Democratic Resilience in Consolidated Democracies

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Introduction

The issue of democratic resilience versus autocratization is presently and globally salient. In the United States, there has been the generally fascinating phenomenon of both parties becoming host to autocratic movements of different varieties, perhaps most notably featuring their use of the powers of the presidency in increasing governance by executive order. The U.S. is far from alone in this pattern of autocratization. In South Korea, the president overplayed his hand by trying to declare martial law. The citizens recognized this authoritarian play and, being a discrete event, were able to mobilize and overturn the act, so the South Korean president lost all power by being removed from office rather than consolidating his grip on control of the country. In Hungary, the recent election that saw the authoritarian incumbent president Orban voted out was of global interest, and presents as well a prime example of the fascinating phenomenon of authoritarian alliance. Sending a foreign government's representative to campaign for and with an elected official in another country is, in more normal times, an unusual move. But autocratic leaders from Hungary to Israel to the U.S. have been engaging in partnerships as they seek to establish less democratic regimes in their respective countries. Whether the case of Hungary is one where U.S. involvement did backfire in this way is beyond the scope of my research, but what it does show is that normal political isolationism is, in the context of installing or maintaining authoritarian regimes abroad, not a legitimate priority of those in power.

Literature Review

It is in this context that I turn to democratic resilience, a recent framework by which to evaluate the factors at play in a healthy and persistent democracy. Historically threats to democracies came more often from outside forces or affected newer and perhaps less economically privileged democratic states. However, there are increasing authoritarian tendencies on display in older, wealthier democracies undergoing institutional breakdowns. I assess the comparative social and economic conditions of consolidated democracies, i.e. the United States, against less established democracies, using the Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset. I expect to find that though the vulnerabilites of the states differ, consolidated democracies are not significantly less susceptible to authoritarian takeover for economic reasons than are more traditionally fragile political systems.

The stability of democratic governments is a deeply important topic of political research, but there had been a lingering gap in the literature on how democratic backsliding or autocratization, once begun, can be successfully resisted or reversed—a phenomenon commonly referred to in recent literature as democratic resilience. A number of studies have been conducted on the features of democratic resilience in the face of democratic backsliding. I assess how the analyses and models proposed in these studies apply to the recent conditions of democratic and undemocratic states alike, with particular interest in the world's more consolidated democracies, which seem to be less studied in regards to resilience (7). In doing this, the key question I will be answering has three parts: which elements of the system are most important in forestalling or withstanding autocratic takeover, which elements are well-positioned to successfully do so, and what political or societal deficiencies have made or could make a loss of democratic government a serious threat. Though, perhaps unfortunately, predicting the political future is not possible

with mathematical certainty, understanding the severity of a given situation and the likelihood of certain outcomes is a useful device both for researchers and the affected citizenry.

While the issues of state stability and persistence are not new to politics, the packaging of these into a notion of democratic resilience is a development that has come to shape policy discussions and research, particularly in publications over the last six years (7). The concept of resilience itself has been used in many fields with varying definitions particular to the needs of each, but these form a preexisting body of work with overlap that helps in creating a basis for defining democratic resilience. Resilience in cases of democratic government can take the form of a maintenance of a generalized status quo, in which situations there is typically no clear agent or group attempting to consolidate autocratic authority or otherwise threaten the state, or it can be in response to a specific, perhaps transient or external, threat. The key point is that "Democratic resilience is the ability of a political regime to prevent or react to challenges without losing its democratic character (13)." Though this definition is fairly broad, I believe it suits the purpose of my analysis well both despite and because of this. One element to this definition that may be dubious is the qualifier that a government must not lose *its* character, as opposed to not losing *a* democratic character, given the many variations that are possible while still counting as democratic political systems. A different variation of democracy may be an appropriate conceivable response to a given challenge, such as drafting a new constitution to reorganize the structure of the government, and this may not be described best as a failure of resilience on the part of that democracy. Further discussion of this possibility may be in order.

