

Electoral backsliding? Democratic divergence and trajectories in the quality of elections worldwide

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the world, scholars and international organisations have voiced their concern in recent years that democracy appears to be 'backsliding.' Elections are an indispensable part of the democratic system, but there has been relatively little focus on whether we have witnessed 'electoral backsliding'. This special issue introductory article considers three rival theses (backsliding, strengthening and divergence) about the trajectory of election quality in response to new structural changes - which are evaluated against empirical datasets. The evidence provides little support electoral backsliding at the aggregate level. There is a continued need to monitor patterns of election quality for signals of future electoral backsliding. The research agenda on electoral integrity therefore remains an indispensable one. However, existing narratives about democratic backsliding should be more nuanced to the more complex and varied trajectories in the integrity of key democratic institutions.

1. Introduction

Throughout the world, scholars and international organisations have voiced their concern in recent years that democracy appears to be 'backsliding' (Mechkova et al., 2017; International IDEA, 2021; Hellmeier et al., 2021). These examples of backsliding are often described as taking a different form: Open-ended coups d'état and state violence are being replaced with promissory coups and executive aggrandizement (Bermeo, 2016; Runciman, 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). The pandemic has provided an opportunity for autocratic leaders to restrict freedoms and extend states of emergency (Edgell et al., 2021). New technologies have allowed a variety of actors to quickly and easily disseminate disinformation about anything from voting locations to the accuracy of results (Garnett and James, 2020; Garnett and Pal, 2022).

A major part of the phenomena noted as part of this backsliding of democracy has been a new era of strategic manipulation of elections (Bermeo, 2016). Literature on electoral integrity demonstrates that elections are key to democratic life (Przeworski, 1999; Dahl, 1971). The same factors likely to influence a decline of democratic quality (such as lower civil liberties, or greater violence and intimidation), should have a profound impact on the quality of elections. But electoral integrity and quality of democracy, while closely related and intertwined, are not the same. As Birch (2011) argues, it is important to make distinctions and 'consider the precise interconnections between regime change and

electoral quality' (p.7). What is the direction of causality, for example? Do changes in electoral quality bring 'changes in other aspects of democracy, such as the observance of rights, accountability, rule of law, and so on ... or whether changes in these other variables are a prelude to changes in electoral practices' (p.8). Likewise, she adds, competitive elections can occur within broadly autocratic regimes – and leaders in broadly democratic regimes can successfully manipulate elections.

This special issue considers the questions: Where is electoral integrity on the rise? And where have elections been backsliding? Some of the pressures on electoral integrity may be long-existing causal pressures such as the temptation of incumbents to try to manipulate electoral administration or dampen turnout. But there are also new challenges as societies in the twenty-first century undergo major demographic, technological, and environmental changes. These changes have brought with them new challenges to the information environment and opportunities for clientelism. At the same time, innovations can also lead to new forms of voter education and awareness, and observation models. How can scholars and practitioners understand these trends in electoral decline and improvement? Furthermore, what policy solutions might help thwart declines in electoral integrity?

This article begins with a review of the literature on democratic backsliding before positing that there is a notable gap in work on *electoral* backsliding. The article then sketches out a theoretical framework which identifies key structural shifts that may have affected the quality

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of elections around the world. With this framework in mind, we elaborate on three potential narratives for the global trends in electoral integrity today: electoral backsliding, electoral strengthening, and electoral divergence.

The article uses data from the Varieties of Democracies (V-Dem) and the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index (PEI) to chart changes in electoral integrity over time. It considers changes across countries to determine whether electoral integrity is backsliding wholesale, strengthening, or whether a divergence between countries has emerged instead. It concludes with a discussion of the articles found in this forthcoming issue that bring greater depth to over-time trends at different points in the electoral cycle.

This special issue comes ten years after the special symposium on electoral integrity which launched the research agenda and is therefore a timely point to revisit these questions. Elections and democracy are under threat — but are citizens, electoral administrators, and political leaders fighting back?

1.1. Democratization and democratic deconsolidation

Traditional literature on democratization identified three waves of democratization, relating to periods of dramatic increases in the quality of democracy (Fukuyama, 1989; Huntington, 1993). The first wave in the 18th and 19th centuries saw regime changes to democratic forms of government in Western Europe and North America, albeit often with a limited franchise of male voters. The so-called ‘first reversal’ appeared after WWI, followed by a second a rise in democratically elected governments post-WWII, as the United States, in particular, influenced the adoption of democratic norms in many post-Axis countries, and decolonization was in full force. This stalled, or perhaps even reversed, in the 1960s and 70s, possibly as the post-decolonization democratic experiments proved challenging in many countries. However, a new rise of democratization emerged shortly thereafter, particularly in Central, Latin, and South America, as well as post-Communist Europe.

By the end of the Cold War, the prevailing attitude was that democratic consolidation was permanent and linear – that any threats to democratic back-sliding had run their course (Norris, 2017). However, in recent years a new hypothesis has taken its place, namely that democratic institutions are once again under threat, particularly from within democratic states themselves (Bermeo, 2016). Thus, a literature of democratic decline, back-sliding, or disenchantment has emerged. Originally, this literature focused on Central and Eastern European contexts, where post-Soviet democratization had stalled or reversed (Greskovits, 2015). However, in recent years, research has expanded to established democracies (Norris, 2017; Foa and Yascha, 2016; 2021). Scholarship has considered a rise in populist movements (Akerman et al., 2016), promulgated by citizens dissatisfied with the results of democratic governance in their own lives, as well as anti-establishment parties and leaders (Norris and Inglehart, 2019), including some with clear authoritarian leanings (Eichengreen, 2018). Furthermore, there are new concerns about autocratic learning, as dictators (or would-be dictators) adopt stealthy methods of electoral manipulation that have found success in other jurisdictions (Morgenbesser, 2020). In this way, new forms of manipulation are spread beyond one country’s borders.

Although many have raised alarm bells about the trajectory of democracy, these claims have also been met by some scepticism among scholars noting that government legitimacy and public trust in institutions is not decreasing at the rate warned. Thomassen and Van Ham (2017), for example, have suggested that calls of democratic malaise are nothing new, and that data simply doesn’t back the existence of this trend, at least not as dramatically and globally as sometimes stated. Norris (2011) chalks it up to a disconnect between democratic aspirations not met by levels of democratic satisfaction, coupled with more negative information about government available to citizens. Some scholars go further than just stating that calls of democratic decline are more nuanced, and openly state that some key indicators, like

satisfaction with democracy, are in fact, increasing (Zalinisky, 2019).

1.2. New trends impacting electoral integrity

Although there has been considerable scholarship on the trajectory of the quality of democracy, the trajectory of election quality is an important but underexplored topic. This special issue therefore seeks to understand the broader trends in electoral integrity in the past decades, paralleling the research done on the changes in democratic quality.

