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State of the world 2020: autocratization turns viral*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the state of democracy in 2020. The world is still more democratic than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, but a trend of autocratization is ongoing and affecting 25 countries in 2020, home to 34% of the world's population. At the same time, the number of democratizing countries has dwindled by nearly half, reducing to 16 countries, home to a mere 4% of the global population. Freedom of expression, deliberation, rule of law and elections show the most substantial net declines in the last decade. A major change is that India, formerly the world's largest democracy, turned into an electoral autocracy. The V-Dem data suggests that direct effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on levels of liberal democracy were limited in 2020. Still, the longer-term consequences may be worse and must be monitored closely. Due to the pandemic and state restrictions on the freedom of assembly, mass mobilization declined to its lowest level in over a decade, yet the decline in pro-democracy protests in 2020 may well prove to be short-lived once the pandemic subsides.

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Introduction

This article analyses the state of democracy in the world in 2020 based on the latest release of the V-Dem dataset (v11).¹ It summarizes the state of liberal democracy in the world in 2020 against the backdrop of developments over the last ten years. While the world is still more democratic than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, we demonstrate that the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2020 is down to the levels around 1990. The “third wave of autocratization”² is continuing, currently affecting 25 countries and 34% of the world's population (2.6 billion). The data also suggests that autocratization typically follows a pattern. Ruling governments first attack the media and civil society and polarize societies by delegitimizing opponents, spreading false information, and then undermine elections. Meanwhile, the number of

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democratizing countries has dropped by almost half compared to ten years ago. Currently, 16 countries are democratizing that are home to only 4% of the global population.

The 2020 “year of lockdown” replaced the prior “year of protest” described in “State of the World 2019”.³ Generally, the Covid-19 pandemic challenged governments’ ability to respond while adhering to democratic standards and norms. Yet, V-Dem data suggests that the pandemic’s direct effect on democracy was limited in 2020. The final impact may however turn out to be higher unless restrictions are removed promptly once the pandemic is over.

In terms of regime types, electoral autocracies continue to be the most common. Together, electoral and closed autocracies are where 68% of the world’s population live. A notable shift in the Regimes of the World classification (based on Version 11 of the V-Dem dataset) is that the world’s largest democracy is now classified as an electoral autocracy: India with 1.37 billion people.⁴ Meanwhile, the number of liberal democracies has decreased to 32, with a population share of only 14%. Electoral democracies account for 60 states and the remaining 19% of the population.⁵

The threat to freedom of expression is intensifying. Among other things, we demonstrate a substantial increase in government efforts to censor the media in over 40 countries and substantial deterioration of civil society repression in 46 countries.

Finally, from a record high in 2019, mass mobilization declined to its lowest level in over a decade in 2020. Yet the decline in pro-democratic mass mobilization in 2020 may well prove to be short-lived. The “year of lockdown” demonstrated that pro-democracy forces could not be dissuaded. Activists rose above adverse conditions and several movements found alternative ways of furthering their cause.

Another year of decline for liberal democracy

Figure 1 illustrates the current state of the world with global and regional breakdowns of the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) from 1972 to 2020.⁶ The left panel of Figure 1 is based on country averages and the thick black line represents the global average of the LDI along with confidence intervals. It captures the gradual increase in democracy that

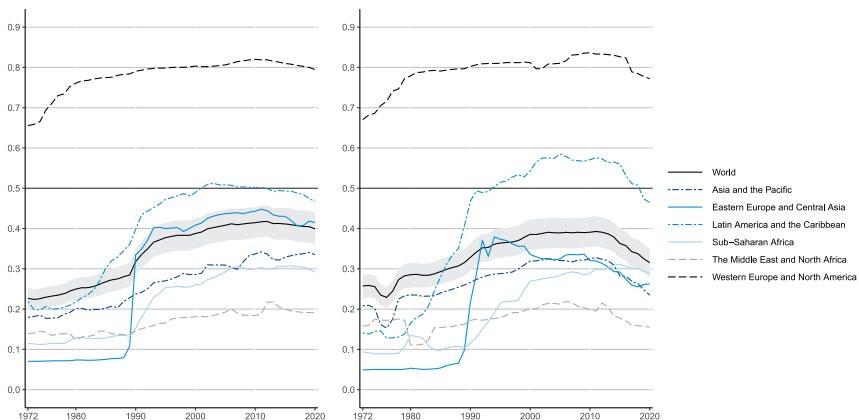


Figure 1. Liberal Democracy Index: Global and regional averages (right side: Population weighted averages), 1972–2020.

began in 1974, often labelled the “third wave of democratization”.⁷ The level of liberal democracy globally and in most regions then started to decline around 2010, although the decline is well within the confidence intervals as indicated by the grey area around the world average.

However, a different picture emerges when taking population size into account. In our view, democracy is *rule by the people*, and it arguably matters how many people are enjoying democratic rights and freedoms. The right-hand panel in [Figure 1](#) therefore shows levels adjusted for population size. These portray greater changes, indicating that the average citizen is experiencing democratic decline. The decline in liberal democracy by this metric has been steep over the last decade, notably in the Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America. The levels of democratic rights and freedoms enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2020 are similar to those found in or before 1990.

The decline in 2020 and covid-19

What was the toll of Covid-19 on democracy in 2020? [Figure 1](#) suggests that the global average of the LDI did not decrease dramatically from 2019 to 2020. Out of the 46 indicators forming the LDI, only three indicators record substantive negative changes in their global average. All three are related to freedom of domestic and international movement – reflecting the lockdown measures during the pandemic. We also calculated an LDI without those indicators and compared it to the original index. The difference in means (0.3998 vs. 0.3990), and thus the effect of these indicators on the overall index score is miniscule.⁸ In short, the pandemic seems to have had a marginal *immediate* impact on the global level of liberal democracy in 2020.

[Figure 2](#) illustrates the relationship between state responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and changes in liberal democracy from 2019 to 2020 in more detail. It shows how democratic decline relates to governments’ handling of the pandemic in terms of (1) the comprehensiveness of containment and closure policies (left) and (2) the adherence to international standards during an emergency (right). We use data on the containment and health index from the Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker⁹ that takes into account state measures such as school closures and restrictions on gatherings, and the pandemic violations of democratic standards index (PanDem)¹⁰ measuring violations of international norms such as the excessive use of force. Higher values on these indices represent more comprehensive containment policies and more violations of international standards, respectively.

The LDI declined from 2019 to 2020 for countries located below the horizontal line and improved for countries above the horizontal line in [Figure 2](#). If state responses to the pandemic were associated with a substantial decline in democracy, we would observe clustering of countries in the lower right corner of the plot. However, the regression lines in both plots (solid black lines) suggest only a weak relationship. Despite more than six months of lockdown, liberal democracy improved slightly, albeit not statistically significant, in Argentina, and the decline in Benin occurred without sweeping containment policies. Many of the countries declining on the LDI such as Sri Lanka, Botswana, and Slovenia were also close to the global average in terms of the comprehensiveness of the containment policies (dashed vertical line, left panel).

