

Is democracy in danger?

Assessing the risk with historical data

Influential voices contend that democracy is in decline worldwide and threatened in the US. Using a variety of measures, I show that the global proportion of democracies is, in fact, at or near an all-time high. The current rate of backsliding is not historically unusual and is well-explained by the economic characteristics of existing democracies. Historical data yield extremely low estimated hazards of democratic breakdown in the US—far lower than in any democracy that has failed. Western governments are seen as threatened by a reported decline in popular support for democracy and an erosion of elite norms. But evidence linking either of these to past democratic failures is sparse. While deteriorating democratic quality in some countries is indeed a cause for concern, available evidence suggests that alarm about a global slide into autocracy is exaggerated.

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1 Introduction

Democracy is widely thought to be in danger both globally and in the US. Around the world, popular government is said to be in “recession,” “decaying,” “in retreat,” “beleaguered,” and in “twilight” (Diamond 2015, Zakaria 2018, Rachman 2016, Abramowitz and Repucci 2018, Applebaum 2020). According to one former US Secretary of State, in 2018 fascism posed “a more serious threat ... than at any time since the end of World War II” (Albright 2018). Recent books offer tips on “surviving autocracy” and resisting “tyranny” (Gessen 2020, Snyder 2017). (Among other practical advice: “Listen for dangerous words,” “Make eye contact and small talk,” and “Be wary of paramilitaries.”) Op-ed pages abound with allusions to Weimar Germany and Chile under Allende (Cohen 2015, Dorfman 2017).¹

How serious are current threats to democracy? The natural place to look for guidance is to the historical experience of countries around the world. Of course, there is no guarantee that patterns will not change, and the data available are far from perfect. Still, anecdotes and analogies have fueled the current discourse on democracy’s fragility. It may be worth exploring the universe of past cases more systematically.

In this paper, I examine what such data reveal about democratic erosion. I begin with description, charting the historical rise of democracy, assessing the dimensions of the current “democratic recession,” and exploring how democracies have ended in the past. I then turn to risk analysis. I first examine what factors best account for past democratic failures. Broad public support for democracy and elite norms of cooperation and tolerance are often said to be vital for democratic survival. Although plausible, these claims are hard to test, and—as I illustrate with data from two major studies—evidence for them is far from unequivocal. While falling support

¹ For dissenting views, see Levitsky and Way (2015) and Carothers and Young (2017).

for democracy might help explain breakdowns among weak electoral democracies—although even that is uncertain—such effects cannot easily explain recent backsliding in most liberal democracies. As for elite norms, the most systematic analysis I could find shows, on close examination, only that in Latin America the presence of a radicalized, authoritarian military increases the risk of an anti-democratic coup. What implications this might have for, say, the partisan polarization in today’s Washington is unclear. By contrast, I show that advanced economic development and a long history of democracy correlate robustly with democratic survival. Using all available historical data, I estimate the hazard that particular countries will revert to authoritarianism. For a country with the US’s income and political history, the odds of this turn out to be extremely low.

The next section uses available data to survey the historical trends in the emergence and survival of democracies. Section 3 explores evidence on the correlates of democratic survival and uses the result to forecast the hazard that particular countries will revert to autocracy. The final section concludes.

2 Charting the fortunes of democracy

I start here by describing the current global distribution of political regimes and how the balance among these has been changing. I discuss both quantity—the proportion of democracies among all states—and quality—just how democratic existing democracies are. Finally, I review the ways in which democracies have broken down in the past.

2.1 Is the proportion of democracies decreasing?

How to measure the prevalence and quality of democracies? Several databases and indicators have been widely used. First the Polity project rates countries annually on their “authority characteristics” on a scale that ranges from -10 (“hereditary monarchy”) to +10 (“consolidated democracy”). Countries scoring 6 or higher on the Polity2 scale are classified as democracies. This score combines ratings on a number of components, which include the extent of political competition and constraints on the executive. Second, since 1972 the NGO Freedom House (FH) has compiled ratings of “political rights” and “civil liberties” in countries around the world on a scale that ranges from 1 (“most free”) to 7 (“least free”). Based on these, it classifies countries as “free,” “partly free,” or “not free.” Although not a measure of democracy per se, the status of “free” has often been equated to democratic government. (It makes sense to place the “partly free” category on the non-democratic side since two-thirds of the “partly free” country years correspond to Polity non-democracies.) Third, the Varieties of Democracy project (VDEM) rates countries on a range of sub-elements of democracy, in some cases going back to 1789. It also provides a composite classification (its variable `v2x_regime`) that distinguishes between “electoral democracies,” “liberal democracies,” “electoral autocracies,” and “closed autocracies.” Finally, the Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy database (LIED) records when each country first met certain electoral thresholds—for instance, holding competitive elections in which virtually all adults were allowed to vote (Skaaning et al. 2015).²

I use these data sources in the following analysis. None is perfect, and some suffer from significant drawbacks and inconsistencies.³ Still, they are the best currently available data

² One other databases is that of Boix, Miller, and Rosato (2013). I do not use it in this version of the paper since it does not include data for years after 2015.

³ I discuss various issues with the Freedom House and Polity measures in the appendix.

sources with which to evaluate claims about democracy worldwide, and they correlate reasonably highly among themselves.⁴ They are also the measures most frequently invoked by those who warn of democratic decline.

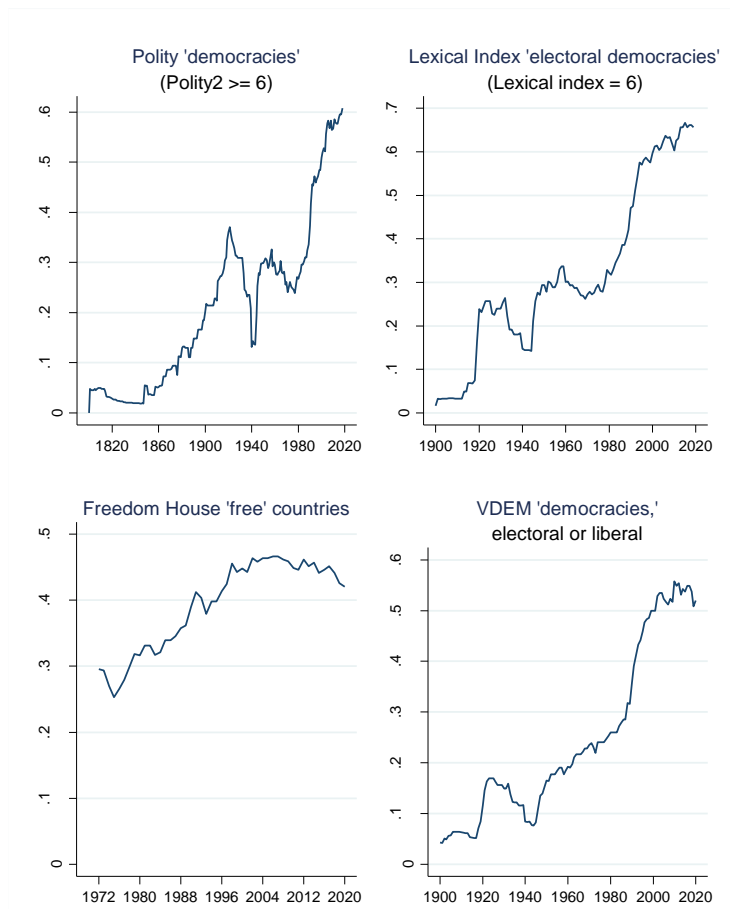
Figure 1 plots the proportion of democracies in the world over time, using each main indicator. In the most recent data, the Polity2 and LIED measures are at or close to their all-time high. As of 2018, a record 61 percent of countries were Polity2 “democracies,” up from 57 percent in 2010 and 51 percent in 2000. The proportion of LIED universal suffrage electoral democracies in 2019—at 66 percent—was also within a couple of percentage points of its all-time peak. The Freedom House and VDEM indicators suggest a bit more backsliding. In 2020, 42 percent of countries were “free,” according to Freedom House, down from 47 percent in 2007. And in 2020, 52 percent of countries were electoral or liberal democracies, according to VDEM, compared to 56 percent in 2010. Still, these declines merely return these indicators to levels first reached in the mid-1990s after the Cold War ended and communism collapsed. At that time, most commentators, rather than lamenting a crisis of democracy, were celebrating its global triumph.

Another way to explore the data is to plot the average democracy score across all countries. Figure 2 shows alternative measures of these. All suggest at most moderate backsliding. The latest reading for each is within 6 percentage points of the all-time peak.

⁴ Across available country years, Polity2 correlates with Freedom House’s political rights index at $r = .89$, with VDEM’s electoral democracy index at $r = .86$, and with its liberal democracy index at $r = .83$. The correlation with LIED’s indicator for competitive elections with universal suffrage (LIED index = 6) is a little lower— $r = .75$ —since some countries had relatively high Polity2 scores in early years despite restricted franchises. Another sign of consistency is that those indicators that are binary—distinguishing “democracies” from “non-democracies”—tend to classify countries into groups that correspond to the same thresholds on continuous measures of regime type. Baltz et al. (2020) show that nine binary democracy measures all classify cases in ways that correspond closely to thresholds of around 5-6 on Polity’s 21-point Polity2 scale and around .40 on V-DEM’s polyarchy scale.

Figure 1: Proportion of democracies among world states, various definitions

A. Extended period



B. Since 2000

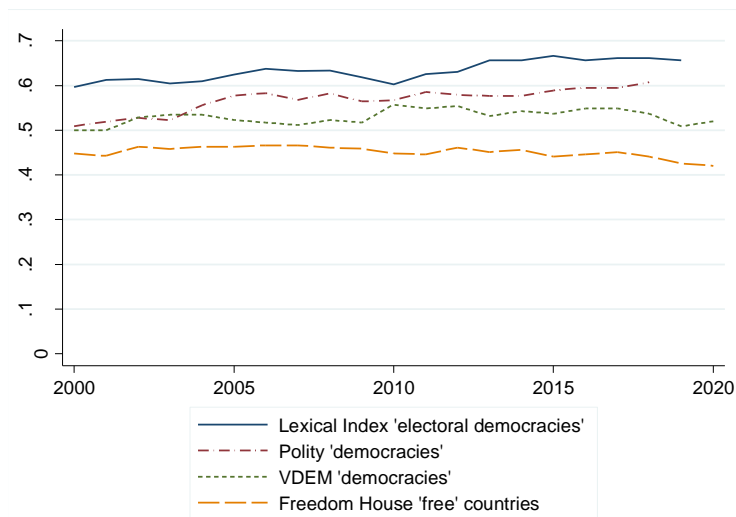
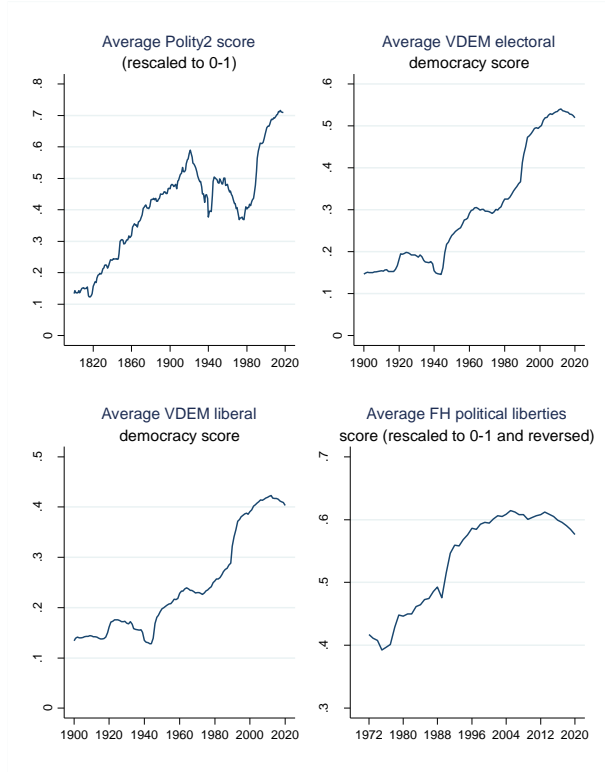
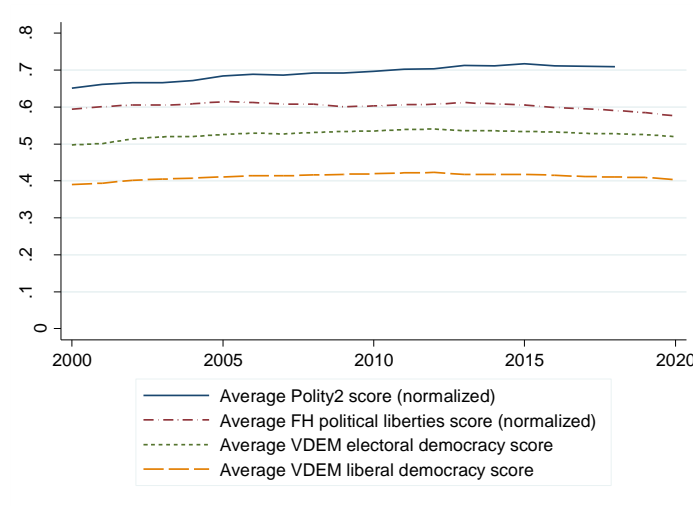


