

Pluralism Under Asymmetric Threat

A Strategic Theory of Democratic Self-Defense in the Age of Epistemic Warfare

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Abstract

Pluralistic societies increasingly face institutional paralysis, legitimacy erosion, and sudden political breakdown without coups, invasions, or overt revolutions. Existing literatures on democratic backsliding, information warfare, and extremism document these outcomes, but they lack a unified account of why open systems fail under asymmetric ideological pressure and which interventions can prevent collapse without drifting toward authoritarianism. This paper models the interaction between pluralistic societies and totalizing ideologies as an asymmetric strategic game characterized by non-reciprocal tolerance, deception-driven epistemic capture, defection cascades, morale dynamics, and institutional entryism. We show that pluralistic collapse is typically driven less by violence than by the preemptive neutralization of resistance through epistemic and procedural capture, producing slow-then-sudden regime shifts and irreversibility thresholds. Formal analysis demonstrates that defensive levers are highly unequal: reducing deception effectiveness and institutional entryism yields superlinear gains in resilience, whereas late-stage coercive responses impose high political and reputational costs. The framework is operationalized through counter-capture institutional design principles and a comparative analysis of India and the United States.

1. Introduction

In recent years, a recurring pattern has emerged across many pluralistic societies. Universities hesitate to enforce basic rules against intimidation and obstruction. Media organizations struggle to sustain credibility as neutral arbiters of fact. Civil-society institutions fracture into ideologically aligned blocs, and international indices and multilateral bodies increasingly function as instruments of reputational contestation rather than neutral assessment. These developments often unfold without changes to constitutional order, electoral rules, or formal distributions of power. Instead, they precede legitimacy crises and political realignments that seem abrupt but, in retrospect, follow long periods of institutional erosion.

This pattern presents a puzzle that existing scholarship does not fully resolve. Research on democratic backsliding emphasizes elite norm erosion, executive aggrandizement, and institutional decay. Studies of information warfare focus on disinformation, propaganda, and influence operations, often framed as external or state-led threats. Work on extremism and radicalization concentrates on ideological commitment and violence. While each of these literatures captures important elements of contemporary instability, none fully explains why institutions charged with safeguarding openness and neutrality so often become incapacitated before overt conflict, or why resistance so often collapses from within rather than being openly contested. This paper argues that the failure stems from a structural mischaracterization

of the strategic environment in which pluralistic institutions operate. Pluralism is often modeled as a neutral procedural condition governed by rules that apply symmetrically to all participants. In practice, however, pluralistic systems function as a strategic regime with asymmetric constraints. They bind themselves to universalist norms—freedom of conscience, procedural neutrality, reciprocity, and good-faith engagement—that are essential to openness but are not necessarily reciprocated. Totalizing ideologies, defined here as doctrines that reject pluralism’s legitimacy and remain normatively incomplete until dominant, can operate within pluralistic institutions while treating pluralism itself as provisional or purely instrumental.

Under these conditions, the primary site of conflict is not territory or formal authority but epistemic control: the capacity to define what counts as knowledge, legitimacy, harm, and moral obligation. Rather than relying primarily on overt coercion, totalizing actors can pursue dominance through entryism, methodological drift, and reputational pressure within knowledge-producing institutions. These tactics increase the cost of lawful resistance while preserving moral and procedural cover, producing a situation in which enforcement of neutral rules becomes politically, professionally, or reputationally prohibitive for pluralistic actors.

To analyze this dynamic, the paper develops an interdisciplinary framework that models the interaction between pluralistic societies and totalizing ideologies as an asymmetric strategic game. The framework integrates several elements that are usually treated separately. Deception and epistemic capture are modeled as endogenous strategic variables rather than as informational noise. Morale and legitimacy are treated as dynamic resources that condition institutional willingness and capacity to act. Defection and preference falsification are incorporated to account for sudden shifts in elite and institutional alignment. Demographic and organizational compounding effects are included to capture long-horizon changes in contest probabilities even in the absence of overt violence. Together, these dynamics generate threshold effects and irreversibility conditions that explain why pluralistic collapse often appears sudden despite prolonged periods of apparent stability.

The analysis yields implications that are both theoretical and practical. It clarifies why defensive interventions are highly unequal in effect: measures that reduce deception effectiveness, constrain institutional entryism, and lower the cost of lawful resistance have disproportionate and compounding stabilizing effects, while late-stage coercive responses tend to be costly and of limited efficacy. These results are translated into concrete counter-capture design principles applicable to universities, media organizations, civil-society bodies, indices, and international institutions, with explicit attention to avoiding authoritarian drift.

The framework is applied comparatively to India and the United States. These cases span Global South and Global North contexts, post-colonial and long-established democracies, and distinct demographic and geopolitical environments. Despite these differences, both exhibit similar patterns of epistemic contestation, institutional capture attempts, and asymmetric legitimacy warfare, suggesting that the underlying dynamics are general rather than culturally specific. For India in particular, the analysis bears directly on questions of information sovereignty, state capacity, and the resilience of a plural civilizational order under sustained reputational pressure.

The central claim of this paper is therefore strategic rather than ideological. Pluralistic societies fail not because pluralism is inherently fragile, but because it assumes symmetry in environments structured by asymmetric norms and incentives. Conversely, pluralism can be defended without suppressing belief or abandoning constitutional commitments if certain forms of institutional trust, accommodation, and moral arbitration are made conditional on reciprocity and non-coercion, while individual civil rights remain unconditional. By unifying formal modeling, interdisciplinary theory, and policy design, the

paper advances a general framework for pluralistic self-defense suited to the epistemic and ideological conflicts of the twenty-first century.

2. Conceptual Framework

This section introduces the core concepts and analytical distinctions that structure the remainder of the paper. The central claim is that pluralism is not merely a normative preference or procedural arrangement but a strategic regime characterized by constraints, incentives, and vulnerabilities. Totalizing ideologies exploit these constraints less through force than through epistemic and institutional mechanisms that alter the conditions under which pluralistic systems can lawfully act. To formalize this interaction, we define pluralism, totalization, asymmetry, and epistemic capture in strategic (rather than purely philosophical) terms.

2.1 Pluralism as a Strategic Regime

Pluralism is commonly defined as the coexistence of multiple belief systems, identities, and moral frameworks within a shared political order. In normative political theory, it is often treated as a background condition sustained by tolerance, rights, and procedural neutrality. Here, however, pluralism is treated as a *strategic regime*: a system of rules and norms that governs participation, enforcement, and legitimacy under conditions of disagreement.

Three features are essential. First, pluralism presupposes freedom of conscience, including the right to hold and express beliefs that others may reject. Second, it relies on procedural neutrality, meaning that institutions adjudicate disputes according to rules rather than substantive moral doctrines. Third, it assumes epistemic reciprocity: participants are expected to engage in good faith, accept adverse outcomes as legitimate, and refrain from coercive or deceptive practices that would undermine the shared framework itself.

These features are not incidental: they are the source of pluralism's legitimacy and moral authority. At the same time, they impose self-binding constraints. Pluralistic institutions are structurally limited in their ability to discriminate preemptively among doctrines, to ascribe intent absent explicit violation, or to condition participation on ideological alignment. As a result, pluralism trades short-term strategic flexibility for long-run stability under the assumption that most participants accept the regime as an end in itself.

2.2 Totalizing Ideologies

Totalizing ideologies are defined here not by specific content but by structural properties. A totalizing ideology is one that (i) denies the legitimacy of pluralism as a stable end state, (ii) treats coexistence as provisional or instrumental, and (iii) remains normatively incomplete until it achieves dominance over competing moral or political orders. Crucially, totalization refers to scope rather than intensity: an ideology may be pursued gradually, nonviolently, or through institutional means while remaining totalizing in its ultimate orientation.