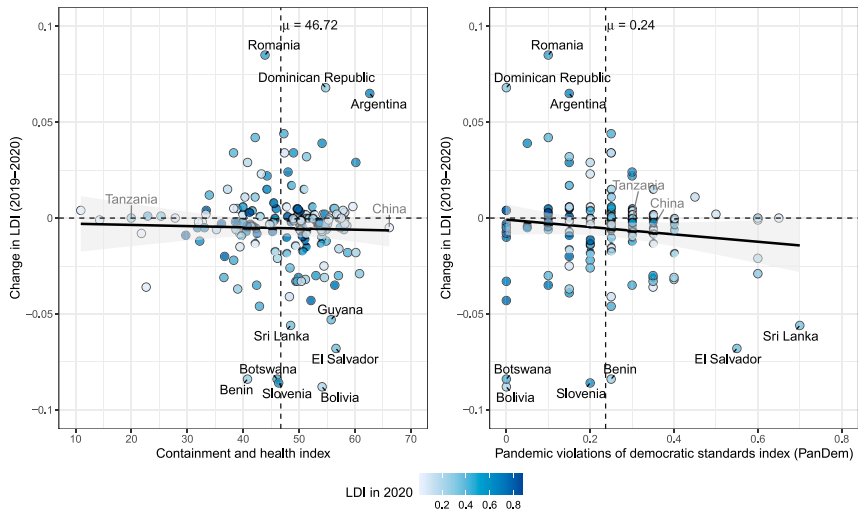


Figure 2. Changes in the Liberal Democracy Index (2019–2020) and state responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Note: Countries with a change of LDI score of more than 0.05 are labeled in black, as well as Tanzania and China (grey) for benchmarking. The Pandemic violations of democratic standards index (PanDem) assesses the extent to which state responses to Covid-19 contravene international standards, ranging from zero (no violation) to one (maximum amount of violations, Edgell et al., “Pandemic Backsliding”). The Containment and health index ranges from zero (no containment policies) to 100 (many comprehensive measures, Hale et al., “A Global Panel Database of Pandemic Policies”).

Nevertheless, as the plot in the right panel of [Figure 2](#) shows, pandemic-related violations of international standards for emergency responses contributed to a substantial decline in democracy over the last year in several countries, such as Sri Lanka and El Salvador. The Sri Lankan government used the pandemic to impose new restrictions on the media, intimidate and silence critics, and repress civil society organizations.¹¹ In El Salvador the government detained hundreds of people for violating lockdown regulations and held them in unsanitary conditions while ignoring injunctions by the country’s Supreme Court to protect fundamental rights.¹² Countries that improved on the LDI such as Argentina, Romania, and the Dominican Republic committed no or only minor violations. Thus, while this exploratory analysis supports our claim that the pandemic’s short-term effects on democracy were limited, it also suggests that the way governments implement restrictive measures is more important than the restrictiveness of the measures.

In addition to the implementation of reasonable containment measures, the pandemic posed a major challenge to the administration of elections, from ensuring voter safety to organizing election observations amidst travel restrictions. Some countries managed the difficulties well, such as South Korea where voter turnout in the legislature elections reached the highest level in 16 years.¹³ In other countries, the pandemic made it harder to observe the quality of elections. In Burundi international observers were not allowed to monitor the presidential elections in May 2020.¹⁴ Restrictions on international observers also reduced the integrity of the Belarusian presidential elections in August 2020,¹⁵ while some governments postponed elections without indicating a reliable alternative date, for instance in Ethiopia.¹⁶ Finally, a series of countries witnessed an upsurge of violence around elections, such as in the Central African Republic¹⁷ and in Guinea,¹⁸ which partly explains why the

indicator for electoral violence ranks fourth in terms of greatest negative change from 2019 to 2020.

While the pandemic did not lead to further autocratization in most countries this past year, the longer-term consequences are still uncertain. Some 43 countries – 24 democracies and 19 autocracies – still had emergency measures without a time limit by December 2020, including Albania, Mexico, and The Gambia.¹⁹ Other countries – including Brazil, Jamaica, and Kyrgyzstan – have set a time limit for specific emergency measures, but not for the overall emergency response.²⁰ 51 countries have not had time limits at some point of the pandemic. Only eight of them have set an end-date for emergency measures as of December 2020.²¹ For democracy to endure the pandemic without long-term damages, it is vital that governments lift such measures once the pandemic tapers off.

Autocracies: home to 68% of the world population

We complement our previous analysis of gradual changes in the level of democracy by investigating trends in substantial differences between polities as captured by regime type while using the same underlying indicators and data from V-Dem as the LDI. **Figure 3** portrays the development since 1972 by the four Regimes of the World types: closed- and electoral autocracies, along with electoral- and liberal democracies.²² Once more the left-hand panel is based on the number of countries, while the right-hand panel depicts shares of the world's population.²³

This perspective reminds us again that the world used to be a lot less democratic than today, despite relapses over the past decade; even with the 87 autocracies at the end of 2020. The dark red lines demonstrate that closed autocracies dominated the world both in terms of the number of countries and the population share they harbored back in the 1970s and 1980s. The numbers then fell gradually to reach a record low when these dictatorships were found in only 20 countries by 2013. Their number has since increased again to 25.

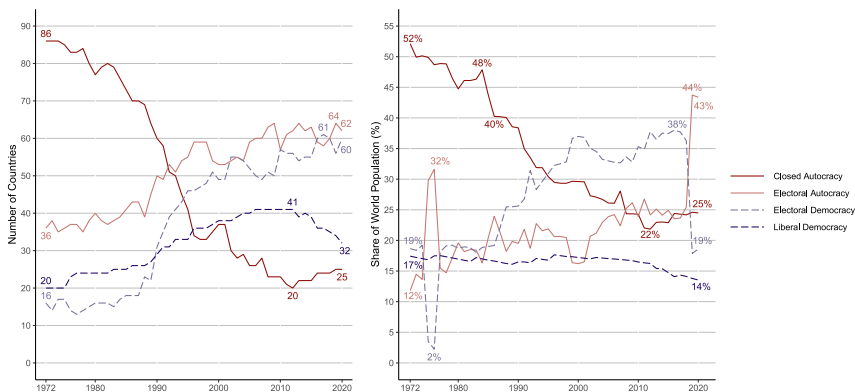


Figure 3. Number of countries per regime type (left panel) and share of population (right panel).

Note: Naturally, uncertainty remains about the classification of countries exhibiting similar degrees of authoritarian and democratic traits and thus are close to the thresholds between regime types. Depending on how we classify ambiguous cases, the number of autocracies in 2020 could range from 79 to 98, with 87 being our best estimate. For more details on the Regimes of the World measure, see Lüthmann et al., "Regimes of the World."

Electoral autocracies (light red lines) have almost doubled in number since 1972 (when there were only 36). Peaking with 64 last year, the number is now down to 62, but it remains the most common regime type in the world. Smaller and larger countries have transitioned in and out of this category so their share of the world’s population has varied. India’s democratic decline, which led to a transition to an electoral autocracy in 2019,²⁴ is especially visible in the right panel of Figure 3. The autogolpe of Indira Gandhi in 1975 is also reflected in that figure. With India’s 1.37 billion people, electoral autocracies now hold 43% of the global population, and both types of autocracies together share more than two-thirds (68%), among the highest recorded since 1972. The number of electoral democracies (dashed light blue lines) has remained around 55–60 countries over the past decade.

