



The Global State of Democracy IN FOCUS

No. 2, October 2018

The Global State of Democracy

Key findings and new data

Summary

This *GSoD In Focus* presents the main findings from the latest update to the Global State of Democracy Indices (GSoD Indices), which now include data on 158 countries for the period 1975–2017.

Introduction

In November 2017 International IDEA launched the first edition of a new biennial report, *The Global State of Democracy*. The report provided evidence-based analysis and data on the global and regional state of democracy. It also contributed to the public debate on democracy, informed policy interventions and examined problem-solving approaches to the challenges facing democracies worldwide.

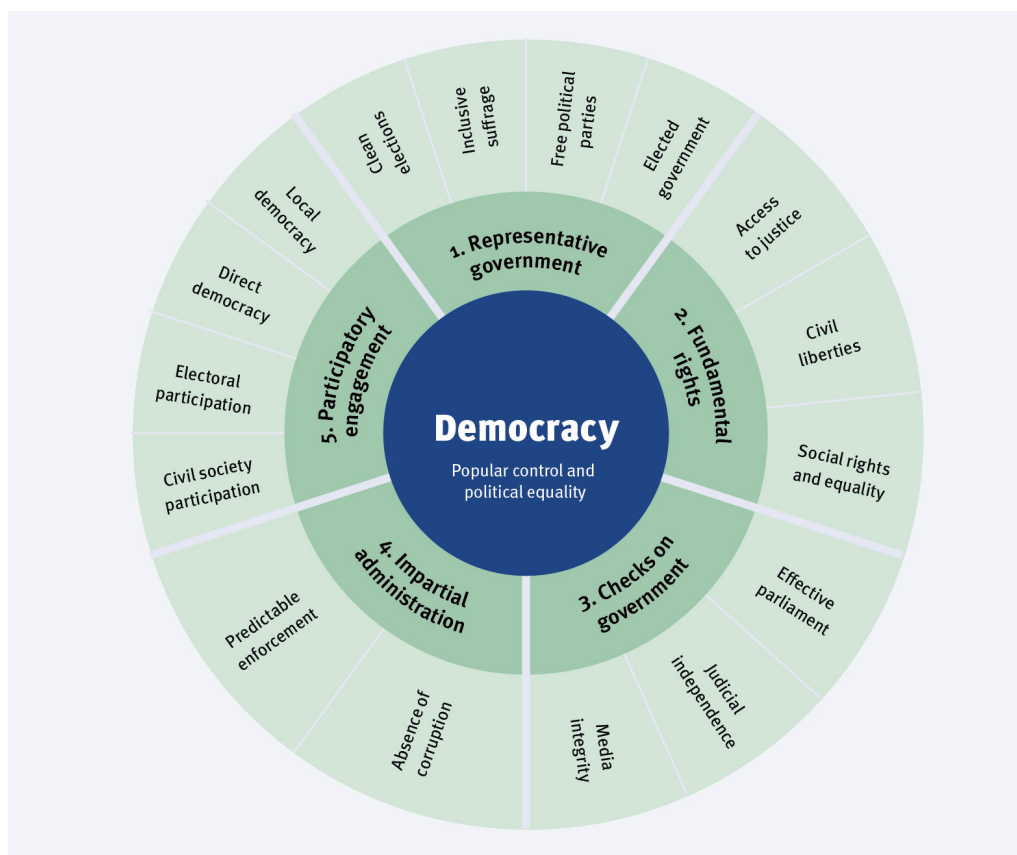
At the same time, International IDEA launched the Global State of Democracy Indices (GSoD Indices), which serve as the main evidence base for the report, and provide a new, comprehensive measurement of democracy. The GSoD Indices depict democratic trends across five main attributes of democracy, as well as a number of subattributes and subcomponents (see Figure 1). For the sake of clarity, these attributes, subattributes and subcomponents are referred to in this *GSoD In Focus* as **aspects of democracy**.

The GSoD Indices aggregate indicators from a number of data sets. Approximately 70 per cent of the data comes from indicators gathered by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project. Other sources include Polity, United Nations Statistics and the International Country Risk Guide (ICRG). For a full list of data sets used in the GSoD Indices, see *GSoD In Focus* No. 1 (International IDEA 2018a). Further details on the GSoD data set and its associated Indices can be found in Skaaning (2018).

This *GSoD In Focus* presents the main findings from the new GSoD Indices data, which now covers a total of 158 countries for the period 1975–2017. Future updates to the data will occur on an annual basis. More detailed analyses of regional findings will be included in the second edition of *The Global State of Democracy*, which will be published in November 2019. Qualitative analyses of both regional and national findings, which help to explain the statistical trends observed in the data, will be published as part of the 2019 report, and do not therefore form part of the analysis presented here.

FIGURE 1

The Global State of Democracy: Conceptual framework



Source: International IDEA

1. Overview of the current democracy debate

While regular warnings of a democratic standstill, decline or crisis have been issued since the mid-1990s (Thomassen and Van Ham 2017), the data and analysis presented in the first edition of *The Global State of Democracy* demonstrate that the world has seen extensive progress in almost all aspects of democracy since 1975. The report concludes that, despite upturns and downturns were visible in individual countries, at the global level there is no evidence of statistically significant progress or decline in the medium-term (i.e. in the period 2005–15).