We might expect there to have been considerable change in the quality of elections worldwide in recent years. It is helpful to distinguish between structural and agent-led causes. There have been multiple ongoing structural shifts that many societies have witnessed in recent years which have posed challenges to election quality, for the better or for worse:

- *The rapid growth of digital politics.* Social media has become embedded into many citizens’ lives. It has become a major source of news and information, but also the platform through which candidates, incumbents, and parties reach out to citizens (Persily and Tucker, 2020). However, these avenues for democratic discourse are threatened by dis- and mis-information, censorship, surveillance, and hateful speech. Meanwhile, there have been changes in the way elections are run, with technology now also increasingly used in the back-office of elections, even if remote online voting has not become widespread (Loeber, 2020).
- *Economic and societal transformations.* Processes of deindustrialisation and economic globalisation have been occurring for decades, but still present ongoing shifts that cause broader disruptions. The global economic environment has been of deregulation enabling the rapid movement of financial capital. It is widely argued that this has contributed towards economic growth but can also create economic inequalities (Gozgor and Ranjan, 2017). These shifts can in turn affect political attitudes, behaviour, and practices of democratic politics (Kurer et al., 2019). It has commonly been argued that economic growth is related to democracy (Waldner and Lust, 2018, 101-3), but what about these more nuanced shifts?
- *The growth of populism.* Many studies have pointed towards increased political polarization, and in particular to the growth of populism, as a key influence on the quality of democracy worldwide (Berman, 2021). A key characteristic of populism is scepticism of public authorities (Norris and Inglehart, 2019, 4) which is therefore likely to affect the running of elections.
- *Extreme weather and pandemics.* Global warming has precipitated an increase in extreme weather conditions such as floods, hurricanes and droughts (IPCC, 2018). Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a profound challenge to societal systems (Edgell et al., 2021; James et al., 2023).
- *Challenges to electoral assistance.* There was considerable international attention and investment in promoting democracy around the world in the post-WWII period, including throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Carothers, 2003). There is evidence that a ‘golden era’ of electoral assistance from the international community has come to an end – with many INGOs facing cost pressures as national governments trim back on expenditure, and public opinion turning against spending money on supporting democracy overseas (Diamond, 2019).

These structural shifts enable actors to respond strategically by shifting incentives and create opportunities for strategic action. In this changing environment, actors such as voters, citizens, parties, candidates, donors, have strategic agency to respond. They may seek to exploit these new conditions, with the effect of either strengthening electoral integrity or weakening it. There are also therefore agency-based theories of change. Neo-statecraft theory focuses analysis on the agency of the incumbent political elite who are argued to be primarily

office-seeking actors trying to retain office (James, 2016). They may do this through convincing the electorate of their competency in office, but may also do so through *bending the rules of the game*, that is, altering the institutional environment in order to make it easier for them to win elections (James, 2012, 82). Electoral integrity may therefore be compromised by deliberate efforts of incumbent leaders to change the rules of the game in their favour.

Given these drivers of potential change in the quality of elections, we suggest that one of three phenomena may be occurring: electoral backsliding, electoral strengthening, and what we propose is most likely: a thesis of divergence.

1.2.1. Electoral backsliding

The first narrative, the *electoral backsliding* thesis, follows the narrative in the democratic backsliding literature that democracy is in decline, and that this decline can also be seen in the electoral sphere. There are strong theoretical reasons to suspect that electoral backsliding may be occurring. The structural conditions set out above have provided an environment in which it is difficult for electoral integrity to be maintained. Economic and societal transformations have been experienced unevenly between countries and within countries. Economic growth is thought to be associated with the quality of democracy (Waldner and Ellen Lust, 2018, 101-3; Lipset, 1994). Additionally, economic stagnation and rising levels of inequality has been documented in many countries (Piketty, 2014) and may have created grievances amongst citizens which have in turned undermined the quality of elections. The relative absence of regulation means that campaign finance restrictions are less meaningful and effective. Global financial movement means that money can flow from overseas sources to parties, candidates and incumbent governments.

Furthermore, the acceleration of digital politics has meant that key media platforms are suddenly much more difficult to regulate (Moore, 2018). Disinformation and misinformation about candidates, policy issues, and voting processes can therefore quickly spread (Shu et al., 2020). Relatedly, it is argued that many societies have been undergoing increased political polarization (Carothers and O'Donohue, 2019). Political polarization is thought to encourage anti-democratic behaviour (Finkel et al., 2020) and there is evidence that electoral integrity has become a topic prone to conspiratorial thinking (Norris et al., 2020). The rise of populism can also create greater scepticism of electoral management bodies and their staff who administer elections. This is likely to be greater because they can be more easily criticized on social media.

The presence of emergency conditions arising from extreme weather conditions and pandemics provide opportunities for incumbent governments to take advantage by using emergency powers to restrict campaign conditions (Lindvall, 2021). Additionally, INGOs have been able to provide less support because of cuts in overseas aid budgets (Diamond, 2019).

Electoral backsliding may have also been driven by statecraft. A prominent feature of the democratic backsliding literature is the idea that would-be autocrats have adapted their approaches for maintenance of power. Morgenbesser (2020), for example, sketches out a framework of 20 different autocratic innovations covering informational, legal, political, reputational, and technological techniques.

In this narrative, electoral integrity is consistently weakening around the globe, in response to these new threats to democratic life. Just as there is a 'democratic recession' (Diamond, 2015), there is an accompanying electoral integrity recession.

1.2.2. Electoral strengthening

In contrast, the *electoral strengthening* thesis provides the narrative that these structural conditions might have generated better quality elections. The rise of digital politics could increase the quality of electoral integrity. It can provide another mode of political participation which triggers a rise in more traditional forms of participation (Xenos et al., 2014). It can provide greater accountability of incumbent

governments and policy makers. It can be used as a method to encourage citizens to register to vote ahead of voter registration deadlines (Merivaki and Suttman-Lea, 2023). Autocrats may find some means of repression more difficult to use, such as pre-electoral violence, because photos and videos are more easily spread of incursions on democratic rights (Roberts and Marchais, 2018). This digital era also makes it easier to hold electoral contestants to account for the source of the funds that they use to campaign for office. Journalists have combined efforts across borders to call out governments in cases such as the 'Panama papers,' 'Cambridge Analytica,' and 'Team Jorge,' and social media can provide further accountability (Neu et al., 2019). Additionally, populist pressures have not been a universal shift across all societies – they are specific to some countries. Although electoral assistance organisations have had challenges with their funding streams, there have also been opportunities for collaboration and innovation (James, 2021).

