

Old Autocracy or Something New?: Conceptualizing and Measuring Democratic Erosion and Overcoming It¹

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Abstract

Existing measurements of democratic erosion (DE) do not necessarily start with adequate conceptual-theoretical scrutiny and insufficiently incorporate DE's distinguishing features into operationalizing it. We review existing measurements, offer a definition based on the constitutive characteristics of DE and the roles of oppositions and institutions, and develop new measurement criteria. We show how this changes the population of DE cases in large- and small-N comparative analysis. We argue that recovery from DE should be conceptualized and measured separately from reversals and near-misses, and identify corresponding country episodes. Successful reversals of DE seem to be scarce, and none for countries that endured more than ten years of DE. Successful recoveries is also a small, if not null set. Exceptions are, technically but not necessarily substantively, Ecuador, and substantively but not yet technically, Moldova. DE is a new type of autocratization and politics may need time to learn how to counter it.

¹ With minor changes, this paper was presented at the annual conference of American Political Science Association, Los Angeles, USA, August 31, 2023.

1. Introduction

A growing body of empirical research and critical analyses argue that what is interchangeably called erosion, backsliding, or incremental decay of democracy (henceforth democratic erosion, DE) is the dominant *form* of autocratization in the 21st century (Diamond, 2015; Bermeo, 2016 and 2022; Waldner and Lust, 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019).² This has galvanized attempts to explain and measure it (among others, Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Mainwaring and Bizarro, 2019; Boese, Lindberg, and Lührmann 2021; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Kneuer, 2021; Carothers and Press, 2022; Grillo and Prato, 2023; Friesen et al. 2023; Wunsch and Blanchard, 2023). Yet, several weaknesses continue to undermine our abilities to understand, measure, and explain DE, and develop adequate remedies.

First, extant writing pays disproportionate attention to the agency of elected incumbents and to some of their eroding behaviors, such as executive aggrandizement and creeping authoritarianism. Accordingly, DE is generally, and rather incompletely described as: The incremental subversion of democracy from within *by* elected governments (Bermeo 2016; Tomini and Wagemann 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Haggard and Kaufman 2021). Agreeing with an emerging corpus of studies that focus on the roles that opposition actors – broadly defined including opposition parties, formal institutions, and civil society/citizens – play during DE (Gamboa 2017 and 2022; Jimenez, 2021; Somer, McCoy, and Luke, 2021; Cleary and Öztürk 2022; Somer, McCoy and Tuncel, 2022; Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev 2022; Somer and Tekinirk, forthcoming), we would propose another definition: The incremental subversion of democracy from within *under* elected governments and by the

²For overall trends, modalities and conceptual-terminological debates, also see Erdmann and Kneuer 2011; Coppedge 2017; Cassani and Tomini 2020; Gerschewski 2021.

interactive actions of governments, oppositions, and institutions, and by maintaining at least the veneer of many institutions, discourses and normative principles of democracy. Among other qualities of DE, this definition suggests that DE cannot be described or explained based on one single dimension of democracy and the agency and actions of one single actor. This should inform conceptualization and measurement efforts: reversing or overcoming DE should be understood as more than stopping or replacing an eroding executive, for example.

Second, studies need yet to confront and answer a fundamental question: Is DE a new and qualitatively different type of autocratization, i.e. regime change? If not, is it a set of mechanisms that autocrats have been using for a long time? In this case, we should observe that the changes we call DE often precede or accompany other types of autocratization, such as breakdowns to full autocracy (“sudden deaths”) or the emergence of defective democracies (Merkel, 2004) and electoral autocracies. The latter might have become more salient in the contemporary world. But it may also be true, for example, that “sudden deaths” such as *autogolpes* and revolutionary takeovers are preceded by periods of incremental and cumulative steps of authoritarianism that we now call DE. Studies reflect a practical emphasis on some notable symptoms and underlying causes of DE, such as severe political polarization (Carothers and O’Donohue, 2019; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, 2018; McCoy and Somer, 2019; Svobik, 2019; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021), the weakening of political parties (Persily, ed. 2015; Grillo and Prato, 2023), the gradual creation of a “Frankenstate” (Scheppelle 2013) by employing technically legal-constitutional tools, step-by-step atonement of democratic norms and rule of law, and creeping authoritarianism for example through partisan recruitments and omnibus bills.. How novel are these, and do they amount to a sui generis form or pattern of autocratization?

Third, better theoretical-conceptual framing, of course, should go together with better empirical measurements. Hence, in relation to theoretical fuzziness, and as we focus on and show in this paper, we lack proper operationalization and empirical measurement of DE in empirical research. Beyond the questions of where and when DE occurred and is occurring, there is ambiguity over which cases represent DE's near misses and reversals, and with partial exceptions, no attempts to properly identify recovery.³

Major contributions and trail-blazing endeavors notwithstanding (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; L. Tomini and Wagemann 2016; Carothers and Press 2022; Mainwaring and Bizarro 2019; Boese et al. 2021; Wunsch and Blanchard 2023; Brownlee and Miao 2022; Friesen et al., 2023), existing measurements do not necessarily start with adequate conceptual-theoretical scrutiny and do not necessarily incorporate the distinguishing features of DE into operationalizing it. Especially but not exclusively, they do not factor the gradual nature of democratic erosion, which may be its constitutive characteristic, into the operationalizations of DE.

