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DRG Learning Digest

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Annual Democracy Metrics Edition

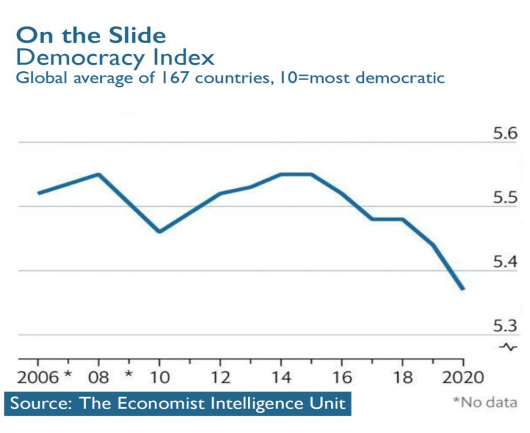
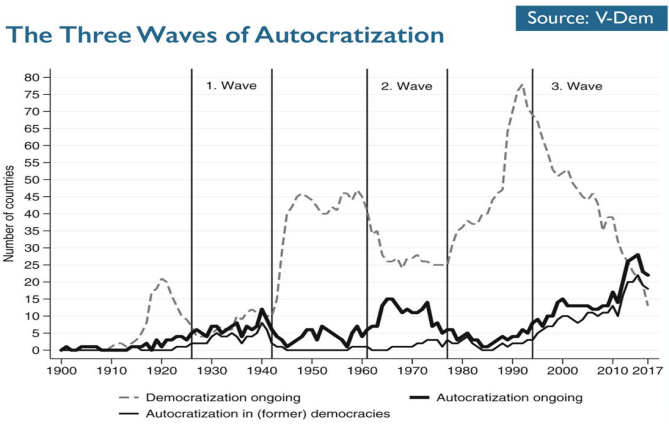
'Tis the season for the release of annual indicators. In this issue, we highlight the latest metrics for measuring trends in the DRG sector and summarize annual reports from several prominent public policy organizations. These metrics capture global, regional, and country trends in democracy and governance over time. Policymakers, advocacy groups, and media rely upon these data sources to frame their positions on key DRG issues. USAID and the State Department use some of these as standard indicators.

This edition of the DRG Learning Digest examines the following topics:

- Democracy Under Threat
- Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic
- Mastering Metrics

Democracy Under Threat

All organizations that measure aspects of democracy, human rights, and governance agreed that 2020 was a terrible year for democracy globally. The global score for the Economist Democracy Index ([Economist Intelligence Unit annual report](#)) fell to 5.37 out of 10, by far the worst global score in the 14-year history of the index. Freedom House titled its annual report “Democracy Under Siege,” as 2020 marked the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom, with only 20 percent of the world population currently living in fully free societies ([Freedom in the World annual report](#)). V-Dem has dubbed our current age the “third wave of autocratization,” as more and more democracies move toward autocracy ([V-Dem annual report](#)). As of 2020, V-Dem now categorizes more countries as autocracies (51 percent) than democracies (49 percent) and notes that 68 percent of the world’s population lives under autocratic rule. **Democracy is in decline in every region of the world.**



The third wave of autocratization not only affects more countries than previous waves, but also uses different means of autocratization. Rather than coups bringing in unelected leaders, democratically-elected leaders are removing checks on their own power. The World Justice Project (WJP) index that measures rule of law globally declined for the third year in a row, and the most severe declines were in constraints on government power and fundamental rights ([WJP annual report](#)). The emerging pattern is one of gradual erosion: the ruling party first controls or restricts media and civil society, then spreads misinformation and polarizes society, and finally undermines electoral institutions and judicial independence. Without elections to hold them accountable or courts to limit their power, the once-democratically elected leaders have become autocrats (for more information, see V-Dem's [Third Wave of Autocratization](#)). These autocrats are increasingly crushing dissent -- both V-Dem and Freedom House noted that the widespread protests of 2019 were met with increased repression in 2020, as governments cracked down on expression and dissent.

The erosion of democracy has obvious negative implications for human rights, rule of law, and freedom, and is also bad for global health and prosperity. Authoritarian leaders are pushing the false narrative that democracy is declining because it cannot address the needs of citizens. In fact, democracies grow faster economically ([V-Dem #27](#)), provide more public services to a broader range of citizens ([Deacon 2009](#)), and spend more money on programs to help the poor and vulnerable than autocracies ([V-Dem #28](#)). As a result, citizens in democracies are healthier and more prosperous than citizens in autocracies. The V-Dem [Case for Democracy](#) initiative is collecting and summarizing research about the effects of democracy and autocracy on a variety of outcomes.

