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# A Tale of Culture-Bound Regime Evolution: The Centennial Democratic Trend and Its Recent Reversal

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# **A Tale of Culture-Bound Regime Evolution: The Centennial Democratic Trend and Its Recent Reversal**

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## Abstract

Using a new measure of “comprehensive democracy” derived from V-Dem ([www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net)), my analysis traces the global democratic trend over the last 116 years, from 1900 till 2016, looking in particular at the centennial trend’s cultural zoning. Despite a burgeoning literature on resurgent authoritarianism, I find no evidence for a wholesale reversal of the centennial democratic trend, although indications for a decennial stagnation and a very recent downswing are undeniable. Whether this downswing will turn into a lasting erosion of democracy remains to be seen but seems unlikely in light of the fact that previous reverse waves have always only temporarily halted democracy’s long-term ascension. At the same time, democracy has been proceeding and continues to differentiate political regimes in a strongly culture-bound manner: high levels of democracy remain a distinctive feature of countries in which emancipative values have grown strong over the generations. By the same token, backsliding and autocratization are limited to cultures with *under*-developed emancipative values. In line with this finding, public support for democracy neither favors democratization, nor does it prevent autocratization in *disjunction* from emancipative values. On the contrary, public support for democracy shows such pro-democratic effects if—and only if—it co-exists in close association with emancipative values. The reason is that—in disconnect from emancipative values—support for democracy frequently reverts its meaning, indicating the exact opposite of what intuition suggests: namely, support for *autocracy*. In conclusion, the prospects for democracy are bleak where emancipative values remain weak.

# I. The New Pessimism about Democracy

“We all agree that pessimism is a mark of superior intellect.”

(John Kenneth Galbraith)

When my co-authors and I wrote the introductory chapter of the first edition of *Democratization* in 2008, the general mood in the discipline was enthusiastic about the *centennial democratic trend* and optimism prevailed about the future of democracy. Accordingly, we pointed out that the world as a whole has experienced over the last century several consecutive waves of democratization, concluding—in unison with many other observers—that a clear majority of the global population now lives in democracies (Haerpfer, Inglehart, Bernhagen & Welzel 2009). As was practice back then, we documented this conclusion using the, at the time, standard democracy indicators from Polity and Freedom House. Due to these indicators, Western countries started out at the top level of democracy a long time ago and endured at the top level all the way until the most recent observation. Alongside the West’s democratic persistence, the world as a whole has then become more and more democratic through consecutive waves by which region after region converged towards the Western standard. These waves affected in an order of sequence Southern Europe (early-mid 1970s), Latin America (late 1970s/early 1980s), East Asia (late 1980s), Central and Eastern Europe (late 1980s/early 1990s) and large parts of Sub-Saharan Africa (early-mid 1990s). Due to this picture, only China, the Islamic world and some very special places remained unaffected by the democratic trend, and it seemed to be only a matter of time when this would change as well.

In the meanwhile, the mood in the discipline has turned dramatically more pessimistic. The resilience of authoritarianism in such successfully modernizing countries as Singapore and China, the revival of authoritarianism in Russia, Turkey and Venezuela, democratic backsliding in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, the global proliferation of so called “electoral autocracies,” the return (Russia) and ascension (China) of autocratic empires to global power as well as the recent successes of right-wing populism with its anti-democratic tendencies all are fueling the new pessimism about democracy and its prospects.

Two widely cited articles by Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk (2016; 2017) represent the apex of the new pessimism, sounding the alarm that even the most long-standing democracies of the West are now in a state of “de-consolidation.” In the face of Brexit and Trump, many observers like to agree (cf. Norris & Inglehart 2016). However, some responses published in the *Journal of Democracy* point out that Foa and Mounk’s alarmist conclusions derive from over-

statements of the facts and even involve some severe mis-interpretations of the data (Alexander & Welzel 2017; Norris 2017; Voeten 2017).

This debate should give us a moment to pause and ask whether the new pessimism isn't just as misplaced as was the optimism that prevailed before. This question seems all the more pressing when one recognizes that public discourse and academic debate move since decades through a recurrent ebb and flow in the "crisis of democracy" rhetoric, all the while democracy itself has—so far—weathered all these crises.

## II. A Fresh New Look at Democracy: The V-Dem Project

Indeed, this might be an ideal time to re-consider the centennial democratic trend and to re-evaluate the global state of democracy today from a fresh new perspective. Fortunately, the *Varieties of Democracy* project ([www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net)), hosted by the University of Gothenburg, offers a welcome opportunity for such a fresh new look (Coppedge, Gerring & Lindberg et al. 2017). The *Varieties of Democracy* (V-Dem) project emerged from an increasing dissatisfaction with the standard democracy indicators by Polity, Freedom House and others. One reason of dissatisfaction consists in the fact that the Polity and Freedom House indicators are unable to exhibit quality differences in democracy among the high scoring countries of the Western world, even though it is obvious that democracy in Sweden, for instance, is in many aspects of higher quality than democracy in, say, Italy. Yet, in Freedom House and Polity data they all look the same.

To tackle this problem, V-Dem has formed a large global network of academics, using the most advanced methods of expert coding, to create several dozen indicators of democracy, for every country and every year since 1900 until 2016, the most recent available data at the time of this writing. V-Dem acknowledges that concepts of democracy vary and, thus, provides disaggregated indicators that scholars can combine as they like, depending on how narrowly or broadly they wish to define democracy.

In line with major works in democratic theory, I see democracy as a tool of human empowerment whose primary purpose is to entitle people to master their own lives and to give them a voice and vote in politics (cf. Dahl 1973 [1971]; Held 1996; Sen 1999). The V-Dem data cover three aspects that I believe are particularly essential for democracy's empowering purpose (cf. Coppedge, Lindberg, Skaaning & Teorell 2015). The first of these aspects is the "*electoral* democracy component," which measures how regular, open, fair and free the elections in a country are and how large a proportion of public offices is filled by contested elections (cf.

Teorell, Coppedge, Skaaning & Lindberg 2016). The “*participatory* democracy component” measures how many legal channels of participation a country offers its citizens, from the local to the national level, and how easy it is for the citizens to use these channels. Finally, the “*liberal* democracy component” measures the extent of civil rights, including minority rights, as well as power separation and horizontal checks on the executive (cf. Luehrmann, Lindberg & Tannenberg 2017).<sup>2</sup>

The distinctiveness of these three components makes them equally important in generating “*comprehensive* democracy,” which exists when the electoral, participatory and liberal components all are present in high quality. Hence, to obtain a single comprehensive measure of democracy, one needs to combine somehow the electoral, participatory and liberal components. One obvious way to do so, is to average the three measures. But this assumes that strength in one component compensates weakness in another, which I think is inadequate because it seems obvious to me that each component is more meaningful when the other two components are present in higher quality (cf. Vanhanen 2003; Alexander & Welzel 2010). In other words, the three components of democracy interact in mutually conditional ways, such that what one component contributes to comprehensive democracy depends on the quality of the other two. Clearly, the mathematical procedure to model mutual conditionality is multiplication. Thus, I calculate each country’s score in comprehensive democracy for each year by multiplying with each other the three scores for the electoral, participatory and liberal components. Doing so sets the bar for democracy high because in multiplication it is always the smallest factor that determines the size of the final product. Therefore, multiplication is the ideal operation to express the necessity and insufficiency of each single condition. For the same reason, multiplication establishes what Goertz (2006) calls a “weakest link” concept of measurement: the whole chain (here comprehensive democracy) is only as strong as its weakest element.

Since V-Dem provides scores for the electoral, participatory and liberal components in a scale range from minimum 0 to maximum 1, with decimal fractions for intermediate positions, the multiplicative score for comprehensive democracy is in the same scale range.

So what new insights do we gain when using this comprehensive measure of democracy to re-examine the centennial democratic trend: Do we see the same optimistic picture as in earlier

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<sup>2</sup> V-Dem also provides measures for a “deliberative” and “egalitarian” component of democracy, which is laudable as it gives scholars room of choice in creating various combinatory measures of democracy. Pondering over the possibility, I decided to not include these two components into my measure of “comprehensive democracy” because, in the majority of scholarship, they are less central to the concept of democracy than the electoral, participatory and liberal components (Held 2006). Furthermore, in certain aspects (like equal resource distribution in the “egalitarian” component) these components extend the idea of democracy beyond the boundary of institutions, which I believe is over-stretching the concept: Measures of democracy should be strictly limited to institutional opportunity structures; they should *not* incorporate the societal (i.e., economic and cultural) pre-conditions in which institutions are embedded. In conclusion, I limit myself to those V-Dem components with a clear-cut focus on institutions.

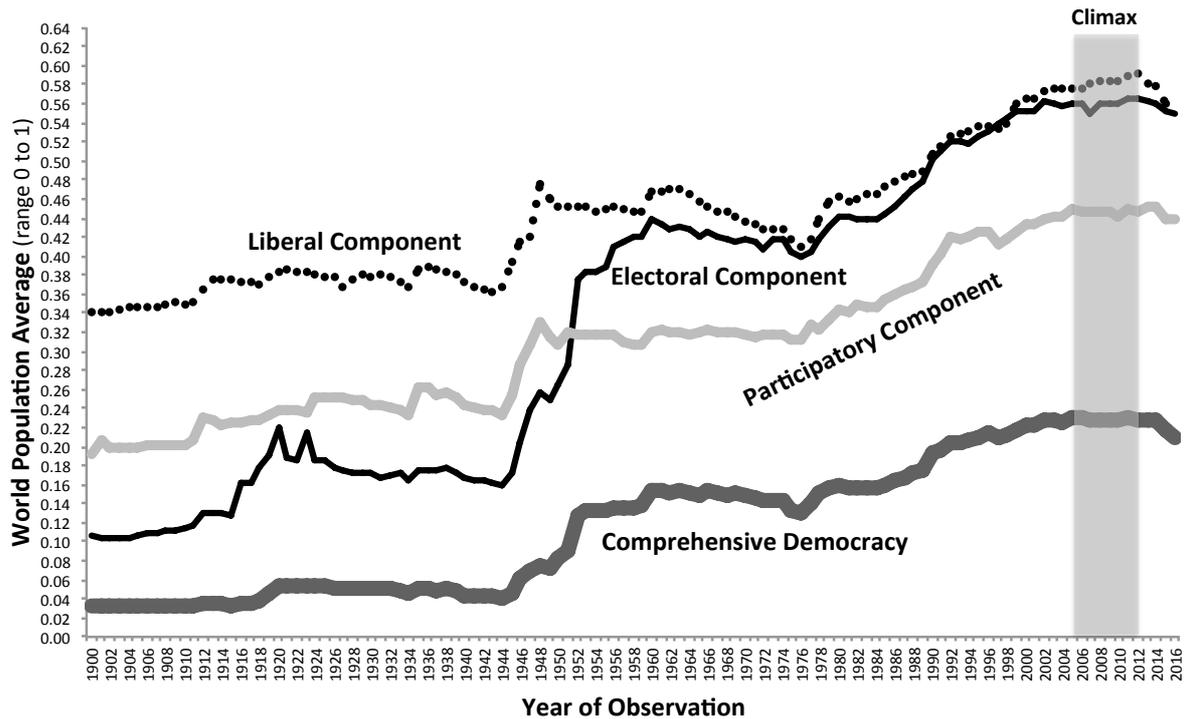
global trend analyses by Markoff and White (2009), with little evidence for democratic backsliding as shown by Møller and Skaaning (2013)? Or do we confirm Mechkova, Luehrmann and Lindberg's (2017) newer results in which the signs of a rather encompassing recent recession of democracy are undeniable?