The above definition also describes democratic resilience as both a reactive and a proactive phenomenon. In either case, this is not possible without individual agents. Although system-level analysis is clearly useful in its ubiquity, human-built systems definitionally do not

create themselves or propagate themselves independent of human actions and choices: law means nothing without a court to interpret it and an agency to enact it, and for better or for worse, even the plainest language can be reinterpreted when motive arises. An example of this is the armament of Japan: per Article 9 of the post-WW2 Japanese Constitution, having a standing army or reserving the right and means to proactively project military force is something Japan has permanently sworn off (4). Even so, the current Prime Minister of Japan has taken a more hardline stance on their relations with China, such that she had to walk it back to sound more in line with normal Japanese foreign policy (16). Her direct quote did not definitively rise to the level of saying Japan would initiate conflict; rather, she framed it as saying they would react defensively if pushed, but that reservation of use of military force from a nation that lacks a standing army is itself a deviation and a strong statement. This both reflects a change in the system for what (she perceives, at least) the Japanese public to have an appetite for, and demonstrates a less autocratic instance of the kind of acts that are so threatening to a democracy's stability: individual choices to prefer their own ideas or immediate (perceived or actual) interests over rules or obligations, especially when there is little or no means of forcing them to act in accord with others' (even their predecessors') intent.

There are two models in the literature discussing democratic resilience that are of particular value to this research. According to van Lit et al., there are two groups within the population: first, the elites, who are politicians or unelected government officials, from government employees to lawyers, and those who are well-informed, such as political scientists or historians, and second, the general population, or the citizenry—those who are voters, but may be minimally or not at all politically engaged in their daily lives (15). While it is the elites who actually make the government function, the citizenry tends to lack trust in them on the basis that

their interests are often not in alignment with those of the rest of the population. In a democracy, the system of government is supposed to incentivize the elites to act in accordance with the needs of the general population by giving them common interests, but the exact pressures that will motivate vary by the role these elites fill, and are often not strong enough or evident enough either to overcome shorter-term self-interests for stability and safety on the part of the elites (as some of the first targets of rising authoritarianism), or to overcome the lack of trust of them by the general population. As such, the model proposed by van Lit et al. describes two ways to resist authoritarianism, one by each group, and the requirements and failures that define these options. As the first line of defense, the elites will notice autocratization before the general public can be confident there is a problem; alternatively, when autocratic behavior is sudden, distinct, and a clear violation of the expected norms, the general public does not need cueing from those whose field of expertise it is to step up and put a stop to authoritarian takeovers.

The second model of particular importance, from Boese et al., establishes a distinction between a democracy's resilience in not succumbing to authoritarian rule—breakdown resilience, as they term it—and a democratic state's ability to forestall autocratic tendencies from gaining a foothold in its government at all, which they call onset resilience. As they note even in their article from 2021, the U.S., which would formerly have been considered a consolidated and thus safe democracy against the threat of autocratization, has failed in exhibiting onset resilience (2), and "norm erosion processes in advanced democracies begin earlier, that is, when norm violators are not (yet) in government and must confront a powerful political establishment that seeks to defend the democratic status quo (6)." This is despite the U.S.'s score of state fragility still placing it toward the more stable end as of 2024 (5)—the challenges to democracy that can develop are more subtle than allows for easy dissection of current condition, as accompanies the

change from clear coups to slower authoritarian creep (12). That is, a consolidated or advanced democracy, as it is variously called by different authors, remains susceptible to harmful influences, and those influences must culturally develop somewhat apart from the established order—out of sight not only of the less politically attuned general public, but perhaps also out of sight of the elites whose work is centered on politics or administration. A critical look at the last two decades of American politics strongly suggests that this is precisely what has happened. Further research into the comparative stability of consolidated and less established democracies, perhaps with original data, would be very enlightening.

