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The Political Repercussions of a Pandemic

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The Political Repercussions of a Pandemic ^{*}

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Abstract.

In this essay, data are recovered that account for the impact of the pandemic on the conditions of democracy in the world. The source of information is the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, which for this year incorporates, in addition to its monitoring of the situation of democracy in more than two hundred countries, a compilation of state responses to the pandemic and its impact on the validity of democratic standards. In this regard, it is observed that throughout the last decade there has been a decline in democracy, and although the effects of the pandemic are still limited, it is to be feared that in the long term its consequences will be worse than those perceived today.

And given that there is an evident relationship between the autocratic character of the regimes and the propensity to violate democratic standards with exaggerated or non-consensual measures to combat the pandemic, is expected a deepening of the distance between countries where democracy prevails and those in which are autocratic forms of exercise of power.

Key words: COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, democracy, information, V-Dem.

Introduction.

At the end of December 2019, a new pathogen capable of generating a lethal disease in humans was detected. This new coronavirus, labeled SARS-CoV-2 and generator of the so called COVID-19, caused a pandemic recognized as such in March 2020 that has affected the entire world, although mainly Europe and America —despite having been initially discovered in China—, forcing the confinement in waves of a significant part of the population in many different countries and the paralysis of multiple economic activities and community life.

But the impact of this pandemic is not limited to economic and social aspects, but has had repercussions at the political level, calling into question the permanence of some individual freedoms and having granted excessive powers to governments to impose rules aimed at contagion containment.

This essay recovers some of the first publicly accessible data that accounts for the impact of the pandemic on the conditions of democracy in the world. The source of information used is the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, which this year incorporates, in addition to monitoring the state of democracy in more than two hundred countries, a compilation of state responses to the pandemic and its impact on the validity of democratic standards.

The new coronavirus pandemic.

A virus is nothing more than "a particle of genetic code, DNA or RNA, encapsulated in a protein vesicle", as the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHRI, 2021) has well defined. These particles cannot replicate on their own, but instead need to access and infect a cell to use its components to copy themselves.

A subfamily of viruses are the coronaviruses, so called because they have a crown of spikes around their surface. About forty species of coronavirus have been identified so far. Some of them are part of the beta-coronavirus, capable of infecting humans and causing serious illness. Although the first species of coronaviruses were described six decades ago, interest in their scientific study was reinforced in the present century, following the discovery of SARS-CoV, which causes severe acute respiratory syndrome (Fang, 2005).

At the end of 2019, a second type of coronavirus was identified, causing a severe acute respiratory syndrome —discovered and isolated in Wuhan, China—, initially called 2019-nCoV and now SARS-CoV-2, which caused a pandemic that was thus recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020a) and continues to date, with more than one hundred and twenty million cases of infection with this virus recorded in practically the entire world and just over two and a half million confirmed deaths.

Although its origin is zoonotic, this virus is currently transmitted primarily from person to person through small drops of saliva that are emitted when speaking, sneezing, coughing or exhaling, but also through aerosols, so its transmission occurs through contact close between people.

Infection with this pathogenic agent may not be symptomatic, but it can also cause fever, dry cough and difficulty breathing, which can lead to complications such as pneumonia and acute respiratory syndrome, capable of causing death.

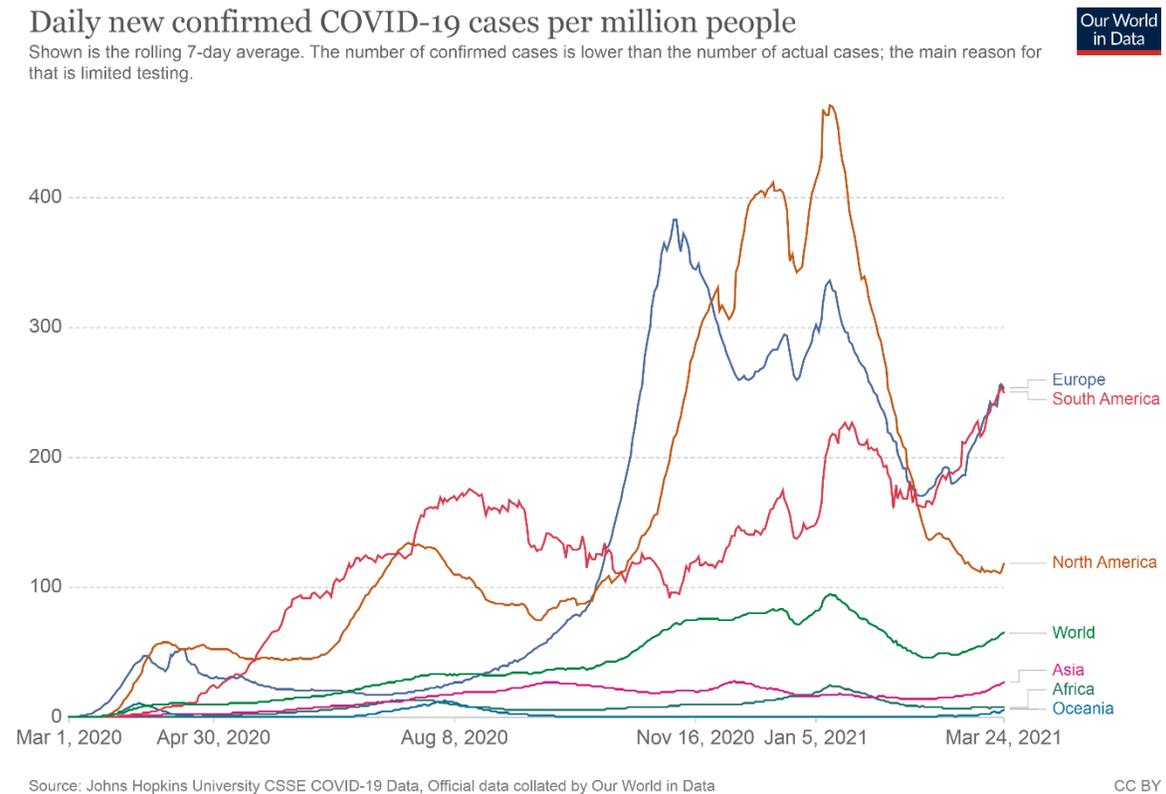
Infection with this virus causes more serious complications in the elderly and in those with conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, respiratory diseases, high blood pressure or immune-deficiencies.

As a virus, its effects cannot be combated with antibiotics, so after its first year of spread there are various vaccines available to prevent the consequences of exposure and recent treatments that seek to mitigate the disease.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the rate of confirmation of new cases of COVID-19 in the world has been different in different regions. It is clear that there was a first wave in March and April 2020 for Europe and North America, which was delayed one quarter for South America. A second wave occurred between November 2020 and January 2021, affecting all three regions simultaneously, although in Europe and North America it reached heights not previously observed.

By March 2021 a new wave was entering Europe and South America, which has not been present in North America. The remaining regions of the world have shown lower incidences of cases at all times.

Figure 1. Daily confirmed cases of COVID-19 per million inhabitants worldwide and by region.