The number of liberal democracies (dashed dark blue lines) was on a steady upward path for many years, starting from 20 in 1972 and peaking at 41 in 2010. The right panel in Figure 3 demonstrates that the uptick in the number of countries over the years was not matched by increasing shares of the population of the world, reflecting that many liberal democracies have relatively small populations such as Barbados, Belgium, Costa Rica, Latvia, and Uruguay. Since 2010, a series of liberal democracies have also been marked by the global wave of autocratization, and their numbers diminished to 32 in 2020. Countries such as Chile, Portugal, Slovenia, and South Africa have gone from being liberal to more limited electoral democracies.

Autocratization accelerates

Autocratization – the decline of democratic regime attributes – also accelerates in terms of countries that are in transition, as indicated by substantive and significant changes on the LDI. Figure 4 shows the number of countries undergoing autocratization or democratization²⁵ by year since 1972. The left-hand panel is based on the number of countries while the right-hand panel displays population shares.

The dashed dark blue line in the left-hand panel demonstrates how a wave of democratization built up through the 1970s and 1980s, broke in the 1990s only to slowly subside thereafter. At its peak in 1999, 72 countries with about 30% of the global

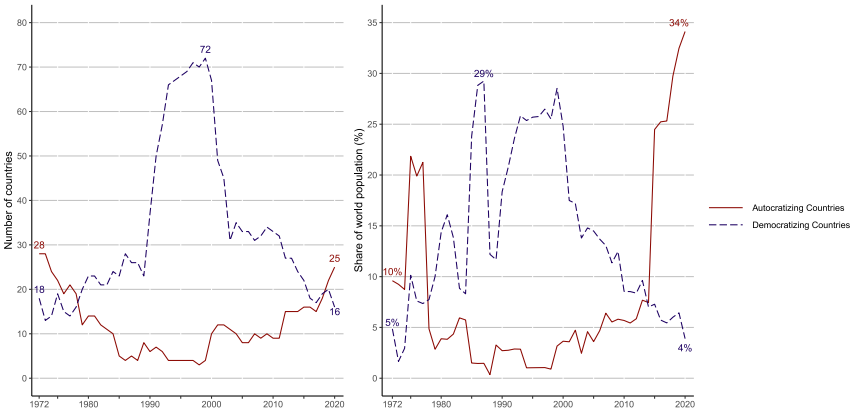


Figure 4. Autocratizing vs democratizing countries, 1972–2020 (left side – number of countries; Right side – share of world population).

population were democratizing. While the number of countries undergoing autocratization (solid red line) declined during the period the democratization wave was growing, it has been on the rise since around 2000 with an uneven yet pronounced upward trajectory. The pace of this “third wave of autocratization”²⁶ has escalated in the last few years. In 2020, there were 25 countries undergoing autocratization compared to less than ten a decade ago. Meanwhile, only 16 countries were in a process of democratization by 2020, a drop of almost half compared to ten years ago.

The accelerating rate at which the world is being taken over by processes of autocratization shows in bold relief when population size is taken into account, as in the right panel of Figure 4. The sharp increase in the last few years is the result of autocratization in large countries like India, Brazil, and the United States of America. By 2020, more than one-third (34%) of the world’s population were living in countries undergoing autocratization while a miniscule 4% were living in democratizing countries.

Advancers and decliners

While autocratization is the dominant trend globally, the demand for democracy remains high in many quarters and positive regime transitions are taking place. In Figure 5, countries above the diagonal line have democratized while states below the diagonal line have autocratized. Country names are only shown for markers of countries where the difference from 2010 to 2020 is statistically significant and substantially meaningful.

The upper diagonal of Figure 5 shows the 16 countries advancing democratically over the last ten years, including Armenia, The Gambia, and Tunisia; each has had relatively free and fair elections with stronger civil societies. South Korea stands out as one of the few cases ever recorded where a process of autocratization started in a

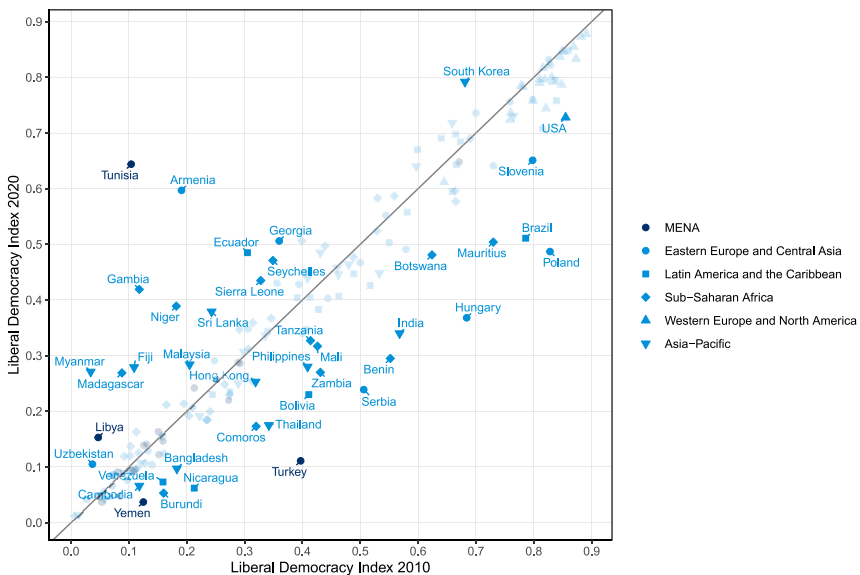


Figure 5. Countries with substantial and significant changes on the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI), 2010–2020.

liberal democracy but was turned around thus avoiding a breakdown. Ecuador is another recent instance of such a rare “U-turn” and together these two cases could be studied in further detail for clues about what it takes to stop and turn around a process of autocratization before it goes too far.²⁷ However, since the democratizing countries - with the exception of South Korea - are typically small, they can only play a marginal role in influencing regional and world trajectories.

Contrast this with the 25 autocratizing countries, among which we find major G20 nations such as Brazil, India, Turkey, and the United States of America. The U.S. declined substantially on the LDI from 0.86 in 2010 to 0.73 in 2020, in part as a consequence of President Trump’s repeated attacks on the media, opposition politicians, and the substantial weakening of the legislature’s *de facto* checks and balances on executive power. The data also shows that other populous or influential states such as Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Tanzania belong to this group of autocratizers, as does Hong Kong. States in Eastern Europe such as Hungary, Poland, and Serbia have continued their downward decline after persistent assaults on the judiciary and restrictions on the media and civil society. Among these autocratizing countries are large, influential countries found across the major regions in the world, making it a truly global phenomenon. Notably, the majority of countries with such substantial and significant declines in the LDI are electoral autocracies ($N = 15$) where rights and freedoms are deteriorating further.

