

Autocratisation, Democratic Erosion and Democratic Resilience¹

Autocratización, erosión y resiliencia de la democracia

Editor's introduction

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Key words

Autocratisation

- Democracy
- Crisis of Democracy
- Democratic Erosion
- Democratic Resilience

Palabras clave

Autocratización

- Democracia
- Crisis de la democracia
- Erosión democrática
- Resiliencia democrática

Abstract

This article presents the main contributions regarding the processes of autocratization, democratic erosion/backsliding, and democratic resilience experienced globally during the last decades. These pages examine the causes, consequences, and reactions to these processes: modernization, globalization, and digitalization; the rise of populism, polarization, and party system change and fragmentation; executive *aggrandizement* at the expense of the separation of powers and the rule of law; severe limitations of citizens and minorities political rights and freedoms; and the weakening and capture of political oversight institutions... Strategies of *horizontal*, *vertical*, and *diagonal* (or *social*) democratic resilience can become effective tools to curb this autocratic trend and the erosion of the quality of democracies, reactions and outcomes that have allowed prominent analysts to question the alarmism of those who quickly declared the "death" of democracy.

Resumen

Este artículo introduce el número monográfico de *la REIS* sobre «crisis de la democracia»: se presentan las principales contribuciones sobre la autocratización y la resiliencia democrática registradas globalmente en las tres últimas décadas, y sus causas, consecuencias y reacciones: globalización y cambio cultural; expansión del populismo, de la polarización y de la fragmentación y cambios en los sistemas de partidos; *aggrandizement* de los ejecutivos, restricción de los derechos y libertades políticas ciudadanas y de minorías, debilitamiento o captura de las instituciones de supervisión y control del poder político y social, y erosión del Estado de derecho... Las estrategias de resiliencia democrática *horizontal*, *vertical* y *diagonal* o *social* pueden suponer eficaces instrumentos para frenar esa tendencia autocrática y de erosión de la calidad de las democracias, y han permitido cuestionar el alarmismo de quienes se precipitaron a anunciar la «muerte» de la democracia.

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The crisis of democracy can now be considered to be a well-established topic in the study of political systems. Although it had been discussed for decades, the debate turned more pessimistic at the start of this century, when scholars examined the widespread manifestations and consequences of democratic erosion and decline, alongside the spread of authoritarian or autocratic regimes and the corresponding attitudes among citizens.

In the final decades of the twentieth century, the debate focused on democratic deficits and on the conditions (and the necessary transformations) that could or should bring democracies closer to an ideal model. In that model, citizens would be more involved and would participate more fully in collective decision-making, while political elites would be more accessible and responsive to citizens' needs and interests. In parallel, authoritarian regimes of various kinds would be transformed into democratic political systems. Nevertheless, the last three decades of the twentieth century were marked by the spread of democratisation, both in terms of the increase in the number of countries that transitioned to democracy and the improvement in the quality of democratic institutions in many of them. Democracy was generally perceived as "the only game in town" (Linz, 1987) and criticism, if any, focused on how to improve it. The early signs of democratic erosion identified at the start of the century (Freedom House, 2008) failed to dispel the optimism generated by the third wave of democratisation: "established democracies did not appear to be in distress" (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019: 1097).

But developments have somewhat moved in the opposite direction over the last two decades. The increasing global presence and success of populist appeals and strategies are now receiving greater emphasis in the debate. This holds

regardless of how populism is understood (Oñate, 2021): as a "thin-centred ideology" (Mudde, 2021); as a strategy of political mobilisation (Weyland, 2001; Torre, 2015); as a discursive frame or communication style (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007); or as a political logic (Laclau, 2005). With the rise of populism, the debate has now come to be focused on democratic erosion and the significant increase in polarisation within our political systems (and in affective polarization attitudes among their citizens). Signs of erosion in democratic institutions are mounting across many political systems, which point to a new, third, wave of autocratisation. This wave has substantially reduced the number of fully democratic political systems worldwide, albeit gradually and through seemingly legal means. Unlike the two previous waves, it has mainly affected democratic regimes rather than electoral autocracies (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). A significant proportion of the citizens in these democracies both accept and embrace populist proposals, as well as recognising that democracy is no longer the most effective or desirable form of government for regulating community life ("the only game in town"). They also accept other loosely defined alternatives which are clearly illiberal in nature (V-Dem Institute, 2026).

Following the third wave of democratisation that unfolded over the last three decades of the twentieth century, many of the democratic advances achieved then still endure today in a large number of countries and regions. The overall levels of democracy remain at an all-time high worldwide, as current processes of democratic erosion are less harmful for democracy than "democratic breakdown" processes, more typical of the last century. This calls into question the extent to which the consequences of the third wave were in fact dramatic (Mechkova *et al.*, 2017; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019).