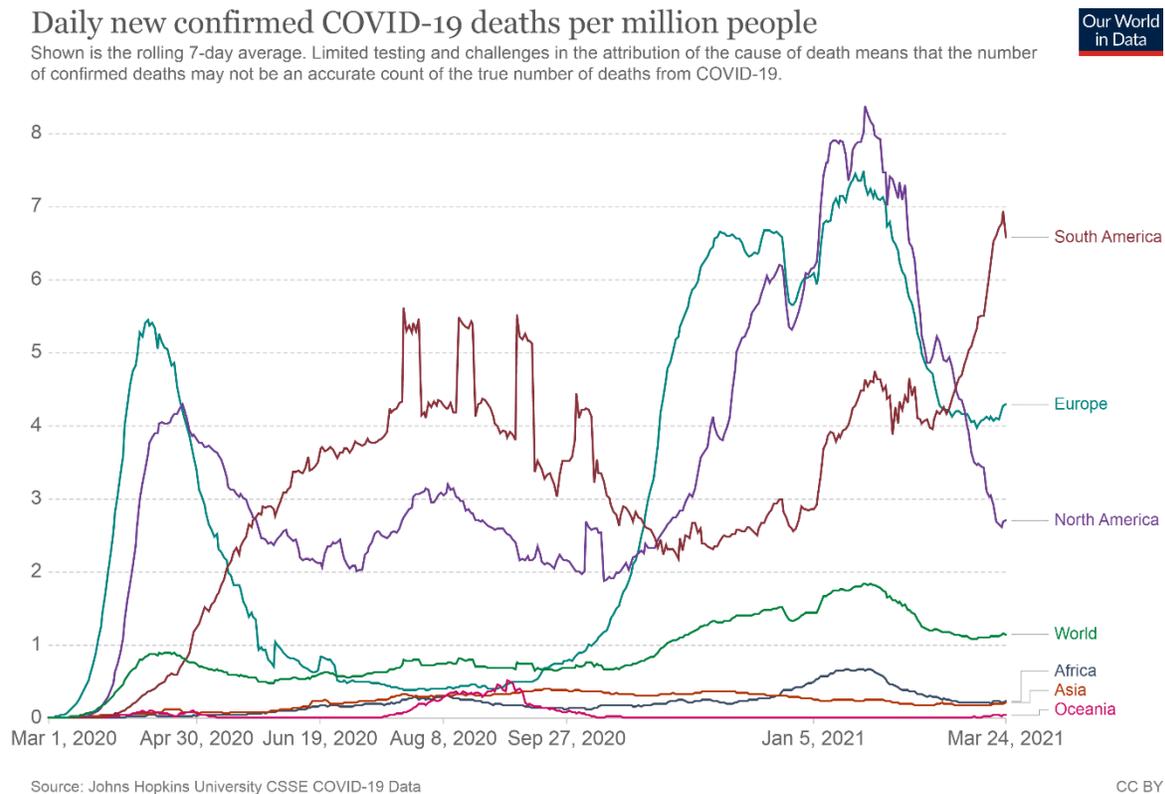


Source: Our World in Data [online]. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer>. Accessed March 25, 2021.

The Figure 2 presents the data on new deaths caused by COVID-19 in the world and in different regions. Once again, Europe and North America presented a first rise in the period March-April 2020. In South America this occurred four months later, but for the change of year 2020 to 2021 the three regions indicated present a second rise that reached levels above the previous ones, although in South America the greatest height is occurring at the end of March.

The main measure to contain contagion is the adoption of prevention and personal hygiene measures, such as hand washing, covering the mouth when coughing, physical distancing between people and the use of masks, in addition to self-isolation and monitoring for people suspected of being infected (WHO, 2020b).

Figure 2. Daily confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million inhabitants worldwide and by region.



Source: Our World in Data [online]. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer>. Accessed March 25, 2021.

To prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2, most of the governments of affected nations have imposed restrictions on international travel, quarantines, confinements, cancellation of events and the closure of establishments of all kinds. Thus, from a public health phenomenon, the pandemic has had a socioeconomic impact. The confinement of people has led to the confinement of up to a third of the population, to the closure of schools and universities in more than a hundred countries and to drastic reductions in economic activity, with consequences in an increase in unemployment and a fall in production, as well as a decline in world trade.

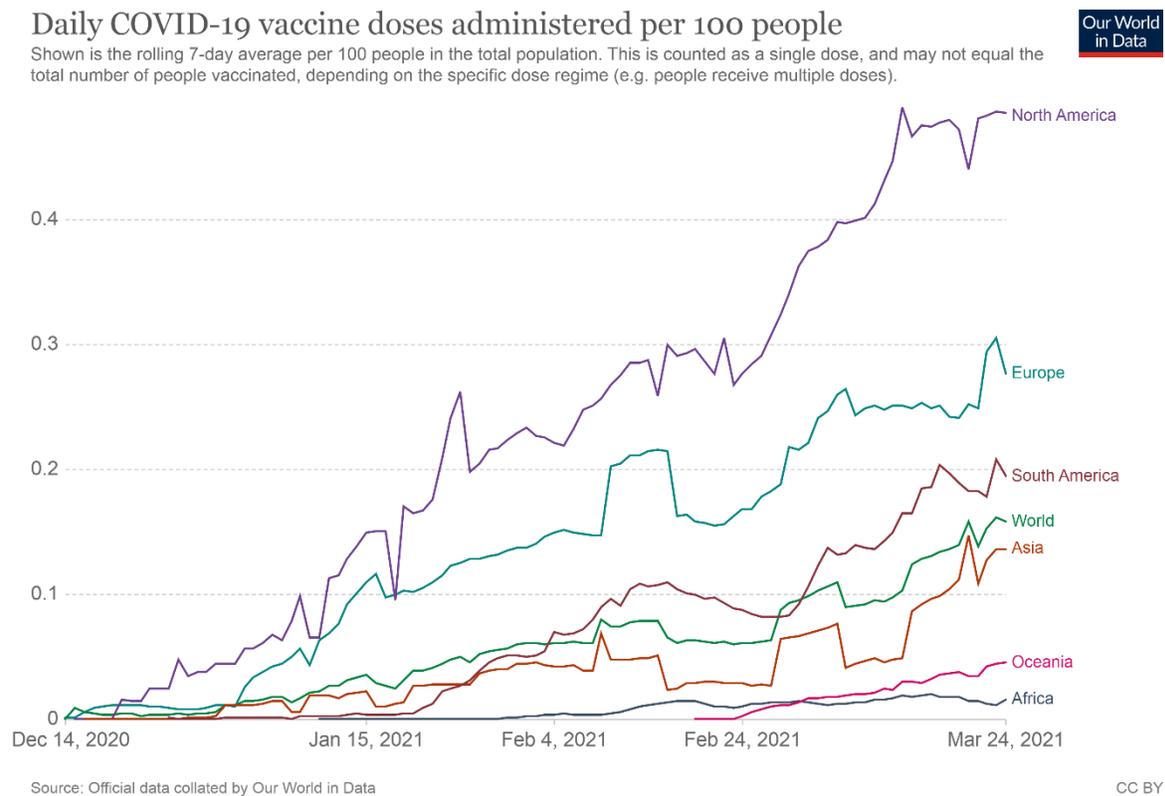
In principle, control for the prevention of contagion implied strict isolation and the suspension of most non-essential activities in countries where confirmed cases of this disease were appearing, which has since been made more flexible with a view to gradually returning to the normality.

The imposition of quarantines, restrictions on night mobility and isolation measures due to the pandemic have meant unusual cuts in individual freedoms, decreed by the government in order to control the spread of the disease, but which affect the mental and physical health of population and constrains democracy.

