

**Covid-19 and the democracy-autocracy freedom divide. Reflections on post-pandemic  
regime change scenarios**

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This research note contributes to the emerging debate on the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for democracy, autocracy and regime change. Following a review of the literature on the short-term impact of the pandemic on citizen freedoms, I conduct a preliminary test showing that Covid-19 has widened the freedom divide between democracy and autocracy. I propose a prudential interpretation of this new finding and of its implications for medium-to-long-term regime change dynamics. In an age of advancing autocratization, regaining awareness that democracies and autocracies treat citizens differently could help marginalize antisystem political forces in democratic countries. However, increased levels of repression in regimes that are already authoritarian are no good news in terms of prospective democratization. Moreover, the management of the social and economic consequences of the pandemic is likely to represent a key driver of future regime change, due to its impact on the legitimacy and stability of both democracies and autocracies.

Keywords: democracy; democratization; autocracy; autocratization; Covid-19; pandemic

## **Introduction**

Since March 2020, when the World Health Organization declared that Covid-19 had assumed the characteristics of a pandemic,<sup>1</sup> both politics and research have been engaged in analysing the damage of the crisis and the most effective responses to it. Among the countless consequences – for health, welfare, labour, productivity and social life – that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on states and populations throughout the world, we need to consider its possible repercussions on the future of democracy too. For several years now, there have been talks of an illiberal trend, of the resurgence of non-democratic powers, and of the risk of a global autocratic drift (Diamond, 2015; Luehrmann and Lindberg, 2019). Will the Covid-19 pandemic represent a driver of regime change, similarly to other crises in the past? Will it give new impetus to the wave of autocratization underway, or could it instead represent a turning point?

To contribute to this emerging debate, this research note distinguishes between short- and medium-to-long-term consequences of Covid-19 for political regimes, respectively regarding the period during and after the pandemic. The short-term consequences on citizen freedoms of the measures that governments around the world have enacted during the past months to contrast the spread of the virus have been readily monitored by research centres such as Freedom House, Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), The Economist Intelligence Unit, and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem).

While this literature highlights that 2020 has witnessed a further decline in global democracy, I show that democratic and autocratic regimes have dealt with the pandemic in quite different ways, leading to the widening of the freedom divide between these forms of political regime. Next, I discuss the implications of this new finding for medium-to-long-term regime

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>

change scenarios. The discussion highlights both opportunities for democratization and democratic stabilization and risks of autocratization and authoritarian consolidation.

### **Freedom at the times of Covid-19**

To analyse the effects of crises, a frequent distinction is between the short term and the medium-to-long term. Regarding the global state of democracy and political freedom, the short-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic mainly derive from the measures that the governments of virtually all states have enacted during the past months to contrast the spread of the virus.

Lockdowns have occurred in political systems as different as China and Italy. Moreover, from Belgium to Cambodia, parliaments have suffered a substantial disempowerment in the past months to enable governments to make urgent decisions, and postponements have occurred to elections in a number of countries (including Bolivia, Ethiopia, Iran and Poland). During a state of emergency (as the Covid-19 pandemic unquestionably is), however, these and other derogations from the normal working of democracy are justifiable, to the extent that the measures adopted be proportional, necessary, temporary and non-discriminatory.<sup>2</sup> In the past, however, crises and states of emergency offered political leaders weakly committed to democracy “the opportunity to both extend their control beyond the realm of the emergency and past the duration of the emergency” (Luehrmann and Rooney, 2021: 622).

The risk that the restrictions to citizens’ freedoms operated during the pandemic will outlive the emergency immediately placed research institutes such as Freedom House, IDEA and V-Dem on the alert. Their global monitoring activity highlights that 2020 has indeed witnessed another year of decline in the global level of democracy (Freedom House, 2021; Varieties of

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance, the March 2020 declaration of the United Nations Human Rights Office (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25668&LangID=E>), based on article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Democracy, 2021; IDEA, 2021), “the biggest rollback of individual freedoms ever undertaken by governments during peacetime”, according to The Economist Intelligence Unit (2021: 14).

Three main worrisome trends have been identified. First, the violation of the freedom of expression, typically with the excuse of limiting the spread of fake news about the management of the health crisis (e.g. Tanzania). Second, the excessive use of violence to enforce lockdowns and quarantine measures (e.g. El Salvador). Third, a discriminatory application of these measures, which often targeted minorities and vulnerable groups disproportionately (e.g. Serbia).

Should we conclude that the pandemic and the states of emergency have effectively paved the way for new attempts to topple democracy around the world? Not necessarily. While analysts have recognized that Covid-19 has fuelled an ongoing trend of democratic decline overall, a second – interrelated, but distinct – issue has thus far received less explicit attention.

