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Global Democracy in Transition: Trends, Challenges, and Institutional Dynamics

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Abstract

Global democracy in the 21st century is undergoing significant transformation, marked by uneven trajectories, institutional challenges, and emerging contradictions. The paper analyzes the trends of democracy in the 2006-23 period with the help of the cross-national information based on the Democracy Index data set. The quantitative, longitudinal, and comparative approach adopted by the study finds the patterns of democratic transition among countries, categorizing them among enhancing, deteriorating, and stable democratic transitions. The research indicates that the percentage of the countries that show a downward trend in the level of democracy is high, which implies the increasing trend of democratic backsliding. A smaller number of countries are showing improvement, but a significant proportion still stands at a relatively the same point, indicating institutional continuity without much improvement. The discussion also emphasizes the importance of institutional processes in defining democratic outcomes, whereby greater governance structures have led to stability and less powerful institutions that have led to decline. Also, the paper finds out some of the main contradictions of the modern democracies where the formal democracies are still there even when their performance is decreasing. These trends are indicative of non-linearity and situationality of democratic change in the contemporary world. The paper by incorporating empirical analysis and a more comprehensive understanding of social change helps understand more about the changing nature of democracy and the institutional forces that shape the direction in which it is moving. The results have significant implications on policy makers and researchers as they underscore the necessity to enhance institutional capacity and tackle the emerging issues in a bid to make democratic systems sustainable.

Keywords: Democracy Index, Democratic Transition, Institutional Dynamics, Democratic, Backsliding, Global Governance

1. Introduction

Democracy has been a time-honoured system by which societies have structured political authority, provided representation, and facilitated accountability. In classical and modern social thought, it can be related to the principles of participation, equality, and legitimacy. Nevertheless, in the 21st century, the understanding of democracy became not a fixed and completely accomplished system, but a process of social life, which is dynamic and evolves along the lines of institutional organisation, historical developments, and world changes. Recent empirical research indicates that the world is experiencing considerable changes in its democratic systems, both in terms of growth in some places and shrinkage in others (Angiolillo et al., 2024; Boese et al., 2022). These changes suggest that democracy should not be studied as a political system, it should be a part of greater process of social transformation, where systems of governance are in relation to economic status, culture and interdependence of the world.

Over the past two decades, global democracy has exhibited increasingly complex and uneven patterns. As some countries have become stronger in their democratic institutions, other countries have stagnated or even declined, a wider pattern of democratic uncertainty. According to major reports around the world, challenges including the deterioration of electoral integrity, institutional mistrust, and inefficiencies in governance are increasingly becoming more noticeable (Global State of Democracy Initiative, 2023, 2024; Papada et al., 2023). Specifically, the process of democratic backsliding, in which the norms and practices that are accepted as democratic gradually dissolve, has become a key issue of political analysis in modern day. There is longitudinal evidence that a higher number of countries have undergone autogravitation with the gains in democracy becoming less frequent and less stable (Nord et al., 2025; Unit, 2025). This change indicates that democracy is neither developing in a linear nor in a homogenous way, but in dissonant and often contradictory ways due to internal institutional vulnerabilities as well as external pressures.

These world trends are enhanced by various structural and contextual forces. A breach of the electoral process, limitation of civil liberties, political polarisation, and the increasing power of misinformation have had a considerable impact on the quality of the democratic governments (Freedom House, 2024). In most instances, formal democratic institutions still remain, but their effectiveness and legitimacy are being increasingly doubted. This leads to a paradox in which nations might still have the outward aspect of democracy, but the substantive functioning of democracy in such nations may decrease. These contradictions reveal the necessity to make a distinction between procedural democracy and substantive democratic performance, and they reveal the necessity of a more subtle perception of the functioning of democratic systems in practice. Simultaneously, the improvement of the democracy measurements allowed for a more systematic and comparative analysis of such trends. Composite indices and cross-national data sets have enabled researchers to monitor changes in democratic performance over time and by region, more precisely (Little and Meng, 2024). These methodological advances make it clear that the change of democracy is non-linear, which implies cycles of development, stagnation, and backsliding instead of a linear movement in the right direction (Waldner & Lust, 2018). Moreover, recent studies indicate that although certain democratic regimes are resilient and adaptable to the challenges, certain ones are susceptible to institutional rot and failures of governance (Mfege, 2023; Papada, 2023). This deviation suggests the pivotal importance of institutional dynamics in the formation of democratic outcomes, and the social and political environments, in general, in which institutional dynamics are structured.

