



# The Global State of Democracy IN FOCUS

No. 7, May 2019

## Press Freedom and the Global State of Democracy Indices

### Key facts and figures

- During the period 1975–2017, the world has seen a remarkable improvement in both Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity, as measured in the GSoD Indices. In 1975, 62 per cent of countries had low levels of Freedom of Expression and 63 per cent had low levels of Media Integrity, while in 2017, this was the case for only 16 per cent and 17 per cent of countries respectively.
- In recent years, an increasing number of countries that were previously high performing on Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity are slipping into the mid-range, reflecting worsening conditions in these countries. The share of high-performing countries on Freedom of Expression peaked in 2012, at 41 per cent, before dropping to 34 per cent by 2017. Likewise, the share of high-performing countries on Media Integrity has dropped from 40 per cent in 2006 to 32 per cent in 2017.
- Since 2012, the number of countries showing a decline in Freedom of Expression has increased steadily every year. The period 2015–2017 marked the first time where more countries have declined than advanced for two consecutive years. Of all the aspects of democracy, Freedom of Expression is the one that has seen the most countries showing a decline.
- From 2012 to 2017, 24 per cent of countries showed a decline, and only 11 per cent an improvement, in their scores on Freedom of Expression. Declines are seen across all regions of the world, with Europe seeing the most countries decline (14 countries, 33 per cent).
- Of the 37 countries experiencing 5-year declines, 3 saw declines great enough to fall below the global average (Cameroon, Libya, Turkey), and 8 fell below their respective regional average (Burundi, Cambodia, Croatia, Egypt, Libya, Poland, Thailand and Yemen).
- From 2012 to 2017, 21 per cent of countries in the world (33 countries) saw a decline on Media Integrity, while only 6.3 per cent (10) saw an improvement. The vast majority saw no change one way or the other.
- In the countries with declining Media Integrity, 5 saw declines great enough to fall below the global average (Burundi, Egypt, Serbia, Thailand, Turkey), and 6 fell below their respective regional average (Bahrain, Burundi, Egypt, Hungary, Poland, Romania).
- Looking at both Media Integrity and Freedom of Expression, 20 countries have seen declines over the period 2012–2017 on both measurements (9 in Europe, 4 in Africa, 4 in Asia and the Pacific, and 1 each in Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East and Iran, and North America), while 7 countries have seen improvements (4 in Africa and 3 in Asia and the Pacific). These developments have affected countries across all regions.

## 1. Introduction

The Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices take a disaggregated approach to measuring democracy. This approach allows for a nuanced analysis of a country's democratic performance. The GSoD framework recognizes that democracy goes beyond the ballot box. While competitive, clean and fair elections are essential to democratic governance, this must also be supported by strong freedom of expression and a diverse and critical press that can monitor government performance and hold the state to account for its actions. Together, the freedom for citizens to openly discuss political issues, and the existence of a critical and diverse press that can operate freely, keeps citizens informed and governments more accountable.

The restriction of freedom of expression isn't just a violation of the rights enumerated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also a direct attack on an important mechanism of democratic accountability: a free, unbiased and critical press. It is increasingly rarer for democratic backsliding to take the form of coups or the abolishment of democratic institutions. Instead, autocratic rulers use legal means to gain control over democratic institutions (International IDEA 2017). Once in power, these rulers chip away at the checks on executive power, through curtailing the independence of the judiciary and the legislative, and through repression of the media. This repression can include a wide range of actions, from closing down media outlets, consolidating media outlets and giving them regime-friendly owners, and active censorship through restrictions on freedom of speech, to more severe violations such as violent intimidation, imprisonment or killing of journalists. The fear of such measures also leads journalists to self-censor what they report on and how they report on it. These violations hollow out democratic accountability and cement executive power.