Analysis

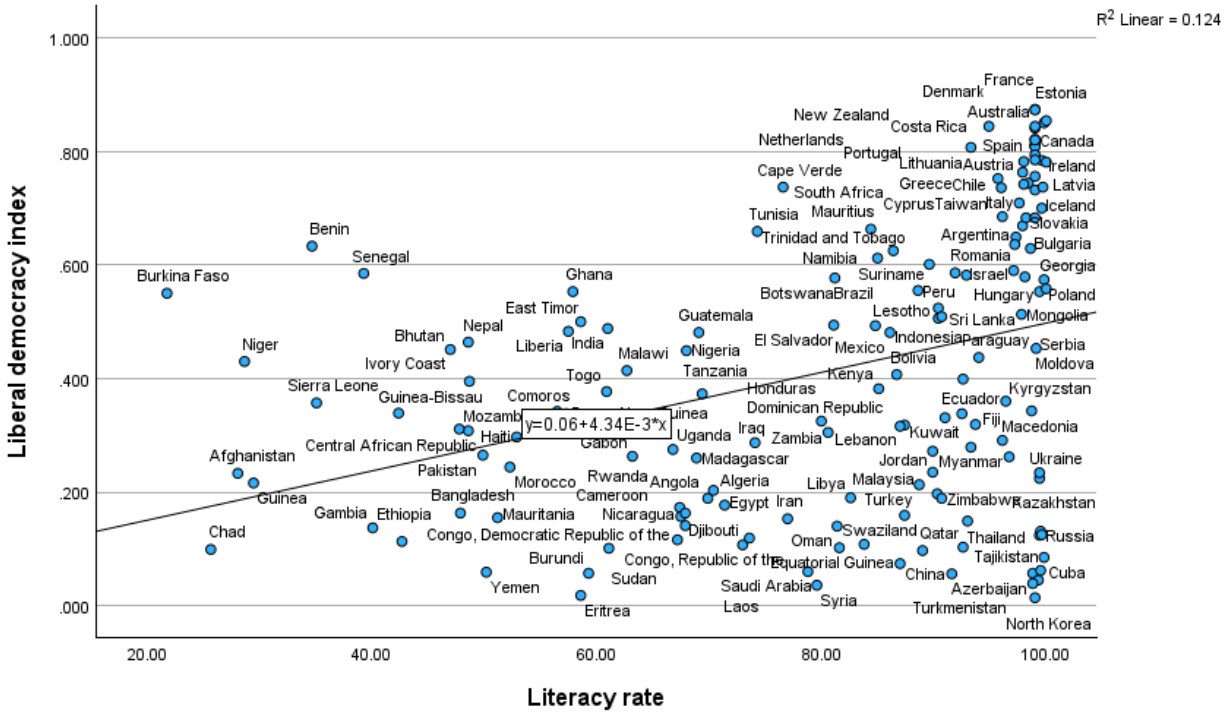
The primary dataset I used was the Episodes of Regime Transition (ERT) from V-Dem. In conjunction with this, I used global Gini data, GDP by country and literacy by country, and a couple metrics from the Heritage Foundation, these being a country's free trade score and its corruption level. The ERT dataset scores states on several factors of democratic wellbeing, leading with whether or not there are free elections and an independent media (EDI), and one that evidently aggregates all results, including the EDI, into the LDI. The other sections in this collection are rule of law and citizens' rights (Liberal component), public participation in the government—in all forms, not merely via voting (Participatory component), and the degree to which elected representatives act in the interests of their constituents as opposed to their own interests or those of interest groups (Deliberative component). The final grouped metric in the dataset is a state's equality of access to rights and resources (Egalitarian component). The final point of data I compared to the dataset's LDI is the number of years since a state's last regime transition.

There are a number of hypotheses I set out to test using this data and per the information I found in my literature review:

1. Better educated countries are likelier to have strong democratic institutions than are less educated (less literate) nations. Because the citizens are able to step in and shut down autocratic takeovers, with or without the leadership and support of members of the government, a better educated citizenry will be likelier to keep itself apprised of the circumstances of the government well enough to catch egregious and unambiguous authoritarian consolidations in progress.
2. More economically equal states have more democratic governments than do less equal states. Greater economic equality means the gap between the general public and the elites in government is smaller, fostering an environment for confluence of interests and thus less distrust of bureaucrats by the citizens.
3. Wealthier states, and those that are able to foster healthy trade relationships with other states, have stronger democracies than poorer or economically isolated states. I predict that loss of international cooperation in the modern world is a key norm erosion that can weaken consolidated democracies, and international trade and the cooperation that facilitates it allows states to generate greater resources.
4. States with less governmental corruption are more democratic than states that host high levels of corruption. This would be a case of elite signaling being feasibly well-received by the public when autocratic behaviors start, since the general public would have positive experiences with their government officials and the requisite trust that the action the elites are prompting them toward is in their own interest, not a case of self-dealing by the bureaucrats.

