, provides the necessary connective tissue between people who have these different sets of skills that are required.

Jaros, responding to the questions posed to him by the two discussants, reassured Mohmand that his research with Newland pays close attention to existing public opinion, via the use of polling data and survey experiments. That said, the topic of US relations with China doesn't resonate with voters as much as one might think, and the majority of voters, while not favorable toward China, are not extremely hostile to China, apart from a sort of hard-core of strongly anti-China voters. Some of the politicians, especially in rural districts and states like Indiana, who are catering to these hard-core anti-China types, may be correct in understanding their own electoral base. But recent polling suggests that the majority doesn't want war with China, and there's an appetite for finding ways to peacefully co-exist. Nonetheless, politicians are adopting policies that are at odds with that balanced view, arguably doing things that are not necessarily making Americans safer but instead exacerbating tensions. It's important to understand that paradox and what's motivating some politicians to stake out increasingly extreme positions and try to outbid each other as China-haters. As Tim Power indicates, national political aspirations are at work, certainly in the case of a DeSantis or a Newsom (who, unlike DeSantis, is trying to establish his international credentials).

Mische took on the question of India posed by Mohmand. The broader question, Mische said, is how anti-partisanship and the strong distrust of institutions, on the one hand, and the re-embedding of parties, on the other, go hand-in-hand. How do partisan actors use and manipulate this generalized anti-partisan sentiment and distrust of politicians in general? Often they create a new party, moving beyond party systems that are more institutionalized. The new parties tend to be less institutionalized. In the case of Argentina, for example, you get protesters in the streets rejecting parties but soon you see politicians dressing in white intermingling with the protesters, starting to build a new anti-Peronist coalition. They try to turn anti-partisanship into anti-incumbency. In the Indian case you have the BJP and the

RSS as Modi's base, but he wins the first time by moving beyond the base and relying on a valence issue like corruption with a much broader, middle-class appeal. He turns generalized frustrations with corruption and the political system into a broad authoritarianism that transcends his own base. This is what some of these new populists are able to do—use the general mistrust of parties to expand beyond their base and create a more inclusive support.

If this is one of the lasting legacies of this particular protest wave, what do we do with that? There are two kinds of polarization, Mische noted— polarization between right or left, but also polarization within movements themselves, which is between institutional and anti-institutional politics. “And my recommendation is that institutional reformers not be afraid of movements and protests, and that protesters not abandon the state and institutional politics.” Insider/Outsider coalitions would be my answer to the question: How do you transcend polarization? It's a little bit different from Schirch's discussion of how you talk across divides, which is also important. Rather, it's about how to engage in “full-field politics” and political interventions. For example, you may need disruption at times, but also at different times the patience that comes with institution-building.

Aníbal Pérez-Liñán responded to Tim Power's query about “ratcheting-down” judicial independence. Once a president purges the Supreme Court and puts all his people on the court, he said, a precedent is set so that whenever there is political realignment, the next government feels not only that they have the right but the duty to pack the courts again in their favor, because this court is illegitimate. But the key point about voters is that they perceive that now the court is delegitimized because they see it as partisan, and they start understanding every tribunal almost as an extension of the cabinet. In this situation every government has the right to create its own judiciary, and so it creates a political equilibrium in which everybody expects the court to be manipulated when a politician has the opportunity to do so.

We do have some historical examples where that cycle is changed, Pérez-Liñán continued. I think it happens because there is a particular political context in which the new government would like to capture the court. However, for whatever reason they can't and so they change the court partially and all of a sudden you have a rebalanced court again. Or, even better, they don't have the political capital to pack the court at all, and then they are forced to deal with an independent court. These historical reversals of “ratcheting downwards” trends are rare, he admitted.

In the discussion that followed, the audience was invited to make comments or ask questions. **Sue Mirza**, a member of the Keough School's advisory council, said she wondered if political scientists have created or could create a matrix or typology of citizen protest movements that might demonstrate the relative success or popularity that comes with an overt focus on human rights and human dignity—on IHD values, that is. In response, Mische noted that there are a number of different attempts to catalog movements and think

about their outcomes, but nothing that looks specifically into the question of affiliation with IHD-resonant values or goals. But this idea, and how it could be done is worth considering, she added.

Rafat Ansari, also a member of the Keough School Advisory Council, brought up what is known as “the China problem,” namely the stunning economic success of the undemocratic Chinese regime, especially in lifting millions of people out of poverty in a relatively short time. If China had been a democratic government 50 years ago, Rafat suggested, we might not have seen such progress. What do we make of that? Ansari also raised the specter of the failed US attempt to democratize Iraq and influence Libya. Then, he added, there are countries that have a pseudo-democracy in that they are run by the military for all intents and purposes. How do we think about them on the democracy scale?