Strong protection of freedom of expression is the cornerstone for a vibrant press. However, guarantees of these rights do not mean that the media landscape will be diverse and critical. For reasons other than government suppression, media can be biased, uncritical or corrupt. The GSoD Indices framework puts Media Integrity as one subattribute of the Checks on Government attribute, along with Effective Parliament and Judicial Independence, highlighting the importance of a vibrant press in holding governments to account. There are two measurements from the GSoD Indices that directly capture freedom of expression and the integrity of the media landscape:

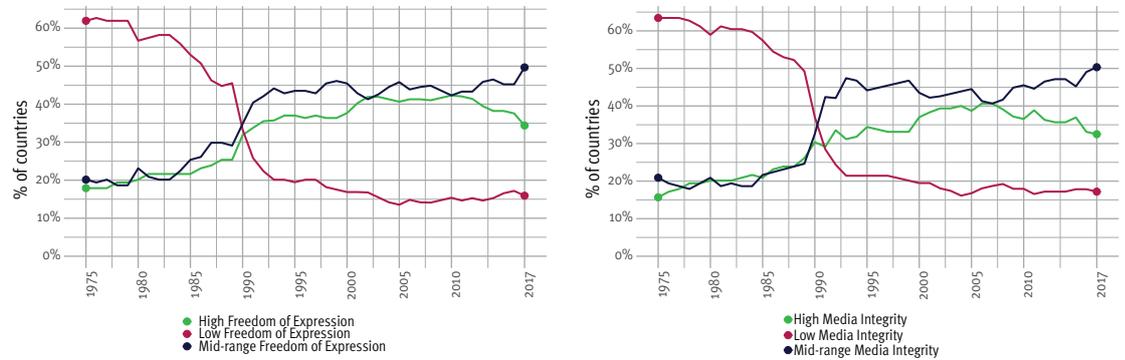
1. The *Freedom of Expression* measurement. This measures the extent to which the public is able to discuss political issues openly. This measurement uses data from seven indicators based on expert surveys from Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) and one in-house coded indicator from the Civil Liberties Dataset (CLD). This measurement is a subcomponent of the Civil Liberties subattribute of the Fundamental Rights attribute.
2. The *Media Integrity* measurement. This measures the extent to which the media landscape offers diverse and critical coverage of political issues. V-Dem indicators are used that measure whether media outlets are critical, offer different perspectives, are biased or are corrupt, in addition to an indicator from the Global Media Freedom Dataset.

A full list of the indicators underlying these measurements can be found in Section 7, The GSoD Indices and indicators of media freedom, at the end of this *In Focus*.

## 2. Long-term trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity, 1975–2017

FIGURE 1

### Long-term trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity, 1975–2017



*Note:* This figure shows the percentage of countries that are classified as having high, mid-range and low performance on Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity. High-performing countries are classified as having higher than 0.70 score on a given measurement, while mid-range is 0.40–0.70 and low performance equals 0.40 or below.

*Source:* International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices (2018), <<http://www.idea.int/gsd-indices>>.

The last 42 years have shown a remarkable expansion of both Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity in the world. Countries with high levels of Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity are those where such freedom of expression rights can generally be enjoyed without restrictions and the public has access to a critical and diverse media. By contrast, in countries with low levels, the right to freedom of expression is severely repressed and violence and repression against citizens exercising their freedom of speech is commonplace, while press freedom is severely restricted and the media outlets that do exist provide uncritical and biased coverage. In 1975, more than half of the countries in the world (62 per cent) had low levels of Freedom of Expression, and 63 per cent had low levels of Media Integrity. Since then, there has been global improvement in the state of Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity, with advances peaking in the mid-1990s which were driven by the remarkable global expansion of democratic rights set off by the ‘third wave of democracy’. By 2017, the number of countries with low performance on these measures had plummeted to only 16 per cent of countries with low levels of Freedom of Expression, and 17 per cent with low levels of Media Integrity.

For both measures, performance at the high and mid-range has expanded dramatically, with high-performing countries on Freedom of Expression increasing from 18 per cent in 1975 to 34 per cent in 2017, and high-performing countries on Media Integrity expanding from 16 per cent to 32 per cent in the same time period. Regionally, only the Middle East and Iran has a majority of low-performing countries for Media Integrity in 2017, while no region has a majority of low-performing countries for Freedom of Expression.