To date, it is not clear whether the disruptive character in daily life and the government practices that the pandemic has imposed will have a circumstantial scope or if they will determine the rules of coexistence for the years to come. It seems obvious that there is a propensity to return to ways of doing things that prevailed before this abrupt cut, but it is also true that much has changed and that a simple return to the preceding is complicated.

An eventual new normal, with major or minor changes from the past, will not happen immediately or simultaneously everywhere. It is true that the most developed nations have better conditions of access to vaccines and their application, which will allow them to return to full economic and social activity sooner. However, it must be remembered that the pandemic is a global phenomenon, so its fight cannot be restricted to a part of humanity, but should ultimately involve everyone.

Figure 3. Daily vaccination against COVID-19 per hundred inhabitants worldwide and by region.



Source: Our World in Data [online]. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer>. Accessed March 25, 2021.

In this regard, Figure 3 shows how the vaccination process against COVID-19 is progressing daily on a global scale and by region. As can be seen, the application rate is higher in North America than in Europe, but in these two regions it is higher than any other, with a delay in vaccination in South America despite facing the highest peak of deaths related to this disease at the end of March 2021.

The source of information on the impacts.

Where can we obtain information that allows us to have reliable estimates of the political impact of the pandemic?

Perhaps the largest open data collection effort on democracy in the world today is the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, whose approach to conceptualizing and measuring democracy is to provide a dataset that attempts to capture the complexity of the concept of democracy as a system of government that includes, but goes beyond the simple presence of elections. How does the “Varieties of Democracy” project define itself?

The project is carried out by a permanent entity, founded by Professor Staffan I. Lindberg in 2014, just six years ago: the V-Dem Institute (of “Varieties of Democracy”), which defines itself as “a research institute based in the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden” (V-DEM, 2022a). This Institute is in charge of most, but not all, of the operations related to data collection and data set.

Varieties of democracy (V-Dem), as a project, is conceived as "a new approach for the conceptualization and measurement of democracy" (V-DEM, 2022b), product of the collaboration of more than thirty academics from around the world, originally jointly organized by the Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Sweden; and the Kellogg Institute at the University of Notre Dame, which by adjusting its actual role and contribution has now become simply the V-Dem Regional Center in North America.

Its structure for the integration of the information that it will later disseminate is based on having six main researchers, two project coordinators, fifteen project administrators in charge of the thematic areas, more than thirty regional administrators, almost 170 coordinators per country, who have the support not only from various research assistants, but from approximately three thousand experts per country.

V-Dem is one of the largest social science data collection efforts in history, with a database that today contains over thirty million data points. This project is not intended to be the recovery of the vivid experience of those who experience democracy in a community. V-Dem seeks objectivity through the recovery of the theoretical and methodological experience of a complex and extensive multidisciplinary global team, in order to achieve the production of data in the most objective and reliable way that it considers possible, from the sum of the knowledge of experts.

Additional advantages of this project is that, while it provides a complete set of indexes for each conception and component, it allows its fundamentally intended users (academics and professionals) to build their own indexes to suit their purposes, exploring the relationships between very specific elements of democracy over long periods of time; which, due to its logic of reconstruction of long time series, allows us to try to advance in the understanding of the historical process of democratization, shedding light on the sequences by which the regimes have developed, in recognizing the possible causes and effects of democracy, allowing us to

approach to estimate to what extent the type of regime is important in today's world, among other advantages that the project itself highlights.

About half of the indicators in the V-Dem dataset are based on factual information that can be obtained from official documents, such as constitutions and government records. The other half consists of evaluations that they describe as more subjective, on topics such as political practices and compliance with de jure rules. In these subjects, in order to seek a certain evaluative neutrality, they normally resort to a minimum of three and an average of five experts for the historical reconstruction from 1789 to 1899 and to five or more experts in the period considered as contemporary from 1900, who provide the qualifications that will give rise to the estimators that will be added to its extensive database.

To conceptualize and try to better measure democracy, the V-Dem project assumes the distinction of five principles of democracy that it calls "high level": Electoral, Liberal, Participatory, Deliberative and Egalitarian.

Each of them leads to a high-level index, whose definitions are (Coppedge, 2020):

- Electoral: “the electoral principle of democracy seeks to embody the central value of making rulers responsive to citizens, achieved through electoral competition for the approval of the electorate in circumstances in which suffrage is extensive; Political and civil society organizations can operate freely; elections are fair and not marred by fraud or systematic irregularities; and elections affect the composition of the country's executive branch. Between elections, there is freedom of expression and independent media capable of presenting alternative opinions on matters of political relevance. In the V-Dem conceptual scheme, electoral democracy is understood as an essential element of any other conception of democracy.
- Liberal: “The liberal principle of democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. The liberal model takes a "negative" view of political power insofar as it judges the quality of democracy by the limits placed on government. This is achieved through constitutionally protected civil liberties, a strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power. To make this a measure of liberal democracy, the index also takes into account the level of electoral democracy.
- Participatory: “The participatory principle of democracy emphasizes the active participation of citizens in all political, electoral and non-electoral processes. It is motivated by concern about a fundamental practice of electoral democracy: delegating authority to representatives. Thus, direct government by citizens is preferred whenever possible. This model of democracy takes suffrage for granted, emphasizing participation in civil society organizations, direct democracy, and the election of sub-national bodies. To make it a measure of participatory democracy, the index also takes into account the level of electoral democracy.

- Deliberative: “The deliberative principle of democracy focuses on the process by which decisions are reached in political practice. A deliberative process is one in which public reasoning focuses on the common good and motivates political decisions, in contrast to emotional appeals, solidarity, attachments, parochial interests, or coercion. According to this principle, democracy requires more than an aggregation of existing preferences. There must also be respectful dialogue at all levels, from preference formation to final decision, between knowledgeable and competent participants open to persuasion. To make it a measure of democracy as well, the index takes the level of electoral democracy into account.”
- Egalitarian: “The egalitarian principle of democracy maintains that material and immaterial inequality inhibit links in the exercise of formal rights and freedoms and reduce the ability of citizens of all social groups to participate. Egalitarian democracy is achieved when people's rights and freedoms are equally protected in all social groups; resources are distributed equally in all social groups; and groups and individuals enjoy equal access to power. This index also takes into account the level of electoral democracy.”

Each of these principles are disaggregated in the compilation and estimation that is carried out, which makes it possible to have several dozen components of democracy at a lower level, providing disaggregated indicators for each conception and each component.

At a basic level, all the variables collected by the Varieties of Democracy project are divided into fifteen themes: elections, political parties, direct democracy, executive, legislature, deliberation, judiciary, civil liberties, sovereignty and state, civil society, media, political equality, exclusion, legitimation and civic and academic space. This thematic account gives an idea of the scope and ambition of this project as an information source.

The information it presents in its database covers all countries and some dependent territories from 1789 to the present, wherever possible, and provides a statistical estimate of the reliability of the measure for each rating, while allowing all grades are public in an easy-to-use interface.

It should be noted that, despite all the indicated precautions that seek to prevent any particular subjectivity from sneaking in, ignorance biasing the assessments or other effects that invalidate the information, it is clear that the estimates presented by the project correspond to the vision of democracy, the world and life that is predominant in the present, so it cannot be detached from historical determinants that may not be valid as evaluative criteria for other historical moments or cease to be valid in the immediate future.