Jaros responded by noting that democracy definitions are on a sliding scale; China calls itself a democracy, for example. He referred to a Master’s class on research design which he taught recently and which featured a lively debate over who gets to choose what is and what is not a democracy, with some of the students, from sub-Saharan Africa in particular, objecting to the assumption that the West or the Global North has a monopoly on what constitutes a democracy. Of course, one can be a democratic relativist and allow every country, including North Korea and China, to define what democracy means in a way that suits their interests, or the interests of their leaders. “I don’t think that most citizens in China share Xi Jinping’s definition of democracy,” Jaros added, “but you do find yourself at an impasse if you have no common metrics or baseline.” Finding consensus is important but very difficult when voices from all over the world and from different political cultures are involved in creating working definitions of democracy. There is actually a strong commitment in most parts of the world to the idea of democracy, Jaros added, but the term itself has become hegemonic and its meaning varies culturally. One cannot assume that the same political system is appropriate in every case, but we do want a core set of commitments (like IHD) that is somewhat context-independent, or is able to be applied and defined and given substance within each context. Unfortunately, democracy as a term has been hollowed out in some ways.

As we’ve seen in this session, Mische noted, there is disagreement about the degree to which democracy is about institutions or about popular participation, or about other things. During the protests she studied in Brazil in 2013, when the strong critiques of the political parties began to surface, representatives of the parties screamed that “Anti-partisanship is Fascist,” because Mussolini banned political parties. In response the neo-anarchist version of anti-partisanship said, “No, parties get in the way of democracy; anti-partisanship is direct democracy and we need to deepen direct democracy.” Historically, Mische continued, we do know that all democracies are incomplete, and need to be continuously challenged by those that are excluded.

Mohmand commented that the connection between democracy, citizenship, and IHD is that if you cannot give citizens what they want under democracy, they are certainly not going to get it under other forms of governance. In my classes, she said, students will bring up Singapore, not China. I respond that if you get a benevolent authoritarian system in power, how do you guarantee that it remains benevolent if you cannot put those safeguards and guardrails in place? If you cannot do that under democracy, another government isn't going to be able to do that. "What it comes down to is the structures of power in which democracy is embedded, and thus the question becomes, 'How do we fix those structures rather than move away from the principles of democracy altogether?'" As with democracy, few will disagree that human rights are important, but they disagree on the practice of it, because power interests and configurations of power in society get in the way.

Power noted that from 1990 until Xi Jinping, China was a form of consultative authoritarianism with rapidly rising living standards. As Ronald Reagan once said, "You can't argue with success." People's material lives improved. Ansari cited Libya and Iraq, Powers said, but those countries have a very different standard of living than China. "That said, if we were to judge governance only by some material criteria, as with Singapore as well as China, we wouldn't need values at all; we wouldn't need to inject them into our debate," he continued. "But my concept of human development is similar to Amartya Sen's, namely, that human development is about the continuous expansion of human choice. Progress in China—its consumption revolution—has vastly expanded people's choices about their lifestyles, and where they can send their children to school, and when they can travel. That's all wonderful, but I think another aspect of human choice is being able to replace your government. That is not possible for a Chinese citizen." So, what if your government falters, would you be able to replace it? Cubans ask the same questions about themselves, and so do lots of other citizens, "so we need to be able to incorporate values regarding both the material and the aspirational aspects of political engagement," Power concluded.

Pérez-Liñán added that Rafat's question is uncomfortable, but a great one that we have been asking for decades. An earlier version of it came in the 1960s when political scientists wondered whether military regimes were more effectively promoting economic growth, and economists have also been dealing with this question for some time. The basic answer was that, on average, democracy and dictatorships grow at the same rate—for every China, you have a catastrophe like Cuba—but dictatorships bring much more instability and uncertainty in what they deliver—sometimes they may be extraordinary, sometimes catastrophic. Recently the consensus has shifted toward the view that democracies tend to outperform dictatorships because of their institutional guarantees of the rule of law, property rights, and of other core requirements of consistent economic performance.

What Power was saying, Pérez-Liñán emphasized, is very important: If we think about development in a comprehensive way, in the sense of IHD, then respect for human dignity must be a fundamental characteristic of political regimes and forms of government. "When

respect for human dignity and the rule of law are the center of the government, then even if and when they underperform, they are delivering other forms of goods.”

What we must remember, he said by way of conclusion, is that democracies are moving targets. We tend to be unsatisfied with democracy, as Mische's work on protest movements reminds us, but that dissatisfaction, history shows, can lead to reforms that foster democracies more and more in line with the values of IHD. Up until the early twentieth century, for example, democracy meant voting by men only. “So we must keep in mind that the very nature of our definition of democracy will change over time, hopefully for the better.”

Miguel Loureiro and Jorge Vargas-Cullell responded to the papers and presentations by Abby Córdova and Andres Mejía Acosta.