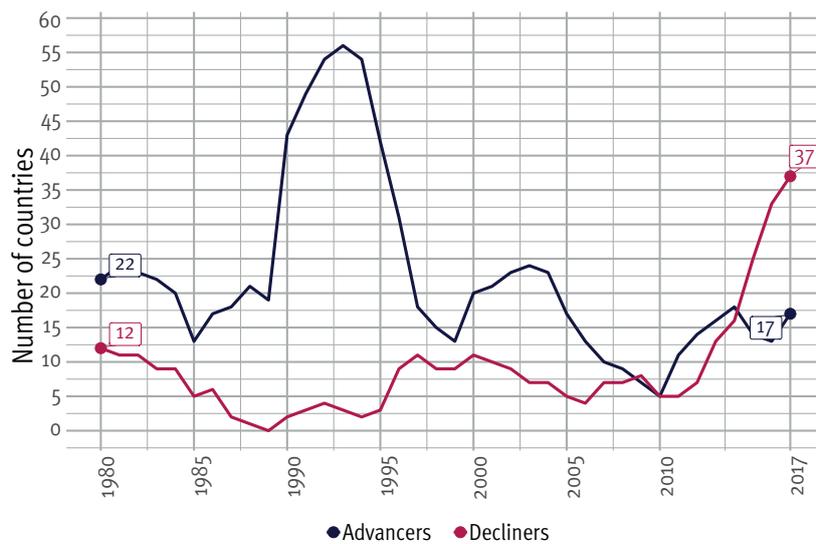
While the share held by low-performing countries has declined in recent decades, the majority of these countries transitioned to performing at the mid-range. While the suppression of freedom of expression and media integrity in mid-range countries is less than in low-performing countries, this does not mean that the press is fully free and diverse there. Many countries in this category still suffer from severe deficits in both dimensions. As with democracy as a whole, Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity see more and more countries in the ‘grey zone’ between full suppression of freedom of expression and the media, and strong and consistent protections of freedom of expression, and a diverse and critical media. Worryingly, an increasing number of high-performing countries on these two dimensions are slipping into the mid-range. The share of high-performing countries on

Freedom of Expression peaked in 2012, at 41 per cent, before dropping to 34 per cent in 2017. Likewise, the share of high-performing countries on Media Integrity has dropped from 40 per cent in 2006 to 32 per cent in 2017.

### 3. Country-level trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity, 2012–2017

FIGURE 2

#### Advancers and decliners in Freedom of Expression 1975–2017

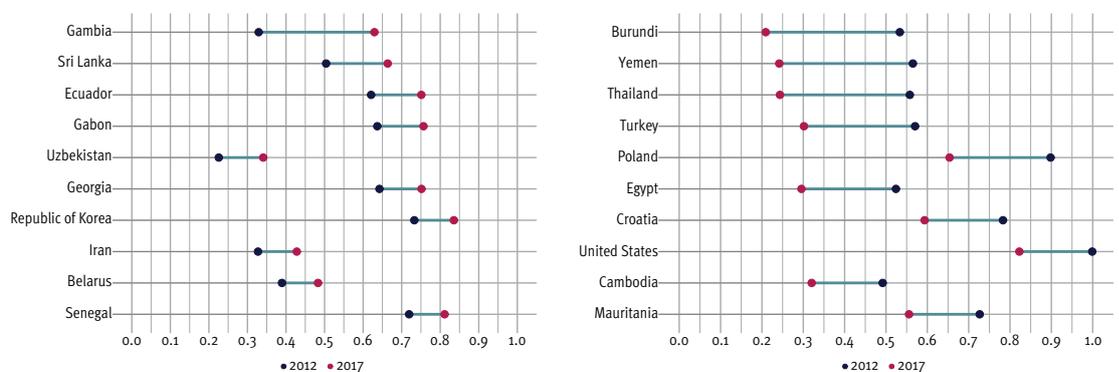


*Note:* This graph shows the proportion of countries advancing or declining from 1975 to 2017, with intervals of five years. A country is classified as an advancer if it has seen a statistically significant improvement on its own scores five years previously. If a country sees a statistically significant decline compared with five years previously, then it is classified as a decliner. Note that this analysis does not consider scale; small and large changes are treated in the same way.

*Source:* International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices (2018), <<http://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

FIGURE 3

#### Freedom of Expression top advancing and declining countries, 2012–2017



*Note:* This graph shows the top 10 countries with the most change on Freedom of Expression from 2012 to 2017. Scoring runs 0–1, with 1 indicating a higher level of performance on Freedom of Expression.

