



TRACING DEMOCRATIC FRAGILITY,
BUILDING TOWARDS RESILIENCE
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I arrived in Berlin at a time when democracy itself felt unusually fragile. From across the Atlantic to the Channel and Berlin, civic norms were fraying, and familiar institutions seemed suddenly radically more vulnerable to corrosion from without and within. My project stepped very modestly into this moment, aiming to understand how laws that appear technical, even mundane—like mandatory voter ID—reshape who gets to speak in a democracy and who is silenced by design.

The Wissenschaftskolleg gave the project more than time. It gave rhythm to thinking. It gave colleagues who turned from strangers into perceptive critics, into friends who challenged assumptions and fortified the work with warmth and insight. There were countless conversations, over coffee and dinner, after Colloquia, and at lunch.

At the empirical heart of my year was a rare opportunity: a natural experiment unfolding in real time as the UK introduced voter ID requirements nationwide. With it came access to data—surveys, discontinuities, and ID trial data. More importantly, voters’ perceptions took shape, and in turn sharpened mine. Democracy, it turned out, can be reshaped quietly, one line of administrative procedure at a time.

Throughout the year, broader questions were gaining momentum and saliency—what kind of resilience democracy really needs and what kind of work it takes to build it. Data alone cannot build resilience. So, we built community.

In May, with the support of the generous and far-sighted Otto und Martha Fischbeck Stiftung, I convened a workshop titled “Democratic Institutional Resilience” at the Wissenschaftskolleg. Two days of honest, urgent exchange followed—across disciplines, across institutions, across science and practice. Scholars and practitioners wrestled with polarisation, trust, authoritarian creep, and civic expectations that outpace institutional delivery. We debated Citizens’ Assemblies and militant constitutionalism, discussed leadership pipelines and judicial insulation. We laughed, built maps of ideas, tested one another’s certainties, and developed new collaborations.

And from these dialogues, something larger began to take shape.

This year not only deepened a specific research project—it seeded a far-reaching one. The outlines of a new initiative began to emerge: a *Centre for Democratic Resilience*. Born from empirical inquiry, but nourished by collaboration and conviction, the Centre aspires to be a space where scholarship meets practice, where democratic fragility is studied and democratic strength is forged. It is the next step—a home for research, dialogue, and practical innovation that carries forward what this year began.

Outside the workshop, the conversations gathered momentum. I was humbled to share research results and plans at Princeton, which was, at the time, reeling from the blizzard of initiatives unleashed by the most recent US administration; at King’s College London, the Hertie School, the University of Stuttgart and the WZB Berlin Social Science Center—each offering a different window into democratic practice, fracture, and resilience.

I was lucky to speak, too, in rooms where practitioners and stakeholders gather: with ReCampaign, Falling Walls Summit, SwissRe, the Ditchley Foundation, Civitates, the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft, Königswinter Conference, the Staatskanzlei Sachsen-Anhalt, at the ULA’s Deutscher Führungskräfte tag and the GLS Bank; and I began a hugely enjoyable collaboration with KreaB Germany. Each offered a different strand to weave into the fabric of this project—a testament to the broad coalition of actors across

government, politics, civil society, and business who are united not only by expertise, but also by a shared interest in renewing and strengthening democracy on the ground where it matters most.

There are so many memorable moments of this year, so many wonderful conversations and Colloquia, but one particular event will stay with me. In spring, Chancellor Angela Merkel joined us at the Wiko for a private panel conversation. In her calm, considered, empathetic, and differentiated way, she reminded us what inspiring democratic leadership can look and sound like. She listened deeply, spoke compellingly, and left the evening heavier with meaning.

From this extraordinary year, a new chapter begins. The Centre for Democratic Resilience is emerging—not just as an idea, but as a home. A home for impactful research that intersects with practice, for policy and public engagement, and for the many hands needed to steady democracy's foundations. What has started here will grow. With hope. With evidence.

To the Wissenschaftskolleg, thank you for a year of extraordinary generosity—for the time, the space, and the intellectual abundance. To my Co-Fellows, thank you for sharing your extraordinary joy in inquiry and your curiosity. And to the Wiko staff—whose care made everything possible, often invisibly—thank you for your warmth, your thoughtfulness, and your unwavering support. Rarely have I been made to feel so welcome. This was more than a sabbatical; it was a season of renewal, made rich by community. I leave grateful and inspired.