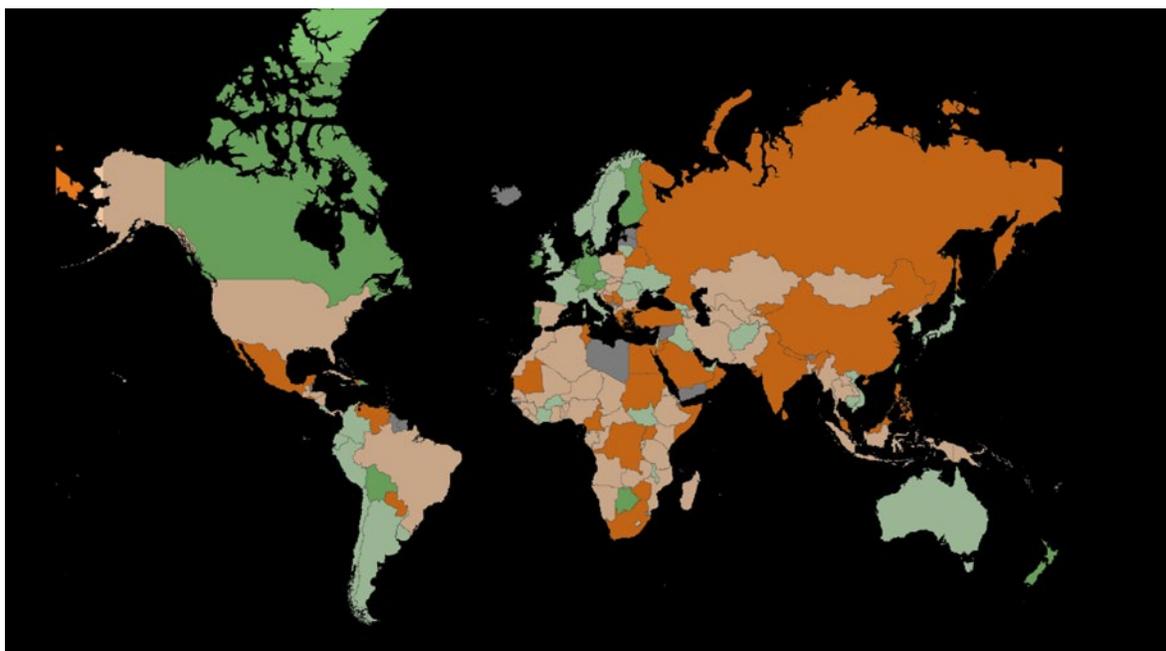
Pandemic containment actions.

With the support of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, V-Dem starts its Pandemic Backsliding (PanDem) project in 2020, to have measurements to monitor state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential effects on democracy. , with a scope of 144 countries for its first delivery (V-DEM, 2021).

Based on the data compiled, V-DEM creates an index of violations of democratic standards due to the pandemic (PanDem) with which it attempts to capture the extent to which state responses to Covid-19 violate democratic standards due to emergency responses. . It also constructs a PanBack Index to reflect the extent to which such responses pose a risk to the overall quality of democracy within each country. Combined, these two indices seek to provide a snapshot of how the emergency responses to Covid-19 may be affecting the quality of democracy in nations.

Figure 4 shows the estimates related to the index of violations of democratic standards due to the pandemic (PanDem) for the end of 2020, where the countries in which no violations were detected are presented in intense green, those in which no violations were detected in dim green. That minor violations are recorded, in light orange where there have been some violations and in intense orange where major violations have been recognized. The intensity varies by different levels of use of emergency powers and by limitations on media freedom.

Figure 4. Map of the index of violations of democratic standards due to the pandemic in the period March-December 2020.



Source: Varieties of Democracy Project [online]. Available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/PanDem/>. Accessed March 23, 2021.

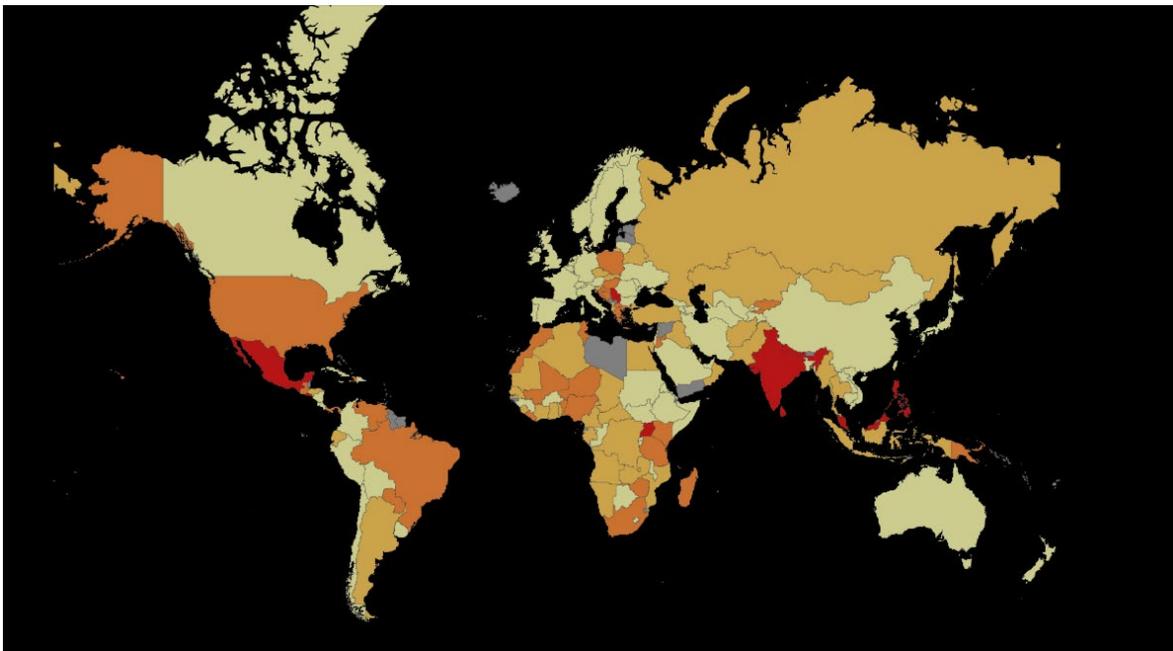
As can be seen on this map, violations have been lower in Europe, especially in the West, and in some Latin American countries, while they are higher in Asian and African nations. Mexico is one of the few countries in the Latin American subcontinent where major violations of democratic standards have been recorded.

This should not be surprising, given that in the country the authorities have not clearly established time limits for emergency measures, decisions have been concentrated in the federal Executive Branch without giving the participation of subnational powers or the legislature and without promoting the participation of social organizations and citizens and because the authorities themselves have promoted a disinformation campaign regarding the disease.

Regarding the extent to which such responses represent a risk to the general quality of democracy within each country, Figure 5 shows the estimates of the PanBack index due to the pandemic, where in yellow the countries with a low risk, in orange those of intermediate risk and in red those of high risk.

As can be seen, there are five countries where V-DEM warns of a greater risk to democracy as a result of the measures adopted to control the pandemic: India and Malaysia on the Asian continent, Uganda on the African continent, Serbia on the European continent, and Mexico on the American continent.