*Source:* International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices (2018), <<http://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

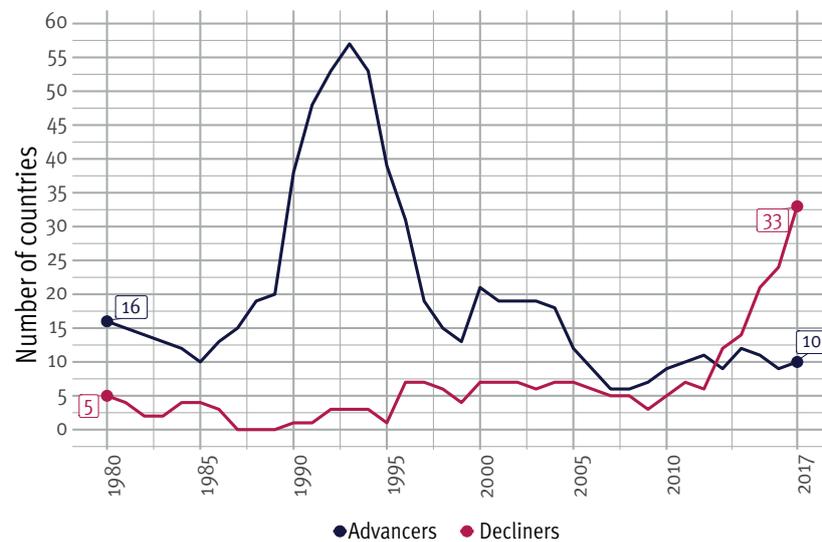
Since 2012, the number of countries declining on Freedom of Expression has increased steadily every year. The period 2015–2017 marked the first time where more countries declined than advanced for two consecutive years. In 2017, the highest number of countries declined on Freedom of Expression since records began in 1980, with nearly a quarter of countries declining (37 countries, 24 per cent). Figure 3 shows the 10 countries that had the largest improvement and the largest declines from 2012 to 2017. Europe saw the most decreases, with 14 countries declining, followed by Asia and the Pacific with 8, Africa with 7, Latin America and the Caribbean with 6 and the Middle East and Iran, and North America each with 1. Of the 37 countries seeing a 5-year decline, 3 saw declines great enough to fall below the global average (Cameroon, Libya, Turkey), and 8 fell below their respective regional average (Burundi, Cambodia, Croatia, Egypt, Libya, Poland, Thailand and Yemen).

Only 17 countries improved during this period, with 7 countries advancing in Africa, 5 in Asia and the Pacific, 2 in both Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean, and 1 in the Middle East. Three of these countries saw increases that put them higher than their regional average (Gambia, Mozambique and Sri Lanka), while four countries improved beyond the global average (Burkina Faso, Ecuador, Gabon and Georgia).

#### 4. Media Integrity

FIGURE 4

Advancers and decliners in Media Integrity, 1975–2017



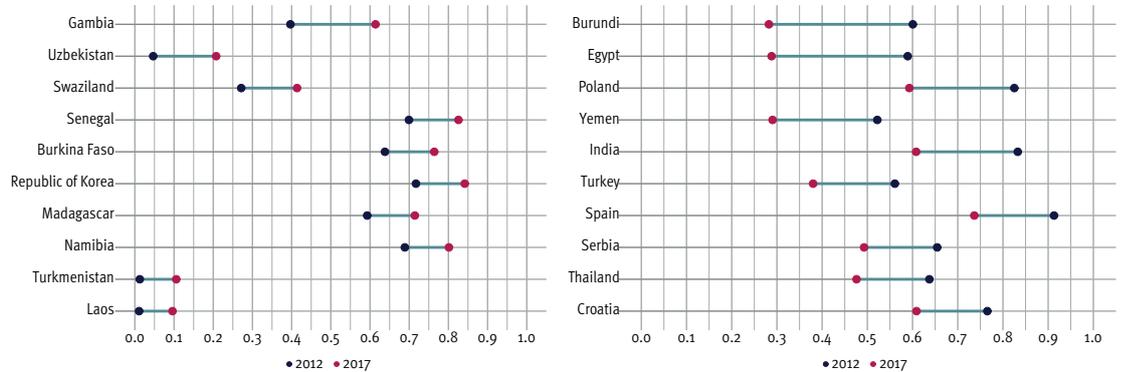
*Note:* This graph shows the proportion of countries advancing or declining from 1975 to 2017, with intervals of five years. A country is classified as an advancer if it has seen a statistically significant improvement on its own scores five years previously. If a country sees a statistically significant decline compared with five years previously, then it is classified as a decliner. Note that this analysis does not consider scale; small and large changes are treated in the same way.

