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# THE MYTH OF DEMOCRATIC RECESSION

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A near consensus has emerged that the world has fallen into a “democratic recession.” Leading observers and democracy advocates characterize the last decade as a period of democratic “rollback,” “erosion,” or “decline,”<sup>1</sup> in which new democracies have fallen victim to a “powerful authoritarian undertow.”<sup>2</sup> In an article entitled “The Great Democracy Meltdown,” for example, Joshua Kurlantzick claims that global freedom has “plummeted.”<sup>3</sup> Another observer suggests that “we might in fact be seeing the beginning of the end for democracy.”<sup>4</sup>

The gloomy mood is made manifest in Freedom House’s yearly reports in the *Journal of Democracy*. Summarizing Freedom House’s annual survey of freedom, Arch Puddington warned in 2006 of a growing “pushback against democracy,”<sup>5</sup> characterized 2007 and 2008 as years of democratic “decline,”<sup>6</sup> claimed that the democratic erosion had “accelerated” in 2009,<sup>7</sup> and described global democracy as “under duress” in 2010.<sup>8</sup> Following a brief moment of optimism during the Arab Spring, Freedom House warned of a democratic “retreat” in 2012 and an “authoritarian resurgence” in 2013.<sup>9</sup>

This is a gloomy picture indeed. It is not, however, an accurate one. There is little evidence that the democratic sky is falling or (depending on your choice of fable) that the wolf of authoritarian resurgence has arrived.<sup>10</sup> The state of global democracy has remained stable over the last decade, and it has improved markedly relative to the 1990s. Perceptions of a democratic recession, we argue, are rooted in a flawed understanding of the events of the early 1990s. The excessive optimism and voluntarism that pervaded analyses of early post–Cold War transitions generated unrealistic expectations that, when not realized, gave

**TABLE 1—MEAN DEMOCRACY SCORE FOR THE WORLD ACCORDING TO FOUR SURVEYS**

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Freedom House	0.53	0.59	0.59	0.61	0.61	0.62	0.63	0.63	0.63	0.62	0.62	0.62	0.62	0.61	0.62
Polity IV	0.53	0.65	0.66	0.66	0.67	0.67	0.68	0.69	0.69	0.69	0.69	0.69	0.70	0.70	0.71
Economist Intelligence Unit	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.55	–	0.55	–	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.55
Bertelsmann Index	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.53	–	0.54	–	0.54	–	0.53	–	0.53

*Note:* All indices are rescaled to the 0–1 interval. Freedom House political-rights and civil-liberties scores are averaged and reversed.

rise to exaggerated pessimism and gloom. In fact, despite increasingly unfavorable global conditions in recent years, new democracies remain strikingly robust.

### The Empirical Record

A look at the empirical record suggests little or no evidence of a democratic recession. We compared the scores of four prominent global democracy indices: Freedom House, Polity, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and the Bertelsmann democracy index.<sup>11</sup> Table 1 shows each index's mean level of democracy (on a normalized scale from 0 to 1) from 2000 to 2013. All four indices' mean democracy scores *remained the same or increased* during this period. According to leading democracy indices such as Freedom House and Polity, then, the world is more democratic today than it was in 2000 (and considerably more democratic than it was in 1990 or any year prior to that). Even if we take the mid-2000s—often cited as the beginning of the democratic recession—as our starting point, three of the four indices show either no change or a slight improvement.<sup>12</sup> Only Freedom House shows a decline between 2005 and 2013, and that decline (from .63 to .62) is extremely modest.

If we examine the overall number of democracies in the world, the data similarly suggest stability rather than decline. Table 2 shows the four indices' scores for the absolute number of democracies as well as the percentage of the world's regimes that were fully democratic between 2000 and 2013. Again, Freedom House and Polity show an increase in the number of democracies since 2000. Only if we look at the 2005–13 period do we see any decline, and that decline is very modest. Freedom House shows a drop-off of *one* democracy between 2005 and 2013. The pattern is similar with respect to the percentage of democracies in the world: Both Freedom House and Polity show a decline of one percentage point between 2005 and 2013.

As an additional measure, we examined all cases of significant regime change—defined as countries whose Freedom House scores increased or decreased by three points or more—between 1999 and 2013.