Extant measurement attempts need to meet several major challenges. First, they need to clarify: Does DE also make sense in polities that only recently became democracies, i.e. new democracies with very limited experience with democracy and habituation of democratic norms and procedures? Can it also occur in long-standing electoral and competitive authoritarian polities where electoral or competitive authoritarian norms and procedures have long become the game in town in the eyes of the public and ruling elites? In other words, is DE a type of autocratization that happens only in democratic countries and in those with substantial democratic experience if yes, how should this qualification be operationalized in empirical research? A related question is

³ See Friesen et al (2023) for a partial exception.

whether DE is an ahistorical, post-Cold War, or 21st-century phenomenon. Undoubtedly, the answer to this question should shape the scope conditions of empirical studies.

Second, and relatedly, what is the population of DE cases that we can study and learn from, as distinct from other types of authoritarianism? As Table I shows, there is considerable confusion and disagreement over this fundamental question. The size of the DE country episodes in different contributions widely differs, not only between studies examining democratic breakdowns and DE/backsliding), but also among studies specifically investigating DE/backsliding. The differences do not appear to result only from disparate data sets used and different time periods covered. They also reflect incomplete conceptualizations and conflicting assumptions built into the measurements. In Table 1, the numbers marked in bold are those conceptualized as some form of DE, and the total number of DE cases varies between 2 and 44.

As Table 2 depicts in Appendix I, studies not only diverge from each other with respect to how many and which countries suffered DE, but with respect to the starting and ending years and overall lengths of autocratization in single countries.

Third, what are the populations of “successful” and “failed” DEs? Clearly, adequate identification of such “positive” and “negative” cases is crucial to conduct any comparative analysis for causal inference.

Table 1. Lack of Consensus on the Universe of Democratic Erosion Episodes⁴.

	Haggard & Kaufman (2021)	Luhrman & Lindberg (2019)	Tomini & Wagemann (2020)	Carothers & Press (2022)	Mainwaring & Bizzaro (2019)	Boese et al. (2021) - ERT (Edgell et al. 2020)	Wunsch & Blanchard (2023)	Brownlee & Miao (2022)	Somer & Yilmaz (2023)
# of Cases (type of process)	16 (DB)	31 (A)	17 (R)	26 (DB)	30/2 (B/DE)	27/10 (B/R)	44 ⁵ (BT)	20/8 (B/S)	20 (DE)
Years Covered	1974 - 2017	1990 - 2017	1990 – 2012	2005 - 2021	1974 - 2021	1990 – 2019	1990 – 2020	2000 - 2021	1990 -2022

A: Autocratization, B: Breakdown, BT: Backsliding Trajectories, DB: Democratic Backsliding, DE: Democratic Erosion, R: Regression, S: Survival

What developments constitute DE “near-misses,” “reversals,” and “recoveries,” and how can we identify countries that experienced them?

We argue that reversals should be distinguished from recoveries. Reversals are countries where “full-fledged” DE took place but was then arrested. However, a “recovery” should represent a polity where full-fledged DE took place but was then not only stopped but was also replaced with sustained re-democratization. In other words, we understand reversals as cases where societies, political oppositions, and institutions *manage*, *contain* or *postpone* DE. By comparison, we understand recoveries as cases where societies, political oppositions, and institutions counter

⁴ We excluded important contributions by Hadenius, Teorell, and Wahman (2013) and Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland (2010) because they analyze regime change as a binary variable (democracy versus autocracy), rather than a continuous variable, which the logic of DE implies. In other words, they measure democratic breakdowns rather than DE per se.

⁵ The authors divide the backsliding trajectories category into 4 sub-categories with different backsliding features. These are Democratic Reversal (18), Backsliding on Diagonal Safeguards (8), Partial Backsliding with Resilient Horizontal Safeguards (11), and Democracies under Attack (7).

and *overcome* DE. In other words, recoveries replace DE with sustained democratic revival and remaking. Hence, reversals may, and often are, temporary, whereas recoveries should be more long-lasting.

There are major causal and prescriptive implications that result from successfully conceptualizing and measuring positive and negative cases of DE. If there are many near-misses, reversals, and recoveries, then the policy implications for tackling DE would be relatively easier to pinpoint. If the populations of those are limited, however, policy recipes would be harder to develop. Consequently, we may conclude that DE is a new and evolving phenomenon, as we tentatively suggest in this paper, to counter which democratic societies have not yet developed appropriate methods.

In the following second section, we discuss and explain the six crucial conditions/criteria we propose to use in operationalizing DE, and then examine to what extent these are applied in current research. In the third section, we present which populations of cases our analysis produces by using the six conditions. We finish with concluding thoughts, observations, and suggestions for future research.

2. Incorporating DE's Distinguishing Features into Its Measurement

Our measurement of DE reflects our attempt to incorporate DE's qualitative differences from other types of autocratization into its operationalization with the above questions in mind. In a nutshell, we add the following six criteria. In this paper, we mainly rely on V-Dem's liberal democracy, ROW (regimes of the world), and coup indicators (Coppedge et al. 2023) to implement these criteria, pending triangulation by using other datasets.

1. Democracy Criterion: DE does not make sense in a country that lacks some basic foundations and a solid legacy of minimum electoral democracy. The notion of DE

presumes the prior presence of established democratic norms and institutions in a country, before they begin to be eroded.

Hence, we limit the universe of DE to countries that had a “regime of the world (ROW)” score of 2 or 3 (which represent respectively electoral and liberal democracies) for at least five years prior to the start of DE.

