

Liberal Democracy in Crisis: Evidence from Three Reports and Some Reflections

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Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of texts have been positing the world is undergoing a “democratic crisis” — that democracy as a system of government is threatened worldwide as political leaders with autocratic tendencies capture the power and manipulate democratic institutions in their favor,¹ various forms of increasingly extreme social polarization — from the partisan divide in the United States to religious sectarianism in India — threaten the functioning of democratic politics,² and resurgent authoritarian powers (notably China and Russia) have regained their primacy in the world stage and even work to reshape international norms along more authoritarian lines.³

However, is it certain that global democracy is threatened today? Are there really signs that democratic institutions and processes are globally eroding, or are the various texts which posit as much to some extent hyperbolic? From an academic perspective, how much objective evidence currently exists to “prove” the world is experiencing a democratic crisis? This paper seeks to provide a tentative answer to that question by comparing data and reports from three different outlets that publish yearly assessments of the state of democracy across the world: *The Economist’s* Democracy Index, Freedom House’s Freedom in the World report, and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. These sources use quantitative methods, guided by the qualitative assessments of experts, to measure countries’ democratic quality and classify how democratic their current political regimes are. In reviewing their methodologies, inherent subjectivities, and latest findings, this piece can posit an assessment of global democracy today, and whether it is truly *in crisis*.

Definitions and Report Methodologies

Democracy theorists and practitioners often defend liberal democracy as the ideal political regime. Stringently defined, it is a system where voters choose political leaders through regular, free and fair elections, while enjoying various political and civil rights and practicing liberal ideals such as rule of law, minority rights, and political pluralism.⁴ Such is not an easy system to reproduce: it requires political elites to only compete for power through peaceful means, and always subject themselves to public accountability.⁵ Moreover, it requires that a suite of individual rights is equally provided to a country’s entire population.⁶ Predictably, liberal democracy thus also needs various public institutions like

electoral boards, oversight bodies, and political parties to ensure such processes are carried out.

Since this concept of *liberal democracy* is not easy to replicate given material and political pressures in different countries, scholars have often defined political regimes across a spectrum of how democratic they are: if, on one end, there are “full” liberal democracies where these standards and conditions are significantly (if not necessarily perfectly) fulfilled, on the other there are fully-consolidated authoritarian regimes where neither effective elections nor political and civil rights are at all guaranteed, and political power rests solely with the state. Between each, one can find the so-called “democracies with adjectives” and “hybrid regimes:” political systems where liberal-democratic and undemocratic political structures coexist to varying proportions.⁷ For this paper, the term “*democratic quality*” refers to the various measures the reports mentioned here use to define where countries⁸ fall along this spectrum.

Methodologically, the Democracy Index, V-Dem, and Freedom in the World reports are relatively similar: they gather qualitative assessments from analysts and experts about the current state of a country’s democracy and, through a process of internal deliberation and data validation, transform them into quantitative scores for overall democratic quality.⁹ All three sources openly admit there is some subjectivity in this process, since it depends on individual experts’ judgments. Each report has its own ways to balance this: V-Dem uses a measurement model to statistically relativize the reliability of experts’ scores, while the Democracy Index limits individual indicators for democratic quality to two- or three-points scoring scales,¹⁰ in order to make expert assessments more easily comparable. Moreover, Freedom House conducts an extensive process of internal review and discussion before publishing scores.¹¹ Although one should not discount the value of such efforts, the findings of each report will always be controvertible: differences in methodology and experts’ interpretations of complicated political phenomena likely means each report will never be entirely comparable. Nonetheless, if their findings are to some extent overlapping, then some meaningful conclusions can be reached about the state of global democracy.

Main analysis of the reports

The latest editions of the Freedom in the World Report, the Democracy Index, and V-Dem’s Democracy Report all agree that global democratic quality is generally worsening and has been for several years.¹² However, this statement

requires nuance: as mentioned, each of these organizations has its particular ways of evaluating countries' democracies, which likely helps explain discrepancies in their temporal trends of democratic decline. For example, the Democracy Index has data going back to 2006, and tracked an almost continuous decline among 167 countries' average "overall score" for democracy starting only in 2015 (going from an average international score of 5.55 to 5.28 in 2021). Before then, global averages intermittently fluctuated up or down.¹³ By contrast, the Freedom in the World report suggests a different tipping point: with a score closer to 1 signifying a greater degree of "freedom,"¹⁴ the average between all countries has almost continuously increased since 2005 — from 3.34 in that year to 3.51 in 2021.¹⁵ Finally, V-Dem posits 2010 as the year when its Liberal Democracy Index measure started declining, from an average of 0.39 among all countries (weighted for population size)¹⁶ in that year to 0.31 in 2021.¹⁷

