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How to cite this publication

Please cite the final published version:

Skaaning, S-E. (2020). Waves of autocratization and democratization: a critical note on conceptualization and measurement. *Democratization*, 27(8), 1533-1542.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1799194>

Publication metadata

Title:	Waves of autocratization and democratization: a critical note on conceptualization and measurement
Author(s):	Svend-Erik Skaaning
Journal:	<i>Democratization</i> , 27(8), 1533-1542
DOI/Link:	https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1799194
Document version:	Accepted manuscript (post-print)

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Waves of Autocratization and Democratization: A Critical Note on Conceptualization and Measurement

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Abstract

Huntington famously distinguished between waves of democratization and de-democratization. Based on an alternative conceptualization of waves of regime change and novel data on episodes of democratization and autocratization, Lührmann and Lindberg¹ identify three waves of autocratization where the most recent and ongoing began in 1994, affects a higher number of democracies, and unfolds relatively slowly and piecemeal. In this note, however, I argue that both their definition and their measurement of waves of democratization and autocratization are questionable. First, their operationalization of regime changes do not capture all degrees of change and it provides a skewed account since the criteria used to identify episodes of autocratization and democratization are not balanced. Second, their definition of waves of regime change deviates from the conventional understandings as it emphasizes relative trends in the number of upturns and downturns rather than looking at the relative size or the relative number of autocratizations vis-à-vis democratizations. The last part of the paper shows that an alternative, more intuitively appealing understanding and operationalization supports different conclusions regarding the periodization of waves.

In *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Samuel P. Huntington² famously distinguished between three waves of democratization and two waves of de-democratization. Since the publication of his book, it has been popular to use the wave metaphor to describe major trends in global regime changes in the direction to or from democracy.³ Two good friends and collaborators of mine, Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg (henceforth L&L),⁴ have recently followed suit in an interesting article titled “A third wave of autocratization is here: What is new about it?” Their article has received a lot of attention among scholars, intellectuals, NGOs, and in the media. A little more than a year after appearing online, the article has already become the second most viewed piece ever published in *Democratization* (more than 30,000 views).

This is understandable given the broad interest in this important topic and the path-breaking features of some of L&L’s analyses. The article’s use of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset paves the way for a number of notable findings regarding the dynamics and characteristics of regime changes along the democracy-autocracy continuum. More particularly, the article suggests how to operationalize regime changes based on a definition of autocratization as substantial de facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy. On this basis, it identifies three waves of autocratization where the latter – beginning in 1994 – affects a higher number of democracies and unfolds more slowly and piecemeal compared to previous reverse waves.

L&L’s attempt to identify the amount (and types) of autocratization and, in a second step, consider the speed of democratic recession is praiseworthy. However, two issues of their conceptualization and measurement of autocratization call for critical discussion since they seem to influence key substantive conclusions about trends in democratization and autocratization. The

importance of this endeavour is supported by the fact that their article has already had a significant impact on the debate about current democratic developments. It is thus likely to influence the actions of international organizations, governments, and national as well as international civil society organizations. The first issue to be discussed is incongruence between their understanding of regime changes as matters of degree and their operationalization of autocratization and democratization, which uses questionable criteria to identify episodes of change.

The second issue concerns the definition of a wave of autocratization as a period where the number of democratizing countries decreases, while the number of autocratizing countries increases. This conceptualization of waves of autocratization constitutes a fundamental break with conventional understandings, which is based on net changes, i.e., substantial movements in the average level of – or the numerical difference in – upturns versus downturns.⁵ Indeed, L&L's unorthodox definition has substantial repercussions for their conclusions. Most importantly, it is the basis of one of the main findings reflected in the very title of their paper, namely, the presence of three waves of autocratization, with the last one apparently having begun already in 1994. Alternative and more conventional criteria would either lead to a later start date for such a wave or even to it being questionable whether such a wave exists at present.

This research note addresses these issues and some of their implications for the periodization of waves of regime change in turn. The purpose is to underline and substantiate some potential problems related to particular definitions and measures, which can lead to skewed perceptions of trends of autocratization (and democratization). A more orthodox use of V-Dem's continuous measure of electoral democracy shows that a decline in the global average only began in 2013 and that the dip is not yet statistically significant. Moreover, even when employing their

own data on episodes of regime transformations, negative regime changes (autocratizations) only surpassed positive regime changes (democratizations) in 2014. These findings underline the importance of plausible definitions and measures, and they question the widespread perception that the past 10 or even 25 years have been characterized by a genuine wave of autocratization.