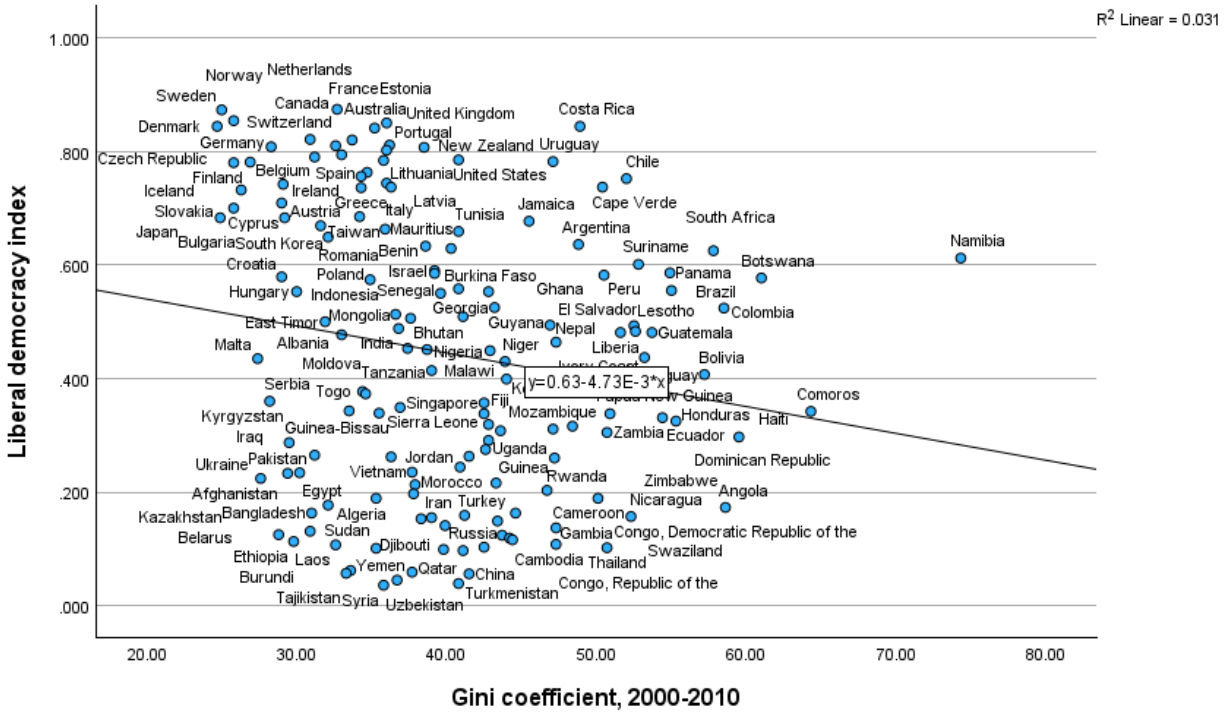
My first test is to see whether there will be a positive association between the LDI and a state's literacy, the null being that there is negative or no directional correlation. A critical supporting factor in democratic states' functionality is an involved population, and the ability to consume information facilitates involvement. While education is something that requires resources to acquire, I predict its comparative ease of acquisition compared to factors like being rich in natural resources will make it a meaningful measure of comparison for both wealthier and poorer states. The expected association bore out, demonstrating my hypothesis. One interesting result is that the autocratic North Korea scores, predictably, very low on the LDI, but it reports a very high level of literacy, higher than wealthier and less isolated states like the Netherlands or even China. Depending on the data collection method, if it is a state's self-reporting, it may suggest North Korea is falsifying data to look better, and doing so to an improbable degree. While many of the rest of the scores are scattered across the distribution, with no outlier that has an extremely high LDI but low literacy, Chad scores nearly equally poorly on both. And many of the countries with the joint best scores are piled close on top of each other, having only marginal change in LDI or in literacy from one to the next. It is notable that most of these countries are clustered in Europe, from Slovakia to Austria, and others have substantial European populations, like Argentina or Australia.