These drops are relatively small, and they seemingly relativize the impact of global democratic decline - but such is deceptive: small drops in overall scores can reflect significant political upheavals and erosion of liberal institutions. For example, India's Liberal Democracy Index score in V-Dem fell from 0.57 in 2013 to 0.36 in 2022, reflecting the increasing level of autocratization and sectarianism the country is facing under Narendra Modi.¹⁸ Meanwhile, *The Economist's* Democracy Index decreased Hong Kong's score from 6.02 to 5.6 between 2019-2021, following the crackdown by the Chinese Communist Party on local civil society.¹⁹ Lastly, the Freedom in the World average score for Brazil rose from 2 in 2018 to 2.5 in 2021, coinciding with the start of Jair Bolsonaro's presidency in the former year.²⁰ Decimal-point score changes can thus be quite consequential.

On a different note, the differences in dates for the start of the democratic decline between each report create problems from a historical perspective: if one had to write a history of liberal democracy in the 21st century based on this data, which year should they pick as the start of a decline? Either 2005 or 2010 may seem tempting, since they are relatively close to the Great Recession and could suggest a narrative of how economic decline weakened democracy. The year 2015 could also be tempting, since it was when Donald Trump announced his candidacy for president. But any of these years is problematic: choosing one of them as the start of a global democratic crisis lends primacy to certain events while diminishing others, thus inserting more subjectivity into whichever narrative we use to explain democratic decline. Even if one uses empirical data gathered and coded by experts to write a history of democratic decline, methodological differences between them may thus still lead to some ambiguity.

Another aspect adding complexity to the current understanding of democratic decline is how it varies regionally: all three reports suggest democratic quality is overall the worst in Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Eastern Europe and the Asia-Pacific - which is not surprising given that most of

the globe's authoritarian regimes are concentrated in those areas.²¹ However, there is greater disagreement about which regions have seen the greatest decreases in democratic quality over the last several years: for example, the Democracy Index cites Western Europe as the region that suffered the second-largest drop in its average score (behind Eastern Europe), from 8.6 in 2006 to 8.22 in 2021 (thus remaining relatively high compared to other regions) - the other organizations concur that democratic quality has decreased among Western European nations, but not enough to make it one of the worst-faring areas. Similarly, V-Dem and the Democracy Index list Latin America as having suffered one of the steepest drops starting in the early 2000s, though Freedom House, likely because it measures the Americas as a single region including the United States and Canada, did not do the same.²²

Moreover, it is important to note that different places are experiencing different causes for democratic backsliding: each region and country has distinct performances across subcategories of democratic quality (e.g. electoral processes, political pluralism, etc.),²³ and specific political or cultural factors may create more localized causes for democratic erosion. For instance, the Freedom in the World posits that authoritarian regimes in Eurasia are modeling themselves after Vladimir Putin's in Russia, with the latter's influence thus becoming a key catalyst for autocratization in the region.²⁴ Meanwhile, the Democracy Index cites many citizens in Eastern Europe as having "low confidence in democracy as a form of government and believe that democratic governance leads to poor economic performance."²⁵ Such factors may create regional dynamics fueling democratic backsliding, with the global crisis manifesting itself in specific ways across the world.

Nonetheless, the reports feature important points of concordance: for one, regardless of differences in overall timelines, all of them agree the average democratic quality across the world has declined over the last several years. This is the most immediate piece of evidence they give for a global democratic crisis of some kind. Moreover, all three reports highlight that liberal democracy is *not* the most common political regime in the world today: both the Democracy Index and V-Dem point to most countries being neither consolidated liberal democracies nor full authoritarian regimes, but rather falling somewhere in-between due to institutional shortcomings that hamper democratic rule, such as widespread corruption or constraints on civil society. The Democracy Index classified only 21 countries or territories as being "full democracies," while a majority (87 countries) fell under either the "flawed democracy" or "hybrid regime" category.²⁶ Similarly, V-Dem's 2022 report classified only 34 countries as full "liberal democracies," with 115 being either "electoral democracies" or "electoral autocracies."²⁷ Lastly, Freedom House classified 83 out of 195 countries in 2021 as being "Free," with the rest falling under either "Partly Free" or "Not Free."²⁸ Though the proportions between them vary, all sources thus point to

most countries today lacking the ability to fully deliver on liberal democracy. The proportion of countries that are not considered full democracies overtaking those that are is not new - indeed, all reports point to this already being the case since at least the early 2000s.²⁹ What is more worrying is that this proportion may *worsen* in the coming years due to the decreasing global average for democratic quality.