Figure 2: Average democracy level among world states, various definitions

A. Extended period



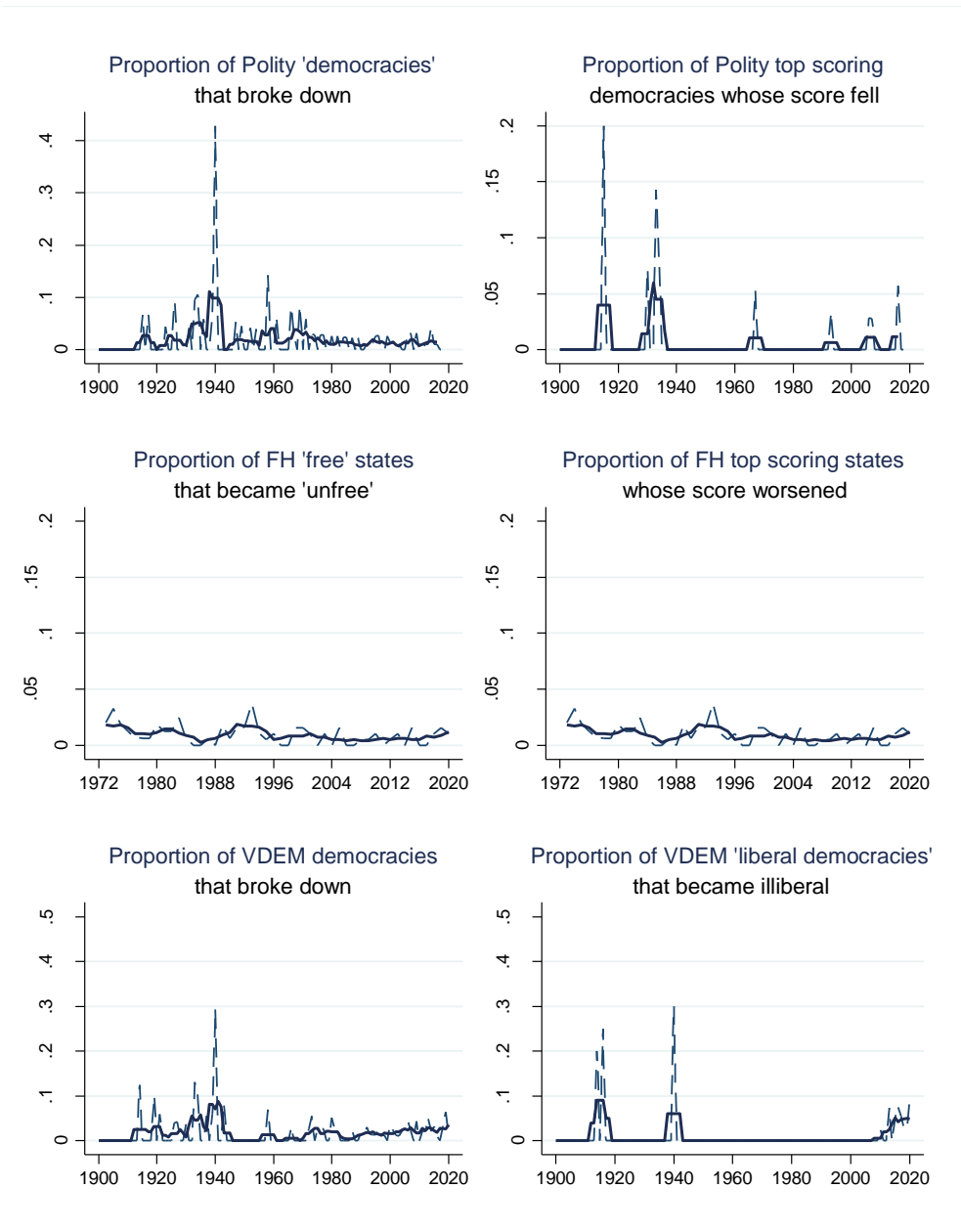
B. Since 2000



While the proportion of democracies in the world and the average democracy score have fallen relatively little, democracies could still be failing at much higher rates than in the past if such failures were being offset by the democratization of other states. Figure 3 checks this. It

shows the proportion of existing democracies that broke down each year, falling below the relevant definitional threshold. Since the annual data are volatile, I also plot centered 5-year moving averages. While some indicators (in particular, VDEM failures) trend up in recent years, most others look flat or even slope down. With the possible exception of VDEM liberal democracies, recent rates of breakdown do not appear historically unusual.

Figure 3: Rates of breakdown of democracies, various definitions



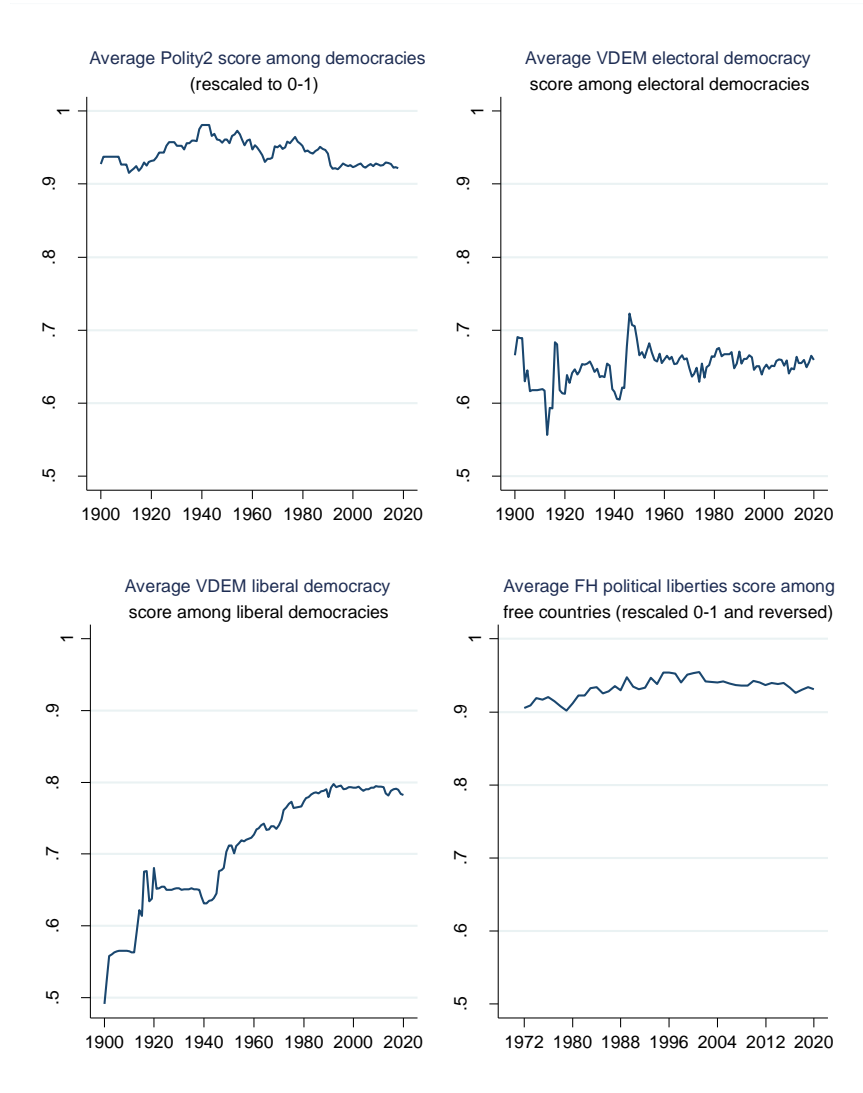
2.2 Is the quality of existing democracies declining?

What about declines in *quality* among existing democracies? Figure 3 shows only the rate of failures large enough to change a “democracy” into a “non-democracy” under the given criterion. But some deteriorations are subtler. Figure 4 shows the average democracy score among those countries classified as democracies (as opposed to the average score in *all* countries, shown in Figure 2). The Polity data suggest a fall in quality back in the early 1990s as the number of democracies sharply increased—but no fall in average quality since then. There is also no sign of falling quality within the class of VDEM electoral or liberal democracies. The average political liberties score among countries that remained “free” fell about 2 percentage points over the last 20 years.

2.3 How do democracies end?

Democracies turn into autocracies in several ways. One distinction concerns who acquires authoritarian power—incumbent leaders of the expiring democracy or outsiders (Maeda 2010, Svobik 2015). If outsiders take over, a second distinction concerns how they do so—by military coup, civil war, or foreign invasion. If insiders undermine democracy, they may do so rapidly—in a “democratic breakdown” or “*autogolpe*”—or gradually, by means of “democratic erosion,” “backsliding,” or “retrogression” (Schedler 1998, Huq and Ginzburg 2018, Waldner and Lust 2018, Haggard and Kaufmann 2021). Of course, these processes may overlap and interact—a coup may occur after democratic erosion has weakened the polity’s defenses, or, conversely, the military may step in ostensibly to protect democracy against an abusive incumbent. Thus, some classifications are debatable.

Figure 4: Average quality among democracies.



LIED classifies all breakdowns of democracy in the database. I compiled similar classifications for the Polity and FH data. For each of the 195 cases in which a democracy (Polity) or “free” state (FH) changed to a non-democracy or a “partly free” or “not free” state, I determined the manner of transition.⁵ Following Svobik (2015, p.730), I coded an authoritarian reversal as a *coup* “when the armed or security forces participated in the removal of a

⁵ I drew heavily on Polity’s “Polity I Country Notes,” which explain its original coding decisions, and Svobik’s (2015) and Powell and Thyne’s (2011) data on coups. The cases and sources are listed in appendix Table A2.

democratically elected government by employing or threatening violence.” I recorded an *incumbent transformation* when “a democratically elected incumbent undermined key tenets of democracy, most often by abolishing or manipulating elections” (Ibid.). I focused on the first change in a given year from democracy to non-democracy, consulting the published notes of the regime coders where possible. For instance, if an incumbent president dissolved parliament, abrogated the constitution, and suspended supreme court justices, thus provoking a military coup to oust him (as in Panama in 1951), I classified this as an incumbent transformation not a coup.

Table 1 shows the results. Regardless which indicator is used, few cases occurred due to civil wars or invasion.⁶ However, the balance between military coups and internal transformation varies across indicators and period covered (from the early 1800s for Polity and LIED, from 1972 for Freedom House). Figure 5 offers insight into the change over time. All indicators agree that the frequency of democratic breakdowns by means of coups has declined, ending up below the frequency of breakdowns accomplished by regime insiders. Thus, it is true, as some have noted, that democracies today are more likely to be undermined by insiders than overthrown by outsiders. But this appears to be because of a sharp decrease in coups rather than a historically unusual rate of endogenous breakdowns.

Table 1: Manner of democratic breakdown, percentages

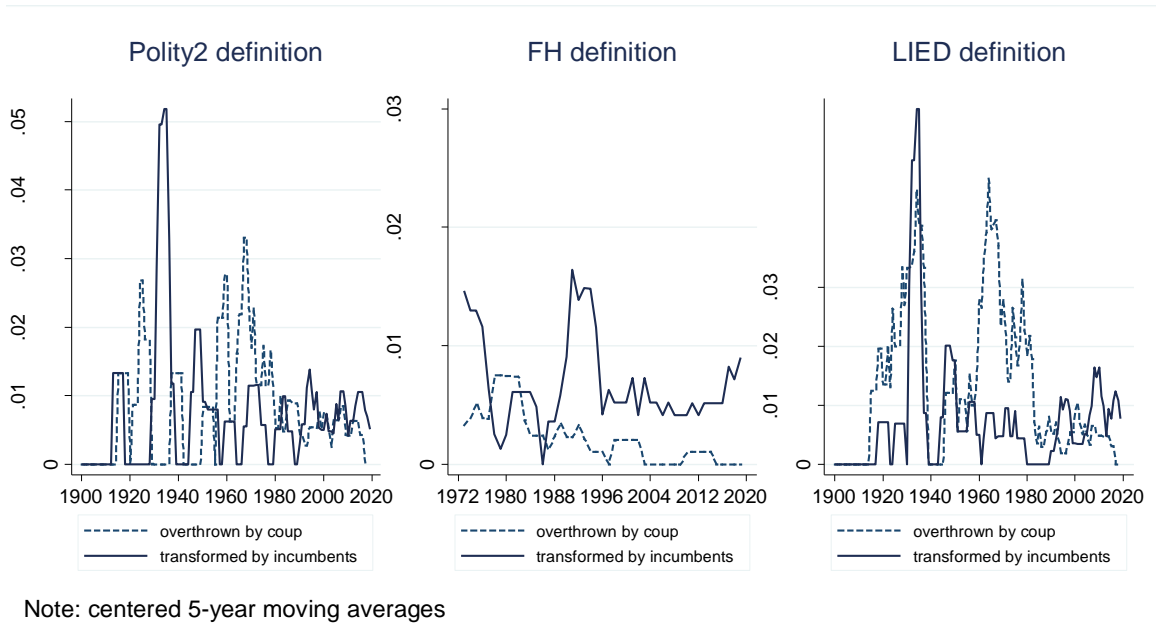
	External			Incumbent transformation
	Coup	Civil War	Invasion	
Polity	44		8	49
LIED	51		10	39
Freedom House	23	1		76

Sources: see Table A2.

