



**ANTONIO CAMPATI**  
(ed.)

# ILLIBERAL TRENDS

*Democracies  
under Pressure*



# Illiberal Trends

*Democracies under Pressure*

EDITED BY  
ANTONIO CAMPATI



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# POLIDEMOS

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MIHAELA IACOB

# Reassessing the Wave of Autocratization Hypothesis

ANDREA CASSANI<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** While autocratization has attracted much scholarly attention over the past years, there is little agreement regarding how to measure autocratization and, relatedly, the actual empirical relevance of this phenomenon. Some authors explicitly claim that we are in the middle of an outright global wave of autocratization, yet others are more sceptical. This paper aims to make three main contributions. First, it reconstructs the debate on the “wave of autocratization” hypothesis. Second, it reassesses empirically this hypothesis using alternative measurement approaches, showing that, despite some differences, autocratization always emerges as an empirically relevant phenomenon of this period. Third, based on a new measurement strategy that builds on and combines several existing indicators and indexes, the paper examines comparatively a sample of autocratization cases.

**Keywords:** autocratization; democracy; autocracy; regime change; measurement.

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## 1. *Introduction*

During the past decade, autocratization – that is, the process of regime change opposite to democratization – has attracted the attention of many scholars (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner and Lust, 2018; Cassani and Tomini, 2019; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, among several others). A decade of intensive research has shed light on a number of fundamental questions regarding this political syndrome. However, there is little agreement among researchers regarding how to measure autocratization and, relatedly, the actual empirical relevance of this phenomenon. Some authors explicitly claim that we are in the middle of an outright global wave of autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). Other scholars are more sceptical (Skaaning, 2020; Little and Meng, 2023; Treisman, 2023). This paper contributes to the debate on contemporary processes of autocratization in three main ways. First, I reconstruct the debate on the “wave of autocratization” hypothesis. Second, after a brief discussion of the main challenges regarding the measurement of autocratization, I reassess empirically the “wave of autocratization” hypothesis using alternative indexes and indicators, based on alternative conceptualizations of autocratization. The analysis shows how these differences could lead to different perceptions regarding the actual extent of the current autocratization trend, even though autocratization always emerges as an empirically relevant phenomenon of this period, no matter how we conceptualize and measure it. Accordingly, based on a new measurement strategy that builds on and combines several existing indicators and indexes, in the third part of this paper, I select and examine comparatively a sample of autocratization cases. Finally, in the concluding sec-

tion, I wrap up and elaborate further on the contemporary autocratization trend.

## *2. The debate on the “wave of autocratization”*

In their 2019 seminal article, Lührmann and Lindberg argue that, starting from the beginning of the 21 century, the world is experiencing a global “wave” of autocratization, which in this paper I will simply define as the opposite of democratization, that is, a process of regime change towards autocracy (Cassani and Tomini, 2019).

The idea of capturing global historical trends of political regime transitions through the image of a “wave” dates back to Samuel Huntington (1991), who first used the wave metaphor to describe the dramatic series of democratic transitions that occurred in Southern Europe (Portugal, Greece, and Spain), Latin America, part of Asia, the communist world, and sub-Saharan Africa between the mid-1970s and the 1990s. More specifically, Huntington saw this as the “third wave” of democratic reforms in history, following up on a first wave, which developed across the 19th and 20th century, and a second wave that started around the end of World War II.

Even if several scholars have challenged the methodological rigour of Huntington’s analysis (Doorenspleet, 2005), the wave metaphor has not lost its allure. After a brief phase of optimism about the future of democracy fuelled by the end of the Cold War (Plattner, 1991), and a more pragmatic phase in which scholars grew increasingly aware of the “challenges of consolidation” (Haggard and Kaufman, 1994) faced by newly established democracies, starting from early 2000s the fear arose that the democratic wave could be followed by an authoritarian tide, and that some of the new democracies

could backslide to repressive and despotic forms of government.