*Source:* International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices (2018), <<http://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

Like Freedom of Expression, Media Integrity showed generally a net positive trend, with more countries advancing than declining for most of the time period covered. However, since 2013 there has been a negative trend, with more countries declining than improving. From 2012 to 2017, 21 per cent of countries (33 countries) in the world declined on Media Integrity, while only 6.3 per cent improved (10).

**FIGURE 5**

**Freedom of Expression top advancing and declining countries, 2012–2017**



*Note:* This graph shows the top 10 countries with the most change on Media Integrity from 2012 to 2017. Scoring runs 0–1, with 1 indicating a higher level of performance on Media Integrity.

*Source:* International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices (2018), <<http://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

Figure 5 shows the 10 countries that had the largest improvement and the largest declines over the period 2012–2017 on Media Integrity. Europe saw the most decreases with 15 countries declining, followed by Africa with 8, Asia and the Pacific with 7, Latin America and the Caribbean with 3, the Middle East and Iran with 2, and North America with 1. Of the 33 countries seeing a 5-year decline, 5 countries saw declines great enough to fall below the global average (Burundi, Egypt, Serbia, Thailand and Turkey), and 6 countries fell below their respective regional average (Bahrain, Burundi, Egypt, Hungary, Poland and Romania).

Only Africa, and Asia and the Pacific saw countries with advancement on Media Integrity. Six countries saw improvements in Africa and four in Asia and the Pacific. Burkina Faso and Madagascar saw improvements that put them above the African and the global average.

**5. Countries with changes on both measurements**

Declines on both Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity provide indications of a worsening media environment. In total, 20 countries have seen declines over the period 2012–2017 on both measurements, while 7 countries have seen improvements. These developments have affected countries across all regions, and from different levels of performance on Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity.

Table 1 lists all of the countries that have seen declines on both dimensions grouped by performance on Representative Government, which measures free and equal access to political power, emphasizing contested and inclusive popular elections for the legislative and directly or indirectly elected executives. Countries declining on Media Integrity and Freedom of Expression are evenly distributed across the performance levels for Representative Government, whereas advancing countries are more distributed in the mid-range and low-performing categories for Representative Government.

TABLE 1

**Declines on both Media Integrity and Freedom of Expression by performance on Representative Government**

Positive trends on Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity	Negative trends on Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity
<b>High Representative Government (0.70–1.0)</b>	<b>High Representative Government (0.70–1.0)</b>
Republic of Korea	Brazil Croatia Greece Poland Romania Spain United Kingdom United States
<b>Mid-range Representative Government (0.40–0.70)</b>	<b>Mid-range Representative Government (0.40–0.70)</b>
Burkina Faso Gambia Senegal	Hungary India Philippines Serbia Turkey
<b>Low Representative Government (0–0.40)</b>	<b>Low Representative Government (0–0.40)</b>
Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) Turkmenistan Uzbekistan	Burundi Egypt Mauritania South Sudan Tajikistan Thailand Yemen

The countries that have seen the largest declines on both dimensions, show the variety of ways in which Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity can deteriorate. In Poland, the PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość or Law and Justice) regime has given party loyalists jobs as CEOs and executives on the Boards of public media companies, after a law change in 2016, which made public media subordinate to a newly created National Media Council, whose members are elected by a simple majority of Parliament, enabling the government to influence its decisions (Freedom House 2017b).

India, a country with a rich democratic tradition, has been criticized by Human Rights Watch, Freedom House and the watchdog organization The Hoot for the use of sedition and criminal defamation laws against government critics and for the use of internet shutdowns, particularly in the Jammu and Kashmir regions, as well as for violence directed at journalists (Freedom House 2017a; Human Rights Watch 2018; The Hoot n.d.).

Thailand’s decline has occurred following the 2014 coup by military and police leaders, forming a new government under the name National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). Following the coup, the NCPO imposed a number of restrictions on freedom of expression: blocking websites,

suspending media outlets and arresting political activists. While some private media outlets continue to operate, these government measures have created an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship (United States Department of State 2017).

In Egypt, the media faces significant restrictions under the regime of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, which has seen a number of independent newspapers and websites classified as terrorist entities, reporters from the Sinai region restricted, and articles on topics such as military operations, currency inflation and corruption resulting in imprisonment (Human Rights Watch 2018; Reporters Without Borders n.d.).

Burundi has seen an increase in restrictions on freedom of expression, following the controversial decision by President Pierre Nkurunziza to run for a third term and an attempted coup against the president, which resulted in the imprisonment of journalists and the closing of media outlets. This has taken place in a climate of increasing human rights violations, with extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary arrests common (Human Rights Watch 2018).