2. Liberal Democracy Criterion: Case analyses show that DE typically starts with gradual and rather subtle impingements upon democratic norms and liberties, such as seemingly harmless licensing and public recruitment laws undermining media freedoms and non-partisan institutions. These are often subtle and resemble individual infringements unrelated to each other.

Since these incremental changes are better captured by liberal democracy indicators, lest we overlook the beginning stages of DE, and joining others in extant research, we measure DE by using liberal democracy scores, though we expect these changes to undermine electoral democracy indicators in a country over time as well.

3. Minimum Length of DE Criterion: Short-lived or steep, all-at-once declines of democratic standards should not count as DE. By definition, DE is a process that is gradual and cumulative, one where relatively small steps (that is, compared to e.g. violent takeovers) build up over time and produce some habituation in the population and institutional actors. Public habituation and interactive actions and reactions of incumbents, oppositions, and institutions constitute major causal mechanisms of DE. These take time to evolve and, in some cases, may go through many critical junctures to take their toll on the quality of democracy in a salient shape and form.

Hence, we require that a country must suffer a continuous decline of at least five years (where any yearly improvement during the episode should remain below the level in the previous year) in the country's liberal democracy score before counting as a DE episode.

4. Minimum Total Decline: At the same time, in order to be considered a type of autocratization, the small changes that form DE should make tangible cumulative changes in a country's democracy.

Hence, we require that the total decrease of LDI score in a DE episode should at least be 0.1, which is an admittedly arbitrary and rule of thumb threshold to exclude minor erosions of democracy, which is also used by other studies.

5. Maximum (Upper Limit) of Annual Decline: Whereas other autocratizations result from drastic, patent, and undeniable interventions in democracy, DE's constitutive trait is its incremental nature resulting from less visible, piecemeal acts that accumulate to regime change over time. Thus, steep declines should not count as part of a DE episode.

Hence, we require that the annual decline in a country's LDI score during a DE episode should remain below 0.084. We arrived at this number by taking the average of the annual fall that experts assessed in a country's LDI score as a result of any coup (military, civilian or self-coups) since 1990, in V-Dem dataset's variable "regime end type (v2regendtype)".⁶ In other words, the annual erosion of democracy should be less than the average erosion caused by a coup, which reflects a different type of autocratization. Most yearly changes in the DE cases we find are much lower than this threshold.⁷

⁶ Coppedge (2023: 137).

⁷ Whenever we observed marginal declines in a particular year, rather than checking if the decline was statistically significant, we went to the case and checked whether there was a meaningful ground for the decline. For example, North Macedonia's DE episode begins in 2004, when its LDI score dropped from 0.470 to 0.465, which is a statistically insignificant drop, but we included 2004 because this is the year VMRO-DPMNE was elected to power and began to erode democracy.

6. Minimum Length and Level of Recovery Period: Brief improvements in LDI scores following DE episodes often prove to be unsustainable. They reflect temporary opposition successes with no agenda or capacity to remedy the political, institutional, and economic systems' flaws, or interest-driven strategic liberalizations by otherwise autocratic-leaning incumbents.

Hence, we require that a “recovery” (as opposed to a mere “reversal”) comprises at least five years of improvement in a country’s LDI scores and a rise in the country’s ROW score if the country’s ROW score had decreased during the DE episode.

In addition to these criteria, we maintain that the total length of DE should be included as a quantitative variable or as a dummy variable (more or less than 10 years) in causal inquiries. Our analysis finds no recovery case in countries that suffered ten years or more of DE.⁸ The hypothesis that we derive from this observation is that a critical juncture is likely to occur in DE after ten or more years. Since DE deepens through habituation (which is not the same as normalization and acceptance) and interactive behaviors of supportive and opposing actors, political preferences and strategies may become more strongly influenced by DE and the power relations may change between the incumbent on one hand and democratic-leaning institutions and oppositions on the other. Hence, it may become harder to recover from DE.

Finally, we also propose that causal inquiries should unpack the LDI scores and repeat the analyses with different subscores of LDI, in line with Wunsch and Blanchard’s (2022) study.

To what extent do extant studies meet the criteria we propose? Table 2 summarizes eight studies in terms of these criteria and compares with ours.

⁸ We reached the same finding also in Friesen et al. (2023).

Democracy Criterion:

Four out of eight, i.e. half of the studies use some sort of a democracy criterion. However, the minimum length of a democratic legacy varies between one and eight years. For this condition to be meaningful, studies need first to theoretically and causally justify why such a criterion makes sense, and the length of the democratic legacy should be chosen accordingly.

We argue that a democracy criterion is necessary because the practices we observe during DE cases derive their power from bypassing and manipulating previously or already present democratic beliefs, principles, and practices against democracy – i.e. manipulate, weaponize, and hollow out *existing* democratic norms and practices to erode democracy from within. This only makes sense in countries where such principles, conventions, and practices have had some time to institutionalize and gain ground in society and practice. Hence, we reckon that at least five years of democratic regime practice, i.e. a full election term, may be a reasonable rule of thumb condition for DE to make sense. This excludes countries like Russia and Armenia from the population of DE, even though they also suffered incremental erosion of their LDI after 2000 and 1994 in respective order.

Liberal Democracy Criterion:

Only two other studies employ this metric to gauge decline (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Mainwaring and Bizzaro 2019).