Against this backdrop, the necessity to study global democracy based on a combined analytical approach integrating both empirical data and understanding of the processes at the institutional and social levels is increasing. The question of the development of democratic regimes, as well as the reason why they can take various paths in various countries, is crucial to academic research and policy makers. This work aims to add to a more profound comprehension of democracy as a disputable and changing aspect of modern social life by emphasizing the patterns of democratic transition and the institutional influence on those patterns.

This study represents specific objectives:

1. To analyse global trends in democracy from 2006 to 2023 using cross-national data.
2. To identify patterns of democratic transition, including improvement, stability, and decline across countries.
3. To examine the institutional dynamics influencing democratic change in the context of contemporary social transformations.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The research design was a quantitative, longitudinal, and comparative study that investigated the trends of democratic change between nations over time. The longitudinal approach facilitated the study of the dynamics of democracy in the countries over a specified time, whereas the comparative aspect of the research, made it possible to determine the similarities and differences in the patterns of democratization among the countries. This was deemed suitable to capture the dynamic and non-linear nature of democratic transitions which was often characterized by periods of growth, stagnation and fall as opposed to a continuous development. The study sought to give a holistic picture of global democratic change in the larger context of social change by combining time, and space analysis.

2.2 Data Source

The empirical research took the Democracy Index data set developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), spanning the timeframe between 2006 and 2023. The data presented a comparable and standard measure of democratic performance in a large sample of countries. Democracy was measured in various aspects such as electoral processes, political participation, civil liberties, political culture and the operation of government. These dimensions were put together in a composite democracy score of 0-10 whereby the higher the scale the higher the democratic performance. Longitudinal nature and international scope of the dataset preconditioned its applicability in studying trends and institutional processes in the context of different political settings (Sur, S. (2024).

2.3 Variables and Measurement

The analysis was done on some of the variables that were used to conduct cross-sectional and temporal analysis. The country (entity) variable was the unit of analysis and represented individual nation states and the year variable was the temporal framework within which changes were to be tracked over time. The democracy score was the key variable of interest as it indicated the general degree of democratic performance. To facilitate analysis, the scores of democracy were taken as continuous values and as directional changes with time. Systems based on observed trends were conceptually categorized into groups of countries that were improving democracies, declining democracies, and relatively stable systems. This categorization assisted in recognizing more general trends of democratic change.

2.4 Data Analysis Techniques

A mix of descriptive, longitudinal, and comparative methods of analysis was used in the study. The possibility of this was initially summarized using descriptive statistics to understand the distribution and variation of democracy scores in countries and years. This was succeeded by time-series analysis which looked at trends on how things had changed throughout the period of study and the patterns of growth, stagnation, or decline. A comparative study was done in order to examine variations in the democratic paths of individual countries. Moreover, a classification method was used to cluster countries according to the observed trends thus making it easier to make an interpretation of democratic transition patterns.

2.5 Analytical Framework

A social change and institutional framework informed the interpretation of findings, and perceived democracy to be a changing product of interactions between social structures, political institutions and global forces. This framework has highlighted the importance of the institutional capacity, governance structures, and systemic resilience to the formation of democratic outcomes. It also recognized the impact of external forces like the globalisation and geopolitics. It is with this framework that the study was able to give a theoretically informed explanation of the mechanisms leading to democratic transition by placing the empirical results in this framework.

3. Results

3.1 Global Trends in Democracy

The review of the Democracy Index data, 2006-2023, displays a typical tendency of the wave followed by a slow deterioration of the world democratic performance. Although the initial years of the dataset seem to represent a slightly stable or slightly improving factor of democracy scores in a number of countries, the post-around 2010 period can be characterized by the rising tendencies toward stagnation and regression. There is an apparent declining tendency in the average world score of democracy, indicating that the gains in democracy have been slowing down and in most instances, they are turning out to be decreasing. This trend suggests that the process of democracy in the 21 st century is not advancing in the same direction but is rather marked by the lapses and falls, which are a manifestation of larger global political and institutional issues.

