

Title:

Democratic Tendency Index (DTI): A Normative Framework for Signaling Democratic Decline through the Education–Internal Security Balance

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Abstract

This paper introduces the *Democratic Tendency Index* (DTI), a novel indicator based on the ratio of public spending on education to internal security. Grounded in democratic theory and critical political thought, the DTI is designed as an early warning signal of democratic decline. Unlike existing indices, which focus on institutional symptoms, the DTI foregrounds the fiscal choices that shape citizen agency or control. This paper lays out the normative rationale and dual-method design of the DTI, paving the way for future empirical validation.

Keywords

Democratic backsliding; Public finance; Democracy indices; Political theory; Education policy; Security policy

1. Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, the lexicon of global politics has been enriched by a disquieting expression: democratic backsliding. These are not sudden collapses or coups, but gradual and methodical erosions, concentration of executive power, shrinking civic space, manipulation of the rules of the game that hollow out democracy from within¹. Most available analytical tools, such as V-Dem, Polity5, Freedom House, or the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, measure these regressions through political and institutional variables, but rarely investigate

¹ (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

the more subtle signals that precede visible symptoms. This is where the proposal of this paper comes in. Public spending is never neutral, it reveals, in numbers, a State's priorities. If a government invests more in education and training, it strengthens its citizens' human capital and critical capacity. If, on the other hand, it gives priority to public order and security, it strengthens coercive control, often at the expense of political freedom, in line with Foucault's² intuition that penal systems and security apparatuses operate as instruments of social discipline. These budgetary choices are therefore thermometers of the direction in which a political system is moving, and this is precisely the insight behind the Democratic Tendency Index (DTI)³.

The DTI, calculated as the ratio of public spending on education to spending on public order and internal security, is intended to be an early warning tool: an indicator capable of signaling, before traditional indices, a State's tendency to strengthen or weaken its democratic dimension. The DTI is structured on two distinct but integrated methodological levels. This methodological choice is not neutral. It reflects a normative stance grounded in political philosophy: democracy is not only a matter of institutions and procedures, but also of the material conditions that enable political agency. The distribution of public resources, what the State chooses to fund or neglect, expresses a hierarchy of values and a vision of the political subject. The DTI thus seeks to capture this orientation.

This paper does not provide empirical validation of the proposed index. Its purpose is to develop the theoretical and conceptual framework behind the DTI, and to position it within the broader literature on democratic erosion and normative public policy. DTI project is conceived on two steps: first, as a normative tool for interpreting the political orientation of state spending; second, as a potential empirical index to be tested and applied across national contexts. While this paper focuses exclusively on the first level, a subsequent publication will be dedicated to the operationalization and validation of the index through mixed-method research.

2. Theoretical Context and Existing Measures

² (Foucault, 1975)

³ From here on DTI.

The contemporary debate on the crisis of democracy is dominated by the much discussed and controversial notion of democratic backsliding. As Bermeo⁴ observes, backsliding manifests as a gradual, internally driven process by elected governments that erode democratic institutions from within. Unlike past coups, it does not produce sudden institutional shocks, but a slow attrition that is difficult to detect in real time. Lührmann and Lindberg⁵ frame this as a «third wave of autocratization», marked by a global increase in restrictions on freedom of expression, political participation, and judicial independence. This insidious character poses a significant challenge to traditional measurement tools.

To monitor such processes, political science has developed a diverse arsenal of indices. Freedom in the World⁶, based on qualitative assessments of civil and political rights; Polity project V⁷, which assigns regime scores from -10 (autocracy) to +10 (democracy); V-Dem⁸, using over 450 indicators with expert coding; the Democracy Index⁹ of the Economist Intelligence Unit, combining 60 indicators across electoral process, pluralism, government functioning, political participation, and political culture; the Direct Popular Vote Index¹⁰ from V-Dem, focusing on participatory democracy; Vanhanen's Index of Democracy¹¹, based on electoral participation and competition; the Democracy Perception Index¹², unique in measuring citizens' subjective perceptions of democracy through global surveys. These tools remain indispensable for international comparison, yet they share a structural limitation: they capture political and institutional conditions once they are already manifested, rather than identifying the early budgetary and policy shifts that might precede them.