Initially, scholars emphasized the problems related to the quality of democracy (Morlino, 2004), the defects of many new democratic regimes (Merkel, 2004), and the institutionalization of “hybrid regimes” (Diamond, 2002). Since the mid-2000s, the spectre of an outright “democratic rollback” (Diamond, 2008) became manifest. The still vague “worrisome signs” noted in a 2005 Freedom House report (Puddington and Aili, 2005) turned into more alarming claims regarding the acceleration of an erosion process (Puddington, 2010). While some authors were sceptical and referred to a period of democratic stagnation (Merkel, 2010), in 2015 the *Journal of Democracy* celebrated its own twenty-fifth birthday with a special issue on the decline of democracy and the beginning of “a mild but protracted democratic recession” (Diamond, 2015). To be sure, the idea that the third wave of democratization will ebb eventually is not new and indeed represents a legitimate fear, if we consider that Huntington himself argued that all previous waves of democratization were followed by a trend of regime changes in the opposite direction, both between the two world wars and in the period between the late 1950s and the early 1970s.

Since the publication of Lührmann and Lindberg’s article (2019) ratifying the “third wave of autocratization”, a debate has emerged on the actual magnitude of the latter. On the one hand, according to some authors (Skaaning, 2020), “numbers don’t tally up”. Based on this criticism, Lührmann and Lindberg’s counting strategy overemphasizes autocratization from a quantitative viewpoint and is not an accurate operationalization of Huntington’s definition, according to which a wave of autocratization is “a group of transitions [...] that occur within a specified period of time and that signifi-

cantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period” (1991, p.15). In fact, while democracy appears to be under threat in several countries, the most consolidated and advanced democracies thus far either have proved immune to autocratization or have experienced modest and only temporary erosions of their democratic quality (Cassani and Tomini, 2019; Brownlee and Miao, 2022). In most cases, autocratization occurred in countries that were, at best, semi-democratic (Levistky and Way, 2015; Dresden and Howard, 2016). Moreover, relatively few cases of democratic breakdown – i.e. outright transitions from democracy to autocracy – have thus far been reported (Little and Meng, 2023).

On the other hand, it has been pointed out that the idea of a third wave of autocratization – and of the democratization “by ebbs and flows” theoretical framework, more generally – is “short-sighted”. First, from a longer-term perspective, the global proportion of democracies remains close to an all-time high (Treisman, 2023). Second, focusing narrowly on short-term regime oscillations artificially inflates the counting of regime transitions and, most importantly, overlooks the history of those countries that currently represent the most consolidated and stable democracies (Berman, 2019). In most of Western Europe, for instance, democracy “wasn’t built in a day”. Quite the contrary, it was the results of relatively long processes of political change, often punctuated by tragic events. As an example, several countries that democratized during Huntington’s “second wave” (that is, after World War II) experienced a first democratic transition during the “first wave” (that is, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries) and subsequently suffered autocratization during the interwar period. From this perspective, it is simply normal that relatively young and still fragile “third wave” democracies are now experiencing “ups and downs”.

### *3. Measurement issues in the analysis of the “wave of autocratization” hypothesis*

To a large extent, disagreement on the actual magnitude of the ongoing autocratization trend originates from different understandings of what autocratization is and, relatedly, how to measure it. Unsurprisingly, the main points of disagreements mirror the uncertainties that still affect the more consolidated field of democratization studies (Pelke and Croissant 2021). From a conceptual viewpoint, two main points of contention can be identified. First, does autocratization occur only when a country experiences a transition from democracy to autocracy, or can we talk about autocratization even when a country does not experience such a transition? Second, is autocratization a phenomenon that could occur only in democratic countries, or can non-democratic countries experience autocratization too?