Miguel Loureiro, addressing Andres Mejía Acosta's analysis of the relationship between democratic backsliding and erosion of state capacity, noted that if you map out countries on an X-axis ranging across from authoritarian regimes to democracies, you'll see countries all across the spectrum, exhibiting varying degrees of characteristics associated with the ideal types. If the Y-axis tracks state competence or capacity, you see a similar scattering across a wide range—non-democratic countries that are incompetent or of weak state capacity; outliers like non-democratic China and Vietnam with strong state capacity; democracies that are weak states with low capacity; and, finally, democracies that deliver to a certain extent. What we're seeing lately, however, he noted, is state capacity getting worse and many countries becoming less democratic. (Loureiro here cited, with gratitude, the Variety of Democracies data that provides countries' trajectories and trends over their histories.) In short, he said, “We know there are different types of, and paths to, democratic backsliding. These kinds of nuances and details make for a fascinating study and make generalizations difficult to come by. However, the papers and discussion in this and the earlier session are suitably nuanced and cautious, including being wary of blanket definitions of democracy—an academic temptation which is difficult to avoid.”

The paper by Mejía Acosta, Loureiro continued, recognizes that there are different types and causes of democratic backsliding. It's not just the effect of voter authorization of weak democracy; sometimes, those who are elected on a pro-democracy platform eat away at democracy's foundations. And/or elected leaders simply start behaving like Leviathan and feed polarization as a way of hanging on to power. This diversity of paths away from democracy, he urged, must be studied from a comparative perspective, as the Keough School and others are doing.

On the question of state capacity, Loureiro cited a study on the intersection between state fragility and authoritarianism which argues that the social contract within each state best indicates the actual levels of state fragility.⁸⁶ Moreover, the capacity of a given state may not be comprehensive or coherent but appears scattered and arranged in bits, given the architecture

and infrastructure of the state in question. If Mejía Acosta were to probe a bit deeper into this point, into the fine grain of the particular cases, Loureiro recommended, it would make for a richer analysis.

In terms of “quick wins” for the state, service delivery is one, but not always assured in the long term. Health care and especially education are not as amenable to “quick wins.” A recent study for the Foreign Ministry of the Netherlands which looked at service delivery for weak states—Afghanistan, Sudan and Mali— documents this point.⁸⁷ At IDS, Loureiro continued, we work with NRAs—national revenue authorities, which are units within governments dedicated to increasing revenues from taxes. When anticorruption campaigns are proposed, the key to their efficacy is transparent and accountable financial management. But how do you implement such measures when you have fragile social contracts where transparency, and accountability are not required? Why would states do it, if the social contract with the citizens does not demand such provisions?

Turning to the paper and presentation by Córdova, Loureiro agreed that in contributing to the normalization of gender-based violence against women, authoritarian leaders shape public opinion in order to reinforce hegemonic masculinity. They increase the distrust of women in the state, by the state. This is a problem not just for Central America, he added, but for North America as well because women are migrating up north (or trying to migrate). In terms of militarized masculinity as central to public security strategy (e.g., male leaders being tough on crime), Loureiro and others have studied the literature on “strong men” ruling in Burundi, Egypt, Rwanda and elsewhere; security concerns often trumped up, are a justification for authoritarianism and democratic backsliding. How does one counter this? The solution that Córdova brings up in her paper is to form preventive networks. The literature on policy coalitions and advocacy networks is relevant here, and could be integrated more into the paper, in that it suggests that civil society organizations led by women gain traction because they are trusted and they can mount campaigns fostering solidarity. But who are their allies? This may depend in part on which categories state policies are targeting—are they targeting gender? Class? What about allies within the state, what Guillermo O’Donnell called “the softliners”? These bureaucrats can actually resist backsliding, as studies of their involvement in civil society organizations in Brazil show. Studies by Raewyn Connell or Alan Johnson on patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity are relevant here, as are studies of feminist bureaucrats.

Jorge Vargas-Cullell opened his remarks by commenting on the panel’s title, “From Evidence to Action” and asking, in other words, ‘Will knowledge set us free?’ The assumption behind this title, Vargas-Cullell averred, is that good evidence and information, expertly disseminated, will persuade people to engage in collective action for good. But is it true that evidence persuades people? “This is my question from 25 years of bridging academia with civil participation in public life and with power brokers, and in trying to connect research, data and analysis with improving the quality of participation and the quality of public policymaking.”