More generally, the electoral strengthening thesis holds that there is a media and intelligentsia bias towards focussing on particular countries where electoral integrity is in decline. The is a common global media focus on the USA, and events surrounding the storming of the Capitol for example project a narrative of backsliding. This is understandable, considering that the US has historically played an important role in being a beacon for democracy and promoting democracy, and is a global leader in the university sector. Thus the problems faced in the US always have potential to dominate debates. At the same time, less newsworthy cases of gradual strengthening in electoral integrity tend to receive less focus. For every established democracy experiencing some decline, there is an emerging democracy that is the product of years of investment in electoral assistance, investment from the international community, and a focus on enacting electoral laws that encourage broader participation. These investments in elections — in independent EMBs and entrenched civil society organisations — have made elections in many countries freer from manipulation or control. Thus, any decline in democratic quality may be found in broader issues of society-wide civil liberties violations or violence, which do influence the quality of elections, but are not the cause of democratic or electoral decline per se.

1.3. Election quality divergence

Given these mixed effects of the trends noted since the third wave of democratization, we argue that the situation is more nuanced than wholesale decline or strengthening. The *divergence* thesis holds that rather than one trend across the board, there are *different trajectories for states*. In the same time period, some countries are improving the quality of elections, while others have lagged behind and reversed course, making a narrative of wholesale decline or strengthening less appropriate than one of divergence.

Divergence in election quality is likely because different parts of the electoral cycle may have been affected differently by the aforementioned transformations. For example, the campaign is one area which is more likely to have been affected by candidates' and parties' move to social media. By contrast, the process of counting votes would be less affected. There are significant differences in how countries regulate campaigns, count votes and undertake all other aspects of electoral activity (Massicotte et al., 2001). It therefore follows that some might be more affected than others by technological, demographic, and other changes — and the divergent paths in election quality.

Election quality divergence is also likely because of evidence of new global patterns of development. Since these are key drivers of electoral integrity, we would expect similar patterns to be emerging in the quality of elections. Lipset's modernization theory put a firm imprint on understandings of comparative politics and political development. It assumed a linear trajectory of history with countries progressing from 'traditional' to 'modern' where 'the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy' (Lipset, 1959, 75). He also categorised countries into either 'stable democracies' or 'unstable democracies and dictatorships' (Lipset, 1959, 74). This put a firm imprint

on US foreign policy from the 1950s as it sought to promote economic growth and democracy together as a geo-political counter to the Soviet Union. Distinctions between ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ countries; ‘democracies’ and ‘dictatorships’; and ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ followed. The terms have been heavily politicised because they are often seen as overly Western, Anglo-centric, Euro-centric or embedded in colonial histories. These scholars assumed that states who had historically been leaders in the quality of democracy and elections would remain so – and their role through international efforts were to support and promote elections and democracy in lower performing states.

Seventy years plus since that time, we might expect that differences between regions and states to be very different. Terms such as ‘Global North/South’ and ‘developed/developing’ have been argued to not only be disparaging, but empirically inaccurate in capturing the changes the world has seen. It has been argued that a profound and ongoing redrawing of the global map of development has taken place (Horner and Hulme, 2019; Horner, 2020). It follows that those states previously leading in election quality may have fallen in light of the new structural conditions. Countries colloquially considered ‘leaders’ in North America and Western Europe have seen considerable pressures such as ongoing deindustrialisation and lower levels of economic growth. By contrast, some states may have been able to harness the new conditions for improved elections.

Furthermore, the trajectory of election quality may owe much to the agency of political leaders and citizens. We would expect variation in the statecraft strategy of political leaders and their approach towards elections. We would expect variation in the views of the public about the importance of clean elections. These country-by-country variations may therefore generate variations in election quality.

Patterns of global electoral integrity are therefore likely to have become more complex. It follows that we should focus analysis on the known drivers of divergence: economic growth, levels of polarization, online media consumption and incumbent statecraft strategy.

1.4. Research question, method, and data

This introductory article therefore seeks to first outline the overall the quality of elections in recent years. Has there been electoral backsliding, strengthening, or a divergence? Which of the narratives is best supported by the evidence? Secondly, we ask: what are the drivers of changes in election quality over time? Can the factors above, including economic growth, polarization, online media, and statecraft, account for these changes?

We rely on expert assessments to measure electoral integrity and the other variables related to this concept (For more on the use of expert perceptions of electoral integrity, see: Martinez i Coma and van Ham, 2015). Data are drawn from two expert surveys. First, we use the Varieties of Democracy project, which includes several indicators of electoral integrity (see Appendix A) on a standardized scale, captured in yearly data from 1789 (Coppedge et al., 2021). Secondly, we use the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index (PEI) which provides a more detailed assessment of the quality of elections across the electoral cycle (see Appendix B), collected from mid-2012 to 2022 (Garnett et al., 2022). These data are captured for each national-level election; thus, changes can be ascertained within a country from election to election, rather than from year to year.

We first map out the longitudinal trends in electoral integrity in the post-WWII era, since 1945, using the V-Dem data. We then zoom in on the period after 1991. This period reflects the so-called ‘Third Wave’ of democratization, and the rise of new democracies after the fall of the Soviet Union. We then zoom in even further to the most recent decade (2012–2022), to test the same factors via election-to-election changes within the country. This time period reflects the years for which the PEI Index is available.

Using regression analysis, we consider the changes each year in

electoral integrity, alongside potential predictor variables. First, we consider regime durability, or the length of time the country’s regime has been in place. This allows for a measure the length of experience in the current regime. This is especially important to control for the longstanding democracies, which have a wealth of democratic experience to solidify their electoral quality. Legacies of both new and old forms of colonialism are measured by a regional dummy variable.

The next three variables measure changes in key factors known to influence democratic and election quality. Following the modernization thesis that suggests that democracies can emerge and thrive where resources are abundant, we include change in GDP per capita as a variable to capture the fluctuation in economic situation in each country which is likely to affect levels of electoral integrity (Lipset, 1959; Norris et al., 2014 and Martinez i Coma and van Ham, 2015). Additionally, change in civil liberties is measured because robust public debate is likely to have a strong influence on the ability of elections to fulfill their deliberative function. Change in neopatrimonialism, as a measure of elite statecraft, capture how authoritarian-leaning leaders may choose to manipulate elections to retain their grip on power.

Finally, we include two variables that may capture new trends driving electoral strengthening or decline. Polarization is included as it is suggested to promote greater anti-democratic behaviour as sides of the political spectrum have increasing animosity toward to each other (Finkel et al., 2020). A measure of online media consumption captures the rise of the digital in elections.

1.5. Longitudinal trends in electoral integrity

Longitudinal data from V-Dem since 1789 support these broad trends of shifts in the quality of democracy as related to the quality of elections. We see in Fig. 1 that electoral integrity broadly does map on the quality of democracy as measured by the V-Dem indexes, which would be expected. However, electoral integrity has also been noticeably higher than most democracy indexes for sustained periods – in effect, ‘dragging them up.’ The figure suggests three main waves of global improvement in electoral integrity over similar periods of time to those commonly identified by the democratization literature.