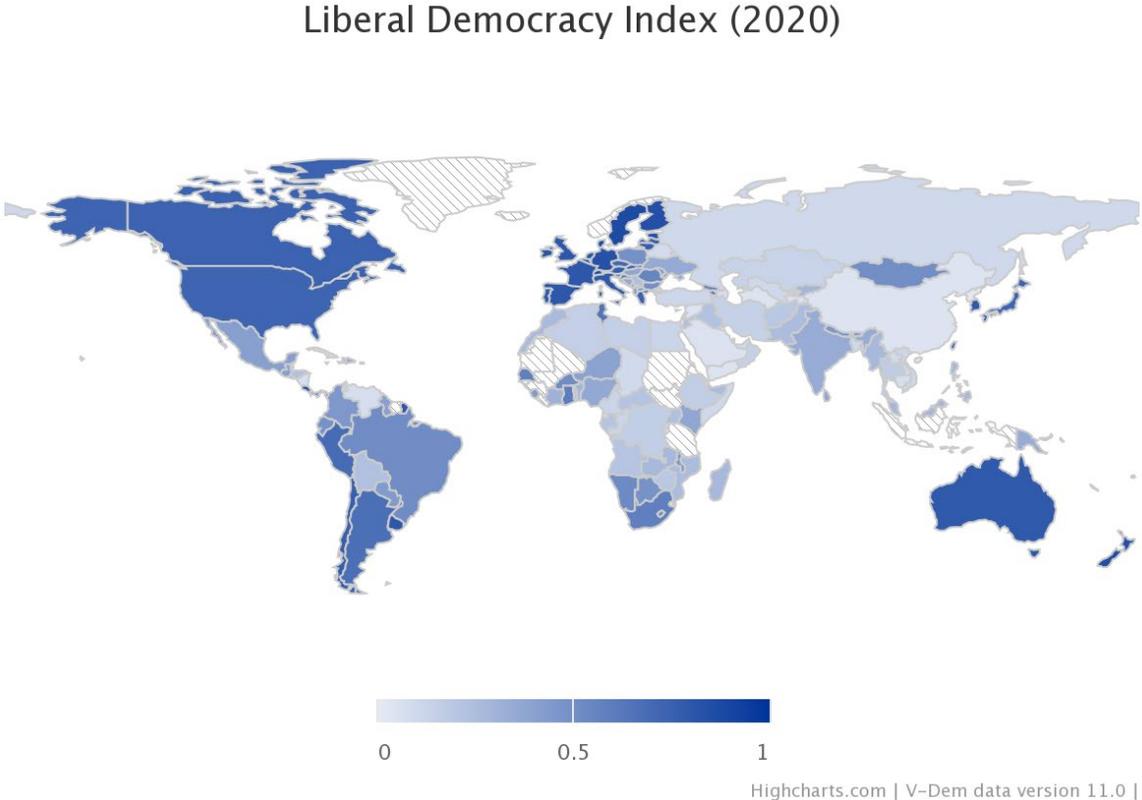
Figure 5. Map of the index of regression due to the pandemic in the period March-December 2020.



Source: Varieties of Democracy Project [online]. Available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/PanDem/>. Accessed March 23, 2021.

If the index of violations of democratic standards are compared with the previously existing index of liberal democracy, which is shown in Figure 6 (where the greater the intensity of the color, the greater the estimated democracy), it can be seen that there is a clear relationship between the presence of an autocratic regime and the violation of the standards of democracy that have occurred as a consequence of the pandemic.

Figure 6. Map of the liberal democracy index in 2020.



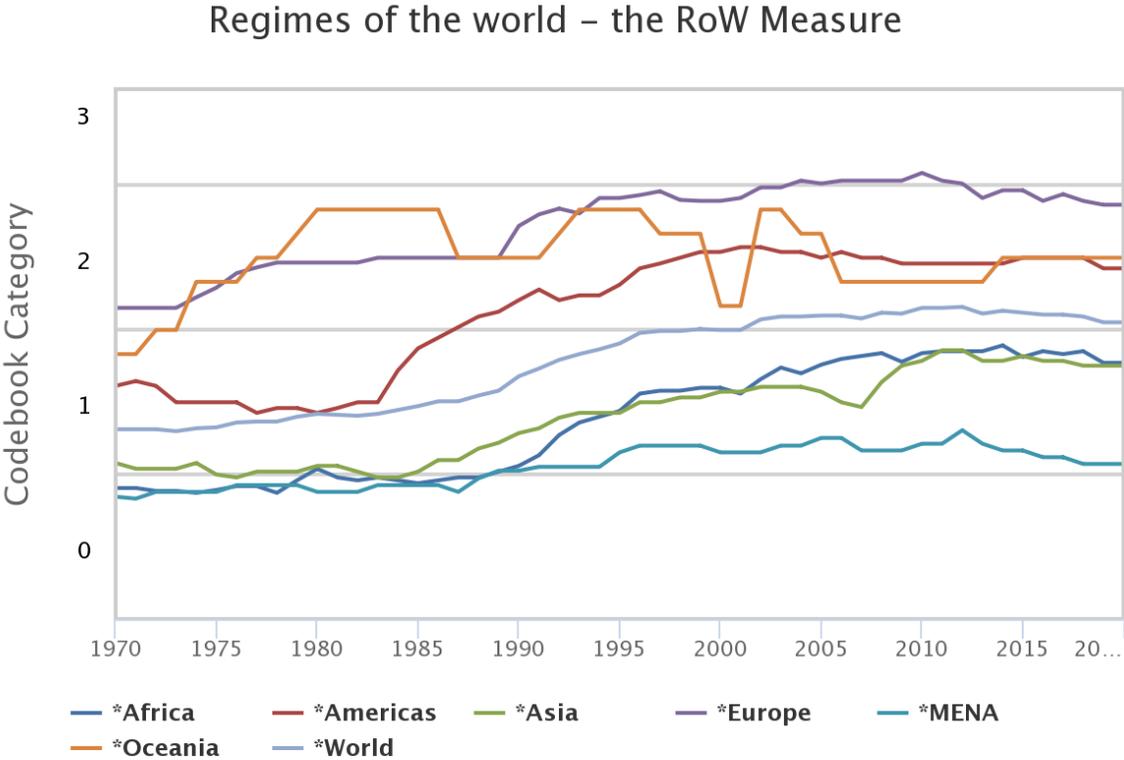
Source: Varieties of Democracy Project [online]. Available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph>. Accessed March 23, 2021.

The impact of the pandemic on democracy.

Although the world is now more democratic than half a century ago, democracy has been in decline for the last decade and this continued in 2020, which is why V-DEM speaks of a “third wave of autocratization”. The effects of the pandemic are limited and are not yet significant at the levels of liberal democracy, but it is to be feared that in the longer term its consequences will be worse than those currently perceived.

A first indicator is the distribution of regimes in the world and by region according to their condition of autocracy or democracy, which is presented in Figure 7. According to this estimator, the greater presence of a democracy in Europe and its lower prevalence in Europe is clear. Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries.

Figure 7. Regímenes del mundo y por región (1970-2020).

