

Conference
**Strengthening Democracy –
Towards Resilient Institutions and Societies in the G7 and Africa**
Berlin, 26 – 27 September 2022

Non-Paper by Dr. Vanessa Boese-Schlösser
Why Democracy Is Worth Fighting For (Even In The G7)

The Case for Democracy: a counternarrative to the “autocratic success story”

Democracy is a core tool to achieve “progress towards an equitable world” - the aim of the German G7 presidency. Of course, democracy explicitly is part of the five main goals of the German G7 presidency. But, in addition, research has demonstrated that democratic institutions outperform autocratic ones in terms of reaching each of the five main goals: 1. Climate change mitigation, 2. Economic stability and transformation, 3. Health outcomes, 4. Providing socially sustainable infrastructure to foster education & gender equality and 5. Peace and rule of law.

Robust empirical evidence shows that democracy is critical to combating climate change (SDG #13). Democracies are more ambitious in the fight against climate change: they consistently perform better than autocracies when it comes to committing to policy on climate change mitigation (Bättig & Bernauer 2009) and signing multilateral climate agreements (Neumayer 2002). These ambitions have an impact. Ample evidence shows that each new climate policy enacted by governments on average reduces CO2 emissions by 0.79% over the first three years and 1.79% after that. In 2016, the reduction in global CO2 emissions due to additional climate policies was larger than the total US yearly emissions. Why? Civil Society Freedom Is Key: Democracies provide more freedom for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that can educate citizens about climate problems, and exert pressure on governments to take action.

In terms of economic stability and transformation, democracy is crucial for reducing poverty (SDG #1), achieving economic growth (SDG #8), and reducing inequality (SDG #10). Democracies provide stable and predictable growth: only 7% of democracies between 1900 and 2009 experienced negative growth as compared to almost 30% of autocracies (Knutsen 2021). Evidence also shows that democratization produces a 20% higher increase in GDP per capita over 25 years than compared to staying autocratic (Acemoglu et al. 2019). Why? Democratic institutions act as a safety net against catastrophic economic outcomes. Through freedom of expression, clean elections, and constraints on the head of state democracies enable citizens to hold their government accountable and replace their leaders if necessary (Boese & Eberhardt 2022).

Democracies provide superior access to quality health care, making it essential for global health and well-being (SDG #3). Democracies have substantially lower rates of infant mortality and cardiovascular deaths than autocracies (Wang et al., 2019; Bollyky et al., 2019).

Transitions to democracy increase life expectancy by 3% within 10 years (Bollyky et al., 2019). Research has shown that democracies provide 23% more safe water access, and 35% more immunization to young children

than autocracies (Lake and Baum, 2001). Autocratization directly leads to a decline in life expectancy by 1.3 percentage points and a decrease in health care protection by 9 percentage points (Wigley et al. 2020).

Democracies outperform autocracies also in terms of providing public goods and infrastructure: they provide up to 40% more electricity access, up to 300% higher internet connection rates (Weidmann et al., 2016), and spend substantially more on education (Ansell, 2008) and social protection (Murshed et al. 2020). Full democracies spend 100% more than closed dictatorships on social protection policies benefitting the poor and vulnerable. In line with this infrastructure, gender equality (SDG #5) is both a dividend and a fundamental aspect of democracy. Civic education is crucial for achieving higher levels of egalitarian gender attitudes. Democratic institutions go in hand with higher levels of female political participation and representation (Fallon et al. 2012). Democracy also produces substantial improvements in women's civil liberties (Sundström et al. 2017). Civil liberties, in turn, provide the opportunity for women's movements to effectively promote gender equality (Paxton et al. 2006).

Lastly, democracy is a tool for the peaceful resolution of conflict (SDG #16). So, in addition to democracy's intrinsic values (such as allowing citizens to shape political decision-making, to have influence and a voice), democratic institutions enable the people to resolve conflicts peacefully (Hegre, 2004). This conflict resolution mechanism holds for both domestic, but also for international conflicts and is the reason why democracies are much less likely to engage in wars and civil wars.

In sum, democracy is not merely part of one of the five goals, but rather it is an essential tool to achieve all of the main aims of the German G7 presidency.