In contrast to these authors' recent overview, I calculate regional and yearly averages by weighting nations for the proportional size of their population. From the viewpoint of humanity as a whole, the weighted treatment of nations is mandatory because the significance of a nation's democraticness varies in direct proportion to the respective population's share in the world population. For instance, it carries greater weight for humanity's state of democracy when more than one billion Indians would live under democracy than when some 80,000 Andorrans do so. To be clear, this is not to say that an individual Andorran counts less than an individual Indian for our species' state of democracy. On the contrary, both individuals count exactly the same in this measurement perspective. They would count unequally, and very heavily so, only if we treated each nation as an equally important unit, in complete ignorance of its population size. If people are supposed to count equally (which democracy implies they should), nations cannot.

### **III. Re-Examining the Centennial Democratic Trend: A Reversal?**

Looking at the entire world over the long time span from 1900 till 2016, Figure 1 shows a continuous incremental increase in all three components of democracy, with a spike—especially in the electoral component—after World War II and a steepening slope since the mid 1970s, which is holding on until about 2005. The pronounced spike after World War II reflects the fact that a few nations with rather large populations—namely India, Japan, Germany and Italy—became democratic during this time. However, the democratic trend stagnates since 2005 on the plateau it has reached by then and even shows a slight downward dip during the last two to four years, depending on the specific component we are looking at. This finding confirms Mechkova, Luehrmann and Lindberg's evidence (2017) from a population-weighted perspective, which is reassuring as the two approaches cross-validate each other's results.

Fig 1 The Centennial Democratic Trend I (global democracy averages)



Note: Data are from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project ([www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net)) and cover between 85 (in 1900) and 175 countries (in 2016). To calculate yearly global averages, we weight countries for the size of their population. Comprehensive Democracy is the product of V-Dem’s Electoral, Participatory and Liberal Components.

Combining the electoral, participatory and liberal components into a single index of comprehensive democracy replicates these trend features, albeit on a lower base level and with a slightly flatter slope. Treating the three components as mutually conditional, as my multiplicative index does, provides a more rigid measurement standard under which the democratic trend appears more modest than when one simply averages the three democracy components. The rigidity of my measure is also evident in the fact that—despite its continuous rise over the last 116 years—the global average in comprehensive democracy today only reaches 0.22 scale points, which is less than just a quarter of the scale maximum. With Polity and Freedom House data, by contrast, the global average in democracy easily crosses the scale midpoint or even the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile, pretending a substantially better state of affairs than my conservative measure reveals.<sup>3</sup>

So let’s try a different approach and see if we can replicate from a another angle this conservative picture of the global state of affairs concerning democracy. To do so, I average the

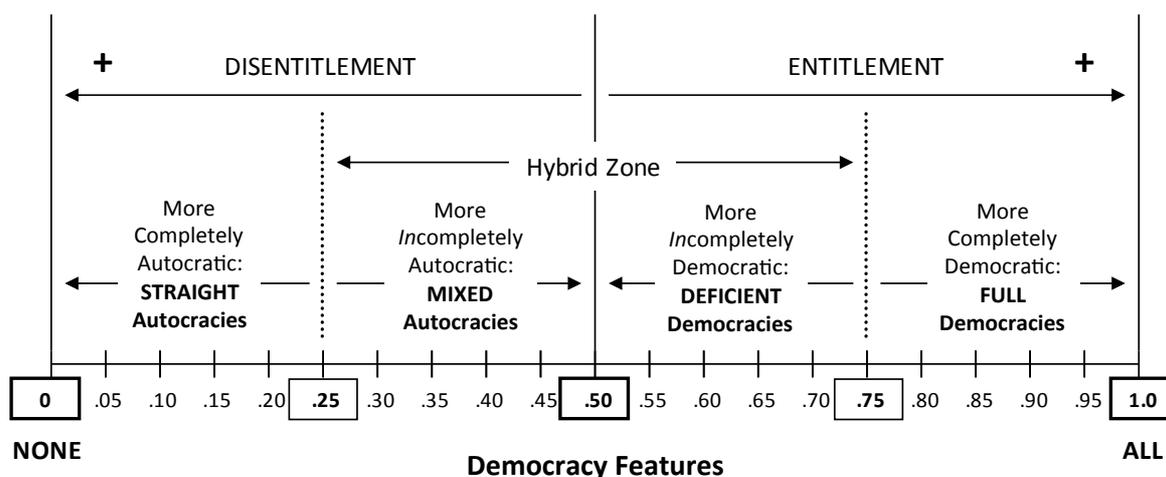
<sup>3</sup> The only other democracy indicator producing a picture of the global state of affairs concerning democracy as conservative as my comprehensive democracy index derived from V-Dem data is Alexander, Inglehart and Welzel’s (2012) “effective democracy index.” This index downgrades Freedom House’s combined civil liberties and political rights scores for unaccounted deficiencies in rule of law (Alexander & Welzel 2011). It is noteworthy that, of all available democracy measures, the effective democracy index correlates strongest with the comprehensive democracy index derived from V-Dem. The correlation ( $R = 0.92$ ;  $N = 172$ ) is indeed so strong that one could consider the comprehensive democracy index an almost perfect replica of the effective democracy index, which provides a strong cross-validation of both measures.

countries' scores over the electoral, participatory and liberal components and divide up regimes by their location on the resulting unitary democracy spectrum, as shown in Figure 2. Specifically, I distinguish (1) “*straight autocracies*” in the lowest quartile of the spectrum (0 to 0.24 scale points), (2) “*mixed autocracies*” in the second-lowest quartile (0.25 to 0.50 scale points), (3) “*deficient democracies*” in the third quartile (0.51 to 0.75 scale points) and (4) “*full democracies*” in the top quartile (above 0.75 scale points). This division of the spectrum follows Alexander and Welzel’s (2010) rationale and should be inherently intuitive: On a fine-scaled unitary democracy spectrum from 0 to 1, where 0 means the complete absence of democracy and 1 its full presence, the spectral zone below 0.50 represents the area in which the deficiency of democracy is the prevalent feature. For ease of language, I call this deficiency area “autocracy.” But in the deficiency zone, 0.25 is still an intuitive cut-off point in the sense that it divides regimes into those being closer to the complete absence of democracy at the zero-point (“straight autocracies”) and those being closer to the scale mid-point where things are perfectly hybrid (“mixed autocracies”). By the same token, the spectral zone above 0.50 constitutes the area in which the presence of democracy is the prevalent feature. Yet again, 0.75 is another natural cut-off point in this area because it divides regimes into those being closer to the hybridity point in the middle of the scale (“deficient democracies”) and those being closer to the upper end of the spectrum (“full democracies”).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This spectral differentiation of regimes is distinct from V-Dem’s qualitative regime typology and provides a meaningful complementary perspective that accords to the existence of a unitary autocracy-democracy continuum (cf. Luehrmann, Lindberg & Tannenberg 2017). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that my uni-dimensional spectral typology of regimes coincides with Luehrman et al.’s multi-dimensional four-fold classification to a very high degree, evident in a Spearman’s correlation of 0.82 across 16,888 country-year observations. Accordingly, there is large correspondance between (mine vis-à-vis Luehrmann et al.’s) “straight autocracies” and “closed autocracies” (91.8% overlap), “mixed autocracies” and “electoral autocracies” (47.8%), “deficient democracies” and “electoral democracies” (46.1%) as well as “full democracies” and “liberal democracies” (97.8%). As is obvious from these numbers, the coincidence is especially high for the pure types, while there is lesser agreement on the mixed types, which raises the question about the preferability of the two typologies. I would argue that this depends on context but would like to note that—in terms of “predictive validity”—the two typologies perform strikingly equal, albeit with a very slight advantage for my spectral classification. These results are available upon request.

Fig 2 The Spectral Typology of Political Regimes

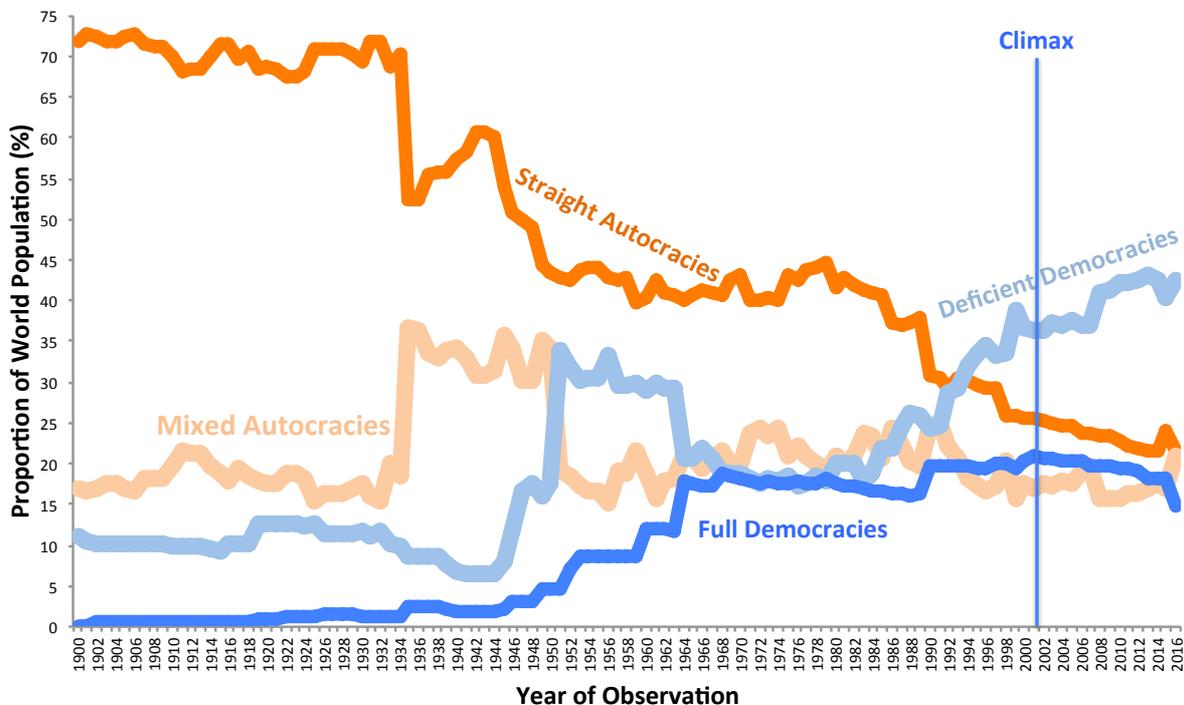


Note: Adapted from Welzel (2013: Fig 8.1).