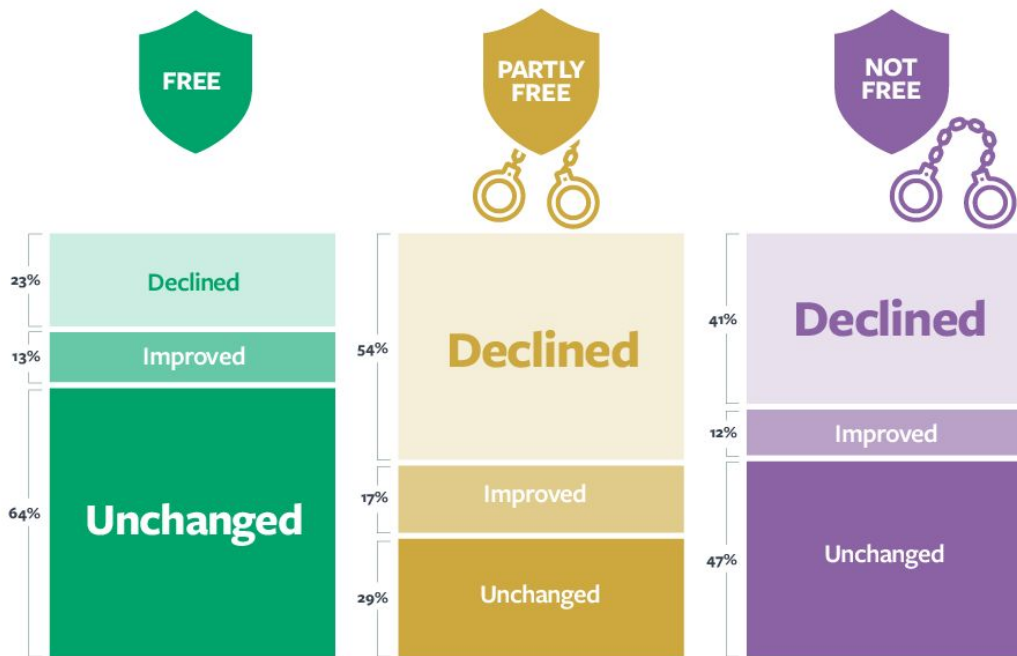
Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Metrics for 2020 show that the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge to democracy and prosperity globally. The pandemic, and the accompanying restrictions on individual freedoms and civil liberties, accounts for some of the deterioration in democracy ratings summarized above. It also accounts for the slowdown in global prosperity, as measured by the [Legatum Prosperity Index](#). Exacerbating these declines in democracy and prosperity, the pandemic also led to an increase in global fragility, as measured by the [Fragile States Index](#). Whereas the world was becoming more stable before the pandemic, countries rich and poor experienced a dramatic decline in stability in 2020. The pandemic combined with climate-driven disasters (such as floods, storms, and fires) and resource scarcity to destabilize many countries. Though instability has plagued some African countries, especially in the Sahel, the [Africa Integrity Index](#) shows that “most African countries are confronting the challenge” of the pandemic in 2020, even if those efforts are being undone in some countries by second and third waves in 2021. One way African countries confronted the challenge was through developing and implementing innovative COVID-19 testing techniques, such as a pooled testing strategy that allowed many African countries to test 10 to 50 times as many people as traditional testing would have allowed ([Mutesa et al. 2021](#); [Ghana 2020](#); [Rwanda 2020](#)).

Though the pandemic was a challenge for democracy, most democracies either did not resort to violating individual freedoms or have already restored those freedoms. The V-Dem [Pandemic Backsliding Project](#) has tracked violations of democratic standards during the pandemic, finding that most democracies had no or minor violations of democratic standards. Of the 14 countries that did not violate democratic standards, 13 were democracies. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) corroborates that finding and adds that most democracies violating democratic standards to fight COVID-19 had begun backsliding before the pandemic; very few full democracies adopted worrisome policies ([IDEA Global State of Democracy](#)). Freedom House's annual report also notes the resilience of democracies to various challenges in 2020, including the pandemic. Freedom House pointed to numerous successful elections and checks on power, including the [Constitutional Court of Malawi resisting bribes and ordering new elections](#) after discovering widespread ballot tampering in the 2019 elections.

The Resilience of Democracy

Democracies and dictatorships alike have been affected by a global decline in freedom over the past 15 years. But in 2020 most Free countries resisted further declines, while many Partly Free and Not Free countries could not.



The columns show the percentage of countries in each category that received a score decline, a score improvement, or no score change for events in 2020, according to *Freedom in the World 2021*.

For more information, visit freedomhouse.org.

The infographic is from the *Freedom in the World 2021* report by freedomhouse.org.