Note: case of France 1958 excluded.

⁶ Breakdowns in civil war occurred in Lebanon 1976, Guinea-Bissau 1998, and the Solomon Islands 2000; however, LIED codes the first two as resulting from coups, and only the third is coded by FH as civil war. The cases of breakdown due to invasion are Transvaal 1877, Colombia 1885, Orange Free State and Transvaal again 1902, Luxembourg 1914, Belgium 1915, San Marino 1921, Czechoslovakia 1938, Netherlands 1939, Belgium 1940, Denmark 1940, Luxembourg 1940, France 1940, and Norway 1940. Polity2 codes France 1958 as a democratic breakdown, but de Gaulle’s assumption of power fits none of the categories, so I exclude it here.

Figure 5: How democracies end: Proportion that failed each year



2.4 Summary

The proportion of countries in the world that are democracies by any measure is at or close to an all-time high. While some backsliding has occurred—especially in the degree of liberalism—it is far from reversing the massive burst of democratization that occurred in the last quarter of the 20th Century. The modal manner of regression has been erosion by insiders rather than military overthrow; this reflects a dramatic fall in the frequency of coups rather than a major increase in backsliding. If that is the current situation, what might the future have in store?

3 Looking ahead

In this section, I use the patterns in historical data to forecast how regimes may change in coming years. Of course, such forecasts can only predict what will happen if current trends and mechanisms persist. It is always possible that “this time will be different” (Przeworski 2019, 80).

Still, the discourse on democratic fragility is itself based on analogies to past cases—just ones that are selected and usually analyzed in small sets. Acknowledging the limits of extrapolation, a forecast based on all available data is arguably a useful benchmark.

A small but quite consistent literature suggests that democratic stability is enhanced by certain economic and political characteristics of countries. Before looking more broadly at such factors, I consider two that, for lack of suitable data, are hard to incorporate into a composite analysis. I then run survival models, including theoretically reasonable determinants for which data do exist and use the predictions from these models to assess the odds of democratic breakdown in various countries, and, in particular, the US.

3.1 Attitudes and norms

Since at least the publication of *The Civic Culture* (Almond and Verba 1963), scholars have argued that stable democracy requires an underpinning of supportive attitudes and norms. Some claim that what matter are the attitudes of the *public*. Others direct attention to values and norms of key political actors. Recently, Foa and Mounk (2017) argued that declining popular support for liberal democracy—especially among the young—threatens democracy in the West. Others contend that the ambivalence of younger cohorts is a life cycle effect rather than a lasting trend (Norris 2017). Among those emphasizing the norms of elites are Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013) and Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), who argue that an erosion of mutual toleration and forbearance among US politicians has undercut American democracy.

Anti-democratic attitudes and the weakening of norms of toleration and restraint are undesirable in themselves. But how strong is the evidence that such factors cause democracies to break down? And how powerful are such factors relative to others that pull in the opposite

direction such as economic development and democratic experience?

Determining how public attitudes affect democratic survival is difficult for several reasons. First, as with many plausible determinants of democracy, causation may run in the opposite direction: democracies that survive are likely to cultivate pro-democratic values. Second, cross-national survey data on attitudes towards democracy—especially those that extend into past eras when breakdowns were more frequent—are quite limited. A third problem is that raters of regimes sometimes include popular support for democracy—or associated attitudes such as confidence in government institutions—as inputs in their measures of democracy. In such cases, it is hardly surprising that support for democracy correlates with democracy ratings.⁷

The most broad-ranging attempt to date to test for a relationship between public support for democracy and regime change is that of Claassen (2020). This study used a Bayesian latent trait model to combine responses to 52 democracy-related questions on an extensive set of cross-national surveys conducted between 1988 and 2017 and to interpolate support levels to years in between polls (Claassen 2020). The polls include multiple waves of the World Values Survey, various Barometer surveys, and the Pew Global Attitudes Project. Using these data, Claassen explored the relationship between popular support for democracy in year t and VDEM's liberal democracy index in year $t + 1$. He found that a permanent one standard deviation fall in popular support for democracy—as occurred, for instance, in Nicaragua in 1996-2004—led to a long-term fall of 8-12 percentage points in the VDEM liberal democracy index (Ibid, 128).⁸

⁷ For instance, the Economist Intelligence Unit includes “political culture” as one of the five elements used for classifying regimes, which makes it impossible to use this rating to assess the relationship between political culture and democratic survival (see <http://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>).

⁸ The actual fall in Nicaragua in these years was about seven points. See also Jacob (2021), which extends the Claassen data to 2020 and argues that, although high public support for democracy does not prevent the election of an anti-democratic leader, it may constrain the ability of such incumbents to backslide.

The study offers impressively broad crossnational evidence that falling public support for democracy may be behind democratic backsliding. Endogeneity could be a problem; explaining a country's democracy level in year $t+1$ as the result of public attitudes in year t is tricky when public attitudes in year t are interpolated from data that extend beyond $t+1$. Still, setting this aside and taking the data at face value, how much backsliding in Western democracies do changes in public attitudes predict?

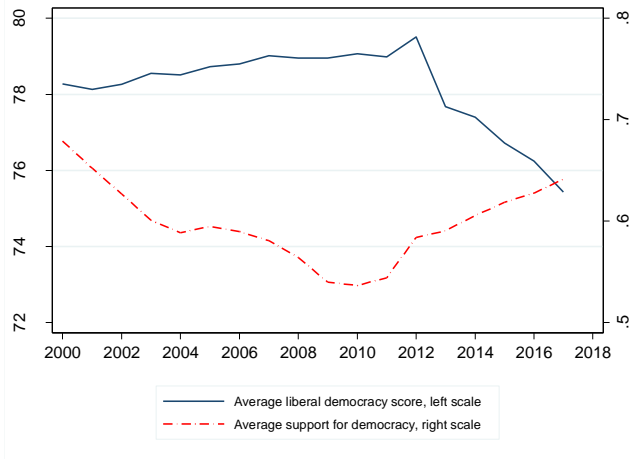
The short answer is: none.⁹ Claassen's results cannot account for any backsliding among the West's liberal democracies—for two reasons. First, it turns out that support for democracy has been *rising* recently among liberal democracies, both on average and in many of those where backsliding has been noted. Second, disaggregating Claassen's results, they turn out to be driven by the electoral democracies. In fact, the data show no link between popular support for democracy and backsliding in *liberal* democracies.

Figure 7 shows the average VDEM liberal democracy score and the average level of Claassen's measure of popular support for democracy in 2000-18 for (a) those countries that were liberal democracies in 2000 and (b) those that were electoral democracies in 2000. Among the liberal democracies, there is a clear *negative* relationship between support for democracy and the level of liberal democracy. Support falls until 2010 alongside a rise in democratic quality. Then from 2011-17, as democratic quality declines, support for democracy rises. Among electoral democracies, the period since 2011 does show a simultaneous fall in support for democracy and a fall in the quality of it. This looks consistent with the common view. But in the period from 2000 to 2010, there is a negative relationship that is even stronger than that among the liberal democracies: the quality of democracy rises and then falls, while support for it falls

⁹ To be clear, Claassen's valuable paper explores the average effect across all democracies; there is no contradiction between the aggregate analysis there and the disaggregated results I present here.

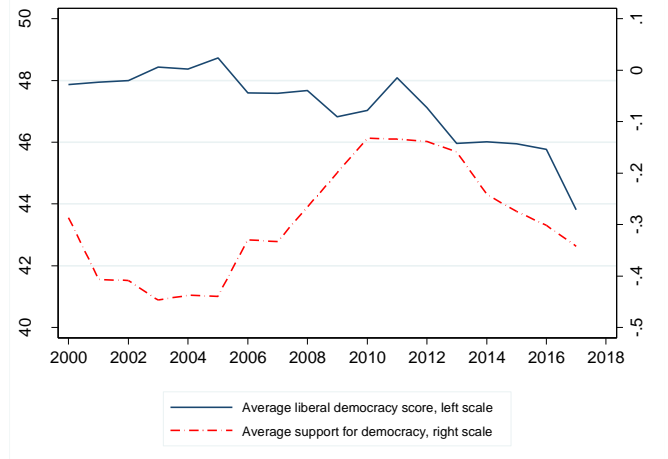
and then rises.

Figure 7: Support for democracy and level of liberal democracy among different types of democracies



Note: correlation $r = -.57$

(a) Countries that were liberal democracies in 2000



Note: correlation $r = -.34$ (2000-10: $r = -.90$, 2011-17: $r = .85$)

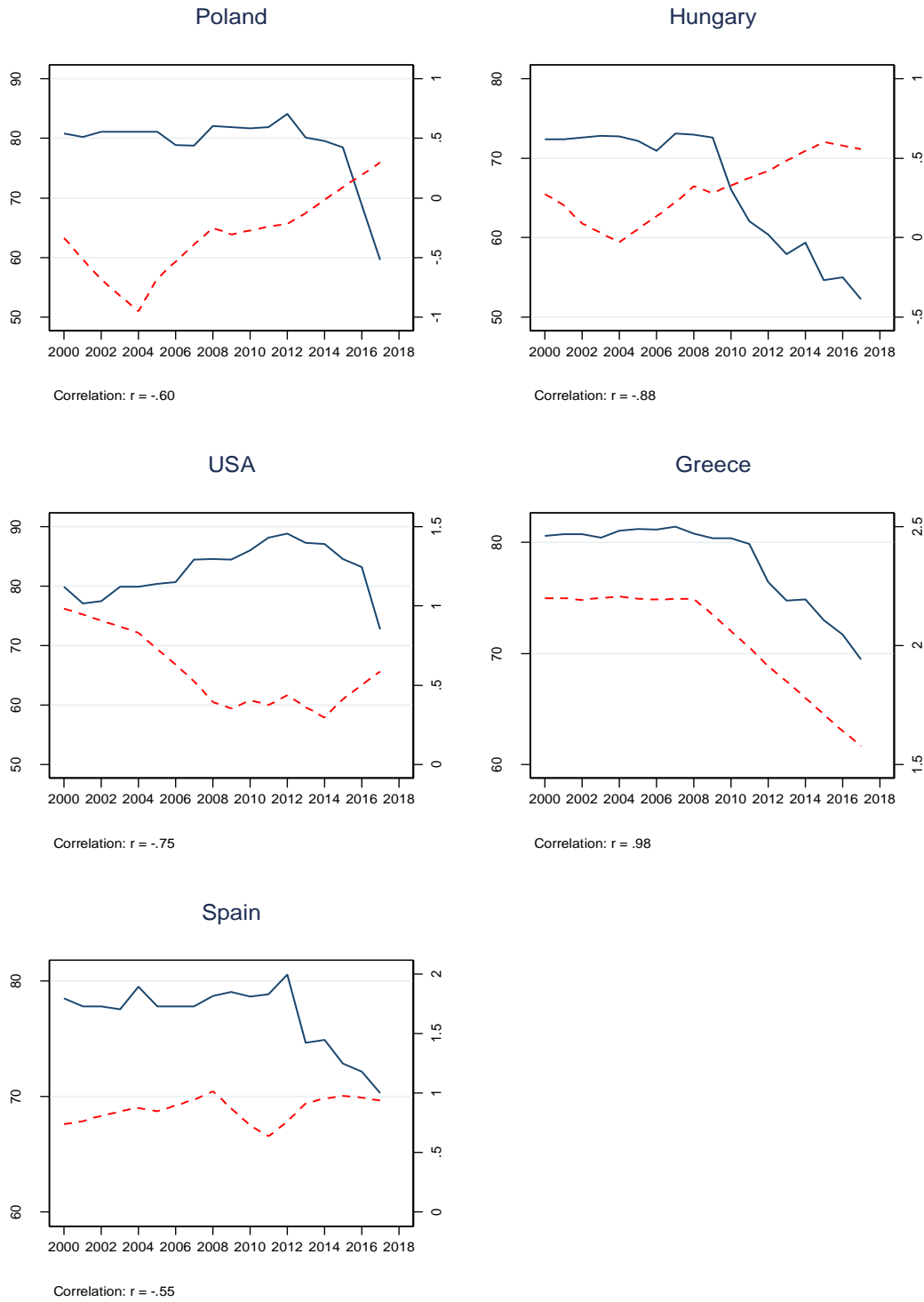
(b) Countries that were electoral democracies in 2000

The five liberal democracies with the largest declines in democratic quality in the 2000-17 period were Poland, Hungary, Greece, Spain, and the US. Did deterioration in the quality of democracy reflect falling support for democracy among the populations of these countries? Figure 8 shows the patterns of support for democracy (again from Claassen 2020) and liberal democracy (from VDEM) for these countries. The pattern for Greece does fit: support for democracy deteriorated significantly from the start of the global financial crisis—albeit from an unusually high initial level—followed by a fall in liberal democracy.¹⁰ But in all four of the other cases there is a strong *negative* correlation.¹¹

¹⁰ In fact, the downward trend in support for democracy in Greece in 2008-17 in Figure 8 appears to be an artifact of the merging of polls from different polling organizations. Using the same questions as Claassen, but limiting data to those from the World Values Survey and European Values Study, which use identical questions and methods, one gets an average level of support for democracy of 93 percent in 1999, 2008, and 2017 (see Figure A2 in appendix).