Looking at the development of these spectrally defined regime types provides an insightful glance at historic regime evolution, which is distinct from and at the same time complementary to previous trend analyses of the V-Dem data (cf. Mechkova, Luehrmann & Lindberg 2017). Interestingly, as Figure 3 illustrates, the most striking feature in this perspective is actually the steep monotoneous decrease of straight autocracies, which drop from a share of 72 percent in 1900 to close to twenty percent in 2016. Mixed autocracies, by contrast, have kept their share among the world population more or less constant, with about twenty percent of the sovereign parts of the world population living in this type of regime, in 1900 as well as in 2016. This constancy is interspersed by a temporary rise of the share of mixed autocracies in the inter-war period, due to the rise of fascism. Most surprisingly perhaps, the share of the world population living in full democracies has risen after World War II from less than five percent in 1945 to just nineteen percent in 1970. But that's pretty much it. Despite a large literature on consecutive waves of democratization, the share of the world population living in truly full democracies is quite stagnant since 1970. It reaches its climax of an unimpressive 21 percent in about 2000 but is trending down to just fifteen percent in 2016, with a remarkably significant drop of five percentage points over just the last two years. So what the consecutive waves of democratization really did is to increase the share of the world population living in *deficient* democracies, which rose from twenty percent in the early 1980s to about forty-two percent in 2016. In conclusion,

the key achievement of the centennial democratic trend consists in the transformation of straight autocracies into deficient democracies, which sounds quite sobering in light of the democratic euphoria that tainted three decades of transition research.

Fig 3 The Centennial Democratic Trend II (regime types)



Note: Data are from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project ([www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net)) and cover between 85 (in 1900) and 175 countries (in 2016). Straight Autocracies are countries scoring between 0 and 0.25 on the average of V-Dem’s Electoral, Participatory and Liberal Components. Mixed Autocracies score between 0.25 and 0.50 on this average, while Deficient Democracies score between 0.50 and 0.75. Full Democracies score above 0.75.

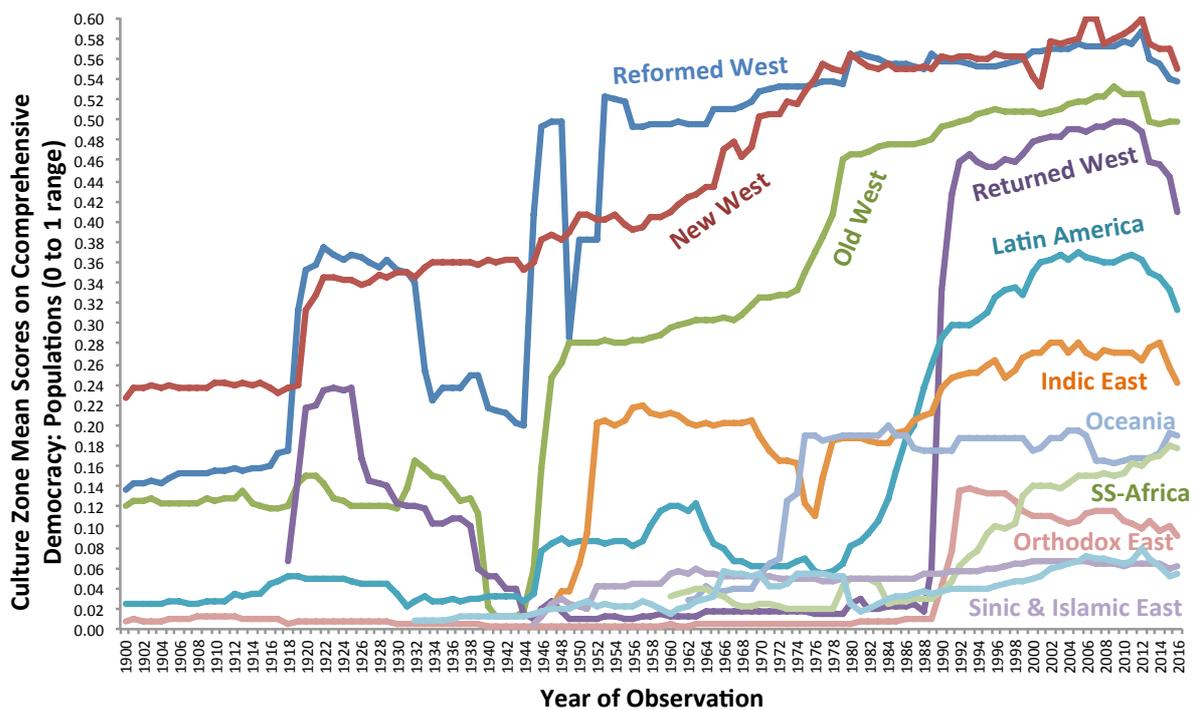
#### IV. Democracy’s Persisting Culture-Boundedness

Figure 4 displays the centennial democratic trend with regional breakdowns, using my historically grounded culture zone scheme (Welzel 2013: 25-33). This scheme defines culture zones by distinct imperial and religious traditions, which overlap with language families as well as ethnic lineages and—accordingly—tend to concentrate in certain geographic areas. I distinguish four Western culture zones, which are defined by their imprint from three emancipatory movements in history that shape Western identity: Renaissance-Humanism, the Reformation and the Enlightenment. The “*Old West*” to begin with, comprises those Romance-tongue nations of Southern Europe that were once part of the Roman Empire, from which they inherited their Catholic tradition. The “*New West*” includes English-speaking nations in North America and Australasia that were once British-ruled colonies, settled by farmers mostly from Protestant Northwestern Europe. The “*Reformed West*” refers to those Germanic-tongue nations in

Northwestern Europe in which the Protestant Reformation was most successful. The “*Returned West*” covers those (mostly) Slavic-tongue nations in Central-Eastern Europe with a Western-Christian tradition, which joined the European Union after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Juxtaposed to the West, four Eastern culture zones took shape in the axial belt of Eurasian civilizations. The “*Indic East*” incorporates those nations in South Asia whose history has been played out under the imprint of Indian culture. Likewise, the “*Sinic East*” embodies those nations in East Asia under the influence of Chinese culture. The “*Islamic East*” includes the nations in the Middle East and North Africa that have been part of the Arab, Persian and Ottoman Islamic empires. Finally, the “*Orthodox East*” incorporates the nations in Eastern Europe and Central Asia that have been dominated by Russia with its Christian-Orthodox roots. Besides, this eight-fold East-West scheme, I distinguish the culture zones of *Latin America*, *Sub-Saharan Africa* and the Pacific islands of *Oceania*.

Fig 4 The Centennial Democratic Trend II (culture zones)



Note: Data are from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project ([www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net)) and cover between 85 (in 1900) and 175 countries (in 2016). Countries are attributed to culture zones due to Welzel’s (2013) historically grounded culture zone scheme. To calculate yearly culture zone averages in Comprehensive Democracy, countries are weighted proportional to the size of their national population.

Using this culture zone scheme, Figure 4 reveals a couple of distinct culture-bound trending patterns. Starting from the highest base level in 1900 (0.22 scale points), the “New West” experiences a pronounced quick rise (towards 0.33 scale points) after World War I, from where it enters a long trajectory of incremental gains in comprehensive democracy throughout

the entire period until 1980 (0.56 scale points). Since then, the “New West’s” ascension continues on a much flatter slope, reaching a climax of 0.60 scale points in 2006, followed by a drop down to 0.55 scale points over just the last five years, from 2011 till 2016.

The “Reformed West” starts out from the second-highest base level in 1900 (at 0.14 scale points) and enters a bumpy ascending path, interspersed by a big dip during Nazi rule, followed by a steep rise after World War II. In about 1980, the “Reformed” and “New West” meet at 0.56 scale points and are indistinguishable ever since.

The “Old West” starts on a lower base level (0.12 scale points) and drops further during fascism in Italy. The “Old West” then returns quickly to a higher base level after World War II (reaching 0.28 scale points) but remains considerably behind the “New” and “Reformed West,” until Portugal, Spain and Greece democratize in the early/mid 1970s. Because of these transitions, the “Old West” approaches the “New” and “Reformed West,” although it never closes the gap entirely, reaching its climax in 2009 at 0.53 scale points, from where the “Old West” slides back to 0.49 scale points in 2016.

The last culture zone to join the Western trajectory is the “Returned West,” which skyrockets during the late 1980s/early 1990s from literally the bottom sharply upward to approach the other Western zone’s high-base trajectory, albeit on a somewhat lower intercept that consistently hovers by 0.10 scale points underneath the “New” and “Reformed West” and by 0.03 scale points underneath the “Old West.” The “Returned West” reaches a climax of 0.50 scale points in 2009, followed by a pronounced drop to 0.41 until 2016, due to democratic backsliding in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

More generally, since the turn of the Millennium, the upward slope of the West’s trajectory has leveled off and even turned into a considerable and uniform recent drop of about 0.05 scale points on average since about 2010. This drop resonates with recent concerns about right-wing populism and its tendency to undermine key features of democracy, such as power separation, critical media, cultural pluralism and minority protection.

Nevertheless, despite stagnation and signs of a partial recent reversal of the West’s democratic ascension, Western populations still live on an exceptionally high base-level of comprehensive democracy that no other culture zone in the world comes even close to.<sup>5</sup> Despite consecutive waves of democratization around the globe, high levels of comprehensive democracy still remain a singularity of the West, which continues to represent a very distinct cluster of

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<sup>5</sup> When one collapses the eleven-fold culture zone scheme into a dummy that only distinguishes Western and non-Western nations, this simple distinction already accounts for almost fifty percent of the entire cross-cultural variation in comprehensive democracy. This finding further underlines democracy’s cultural linkage to the West and the signature marker of the West’s culture, emancipative values: cross-national variation in the latter is tied to even more than fifty percent to the simple Western/non-Western division.

nations. In line with this evidence, the centennial democratic trend has by no means produced greater global convergence on Western democratic standards.

Partly, the lack of global convergence in comprehensive democracy reflects the fact that Western nations started out at the horizon of democracy but then continued to expand this horizon farther and farther. Thus, the rise of the global average in comprehensive democracy over time partly reflects the continuous ascension of Western nations themselves. Standard democracy measures by Polity and Freedom House gloss over this important observation because their less nuanced views set the bar for democracy much lower, for which reason Western nations appear on the top level of democracy from the beginning, showing a constant flat line, to which various regional groups of non-Western nations have converged through consecutive waves of democratization. The view provided by my take on the V-Dem data is markedly different on both accounts: continuous improvement among Western nations (with a recent drop) and a largely incomplete approximation of non-Western nations to Western standards (with recent drops as well).

