

Preface

Democracy is experiencing severe challenges all over the world. The sense of hope and inevitability that infused democracy's remarkable expansion during the second half of the 20th century is all but gone. Pessimism and hand wringing about the health of democracy have become the norm.

Is democracy ill? If so, what are the remedies?

In this report, International IDEA, the only intergovernmental organization exclusively working on democracy worldwide, provides a global health check of democracy. Based on data covering 158 countries since 1975, we explore democratic trends, challenges and opportunities, and provide a uniquely comprehensive analysis of democracy at national, regional and global levels. In addition to vital democratic elements such as free and fair elections, independent judiciaries and representative institutions, our analysis also includes diagnostics of civil society participation, social rights and equality, media integrity and corruption, to name a few. A total of 28 aspects of democracy—based on 97 indicators—are used to measure and compare democratic performance over time. This provides a nuanced, holistic assessment of democracy's health.

The overall diagnosis is both worrying and hopeful

When looking at democratic developments in the past decade, there are legitimate reasons to be concerned. The data demonstrates that democracy continues to expand its global reach, while experiencing a significant decline in quality across the board. This multi-faceted deterioration affects old and new democracies alike, across all regions. The erosion of popular trust in democratic institutions and processes reflects—and nurtures—an alarming rise in authoritarian rhetoric and practices. Democratic backsliding is a growing malaise, often initiated through electoral and constitutional channels and fuelled by civic disenchantment

about corruption and democracy's ability to deliver results. Democratic erosion is further exacerbated by polarization, disinformation and hate speech. Seriously weakened Checks on Government and a shrinking civic space are seen despite the widespread adoption of elections.

These worrying signs notwithstanding, there are also reasons to be optimistic. The number of democracies around the world continues to grow, and a wide range of countries has transitioned to democracy in recent years. Our data shows that, despite its shortcomings, democracy is still by far the preferred form of government in all continents. Democracy continues to be an aspiration for those who have never experienced it. When democracy is threatened, citizens all over the world have united to protect it. In nearly every democracy, most people want democracy to work, even when they feel that it may not be working perfectly for them.

This report—and, indeed, all of the work that International IDEA carries out globally—is driven by the recognition that, despite its current ills, democracy's vitality should be acknowledged and celebrated. It aims to shed light on democracy's present predicament, as well as the possible solutions to this predicament. As such, these pages are infused with a sense of urgency, but also of possibility and hope. Through this report, we provide actionable knowledge, tools and advice to actors working on democratic reform processes at the subnational, national and regional levels. We seek to empower and enlighten, sustain and support, reinvigorate and relaunch the efforts to protect and advance democracy worldwide. It is only through a vast collective effort, fired by conviction but also grounded in facts, that we can address democracy's ills and revive its promise.

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