This finding is in stark contrast to the rather bleak picture of the current state of democracy which has dominated the public debate in recent years. To take two examples: Freedom House called its 2018 report *Democracy in Crisis* and reported a twelfth consecutive year in which more countries experienced a democratic decline than democratic advances (Freedom House 2018). Similarly, the 2018 *Democracy Index* issued by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) was subtitled ‘Free speech under attack’ and reached similar conclusions about a global decline in democracy (EIU 2018). A narrative has taken hold that democracy is in unquestionable decline around the world.

To shed some new light on these claims, this *GSoD In Focus* provides an overview of democratic trends around the world from a short- (4–5 years), medium- (10 years) and long-term perspective (42 years, since 1975). A long-term perspective in particular is key to understanding the context and scale of current developments. The analysis presented here is based solely on the mainly descriptive data in the new GSoD Indices data sets. More in-depth and qualitative analyses of regional contexts and country cases will be presented in the 2019 edition of *The Global State of Democracy*.

2. Overview of the global and regional democracy landscape

The key findings from the most recent update to the GSoD Indices data are as follows.

- The global expansion of democracy has come to a halt in the past decade.
- The number of countries experiencing democratic decline is now greater than the number experiencing democratic gains, breaking a trend that stretches back to 1980.
- The highest declines are linked to aspects relating to civic space.
- Regions with a concentration of so-called established or high-performing democracies (e.g. in North America, Europe, and more recently in Latin America and the Caribbean) have experienced democratic declines in the last five years.
- The democratic decline in established democracies has been gradual. *The Global State of Democracy* refers to this as ‘modern democratic backsliding’, which is characterized by democratically elected parties or leaders using legal means to weaken democracy from within.
- This democratic decline is not necessarily characterized by a deterioration in the conduct of elections, but more often by a worsening situation with regard to respect for civil liberties, restrictions on civil society or the media.
- Africa and Asia have continued to experience democratic expansion in the past five years, while other regions have seen declines. However, a large percentage of countries in Africa and Asia still have low levels of democratic performance.

2.1. Global democratic trends, 2007–17

The number of countries experiencing democratic declines is now greater than the number of countries experiencing democratic gains, breaking a trend that stretches back to 1980.

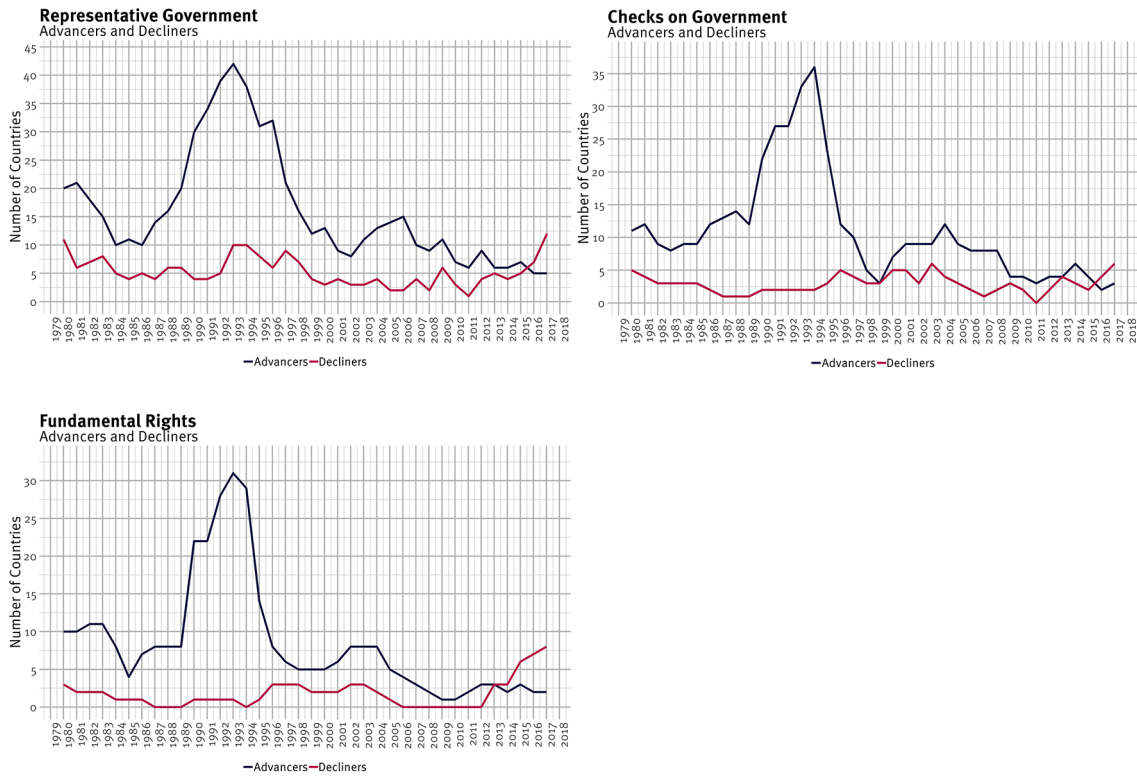
Despite the global democratic gains over the past 42 years, the rate of democratic expansion, measured in terms of global averages, has stagnated in the past decade. More worryingly, when measuring the number of countries declining in some aspects of democracy against the number of countries advancing, the countries in decline are starting to outnumber the advancing countries, breaking a continuous trend that stretches back for the entire period covered by the GSoD Indices (i.e. since 1975). This break in the trend can be seen in Figure 2 for Representative Government, Checks on Government and Fundamental Rights. If a country has seen a statistically significant positive change in one of these three aspects over the past five-year period, it is grouped as an ‘advancer’. If a country has seen a statistically significant decline in that time, it is grouped as a ‘decliner’.