Operationalization of regime changes

“Autocratization” is increasingly used as an umbrella term to describe de-democratization, i.e., changes that decrease the democraticness of political regimes.⁶ L&L follow suit and also understand autocratization as democratization in reverse.⁷ Let me begin by stating that I am generally sympathetic to L&L’s attempt⁸ to conceptualize autocratization “as a matter of degree that can occur both in democracies and autocracies.” This perspective likely offers interesting nuance to overviews based on crisp distinctions between democracy and autocracy that only identify outright democratic breakdowns.

However, their more particular understanding of autocratization is a “substantial de-facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy.” While the focus on de facto decline and core institutional features makes good sense, it is not obvious how one should best specify the threshold for what substantial means, or even why a decline needs to be substantial to signify autocratization. It would be more straightforward to consider all negative movements on the autocracy-democracy spectrum as instances of autocratization. Indeed, the latter understanding seems to correspond better with L&L’s explicit preference for a continuous perspective, despite the widespread practice (among scholars and laymen) to link democratic recession to critical events with substantial impact.

Operationally, L&L use the following criteria to identify episodes of autocratization: An episode begins with a drop on the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) (ranging from 0 to 1) of at least .01 from one year to the next and ends when the EDI increases by at least .02 or has not dropped .01 or more over the previous four years. In addition, to be counted as an autocratization episode, the combined decrease over this period must amount to at least 0.1 on the EDI.⁹

Definition of waves of regime change

One can always discuss the different thresholds and criteria. For instance, all thresholds placed on a continuous scale will inevitably be arbitrary. L&L recognize this in their article and carry out a number of robustness checks using different thresholds.¹⁰

However, what I take issue with here is primarily their understanding of waves of regime change. L&L consider a wave of autocratization to be:

”... starting when the number of democratization episodes begins to decrease at the same time as autocratization episodes increase for two years in a row. It ends when autocratization episodes decline in number and democratization episodes increase over the next four years.”¹¹

There are several reasons to question this conception and the resulting identification of waves of autocratization. Their conception deviates from conventional, well-established understandings, which exclusively focus on net effects, i.e., the relative size or the relative number of autocratizations vis-à-vis democratizations. Deviation from conventional standards is

not a problem in itself; path-breaking insights have often derived from novel perspectives. In this particular case, however, it leads to the counterintuitive conclusion that waves of autocratization have been ongoing in years where the world has actually become more democratic or, at least, more countries were undergoing episodes of democratization than autocratization (see below).

Huntington¹² originally defined a wave of democratization as “a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period of time.” Accordingly, a wave of autocratization – or a reverse wave of democratization in Huntington’s terminology – is a period characterized by a sustained and significant increase in the number of autocracies relative to the number of democracies. Several studies have translated this understanding of waves into a continuous perspective. More particularly, they break with the dichotomous understanding of regimes (democracy or autocracy) and instead take all positive and negative changes in individual countries into account. Waves are then identified based on developments in the global average of democracy.¹³

L&L take a mixed position where they identify the number of countries undergoing substantive, gradualist changes. This aspect of their conception is novel, but it does not constitute a serious break with the conventions. As demonstrated below, the overall conclusions about trends is significantly affected by this combination of the crisp and continuous perspectives. However, another aspect of their definition sets them even more apart from the literature and leads to what many would consider as counterintuitive conclusions: When identifying waves of autocratization, they focus on the *trends* in the number of democratization episodes and autocratization episodes rather than the *relative number or size* of autocratic versus democratic changes. Let me elaborate:

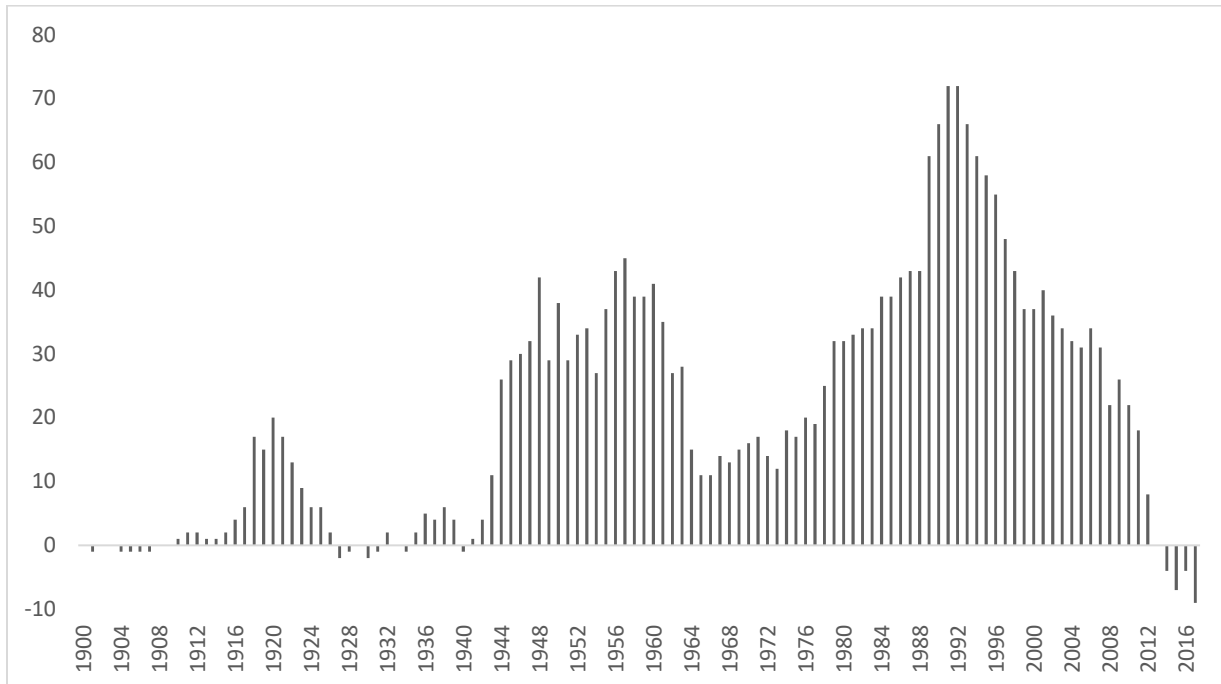
L&L understand a wave of autocratization to be ongoing when the number of democratization episodes is decreasing, and the number of autocratization episodes is increasing, even if democratization episodes might outnumber autocratization episodes. This definition means that years with more democratization episodes than autocratization episodes are potentially part of a wave of autocratization and vice versa. Take, for example, year 2000. Even if L&L register 52 episodes of democratization and only 15 episodes of autocratization – a difference of 37 in favour of democratization – they consider this year as part of a third wave of autocratization. This constitutes a critical departure from Huntington’s emphasis of relative changes (“outnumber transitions in the opposite direction”), which is the perspective shared in the literature more generally. To illustrate the lack of intuitive appeal of L&L’s choice to include such years in waves of autocratization, imagine if the opposite situation had occurred: For example, had there been a slight decrease in the number of ongoing episodes of autocratization over three years, say from 40 to 35, while the number of democratization episodes had gone up from one to six, it seems implausible to consider this a wave of democratization when the world would actually become less democratic.

Periodization of global waves

As already indicated, L&L’s own numbers show that the counterintuitive scenario is not merely of theoretical importance. They identify three waves of autocratization covering the following periods: 1926–1942, 1961–1977, and 1994– (ongoing).¹⁴ However, taking a second look at their data, there is hardly any evidence of any waves of autocratization if we employ a more conventional understanding focusing on the net number of countries undergoing regime changes in different directions. This is clear from Figure 1, which shows the number of democratization

episodes for each year subtracted by the number of autocratization episodes.¹⁵ Only very few years show negative scores, indicating that more countries autocratize than democratize, whereas positive scores dominate throughout most of the period.

