

Defining characteristics of democracy in the 21st century

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Question

What are the salient characteristics of democracy in the 21st century?

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1. Summary

Definitions of democracies and non-democracies are abundant in the literature, with recommendations to support democratisation being highly dependent on the base definition being applied. The binary concepts of democracy and non-democracy, while useful for categorisation for some purposes, are now understood to be overly generalised and non-representative of the many ‘shades’ of regime classification (Collier & Adcock, 1999). Terms such as ‘hybrid regimes’, ‘sub-types’ and ‘democratic quality’ are used to differentiate and analyse the full range of political systems and socio-political relations that have emerged around the world (Diamond, 2002; Collier & Adcock, 1999; Gaventa, 2006; Munck, 2016). Collier and Adcock (1999) consider this plurality to be more productive than the search for a “definitive interpretation” of democracy and suggest a pragmatic approach to conceptualising and defining democracy that depends on how the term is to be used. Others caution that public understandings of the intended characteristics of democracy have led to a decline in public support for democracy, where quasi-authoritarian regimes or limited electoral functions that lack substantive political agency have been perceived as democracy (Brunkert et al., 2019).

This report offers a brief overview of the literature on the defining characteristics of democracy in the 21st century. By no means a comprehensive review of this vast literature, this report seeks to map out a range of conceptual approaches to understanding democracy, evidence on emerging trends in democratisation, and challenges to realising democracy in its varied forms. The report begins with a discussion on definitions of democracy that have emerged in recent decades (Section 2), highlighting a range of qualifiers that are widely used to differentiate and analyse different democratic regime types. Section 3 summarises trends in key indicators of democracy from widely cited observers – The Economist Intelligence Unit and the V-Dem Institute - and recent trends in public opinion towards democracy, according to World Values and Pew Centre surveys. Section 4 gives a very brief overview of three leading challenges to democracy discussed widely in the literature – gender inequality; the role of media and social media; and declining quality of elections, freedom of expression and civic space.

Evidence on the state of democracy in the 21st century is vast and diverse, ranging from observational studies, historical analyses, analyses of population surveys, and various mixed methods approaches. The focus of many studies in recent years has been the study of democracy’s decline, particularly in historically democratic countries, but also in ‘quasi-democracies’ as well as the deepening of autocracy in non-democracies. All indicators of democracy reviewed for this report confirm this (EIU, V-Dem, Freedom House), as do reviewed public opinion polls (World Values, Pew Centre). This has led numerous observers to comment on a ‘third wave of autocratisation’ unfolding around the world and has “sparked a new generation of studies on autocratization” (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2018).

Though beyond the scope of this report, evidence on the effectiveness of programmes to support democratisation is also widely available and spans diverse conceptualisations of democracy. Concepts that are not explored in this report that relate to the process and intended outcomes of democratisation include: support to election cycles to improve election quality; parliamentary support to improve government representation, administration and procedural functioning and accountability; support to civil society to deepen public political influence and support accountability channels; support to deliberation processes to promote deliberative democracy; and broader support to promote participation in political life such as civic education.

2. Expanding definitions of democracy

The defining characteristics of democracy have long been debated, and this debate has become further stimulated by “unprecedented growth in the number of regimes that are neither clearly democratic nor conventionally authoritarian” (Bogaards, 2009; Diamond, 2002, p. 25). There has been “a proliferation of adjectives that serve to qualify democracy” and recent post-transition regimes classified “not as flawed democracies, but as weak forms of authoritarianism” has also led to “a proliferation of adjectives to describe forms of authoritarianism” (Bogaards, 2009, p. 399-401). This section examines some of the qualifiers of democracies and non-democracies that are commonly discussed in the literature to explore the breadth of conceived regime types.

‘Liberal democracy’ is one of the most widely used qualifiers of democracy and as such, has a range of interpretations. By some classifications, liberal democracy and democracy are used synonymously (e.g. Freedom House). Other classifications, such as V-Dem’s Regimes of the World (ROW), distinguish between electoral and liberal democracy (See Figure 1). Both regimes have a “sufficient level of institutional guarantees of democracy such as freedom of association, suffrage, clean elections...[while] liberal democracy is, in addition... characterised by its having effective legislative and judicial oversight of the executive as well as protection of individual liberties and the rule of law” (Lührmann et al., 2018, p. 61). Other observers note the liberal principle of individual freedoms independent of the state and include limitations on the scope of public power, a principle that that has received increased attention in light of the rise of populism (Galston, 2018).