Our rationale for adopting the LDI stems from our conceptualization of DE as a process under elected governments, where free and fair elections prevail in the early stages. Rather than being challenged normatively and dismantled openly, elections lose their free and fair nature through the gradual and cumulative weakening of rule of law, rights, and freedoms. The latter are best captured by LDI, and, thus, this subtle, gradual, and multilayered process.

Having said that, we propose that the analysis is repeated with different subsets, or “dimensions” (Wunsch and Blanchard, 2023) of scores that make up LD. This is because DE does not affect all of these dimensions equally or simultaneously. Two constituent variables comprise the LDI: the Electoral Democracy Index and the Liberal Component Index (Coppedge et al., 2023, 45). The Electoral Democracy Index encompasses five distinct variables that assess foundational democratic elements, such as free and fair elections and freedom of expression. As a result, the Liberal Component Index integrates four variables that encompass Equality Before the Law and Individual Liberty, Judicial Restraints on the Executive, Legislative Checks on the Executive, and Bicameral Legislature.

Minimum Length of DE Criterion:

Only one other study, Tomini and Wageman, establishes a minimum length condition, albeit one of only two years or more. Mainwaring and Bizzaro use a type of *maximum* length condition, i.e. any substantial decline in the liberal democracy score until a change in the ROW regime score. Yet, there are important theoretical and empirical reasons (for example, Grillo and Prato) to think that the causal mechanisms of DE need some time to work.

Minimum Total Decline:

Three of eight studies create such a condition, and others require statistically significant or “substantial” declines. We agree that in order to be considered a type of autocratization, DE should make tangible changes in a country’s democracy. Hence, we require that the total decrease of LDI score in a DE episode should at least be 0.1, which is used also by other studies.

Maximum Annual Decline:

No other study uses such a condition. But incrementality is arguably one of the constitutive features of DE and should be included in its operationalization. Other autocratization types result from

drastic, patent, and undeniable interventions in democracy. DE's distinguishing trait is its gradual nature resulting from less visible, piecemeal acts that accumulate to regime change over time. Thus, steep declines should not count as part of a DE episode. Hence, we require that the annual decline in a country's LDI score during a DE episode should remain below 0.084, the average fall experts assessed for any coup year since 1990.

Minimum Length and Level of Recovery Period:

Other studies do not conceptualize recovery as separate from "reversal" and do not use such a condition. Brief improvements in LDI scores following DE episodes can be unsustainable. They reflect temporary opposition successes with no agenda or capacity to remedy the political, institutional, and economic systems' flaws, or interest-driven strategic liberalizations by otherwise autocratic-leaning incumbents. Hence, we require that a "recovery" (as opposed to a mere "reversal") comprises at least five years of improvement in a country's LDI scores and a rise in the country's ROW score if the country's ROW score had decreased during the DE episode.

Table 2. Eight Studies and Their Measurement Compared to Our Own

Source	Dem. Condition	Democratic Decline Condition	Other Rules	Minimum Length of Aut.	Upper Limit of Annual Decline	Time (Total Length of DE) variable ?	Concept of Recovery ? If Yes, Minimum Length and Level of Recovery Period?	Unpacking LDI	Concept And Data Source
Haggard and Kaufman (2021)	YES. EDI>0.50 for 8 years before the onset of the episode	Statistically significant decline from country's peak LDI during time period.	Democratic breakdown occurs when EDI falls below 0.50	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	- Backsliding (the main concept) and erosion - Vdem EDI, LDI; EIU; FH; Polity
Luhrmann and Lindberg (2019)	NO. (all countries)	EDI decline of 0.1 or more from year before start to end year.	Starts with decline of 0.01. Period continues until four years of stagnation or increase of 0.02.	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	- Autocratization - Vdem EDI
Tomini and Wageman (2020)	YES. Cases at or under 2.5 FH index	Two or more years of decline within continuing regression	Regression if a decline in FH scores from somewhere between 1-2.5 to somewhere between 1.5-2.5. Breakdown if falls below 2.5.	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	- democratic breakdown and regression - FH
Carothers and Press (2022)	YES. Two of: 2 or 3 ROW score; Polity>=6; IDEA	Two of: -1 ROW category; below 6 in Polity; below GSOD 0.70		NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	- Democratic Backsliding - Vdem; Polity; GSOD

	GSOD \geq 0.70								
Mainwaring and Bizzaro (2019)	NO. 91 democratic transition regimes between 1974-2012. Transition is move from ROW 0/1 to 2/3.	Erosion: Substantial decline in LDI but no change in ROW. Substantial decline is any decline that is at least double of the gap between the country's LDI score in first year of transition and its confidence interval, without a change in its ROW score. Breakdown: move from ROW 2/3 to 0/1	Breakdown: must move to autocracy categories for 3 years or more.	NO but there is a criterion for breakdown. They look at the change in ROW for breakdown and to consider breakdown there has to be no change in 3 years in ROW. If not change in ROW, then LDI.	NO	NO	NO	NO	- breakdowns, erosions, stagnations, advances, and cases where regimes have remained highly democratic without major advances - Vdem ROW and LDI
Boese et al. (2021) – ERT (Edgell et al. 2020)	NO. (all countries)	Begins with EDI -0.01, decline overall by at least 0.10, ends when no decline for five years, or increases by 0.03 or increases by at least 0.10 over five years.	Breakdown – country ends episode ROW 0 or 1 for at least five years or one election.	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	- Democratic breakdown - Vdem EDI

