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*First edition*

# The Global State of Democracy

Exploring Democracy's Resilience



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*The Global State of Democracy: Exploring Democracy's Resilience*

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International IDEA  
Strömsborg  
SE-103 34 STOCKHOLM  
SWEDEN  
Tel: +46 8 698 37 00  
Email: [info@idea.int](mailto:info@idea.int)

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Text editing: Kelley Friel

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# Introduction

Democratization processes over the last four decades have created many opportunities for public participation in political life. More people today live in electoral democracies than ever before. However, numerous countries grapple with challenges to democracy, contributing to the perception that democracy is in ‘decline’ or has experienced ‘reversals’ or ‘stagnation’. Some of these challenges relate to issues of corruption, money in politics and policy capture, inequality and social exclusion, migration or post-conflict transition to democracy. Many leaders and democratic actors continue to manipulate democratic processes and institutions, which often contributes to democratic backsliding in their respective countries.

**Written by**  
Armend Bekaj

Governments, parliaments and political parties are increasingly viewed by their electorates as unable to cope with complex policy problems. Many see a crisis of legitimacy in democratic institutions and processes, coupled with a creeping erosion of public trust, which exposes democracies as fragile and vulnerable. Even mature democratic systems can corrode if they are not nurtured and protected. There is evidence of a growing disconnect between politicians and the electorate. Transnational challenges related to inequality, migration and globalization are complex problems that challenge democratic institutions to respond effectively to public concerns, causing a decline in trust and legitimacy in democratic governance.

It is thus no coincidence that populist and extremist political parties and leaders are successfully exploiting their electorates’ insecurities. Exclusionary rhetoric occupies more space in public discourse than before and can influence the outcome of elections. If the recent rise of populism with authoritarian tendencies is unopposed, it could undermine democracy from within, using democratic tools.

It is thus natural to wonder whether the best of what democracy has to offer is in the past. The so-called third wave of democracy expansion that began in the 1970s was a good omen of things to come. With the fall of communism, Central and Eastern European countries enthusiastically embraced democratic values and principles. There was further hope that the 2010–11 Arab Uprisings would trigger a new wave of democratization that would be embraced by countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Such expectations were quickly dashed, however, as (with the exception of Tunisia) new autocracies and terrorist groups filled the void left behind by deposed dictators. In countries such as Hungary, the Philippines, Turkey and Venezuela, extremism, populist leadership and autocratic tendencies continue to challenge democracy.

Considering these developments, is there reason to believe that democracy is in trouble, or do recent events simply constitute a temporary downward fluctuation? Are sceptics overreacting to the alarmist daily headlines, and therefore losing sight of democracy’s numerous benefits over the last few decades? And under what conditions is democracy resilient?

International IDEA defines democracy as a political system that is based on popular control and political equality. One of the Institute’s core principles is that democracy is a universal value for citizens and a globally owned concept for which there is no universally applicable model

## About this publication: definitions, methodology and structure

This first edition of *The Global State of Democracy* explores current challenges to democracy and the enabling conditions for its resilience.

### Definitions

As an intergovernmental organization that supports sustainable democracy worldwide, International IDEA defines **democracy** as a political system that is based on popular control and political equality. One of the Institute's core principles is that democracy is a universal value for citizens and a globally owned concept for which there is no universally applicable model. Democracy is an ideal that seeks to guarantee equality and basic freedoms, empower ordinary people, resolve disagreements through peaceful dialogue, respect differences, and bring about political and social renewal without economic and social disruption. Hence, International IDEA's broad concept of democracy encompasses more than just free elections; it has multiple dimensions, including civil and political rights, social and economic rights, democratic governance and rule of law.

International IDEA's broad understanding of democracy overlaps with features emphasized by different traditions of democratic thought associated with the concepts of electoral democracy, liberal democracy, social democracy and participatory democracy. This concept of democracy reflects a core value enshrined in article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that the 'will of the people' is the basis for the legitimacy and authority of sovereign states. It reflects a common and universal desire for peace, security and justice. Democracy reflects the fundamental ethical principles of human equality and the dignity of persons, and is thus inseparable from human rights.

International IDEA defines **resilience** as the ability of social systems to cope with, innovate, survive and recover from complex challenges

and crises that present stress or pressure that can lead to systemic failure. This publication explores democracy's resilience: its ability as a political system to recover, adapt and/or flexibly address such complex challenges and crises.