Unlike pluralistic doctrines, totalizing ideologies do not require epistemic reciprocity. They may engage in pluralistic institutions tactically while rejecting pluralism as a principle. This creates a fundamental asymmetry: pluralistic actors are constrained by norms of neutrality and tolerance, whereas totalizing actors are not constrained by reciprocal obligations to preserve the shared framework. Participation in pluralistic systems is therefore not evidence of pluralistic commitment.

This distinction clarifies why appeals to moderation, inclusion, or dialogue often fail in asymmetric contexts. The issue is not extremism versus moderation, but whether an actor treats pluralism as a binding constraint or as a temporary operating environment. Totalizing strategies can be pursued through cultural

influence, institutional entryism, methodological redefinition, or reputational coercion without overt rejection of procedural rules.

2.3 Asymmetry and Non-Reciprocal Tolerance

The interaction between pluralistic regimes and totalizing ideologies is structurally asymmetric. Pluralistic systems enforce norms uniformly and constrain themselves against viewpoint discrimination, prior restraint, and collective punishment. Totalizing actors, by contrast, are able to selectively comply with or violate these norms depending on strategic advantage. This asymmetry is amplified by what may be termed *non-reciprocal tolerance*: the extension of procedural and moral protections to actors who do not extend those protections in return.

Non-reciprocal tolerance does not immediately produce instability. In early stages, pluralistic institutions absorb challenges by interpreting them as good-faith disagreement. Over time, however, asymmetry accumulates. Enforcement becomes selective, standards of evidence shift, and institutions face increasing reputational costs for neutral rule application. The result is not overt repression but paralysis: the inability to act without incurring internal or external legitimacy penalties.

This dynamic helps explain why pluralistic decline often precedes any decisive transfer of formal authority. The loss occurs first at the level of enforcement confidence, followed by elite defection, preference falsification, and institutional self-censorship. By the time coercive power is exercised openly, the epistemic and moral conditions necessary for effective resistance have already eroded.

2.4 Epistemic Capture

Epistemic capture refers to the process by which institutions responsible for producing, validating, or disseminating knowledge are repurposed to advance asymmetric strategic objectives. Unlike classical regulatory capture, which concerns material incentives and policy outcomes, epistemic capture operates through methodological drift, norm redefinition, and reputational leverage. Its primary effect is not the imposition of false beliefs, but the alteration of what counts as legitimate inquiry, acceptable evidence, or permissible enforcement.

Captured institutions may continue to function procedurally while losing substantive neutrality. Indicators include asymmetric application of standards, redefinition of key terms to favor particular actors, suppression through reputational threat rather than formal sanction, and the displacement of universal criteria by positional or identity-based authority. Importantly, epistemic capture often proceeds without explicit coordination or centralized control; it is sustained by incentive structures that reward conformity and penalize deviation.

Once epistemic capture reaches a critical threshold, pluralistic systems face a legitimacy trap. Actions taken to restore neutrality are framed as violations of the very norms pluralism seeks to uphold, while inaction further entrenches asymmetry. This trap explains the apparent paradox whereby pluralistic institutions appear strongest at moments of rhetorical commitment and weakest at moments of enforcement.

2.5 Implications for Modeling and Policy

Treating pluralism, totalization, and epistemic capture as strategic rather than purely normative phenomena allows for formal analysis of dynamics that are otherwise described impressionistically. In particular, it permits modeling of legitimacy and morale as endogenous variables, analysis of defection cascades and irreversibility thresholds, and identification of leverage points where small institutional interventions produce disproportionate stabilizing effects.

The framework also implies that pluralistic self-defense need not entail ideological suppression or abandonment of civil liberties. The critical distinction is between unconditional rights held by individuals

and conditional trust extended to institutions, doctrines, and actors. Conditioning participation, authority, or institutional power on reciprocity and non-coercion preserves pluralism's moral foundations while correcting for asymmetric exploitation.

3. Intellectual Lineage and Analytical Gaps

This paper draws on multiple literatures on democratic fragility, ideological conflict, and information manipulation. No single strand, however, provides a complete account of the asymmetric epistemic dynamics described here. Rather than offering a comprehensive survey, this section positions the present framework relative to key traditions, highlighting points of convergence and the specific gaps that motivate the synthesis developed in this paper.

3.1 Democratic Backsliding and Institutional Decay

A substantial literature documents the erosion of democratic institutions without overt regime change. Early work emphasized formal institutions and elite commitments, most notably in Linz and Stepan's account of democratic consolidation.¹ More recent scholarship has focused on gradual, legalistic forms of decline. Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize the erosion of informal norms such as mutual toleration and institutional forbearance,² while Bermeo distinguishes classic coups from subtler mechanisms including executive aggrandizement and strategic manipulation of democratic rules.³

This literature correctly shows that democratic failure is often incremental and endogenous. However, it tends to treat norm erosion as a byproduct of domestic competition (polarization, opportunism, declining civic virtue) rather than as the result of asymmetric strategies that exploit pluralistic constraints. In consequence, backsliding is often modeled as a drift in incentives and norms, not as a strategic contest over epistemic authority, legitimacy, and enforceability.

3.2 Information Warfare and Influence Operations

A parallel literature examines information manipulation as a tool of strategic competition. Rid conceptualizes disinformation and cyber-enabled influence as contemporary continuations of Cold War-era active measures designed to shape perceptions and decision-making.⁴ Paul and Matthews, in their RAND study, analyze how high-volume, rapid, and emotionally resonant narratives can outperform factual rebuttal in contested informational environments.⁵

This literature provides valuable insight into tactics and transmission. However, it often frames information warfare as primarily external or state-led and treats truth as a stable reference point under attack. It pays less attention to how standards of evidence, authority, and legitimacy are themselves reshaped through sustained institutional pressure. As a result, influence operations are typically modeled as episodic campaigns rather than as long-horizon processes that transform the epistemic foundations of pluralistic systems.

¹Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

²Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

³Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding", *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19.

⁴Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus / Giroux, 2020).

⁵Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model* (RAND Corporation, 2016).

3.3 Extremism, Radicalization, and Ideological Commitment

Research on extremism and radicalization has largely focused on pathways to violence and individual-level belief formation. Wiktorowicz emphasizes recruitment dynamics and identity-seeking behavior,⁶ while Horgan and McCauley and Moskalenko analyze psychological mechanisms underlying radical commitment and escalation.⁷

This work helps explain why individuals adopt extreme views or engage in violence, but it is less informative about how ideologies pursue dominance through institutional means in pluralistic settings. Totalization is often treated as synonymous with militancy, obscuring the possibility of nonviolent, procedural, and reputational strategies that remain legible as lawful participation within open systems.

3.4 Institutions, Legitimacy, and Preference Falsification

Several strands of political economy and sociology offer tools that are central to the present framework. Hirschman's typology of exit, voice, and loyalty provides a foundation for understanding institutional response under stress,⁸ while Kuran's theory of preference falsification explains why sudden cascades of apparent consensus often follow long periods of suppressed dissent.⁹ North, Wallis, and Weingast's work on social orders highlights how institutions structure incentives for cooperation and coercion.¹⁰

These contributions illuminate key mechanisms—elite defection, legitimacy erosion, and coordination thresholds—but they do not fully integrate the role of epistemic authority and moral arbitration in constraining institutional action. Legitimacy is often treated as an outcome rather than as a strategic resource that can be actively depleted through asymmetric engagement.

3.5 Synthesis and Gap

Taken together, these literatures offer partial explanations for pluralistic decline but leave a critical gap. Democratic backsliding research explains institutional erosion without modeling adversarial asymmetry. Information warfare studies analyze narrative manipulation without theorizing institutional epistemic capture. Extremism research focuses on violence rather than domination through procedural means. Institutional theories capture legitimacy and defection dynamics but do not place them within an account of epistemic conflict.