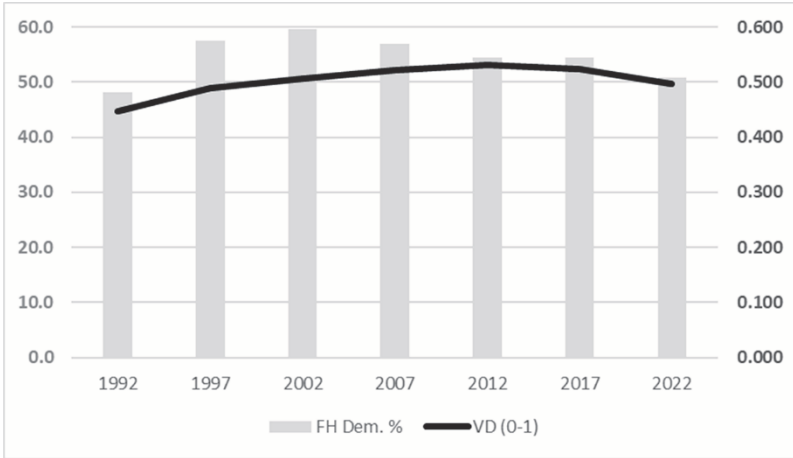
Concerning the measurement of autocratization, a major divide exists between qualitative- and quantitative-oriented approaches. A qualitative-oriented approach typically rests on either small number of cases, which allows researchers to select accurately the episodes of autocratization using multiple sources and personal expertise, or medium-n samples often selected based on geography and/or a focus on specific forms of autocratization (e.g. coups d'état; electoral frauds; constitutional reforms). In turn, a quantitative-oriented approach aims to either record the occurrence/non-occurrence of autocratization or quantify how much autocratization a country experiences and for how long. In the first case, one could rely on regime categories to seize outright regime changes, that is, transitions from democracy to autocracy. In the second case, we could use a democracy index and measure negative changes over time to account for the incremental nature of a

process of autocratization. Of course, within the above-described broad approaches, measurement decisions can be more or less fine-grained and theoretically informed, and mixed approaches exist too. All the existing approaches have their own merits, limitations, and trade-offs; none of them escape a certain degree of arbitrariness.

Rather than trying to settle the above conceptual and measurement issues, the goal of this section is to show how different operationalizations of autocratization may lead to different conclusions regarding the “wave of autocratization” hypothesis and, more generally, the magnitude of the ongoing autocratization trend. The analysis covers the last three decades (1992-2022) and all independent countries, excluding micro-states.

The easiest way to observe autocratization is through the data made available on a yearly basis by research institutes such as Varieties of Democracy and Freedom House. Using the Varieties of Democracy’s Electoral Democracy Index (ranging from 0 to 1), for instance, we could track the global average level of democracy. Alternatively, we could estimate the share of countries that Freedom House classifies as “electoral democracies”. Figure 1 shows the results of this analysis. As we can see, both Freedom House and Varieties of Democracy agree that we are experiencing a phase of democratic decline. However, according to the latter, the average level of democracy started to decline in the early 2010s and, as of 2022, returned to the levels of about twenty years ago. According to the former, in turn, the share of democratic countries has been decreasing since the early 2000s and, as of 2022, it is even lower than twenty-five years ago.

Figure 1. Democracy trends worldwide, 1992-2022.



Notes: Author's own elaboration. The vertical bars (left-hand axis) report the percentage of states classified as electoral democracies by Freedom House (FH). The solid line (right-hand axis) traces the global average level of democracy, as measured by Varieties of Democracy (VD).

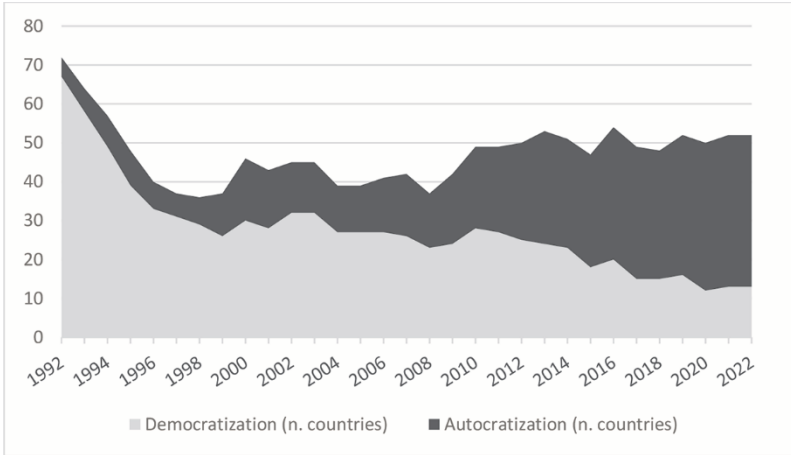
This kind of analysis is useful insofar it captures global trends in the diffusion of democracy and, relatedly, how autocratization influences it. However, to conduct a more cogent test of the “wave of autocratization” hypothesis, we need to focus on autocratization as a process of regime change. Moreover, following Huntington’s definitions of “waves” (1991), autocratization should be analysed in comparison to democratization to observe whether the former actually exceeds the latter.