The major autocratizers

The top 10 major democracy decliners are shown in Figure 6. A notable finding is that while nine out of these ten were electoral or even liberal democracies in 2010, only three (Brazil, Mauritius, and Poland) of those nine remain democracies. This

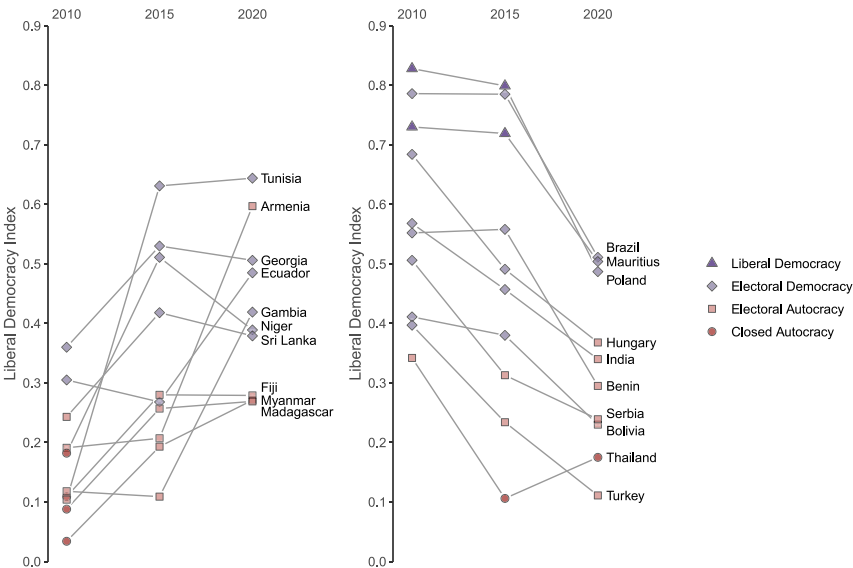


Figure 6. Top 10 advancers (left) and decliners (right), Liberal Democracy Index (2010, 2015, 2020).

highlights a worrying finding by a recent study showing that almost 80% of all instances of autocratization in democracies from 1900 to 2019 lead to democratic breakdown.²⁸

Compared to 2020's article, Benin, Bolivia, and Mauritius are new cases among the top 10 autocratizing countries. Among those, only Bolivia seems to have recovered some of its democratic quality after the elections in October 2020.²⁹ While Hungary's ongoing autocratization is still conspicuous, Poland has taken over the first position with a dramatic 34 percentage-points decline on the LDI, most of which has occurred since 2015. Turkey is still found in the very top group among the major decliners, closely followed by Brazil and Serbia.

How autocratization unfolds

The detailed nature of V-Dem data on the indicators comprising the LDI can shed light on how contemporary autocratization unfolds. Figure 7 shows those indicators that tended to deteriorate first and ultimately the most in eight most characteristic autocratizing countries. Vertical dashed lines indicate if a democratic breakdown took place, meaning that autocratization has gone so far that the country is downgraded to an electoral autocracy in the Regimes of the World classification.

Figure 7 lays bare notable commonalities in the way autocratization unfolds across these varying contexts. Media and academic freedoms, and civil society, are typically repressed first. Alongside that, ruling governments often polarize society through official disinformation campaigns disseminated via social media³⁰ and by encouraging disrespect for counter-arguments from political opponents.³¹ Only then are formal institutions such as the quality of elections undermined in a further step towards autocracy.

Eight of the top 10 major autocratizers over the last ten years follow a similar pattern: Brazil, Bolivia, Hungary, India, Poland, Turkey, as well as Benin and Serbia, although the latter two show more variation. In fact, Hungary is a typical case of

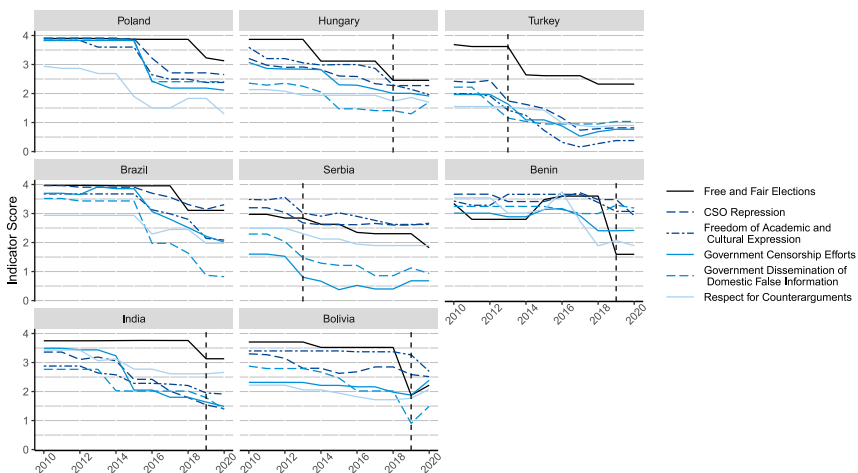


Figure 7. How autocratization unfolds – country examples, 2010–2020.

Note: Vertical lines mark the year of regime transition to electoral autocracy.

democratic erosion, with the deterioration of freedom of expression and civil society repression dating back to as early as 2010 when the right-wing government led by Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party enacted several media laws that curtailed media freedom substantially. The establishment of a national media authority gave the government greater control over news media.³² Subsequently, the government restricted academic freedom and further limited pluralism by the formation of a pro-government news conglomerate.³³

The decay in freedom of the press, academia, civil society, and increasing spread of false information in Turkey predates 2010 but has continued since, with legal restrictions to further limit civil society activity and freedom of expression, for example.³⁴ Serbia largely followed the pattern of deteriorating academic, civil society, and media freedoms contributing to the backsliding into authoritarianism by 2013.³⁵ Additionally the quality of elections has deteriorated since early on in the autocratization process and further worsened in 2020, when many opposition parties boycotted the parliamentary elections held amidst the pandemic.³⁶

The MAS (Movement for Socialism) party led by Evo Morales undermined independent journalism in Bolivia by passing legislation limiting media freedom,³⁷ including the Supreme Decree 181 allowing government discretionary control over state funding to media outlets.³⁸ Increasing government censorship then also preceded a steep decline in the quality of elections in 2019 when Evo Morales ran for a fourth term and subsequently had to leave the country following mass protests. Until the 2020 election, Bolivia was in a turbulent phase but the quality of elections seems to have partly recovered in 2020.

Government censorship, hostility to non-partisan media, and government dissemination of false information are steadily increasing in Brazil, in particular after populist President Bolsonaro became President in January 2019,³⁹ including government dissemination of false information.⁴⁰ In Poland, media laws from 2015/16 place significant limitations on freedom of expression and the media.⁴¹ Following the 2016 election of Patrice Talon as President, measures limiting political dissent and competition intensified in Benin. A new Penal Code adopted in 2018 penalized civil society organizations and opposition parties, in addition to a 2017 law on digital publications that targeted independent journalists.⁴² The freedom and fairness of elections are now also declining in Benin. In 2019, electoral laws made participation in parliamentary elections prohibitively expensive and opposition activists and journalists were subject to arrest.⁴³ When autocratization affects the quality of elections, democracy can eventually break down, as the case of India illustrates.