Based on this definition, International IDEA has constructed new Global State of Democracy indices (GSoD indices) based on its State of Democracy assessment framework (a tool designed for in-country stakeholders to assess the quality of democracy). The indices were developed by International IDEA staff with the support of external experts and the supervision of an expert advisory board consisting of five leading experts in the field of democracy measurement. The GSoD indices examine 155 countries over the period 1975–2015 and provide a diverse data set and evidence base for analysing global and regional trends. The GSoD indices data sets start in 1975 to ensure a high reliability and quality of secondary data sources.

### Methodology

Both the indices and the analysis contained in this publication respond to the lack of analytical material on democracy building and the quality of democracy at the global and regional levels; most studies focus on the national level. It strives to bridge the gap between academic research, policy development and democracy assistance initiatives. It is intended to inform policymakers and decision-makers, civil society organizations and democracy activists, policy influencers and think tanks, and democracy support providers and practitioners.

As an Institute-wide project, the publication employs a mixed methodology. It incorporates input from staff members across the headquarters and regional offices, including external contributors. It was peer reviewed by an editorial review board and a group of external substantive experts and practitioners. Building on International IDEA's regional presence and expertise in the field of democracy, the publication draws on the Institute's in-depth regional knowledge of democratic trends

in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and Iran, and North America. An overview of International IDEA's geographical division of regions and countries can be found in the Annex.

The publication analyses the period between 1975 (to coincide with the third wave of democratization) and 2017, and explores the conditions under which democracy is resilient in different time spans and regions. It has adopted a modular approach: the chapters can be read independently, yet form an essential part of the publication as a whole. The publication analyses a number of key challenges to democracy, and explores the conditions under which democracy is resilient to such challenges.

### Structure

The chapters complement each other, both methodologically and empirically. The publication is structured as follows:

Chapter 1, 'The global state of democracy, 1975–2015', provides an overview of the democratic landscape stemming from global and regional trends for the period 1975–2015, based on the GSoD indices. To capture recent events there is a focus on trends for the period 2005–15.

Chapters 2 to 8 provide qualitative analyses of the impact of the process of democratic backsliding on the quality of democracy, and key challenges and crises affecting democracy. They also explore policy options conducive to enabling democracy's resilience.

Chapter 2, 'Democracy's resilience in a changing world', explores current challenges and crises that impact democracy based on International IDEA's definition of democracy's resilience and its characteristics.

Chapter 3, 'Threats from within: democracy's resilience to backsliding', reviews the concept of 'democratic backsliding' and its effect on other aspects of democracy, as well as development

and stability. The chapter explores why backsliding is a particular threat to democratic values, human rights and the rule of law, and highlights how it can be tackled with bottom-up citizen support and existing systems of checks and balances.

Chapter 4, 'The changing nature of political parties and representation', evaluates some of the contemporary challenges of representation, such as citizen movements, digital engagement and the decision-making powers that lie outside national borders. It explores how such conditions can weaken politicians' ability to deliver, and may erode the people's trust in politics, and offers policy recommendations.

Chapter 5, 'Money, influence, corruption and capture: can democracy be protected?', stresses that money is a necessary ingredient that enables democratic actors to perform their tasks. When money is poured into a system that lacks sufficient transparency and accountability, this may trigger suspicions of corruption and malfeasance. Such a situation may lead to policy capture by special interests, which can be detrimental to democracy and its legitimacy. This chapter examines the role of 'big money' in politics, and assesses whether political finance regulations can adequately address its negative effects.

Chapter 6, 'Mind the gap: can democracy counter inequality?', highlights some of the difficulties in discerning the relationship between economic inequality and democracy. Given the rising trends of economic inequality and social exclusion, the chapter explores how democracy can deliver under such conditions, particularly for youth.

Chapter 7, 'Migration, social polarization, citizenship and multiculturalism', analyses the impact of migration on democracy with a focus on citizenship rules, voting rights, representation and political parties. It showcases how well countries politically integrate immigrants, and how this relates to their quality of democracy, as well as the

potential and controversies surrounding the political engagement of emigrants and their role as agents of democracy. It highlights key dilemmas of the migration debate for policymakers, and suggests policy approaches to tackling the migration challenge.

Chapter 8, 'Inclusive peacebuilding in conflict-affected states: designing for democracy's resilience', examines post-conflict inclusion mechanisms in three key transitional processes: constitution-building, rebel-to-party transformation and electoral system design. It highlights that these processes are some of the most fundamental in state-building, as they

determine the rules of the new state, who can participate in that state and the nature of the levers of that participation.

The Annex describes how International IDEA's GSoD indices methodology was constructed. It contains snapshots of indices data from 1975 to 2015 on the state of a selection of countries' democracies based on International IDEA's definition of democracy and attributes of its resilience.

Each chapter is accompanied by a resource guide that provides further background reading.