There is a first wave of electoral integrity growth from the 1840s until the start of the twentieth century. This was the period where some European states expanded the parliamentary franchises and efforts were made to reduce vote buying (O’Leary, 1962). There remained fundamental issues in those states, however, such as gendered voting rights and voter suppression (James, 2012). Electoral backsliding does seem apparent at this stage, however, with a considerable drop in the Free and

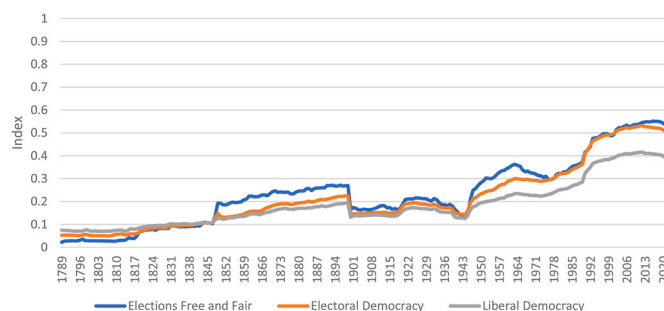


Fig. 1. V-Dem Democracy and Election Indicators, 1789–2022 Data: Varieties of Democracy (Vdem) Note: higher numbers mean better quality election for all V-Dem variables Measures: Electoral democracy index (v2x_polyarchy) “To what extent is the ideal of electoral democracy in its fullest sense achieved?” Liberal democracy index (v2x_libdem) Question: “To what extent is the ideal of liberal democracy achieved?” Election free and fair (v2x_elfrfair) Question: “Taking all aspects of the pre-election period, election day, and the post-election process into account, would you consider this national election to be free and fair?”

Fair index at the turn of the century.

A second major wave of electoral integrity strengthening is identifiable as beginning at the end of the second world war in 1945 and lasting until the mid-1960s. Fascist governments fell following the armed conflict and many countries gained independence from colonial powers to hold independent elections during this time. There does seem to have been a period of electoral backsliding in the 1960s, however. A third wave of electoral democratization is also apparent from the 1970s onwards. Dictators fell in the Iberian Peninsula in Europe to make way for elections in Spain and Portugal. This longitudinal analysis demonstrates that there is less evidence to support the case of electoral backsliding than there is democratic backsliding during this period. Fig. 1 capturing trajectories in VDEM data shows that election quality continued to rise after the slump in democracy quality, only then tailing off.

The Soviet Union collapse in the 1990s enabled former Soviet-bloc countries to hold elections (Fukuyama, 1989; Huntington, 1993) ushering in a third wave of democratization. The common narrative of democratic decline holds that we are in a third reversal, that democracy and elections have been under threat most notably since this third wave. Contrary to some narratives of broader democratic decline, however, we note a gradual increase in both the quality of elections and liberal democracy, albeit with some flatlining in recent years.

This shows that there is no wholesale democratic decline in recent years, but at the same time, the past three decades have not seen the meteoric rise in election quality noted in other eras.

1.5.1. Regional and country changes

But we argue that these comparisons of yearly means do not tell the whole story. These annual means may be masking divergence between regions and individual countries. Fig. 2 shows regional changes over the 1991–2019 time period. We can observe a flatlining of electoral integrity over this time period in Western Europe and North America, but

election quality remains very high. There are increases elsewhere - at least from the first to last year studied. There is a late decline in election quality in sub-Saharan Africa and the MENA region. Latin America and the Caribbean has seen a longer-run since 2016, but slower decline since the early 2000s.

But even regional graphs may mask specific country trends. Fig. 3 shows a map of changes in overall electoral integrity from 1991 to 2019. Even if global averages haven't shifted much in this time period, it is evident that there are certainly changes in many countries, both for the better and the worse.

Table 1 lists the countries with the greatest increase and decrease in the V-Dem score. Those that have seen considerable increases are of great geographical variety. They tend to include countries which held their first elections following independence or under a new constitution which generate a large spike in election quality – but which also often subsequently saw further improvements. Croatia held its first elections under the new constitution and independence from the Soviet Union in 1992. The elections score –0.42 in the index but there were continuous improvements thereafter with a score of 0.88 in 2007 and 1.99 in 2016. Improvements in elections in Bhutan date to 2008 where the first elections were held under a constitutional monarchy rather than absolute monarchy – as part of a top-down peaceful transition towards democracy in which elections were described as a ‘gift from the King’ (EU, 2008). A score of 1.25 was recorded in 2008, which dropped to 0.64 in 2013, but rose back up to 1.37 in 2021. Timor-Leste saw leap forwards on the index from –1.72 in 1979, to 0.47 in 2001. This followed independence from Indonesia in 2002. However, there were continued improvements in the quality of elections with a score of 1.38 in 2022. The EU EOM reported that the 2022 were ‘credible and transparent’ (EU EOM, 2022). Kuwait’s transformation also occurred in the 1990s with the country scoring 1.24 in elections in 1993 – following a score of 0.21 in 1991 after the invasion of Iraq. The score held steady thereafter. Ghana saw a leap in a value of –0.68 in 1994 to 0.17 to in 1996 as the