India: sliding into electoral autocracy

Narendra Modi led the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to victory in India's 2014 elections and most of the democratic decline occurred following BJP's victory and their promotion of a Hindu-nationalist agenda. India's level of liberal democracy registered at 0.34 by the end of 2020 after a steep decline from its high at 0.57 in 2013. That represents a 23-percentage point drop on the 0 to 1 LDI scale, making it one of the most dramatic shifts among all countries in the world over the past ten years alongside countries like Hungary and Turkey. The latter two became (electoral) autocracies in 2018 and 2014 respectively, and India now joins their rank. The world's largest democracy turned into an electoral autocracy and the autocratization process largely followed

the pattern discussed above: a gradual deterioration where freedom of the media, academia, and civil society were curtailed first and to the greatest extent (see Figure 7).

Figure 8 displays the decline from 2010 to 2020 on all indicators that go into the LDI. The indicators typically range from “0” to “4” and a drop of two full points on that scale represents a dramatic shift. The figure shows a stark increase in media censorship efforts by the government, repression of civil society organizations, and a noticeable decline in the autonomy of the election management body. These trends signal deterioration in the quality not only of informal institutions but also of critical formal institutions that act as important safeguards for democracy. The overall freedom and fairness of elections was hit hard during the last elections in 2019, precipitating a downgrading to an electoral autocracy.

Among the indicators, those that relate to freedom of expression, the media, and civil society have declined by the largest amount. The Indian government rarely, if ever, used to exercise censorship as evidenced by its score of 3.5 out of 4 before Modi became Prime Minister. By 2020, this score is close to 1.5 meaning that censorship efforts are becoming routine and no longer restricted to issues sensitive to the government. India is now as prone to using censorship as Pakistan, and its censorship is worse than its neighbors Bangladesh and Nepal. In general, the Modi-led government in India has used laws on sedition, defamation, and counterterrorism to silence critics.⁴⁴ For example, over 7,000 people have been charged with sedition after the BJP assumed power and most of the accused are critics of the ruling party.⁴⁵

The law on defamation upheld in India’s Supreme Court in May 2016, has been used frequently to silence journalists and news outlets that take exception to policies of the BJP government.⁴⁶ The punishments for critical messaging range from two years in prison to life imprisonment for “words, spoken or written, or signs or visible representation that can cause ‘hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection’ toward the government”.⁴⁷

Modi and his government have also placed constraints on civil society and have gone against the constitution’s commitment to secularism.⁴⁸ The Unlawful Activities

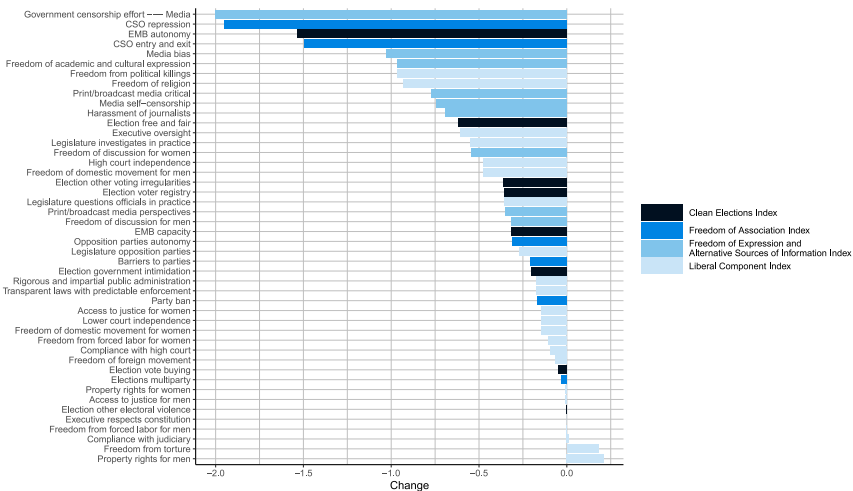


Figure 8. Degree of change on indicators of LDI, India 2010–2020.

(Prevention) Act (UAPA) from 1967 and amended in August 2019 is being used to harass, intimidate, and imprison political opponents, as well as people mobilizing to protest government policies,⁴⁹ and to silence dissent in academia.⁵⁰ Universities and authorities have also punished students and activists in universities engaging in protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).⁵¹ The CAA was passed by India's parliament in December 2019⁵² and makes it possible for illegal immigrants that are Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian to become citizens while denying it to Muslims. The bill arguably violates the constitution, which prohibits discrimination by religion.⁵³

Civil society is also being muzzled in the autocratization process. The indicators gauging the level of repression of civil society organizations (CSO) and the government's control of which organizations are allowed to exist ("CSO entry and exit") capture a severe deterioration. Meanwhile, civil society organizations aligning themselves with the Hindutva movement are gaining more freedom.⁵⁴ The BJP have increasingly used the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA) to restrict the entry, exit and functioning of Civil Society Organisations (CSO).⁵⁵ The FCRA was amended in September 2020 to further constrain the use of foreign contributions to NGOs within India.⁵⁶ These developments are among the instances contributing to the descent into electoral authoritarianism in what used to be the world's largest democracy.

Rays of hope: top 10 democratizing countries

The data registers 16 countries that made substantially meaningful and statistically significant advances on the LDI between 2010 and 2020.⁵⁷ Figure 6 lists the top ten democratizing countries on the LDI during the last decade. Of these ten countries, four transitioned to democracy during the last ten years while two democracies and four autocracies improved their democratic qualities significantly.

Georgia is the new addition to the top 10 list of democratizing countries this year. The improvements compared to 10 years ago are especially pronounced in areas such as freedom from torture and freedom of expression. Yet, Georgia's score on the LDI is in decline again since 2019 and there are concerns that further reversals could come. Among other things, the recent arrest of an opposition leader in February 2021 raises questions about the state of the rule of law in Georgia, and its future.⁵⁸

As in 2020's "State of the World" article, Tunisia is the most prominent case of a successful transition to democracy over the past decade. It is the only Arab country in the MENA region that democratized after the uprisings that erupted in 2010 and 2011. Despite deep tensions between Islamists and secularists and mounting insecurities, Tunisia adopted a new Constitution in January of 2014, paving the way for largely free and fair elections in late 2014 and again in 2019. Other countries in the region like Morocco saw few if any improvements compared to the situation in 2010 and closed autocracies like Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates continued without meaningful liberalization throughout the period.

Eight more countries also reappear from last year: Armenia, Ecuador, Fiji, The Gambia, Madagascar, Myanmar, Niger, Sri Lanka. Their relative advances were similar as of year-end 2020 to that which we reported then for 2019.