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that—although Western nations reach exceptionally high levels in comprehensive democracy—they are still considerably below the possible maximum. On average, they score at about 0.52 scale points in comprehensive democracy, all the while the theoretical endpoint is at 1.0. Hence, there is still substantial room for improvement, which highlights another difference to the measures by Freedom House and Polity where dozens of nations around the world score at the maximum. With my measure of comprehensive democracy, no nation in the world has reached the maximum yet.<sup>6</sup>

In line with these observations, Figure 5 documents that the countries' culture zone memberships account for 67 percent of the entire cross-national variance in comprehensive democracy across 175 states worldwide.<sup>7</sup> As Figure 6 illustrates, the variance proportion in democracy explained by the nations' culture zone memberships is basically constant since the end

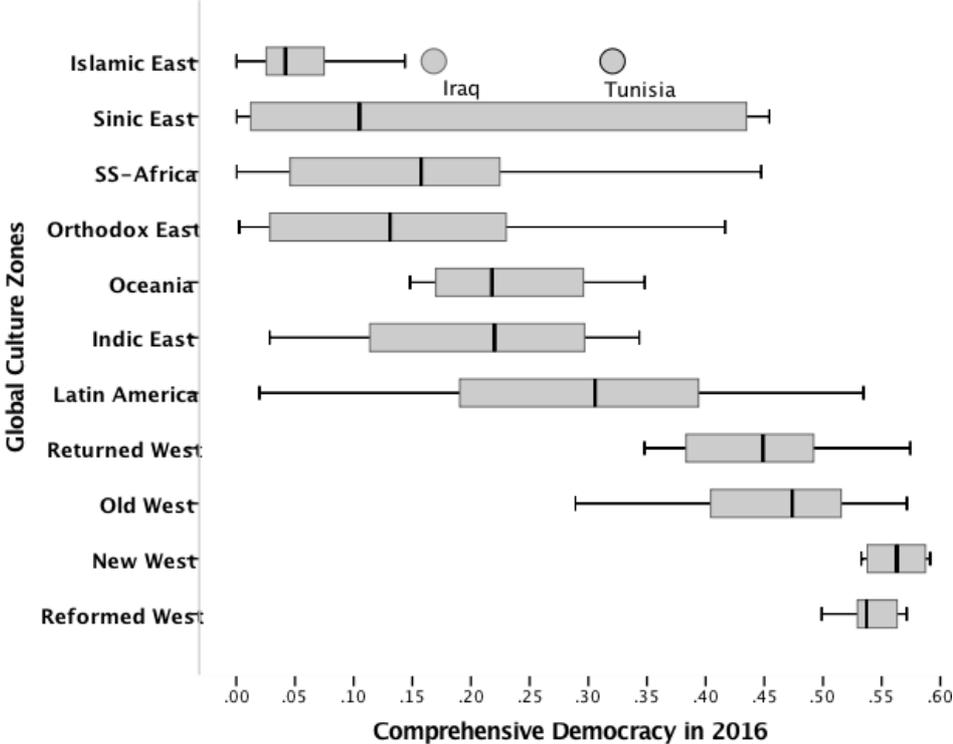
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<sup>6</sup> Again, the only other democracy indicator replicating this feature is Alexander, Inglehart and Welzel's (2012) "effective democracy index."

<sup>7</sup> An interesting question is whether my eleven-fold culture zone scheme provides the most effective grouping of countries in terms of the cross-national variance in democracy that this grouping accounts for. To explore this question, I attributed the 175 nations into twenty-eight regional groups that are considerably smaller than my culture zones. Latin America, for instance, divides into three smaller regional groups: Central America, the Caribbean and South America. Indeed, these twenty-eight global regions account for more of the cross-national variance in comprehensive democracy than do the eleven culture zones, namely eighty-five percent compared to sixty-seven percent. This 18-percentage points gain means an increase of the explained variance by a factor of 0.27. But this increase has been achieved by enlarging the number of units from eleven to twenty-eight, which corresponds to a factor of 2.5. Thus, we need to relate the variance explained by a grouping scheme to the number of groups that it includes, due to the premise that a grouping scheme's effectiveness increases by the *ratio* of its explained variance relative to its number of groups. Looking at this ratio, the eleven-fold culture zone scheme is double as effective as the twenty-eight-fold regional groups scheme:  $67 / 11 = 6.1$  compared to  $85 / 28 = 3.0$ .

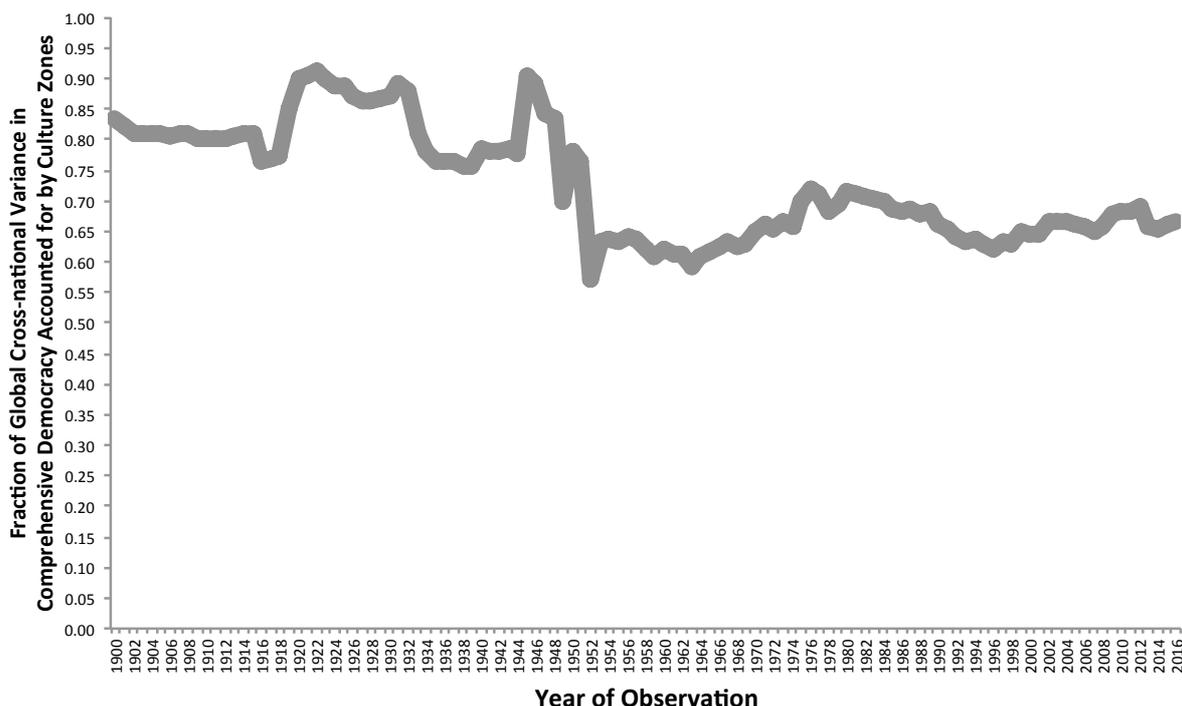
of World War II. Despite consecutive regional waves of democratization, contemporary democracy appears every bit as culture-bound as it used to be.

**Fig 5 Democracy's Culture Zone-Boundedness**



*Note:* Data are from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project ([www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net)) and cover 175 countries. Countries are attributed to culture zones due to Welzel's (2013) historically grounded culture zone scheme. Comprehensive Democracy is the product of V-Dem's Electoral, Participatory and Liberal Component. To calculate culture zone averages in Comprehensive Democracy, countries are weighted proportional to the size of their national population.

Fig 6 The Centennial Persistence of Democracy's Culture Zone-Boundedness



Note: Data are from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project ([www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net)) and cover 175 countries. Countries are attributed to culture zones due to Welzel's (2013) historically grounded culture zone scheme. Comprehensive Democracy is the product of V-Dem's Electoral, Participatory and Liberal Component. To calculate culture zone averages in Comprehensive Democracy, countries are weighted proportional to the size of their national population.

Outside the West, improvements in comprehensive democracy are modest at best, with the exception of Latin America, which began a steep ascension in the late 1970s, ending up at two thirds of the Western standard, at 0.37 scale points in 2004. Since then, Latin America's ascension stalls and actually trends downward starting in 2010, reaching a recent low of 0.30 scale points, due to democratic backsliding in countries like Brazil and Venezuela.

With more than a billion people, India's establishment as a constitutional democracy in 1947 has a significant influence on the world population average in comprehensive democracy. However, the index of comprehensive democracy also reveals that India reaches at best half the Western standard, which conflicts with the traditional democracy measures by Polity and Freedom House where India scores much higher. On the other hand, India's modest democracy performance in the V-Dem data fully confirms Alexander, Welzel and Inglehart (2012) who claim since long that India's state of democracy fares too well in traditional measures and needs to be discounted for serious deficiencies in rule of law and human rights enforcement (cf. Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Alexander and Welzel 2010).<sup>8</sup> The very recent drop of the "Indic East" in Figure 4

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, with Alexander, Inglehart and Welzel's (2012) "effective democracy index," India scores at only a third of the scale maximum (at 0.33) in 2012 as well as in other years, which is practically identical with its score in comprehensive democracy (i.e., 0.32).

(down from 0.28 to 0.24 scale points between 2013 and 2016) mostly reflects India's democratic backsliding under the Hindu-nationalist administration of Modi.

Some other remarkable democratic improvements occurred among the Pacific island states of Oceania during the early 1970s, followed by a stable flat line until today. Sub-Saharan Africa experienced a similar rise during the early 1990s. Its slope has gotten flatter since 2000 but continues to point upward. Still, Oceania and Sub-Saharan Africa only achieve about a third of the Western standard in comprehensive democracy (at less than 0.20 scale points on average).

In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution during the early 1990s, the "Orthodox East" also moved to about a third of the Western standard through a very steep and short rise. But since the mid 1990s, the "Orthodox East" is on a clear downward slope, due to Russia's re-autocratization under Putin (down from 0.14 scale points in 1992 to 0.09 in 2016).

Since the beginning, the "Sinic East" moves continuously close to the bottom of the comprehensive democracy scale, reflecting China's resilient authoritarianism. The democratic transitions in South Korea and Taiwan in the late 1980s and in Mongolia in the early 1990s are hardly recognizable here because of these populations' minor size compared to China's more than one billion people.

The "Islamic East," too, moves continuously close to the bottom of the comprehensive democracy scale, with a barely recognizable improvement after the largely failed Arab Spring. Despite the democratic aspirations expressed during this upheaval, the countries with the biggest populations in the "Islamic East"—namely Iran, Egypt and Turkey—remain rock-solid authoritarian or are moving in this direction, as in the case of Turkey under Erdogan.

In summary, the global state of democracy has been continuously improving since the end of World War II. This improvement is due to (1) an incremental improvement of an increasingly uniform Western standard, and (2) due to other regions' consecutive ascension to two thirds (Latin America), half ("Indic East") and a quarter (Oceania, Sub-Saharan Africa, "Orthodox East") of the Western standard. As shown in Figure 1, humanity as a whole is experiencing an unprecedentedly high standard of democracy since the mid 1990s.

Nevertheless, there are some points of concern that darken this optimistic outlook. First, very high levels of comprehensive democracy remain a distinct feature of the West, with the notable exceptions of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Chile and Uruguay. Second, even among Western countries and these few non-Western exceptions, it is still a good way to the maximum in comprehensive democracy. Third, and probably most discomfiting, the centennial democratic trend has stalled since the turn of the Millennium and shows an almost uniform recent dip all over the world.