¹¹ Jacob (2021, 25) also finds that governments tend to be more illiberal not when popular support for democracy is weak but when it is strong.

Figure 8: Support for democracy and level of liberal democracy in liberal democracies with greatest backsliding



— Actual liberal democracy score, left scale
 - - - Popular support for democracy index, right scale

For more systematic results, I replicated Claassen’s regression and used interaction terms to separate out the effect of democratic support in different types of regime. The estimated marginal effects of popular support are shown in Table 5. The important point here is that among liberal democracies the estimated effect is insignificant and close to zero. While falling public support for democracy could be a cause of democratic backsliding among electoral democracies such as Turkey and Thailand, this does not seem to be the case among liberal democracies such as Poland, Hungary, and the US.

Even among the electoral democracies, the role of public attitudes varies a great deal across the cases. In the appendix, I show graphs for the five VDEM electoral democracies as of 2000 that suffered the largest subsequent drops in the liberal democracy index. Consistent with the positive aggregate result, there is a strong positive relationship in India and Thailand and a weak one in Turkey. But there is no relationship at all in Nicaragua and a strong *negative* one in Venezuela.

Table 5: Estimated marginal effect of popular support for democracy on VDEM’s liberal democracy index in different types of regime.

	All regimes	Closed autocracies	Electoral autocracies	Electoral democracies	Liberal democracies
Marginal effect	.27** (.07)	.44 (.69)	.26 (.24)	.44** (.17)	-.01 (.07)

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Regime classified as in previous year. Based on replication of Table 1, Model 1 regression in Claassen (2019), with the support for democracy measure interacted with regime dummies based on VDEM’s `v2x_regime`.

In short, while softening popular support for democracy might help explain backsliding in some electoral democracies, there is no evidence of this in the liberal democracies of the West. In fact, support for democracy in these *increased* on average in recent years (Figure 7(a)). Claassen’s data end in 2017. But this conclusion would be even stronger if one added the latest round of the World Values Survey. Among countries VDEM classified as liberal democracies in

2010, the median percentage of respondents saying that living in a democratic system was important to them rose from 81.0 percent in the sixth wave (2010-14) to 88.2 percent in the seventh (2017-20).¹²

Turning to the norms of political elites, establishing an empirical link between these and democratic survival is even more challenging given the dearth of data on such norms. The most systematic study I found was that of Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013), focused on Latin America. The authors identified the key political actors in different periods in 20 countries and rated each on their normative preference for democracy and the radicalism of their policy positions. Between 1945 and 2005, greater opposition to democracy and (in some models) greater radicalism, correlated with democratic breakdowns in the countries studied. At the same time, the authors found no relationship within Latin America between economic development and democratic survival.

Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán were careful not to generalize beyond Latin America. Their work provides valuable insights into the countries studied. But are there broader implications? To assess that, it makes sense to check which cases drive their finding. Using their data and replicating the main regression, I find the result depends on Argentina and Uruguay: if they are excluded, the effect of actors' normative preference for or against democracy becomes insignificant with a coefficient close to zero (Table A4). At the same time, income becomes significant with a negative coefficient, suggesting that—as modernization theorists contend—economic development did protect against democratic breakdown.¹³

Who were the key actors in the Argentine and Uruguayan cases, and what norms in particular did they embrace? It turns out that before each of the democratic breakdowns (1951,

¹² Or from 80.2 to 84.5 including only those liberal democracies surveyed in both waves.

¹³ See also Przeworski et al. (2000).

1962, 1966, and 1976 for Argentina; 1973 for Uruguay), one key actor was a military with radical policy positions and a preference for dictatorship.¹⁴ In four of the five cases, a military coup overthrew democracy.¹⁵ In short, where top military leaders favor dictatorship and radical policies, democracy may be at risk. Fortunately, that does not describe the kind of norm erosion detected recently in liberal democracies of the West, where military leaders have so far stayed out of politics and appear committed to democracy. Were that to change, it would, indeed, be reason to worry.

In the 1970s, Argentina and Uruguay were exemplars of “bureaucratic authoritarianism,” a form of dictatorship that survived at moderately high levels of modernization (O’Donnell 1988). Thus, it is not surprising that including them eliminates the association between authoritarianism and low development in Latin America. What is more interesting is that excluding these two countries, there *is* a strong relationship between development and lower democratic breakdown risk among the remaining 18 countries. It seems to be not Latin America that is different but Argentina, Uruguay, and perhaps a few others.

3.2 Correlates of democratic breakdown

Previous work has linked a number of factors to democratic survival. Some of these have to do with the nature of society. Economic development renders citizens more eager to participate politically (Inglehart and Welzel 2009) and harder to control. An educated, globally connected, socially skilled, and technologically sophisticated population can monitor incumbents and resist

¹⁴ Actors are coded from 0 to 1 on pro-democratic preferences, pro-dictatorship preferences, and radicalism of policy preferences. If we add the scores for pro-dictatorship preferences and radicalism together, subtract the score for pro-democratic preferences, and add 1, we get a measure ranging from 0 to 3 of anti-democratic norms. In each of the 5 Argentine or Uruguayan cases in which breakdown followed, the score for the military was 2.5 or 3.

¹⁵ The exception was 1951 in Argentina. In this case, the incumbent, President Juan Péron, is coded as having undergone a sharp normative change that year towards opposing democracy.

their power grabs (Przeworski et al. 2000, Boix and Stokes 2003, Boix 2011, Aléman and Yang 2011, Erdmann 2011, Treisman 2020). By contrast, very high levels of economic inequality and social polarization are often thought dangerous to democracy (e.g., Haggard and Kaufmann 2021).¹⁶

Other factors have to do with the characteristics and resources of the state. Plentiful mineral rents spare rulers the need to negotiate with citizens over taxes and help to fund either authoritarian co-optation or repression (Ross 2012). Greater administrative capacity might either help or hurt. On the one hand, rulers can use this to control society (Albertus and Menaldo 2018). On the other hand, too little capacity leaves a democracy vulnerable to capture by authoritarian actors (Bratton and Chang 2006, Fortin 2012). Over time, democratic institutions may consolidate. Svobik (2015) shows that democracies' survival odds increase dramatically after about 20 years. However, past democratic breakdowns—by providing models for the rebellious—may increase the likelihood of new ones (Przeworski et al. 2000). And the institutional details may matter. Some contend that presidential systems enable the executive to subvert democracy more easily than do parliamentary ones (Przeworski et al. 2000, Maeda 2010).

A third set of factors relate to shocks. Economic crises can destabilize democracies, prompting emergency measures or igniting disruptive social conflicts (Przeworski et al. 2000, Svobik 2008). The wave of democratic failures in the 1930s is often blamed on the Great Depression. Fourth, the international environment may affect survival. The end of the Cold War initiated a period of stronger global support for democracy (Boix 2011). Democracies surrounded by others appear less vulnerable than those encircled by dictatorships. And the global

¹⁶ Although Ansell and Samuels (2014) suggest this may be true of land-holding inequality but not income inequality.

performance of different regimes influences their relative attractiveness. In periods when democracies are growing fast, they may prove more resilient than when autocracy is seen as an economically more effective model (Miller 2016, Abramson and Montero 2020).

The range of possible determinants—and their likely interactions—make identifying causal relationships extremely hard. Plausible instruments have been found for economic development (Boix 2011) and economic growth (Bruckner and Ciccone 2011), confirming a relationship between these and democracy, although debate continues (e.g., Acemoglu et al. 2014). Here, however, the goal is not a fully convincing causal explanation but rather the most plausible forecast based on past patterns. Although such a “prediction” merits several grains of salt—as noted, the process may change—it can still provide a useful benchmark against which to evaluate a public discourse that is rich in assumptions and claims about democracy’s future.

Various empirical studies have used survival models to explore the correlates of democratic breakdown (e.g., Przeworski et al. 2000, Bernhard et al. 2001). I estimated survival models using a Weibull distribution, which makes possible the simulation of baseline hazard rates. Democratic failure is defined as transition from “democracy” to “non-democracy” (or “free” to “partly free” or “not free” status), under the relevant definition.

I sought data to capture each of the possible determinants mentioned; sources and details are in Table A1. While finding proxies for some variables was straightforward, others posed challenges. It proved impossible to locate any reliable measure of social polarization with broad geographical and temporal coverage.¹⁷ State capacity is also difficult to measure. I use the

¹⁷ One possibility I considered was VDEM’s “political polarization” measure, *v2cacamps*. Unfortunately, this proved problematic for several reasons. First, the assessments of VDEM’s country experts are almost certainly affected by knowledge of subsequent history. Knowing that a democracy collapsed in civil war or other unrest in year *t* inevitably leads one to think it must have been politically divided in *t-1*. Second, this variable turns out to correlate hardly at all with two survey-based measures of affective polarization that are available for a (very) limited number of country-years (Ward and Tavits 2019, Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2020). Third, there are large, non-random gaps in the VDEM data. And, finally, when data do exist, some of the classifications are puzzling; for

estimates of Hanson and Sigman (2013), who found that a variety of capacity indicators all load strongly on one common dimension. Unfortunately, this dimension correlates very highly ($r = .86$) with income per capita, making it hard to distinguish the effects of each (although for forecasting purposes, that is not essential). Three of the variables—oil and gas income per capita, state capacity, and inequality—are available for far fewer country-years than the others, so I present models both including and excluding them. Including them, convergence of the survival models is not always achieved.

Table 2 presents the results. The table shows exponentiated coefficients, which can be interpreted in terms of hazard rates (a coefficient below one reduces the hazard, one above one increases it). Since falling below a certain threshold is easier if a country starts closer to it, I control for the country's lagged democracy index.¹⁸ The coefficients on these are less than one, as expected, suggesting breakdowns are rarer in highly rated democracies. (Of course, no surprise that a country with a Polity2 score of 10 is less likely to fall below 6 than one with a score of 6.)

As the table shows, economic characteristics help to predict democratic durability. Democracies with more developed economies that were growing faster were much less likely to fail. Consistent with the “oil curse” literature, large oil and gas revenues correlated with democratic fragility in the Freedom House data, although results were not statistically significant in the other series, perhaps because the oil curse obtains mostly in the period since the 1970s, on which the Freedom House data focus (Ross 2012). Institutional history also seems to matter. A longer experience of democracy correlates with greater resilience. Fewer past cases of

instance, the US in 2020 was more polarized than Rwanda in 1994, Iran in 1979, Germany in 1932, and Spain in 1935. Another V-DEM variable, “polarization of society” (*v2smpolsoc*), was only available from 2000.

¹⁸ That is, Polity2, FH political rights score, *v2x_polyarchy*, or *v2x_libdem*.

Table 2: Correlates of democratic breakdowns

	(1) Polity2 > 6	(2) VDEM dem- ocracy	(3) VDEM liberal democracy	(4) FH free	(5) LIED	(6) Polity2 > 6	(7) VDEM dem- ocracy	(8) VDEM liberal democracy	(8) FH free	(9) LIED
<i>Economic development</i>										
Ln GDP per capita (lagged)	0.54** (0.084)	0.72* (0.11)	0.65 (0.30)	0.59** (0.12)	0.60** (0.089)	1.23 (0.50)	1.10 (0.49)	166.7 (473.5)	0.78 (0.26)	0.70 (0.21)
<i>State characteristics</i>										
Ln previous years democratic	0.078** (0.077)	0.098* (0.10)	0.040 (0.20)	0.64* (0.13)	4.9e-14** (2.8e-13)	0.0086* (0.021)	0.20* (0.16)	3.0e-29 (1.1e-27)	0.67 (0.15)	3.6e-22** (4.5e-21)
Past democratic breakdowns (lagged)	4.35** (1.69)	2.87** (0.88)	7.12 (8.08)	1.05 (0.28)	1.13 (0.13)	5.57* (4.11)	2.56* (1.07)	1.6e-89 (.)	0.78 (0.25)	1.08 (0.17)
Presidential system	1.21 (0.38)	1.31 (0.40)	0.18 (0.18)	1.26 (0.54)	1.29 (0.30)	0.97 (0.63)	1.35 (0.69)	2.3e-109 (.)	1.18 (0.55)	1.25 (0.65)
Lagged democracy indicator	0.84** (0.038)	2.4e-6** (3.7e-6)	0.012 (0.065)	0.31** (0.087)	1.00 (0.19)	0.78** (0.052)	1.4e-7** (4.0e-7)	2.3e-4 (3.0e-3)	0.56 (0.17)	0.25** (0.098)
<i>Shocks</i>										
Growth rate	0.92** (0.013)	0.94** (0.013)	0.83** (0.050)	0.92** (0.018)	0.92** (0.0087)	0.95 (0.036)	0.96 (0.034)	0.99 (0.072)	0.91** (0.034)	0.88** (0.026)
<i>International factors</i>										
Post-Cold War (after 1989)	0.51 (0.18)	1.12 (0.41)	2.96 (2.13)	1.22 (0.42)	0.58 (0.18)	0.96 (0.68)	1.67 (1.15)	3.7e+5 (4.5e+7)	3.56* (2.19)	0.72 (0.48)
Average dem. level of contiguous states	0.91** (0.028)	0.38 (0.20)	0.044** (0.053)	1.04 (0.11)	0.76** (0.063)	0.87** (0.038)	0.36 (0.26)	0.15 (0.18)	1.24 (0.18)	0.76* (0.10)
Difference in avge. growth rate, 10 years, dems – non-dems	0.83 (0.13)	0.96 (0.15)	0.33** (0.12)	1.17 (0.16)	0.75* (0.091)	1.13 (0.27)	1.33 (0.29)	0.010* (0.022)	1.37* (0.20)	0.83 (0.17)
<i>Additional</i>										
Gini coefficient (pre-tax income)						0.029 (0.088)	3.4e-4 (1.7e-3)	180.7 (604.6)	0.13 (0.30)	0.054 (0.17)
State capacity						0.18** (0.098)	0.56 (0.34)	0.039 (0.14)	0.30** (0.13)	0.64 (0.30)
Oil and gas income per capita (logged)						1.17 (0.10)	0.98 (0.091)	1.31 (0.57)	1.35** (0.13)	1.13 (0.093)
N	3656	3229	1592	1855	4148	2089	1987	1009	1478	2221
Log likelihood	-118.5	-85.9	-15.1	-90.9	-92.9	-49.1	-46.0	3.75	-55.1	-25.6
Chi squared	103.8	150.2	232.0	102.3	186.6	60.2	161.0	n.a.	130.2	126.2
p	2.7e-18	8.2e-28	6.4e-45	5.4e-18	2.1e-35	2.0e-8	3.3e-28	n.a.	5.7e-22	3.6e-21

Sources: see Table A1.