Vargas-Cullell acknowledged his skepticism about the assumption that good evidence triggers normatively meaningful action. The flaw in this reasoning, he argued, is the typical academic's idea of what evidence is and what counts as "evidence." Data is part of evidence, of course, he continued, but it's not the whole story. Vargas-Cullell then recounted that he once was talking to a powerful power broker in a Central American country. The power broker was told that 70 percent of the children in his country are malnourished. His response was to point to the "good news" about the 30 percent who received sufficient nourishment. "He and I walked away with entirely different stories about the same data," Jorge noted. "The lesson? Know your audience; know your policymaker. In order to understand what counts as evidence, you must know who you are talking to. Your research is virtually useless if it is not meaningful from a practical perspective. What is the mindset of your interlocutor?" Some government officials really want to solve development problems, he added, while others just want to cling to power. "We academic researchers tend to be driven by data; we don't take a demand-driven approach. What does your audience want to learn? Producing relevant data requires that you incorporate the needs and goals of your policy audience(s) into the research design *from the very beginning*." You have to build the audience into your design, he urged. This does not mean that you bend your data or research design to meet policy officials' needs; to the contrary, Vargas-Cullell said, you will not always be bringing him good news. Rather, you may be saying: "You need to increase taxes by X percentage if you want to fund Y, but the political climate makes X unfeasible." You have to address the questions *he* is asking to capture *his* imagination, not only talk about your data.

A second problem, he continued, with the seemingly straightforward proposition "evidence leading to action" is that, unfortunately, evidence does not speak for itself; it has to be interpreted. This requires bowing to cognitive capabilities. "Sometimes people don't know percentages, they don't know what regression is. That's just like Martian language to them. You have to sit down and be aware of your report potentially being lost in translation. It is not that people are not intelligent. They are highly intelligent people. They are simply working within another type of reality, so given that the data does not speak for itself, we need to ensure it does not become irrelevant to your audiences."

We humans, from the most sophisticated to the most ordinary, think by metaphors and stories, Vargas-Cullell insisted. You have to have a good story; narrative is important. What is the story you are trying to tell? "I've found that most academics don't have a story to tell. They have a research tool or method or finding to convey. They do not have a meaningful story for people who are often enmeshed within very complicated situations, often power games (e.g. 'X is advising me to raise taxes, but I have this coalition partner that's going to kill me, and then if the guys who funded my campaign get wind of this . . . how do I sell this?') Find the narrative that addresses such dilemmas as well as your data without bending it; that is crucial. We use our data, of course, and need to be loyal to it, but we need to embed it within a meaningful story for a human being that thinks in and through images and metaphors."

A third challenge, he noted, in moving “from evidence to action”: What does “action” mean? Know your limits here. Your audience knows what kinds of actions they can take, or not, in response to the information and the stories you provide them. “You must also ask yourself: What is my borderline in crossing from evidence to action, how far can I go in recommending certain steps that may not comport with my own values (or with Notre Dame’s values and interests)?” At the Keough School and Notre Dame, Vargas-Cullell observed, you are working in some very difficult countries. “Where do you stop when you engage with actors that need you and may use you because they need your reputation and your name?”

In response to Loureiro’s comment that allies for social change can be found even within authoritarian regimes, Córdova said that, yes, but these potential allies from within may be fearful, so when and how we engage them is related to Vargas-Cullell’s comment that we researchers are always speaking to two players. One is the political elites within governments, but based on my personal experience and my research and also on case studies, I feel that once the government crosses a line and empowers a president who repeatedly defies the constitution and laws and who has a majority in Congress, we no longer can hope that the evidence you show to that government is going to change their minds unless it is beneficial for their political gain.

And so, Córdova continued, my other audience and my focus as a scholar is on citizens and the mobilization of citizens who favor justice and equality in general, not just gender equality and can become advocates for human rights. “From public opinion polls we have evidence that once the high rate of popularity that these leaders have among the population begins to decline, citizens can make a difference,” she said, “maybe not dramatically in the short run by bringing back democracy fully, but at least by shortening the period that these strong men are going to be empowered.” Once you identify citizens as your audience, “the evidence suggests that you can change their hearts and minds based on specific information and cultivate in them a normative commitment to support human rights and to oppose authoritarianism. Some of my work shows experimentally that you can change the narrative and citizens minds, about the aggressive role of the military by providing quite specific information, for example, on the nefarious collusion between the military, the police and organized crime.” Citizens tend to romanticize these institutions in these authoritarian countries, she noted, so evidence is important, but it’s not any kind of evidence, as Jorge said, it’s evidence that has been tested and that shows what works and what doesn’t in terms of undermining this collusion.

Vargas-Cullell then asked, “Where do you want to stop trying to intervene with your research?” “As a faculty member at Notre Dame,” Córdova responded, “I feel that I am part of civil society, global civil society—a very privileged member, of course. We are a non-partisan institution, but Notre Dame’s mission calls for my contribution as a scholar to make a difference in the world. Since I came to the Keough School I’ve learned more about how

to translate this research into a tool that can help others— and not only using it as a top-down mechanism but in studying and reporting the needs and aspirations of regular citizens on the ground.”

Mejía Acosta offered a quick caveat on the limits of disclosing evidence because “when you are talking with organized armed groups, showing too much evidence in denouncing collusion can get you killed or imprisoned, and that is the real constraint within which we operate. Last year, a presidential candidate in Ecuador was assassinated a few days after saying he had the list of who is colluding with whom and who is receiving campaign funds from drug-dealing cartels.”

