DEMOCRATIC EROSION CONSORTIUM

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A GUIDE TO MEASURING DEMOCRATIC EROSION

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SUMMARY

Publicly available data measuring democracy and democratic erosion abounds, but it can be difficult to understand how datasets and measures differ, their relative advantages and disadvantages, and the types of questions that each dataset is best positioned to answer.

Expanding on a longer article,[1] this brief aims to help policymakers, practitioners, and researchers make sense of existing approaches to measuring democratic resilience and decline. It also highlights the Democratic Erosion Consortium (DEC)'s event dataset, which measures the concrete events associated with democratic backsliding and resilience.

Using the cases of Turkey and Brazil, this brief illustrates how event-based data can help reconcile discrepancies between different approaches to measuring democratic erosion and provide nuanced insights into the trajectory of democratic backsliding across and within countries.

Highlights

Policymakers have many data sources at their disposal when trying to understand to what extent democratic erosion is occurring, including more subjective measures, more objective measures, and event-based measures. Yet, it is not readily apparent how measures differ and why they sometimes produce differing assessments of backsliding.

Different approaches to measuring democratic erosion lend themselves to answering different kinds of questions. Expert assessments and more objective data are both useful for understanding cross-country and over time trends, while event data is well poised to demonstrate how democratic erosion and resistance to it play out on the ground at a more granular level.

Considering the relative advantages and disadvantages of each approach is crucial when deciding which measures to use and when. For instance, more subjective measures have a higher potential for bias but more objective measures might miss key aspects of erosion that are hard to measure. With event data, it can be hard to aggregate individual indicators for cross-country comparison.

When subjective and objective measures diverge in their assessments of democratic erosion, event-based data can be especially useful by offering a way to "look under the hood" at what is happening within countries.

INTRODUCTION

Alarm bells about democratic decline are everywhere. Academics, policymakers, journalists, and activists alike point to cases like Poland,[2] Venezuela,[3] and Hungary,[4] as evidence of democratic erosion. More systematic cross-country evidence also suggests that democratic backsliding is pervasive around the world.[5] Yet, examples of popular and institutional resilience to democratic erosion also abound.[6] How then do we know whether democratic erosion is actually occurring, and to what extent? What measures should be used to understand democratic decline within individual countries as well as across them? And how can these measures be accessed and used?

Recently, researchers have debated the advantages and disadvantages of using measures that tend to be more subjective or objective in nature.[7] *Subjective* measures are generally based on expert assessment and opinion (e.g,. responses to questions like 'can this election be considered free and fair?'). More *objective* measures tend to be indicators of democratic decline that can be verified and observed systematically across countries using existing data (e.g., electoral results or the number of journalists arrested per year).

Yet, in many cases, these approaches yield different diagnoses as to the extent of backsliding around the world. To help adjudicate between these diverse accounts, this brief highlights a third approach—one that is based on tracking granular country-specific *events* associated with democratic backsliding and resilience (e.g., whether a chief executive made anti-democratic public statements or whether protests to support democracy took place). Event-based data provides a way to "look under the hood" of country-level and cross-country trends in democratic erosion.

This brief describes the role of these different approaches to measuring democratic erosion and resilience; the kinds of questions that each can answer; and why the different kinds of measures can yield varying diagnostics about the state of democratic erosion today. It is also important to note that measuring democratic backsliding requires a clear concept of what the phenomenon entails. Box 1 discusses the various definitions of democratic erosion and how even the concept itself can be contested.

This Democracy Indicators Table, available online, summarizes ten publicly-available datasets with several indicators that document aspects of democratic erosion. It includes information about the underlying data and links to directly download the datasets and codebooks themselves. It also describes the variation of objective and subjective indicators within each dataset.