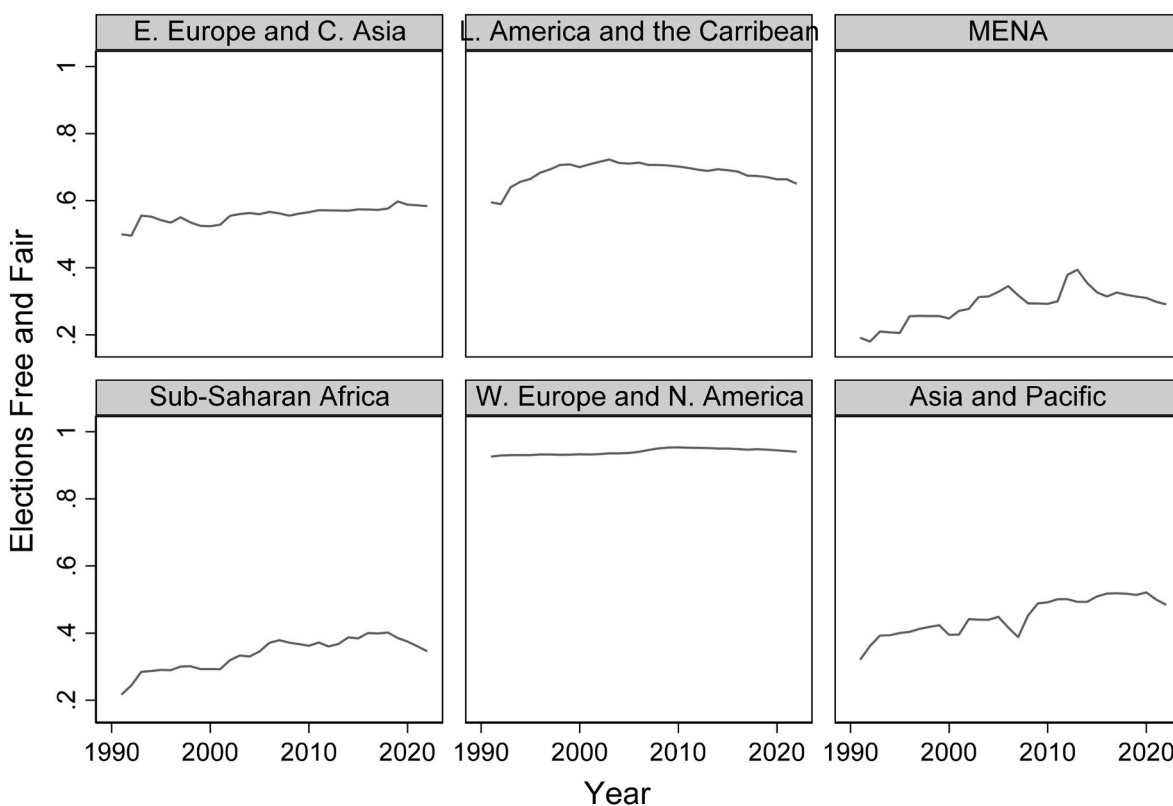


Fig. 2. Regional Changes (1991–2019) Data: Varieties of Democracy (Vdem) Election free and fair (v2x_elfrfair) Question: “Taking all aspects of the pre-election period, election day, and the post-election process into account, would you consider this national election to be free and fair?”

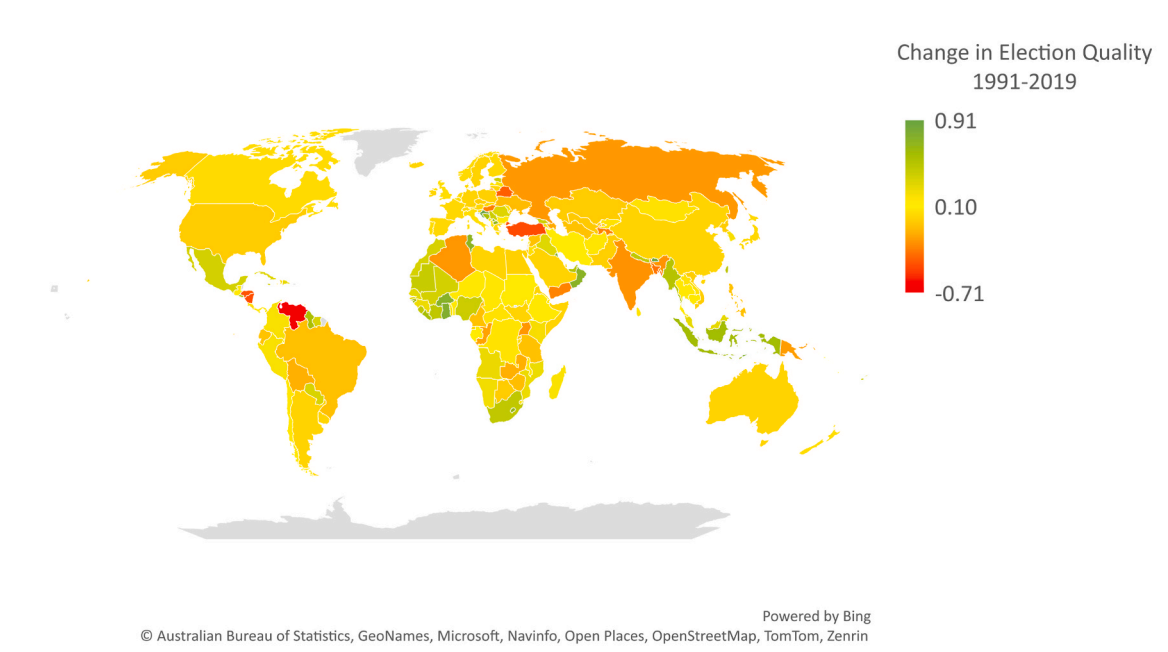


Fig. 3. Changes in Electoral Integrity from 1991 to 2019 Data: Varieties of Democracy (Vdem) Election free and fair (v2x_elfrfair) Question: “Taking all aspects of the pre-election period, election day, and the post-election process into account, would you consider this national election to be free and fair?”

Table 1
Greatest changes in Electoral Integrity from 1991 to 2019.

Greatest increases		Greatest decreases	
Country	Change	Country	Change
Croatia	0.91	Venezuela	-0.71
Bhutan	0.86	Turkey	-0.46
Timor-Leste	0.79	Nicaragua	-0.45
Kuwait	0.78	Honduras	-0.43
Ghana	0.77	Belarus	-0.39

military regime of Jerry John Rawlings succumbed to intense domestic and international pressures (Kumah-Abiwu, 2011). However, there were also continued improvements reaching 1.98 in 2010, before some tapering off and imperfections in elections continued (Kumah-Abiwu and Darkwa, 2020).

Those states which saw the most dramatic declines were commonly cited as exemplars of wider autocratisation under presidents such as Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Juan Orlando Hernández in Honduras, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, and Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus. For example, Venezuela’s score plummeted from 1.38 for the 1998 peaceful multi-party elections (Trinkunas and McCoy, 1999), to -2.71 for the 2018 presidential elections which were described as ‘sham elections’ (Sen, 2018) which were boycotted by the opposition (Seelke and Clare, 2018). However, the cases are not specific to one continent.

1.5.2. Stages of the electoral cycle

Has there been variation in the quality of elections by parts of the electoral cycle? Here the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index proves useful, as it maps out electoral integrity over an 11-stage electoral cycle from 2012 to 2022 (Fig. 4). The only statistically significant changes over the past ten years show some strengthening in some areas of the electoral cycle. Notably, there is an improvement over time of the mean scores for electoral boundaries (Coeff 0.70, p < 0.05) and campaign finance (Coeff 0.61, p < 0.05), perhaps related to increased global attention to these issues and the role of regulation to ‘level the playing field’ (Hummel et al., 2019). This lends some credence to the electoral strengthening thesis in these specific areas. The data for overall PEI

Index thus shows little evidence of there being global electoral backsliding, at least not for all countries across the ten years for which data have been collected.