The framework advanced in this paper integrates these strands by treating pluralism as a strategic regime subject to asymmetric exploitation. By foregrounding epistemic capture, non-reciprocal tolerance, and legitimacy depletion as endogenous variables, it provides a unified account of how pluralistic societies can lose enforceability without a formal loss of power—and how targeted institutional design can reduce this vulnerability.

4. Formal Model: Asymmetric Epistemic Conflict in Pluralistic Regimes

This section specifies a dynamic, adversarial model of interaction between a pluralistic regime and totalizing ideological actors. The aim is not maximal generality but a transparent set of definitions and functional forms that (i) reproduce the empirically observed *slow-then-sudden* failure pattern, (ii) formalize *non-reciprocal tolerance* and *epistemic capture* as endogenous strategic variables, and (iii)

⁶Quintan Wiktorowicz, "A Genealogy of Radical Islam", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 2 (2005): 75–97.

⁷John Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism", *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (2008): 80–94; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008): 415–433.

⁸Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

⁹Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹⁰Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

yield policy levers that follow from comparative statics rather than intuition.

The modeling stance is closest in spirit to strategy-oriented formal work (e.g., commitment, deterrence, and focal-point reasoning) rather than equilibrium refinements in complete-information games.¹¹ We also incorporate mechanisms of *preference falsification* and cascade dynamics, which explain abrupt shifts after long periods of apparent stability.¹² Finally, we treat influence operations and deception as *active measures* that reshape the decision environment rather than merely injecting noise.¹³

4.1 Players, Populations, and Time

Time is discrete: $t = 0, 1, 2, \dots$ (interpretation: months or quarters).

There are two interacting aggregates:

- P_t : the effective mass of actors committed to pluralistic norms (“pluralist coalition”).
- T_t : the effective mass of actors aligned with a totalizing project (“totalizing coalition”).

We emphasize *effective mass* because institutional influence is not proportional to headcount alone; it includes organizational capacity, elite share, and positional control. Define total effective mass $N_t = P_t + T_t$ and shares

$$p_t := \frac{P_t}{N_t}, \quad \tau_t := \frac{T_t}{N_t} = 1 - p_t.$$

4.2 State Variables: Legitimacy, Morale, and Epistemic Capture

The model’s core is a small set of endogenous state variables that summarize system condition.

Legitimacy. $L_t \in [0, 1]$ is the perceived moral-procedural legitimacy of pluralistic enforcement among pivotal audiences (domestic elites, institutional gatekeepers, and relevant external reputational arbiters). Lower L_t increases the political and reputational cost of enforcing neutral rules.

Pluralist morale. $M_t \in [0, 1]$ is the willingness of pluralist actors to incur costs to defend the regime (mobilize, litigate, discipline, investigate, refuse intimidation). It captures the Hirschman-style transition from *voice* to *exit* under institutional stress.¹⁴

Epistemic capture. $C_t \in [0, 1]$ is the extent to which knowledge-producing and legitimacy-arbitrating institutions (universities, media, NGOs, indices, professional bodies) have drifted from neutrality in ways that systematically raise the cost of pluralist enforcement or systematically lower the cost of totalizing tactics. Conceptually, C_t is the sufficient statistic for the degree to which standards of evidence, harm, and permissible speech/enforcement have been endogenized by asymmetric pressure.

Effective enforcement capacity. $E_t \geq 0$ is the pluralist coalition’s effective capacity to enforce neutral rules in practice. This is not raw coercive power; it is *usable* enforcement given legitimacy constraints.

We relate E_t to the other variables via a reduced-form:

$$E_t = E_0 \cdot p_t^\alpha \cdot M_t^\beta \cdot L_t^\gamma \cdot (1 - C_t)^\kappa, \quad (1)$$

with $\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \kappa > 0$. This functional form encodes a central claim: capture (C_t) reduces *usable* enforcement

¹¹Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

¹²Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹³Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus / Giroux, 2020).

¹⁴Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

multiplicatively even when the state retains formal authority.

4.3 Control Variables: Deception and Entryism

Totalizing actors choose strategic intensities each period:

$$d_t \in [0, 1] \quad (\text{deception / narrative manipulation intensity}), \quad e_t \in [0, 1] \quad (\text{entryism / institutional infiltration effort}).$$

The pair (d_t, e_t) are costly but increase (i) capture and (ii) defection pressure on pluralist actors by increasing the expected cost of resistance and lowering perceived legitimacy.

Pluralist actors choose:

$$r_t \in [0, 1] \quad (\text{counter-capture investment / resilience effort}).$$

Examples: procedural hardening, transparency reforms, conflict-of-interest enforcement, institutional design, and reputational defense.

4.4 Dynamics I: Capture Accumulation

Capture is a stock that evolves:

$$C_{t+1} = C_t + (1 - C_t) \underbrace{\sigma(\eta_0 + \eta_1 e_t + \eta_2 d_t - \eta_3 r_t)}_{\text{new capture inflow}} - \underbrace{\delta_C C_t}_{\text{decay / reform}}, \quad (2)$$

where $\sigma(x) = \frac{1}{1+e^{-x}}$ is logistic, $\eta_i > 0$, and $\delta_C \in (0, 1)$ is the natural rate at which capture decays absent continued pressure (turnover, institutional correction). The $(1 - C_t)$ term ensures diminishing returns as capture saturates.

Interpretation: entryism and deception have compounding long-horizon effects because they push C_t upward, which then reduces E_t via (1), which further reduces the pluralist ability to reverse capture.

4.5 Dynamics II: Legitimacy and Morale as Endogenous Resources

We model legitimacy and morale as resources that respond to outcomes and information conditions.

Legitimacy update. Legitimacy falls when (i) deception is effective and (ii) enforcement is framed as illegitimate, especially under capture.

$$L_{t+1} = L_t + \lambda_+(1 - L_t) \phi(E_t) - \lambda_- L_t h(d_t, C_t), \quad (3)$$

where $\phi(\cdot)$ is increasing and concave (effective enforcement can restore confidence but with diminishing returns), and $h(\cdot)$ is increasing in both arguments (deception is more damaging when epistemic arbiters are captured).

A simple instantiation:

$$\phi(E) = 1 - e^{-\xi E}, \quad h(d, C) = d(1 + \chi C),$$

with $\xi, \chi > 0$.

Morale update. Morale rises with perceived efficacy and legitimacy, and collapses when resistance is punished or looks futile (a mechanism consistent with preference falsification and cascade dynamics).¹⁵

$$M_{t+1} = M_t + \mu_+(1 - M_t)u(L_t, E_t) - \mu_- M_t v(d_t, C_t), \quad (4)$$

with u increasing in (L, E) and v increasing in (d, C) .

4.6 Dynamics III: Ideological Replication and Defection

Population shares change through (i) differential growth/replication and (ii) defection.

Let baseline demographic/organizational replication rates be $g_P, g_T > -1$ (net growth per period). Let ideological replication be influenced by legitimacy, capture, and relative enforcement.

We write:

$$P_{t+1} = (1 + g_P) P_t + \underbrace{\Delta_{T \rightarrow P}(t)}_{\text{defections to pluralism}} - \underbrace{\Delta_{P \rightarrow T}(t)}_{\text{defections to totalization}}, \quad (5)$$

$$T_{t+1} = (1 + g_T) T_t + \Delta_{P \rightarrow T}(t) - \Delta_{T \rightarrow P}(t). \quad (6)$$

Defection flows are modeled as:

$$\Delta_{P \rightarrow T}(t) = P_t \cdot \rho_{PT} \sigma(a_0 + a_1 C_t + a_2 d_t - a_3 E_t - a_4 L_t), \quad (7)$$

$$\Delta_{T \rightarrow P}(t) = T_t \cdot \rho_{TP} \sigma(b_0 - b_1 C_t - b_2 d_t + b_3 E_t + b_4 L_t), \quad (8)$$

with $\rho_{PT}, \rho_{TP} \in (0, 1)$ scaling maximum defection rates. This encodes an interpretable asymmetry: capture and deception increase the social/professional cost of pluralist affiliation and increase the perceived inevitability of totalization, pushing net defection toward T .