**TABLE 2—PERCENTAGE AND ABSOLUTE NUMBER OF DEMOCRACIES ACCORDING TO FOUR SURVEYS**

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Freedom House	39%	45%	44%	46%	46%	46%	46%	47%	47%	46%	46%	45%	45%	46%	45%
	65	86	85	89	88	89	89	90	90	89	89	87	87	90	88
Polity IV	39%	50%	52%	53%	53%	56%	58%	58%	57%	58%	57%	57%	59%	58%	57%
	56	80	83	85	84	90	93	95	92	95	93	93	96	94	94
Economist Intelligence Unit	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	49%	—	48%	—	47%	47%	47%	47%
	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	82	—	80	—	79	78	79	78
Bertelsmann Index	—	—	—	—	—	—	55%	—	64%	—	62%	—	61%	—	59%
	—	—	—	—	—	—	65	—	76	—	74	—	72	—	70

Whereas 23 countries experienced a significant improvement in their Freedom House score between 1999 and 2013, only eight experienced a significant decline. Even between 2005 and 2013, the number of significantly improved cases (10) exceeded the number of significant decliners (8). Moreover, most of the significant declines occurred not in democracies but in regimes that were *already authoritarian*, such as the Central African Republic, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Jordan.

Indeed, what is most striking about the 2000–13 period is how few democracies actually broke down. Seven countries that Freedom House classified as Free in the late 1990s are no longer classified as Free today: Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, Mali, the Philippines, Thailand, and Venezuela.<sup>13</sup> Of these seven cases, the scores for Ecuador, Bolivia, and the Philippines declined only marginally, and all three regimes remained borderline democracies in 2014 (indeed, the Philippines has redemocratized; Freedom House’s decision to designate it as Partly Free appears to reflect problems of corruption, *not* violations of democratic rules of the game). Honduras and Mali suffered military coups in 2009 and 2012, respectively, but both authoritarian turns were subsequently reversed.<sup>14</sup> That leaves Thailand and Venezuela as the only unambiguously democratic regimes that collapsed and remained authoritarian in 2014.

The list of breakdowns could be expanded to include Nicaragua and Sri Lanka, two near-democracies (classified as Partly Free by Freedom House in the late 1990s) that deteriorated into authoritarianism in the 2000s. One might also add Hungary (still classified as Free by Freedom House in 2013), although it remains, at worst, a borderline case. Turkey, which is sometimes labeled a case of democratic breakdown, underwent a transition from one hybrid regime to another. Although the AKP government has shown clear authoritarian tendencies, the regime that preceded it—marked by vast military influence, restrictions on Kurdish and Islamist parties, and substantial media repression—was never democratic (in fact, Turkey’s Freedom House score in 2013 was better than it was prior to the AKP’s first election victory in 2002).

Even if we categorized all these cases as democratic breakdowns, despite the fact that most of them are borderline cases (Bolivia, Ecuador, Hungary, the Philippines) or cases in which authoritarian turns were subsequently reversed (Honduras, Mali, the Philippines), the number of breakdowns is matched by cases of democratic advance. Eight countries—including some very important ones—entered Freedom House’s Free category in the 2000s and remain there today: Brazil, Croatia, Ghana, Indonesia, Mexico, Peru, Senegal, and Serbia.<sup>15</sup> This list does not include countries, such as Chile, that were already classified as Free but experienced major democratic advances (in the Chilean case, the establishment of full civilian control over the military). Nor does it include countries such as Nepal, Pakistan, and Tunisia, which became considerably more democratic after the mid-2000s but remained in Freedom House’s Partly Free category.

The big picture over the last decade, then, is one of net stability. Although it is certainly possible to identify cases of democratic backsliding, the existence of an equal or greater number of democratic advances belies any notion of a global democratic “meltdown.” As Tables 1 and 2 make clear, the net change since the mid-2000s is essentially zero. Thailand, Venezuela, and perhaps Hungary are suffering democratic recessions. But claims of a worldwide democratic downturn lack empirical foundation.