1.6. Explaining trajectories

This descriptive analysis from V-Dem and PEI data shows that there is not a wholesale decline or improvement over time in terms of electoral integrity around the globe. In some places there are great increases in election quality, while in others there are great declines. Some stages of the electoral cycle appear to be improving in quality, but this is hardly across the board.

We therefore ask: what then can explain (or predict) this divergence in electoral integrity, notably the improvements in electoral integrity in some countries, but declines in others? Models in Table 2 present the results of multi-level regression models with country fixed effects predicting the change year-to-year (Models 1–3) or election-to-election (Model 4) in electoral integrity within a country (ie. years or elections nested in countries). For all models, we consider two predictors at the most recent observation: regime durability, or length of regime, measured at a fixed point of the 2019 value, to delineate between longstanding and newer democracies, and region. We also consider changes year-to-year (or election-to-election) in economic growth, the expansion or repression of civil liberties, the growth or decline of neo-patrimonialism in the country (see Table 3).

In Model 1, these changes are studied from 1991 to 2019. In Model 2, these changes are studied for the reduced time period of 2000–2019. This model also introduces the variables of political polarization and online media consumption (which are only available after 2000). Model 3 presents an even more reduced time period (2012–2019) which is useful for comparison with Model 4, which shows election-by-election change using PEI Data.

We first note that in the initial years of study (1991–2019 and 2000–2019), the longer a country has been a democracy is actually negatively related to their changes in electoral integrity. This is likely because in these initial years of the third wave the greatest increases in electoral integrity were happening in new democracies. However, this does not extend to the most recent (2012–2019 or 2012–2022) time

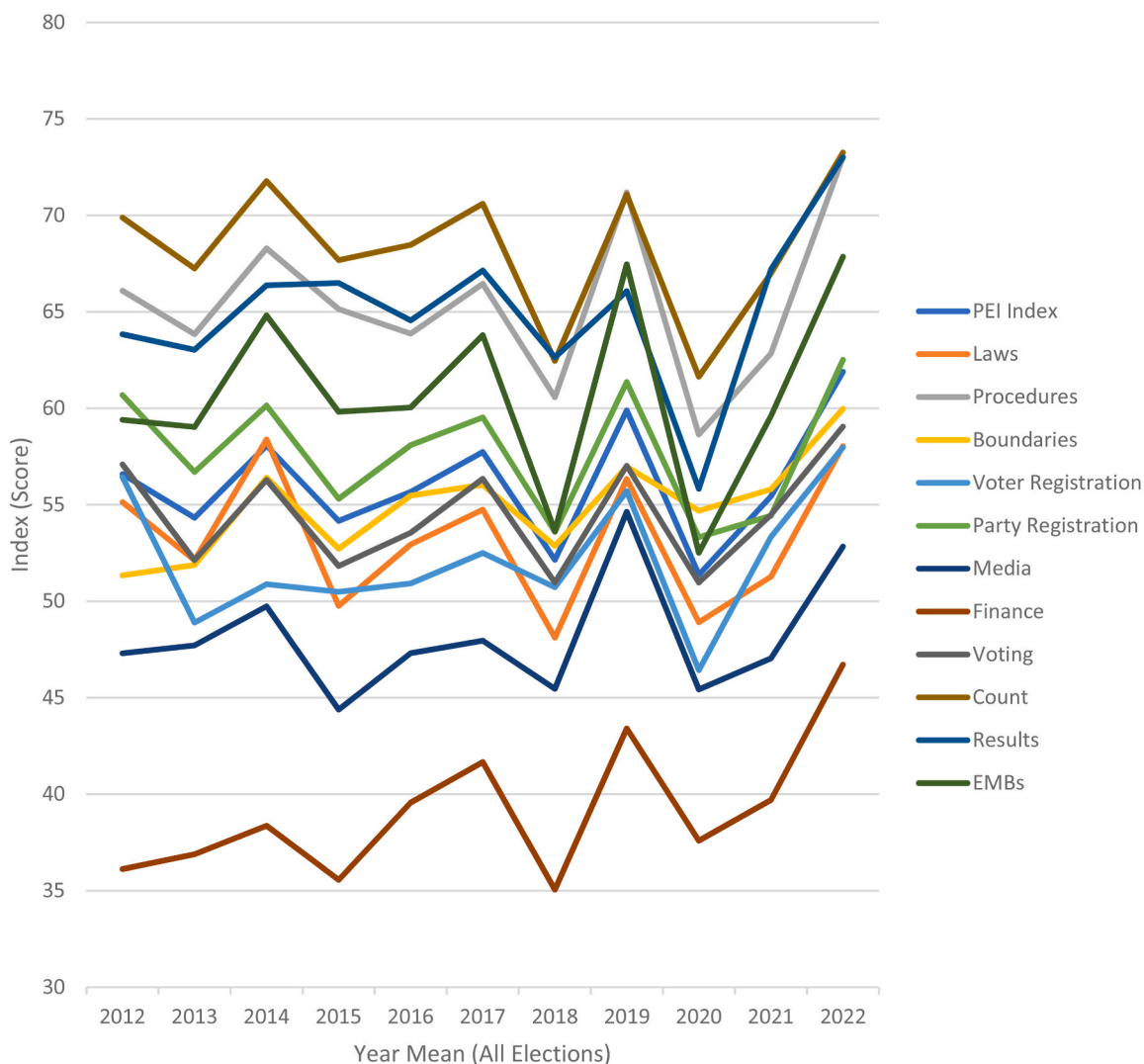


Fig. 4. Average change from first election studied to last election studied in the same country Data: Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index. See Appendix B.

period. By this point, the relationship is not statistically significant, meaning that increases or declines in electoral integrity are not the purview of only old or new democracies.

Change in economic growth has a statistically significant impact on a year-to-year basis for the 1991–2019 period only. We suspect, like regime durability, this is related to the third wave of democratization happening in the early part of this period, as economies and quality of elections were growing simultaneously. However, for the subsequent models there is no statistically significant relationship between economic growth and improvements in electoral integrity. Instead, we see that the modernization thesis that growth will normally improve the quality of democracy and therefore also elections, no longer applies.

One of the findings that is largely consistent is that there is a positive association between an increase in civil liberties in a country and an improvement in electoral integrity. This is unsurprising, since a robust civil society is necessary for there to be true public debate and competition, some of the key principles that underline electoral integrity. However, this relationship is not noted with the PEI data from 2012 to 2022.

We see that statecraft (measured here by the variable of neopatrimonialism, or the personalization of power) has some of the most dramatic effects on electoral integrity, as evidenced in the predictive margins of Fig. 5. We suspect that as authoritarian-leaning leaders

consolidate their grip on power, elections can get in the way. Thus, manipulating elections and chipping away at the processes that could result in them losing power appears to be a key means to retain power. In this process, electoral integrity can be decreased. This links electoral integrity squarely with changes in the personalization of leadership in a country, providing evidence that the agency of political leaders and statecraft can be a threat to electoral integrity.