Figure 1: Regimes of the World (ROW) classification,

Closed Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Democracy	Liberal Democracy
No <i>de-facto</i> multiparty, or free and fair elections, or Dahl’s institutional prerequisites not minimally fulfilled		<i>De-facto</i> multiparty, free and fair elections, and Dahl’s institutional prerequisites minimally fulfilled	
No multiparty elections for the chief executive or the legislature	<i>De-jure</i> multiparty elections for the chief executive and the legislature	The rule of law, or liberal principles not satisfied	The rule of law, and liberal principles satisfied

Source: Lührmann et al. (2018, p. 63), licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

See: **V-Dem Democratization scale**, source: V-Dem (2020, p. 11), https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/de/39/de39af54-0bc5-4421-89ae-fb20dcc53dba/democracy_report.pdf

Procedural or electoral democracy is defined as regimes where elections take place and substantial competition occurs but also where “widespread violations of civil liberties continue to be a fundamental feature of political life” (Collier & Adcock, 1999). This regime type has been characterised by its ambiguity, such that “we may not have enough information to know whether electoral administration will be sufficiently autonomous and professional, and whether contending parties and candidates will be sufficiently free to campaign” (Diamond, 2002, p. 22). The distinction between liberal democracy and electoral democracy provided by Diamond

(2002) centres around the freedom, fairness, inclusiveness and meaningfulness of elections (p. 28). According to the V-Dem index (detailed in Section 3), which follows Diamond's categorical distinction between electoral democracies and liberal democracies, 32% of the global population lived in electoral democracies in 2019 and this categorisation has been the most prolific since the turn of the century (see Figure 3). By comparison, only 14% of the world lived in a liberal democracy in 2019 (V-Dem, 2020).

'Polyarchy' was proposed by Robert Dahl in the 1970s as a modern adaptation of democracy to capture the fact that the operationalisation of democracy has shifted significantly from its roots in fifth century Greek city-states. Dahl's approach is concerned with the "difficulty of self-governance in a complex, populous modern society" which differs from the Greek context where "the fundamental democratic institution of that age was the city assembly, where free citizens conducted politics face to face" (Bailey & Braybrooke, 2003, p. 100). By contrast, "the democracies of today, to stay relevant and effective, must cope with not only with the realities of enormously populous societies and with social pluralism inside and outside national boundaries, but also with a globalizing modern market economy" (Bailey & Braybrooke, 2003, p. 100). Dahl's concept of Polyarchy is based on six institutional characteristics: elected officials; free and fair elections; freedom of expression; alternative sources of information; associational autonomy, and inclusive citizenship (Dahl, 1971, p. 8 quoted in Lührmann et al., 2018, p. 62).

Exclusionary democracy has been defined as a regime that allows for political competition but that "cannot incorporate or respond to the demands of the majority in any meaningful way... where the voices of the poor are frequently overruled by the demands of external actors" (Abrahamsen, quoted in Gaventa, 2006, p. 10). The defining characteristics of this regime type have been summarised by Luckham et al. (2002) as:

- "Hollow citizenship – in which citizens do not enjoy equal rights and entitlements.
- Lack of vertical accountability – 'the inability of citizens to hold governments and political elites accountable for their use of power'.
- Weak horizontal accountability – in which 'potentially tyrannical' executives manipulate checks and balances through patronage, corruption, and the stifling of dissent.
- International accountability dilemmas – involving the shrinking policy space of national governments, and their citizens, due to the decision-making power of global markets, multinational firms, and international bodies".

Electoral autocracies are characterised by "de-facto multi-party elections for chief executive [that] fall short of democratic standards due to significant irregularities, limitations on party competition... and sufficient guarantees of democracy such as freedom of association" (Lührmann et al., 2018, p. 61). Electoral autocracies share the ambiguity of electoral democracies in that the level of competition may be difficult to assess by international observers. The main distinguishing feature between the two is that electoral autocracies have legally mandated multi-party elections that are not realised in practice, whereas electoral democracies have multiparty elections in practice, though they do not satisfy full liberal principles to qualify as liberal democracies (see Figure 1). Using V-Dem's classification of electoral autocracies, this category of political regime has been one of the fastest growing regime types in recent years, doubling from 36 in 1972 to 67 in 2019 (V-Dem, 2020). The largest

increase occurred between 2018 and 2019 where seven electoral democracies were reclassified as electoral autocracies according to the V-Dem Index (see Figure 3).