4.7 Asymmetry as a Constraint Difference

The defining asymmetry is not merely in preferences but in *constraint sets*. Pluralist actors are constrained by neutrality norms: they cannot condition rights on ideology and face higher reputational penalties for enforcement errors. Totalizing actors face no analogous constraint to preserve pluralism. We represent this as a cost wedge.

Costs. Pluralist countermeasures r_t (and enforcement actions that increase E_t) incur a legitimacy-sensitive cost:

$$\text{Cost}_P(r_t) = k_P \frac{r_t^2}{L_t + \varepsilon}, \quad (9)$$

so that as legitimacy falls, each unit of defense becomes more expensive (politically and reputationally). $\varepsilon > 0$ avoids division by zero.

Totalizing actions incur:

$$\text{Cost}_T(d_t, e_t) = k_d d_t^2 + k_e e_t^2, \quad (10)$$

a simpler cost that does not scale up with pluralist legitimacy. This captures non-reciprocal tolerance: pluralist self-binding creates a nonlinear defensive handicap.

4.8 Regimes, Thresholds, and “Slow-Then-Sudden” Collapse

The system admits qualitatively distinct regimes depending on parameter values and initial conditions.

¹⁵Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Pluralist stability (resilient regime). A resilient regime is characterized by a stable neighborhood around high (L, M) and low C , with p_t bounded away from zero. Sufficient (not necessary) conditions include:

η_3 large (defense effective), δ_C nontrivial (capture decays), κ moderate (capture less damaging), a_3, a_4 large (enforcement effective)

Capture regime (degenerate pluralism). In this regime, C_t drifts upward and L_t drifts downward, driving E_t down via (1) even if p_t initially remains high. Institutions become procedurally pluralist but substantively asymmetric: enforcement against intimidation and coercion becomes prohibitively costly.

Cascade regime (abrupt alignment shift). As C_t and d_t rise, (7) can enter the steep region of the logistic, producing rapid defection cascades consistent with preference falsification models.¹⁶ The apparent suddenness arises because the system crosses a threshold where marginal changes in (C, d) cause superlinear changes in net defection.

Define net defection rate:

$$\Delta_t := \frac{\Delta_{P \rightarrow T}(t)}{P_t} - \frac{\Delta_{T \rightarrow P}(t)}{T_t}.$$

A practical tipping condition is $\Delta_t > 0$ over sustained periods combined with E_t below a floor $\underline{E}$ required for routine institutional enforcement.

4.9 Comparative Statics: Levers Implied by the Model

The model yields immediate directional implications, which later sections operationalize as institutional design principles.

Deception suppression is high leverage. Because d_t enters capture inflow (2), legitimacy decay (3), morale decay (4), and defection (7) simultaneously, reductions in effective deception produce multiplicative resilience gains. In elasticity terms, the total derivative of E_t with respect to d_t is amplified through C_t , L_t , and M_t :

$$\frac{\partial \ln E_t}{\partial d_t} = -\kappa \frac{\partial \ln(1 - C_t)}{\partial d_t} + \gamma \frac{\partial \ln L_t}{\partial d_t} + \beta \frac{\partial \ln M_t}{\partial d_t},$$

highlighting why interventions that reduce deception effectiveness can have superlinear long-run effects.

Counter-capture investment has compounding returns. r_t reduces capture inflow (2), which increases E_t via (1), which further improves L_t and M_t via (3)–(4). This creates a positive feedback loop under favorable parameters, motivating early investment.

Late coercion is structurally expensive. As L_t declines, the marginal cost of defense rises nonlinearly via (9). This formalizes the practical observation that once legitimacy is degraded, restoring neutral enforcement requires higher visible force and higher political cost.

¹⁶Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

4.10 Illustrative Plots

(i) Enforcement as a function of capture.

Then:

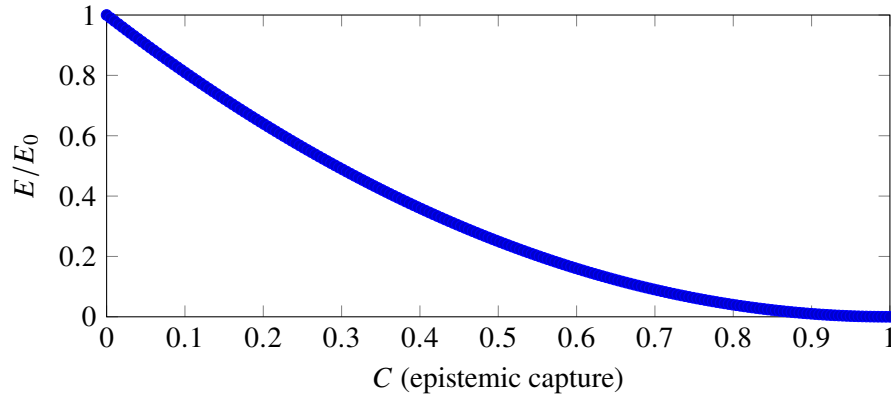


Figure 1: Illustrative enforcement degradation $E/E_0 = (1 - C)^\kappa$ with $\kappa = 2$. Higher κ implies stronger nonlinearity: modest capture yields large loss of usable enforcement.

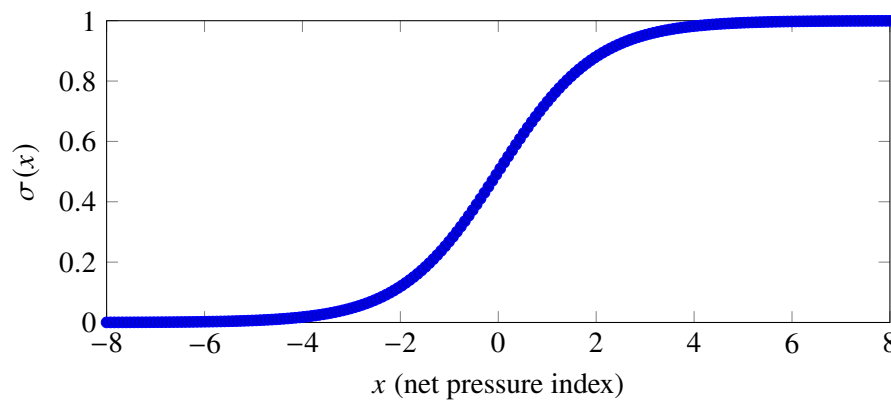


Figure 2: Logistic threshold shape used in (2) and (7)–(8). Slow change below threshold; rapid change near the inflection; saturation thereafter.

(ii) Defection probability as a threshold function.

4.11 Relation to Prior Formal and Empirical Work

Three connections matter for interpretation.

First, the model's emphasis on commitment asymmetry and the strategic use of non-violent instruments aligns with classic strategic reasoning about credible commitment and the structure of conflict.¹⁷

Second, the cascade behavior is explicitly consistent with preference falsification and sudden alignment shifts after long periods of suppressed dissent.¹⁸

¹⁷Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

¹⁸Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Third, the role of deception as a strategic instrument that changes the action environment follows modern accounts of active measures and influence operations.¹⁹

The distinctive move here is to couple these with an explicit capture state variable C_t that endogenizes the drift of epistemic arbiters and legitimacy metrics, thereby converting reputational and procedural dynamics into hard constraints on E_t and on defection flows.

¹⁹Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus / Giroux, 2020).