Nevertheless, robust evidence has clearly demonstrated a trend over the past three decades: erosion of institutional quality, democratic backsliding and decline, and a proliferation of autocratic drifts across many democracies, both young and long-established (V-Dem Institute, 2026). These patterns of democratic erosion and autocratisation can be seen among leaders, parties and political systems, as well as among substantial parts of the electorate. They are not confined to leaders or parties clearly identified as populist; they also emerge as a strategy of electoral competition within traditional or mainstream parties that stop short of adopting populist positions. The result is widespread and diverse trends of democratic erosion and decline, as well as autocratisation ones as conceptualised by Cassani and Tomini (2018) across many existing democratic systems. They appear not only in institutions and processes but also in the political attitudes and behaviour of a significant share of citizens.

According to data from V-Dem Institute (2026), today there are more autocratic regimes (ninety-two) than democratic ones (eighty-seven), a situation that had not been seen in the past twenty-five years, and liberal democracy is now the least common type of political regime. Almost three-quarters of the world's population (74 %) lives under an autocratic system, the highest percentage in the past five decades. Trends in regime change point towards increasing autocratisation: two decades ago, twelve countries were undergoing such a process, whereas today forty-four are, a number never previously recorded (V-Dem Institute, 2026).

The processes of democratic erosion, backsliding or decline observed in this third wave of autocratisation differ from the processes identified in the last century. Those whom Guriev and Treisman (2022) called the “new autocrats” do not seize

power or transform the system through abrupt or violent disruptions of democratic processes. They neither employ systematic strategies of repression nor radically and overtly exclude the opposition; and, at the same time, they maintain the appearance of democracy. Their erosion strategies operate from within the democratic system and its institutions, typically through “executive aggrandizement” (Laebens, 2023). This involves reaching positions of power in the executive or the legislative branches, whether through legitimate electoral processes or by maintaining an appearance of constitutional legality (Svolic, 2015; Bermeo, 2016; Coppedge, 2017; Mechkova *et al.*, 2017; Waldner and Lust, 2018). But once they have attained these positions of power, they gradually erode the institutions of democratic control. They do so by limiting citizens' rights and freedoms; restricting pluralism in civil society and the media; and transforming, neutralising or capturing the institutions designed to ensure the balance between the various branches of government, substantially eroding the rule of law and undermining minority rights. And yet, they maintain a “respectable democratic façade” (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019) despite being “illiberal democracies” (Zakaria, 2024) or “electoral autocracies” (Lührmann, Tanneberg and Lindberg, 2018).

These political transformations are linked to economic and social changes. Both in turn derive either from the process of globalisation that began in the 1990s or from the cultural change that unfolded over the last decades of the twentieth century (see, among others: Ignazi, 1998 and 2003; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Stokes, 2025). While globalisation brought positive transformations, it also had negative consequences for a large part of the population. These included individualisation and the erosion of social and community ties, rising inequal-

ity, economic uncertainty and insecurity, and a deterioration in many citizens' material living conditions and future prospects. It also constrained the capacity for action of national and local political authorities. Alongside this came a form of multiculturalism that exposed citizens to challenges to their traditional ways of understanding and inhabiting the world, which could eventually open the door to culture wars over values. This mobility and the resulting multiculturalism would give rise to more diverse and complex societies, whose demands would prove more difficult to meet for national political elites, as these were subject to "systemic constraints and imperatives" and reducing their capacity for action.

Furthermore, these transformations took place in contexts where cultural change, post-materialism and self-expression values would play an increasingly significant role in the attitudes of younger generations and, as a result, would gradually come to the fore in the public and political sphere (Inglehart, 1977; Inglehart and Welzel, 2006). Citizens would have higher and better levels of education and training than their elders, access to more information, and a greater awareness of their rights and role in the political system: they would be "more sophisticated citizens", more demanding and more "critical". Self-expression values would spread and, from the start of the twenty-first century, would heighten the importance of feelings and emotions in the public sphere. This would in turn intensify the importance of political identities. In this way, emotions would gain ground either as a criterion for legitimising democracy, its institutions and actors, or as a factor contributing to its erosion and eventual decline through polarising populist strategies.