Change in the level of polarization in the country do not appear to be driving change in most of the models presented above. In other words, we cannot say for certain that growth in divisions within a country necessarily always impede the growth of electoral integrity.

Finally, we consider changes in online media consumption. While media consumption has increased remarkably in the last decade this hasn't corresponded directly to shifts in electoral integrity. We cannot therefore conclude that the growth of online technology, and with it the threats of foreign interference, cyber-security challenges and mis- and dis-information, necessarily signal a decline in electoral integrity. This suggests a more nuanced impact of technology on elections.

OLS models allow us to also test regional divergence. In the full time period studied (1991–2019) with V-Dem data, we do see increases in the quality of elections over time in all regions when compared with North America and Western Europe. This reflects the largescale advances of electoral integrity during this time period. However, when considering

Table 2
Multi-level models with country fixed-effects.

	(1)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Change (year to year) in V-Dem Elections Free and Fair (1991–2019)	Change (year to year) in V-Dem Elections Free and Fair (2000–2019)	Change (year to year) in V-Dem Elections Free and Fair (2012–2019)	Change (election to election) in PEI Index (2012–2022)
Regime Durability	–0.00*	–0.00**	–0.00	–0.00
	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Change in Economic Growth	0.00**	0.00	0.01	–0.00
	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Change in Civil Liberties	0.18***	0.20***	0.14**	–3.31
	0.03	0.04	0.06	14.05
Changes in Neopatrimonialism	–0.47***	–0.34***	–0.25***	–36.53***
	0.03	0.04	0.06	11.79
Change in Polarization		0.01**	0.01	2.08
		0.00	0.01	1.33
Change in Online Media Consumption		0.00	0.00	2.52
		0.01	0.01	2.40
Years since last election				–0.49
				0.42
_cons	0.01**	0.01***	0.01	6.14
	0.00	0.00	0.01	4.93
N (year or election changes)	4825	3295	1218	360
N (countries)	174	174	174	152
R-sq	0.10	0.07	0.06	0.11

Standard errors in second row* p < 0.10 **p < 0.05 ***p < 0.01.

Table 3
OLS regression models.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Change (year to year) in V-Dem Elections Free and Fair (1991–2019)	Change (year to year) in V-Dem Elections Free and Fair (2000–2019)	Change (year to year) in V-Dem Elections Free and Fair (2012–2019)	Change (election to election) in PEI Index (2012–2022)
Change in Civil Liberties	0.35***	0.34***	0.25***	21.53***
	0.02	0.03	0.04	5.69
Changes in Neopatrimonialism	–0.76***	–0.60***	–0.72***	–31.40***
	0.02	0.03	0.04	5.15
Change in Economic Growth	–0.00	–0.00***	–0.00	–0.00
	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Regime Durability	0.00***	0.00***	–0.00	0.00**
	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Eastern/Central Europe	0.11***	0.04***	0.02	0.90
	0.01	0.01	0.01	1.54
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.05***	–0.04***	–0.01	2.91*
	0.01	0.01	0.01	1.75
MENA	0.06***	0.06***	–0.04***	–1.65
	0.01	0.01	0.01	1.97
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.10***	0.01	0.02*	–2.51
	0.01	0.01	0.01	1.82
Asia and Pacific	0.06***	0.05***	–0.00	3.06*
	0.01	0.01	0.01	1.76
Change in Polarization		0.03***	–0.01	–0.44
		0.00	0.00	0.64
Change in Online Media Consumption		0.00	0.02***	1.80**
		0.00	0.01	0.87
Years since last election				0.33
				0.21
_cons	–0.03***	0.06***	–0.01	–3.43*
	0.01	0.01	0.01	2.04
N	4950	3469	1392	504
R-sq	0.57	0.48	0.47	0.29

Standard errors in second row* p < 0.10 **p < 0.05 ***p < 0.01.

Reference group – Western Europe and North America.

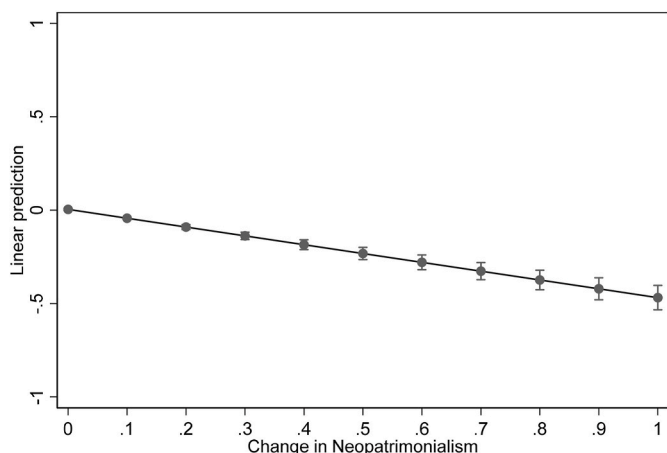


Fig. 5. Predicted Relationship between Neopatrimonialism (Statecraft) and Electoral Integrity, 1991–2019 95% confidence intervals depicted. From Table 2, Model 1 (1991–2019).

just the most recent decades, these trends have stalled, although not reversed as some have suggested. It has been hypothesized that the declines in electoral integrity could be happening predominately due to a reversal in established North American and Western European democracies, but this does not bear out in the data that these long-established democracies are on a decline.

1.7. The special issue ahead

This overview of the available data on trends in electoral integrity shows that after an initial increase in electoral integrity over time, its upward trajectory has largely stalled. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the quality of elections in all countries has remained static. Instead, there are noticeable cases of decline and strengthening of electoral integrity, in different countries, regions, types of political systems, and stages of the electoral cycle. Notably, we find that changes in electoral quality in a country are related to changes in civil liberties, influencing the environment in which a variety of actors can engage in free elections. Additionally, the personalization of power and statecraft that comes with it can be used to influence elections.

Divergence in election quality means that research on the determinants of election quality is ever more important. This special issue therefore aims to advance this agenda by considering the mix of, and interaction between, structural and agency-based drivers.

A focus on structural pressures begins with a focus on environmental and climate shifts. The article by Birch and Martinez i Coma demonstrates how extreme weather has opened new avenues for electoral clientelism in Honduras, significantly effecting the competitive environment of elections in the country. Constitutions also provide important structural barriers to electoral backsliding. In response to challenges with the acceptance of the results, Gerzo demonstrates how Kenyan electoral law evolved to increase the impartiality of electoral

justice post-election and resist incumbent pressure.