### **The Illusion of Backsliding**

Why do many observers perceive there to be a democratic recession when the evidence for such a recession is so thin? The global regime landscape looks darkened today because observers viewed the events of the initial post-Cold War period through rose-tinted glasses. During the early 1990s, many observers slipped into an excessively optimistic—even teleological—mindset in which virtually all forms of authoritarian crisis or regime instability were conflated with democratization.<sup>16</sup>

The excessive optimism of the early 1990s was shaped, in part, by the extraordinarily successful democratizations of the early “third wave” period (1974–89). In Southern Europe (Greece, Spain, Portugal), South America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay), and Central Europe (Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland), authoritarian crises consistently led to democratization. Initial authoritarian openings almost invariably escaped the control of regime elites and evolved into full-scale transitions. And when authoritarian regimes fell, they were almost invariably replaced by democracies.

In retrospect, it is clear that these early third-wave transitions differed markedly from later transitions in Africa and the former Soviet Union. Transitions in Southern Europe, South America, and Central Europe occurred under conditions that favored successful democratization, including

relatively high levels of development, robust civic and opposition movements, functioning states, and extensive ties to the West. Yet observers generalized from these cases, drawing at least two false lessons that powerfully shaped the way that they interpreted the transitions of the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> First, observers began to conflate authoritarian breakdown with democratization. The collapse of a dictatorship may yield diverse outcomes, ranging from democracy (post-1989 Poland) to the establishment of a new authoritarian regime (post-1979 Iran) to state collapse and anarchy (post-2011 Libya). Historically, in fact, most authoritarian breakdowns have *not* brought democratization.<sup>18</sup> Thus, although the collapse of a dictatorship creates opportunities for democratization, there are no theoretical or empirical bases for assuming such an outcome. Yet that is exactly what many observers did in the 1990s. Wherever dictatorships fell and opposition groups ascended to power, transitions were described as democratization and subsequent regimes were labeled “new democracies.”

Second, all authoritarian openings were assumed to mark the onset of a transition that would eventually lead to democracy. Thus even limited openings aimed at deflecting international pressure were expected to escape the control of autocrats and take on a life of their own, as had occurred in countries such as Brazil, Chile, Hungary, Poland, and Spain. Such expectations ignored the fact that autocrats may (and often do) undertake “window-dressing” reforms aimed at defusing short-term crises, and then use their continued control of the army, police, and major revenue sources to reconsolidate power once the crisis has passed.

The tendency to conflate authoritarian crisis and democratic transition was powerfully reinforced by the demise of communism. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union generated a widespread perception that liberal democracy was the “only game in town.” Because all roads seemed to lead to democracy, observers began to interpret all regime crises as incipient democratic transitions.

This excessively optimistic mindset led observers to mischaracterize many post-Cold War regime crises. Although the 1990s are widely viewed as a decade of unprecedented democratization, they are more accurately described as a period of unprecedented authoritarian crisis. The end of the Cold War posed an enormous challenge to autocrats. Both Soviet client states and Western-backed anticommunist dictatorships lost external support. Western democracies emerged as the dominant center of military and economic power, and the United States and the European Union began to promote democracy to an unprecedented degree. At the same time, deep economic crises deprived autocrats of the resources needed to sustain themselves in power. States were effectively bankrupted throughout much of Africa and the former Soviet Union, leaving governments unable to pay their soldiers, police, and bureaucrats. In many cases (Albania, Benin, Cambodia, Georgia, Haiti, Liberia, Madagascar, Tajikistan, Zaire), states either collapsed or were brought to the brink of collapse.

Conditions in the early 1990s thus amounted to a virtual “perfect storm” for dictatorships. Throughout Africa, the former Soviet Union, and elsewhere, autocrats confronted severe fiscal crises, weak or collapsing states, and intense international pressure for multiparty elections.

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Lacking resources, external allies, or reliable coercive institutions, many of these autocracies fell into severe crisis. The result was widespread “pluralism by default,”<sup>19</sup> in which competition—and even turnover—occurred because governments lacked even rudimentary means to suppress opposition challenges. Autocrats fell from power in Albania, Belarus, Benin, the Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, Georgia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Moldova, Niger, Ukraine, and Zaire not because they faced robust democracy

movements, but because they were bankrupt, their states were in disarray, and in many cases they had lost control of the coercive apparatus. Likewise, governments in Cambodia, Cameroon, Gabon, Kyrgyzstan, Mozambique, Russia, and elsewhere tolerated competitive multiparty elections because they lacked even minimal capacity to resist them.