A closer look at the data suggests that the recorded violations and abuses mainly took place in countries that were already authoritarian at the end of 2019 (i.e. before the pandemic). Autocrats have exploited the pandemic to crack down on their critics even harder, as Belarus, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Sri Lanka. On the contrary, governments in countries with more consolidated democratic institutions have addressed the emergency with only minor and non-systematic violations – from Canada to Taiwan, from New Zealand to Botswana – leading Varieties of Democracy to conclude that “the most pessimistic predictions did not materialize” (2021: 15-16).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Exceptions unfortunately exist. Since the pandemic outbreak, democratic and semi-democratic countries that have experienced backsliding (to varying degrees, and not always “due to” the pandemic) include El Salvador, Mali, Myanmar.

## **The democracy-autocracy freedom divide during the pandemic**

If the decline in the global level of democracy triggered by the pandemic in 2020 has been mainly driven by abuses occurred in countries that were already authoritarian, the pandemic should have accentuated the difference between democracy and autocracy, especially regarding how democratic and autocratic governments treat citizens and respect their freedoms.

To conduct a preliminary test of this new hypothesis, I work on a sample of 174 independent states observed throughout the 2011-2020 decade, using data from the V-Dem dataset (v.11.1). The analysis aims to trace changes across time in the freedom divide between democratic and autocratic countries, as identified by the V-Dem *Regimes of the World* indicator.<sup>4</sup>

Freedom is measured based on three V-Dem indexes, namely, *Political civil liberties*, *Physical integrity*, *Private civil liberties*. These correspond to as many civil liberty dimensions, according to the V-Dem conceptual framework. Civil liberty is the absence of violence, repression and constraints on individuals' freedom by the government. Specifically, political liberties encompass freedom of association for both political parties and civil society organizations, freedom of expression for both ordinary citizens and the media, and the access to alternative sources of information. Physical integrity consists in freedom from political killings and torture by the government. Private liberties, in turn, include a range of other liberal rights pertaining to individuals' non-political life.

The analysis focuses on these non-electoral dimensions of freedom for two main reasons. First, electoral competition is pivotal among the criteria used to classify countries as democratic or autocratic (Luehrmann et al., 2018). Second, I am specifically interested in highlighting

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<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, in the present analysis, liberal and electoral democracies and electoral and closed autocracies are collapsed in one democracy category and one autocracy category, respectively. Ambiguous cases lying in between electoral democracy and electoral autocracy, as signalled by the Regimes of the World indicator, are not considered.

differences (if any) in how democracies and autocracies *treat* their citizens, especially in times of crisis and considering the opportunities to abuse citizen rights offered by an emergency situation such as a pandemic (Luehrmann and Rooney, 2021). Moreover, these three indexes are more sensitive than the aggregate *Civil Liberties* index, offering a more nuanced picture of how governments protect distinct civil liberty categories.

As an additional test, I also examine the V-Dem *Rule of Law* index, recording the extent to which laws are enforced transparently and impartially and government officials comply with the law. While this index does not measure citizen freedoms, the rule of law represents an essential complement relating to their enforcement.

For each indicator, first I estimate separately the annual average for democracies and for autocracies, and subsequently I compute the annual difference between democracies and autocracies' average performance.<sup>5</sup> The resulting new scales respectively measure the democracy-autocracy deviation in terms of political liberties (*pol*), private liberties (*priv*), physical integrity (*phys*), and rule of law (*rule*). The four lines reported in Figure 1 trace changes in these scales from 2011 to 2020. Negative slopes indicate convergence (i.e. a diminishing difference) in how democracies and autocracies protect civil liberties. Positive slopes suggest an increasing divide, vice versa.

The graph confirms that, in 2019, an ongoing path of democracy-autocracy convergence came to a halt. The convergence trend started around 2015 and 2016 and can be observed in all the indexes under examination. However (and most importantly), all the lines depicted in Figure 1 show an increasing democracy-autocracy divide between 2019 and 2020. The rule of law and the physical integrity indexes record the largest positive changes, followed by the private liberty

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<sup>5</sup> A one-year interval is used between a country's regime classification and the measurement of its freedom performance. Hence, for instance, democracies' freedom performance during year T is computed with reference to those countries that were classified democratic as of the end of year T-1.

and political liberty indexes. In other words, during 2020, the pandemic has not only stopped an ongoing convergence trend between democracy and autocracy but has actually widened the divide between these two forms of political regime in the protection of citizen freedoms.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

### **Implications for post-pandemic regime change scenarios**

Beyond the short-term effects on citizens' freedom, the pandemic is set to have medium-to-long term repercussions on the stability of both democratic and autocratic countries and on future dynamics of regime change. We observed the widening during 2020 of the democracy-autocracy freedom divide: Yet what do these findings tell us regarding democratization and autocratization?