The LDI for Myanmar was steadily increasing after it transitioned from a closed to an electoral autocracy in 2011 until 2016. The recent events in February 2021 when the

military seized control has thrown the process of democratization overboard and returned Myanmar to the kind of military rule that characterized its politics before liberalization began in 2011. This turn of events followed the general elections on 8 November 2020 won by Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy.⁵⁹ We also note the concerning developments in Sri Lanka and anticipate that it might suffer from further declines due to its actions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, as discussed earlier in this article. Political tensions between the military and the government have also risen in Armenia following the armed conflict for the Nagorno-Karabakh region, and the outcome remains uncertain.

Intensified threat to freedom of expression

In Figure 9, we examine global changes in individual indicators that compose the Liberal Democracy Index. It provides a count of the number of countries with substantial and statistically significant declines⁶⁰ between 2010 and 2020 for the 25 indicators that declined the most. Repression of civil society is the worst affected indicator registering increases in civil society repression in 46 countries by 2020 compared to 2010. This is a dramatic change from previous years’ “State of the World” articles that found only 25 countries in decline on this indicator as late as in 2019.

Also, the trend we reported on over the last years for rule of law continues, with a slightly accelerated decline.⁶¹ The data register for instance 27 countries with a substantial worsening on the indicator “Transparent laws with predictable enforcement” in 2020 compared to 18 in 2018, and in 20 countries “Freedom from torture” declined substantially and significantly. Likewise, the indicators of “Freedom of movement”

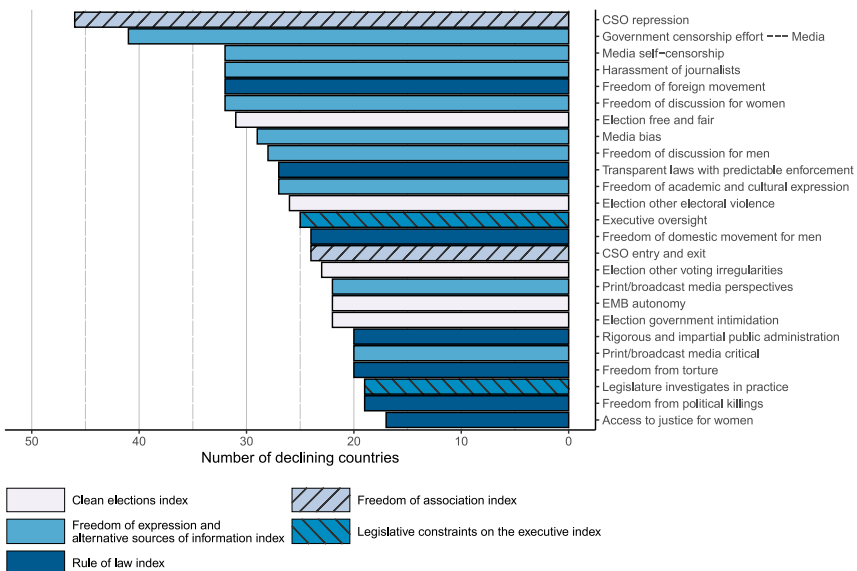


Figure 9. Indicators of liberal democracy declining substantially and significantly in more than 20 countries, 2010–2020.

Note: We count an indicator as declining substantially and significantly if its 2020 value is at least 0.5 points lower than its 2010 value on a scale ranging from 0 to 4; and the confidence intervals do not overlap.

declined in many countries – possibly accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In 31 countries the data record a substantive decline in the freedom and fairness of elections and improvements in just 23.

Similar to 2020’s “State of the World” article, we find that many indicators measuring media freedom and freedom of expression are in marked decline. “Government censorship effort—Media” has intensified in 41 countries and media self-censorship in 32, for example. As discussed above, media freedoms are typically among the first to be repressed during autocratization. Ten out of the 13 countries where democracy broke down between 2010 and 2020 had also intensified media censorship, for instance Serbia and Turkey. What was the state of media freedom in 2020?

The first and second columns in [Table 1](#) shows that 45 closed and electoral autocracies engaged in direct or indirect but routine attempts to censor the media in 2020. Nevertheless, three electoral democracies – Albania, El Salvador, and Sri Lanka – also routinely censored the media in 2020. In Albania, government attempts at media control have intensified since an anti-defamation law was passed in December 2019.⁶² President Bukele of El Salvador has repeatedly attacked dissenting voices in the media, harassed multiple journalists and media organizations, and influenced media content.⁶³ In Sri Lanka, the acting Inspector General instructed the police to take legal action against those who publish posts on social media to criticize government actions.⁶⁴ Furthermore, seven electoral democracies – Brazil, Guinea-Bissau, Mexico, Poland, Timor-Leste, and Vanuatu – engage in “some direct, but limited media censorship” (the medium category).

Most countries with a high level of “Media self-censorship” are autocracies (46 out of 48 countries, [Table 2](#)). The exceptions are two electoral democracies – Bhutan and Bosnia and Herzegovina – where defamation suits against journalists seem to encourage media self-censorship.⁶⁵ Given the critical role of independent media as providers of information and during autocratization processes, democracies limiting media freedom is a worrying sign.

Table 1. Government censorship of the media by regime type in 2020.

Regime Type (RoW)	Government censorship effort—Media					Sum
	Direct and routine	Indirect but routine	Direct but limited	Indirect and limited	Rare attempts punished	
Closed autocracy	14	5	5	1	–	25
Electoral autocracy	20	6	20	16	–	62
Electoral democracy	–	3	7	40	10	60
Liberal democracy	–	–	–	7	25	32
Sum	34	14	32	64	35	179

Table 2. Media self-censorship by regime type in 2020.

Regime type (RoW)	Media self-censorship				Sum
	Complete, thorough	Common, incomplete	Some	Little, no	
Closed autocracy	11	10	4	–	25
Electoral autocracy	4	21	37	–	62
Electoral democracy	–	2	45	13	60
Liberal democracy	–	–	15	17	32
Sum	15	33	101	30	179

From year of protest to year of lockdown

We reported in the “State of the World” last year that 2019 saw unprecedented levels of street protests worldwide. The data pointed to a counter-movement to the wave of autocratization. Compared to that, [Figure 10](#) shows a steep decline in the number and size of protest events in general and of pro-democracy protests in particular. The 2020 “year of lockdown” registers the lowest levels of mass mobilization in over a decade in the V-Dem data, and a substantial drop in protest events at the beginning of the global spread of the pandemic is corroborated by other studies.⁶⁶

The spread of Covid-19 and government responses to the pandemic challenged the organization of collective action. Participation at mass events is associated with a considerable risk of contagion for activists, and governments put in place heavy restrictions on the freedom of assembly in 2020 by limiting the number of people allowed to gather in public and sometimes ordering curfews. Given this, the drop is perhaps smaller than expected. Numerous protests occurred in autocracies but also in liberal democracies, and pro-democracy activists took to the streets despite the pandemic and state-imposed restrictions.