## V. Democracy's Societal Anchors

Why does democracy continue to be so culture-bound? One answer is that the societal roots in which democracy is anchored continue to be culture-bound as well. Indeed, advocates of modernization theory argue since long that democracy is a difficult achievement because it places certain demands on the populations among which it is practiced. Democracy is basically an emancipatory project because it is inspired by the idea to entitle people to practice freedoms—freedoms in guiding their personal lives and in participating in politics. To function properly, democracy thus places two major demands on the populations among which it is practiced: (1) *action resources*—including material means, cognitive capacities and connective opportunities—must be widely dispersed throughout large population segments because these resources shape people's capability to practice freedoms; (2) *emancipative values* must be firmly encultured among large population segments because only these values make people eager to practice freedoms (Welzel 2013). Accordingly, comprehensive democracy should show a strong societal anchorage in that its presence correlates powerfully with the spread of action resources and emancipative values among national populations.

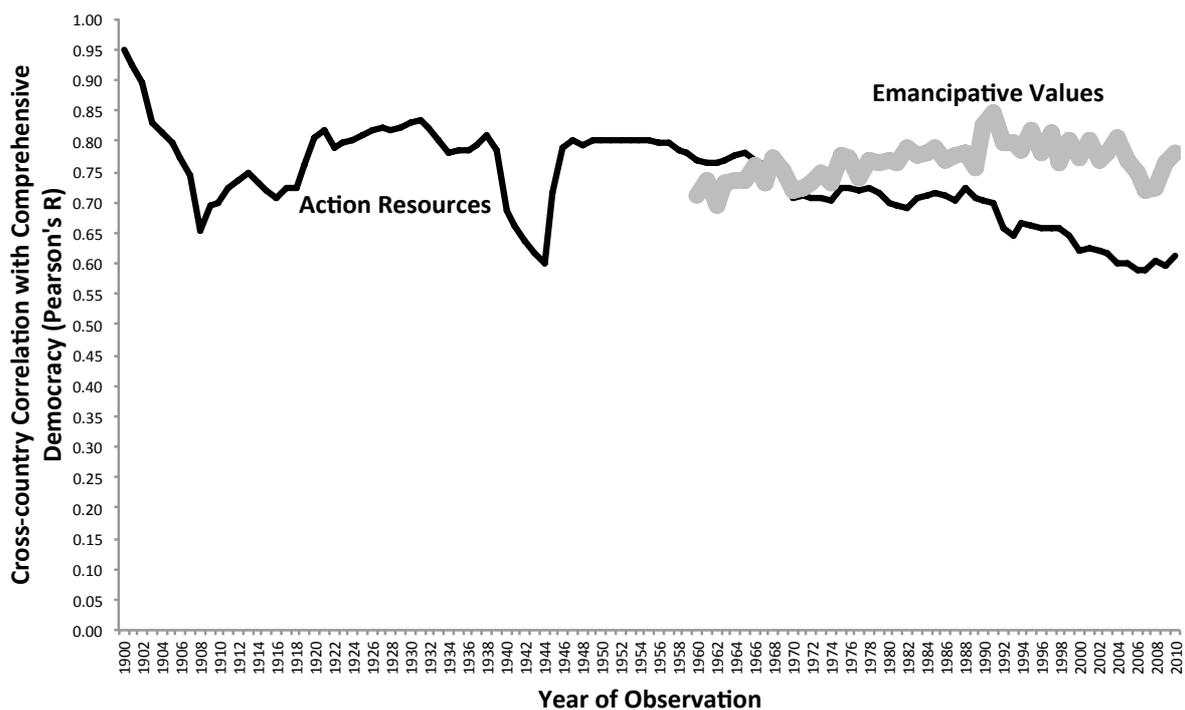
Figure 7 uses the encompassing measure of action resources described by Welzel and Inglehart (2018: ch. 9).<sup>9</sup> In line with my expectation, the diagram shows that the countries' levels of comprehensive democracy correlate with the spread of action resources among the people between  $R = 0.95$  and  $R = 0.65$ , in any given year from 1900 till 2010.<sup>10</sup> Democracy's linkage to people's action resources is somewhat weaker in the years preceding World War I and then, again, during World War II, which probably shows that rising nationalism in the context of wars can deteriorate democracy even in countries with widespread action resources. Since the early 1970s, the linkage of democracy to people's action resources is in a slight continuous decline, perhaps reflecting the fact that globalization, regional contagion and international advocacy all help to transplant democracy into countries in which people's action resources are less widespread. But even in the last year of observation, democracy's link to people's action resources remains decently strong.

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<sup>9</sup> The measure summarizes country-year data on average life expectancies, per capita income, schooling years (primary, secondary and tertiary combined) and inverse female fertility rates in a single factor score variable, which is then standardized between minimum 0 and maximum 1, with decimal fractions for intermediate positions. Missing data for single indicators are imputed from the available indicators using linear regression. For country-years before 1960, scores are estimated based on Vanhanen's (2003) "index of power resources," using linear regression: For country-years ( $N = 4,752$ ) in which both measures are available, the Pearson's correlation is at  $R = 0.82$ . My final measure of action resources also correlates strongly with Teorell's (2010) modernization index as well as with the Human Development Index ( $R = 0.93$ ;  $N = 5,253$ ) but has somewhat higher predictive power over democracy than these.

<sup>10</sup> The observation period ends here because of limitations in available data for the measures of action resources and emancipative values.

Fig 7 Democracy's Continuing Dependence on Its Economic (Action Resources) and Cultural (Emancipative Values) Societal Anchors



Note: Data for Comprehensive Democracy are from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project ([www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net)). Comprehensive Democracy is the product of V-Dem's Electoral, Participatory and Liberal Components. Action Resources comprise the populations' material, cognitive and connective resources, while Emancipative Values indicate their emphasis on universal freedoms. Both are estimated as explained in Welzel and Inglehart (2018). Country coverage for Action Resources varies from 85 cases in 1900 to 162 cases in 2010. Country coverage for Emancipative Values is constantly 94 cases worldwide, which represent more than 90% of the global population.

Emancipative values measure people's emphasis on universal freedoms, based on a dozen of items from the *World Values Surveys* (Welzel 2013: ch. 2). When it comes to these values, our data cover a shorter time series, which only starts in 1960, using the estimates introduced by Welzel and Inglehart (2018: ch. 9).<sup>11</sup> We also cover a smaller number of states (N = 94). But since these states include the biggest national populations in each region of the globe, they still represent more than ninety percent of the world population. Given these limitations, the diagram shows that the link of comprehensive democracy to people's emancipative values has a high temporal stability at a consistently strong correlation of  $R = 0.80$ .

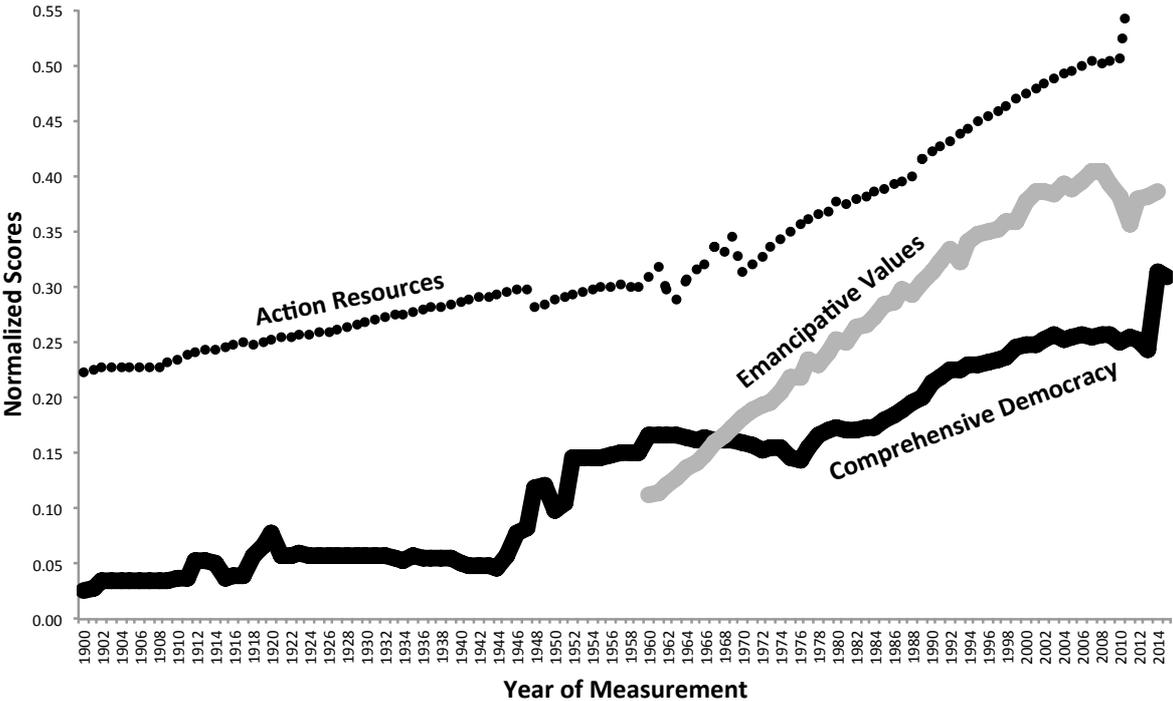
The temporal persistence of democracy's anchorage in action resources and emancipative values embodies a key message: Comprehensive democracy never really has established itself at high levels, and never for long, beyond societies in which the two main anchors of democracy—

<sup>11</sup> Welzel and Inglehart (2018) generate country-year estimates for emancipative values by transposing a country's cohort differences in emancipative values from a current survey into an annual time series that reaches back into the past until 1960. These backward estimates are then adjusted for time passage to reflect the progressive temporal trend in emancipative values. These trend adjustments in turn are conducted in a country-specific manner, assuming a steeper temporal trend for countries with higher mean levels in emancipative values today. Inevitably, this assumption simulates a reality in which the countries' emancipative values have been more similarly weak, the farther back we go into the past. Given that some domains of emancipative values, such as rising homosexual tolerance, represent relatively novel themes of emancipation, it seems plausible that countries have indeed been more similarly traditional on these issues farther back in time.

people’s action resources and emancipative values—grew strong among most of the population. As it seems, this is not about to change in the near future.

The temporal persistence of democracy’s link to action resources and emancipative values also suggests that—over time—action resources, emancipative values and comprehensive democracy co-evolve in close association with each other. Figure 8 demonstrates in striking clarity that this is indeed the case. As Welzel and Inglehart (2018) illustrate, the temporal co-evolution of action resources, emancipative values and comprehensive democracy is driven by a dynamic in which spreading action resources give rise to emancipative values, which then together with action resources release mass pressures in favor of comprehensive democracy.<sup>12</sup> By the same token, societies that do not embark on this upward trajectory of progressively co-evolving resources and values, are unlikely to achieve and sustain high levels of comprehensive democracy.

**Fig 8** The Global Co-Evolution of Action Resources, Emancipative Values and Comprehensive Democracy



*Note:* Action Resources, Emancipative Values and Comprehensive Democracy are measured for a constant set of 72 countries listed in the footer of Figure 9.4 of Welzel and Inglehart (2018). Since these countries include the largest populations in each global region, they represent more than 90% of the world population. To calculate yearly averages, countries are weighted proportional to the size of their population.