Notes: Survival model with Weibull distribution; exponentiated coefficients; robust standard errors, clustered by democratic episode, in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Using V-Dem's liberal democracy indicator, there were insufficient cases to achieve convergence when inequality was included. Ln total years democratic: in models 4 and 8, using the VDEM measure of democracy since many countries had already been democratic for many years when the FH data begin in 1972.

democratic failure and greater state capacity also tend to correlate with better survival odds.

Being surrounded by democracies may help, although the evidence on this was not robust. Some

other factors found little support in the data. High pre-tax inequality, for instance, did not correlate with democratic failure. In fact, although never statistically significant, higher inequality was associated with lower odds of breakdown.¹⁹

Table 3: Distinguishing modes of democratic breakdown

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Democracy measure</i>	Polity2 > 6	Polity2 > 6	FH free	FH free	LIED	LIED
<i>Mode of transition</i>	coup	internal	coup	internal	coup	internal
<i>Economic development</i>	0.45** (0.13)	0.56** (0.098)	0.46 (0.22)	0.65 (0.17)	0.40** (0.11)	0.33** (0.12)
<i>Ln GDP per capita (lagged)</i>						
<i>State characteristics</i>						
Ln previous years democratic	0.017* (0.030)	0.086* (0.10)	0.64 (0.34)	0.62* (0.14)	0.50 (0.25)	0.44 (0.23)
Past democratic breakdowns (lagged)	12.3** (9.42)	3.47** (1.55)	1.75 (0.79)	0.95 (0.33)	1.51 (0.33)	1.01 (0.24)
Presidential system	1.77 (0.84)	1.58 (0.45)	0.88 (1.09)	1.32 (0.58)	0.89 (0.48)	1.37 (0.63)
Lagged democracy indicator	0.83* (0.061)	0.91* (0.043)	0.99 (0.69)	0.24** (0.069)	3.00** (0.81)	1.7e+6** (7.2e+5)
<i>Shocks</i>						
Growth rate	0.93** (0.024)	0.94** (0.021)	0.90** (0.031)	0.92** (0.022)	0.87** (0.024)	0.93 (0.043)
<i>International factors</i>						
Post-Cold War (after 1989)	0.28 (0.20)	1.63 (0.54)	0.41 (0.28)	1.94 (0.84)	0.49 (0.41)	2.80 (1.90)
Average dem. level of contiguous states	0.86** (0.037)	0.98 (0.027)	1.31 (0.28)	0.97 (0.12)	0.51** (0.066)	1.01 (0.15)
Difference in avge. growth rate, 10 years, dems – non-dems	0.77 (0.22)	1.06 (0.13)	1.05 (0.39)	1.22 (0.19)	0.53 (0.19)	0.95 (0.16)
<i>N</i>	3656	3278	1855	1855	3292	3296
Log likelihood	-63.6	-136.1	-31.7	-78.8	-48.2	-53.8
Chi squared	44.6	54.4	59.9	69.8	161.7	1.0e+5
P	1.1e-6	1.6e-8	1.4e-09	1.7e-11	3.4e-30	0

Sources: see Table A1.

Notes: Survival model with Weibull distribution; exponentiated coefficients; robust standard errors, clustered by democratic episode, in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Ln total years democratic: in models 5 and 6, using the VDEM measure of democracy since many countries had already been democratic for many years when the FH data begin in 1972.

¹⁹ This is at odds with much theorizing (e.g., Boix 2003) and some empirical studies (e.g., Houle 2009). But other recent work casts doubt on a relationship between inequality and regime change (e.g., Ahlquist and Wibbels 2012, Haggard and Kaufmann 2012). I also tried using a measure of post-tax-and-transfer inequality; the results were never statistically significant.

Table 3 disaggregates by the mode of transition—antidemocratic coup or incumbent transformation. Economic development and high growth seem to protect against both types of breakdown (cf. Svobik 2015). Democratic experience again may help against both types, although results are often statistically insignificant. Having fewer past breakdowns appears to offer stronger protection against coups than against backsliding (the coefficient is always higher in the first case). Other effects do not appear robust.

3.2 Assessing the risk of authoritarian reversion

The goal in constructing these models was not to resolve arguments about causality but to provide a plausible basis for forecasting. A first question, then, is how well these models fit. How well do they predict out of sample?

One useful benchmark in this regard is provided by Morgan et al. (2019), who used sophisticated machine learning techniques to forecast “adverse regime transitions,” defined as downward shifts on the VDEM regimes index, from liberal to electoral democracy, electoral democracy to electoral autocracy, or electoral autocracy to closed autocracy. They trained their models on about 450 explanatory variables, taken from five data sources, including VDEM itself. First, they estimated their model on data from 1970 to 2017; then they used the resulting model to predict the risk of downward transitions for each country in 2019-20, employing data from 2018. Of the seven electoral democracies that failed in 2019-20 according to VDEM (Bolivia, Malawi, Mali, India, Albania, Benin, Ivory Coast), three were among the 20 electoral democracies that Morgan et al. judged to have the highest estimated hazards. Of the four liberal democracies that actually failed in 2019-20 (Chile, Slovenia, Portugal, the Czech Republic), three were among the team’s 20 liberal democracies at greatest risk.

To parallel this procedure, I re-estimated models 1-5 from Table 2 using data only up to 2017, and then fed the 2018 data into the resulting models to derive predictions for 2019-20. I compared these predictions to the actual democratic breakdowns in those years.²⁰ Four of the seven actual electoral democracy failures appeared in my top 20 hazard list for electoral democracies. And all four of the actual liberal democracy failures were in my top 20 for liberal democracies. This record of 4/7 and 4/4 compares favorably with that of Morgan et al.'s far more sophisticated and data-rich machine-learning models, which achieved 3/7 and 3/4.

For the Polity data, the equivalent test (estimating my model on data up to 2015, predicting with 2016 data, and applying this to 2017 and 2018, the last year with available data) yielded a hit rate of 100 percent (the one democratic breakdown according to Polity—Comoros—was in my top 20 hazard list). For Freedom House “free” states, my top 20 hazard list, estimated in similar fashion, contained all five of the five actual failures (Benin, El Salvador, Peru, India, and Senegal). Of the four LIED failures, my top 20 hazard list included two.

A common statistic for assessing the accuracy of predictions or diagnoses is the receiver operating characteristic area under the curve (ROC AUC). According to Mandrekar (2010): a value of this of “0.7 to 0.8 is considered acceptable, 0.8 to 0.9 is considered excellent, and more than 0.9 is considered outstanding.” Estimating each model on data up to the sixth year before the end of that data series, I derived predictions for the last five years and calculated the ROC AUC for these. These range from 0.84 (for LIED) to 1.0 (for Freedom House).

The models in Table 2 also allow us to gauge how surprised we should be by the rate of democratic reversals in recent years. The retrenchments after the first two democratization waves

²⁰ Besides the fact that I selected explanatory variables on theoretical grounds rather than using machine learning algorithms, my procedure differed from that of Morgan et al. in two ways. First, they explicitly estimated the risk of breakdown within a two-year window, whereas I ran simpler annual regressions, applying the prediction for 2018 to both 2019 and 2020. And, second, they started estimations with 1970 data while I used all the earlier available years.

were far more pronounced than anything so far visible after the third (see Figure 1). At the height of a democratization wave, some unlikely contenders for free government get swept up in the momentum. Such crossovers will have lower income and state capacity, more volatile economies, and—almost by definition—less democratic experience than is conducive to stable democracy. For that reason alone, we should expect some backsliding. Median income among Polity “democracies” peaked in 1981 around \$20,000 (at 2011 prices). It fell to under \$10,000 in 1994, and was about \$15,900 in 2018 (using the Maddison data). State capacity of Polity “democracies” peaked in 1980 and was almost 50 percent lower in 2015.

Given the lower income and state capacity levels of recently existing democracies, we should expect a certain amount of reversion. To estimate how much, I ran survival models as in Table 2 but including only previous year logged income and current state capacity as explanatory variables and using data only up to 1999. I used these models to predict the hazard rates for all democracies in subsequent years based just on their income and state capacity and then summed the individual country-year hazards to get the predicted total number of breakdowns in each year up to 2018. Table 4 contains the results. For three of the democracy measures, the relatively lower incomes and state capacity of democracies after the Third Wave almost exactly predict the amount of backsliding that actually occurred. This was not the case for the VDEM electoral democracy income-only model, which predicted a little less than half the number of actual breakdowns. If I add to this model the growth rate and measures of democratic fragility—the lagged level of electoral democracy (`v2x_polyarchy`), the logged number of years democratic, and the number of previous breakdowns, the VDEM model predicts 46 breakdowns, slightly more than the actual number.²¹ As before, the point is not the precise prediction, which changes

²¹ Adding these additional measures to other models slightly improves the prediction for the Freedom House “free” country indicator (it now predicts the exact number of failures, 22), but leads the Polity and Lexical index indicators

with model specification; the point is that, given the changed composition of the pool of democracies after the third wave, a rate of backsliding comparable to what occurred was already, so to speak, “baked in.”²²

Table 4: Predicted and actual number of democratic failures, 2000-2018

<i>Democracy measure</i>	<i>Predicted</i>		<i>Actual</i>
Polity 2	22		22
ROC AUC		.76	
VDEM electoral democracy	19		40
ROC AUC		.78	
FH “free” states	24		22
ROC AUC		.82	
LIED democracy	30		31
ROC AUC		.82	

Note: Survival models containing only previous year logged income and state capacity as explanatory variables. Model estimated on data up to 1999, then used to form predictions for each year in 2000-18. “Predicted” is the sum of the individual country-year hazard predictions—that is, the predicted total number of democratic failures over the period. ROC AUC is the receiver operating characteristic area under the curve, which compares the predicted hazards for 2000-18 to the actual pattern of breakdowns.

The analysis allows us to explore how high the risk is that democracy will break down in a country like the US. Using the models in Table 2, we can predict the hazard rate for the US in all years for which data exist. Figure 6 shows hazard rates for democratic failure in the US, estimated from models 1-5 in Table 2. In the 19th Century, Polity-based hazard rates rise to 1 in 25 at several points, around the time of the Civil War and in the Gilded Age. VDEM only codes the US as a democracy from 1921, after women got the vote. The much greater instability of young democracies, combined with the economic turmoil of the 1930s, drives the VDEM-based

to overpredict. Of course, income does not explain why relatively rich democracies such as Russia and Malaysia became undemocratic in this period.

²² Even taking into account income and state capacity, a few breakdowns remain anomalous (e.g., Turkey in 2014). In such cases, past breakdowns and lack of democratic experience may be key.

