

The Global State of Democracy 2024

Strengthening the Legitimacy of Elections in a Time of Radical Uncertainty

Summary

In one way, 2024 is a banner year for democracy. Dubbed by some an election ‘super-cycle’ year, it will set a record for the most voters in a single year in human history (Sorkin 2024). This would be a triumph of democracy but for the fact that the quality of elections in many countries has declined significantly since the last time voters went to the polls. Around the world, the credibility of elections was worse in more than one fifth of the countries we cover (39 of 173) in 2023 (the most recent year for which we have complete data) than it had been five years before, in 2018. The way that people engage with electoral processes has also been changing over the past several decades: turnout has been going down while the incidence of protests and riots has been going up.

We now live in an era of radical uncertainty, in which multiple, compounding challenges threaten the patterns of stability and growth on which we have come to rely. Amid this pervasive uncertainty, elections are now regularly disputed. When political leaders make public statements disputing the credibility of an election or take the step of challenging an election in court, it sends an important signal to voters. In some cases, such signals convey legitimate concerns about an election; in others, they are cynical attempts to erode public faith in an opponent’s victory. Between mid-2020 and mid-2024, one in five elections was challenged in at least one legal proceeding, with voting and vote counting emerging as the most-litigated aspects of the electoral process. During the same period, one in five elections saw a losing presidential candidate or losing party in parliamentary elections publicly reject the outcome of the election, and opposition parties boycotted one in ten elections. These factors combine to challenge public confidence in political processes.

Democracy continued its recent decline in 2023, with notable challenges emerging with regard to Representation and Rights. Assessing each country’s various areas of improvement and deterioration, we find that, on balance, four in nine countries were worse off in 2023 than they had been in 2018, while only one in four had improved, continuing a negative trend that developed roughly a decade ago. Challenges to democracy are found in every part of the world and at every level of democratic performance. Already-repressive contexts have continued to get worse, as governments have taken ever greater steps to suppress dissent and limit the ability of the people to choose who will govern them. At the same time, we find declines in democratic performance in countries that have been among the world’s freest for decades.

Figure 1. Number of countries with significant changes in each factor

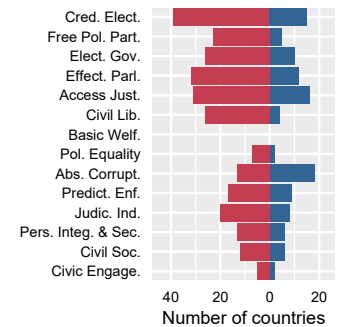
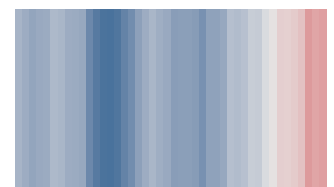


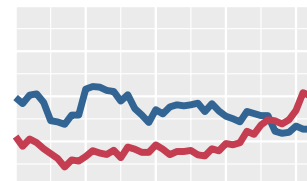
Figure 2. Global balance of countries net advancing and declining



Amid this broad context of decline, however, many elections have delivered on their inherent promise as a means of ensuring that the people have control over decision makers and decision making in government and as such remain a cornerstone of democracy despite the current challenges. Recent elections in Guatemala, India, Poland, Senegal and many other countries have allowed the voters to have an effective voice. If democracy is 'a system in which parties lose elections' (Przeworski 1991: 10), then democracy remains alive and well in diverse countries around the world.

Taking the election super-cycle year as a call to action, this year's report uses the data as a jumping-off point for solutions to the challenges that elections face in 2024. In particular, we focus on how court challenges and refusals to concede undermine public perceptions of electoral credibility. The report concludes with a set of policy recommendations targeted at improving public confidence in elections. Many of these recommendations call for increased attention to communication with voters and for the incorporation of data on public perceptions into election management plans.

Figure 3. Number of countries with advances and declines in at least one factor



Key findings

1. In an election super-cycle year in which approximately 3 billion people will go to the polls, one in three will vote in countries where the quality of elections is significantly worse than it was five years ago.
2. Between 2020 and 2024, in almost one in five elections, a losing candidate or party rejected the electoral outcome. Elections are being decided by court appeals at almost the same rate.
3. The global rate of electoral participation has declined as elections have become increasingly disputed, with the global average for electoral turnout declining from 65.2 per cent to 55.5 per cent over the past 15 years.
4. Countries experiencing net declines in democratic performance far outnumber those with advances. About one in four countries is moving forward (on balance), while four out of every nine are worse off.
5. Declines have been most concentrated in Representation (Credible Elections and Effective Parliament) and Rights (Economic Equality, Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Press).
6. In addition to declines in weaker contexts, democratically high-performing countries in all regions have suffered significant deterioration, especially in Europe and the Americas.
7. While substantial progress has been made in improving electoral administration, disputes about the credibility of elections deal mainly with irregularities at the point of voting and vote counting.
8. Elections retain their promise as a mechanism for ensuring popular control over decision makers and decision making. Incumbent parties have lost presidential elections and parliamentary majorities in highly watched elections in 2023 and 2024.



Read the full report.