



The Global State of Democracy IN FOCUS

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Populist government and democracy: An impact assessment using the Global State of Democracy Indices

Key facts and findings

- The number of populist parties in government has never been as high as it is today—nearly doubling over the last 15 years. More than half are located in Europe, while the rest are spread throughout the Americas and Asia.
- The recent growth of electoral support for populist political actors around the world is rooted in several interacting trends: economic and cultural globalization, weakening nation state policy/autonomy, societal change, a polarized digital public sphere and a decline in support for mainstream political parties.
- The rise of populist parties, movements and politicians opposing established political elites can be seen as a reaction to the perceived underperformance of democracies and as a sign of crisis among mainstream political parties.
- However, there is also a more ‘benign’ view of populism, whereby it is seen as contributing to the reinvigoration of democracy by identifying flaws and failures in current democratic systems, placing issues on the public agenda and pushing forward necessary reform.
- Many populists question the legitimacy of competing political actors and segregate outsiders from ‘the people’. When voted into government, populists often seek to weaken the formal and informal accountability institutions that check executive authority and protect political pluralism. Democratically elected actors challenging and weakening the norms and institutions underpinning liberal democracy thus turns contemporary populism into a complex challenge for democracy.
- The GSoD Indices show that populist governments diminish the quality of democracy relative to non-populist governments. Of the 28 aspects forming the GSoD Indices, 22 experienced declines under populist governments. Statistically significant declines were observed for Elected Government, Civil Liberties and three of its subcomponents: Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Association and Assembly, and Freedom of Movement.
- Only six aspects of democracy improved under populist governments, none of them significantly. The only aspect of democracy that has improved more under populist governments than under non-populist governments is Electoral Participation.
- The GSoD data shows that populist presidents and governments tend to make democratic backsliding more likely and to increase the scope of backsliding.

1. Introduction

Electoral successes of populist politicians and parties in the past decade have posed challenges to both established and younger democracies. Populists tend to view themselves as exclusive representatives of ‘ordinary’ citizens and accuse the political elites of betraying the people and disrespecting its ‘true’ interests. Mobilizing around these key messages, populist parties have gained increasing numbers of votes in numerous elections.

How have these new political actors affected the quality of democracy? Do they dismantle the system of checks and balances underpinning democratic accountability? Or do they revive democratic representation by bringing back citizens who have felt marginalized by mainstream parties and traditional democratic institutions?

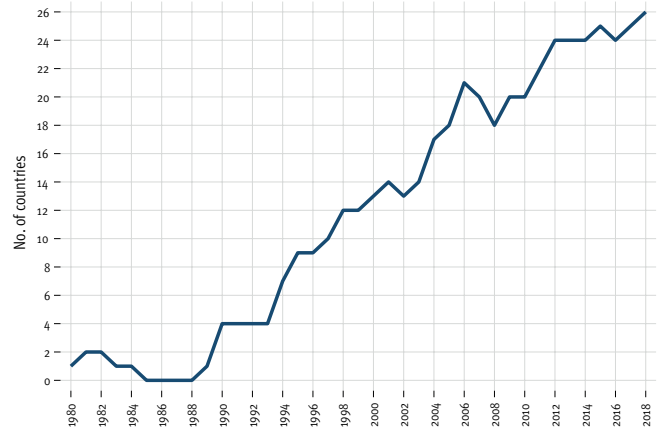
The Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices provide a unique data set to study these questions. Published annually by International IDEA, they include detailed indicators measuring democracy in 158 countries since 1975. This *GSoD In Focus* shows how the Indices can be used to assess the impact of populism on democracy.

2. Rise of populism

While populism is not a new phenomenon and has existed historically across a number of regions, populist political actors and parties have risen significantly in recent years across almost all regions of the world, as have the number of governments with political parties or leaders labelled as populists. According to the two combined data sets used by International IDEA to measure populism, the number of governments with populist political actors in power has nearly doubled in the last 15 years (see Figure 1), and more than half of those are located in Europe, although they can also be found in Asia and the Americas. According to a 2016 estimate, these parties have more than doubled their average vote share in European national parliamentary elections in the last decade, reaching 12.4 per cent (Norris and Inglehart 2019: 9). According to a more recent analysis, populist parties have garnered around 25 per cent of the votes in recent national elections in Europe (Rooduijn et al. 2019).