As anticipated, Covid-19 broke out in a historical conjuncture particularly dismal for democracy. The increasingly frequent signals of a global democratic recession (Diamond, 2015) are at the centre of a lively academic debate. Scholars have discussed what should and should not count as autocratization, highlighting that the latter can target both democracies – defective democracies, especially – and countries that are already non-democratic, leading to authoritarian consolidation (Cassani and Tomini, 2019; Luehrmann and Lindberg, 2019). The differences between contemporary and past autocratization have been examined (Bermeo, 2016), as well as the determinants of these processes (Waldner and Lust, 2018). Contemporary processes of autocratization tend to originate from complex constellations of economic, cultural, institutional and agency factors, and to unfold slowly and incrementally through executive aggrandizement and electoral manipulation, in particular. Crises have been highlighted too (Linz and Stepan, 1978), as factors fuelling political polarization (Svolik, 2019), democratic disaffection (Foa and Mounk, 2017) and support for extremist parties (Pirro, 2015).

Finally, scholars have debated on whether an outright new wave of autocratization has started (Luehrmann and Lindberg, 2019; Skaaning, 2020), which is the question that the findings presented in the previous section may help address. Is the widening of the democracy-autocracy freedom divide observed in 2020 good or bad news? What are its implications for ongoing regime change trends? More generally, will the pandemic give new impetus to the wave of autocratization underway, or could it instead trigger a democratization upswing?

As a premise, it should be clarified that the 2020 widening of the freedom divide could have multiple explanations not necessarily related to the pandemic. Moreover, 2020 arguably represented an “extra-ordinary” year and any claim regarding the beginning of an outright opposite trend is inevitably premature. However, it is unquestionable that the last year has been profoundly shaped by Covid-19 and by how governments have responded to it. Moreover, events such as a pandemic are inherently likely to have systemic consequences. Hence, while determinism should be avoided, interpreting the 2020 widening of the democracy-autocracy freedom divide in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and reflecting on its implications for future regime changes remain useful efforts.

A first point deserving consideration is that, during the past few years, the idea has spread that democratic governments struggle in dealing with many contemporary challenges (such as economic recession and migrations) (Foa and Mounk, 2017). In this context, the widening of the freedom divide during 2020 helps regain awareness that democracies and autocracies treat citizens differently, especially in times of crisis. In other words, living under democracy or autocracy does make a difference during a pandemic. This in turn can favour the reconsolidation of citizens’ trust in democratic institutions.

A number of caveats invite to prudence, though. First, the widening of the freedom divide between democracy and autocracy should not be mistaken for an interruption of the ongoing global decline in the level of democracy, which has continued in 2020 (Freedom House, 2021;



Varieties of Democracy, 2021). Second, a deeper look inside the data presented in Figure 1 shows that democracies have recorded relatively thin improvements, compared to the thicker worsening of autocracies' freedom performance. Third and relatedly, the increasingly repressive nature of several autocracies reduces the prospects of future processes of democratization.

### **A missing factor: the post-pandemic management**

The management of the Covid-19's health, social and economic implications represents another key but thus far disregarded factor that will influence post-pandemic regime change dynamics. Will democracies or autocracies respond more effectively to the health, welfare, labour and productivity crises triggered by the pandemic and extended periods of lockdown and semi-lockdown?

The literature has produced both competing arguments and findings. For instance, at the pandemic outbreak, the lack of transparency of several autocrats was criticized for causing delays in the communication of the diffusion of the virus (Stasavage, 2020), thus supporting Sen's idea (1999) that democracies are endowed with better early-warning mechanisms pushing governments to intervene readily. However, others noticed that many democracies have been slow and hesitant to take draconian measures to limit the virus spread (Cheibub et al., 2020), to which authoritarian governments can resort more easily (Rao, 1983).<sup>6</sup> Even the analysis of democracies and autocracies' routine welfare performance has produced mixed conclusions. While electoral competition should induce democratic governments to be more responsive to

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted, however, that an assessment of government responses to Covid-19 during the first part of 2020 shows no correlation between the adoption of stricter emergency measures and the achievement of better results in tackling the health crisis (Maerz et al., 2020).

people's need (Carbone, 2009), co-optation of critical supporting groups and political survival can similarly motivate autocrats to deliver welfare (Knutson and Rasmussen, 2017).

The management of the post-pandemic phase will represent the occasion for re-assessing democracies and autocracies' ability to take care of citizens' material wellbeing. Most importantly, democracies and autocracies' responses to the pandemic-related health, social and economic challenges will influence heavily the legitimacy of both incumbent governments and the institutions they represent, with consequences on future democratization and autocratization. Specifically, while a successful management of the post-pandemic phase will likely help stabilize both democratic and autocratic regimes, difficulties in recovering the economy and the welfare state have historically triggered regime breakdown (Linz and Stepan, 1978; Huntington, 1991).