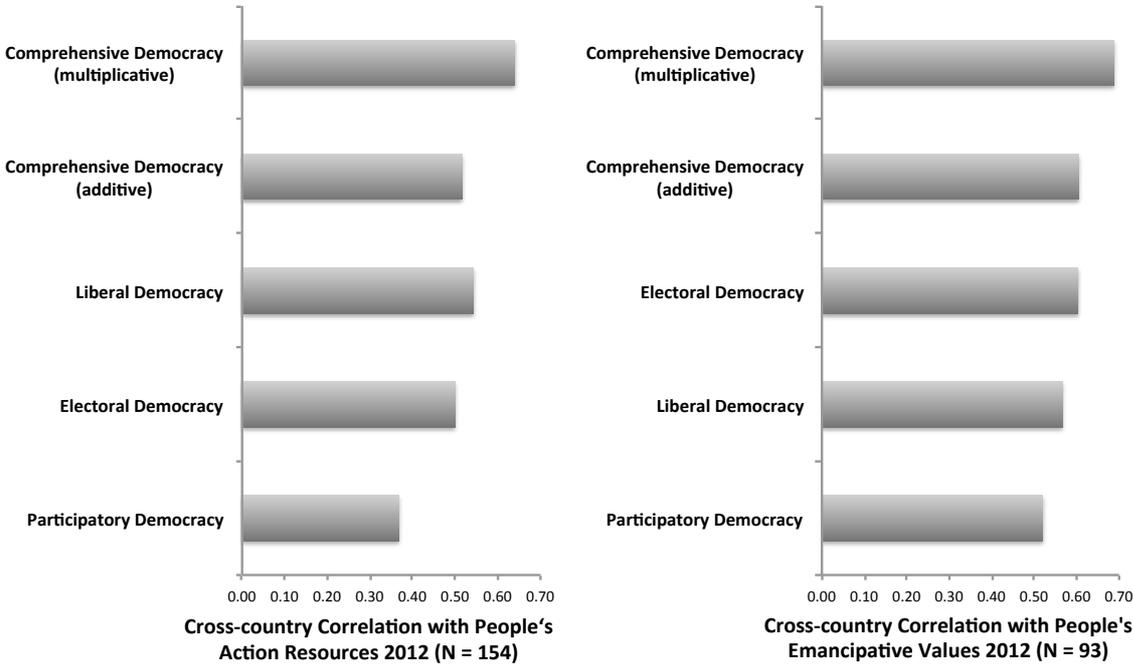
In contrast to my measure of comprehensive democracy, the traditional measures of democracy by Polity and Freedom House set the bar of democracy so low that many countries

<sup>12</sup> Welzel and Inglehart (2018) demonstrate this point in response to claims to the opposite by Dahlum and Knutsen (2016).

with substantially lesser action resources and emancipative values appear just as democratic as many Western nations where action resources and emancipative values are generally more abundant. This inflationary tendency in traditional democracy indicators partially obscures democracy’s rootedness in its economic and cultural societal anchors. Consequently, Freedom House and Polity measures of democracy correlate at a magnitude of 0.15 to 0.20 points weaker with both action resources and emancipative values.

Figure 9 shows that each of the three components of democracy is significantly and positively linked to people’s action resources and their emancipative values. When we combine the three components into my comprehensive measure of democracy, the societal anchorage of democracy surfaces even stronger—and more so when we combine the components multiplicatively than additively. Thus, in revealing the strength of democracy’s societal anchorage, a multiplicative combination is superior. This finding in turn illustrates that the components of democracy are not just additive complements to each other but actually condition each other such that each component’s contribution to the comprehensive measure depends on what the other two contribute.

**Fig 9** The Correlation of Comprehensive Democracy and Its Components with Action Resources and Emancipative Values



*Note:* Electoral, Participatory and Liberal Democracy are measured using the respective component indices from V-Dem. Action Resources and Emancipative Values are measured as explained in Welzel and Inglehart (2018).

## VI. Global Support for Democracy – A False Standard

Despite recent signs of a partial reversal of the centennial democratic trend, the grassroots societal seeds from which democracy grows—people’s action resources and emancipative values—show little sign of a general deterioration. On the contrary, overall these seeds of democracy continue to germinate and are doing so in most parts of the world, albeit on varying levels and at different paces—which account for the persisting cross-national variability in democracy.

Again, I claim that the societal seeds of democracy continue to develop, for the most part, progressively and that this is also true especially for democracy’s cultural seed: emancipative values. This claim contrasts starkly with Foa and Mounk’s (2016; 2017) alarmist conclusions about the eroding cultural basis of democracy in even the most mature democracies of the West. To estimate the strength of democracy’s cultural basis, Foa and Mounk—as countless scholars before them—focus on public support for democracy. The underlying assumption is that the scope of public support for democracy is the single most reliable indicator of a population’s aspiration for and appreciation of democracy. Obviously, this assumption implies that, when people say that they support democracy, these people have a roughly accurate understanding of what democracy means and, hence, all support the same thing when saying to support democracy. Unfortunately, this widely held assumption is just wrong and continues to inform flawed conclusions until this very day.

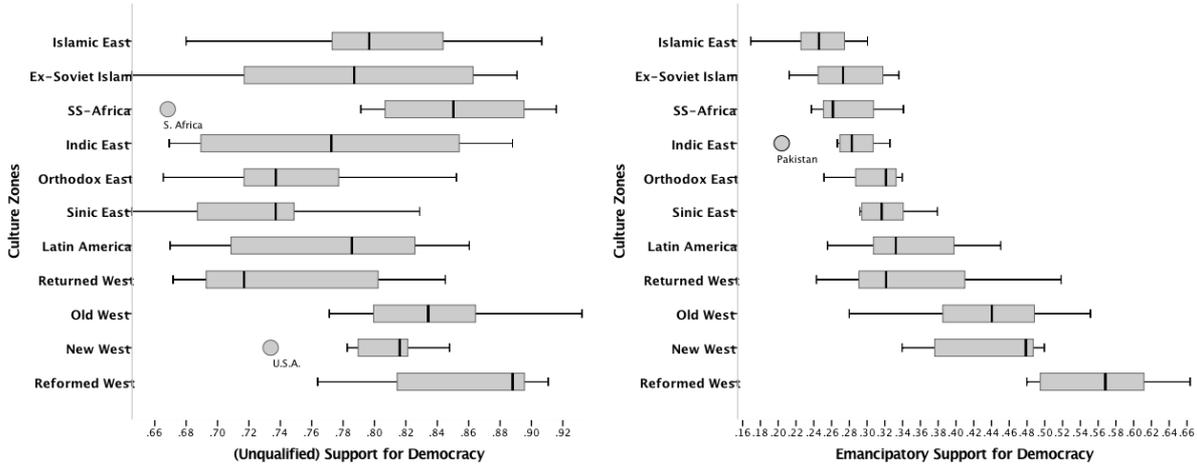
Indeed, recent evidence demonstrates in striking clarity that many people outside the Western world, as well as people in more traditional segments of Western populations, hold notions of democracy that are in flat contradiction to democracy’s electoral-participatory-liberal meaning in constitutional law, political theory and empirical research (Welzel & Kirsch 2016). Inevitably, when these people say that they support democracy, they in fact support its opposite, in which case the meaning of support for democracy turns into its own contradiction. For this reason, ratings of public support for democracy are strictly speaking incomparable, unless further qualified for the values that inspire this support.

Related recent evidence shows in similar clarity that emancipative values immunize people against the adoption of authoritarian mis-conceptions of democracy (Welzel & Kirsch 2016). Therefore, emancipative values also immunize people against mis-perceiving authoritarian regimes as democratic (Kruse, Ravlik & Welzel 2016). The two diagrams in Figure 10 demonstrate these findings in glaring lucidity.



accords to a solid two-thirds minimum base of the world population. But *unqualified* support for democracy can mean anything from truly supporting democracy to supporting authoritarianism. For this reason, culture zone variation in *unqualified* support for democracy is—for its most part—random, showing no clear alignment with culture zones.

Fig 11 The Differential Alignment of Unqualified and Emancipatory Support for Democracy with Culture Zones

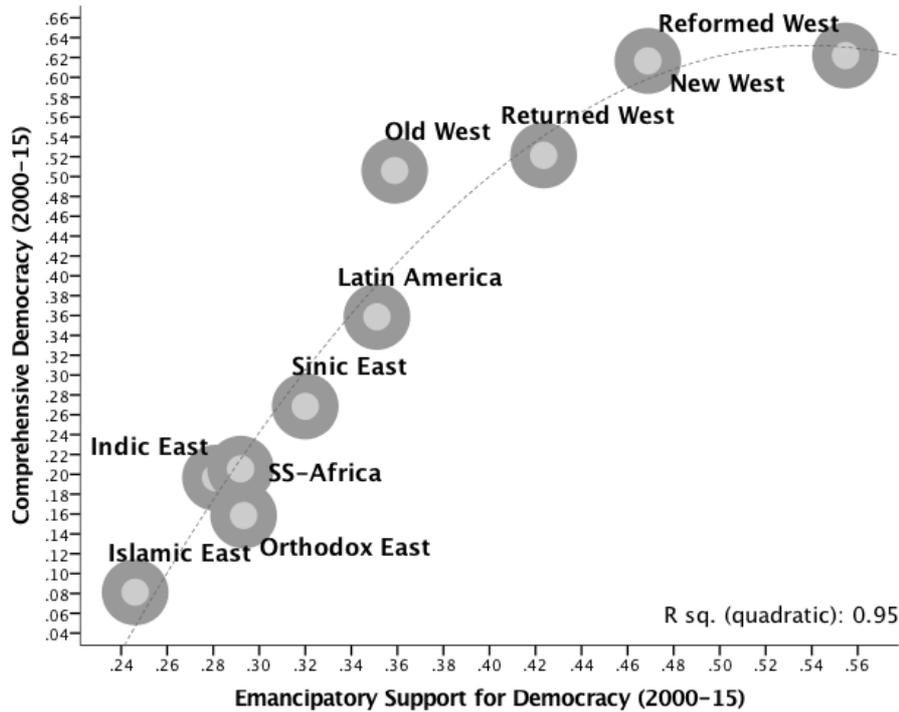


Notes: Culture zones account for only 37% of the total cross-national variation in (Unqualified) Support for Democracy but for fully 78% in Emancipatory Support for Democracy, after weighting countries for their population size. Number of countries is 110, taking the latest available data for each country from the World Values Surveys ([www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)). Countries are attributed to culture zones as explained in Welzel (2013). (Unqualified) Support for Democracy measures how good an idea people think it is to have a democratic system. Emancipatory Support for Democracy measures the same but on the additional condition that people also emphasize emancipative values. It is noteworthy that Unqualified and Emancipatory Support correlate with each other in only moderate strength ( $R = 0.40$ ;  $N = 110$ ).

By contrast, *emancipatory* support for democracy shows a clear pattern of alignment with culture zones, varying from a very strong presence among Western cultures to the weakest presence in the “Islamic East.” In fact, the countries’ culture zone memberships account for fully 78 percent of the total cross-national variation in *emancipatory* support for democracy across some 110 countries, which represent more than ninety percent of the world population.