The GSoD Indices data shows that, since 2016, the scores for Representative Government and Checks on Government have declined in more countries than they have advanced. The trend is similar when it comes to Fundamental Rights (and also Civil Society Participation), but for these aspects the decline started in 2014. These findings differ from those of Freedom House, for example, which began noting a democratic rollback in the mid-2000s. However, International IDEA’s findings when using this measurement confirm the concerns raised in the current wider democracy discourse about a democratic downturn.

From 2012 to 2017, 62 countries experienced a decline in at least one of the 28 aspects of democratic performance covered by the GSoD Indices, while only 41 countries experienced gains (31 countries experienced both gains and declines on different aspects). Moreover, between 2014 and 2017, for the first time since 1975, there were two or more consecutive years in which more countries declined than improved in any aspect of democracy.

FIGURE 2

Global trends: Number of countries advancing and declining, 1975–1980 to 2017

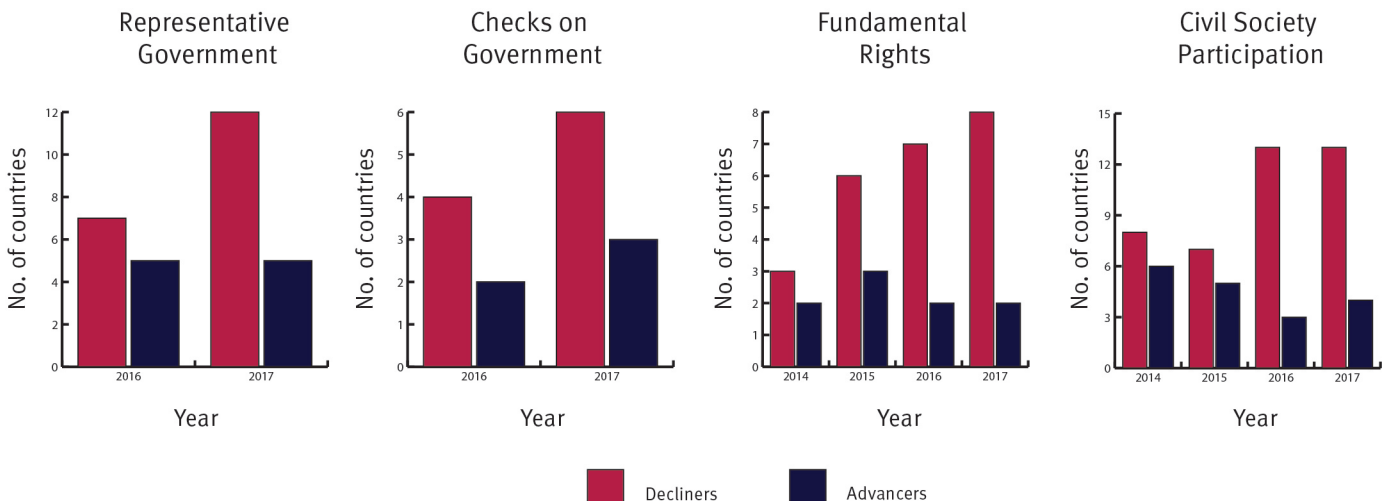


Source: GSoD Indices, <<http://idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

Figure 3 shows the consecutive years in which the number of countries declining outnumbered those advancing in the previous five years in relation to four of the aspects covered by the GSoD Indices: Representative Government, Checks on Government and Fundamental Rights (which are all *attributes* of democracy) and Civil Society Participation (which is a *subattribute* as there is no aggregate score for participatory engagement).

FIGURE 3

Number of countries in which declines outnumbered advances during consecutive years, by attribute/subattribute, 2014–17

