

Can democracy survive 2024?



A historic number of elections will take place this year, but autocracy is spreading and young people are rejecting the status quo

Alec Russell in London JANUARY 3 2024

There will be no fanfare outside the polling booth. Posterity may never know the voter's name. But early on the morning of January 7, a Bangladeshi will cast the first vote in their country's fraught national elections and set in motion the most intense and cacophonous 12 months of democracy the world has seen since the idea was minted more than 2,500 years ago.

Some 2bn people, about half the adult population of the globe, will have the chance to vote in 2024, far more in one year than ever before. Eight of the 10 most populous countries are among the more than 70 states holding elections — a tribute, it could be argued, to the power of an idea, democracy, and to the spread of [political](#) freedom.

It would be heartening to imagine that historians will see 2024 as a milestone in democracy's long journey from the rowdy town square debates of classical Athens, through the thinking of 18th-century philosophers and beyond to an ever more just and equitable world.

But that seems unlikely. These elections take place against a backdrop of spreading illiberalism around the world, the weakening of independent institutions in a number of big democracies and a creeping disillusionment among younger people about the very point of elections.

“There is a spirit of the times and it is not a democratic one,” says Larry Diamond, a professor at Stanford University, who more than a decade ago coined the phrase “democratic recession”.



Election posters in Dhaka Bangladesh, a performative democracy, where leaders may just about allow the opposition to compete — but not to win © Syed Mahabubul Kader/Zuma/eyevine

The election defeat in October of Poland's Law and Justice party, which spent years undermining the rule of law and turning the state broadcaster into a government mouthpiece, was a reminder that democracy is far from running out of puff. The fate of a host of leaders is up in the air this year, in older democracies such as America and the UK and in younger ones too, such as Taiwan where this month's election has huge consequences for global security.

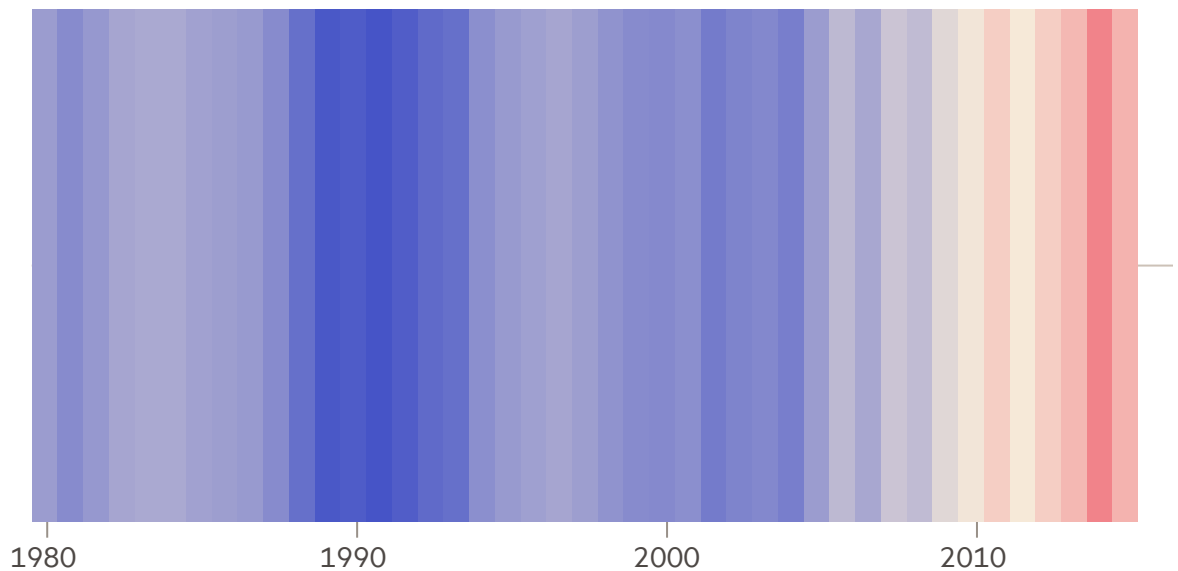
But, overall, surveys chart a retreat in the democratic spirit after a high-water mark in the decade after the end of the Soviet Union and apartheid in the 1990s. The quality of democracy enjoyed by an average global citizen in 2022 is back to the levels of 1986, according to the V-Dem Institute, which assesses democracies' health on five principles: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian.

