

Indicators vs. Foundations: A Comprehensive Look at Democracy's Resilience

In recent years, the democracy indicators for many long-standing democratic regimes have decreased. However, the foundations and strengths of these democracies still hold strong and are unlikely to dissipate. Due to the structure of these longstanding democracies coupled with their histories of resilience, the plausibility of a democratic backslide is less likely compared to more recently formed democratic nations, which may face a far greater risk of being perverted into an authoritarian regime due to their infant status. While recent years have seen challenges such as polarization within parties and institutional erosion, the foundation of consolidated democracies provides a safeguard against the widespread adoption of authoritarianism.

This trend in decreases in democracy indexes is reflected in discernible declines in democracy indicators across various nations. These indicators, spanning political, social, and institutional metrics, serve as vital benchmarks for evaluating the health of democratic systems. The Varieties of Democracy Index (V-Dem) is a key measure reflecting this concerning trend quantifying democracy on a 0-1 scale. This index utilizes a multidimensional approach, incorporating expert surveys, media surveys, national surveys, institutional data, official documents, qualitative case studies, and geographic information. The diverse data sources contribute to a nuanced understanding of democratic governance.

The aggregated and ranked results from the V-Dem Index reveal a disconcerting reality: many democracies are currently experiencing democratic backsliding, indicating a deliberate weakening or elimination of institutions sustaining democracy (Bermeo, 2016). This regression is particularly alarming as it suggests a departure from democratic principles towards alternative

forms of governance, raising concerns about the erosion of democratic values globally and a step towards authoritarianism.

While a discernible decline in democracy indicators is undeniable, the current state of democracies globally presents a complex landscape, showcasing both concerning challenges and the enduring strength of foundational principles. Real-world examples abound, shedding light on the stark issues faced by democracies.

Numerous countries grapple with a noticeable deterioration in democracy indicators, each contending with its unique set of challenges. Consider the case of the United States, a nation historically viewed as a bastion of democracy. In recent years, political, social, and institutional dynamics have experienced a shift, contributing to a visible decline in democracy scores. The rise of divisive rhetoric, heightened polarization, and challenges to democratic norms have left an indelible mark on the nation's political landscape.

One prominent challenge in this decline is the pervasive issue of political polarization. Ideological differences between political factions have escalated, hindering constructive dialogue and compromise. Notably, the United States exemplifies this trend, with a significant gap in presidential favorability among opposition parties. President Joe Biden's approval ratings differ by a substantial 77 points when compared to, Former President Clinton, whose gap was comparatively modest at 39 points (Murray & Marquez, 2023). This widening ideological divide raises valid concerns about the resilience of democracies in fostering collaboration and unity during challenging times.

Another significant challenge confronting traditionally strong and consolidated democracies is the erosion of the states' institutions, posing a substantial threat to both emerging and established democratic systems. This phenomenon is notably observed in countries like

Poland, where recent years have witnessed a decline in the rule of law. The ruling Law and Justice party's actions, marked by government interference in crucial institutions, modifications to the judiciary, and challenges to judicial independence, contribute to the erosion of the rule of law (Błędowski, 2023). The establishment of committees with extensive powers and proposed amendments to criminal codes is perceived as a further menace to the rule of law, all contributing to a decrease in Poland's overall democracy score.

The challenges that democracies face are undeniably significant, with far-reaching impacts on the rights, movements, and overall quality of life of citizens. Despite these challenges, it's crucial to acknowledge that they are not insurmountable. The resilience of democracies is evident when considering the historical context and foundation of consolidated democratic systems. Since the inception of the first consolidated democracy, these political systems have encountered various trials. However, they have managed to navigate through difficulties and establish a rich historical precedent, with not a single one falling towards authoritarianism. This historical context serves as a guide for overcoming contemporary challenges, highlighting the enduring strength of democratic principles.

Examining the strengths of long-standing democracies becomes imperative in this context. These political systems, built upon a foundation of democratic ideals, have proven to withstand the test of time. The core principles that form the bedrock of these democracies remain robust, providing a sturdy framework even in the face of adversity. A poignant example of this resilience can be seen in Brazil in the 1960s. While not fully consolidated at that point in the nation's history, they still stood at 0.3 on the V-Dem scale, meaning that they were within the range to be considered a democracy. This changed in the coming years as they dropped to 0.1 only one year later (Teorell, 2023). This represented a 66 percent change in their V-Dem score,

which they eventually were able to recover from, subsequently flourishing in their V-Dem score. A similar trend can be seen in the modern day, with Brazil scoring 0.8 in the 2010s but dropping to 0.4 in the 2020s (Teorell, 2023). While this represents a higher overall drop than that seen in the 1960s, it is a lesser percentage decrease. History shows that not only Brazil but many more consolidated democracies can recover from the brink of authoritarianism.

While there is historical precedent for nations recovering from the changes associated with a decrease in V-Dem scores, it is imperative to understand why and how these authoritarian tendencies are spreading, particularly in the context of diminishing social groups and eroding social capital, as highlighted by the ideas of Robert Putnam in his book 'Bowling Alone.' The decline in civic engagement and social interconnectedness, observed by Putnam, creates a fertile ground for the rise of authoritarianism. The fraying social fabric not only diminishes the collective strength of communities but also leaves a void that autocratic forces may exploit.

