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HOW MUCH DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING?

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Is there evidence of a global democratic recession? The answer, unfortunately, is yes. The average level of democracy in the world has slipped back to where it was before the year 2000. The decline has been moderate, however, and most changes have occurred within regime categories—with democracies becoming less liberal and autocracies less competitive and more repressive. So far, at least, the data show relatively few countries backsliding from democracy all the way to full-blown autocracy.¹

Our analysis is based on the largest democracy database ever compiled. The Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem) contains more than eighteen-million data points relevant to democracy, measuring 350 highly specific indicators across 174 currently existing countries as of the end of 2016.² V-Dem is the first systematic effort to measure the de facto existence of all institutions that make up Robert A. Dahl’s famous conceptualization of electoral democracy as “polyarchy.”³ V-Dem identifies liberal democracies by looking for electoral democracy plus three additional components: the rule of law ensuring respect for civil liberties, judicial constraints on the executive branch, and legislative checks and oversight of the executive.

Drawing on earlier work, we use V-Dem data to sort countries into four regime categories. In a *closed autocracy*, the chief executive is either not elected or there is no meaningful electoral competition. An *electoral autocracy* holds de facto multiparty elections to choose the

chief executive, but these fall short of democratic standards due to significant irregularities, limits on party competition, or other violations of Dahl's institutional requisites. To be counted as an *electoral democracy*, a country must not only hold de facto free and fair multiparty elections, including for the executive (whether the vote is direct or indirect), but must also guarantee universal suffrage and considerable freedom of association and expression. If, in addition to those conditions of freedom and competitiveness surrounding elections, a country boasts the rights-securing rule of law as well as effective judicial and legislative constraints on executive power, then it qualifies as a *liberal democracy*.⁴

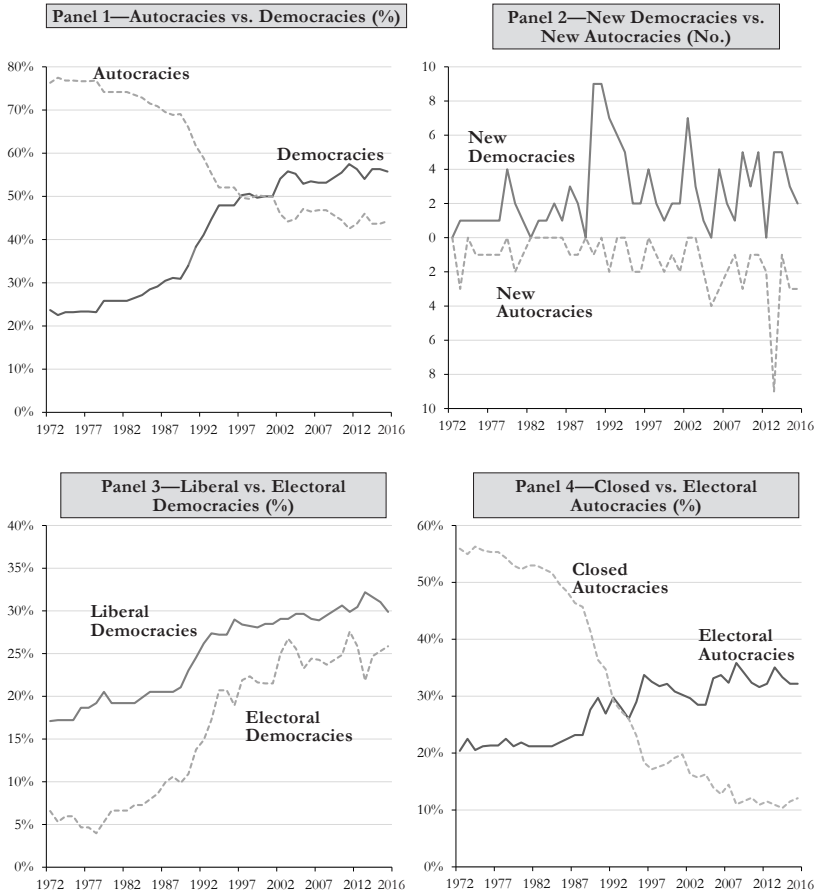
When the "third wave" of democratization started in 1974, the world looked very different than it does today: Only 35 of the countries in our dataset (23 percent) were democracies, while 116 were autocracies of some type. The democratic upsurge peaked in 2011 with 100 countries reaching the threshold for democracy, leaving 74 states under authoritarian rule. By the end of 2016, the number of democracies declined by three to 97 out of 174, or about 56 percent—hardly cause for alarm. This was divided between 45 electoral and 52 liberal democracies.