Diminished democracy, democratic deficits, and democratic regression are now widely used terms that draw attention to the transformation of democracies over the last two decades, particularly in relation to the rise of populism and autocratic regimes around the world. These classifications refer to regimes that have been previously classified as democracies but have since been reclassified to more autocratic categories, or to describe challenges to persisting democracies that threaten the maintenance of their democratic standing. The next section explores trends in international indices of democracy that have given rise to the concern of a ‘reverse wave’ of the “third wave of democracy”.

3. Recent trends in democracy

Many historical analyses of modern democracy note three distinct phases of democratisation around the world, known as the three waves of democratisation. The first wave is said to have begun in the 1820s with the widening of suffrage; the second wave emerging after the end of the second world war, and the most recent wave to have emerged in the 1970s. Huntington (1991, p. 13) associates the third wave’s emergence, predominantly in Western and Eastern Europe and Latin America, with deepening legitimacy problems in authoritarian regimes, rising living standards, challenges to authoritarianism from the Catholic church, policy changes by the European Union, United States and Soviet Union, and the “demonstration effect” of earlier transitions “stimulating and providing models for subsequent efforts at democratization”. Huntington notes that the first two waves were followed by “reverse waves” of democratic decline, a trend which many observers warn has begun to unfold in recent years.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, the global average score of democracy has fallen to its lowest level since the EIU Index began in 2006, with nearly 70% of countries monitored seeing a decline in overall score (EIU, 2021, p. 4-5). The Index classifies countries as “full democracy”, “flawed democracy”, “hybrid regime” and “authoritarian regime” based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism; the functioning of government; political participation; political culture, and civil liberties (EIU, 2021, p. 3). The authors of the index note that “democracy has not been in robust health for some time” but that the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in significant deterioration of individual freedoms and civil liberties in all regions of the world, but especially in sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, and North Africa (EIU, 2021 p. 4). Figure 2 shows trends in the EIU global index between 2008 and 2020. The biggest declines in the index from 2019 were reported in Mali and Togo, with Mali being downgraded from a “hybrid regime” to an “authoritarian regime”, and Togo falling lower in the rankings of “authoritarian regimes”.

See: Figure 2: EIU measures of democracy by category, 2008-2020, source: EIU (2021, p.19), https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/#mktoForm_anchor

V-Dem’s “varieties of democracy” index finds similar trends with 2020 marking the first time since 2001 that the majority of people globally lived in autocracies (V-Dem, 2020, Figure 3). The index measures five ‘high-level principles’ of democracy – electoral, liberal,

participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian – disaggregated into ‘lower-level components’ including regular elections, judicial independence, direct democracy and gender equality. V-Dem’s latest Democracy Report (2020) warns of a ‘third wave of autocratisation’ due to declining liberal democracy in large influential countries such as Brazil, India, the United States and Turkey and returns to early 1990s levels in Latin America and post-Soviet lows in Central Asia (V-Dem, 2020, p. 9). The report also notes, however, a rise in pro-democracy protests and unprecedented mobilisation for democracy in response to deepening autocratisation (V-Dem, 2020).

See: Figure 3: V-Dem Index change by share of world population, 1972-2019, source: V-Dem, (2020, p. 13), https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/de/39/de39af54-0bc5-4421-89ae-fb20dcc53dba/democracy_report.pdf

Opinion polls indicate that public perceptions of democracy are mixed around the world, though support for autocracy has increased (Wike & Schumacher, 2020; The Economist, 2020). Pew’s recent (2020) survey of respondents in 34 countries in all regions finds that support for democracy remains strong, but that many are unhappy with how democracy is working (Wike & Schumacher, 2020). According to analysis of repeated waves of World Values and European Values Surveys between 1995-2020, The Economist finds “a big increase in support for despots in flawed democracies, but little change in places with lots of political freedom” (The Economist, 2020). Modelling of this data indicates that the likelihood a ‘middling person’ (40 years old with middling education, ideology, and income) would “favour a strongman rose from 29% to 33% between 1998 and 2020 [with growth] particularly high in Latin America, South East Asia and former Soviet States” (The Economist, 2020). Dissatisfaction with democracy has also been linked to perceptions that ‘the national economy is bad’ and to those who believe “elected officials do not care about what people like them think” according to Pew’s data (Wike & Schumacher, 2020)

Ambiguity around the defining characteristics of democracy and dissatisfaction with democratic functionings, rather than democratic principles, may be impacting public support for democracy. Brunkert et al. (2019, p. 434) caution direct interpretation of perceptions surveys where respondents may adopt alternative definitions of democracy.