Wunsch & Blanchard (2023)	NO. 79 third wave democracies.	Construct their own scores by using 24 five-scale ordinal V-Dem variables, each contributing to one of the three dimensions.	Clusters countries on dimensions, changes in some dimensions of democracy (clusters 5-8) assigned as “backsliding” countries	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES. They unpack all V-Dem democracy scores to create clusters	- Democratic Backsliding - Vdem
Brownlee and Miao (2022)	YES Democracy for three continuous years	Erosion: Decline of 0.10 or more on V-Dem polyarchy. Executive Removal and Takeover from LIED		NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	- Democratic breakdown and backsliding. - Also a category named “survival preceded by backsliding period” - Vdem EDI
Somer and Yilmaz (2023)	YES. ROW 2 or 3 for five consecutive years preceding the DE period	Five years of decline in LDI. Total decrease of >0.1. No increase in any single year exceeding the previous year’s score.	Breakdown left open.	YES Five years.	YES. LDI cannot decline in a single year by more than 0.084	YES Ten years dummy variable identified as possible critical juncture.	YES. Recovery period: Five consecutive years of LDI increase that recovers the LDI score at the onset of the erosion episode.	YES.	- Democratic Erosion - Vdem ROW and LDI

3. DE Cases Resulting from Employing the Six Conditions

The employment of our criteria gives rise to 24 country episodes of DE, three reversals, and one recovery. Table 3 lists these cases, and explains in parentheses why some reversal cases are not

considered as recoveries. Grey zone country episodes comprise cases that miss some criteria by small margins, in-between categories, and those that meet the criteria technically, but there are reasons to disqualify them based on case-specific analyses. For this paper, we did not generate a list of “near-miss” countries, but we think that some grey-zone countries, such as South Korean be classified as near-miss in addition to countries like Colombia, where erosion attempts were not captured by V-Dem scores, but we know that there were erosion attempts that were prevented or pre-empted.

Importantly, we find only one country that technically met our criteria of recovery: Ecuador. However, case-studies reveal that there are strong grounds for not classifying Ecuador as a recovery case. The country’s democratic troubles and vulnerabilities are continuing and were not replaced by a solid democratic rebound. In turn, Moldova’s post-DE re-democratization has been continuing for four years, thus missing our recovery criterion by one year, but its re-democratization appears to have stronger prospects, especially if the country joins the EU and avoids the Ukrainian fate and an offensive by its big neighbor Russia.

Significantly, we did not find any case of reversal or recovery in any country that suffered DE for more than 10 years. Bolivia, India, Indonesia, Hungary, Nicaragua, Turkey, and Venezuela are the countries that experienced DE for more than a decade. Among these, Bolivia and India technically met the criterion of reversal for only one year in 2021 and 2020 in respective order, but these years were followed by declines, and democratic decay appears to be continuing in both countries. Bolivia, Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela suffered regime change to electoral autocracy during their episode, Hungary after seven years, and Bolivia and India after thirteen years. Venezuela suffered breakdown only one year into its episode, but satisfies our criteria and the process of DE continued until 2015.

Our hypothesis is that two election terms or so may form a critical juncture for DE processes, and we propose that “time” should be added as a causal factor to explaining DE and as a dummy variable in empirical studies.

Table 3. Country Episodes of DE, DE reversal, and DE Recovery

Democratic Erosion Country-Episode (20)	Gray Zone as Declines (8)	Reversal (6)	Recovery (1)
Bolivia (2005 – 2018)	Armenia (1991 – 2000)⁹	Bolivia (2021) (slight decline in 2022)	<u><i>Ecuador (2015 – 2022)</i></u>
Botswana (2012 – 2022)	Fiji (2002 – 2011)	Croatia (2019 - 2022)	
Brazil (2017 – 2022)	Niger (2013 – 2020)¹⁰	<u><i>Moldova (2018 - 2022)</i></u> (has recovered the score, possible recovery if continues one more year)	
Croatia (2013 – 2019)	South Korea (2009 – 2014)	North Macedonia (2015 - 2019) (has not recovered the 2005 level, and decline in last two years)	
Ecuador (2006 – 2015)	United States (2012 – 2020)	South Korea (2015 - 2018) (Has recovered the 2007 level but stagnation since 2018 and decline in last two years)	

⁹ Armenia technically comes close to meeting our criteria. i.e. our -democratic condition- criterion, having been coded as 2 (Electoral Democracy) between 1990 and 1994, i.e. for four years and just one year short of our five-year condition. Substantively, however, it would be hard to consider Armenia a country with well-established democratic legacy. Also, the LDI decline started in Armenia as soon as it became an electoral democracy in 1990, i.e. even before the presumed DE episode began.

¹⁰ Technically, the erosion in Niger just falls short of the 0.1 threshold, but practically, it suffered a DE episode. Niger also seems to be an example of countries whose DE episode is followed by a sudden death, as in the 2023 coup in Niger.

Ghana (2012 – 2022)	Venezuela (1992 – 1998)	Sri Lanka (2010 - 2018) (has recovered the 2003 level but then decline and improving in last two years)	
Greece (2012 – 2022)		<u><i>Zambia (2018 - 2022)</i></u> (Has recovered the 2012 level in 2022, can be recovery if continues one more year)	
Guatemala (2016 – 2022)			
Guyana (2017 – 2022)			
Hungary (2011 – 2022)			
India (2003 – 2020¹¹)			
Indonesia (2009 – 2022)			
Mali (2017 – 2020)			
Moldova (2012 – 2018)			
Nicaragua (1995 -2001) (2009 – 2022)			

¹¹ Technically, the episode ends in 2020 because of a small improvement in 2021, but this is not followed by a reversal in India, in reality, democratic decay seems to be continuing.