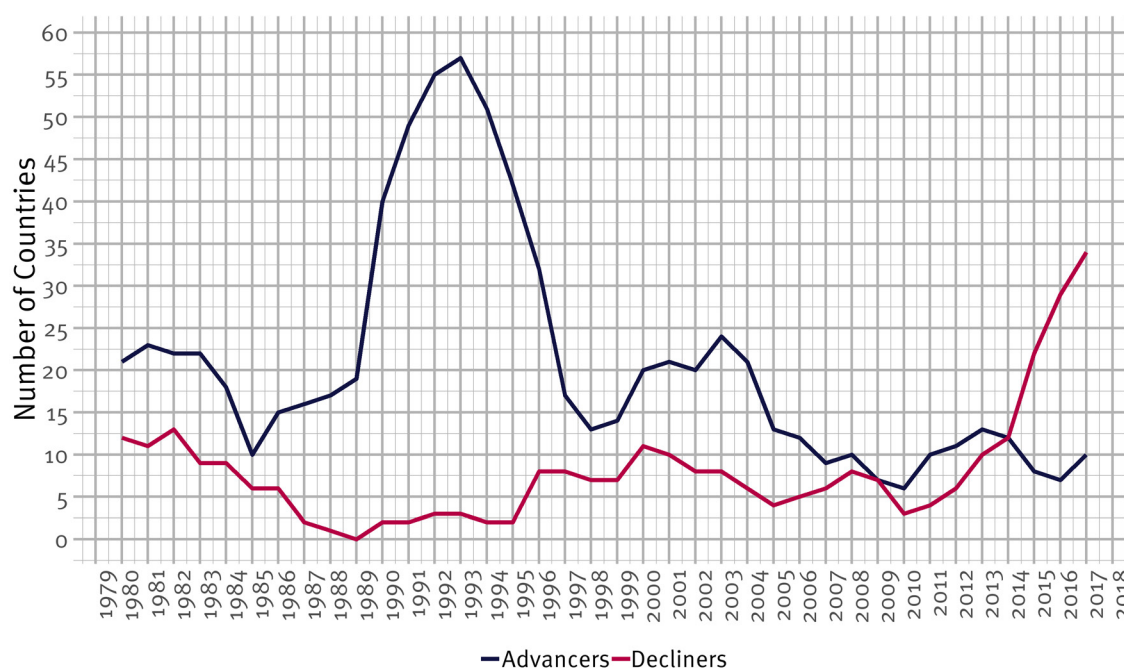


The largest declines observed are linked to aspects relating to civic space, such as Civil Liberties, Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Association and Assembly, Civil Society Participation and Media Integrity.

Within Fundamental Rights, the aspect of **Civil Liberties** has seen the most countries declining in the past five years. In 2017, civil liberties declined in 34 countries, compared to 10 where they advanced—a figure that has been constant since 2004. Civil Liberties is also the aspect with the largest gap between the number of advancing and declining countries (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Global trends: Number of advancing and declining countries, Civil Liberties, 1975–1980 to 2017



Source: GSoD Indices, <<http://idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

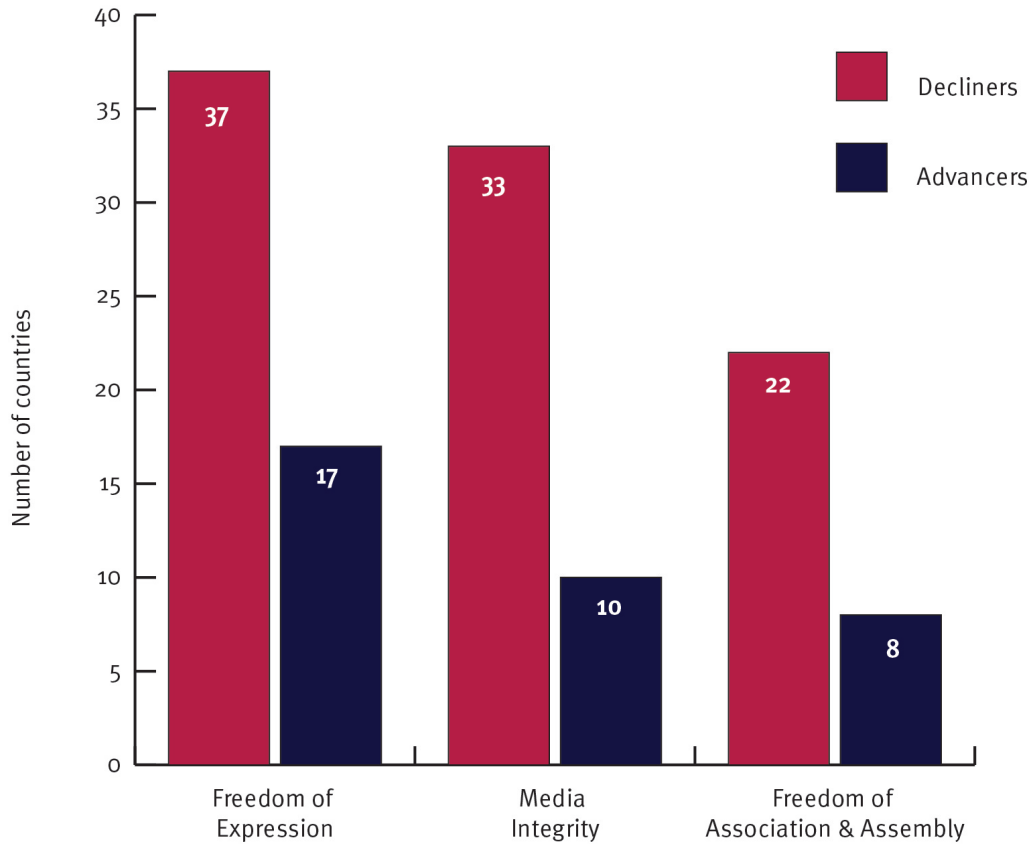
Analyses of the causes of the decline in Civil Liberties identify declines in Freedom of Expression as the major factor. On this aspect, 37 countries have declined while only 17 have advanced in the past five years. There is a similar pattern with Media Integrity, on which 33 countries declined and 10 advanced. Similar patterns can be observed for Freedom of Association and Assembly (see Figure 5), and Civil Society Participation.

While the trend for the number of countries deteriorating in their democratic performance now outnumbering the number of countries advancing is a cause for concern, it is important to note that the vast majority of countries (around 140) have seen no significant changes in their democratic performance in either direction since 2012. This interpretation is based on an individual analysis of each attribute, as opposed to an analysis across all 28 aspects of democracy covered by the GSoD Indices.

For Impartial Administration (see Figure 6) the trend is one of polarization, with an increase in both the number of countries advancing and declining. The subattributes that make up Impartial Administration (Absence of Corruption and Predictable Enforcement) show an even more marked polarization. Since 2006, more countries have made significant gains in reducing corruption, but there are also an increasing number of countries where corruption is gaining ground. Predictable Enforcement shows the opposite trend, with more countries deteriorating and less countries advancing since 2011.