These moments of authoritarian weakness and instability were widely equated with democratization. Thus the ascent of noncommunists to power in Russia and other post-Soviet states, as well as the fall of autocrats in Madagascar, Malawi, Niger, Zambia, and other African states, were frequently characterized as democratic transitions. Similarly, the holding of multiparty elections in Angola, Cambodia, Cameroon, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Mozambique, and Tanzania was said to mark the onset of democratic transitions, however “flawed” or “prolonged.” Nearly all these regimes were characterized as “new democracies” or, at minimum, some diminished subtype of democracy (e.g., electoral, illiberal, unconsolidated).<sup>20</sup> This optimism was shared by Freedom House, which upgraded autocracies in Gabon, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and even totalitarian Turkmenistan to Partly Free status in the early 1990s.

Such evaluations were largely misguided. Many of the authoritarian crises of the early and mid-1990s did not constitute meaningful movement toward democracy. Numerous autocracies broke down because states either collapsed (e.g., Azerbaijan, Georgia, Sierra Leone, Tajikistan, Zaire) or weakened dramatically (e.g., Belarus, Madagascar, Malawi, Ukraine). State failure brings violence and instability; it almost never brings democratization. Many other regime “openings” were, in reality, moments of extraordinary incumbent weakness, driven not by

societal pressure for democracy but rather by severe fiscal crisis, state weakness, or external vulnerability. For example, Russian politics were competitive in the early 1990s not because Boris Yeltsin presided over a democratic transition but rather because he presided over a state in disarray, which left him unable to control his own security forces, bureaucracy, and regional governments. Likewise, Cambodia's competitive 1993 elections were a product of the virtual state collapse that followed Vietnamese and Soviet withdrawal. Bankruptcy and international isolation compelled the Hun Sen government to cede control of the electoral process to the UN. Similarly, autocrats in Cameroon and Gabon, facing severe fiscal crises, riots, and the specter of international isolation, were compelled to hold unusually competitive elections in the early 1990s.

For observers who viewed these and other cases of pluralism by default as democratic transitions, the developments of the 2000s were bound to be disappointing. The "perfect storm" conditions of the initial post-Cold War period eventually passed. For one, the economies of most developing countries improved during the 1990s and, thanks to soaring commodity prices, many of them boomed in the 2000s. Consequently, governments that a decade earlier had lacked funds to maintain patronage networks or even pay soldiers and bureaucrats were now flush with resources—helping to restore a minimum of state capacity.

Second, autocrats adapted to the post-Cold War environment. Rulers whose ignorance of how to survive in a context of multiparty elections nearly cost them power in the early 1990s eventually learned how to manage competitive elections, coopt rivals and independent media, control the private sector, and starve civic and opposition groups of resources without resorting to the kind of naked repression or fraud that could trigger a domestic legitimacy crisis and international isolation.<sup>21</sup>

Third, the geopolitical environment changed. The extraordinary influence of the United States and the EU, which had peaked in the immediate post-Cold War period, declined in the 2000s. At the same time, the emerging influence of China, Russia, and other regional powers, together with soaring oil prices, created more space for autocrats in Asia, the former Soviet Union, and Africa.

By the 2000s, economic recovery, state-rebuilding, and a more permissive international environment had reduced the level of authoritarian weakness and instability that had characterized much of Africa, the former Soviet Union, and Asia during the initial post-Cold War period. Less vulnerable to international pressure, and with greater revenue and more effective states at their disposal, autocracies that had been highly vulnerable in the 1990s were, in many cases, able to reconsolidate power. In Cambodia, for example, improved finances and fading international pressure enabled the Hun Sen government to reestablish authoritarian dominance. Without the extreme fiscal and external constraints of the early 1990s, the ruling Cambodian People's Party was able to repress rivals and rig elec-



tions with greater impunity. Likewise, Presidents Paul Biya in Cameroon and Omar Bongo in Gabon reconsolidated power in the late 1990s and early 2000s, reversing earlier concessions—such as constitutional term limits—that many observers had interpreted as democratic “openings.” Similar processes of authoritarian reconsolidation occurred in Algeria, Angola, Burma, Congo-Brazzaville, Mozambique, and elsewhere.