North Macedonia (2005 – 2015)			
Philippines (2013 – 2022)			
Poland (2017 – 2022)			
Serbia (2014 – 2021)			
Slovenia (2015 – 2021)			
Sri Lanka (2002 – 2009)			
Turkey (2005 – 2015)			
Venezuela (2001 – 2015)			
Zambia (2013 – 2018)			

4. Concluding Remarks

All in all, Waldner and Lust's (2018: 94-95) observation is still valid: “democratic backsliding connotes a process related to yet still distinct from reversion to autocracy.. scholars have invoked this term with far greater frequency since 1990. But they have not used the term

consistently; moreover, they have not measured the phenomenon accurately. Efforts to explain backsliding remain inchoate.”

The lack of adequate measurements undermines efforts to develop causal explanations of DE in particular countries. It also undermines our ability to adequately answer a number of important empirical and theoretical questions regarding the state and future of democracy in the world.

To begin with, there is an ongoing debate whether the world is indeed endangered by a deepening democratic crisis (Merkel, 2014; Levitsky and Way, 2015; Weyland, 2020; Bermeo, 2022; Brownlee and Miao, 2022). Alarmists duly point to democracies that break down *as well as* those losing their vitality, relevance, and quality. They also highlight scholars’ responsibility not only to explain retrospectively, but also to predict, explain and warn proactively. Critics point to democratizing countries and pro-democratic movements parallel to autocratizing and autocratic ones. Critics also downplay the amount of threat resulting from social, political, and institutional changes that occur within democracies, by interpreting them as conflicts, adaptations, and challenges that democracies can cope with and are designed to overcome. In turn, insofar as DE is a type of autocratization in its own terms, existing democracies may not yet be well-equipped to counter it.

Adequately conceptualizing and measuring DE can inform this debate, by eliminating Type I and Type II errors. Inadequate measurements may misidentify many actual DE cases as crises that are part and parcel of democracies rather than as gradual regime changes, or depict the onset of DE after its actual beginning. Alternatively, we may be led to excess alarm by exaggerating democratic conflicts as regime threats. But perhaps the most important task ahead for scholars is to explain the structural and agentic root causes of DE, and how it can be *overcome* rather than

temporarily be arrested. Here, too, scholars need to be proactive, and deductive as well as inductive, because clear-cut cases of recovery are in short supply, as we argue and suggest in this paper. Once again, both conceptual development and adequate measurements can inform these efforts by reliably distinguishing between near-misses, reversals, and recoveries and begin to explain the differences among them.

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Appendix 1. Disagreement in studies over when countries suffered autocratization.

	Haggard and Kaufman (2021)	Luhrman and Lindberg ¹² (2019)	Tomini and Wageman (2020)	Carothers and Press (2022) ¹³	Mainwaring and Bizzaro (2019) ¹⁴	Boose et al. (2021) - ERT (Edge et al. 2020) ¹⁵	Wunsch & Blanchard (2022)	Brownlee and Miao (2022) ¹⁶	Hadenius, Teorell, and Wahman (2013)	Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010) ¹⁷	Somer and Yilmaz (2023)
Albania							✓				
Argentina			1990				✓				
Armenia		1993 - 1998			1996						
Bangladesh					2005	2002		2007			2001 - 2006
Benin				✓		2017 - 2019					
Belarus		1995 - 2005			1996						
Belgium			1996								
Bhutan							✓				
Bolivia	2007-2019	2006 - 2015		✓				2019			2005 - 2018

¹² The authors use autocratization as a concept.

¹³ The authors do not indicate years for cases. These cases are backsliding cases.

¹⁴ The cases with tick marks are “Erosion” cases. Other cases are “Breakdown” cases.

¹⁵ Bold cases are “Censored Democratic Regression” cases. Others are “Breakdown” cases.

¹⁶ Cases with tick marks are “Breakdowns Preceded by Backsliding Periods”. Others are “Survivals Preceded by Backsliding Periods”.

¹⁷ Bold cases are “Democratic Erosion Country-Episode” cases.

Bosnia and Herzegovina							✓				
Botswana			2009								2012 - 2022
Brazil	2016 - 2019	2012 - 2017		✓		2012 - 2019	✓	✓			
Bulgaria			1996, 2009			2002 - 2019	✓	✓			
Burkina Faso		2014 - 2015		✓	2015	2014 - 2015					
Cabo Verde							✓				
Chile						2011 - 2019	✓				
Colombia			1975				✓				
Comoros		2015 - 2017		✓	2015	2015	✓	2019			
Croatia		2013 - 2017				2011 - 2019	✓	✓			2013 - 2019
Czech Republic						2009 - 2019	✓	✓			
Dominican Rep.	2014 - 2017	2015 - 2017			1990			✓			
Ecuador	2009 - 2017	2008 - 2010	1984		✓		✓	✓			2006-2015
Egypt				✓							
El Salvador				✓							
Ethiopia				✓							
Fiji					2007	2000, 2006 - 2007					
Georgia				✓			✓				