The Global State of Democracy Initiative by Sweden's International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance found that 2023 marked the sixth consecutive year in which democracy declined in half of all countries, the longest retreat since their records began in 1975.

Twilight of democracy? Several successive years of decline

Number of countries advancing or declining in terms of democratic metrics

Net annual change -90 90



FINANCIAL TIMES

Source: [International IDEA](#)

Kevin Casas-Zamora, the head of the institute, a former vice-president of Costa Rica, cites four factors: “the perception that democracies are slow and clumsy to respond to social demand”; a sense of “impunity” for corruption; “levels of social anxiety going through the roof leading to an embrace of authoritarian figures”; and the decline in the west’s moral authority in the wake of the invasion of Iraq, the financial crisis, and the election of Donald Trump, which have weakened its advocacy for democracy.

“All these have made people more willing to give up on it,” he says.

So is democracy in crisis? Or is it that it and its institutions and spirit have always needed time to develop, and tending?

Its difficulties will play out this year in four distinct electoral cultures. The first is a tyrannical group that includes Belarus, Russia and Rwanda, where rulers jail opponents and run a charade of an election culminating in 90-per cent majorities or higher. A second group comprises performative democracies such as Iran, Tunisia and Bangladesh, where leaders may just about allow the opposition to compete — but not to win.

Measuring democracy since the French revolution

V-Dem Electoral Democracy index, 1789-2022, World and G20 countries (1= most democratic)

Choose country from menu to show



FINANCIAL TIMES

Source: V-Dem; Our World In Data • Measures the extent of free and fair elections, comprehensive voting rights, and freedoms of association and expression.

It is in the third and fourth tiers, however, that most is at stake. In the third, encompassing the most voters this year, democracy faces a more subtle erosion. The scenario here is for leaders to win power in genuinely free and fair elections but then oversee illiberal policies, as has happened in Hungary under Viktor Orbán. In India, Indonesia and Mexico millions will vote enthusiastically this year, but the spirit of their democracies and some institutions that uphold it are under strain.

In the fourth tier there are the older democracies, where the centrist establishment is threatened by further gains of populists at the ballot box. Anti-Islam extremist Geert Wilders won elections in the Netherlands in November and [the far right is expected to enjoy a surge in support](#) in much of the EU in European parliament elections in June.



In countries with a tyrannical electoral culture, such as Russia, leaders jail opponents and run a charade of an election culminating in 90 per cent majorities or higher © Anatoly Maltsev/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

But it is the re-election of the demagogic Trump in November's American elections that would threaten the most damage to democracy. For decades America has been the essential arsenal and guarantor of the free world, even if it has turned a blind eye to the excesses of some allies. Trump's return to the White House would test the core foundations of America's democracy, says Diamond — although he believes on balance they would survive intact. He argues it would also embolden global autocracy, which is already having a springtime around the world.

“Populism is on the rise,” he says. “The liberal democratic west is objectively weaker and less confident about its democratic values. We have really lost our resolve.

“There is a huge vacuum and it is filled by bad actors who bite, bite, bite at the essence of democracy and in one way or another move decisively to govern as badly as they want to.”

The limits of free elections

When South Africa goes to the polls in the middle of this year, it will be 30 years since Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress ended white rule by winning a commanding majority in the country's first all-race elections. The media, civil society and courts have kept the democratic flame alive — and the ANC on its toes. This year the party faces its first competitive race.

But South Africa is one of a number of important countries in the third tier of electoral contests where independent institutions are under pressure and where this year's elections implicitly pose two big questions. Are free elections, for all that they are worth celebrating, an insufficient guide to a democracy's health? And is what happens next its real test?