FIGURE 5

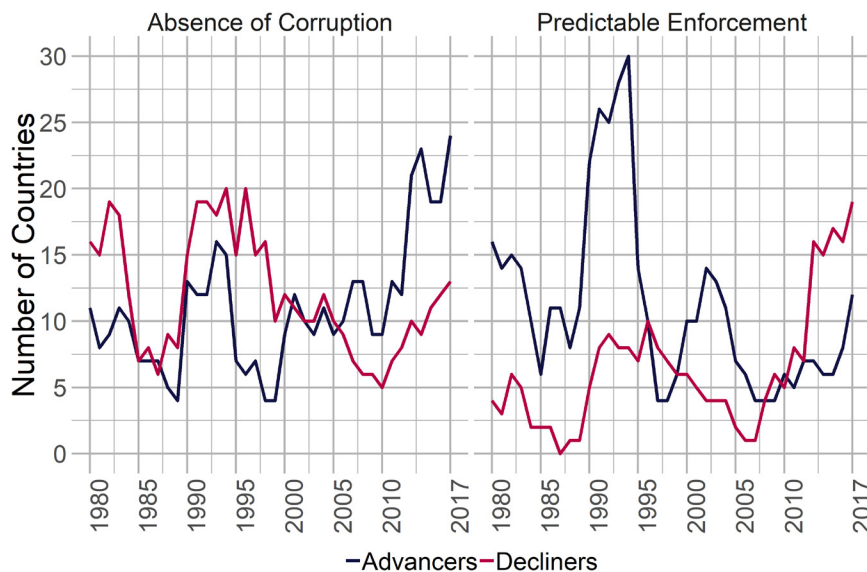
Number of countries with statistically significant gains or declines, Freedom of Expression, Media Integrity, and Freedom of Association and Assembly, 2012–17



Source: GSoD Indices, <<http://idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

FIGURE 6

Advancers and decliners (country level), subattributes of Impartial Administration, 1980–2017



2.2. Regional democratic trends

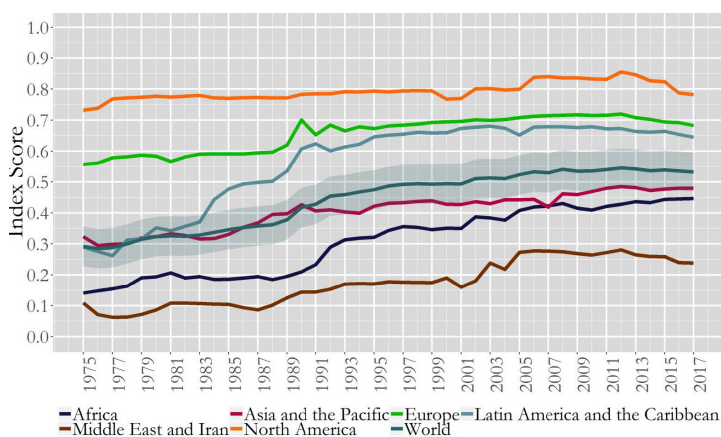
This section analyses regional democratic trends as regional averages per attribute in the period 2007–17, with some contextual data to show progress since 1975. Statistically significant changes are not generally seen in global or regional averages. Therefore, a slight, (statistically insignificant) decrease or increase in regional averages is described here as ‘downward pressure’ or ‘upward movement’. For more information on the geographical definition of regions in the GSoD Indices and *The Global State of Democracy* see International IDEA (2018b).

Attribute 1: Representative Government

Representative Government covers the extent to which access to political power is free and equal as demonstrated by competitive, inclusive and regular elections. It includes four subattributes: Clean Elections, Inclusive Suffrage, Free Political Parties and Elected Government. Figure 7 shows the trends by region for this attribute in the period 1975–2017.

FIGURE 7

Trends by region, Representative Government, 1975–2017



Source: GSoD Indices, <<http://idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

Since 1975, Latin America and the Caribbean has demonstrated the greatest improvements in Representative Government, followed by Africa. Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East and Iran, have also made improvements over the over the past 42 years, but at a slower rate than Africa or Latin America and the Caribbean. North America and Western Europe (classed as a subregion within Europe) have had similar levels of democratic development for the past 42 years, outperforming all other regions across all attributes.

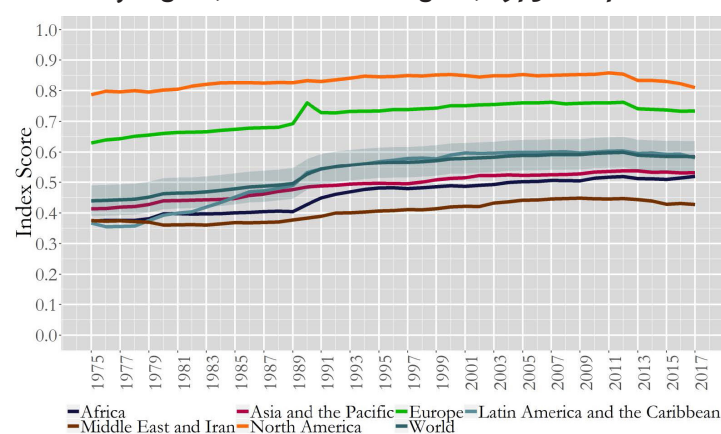
Since 2007, North America, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and Iran have all faced downward pressure on the regional averages for the attribute of Representative Government, whereas Asia and the Pacific and Africa have experienced upward movement. Excluding North America, and Asia and the Pacific, at least one country in every region suffered a statistically significant decline in this attribute between 2007 and 2017. Albeit starting from very different levels of democratic development, only countries in Africa (Angola, Côte d’Ivoire, the Gambia, Guinea, Nigeria, Sudan and Tunisia) and Asia and the Pacific (Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Nepal and Timor-Leste) experienced statistically significant increases on Representative Government during this period. In these countries, access to political power was freer and more equal in 2017 than it was a decade before.