Mejía Acosta continued by thanking Loureiro for recommending thinking in two dimensions about how the patterns of backsliding evolve, “particularly because I’m trying to document patterns of executive-led state erosion, so we talk about the dismantling of national democratic institutions, but there is also a trend whereby executives see it in their interest to dismantle state institutions, including the judiciary, but also the bureaucracy and reach of local governments, which opens another area for research that we need to understand.” Mejía Acosta also thanked Loureiro for the shout-out to V-Dem (the Variety of Democracies project and data), which, he commented, “is probably an underutilized resource for policy-specific research.”

Vargas-Cullell is right, Mejía Acosta continued, that it is essential to think about who the policy scholar’s audiences are. When it comes to taxation, for example, local mayors are a very interested audience because it is in their interest to collect more taxes, a choice that is unpopular with the central level. (Interestingly, mayors don’t organize along party lines but in mayors’ associations, which organize across party lines to demand more taxes, more use of property taxes for investments.)

So: How do we identify our audience? And how do we tell a story about the issues that concern them? In my research, Mejía Acosta said, we’re looking at national allocations to subnational governments. The pattern is very difficult to change because there’s a lot of policy inertia. Once you set a trend in how the central government allocates intergovernmental transfers, it’s hard to break. In Colombia in 2012 President Santos managed to strike a coalition with some native leaders from non-producing districts in order to redistribute the spoils from hydrocarbons, and passed a reform to distribute these revenues across producing and non-producing districts. The image he used in justifying this move was “let’s spread the jam across the whole toast,” which meant, essentially, “let’s be fair to everybody.”

William Clark then posed a question for Vargas-Cullell. Professor Clark said he has been spending a great of time in the last ten years trying to build an evidence base to answer your question of when knowledge leads to action and when it doesn’t. “So what I want to

raise," Clark continued, "is the question of where the Keough School programs, with their very appropriate focus on human dignity, come into this analysis of what needs to be the relationship between expert evidence and action. "In our own work (on sustainability), we have to start with the person who is going to be acting and work back to determine the problem they have, rather than the one you want to sell them on. So the evidence you present needs to seem to them to be credible and truthful—you show evidence and you know what you're talking about." However, he added, "we also found that a big difference between evidence that was influential and evidence that was not, was whether the user saw it as consistent with her dignity." By accepting this evidence, she wasn't caving into experts who were above her or thinking themselves smarter than her—as if I don't know what I'm doing.' Instead, we want her to say that 'the experts are finally telling me what I need to do in a way that acknowledges or even enhances my self-respect.'" Frankly, as Vargas-Cullell said, Clark continued, "the way that many academics bring their evidence into a discussion with decision-makers is inconsistent with the decision-makers coming out of the meeting with their dignity intact." So, "if the researcher tries to give their story while also engaging the dignity concerns of the Keough School, what will come out of it?"

Vargas-Cullell responded that there are many ways of doing that. One is involving the stakeholders from the very beginning of your research and even in the framing of the topic that you are going to research. And within the topic you want to research, what are the specific areas that interest the people you are consulting? Academics tend to think: "Well, I will investigate democracy because that's my preference." But you have to bring in the target audience from the very beginning and understand their perspective and viewpoints and identify the potential points of conflict from the beginning, Vargas-Cullell insisted, "because at the very end, all the people who are engaged power-plays have to have a good reason to kill you and another good reason not to kill you. That is, research lands within a social-political process. You bring the people in when you're discussing the preliminary results so there is no surprise when you present final results—that allows people even to take some data and begin to consult with their specific constituencies and get their reactions." The researcher and the audience can then strike a balance in the research report between what will be well-received and not so well-received.

"We can speak in the terms of human dignity in the abstract, of course, Vargas-Cullell continued, "but it comes across concretely in your applied research when we take people and their specific issues seriously. That means defining your research after getting their viewpoints and engaging them in dialogue along the way. Your research then proceeds alongside constant consultation and participation so you don't surprise people. If people at the end tell you your data is shit, that means you didn't bring them in from the beginning and walk with them along the way." It's like buying an insurance policy at the outset, he noted. "It's not that you're going to cave in to some power broker because sometimes you're going to give them bad news. All the more reason, then, not to give them a reason to kill you or your research."

In Guatemala 20 years ago, he concluded, we had to go ask permission to dig into homicides, a topic that could get researchers killed. One of the top powerful powerbrokers told us “no” initially, but reconsidered and struck a deal with us. “OK,” he told us, “you can investigate human rights as long as you also do research on property rights in Guatemala,” which is a very important right in the country. He was allowing us to investigate human rights, “but give me something in return.”

P.S., Vargas-Cullell added: “And never tell the officials or policymakers who commissioned or who are receiving the research: ‘What we really need is more research.’ You will quickly be shown the door.”