“... recent evidence demonstrates ... that many people outside the Western world, as well as inside traditional segments of Western populations, confuse democracy with “benevolent” authoritarianism... Inevitably, when people who confuse democracy with autocracy say that they support democracy, they in fact support the opposite. For this reason, ratings of public support for democracy are strictly speaking incomparable, unless further qualified for the values that inspire this support”.

4. Leading challenges to democracy

The literature on challenges to democracy is vast and encompasses a wide range of conceptual and thematic approaches; far too many to be captured in this report. The following section offers a very brief overview of three leading challenges highlighted in the literature: gender inequality; the role of media and social media, and declines in election quality, freedom of expression and civic space.

Gender equality is recognised as a foundational characteristic of democracy. The concept of democratic deficits has been used to describe those regimes where women do not share

equally in public decision-making (Tremblay, 2007). While the number of women holding political office has increased globally, women's actualised power to influence political outcomes and everyday political and in power have not necessarily followed (Brechenmacher et al., 2021). Male political leaders "may promote women loyal to the dominant political project while pushing out those who challenge the status quo, as demonstrated by the case of Rwanda", Belarus and Nigeria (Brechenmacher et al., 2021; Amnesty International, 2020; Kelly, 2019). Furthermore, increases in national-level political representation of women do not always translate into "increases in women's everyday political agency and power (Brechenmacher et al., 2021). Analysis of Asian Barometer surveys have found that increases in women's political representation in East and Southeast Asia has been associated with a reduction in women's political engagement, raising concern about the "the effectiveness of women's symbolic representation" in politics (Liu, 2018).

The role of media and social media platforms in democratic processes has come under increased scrutiny. Access to information has expanded dramatically in the last few decades, particularly through "the democractizing effect of the internet, and its emancipatory impact on under-represented and marginalized groups living under authoritarian regimes, where it nurtures a networked public sphere" (Polonski, 2016). The internet, and social media in particular, is increasingly being used for "bottom-up agenda setting, empowering citizens to speak up in a networked public sphere, and pushing the boundaries of the size, sophistication and scope of collective action" (Polonski, 2016). On the other hand, the role of social networks and media outlets in promoting "fake news and propaganda, empowering disruptive voices, ideologies, and messages" is increasingly seen as having the potential to "alter civic engagement, thus essentially hijacking democracy, by influencing individuals toward a particular way of thinking" (Olaniran & Williams, 2020, p. 77). Recent analysis from Freedom House suggests:

"Digital platforms are the new battleground for democracy. Shaping the flow of information on the internet is now an essential strategy of those seeking to disrupt the democratic transfer of power through elections. Incumbent political actors around the globe use both blunt and nuanced methods to deter opposition movements while preserving a veneer of popular legitimacy. Such internet freedom restrictions tend to escalate before and during crucial votes."

(Shabaz & Funk, 2020)

There is also evidence to suggest that digital media use reinforces existing inequalities in political participation. A recent meta-analysis of repeated panel data studies over the last 25 years found that those who use social and digital media for political activity were already more likely to be doing so outside of the digital sphere (Oser & Boulianne, 2020).

Declines in election quality, freedom of expression, and civic space - all core components of most measures of democracy - are a contributing factor in the regression of democracy in many contexts. According to V-Dem's 2020 democracy report, the Clean Elections Index fell significantly in 16 countries in 2019, while increasing in 12 (V-Dem, 2020). A recent Freedom House Report on the impacts of Covid-19 on elections has also found that disruptions due to the pandemic have been used to undermine elections through "abuses of power, silencing [of] critics and weakening or shuttering important institutions (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020). "National elections in nine countries, and many more subnational votes, were disrupted in some way between January and August 2020, with frequent accusations that decisions on election

administration had been politicized” (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020). Declining trends in freedom of expression and civic space have also been observed in recent years. According to V-Dem’s 2020 democracy report, attacks on freedom of expression intensified in 19 countries in 2018, but “swelled to encompass a further 31 nations” in 2019 (V-Dem, 2020, p. 18). Figure 5 summarises declines in indicators of election quality, freedom of expression and civic space reported across countries between 2009 and 2019.

See: Figure 5: Observed declines in election quality, freedom of expression, and civic space globally, 2009-2019, source: V-Dem (2020, p. 20), https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/de/39/de39af54-0bc5-4421-89ae-fb20dcc53dba/democracy_report.pdf

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