⁴ Bromero (2016).

⁵ Lührmann and Lindberg (2019).

⁶ Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* is an annual global report on political rights and civil liberties, consisting of numerical ratings and descriptive text for each country and a select group of territories.

⁷ Polity Project V – are a Societal-Systems Research Inc. Project on Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2018, designed and/or prepared by Monty G. Marshall, Ted Robert Gurr, Founder.

⁸ V-Dem – Varieties of Democracy is an index of democracy designed by the V-dem institute.

⁹ Democracy Index is an index of democracy designed by the Economist Intelligence Unit.

¹⁰ Based on expert estimates and the V-Dem index. It combines information on the extent to which citizens can vote independently.

¹¹ Vanhanen, T. (2000).

¹² The Democracy Perception Index (DPI) is the world's largest annual study of democracy, conducted by Latana in collaboration with the Alliance of Democracies to monitor attitudes toward democracy around the world

Parallel to this literature, public finance research has shown that budgetary priorities reflect the implicit social contract between State and citizens. Securitization processes¹³, in which social issues are reframed as security threats, are concretely expressed in public spending allocations. Foucault¹⁴ demonstrated how penal systems and security apparatuses function as instruments of social discipline; conversely, investment in education enhances citizens' cognitive and critical capacities, strengthening what Sen¹⁵ and Nussbaum¹⁶ call democratic capability, the real possibility for individuals to participate in political life in an informed and autonomous way. Empirical studies have shown robust correlations between educational attainment and quality of governance¹⁷, as well as between education and crime reduction¹⁸.

The DTI is supposed to fill a conceptual and empirical gap: although the OECD and IMF COFOG data allow for historical comparisons of public spending, no synthetic indicator systematically uses the ratio of spending on education to spending on public order as an independent measure of democratic tendencies. The DTI, without replacing existing indices, complements them as an early warning tool, a budgetary "thermometer" capable of capturing subtle shifts in political priorities that can anticipate processes of strengthening or eroding democracy, applicable across different national and temporal comparative contexts.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the Democratic Tendency Index (DTI) rests on the premise that public spending is an ideologically charged act¹⁹. Drawing on critical theory and normative political thought, the DTI interprets fiscal allocations as structural expressions of political intent. It moves beyond institutional descriptions of democracy to focus on the underlying logic of public policy: whether a state invests in emancipation or in control.

¹³ Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde (1998).

¹⁴ Foucault (1975).

¹⁵ Sen (1999)

¹⁶ Nussbaum (2011)

¹⁷ Glaeser et al., (2004).

¹⁸ Lochner & Moretti (2004).

¹⁹ Musgrave (1959).

This duality is reflected in the index's core components: education (COFOG 9) as a vector of autonomy and critical capacity²⁰, and internal security (COFOG 3) as a mechanism of discipline and normalization²¹. The DTI does not assume that more spending on one sector automatically indicates democratic quality; rather, it proposes that the relative orientation of spending patterns can signal political priorities before formal democratic decline becomes measurable.

The index is inspired by two intersecting theoretical traditions. First, the *capabilities approach*, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, which links democracy to the development of individual agency²². Second, Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, where security infrastructures shape and constrain subjectivities²³. These perspectives converge in a shared concern for how institutions shape the conditions under which individuals become political actors.

In this light, the DTI is not a descriptive or predictive model. It is a normative instrument, a conceptual lens for interpreting fiscal decisions as indicators of democratic commitment.

4. Methodological Architecture

The DTI is structured on two distinct yet integrated methodological levels: a first level of objective quantitative measurement and a second level of qualitative evaluation, which serves to critically contextualize the numerical results.

