Why Pluralism Persists

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PANEL 3:
How Autocracies Live and Die

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE:

"The Autocratic Challenge to Liberal Democracy and the Future of Global Development: The World 20 Years After the Founding of CDDRL" was a one-day workshop examining the state of democracy and development today held on November 4, 2022, in celebration of CDDRL's 20th anniversary.

The workshop brought together current and former CDDRL scholars to understand the causes and consequences of these global challenges, and to advance a research agenda that can underpin an era of democratic renewal.

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Democracy has confronted extraordinary threats in the last two decades. The rise of increasingly aggressive autocratic powers in China and Russia has shifted the global balance of power away from Western hegemony – threatening to reverse substantial democratic gains made in the 1990s. Second, illiberal politicians—from Viktor Orban in Hungary, to Marie Le Pen in France to Donald Trump in the United States—have emerged as powerful actors in democracies new and old. Never in the modern era has global democracy had to withstand such open hostility from the United States under Trump. Furthermore, disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have discredited the idea of democracy promotion in the eyes of many; while the 2008 Financial crisis, Brexit, and the 2009 European debt crisis revealed fundamental problems in Western economies and governance structures. Finally, these developments have coincided with a variety of long-term trends -- rising inequality, increased polarization, and the decline of establishment media – that pose fundamental challenges to democratic governance.

Such changes have generated intense levels of pessimism surrounding the fate of democracy in the world. For example, Freedom House in its 2022 report argues that there have been “16 consecutive years of decline in global freedom.”\(^1\) Another major index, V-Dem, highlights “intensifying wave of autocratization.”\(^2\)

These reports obviously reflect important trends. Thus, the challenges described above have generated significant setbacks in a number of countries previously considered democratic strongholds – including Hungary, India, and Venezuela. Most significantly, the United States, the world’s oldest democracy, is under severe risk of breakdown caused by deepening polarization and an increasingly authoritarian Republican Party.\(^3\) Some degree of backsliding has occurred in recent years in over two dozen countries across the globe.

Yet, such accounts disguise a stunning degree of global democratic resilience that has received almost no attention. Despite setbacks, there are still more competitive democratic countries right now than at almost any time in world history – twice as many as in 1980. Twenty years after commentators first expressed concerns about democratic backsliding, about half of countries in the world remain democratic or nearly so according to the most well-respected index, V-Dem – just a bit down from a world historical high of 54% in 2017, and significantly better than in 1985, when only 28 percent of countries in the world were democratic.\(^4\) The number of closed autocracies remains far lower than in the not-too-distant past – roughly three times fewer than in the early 1970s. Thus, while democracy is certainly in crisis, it has declined

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2 [https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf](https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf)
4 Data from Freedom House (and other indices) show similar trends. Thus, Freedom House began claiming consecutive annual declines in global freedom in 2006 when according to its figures, 47% of the world was Free. Today (2021), 43% of countries are Free.
5 V-dem argued in early 2022 that “[t]he last 30 years of democratic advances are now eradicated” based on the fact that the average global democracy score, when weighted by population, has declined to the level it was 1989. Such an assertion, which is explained by democratic declines in a few large countries such as India and the United States, contradicts V-Dem’s own data which shows significant and sustained democratic progress in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe since 1989.
far less than in earlier historical periods of backsliding. For example, between 1920 and 1940, the share of democracies in the world declined about 20 percent (Gunitsky 2017: 2).

Unpacking “Democratic Crisis”
Part of the confusion around democratic trajectories has to do with the fact that the crisis of democracy does not necessarily involve a direct threat to the survival of democracy. Among established democracies, crisis manifests itself in three ways. The first and most serious type of challenge – most notably in the United States (and Hungary, Brazil?) – involves a direct threat to the continuation of democracy. Thus, without doubt, the United States is now on the cusp of competitive authoritarianism.6 A second related but distinct challenge comes from the rise of far-right parties in countries like Italy and France that are characterized by increased polarization but not necessarily democratic breakdown. Rightwing groups and politicians – Brothers Italy, the French National Rally – threaten immigration and the rights of minorities but do not (yet?) present a clear challenge to democracy as such.7 The third and final set of cases are those such as Great Britain that suffer from severe problems of governance but face no obvious threat to democracy. Overall, long established, wealthy democracies in Western and Southern Europe, East Asia, and Oceana have (except for the United States) avoided backsliding.8