FIGURE 1

Number of populist governments in power 1980–2019



Source: Kyle and Gultchin 2018; Timbro 2019.

Drivers of the populist surge

The origins of the recent populist wave can be traced back to several interacting factors and developments detailed here. A summary can be found in Table 1.

- **2008 financial crisis.** The long-term challenges of globalization, immigration and digitalization have concurred with the medium-term disruptions triggered by the global financial and economic crisis after 2008. This crisis and the ensuing sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone undermined the credibility of the European Union and the nexus between economic integration and prosperity—a belief that had guided political elites in Eastern and Southern Europe for several decades (Kriesi 2018). Disappointed citizens voted for populist and anti-establishment parties to protest against mainstream elites and what many perceived as externally inflicted economic and migration crises (Krstev 2014). Populists have criticized the influence of the EU and non-elected expert bodies in the international system. They claim that these organizations constrain popular sovereignty and serve the interests of technocratic elites or foreign economic or political powers. Such claims have been made, for example, during the refugee and Eurozone crises or during the referendum on ‘Brexit’ held in the United Kingdom.

- **Economic and financial globalization.** This has constrained the scope for national policies, while confronting national governments with complex new transnational interdependencies. Governments have sought to address these challenges by collaborating with private businesses and non-governmental actors on the one hand, delegating authority to central banks, international regulatory bodies or regional organizations on the other (Mair 2013; Rodrik 2011).
- **Labour market transformation.** Western and post-socialist societies have undergone profound changes, resulting in the decline of traditional industrial sectors and the growth of services or high-technology manufacturing. These processes have increased domestic disparities between the beneficiaries of economic globalization and those groups of people falling behind because of structural disadvantages related to age, location or a lack of skills. The World Bank describes these groups as disenchanting by a broken 'social contract', where their preferences for equity and perceptions about inequalities clash with how markets and public policies distribute these resources (Bussolo et al. 2018). Hence, rising inequalities (real or perceived), combined with increasing vulnerability, the loss of social status and related fears, have made these groups particularly susceptible to the appeals of populist political movements in Western and post-communist Eastern Europe.
- **Increased migration flows.** Globalization has also manifested itself in growing inflows of immigrants and refugees to Europe and the United States—partly fleeing from violent conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria and other countries, partly induced by poverty, economic crises or the effects of climate change in developing countries. These asylum seekers have compounded fears and resentment, particularly among socially vulnerable citizens who are questioning whether nation states are still able to protect their citizens and their distinct national culture against the perceived threats of immigration.
- **Growth of the middle classes.** The social and political cultures of Western, post-socialist and developing countries alike have been transformed by growth in the rising middle class (Appadurai 2006; Chen and Chunlong 2011; Ravallion 2010). Such social groups have higher expectations regarding the performance of political regimes—and democracies in particular. They also have more resources, enabling them to participate in politics. Sociocultural modernization has weakened traditional authority mechanisms and made regime legitimacy more reliant on performance, responsiveness, legal authority or personal charisma. Socio-economic, sociocultural and generational changes have resulted in more political mobilization, protests and civil society activism (Bermeo and Yashar 2017; Inglehart and Welzel 2005).
- **Transformation of political culture.** The spread of individualist value orientations and the disintegration of traditional community ties led to a decline in traditional forms of collective political action, such as mass-membership organizations including political parties, trade unions and churches (Putnam 2000; van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012). This crisis of representation is also manifested in a decline of trust in political leaders, parties and institutions (International IDEA 2017: 98–122). Public disaffection and indignation have been additionally fuelled by political institutions and processes that seem unresponsive to citizens' needs.
- **New technologies.** The use of the Internet and the spread of social media have fundamentally transformed the public sphere and political communication across the world. These new technologies greatly facilitate transnational communication, contributing to the transfer of social and cultural practices across nation states, and increasing citizens' awareness of realities in other countries. They also reduce the transaction costs of collective action and therefore support political mobilization through protests and other public campaigns (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Diamond and Plattner 2012). However, while new technologies ease access to information for many citizens, they also multiply the flows of information, dilute the filter functions performed by traditional mass media and displace some of the mediating functions of political parties.
- **Political and social polarization.** Unlimited information flows enabled by digital technologies and the underlying business models of the commercial platform providers also lead to a more fragmented and segmented public sphere, harming the inclusiveness and quality of democratic deliberation (Deibert 2019; Keane 2013; Tucker et al. 2017). A fragmenting public sphere has catalysed the polarization of society into adversarial 'tribes', lacking a sense that they share a polity in common; and the erosion of the civic virtues that were once held to be essential to a democratic polity, such as tolerance, integrity, truthfulness and responsibility (Fukuyama 2018). Social media platforms lend themselves to populist mobilization because they facilitate interactive communication, but their potential is also misused to simulate a direct exchange between populist political leaders and citizens.