A focus on agent-based theories of change begins with political candidates. Erlich, Kerr, and Park consider how elites strategically use post-election legal challenges in Kenya for reasons other than to ensure the integrity of the electoral result. Instead, these challenges can also be used to influence self or public perceptions and access government benefits. In a similar vein, Schnaudt considers perceptions of electoral integrity among candidates in the 2021 German federal election. He suggests that politicians actually have largely positive beliefs about electoral integrity, although less so for those who had negative campaign experiences, were defeated, or belong to populist parties.

Citizens are also important actors and how they respond to electoral malpractices can have important consequences for whether they are perpetuated in the future. Responding to the rise of antidemocratic statements from politicians, Frederiksen and Skaaning demonstrate the apathetic responses of citizens in United States, Germany, and Hungary to these types of messages. Likewise, Van Noort shows that anti-democratic behaviour did not seem to temper voters’ support of the Republican Party in the United States post-January 6th insurrection, suggesting some tolerance for the erosion of electoral integrity when the success of key ideologies is at stake.

In sum, this special issue shows that, despite the major threats posed to electoral integrity in an era of digital technologies, climate change, polarization, and political statecraft, there is no global decline in electoral integrity consistent across all countries. However, at the same time, the current narrative is not one of wholesale strengthening either. Instead, this introduction, alongside the articles in this special issue, demonstrate a much more nuanced picture of divergence in election quality—where a variety of actors use new structural conditions to their advantage – be that to enhance or undermine electoral integrity. These findings have important implications for the study for policy makers. Narratives about electoral and democratic backsliding should be more nuanced, account for divergence, and be more precise about drivers and problematic countries. Policy transfer from successful cases of electoral strengthening should be encouraged.

A cautionary note is important, however. While existing measures of and trajectories of electoral quality do not yet show overall electoral backsliding, it remains essential that future research continues to monitor election quality because this may yet occur in the future. The research agenda on electoral integrity is therefore an indispensable one for electoral studies, comparative politics, and the study of democracy.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

All data are publicly available

Appendix A. V-Dem Variables

Variable	Variable label	Question
Neopatrimonialism	v2x_neopat	To what extent is rule based on personal authority?
Civil Liberties	v2x_civlib	To what extent is civil liberty respected?
Regime Durability	v2regdur	How many days have passed since the current regime started?
Region (6 Category)	e_regionpol_6C	In which politico-geographic region is this country located? Eastern Europe and Central Asia (including Mongolia and German Democratic Republic) 2: Latin America and the Caribbean 3: The Middle East and North Africa (including Israel and Turkey, excluding Cyprus) 4: Sub-Saharan Africa 5: Western Europe and North America (including Cyprus, Australia and New Zealand, but excluding German Democratic Republic) 6: Asia and Pacific (excluding Australia and New Zealand)

(continued on next page)

(continued)

Variable	Variable label	Question
Polarization	v2smpolloc	How would you characterize the differences of opinions on major political issues in this society?
Online Media Consumption	v2smonex	Do people consume domestic online media?
GDP	e_gdppc	Point estimate from latent variable model of Gross Domestic Product Per Capita based on a number of sources.
Election free and fair	v2xel_frefair	Taking all aspects of the pre-election period, election day, and the post-election process into account, would you consider this national election to be free and fair?
Electoral democracy index	v2x_polyarchy	To what extent is the ideal of electoral democracy in its fullest sense achieved?
Liberal democracy index	v2x_libdem	To what extent is the ideal of liberal democracy achieved?

Source: Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, Agnes Cornell, M. Steven Fish, Lisa Gastaldi, Haakon Gjerløw, Adam Glynn, Sandra Grahn, Allen Hicken, Katrin Kinzelbach, Kyle L. Marquardt, Kelly McMann, Valeriya Mechkova, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Johannes von Römer, Brigitte Seim, Rachel Sigman, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton, Eitan Tzelgov, Luca Uberti, Yi-ting Wang, Tore Wig, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2022. "V-Dem Codebook v12" Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

Appendix B. PEI Variables

	Sections	Performance indicators	Direction	
PRE-ELECTION	1. Electoral laws	1-1 Electoral laws were unfair to smaller parties	N	
		1-2 Electoral laws favored the governing party or parties	N	
		1-3 Election laws restricted citizens' rights	N	
	2. Electoral procedures	2-1 Elections were well managed	P	
		2-2 Information about voting procedures was widely available	P	
		2-3 Election officials were fair	P	
		2-4 Elections were conducted in accordance with the law	P	
	3. Boundaries	3-1 Boundaries discriminated against some parties	N	
		3-2 Boundaries favored incumbents	N	
		3-3 Boundaries were impartial	P	
	4. Voter registration	4-1 Some citizens were not listed in the register	N	
		4-2 The electoral register was inaccurate	N	
		4-3 Some ineligible electors were registered	N	
	5. Party registration	5-1 Some opposition candidates were prevented from running	N	
		5-2 Women had equal opportunities to run for office	P	
		5-3 Ethnic and national minorities had equal opportunities to run for office	P	
		5-4 Only top party leaders selected candidates	N	
		5-5 Some parties/candidates were restricted from holding campaign rallies	N	
	CAMPAIGN	6. Campaign media	6-1 Newspapers provided balanced election news	P
			6-2 TV news favored the governing party	N
7. Campaign finance		6-3 Parties/candidates had fair access to political broadcasts and advertising	P	
		6-4 Journalists provided fair coverage of the elections	P	
		6-5 Social media were used to expose electoral fraud	P	
		7-1 Parties/candidates had equitable access to public subsidies	P	
		7-2 Parties/candidates had equitable access to political donations	P	
		7-3 Parties/candidates publish transparent financial accounts	P	
		7-4 Rich people buy elections	N	
		7-5 Some state resources were improperly used for campaigning	N	
ELECTION DAY	8. Voting process	8-1 Some voters were threatened with violence at the polls	N	
		8-2 Some fraudulent votes were cast	N	
		8-3 The process of voting was easy	P	
		8-4 Voters were offered a genuine choice at the ballot box	P	
		8-5 Postal ballots were available	P	
		8-6 Special voting facilities were available for the disabled	P	
		8-7 National citizens living abroad could vote	P	
		8-8 Some form of internet voting was available	P	
POST-ELECTION	9. Vote count	9-1 Ballot boxes were secure	P	
		9-2 The results were announced without undue delay	P	
		9-3 Votes were counted fairly	P	
		9-4 International election monitors were restricted	N	
		9-5 Domestic election monitors were restricted	N	
	10. Results	10-1 Parties/candidates challenged the results	N	
		10-2 The election led to peaceful protests	N	
		10-3 The election triggered violent protests	N	
	11. Electoral authorities	10-4 Any disputes were resolved through legal channels	P	
		11-1 The election authorities were impartial	P	
		11-2 The authorities distributed information to citizens	P	
		11-3 The authorities allowed public scrutiny of their performance	P	
		11-4 The election authorities performed well	P	

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