Lastly, the civil war in Yemen has made it impossible for journalists to operate freely, and several private media outlets have been forced out due to instability and increasingly dangerous conditions. Journalists and media have been directly targeted as rebels have ransacked media outlets and imprisoned journalists (The New Arab, 2018). Before the outbreak of the civil war, Yemen took steps to improve freedom of information in 2012; however, due to the ongoing conflict, this law has yet to be implemented (Freedom House, 2016).

## 6. Conclusion

Significant advances in Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity, as measured in the GSoD Indices, have been achieved in the last four decades. Citizens around the world are today more able to enjoy the freedom to openly discuss political issues, and to have access to a diverse and critical media, than they were 40 years ago. These advances go hand in hand with the global democratic expansion witnessed since the third wave of democratization initiated in the 1970s. However, the last decade has seen an increasing number of countries declining on these measures. These declines are seen across all ranges of democratic performance, with Europe being the region with the greatest number of countries experiencing declines. The explanatory factors for the declines vary across countries. In some cases, the declines have occurred in the context of general democratic breakdown, aimed at limiting the space for opposition, silencing critical voices and manipulating electoral processes, while in other cases, it has occurred in a context of less severe democratic deterioration, explained by the rise of nationalist political parties, and justified by arguments of national sovereignty, law and order, national security and firm responses to terrorism. Democracies nurture themselves from a range of societal voices, critical and less critical of the state. However, if the critical voices are silenced, the space for democratic deliberation narrows. Thus, independent of the driving factors, the declines in Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity represent a weakening of an important mechanism of democratic accountability. It is essential for regimes, international actors and civil society to take every step possible to ensure that these rights are safeguarded, so that societies can benefit from the full range of views that make up the democratic fabric of societies.

## 7. The GSoD Indices and indicators of media freedom

### Freedom of Expression

The Freedom of Expression subcomponent denotes the extent to which the public are able to discuss political issues openly. This subcomponent is measured using seven indicators based on expert surveys from V-Dem and one in-house coded indicator from CLD. The question underlying

the CLD variable is fairly all-encompassing, whereas the V-Dem variables are more specific and refer to different aspects of media freedom and to the right to discuss political issues openly and to express political opinions outside the mass media (Skaaning 2014; Varieties of Democracy 2018). Two of them distinguish between freedom of expression for men and for women.

**TABLE 2**

**GSoD indicators on Freedom of Expression and sources**

No.	Indicator	Description	Data set
2.2.1.	Print/broadcast censorship effort	Expert Survey: Does the government directly or indirectly attempt to censor the print or broadcast media?	V-Dem
2.2.2.	Harassment of journalists	Expert Survey: Are individual journalists harassed; that is, threatened with libel, arrested, imprisoned, beaten or killed, by governmental or powerful non-governmental actors while engaged in legitimate journalistic activities?	V-Dem
2.2.3.	Media self-censorship	Expert Survey: Is there self-censorship among journalists when reporting on issues that the government considers politically sensitive?	V-Dem
2.2.4.	Freedom of discussion for women	Expert Survey: Are women able to openly discuss political issues in private homes and in public spaces?	V-Dem
2.2.5.	Freedom of discussion for men	Expert Survey: Are men able to openly discuss political issues in private homes and in public spaces?	V-Dem
2.2.6.	Freedom of academic and cultural expression	Expert Survey: Is there academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression related to political issues?	V-Dem
2.2.7.	Freedom of opinion and expression	Standards Based Coding: The extent to which individual citizens, groups and the media have freedom of opinion and expression, that is, the right of the citizens, groups and press to hold views freely and to seek, obtain and pass on information on political issues as broadly understood without being subject to actual limitations or restrictions.	CLD

**Media Integrity**

The Media Integrity subattribute denotes the extent to which the media landscape offers diverse and critical coverage of political issues. Media integrity and freedom of expression are related. Nonetheless, the media can do a poor job controlling the government even in a situation of media freedom if for other reasons than government repression they are very one-sided, uncritical, superficial or corrupt. V-Dem offers indicators that reflect these additional circumstances as they reflect whether various media are critical, offer different perspectives, are biased or are corrupt. The indicators included are based on expert surveys. In addition, the Media Freedom Data in-house coded indicator is used. It evaluates whether the media are critical of the government and its officials (Whitten-Woodring and Van Belle 2014, 2017).