TABLE 1

Economic and political drivers of the rise in populism

ECONOMIC DRIVERS	POLITICAL DRIVERS
<p>Vulnerability ensuing from 2008 economic and financial crisis</p> <p>Rise in middle classes in regions such as Central-Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America</p> <p>Perceived underperformance of democracies’ delivery (in economic performance, in reducing socio-economic inequalities, in reducing corruption)</p> <p>Enhanced vulnerabilities caused by technologically driven labour market transformation</p> <p>Globalization and loss of national control over key policy decisions</p> <p>Reaction to immigration flows to Europe, North America and Latin America</p>	<p>Crisis of representation of mainstream and traditional political parties</p> <p>More politically aware and mobilized middle-class populations with high expectations of democracy’s delivery capacity</p> <p>More political mobilization, protests and civil society activism</p> <p>Fragmentation and polarization of the public sphere and of politics, reinforced by social media</p> <p>The transformation of political culture with the advent of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and an increased focus on the individual</p>

In summary, political regimes and political elites are under pressure to meet the expectations of citizens and respond to their demands. Governments increasingly depend on policy performance (economic growth, rising incomes, and social and human security) as a source of regime legitimacy, but are less able to guarantee such performance due to eroded state capacities and increased interdependencies.

Declining trust in institutions and declining turnout are particularly salient in younger democracies originating from the so-called Third Wave of democratization beginning in 1974 (Huntington 1991). While their transition to democracy has raised performance expectations among citizens, their democratic institutions are less consolidated in political culture.

3. How do populists challenge democracy?

Most scholars of populism agree that the opposition between ‘the people’ and an elite that fails to represent the people’s true interest constitutes the core idea of populist rhetoric and framing of politics. Various rhetorical tropes are used to criticize incumbent elites and democratic institutions—for example, ‘the mainstream media (“fake news”), elections (“fraudulent”), politicians (“drain the swamp”), political parties (“dysfunctional”)’ (Norris and Inglehart 2019: 4). According to one prominent definition, a populist world view considers ‘society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6).

Falling short of an elaborate political ideology (so-called ‘thin-centred’ ideology), this populist world view is often articulated in connection with other political ideas (Freedman 1998; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). A left-wing variant, motivated by issues of economic justice and distribution, sees elites primarily in financial terms, as a plutocratic ruling class who must be restrained and overcome in the name of the people. A right-wing variant sees elites in cultural terms, as a liberal cosmopolitan bourgeoisie that betrays the ‘true values’ of the nation and looks down on the homespun folkways of the people.

Taking a ‘benign’ perspective, such populisms do not challenge democracy, but contribute to its reinvigoration by identifying flaws and failures in current democratic systems and pushing forward necessary reform. In these circumstances, where the political system fails to respond to major unmet public needs through established democratic channels, such as elections, parties and legislatures, voters turn to populist alternatives in the hope that they will better meet their expectations.

Thus, populism appears to be a rational response to the failure of established political parties to represent an important section of voters; if the established parties will not speak for them, then new parties (or new insurgent movements) will. According to this understanding, the rise of new parties occupying this issue space is not, in itself, a problem for democracy. Such parties give voice not only to neglected classes and ideologies, but also to overlooked rural and regional areas away from metropolitan economic and cultural centres. They also place important issues on the public agenda, such as responses to unemployment, and the need to address socio-economic inequalities and

reduce corruption. Some therefore argue that the rise of these populist parties is not, as many worry, a symptom of democracy in crisis, but rather a healthy sign of democracy's capacity for self-correction and peaceful change.