Figure 1: Net number of ongoing episodes of democratization vs. autocratization



Note: Yearly number of ongoing episodes of democratization minus ongoing episodes of autocratization based on data from L&L.¹⁶

Let us look more carefully at L&L’s three “waves of autocratization.” Between 1926 and 1942, the yearly tally of ongoing democratization episodes and autocratization episodes are very similar. In a plurality of these years, there are actually a few more of the former than the latter. A general trend of autocratization is even less pronounced in the period 1961–1977 where democratization episodes consistently outnumber autocratization episodes (ranging from a maximum difference of 41 vs. 6 to a minimum difference of 26 vs. 15). A similar pattern is

found for the years 1994–2012 (ranging from a maximum difference of 69 vs. 8 to a minimum difference of 28 vs. 20).

Overall, it does seem plausible to employ the notion of a wave of autocratization as long as more countries are actually undergoing episodes of democratization than autocratization. Only after 2013 has there been a period of more than three consecutive years where negative episodes have outnumbered the positive ones. In other words, using the well-established understanding of waves of regime change to interpret L&L's own episodes measure, the presence of the two first waves of autocratization does not find much support in the data, and the third reverse wave only began a few years ago.

This finding is all the more surprising when we consider two features of L&L's measurement procedure that can bias the comparisons. The first one concerns the asymmetry in the way they operationalize the different kinds of episodes: Autocratization episodes are allowed to begin in democracies as well as in autocracies, as defined by the Regimes of the World classifications.^{17,18} However, their operational criteria say that democratization episodes are only counted as such if they begin in autocracies.¹⁹ This means that cases of substantial democratic improvement, which do not involve a democratic transition, do not count as democratization episodes.²⁰

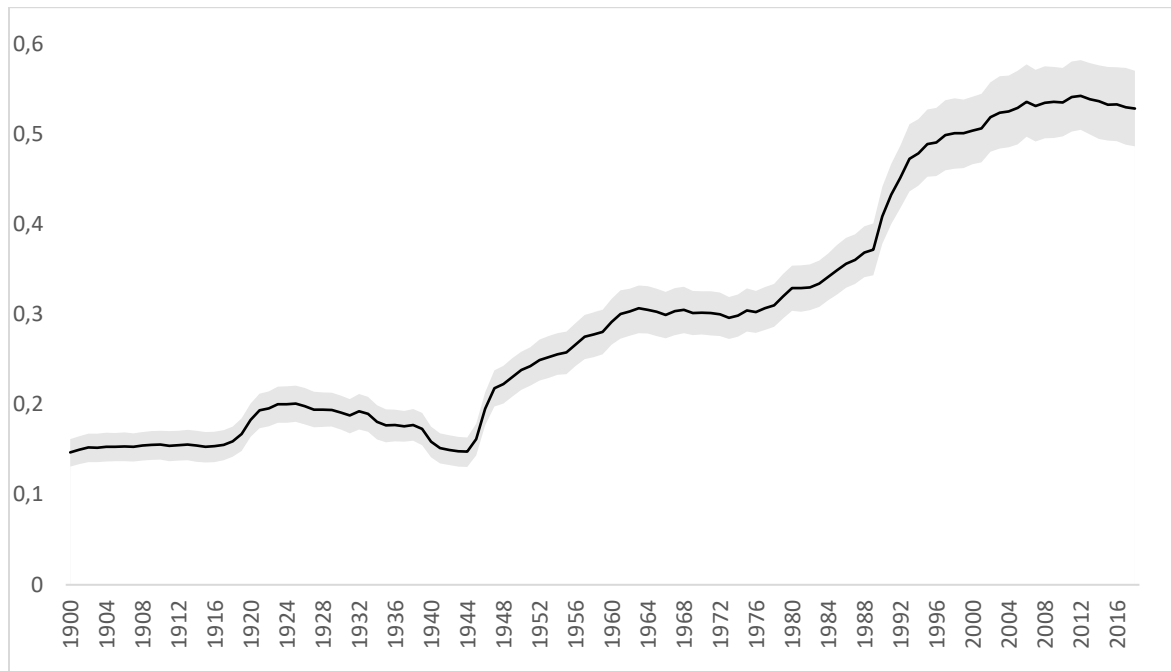
In addition, only looking at the number of ongoing episodes in each direction can give a skewed impression of the general trends. This could happen when changes in one direction are generally more slow-moving (some episodes last for several years) compared to movements in the opposite direction, which could be more abrupt.²¹ The literature on recent processes of autocratization, including contributions by L&L, has actually highlighted the slow-moving nature of current autocratization compared to previous periods and compared to current

democratization processes.²² If these findings are correct, recent episodes of autocratization generally receive more weight in the cumulative overviews than episodes of democratization simply because they last longer (not because they are of different size).