Nevertheless, a closer look at the data reveals much greater volatility in regime trends. As Panel 1 of the Figure shows, the relative shares of democracies and autocracies have swung up and down since the year 2000, with perhaps a moderate downward trend among democracies in the last five years. Panel 2 depicts the volatility in regime transitions—from autocracy to democracy and the reverse—going back to 1972 (the eve of the third wave). In 2013 alone, five countries went from autocracy to democracy, and nine went the other way. This volatility suggests a fair amount of uncertainty as to how robust the democratic gains of the last four decades or so actually are.

Comparing liberal and electoral democracies, the percentage of states that are liberal democracies increased steadily until 2013, and then declined three years in a row (Panel 3). By contrast, the share of electoral democracies moved up and down at regular intervals since the mid-1990s, but upward slightly in the last three years. A lot of the democratic backsliding in these last three years thus seems to have consisted of countries regressing moderately from liberal to electoral democracy. Perhaps the biggest change over the past 45 years has been from a world where closed autocracies predominated to one where they are rare. The largest share of authoritarian countries now belongs to the category of electoral autocracy, where politics is somewhat competitive (Panel 4).

Aggregate numbers are useful to describe overall patterns, but they disguise varying country trajectories. In the online Appendix (see www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/supplemental-material, Figures 2 and 3), we provide a country-by-country comparison of V-Dem point estimates and confidence intervals for 2006 and 2016 on both the elector-

REGIME DYNAMICS FROM 1972 TO 2016



al- and liberal-democracy indices, and then we classify each country in each of these two years by our four regime types (see online Appendix, Table 2).

There is some good news: Sixteen countries have moved from autocracy in 2006 to democracy in 2016.⁵ The transition in Nepal from a closed dictatorship to an electoral democracy is one of the most positive changes over the last decade, and much less widely noted than the dramatic transition of Tunisia from an electoral authoritarian regime into a liberal democracy. Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka also transitioned from electoral autocracy to electoral democracy in the last ten years. Angola, Burma, and the Maldives moved from closed to electoral autocracy. All these cases helped to counterbalance (at least in a raw, “big picture” sense) the derailing of democracy in many other countries.

Yet it should be noted that much of the political change among au-

tocracies in the last decade involved deepening authoritarianism. Six authoritarian states registered significant worsening levels on V-Dem's electoral-democracy index. Burundi, for example, regressed from an electoral autocracy, where many hoped for further liberalization, to become a highly repressive dictatorship after President Pierre Nkurunziza was allowed a disputed third term in office following a coup attempt, severe repression, shutdown of independent media, and the exodus of hundreds of thousands from the country in 2015.

Backsliding Democracies

Among the countries that were liberal democracies in 2006, the main trend has been a weakening of their liberal-democratic character, leading to lower scores and in some cases even to downgrading to electoral-democracy status. The United States remained a liberal democracy according to our classification, for example, but slipped from 0.84 (on a 0–1 scale) in 2006 to 0.78 in 2016, the year in which President Donald Trump was elected. By thus sliding, the United States fell from 12th to 17th place among the world's 52 liberal democracies. Hungary's increasingly restricted space for freedom of expression and association brought down its score on the liberal-democracy index from 0.70 in 2006 to 0.55, meaning that Hungary now ranks 59th in the world. Already by 2010, Hungary had lost its status as a fully fledged liberal democracy.⁶ Other countries that were liberal democracies in 2006 and suffered significant declines, falling down into the class of electoral democracies, include Brazil, Panama, Poland, and Suriname.

Freefall by liberal democracies seems to be less of a concern, however. We analyzed all 117 years of data from 178 (currently and previously existing) countries. We found that—with the exception of countries that Germany invaded during World War II—it is very rare for a liberal democracy to collapse so fully that it becomes an autocracy.

V-Dem's data also record significant democratic declines by 2016 among a number of countries that the coding here classified as at least electoral democracies in 2006 (see online Appendix, Figure 3 and Table 2). Even more disturbingly, ten electoral democracies have become autocracies since 2006. Turkey is maybe the most prodigious example, falling from 0.69 to 0.34 on the electoral-democracy index. Bangladesh, Honduras, Serbia, and Zambia are among the other countries that relapsed into electoral autocracy in the last decade, while Thailand made a full circle from dictatorship to electoral democracy, then back again to dictatorship following the May 2014 military coup.

Within this mixed ten-year trend of democratic regression in many countries plus advances in some others, which aspects of democracy have been most affected? When actors combine to weaken or even derail democracy, what features suffer most? Conversely, when oppositions

induce ruling coalitions to expand democratic rights, what aspects of democracy advance the most? The richly detailed V-Dem dataset, with 23 main indicators that determine what is an electoral democracy and an additional 23 that identify a liberal democracy, enables us to calculate the number of countries registering significant changes for each of these specific indicators. This provides a more nuanced picture than extant data sets allow (see Figure 5 in the online Appendix).