The Persistence of Pluralism
Indeed, democracy hasn’t simply survived in wealthy countries with strong institutions (e.g., South Korea, Taiwan) but has thrived in numerous countries that face serious democratic obstacles and were undemocratic before the end of the Cold War. Ghana – a lower middle-income country that was one of the most coup ridden places on earth during the Cold War – has been stable and fully democratic since 2000. Here, incumbent governments peacefully left power after losing democratic elections in 2000, 2008, and 2021. Similarly, South Africa, despite its violent political transition and long history of racial conflict, is an “impressive democratic success” characterized by fiercely competitive and free elections, a free media, robust judiciary and strong rights for minorities.9 Remarkable democratic resilience can also be found in postcommunist Eastern Europe, which was exclusively dominated by single party dictatorships before 1989. Now, two thirds of countries are fully democratic and no regimes are entirely authoritarian. Perhaps the most extraordinary success story is Romania, which under Nicolae Ceaușescu remained Stalinist until the very end and suffered the region’s only violent transition from communism in 1989. Democratic since 1996, Romania hosts a diverse and open media, free and fair elections and a highly competitive party system that has witnessed five different democratic transfers of power. Elsewhere in the Balkans, Croatia, which suffered from ethnic polarization, civil war and harsh dictatorship in the 1990s, has been a democracy since 2000. Since that time, Croatia’s two major parties – the Christian Democratic Party and Social Democratic Party have – have traded power four different times. Bulgaria, which was often considered to be the 16th Soviet Republic in the 1970s and 1980s, has similarly experienced three decades of democracy and six democratic

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7 Tom Carothers and Benjamin Press make this point as well. See “Stop Projecting America’s Democratic Decline Onto the World” Foreign Policy October 18, 2022.
8 See Jason Brownlee and Kevin Miao “Debate: Why Democracies Survive.” and Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press
turnovers of power. In Macedonia, which experienced severe ethnic polarization between Albanians and Macedonians, incumbents have lost power four different times in peaceful, mostly democratic elections. Another surprising democracy in the postcommunist world is Mongolia, a poor country that was among the most isolated and closed countries anywhere until the late 1980s. Mongolia has been a democracy for more than three decades and seen three democratic turnovers since the early 1990s. Finally, all three Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – have remained consistently democratic since the end of the Cold War.

Similarly in Latin America, numerous countries that were authoritarian during the Cold War – such as Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Panama, and Uruguay – have been stable democracies for decades. In addition, Guyana, which was the second poorest country in the hemisphere (after Haiti) and one of the world’s 20 poorest nations in the 1990s, made a successful transition to democracy shortly after the end of the Cold War and has seen three democratic turnovers since 1992. Similarly, the Dominican Republic, which suffered decades of neopatrimonial rule during the Cold War and hosted a weak civil society, has been democratic since 1996 and witnessed four different democratic turnovers since the end of the Cold War.

Other cases in the former Soviet Union and sub-Saharan Africa have faced greater democratic challenges but are nonetheless far more pluralist than most theories would predict. Take Liberia and Sierra Leone – two of the poorest countries in the world that experienced severe state collapse and civil war in the 1990s. It would be hard to find two countries with weaker democratic prerequisites. Yet, over the last two decades, relatively free and highly competitive elections have been the primary means for gaining and keeping power. Despite persistent problems of corruption and some harassment of opposition, such contests have led to two mostly peaceful transfers of power, making these countries far more competitive than many regimes in the region. Simultaneously, weak and poverty ridden Zambia and Malawi have experienced respectively three and four democratic turnovers since the end of the Cold War. Even Angola, one of the most authoritarian countries in Africa, recently witnessed the closest election in its history.