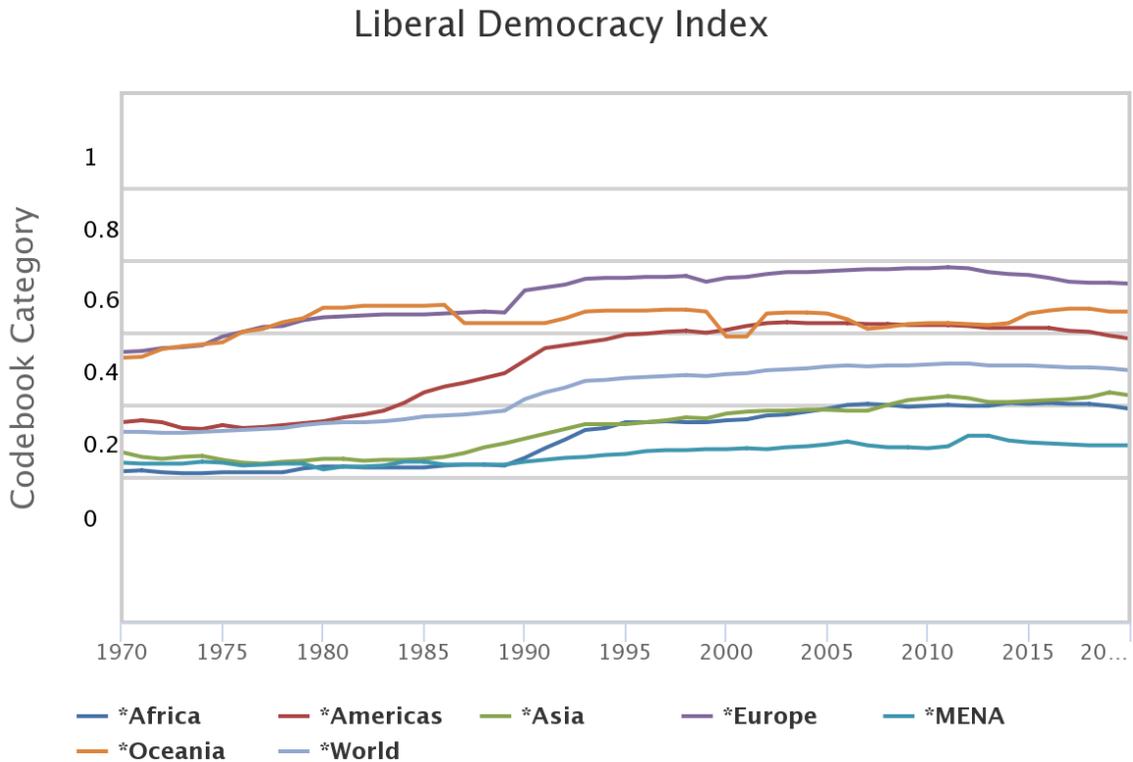


Highcharts.com | V-Dem data version 11.0

Source: Varieties of Democracy Project [online]. Available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph>. Accessed March 23, 2021.

At the end of 2020, the liberal democracy index in the world stood at 0.4, slightly below what was recorded ten years earlier. As can be seen in Figure 8, there is a clear separation between the levels of liberal democracy achieved in Europe, America and Oceania, which are higher than those registered in Asia, Africa and the MENA region.

Figure 8. Liberal democracy index by region (1970-2020).



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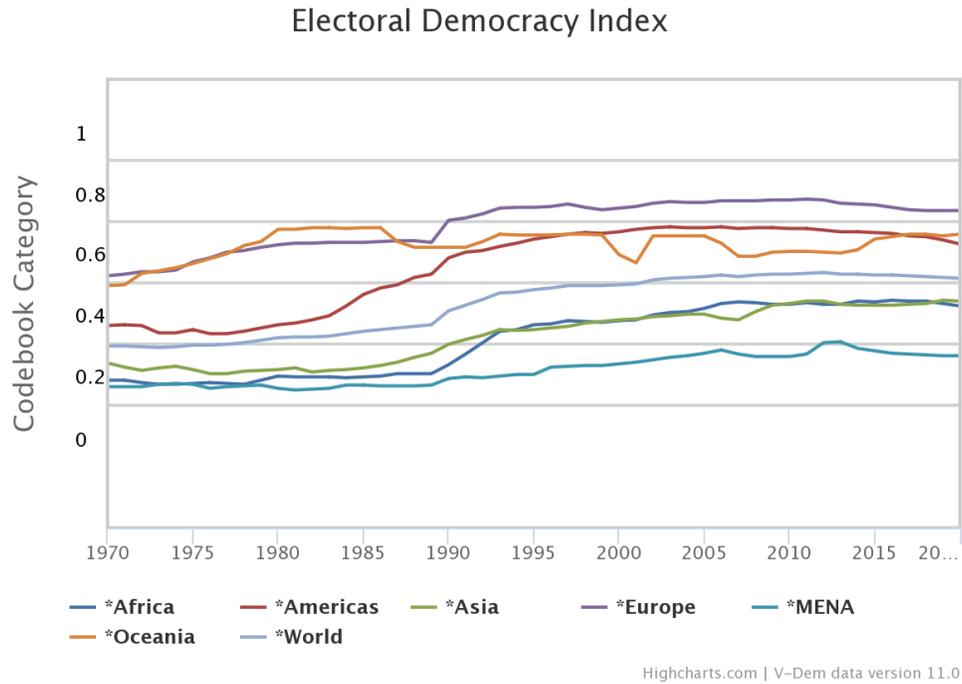
Source: Varieties of Democracy Project [online]. Available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph>. Accessed March 23, 2021.

The decline of democracy is more marked when looking at the electoral democracy estimator, which is presented in Figure 9. There it can be seen that the recent decline has occurred in practically all regions, except Oceania and Asia, and that it has been more marked in the case of the Americas. But this occurs in a context where electoral democracy is stronger in Europe and America and less so in Asia and Africa (Figure 10).

As for participatory democracy, which is presented in Figure 11, the decrease in the short term is less in Oceania and Asia and more marked in America and Africa. Again, this occurs in a framework where democracy is more participatory in Europe and America and less so in Asia and Africa (Figure 12).

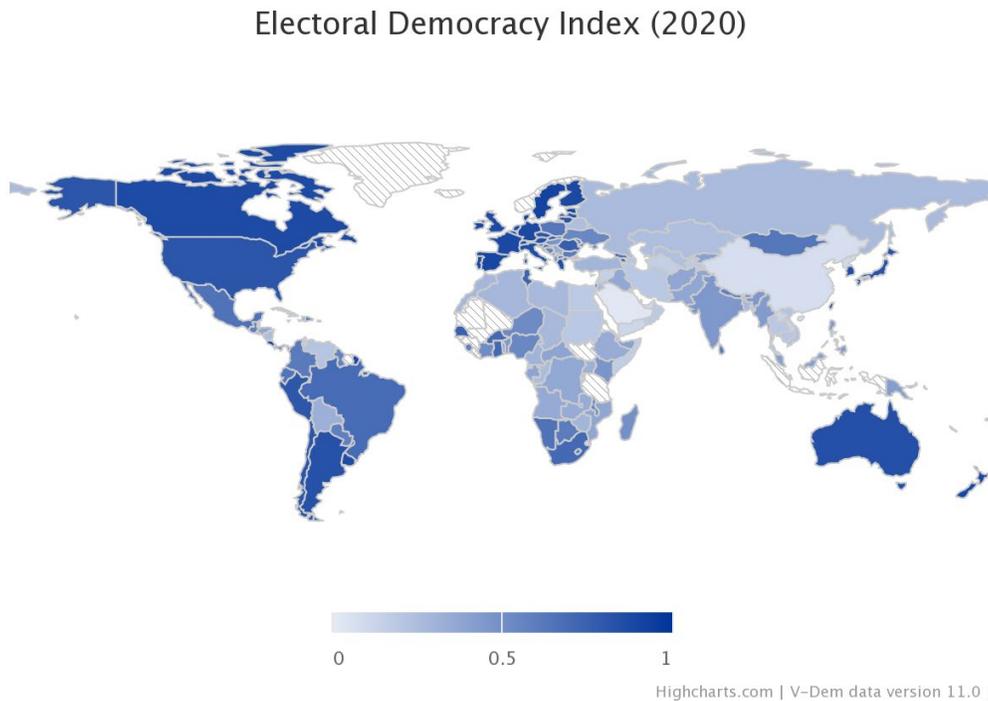
The deliberative component of democracy showed a clear rise at the beginning of the decade, as an immediate consequence of the "Arab Spring", but this was not sustained, so this indicator has shown a decline in recent years, which not only affects to the MENA region but it has also occurred in Europe and America, as shown in Figure 13. And according to Figure 14, it is clear that democracy, in its deliberative form, is more entrenched in the western part of Europe and that it is weaker in other regions of the world, although with a certain presence in the Southern Cone of Latin America.