A voter registration event in Johannesburg. The ruling African National Congress will face its first serious challenge since the end of apartheid when South Africa goes to the polls this year © Nicolas Adamy/Hans Lucas/Reuters

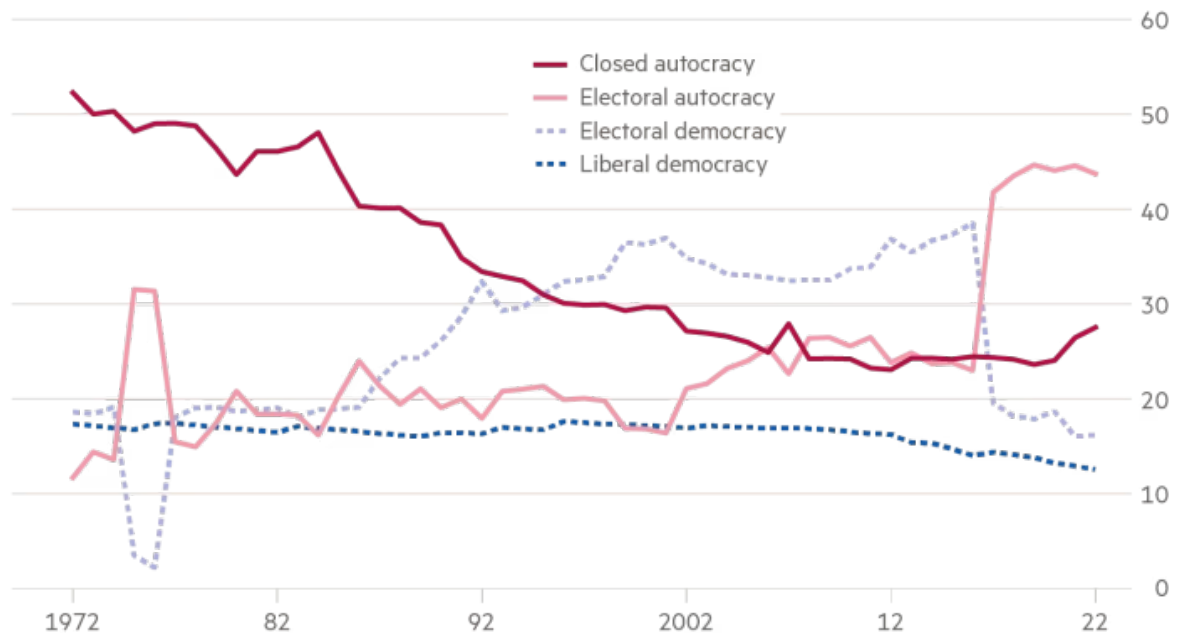
“Democracy is not only made of elections. So much more goes into it,” says Kholood Khair, founder of Confluence Advisory, a think-tank based in Khartoum before the Sudanese civil war erupted in April. “One of our mistakes has been to think that democracy is something you can do and have finished, rather than something that requires hard work. It is a struggle not just to create democracy but to maintain it.”

A further key to a successful democracy is the broad acceptance of a diversity of political views. The 19th-century French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of the risk that democracy could lead to the tyranny of the majority. His warning has resonance in a number of rising powers holding elections, not least the world's largest democracy, India.

Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party are expected to win a third successive victory in May, capitalising on a booming economy and his sky-high ratings. But this comes against a backdrop of intolerance towards minorities, pressure on the independent media, often applied behind-the-scenes via tax policy and the undermining of the courts.

Rise of autocracies worldwide

Share of world population, by regime type (%)



Source: V-Dem Institute

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“Electoral democracy is still very strong [in India],” says Pratap Bhanu Mehta, an academic and veteran liberal commentator. “Mr Modi is genuinely popular. A lot of people see this as an empowering moment rather than a disempowering one.” Mehta cites in particular how the BJP’s policies have been liberating for poorer women voters, for example via better access to sanitation and making cash transfers to women’s accounts.

He has, however, two concerns for the future. The first is over an undercurrent of pressure on the media and on the courts. “The arbitrariness around civil liberties has increased and is signified in the loss of independence of the Supreme Court and the judiciary,” he says.

The other is over pluralism, in particular tolerance towards minorities. “There is a cultural movement around asserting Hindu cultural supremacy,” he says. “And that kind of nationalist politics risks converting India into an ethno-nationalist majoritarian state.”