Improvements in democratic quality have come mostly in the area of elections. In country after country, these now tend to be free and fair and to involve multiple parties. Open intimidation of oppositionists is growing rarer, as is vote buying. Able, autonomous election-administration bodies are playing larger roles. Many more countries improve than backslide on these indicators. This is the area where the indicators are often easy to see and define, and where the international community, together with local organizations and the media, focuses a lot of attention. Elections are high-profile events that take place in a short time, and elaborate democracy-friendly procedures and safeguards exist to defend them. When voting time rolls around, even rulers with dubious democratic credentials will want to look as good as they can on election-related indicators.

Measures of the degree to which courts and legislatures are able to constrain executive power present a more mixed picture, with advances as well as regressions. The most troubling indicators are typically those measuring the freedoms of expression and association. These are harder to study than conditions surrounding elections, which makes it difficult for outside observers to be as precise and verifiable as they would like to be when assessing to what degree a society permits liberty of communication and association. The indicator along which negative change has been most common is government censorship of the media. Few governments censor openly, but more than a few know how to censor behind the scenes. Other tactics that rulers get away with include informal restrictions on academic and cultural freedom; increasing constraints on and threats to civil society groups; efforts to narrow the range of political opinions allowed in the media; and harassment of journalists who criticize the government. These everyday processes are open to a gradual and often hidden “tightening of the screws” that can quietly negate high-profile advances in the electoral arena.⁷

Autocracies and Democracies

Another way to diagnose democracy’s backslidings and advances is to analyze changes within three classes of regimes: autocracies, electoral democracies, and liberal democracies. We report the top three indicators on which the greatest number of countries in each class show changes both positive and negative (see Table 3 in the online Appendix).

When it comes to democratic backsliding, autocracies differ marked-

ly from the two types of democracies. The autocracies more aggressively and openly attack remaining democratic space. Active government repression and harsher controls on civil society, as well as increasing use of politically motivated killings, are the indicators that most frequently deteriorated in autocracies over the

last decade. These actions seem most likely to be used by rulers who are bent on staying in power at almost any cost and who are little concerned with popular opinion and international reputation.

Democracy is facing challenges across the world, yet alarmist reports of a global demise or crisis of democracy are not warranted.

Among electoral democracies, we see a mix of measures—some subtle and some more readily apparent. Government intimidation of the opposition during elections is usually obvious and can be documented, while other factors on the top-three list of

worsening indicators among electoral democracies are more elusive. One is the extent to which the media is willing to report critically on the government, and another is the growth of constraints on freedom of discussion.

In the countries that were liberal democracies in 2006, the declines over the ensuing decade are led by informal changes in nonelectoral arenas. Behind-the-scenes media censorship, unofficial government harassment of critical journalists, constraints on academic freedom imposed without changing any laws, and ignoring high-court rulings are the principal means that governments have used to constrict democratic space in the liberal democracies.

Democratic advances over the past ten years, by contrast, have tended to occur primarily with regard to rights and institutions involved in the electoral arena. This has been true across regime types. Such a finding reinforces what we noted above: Governments are more likely to focus on improving “what shows,” and may do so while ignoring or even undermining democratic rights and institutions that are less visible.

Democracy is facing challenges across the world, yet alarmist reports of a global demise or crisis of democracy are not warranted. The average levels of democracy in the world, as well as the number of electoral and liberal democracies, are still close to the highest ever recorded, even if a slight decline may be detectable in last few years. At the same time, we find grounds for worry when we try to provide the more nuanced picture for which Thomas Carothers and Richard Youngs, for example, have called.⁸ Several democracies (e.g. Brazil, Hungary, Poland, and South Korea) have regressed significantly over the past decade yet not to the point where they have ceased to qualify as democracies. Some countries that qualified for the less demanding criteria of electoral democracy in 2006 (e.g. Bangladesh, Comoros,

Honduras, Iraq, Montenegro, Nicaragua, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, and Zambia) became electoral autocracies.

Despite everything, it seems that the normative power of democracy remains relatively strong. Dictators continue to try masking their repressive regimes with *de jure* democratic practices such as multiparty elections and even strive to strengthen such façades by engaging in fewer visible irregularities and acts of intimidation. In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan sought to legitimize the executive coup he has carried out by holding a constitutional referendum in April 2017. (He won, but with a meager 51.4 percent, and there has been much criticism surrounding the vote.) During the last decade, we have also witnessed some success stories in unlikely places, such as the first peaceful alternation in power in Nigeria following the 2015 elections there, and the transition to democracy in Tunisia following the 2011 uprising. In 2006, Tunisia was ruled by the corrupt autocrat Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, one of the most repressive dictators in the Middle East and North Africa. By 2016, the country had seen two peaceful handovers of power and fairly widespread freedoms, even if elections at the local level still have not been held and there are periods of emergency rule.