Surprisingly persistent pluralism can also be found in the former Soviet Union. In Ukraine, “a profound disregard for the rule of law,” weak civil society, and persistent ethno-linguistic and regional divisions led many to predict that democracy would not emerge “until far in the future.” Yet, Ukraine has witnessed a vibrant media, extremely active and well-organized political opposition, and four peaceful, democratic turnovers since the collapse of the USSR. Similarly, Moldova is poor and rural country racked by ethnic tensions that had a weak civil society no democratic history or even serious dissident movement before the Soviet collapse. Yet, after 1991, Moldova was one of the most democratic countries in the former Soviet Union. Elections were mostly free and incumbents confronted enormous difficulties controlling the legislature, opposition, and the media. Moldova experienced four democratic turnovers in power – in 1996, 2001, 2009, and 2019. While these countries have periodically experienced democratic deficiencies, they have remained far more democratic and competitive

13 They have often been competitive authoritarian rather than democratic. See Levitsky and Way (2010, chapters 4, 5 and 6).
than most or (in the case of sub-Saharan Africa) *any* extant theories of democratization would predict.

More broadly, the nature of authoritarianism has fundamentally changed since the end of the Cold War. Certainly “old fashioned” dictatorships without elections such as China and Saudi Arabia are still around. But, in a significant number of competitive authoritarian regimes, elections remain the primary means of gaining and keeping power. Such contests are highly unfair but meaningfully competitive. Iliberal politicians in Europe and the United States have mostly refrained from attacking democracy directly via military coups, overt attacks on civil liberties or (with the important exception of Trump in 2020) attempts to steal elections. Instead, the main challenge to Western democracy has come in the form of less visible efforts to politicize the state bureaucracy and infiltrate previously independent media outlets. And while democracy is in trouble in the United States, full scale authoritarianism is not on the horizon.

Indeed, the commonly accepted dividing line between democracy and autocracy has shifted significantly since the end of the Cold War. Cold War “democracies” such as Japan – where the ruling Liberal Democratic Party used tight control over fiscal transfers to maintain hegemonic control for three decades – would not be considered democratic today; whereas Orban’s Hungary would almost certainly have been seen as democratic before 1989.

### Why Pluralism Persists

The fact that pluralism has survived so far doesn’t mean it won’t collapse in the near future. However, democracy’s survival does not appear to be an accident. There are at least five global structural factors that may facilitate the persistence of pluralism over the long haul: (1) high levels of economic development in the democratic core, (2) continued Western liberal global power, (3) the absence of broadly legitimate alternatives to multiparty democracy, (4) digital technologies that make it harder for dictators to control the information sphere, and finally (5) incumbent weakness in parts of Africa and the former Soviet Union that undermine efforts to monopolize political control.

First, as numerous classical accounts, and, very recently, Jason Brownlee and Kevin Miao (2022) have suggested, economic development appears to provide a powerful explanation for democratic persistence. High levels of economic development facilitate the growth of independent sources of economic, social, and political power that make it harder for leaders to monopolize political control. Thus, the vast majority of stable democracies today are high income countries.

Second, the rather messy character of regime trajectories today reflects the equally muddled global balance of power. While the liberal West may be down, but it is hardly out. Western democracies dominate both militarily and economically. The United States spends nearly three times more on the military than does China and more than China, India, Russia, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Germany, France, Japan, and South Korea combined. Eight of the world’s ten largest economies are established democracies, and the dollar remains the world currency.

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14 Levitsky and Way (2010, 2020)
In turn, the emergence of a new “authoritarian international” to challenge the democratic west has been hampered Western economic and military dominance. Thus, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been severely undermined by Ukrainian access to Western support and superior Western military technologies. Furthermore, Russian military defeats and declining European energy independence have severely damaged Russia’s long-term geopolitical influence. Finally, while the Chinese government has given rhetorical support for Putin and purchased Russian oil, it has so far mostly abided by international sanctions against Russia – presumably because it is unwilling to forego trade with Western economies valued at USD 35 trillion to support Russia (1.5 trillion) economy. Thus, the rise of China and an increasingly aggressive Russian foreign policy have to an important extent been counterbalanced by the continued geopolitical and economic power of Western democracies. The shift in the global balance of power has not resembled the kinds of hegemonic shocks that Seva Gunitsky (2017) has argued generate significant shifts in regime outcomes.