Democratic resilience in the G7 and Europe today

So, we know democracy has a positive effect on several socio-economic outcomes. Yet, the world finds itself in what has been *labeled* a "wave of autocratization".

At the Varieties of Democracy (or V-Dem) Project, we collect data on hundreds of aspects of political institutions across almost all countries. In our annual democracy report, we gather the findings from this data and I want to present some of these results here to give you an idea of the status of global democratic resilience but in particular in the G7:¹

The level of democracy (as measured by V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index, LDI) enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2021 is down to 1989 levels. The last 30 years of democratic advances are now eradicated. Dictatorships are on the rise and harbor 70% of the world population – 5.4 billion people.

But, the good news for the G7 is: all G7 countries are among the top 20% of most democratic countries worldwide, France and Germany even among the top 10% (acc. to the LDI).

However, there is also bad news: we also document signs that the current wave of autocratization is now even affecting the G7:²

In the United States weakening constraints on the executive under the Trump administration initiated a process of democratic erosion and even now under Biden polarization remains dangerously high. Democracy survives in the United States, but it still is under threat.

¹ You find more information on the V-Dem Project at its website: www.v-dem.net. The Democracy Report 2022 summarizes the state of democracy worldwide and is available at: https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf

² Democracy is comparatively resilient in Canada, Japan, and Italy (or at least they are not the most vulnerable to autocratization in the G7) which is why these cases are not explicitly discussed here.

Similarly, with more than 20% of EU members autocratizing (6 of 27 since 2011), the EU is starting to face its own wave of autocratization.

Threats to democracy no longer stem only from within (e.g. through populist movements or polarization), but also from abroad as highlighted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine – an independent country led by a democratically elected government. The invasion seems like a definite confirmation of the dangers the world faces as a consequence of autocratization around the world.

Confronted with such increasing attacks on democracies and an ongoing wave of autocratization, making democracies resilient is now more urgent than ever.

What is democratic resilience? Democratic resilience is the ability to prevent substantial erosion of the quality of democratic institutions and practices. My research shows that democratic resilience has become substantially weaker since the end of the Cold War: since 1993 the World witnessed an unprecedented breakdown of 36 democratic regimes. Once autocratization begins, only one in five democracies manage to avert breakdown.

Aspects of democracy most endangered by autocratization trends in the G7 and EU

Broadly speaking, in the G7 there are four aspects of democracy that are most under threat: i) Respect for counterarguments and the culture of deliberation, ii) Freedom of expression and the media, iii) Access to information, and iv) formal institutions designed to hold the head of state accountable.

When it comes to a democratic culture of deliberation, one current trend we observe is that hate speech is a frequent tool of illiberal/anti-democratic parties to denounce their opponents or minorities and to further exacerbate a division of society into polarized groups. Research has shown that a polarized society is more likely to elect anti-democratic leaders: in such cases, citizens often trade off democratic principles for other priorities such as political ideology, partisan loyalty, or policy preferences, and elect illiberal leaders (Boese et al, 2022; Svolik, 2019).

In terms of freedom of expression and the media in the G7, we observe that the working environment for journalists is becoming more difficult. In Germany, for example, the V-Dem indicators display a narrow but continuing increase in harassment of journalists with the emergence of the term “Lügenpresse” (“lying media”) around 2014.

Government misinformation in the media is also becoming a major obstacle to a free media environment. Governments have continuously expanded their use of digital and social media to spread false information at home since 2000. In Western Europe and North America, we observe a slight increase in domestic government misinformation. These governments rarely used to spread misinformation through digital and social media. The use of misinformation for both domestic and international audiences in 2021 as measured by the Digital Society Project³ was most frequent in Malta, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

In recent years, we also observe an increase in government misinformation in the form of intentional manipulation of official statistics, such as the COVID-19 death rates (Morrison & Boese, 2022). This, in turn, makes it more difficult to provide accurate evidence-based policy recommendations. Misinformation campaigns are such a popular tactic in slowly eroding democratic resilience because they target public opinion and can be used to break up the democratic public into polarized factions. Hate speech and fake news regarding political opponents can inflate negative feelings and distrust, or even instigate violence, which in turn aggravates levels

³ The Digital Society Project (DSP) uses the V-Dem infrastructure to cover such topics as online censorship, polarization and politicization of social media, or government misinformation campaigns. You find more information on their website: <http://digitalsocietyproject.org>

of polarization. This pattern played out during the “Brexit” vote in Great Britain and the 2016 US presidential election, for example.