We have already seen in Figures 5 and 6 that cross-national variation in comprehensive democracy maps closely on the world’s culture zones. Just now, we have seen that *emancipatory* support for democracy maps similarly—and even more strongly—on culture zones. But *unqualified* support shows no such pattern. This suggests that the cultural boundedness of comprehensive democracy is explained by the cultural boundedness of *emancipatory* support for democracy. Figure 12 demonstrates that this is indeed the case: Cross-cultural variation in *emancipatory* support for democracy explains an astounding 95 percent of the cross-cultural variation in comprehensive democracy.

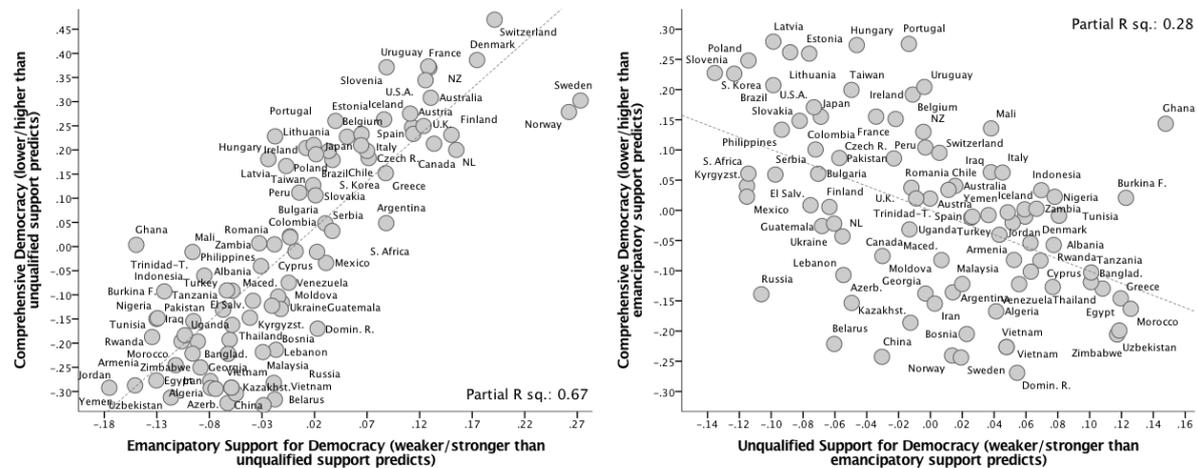
Fig 12 The World's Culture Zones' Emancipatory Support for Democracy Explains their Level of Comprehensive Democracy



Notes: Data cover 110 countries from all over the globe, representing more than 90% of the world population. To calculate culture zone averages in Emancipatory Support for Democracy and Comprehensive Democracy, countries are weighted proportional to the size of their population. Emancipatory Support for Democracy measures support for democracy to the extent that it is tied to emancipative values, based on data from the latest World Values Survey ([www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)) for each country. Comprehensive Democracy is the product of V-Dem's ([www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net)) Electoral, Participatory and Liberal Components. Countries are attributed to culture zones as explained in Welzel (2013).

My evidence further suggests that the driving psychological force behind comprehensive democracy is not support for democracy as such but, much more specifically, *emancipatory* support for democracy. Results from a multivariate regression analysis in Figure 13 support this conclusion. The two partial regression plots in this figure show the simultaneous impact of emancipatory and unqualified support for democracy on comprehensive democracy.

Fig 13 The World's Culture Zone's Emancipatory Support for Democracy Explains their Level of Comprehensive Democracy



Notes: Time coverage varies between 2000 and 2012 from country to country, depending on the year of the latest World Values Survey ([www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)) in each country. Comprehensive Democracy is the product of V-Dem's Electoral, Participatory and Liberal Components. Unqualified Support for Democracy measures how strongly the people in a country endorse the idea of having a democratic system. Emancipatory Support for Democracy measures the same but under the additional condition that people also emphasize emancipative values. The two diagrams are partial regression plots obtained by regressing the countries' Comprehensive Democracy simultaneously on their populations' Unqualified and Emancipatory Support for Democracy. It is noteworthy that Unqualified and Emancipatory Support correlate with each other in only moderate strength ( $R = 0.40$ ;  $N = 110$ ).

Left-hand diagram shows how more and less Emancipatory Support influences Comprehensive Democracy when Unqualified Support is held constant.

Righth-hand diagram shows how more and less Unqualified Support influences Comprehensive Democracy when Emancipatory Support is held constant.

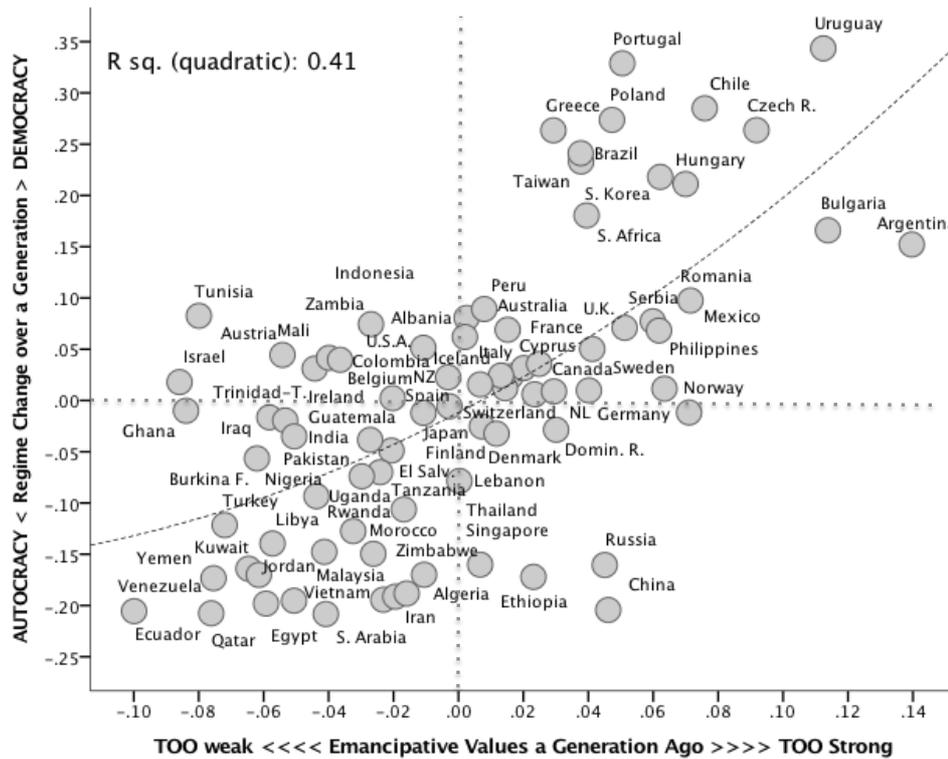
In the left-hand diagram of Figure 13, we see that in countries like Denmark, New Zealand and Switzerland where people have *more* emancipatory than unqualified support, democracy is *stronger*. Vice versa, in countries like Jordan, Uzbekistan and Yemen where people have *less* emancipatory than unqualified support, democracy is *weaker*, if not outright absent. Thus, the general tendency is that—among countries at the same level of unqualified support—more emancipatory support is strongly conducive to democracy. This tendency accounts for 67 percent of the entire cross-national variation in comprehensive democracy.

The right-hand diagram of Figure 13 shows that in countries like Egypt, Morocco and Zimbabwe where people have *more* unqualified than emancipatory support, democracy is *weaker*, all the way down to its complete absence. Vice versa, in countries like Latvia, Slovenia and South Korea where people have *less* unqualified than emancipatory support, democracy is *stronger*. Thus, the general tendency is that—among countries at the same level of emancipatory support—more unqualified support is actually *detrimental* to democracy. This negative tendency is more modest than the positive tendency of emancipatory support and accounts for 28 percent of the entire cross-national variation in comprehensive democracy.

The reason why unqualified support for democracy actually turns into a negative influence under control of emancipatory support is straightforward: When unqualified support is high

relative to emancipatory support, this is regularly the situation in which many people hold authoritarian mis-conceptions of democracy. When saying to support democracy, people actually support autocracy in these cases. It should be of little surprise that such a reversal in the meaning of democratic support affects democracy negatively.

Fig 14 Democratic Backsliding as a Function of Under-developed Emancipative Values



Note: Time perspective from latest available survey, looking 32 years into the past. Partial regression plot shows residuals in respective variables controlling for past level of comprehensive democracy 32 years ago. Emancipative Values are estimated as explained in Welzel and Inglehart (2018).

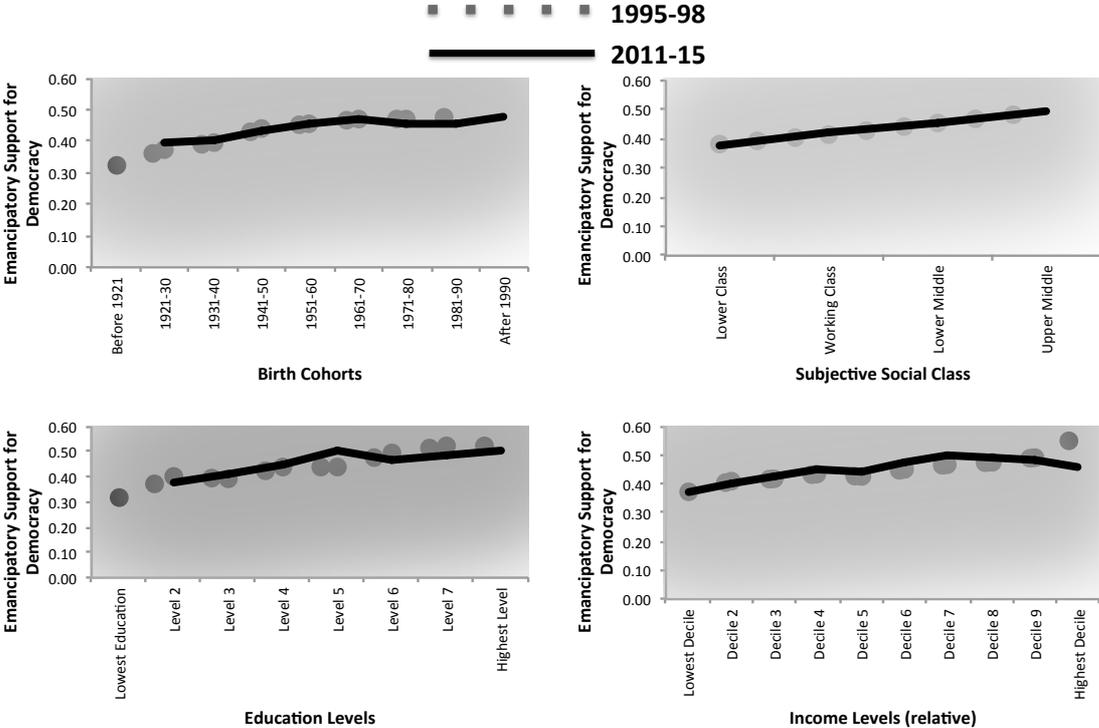
Adding a longitudinal perspective to these findings lends further credibility to my causal interpretation of the evidence. Thus, Figure 14 shows that, when at the timespan of a generation ago, a country had democracy at a level compared to which the population’s emancipative values appeared *too* weak, this is where we see most of the serious declines of democracy over the generational timespan that follows. Thus, *negative* regime changes away from democracy cluster densely in the left half of the diagram where emancipative values appear to be weak to sustain democracy. Hence, on the long run, democratic backsliding and autocratization are much likelier where emancipative values remain under-developed. Vice versa, positive regime changes towards more democracy cluster just as densely in the right half of the diagram where emancipative values have been stronger than democracy a generation ago. Put differently, autocracy is difficult to maintain where emancipative values point towards democracy. Indeed, whether over the timespan of a generation a nation moved away or towards democracy corresponds to fully

seventy-five percent with whether people’s emancipative values have been “too” weak or “too” strong relative to the regime’s position on the autocracy-democracy continuum a generation ago. In conclusion, emancipative values operate as a diffuse selective force in regime evolution whose temporal reach spans about a generation.