Technological change and the growing use of social media would amplify

the harmful effects of all these political transformations. This would result in the weakening of traditional mediating actors and open up favourable political opportunity structures for new actors (*outsiders*) to emerge and become established. They would also foster virtual communities whose self-referential discursive drift would be reinforced by (never neutral) algorithms (Castells, 2006; Pariser, 2012; Beck, 2018). All this unfolded in public and semi-public spheres that were increasingly digitalised, fragmented and "platformised" (Habermas, 2025). In these spheres, "post-truth" and "alternative reality" found fertile ground to take hold in public and political discourse. They did so to the point of eroding the very possibility of conceiving the intersubjective space that constitutes the "common world", as Hannah Arendt put it (Vallespín, 2012; Martínez-Bascuñán, 2025).

Against this backdrop of change, two crises ultimately contributed to reshape conditions that had existed for years, namely the global financial crisis that began in 2008, which had devastating consequences, particularly severe in some countries; and the one stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, which also had a strong impact on citizens in some societies. Together, they gave final form to a political setting in which the long-running crisis of democracy took on a different character and faced new challenges. These challenges included: governments becoming less effective and less able to resolve the problems of diverse and plural citizens; widespread disaffection and distrust of traditional parties, which citizens no longer regarded as capable of addressing the problems of everyday life; the emergence of new radical and populist anti-system leaders and parties, which posed a serious threat to democratic institutions and principles once they receive a relevant share of votes in elections and in-

introduce centrifugal tendencies in the electoral competition; increasing political fragmentation (and weakness), accompanied by a marked rise in ideological polarisation; and a substantial expansion of affective polarisation attitudes that also spread among much of the citizenry. Such attitudes encouraged tolerance for curtailed democratic rights and safeguards of opponents, who were now preceived as “political enemies” and a plausible threat to the survival of one’s own group and its “way of life”.

Traditional political elites thus were at the receiving end of discontent, indignation, weariness, exasperation, rejection, distrust and suspicion from broad sections of the population. These elites appeared unable, or unwilling, to respond effectively to citizens’ demands, both old and new. These sections of the population included not only the “losers of globalisation”, but also those who felt that “their world” was disappearing or being dangerously challenged. These sectors provided electoral support for new populist leaders and parties that offered easy and false solutions to complex problems and reinforced traditional identities perceived to be at risk in the context of globalisation.

Traditional politics appeared to respond to these new challenges by embracing a new way of conceiving politics, although not with the effectiveness that a discontented citizenry seemed to demand. This approach introduced innovative strategies to involve citizens in the everyday management of public affairs. The “new multilevel governance” emerged and spread during the 1990s as a fresh way of understanding and engaging in politics. It encompassed transformations of the state; decentralisation through federalism and “new regionalism”; citizen participation; and interaction, cooperation and connection across the various levels of government and in

international relations, along with innovations in the design and implementation of public policy, etcetera (Hooghe and Marks, 2003; Piattoni, 2010; Alcántara and Nelles, 2014; Tortola, 2016).

The new way of understanding politics from the perspective of multilevel governance conceives it as a “reallocation and dispersion” of power from central states (and authority) “upwards” and “downwards” (across different territorial levels). It also regards it as the participation and inclusion of various public and private actors in adopting and implementing political decisions. These actors interact with state authorities through a process defined by horizontal rather than vertical dynamics. It is more participatory and consensual than hierarchical, and more informal and flexible than formal and rule-bound. It rests on negotiation and agreement instead of relying on unilateral, imposed decisions. This approach operates through networks rather than bilateral relations with the central government as the dominant actor (Lachapelle and Oñate, 2017).

These transformations have altered the state’s political and institutional structures and the distribution of authority and jurisdictions (Hooghe and Marks, 2003). But they do not entail the disappearance or blurring of the state, as Tortola (2016) noted. Rather, this new conception of politics has transformed the role of government at each territorial level. In this way, it is now engaged in promoting new networks of supra-state and sub-state actors, both public and private, including social actors, NGOs and agencies of various kinds. Within these networks, governmental roles involve interacting, collaborating, negotiating and reaching agreements on the design and implementation of public policy and political processes (Lachapelle and Oñate, 2017).

Multilevel governance produces a set of overlapping political and social arenas that interact to reach and apply political decisions traditionally taken through vertical hierarchy. This entails overcoming conventional conceptions of federalism and decentralisation (Sbragia, 2010; Papillon, 2012; Alcántara and Nelles, 2014). As Tortola (2016) argued, this takes place without substantially altering state structures, except in how authority and jurisdictions are allocated. The tendency is not exclusionary but inclusive and dialogical, as the various levels or areas of government are linked to society. Thus they become progressively interdependent and interconnected through both formal and informal channels.