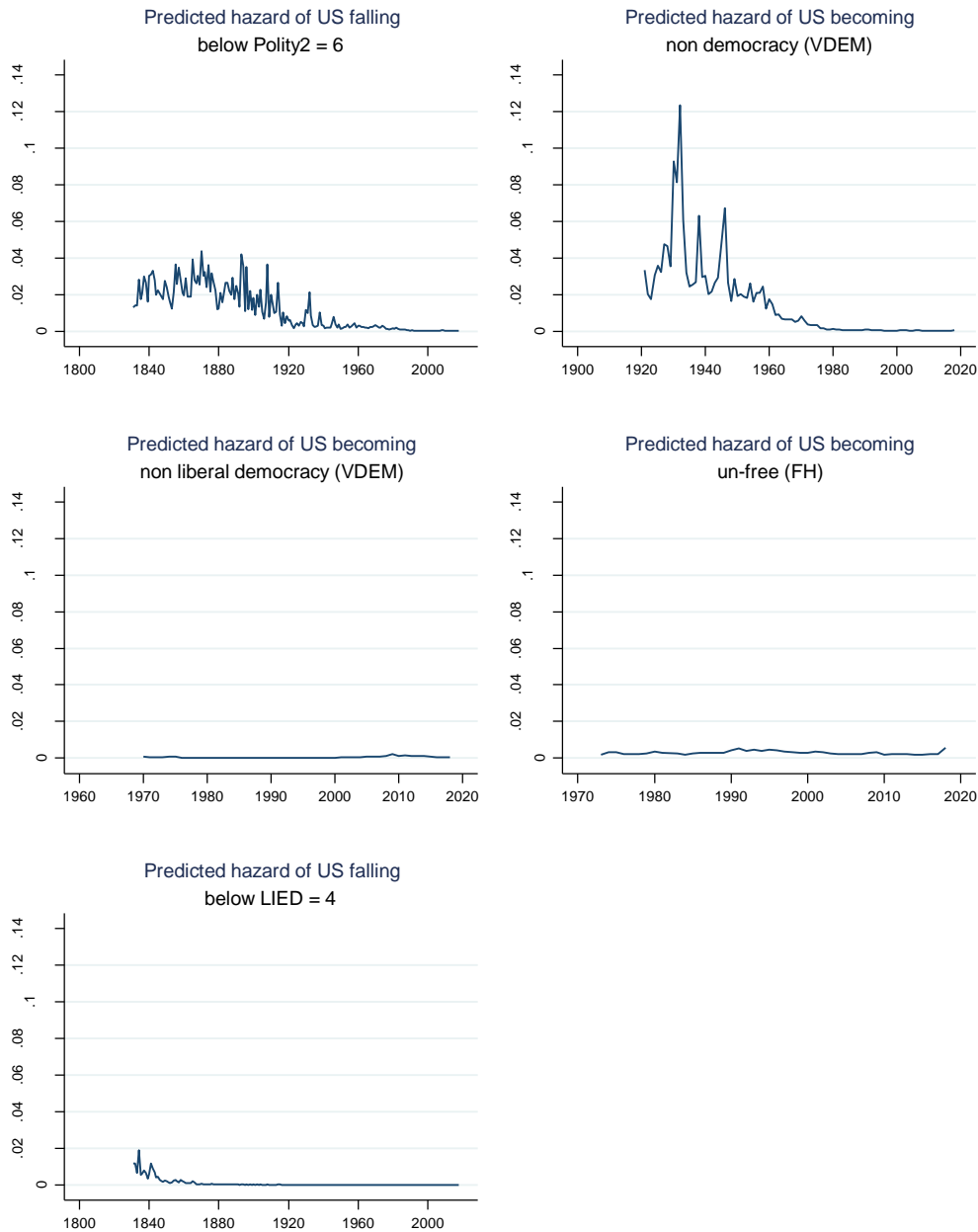
risk of breakdown as high as 1 in 8 in that decade. Yet all indicators agree on one point: the hazard of democratic failure in recent years has been extremely low. The US's long experience of democracy and high economic development appear to provide a strong protective effect.²³ Using the latest years for which data are available, the estimated probability that a country with the US's characteristics would fall below the Polity "democracy" threshold is .0004; for Freedom House's "free" status, .006; for VDEM democracy, .0007; and for LIED electoral democracy, .0000002.²⁴ In each case, a change to authoritarianism is extremely improbable. The exact numbers should not be taken too seriously; changes in models lead to small changes in the hazard. But as ball-park estimates, they are revealing. They suggest with which other cases it makes sense to compare the US. For instance, using the Polity data, Germany in 1932 was 115 times more likely to become undemocratic than was the US in 2018. Chile in 1972 was 234 times more likely. No democracy has ever failed with a hazard as low as that of the US in 2018 (again, using Polity). The closest case is that of Greece in 1949. Its estimated hazard that year was .0021, nearly five times that of the US in 2018.²⁵

²³ This would still be true if, as some have argued, the US only became fully democratic in the 1970s, after the successes of the civil rights movement (Mickey, Levitsky, and Way 2014). Indeed, the vast majority of breakdowns of democracy (73 percent using Polity data and 65 percent using V-DEM) have occurred in countries that had been democratic for less than 20 years and that had income of less than \$10,000 per capita. (For GDP per capita, I use estimates of Madison (see Bolt et al. 2018), supplemented by those of Fariss et al. (2021).)

²⁴ And the hazard is even lower using the Table 2, columns 6-11 models, for which inputs were only available from around 1960 through 2014.

²⁵ It is ironic that the Polity team did, in fact, code the US as no longer a democracy in 2020 (see discussion in the appendix). Of course, it is possible that this coding is correct and that a very rare event did in fact occur. But the rationale given by Polity for this downgrading is inconsistent with previous coding practice and explicit criteria. Figure A1 in the appendix shows the hazard predicted using the model from Table 2, column 1, with the non-significant variables (i.e. presidentialism, post-Cold War, and difference in growth rates between democracies and non-democracies) excluded. The results are similar. The estimated hazard for the US in 2018 was still .0005. The estimate for Germany in 1932 was 62 times higher, and that for Chile in 1972 was 154 times higher.

Figure 6: Estimated hazard of US democratic breakdown



Another way to put this is to estimate how severe an economic crisis would have to be to raise the odds of democratic breakdown for the US today to the level of, say, Chile in 1972. The answer is that it would take a growth rate of about -62 percent using the Polity criterion (or -42

percent using the VDEM definition)—in other words, a contraction greater than the Great Depression. And even an economic disaster of this magnitude would probably *not* lead to dictatorship in the US: the estimated probability (of a Polity2 breakdown) for Chile in 1972 was only .11. It would take sustained contractions on this scale for a number of years to render authoritarian reversion more likely than not. Again, the point is not to attribute to these numbers exaggerated precision; it is just to illustrate the stretch necessary to compare the threats to democracy in the US in recent years to those in Chile under Allende.

4 Conclusion

Available measures suggest the proportion of democratic countries in the world today is at or near an all-time high. Those indicators that show some backsliding indicate only a return to levels of the 1990s, a time when liberal democracy was viewed as triumphant. The rate of advance has certainly slowed and average quality has declined somewhat. But this follows the stunning surge of democracy's Third Wave. The rate of failures among existing democracies is well explained by their levels of economic development and state capacity. Moreover, while previous waves were followed within 10-15 years by a significant fall in the proportion of democracies, that has not occurred this time, at least so far. Neither the rate of democratic breakdowns nor that of quality deteriorations in existing democracies is historically unusual.

Previous literature and the survival models presented here confirm that economic development, economic growth, and long democratic experience are associated with much lower odds of democratic breakdown. Indeed, excluding cases of foreign occupation, no democracy has ever failed at a per capita income above about \$26,000 or after surviving for more than 52

years.²⁶ Based on such estimated relationships, the hazard of a breakdown in the US today appears extremely low.²⁷ While some data suggest a weakening of commitment to democracy among parts of the US public—worrying in itself—there is little evidence that falling support for democracy is what causes deterioration or breakdowns in liberal democracies. As for elite norms, an erosion of these has coincided with democratic failure in certain Latin American countries where a radicalized military that favored dictatorship staged a coup. But in countries where norm erosion has not produced a radical, anti-democratic military, the claim that norm erosion threatens democracy’s survival appears to rest on introspection or anecdotes rather than systematic evidence.

If the rate of democratic failure is not particularly high, why do many observers have a different impression? A number of factors probably contribute. In part, writers highlight the most negative indicators (VDEM liberal democracy, Freedom House) rather than others that tell a less alarming story (Polity, VDEM electoral democracy). At the same time, backsliding among democracies is often conflated with increased repression in authoritarian regimes.²⁸ Each year, Freedom House reports where freedom decreased, combining democracies with autocracies. Of course, declining freedom anywhere is undesirable. But Xi Jinping’s harsher methods do not indicate a crisis of democracy—China has never been one. Today’s alarm also feeds off the

²⁶ The highest income democratic breakdowns to date under different democracy measures are: Malaysia 2014 at \$22,000 (Polity), Hungary 2018 at \$26,000 (Freedom House and VDEM democracy), Poland 2016 at \$25,000 (VDEM liberal democracy) and Turkey 2018 at \$19,000 (Lexical Index). The democratic breakdowns after the longest tenure, excluding foreign military occupation, are: Greece 1915 at 52 years (Polity), India 2019 at 43 years (VDEM democracy), Portugal 2020 at 44 years (VDEM liberal democracy), and Venezuela 2008 at 51 years (Lexical Index). (Since Freedom House ratings are only available since the early 1970s, I exclude them here. I also exclude Polity’s strange claim that the US became an authoritarian state in 2020.)

²⁷ The US income in 2018 as per Maddison was \$55,000. Its tenure as a democracy was 218 years (Polity), 98 years (VDEM democracy), 50 years (VDEM liberal democracy), and 219 years (Lexical Index).

²⁸ Diamond (2015, 151) is explicit on this: “An important part of the story of global democratic recession has been the deepening of authoritarianism.” While related, the deterioration of democracies and the consolidation of authoritarian regimes are not the same thing.

excessive expectations the Third Wave aroused. Amid the optimism of the 1990s, many assumed that liberal democracy had decisively defeated other models. From that perspective, even just a leveling off in the system's spread feels disappointing.

Some commentators realize decline so far has been limited but aim to raise awareness of the negative trend. The slow start will be little consolation if the deterioration speeds up. Meanwhile, certain well-known cases of backsliding (e.g., Hungary since 2010, Brazil since 2013) are more salient than recent cases of improvement (e.g., South Korea since 2014, Armenia since 2015). Since 1999, the proportion of democracies in Africa has doubled according to Polity. Yet this rarely makes the news. In a 2008 article calling attention to the “democratic rollback,” Larry Diamond (2008) rightly pointed to Nigeria's disappointing performance. Yet the country subsequently improved on all the democracy scales—Polity, VDEM, and Freedom House—ending up significantly higher by 2018. Kenya's ratings tell a mostly similar story.

The greater salience of certain backsliders makes sense. Between 2000 and 2020, 19 VDEM autocracies became democracies while 15 democracies became autocracies. Yet, while the upward movers were mostly small, the downward movers included countries with vast populations such as India and Bangladesh. Almost two billion people live in the new autocracies, compared to just 370 million in the new democracies. In terms of human welfare, a move to authoritarianism in India harms far more people than similar change in most other countries. At the same time, backsliding has hit unexpectedly “close to home” for many of the world's leading democracy watchers. Illiberal leaders have appeared within the EU and even the US.

In short, even if perceptions of recent democratic deterioration are exaggerated, that does not mean there is no reason for concern. Any decline in freedom is undesirable. And negative trends could continue—or even accelerate. Our uncertainty about the true causes of democratic

stability is itself disturbing. Unrecognized local problems may lurk behind the aggregate statistics. For some long-established democracies, particular challenges loom. Few have been tested by the kind of demographic change forecast for the US in coming decades as the numerically dominant race loses majority status.

Still, addressing such dangers requires an accurate, evidence-based understanding of past experience and the current state of play. The historical record suggests that democracies like the US have inner resources that distinguish them from younger and poorer ones. Supporting democracy around the world requires that we identify and strengthen such sources of resilience.

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Appendix (for online publication)

I. Tables

Table A1. Data Sources for Tables 2 and 3

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Source</i>
Ln GDP per capita	Using real GDP per capita (gdppc)	Maddison Project Database, version 2020. Bolt, Jutta, Robert Inklaar, Herman de Jong and Jan Luiten van Zanden (2018), "Rebasing 'Maddison': new income comparisons and the shape of long-run economic development", Maddison Project Working paper 10
Growth rate	Annual growth rate of GDP per capita (using rgdnpac)	Maddison Project Database, version 2020. Bolt, Jutta, Robert Inklaar, Herman de Jong and Jan Luiten van Zanden (2018), "Rebasing 'Maddison': new income comparisons and the shape of long-run economic development", Maddison Project Working paper 10
Ln oil and gas income	Natural log of value of oil and gas sales	Ross, Michael L, 2013, "Oil and Gas Data, 1932-2011" https://hdl.handle.net/1902.1/20369 , Harvard Dataverse, V2 , UNF:5:dc22RIDasveOTAJvwIjBTA== updated to 2014.
Democratic for more than 20 consecutive years	Using the same democracy definition as the dependent variable (except for Freedom House, for which using VDEM's democracy measure).	Various
Past democratic breakdowns	Using the same democracy definition as the dependent variable.	Various
Average democracy level of contiguous states	Average Polity2 score of neighbors for Polity2 models; proportion of neighbors that are democracies for BMR models; average political rights score of neighbors for FH. Neighbors are countries with a land or river border.	Polity IV, BMR (Boix, Carles, Michael Miller, and Sebastian Rosato. 2013. "A Complete Data Set of Political Regimes, 1800-2007." <i>Comparative Political Studies</i> 46 (12): 1523-54.), Freedom House.
Presidential system	Dummy for presidential system; current year or as of 2000 for years after 2000.	Adam Przeworski et al. 2013. <i>Political Institutions and Political Events Database</i> .
Gini pre-tax and post-tax income	Average of 100 imputed values, where data unavailable.	SWIID V6.2. (Solt 2016).
Average years schooling, over 15	Average years of schooling for members of the population aged over 15, interpolated linearly since figures given once per decade.	Morrisson, Christian, and Fabrice Murtin. "The century of education." <i>Journal of Human Capital</i> 3.1 (2009): 1-42.
Polarization	v2cacamps : "the extent to which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions. Societies are highly polarized if supporters of opposing political camps are reluctant to engage in friendly interactions, for example, in family functions, civic associations,	V-DEM v.11.

	their free time activities and workplaces.”	
State capacity	Estimate of state capacity	Hanson and Sigman (2013).