Table 1: Global Average Democracy Score (2006–2023)

Year	Average Democracy Score
2006	5.54
2010	5.48
2015	5.57
2020	5.39
2023	5.70

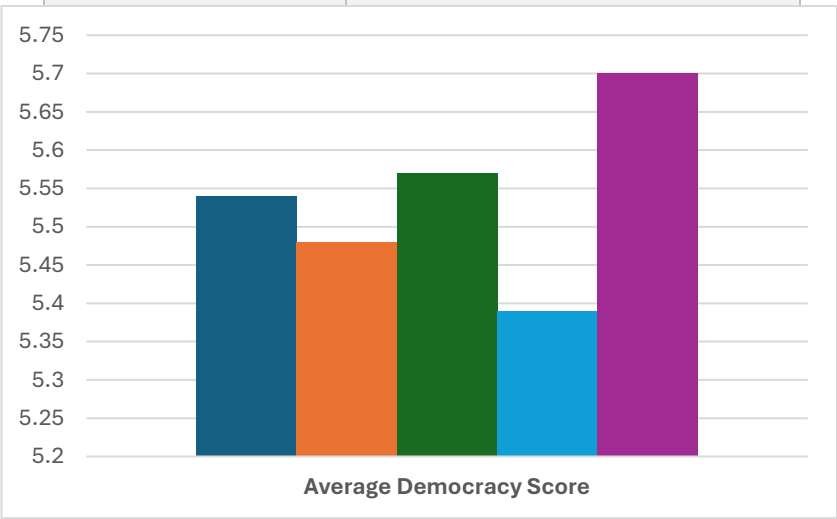


Figure 1: Global Trend in Average Democracy Scores (2006–2023)

3.2 Regional Variations in Democratic Performance

The findings also indicate that there is a great diversity in regions indicating that the democratic change is not evenly distributed. Those countries that had historically robust democratic institutions are observed to be relatively high but some are found to be weakly declining with time. Conversely, the fluctuations between several developing and transitional countries are more pronounced with some countries realizing significant gains whilst some experiencing significant losses. This variance indicates that political environment, institutional maturity, and socio-economic statuses are very crucial in determining democratic paths in a region. The results emphasize the idea that democracy does not develop in a vacuum and is profoundly affected by contextual and structural determinants that are unique to the areas.

Table 2: Classification of Countries by Democratic Transition

Category	Number of Countries	Percentage (%)
Improving Democracies	51	29.3%
Declining Democracies	88	50.6%
Stable Democracies	35	20.1%

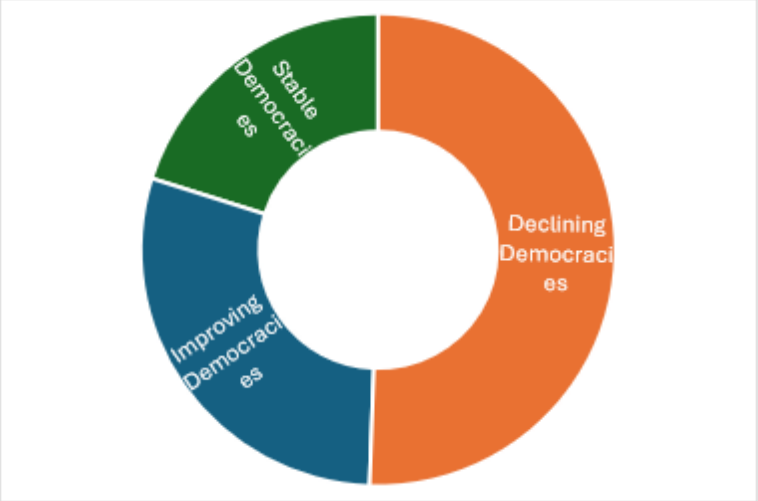


Figure 2: Classification of Countries by Democratic Transition (2006–2023)

3.3 Patterns of Democratic Transition

The longitudinal study of the democracy scores between 2006 and 2023 shows that countries are changing democracy in different ways and it is uneven and dynamic, which is a global democracy. A comparatively few countries are showing a steady increasing tendency in the score of democracy, which means that there is a gradual institutionalization and better governance practices with time. Conversely, the majority of countries have a negative trend, which is indicative of democratic backsliding in the form of diminished institutional performance, less accountability and undermined democratic principles. Alongside these trends, there is another group of countries that are relatively stable and have not varied widely in the democracy scores over the years of the study, which indicates the existence of institutional frameworks that are deeply-rooted and do not increase or reduce significantly. This overwhelming prevalence of negative and stagnating trends over positive highlight the wider global trend, whereby democratic regression has become more characteristic than democratic progress, highlighting the transitional and non-linear character of democratic development in the modern period.