Lastly, in the G7 today, one area that is also under threat is formal accountability institutions designed to exercise oversight over the head of state. According to V-Dem indicators, the legislature’s oversight over the chief executive weakened in 5 of 31 countries (G7 + EU). This is not a coincidence: research has shown that separation of powers and such accountability mechanisms are crucial for democratic resilience: an independent legislature and judiciary often act as a “last bulwark” against the forces of autocratization (Boese et al, 2021).

The Road ahead: Strengthening Democratic Resilience

Scientific evidence suggests that democratic resilience is inherently linked to what democracy *is*. The word “Democracy” is a link of the Ancient Greek words Δῆμος- the people - and Κράτος- which means power or rule.

1. Κράτος - the rule: strong functioning formal democratic institutions are crucial to ensure a democratic balance of power. This includes institutions related to the just mentioned accountability mechanisms such as judicial independence and executive oversight but also those related to electoral processes such as autonomous election management bodies.
2. Δῆμος - or the people: citizens who are well informed (because they have access to a wide range of information in the media), who are politically educated, and who can identify what is fake news or what is anti-democratic behavior. And, if they observe it, they can mobilize against it.

Lastly, what links these two areas together is:

3. A strong, inclusive and independent civil society, in which a diverse set of citizens and actors can meaningfully engage and give voice to their concerns without harming others or engaging in hate speech. This is the link that connects institutions and people (Δῆμος and Κράτος) and makes it a democracy.

How can the G7 strengthen democratic resilience? In short, reinforce the three pillars of democracy mentioned above.

Supporting inclusive civil society organizations, protecting journalists from harassment, providing access to a range of information and public education on political processes as well as strengthening checks and balances are strategies to reinforce the resilience of democratic regimes.

To exhaust polarization, fighting disinformation, increasing civic education, and giving citizens a platform to mobilize (through CSOs) is crucial. For example, democratic actors can promote easy-to-use tools for fact-checking (such as “Fullfact”, for example) and push social media providers to implement them. Similarly, increased public education and raising awareness of disinformation are key in fighting disinformation. Citizens who understand how democracy works, and who feel they can make a difference by engaging in the public sphere legitimately, are less likely to support illiberal ideologies and parties. Citizens who lack trust in their fellow citizens and the political process on the other hand are more likely to support policies that challenge democratic rules and institutions.

Civic education needs greater emphasis inside and outside schools. It fosters the resilience of democracy by spreading democratic values, norms, and knowledge about how to get involved in the democratic process. Democratic actors should invest more in spreading the word about the benefits of democracy and liberalism – in particular among those citizens susceptible to illiberal agitation. Civic education should target such groups with innovative ideas for out-of-school civic education - for example with activities in football clubs and on social media.

Relatedly, civic awareness of what constitutes hate speech is crucial to devitalize polarization. Hate speech should not be ignored or normalized, but countered vehemently and reported to law enforcement agencies. Democratic actors should spread information about websites that allow users to report hate speech, and about others that offer psychological support.

In terms of the formal institutions: naturally securing a clean electoral process and rule of law are key. If anti-democratic parties have been democratically elected into a government, research shows that such parties lose most vote shares after changes in leadership, corruption scandals, and internal splits. This leaves democratic parties with one main tool: Use spotlights to broadcast illiberal parties' scandals and internal conflicts. Democratic parties could also develop creative strategies seeking to force factions in illiberal parties to take positions unpopular with other parts of the party.

Finally, another crucial tool to strengthen democratic resilience is to speak up for democracy: spell out the benefits of democratic governance as a counternarrative to the autocratic success story and be clear on what democracy is and what it is not. Autocratic leaders all over the world falsely proclaim their systems to be democracies with adjectives, such as an "illiberal democracy" or a "whole-process people's democracy", yet that label does not make these systems democratic. What happens on the ground - the institutions, the political processes, the people, their rights and freedoms – determines whether a country is democratic. So be clear when democratic standards are violated and speak up for democracy!