Table A2. Democratic Breakdowns

<i>State</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Polity</i>	<i>FH</i>	<i>LIED</i>	<i>Coup</i>	<i>Internal</i>	<i>Sources</i>
Hamburg	1850	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
France	1851	1	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes
France	1852	0	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes, Svolic (2015)
France	1852	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
New Zealand	1876	1	0	0	0	1	Brooking (2004)
Transvaal	1877	0	0	1	0	0	LIED
Colombia	1885	0	0	1	0	0	LIED: foreign occupation
Colombia	1886	1	0	0	0	1	Bushnell (1993, pp.142-3)
Costa Rica	1892	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Orange Free State	1902	0	0	1	0	0	LIED
Transvaal	1902	0	0	1	0	0	LIED
Luxembourg	1914	0	0	1	0	0	LIED: foreign occupation
Belgium	1915	0	0	1	0	0	LIED: foreign occupation
Greece	1915	1	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes
Cuba	1916	0	0	0	0	1	Staten (2015, p.59)
Costa Rica	1917	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Bulgaria	1920	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Romania	1920	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
San Marino	1921	0	0	1	0	0	LIED: foreign occupation
Italy	1922	0	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes
Italy	1922	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Spain	1923	1	0	0	1	0	Polity I notes
Chile	1924	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Chile	1925	0	0	0	1	0	Rector (2005, p.132), Svolic (2015).
Lithuania	1926	0	0	0	1	0	Polity I notes
Lithuania	1926	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Poland	1926	1	0	0	1	0	Polity I notes
Poland	1926	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Portugal	1926	1	0	0	1	0	Polity I notes, Svolic (2015)
Dominican Republic	1927	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Yugoslavia	1929	0	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes
Yugoslavia	1929	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Argentina	1930	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Romania	1930	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Argentina	1931	0	0	0	1	0	Polity I notes, Svolic (2015)
El Salvador	1931	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Finland	1931	1	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes
Japan	1932	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Austria	1933	1	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes, Svolic (2015)
Austria	1933	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Bolivia	1933	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Germany	1933	1	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes, Svolic (2015)
Germany	1933	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Peru	1933	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Uruguay	1933	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Bulgaria	1934	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Estonia	1934	1	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes
Estonia	1934	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Honduras	1934	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Latvia	1934	1	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes
Latvia	1934	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Uruguay	1934	0	0	0	0	1	Weinstein (1988, p.22), Svolic (2015)

Ecuador	1935	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Greece	1935	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Greece	1936	1	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes, Svolik (2015)
Nicaragua	1936	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Panama	1936	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Spain	1936	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Spain	1937	0	0	0	1	0	Polity I notes
Czechoslovakia	1938	0	0	1	0	0	LIED
Netherlands	1939	0	0	1	0	0	LIED: foreign occupation
Spain	1939	1	0	0	1	0	Polity I notes
Belgium	1940	0	0	1	0	0	LIED: foreign occupation
Belgium	1940	1	0	0	0	0	Polity I Notes
Denmark	1940	0	0	1	0	0	LIED: foreign occupation
Denmark	1940	1	0	0	0	0	Polity I Notes
France	1940	1	0	0	0	0	Polity I notes: Invasion
France	1940	0	0	1	0	0	LIED: foreign occupation
France	1940	1	0	0	0	0	Polity I Notes
Luxembourg	1940	0	0	1	0	0	LIED: foreign occupation
Luxembourg	1940	1	0	0	0	0	Polity I Notes
Netherlands	1940	1	0	0	0	0	Polity I Notes
Norway	1940	0	0	1	0	0	LIED: foreign occupation
Norway	1940	1	0	0	0	0	Polity I Notes
Ecuador	1946	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Brazil	1947	1	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes
Czechoslovakia	1947	1	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes
Colombia	1948	0	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes, Svolik (2015)
Costa Rica	1948	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Czechoslovakia	1948	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Peru	1948	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Venezuela	1948	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Greece	1949	1	0	0	0	1	Polity I notes
Argentina	1951	0	0	1	0	1	LIED Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015). Although President Arias was removed by the National Guard, this was after he had abolished the constitution, dissolved the national assembly, and suspended Supreme Court justices (Coniff 2012, p.194).
Panama	1951	0	0	0	0	1	
Cuba	1952	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Egypt	1952	1	0	0	1	0	Polity I notes
Cuba	1953	0	0	0	1	0	Svolik (2015)
Guatemala	1954	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Guatemala	1954	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Turkey	1954	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Pakistan	1956	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Pakistan	1956	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Indonesia	1957	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
France	1958	1	0	0	0	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Laos	1958	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Myanmar	1958	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Myanmar (Burma)	1958	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Pakistan	1958	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Sudan	1958	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Sudan	1958	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Laos	1959	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Laos	1960	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Brazil	1961	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)

Korea South	1961	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Korea, South	1961	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Argentina	1962	0	0	0	1	0	Rock (1987, p.342)
Argentina	1962	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Myanmar	1962	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Myanmar (Burma)	1962	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Peru	1962	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Peru	1962	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Congo Brazzaville	1963	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Dominican Republic	1963	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Ecuador	1963	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Ecuador	1963	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Guatemala	1963	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Honduras	1963	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Honduras	1963	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Bolivia	1964	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Brazil	1964	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Brazil	1964	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Zanzibar	1964	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Greece	1965	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Philippines	1965	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Philippines	1965	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Argentina	1966	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Argentina	1966	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Nigeria	1966	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Nigeria	1966	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Uganda	1966	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Uganda	1966	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Greece	1967	0	0	0	1	0	Polity I notes, Svolik (2015)
Sierra Leone	1967	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Sierra Leone	1967	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Panama	1968	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Panama	1968	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Peru	1968	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Peru	1968	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Malaysia	1969	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Somalia	1969	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Somalia	1969	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Sudan	1969	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Sudan	1969	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Ecuador	1970	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Lesotho	1970	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Turkey	1971	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Uruguay	1971	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Ghana	1972	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Ghana	1972	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Honduras	1972	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Honduras	1972	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Chile	1973	1	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Chile	1973	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Guyana	1973	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Maldives	1973	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Uruguay	1973	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Uruguay	1973	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Argentina	1974	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)

Bangladesh	1974	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Cyprus	1974	0	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Dominican Republic	1974	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Guatemala	1974	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Malaysia	1974	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
India	1975	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Lebanon	1975	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Sri Lanka	1975	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Argentina	1976	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Argentina	1976	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
El Salvador	1976	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011) civil war: www.nytimes.com/1976/03/19/archives/anarchy-in-lebanon-all-aspects-of-society-disintegrating-as-the.html
Lebanon	1976	0	0	0	0	0	LIED
Lebanon	1976	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Thailand	1976	0	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Thailand	1976	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Pakistan	1977	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Pakistan	1977	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Seychelles	1977	0	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Sri Lanka	1977	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Sri Lanka	1977	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Mauritius	1978	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Grenada	1979	0	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Grenada	1979	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Bolivia	1980	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Bolivia	1980	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Burkina Faso	1980	0	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Suriname	1980	0	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Suriname	1980	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Turkey	1980	1	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Turkey	1980	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Ghana	1981	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Ghana	1981	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Gambia	1982	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Ghana	1982	0	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Guatemala	1982	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Sri Lanka	1982	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Honduras	1983	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Malta	1983	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Nigeria	1983	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Nigeria	1983	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Sri Lanka	1983	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Vanuatu	1983	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Nigeria	1984	1	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Honduras	1985	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Uganda	1985	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Fiji	1987	1	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Fiji	1987	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Colombia	1989	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Peru	1989	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Sudan	1989	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Suriname	1989	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Peru	1990	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Philippines	1990	0	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Suriname	1990	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)

Suriname	1990	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Antigua	1991	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Haiti	1991	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
India	1991	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Thailand	1991	0	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Thailand	1991	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Estonia	1992	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Latvia	1992	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Peru	1992	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Peru	1992	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Venezuela	1992	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Bangladesh	1993	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Brazil	1993	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Dominican Republic	1993	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Honduras	1993	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Nepal	1993	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Papua New Guinea	1993	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Ukraine	1993	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Zambia	1993	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Belarus	1994	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Dominican Republic	1994	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Dominican Republic	1994	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Gambia	1994	1	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Gambia	1994	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Mali	1994	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Armenia	1995	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Belarus	1995	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Belarus	1995	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Bolivia	1995	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Albania	1996	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Albania	1996	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Ecuador	1996	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Niger	1996	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Niger	1996	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Slovak Republic	1996	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Zambia	1996	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Zambia	1996	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Guinea-Bissau	1998	0	0	0	0	0	Forrest (2005, p.256): civil war
Guinea-Bissau	1998	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Comoros	1999	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Haiti	1999	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svolik (2015)
Haiti	1999	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Honduras	1999	0	1	0	0	1	freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/1999/honduras
Malawi	1999	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Pakistan	1999	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Pakistan	1999	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Russia	1999	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Venezuela	1999	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Ecuador	2000	0	1	0	1	0	https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2001/ecuador , Svolik (2015)
Fiji	2000	1	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Fiji	2000	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Solomon Islands	2000	0	1	0	0	0	ethnic civil war: http://www.refworld.org/docid/5278c918b.html
Argentina	2001	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Malawi	2001	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)

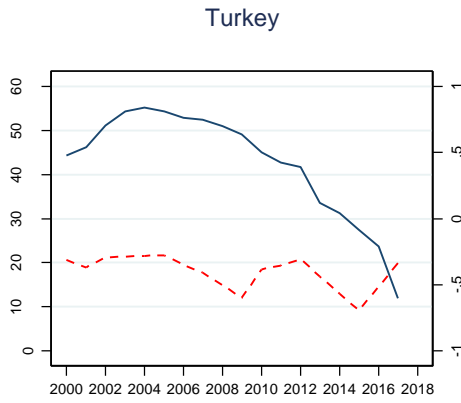
Trinidad and Tobago	2001	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Guinea-Bissau	2002	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Nepal	2002	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Nepal	2002	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Bolivia	2003	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Central African Republic	2003	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Central African Republic	2003	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Fiji	2003	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Papua New Guinea	2003	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Sri Lanka	2003	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Mozambique	2004	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Russia	2004	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Guyana	2005	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Philippines	2005	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Thailand	2005	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Venezuela	2005	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Fiji	2006	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Solomon Islands	2006	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Thailand	2006	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svulik (2015)
Thailand	2006	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Venezuela	2006	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Bangladesh	2007	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Bangladesh	2007	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Ecuador	2007	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Russia	2007	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011), Svulik (2015)
Georgia	2008	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Kenya	2008	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Senegal	2008	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Venezuela	2008	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Honduras	2009	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Honduras	2009	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Lesotho	2009	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Madagascar	2009	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Madagascar	2009	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Mozambique	2009	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Niger	2009	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Niger	2009	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Sri Lanka	2009	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Burundi	2010	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Guinea-Bissau	2010	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Haiti	2010	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Mexico	2010	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Sri Lanka	2010	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Sri Lanka	2010	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Ukraine	2010	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Guinea-Bissau	2012	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Maldives	2012	0	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Maldives	2012	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Mali	2012	0	1	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Mali	2012	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Indonesia	2013	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Mali	2013	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Sierra Leone	2013	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Bangladesh	2014	0	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Bangladesh	2014	0	0	1	0	1	LIED

Libya	2014	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Malaysia	2014	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Thailand	2014	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Thailand	2014	0	0	1	1	0	LIED
Turkey	2014	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Ukraine	2014	1	0	0	1	0	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Burundi	2015	1	0	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Dominican Republic	2015	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Lesotho	2015	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Maldives	2015	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Montenegro	2015	0	1	0	0	1	Powell and Thyne (2011)
Nicaragua	2016	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Niger	2016	1	0	0	0	1	LIED
Niger	2016	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Zambia	2016	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Comoros	2018	1	0	0	0	1	LIED
							Freedom House
Hungary	2018	0	1	0	0	1	(https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/freedom-world/2019)
Pakistan	2018	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
							Freedom House
							(https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2019)
Serbia	2018	0	1	0	0	1	
Turkey	2018	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
							Freedom House
							(https://freedomhouse.org/country/benin/freedom-world/2020)
Benin	2019	0	1	0	0	1	
Bolivia	2019	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
Comoros	2019	0	0	1	0	1	LIED
							Freedom House (https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2020)
El Salvador	2019	0	1	0	0	1	
							Freedom House
							(https://freedomhouse.org/country/senegal/freedom-world/2020)
Senegal	2019	0	1	0	0	1	
							Freedom House
							(https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2021)
India	2020	0	1	0	0	1	
							Freedom House
							(https://freedomhouse.org/country/peru/freedom-world/2021)
Peru	2020	0	1	0	0	1	

Additional sources:

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- Brooking, Tom. 2004. *The History of New Zealand*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing.
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- Forrest, Joshua B. 2005. "Democratization in a Divided Urban Political Culture: Guinea-Bissau." In *The Fate of Africa's Democratic Experiments: Elites and Institutions*, eds. Leonardo A. Villalon and Peter Von Doepp. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 246-66.