Figure 1:



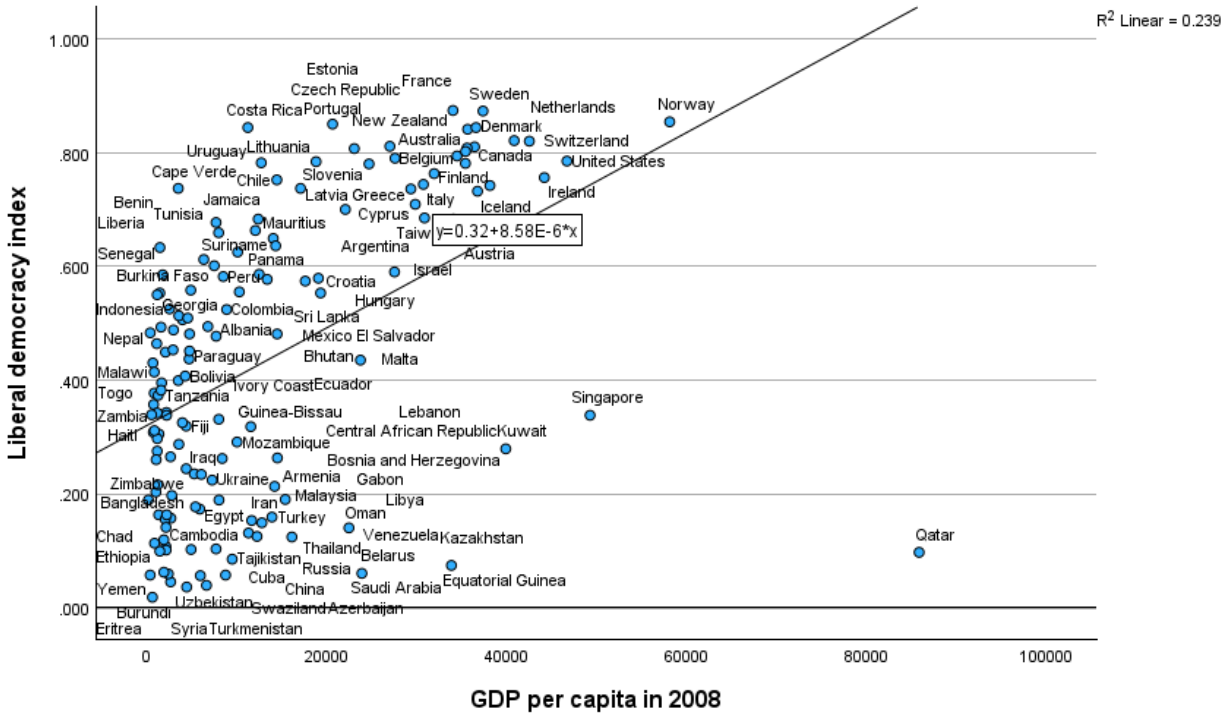
My second hypothesis is that the LDI and a state's Gini score will improve in concert with each other, the null thus being no relation or a negative relationship, where one improves and the other declines. Similarly to the previous result, greater economic equality in a state proved to correlate with a state's having a more positive score for its democracy. Namibia being a significant outlier is notable, in part because there seems to be relatively limited geographic pattern to which countries score well versus poorly. Culturally, Germany and Canada may be part of the same Western bloc, but they and New Zealand are all very far away from each other. Namibia's nearest neighbors in terms of LDI and Gini scores include South Africa and Botswana, both of which are at least in Africa, but also Colombia. On the other end of the graph, Bangladesh and Sudan are scored similarly. Further research into geographic factors for neighbors' differences may be useful.