Third and relatedly, the resilience of pluralism may be explained by the weakness of ideological alternatives. The demise of communism as a salient substitute for liberal democracy at the end of the Cold War significantly weakened threats posed by authoritarianism. For the first time in world history, no legitimate alternative model exists to challenge multiparty democracy. Certainly, contemporary populist politicians have undermined democracy. But they have almost never attacked competitive elections as such. By contrast, during the 1920s and 1930s, fascism and communism enjoyed broad elite-and mass-level support in countries across the world. Well-organized parties and movements embraced them as superior alternatives to liberal democracy. During the 1960s and 1970s, Leninist single party rule was embraced by prestigious Third World leaders such as Ben Bella, Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Nkrumah, and Nyerere. In other countries, particularly in South America and parts of Asia, right wing military dictatorships were widely accepted as a legitimate, if less than ideal, means of staving off communism.

The absence of salient alternatives to democracy has reduced the threat posed by authoritarianism both internationally and domestically. On the one hand, autocracies such as China and Russia (at least until 2022) have been far less interested in spreading authoritarianism than they were during the Cold War. During the Cold War, China and the Soviet Union engaged in serious efforts to spread communism in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. In the immediate wake of the Soviet collapse, such efforts ceased completely – in large part because Russian power had been so dramatically weakened. But such endeavors remained anemic even after Russian and Chinese geo-political power increased in the early 21st century. Thus, in recent decades, Russia and China have done relatively little to promote alternative regime models abroad – seeking primarily to support allied governments, rather than promote authoritarianism per se.17 Russian support for authoritarianism before 2022 was largely opportunistic—and often ineffective.18 The Putin government backed opposition forces when they targeted anti-Russian governments, as in Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, and Ukraine. And in some cases, such as Ukraine, Russian intervention has been so ham-fisted that it has triggered an anti-Russian backlash that strengthened democratic forces. As noted above, Russian efforts to occupy Ukraine in early 2022 were met by fierce Ukrainian resistance and a unified Western effort to isolate and weaken Russia.

Simultaneously, the absence of alternatives to democracy has been manifested in the continuing popularity of multiparty elections that are widely viewed as the most legitimate means of ascending to power. After the collapse of Communism in the 1980s and 1990s, popular forces throughout the globe mobilized in favor of democratic change. Even today, citizens remain essentially Churchillian: they do not necessarily love democracy, but outside of a handful of countries (e.g., China, Singapore), they do not find the alternatives any better. Support for human rights has increased dramatically across the world since the 1980s. Societies may not be deeply committed to the principles of liberal democracy, but people like competitive elections, and in particular, they value the ability to vote out bad governments. This is why citizens across the world—in Algeria, Armenia, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Hong Kong, Nicaragua, Serbia, Sudan, Venezuela—have in recent years taken to the streets to demand or defend competitive elections.

But why haven’t autocrats in the developing world been more successful in suppressing democracy in the 21st century? In the absence of robust civil societies or other democratic prerequisites, dictators don’t need an ideological justification to suppress opposition. Two factors appear to limit the capacity of dictators in less developed contexts.

First, the rise of social media and cell phone technology has arguably hindered efforts to create closed autocracies by evening the playing field between opposition and autocrats. New digital technologies have both made it harder for autocrats to hide abuses and enhanced the capacity of ordinary citizens to mobilize support for democratic change. Digital technologies have made it more difficult for dictators to hide serious abuses from the outside world. Early in the twentieth century, dictators such as Joseph Stalin, Adolph Hitler, and Mao Zedong successfully concealed the deaths of millions of their citizens. Today, the ubiquity of cell phones and the internet significantly complicates efforts to hide even relatively minor abuses. While intrepid autocrats may still choose to engage in large scale abuse, state violence is more likely to incur serious costs than it was a generation ago. Indeed, political violence has declined dramatically over recent decades. While Guriev and Treisman (2022) trace this development to “spin dictators” who decide that violence is ineffective, reductions in violence are also likely the result of increased constraints on such behavior.