The methodological choice to assess democratic tendencies is not neutral; rather, it expresses a normative judgment: a state that invests in the education of free, critical, and participatory citizens orients its organization toward democratic strengthening; conversely, a state that prioritizes control and surveillance tends toward authoritarian regression. This assumption is based on a theoretical horizon that unites:

- the phenomenology of citizenship, which allows us to understand education and security as social experiences that structure political subjectivity;
- contemporary biopolitics, which interprets security as a means of governing lives and not merely as protection from danger;

²⁰ OECD. (2024).

²¹ Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde (1998).

²² Sen (1999).

²³ Foucault, M. (1975)

- the philosophy of language and communicative action, which allows us to understand public spending as a performative act, that is, as an institutional enunciation of value priorities;
- and finally, the theory of justice which links the allocation of public resources to the development of citizens' fundamental capabilities.

First level: Objective quantitative index: the first level of the DTI is represented by a simple numerical ratio between two items of public spending:

$$DTI = \frac{\text{Spending on Education (COFOG Div.9)}}{\text{Spending on Public order and internal security (COFOG Div.3)}}$$

The data will be collected from official and standardized sources.

Second level: Contextual qualitative analysis.

The second level contextualizes and refines the interpretation of the numerical DTI, considering the quality and effectiveness of education and internal security policies. It is divided into two sections:

Qualitative assessment of the education system and internal security: objective indicators will be analyzed to measure the system's efficiency. Countries will be classified into three categories: High quality / Medium quality / Low quality.

Integrative function of the second level:

The second level does not modify the index score, but offers a contextualized interpretation, capable of distinguishing between: States with the same DTI but different effective democratic profiles:

- States where security spending is effectively justified (e.g., high crime rates) from those where it represents a symptom of disguised authoritarian regression
- States where educational investment produces real empowerment from those where it is formally present but lacks democratic effectiveness

In this way, the second level introduces a philosophical and critical dimension into the method itself, avoiding the reduction of democracy to a mere quantitative formula. The DTI, in its structure thus aims to overcome the separation between

normative philosophy and empirical science, contributing to a more comprehensive and predictive understanding of democracy as an evolving process.

5. Expected application and Implications

The Democratic Tendency Index (DTI) is not intended as a replacement for existing democratic indices, but as a complementary analytical tool. Its primary function is to serve as an early warning signal, capable of detecting changes in a state's fiscal stance that may precede or accompany democratic erosion²⁴. By focusing on budget allocation rather than institutional performance, the DTI offers a new perspective for democratic assessment: one that reveals a state's priorities, not just its formal guarantees.

The index can be applied in several research areas. First, in comparative analysis, it enables cross-national mapping of fiscal trends, offering a way to group states based on their regulatory budget profiles²⁵. Second, in longitudinal studies, it can be used to monitor the evolution of a single state's fiscal-democratic stance over time, revealing whether its democratic commitment is strengthening, stabilizing, or deteriorating. Third, in policy analysis, DTI can serve as a diagnostic input for civil society actors, international organizations, and oversight institutions interested in democratic resilience²⁶.

DTI can also stimulate theoretical debates. By treating fiscal choices as political acts, it calls for a reconceptualization of democracy that integrates material distribution and epistemic empowerment into the core of democratic evaluation. It thus aligns itself with a strand of political theory that challenges the procedural bias of traditional democratic metrics²⁷. And foregrounds the invisible infrastructures that sustain or erode democratic life.

Although its validity still requires empirical demonstration, DTI offers a promising conceptual framework for exploring how states allocate resources not only as a matter of economic policy, but as an expression of political

²⁴ Diamond (2021).

²⁵ Przeworski (2019).

²⁶ Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018).

²⁷ Mounk (2018)

vision. Its greatest potential lies not in scoring democracies, but in questioning the conditions under which democracy becomes sustainable.