SUBJECTIVE INDICATORS OF DEMOCRATIC EROSION

Many of the most well-known democracy indicators in use today are more subjective measures based on expert surveys. For example, V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy), one of the most prominent of the democracy datasets, uses expert surveys, though it also incorporates more objective measures (described below). The surveys ask experts to give their subjective opinions on questions like, "would you consider this national election to be free and fair?"; "is there media bias against opposition parties or candidates?"; and "does the government attempt to repress civil society organizations?"[8]

Box 1: Conceptualizing Democratic Erosion

One of the most prominent definitions of democratic erosion describes it as the "state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy."[9] Other conceptualizations expand beyond the degradation of institutions to include the erosion of democratic norms as well.[10] Some researchers consider a country to have undergone backsliding if it experiences a worsening in at least two of the following three areas: the competitiveness of its elections; the full political participation of its citizenry; and the political accountability of government officials.[11]

One key area of consensus is the idea that democratic decline involves changes that occur incrementally. Unlike with military coups, democratic backsliding reflects piecemeal modifications that occur slowly over time. In practice, these changes are often, though not exclusively, pushed forward by the executive. This includes efforts termed executive aggrandizement, or weakening the checks on the executive's political power through laws or executive decrees to increase the executive's power over other branches of government; curtailing media freedom; or eliminating restrictions on re-election.[12]

There remain several points of contention over what constitutes democratic backsliding, however. For one, researchers disagree over whether changes in norms or rhetoric constitute erosion if they do not precipitate, or are not accompanied by, institutional changes to weaken democracy. Similarly, it is unclear whether threats to democracy that fail or that encounter popular or institutional resilience (e.g., a failed coup attempt, or unsuccessful efforts to overturn election results) should be considered evidence of erosion.

Another subject of debate is whether erosion is unique to democracies. Some definitions consider backsliding to be "a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance," rather than of democracy itself. This means that erosion could also occur in authoritarian regimes that have some minimal components of democratic governance that could be chipped away.[13]

The resulting answers from multiple experts are combined and used to build individual indicators. To minimize reliance on any one individual expert coder, V-Dem researchers recruit at least 5 experts per indicator per country, meaning in practice in 2023 there were, on average, about 22 experts per country involved in generating the data.[14] Their overall democracy index aggregates 483 individual indicators, covering concepts related to elections, freedom of expression, and freedom of association. V-Dem also produces sub-indices based on more specific areas of democratic practice.

Freedom House is another frequently used source of democratic erosion data. Freedom House country reports, published annually beginning in 1972, are also based on assessments from a set of analysts and country experts. The experts score countries based primarily on political rights and civil liberties, with a focus on protections in practice not just in law.[15] Freedom House produces a summary indicator that ranks countries as "free", "partly free", or "not free", with a numerical value from 0 to 100 to show variation within those three categories.

One of the main advantages to using more subjective assessments to study democratic erosion is that it is possible to cover any aspect of democracy of interest, and thus they can encompass a broader understanding of democratic backsliding. In other words, there are no real data limitations as there might be with more objective or systematically observable indicators since experts can be asked to give their opinion about virtually anything. This is important because at least some key characteristics of democracies may be inherently subjective (e.g., the extent to which elections are "free and fair") or otherwise hard to measure objectively.

One critique of subjective assessments is that they are potentially biased or incomplete precisely because they do depend on individual judgment.[16] For example, two experts might

give entirely different answers when asked whether elections in a given country are "free and fair". Furthermore, it is generally not possible to know the extent to which an assessment might over- or under-estimate democratic erosion because it is hard to know how experts subjectively weigh different factors and whether the experts themselves are influenced by popular or media narratives that could be biased.

OBJECTIVE INDICATORS OF DEMOCRATIC EROSION

In contrast to more subjective approaches that ask experts to translate their observations into scores or ratings, more objective measures are indicators of democratic decline that tend to be more concrete and verifiable. They also tend to be readily available with existing data for a large number of countries, which facilitates easy tracking of changes within countries over time or across a large number of countries. Such objective measures can include electoral returns, whether an incumbent was re-elected, or the number of parties competing.

V-Dem, the dataset mentioned above, asks experts to provide both subjective assessments as well as information for more objective measures, such as the percent of the population that is eligible to vote. Recently, the political scientists Andrew Little and Anne Meng (hereafter L&M)[17] studied democratic backsliding using a number of publicly available objective measures, including measures of electoral competitiveness, the existence of constraints on the executive (e.g., term limits), and the number of journalists jailed or killed.

The main *advantage of more objective measures* is that they are not as subject to human bias as the indicators that rely on expert assessments. Instead, anyone can more easily "see" and understand what the indicator measures and how it was constructed, for example, whether or not an election happened.