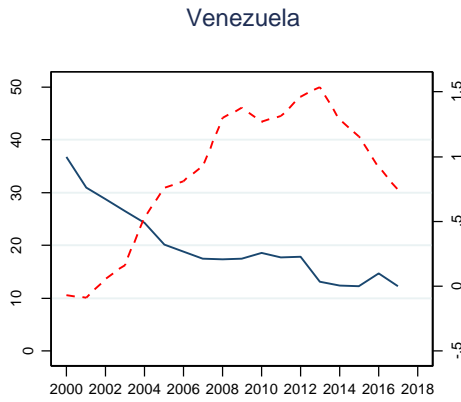
Figure : Support for democracy and level of liberal democracy in electoral democracies with greatest backsliding



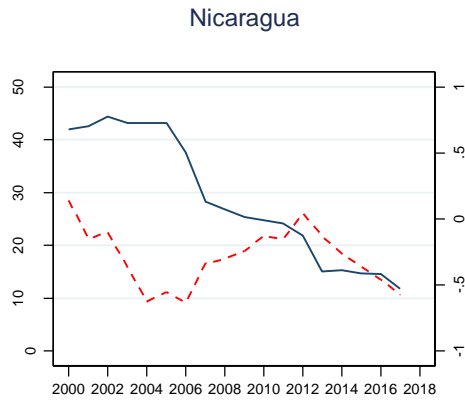
Correlation: $r = .41$



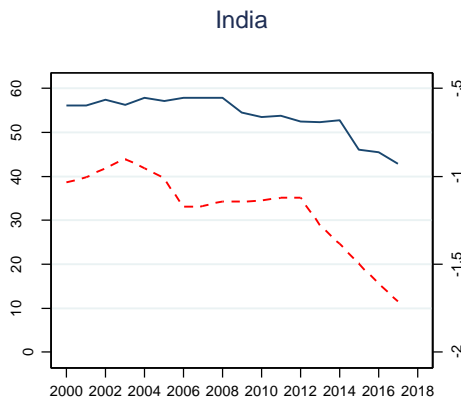
Correlation: $r = .84$



Correlation: $r = -.85$



Correlation: $r = .00$



Correlation: $r = .90$

— Actual liberal democracy score, left scale
 - - - Popular support for democracy index, right scale

Table A4. Normative preferences and democratic breakdown in Latin America

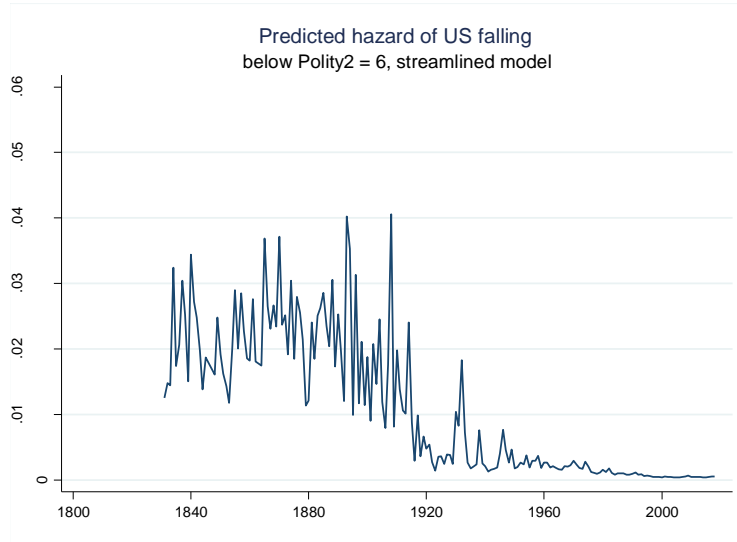
	(1) Replicating Mainwaring and Pérez- Liñán, model 4.4.5	(2) Excluding Argentina and Uruguay
Normative preferences	-2.70* (1.10)	0.090 (0.94)
Radicalism (ruler)	1.03 (0.99)	0.86 (1.09)
Radicalism (opposition)	-0.69 (0.69)	0.57 (0.76)
Region, $t - 1$	-4.38* (1.93)	-1.65 (2.01)
US policy, t	-0.83 (0.64)	-1.57** (0.56)
Polity outside the region, $t - 1$	-0.43 (0.25)	-0.60 (0.32)
Per capita GDP, ln, $t - 1$	0.31 (0.53)	-2.09* (1.00)
Growth, 10 years	6.96 (12.9)	25.7 (17.2)
Oil and mineral exports	-0.98 (0.71)	0.28 (0.66)
Industrial labor, $t - 1$	-0.00051 (0.048)	-0.00051 (0.044)
Age of the regime	0.21 (0.16)	0.24 (0.15)
Age of the regime squared	-0.0081 (0.0087)	-0.0079 (0.0080)
Age of the regime cubed	0.00010 (0.00013)	0.00010 (0.00012)
Presidential powers	-0.25** (0.049)	-0.32** (0.085)
Multipartism, t	0.45 (0.64)	0.58 (0.80)
Semi-democracy, $t - 1$	2.31** (0.62)	1.71* (0.73)
<i>N</i>	644	558
Log likelihood	-70.3	-56.8

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Data from Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013), <http://kellogg.nd.edu/democracies-and-dictatorships-latin-america-emergence-survival-and-fall>.

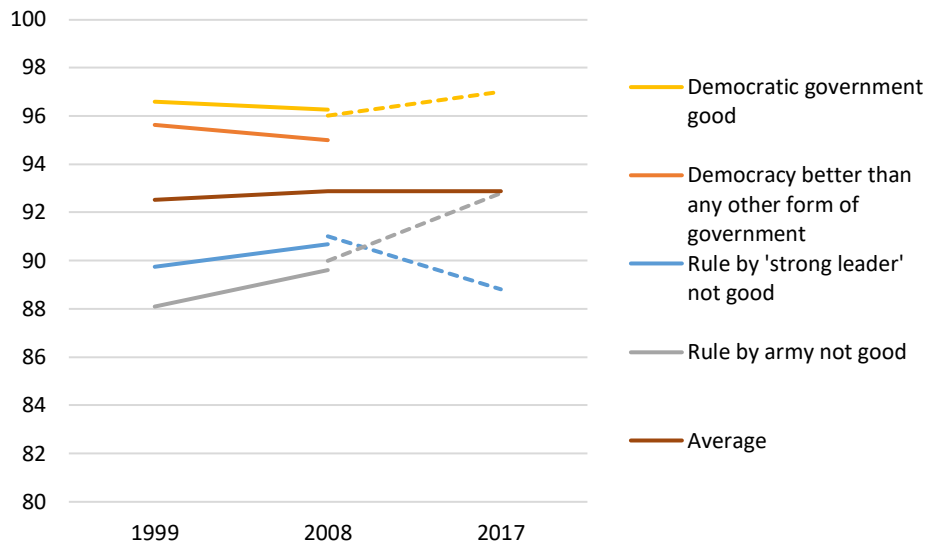
II. Figures

Figure A1: Estimated hazard for the US, model excluding insignificant variables



Note: presidentialism, post-Cold War, and difference in growth rates between democracies and non-democracies excluded from model in Table 2, column 1.

Figure A2: Percentage supporting democracy in Greece: results using just the World Values Survey and European Values Survey



Note: Data for 1999 and 2008 from Claassen dataset. Dashed lines extend data using the World Values Survey 2017, not available when Claassen was writing. Democracy better than any other form of government question not asked in 2017. Claassen combined the WVS/EVS responses with some from Pew in 2017 which had lower values. The 2017 WVS/EVS responses are more fully comparable.

III. Issues with widely used democracy indexes

Freedom House: Bush (2017, p.722) shows that Freedom House consistently rates US allies higher than does Polity.

Polity: Under President Trump, the team lowered the US Polity2 score dramatically, in a way that was not convincingly justified and that seemed to be a comment on the president's illiberal speech more than an evaluation of the system per se. The low scores given the US in these years were inconsistent with the previous scoring of the US and with crossnational comparisons.

For 2016, the team lowered the US's Polity2 score from 10 to 8. According to the Polity notes: "Political discourse in the United States had become increasing partisan during the administration of President Barack Obama. During the campaign for the November 2016 presidential elections, Donald Trump used combative rhetoric to excite 'populist' support and seize the Republican Party nomination. His surprise victory in Electoral College votes polarized political competition into 'anti-establishment' and 'anti-Trump' factions." It is not clear what in this description represents an erosion of democracy: partisan discourse, combative rhetoric, and surprise victories that divide the winner's supporters and opponents are everyday occurrences in democracies (and were common in the US before 2016). More specifically, Polity downgraded the US "political participation" score from "competitive" to "factional." A "factional" polity is defined as one in which "parochial or ethnic-based political factions... regularly compete for political influence in order to promote particularist agendas and favor group members to the detriment of common, secular, or cross-cutting agendas." The "parochial or ethnic-based political factions" presumably refer to the Democratic and Republican parties. If so, it is hard to understand what change in the ethnic or parochial bases of the parties in 2016 justifies the downgrade. Exit polls suggest a slightly *weaker* correlation between race and the presidential vote in 2016 than in 2012. African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans voted at higher rates for Obama in 2012 than for Clinton in 2016, and a higher proportion of white voters chose Romney than chose Trump (59 to 57 percent). In terms of party identification, 92 percent of Democrats voted for Obama in 2012 and 93 percent of Republicans for Romney; the corresponding figures for Clinton and Trump in 2016 were 89 and 88 percent (see <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/polls/us-elections/how-groups-voted/groups-voted-2016/> and <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/polls/us-elections/how-groups-voted/how-groups-voted-2012/>). Thus, coding the US as "factionalized" in 2016 but "competitive" in 2012 appears odd. It is also hard to reconcile this with the coding of the US as Polity2 = 10 throughout the Jim Crow era, definitely a time of "parochial or ethnic-based political factions" in the South.

The Polity codings of subsequent years are even stranger. The US score was reduced from 8 to 7 in 2019 and then to 5 in 2020, rendering it no longer a "democracy." This put the US in 2020 on a level with Suriname, Ecuador, Mali, and Niger in 2018. The team judged constraints on the executive in the US, at 4, to be weaker than those under Zimbabwe's dictator Robert Mugabe or Algeria's military government. They were on a par with those in Russia under Putin or in Afghanistan in 2018. The reasons given for this were "the executive's systematic purge of "disloyalists" from the administration, forceful response to protest, vilification of the main opposition parties; and undermining public trust in the electoral process" (<http://www.systemicpeace.org/index.html>).

With regard to the purge of "disloyalists," it is worth noting that Polity did not lower the US executive constraints rating from its perfect score at all during the McCarthy "Red Scare" period from 1947 to 1956, during which "5 million federal workers were screened for communist ties" under "vague and ever-changing" loyalty standards, with about 25,000 undergoing FBI investigation, about 2,700 dismissed and 12,000 resigning (<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/history-trump-attacks-civil-service-federal-workers-mccarthy-214951/>). Nothing under Trump came close to this. Polity also continued to give the US a perfect 7/7 for executive constraints during the presidency of James Buchanan at the height of the 19th Century "spoils system," during which office-holders loyal to Buchanan's rival were "hunted down like wild beasts" and "virtually every federal worker" subject to presidential appointment was replaced (Mitnick 2021, Tabachnik 1971).

The forceful policing of protests under Trump also bears little comparison to the brutality of Southern police during the Civil Rights era and before or to the killings of peaceful union organizers during late 19th Century strikes; during both periods, Polity gives the US a perfect score on executive constraints. Verbal attacks on opposition parties are hardly something new to US politics. As for "undermining public trust in the electoral process," in the 1888 election the Republicans overtly bribed voters to vote for their candidate—but Polity continued to give the US a perfect score of 7 on executive constraints. (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/rigged-vote-four-us-presidential-elections-contested-results-180961033/>). In other countries, major candidates have refused to accept official election results without attracting Polity's attention. In Mexico in 2006, Andrés Manuel López Obrador—now the president—claimed fraud and occupied the center of Mexico City for weeks with

demonstrations. In 1988, the ruling PRI party committed a massive electoral fraud—not just claiming the election was stolen but probably actually stealing it. Polity *increased* the country’s rating for executive constraints that year, from 3 to 4.

Another interpretation of the aftermath of the 2020 election would be that institutional checks were extremely effective at constraining an unprincipled incumbent, whose efforts to subvert the election met a wall of resistance from state-level officials and were rejected dozens of times by the courts. Despite a rampaging mob invading the Capitol, Congress refused to delay the certification of the election results for more than a few hours. Indeed, even in the highly conservative Supreme Court, Trump lost more frequently than any president since before FDR (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/07/20/trump-has-worst-record-supreme-court-any-modern-president/>).