Accordingly, Figure 2 tracks the raw number of countries that are experiencing autocratization vis-à-vis the number of countries that are experiencing democratization. Data are from the recently released Episodes of Regime Transform-

mation (ERT) dataset (Maerz et al., 2023). ERT uses the Varieties of Democracy's Electoral Democracy Index to establish if a country experiences democratization and/or autocratization based on a rather sophisticated series of operational rules sensitive to both the amount and the duration (in years) of the (positive and/or negative) changes recorded by the index. Significantly, ERT identifies what countries experience autocratization and for how long, including both democratic and non-democratic countries and both outright transitions from democracy to autocracy and comparatively minor autocratization episodes. The same approach is used to identify cases of democratization. Based on these relatively broad understandings of autocratization and democratization, Figure 2 shows that these processes of regime transformation have been following diametrically opposite trends. While the number of countries experiencing democratization has progressively decreased, the countries experiencing autocratization are increasingly common. Since the early 2010s, the latter significantly outnumber the former, in particular.



Figure 2. Democratization and autocratization compared, 1992-2022.

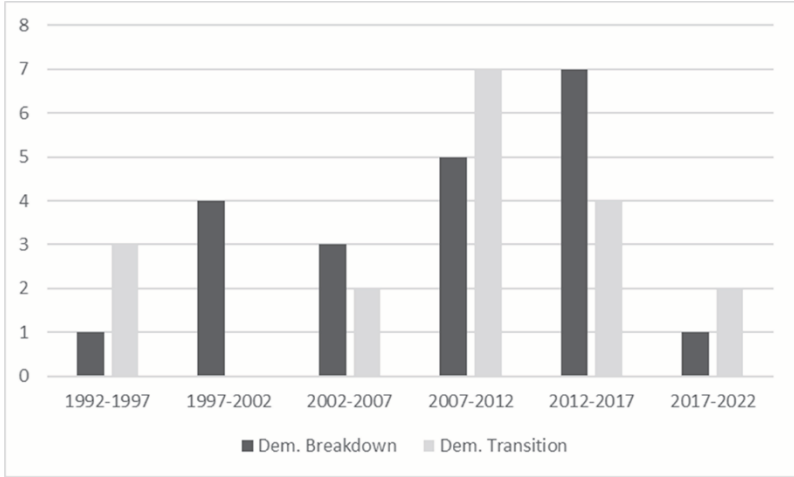


Notes: Author's own elaboration of data from the Episodes of Regime Transition (ERT) dataset. The vertical axis measures the raw number of countries that, in a given year (horizontal axis), are experiencing democratization (light grey area) and autocratization (dark grey area). Stable regimes (i.e. countries that are experiencing neither autocratization nor democratization) are not counted.

Figure 3, finally, examines whether our conclusions change if we focus narrowly on outright episodes of democratic breakdown, that is, cases in which a democratic country becomes authoritarian. In other words, this measurement approach excludes from the counting those episodes of autocratization occurred in countries that were already authoritarian, as well as those episodes of autocratization occurred in democratic countries without leading to democratic breakdown. In a similar way, Figure 3 also counts outright episodes of democratic transition in which an authoritarian country becomes democratic. Data are from Boix, Miller and Rosato (Miller et al., 2022). As we can see, even in this case an increase in the epi-

sodes of democratic breakdown is evident, especially throughout the 1997-2017 period. However, the reported figures are significantly smaller than in the previous graph.

Figure 3. Democratic breakdowns and transitions, 1992-2022.



Notes: Author's own elaboration of data from the Boix, Miller and Rosato (BMR) dataset. The vertical bars measure the raw number of episodes of democratic breakdown (dark grey) and democratic transition (light grey), grouped by 5-year periods.