On one hand, the social and economic costs of the pandemic can represent the knockout blow for countries that are already experiencing democratic erosion (Rapeli and Saikkonen, 2020). The recent experience demonstrates that economic recession and its social repercussions (e.g. impoverishment and inequalities) make voters "willing to trade off democratic principles for partisan interests" (Svolik, 2019: 24), and increase the appeal of alternative forms of government to democracy (Foa and Mounk, 2017) and the support for extremist parties (Pirro, 2015).

Similarly to and perhaps even more than democracies, autocracies rest on performance-based legitimation (Cassani, 2017). Hence, the post-pandemic management can challenge the survival of existing autocracies too, and open windows of opportunities for democratization (Rapeli and Saikkonen, 2020). In this regard, in 2019 we witnessed one of the largest waves of protests in the recent history (Chenoweth, 2020), which destabilized authoritarian governments in the likes of Algeria, Sudan and Hong Kong. The pandemic brought mass demonstrations to a temporary halt, but the asperities of the post-pandemic management may revitalize opposition

movements, even though the coloured revolutions in the early 2000s and the 2011 Arab Spring warn against assuming that autocratic breakdowns inevitably spur democratic transitions (Del Punta, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Research on the regime consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic is its infancy, yet it will likely absorb the attention of many scholars in the next years. To contribute to this emerging debate, I distinguished between the short (i.e. during the pandemic) and medium-to-long term (i.e. after the pandemic), showing a short-term widening of the democracy-autocracy freedom divide, and discussing its implications for medium-to-long term regime change dynamics.

In an age of advancing autocratization, regaining awareness that democracies and autocracies protect citizen freedom in different ways, especially in times of crisis, can propel the relaunch of democracy and marginalize antidemocratic forces. However, increased levels of repression in regimes that are already authoritarian are no good news for prospective democratization. Moreover, the management of the social and economic consequences of the pandemic is likely to have an impact on the legitimacy and stability of both democracies and autocracies, bringing new challenges to the former, but also opening new windows of opportunities for democratic change in the latter.

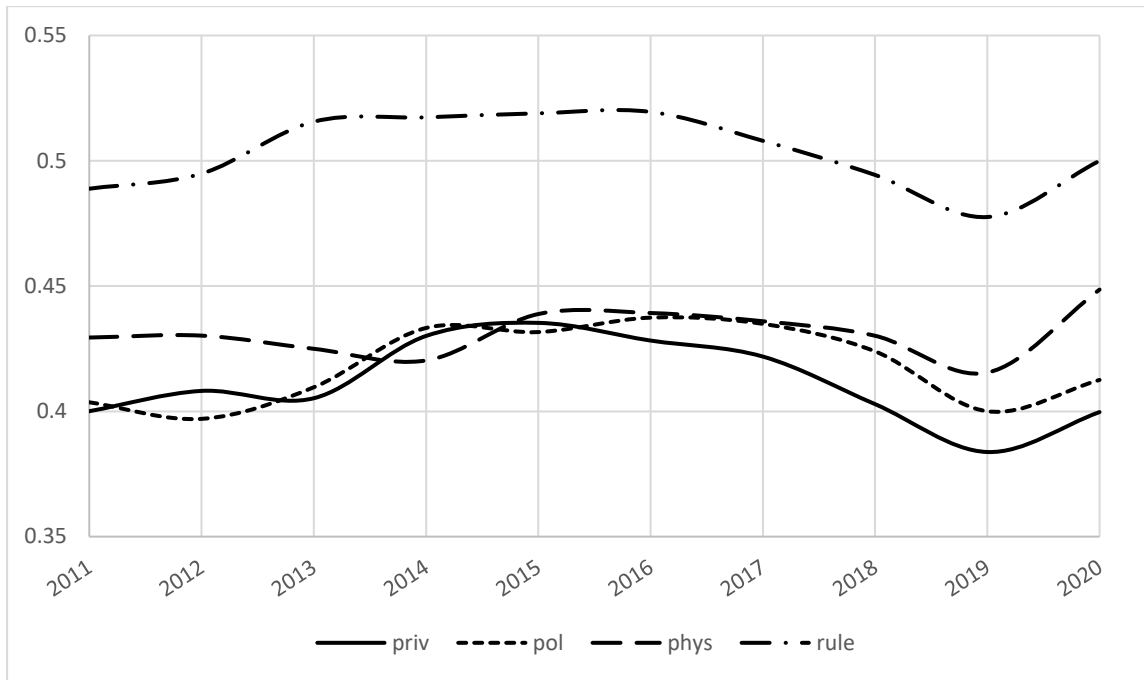
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**Figure 1. The democracy-autocracy freedom divide, 2011-2020.**

Source: Author's elaboration of data from the V-Dem Dataset v11.1.