Autocrats have reacted very differently to the pandemic, using it as an excuse to repress their citizens. According to IDEA, 90 percent of non-democracies adopted policies that curtailed individual rights and civil liberties. And according to V-Dem, two-thirds of the countries that engaged in major violations of rights and liberties were already autocratic. Despite disinformation campaigns to the contrary by autocrats, this repression has had no identifiable impact on the effectiveness of their COVID-19 response; countries that resorted to authoritarian tactics contained the pandemic no better than countries using democratic tactics ([V-Dem paper 110](#)). Taiwan and South Korea, for example, handled COVID-19 very effectively without adopting any authoritarian tactics, such as dissolving the legislature, restricting press freedom, or ordering indefinite lockdowns. Instead of aiding the fight against COVID-19, autocrats' responses to the pandemic have allowed them to entrench their power. One consequence has been a dramatic decline in internet freedom, according to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net](#) report. The pandemic accelerated a 10-year decline in global internet freedom and increased intrusive surveillance measures.

Mastering Metrics

Now let's turn to discussing metrics and measurement in general. Metrics are our way of "seeing" DRG phenomena that we cannot directly observe with our eyes. When we see the world through metrics, we should keep a few caveats in mind.

We see only what we look for. This edition of the Learning Digest mainly reports on metrics about democratic backsliding and COVID-19 because those issues grabbed global attention. We begin to measure issues as they become salient, but many important issues are missed. For example, few organizations captured metrics about LGBTQ+ rights for many years. We have to remember to look for metrics beyond our immediate experience. If we don't measure issues like youth opportunities or LGBTQ+ rights, we won't see, talk about, or take action on issues affecting those communities.

All metrics are imperfect proxies. We cannot perfectly measure many social and political phenomena; there is no democracy thermometer to hold against a country's forehead. These issues are especially acute for more abstract DRG phenomena such as rights and freedom of expression, rather than relatively tangible phenomena such as voting and public services. But in the DRG sector, we can rely on behavioral and administrative data that are less open to interpretation than other data. Expert survey metrics (the bulk of the data summarized in this edition), should separately measure the multiple dimensions of a concept/topic with clear, specific questions. Rather than asking broad questions like "How free and fair was the most recent election?" experts should be asked specific questions like "What percentage of polling places allowed independent election observers?" and "How many instances of electoral violence occurred on election day?" The big-picture vantage of a broad question can be approximated by combining multiple, specific questions. The organizations cited above use these and other methods to generate accurate measures from their expert surveys. When making use of metrics, it is important to understand the methodologies used to develop them.



Two DRG phenomena: one more easily measurable (voting), the other less so (freedom of expression). *Left:* Kendra Helmer/USAID, 2011 vote counting, Port-au-Prince, Haiti. *Right:* Roman Shalamov/IFES, 2019 Kyiv Pride March, Ukraine.

Categorization, while helpful for interpretation, creates the illusion of large between-category differences and minimal within-category differences. When a country shifts from a democracy to an autocracy, it can seem like a dramatic change occurred in a single year. In most cases, however, that change has been occurring gradually for years, and the year of the categorical switch is better described as the latest step in a slow walk toward autocracy than a large, sudden leap. For example, the drastic decline in the world population living in democratic regimes is driven by most organizations recategorizing India from democracy to autocracy. India in 2020 (now categorized as an autocracy) is still more similar to India in 2019 (categorized as a democracy) than it is to extremely repressive autocratic countries like Russia and China, despite now being in the autocratic category. India's change means that it has taken a single step across the line delineating democracy from autocracy, not that it jumped in a single bound from a liberal democracy to a repressive autocratic state.

Use Our Resources

Welcome to the DRG Learning Digest, a newsletter to keep you informed of the latest learning, evaluation, and research in the Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG) sector. Views expressed in the external (non-USAID) publications linked in this Digest do not necessarily represent the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

Don't forget to check out our DRG Learning [Menu of Services!](#) (Link only accessible to USAID personnel.) The Menu provides information on the learning products and services the Evidence and Learning Team offers to help you fulfill your DRG learning needs. We want to help you adopt learning approaches that emphasize best fit and quality. The Evidence and Learning Team is also excited to share our [Inventory of DRG Learning](#) with you! (Link only accessible to USAID personnel.) The inventory is a searchable database of DRG learning products, including summaries of key findings and recommendations, drop-down menus to easily find documents related to a particular country or program area, and links to the full reports on the DEC.

Our friends at the [Varieties of Democracy \(V-Dem\) Institute](#) are also seeking to expand their research partnership with USAID on the complex nature of democracy by inviting research questions from you for V-Dem to work on. If there's a DRG technical question you've been wondering about, please submit it to the [Research Wishlist](#) now! (Link only accessible to USAID personnel.)