Figure 2:



Since Gini does not assess a country's overall wealth, however, this factor also bore assessing. My next hypothesis is that a state with greater overall resources in the form of a higher GDP will score better on democratic institutions than a state with fewer resources and resultant less overall wealth, rather than the null of no correlation or an inverse relationship. Again, there is a positive association between a state's democratic wellbeing and its overall wealth, with Qatar being a very notable outlier here. It is also noteworthy that while both the previous analyses showed associations between the measured factors, the trend line in this case is visibly steeper and the clustering almost divides countries into two groups. The highest joint score is that of Norway, though it has substantially lower GDP per capita than Qatar and there are several countries with higher LDI scores. Saudi Arabia, being a monarchy, has a very low LDI score, but it has a fairly low GDP per capita as well, suggesting that despite their oil wealth, they are distinct from Qatar in that they have a much larger population.

Figure 3:



Thus, it made sense to run a multivariate analysis to control for the relationships of the impact each factor had. When these three data points were compared against each other and the LDI, only the GDP per capita proved to be significant. A country with higher literacy or greater economic equality (characteristics which may themselves be linked) correlates with better democratic institutions, but the link is not sufficient to be causally significant.

Figure 4:

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Unstandardized Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	.120	.122		.989	.324
	Gini coefficient, 2000-2010	.002	.002	.072	.917	.361
	GDP per capita in 2008	8.480E-6	.000	.497	5.437	<.001
	Literacy rate	.002	.001	.140	1.619	.108

a. Dependent Variable: Liberal democracy index

With this in mind, further multivariate analysis was in order to control for the results being susceptible to correlation. Since GDP had proved to be the only significant result once a multivariate analysis was run, I next hypothesize that the significance of its relationship will hold up to comparison with a state's free trade and corruption levels, which I expect will also show significant association with the LDI, the null being no association. While GDP per capita retained its statistical significance, if marginally diminished, only a state having less corruption was substantially associated with its democratic wellbeing via the LDI. Free trade had no meaningful link with a state's LDI score, which together with the prior points on literacy and wealth make many of the lifestyle or quality of life advantages Western countries offer of limited significance to the preservation of a healthy democracy. This is consistent with the general lack of democratization in China, where the Tiananmen Square protests covered in history class gave way to no great political change even as China has been able to expand its industrialization internationally into helping developing nations (17).

Figure 5:

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Unstandardized Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	-.162	.107		-1.520	.131
	GDP per capita in 2008	-5.143E-6	.000	-.294	-3.144	.002
	Heritage Foundation rating: free trade	.003	.002	.137	1.981	.050
	Heritage Foundation rating: corruption	.011	.001	.880	9.193	<.001

a. Dependent Variable: Liberal democracy index

This prompted the hypothesis that, taking all five of these factors together and adding the length of time since a state had a change in government, the significance of the respective results would remain. The null for this is that the results would lose their statistical weight when all factors were controlled for together. Indeed, the results were very similar. GDP again lost some of its strength of association but remained significant, while all other factors except corruption fell short of a significant relationship with the LDI.

Figure 6:

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Unstandardized Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	-.250	.131		-1.904	.059
	Literacy rate	8.812E-6	.001	.001	.010	.992
	Gini coefficient, 2000-2010	.002	.002	.076	1.208	.230
	GDP per capita in 2008	-3.936E-6	.000	-.232	-2.129	.035
	Heritage Foundation rating: corruption	.011	.001	.914	7.709	<.001
	Heritage Foundation rating: free trade	.003	.002	.142	1.743	.084
	Number of years since the last regime transition	.000	.001	-.052	-.663	.509

a. Dependent Variable: Liberal democracy index

Whether GDP would continue to lose strength of association until it reached irrelevance when other factors are controlled for is beyond the scope of this paper. What is certain is that a state's corruption, that being the compromised state of the people who make up the government such that they do not act in the public interest, is strongly related to a state's LDI score. This shows the importance of a state's elites to standing against autocratization, as well as showing how they can do so: when personal commitment to ethical action is the cultural norm, it protects the state against malignant or unethical actors. Even when a state has recently undergone regime change, it can be inferred from the significance of these results that so long as the members of government act with integrity, a stable and resilient democracy is achievable.

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