In this light, it is somewhat surprising that the years demarcating L&L's two first waves of autocratization are quite similar to Huntington's two reverse waves (1922–1942; 1960–1975). This overlap could indicate that there is no fundamental disagreement. However, we have to remember the background for Huntington's periodization. Besides the differences highlighted by L&L (i.e., his more minimalist and crisp definition of democracy), Huntington's identification of waves seems to have been based, to a large extent, on his own gut feelings linked to well-known historical events (such as Mussolini's March on Rome in 1922 and the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974) rather than on systematic data analysis.

However, how does the picture look like when we use the most simple and classical procedure to capture differences in degree instead of using L&L's identification of episodes? To answer this question, I employ the same source and sample. More particularly, I calculate the global average for all years from 1900 until 2018 for all polities²³ covered by V-Dem's continuous measure of electoral democracy (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Global average of electoral democracy (polyarchy)



Note: Global average of electoral democracy (polyarchy) based on all polities included in the V-Dem dataset (v9).²⁴ The shaded area demarcates the confidence interval (+/- one standard deviation).

In this period, the most important sign of a first wave of democratization was the jump in 1919–1920 following the end of World War I. Thereafter the global average declined moderately, but only during World War II it got significantly lower than the score for 1920 (as signified by non-overlapping confidence intervals). Subsequently, a second wave of democratization took place until it was replaced by a period of global standstill (trendless fluctuations) from the early 1960s until the mid-1970s. A third wave is recognizable from the late 1970s, with an abrupt increase in the early 1990s, followed by more moderate increases until 2012 where the global average peaked. Since then, the level has decreased .01 points on the scale ranging from 0 to 1. This drop is minuscule and clearly within the boundaries of the statistical confidence levels offered by V-Dem in order to account for potential measurement error. Interestingly, these trends are more in line with L&L’s conclusions about the periodization of global waves of regime change than the

findings based on their own episodes data and a conventional understanding of waves focusing on net changes in either direction.

Conclusion

In a widely read article, L&L²⁵ have introduced new definitions and measures to uncover trends in regime changes. The purpose of this research note has been to emphasize some problems related to their unconventional way of conceptualizing and measuring waves of autocratization and democratization. I have demonstrated that their definition does not align with common, more intuitively appealing understandings of waves of regime change. Moreover, I have shown how their approach might introduce systematic biases when analyzing trends in regime change.

Arguably, based on a standard focus on net changes, a third wave of autocratization did not begin in the mid-1990s, and it is even uncertain whether we are currently in the midst of an outright wave of autocratization.²⁶ To be sure, there are several disturbing tendencies today, which deserve close attention. Democratic progress has (at least) come to a halt, globally, and autocratic regimes and shortcomings regarding democratic best-practices remain widespread. Moreover, it is certainly worrying when a number of relatively mature democracies and even EU members, such as Hungary and Poland, have recently experienced democratic backsliding. Finally, Russia and China as well as recent cases of autocratization, such as Brazil, Egypt, India, and Turkey, are major countries with the potential – directly or indirectly – to undermine democratization and democratic stability elsewhere. Finally, the COVID-19 crisis is currently undermining a number of fundamental civil liberties and has led to the postponement of elections. Some initiatives are based on legitimate concerns, while others tend to be driven by incumbents attempting to exploit the situation to get a firmer grip on political power.

Whether these circumstances are merely a short-term effect or the pandemic will have longer-term impact on democratic rights still remains to be seen. We should not forget that democracy continues to be the preferred regime type in the great majority of countries and that many autocracies are also in serious trouble.²⁷ These countervailing forces underline the importance of sound definitions and operationalizations of the key concepts of interest in order to get a balanced and nuanced view of general trends.