The Democracy Index, Freedom in the World Report, and V-Dem Project do thus provide evidence that the world is *indeed* experiencing a global crisis of liberal democracy. However, one needs to see the nuance in this statement: fewer countries having a perfect claim to liberal democracies *does not mean democracy as a system of government is at risk of extinction*. Even if an increasingly larger share of countries fit into the “second-best” categories of regime types (that is, “electoral” and “flawed” democracies, along with “Partly Free” countries), democratic institutions and processes will likely continue to persist there in meaningful ways. Rather, the real risk is that countries will become increasingly unable or unwilling to fully provide the liberties, rights and political participation that liberal democracy truly calls for.

Finally, the reports do suggest that some causes for democratic erosion are *global*, affecting countries across regions. For example, the 2022 editions of both Freedom House and the Democracy Index paid particular attention to China’s attempts to influence the international system, delegitimizing forms of democratic governance and chilling civil society voices speaking out against its human rights abuses.³⁰ Furthermore, V-Dem suggests that autocratization today is being galvanized by increasing levels of toxic political polarization across the world: would-be dictators are adopting a playbook of leveraging social divisions to demonize their opposition, and justify the breakdown of democratic institutions. V-Dem posits this pattern has been seen across a wide variety of national contexts, from Poland, through Brazil, and to India - and it may repeat itself elsewhere as global levels of polarization increase, including within established liberal democracies.³¹ Lastly, both V-Dem and the Democracy Index concur that the coronavirus pandemic has harmed democratic processes across the world, though to varying degrees. While the Democracy Index posits pandemic restrictions were a serious infraction on civil liberties, V-Dem found “that the pandemic has had limited direct effects on the global downward trend in democracy. While leaders of some countries take advantage of the pandemic to further consolidate power, autocratization was typically happening already.”³²

Conclusions

Studying global democratic decay reminds one of the parable of blind men trying to describe an elephant: each of them could touch and describe specific parts of the animal, but it was much more difficult to connect those descriptions into an accurate whole. Likewise, the democratic crisis’s multifaceted nature means it is challenging to ascertain

which factors are causing it: as suggested by the reports analyzed here, those causes may vary in important ways across time, region and country. Even though it is known that there is a democratic crisis, its overall nature thus remains elusive. However, the very fact each report points to drivers of democratic erosion varying globally also provide an important clue for how to counter them, since programmatic or academic approaches to democracy promotion could be best-served by understanding what those drivers are in each specific context, rather than assuming only global factors (like the influence of authoritarian nations or the coronavirus pandemic) are to blame. One should not easily assume the world is irreversibly set on a course towards autocratization: the full history of liberal democracy has not yet been written, and we have both time and some tentative clues for how to affect it for the better.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Anne Applebaum. *Twilight of Democracy: the Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020); Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way. “The New Competitive Authoritarianism.” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020): 53-54, 59-60 <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0004>.
- 2 Sumit Ganguly. “An Illiberal India?” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0016>; Ezra Klein. *Why We’re Polarized*. (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020).
- 3 Levitsky and Way, “The New Competitive Authoritarianism,” 52-3; United States Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC, 2018), 2, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; Christopher Walker. “What Is ‘Sharp Power?’” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): 9–23. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0041>.
- 4 Sheri Berman. *Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe: from the Ancien Régime to the Present Day* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4-6.
- 5 Schmitter and Karl. “What Democracy Is. . . and Is Not.” *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 3 (1991): 75–88. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0033>.
- 6 Berman, *Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe: from the Ancien Régime to the Present Day*, 6.
- 7 Collier and Levitsky. “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research.” *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (1997). <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.1997.0009>; Levitsky and Way, “The New Competitive Authoritarianism.”
- 8 The Democracy Index, V-Dem and Freedom in the World report score both countries and some territories (such as Hong Kong, Western Sahara, Macao, etc.) in their respective analyses - for the sake of expediency, the word “country” is used here to refer to both the countries and territories taken into consideration by each report, and