Much the same pattern could be observed in the former Soviet Union, where regimes that had been marked by weakness and instability during the initial postcommunist period consolidated during the 2000s. In Russia, for example, state-rebuilding and soaring oil prices allowed the Putin government to coopt the private sector and media, repress opponents, and manipulate elections to a degree that had been unthinkable a decade earlier.<sup>22</sup> In Belarus, the government of Alyaksandr Lukashenka established vast control over the economy during the second half of the 1990s, which allowed him to effectively starve his opponents of resources. Authoritarian regimes also consolidated in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan.

In sum, improved finances, state reconstruction, and a less hostile international environment enabled many authoritarian regimes that had been weak and unstable in the initial post-Cold War period to stabilize and even consolidate in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Unsurprisingly, countries such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cambodia, the Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, all of which Freedom House had optimistically upgraded to Partly Free status in the early 1990s, were downgraded to Not Free.

These transitions from weak or unstable authoritarianism to more stable authoritarian rule are often viewed as cases of democratic failure and taken as evidence of a democratic recession. Such characterizations are misleading. Many of these regimes were never remotely democratic, and in some of them (e.g., Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), democracy was never even seriously on the agenda. Just as authoritarian crisis should not be equated with democratic transition, authoritarian (re)consolidation should not be equated with democratic rollback.

In other cases, regime instability—often rooted in state failure—generated brief democratic “moments” in which intense international pressure or the extreme weakness of all major political actors permitted competitive elections and turnover (e.g., Bangladesh 1991; Haiti 1991; Congo-Brazzaville 1992; Belarus 1994; Niger 1999; Guinea-Bissau 2000; Madagascar 2002; Burundi 2005). Although these cases may have been minimally “democratic” on election day, they did not remain so after new governments took office—and thus could not be described as democratic regimes. Indeed, turnover occurred under conditions that overwhelmingly favored nondemocratic outcomes: Democratic institutions existed only on parchment (in many cases, they had never been tested); states were weak or collapsing, resulting in pervasive neopatrimonialism and the ab-

sence of rule of law; private sectors were small and state-dependent; and civil societies and opposition parties were weak and disorganized. The combination of neopatrimonial states and impoverished societies gave incumbents vast resource advantages from day one, and in the absence of functioning democratic institutions, civil society, or an organized opposition, constraints on authoritarian abuse were minimal. Under such conditions, new governments almost inevitably abuse power, triggering either regime instability or another round of authoritarianism.

“Democratic moments” thus proved ephemeral, if not illusory, in each of the cases listed above. For example, Congo-Brazzaville experienced electoral turnover in 1992, but new president Pascal Lissouba immediately dissolved parliament and held flawed elections that triggered an opposition boycott and an eventual descent into civil war and dictatorship. Similarly, Burundi’s competitive elections in 2005 led Freedom House to label it an “electoral democracy,” but President Domitien Ndayizeye immediately began to arrest opposition leaders and journalists, and subsequent elections were marred by fraud and repression. In Guinea-Bissau, the 1999 overthrow of João Bernardo Vieira led to internationally sponsored elections won by opposition leader Kumba Yala (which led Freedom House to label the country an electoral democracy). But Yala was as authoritarian as his predecessor, closing newspapers and arresting opposition leaders and the president of the Supreme Court before his overthrow in a 2003 coup.

Newly elected presidents also immediately abused power in Bangladesh, Belarus, the Central African Republic, Haiti, Madagascar, Niger, and elsewhere. These regimes were never democracies in any meaningful sense, for any meaningful period of time. To label them as cases of subsequent “democratic breakdown” is, therefore, quite misleading. And yet most of the breakdowns cited by proponents of the democratic-recession thesis are precisely of this type—take the list of 25 post-2000 breakdowns in Larry Diamond’s article in this issue (Table 1 on page 144).