Indonesia will also hold a vigorous and free election this year — and also faces questions over its democratic spirit. A hotly contested race in February reflects how far the world's fourth most populous country has moved since the overthrow of the autocrat Suharto 25 years ago. [Joko Widodo](#), the president stepping down after 10 years in office, has stratospheric approval ratings of 80 per cent, drawing on his steady stewardship of the economy, and he talks a good democratic game.

But his critics point to the weakening of the anti-corruption body in recent years. The recent emergence of his elder son as the running mate to the frontrunner to succeed him, suggests that he has a dynasty in mind.



In India, millions will vote enthusiastically, but the spirit of its democracy and some institutions that uphold it are under strain © Vishal Bhatnagar/NurPhoto/Reuters

There is a similarly blurred picture in Mexico. The elections in June will mark a democratic milestone as the two main presidential candidates are women, ensuring the country's first female leader. But the outgoing president, the leftwing populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has been chipping away at the independence of democratic institutions and is now pushing for a constitutional amendment to allow the 11 Supreme Court judges to be elected by universal suffrage. His critics worry that his protégée, the ruling Morena party's candidate, Claudia Sheinbaum, the frontrunner, would continue in this vein if elected.

“Our democracy is still incipient,” says Jorge Castañeda, a former foreign minister in Mexico, who now lectures on governance at NYU and Sciences Po. “It’s a work in progress. Our first proper election was in 2000 [which ended the then ruling party’s 71-year hold on power].

“López Obrador has a weak target when he tries to destroy the independence of judicial and independent agencies built up over the last 30 years. They don’t have the resources, esprit de corps or a history to look back on.”

A further factor is that at a time when America is competing with China for the world’s support, and immigration is a major American election issue, Washington is less vocal about democratic slippage than in the 1990s and 2000s when it was the sole superpower. America has been noticeably silent about López Obrador’s pressure on the courts.

“What does a disservice to global democracy is the partisanship and hypocrisy of democratic states,” says Khair. “Look at how the US and UK absolutely support the one-party state of Rwanda’s Paul Kagame.

“Inside the country no one can tell the difference between the US position and the Chinese.”

Young people are turning off

Possibly the most arresting finding in polls about democracy is how younger voters are increasingly tolerant of autocracy.

Concern over climate change, frustration over the failure of past generations to tackle it, and uncertainty over the future in an age of rapid technological change have fuelled, in the west in particular, a dissatisfaction with the status quo.

“Support for democracy is in freefall among young people now,” says Casas-Zamora, the head of International Idea. “My sense is that young people want to engage with politics around specific struggles they believe in.

“When you are a warrior for a specific cause you don’t have to compromise. The bread and butter of formal politics is the art of compromising. You have to be aware of trade-offs. That smacks to young people of losing your purity.”

Opinion polls suggest this will be an issue in the elections for the European parliament in June. It also promises to be an important factor in America's elections. Turning out the youth vote will be vital for the re-election campaign of President Joe Biden whose staunch support for Israel over the war in Gaza has alienated large numbers of young Democrats.

The Argentine election in November was a warning sign to incumbents of the frustrations of the youth. The victor, [the maverick libertarian, Javier Milei](#), struck a chord with younger people who were frustrated with the establishment parties, in particular the Peronists who have run Argentina for most of the past four decades.

"A lot of young people [in Argentina] do not think democracy is worth much," says Camila Crescimbeni, a former deputy for the conservative PRO party. "They feel it's failing, not giving them opportunities."



Supporters celebrate the victory of Javier Milei, who won over young voters frustrated with Argentina's establishment parties © Juan Mabromata/AFP/Getty Images

There is a similar mood across swathes of Africa. A spate of military coups, seven in the past three years, in part reflects exasperation with the fruits of elections. Polls suggest young people are increasingly disillusioned.

"The recent coups in the western Sahel were triggered by discontent," says the Sudanese analyst Khair. "People wanted a change of government. That's why we saw a lot of support particularly by young people for juntas."