Unprecedented pro-democracy mobilization erupted in August 2020 in Belarus in reaction to the official results of the elections that “Europe’s last dictator” Aleksandr Lukashenko claimed he won in a landslide. Despite a violent crackdown by security forces, thousands took to the streets for months demanding the resignation of Lukashenko.⁶⁷

In Thailand, thousands of pro-democracy protesters demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth Chanocha, a new constitution, and a reform of the political role of the monarchy. Elevated to power in the 2014 military coup, Prayuth has rejected the demands, and some of the protestors face criminal charges under an antiquated *lèse-majesté* law that prohibits defaming the royal family.⁶⁸ However, the movement

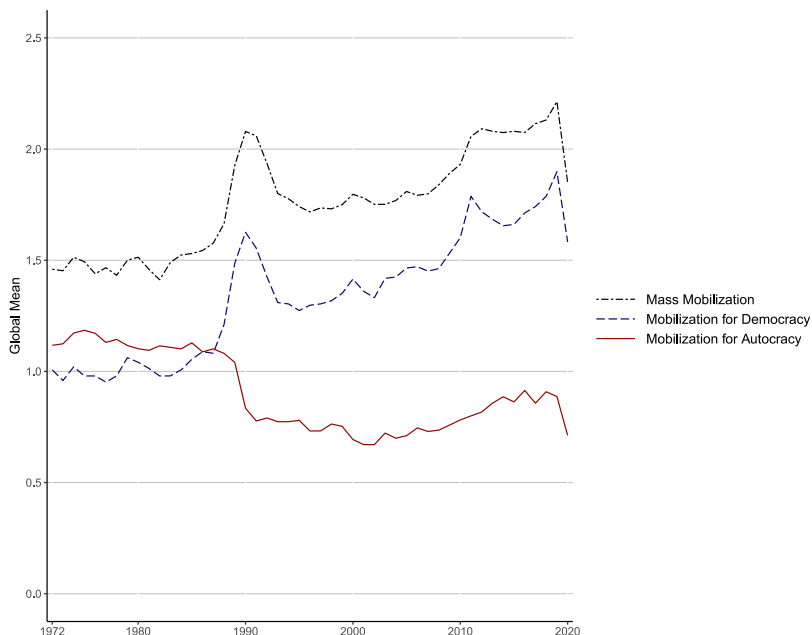


Figure 10. Mobilization for democracy and autocracy (1972–2020).

has lost momentum during the pandemic and its impact on the political system remains limited.

Young people in Nigeria mobilized against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) after several videos of police brutality went viral. The protests grew to a larger movement against bad governance under the Twitter hashtag #EndSARS. Although the government eventually disbanded the SARS police unit, both protests and repression of protestors including the use of lethal force continued.⁶⁹

The United States of America saw the highest number of protests in recent history with more than half a million participants on June 6 2020 alone.⁷⁰ Spurred by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, the Black Lives Matter movement and its supporters took to the streets, denouncing police brutality and demanding police reforms as well as equal representation and treatment. The mass mobilization persisted for months in various parts of the country.

In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic led to the emergence of new grievances with accompanying “pandemic protests”, socially distanced protests by health care personnel, anti-lockdown protests, and even riots.⁷¹ The pandemic’s effect on the broader protest landscape remains to be seen, as well as how pandemic-related protests affect democracy. While mass mobilizations naturally declined significantly, the developments in 2020 still demonstrated that pro-democratic forces cannot be deterred from pursuing their aspirations even by a pandemic or lockdowns.

Conclusion

Liberal democracy continued to decline in 2020 and the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen is now back to around 1990. Electoral autocracy remains the most common form of regime type in the world and together with the closed dictatorships, they host more than two-thirds of the population. Notably, India has become an electoral autocracy.

Despite the continued decline of liberal democracy at the global level in 2020, it has not decreased dramatically from 2019. This shows that the worst predictions about the effect of Covid-19 on democracy did not materialize, at least in the short-term. We do not find a strong relationship between government responses to the pandemic and changes in liberal democracy over the last year. Most democracies acted responsibly in the face of the pandemic and the majority of severe violators were already autocracies before the pandemic. Nevertheless, almost 1/3 of countries have (or had) emergency measures without a time limit. Unless restrictions are eliminated immediately after the pandemic ends, the final toll on democracy may turn out to be higher.

Autocratization continues, now engulfing 25 nations home to over one-third of the citizens of the world. Among the countries declining the most on the LDI, we find countries like Bolivia, Brazil, Hungary, India, Poland, and Turkey. Autocratization across such varying contexts follows a remarkably similar pattern. Ruling governments first attack the media and civil society, and polarize society by disrespecting opponents and spreading false information only then to undermine core institutions such as elections. Meanwhile, only 16 countries are democratizing and they host only 4 percent of the population.

One of the most affected aspects are freedom of expression and the media, which make up eight of the ten indicators declining in the greatest number of countries over the past ten years. The threat to freedom of expression is also intensifying as

an increasing number of governments attack the media and civil society. Given that threats to freedom of expression typically arise from elected leaders, debates about preventing such autocratization often revolve around how to stop autocratizing actors from rising to power. Some advocate for a “militant democracy” posture that tolerates some amount of preemptive illiberal measures to prevent democracy’s enemies from seizing power and destroying democracy from within.⁷² Strategies might include party bans, prosecution and surveillance of anti-democratic groups, as well as limits on freedom of expression.

However, hard measures create tensions with democratic ideals. They may even be ineffective at containing contemporary challengers of democracy who conceal an anti-pluralist agenda behind a democratic façade and thus do not meet the normative and legal criteria for the application of hard measures. Democratic resilience may be reinforced by other factors. Research shows that pro-democratic mass mobilization has often proven effective in defending and promoting democracy.⁷³ The events of last year demonstrate that even a global pandemic and forceful state restrictions cannot dissuade pro-democracy forces. Activists rose above the adverse conditions and several movements also found alternative ways of drawing attention to their cause. The decline in pro-democratic mass mobilization in 2020 may well prove to be short-lived, and pro-democracy mobilization might be one of the most vital barriers against further autocratization.

Notes

1. Coppedge et al., “V-Dem Country-Year Dataset v11.” V-Dem improves the quality of the released data every year by engaging a large number of global experts. This process of constant improvement may lead to a correction of scores reported in earlier versions of the dataset and the “State of the World” articles. For details on the methodology, see Pemstein et al., “The V-Dem Measurement Model.”
2. Lüthmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here.”
3. Maerz et al., “State of the World 2019.”
4. Version 11 dates India’s regime transition according to the Regimes of the World classification to 2019.
5. Percentages are rounded.
6. V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) captures both electoral and liberal aspects of democracy and goes from the lowest (0) to the highest (1). The electoral component is measured by the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) that captures the extent to which all elements of Robert Dahl’s (*Democracy and Its Critics*) famous articulation of “polyarchy” are present, including the quality of elections, individual rights, as well as the media and freedoms of association. The Liberal Component Index (LCI) captures the liberal aspects including checks and balances on the executive arm of government, respect for civil liberties, the rule of law, and the independence of the legislature and the judiciary.
7. Huntington, *The Third Wave*.
8. Only one country has an LDI value that is more than 0.01% greater without the freedom of movement indicators (Timor Leste; LDI: 0.4636; adjusted LDI: 0.4746) than with them; for a further eleven countries the index value would be between 0.005% and 0.01% greater (United Arab Emirates; Burma/Myanmar; Luxembourg; Croatia; United Kingdom; Bhutan; Palestine/Gaza; Norway; Slovenia; Ethiopia; Burkina Faso). For all other countries, the difference is below 0.005%.
9. We use the average containment and health index for the year 2020. For more information on the composition of the index, see Hale et al., “A Global Panel Database of Pandemic Policies” and <https://github.com/OxCGRT/covid-policy-tracker>.
10. From March to December 2020, the V-Dem Institute’s Pandemic Backsliding Project (PanDem) measured seven types of violations: (1) discrimination against minorities, (2)