Table 1: Qualitative Regimes in Asymmetric Epistemic Conflict

Regime	State Profile	Institutional Characteristics	Dominant Dynamics	Transition Triggers
Resilient Pluralism	Low C_t ; high L_t, M_t, E_t ; stable p_t	Neutral institutions enforce rules at low reputational cost; pluralist norms widely internalized	Capture inflow offset by decay (δ_C); enforcement restores legitimacy; defections net to zero	Increase in effective deception d_t without countermeasures; erosion of legitimacy via externalization of norms
Degenerate (Hollow) Pluralism	Moderate to high C_t ; declining L_t and E_t ; p_t superficially stable	Formal pluralism preserved, but enforcement becomes asymmetric and risk-averse; intimidation tolerated	Epistemic capture raises cost of enforcement; pluralist self-binding constrains response; morale erosion begins	Crossing legitimacy threshold where $\partial \text{Cost}_P / \partial r_t$ becomes large; sustained deception
Cascade / Alignment Shift	Rapid drop in M_t and p_t ; C_t high; $E_t < \underline{E}$	Sudden elite and institutional defections; rapid narrative realignment; apparent overnight change	Preference falsification breaks; defection logistic enters steep region; coordination cascades	Net defection rate $\Delta_t > 0$ for sustained periods; symbolic enforcement failures
Post-Plural Totalization	$C_t \rightarrow 1$; $L_t \rightarrow 0$; $E_t \approx 0$; $p_t \ll 1$	Pluralist norms persist only rhetorically or historically; enforcement becomes ideologically selective	Institutional lock-in; suppression of pluralist voice; reproduction dominated by totalizing coalition	Only large exogenous shocks or regime redesign permit exit; high hysteresis

5. Regimes and Equilibria

This section characterizes the qualitative regimes implied by the dynamic system specified in Section 4. A *regime* is defined as a long-run qualitative pattern in the joint evolution of the state vector

$$(C_t, L_t, M_t, E_t, p_t),$$

together with the associated institutional behavior and incentive structure. The focus is not on closed-form equilibria in the narrow game-theoretic sense, but on *dynamically stable configurations* and the transitions between them under asymmetric constraints.

Table 1 summarizes the core regimes. This section explicates each regime in turn, identifies its stability properties, and clarifies the mechanisms governing transitions.

5.1 Resilient Pluralism

In the resilient pluralism regime, epistemic capture remains low ($C_t \approx 0$), legitimacy and morale are high (L_t, M_t close to unity), and effective enforcement capacity E_t remains comfortably above the minimum threshold $\underline{E}$ required for routine institutional action. The pluralist share p_t is stable, even in the presence of ideologically opposed actors.

From the model, this regime is locally stable when capture inflow is offset by decay:

$$(1 - C_t) \sigma(\eta_0 + \eta_1 e_t + \eta_2 d_t - \eta_3 r_t) < \delta_C C_t,$$

and when legitimacy-restoring effects of enforcement dominate deception-induced erosion in (3). Under these conditions, pluralist self-binding does not become a strategic liability because enforcement remains reputationally cheap.

This regime corresponds to what much of the democratic theory literature implicitly assumes as the default state of pluralistic societies: neutral institutions, bounded disagreement, and contestation within shared procedural norms. However, the model highlights that resilience is not passive. It requires sustained counter-capture investment r_t and limits on effective deception d_t . Absent these, the regime is only metastable.

5.2 Degenerate (Hollow) Pluralism

Degenerate pluralism arises when epistemic capture accumulates (C_t rises), while formal pluralist procedures remain intact. Legitimacy L_t and effective enforcement capacity E_t decline gradually, yet the pluralist population share p_t appears superficially stable.

This regime is characterized by a critical asymmetry: institutions continue to exist and operate, but the cost of enforcing neutral rules becomes nonlinearly increasing due to legitimacy erosion. From (9), as L_t falls,

$$\text{Cost}_P(r_t) \propto \frac{1}{L_t},$$

making even modest defensive actions politically or reputationally expensive.

The regime is locally stable because capture dynamics are self-reinforcing. Rising C_t reduces E_t via (1), which weakens legitimacy recovery in (3), further discouraging counter-capture investment. Importantly, this regime often persists for extended periods, creating the illusion of stability. It corresponds to what observers frequently describe as “institutional paralysis” or “norm erosion without collapse.”

The literature on democratic backsliding documents this pattern descriptively, but typically treats it

as an endogenous political failure.²⁰ The present model clarifies that degenerate pluralism is instead a *strategically exploitable equilibrium* under asymmetric epistemic pressure.

5.3 Cascade and Alignment Shift

The cascade regime represents a rapid transition rather than a steady state. It occurs when declining morale M_t and legitimacy L_t push defection dynamics into the steep region of the logistic functions in (7) and (8). Once the net defection rate

$$\Delta_t = \frac{\Delta_{P \rightarrow T}(t)}{P_t} - \frac{\Delta_{T \rightarrow P}(t)}{T_t}$$

becomes persistently positive and $E_t < \underline{E}$, coordination cascades dominate.

This mechanism formalizes preference falsification: individuals and institutions privately dissent from the emerging dominant alignment but publicly conform until enforcement failures or symbolic shocks reveal the true distribution of beliefs.²¹ The result is an apparently sudden realignment of elites, organizations, and narratives, often misinterpreted ex post as a spontaneous or purely emotional shift.

The cascade regime is intrinsically unstable. It resolves either into a new stable configuration—typically post-plural totalization—or, less commonly, back into resilient pluralism if countervailing enforcement and legitimacy restoration occur rapidly. The asymmetry in costs makes the latter outcome rare.

5.4 Post-Plural Totalization

In the post-plural totalization regime, epistemic capture approaches saturation ($C_t \rightarrow 1$), legitimacy of pluralist enforcement collapses ($L_t \rightarrow 0$), and effective enforcement capacity becomes negligible ($E_t \approx 0$). The pluralist share p_t shrinks to a marginal minority.

Institutions may continue to use pluralist language and symbolism, but enforcement becomes ideologically selective. Reproduction dynamics are dominated by the totalizing coalition, and dissent is suppressed procedurally, reputationally, or coercively. In terms of the model, this regime is globally stable absent large exogenous shocks because high capture and low legitimacy jointly raise the cost of any attempted reversal.

This configuration corresponds to what North, Wallis, and Weingast describe as a shift toward a closed access order, albeit achieved through procedural and epistemic means rather than overt violence.²² Exit from this regime requires either external intervention or wholesale institutional redesign; marginal policy adjustments are ineffective due to hysteresis.

5.5 Irreversibility, Hysteresis, and Strategic Implications

A central implication of the regime structure is the presence of hysteresis. The path from resilient pluralism to degenerate pluralism and onward to totalization is gradual, but the reverse path is steep and costly. This asymmetry arises because legitimacy and morale are slow to rebuild once depleted, while capture-induced constraints persist.

From a strategic perspective, pluralistic regimes face a timing problem analogous to commitment problems in conflict.²³ Early, low-cost interventions to suppress effective deception and limit capture dominate late, high-cost enforcement efforts after legitimacy erosion has set in. The model thus predicts

²⁰Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018); Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”, *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19.

²¹Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

²²Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²³Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

that societies often fail not because they lack power, but because they delay its use until its effective cost has become prohibitive.

6. Institutional Levers and Counter-Capture Design

This section derives actionable institutional levers directly from the regime dynamics characterized in Section 5. A *lever* is defined as a policy- or design-level intervention that alters the parameters governing capture accumulation, legitimacy erosion, morale decay, or defection flows. The objective is not maximal suppression of ideological opposition, but the preservation of a non-degenerate pluralist regime by restoring symmetry in constraints and costs.

We rank levers by their *systemic leverage*: the extent to which marginal intervention produces superlinear effects on regime stability by acting on multiple state variables simultaneously.