Simultaneously, digital technologies have facilitated domestic efforts by opposition to mobilize support. In the old days, internal criticism of totalitarian regimes in the Soviet Union, or the Chinese Communist Party was almost entirely limited to the kitchen table or brave but fleeting acts of disidence that were quickly suppressed. When opposition protest emerged in Novocherkassk in the Soviet Union in 1962, for example, the government was able to suppress it before it spread to other places. Even in less totalitarian military regimes, opposition was highly costly and successfully sidelined. Today, by contrast, it is far more difficult for governments to hide popular discontent and prevent the spread of protest. Digital technologies facilitate

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20 https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/10/16/globally-broad-support-for-representative-and-direct-democracy/
communication among people outside government-controlled channels, thus enhancing opportunities for coordination among those opposed to autocratic rule.\(^\text{23}\)

Of course, new media is no panacea. It can be blocked, used to spread pro government messages/fake news and to enhance surveillance.\(^\text{24}\) However, relative to the pre internet era, the balance of power between citizens and dictators has arguably shifted in favor of ordinary citizens. Technology’s capacity to increase surveillance and enhance the spread of misinformation appears to be mostly outweighed by its power to facilitate the spread of information about authoritarian abuses and to enable opposition mobilization. Indeed, while certain higher capacity autocracies such as China and (more recently) Russia have successfully monopolized the information sphere, many if not most nondemocracies in the developing world lack sufficient capability to effectively stifle dissident voices.\(^\text{25}\) In Iran for example, eighty percent of the population use some form of social media despite significant government efforts to restrict access.\(^\text{26}\) As a result, the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody in September 2022 rapidly sparked opposition protests throughout the country. Thus, while digital technologies may not facilitate a transition to stable democracy, they often appear to complicate efforts to impose full scale authoritarianism.

Overall, the rise of new media both helps to explain why many older democracies are in crisis but also why pluralism has remained so resilient. On the one hand, numerous recent studies of new technologies have emphasized their pernicious effects – including the spread of false information, extremist views and the decline of traditional, fact-based media. Indeed, new technologies – combined with cultural backlash generated by demographic and other social changes – have facilitated the rise of illiberal forces in established democracies.\(^\text{27}\) On the other hand, in countries that lacked political openness or established democratic institutions, new technologies have seemingly had a net positive effect of hampering authoritarian efforts to suppress opposition forces. The same factors that have contributed to political crisis in the democratic core have facilitated the resilience of pluralism in other parts of the world.

A final factor limiting efforts to impose full scale authoritarianism is incumbent weakness.\(^\text{28}\) In fact, a number of countries without strong democratic prerequisites also lack extensive coercive and political capacity to maintain elite unity and suppress even modest opposition. In such cases, democratic contestation has persisted because autocrats have been too weak to steal elections, repress opposition, or keep allies in line. Such weakness likely explains the persistence of pluralism in cases such as Sierra Leone and Liberia that lack almost any identifiable democratic prerequisites. While incumbent weakness almost never leads to democracy, it has ensured the persistence of competitive authoritarianism in large numbers of countries.


\(^{25}\) Feldstein “Digital Technology’s Evolving Role”


\(^{28}\) Lucan Way *Pluralism by Default*. 
Conclusion:

In sum, while the last decade has often been referred to as an authoritarian resurgence, regime trajectories can better be understood as a very real but still modest retreat from an historically high level of global democracy. The battle between democracy and autocracy resembles trench warfare with minimal movements in either direction. But things could change. Based on the above analysis the most plausible threat to the current status quo is clearly the establishment of full-scale competitive authoritarianism in the United States. While the Trump presidency did not result in as severe a drop in democracy as we might have expected, some form of autocracy in the United States would present a very serious threat to the democratic advances witnessed in the last three decades.
Since 2002, the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) at Stanford University has collaborated widely with academics, policymakers and practitioners around the world to advance knowledge about the conditions for and interactions among democracy, broad-based economic development, human rights, and the rule of law.

CDDRL bridges the worlds of scholarship and practice to understand and foster the conditions for effective representative governance, promote balanced and sustainable economic growth, and establish the rule of law. Our faculty, researchers, and students analyze the ways in which democracy and development are challenged by authoritarian resurgence, misinformation, and the perils of a changing climate.

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