Table 3: Top Performing Countries (2023)

Rank	Country	Democracy Score
1	Norway	9.81
2	New Zealand	9.61
3	Iceland	9.45
4	Sweden	9.39
5	Finland	9.30

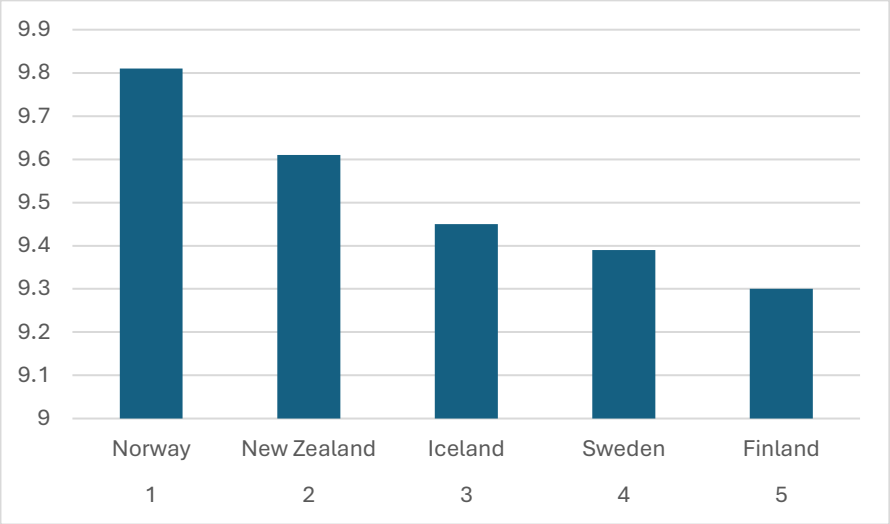


Figure 3: Top Performing Countries by Democracy Score (2023)

3.4 Institutional Dynamics and Observed Changes

The patterns of democratic change that we have seen are indicative of implicit institutional dynamics affecting the stability and performance of democracies. The countries which have been improving tend to exhibit institutional strengthening evidenced by better governance systems and better political procedures. On the other hand, weaker democracies are more likely to exhibit signs of institutional decay, such as decreased governance effectiveness, decreased accountability and weakening of democratic norms. Such results indicate that the key to maintaining democratic mechanisms is institutional capacity and resilience, and their decline may result in dramatic decreases in the quality of democracy.

Table 4: Bottom-Performing Countries (2023)

Rank	Country	Democracy Score
1	China	2.12
2	Burundi	2.13
3	Gabon	2.18
4	Guinea	2.21
5	Russia	2.22

3.5 Emerging Contradictions in Democratic Systems

The first notable conclusion of the analysis is that there are contradictions in the democratic system. In some instances, the nations that can be termed democracies still have formal institutional forms, including elections and representative systems but they are losing democracy ratings. This means there is a disconnect between the form and the reality of democracy. These contradictions underscore the intricacy of modern-day democracy in which institutionalization can be maintained despite undermining its efficacy and legitimacy. This two-sidedness supports the idea of considering democracy not only as the structure of its elements but as the substantive performance and results of democracy.

On the whole, the findings prove that the non-linear patterns of global democracy in the 2006-2023 period are featured by the regional inequalities and the growing numbers of democratic backsliding. The detection of certain transition patterns, and the influence of institutional dynamics would be valuable clues to the changing character of democracy. These results provide an excellent empirical background on the further discussion of causes of democratic change, implications, and theoretical explanation of democratic change in the modern world.

4. Discussion

The results of this research indicate that international democracy in the 21 st century can be described as associated with non-linear change, growing instability, and a significant amount of democratic degradation, which is consistent with other academic findings on democratic backsliding and institutional frailty. The fact that the majority of democracies identified in the results are on the path of decline supports the claim that democratic regression is a characteristic of the modern political systems, and not a one-off event. The trend aligns with the existing studies emphasizing the fact that numerous nations are undergoing a slow loss of democratic values, despite having institutional structures in place (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Carothers and Press, 2022).

Among the main lessons that come out of the analysis is that democratic change lies at the core of the institutional processes, especially the ability of the system of governance to maintain accountability, participation, and legitimacy.

The weakened institutional performance of countries with a falling score of democracy is quite common, which implies that democratic stability is quite dependent on the quality and stability of political institutions. This observation confirms the view of democratic backsliding not being sudden but instead taking place through institutional decay, including diminished checks and balances, undermined rule of law, and limited political competition (Diamond, 2022; Levitsky and Way, 2020). Democracy in this sense cannot be just seen as a set of formal procedures but as an institutional system which must be constantly reinforced to be effective.