However, this view tends to ignore that many populists do not only oppose elites, but also claim to exclusively represent the people (Müller 2016). This monopolizing claim questions the legitimacy of competing political actors and thereby the notion of a pluralist society. Moreover, many populists also distinguish between 'the people' and outside groups, such as foreign nationals—immigrants in particular—or foreign political and economic powers (Brubaker 2017). By representing immigrants or societal minorities as dangerous, deviant or unworthy, populism morphs into ethnonationalism. An example of this ethnonational populism with religious roots has, according to observers, become a salient political discourse in India (Mishra 2017).

Both the rejection of interest pluralism and the stigmatization of outsiders challenge the liberal norms underpinning democracy. What renders the phenomenon so complex, however, is that in countries where such parties are voted into governments through free and fair elections, often with high levels of electoral participation and support, they represent the voice and 'illiberal' values of large segments of the population. Populist practices have therefore led critics of populism to suggest the term 'authoritarian populism' (Norris and Inglehart 2019: 69–71).

Because many populists present themselves as the only true representatives of the people, they often interpret their electoral support as a mandate authorizing them to ignore or disrespect institutions enshrined in democratic constitutions. In the populist framing, constitutional checks and balances against the abuse of executive authority have not only failed to make elites responsive but also enabled elite conspiracy. This is why these checks and balances, in the view of populists, cannot be used to obstruct the will of the people. The direct personalistic link between populist leaders and the people renders these institutions obsolete and can override or substitute them. This inherent predisposition for unconstrained power by democratically elected governments implementing legal reforms to weaken democratic institutions through parliamentary majorities turns populism into a complex potential new threat for democracy.

4. The impact of populism on democracy as measured by the GSoD Indices

To what extent are populists in government able to erode or dismantle democratic accountability? Or is there evidence confirming that populist governments are more responsive to the needs and concerns of the people? These questions can be explored by using the GSoD Indices. However, since the GSoD Indices do not measure populism, the following analysis draws on two extant data sets that seek to identify episodes of populist-led government in numerous countries of the world.

The first source is a report published by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, which lists 46 populist leaders or political parties in office, covering 33 countries across the world since 1990 (Kyle and Gultchin 2018).¹ According to the authors, 'populism is the combination of two claims: the people are locked into conflict with outsiders; and nothing should constrain the will of the true people' (Kyle and Gultchin 2018: 19). The authors have coded political leaders as populists by screening academic journals for populism-related articles. They selected the names of politicians mentioned in these articles and validated the resulting list by consulting experts on populism.

The second data source has been compiled by the free market think tank Timbro (2019). In this study, authoritarian populism is defined by the positioning of parties as 'true representatives of the people standing up to the elite', a disregard for the 'constitutional rule of law' and 'the quest for a more powerful state' (Timbro 2019: 10 and 12). Timbro has published an 'Index of Authoritarian Populism' that maps populist parties in 33 European countries since 1980, based on an in-house coding of parties that relies on scholarly literature, Internet sources and expert surveys of parties' ideological positions.

The two data sets were combined by including a country-year as 'populist' if it was identified so by at least one of the sources. These selection criteria yielded a sample of 43 countries that have seen one or more years of populist government during the period from 1980 until 2018. The total number of years with populist government for these countries and during this period is 465 (Brusis 2019).

1. In the absence of a single robust data set on populist governments, the findings of this analysis therefore need to be interpreted with caution.

TABLE 2

GSoD Indices scores in populist and non-populist periods of government, 1980–2018

