

Democracy, Democracy Support and Democracy Socialization

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Abstract: What is the current democratic situation in the world? How can we explain the presence or absence of democracy in countries? How much popular support is there for democracy? How can we explain variance in this support for democracy? These are the key questions to answer in this article. Only a small fraction of the world's countries are democracies, and only a small fraction of the world's population lives in a democracy. Moreover, many existing democracies suffer from a gradual erosion. Favourable conditions for democracy include a positive economic development, a good functioning of the actual democracy, democratic leaders without autocratic temptations, and a strong and robust support for democracy among the population. Support for democracy among citizens in the world is however weak: only a minority said that a representative democracy is a very good way of governing the country and even less support a representative democracy without also supporting a non-democratic rule by experts, a strong leader or the military. Support for democracy on the individual level is the effect of various other orientations such as knowledge of democracy and autocracy, satisfaction with democracy, political trust, subjective well-being, and emancipatory values. People acquire these orientations through experience and socialization. Committed democrats are concerned with the decline of democracy and the intensifying wave of autocratization in the world over the past decade and ask for new initiatives to establish and defend democracy.

Keywords: democracy socialization, democracy support, democracy

Introduction

The U.S.A. is the example of a democracy in the eyes of many. So, it was a big surprise when the Republican former president and 2024 presidential candidate Donald Trump told a crowd of Christian supporters that they won't 'have to vote again' if they return him to the presidency in the coming election. 'Christians, get out and vote! Just this time – you won't have to do it anymore'.² Even greater was the surprise when he turned out to have been elected by an overwhelming majority, while Americans generally say in surveys that they are in favour of a democracy. Not only in the U.S.A. but also in other countries, e.g. Hungary, democracy is in danger under attack from an undemocratic leader. The current situation of democracy in the world is indicated

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2 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jul/27/trump-speech-no-need-to-vote-future>
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jul/30/donald-trump-wont-have-to-vote-any-more-fox-interview>.

by words such as decline, recession, degradation, erosion, and backsliding. This brings me to a number of questions. Who keeps track of the democracy versus autocracy developments in the world and how? What is the current democratic situation in the world? If there is indeed a decline, what are the causes of this decline and what explains the presence or absence of democracy in a country most? That leaders want more power is not unusual, but what do citizens think about it? Who keeps track of the support for democracy in the world? How is support for democracy measured? How much popular support is there for democracy? Is support for democracy declining, and if so, also among mature democracies? And how can we explain variances in this support? Driven by amazement and curiosity, I looked for answers to those questions as much as possible based on empirical evidence. The ones I found so far are below.

Democracy in the world

Democracy is defined and measured differently in the relevant literature. 'Thin' or 'minimalist' definitions include a few institutional features. 'Thick' or 'maximalist' definitions include more institutional attributes and involve also economic, social, and cultural aspects. An extremely 'thin' definition includes only presence of elections. This makes sense because democracy cannot exist without elections but is on the other hand not completely satisfying because elections in themselves do not make democracy and can even serve as a facade for the opposite (electoral autocracies). A few additional institutional features, which have been mentioned in several publications and on which there seems to be consensus, are: incumbent government can be turned out of office through elections; these elections are fixed-term, free and fair; universal adult suffrage; right to run for office; trias politica with an independent judiciary; a competitive multi-party system; freedom of expression; independent media with alternative sources of information; and an associational autonomy (among others, Dahl, 1971). These attributes are also reflected in the description of democracy in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures'.³ The different conceptualizations and operationalizations of democracy have led to several questions about the validity and reliability of the existing measurements of democracy (Knutsen, 2010). In any case, it seems good not to rely on one but several data sources for knowledge of the situation of democracy in the world. Here I use the international comparative measurements of democracy by Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit, the Varieties of Democracy Institute, the Bertelsmann Stiftung, and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

Freedom House⁴ publishes every year a global report on political rights and civil liberties since 1973 and a regional report on democratic governance since 1998. The 2024 *Freedom in*

3 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217 A) as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations. Articles 21.1, 21.2, and 21.3 present de democracy features. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

4 Freedom House is 'a non-profit, nonpartisan organization that works to create a world where all are free'. The mission is to inform the world about threats to freedom, to mobilize global action, and to support democracy's defenders. 'Freedom House is founded on the core conviction that freedom flour-