#### 4. *What countries autocratize?*

The analysis presented in the previous section demonstrates that, even after years of intensive scrutiny, ultimately, we do not know how much autocratization the world is experiencing. However, whether an outright wave of autocratization is or is not underway, most scholars agree that autocratization is an empirically relevant phenomenon of the post-Cold War period and, for this reason, it deserves attention. Accordingly,

in this section, I select a sample of recent cases autocratization and I examine them from a comparative perspective, with the goal of mapping the phenomenon and tracing the profile (or profiles) of autocratizing countries.

The case selection builds on and combines several existing indicators and indexes. I proceed as follows. First, I identify those cases that are relevant to this research. Specifically, while autocratization could affect both democratic and non-democratic regimes, this analysis only focuses on autocratization events occurring in minimally democratic countries. Moreover, to conduct comparative analysis, the countries that experience autocratization need to be contrasted with the countries that do not experience this process of regime change. Accordingly, with a focus on the last three decades, the cases that are relevant to my analysis consist in democratic countries that either have experienced autocratization or have not experienced any autocratization at all.

To maximise the confidence of selecting countries that are/were democratic, I collect democracy indicators from several sources, namely, Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy, Database of Political Institutions, Skaaning, Gerring and Bartusevičius (2015), Boix, Miller and Rosato (Miller et al., 2022). Using these data, I identify democracies according to a “majority rule”, that is, based on the agreement of at least three of the five above-listed democracy indicators. However, I exclude cases in which democracy has not lasted at least four consecutive years without experiencing autocratization.

I identify 96 relevant cases which, as a next step, must be classified in “enduring democracies” and “autocratization episodes”. To measure autocratization, I rest on the previously described ERT dataset (Maerz et al., 2023). Among the existing alternatives, ERT strikes a fair balance between validity (i.e. the ability to seize outright episodes of autocratization)

and reliability and replicability (i.e. operational rules are clear and all the material is publicly available) (Pelke and Croissant, 2021). This measurement strategy implies that my analyses consider both outright democratic breakdowns and autocratization events that only lead to a decline in the level or quality of democracy. As in the previous step, I exclude autocratization episodes lasted three years or less.

As a result of the above-described case selection procedure, I identify 52 enduring democracies and 44 countries that experienced autocratization during the post-Cold War period. The latter include 17 cases of democratic decline, and 27 cases of democratic breakdown, eight of which have subsequently experienced a phase of at least partial democratic recovery. As a final step, I classify the selected cases based on the geographical region, the income level (based on the World Bank's income groups), and the quality and consolidation of their democratic institutions. Concerning quality, I distinguish liberal from electoral democracies using Varieties of Democracies data. Concerning consolidation, I simply distinguish countries that democratized before and after the end of the Cold War. The quality and consolidation of democratic institutions in those countries that experienced autocratization refer to the period before autocratization.

Table 1 summarises the results of the analysis. In the “autocratizing countries” column, the reported figures encompass both democratic declines and democratic breakdowns, whereas the numbers in parentheses refer to the sub-group of cases that experienced democratic breakdown.

As we can see, the contemporary trend of autocratization has affected several regions, including Africa, Asia, the former communist countries (Eastern Europe, Balkans, and former soviet republics) and Latin America. In all these regions, au-

tocratizing countries include both cases of democratic decline and of democratic breakdown. As a reminder, these regions were also the protagonists of the previous “third wave” of democratic reforms (Huntington, 1991). The list of autocratizing countries include some cases previously considered exemplary “democratization success stories”, such as Africa’s Mali, Benin and Tunisia (i.e. the only successful democratic transition of the so-called Arab Spring), but also Mongolia and the Philippines in Asia, and Hungary and Poland in Eastern Europe. Other oft-cited cases included in the list of autocratizing countries are Nicaragua, El Salvador and Brazil (under Jair Bolsonaro) in Latin America, India in Asia, and Turkey in the Middle East. In turn, Western Europe and North America host the largest number of enduring democracies, and the only reported episode of autocratization (the US during Donald Trump’s presidency) only resulted in a temporary democratic decline.