Notes

1. Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization.”
2. Huntington, *The Third Wave*.
3. See, e.g., Berg-Schlosser, ” Long Waves and Conjunctures of Democratization,” 41–73; Diamond, “Is the Third Wave Over?” 20–37; Doorenspleet, ” Reassessing the Three Waves of Democratization”; Knutsen and Skaaning, “The Ups and Downs of Democracy”; Kurzman, “Waves of Democratization”; Markoff, *Waves of Democracy*; Møller and Skaaning, *Democracy and Democratization in Comparative Perspective*.
4. Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization.”
5. Kurzman (“Waves of Democratization”, 50) also identifies a third understanding, which considers the “linkages among a group of countries undergoing democratization” (see also Gunitsky, “Democratic Waves in Historical Perspective”). However, since this approach moves beyond descriptive purposes by emphasizing the importance of connections and resting on assumptions about diffusion or imposition effects, I disregard it here.
6. E.g., Cassani and Tomini, ”Reversing Regimes and Concepts”; *Autocratization in Post-Cold War Regimes*; Cederman, Hug, and Krebs, “Democratization and Civil War”; Durán, “Dual Presidentialization and Autocratization”; Lührmann et al., “State of the World 2017”; Tan, ”Regime Change and Conflict Recidivism within Rivalry.”
7. Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization,” 1099.
8. Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization,” 1098.
9. Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization,” 1101.
10. Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization.”
11. Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization,” 1111.
12. Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 15.
13. See, e.g., Knutsen et al., ”Introducing the Historical Varieties of Democracy Dataset”; Knutsen and Skaaning, ”The Ups and Downs of Democracy”; Strand et al., *Why Waves?*; Teorell, *Determinants of Democracy*.
14. Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization,” 1102.
15. See also Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization,” Figure 2.
16. Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization.”

17. See Lührmann, Tannenbergh, and Lindberg, “Regimes of the World (RoW)”.
18. It bears mentioning that also the ROW categorizations are based on somewhat arbitrary thresholds. More particularly, democracies are distinguished from autocracies by identifying polities scoring higher than .5 on the V-Dem electoral democracy index and at least 2 on two V-Dem indicators (using the _osp-version), i.e., multi-party elections and free and fair elections.
19. See Lindberg et al., *Successful and Failed Episodes of Democratization*.
20. A new, symmetrical version of the Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset is about to be released.
21. A similar point can be made about the size of changes, where some are relatively small (just fulfilling the threshold criteria), while others are big.
22. See, e.g., Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”; Diamond, *Ill Winds*; Lührmann et al., “State of the World 2017”; Waldner and Lust, “Unwelcome Change”.
23. Notice that, following L&L, all polities included in the V-Dem dataset are used in the analysis. Accordingly, some of the polities included are not independent countries but rather semi-sovereign units such as overseas colonies. This means that some of the revealed patterns are different those based on an analysis only based on independent countries, which is the approach most commonly applied when constructing such overviews. Only including independent countries would, for example, imply a higher average until the late 1960s a more pronounced upturns and downturns largely in line with Huntington’s periodization (see Knutsen and Skaaning, “The Ups and Downs of Democracy”). There is not much evidence of a second reverse wave, however, if one takes into account that the number of independent countries has increased (see Doorenspleet, “Reassessing the Three Waves of Democratization”; Møller and Skaaning, *Democracy and Democratization in Comparative Perspective*).
24. Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, M. Steven Fish, Adam Glynn, Allen Hicken, Anna Lührmann, Kyle L. Marquardt, Kelly McMann, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Brigitte Seim, Rachel Sigman, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton, Steven Wilson, Agnes Cornell, Lisa Gastaldi, Haakon Gjerløw, Nina Ilchenko, Joshua Krusell, Laura Maxwell, Valeriya Mechkova, Juraj Medzihorsky, Josefina Pernes, Johannes von Römer, Natalia

Stepanova, Aksel Sundström, Eitan Tzelgov, Yi-ting Wang, Tore Wig, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2019. *V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset v9*, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem).

25. Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization.”
26. Other studies have reached similar conclusions, see, e.g., Carothers and Young, “Democracy Is Not Dying”; Knutsen and Skaaning, “The Ups and Downs of Democracy”; Levitsky and Way, “The Myth of Democratic Recession”; Skaaning and Jiménez, “The Global State of Democracy”; Treisman, *Is Democracy in Danger?*.
27. Carothers, “Dictators in Trouble.”

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