Ghana		2012 - 2017			1981		✓				2012 - 2022
Guatemala				✓							2016 - 2022
Greece	2017		1984, 1993, 2011								2012 - 2022
Guyana											2017 - 2022
Honduras					2010						
Hungary	2011 - 2017	2010 - 2017	2011	✓		2006 - 2018	✓	✓			2011 - 2022
India			1980	✓		2002 - 2019	✓	✓			2003- 2020
Indonesia							✓	✓			2009 - 2022
Israel						2010 - 2019					
Italy			1977, 1992, 2008								
Jamaica			1976, 1993								
Japan			1991								
Latvia			2007								
Lesotho		2015 - 2017					✓				
Leste							✓				
Liberia							✓				
Madagascar		1997 - 2002		✓	2001	2009					
Malawi		1999 - 2005			2004	2011 - 2014					

Maldives		2012 - 2017			2014		✓				
Mali			2007	✓	2012	2011 - 2012					2017 - 2020
Mauritius			2006					✓			
Moldova		2000 - 2006, 2012 - 2017			2005	2000 - 2005		✓ (2)			2012 - 2018
Mongolia							✓				
Montenegro				✓	2007						
Myanmar				✓							
Nepal					2011	2012	✓				
Nicaragua	2005 - 2019	1996 - 1999, 2003 - 2017		✓	2008	2003 - 2007	✓	2016			1995 - 2001, 2009 - 2022
Nigeria				✓							
Niger		2013 - 2017			2009	1995 - 1996, 2007 - 2009, 2013 - 2019	✓				
North Macedonia	2010 - 2016	2005 - 2012			2012	2007 - 2013		✓			2005 - 2015
Palestine/West Bank						2007					
Papua New Guinea						2002 - 2011					
Peru					1992		✓				

Philippines				✓	2004	2001 - 2004, 2016 - 2019	✓	✓ (2)			2013 - 2022
Poland	2016 - 2017	2013 - 2017		✓	✓	2013 - 2019	✓	✓			2017 - 2022
Russia	2000 - 2017	1993 - 2017			2000			2004			
Senegal							✓				
Serbia	2013 - 2017	2006 - 2017		✓		2004 - 2015		✓			2014 - 2021
Sierra Leone						2007 - 2012	✓				
Slovenia							✓	✓			2015 - 2021
Solomon Isl.		1997 - 2001			1999	2000					
South Africa			2006			2009 - 2019	✓				
South Korea		2008 - 2014					✓	✓			
Spain		2013 - 2017									
Sri Lanka		2004 - 2008			2005			2010			2002 - 2009,
Suriname					1980						
Taiwan							✓				
Tanzania				✓	2001, 2016	2000 - 2001	✓				
Thailand				✓	2006	2005 - 2006					

Timor							✓				
Togo						2017					
Tunisia				✓			✓				
Turkey	2010 - 2017	2008 - 2017		✓	2014	2007 - 2014		2018			2005 - 2015
Ukraine	2010 - 2017	1997 - 2002			1998	1997 - 1998, 2008 - 2012	✓	✓			
United Kingdom			1990								
United States	2016 - 2017			✓		2015 - 2019		✓			
Uruguay								✓			
Vanuatu		1988 - 1996						✓			
Venezuela	1998 - 2017	1999 - 2008				1999 - 2003		2008			2001 - 2015
Zambia	2016 - 2017	2010 - 2017			2014	2013 - 2014					2013 - 2018,

Appendix 2.