Attribute 2: Fundamental Rights

Fundamental Rights captures the degree to which civil liberties are respected, and whether people have access to basic resources that enable their active participation in the political process. This aspect overlaps significantly with the international covenants on civil and political, and economic, social and cultural rights. It includes three subattributes: Access to Justice, Civil Liberties, and Social Rights and Equality. It also includes the following subcomponents of Civil Liberties: Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Association and Assembly, Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Movement, Personal Integrity and Security, Basic Welfare, Social Group Equality, and Gender Equality. Figure 8 shows the trends by region for this attribute in the period 1975–2017.

FIGURE 8

Trends by region, Fundamental Rights, 1975–2017



Source: GSoD Indices, <<http://idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

Since 1975, Latin America and the Caribbean has improved most with regards to respect for Fundamental Rights, followed by Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe, albeit at a slower pace. The Middle East and Iran is the region that has recorded the fewest advances. Since 2007, the regional average for Fundamental Rights in both Asia and the Pacific and Africa has stagnated. There has been downward pressure in North America, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and Iran.

In the past 10 years, there were improvements on **Social Rights and Equality** in Africa and Asia and the Pacific. This aspect measures the extent to which basic welfare (social security, health and education) and political and social equality between social groups and genders have been realized. Africa has witnessed the greatest improvement in the past 10 years, followed by Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean. On basic welfare, there has been a statistically significant increase in both Africa and Asia and the Pacific since 2007. In both regions, citizens had better access to basic welfare in 2017 than was the case 10 years before.

The subcomponent of **Gender Equality** (which aggregates indicators on political power by gender, representation of women in legislatures and executives, barriers to women’s participation in civil society and mean years of schooling) saw considerable improvement across the world between 1975 and 2017, with almost a doubling of its global score, from 0.37 in 1975 to 0.6 in 2017. Despite significant differences in starting points, similar increases were seen in all the regions of the world. In the past decade, Africa has again improved at a faster rate than any other region. Of the 10 countries that had statistically significant improvements in Gender Equality

between 2007 and 2017, seven are in Africa (Algeria, Angola, Libya, Namibia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Tanzania), two are in Asia and the Pacific (Myanmar and Nepal) and one is in Latin America and the Caribbean (Ecuador).

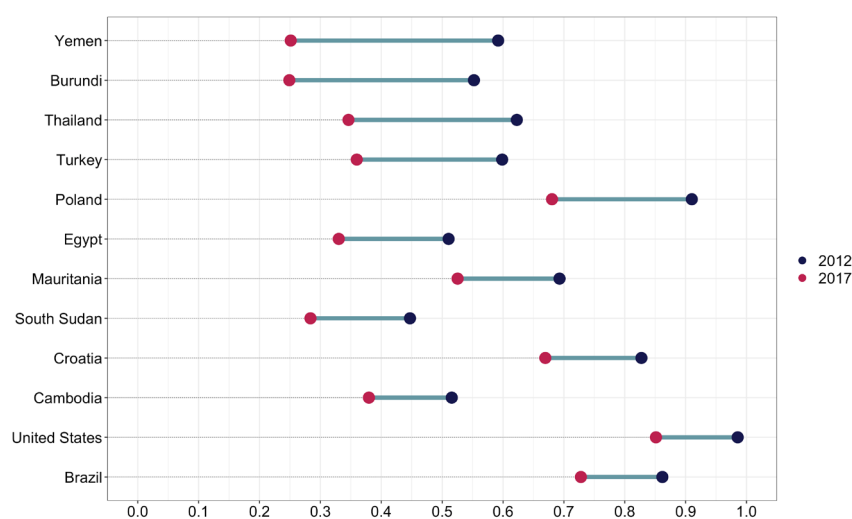
Civil Liberties measures the extent to which civil rights and liberties are respected, and the aspects that protect citizens in the exercise their political rights: Freedoms of Expression, Association and Assembly, Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Movement, and Personal Integrity and Security.

Worryingly, there has been downward pressure on all regional averages in the past decade, an increase in the number of countries declining, and a decrease in the number of countries advancing, with decliners now by far outnumbering advancers. A diverse range of countries, in terms of both region and level of democratic development, experienced statistically significant declines in Civil Liberties between 2012 and 2017. The largest declines were found (in descending order) in Yemen, Burundi, Thailand, Turkey and Poland (see Figure 9).

It is noteworthy that larger established democracies, such as Brazil, India and the United States, are also seeing declines in their Civil Liberties scores.

FIGURE 9

Civil Liberties in ‘declining countries’, 2012–17



Source: GSoD Indices, <<http://idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

Attribute 3: Checks on Government

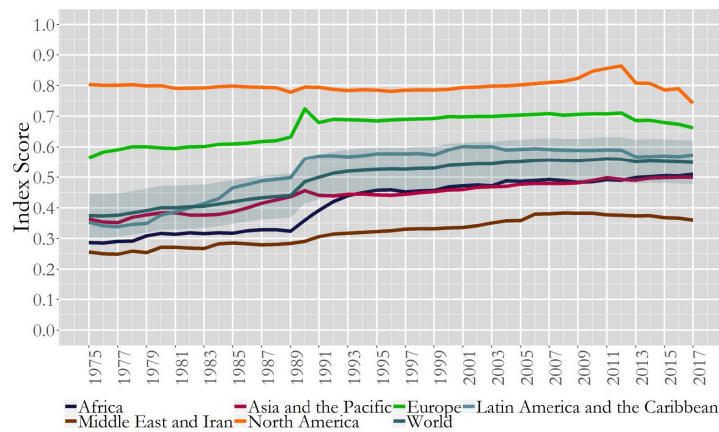
Checks on Government measures effective control of executive power. It includes three subattributes: Effective Parliament, Judicial Independence and Media Integrity. Figure 11 shows the trends by region for this attribute in the period 1975–2017.