## VII. Economic Inequality: Democracy’s Key Challenge

Foa and Mounk (2016; 2017) document a decline of unqualified support for democracy in mature Western democracies. But this decline is rather modest to begin with and, more importantly, altogether inconclusive because support for democracy can mean anything from truly supporting democracy to supporting the opposite of it. Unless further qualified for the values that inspire it, support for democracy as such is an inherently misleading indicator that hides more than it reveals. What really matters is to what extent people’s support for democracy is inspired by emancipative values. Contrary to Foa and Mounk’s decline scenario, emancipatory support for democracy is neither in a temporal nor a generational decline, as the line graphs in Figure 15 demonstrate for mature democracies. These graphs also suggest that rising incomes, education and growing middle classes fuel emancipatory support for democracy, and all of these factors are on a global rise, albeit in ways that widen inner-societal divisions (Welzel 2013: 4).

Fig 15 The Social Profile of Emancipatory Support for Democracy in Mature Democracies around the Globe



Note: Data are from the World Values Survey ([www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)), rounds 3 (1995-98) and 6 (2011-15), pooling samples from Argentina, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the US, weighting each sample to an equal N of 1,000 per round (pooled N ≈ 14,000).

On the downside, we need to recognize that large population segments in still too many places of the developing world remain excluded from income growth, expanding education and other benefits of modernization. As a consequence, emancipative values remain deficient in these places, which darkens the prospects for democracy. Advanced post-industrial democracies also face challenges, although they are of a different nature. The main challenge is the economic inequality between the social classes that is steeply rising in Western democracies since the early 1980s, as a result of outsourcing industrial production, welfare state retrenchment and a neo-liberal turnaway from progressive taxation, especially of capital, stocks, real estate and other sources of economic rents (Stiglitz 2012; Picketty 2015). The resulting economic inequalities turn into sharp political inequalities that become visible in a manifest *oligarchic tendency* among modern democracies: Although policies usually follow public preferences, when lower and upper class preferences diverge, policies go without fail with the upper class, even under leftist governments (Gilens 2005; Schaefer 2017). Needless to say, this oligarchic tendency increases in direct proportion to the magnitude of economic inequalities between the social classes.

The inevitable result of the oligarchic tendency is a rising disillusionment among lower class segments whose members feel increasingly “left behind.” These feelings are also manifest in a growing class polarization over emancipative values. Over recent decades, all segments of the electorates of mature Western democracies have become significantly more emancipatory in their value orientations. But members of the upper and middle class have progressed on these values much farther than members of the working and lower class. Consequently, class polarization over emancipative values has more than doubled over the past fifteen years or so (Alexander & Welzel 2017).<sup>14</sup> This polarization has surely deepened the alienation of the more traditionalist voter segments in the face of an increasingly progressive policy agenda that pushes for drug liberalization, same sex marriage, gay rights and, above all, cosmopolitan openness to refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants.

Lack of education among the more traditionalist voter segments comes with diminished cognitive capacities and a low need for information, which makes these voters feel detached from the academic jargon of the established parties (Fording & Schram 2018). For all these reasons, lower class voters tended to turn out in elections in continuously decreasing numbers, the more political parties coded their campaigns in rational language (Dalton 2017). This is where right-wing populist parties step in with growing success: Their emotional and simplistic rhetoric

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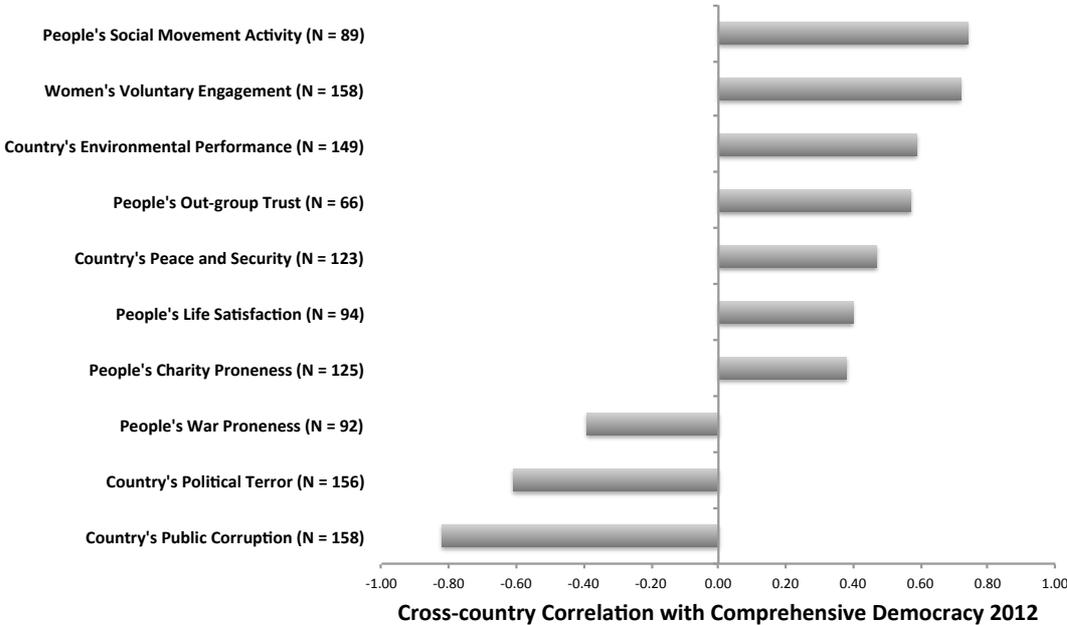
<sup>14</sup> The distinction between “lower,” “working,” “lower middle,” “upper middle” and “upper class” does not derive from a theoretical definition of objective indicators but reflects people’s subjective self-attribution to the classes in this pre-set scheme. It can be taken as an indication of the validity of these self-attributions that they correlate strongly, and in the expected direction, with the respondents’ self-reported household income and formal education.

appeals to the instinct of voters with diminished cognition needs and turns their distaste for rational argumentation from a depressor into a catalyst of participation. The good news about this development is that populism brings back in previously excluded voter segments, which forces the established parties to pay more attention to these segments' legitimate concerns. But the price we pay for this return is a change in political culture in which evidence, facts and reason become de-valued to the benefit of instinct, anger and demagoguery. Coping with this challenge requires a reversal of the economic inequality from which it feeds itself.

## VIII. The Value of Democracy

Despite these challenges, it remains a basic matter of fact that comprehensive democracy is closely tied to a broad distribution of action resources among ordinary people. Democracy's tie to action resources testifies to its rootedness in favorable existential conditions, from productivity to technology to longevity, prosperity, education and information—all of which turn the nature of most people's life from a source of threats into a source of opportunities. Likewise, comprehensive democracy's close tie to emancipative values testifies to its rootedness in healthy psychological climates that turn societies into more trusting, tolerant, empathetic, engaged, inspired and happy places.

Fig 16 Democracy's Link with Social Goods and Social Ills



Note: Data are from the latest World Values Survey (Social Movement Activity, Out-group Trust, Life Satisfaction, War Proneness), V-Dem 2012 (Comprehensive Democracy, Women's Voluntary Engagement, Public Corruption), Yale University's Environmental Performance Index 2010 (Environmental Performance), Vision of Humanity's 2010 Global Peace Index, inverted (Peace and Security), Gibney et al.'s (2010) Political Terror Scale (Political Terror) and data distributed by Peter Smith (Charity Proneness).

In line with this depiction, Figure 15 shows that comprehensive democracy is a strong positive correlate of a variety of desirable social goods, including social movement activity, women's engagement, life satisfaction, out-group trust, peace and security and environmental protection. At the same time, comprehensive democracy is a negative correlate of some of the most serious social ills, above all corruption, terror and belligerence.

To be sure, whether all this means that democracy is merely a symptom of all these social goods and ills or contributes to them as a true cause cannot be inferred from just correlations. To figure this out would be an extremely painstaking task that goes beyond the scope of this article. And anyways, the causal connection is most plausibly running both ways—from as well as to democracy—given that social phenomena are naturally reciprocal. Still, the positive link of democracy to social goods, and its negative link to social ills, is a matter of fact so fundamental that it needs to be recognized as a quintessential part of reality. So, no matter whether democracy is a symptom or a cause, the way it is linked to desirable goods and undesirable ills makes it worthwhile to be better understood in both its foundations and challenges.

## Conclusion

Using a comprehensive measure of democracy derived from V-Dem data, my analysis traced the global democratic trend over the last 116 years, from 1900 till 2016, looking in particular at the centennial trend's culture zoning. In line with the burgeoning literature on resurgent authoritarianism and democratic backsliding, there is evidence that the the centennial democratic trend has stalled since the late 1990s and shows recent signs of a partial reversal, almost all over the globe. At the same time, and despite all trending patterns, democracy always has been and continues to be a strongly culture-bound phenomenon: At the horizon of democracy, we always and only find nations that are at the frontier of emancipative values at their time. In line with this finding, public support for democracy exerts no positive influence on democracy in disjunction from emancipative values; it only does in close connection with these values. The reason is that—in disconnect from emancipative values—support for democracy frequently reverts its meaning, indicating the exact opposite of what intuition suggests: namely, support for authoritarian rule. In conclusion, the prospects for democracy are bleak where emancipative values remain weak.

Whether the recent reversal of the centennial democratic trend will turn into a lasting erosion of democracy remains to be seen. At the moment, one can only speculate about this. And since the past does not predict what is coming, the future is uncertain by definition. Still, knowing what happened in the past provides a rough sense of expectable trajectories. From this point of

view, one should note that reverse waves have occurred repeatedly over the last 116 years but they always halted democracy's long-term ascension only temporarily. Of course, no one can guarantee that this will be the same with the current reverse wave but reason for optimism can be seen in the fact that democracy's cultural seed—emancipative values—is rising over the generations and is doing so in most parts of the world, including such seeming strongholds of authoritarianism as China, Egypt, Russia, Singapore and Turkey.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, as much as right-wing populism might be seen as a cultural backlash against democracy's emancipatory spirit, it is also a movement that closes the widened class gap in political participation, which is reason for hope that the oligarchic tendencies in modern democracies might shrink in the future. In the end, there is reason for concern but also for some mild optimism about the prospects of democracy.

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<sup>15</sup> Among the few places where the WVS data show a negligible increase of emancipative values from older to younger cohorts are the Arab oil monarchies, including Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar.

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