Moreover, this decline in social capital contributes to a weakened civil society, limiting its ability to check the power of authoritarian leaders. In the absence of robust social networks, citizens may become more susceptible to divisive narratives and populist appeals, further fueling the spread of autocratic tendencies. The evidence presented, including the rise of divisive rhetoric, heightened political polarization, and erosion of institutions in countries like the United States and Poland, suggests a significant vulnerability that could lead to the undermining of democratic values. While historical examples demonstrate the resilience of democracies over time, it is crucial to consider the unique contemporary factors contributing to the decline in democracy indicators, such as the pervasive issue of declining social capital outlined by Robert Putnam. The interconnected dynamics of weakened civil society and the rise of authoritarianism present a formidable threat that cannot be dismissed by relying solely on historical precedent.

In navigating these challenges, a comprehensive understanding of the current socio-political landscape is imperative, recognizing the potential for a shift towards authoritarianism if effective measures are not taken to address the root causes of democratic decline.

Putnam's theory emphasizes the diminishing participation in social and community activities, leading to weakened societal bonds. To counteract this, strategies for defending democracy should include initiatives to rebuild social capital through shared activities and communal experiences. Interethnic dialogues can serve as a catalyst, fostering connections among diverse groups, and international organizations can support programs that encourage cross-cultural understanding. Civil society, cognizant of the Bowling Alone phenomenon, plays a crucial role in revitalizing community bonds. Efforts should prioritize the creation of inclusive spaces and opportunities for collective engagement. Moreover, citizens need encouragement to overcome social isolation by participating in joint activities, reinforcing the belief that individual contributions collectively shape the democratic landscape.

Understanding the interconnected dynamics of declining social capital and the rise of authoritarianism is crucial for devising effective strategies to counteract these trends. Rebuilding social groups, fostering community engagement, and revitalizing social capital can play a pivotal role in fortifying the resilience of democracies. By addressing the root causes of social fragmentation, we can actively work towards creating a more vibrant and interconnected civil society that acts as a wall against the encroachment of authoritarian forces.

Examining the landscape of democracies globally reveals a spectrum of outcomes, with recent or less economically advantaged democracies exhibiting distinct trajectories compared to their consolidated and wealthy counterparts. The contrast in outcomes raises intriguing questions about the influence of historical and institutional differences on the potential for authoritarian backslide. Recent or economically disadvantaged democracies often face unique challenges stemming from historical legacies, economic disparities, and institutional vulnerabilities. These challenges may manifest in a higher susceptibility to authoritarian tendencies, as seen in instances where political instability, corruption, or weak institutional frameworks hinder the consolidation of democratic norms.

In examining the challenges faced by recent or economically disadvantaged democracies, the real-world example of Venezuela illustrates the impact of historical and economic factors on the potential for authoritarian backslide. The country's history of political instability, economic disparities, and dependence on oil exports contributed to a weakened democratic foundation. As a result, Venezuela experienced an erosion of institutions, widespread corruption, and a consolidation of power by political leaders, showcasing the real-world complexities of democratic development and potential regression (Hernández, 2023).

This resilience is discernible in research correlating a state's GDP with the likelihood of transitioning between governance forms. The data indicates that when a state's GDP per capita exceeds 6,000, the likelihood of a shift in governance significantly decreases, and all consolidated democracies boast a GDP per capita far surpassing this threshold (Anderson, 2023). This economic stability, coupled with historical steadiness and robust institutions, creates a buffer against the erosion of democratic values. Examining the diverse paths taken by democracies of varying historical and economic backgrounds enriches our comprehension of

complex factors and provides a metric for comparing consolidated democracies with their less-established counterparts regarding the risk of an authoritarian shift.

Despite the historical resilience of democracies, one may argue that the current geopolitical landscape introduces unprecedented challenges, demanding a thoughtful reevaluation of their long-term viability. In the digital age, marked by rapid information dissemination and external influences, democracies face novel threats not encountered in historical contexts. The variability in the quality of democratic institutions among long-standing democracies adds complexity, acknowledging that resilience is not uniformly distributed. This variability suggests that some democracies may possess vulnerabilities, particularly in the face of contemporary challenges like the rapid spread of misinformation and cyber threats. While historical examples are crucial, recognizing and addressing these immediate and potent challenges becomes imperative for a comprehensive understanding of the risks democracies face today. An adaptive and nuanced perspective is essential to navigate the intricacies of the current geopolitical landscape and safeguard democratic values effectively.

The current decline in democracy indicators among longstanding democracies, as highlighted by tools like the Varieties of Democracy Index, raises concerns about a potential shift toward authoritarianism. Real-world examples from the United States and Poland illustrate diverse challenges, including political polarization, institutional erosion, and historical and economic factors contributing to democratic regression. However, the historical resilience of consolidated democracies, exemplified by Brazil's recovery from past setbacks, offers hope. To counteract the threats posed by declining social capital and the rise of authoritarianism, initiatives should focus on rebuilding societal bonds, fostering community engagement, and revitalizing civil society.

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