TABLE 3

**GSoD indicators on Media Integrity and sources**

No.	Indicator	Description	Data set
3.3.1.	Print/broadcast media critical	Expert Survey: Of the major print and broadcast media outlets, how many routinely criticize the government?	V-Dem
3.3.2.	Print/broadcast media perspectives	Expert Survey: Do the major print and broadcast media represent a wide range of political perspectives?	V-Dem
3.3.3.	Media bias	Expert Survey: Is there media bias against opposition parties or candidates?	V-Dem
3.3.4.	Media corrupt	Expert Survey: Do journalists, publishers or broadcasters accept payments in exchange for altering news coverage?	V-Dem
3.3.5.	Media freedom	Standards Based Coding: Is criticism of government and government officials a common and normal part of the political dialogue in the mediated public sphere?	Media Freedom Data

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## Acknowledgements

This *GSoD In Focus* was written by Joseph Noonan. Reviewers included Annika Silva-Leander, Elisenda Balleste Buxo and Martin Brusis. The first edition of *The Global State of Democracy* was published with financial support from the Swedish Government.

## 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 the 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>>

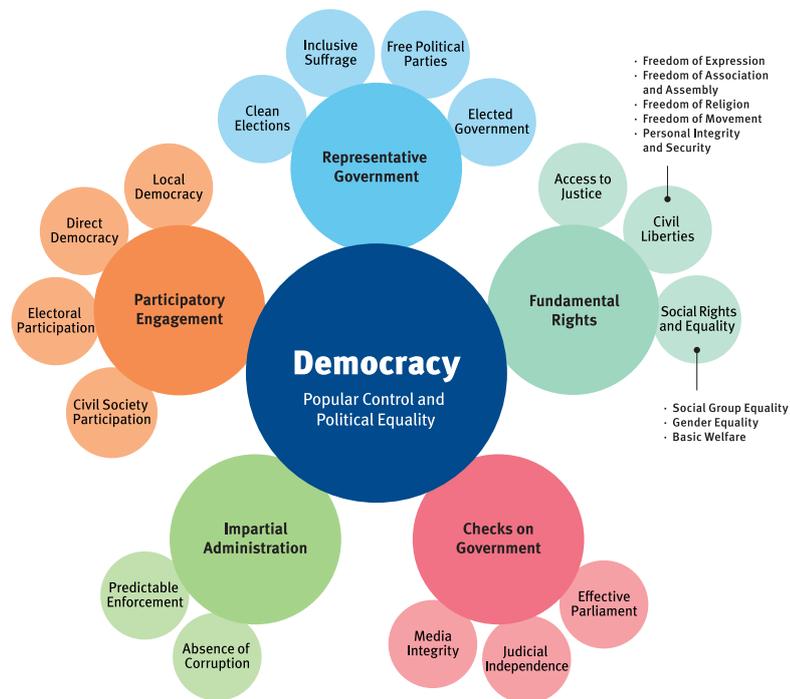
### About the GSoD Indices

The Global State of Democracy Indices measure global-, regional- and country-level democratic trends over time, from 1975 to 2017. The conceptual framework for the Indices is based on International IDEA's broad definition of democracy, which emphasizes popular control over public decision-making and decision-makers, and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control (Beetham et al. 2008).

In the GSoD conceptual framework, this definition is translated into five main attributes of democracy: Representative Government, Fundamental Rights, Checks on Government, Impartial Administration and Participatory Engagement. These are then subdivided into 16 subattributes and 8 subcomponents, to give 29 aspects of democracy based on 97 indicators.

The GSoD Indices take data, 70 per cent of which is from the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem), from 12 different datasets. More information about the overall framework can be found in *GSoD In Focus* No. 1 (International IDEA 2018a).

### Conceptual Framework: The Global State of Democracy



### About International IDEA

Founded in 1995, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), is an intergovernmental organization that supports sustainable democracy worldwide. The Institute is the only intergovernmental organization with a global mandate solely focused on democracy and elections, and is committed to be a global agenda-setter in the democracy-building field. With 32 Member States from all continents, International IDEA supports the development of stronger democratic institutions and processes; and fosters sustainable, effective and legitimate democracy through the provision of comparative knowledge resources, dialogues and partnerships at the global, regional and country levels.

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](mailto:GSoD.Indices@idea.int).

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