To the point about respecting the dignity of the policy or government official, Bill Clark used the analogy of presenting instructions to one’s children, who are tired of simply being told what to do “because I say so.” “To get my child to accept my argument, I had to leave the kid with some of sense of agency and autonomy,” Clark recalled. “If it’s just one more time of ignoring my dignity, then ‘the hell with you, I won’t do it,’ no matter how reasonable the instruction.”

Mahan Mirza emphasized the importance of how we tell the story of democracy promotion around the world. One perspective is that “this is not a story of spreading human rights and human dignity, but of enhancing the power of the Western world that wants to enrich itself.” According to this perspective, widespread in some regions of the world, when it serves the power interests, they go for democracy promotion, and when it serves the power interest, they go for democracy prevention. In short, there have been different kinds of outcomes for so-called democracy promotion. “So,” Professor Mirza concluded, “when you bring evidence of, say, Russian war crimes to support the US and the Western allies in their claims against Russia in its war with Ukraine because, you know, ‘democracy is good and dictators are bad,’ people of this perspective are going to need a lot more than ‘this is good for democracy’ to convince them, because they have a different story about what the West’s ‘promotion of democracy’ means.”

In the Peace Accords Matrix project, Echavarría commented, we think about what is a good story and how to embed our research data within a narrative. “But we’ve found that the question cannot be about the actors necessarily or your interlocutors; the story has to be about a certain process that would be good for the country. How do I make the implementation of peace accords more robust work for us?” Similarly, she added, Córdova’s question is, “how can I contribute to improving the conditions for gender equality?”

How, then, she asked, do we contribute with our stories to building or strengthening a process, to a systemic process and to just structural conditions?

Independent funding, Professor Echavarría added, is crucial to this advocacy work.

“Research that makes political actors uncomfortable is inevitable, which is why we need the support of the advisory boards, the boards of trustees and independent donors, which allows us to contribute to a public and social debate that is democratic in its purest possible form and not being coopted by economic and political interests.” Respect for human dignity also arises, she noted, when we interact and negotiate with former combatants, and with politicians with deep respect for the person (not always for the actions of the person), and of course people feel that you respect them and value them in their dignity beyond their specific actions. But when it comes to negotiating with political actors and formerly violent actors, “there are other ways of getting your message across.”

Echavarría ended her intervention with a story. “When we were in Columbia recently, we were near the Darién Gap meeting with victims’ organizations. We asked them about the violence that was happening in the territories and about their fears. ‘How do you manage to survive? Are you able to do your work?’ And they responded: ‘Only because of the protection the Church provides us.’ (Not the people with the vast UN resources.) “The moral of that story,” she concluded, “is that you can also look for mediators and partners, and for other gatekeepers, that are not necessarily political actors or violent actors.”

Vargas-Cullell concluded the session by indicating that the images we push forward can be simple and powerful. “The stories underneath can be complex, but using metaphor and image does not mean that you are being simplistic. As Echavarría knows, trust is essential and building that trust through powerful images and stories makes the research meaningful.”

Endnotes

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³ See Rodrigo Tavares, *Paradiplomacy: Cities and States as Global Players* (Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁴ David Vogel, *California Greenin’: How the Golden State Became an Environmental Leader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), Chapter 7.; Oswaldo Lucon and Jose Goldemberg, “Sao Paulo—The ‘Other’ Brazil: Different Pathways on Climate Change for State and Federal Actors,” *Journal of Environment and Development* 19, no. 3(2010): 335-357.

⁵ For an overview, see Czeslaw Tubilewicz and Natalie Omond, *The United States’ subnational relations with divided China: A constructivist approach to paradiplomacy* (Routledge, 2021).

⁶ See Kyle A. Jaros and Sara Newland, “Paradiplomacy in Hard Times: Cooperation and Confrontation in Subnational US-China Relations,” Forthcoming at *Publius: Journal of Federalism*, (2024).

⁷ Patricia M. Kim et al., “Should the US pursue a new Cold War with China?,” *Brookings Institutions*, September 1, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/should-the-us-pursue-a-new-cold-war-with-china/>; Christopher Carothers and Taiyi Sun, “Bipartisanship on China in a Polarized America,” *International Relations* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178231201>.

⁸ Indiana, for example, exported \$5.2 billion in goods and services to China in 2021, making China the state’s third largest export market after Canada and Mexico. See “US Export Report 2022 [Data set],” *US-China Business Council*, April 20, 2022, . <https://www.uschina.org/reports/us-export-report-2022>.

⁹ (Tubilewicz and Omond, 2021)

¹⁰ In 2011, for example, the US federal government and Beijing launched a series of US-China Governors Forums at which subnational leaders could mingle and discuss cooperation opportunities. See Emily de la Bruyère and Nathan Picarsic, “All Over the Map: The Chinese Communist Party’s Subnational Interests in the United States,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/11/15/all-over-the-map/>.

¹¹ See, for example, Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no.2 60-70.