Nearly two-thirds of these breakdowns were of regimes that (at best) were no more than ephemeral “democratic moments.” If we limit our analysis to *actual democratic regimes*—defined, say, as those in which at least one democratically elected government held free elections and peacefully ceded power to an elected successor—16 of Diamond’s 25 “democratic breakdowns” disappear. Of the nine cases of breakdown that remain,<sup>23</sup> only five still had authoritarian regimes in 2014, and one of those was a microstate.

### Non-Democratization in the 2000s

Contemporary pessimism about the fate of global democracy is also rooted in excessive voluntarism. Many of those who argue that democracy is in retreat focus less on democratic backsliding than on the absence of democratic *progress*. In effect, nondemocratization

in China, the Middle East, or Central Asia is treated as a setback. For example, Puddington's 2009 report in the *Journal of Democracy* claimed that "perhaps the most disappointing development" in Asia in 2008 was "the failure of China to enact significant democratic reforms . . . during its year as host of the Olympic Games."<sup>24</sup> The following year, he cited the Kazakh government's failure to undertake political reform as evidence of a "downward spiral" in Central Asia and pointed to the absence of political liberalization in Cuba as evidence of "continued erosion of freedom worldwide."<sup>25</sup> Puddington's most recent *Journal of Democracy* report openly cites unmet expectations—as opposed to *actual rollback*—as a source of democratic gloom, writing that although observers had "predicted that China would rather quickly evolve toward a more liberal and perhaps democratic system," the government instead developed new strategies "designed to maintain rigid one-party rule."<sup>26</sup>

The failure of authoritarian regimes in China, the Middle East, or Central Asia to democratize should not be taken as evidence of democratic retreat (doing so would be akin to taking a glass that is half full and declaring it not to be half empty but to be emptying out). Nor should it surprise us. By the mid-2000s, nearly every country with minimally favorable conditions for democracy had already democratized. With a handful of exceptions (e.g., Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Turkey, and now Venezuela), the low-hanging fruit had been picked. Today, most of the world's remaining nondemocracies exist in countries that existing theory suggests are unlikely to democratize.<sup>27</sup>

According to a substantial body of research, stable democratization is unlikely in very poor countries with weak states (e.g., much of sub-Saharan Africa), dynastic monarchies with oil and Western support (e.g., the Persian Gulf states), and single-party regimes with strong states and high growth rates (China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore). Our own research suggests that democratization is less likely in countries with very low linkage to the West (e.g., Central Asia, much of Africa) and in regimes born of violent revolution (China, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Vietnam, Cuba, Iran, Laos, North Korea). If we take seriously these lessons generated by several decades of research, relatively few countries today could be considered true democratic underperformers. While the recent stagnation in the overall number of democracies in the world may be normatively displeasing, it is entirely consistent with existing theory.

Why, then, has the lack of democratic expansion since the mid-2000s triggered so much pessimism and gloom? One reason is the unfounded expectations raised by the collapse of communism. After the extraordinary events of 1989–91, many observers simply assumed that the wave of democratic advances of the 1980s and 1990s would continue.

Another reason for contemporary disappointment is excessive voluntarism. The early third-wave democratizations dealt a powerful blow to

the classic structuralist theories that had predominated in the 1960s and 1970s. These theories emphasized the social, economic, and cultural obstacles to democratization in the developing and communist worlds. Democratization in countries like Bolivia, El Salvador, Ghana, and Mongolia made it clear that democratization was possible anywhere. Yet this healthy skepticism regarding overly structuralist analysis evolved into exaggerated voluntarism. Evidence that structural factors such as wealth, low inequality, or a robust civil society are not necessary for democratization led many observers to conclude that they are causally unimportant. In other words, the important lesson that democratization can happen anywhere was taken by some observers to mean that it *should happen everywhere*.

There are simply no theoretical or empirical bases for such expectations. A wealth of research has shown that structural factors such as level of development, inequality, economic performance, natural-resource wealth, state capacity, strength of civil society, and ties to the West continue to powerfully affect the likelihood of achieving and sustaining democracy. It is no coincidence that most of the world's remaining non-democracies are clustered in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and the former Soviet Union. Many countries in these regions are characterized by multiple factors that scholars have associated with authoritarianism. One may hope (and work) for democratization in countries like Cambodia, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Libya, or Iraq, but *expectations* that democratization will occur in such cases lack theoretical or empirical foundation. And the dashing of unfounded expectations should not be confused with democratic recession.