Concerning economic conditions, Table 1 seems to lend support to the modernization paradigm and particularly to those scholars that see economic development as a driver of democratic survival (Przeworski et al., 2000; Brownlee and Miao, 2022). The vast majority of enduring democracies are high-income economies, whereas the lion’s share of autocratizing countries is represented by middle- and low-income economies. The correlation between economic (under-)development and autocratization appears even stronger if we focus on outright cases of democratic breakdown.

As we shift attention to the state of democratic institutions in the two groups of countries under examination, it is immediately evident that the risk of experiencing autocratization – and, particularly, the risk of democratic breakdown – is much higher in so-called “electoral democracies”, that is, in countries in which elections are relatively free but, differently

from “liberal democracies”, the boundaries of government power remain blurred. This confirms previous research arguing that, when the system of checks and balances to the executive power is weak, attempts to abuse political power will face little resistance (Cassani and Tomini, 2019). In turn, the majority of enduring democracies are relatively advanced, or liberal, forms of democracy.

Finally, we can also observe a correlation between democracies’ age and the likelihood of suffering autocratization. More than two-thirds of autocratizing countries transitioned to democracy after the end of the Cold War. However, even though a majority of enduring democracies democratized before 1989, this group of countries also include a fairly large number of relatively young democracies.

Table 1. Autocratizing countries and enduring democracies in the post-Cold War period.

		ENDURING DEMOCRA- CIES	AUTOCRATIZ- ING COUN- TRIES
region	Africa	9	10 (6)
	Asia	3	10 (7)
	Eastern Eu- rope/Balkans/ex -USSR	8	12 (7)
	Latin Ameri- ca/Caribbean	11	9 (5)
	Western Eu- rope/North America	18	1 (0)
	Middle East	1	1 (1)
	Oceania	2	1 (1)

		ENDURING DEMOCRA- CIES	AUTOCRATIZ- ING COUN- TRIES
economy	High income	33	7 (1)
	Upper-middle income	12	17 (11)
	Lower-middle income	5	16 (12)
	Low income	2	4 (3)
democratic quality	Electoral	20	35 (26)
	Liberal	32	9 (1)
democratic consolida- tion	pre-1989	28	14 (6)
	post-1989	24	30 (21)

Notes: Author's own elaboration of data from various sources. The table reports the raw number of cases. In the "autocratizing countries" column, the reported figures encompass both democratic declines and democratic breakdowns, whereas the numbers in parentheses refer to the sub-group of cases that experienced democratic breakdown. Enduring autocracies (despite of their institutional form) and persistently unstable regimes are not considered.

## 5. *Conclusion*

In this paper, I argued that the existing disagreement regarding the actual magnitude of the ongoing "wave of autocratization" has conceptual and measurement origins and that, whether an outright wave of autocratization is or is not underway, autocratization is an empirically relevant phenomenon of the post-Cold War period, which therefore deserves attention. Accordingly, I conducted a comparative analysis of a sample of autocratization episodes and the typical profile of

a country experiencing autocratization is a middle-income, relatively young, electoral democracy.

What is the future of autocratization? Should we expect it to continue spreading throughout the world? The most recent reports of those research centres monitoring the state of democracy across the world, such as Freedom House (2023), Varieties of Democracy (2023) and Economist Intelligence Unit (2023), recognize some signals suggesting that the global autocratization trend is coming to a halt, even though it remains unclear if an outright new phase of democratic recovery will follow. In this regard, the analysis presented in this paper does not allow to forecast for how long the contemporary trend of autocratization will last. However, the list of cases selected for my analysis does include some countries that, after a period of autocratization, seem to be able and willing to return to democracy (Bolivia and Zambia are among the most recent such cases, for instance).

Another positive signal refers to the relatively modest consequences for democracy of the Covid-19 crisis: besides the limitations to several freedoms imposed during the year 2020, it seems that relatively few democratic governments exploited the state of emergency to aggrandize their power beyond the realm and past the duration of the crisis, even though the same cannot be said for authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning governments (Lührmann and Rooney, 2021; Cassani, 2022). Unfortunately, these timid and uncertain positive signals are matched by other unquestionably alarming events, such as the tight series of army interventions and new military regimes that has swept the African continent since 2019 (Carbone, 2021) in Sudan, Mali, Chad, Guinea, Burkina Faso and, most recently, Niger.



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