¹² See Anna Gronewold, “Pompeo to governors: China is watching you,” *Politico*, February 8, 2020, . <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/08/mike-pompeo-governors-china-112539>; Christopher Wray, “The Threat Posed by the Chinese Government and the Chinese Communist Party to the Economic and National Security of the United States,” FBI, July 7, 2020, . <https://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches/the-threat-posed-by-the-chinese-government-and-the-chinese-communist-party->

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¹³ Such cases are discussed in Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, eds., *China's Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance. Report of the Working Group on Chinese Influence Activities in the United States* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2019).

¹⁴ Cheng Li and Xiuyue Zhao highlight the valuable economic, educational, and cultural links US states and cities have formed with China, and express hopes that steady subnational engagement might calm the bilateral relationship. Cheng Li and Xiuyue Zhao, "America's governors and mayors have a stake in US-China relations," *Brookings Institution*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/14/americas-governors-and-mayors-have-a-stake-in-us-china-relations>.

¹⁵ (de la Bruyère and Picarsic, 2021).

¹⁶ See, for example, US Senator Marsha Blackburn's critiques of sister-city relations with China. "Blackburn exposes Chinese partnerships across USA." Website of Senator Marsha Blackburn, April 18, 2023, <https://www.blackburn.senate.gov/2023/4/issues/china/blackburn-exposes-chinese-partnerships-across-usa>.

¹⁷ Jaros and Newland elaborate on these risks in a recently published policy report. See Kyle A. Jaros and Sara A. Newland, "Bridges or Battlegrounds? American Cities in a Changing US-China Relationship," Truman Center for National Policy, February 26, 2025, <https://www.trumancenter.org/news-posts/truman-center-launches-new-report-american-cities-in-a-changing-us-china-relationship>.

¹⁸ In the case of California, which has pursued far-reaching and durable engagement with China, the personal role of governors looms large. Jerry Brown traveled to China in 2013 and again in 2017, not merely to strengthen economic relations but also to institutionalize climate cooperation between the state and Chinese central and subnational government actors. Brown's successor, Gavin Newsom, took his own high-profile trip to China in October 2023 to sustain such climate cooperation and to encourage the rebuilding of official dialogue between US and Chinese officials. As the first US governor to visit China since Covid-19 and the leader of the largest US state and the world's fifth largest economy, Newsom was received exuberantly and granted an audience with Xi Jinping. On the other extreme, Florida governor Ron DeSantis made combating CCP influence in the state a centerpiece of his agenda. DeSantis has enacted multiple executive orders and signed multiple pieces of legislation that curb Chinese real estate purchases, limit university cooperation with China, and limit government procurement from China.

Even governors operating between these poles of cooperation and confrontation can generate a significant personal influence on states' China relations, particularly when they play to both sides or pivot sharply. In Indiana, Republican governor Eric Holcomb maintained close and cooperative relations with Indiana's sister-province Zhejiang after taking office, hosting Zhejiang's leader in 2017 and leading a trade mission to China in 2019 during the thick of the Trump trade war. As Covid-19 travel restrictions eased, Holcomb revamped economic relations with the PRC by hosting Chinese ambassador Qin Gang at Indiana's Global Economic Summit. Later in the year, however, he angered the PRC government by leading a trade delegation to Taiwan, the first by an Indiana governor in almost two decades. As anti-China sentiment mounted in Indiana, Holcomb avoided inflammatory rhetoric but quietly signed off on new laws restricting Chinese investment in the state and divesting Indiana's pension fund from the PRC.

¹⁹ Jaros adds: “One indication of this is the way ‘paradiplomacy’ by state leaders, can pave the way to national-level diplomatic breakthroughs. The positive sentiment fostered by Gavin Newsom’s 2023 China trip is credited by many of our interviewees as having set the stage for Xi Jinping’s visit the following month to the San Francisco Bay Area, where he attended the APEC summit and held high-level meetings with US President Joe Biden. On the other side of the ledger, a recent parade of US governor visits to Taiwan has strengthened de facto US political and economic ties with Taiwan and increased the PRC’s anxieties on cross-strait issues.”

²⁰ This section draws on ideas from Kyle A. Jaros, “State-level US-China Relations at the Crossroads: Predicaments and Prospects for Subnational Engagement,” *2022-2023 Wilson China Fellows: Essays on China and U.S. Policy* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2023); and, from Kyle A. Jaros and Sara Newland, “Federal anti-China sentiment is increasingly seeping into state laws,” *The Hill*, April 28, 2023, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3975855-federal-anti-china-sentiment-is-increasingly-seeping-into-state-laws/>.

²¹ The Biden administration’s creation of a State Department Special Representative for City and State Diplomacy to provide diplomatic assistance and resources to states and cities was a helpful step in the right direction. This unit should be expanded, but is currently at risk of being discontinued.