## Democracy's Surprising Resilience

Disappointment over the lack of democratization in countries where it is unlikely to emerge should not obscure the extraordinary democratic achievements of the last quarter-century. When the *Journal of Democracy* was launched in 1990, there were 38 developing and postcommunist countries classified as Free by Freedom House. In 2014, that number stood at 60.

As impressive as the breadth of the third wave has been its robustness. At the time of the *Journal of Democracy*'s inaugural issue, newly democratic regimes in Latin America and Central Europe were widely viewed as precarious. Scholars of democratization were skeptical that many of them would endure. In their classic book on transitions from authoritarian rule, for example, Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter characterized Latin American cases as "uncertain democracies."<sup>28</sup> Likewise, few scholars expected that the 1989 transitions in Central Europe would produce almost uniformly stable democratic regimes. Yet with a few short-lived exceptions (e.g., Peru 1992–2000), the

democracies that emerged in South America and Central Europe have now survived for a quarter-century or more. Moreover, they survived despite severe economic crises and radical economic reforms that many

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*The real story of the last decade is not democracy's "meltdown," but rather its resilience in the face of a darkening geopolitical landscape.*

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scholars believed were incompatible with democracy. Between 1990 and 2000, several other important countries democratized, including Croatia, Ghana, Indonesia, Mexico, Serbia, Slovakia, South Africa, and Taiwan. Although some of these new democracies were marked by deep racial or ethnic cleavages, they too proved strikingly robust.

These patterns did not change substantially after 2000. Democratic breakdowns remained rare, often short-lived, and generally

unrepresentative of broader trends. Although democracy retreated in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Venezuela, it survived in a range of important middle-income countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Croatia, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Poland, Serbia, South Africa, South Korea, and Taiwan. Democracy also survived in several countries with strikingly unfavorable conditions, including Benin, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ghana, Guyana, Mongolia, and Romania. These were countries with little or no democratic tradition, weak states, high levels of poverty and inequality, and in some cases deeply divided societies. Yet their democracies endured, and some of them are now more than two decades old.

In several important countries, democracy not only survived but *strengthened* during the 2000s. In Brazil, which suffered severe governability problems in the 1980s and early 1990s, the stability and quality of democracy improved markedly in the 2000s; in India, expanding rates of participation, particularly among poorer and lower-caste citizens, have created an increasingly inclusionary democracy; in Chile, a 2005 constitutional reform eliminated remaining authoritarian enclaves and established full civilian control over the military; in Croatia, Ghana, Mexico, and Taiwan, former authoritarian ruling parties returned to power and governed democratically—a critical step toward consolidation. And in Colombia and Poland, democratic institutions effectively checked the ambitions of autocratic-leaning presidents (Alvaro Uribe in Colombia, Lech Kaczyński in Poland). These were major democratic successes, many of which occurred in large and influential countries. Yet they received far less attention than democratic backsliding in Thailand and Venezuela and nondemocratization in China.

These successes suggest an alternative way of viewing the events of the 2000s. Over the last decade, several global developments posed a serious threat to new democracies. These included the severe post-2008

economic crisis in Western democracies, the declining influence of the United States and the European Union, the growing power and self-confidence of China and Russia, and soaring oil prices. Yet the number of actual democratic breakdowns has been strikingly low.

Arguably, then, the real story of the last decade is not democracy's "meltdown," but rather its resilience in the face of a darkening geopolitical landscape. This resilience merits further study. Understanding its sources may help democracy advocates to prepare for the day when the wolf of authoritarian resurgence does, in fact, arrive.

## NOTES

1. See Larry Diamond, "The Democratic Rollback: The Resurgence of the Predatory State," *Foreign Affairs* 87 (March–April 2008): 36–48; Diamond, "Democracy's Deepening Recession," *Atlantic.com*, 2 May 2014; Arch Puddington, "The 2008 Freedom House Survey: A Third Year of Decline," *Journal of Democracy* 20 (April 2009): 93–107; Puddington, "The Freedom House Survey for 2009: The Erosion Accelerates," *Journal of Democracy* 21 (April 2010): 136–50; Joshua Kurlantzick, "The Great Democracy Meltdown," *New Republic*, 9 May 2011, 12–15, available at [tnr.com](http://tnr.com).