6.1 Lever I: Suppress Effective Deception ($\downarrow d_t$)

Model linkage. Deception intensity d_t enters the system at four critical points: capture inflow (2), legitimacy decay (3), morale decay (4), and defection pressure (7). As shown in the comparative statics of Section 4, the elasticity of effective enforcement with respect to d_t is amplified through these channels.

Effect profile. Reductions in effective deception yield *superlinear* benefits because they simultaneously: (i) slow capture accumulation, (ii) stabilize legitimacy, (iii) preserve morale, and (iv) reduce defection cascades. In regime terms, this lever directly prevents transitions from resilient to degenerate pluralism and sharply lowers the probability of cascade events.

Design principles. Ethically permissible interventions focus on *reducing effectiveness*, not suppressing speech content. Examples include:

- provenance and funding transparency requirements for advocacy organizations;
- disclosure standards for coordinated campaigns and foreign-linked narratives;
- procedural penalties for demonstrable misrepresentation in institutional settings;
- auditability of indices, reports, and ratings that function as epistemic arbiters.

These measures align with the insight that influence operations succeed by overwhelming verification capacity rather than by persuasion alone.²⁴

6.2 Lever II: Harden Institutions Against Capture ($\downarrow \eta_1, \uparrow \delta_C$)

Model linkage. Entryism effort e_t increases capture via η_1 in (2), while δ_C governs the natural decay of capture through turnover and correction. Increasing δ_C or reducing η_1 shifts the capture steady state downward.

Effect profile. This lever has *compounding but delayed* effects. Unlike deception suppression, which acts immediately, capture hardening primarily alters the long-run basin of attraction, preventing the system from drifting into degenerate pluralism.

Design principles. Counter-capture design emphasizes structural neutrality:

- rotation and term limits for gatekeeping roles;
- strict conflict-of-interest and disclosure regimes;

²⁴Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus / Giroux, 2020).

- separation between advocacy and assessment functions;
- adversarial review mechanisms for high-impact reports and indices.

The key is not ideological screening, but *procedural friction*: raising the cost of coordinated infiltration without penalizing good-faith participation.

6.3 Lever III: Preserve Enforcement Legitimacy ($\uparrow L_t$)

Model linkage. Legitimacy L_t is a multiplicative input into effective enforcement (1) and inversely determines the marginal cost of defense (9). Once L_t falls below a threshold, even well-designed interventions become politically infeasible.

Effect profile. Legitimacy restoration produces *threshold effects*. Above a critical level, enforcement is cheap and stabilizing; below it, enforcement becomes costly and accelerates further legitimacy loss. This nonlinearity explains why late interventions often appear authoritarian even when substantively neutral.

Design principles. Legitimacy preservation requires:

- consistency in rule application across groups;
- procedural due process in enforcement actions;
- clear articulation of neutral principles (non-coercion, reciprocity);
- insulation of enforcement decisions from reputational warfare.

The model predicts that selective or symbolic enforcement disproportionately harms L_t and accelerates regime degradation.

6.4 Lever IV: Sustain Pluralist Morale ($\uparrow M_t$)

Model linkage. Morale M_t amplifies enforcement capacity (1) and moderates defection dynamics (7). It is particularly sensitive to perceived efficacy and institutional backing.

Effect profile. Morale interventions have *nonlinear stabilizing effects* near cascade thresholds. Small improvements can prevent entry into the steep region of the defection logistic, thereby averting sudden alignment shifts.

Design principles. Effective morale preservation includes:

- visible institutional backing for good-faith rule enforcement;
- protection against reputational and professional retaliation;
- rapid correction of demonstrably false allegations;
- signaling that resistance is neither isolated nor futile;

These mechanisms counter preference falsification by increasing the visibility of pluralist commitment.²⁵

6.5 Lever V: Restore Symmetry of Constraint (Reciprocity)

Model linkage. The defining asymmetry in the system arises from pluralist self-binding under (9) combined with unconstrained totalizing tactics (10). Restoring symmetry requires conditioning participation on reciprocal adherence to non-coercive norms.

Effect profile. Reciprocity has *structural effects*: it does not directly alter C_t or d_t , but changes the feasible strategy set, eliminating exploitative equilibria such as degenerate pluralism.

²⁵Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Design principles. Reciprocity-based conditions may include:

- conditioning institutional access on renunciation of coercion and intimidation;
- symmetry in disclosure and compliance requirements;
- exclusion of actors who reject the procedural premises of pluralism from adjudicative roles.

Importantly, these conditions are procedural rather than ideological. They preserve pluralism by making it conditional on the very norms that define it.

6.6 Lever Ranking and Strategic Priority

Table 2 summarizes the relative leverage of the interventions discussed.

Table 2: Institutional Levers Ranked by Systemic Impact

Lever	Primary Variables	Effect Type
Suppress effective deception	d_t	Superlinear, immediate
Harden institutions against capture	η_1, δ_C	Compounding, long-run
Preserve enforcement legitimacy	L_t	Threshold, nonlinear
Sustain pluralist morale	M_t	Cascade prevention
Restore reciprocity of constraint	Strategy set	Structural equilibrium shift

Summary. The model implies a clear ordering: interventions that reduce deception effectiveness and prevent capture dominate late-stage coercive responses. Pluralistic regimes fail not because they lack power, but because they allow asymmetric exploitation of their own procedural commitments. Counter-capture design restores equilibrium by reintroducing symmetry at the level of constraints rather than suppressing ideological contestation.

Preview. The next section applies these levers to empirical cases, beginning with India and the United States, to illustrate where key thresholds were crossed and which interventions were delayed or foreclosed.

7. Empirical Applications: India and the United States

This section applies the analytical framework to two pluralistic democracies with distinct histories, institutional architectures, and geopolitical positions: India and the United States. The purpose is not to adjudicate normative disputes or exhaustively catalogue events, but to demonstrate how the model illuminates regime dynamics, transition thresholds, and the relative effectiveness of institutional levers in real-world contexts.

The two cases are analytically complementary. India represents a large, postcolonial, civilizationally continuous democracy operating under sustained external and internal reputational pressure. The United States represents a mature liberal democracy with global epistemic influence and unusually porous informational and institutional boundaries. Together, they illustrate how asymmetric epistemic conflict manifests across different structural conditions.

7.1 India: Externalized Legitimacy and Contested Enforcement

Baseline regime. For much of the post-independence period, India exhibited characteristics consistent with resilient pluralism: high pluralist share p_t , robust electoral legitimacy, and an administrative state capable of routine enforcement. Despite internal diversity and periodic conflict, pluralist norms of constitutionalism and procedural neutrality were broadly internalized.

Shift toward degenerate pluralism. Beginning in the late 2000s and accelerating in the 2010s, India increasingly exhibited features of degenerate pluralism as defined in Section 5. Notably, legitimacy L_t of enforcement actions became increasingly contingent on *external epistemic arbiters*, including international indices, NGOs, and transnational media narratives. This externalization amplified the effect of epistemic capture (C_t) beyond domestic institutions.

From the model's perspective, two dynamics were salient. First, effective deception d_t operated through reputational channels rather than mass persuasion, raising the perceived cost of neutral enforcement even when formal authority remained intact. Second, entryism and narrative alignment within domestic elite institutions increased η_1 , slowing capture decay δ_C and making correction politically costly.

Threshold events. Several high-visibility enforcement actions—particularly those involving terrorism, national security, or communal violence—functioned as symbolic tests of legitimacy. In model terms, these episodes reduced L_t disproportionately relative to their substantive legal merits, increasing $\text{Cost}_P(r_t)$ and discouraging timely counter-capture investment. The result was not immediate collapse, but a prolonged hollowing-out phase characterized by enforcement risk-aversion and institutional paralysis.

Countervailing factors. Unlike many pluralistic systems, India retained several stabilizing features that limited cascade risk. Strong electoral turnover, decentralized federal structures, and a comparatively cohesive civilizational narrative helped sustain morale M_t among pluralist actors, preventing large-scale defection cascades. In the language of the model, E_t remained above $\underline{E}$ despite legitimacy erosion, averting a full transition to the cascade regime.