On the brighter side of developments, we also find that the wave of illiberal left-wing populism that swept parts of Latin America during the first years of this century may already be receding. Democratic forces remain mobilized in the United States, Europe, and parts of Africa and Asia, and a majority of countries in the world are still democratic and robustly stable. All these conditions suggest that democracy still has a future.

There are indeed worrisome trends and cases. In many established democracies, there is the rise of intolerance and right-wing-populist calls for various forms of more “illiberal” democracy. In some newer democracies, there is the gradual erosion of democratic rights and institutions. In places such as Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela, there have been relapses to harsh electoral autocracy. And in countries such as Burundi, Tajikistan, and Thailand, there is increasing repression. All these developments represent challenges to democracy, no doubt, but there is at the same time no robust evidence in the V-Dem data that democracy is caught in a global crisis.

NOTES

1. See Figure 1 in the online Appendix, at www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/supplemental-material. It displays the average levels of electoral and liberal democracy, accompanied by confidence intervals capturing the uncertainty associated with the estimates. It covers the period from 1972 through 2016.

2. Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, Staffan I. Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, M. Steven Fish, Adam Glynn, Allen Hicken, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Joshua Krusell, Anna Lührmann, Kyle L. Marquardt, Kelly Mc-

Mann, Valeriya Mechkova, Moa Olin, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Josefine Pernes, Constanza Sanhueza Petrarca, Johannes von Römer, Laura Saxer, Brigitte Seim, Rachel Sigman, Jeffrey Staton, Natalia Stepanova, and Steven Wilson. 2017. The “V-Dem Country-Year Dataset v7.0” includes Palestine, which is not universally recognized as a state, and excludes most countries that have fewer than a million people. V-Dem represents a new approach to conceptualizing and measuring democracy, and is one of the largest social science data-collection projects ever undertaken. It involves seventeen principal investigators and project managers, more than thirty regional managers, 170 country coordinators, and approximately 2,800 country experts. For each indicator and year, V-Dem typically asks five experts to evaluate each country. V-Dem then aggregates the expert assessments using a Bayesian IRT model, which also provides an estimate of uncertainty reflecting how much experts disagree. When we speak of “significant” changes, we refer to developments visible even after considering this uncertainty estimate. More information, including all data and reference material, can be found at www.v-dem.net/en/data/data-version-7.

3. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Michael Coppedge, Staffan Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, and Jan Teorell, “Measuring High Level Democratic Principles Using V-Dem Data,” *International Political Science Review* 37 (November 2016): 580–93.

4. Table 1 of the online Appendix summarizes these criteria. For more, see Anna Lührmann, Marcus Tannenberg, and Staffan I. Lindberg, “Regimes in the World (RIW): A Robust Regime Type Measure Based on V-Dem,” V-Dem Working Paper No. 47, V-Dem Institute, 2017, www.v-dem.net/en/news-publications/working-papers. The V-Dem project does not translate its measures into regime categories, and several of the project’s participants do not believe that V-Dem indices should be used for this purpose. We maintain here that the identification of regime types is important and necessary for analytical purposes, and that the combination of index scores and key conditions makes the present classification scheme valid.

5. They are Bhutan, the Central African Republic, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Malawi, Moldova, Nepal, Nigeria, the Philippines, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Togo, and Tunisia.

6. Our scheme for classifying regimes includes uncertainty estimates to identify countries in the “gray zone” between regime types and to reflect disagreements among V-Dem coders. Based on these estimates, we place Hungary from 2010 on in the lower bound of “Liberal Democracy,” indicating that the assessments of V-Dem experts point toward this category but with limited confidence. For more details see Table 1 and 2 of the online Appendix.

7. Many of the indicators on which we find the most notable declines taking place also mark the qualities that are the last to develop and come fully into their own as a country approaches a state of effective governmental accountability. See Valeriya Mechkova, Anna Lührmann, and Staffan I. Lindberg, “From de-jure to de-facto: Mapping Dimensions and Sequences of Accountability,” Background Paper for the World Development Report 2017, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/26212>.

8. Thomas Carothers and Richard Youngs, “Democracy Is Not Dying: Seeing Through the Doom and Gloom,” *Foreign Affairs*, 11 April 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/04/11/democracy-is-not-dying-pub-68651>.