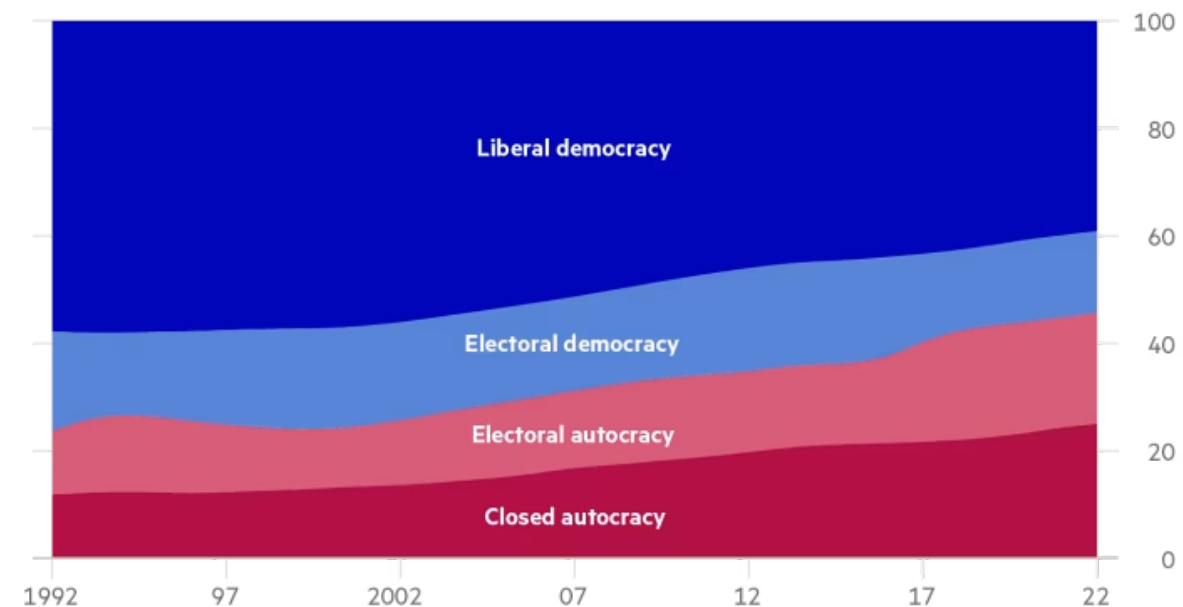
“The idea that elections equal democracy is tainted. But the idea that people have duties and rights, that is where we need to focus.”

Government ministers in democratically elected governments rue how hard it is to do policy and make decisions when their every move is being scrutinised on social media almost in real time. But if there is one lesson for democracies where illiberal figures are vying for power, it may be that, as ever, it is incumbent on them to deliver.

Erika Mouynes, a former foreign minister of Panama who is now a Harvard fellow focused on good governance, says democracies have somehow to become more participatory — in an implicit nod back to the classical Greek city-state system of citizen power.

Economic power shifts toward autocratic rule

Share of world GDP*, by regime type (%)



* GDP is measured in common currency and at purchasing power parity

Source: V-Dem Institute

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“People are not losing faith in democratic values,” she says. “Rather, an alarming, growing population is becoming indifferent because they don’t see the political system working for them. In a new digital world, more opportunities exist to get citizens directly involved.”

Casas-Zamora sees hope for the spirit of democracy via displays of civic action, such as over the controversial judiciary reforms in Israel before the war in Gaza, or the mobilisation of civil society in Thailand before its last elections. The perception, he adds, that democracy is less efficient in tackling crises than autocracy is wrong.

“The reason why the performance of democracy over Covid ended up looking better than autocracy is structural. Democracies are able to change course. Authoritarian systems can be effective at dealing with crises but they are very brittle because the possibility of error is higher.”

Sometime in 2024 Maia Sandu, the president of Moldova, one of Europe’s smallest and weakest democracies, will fight for re-election. She has had tough years confronting Moscow-backed anti-democratic forces but is not shrinking from defending what she believes is right.

“It’s still a fragile democracy,” she told the FT last year. “But we’ve been fighting for it. The more democracies we have in the world, the better for everyone. ” It’s a message with resonance for much of the world — from Bangladesh to America.

Data visualisation by [Keith Fray](#) and [Bob Haslett](#)

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