Implications. India's case illustrates how degenerate pluralism can arise even when domestic democratic legitimacy remains electorally robust. The key vulnerability lies in the coupling of enforcement legitimacy to externally captured epistemic institutions, effectively importing asymmetry into the domestic constraint structure. The model predicts that counter-capture levers emphasizing transparency, reciprocity, and institutional insulation from reputational warfare are particularly high-leverage in such contexts.

7.2 United States: Internal Capture and Cascade Dynamics

Baseline regime. For much of the twentieth century, the United States exemplified resilient pluralism with exceptionally high legitimacy of enforcement, strong institutional morale, and low effective capture. The pluralist coalition was large and ideologically heterogeneous, but broadly committed to shared procedural norms.

Transition through capture. From the late 2010s onward, the U.S. case displays a clearer trajectory through degenerate pluralism toward cascade dynamics. Epistemic capture (C_t) increased primarily *internally*, through universities, media organizations, professional associations, and administrative bodies that function as domestic epistemic arbiters. Unlike India, legitimacy erosion did not depend on external validation but on internal reputational realignment.

In the model's terms, both deception intensity d_t and entryism effort e_t increased, while counter-capture investment r_t lagged due to pluralist self-binding and fear of appearing illiberal. This raised the cost of enforcement and accelerated morale decay among institutional actors.

Cascade indicators. The United States exhibits several hallmarks of the cascade regime. These include sudden elite defections, rapid narrative realignment across institutions, and the normalization

of intimidation tactics previously considered outside the bounds of legitimate contestation. Preference falsification dynamics are evident in the speed with which positions once considered fringe became institutionally dominant, consistent with the logistic defection mechanisms in (7).²⁶

Critically, symbolic enforcement failures—where violations of neutral rules went unaddressed due to reputational risk—functioned as coordination signals, pushing M_t downward and Δ_t upward.

Partial stabilization and open trajectory. Despite these dynamics, the U.S. system has not fully transitioned to post-plural totalization. Constitutional decentralization, judicial heterogeneity, and federalism have introduced friction, preventing complete institutional lock-in. In model terms, capture remains high but uneven, keeping the system near—but not beyond—the cascade boundary.

Implications. The U.S. case underscores the model’s central claim that pluralistic collapse is often driven by delayed response rather than lack of capacity. High baseline legitimacy made early intervention appear unnecessary or illiberal, allowing capture and deception to compound. The resulting loss of morale and legitimacy made later interventions appear authoritarian, even when procedurally neutral.

7.3 Comparative Insights

Comparing India and the United States highlights three generalizable insights.

First, epistemic capture can operate through external or internal channels; its strategic effect is invariant to origin. Second, legitimacy erosion is more dangerous than ideological disagreement per se, because it raises the nonlinear cost of enforcement. Third, pluralistic systems are most vulnerable not at moments of overt crisis, but during prolonged periods of apparent stability in which counter-capture investments are deferred.

Empirical Anchors and Data Sources

To ground the preceding case analyses, this subsection identifies publicly available datasets and institutional artifacts that correspond to the model’s state variables. The intent is not to treat these sources as authoritative truth, but as *strategic indicators* whose construction, weighting, and institutional provenance themselves form part of the epistemic environment under study.

India. Several recurrent data sources illustrate the dynamics described above.

First, international democracy and freedom indices—including V-Dem, Freedom House, and Reporters Without Borders—have increasingly functioned as external epistemic arbiters shaping perceptions of legitimacy L_t .²⁷ Methodological revisions in these indices during the 2010s introduced higher reliance on expert-coded subjective indicators and networked NGO inputs, increasing sensitivity to coordinated narrative pressure. From the model’s perspective, this raises effective C_t and amplifies the reputational cost of enforcement actions independent of their domestic legal grounding.

Second, enforcement episodes involving terrorism-related prosecutions and public-order measures have generated asymmetric reputational shocks. For example, pre-trial detention or bail denial under national security statutes has been cited in international advocacy reports as evidence of democratic decline, despite similar or harsher practices being routine in comparator states. These episodes correspond to sharp, localized drops in perceived L_t , increasing $\text{Cost}_P(r_t)$ in (9) without materially changing domestic

²⁶Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

²⁷Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New About It?”, *Democratization* 26, no. 7 (2019): 1095–1113; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2023); Reporters Without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index 2023* (Paris: Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

electoral legitimacy.

Third, despite these pressures, electoral participation rates, alternation in state-level governments, and judicial heterogeneity indicate that E_t remained above the collapse threshold $\underline{E}$. Data from the Election Commission of India and National Judicial Data Grid support the claim that pluralist enforcement capacity, while contested, did not enter the cascade regime.²⁸

United States. In the U.S. case, the relevant datasets are primarily domestic.

University climate surveys, professional association statements, and content moderation policies of major platforms reveal internal epistemic realignment rather than external pressure. Longitudinal analysis of public trust in media and higher education from Pew Research Center shows a sharp decline in perceived neutrality beginning in the mid-2010s, consistent with rising C_t and falling L_t .²⁹

Second, incident-level data on campus disruptions, speaker disinvitations, and administrative non-enforcement of stated rules provide observable proxies for declining effective enforcement E_t . FIRE's annual reports on campus free expression document an increase in rule non-application driven by reputational risk rather than formal incapacity.³⁰

Third, survey evidence indicates preference falsification dynamics. Polling shows significant gaps between private beliefs and publicly expressed positions on contested issues, consistent with the cascade mechanisms described in (7).³¹

Taken together, these datasets do not “prove” the model, but they render its mechanisms empirically legible and falsifiable.

Preview. The next section operationalizes these insights by proposing measurable indicators and monitoring frameworks capable of detecting early transitions from resilient to degenerate pluralism before cascade dynamics take hold.

8. Measurement, Indicators, and Early-Warning Systems

This section translates the theoretical variables of the model into observable indicators suitable for monitoring pluralistic resilience in real time. The objective is not to construct a single composite index, but to identify *leading indicators* that signal regime transitions before cascade dynamics render intervention prohibitively costly.

8.1 Mapping Model Variables to Observables

Table 3 summarizes candidate proxies for each core variable.

8.2 Early-Warning Indicators

The model predicts that pluralistic collapse is preceded by specific, detectable patterns:

1. **Capture–legitimacy divergence:** rising C_t with stable or declining L_t , even when formal authority is unchanged.
2. **Enforcement asymmetry:** increasing variance in enforcement outcomes conditional on identity rather than conduct.

²⁸Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Elections* (New Delhi: Election Commission of India, 2022); National Judicial Data Grid, *NJDG Statistics Overview* (New Delhi: Department of Justice, Government of India, 2023).

²⁹Pew Research Center, *Trust in Government: 1958–2019* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2019); Pew Research Center, *Americans' Mistrust of Media Outlets* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2022).

³⁰Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, *Spotlight on Speech Codes 2022* (Philadelphia: FIRE, 2022).

³¹Cato Institute, *State of Free Speech and Tolerance in America* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2020).

Table 3: Model Variables and Observable Indicators

Model Variable	Observable Proxies	Notes and Caveats
Epistemic capture (C_t)	Concentration of narrative alignment across institutions; overlap of expert networks; methodological opacity in indices	High C_t is indicated by declining inter-institutional disagreement and reduced auditability, not by ideological content
Legitimacy (L_t)	Public trust surveys; compliance with neutral enforcement decisions; reputational response to rule application	Sudden drops following procedurally neutral enforcement are more informative than baseline disagreement
Morale (M_t)	Willingness of officials to enforce rules; whistleblower activity; elite exit rates	Preference falsification implies morale may collapse rapidly after long stability
Effective enforcement (E_t)	Rate of rule enforcement conditional on violation; enforcement asymmetry across groups	Symbolic non-enforcement events are critical early signals
Effective deception (d_t)	Volume and coordination of misleading narratives; funding opacity; repetition across platforms	Effectiveness matters more than volume; focus on reach and institutional uptake

3. **Symbolic enforcement failures:** high-visibility non-enforcement events that function as coordination signals.
4. **Morale discontinuities:** sudden elite defections following long periods of apparent stability.