Since 1975, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Africa, have made the most improvements on strengthening their Checks on Government. Asia and the Pacific has also improved, but at a slower rate. The slowest improvements have been in Europe and in the Middle East and Iran. Since 2007, Asia and the Pacific and Africa have continued to see upward movements on this attribute. Latin America and the Caribbean has remained constant while North America, Europe, and the Middle East and Iran have suffered downward pressure. Effective Parliament and Judicial Independence show similar trends.

Media Integrity, which measures the diversity of the media and the level of critical coverage of political issues, has stagnated or declined in every region since 2007. These declines are starkest—but not yet statistically significant—in Europe, North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean. A less critical and diverse media is a threat to the crucial role that the media plays in keeping governments accountable.

FIGURE 10

Trends by region, Checks on Government, 1975–2017

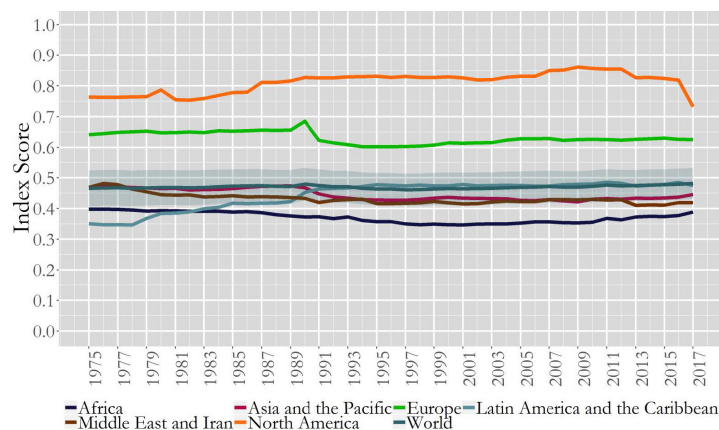


Attribute 4: Impartial Administration

Impartial Administration concerns how fairly and predictably political decisions are implemented, and thus reflects key aspects of the rule of law. It includes two subattributes: Absence of Corruption and Predictable Enforcement. Figure 11 shows the trends by region for this attribute in the period 1975–2017.

FIGURE 11

Trends by region, Impartial Administration, 1975–2017



Source: GSoD Indices, <<http://idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

The only region that has seen some improvement on the impartiality of its administration since 1975 is Latin America and the Caribbean. All other regions have seen slight (albeit statistically insignificant) declines, starting with the Middle East and Iran, followed by North America, and then Europe, and Asia and the Pacific.

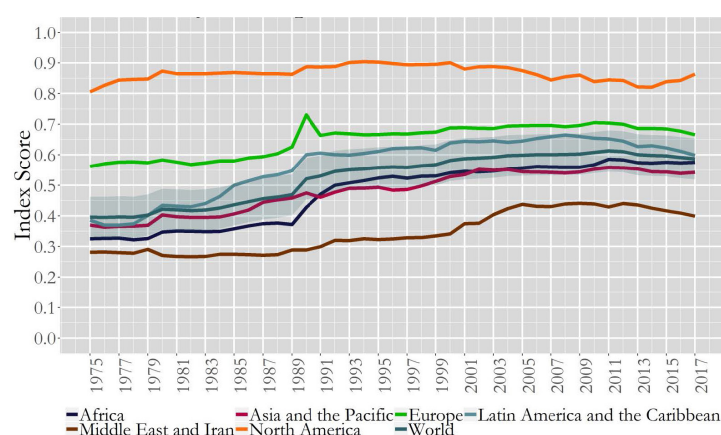
Since 2007, all regions have continued stagnating on this aspect, while North America has seen a statistically significant decrease, driven by a decline in the USA since 2016. While the 10-year regional averages on Impartial Administration show no variation, this does not mean that individual countries are not displaying signs of progress or regression. Between 2007 and 2017, albeit from widely varying starting points, The Gambia, Guinea, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar and Tunisia, among others, have all seen statistically significant improvements in impartial administration, while Burundi, Cambodia, Syria, Turkey, the USA, Venezuela and Zambia have all suffered significant declines.

Attribute 5: Participatory Engagement

Participatory Engagement measures instruments of, and for the realization of, people’s participation and societal engagement at different levels. Because they capture different phenomena, the subattributes of this aspect—Civil Society Participation, Electoral Participation, Direct Democracy and Local Democracy—are not aggregated into a single index. Figure 13 shows the trends by region for Civil Society Participation in the period 1975–2017.

FIGURE 12

Trends by region, Civil Society Participation, 1975–2017



Source: GSoD Indices, <<http://idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

Since 1975, Africa has seen the largest expansion of civil society (measured in terms of the extent to which organized, voluntary, self-generating and autonomous social life is dense and vibrant). Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia and the Pacific, have also seen an expansion, although slower than in Africa. The slowest advancing regions have been Europe, and the Middle East and Iran.