Figure 9. Electoral democracy index by region (1970-2020).



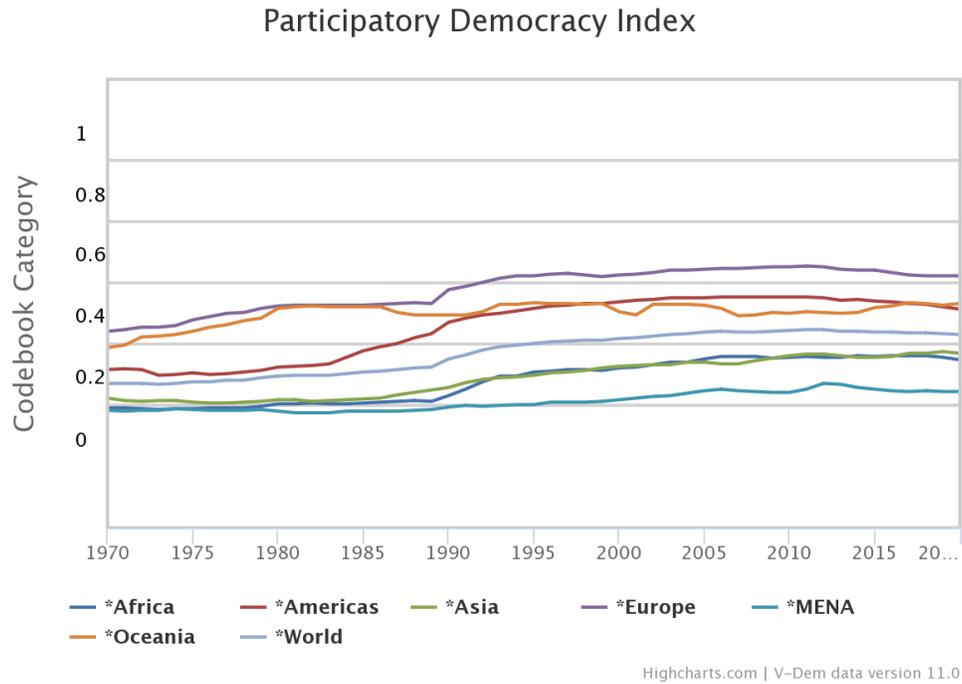
Source: Varieties of Democracy Project [online]. Available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph>. Accessed March 23, 2021.

Figure 10. Map of the electoral democracy index in 2020.



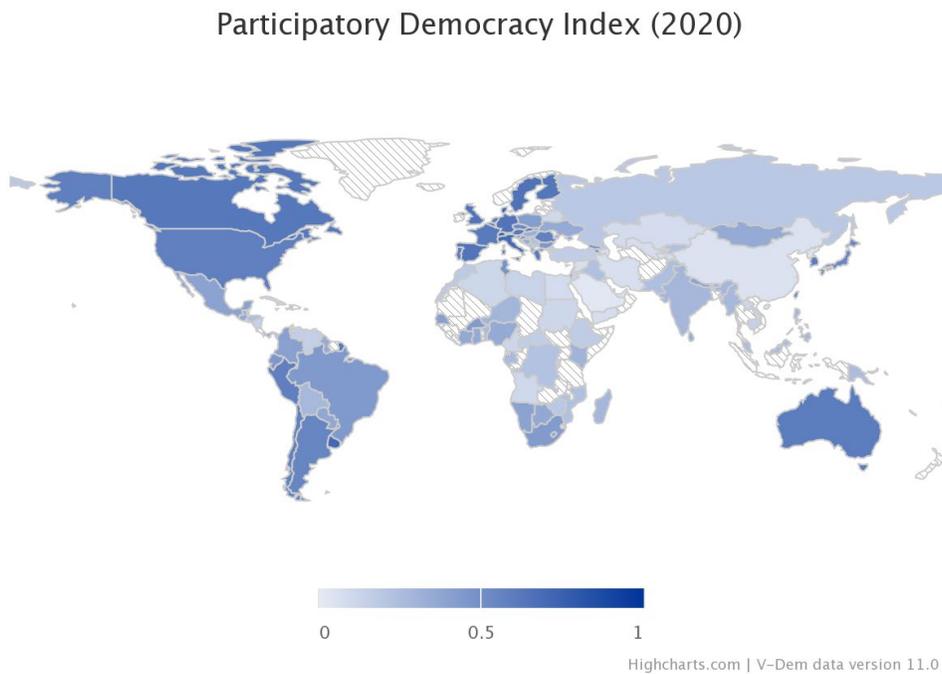
Source: Varieties of Democracy Project [online]. Available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph>. Accessed March 23, 2021.

Figure 11. Participatory democracy index by region (1970-2020).



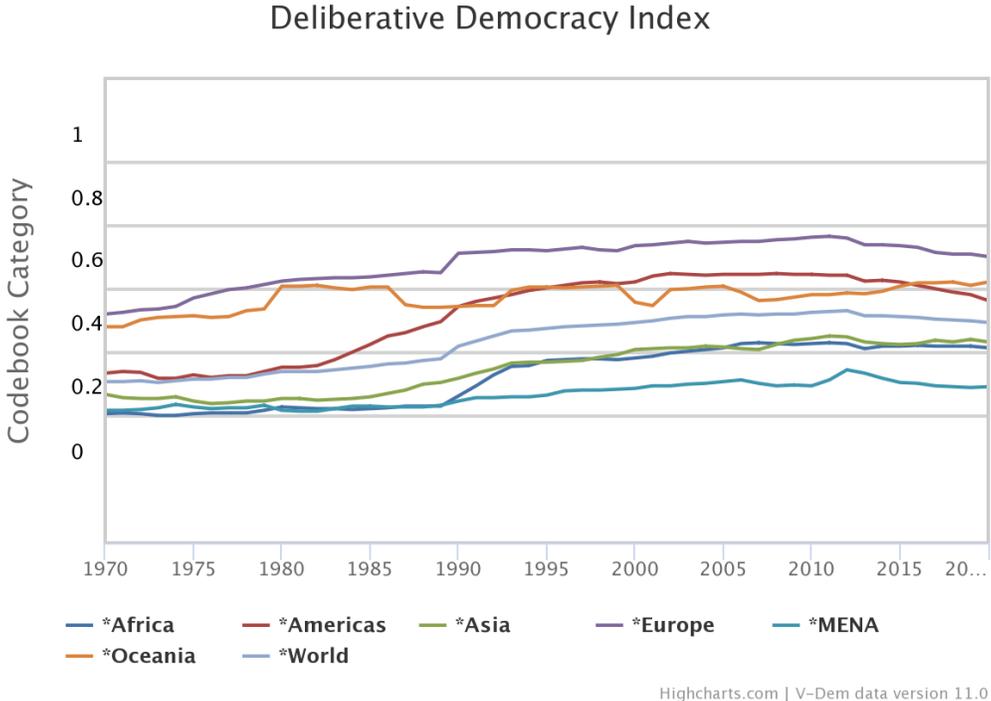
Source: Varieties of Democracy Project [online]. Available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph>. Accessed March 23, 2021.