These indicators typically appear *before* large shifts in population share p_t , making them suitable for preventive action.

8.3 Dashboard Design Principles

Rather than aggregating indicators into a single score, the model implies a *dashboard approach*:

- Track variables separately to preserve diagnostic power.
- Emphasize rate-of-change metrics (first derivatives) over levels.
- Flag threshold crossings, not gradual trends.
- Maintain transparency in data sources and weighting.

A dashboard consistent with this approach resists epistemic capture by making its own construction auditable.

8.4 Thresholds and Intervention Windows

The most policy-relevant implication is temporal. Once $E_t < \underline{E}$ and $\Delta_t > 0$ persist simultaneously, the system enters a high-hysteresis region where marginal interventions have diminishing returns. Preventive action is therefore most effective during the transition from resilient to degenerate pluralism, when legitimacy remains recoverable and morale responsive.

8.5 Closing the Loop

By linking theory, empirical observation, and institutional design, the framework enables pluralistic societies to treat resilience as a *strategic variable* rather than a moral assumption. The central lesson is not that pluralism is fragile, but that it must be actively defended against asymmetric exploitation if it is to

remain non-degenerate.

Preview. The concluding section synthesizes these findings, addresses normative objections, and clarifies the conditions under which pluralistic self-defense remains compatible with freedom of conscience and equal civic standing.

9. Normative Objections and Democratic Self-Defense

Any framework that advocates conditionality within pluralistic systems will encounter a predictable set of normative objections. Chief among them are concerns that counter-capture measures risk sliding into illiberalism, suppressing dissent, or violating freedom of conscience. This section addresses these objections directly and clarifies the distinction between *democratic self-defense* and authoritarian closure.

9.1 Objection I: Conditionality Is Inherently Illiberal

A common objection holds that conditioning institutional access or participation on adherence to procedural norms constitutes an illiberal restriction on belief or expression. This objection rests on a category error. The model does not propose conditioning *belief*, but conditioning *institutional privilege*—particularly access to adjudicative, gatekeeping, or enforcement roles—on reciprocal adherence to non-coercive norms.

Pluralistic systems already impose extensive conditionality: judges must accept constitutional supremacy; civil servants must apply rules neutrally; researchers must disclose conflicts of interest. These constraints are not illiberal; they are the very mechanisms that make pluralism possible. The framework simply generalizes this logic to address asymmetric exploitation, restoring symmetry in constraint rather than suppressing ideological diversity.

9.2 Objection II: Enforcement Risks Authoritarian Overreach

A second objection is that proactive enforcement against intimidation, deception, or capture risks delegitimizing pluralistic institutions and accelerating the very collapse it seeks to prevent. The model clarifies why this risk is real but contingent.

From (9), enforcement becomes costly primarily when legitimacy L_t has already been eroded. Early, procedurally neutral enforcement in the resilient regime is comparatively cheap and legitimacy-enhancing. Late enforcement in the degenerate regime appears authoritarian because it occurs after capture has already raised reputational costs. The lesson is temporal, not ideological: *delay converts neutral enforcement into perceived repression*.

This insight aligns with established theories of democratic self-defense, which emphasize the permissibility—and necessity—of constraining anti-democratic actors before they can hollow out institutions from within.³²

9.3 Objection III: Who Decides What Is “Totalizing”?

A third objection concerns epistemic authority: who determines which actors or behaviors are incompatible with pluralism? The framework deliberately avoids ideological classification. Totalization is defined *behaviorally*, not doctrinally, by observable rejection of reciprocal constraint—coercion, intimidation, procedural sabotage, or the refusal to accept neutral adjudication.

This behavioral criterion is critical. It ensures that pluralism remains open to radical critique, heterodox belief, and moral disagreement, while excluding only those strategies that exploit pluralism’s self-binding to eliminate it. In this sense, democratic self-defense is narrower—and more principled—than many

³²Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

existing forms of informal exclusion.

9.4 Objection IV: Isn't This Just Power Politics?

Finally, critics may argue that the framework reduces pluralism to strategic competition, stripping it of moral content. This objection misunderstands the role of strategy. The model does not replace moral commitments with power calculations; it explains how moral commitments can be rendered ineffective when they are not institutionally defended.

Pluralism without self-defense is not morally pure; it is morally brittle. By articulating the conditions under which pluralistic norms can be preserved in adversarial environments, the framework aims to secure the moral goods pluralism promises—freedom of conscience, equality before the law, and peaceful coexistence—against systematic erosion.

10. Conclusion: Conditional Pluralism as a Stable Regime

Pluralism is not a self-stabilizing equilibrium. When pluralistic systems face totalizing actors operating under asymmetric constraints, they tend toward one of two degenerate outcomes: hollow proceduralism or capture. Avoiding these outcomes requires reconceiving pluralism as a *conditional regime* grounded in reciprocity, enforceability, and institutional resilience.

10.1 Conditionality Without Illiberalism

Conditional pluralism does not require ideological conformity or the suppression of dissent. It distinguishes between unconditional individual rights and conditional access to institutional power. Speech, belief, and association remain inviolable; adjudicative, gatekeeping, and enforcement roles do not.

In formal terms, conditionality alters the feasible strategy set, eliminating exploitative equilibria while preserving ideological contestation. It restores symmetry in constraint without abandoning openness.

10.2 Resonances with Indian Political Thought

The tension between rights and responsibilities is not unique to modern liberal theory. Classical Indian political and ethical texts repeatedly treat *dharma*—duty, order, and right conduct—as constitutive of social harmony rather than merely expressive of private virtue.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* links moral agency to responsibility rather than entitlement.³³ The *Arthaśāstra* balances tolerance and inclusion with firm enforcement against deception and subversion.³⁴ The *Pañcatantra* illustrates, through adversarial fables, the costs of naïve trust and the necessity of prudence.³⁵

Read together, these traditions do not advocate tyranny; they reject moral naïveté. They imply that durable orders persist when norms are actively upheld and when tolerance is extended to those who reciprocate it.

10.3 Rights, Responsibilities, and Stability

The central lesson, both ancient and modern, is that rights are difficult to sustain in the absence of reciprocal restraint. Pluralism that refuses to defend its procedural premises becomes a vehicle for its own negation; pluralism that enforces them remains open, resilient, and morally coherent.

Final remark. Pluralism survives not by denying conflict, but by structuring it.

A concise formulation of the paper's normative claim appears in the Sanskrit aphorism *dharmo rakṣati*

³³Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1951).

³⁴Kautilya, *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra*, **cb**editor Patrick Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁵Patrick Olivelle, *Pañcatantra: The Book of India's Folk Wisdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

rakṣitaḥ (“dharma protects those who protect it”). Read structurally, it asserts that normative orders are not self-enforcing; they persist only when defended.

In the present framework, *dharma* can be understood not as sectarian doctrine but as the procedural-moral order that sustains pluralistic coexistence: non-coercion, reciprocity, truthful adjudication, and restraint in the exercise of power. The model formalizes the same point: legitimacy (L_t), morale (M_t), and usable enforcement (E_t) decay when their generating norms are treated as unconditional entitlements rather than enforceable practices.

Degenerate pluralism emerges when pluralistic actors allow epistemic capture (C_t) and deception (d_t) to accumulate while deferring counter-capture investment (r_t) out of fear of appearing illiberal. Over time, the order is not protected—and therefore it ceases to protect.

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