The findings also indicate that political polarisation and internal division within the society are contributing factors to the decline of democracy. Polarisation may erode the processes of consensus-building, erode democratic norms and leave institutional defenses open to challenge or circumvention. According to recent research, these internal processes tend to contribute to the further destabilization of democracy, as they enhance political tension and decrease confidence in democratic institutions (Frantz et al., 2025). This is especially topical in the modern world, when ideological disintegration and identity politics have gained increased strength, affecting the functioning of government and popularity among the population with democratic processes.

The other crucial dimension that the findings underline is the impact of structural and systemic factors such as federal arrangements and complexity of governance on democratic results. The institutional formats, including federalism, may support the democratic strength or lead to fragmentation and inefficiency based on their design and management (Kaufman et al., 2025). This implies that the design of institutions is essential in determining democratic paths, and that different democratic foundations can produce different results despite having similar democratic institutions.

The continued existence of stable democracies, as well as those becoming less democratic, also demonstrate the disproportional character of the global democratization. There are those countries that exhibit some form of institutional resilience, which shows that the countries have a steady democracy score, even in the face of external and internal pressures. The strength in institutional frameworks, well-developed legal systems, and well-established democratic norms allow such systems to overcome challenges, which explains this resilience (Merkel & Luhrmann, 2021). This stability should however not cloud the general trend of decline since even the stable democracies can have some latent vulnerability that can result in regression in future.

The results also disclose some significant contradictions in the modern democratic systems, in particular, the existence of formal democratic systems with regressing democratic outcomes. This paradox is indicative of a scenario where elections and representative institutions remain to operate, only to be weakened in their ability and legitimacy. These inconsistencies are reflective of what has been termed as democratic backsliding at the inside which is erosion by legal and institutional means as opposed to blatant authoritarian interference (Sellgren, 2025). This illuminates the necessity of a more sophisticated interpretation of democracy that transcends institutional existence, to the quality and functionality of democracy practices.

Also, the part played by the citizen perceptions and demand-side factors cannot be ignored in the explanation of democratic transitions. A different perception of democracy and different anticipations of the government can shape the political behaviour and institutional results, defining the way democratic change should take place (Wunsch et al., 2025). Reducing the level of trustpeople have in democratic institutions can open the door to other political formations that are possible to subvert democratic standards. This highlights the significance of aligning the performance of institutions with the expectations of the society so as to maintain democratic legitimacy.

Lastly, the problem of democratic decline is not only limited to political systems but also includes the human rights, social stability and conflict prevention. Democratic institutions have been linked with improved chances of governance failure and social unrest, which are often interconnected with the results of democracy and society as a whole (Bapt & Day, 2025). In this regard, the change towards global democracy is not simply a political issue, but a vital point of social transformation with far-reaching outcomes on the development, equality, and stability of the whole world.

In general, the results of the present work add to the increasing literature on the topic that focuses on the multifaceted, disputable, and transformative character of the modern-day concept of democracy. The study sheds light on the role of the institutional strength, societal cohesion, and structural design in defining democratic paths by drawing attention to the patterns of deterioration, stagnation, and minimal progress. These lessons inform the need to keep studying and discussing the issues afflicting democracy, especially in a world where uncertainty and change are gradually becoming the order of the day.

5. Conclusion

The cross-national approach to global democratic tendencies in 2006-2023 focuses on the trends of change and the institutional processes of this change. The results indicate that the 21 st century democracy is not linear and not uniformly progressive, but characterised by lopses and lumps, growing instability, and a significant percentage of democratic decline. The percentage of countries that are on a downward trend in terms of democracy is a considerable percentage and this means that democratic backsliding is becoming a pervading and enduring trend. Another key point that comes out in the analysis is that a strong and resilient political institution is closely associated with democratic outcomes. Those countries that have stable or strengthening democratic performance are likely to have a stronger governance structure, whereas those that have deteriorating performance are likely to exhibit institutional

deterioration. Simultaneously, the coexistence of official democratic systems with their deteriorating performance highlights the existence of structural contradictions, in which the democratic institutions remain, but they work less efficiently in the reality. In a larger context, the research supports the conceptualization of democracy as a dynamic and changing aspect of social transformation, as driven by both internal institutional processes and global forces. These conclusions have significant implications to policymakers and scholars, underscoring the necessity to improve institutional capacity, accountability, and respond to the new challenges of polarisation and a lack of trust. To sum up, global democracy is still in a transitional phase, and it needs to be constantly followed and discussed as a means to make it sustainable and relevant in the ever complex and globalized world.

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