GSoD attribute	GSoD subattribute/subcomponent	Non-populist period (% change)	Populist period (% change)
1. Representative Government		1.4	-0.3
	1.1 Clean Elections	1.4	-0.3
	1.2 Inclusive Suffrage	0.5	0.2
	1.3 Free Political Parties	1.0	-0.4
	1.4 Elected Government*	0.9	-0.4
2. Fundamental Rights		0.9	-0.4
	2.1 Access to Justice	0.7	-0.4
	2.2 Civil Liberties*	1.1	-0.8
	2.2.A: Freedom of Expression*	1.2	-0.9
	2.2.B: Freedom of Association and Assembly*	1.3	-0.9
	2.2.C: Freedom of Religion	0.6	-0.4
	2.2.D: Freedom of Movement*	0.6	-0.2
	2.2.E: Personal Integrity and Security	0.9	-0.4
	2.3.A: Social Group Equality	0.4	-0.2
	2.3.B: Basic Welfare	1.0	0.8
	2.3.C: Gender Equality	1.1	0.5
3. Checks on Government		1.1	-0.8
	3.1 Effective Parliament	1.1	-0.6
	3.2 Judicial Independence	0.8	-0.7
	3.3 Media Integrity	1.2	-0.8
4. Impartial Administration		0.6	-0.5
	4.1 Absence of Corruption	0.3	-0.1
	4.2 Predictable Enforcement	0.8	-0.8
5. Participatory Engagement			
	5.1 Civil Society Participation	1.3	-0.8
	5.2 Electoral Participation	-0.1	0.6
	5.3 Direct Democracy	2.6	2.1
	5.4 Local Democracy	1.1	0.1

Notes: This table shows mean percentage changes in GSoD Indices aspects per year, comparing ‘populist’ and ‘non-populist’ episodes in a sample of 43 countries which experienced populist episodes of government between 1980 and 2018. There is no aggregate score for Participatory Engagement. Red shading denotes declines, while green denotes advances. Asterisks denote statistically significant differences.

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices (2019), <<http://www.idea.int/gso-d-indices>>; Kyle, J. and Gultchin, L., ‘Populists in power around the world’, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 13 November 2018, <<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3283962>>; Timbro, Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index (Stockholm: Timbro, 2019), <<https://populismindex.com/report/>>.

To examine how populist governments influence democracy, the analysis compares years under populist government with years of non-populist government in the same sample of countries. All other countries covered by the GSoD Indices were ignored because the sources do not contain information that would allow them to be reliably identified as ruled or not ruled by populist governments. Since the duration of populist governments in office differs across countries, the analysis looks at the mean changes of GSoD Indices aspects per year, comparing 'populist' and 'non-populist' episodes for a sample of 43 countries from 1980 to 2018 (see Table 2).

The data shows that the quality of democracy declines under populist governments. These comparisons show that periods with populist governments in office entail declines on 22 of the 28 aspects of democracy measured by the GSoD Indices. In contrast, episodes without populist government are frequently marked by improvements. Only six aspects of democracy improved under populist governments. Of these, only Electoral Participation increased more than under non-populist governments, while the other aspects (Direct Democracy, Inclusive Suffrage, Basic Welfare, Gender Equality and Local Democracy) saw an increase during both periods, but improved more during non-populist governments.

To determine whether the differences between the mean changes per episode are significant, regression analyses were conducted to measure the effect of populist government on the GSoD Indices aspects.² These models indicate that declines are significant for Elected Government, Civil Liberties and three of its subcomponents: Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Association and Assembly, and Freedom of Movement. Under non-populist government, the mean GSoD Indices score for Civil Liberties, for example, improved by 1.1 per cent per year. In contrast, populist government was associated with an average annual decline of 0.8 per cent on Civil Liberties.

Therefore, the GSoD Indices provide empirical evidence that populist-led governments weaken and undermine democracy. This impact is most clearly visible for critical civil liberties underpinning the media, civil society and the public sphere. The GSoD Indices tend to confirm the assumption that populists mobilize hitherto indifferent voters, since they point to increases in electoral turnout. However, these gains

2. The models include country and year fixed effects. In addition, two control variables are included: the Representative Government attribute of the GSoD Indices and the gross domestic product per capita (logtransformed). This design allowed control for the influence of individual country features, years, levels of income and levels of democracy. All explanatory variables were lagged by one year. Cluster-robust standard errors were estimated to relax the assumption of uncorrelated error terms (Brusis 2019).

in representativity are associated with losses in many other aspects of democracy. The present findings are broadly in line with the insights of recent scholarly studies that use other data sets of democracy and populist rule to assess the impact of populist government (Kyle and Mounk 2018; Lührmann et al. 2019).

5. Populism and democratic backsliding

The GSoD Indices refer to democratic backsliding as the gradual weakening of checks on government and civil liberties by democratically elected governments. Democratic backsliding is an incremental, partly concealed institutional change that is legitimized by references to popular electoral mandates, majority decisions and laws. It is often driven by the intentional dismantling of accountability institutions. Other forms of democratic erosion are generally not driven by such explicit intentions.