However, this new way of understanding and engaging in politics does not appear to have met the public's demands; citizens continue to perceive a profound democratic deficit in contemporary political systems, a deficit which gives rise to widespread feelings of unease and discontent. These attitudes, emotions and feelings have created a favourable context for the success of either new populist actors, or traditional mainstream actors that use populist strategies. These actors have won considerable support from electorates wearied by the offerings of liberal democracy's parties and leaders.

The success of populist movements is evident not only in their remarkable electoral achievements, which have a profound impact on political and electoral competition dynamics in political systems across all five continents, therefore becoming a truly global phenomenon. Their consequences also extend to the rhetoric and programmatic contents (agendas) of many traditional leaders. These leaders adopt or instrumentalise the strategies and discourses of populist movements, leaders and parties. They do so in a vain attempt to exploit them for narrow elec-

toral or competitive gain, rather than "distancing themselves" from them democratically (Bermeo, 2003; Bartels, 2023).

As a result, the spread and "normalisation" of populism in many political systems has meant that it is no longer perceived as a "pathology" of democracy. Quietly and almost imperceptibly, this process has transformed those systems into a "pathological democracy". In such a democracy, populism, radicalism and polarisation have become an intrinsic part of the system itself (Mudde, 2016 and 2021).

Both populist and non-populist parties and leaders encourage and/or exploit the (ideological, systemic and emotional) growth of polarisation among the population as a mobilisation strategy. They do so in order to gain new ground and support from the public and within institutions (McCoy *et al.*, 2018; Stokes, 2025).

This polarising strategy reduces the plural social divisions that once structured citizen participation and party competition to a single, simpler and more encompassing dimension. It produces an "us versus them" dynamic that sets aside the virtues of pluralism. Those who think differently (out-group) are no longer perceived as fellow citizens or political adversaries. They are seen instead as an enemy and a threat to the survival of the in-group's traditional way of life, and thus to democracy itself (McCoy *et al.*, 2018 and 2019; Somer *et al.*, 2021). In this highly polarised context, there is a growing tolerance among the public towards the erosion of democratic safeguards and principles in relation to members of the "other" group; and consequently, towards the decline in the quality of democracy itself.

Democracy and the quality of democratic institutions are being eroded by these populist leaders and their polarising tactics: actual alternatives which traditional leaders sometimes exploit or uncrit-

ically embrace in order to gain a pyrrhic electoral advantage, with the ensuing pernicious consequences for democracy.

Empirical evidence has shown that autocratic trends and the erosion of democratic principles and institutions have more to do with the activity and positions of political elites than with citizens' attitudes (Bartels, 2023; Stokes, 2025). And this becomes particularly relevant when considering that the true guardians of democratic quality are political leaders and parties far more than citizens (Linz, 1987; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

Virtually all organisations that systematically and rigorously study the democratic quality of political systems around the world have found evidence of a general decline in democratic quality and a rise in autocratic tendencies (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024; Freedom House, 2025; IDEA International, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2026). Many analysts have studied the possible causes of these trends, whether economic or cultural and value-based. These lead citizens to support populist appeals that are harmful to democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Laebens, 2023; Andrew and Meng, 2024, among others).

Some of these authors, however, consider that the erosion caused by the polarising and populist trends discussed has not yet led to a severe democratic breakdown. They have provided evidence that these regimes have demonstrated considerable resilience and adaptability, which safeguard their fundamental principles and institutions (Voeten, 2017; Boesse *et al.*, 2021; Bartels, 2023; Merkel, 2023; Levitsky and Way, 2023; Treisman, 2023; Weyland, 2024; Stokes, 2025; Walz *et al.*, 2025, see the bibliographic essay in this issue of the *REIS*). From this point of view, democracy is more resilient and shows a considerable capacity to withstand these eroding trends, which prevents

it from experiencing a genuine breakdown, let alone a sudden demise, as some authors predicted a few years ago. These scholars have pointed to democratic systems that have resisted these trends. They have also identified other systems affected by the autocratic trends of some leaders where other actors implemented democratic resistance or resilience strategies. These strategies were: horizontal (operated through the activity of other branches of the state); vertical (implemented through citizen initiatives and voting in subsequent elections); or transversal or social (applied through the action of social and academic bodies, associations and organisations). Additionally, these authors have identified examples of countries that have successfully recovered from an autocratic phase by rebuilding the democratic quality of their institutions through "remedial" and "anti-erosion" strategies implemented by these actors (Stokes, 2025).

In this new context, we remain cursed to "live in interesting times". The impact of the development of artificial intelligence and the consequences that its "algorithmic rationality" (Innerarity, 2025) may have on the quality of our democratic systems has yet to be fully analysed.

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