

# Measuring Democratic Backsliding

Andrew T. Little, *University of California, Berkeley, USA*

Anne Meng, *University of Virginia, USA*

**ABSTRACT**

Despite the general narrative that the world is in a period of democratic decline, there have been surprisingly few empirical studies that assess whether this is systematically true. Most existing studies of global backsliding are based largely if not entirely on subjective indicators that rely on expert coder judgment. Our study surveys objective indicators of democracy (e.g., incumbent performance in elections) and finds little evidence of global democratic decline during the past decade. To explain the discrepancy in trends between expert-coded and objective indicators, we consider the role of coder bias and leaders strategically using more subtle undemocratic action. Although we cannot rule out the possibility that the world is becoming less democratic exclusively in ways that require subjective judgment to detect, this claim is not justified by existing evidence.