Low levels of public support for democracy are associated with higher declines and an increased probability of backsliding. Declines in support may be due to weak governmental performance, economic crisis or more adversarial political conflicts undermining the credibility of democratic institutions.

The GSoD data shows that populist presidents and governments tend to make democratic backsliding more likely and to increase the scope of decline.³ Backsliding episodes usually begin prior to the inauguration of populist-led governments, but this does not mean that populist challengers did not exist when the backsliding began. On the contrary, qualitative evidence from the cases analysed suggests that such challengers contributed to the polarization of society before they took power.

Based on the GSoD Indices, a total of 10 countries in the world are currently experiencing democratic backsliding (see Table 3). The most severe cases are Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Turkey. However, countries such as India, the Philippines and Ukraine are also affected. In Nicaragua (from 2006) and Pakistan (from 2014), the backsliding was so severe that it led to a regression into hybridity (partial democratic breakdown). All of those 10 countries have been described by analysts as being led by populist governments or leaders of some sort, on either the right or left of the political spectrum.

3. However, these effects are only partially significant and should be interpreted with caution, since the available survey and populism data does not cover all countries identified as backsliding.

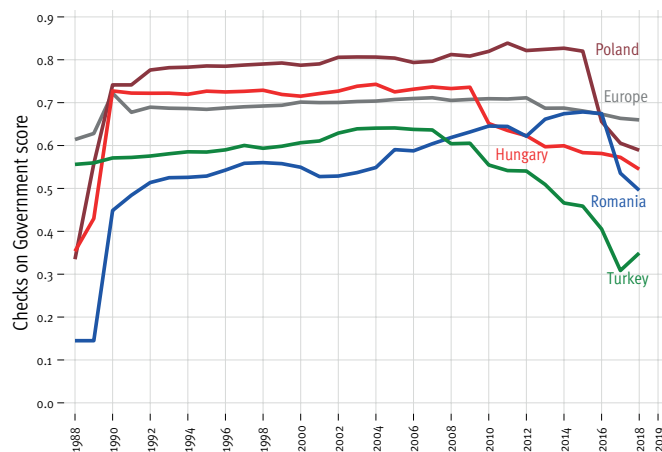
TABLE 3

Episodes of democratic backsliding in the GSoD data set

LEVELS OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING			
Moderate	Severe	Severe which led to democratic breakdown	
		Partial democratic breakdown From democracy to hybrid regime	Full democratic breakdown From democracy to non-democracy
India 2006–2018	Hungary 2006–2018	Nicaragua 2006–2018	Venezuela Regressed from a hybrid regime to a non-democracy in 2017
Philippines 2015–2018	Poland 2013–2018	Pakistan 2014–2018	
Ukraine 2010–2018	Romania 2017–2018	Venezuela 1999–2010 Regressed to a hybrid regime in 2008	
	Serbia 2010–2018		
	Turkey 2008–2018		

FIGURE 2

Checks on Government in East-Central European countries and Turkey



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices (2019), <<http://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

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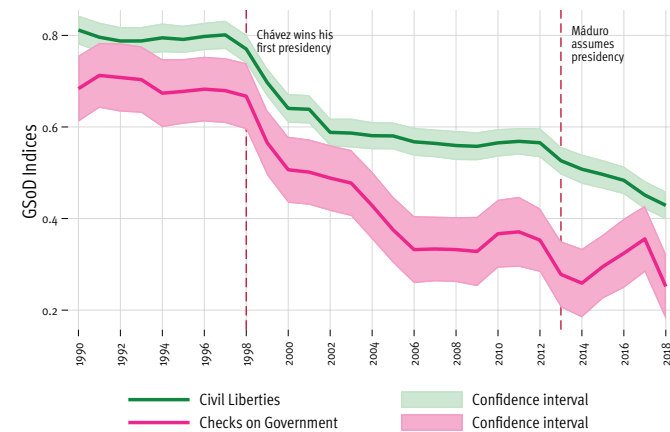
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FIGURE 3

Backsliding in Venezuela



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices (2019), <<http://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

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Colophon

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