Sources	Haggard and Kaufman (2021)	Luhrmann and Lindberg (2019)	Tomini and Wagemann (2020)	Carothers and Press (2022)	Mainwaring and Bizzaro (2019)	Boese et al. (2021) – ERT (Edgell et al. 2020)	Wunsch & Blanchard (2023)	Brownlee and Miao (2022)	Somer and Yilmaz (2023)
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Bolivia (2007-2019) Brazil (2016-2019) The Dominican Republic (2014-2017) Ecuador (2009-2017) Greece (2017) Hungary (2011-2017) Macedonia (2010-2016) Nicaragua (2005-2019) Poland (2016-2017) Russia (2000-2017) Serbia (2013-2017) Turkey (2010-2017) Ukraine (2010-2017) United States (2016-2017) Venezuela (1998-2017) Zambia (2016-2017) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Armenia (1993 – 1998) Belarus (1995 – 2005) Bolivia (2006 – 2015) Brazil (2012 – 2017) Burkina Faso (2014-2015) Comoros (2015 – 2017) Croatia (2013 – 2017) Dom. Rep. (2015 – 2017) Ecuador (2008 – 2010) Ghana (2012 – 2017) Hungary (2010 – 2017) Lesotho (2015 – 2017) Macedonia (2005 – 2012) Madagascar (1997 – 2002) Malawi (1999 – 2005) Maldives (2012 – 2017) Moldova (2000 – 2006, 2012 – 2017) Nicaragua (1996 – 1999, 2003 – 2017) Niger (2013 – 2017) Poland (2013 – 2017) Russia (1993 – 2017) Serbia (2006 – 2017) Solomon Islands (1997 – 2001) South Korea (2008 – 2014) Spain (2013 – 2017) Sri Lanka (2004 – 2008) Turkey (2008 – 2017) Ukraine (1997 – 2002) Vanuatu (1988 – 1996) Venezuela (1999 – 2008) Zambia (2010 – 2017) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Argentina (1990) Belgium (1996) Botswana (2009) Bulgaria (1996), (2009) Colombia (1975) Ecuador (1984) Greece (1984), (1993), (2011) Hungary (2011) India (1980) Italy (1977), (1992), (2008) Jamaica (1976), (1993) Japan (1991) Latvia (2007) Mali (2007) Mauritius (2006) South Africa (2006) United Kingdom (1990) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Benin Bolivia Brazil Burkina Faso Comoros El Salvador Egypt Ethiopia Fiji Georgia Guatemala Hungary India Madagascar Mali Montenegro Myanmar Nicaragua Nigeria Philippines Poland Serbia Tanzania Thailand Tunisia Turkey United States 	<p>Breakdown</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Armenia 1996 Nepal 2011 Bangladesh 2005 Nicaragua 2008 Belarus 1996 Niger 2009 Burkina Faso 2015 Peru 1992 Comoros 2015 Philippines 2004 Dominican Rep. 1990 Russia 2000 Fiji 2000 Serbia 2017 Fiji 2007 Solomon Is. 1999 Ghana 1981 Sri Lanka 2005 Honduras 2010 Suriname 1980 Macedonia 2012 Tanzania 2001 Madagascar 2001 Tanzania 2016 Malawi 2004 Thailand 2006 Maldives 2014 Turkey 2014 Mali 2012 Ukraine 1998 Moldova 2005 Ukraine 2014 Montenegro 2007 Zambia 2014 <p>Erosion</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Ecuador Poland 	<p>Democratic Breakdown</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Bangladesh (2002-2002) Benin (2017–2019) Burkina Faso (2014-2015) Comoros (2015-2015) Fiji (2000-2000, 2006-2007) Hungary (2006-2018) Madagascar (2009-2009) Maldives (2011-2014) Mali (2011-2012) Moldova (2000-2005) Nepal (2012-2012) Nicaragua (2003-2007) Niger (1995-1996, 2007-2009) North Macedonia (2007-2013) Palestine/West Bank (2007-2007) Papua New Guinea (2002-2011) Philippines (2001-2004, 2016-2019) Serbia (2004-2015) Sierra Leone (2007-2012) Solomon Islands (2000-2000) Tanzania (2000-2001) Thailand (2005-2006) Togo (2017-2017) Turkey (2007-2014) Ukraine (1997-1998, 2008-2012) Venezuela (1999-2003) Zambia (2013-2014) <p>Censored democratic regression</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Brazil (2012-2019) Bulgaria (2002-2019) Chile (2011-2019) Croatia (2011-2019) Czech Republic (2009-2019) India (2002-2019) Israel (2010-2019) Niger (2013-2019) Poland (2013-2019) South Africa (2009-2019) Tanzania (2015-2019) USA (2015-2019) 	<p>Democratic Reversal</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Nicaragua Croatia Tunisia Liberia Tanzania Niger Ukraine Indonesia Albania Timor Leste Nepal Georgia Bhutan Sierra Leone Maldives Lesotho Comoros <p>Backsliding on Diagonal Safeguards</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> India Vanuatu Ghana Uruguay Peru Cabo Verde South Korea Bulgaria <p>Partial Backsliding with Resilient Horizontal Safeguards</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Brazil Chile Czechia Slovenia Lithuania Estonia Benin Slovakia Colombia Taiwan South Africa <p>Democracies under Attack</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Mongolia Hungary Philippines Argentina Senegal Poland Ecuador 	<p>Breakdowns Preceded by Backsliding Periods (8)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Bangladesh 2007 (r) Bolivia 2019 (t) Comoros 2019 (t) Nicaragua 2016 (t) Russia 2004 (t) Sri Lanka 2010 (t) Turkey 2018 (t) Venezuela 2008 (t) <p>Survivals Preceded by Backsliding Periods (20)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Bosnia and Herzegovina Brazil Bulgaria Croatia Czech Republic Dominican Republic Ecuador Hungary India Indonesia Macedonia Mauritius Moldova (2) Philippines (2) Poland Serbia Slovenia South Korea Ukraine United States 	<p>Democratic Erosion Country-Episode (20)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Bolivia (2005 - 2018) Botswana (2012 - 2022) Brazil (2017 - 2022) Croatia (2013 - 2019) Ecuador (2006 - 2015) Ghana (2012 - 2022) Greece (2012 - 2022) Guatemala (2016 - 2022) Guyana (2017 - 2022) Hungary (2011 - 2022) India (2003 - 2020) Indonesia (2009 - 2022) Mali (2017 - 2020) Moldova (2012 - 2018) Nicaragua (1995 - 2001), (2009 - 2022) North Macedonia (2005 - 2015) Philippines (2013 - 2022) Poland (2017 - 2022) Serbia (2014 - 2021) Slovenia (2015 - 2021) Sri Lanka (2002 - 2009) Turkey (2005 - 2015) Venezuela (2001 - 2015) Zambia (2013 - 2018) <p>Gray Zone as Declines (8)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Armenia (1991 – 2000) Brazil (2013 – 2021)

									<div>3. Fiji (2002 – 2011)</div> <div>4. India (2002 – 2014)</div> <div>5. South Korea (2009 – 2014)</div> <div>6. United States of America (2012 – 2020)</div> <div>Reversal (7)</div> <div>1. Bolivia (2021)</div> <div>2. Croatia (2019 - 2022)</div> <div>3. Moldova (2018 - 2022)</div> <div>4. North Macedonia (2015-2019)</div> <div>5. South Korea (2010 - 2018)</div> <div>6. Sri Lanka (2010 - 2018)</div> <div>7. Zambia (2018 - 2022)</div> <div>Recovery (1)</div> <div>1. Ecuador (2015 – 2021)</div>
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