violations of fundamental rights (non-derogable rights), (3) excessive use of force, (4) absence of a time limit for emergency measures, (5) limitations on the legislature's ability to constrain the executive, (6) official disinformation campaigns, and (7) restrictions on media freedoms. The composite Pandemic Democratic Violations Index (PanDem) assesses the extent to which state responses to Covid-19 contravene the standards, ranging from zero (no violation) to one (maximum number of violations). For more information see Edgell et al., "Pandemic Backsliding"; <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/PanDem/>; Kolvani et al., "Pandemic Backsliding."

11. https://github.com/vdeminstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Sri%20Lanka.md
12. https://github.com/vdeminstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/El%20Salvador.md
13. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52275993>
14. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-burundi-election-idUSKBN22Y2NE>; <https://www.dw.com/en/ohcrc-burundis-elections-arent-credible-and-free/a-53513705>
15. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/23/who-is-making-sure-belarus-presidential-election-is-free-and-fair>
16. <https://www.dw.com/en/crisis-looms-in-ethiopia-as-elections-are-postponed/a-53829389>
17. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1081682>
18. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/19/guinea-post-election-violence-repression>
19. Edgell et al. "Pandemic Backsliding." <https://shendetesia.gov.al/nivel-i-larte-risku-komiteti-teknik-i-eksperteve-vijone-te-mbeten-ne-fuqi-masat-e-marra-pa-afat/>; https://github.com/vdeminstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Mexico.md, https://github.com/vdeminstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/The%20Gambia.md
20. <https://www.in.gov.br/web/dou/-/portaria-n-188-de-3-de-fevereiro-de-2020-241408388>; https://github.com/vdeminstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Jamaica.md; <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/340411/kyrgyzstan-authorities-extend-state-of-emergency-indefinitely-may-8-update-10>
21. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Events/EmergencyMeasures_Covid19.pdf
22. The typology and indicator "Regimes of the World" uses V-Dem data but is not officially endorsed by the V-Dem Steering Committee; see Lührmann et al., "Regimes of the World."
23. For a complete list of all countries' regime classifications and regime transitions for 2010–2020, see Table 3 in Alizada et al., "Autocratization Turns Viral," 31.
24. V-Dem measures uncertainty associated with underlying data in a meticulous way. This resulted in the classification of India being highly uncertain last year but with more and better data this year, India is classified with a higher degree of certainty as an electoral autocracy from 2019.
25. In this article we use a simplified metric to capture which countries are autocratizing or democratizing. We simply measure the difference between the country score at time t and time $t-10$ years. If the difference is statistically significant (confidence intervals do not overlap) and substantial (a difference greater than 0.05), we count the country as being in a process of autocratization or democratization. For a more sophisticated approach, see the "Episodes of Regime Transformation" data and codebook (Edgell et al., "Episodes of Regime Transformation Dataset"; Maerz et al., "A Framework for Understanding Regime Transformation"), www.github.com/vdeminstitute/ert.
26. Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here."
27. Labens and Lührmann, "What Halts."
28. Boese et al., "How Democracies Prevail."
29. See detailed analysis below.
30. The indicator on "Government Disinformation of Domestic False Information" is part of the Digital Society Survey in the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al., "V-Dem Country-Year Dataset v11").
31. This is an indicator on deliberation (the extent to which political elites respect counterarguments) as another component of democracy which has been identified as being targeted already during early phases of autocratization, see Gora and de Wilde, "The Essence of Democratic Backsliding in the European Union."
32. <https://www.economist.com/eastern-approaches/2010/12/23/all-eyes-on-orban>

33. <https://www.euronews.com/2019/06/12/don-t-be-fooled-hungary-s-government-remains-a-threat-to-european-values-view>; <https://rsf.org/en/news/unprecedented-merger-poses-threat-survival-media-pluralism-hungary>
34. Yılmaz and Turner, “Turkey’s Deepening Authoritarianism.”
35. The difference in reporting on Serbia compared to last year’s analysis is due to a change in the indicators used for the vertical and horizontal lines.
36. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53107011>
37. Sánchez-Sibony, “Competitive Authoritarianism in Morales’s Bolivia.”
38. <https://rsf.org/en/news/no-state-advertising-politicized-media-bolivia>
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48. Ding and Slater, “Democratic Decoupling.”
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54. Basu, *Violent Conjectures*.
55. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/08/india-foreign-funding-law-used-harass-25-groups>; <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Anti-national-acts-25-NGOs-lose-foreign-fund-licences/articleshowprint/55254613.cms?null>
56. <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=0d92afd5-6817-419f-a58d-7597b5c68904>
57. For the full list and the extent of changes, see Figures 10 and 16 in V-Dem *Democracy Report 2021* (Alizada et al., “Autocratization Turns Viral,” 19, 32–33).
58. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/georgia-police-storm-opposition-headquarters-to-arrest-leader-nika-melia/>; https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/georgia-democracy-putin-nika-melia/2021/02/26/0c16a3bc-7791-11eb-8115-9ad5e9c02117_story.html
59. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55902070>
60. We count an indicator as declining substantially and significantly if its 2020 value is at least 0.5 points lower than its 2010 value on a scale ranging from 0 to 4; and the confidence intervals do not overlap. The numbers in this paragraph deviate slightly from Alizada et al., “Autocratization Turns Viral,” due to a coding error that was discovered after the original report was published.
61. Maerz et al., “State of the World 2019.”
62. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-albania-media-law-idUKKBN1YM2HD>
63. <https://rsf.org/en/news/salvadoran-presidents-alarming-hostility-towards-independent-media>
64. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/03/sri-lanka-uses-pandemic-curtail-free-expression#>
65. <https://rsf.org/en/bhutan>; <https://rsf.org/en/bosnia-herzegovina>
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70. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>
71. Gerbaudo, “The Pandemic Crowd,” 63.
72. Müller, “Militant Democracy.”
73. Bunce, “Rethinking Recent Democratization”; della Porta, “Mobilizing for Democracy.”

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Data availability statement

The data for this article comes from Coppedge et al. “V-Dem Country-Year Dataset v11”. It can be freely accessed at <https://www.v-dem.net/en/data/data/v-dem-dataset-v11/>. Descriptions of the variables and indices are found in Coppedge et al. “V-Dem Codebook v11.” For R users, we have developed a package to load, explore and work with the v11 dataset: Maerz et al., “Vdemdata - an R Package to Load, Explore and Work with the Most Recent V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Dataset.” <https://github.com/vdeminstute/vdemdata>. R scripts for replication of the analyses presented in this article are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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