Since 2007, there has been upward movement in North America and stability in Africa, and in Asia and the Pacific. Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and Iran, and Europe have experienced downward pressure. Between 2007 and 2017, there were statistically significant increases only in countries in Africa or Asia and the Pacific. The largest increases were in The Gambia, Libya, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Tunisia, all from varying levels of civil society development. The declines were much more evenly spread. Countries from every region apart from North America had declining scores on **Civil Society Participation**. The countries with the largest decreases were Bahrain, Brazil, India, Thailand and Turkey.

On **Electoral Participation** (voter turnout), there was either stability or a slight, statistically insignificant decline in all regions apart from Asia and the Pacific, while there was a notable

increase in the Middle East and Iran. On **Local Democracy** there were increases in North America, Africa and Asia and the Pacific, but either stagnation or decline in all other regions.

2.3. Country-level changes, 2013–17

Despite the important democratic gains made in several regions over the past 42 years, developments in recent years provide cause for concern. The most significant reason for concern is the democratic decline in countries in regions, such as Europe, that have traditionally had high levels of democratic performance. Recently, declines have also been noted in several aspects of US democracy. Moreover, a number of recent declines are also noted in what has been considered large established democracies, such as Brazil and India.

Of the 12 countries that have experienced a decline in the largest number of democratic aspects in the last five years, four are in Europe (see Table 1). Turkey is the country with the highest number of declines, in 15 of its democratic aspects, followed by Poland, Romania and Ukraine. Hungary is also a country that has seen significant democratic declines over the past decade.

TABLE 1

Countries with significant declines in highest number of aspects, 2013–17

| Country | No. of aspects declined |
|---------------|-------------------------|
| Yemen | 18 |
| Thailand | 15 |
| Turkey | 15 |
| Poland | 12 |
| Brazil | 11 |
| Burundi | 11 |
| Venezuela | 8 |
| India | 7 |
| Romania | 7 |
| Ukraine | 7 |
| Nicaragua | 6 |
| United States | 6 |

Source: GSoD Indices, <<http://idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

Note, however, that the declines seen in these established democracies need to be put into context as both declines and gains occur from very different points of departure. Brazil and Poland remain in the top 25 per cent in the world on Representative Government; Poland is in the top 25 per cent on Impartial Administration and mid-range on other attributes; India scores in mid-range compared to other countries on all aspects of its democracy; Romania scores mid-range on all aspects; Hungary scores mid-range on all aspects, but is in the top 25 per cent on Fundamental Rights due to high scores on Access to Justice; while Turkey scores in the bottom 25 per cent in the world on Fundamental Rights, Checks on Government and Civil Society Participation, but mid-range on Impartial Administration.

However, there are also a number of countries in recent years that have experienced significant democratic gains. Of the six countries with statistically significant gains in at least five of the democratic aspects, three are in Asia, two are in Africa and one is in Europe. Of the 15 countries with statistically significant gains in at least three aspects, nine are in Africa, four are in Asia, one is in Latin America and the Caribbean and one in Europe. Here again, all countries listed in Table 2 have very different points of departure in their democratic performance. Hence, despite the gains, Africa and Asia continue to experience significant democratic challenges: around one-third of Asian and African countries score in the bottom 25 per cent in the world in Representative Government.

TABLE 2

Countries with significant gains in highest number of aspects, 2013–17

| Country | No. of aspects gained |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| The Gambia | 20 |
| Sri Lanka | 13 |
| Central African Republic | 10 |
| Macedonia | 7 |
| Republic of Korea (South Korea) | 7 |
| Myanmar | 5 |

Source: GSoD Indices, <<http://idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

Conclusions

The current democratic landscape is facing an increasing number of challenges. Since 2014, more countries have seen democratic declines than advances. Especially worrying is the decline in what were traditionally democratically high-performing countries or established democracies.

However, if a long-term historical perspective is adopted, significant democratic gains have been achieved over the past 42 years, leading to the expansion of democracy into regions that previously had little experience of democratic forms of government, such as Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Middle East and Iran. Thus, democratically, the world today is faring better than it did in the 1970s and 1980s.

Nonetheless, current challenges must be taken seriously and addressed to ensure that the current declines do not take hold and gain further ground. Serious measures are needed to reinvigorate the belief in, and the quality of, democracy in those countries, to reaffirm democracy’s resilience, halt the decline and show emerging democracies that democracy is still the best model around, compared to all others.

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About this series

In 2018 International IDEA launched the new GSoD In Focus series. These short updates apply the GSoD Indices data to current issues, providing evidence-based analysis and insights into the contemporary democracy debate.

Where to find the data

The GSoD Indices are available on the International IDEA website. Users can generate their own data visualizations and extract data at the country, regional and global levels across attributes and subattributes for specific years or for selected time periods starting from 1975. The Indices are updated annually.

◀<http://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>▶

COLOPHON

About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mandate to promote and advance democracy worldwide. International IDEA contributes to the public debate on democracy and assists in strengthening processes, reforms, institutions and actors that build, advance and safeguard democracy, with a focus on electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation.

The Global State of Democracy Initiative is headed by the Democracy Assessment and Political Analysis (DAPA) Unit. For queries regarding the GSoD Initiative or the GSoD Indices, please contact the DAPA team and GSoD Helpdesk at GSoD.Indices@idea.int.

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

Strömsborg
SE-103 34 Stockholm, SWEDEN
Tel: +46 8 698 37 00
info@idea.int
www.idea.int

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