²² Thomas Carothers and Brendan Harnett, “Protests in 2023: Widespread Citizen Anger Continues, With Sources Multiplying,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 18, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/12/protests-in-2023-widespread-citizen-anger-continues-with-sources-multiplying?lang=en>.

²³ Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenism, and Global Protest, Illustrated edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁴ The Global Protest Tracker of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a terrific resource for researchers.

²⁵ Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²⁶ The slogan of the 2011 uprising in Egypt was “bread, freedom, and social justice,” expressing grievances and hopes that spanned economic, political, and social domains. Mona El-Ghobashy, *Bread and Freedom: Egypt’s Revolutionary Situation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

²⁷ Thomas Carothers and Richard Youngs, “The Complexities of Global Protests,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 18, 2015, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/10/08/complexities-of-global-protests-pub-61537>.

²⁸ Charles Tilly, *Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511804922>.

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³⁰ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 4th edition (Cambridge, New York, NY Melbourne, New Delhi, Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

³¹ Gomás Gold, and Ann Mische, “Channeling Anti-Partisan Contention: Field Structures and

Partisan Strategies in a Global Protest Wave (2008-2016),” *American Journal of Sociology* 129, no. 6 (May 2024).

³² The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) is a multi-dimensional index for conceptualizing and measuring democracy. Information and data can be found here.

³³ Angela Alonso and Ann Mische, “Changing Repertoires and Partisan Ambivalence in the New Brazilian Protests,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 36, no. 2 (2017). Mische has also written about the Brazilian protests in two extended blog posts in Mobilizing Ideas, shortly after the protests in 2013 and during Bolsonaro’s campaign in 2018.

³⁴ Angela Alonso, *Treze: A política de rua de Lula a Dilma*, 1st edition (Companhia das Letras, 2023).

³⁵ Richard Youngs, ed., *The Mobilization of Conservative Civil Society* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/10/04/mobilization-of-conservative-civil-society-pub-77366>.

³⁶ David Pettinichio, “Institutional Activism: Reconsidering the Insider/Outsider Dichotomy,” *Sociology Compass* 6, (2012): 499-510.

³⁷ See two public facing essays by Mische: Ann Mische, “Pathways toward justice: Protest and the disruptive imagination,” *Dignity and Development Blog, Keough School of Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame*, July 20, 2020, <https://keough.nd.edu/news-and-events/news/pathways-toward-justice-protest-and-the-disruptive-imagination/> ; Ann Mische, “Between Disruption and Coordination: Building Insider-Outsider Strategies,” *Peace Policy Blog, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame*, September 15, 2020, <https://peacepolicy.nd.edu/2020/09/15/between-disruption-and-coordination-building-insider-outsider-strategies/>.

³⁸ Scenario exercises convene heterogeneous (and sometimes adversarial) groups of participants, ranging from academic or professional experts to government and corporate leaders, social movements, civil society organizations, and local residents or citizens. Some are national in scope (the future of Kenya or Indonesia) while others have global, regional, or municipal foci (the future of global climate governance, democracy in Latin America, or urban informality in Bangkok). These projects have been supported by transnational networks of researchers, consultants, and donors. Some involve broad public or stakeholder dialogues, while others rely on expert consultations. They vary in the degree to which they understand their work as “political,” that is, as engaged with public advocacy, institutional reform efforts, or broader movements for social change. “Global Analysis,”

³⁹ “Global Analysis,” *Front Line Defenders*, April 4, 2023, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/global-analysis-2022>.

⁴⁰ Saskia Brechenmacher, Erin Jones, and Özge Zihnioğlu, “On the Front Lines: Women’s Mobilization for Democracy in an Era of Backsliding,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 21, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/03/on-the-front-lines-womens-mobilization-for-democracy-in-an-era-of-backsliding?lang=en>.

⁴¹ (*Front Line Defenders*, 2022)

⁴² Teresa Toldy and Júlia Garraio, “Gender ideology: A Discourse That Threatens Gender Equality,” *Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals* (2020).Toldi and Garraio 2020.

⁴³ Kaul Nitasha Kaul, “The Misogyny of Authoritarians in Contemporary Democracies,” *International Studies Review* 23, no. 4 (2021).

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⁶⁷ Andres Mejia Acosta, Raul Alda, and Daniel Baquero, “Party or Homeland? Executive-led State Erosion in Ecuador,” Conference paper delivered at REPAL 2023.

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⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ The Central American “Estado de la Región” report is another fine example of a practical policymaking instrument, offering high quality, accessible information to motivate public dialogues with broader audiences around public policy issues that affect everyone, particularly the most vulnerable.

⁸⁶ Robin Luckham, “Do Autocracy and Fragility Connect?,” SDC Topic Paper (2021).

⁸⁷ Christoph Zürcher, et al., “Evidence on Aid (in)effectiveness in Highly Fragile States: A synthesis of three systematic reviews of aid to Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan, 2008 - 2021,” WIDER Working Paper, No. 2022/160, The United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), (2022).