Figure 12. Map of the participatory democracy index in 2020.



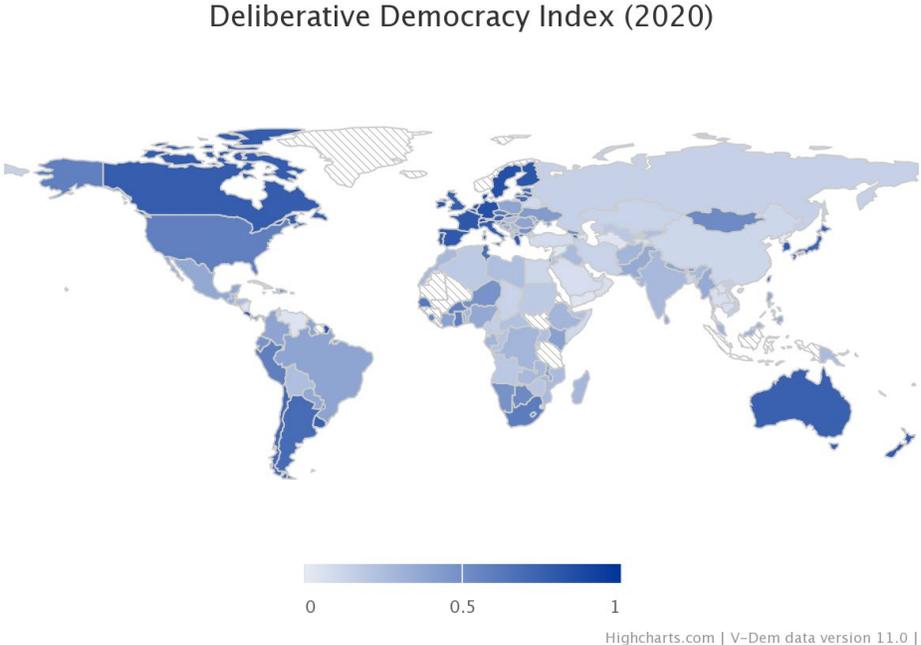
Source: Varieties of Democracy Project [online]. Available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph>. Accessed March 23, 2021.

Figure 13. Deliberative democracy index by region (1970-2020).



Source: Varieties of Democracy Project [online]. Available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph>. Accessed March 23, 2021.

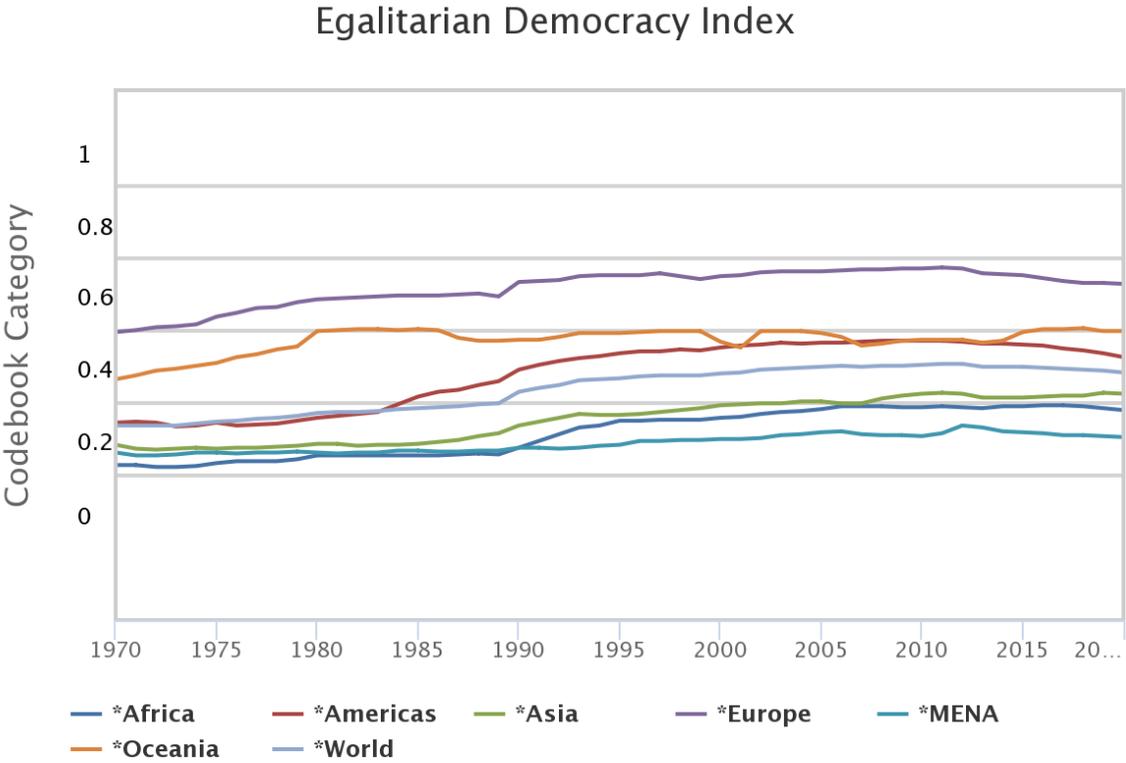
Figure 14. Map of the deliberative democracy index in 2020.



Source: Varieties of Democracy Project [online]. Available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph>. Accessed March 23, 2021.

Finally, the finer component related to egalitarian democracy, which is presented in Figure 15, has increased in recent years in the Oceania and Asia regions, but has decreased in Europe and the Americas. It is worth mentioning that this index has not yet been calculated for all nations for 2020, so the corresponding map is omitted.

Figure 15. Egalitarian democracy index by region (1970-2020).



Highcharts.com | V-Dem data version 11.0

Source: Varieties of Democracy Project [online]. Available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph>. Accessed March 23, 2021.

Conclusions.

Over the last decade, and once the dream caused by the wave of democratization after the fall of the Berlin Wall has been left behind, the world is experiencing a decline in democratic forms of government, which continued in 2020. Although the effects of the pandemic are still limited and are not yet significant in terms of democracy, but it is to be feared that in the longer term its consequences will be worse than those currently perceived.

In addition, given that there is an evident relationship between the autocratic nature of the regimes established in each country and the propensity to violate democratic standards with exaggerated or non-consensual measures to combat the pandemic, a widening of the distance between countries where autocracy prevails would be expected democracy and those in which there are autocratic forms of exercising power.

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