2. Diamond, "The Democratic Rollback," 36.

3. Kurlantzick, "The Great Democracy Meltdown."

4. See Robert Battison, "The 'Democratic Recession' Has Turned into A Modern Zeitgeist of Democratic Reform," *OpenDemocracy*, 21 December 2011.

5. Arch Puddington, "The 2006 Freedom House Survey: The Pushback Against Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 18 (April 2007): 125–37.

6. Puddington, "A Third Year of Decline."

7. Puddington, "The Erosion Accelerates."

8. Arch Puddington, "The Freedom House Survey for 2011: Democracy Under Duress," *Journal of Democracy* 22 (April 2011): 17–31.

9. Arch Puddington, "The Freedom House Survey for 2012: Breakthroughs in the Balance," *Journal of Democracy* 24 (April 2013): 49; Arch Puddington, "The Freedom House Survey for 2013: The Democratic Leadership Gap," *Journal of Democracy* 25 (April 2014): 90.

10. Jay Ulfelder makes a similar argument. See Ulfelder, "The Democratic Recession That \*Still\* Isn't," <http://dartthrowingchimp.wordpress.com/2014/01/23/the-democratic-recession-that-still-isnt>.

11. For Freedom House data, see [freedomhouse.org](http://freedomhouse.org); Polity data: [systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm](http://systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm); Economic Intelligence Unit data: [www.eiu.com/public/topical\\_report.aspx?campaignid=Democracy0814](http://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=Democracy0814); Bertelsmann data: [www.bti-project.org/index/](http://www.bti-project.org/index/). All scores for actual years rather than year of report.

12. The Varieties of Democracy Index, which is not shown here, also finds no decline. See Staffan I. Lindberg et al., "V-Dem: A New Way to Measure Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 25 (July 2014): 162–63.

13. We exclude microstates such as Fiji (which Freedom House classified as Free for one year in 1999 but which arguably never established a democratic regime) and Solomon Islands. Two other countries—Argentina and Guyana—briefly exited Freedom House’s Free category during the 2000s but returned within one year.

14. Similarly, Ukraine (which was classified as Partly Free in the late 1990s but democratized in the mid-2000s) slid into competitive authoritarianism in 2010, but the regime collapsed in 2014.

15. Freedom House moved Mexico back into the Partly Free category in 2011 due to drug violence. However, there exists a broad scholarly consensus that Mexico retains a democratic regime. Senegal also slipped into the Partly Free category in the mid-2000s but regained its Free status in 2013.

16. For a similar critique, see Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 5–21; also Marc Howard and Meir R. Walters, “Mass Mobilization and the Democracy Bias: A Comparison of Egypt and Ukraine,” Georgetown University (unpubl. ms.).

17. See Carothers, “End of the Transition Paradigm.”

18. See Milan Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

19. Lucan Way, “Pluralism by Default: Weak Autocrats and the Rise of Competitive Politics,” University of Toronto (unpubl. ms.).

20. See David Collier and Steven Levitsky, “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research,” *World Politics* 49 (April 1997): 430–51.

21. Michael Bratton and Daniel Posner, “A First Look at Second Elections in Africa, with Illustrations from Zambia,” in Richard A. Joseph, ed., *State, Conflict, and Democracy in Africa* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1999), 387; Lucan Way, “Deer in Headlights: Incompetence and Weak Authoritarianism After the Cold War,” *Slavic Review* 71 (Fall 2012): 619–46.

22. See Mikhail Myagkov, Peter C. Ordeshook, and Dimitri Shakin, *The Forensics of Election Fraud: Russia and Ukraine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

23. These are Venezuela and Thailand in 2005, Solomon Islands, Honduras, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Nicaragua, Ukraine, and Mali.

24. Puddington, “A Third Year of Decline,” 103.

25. Puddington, “The Erosion Accelerates,” 137, 141.

26. Puddington, “The Democratic Leadership Gap,” 90–91.

27. Marc F. Plattner, “The End of the Transitions Era?” *Journal of Democracy* 25 (July 2014): 5–16.

28. Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).