



## The Case for Democracy:

# Does Democracy Increase Global Health?

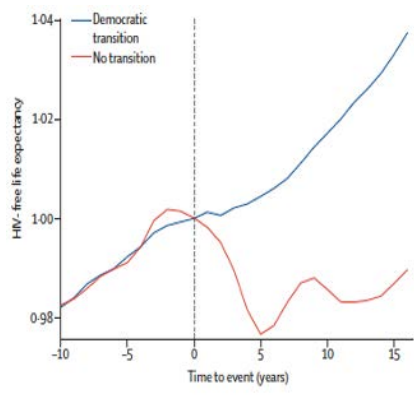
### Scientific Evidence Shows:

- Transition to democracy increases life expectancy by 3% within 10 years of regime change.
- Increased global levels of democracy averted 16.2 million cardiovascular deaths between 1995 and 2015.
- A high level of democracy leads to 94% lower infant mortality compared to dictatorships.
- Autocratization directly leads to a 1.3 percentage point decline in life expectancy, 8.7 percentage point decline in health care protection, and 5.6 percentage point increase in out-of-pocket spending per capita.

### Democracy Improves Health and Life Expectancy

Democracy and population health are increasingly and unavoidably inseparable. A comprehensive study by Bolyky et al. (2019) in *The Lancet*, spanning over 170 countries between 1980-2016, shows unequivocally that **transitions to democracy increase life expectancy, reduce child mortality, and that democratic experience significantly lowers deaths from non-communicable diseases**. For example, there is now evidence that on average, democratization leads to a 3% increase in life expectancy within 10 years after a transition from autocracy (Bollyky et al., 2019).

FIG 1. ADULT LIFE EXPECTANCY, 1970-2015 (BOLLYKY et al., 2019).



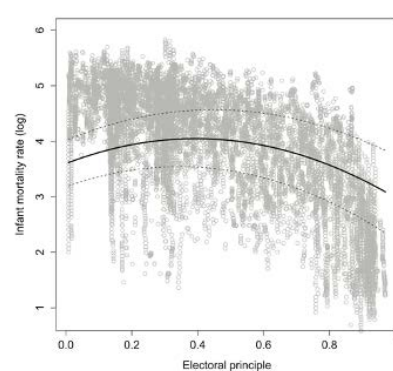
Evidence also demonstrates that democratic transitions significantly reduce mortality from non-communicable diseases. For example, scientists calculate that **increased levels of democracy in the world between 1995 and 2015 prevented 16.2 million deaths from cardiovascular diseases** (Bollyky et al., 2019).

Democracy's effect on health is not driven by income (GDP). The changes in health indicators depend on two key factors: free and fair elections and how long a country has been democratic, since long-standing democracies invest in healthcare to a higher degree. These findings demonstrate that democracy improves human development and that democratic experience matters for population health.

### Democracy Reduces Infant Mortality

There is hard evidence showing that democracy has both instant and lasting effects on the lowering of infant and child mortality (e.g., Gerring et al., 2012; Pieters et al., 2016; Wigley & Akkoyunlu-Wigley, 2017).

FIG 2. LOWER INFANT MORTALITY IN DEMOCRACIES (WANG et al., 2019).



Electoral democracy reduces infant mortality even when controlling for other relevant factors, such as effectiveness of governance. The substantive effects are quite striking: **Full-fledged democracies have (on average) 94% lower infant mortality than closed dictatorships**. (Wang et al., 2019).

The results also show that **the quality of democracy matters** for the positive effects to become evident. Democracy reduces infant mortality rates first when above 0.4 on a 0-1 scale of democracy. Yet, the really pronounced positive effects show only after reaching 0.7 or higher, and the full effect requires more than a decade to materialize. This is important for policy-makers and donors to keep in mind.

### Autocratization Decreases Health Care Coverage

Rigorous scientific evidence shows that autocratization leads to substantial deterioration of both population health and health care coverage.

1 Access to quality essential health services, without incurring undue financial hardship (Wigley et al. 2020).

**Autocratizing countries have lower estimated life expectancy, less effective health service coverage, and higher levels of out-of-pocket health spending** than they would have had without erosion of democratic rights and freedoms (Wigley et al. 2020). Wigley et al (2020) find that 10 years after autocratization starts, countries underperformed in three health outcome measures compared to if they had not reversed politically.

Their comprehensive analyses show that life expectancy at age 5 decreased by 1.3 percentage points, the universal health coverage decreased by 8.7 percentage points, and out-of-pocket spending for medical services per capita increased by 5.6 percentage points as direct effects of autocratization. Evidence thus demonstrates that progress toward SDG 3–Global health and well-being, is under threat from the current wave of autocratization in the world.

## REFERENCES

- 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), 1628-1640.
- Gerring, J., Thacker, S. C., & Alfaro, R. (2012). *Democracy and Human Development*. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(1), 1-17.
- Pieters, H., Curzi, D., Olper, A., & Swinnen, J. (2016). Effect of Democratic Reforms on Child Mortality: A Synthetic Control Analysis. *The Lancet Global Health*, 4(9), e627-e632.
- Wang, Y. T., Mechkova, V., & Andersson, F. (2019). *Does Democracy Enhance Health? New Empirical Evidence 1900–2012*. *Political Research Quarterly*, 72(3), 554-569.
- Wigley, S., & Akkoyunlu-Wigley, A. (2017). *The Impact of Democracy and Media Freedom on Under-5 Mortality, 1961–2011*. *Social Science & Medicine*, 190, 237-246.
- Wigley, S., Dieleman, J. L., Templin, T., Mumford, J. E., & Bollyky, T. J. (2020). *Autocratisation and Universal Health Coverage: Synthetic Control Study*. *BMJ*, 371.

*The Case for Democracy week 22-25 March 2021 set out to gather evidence on what democracies deliver with a focus on: economic development, human development, domestic and international security, and combating climate change. With increasing levels of autocratization around the world, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute in collaboration with the Directorate-General for International Partnerships of the European Commission initiated this joint project. The objective is to build a strong case for policy makers and other development actors to continue their engagement for promotion and protection of democracy. The 'Case for Democracy' week was partly funded by the European Union and was organized by Nazifa Alizada, Dr. Vanessa Boese, Prof. Staffan Lindberg, Martin Lundstedt, Natalia Natsika, and Shreeya Pillai.*



Co-funded by  
the European Union

## ABOUT V-DEM INSTITUTE

V-Dem is a unique approach to conceptualization and measurement of democracy. The headquarters – the V-Dem Institute – is based at the University of Gothenburg with 23 staff, and a project team across the world with 5 Principal Investigators, 19 Project Managers, 33 Regional Managers, 134 Country Coordinators, Research Assistants, and 3,500+ Country Experts. V-Dem is one of the world's largest data collection projects on democracy.



Department of Political Science  
University of Gothenburg  
contact@v-dem.net  
+46 (0) 31 786 30 43  
www.v-dem.net  
www.facebook.com/vdem institute  
www.twitter.com/vdem institute  
www.linkedin.com/company/vdem institute