The views shared in this paper do not necessarily reflect the official policy position of the German Federal Foreign Office.

The German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) provided funding for the study through the Stabilisation Platform (SPF)/GIZ.

References

- Acemoglu, D., Naidu, S., Restrepo, P., & Robinson, J. 2019. Democracy Does Cause Growth. *Journal of Political Economy* 127(1).
- Acemoglu, D., Naidu, S., Restrepo, P., & Robinson, J. A. 2015. Democracy, Redistribution, and Inequality. In *Handbook of Income Distribution 2*. Elsevier.
- Annaka, S. 2021. Political Regime, Data Transparency, and COVID-19 Death Cases. *Population Health* 15.
- Ansell, B. W. 2008. Traders, Teachers, and Tyrants: Democracy, Globalization, and Public Investment in Education. *International Organization* 62(2).
- Boese, V. A., Lundstedt, M., Morrison, K., Sato, Y., & Lindberg, S. I. (2022). State of the world 2021: autocratization changing its nature?. *Democratization*, 1-31.
- Boese, V.A. and Markus Eberhardt. 2022. Which Institutions Rule? Unbundling the Democracy-Growth Nexus. V-Dem Working Paper 131.
- Boese, V. A., Edgell, A. B., Hellmeier, S., Maerz, S. F., & Lindberg, S. I. (2021). How democracies prevail: democratic resilience as a two-stage process. *Democratization*, 28(5), 885-907.
- Bollyky, T. J., Templin, T., Cohen, M., Schoder, D., Dieleman, J. L., & Wigley, S. 2019. The Relationships between Democratic Experience, Adult Health, and Cause-Specific Mortality in 170 Countries between 1980 and 2016: An Observational Analysis. *The Lancet* 393(10181).
- Bättig, M. & Bernauer, T. 2009. National Institutions and Global Public Goods: Are Democracies More Cooperative in Climate Change Policy? *International Organization* 63(2).
- Fallon, K. M., Swiss, L., & Viterna, J. 2012. Resolving the Democracy Paradox: Democratization and Women's Legislative Representation in Developing Nations, 1975 to 2009. *American Sociological Review* 77(3).
- Harding, R. 2020. Who is Democracy Good for? Elections, Rural Bias, and Health and Education Outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Politics* 82(1).
- Hegre, H. (2014). Democracy and Armed Conflict. *Journal of Peace Research*, 51(2), 159-172.
- Knutsen, C. H. (2021). A business case for democracy: regime type, growth, and growth volatility. *Democratization*, 28(8), 1505-1524.
- Lake, D. A., & Baum, M. A. (2001). The invisible hand of democracy: political control and the provision of public services. *Comparative political studies*, 34(6), 587-621.
- Morrison, K. & Boese, V. A. (2022). [The Case for Democracy: Democracies Produce More Transparent and Higher-Quality Data](#), V-Dem Policy Brief, Number 34.
- Paxton, P., Hughes, M. M., & Green, J. L. 2006. The International Women's Movement and Women's Political Representation, 1893–2003. *American Sociological Review* 71(6).
- Sundström, A., Paxton, P., Wang, Y. T., & Lindberg, S. I. 2017. "Women's Political Empowerment: A New Global Index, 1900–2012." *World Development* 94.
- Svolik, M. W. "Polarization Versus Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (2019): 20–32.
- Wang, Y. T., Mechkova, V., & Andersson, F. 2019. Does Democracy Enhance Health? New Empirical Evidence 1900–2012. *Political Research Quarterly* 72(3).

Weidmann, N. B., Benitez-Baleato, S., Hunziker, P., Glatz, E., & Dimitropoulos, X. (2016). Digital discrimination: Political bias in Internet service provision across ethnic groups. *Science*, 353(6304), 1151-115.

Wigley, S., Dieleman, J. L., Templin, T., Mumford, J. E., & Bollyky, T. J. 2020. Autocratisation and Universal Health Coverage: Synthetic Control Study. *BMJ*.