- the global quantitative trends presented in this paper also use scores for both.
- 9 Varieties of Democracy Project. *Autocratization Changing Nature?: Democracy Report 2022*. (Sweden: University of Gothenburg, 2021), 48, https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/74/8c/748c68ad-f224-4cd7-87f9-8794add5c60f/dr_2021_updated.pdf; The Economist Intelligence Unit. “Democracy Index 2021: The China Challenge.” (London: The Economist, 2022), 65-69, <https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf>; Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2022 Methodology*. (Washington, DC, 2022), 2-3, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FreedomInTheWorld_2021_Methodology_Checklist_of_Questions.pdf.
 - 10 That is, the scoring scale for indicators range from either 0–1 (two-point) or 0–0.5–1 (three-point).
 - 11 The Economist Intelligence Unit. “Democracy Index 2021,” 65-69; V-Dem, *Autocratization Changing Nature?*, 48; The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021*, 65-69; Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2022 Methodology*, 2-3.
 - 12 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021*, 3-6; Repucci & Slipowitz. *Freedom in the World 2022*. (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2022), 1, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021_World_02252021_FINAL-web-upload.pdf; V-Dem, *Autocratization Changing Nature?*, 6.
 - 13 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021*, 36.
 - 14 Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2022 Methodology*, 2-3.
 - 15 This does not include the average rating for territories, such as Hong Kong or Macao, only countries - Freedom House. *Country and Territory Ratings and Statuses, 1973-2022*. (Washington, DC, 2022), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule/countries-regions>.
 - 16 V-Dem actually provides us with two possible start dates for the democratic decline: if we weigh each country according to their share of the world’s population, as V-Dem itself did in its 2022 report, then the continuous decrease in the Liberal Democracy Index measure indeed started in 2010 - with the *average global citizen* enjoying a decreasing level of democratic quality from that point onwards. But if we do not weigh any countries and just consider the overall average between all of them (as the Democracy Index and Freedom House data provided here do), then the drop in democratic quality was less steep: it started falling from 0.42 in 2011 to a low of 0.39 in 2021 - Coppedge, Michael et al. V-Dem [Country–Year/Country–Date] Dataset v12. (Varieties of Democracy Project, Sweden: University of Gothenburg, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds21>.
 - 17 Coppedge et al, V-Dem [Country–Year/Country–Date] Dataset v12; V-Dem, “Autocratization Changing Nature?,” 12.
 - 18 Coppedge et al, V-Dem [Country–Year/Country–Date] Dataset v12; Ganguly, “An Illiberal India?”
 - 19 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021*, 34.
 - 20 Freedom House. “Freedom in the World 2022 - Brazil.” (Washington, DC, 2022), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/brazil/freedom-world/2022>; Freedom House. *Country and Territory Ratings and Statuses, 1973-2022*.
 - 21 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021*, 37; V-Dem, “Autocratization Changing Nature?,” 12; Repucci & Slipowitz. *Freedom in the World 2022*, 18.
 - 22 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021*, 34; V-Dem, “Autocratization Changing Nature?,” 13; Repucci & Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2022*, 14, 21.
 - 23 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021*, 12-16; Repucci & Slipowitz. *Freedom in the World 2022*, 14.
 - 24 Repucci & Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2022*, 23.
 - 25 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021*, 43.
 - 26 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021*, 4.
 - 27 V-Dem, “Autocratization Changing Nature?,” 45; Lührmann, Tannenber, and Lindberg. “Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes.” *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 1 (2018): 61. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i1.1214>.
 - 28 Repucci & Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2022*, 18.
 - 29 Kezic, Laza. *The Economist Intelligence Unit’s index of democracy*. (London: The Economist, 2007), 6, https://www.economist.com/media/pdf/DEMOCRACY_INDEX_2007_v3.pdf; V-Dem, “Autocratization Changing Nature?,” 14; Repucci & Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2022*, 4.
 - 30 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021*, 3-4, 23-24; Repucci & Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2022*, 1.
 - 31 V-Dem, “Autocratization Changing Nature?,” 31-35.
 - 32 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021*, 5-6; V-Dem, “Autocratization Changing Nature?”