6. Limits and future prospects

Like any analytical tool, the Democratic Tendency Index (DTI) has inherent limitations that must be acknowledged. The first concerns the simplification of complex fiscal realities. The ratio of education to security spending is a powerful signal, but it inevitably abstracts from the broader fiscal context. States differ significantly in their welfare regimes, economic structures, and levels of development; comparing them requires caution and careful calibration²⁸.

A second limitation is its context-dependent nature. Increased security spending may reflect an authoritarian drift, but it can also respond to external threats, international obligations, or temporary crises. Similarly, increased education spending may be driven by electoral opportunism or international aid rather than genuine democratic commitment. Without qualitative contextualization, the risk of misinterpretation remains high.

Third, the DTI is normative in nature. It does not claim neutrality but explicitly frames fiscal choices as political acts that strengthen or limit democratic action. This normative stance represents both its strength and its vulnerability: it foregrounds values but also exposes the index to challenge from perspectives adopting alternative definitions of democracy²⁹.

These limitations are not flaws to be eliminated, but rather conditions to be addressed through future research. The next step is the empirical validation of the DTI. This will involve two phases: (1) quantitative tests on a large sample of countries, examining correlations with existing democracy indices and governance outcomes; and (2) qualitative case studies, using process tracing and document analysis to interpret the meaning of fiscal trends in specific contexts³⁰. Further refinement could also involve incorporating additional policy domains, such as healthcare, social protection, or environmental spending, into the index's conceptual architecture.

²⁸ Sartori (1970).

²⁹ Collier & Levitsky (1997).

³⁰ Lieberman (2005).

Ultimately, the value of the DTI lies not in producing definitive scores, but in opening up a new space for inquiry. By connecting public finance to democratic theory, it suggests new ways of understanding how states allocate resources and how these choices shape the possibility of democratic life. Future work will determine not only the validity of the index, but also its ability to reshape the debate on democratic resilience.

7. Conclusion

Democracy is often described as a set of procedures, institutions, and rights. However, its durability depends on something more elusive: the material and epistemic conditions that enable citizens to think critically, act collectively, and resist domination. By proposing the Democratic Tendency Index (DTI), this article has sought to promote a normative framework that interprets fiscal priorities as mirrors of democratic orientation. The allocation of public resources is never a mere technical decision; it is a political act that reveals what a state values, how it envisions its citizens, and what kind of political system it aspires to be.

In this sense, the DTI does not claim to exhaust the meaning of democracy. No single metric can do so. What it aims to illuminate is a dimension systematically overlooked by conventional indices: the underlying infrastructures through which governments cultivate the autonomy of their citizens or invest in their surveillance and control. Democracy is eroding not only through formal restrictions, but also through the silent shift of resources from emancipation to coercion, from education to security. The DTI focuses on this shift, not as a neutral measure, but as a critical lens that exposes the policies hidden in budgets.

Its ambition, therefore, is not to add another score to the crowded landscape of democratic rankings, but to reframe the debate. The DTI reminds us that democracy cannot be reduced merely to procedures, ballots, or institutional guarantees. It thrives in the distribution of knowledge, the cultivation of critical capacities, and the social infrastructures that support dissent and deliberation. Conversely, it withers when coercion is normalized as the organizing principle of order, when fear replaces trust, and when citizens are reduced to objects of control rather than subjects of freedom.

The road ahead is challenging. The index must be subjected to empirical testing, across different countries and historical trajectories, to examine its robustness and applicability. But the conceptual challenge is already clear: by connecting political theory to public finance, the DTI opens a new way of thinking about democracy, not as a static form or an electoral cycle, but as a dynamic orientation inscribed in the state's daily decisions. Its ultimate value will lie not only in technical refinement, but in its capacity to spark new critiques, sharpen our vigilance against authoritarian tendencies, and broaden the horizon of what we mean when we talk about "democracy."

If democracies are to survive the creeping tide of autocratization, they must be defended not only at the ballot box or in the courts, but also in the budgets through which states shape life's possibilities. It is here, in the hidden grammar of spending, that the future of democracy is being written.

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