One key *disadvantage to objective measures* is that, because they tend to cover aspects of democratic decline that are visible and easy to measure across countries, they risk missing aspects of democratic erosion that might be harder to quantify and track systematically across countries and over time. This includes, for example, intimidation of voters, changes in rhetoric or norms, journalist self-censorship, and citizen fear of protesting against the government. Thus, it is possible that more objective measures alone cannot adequately capture all aspects of democratic erosion that might be of concern.

AN EVENTS-BASED APPROACH TO MEASURING BACKSLIDING

A third approach to measuring democratic backsliding focuses on collecting data on events. Event-based measures differ in that they are tied to concrete, real-world developments and facilitate transparency about what actors and patterns are contributing to erosion. They also differ in that they provide a more nuanced documentation of changes across and within countries, but also often require subjective assessments of which events should be included and how they should be categorized. Overall, event data can track the specific occurrences that contribute to changes in aggregate democracy indices like V-Dem, while also capturing aspects of democratic erosion that are more difficult to measure through purely objective approaches.

The Democratic Erosion Consortium (DEC) developed the Democratic Erosion Event

Dataset (DEED), which tracks events related to democratic erosion across countries and over time.[18] The current beta version (v6) of DEED includes 5,979 events across 143 countries between 2000 and 2023. Because the dataset is still in development, some countries have more uneven coverage than others, and more recent data is also less complete. Future updates to DEED aim to achieve broader country coverage, more systematically code recent events, and further validate the data with country experts.[19] All version updates will be posted on the DEC website annually, where there are also tools to easily explore the data and visualize spatial and temporal patterns.

DEED classifies events into four types, distinguishing between events that often precede democratic erosion (precursors) from those that constitute erosion itself (symptoms) and those that counteract erosion once it has already begun (resistance). For autocratic countries, the dataset also includes events that undermine the stability of an autocratic regime (destabilizing); in democracies, these kinds of events might lead to more authoritarianism, however in authoritarian regimes, the result could be either more democracy if the events successfully undermine the regime, or more authoritarianism if the event pushes the regime to consolidate power.

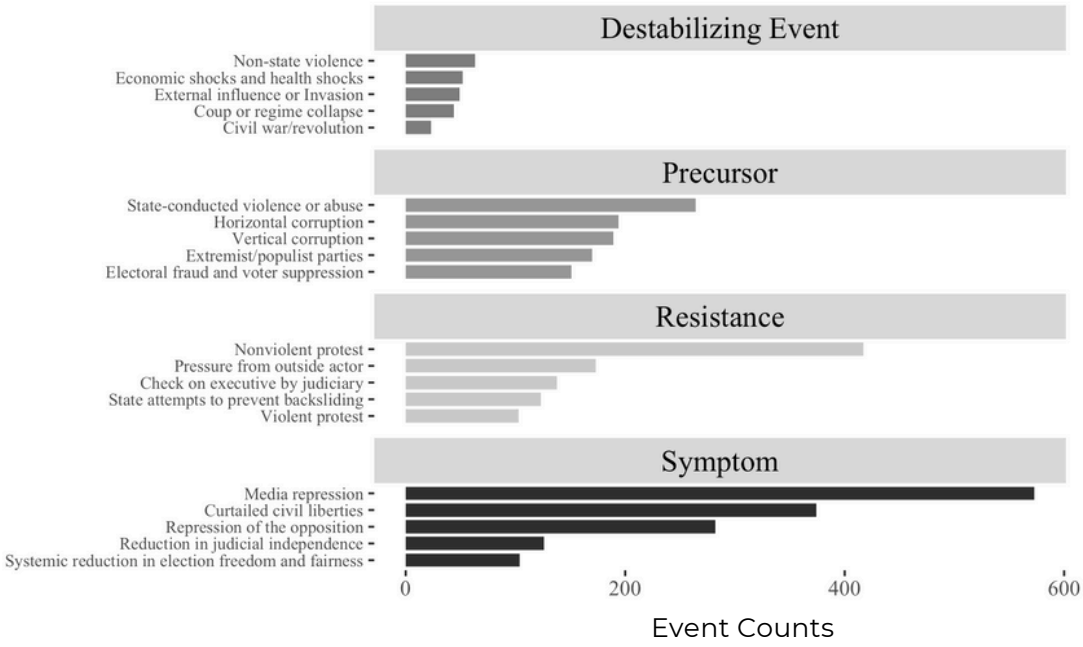
Within these four event types, observations can also be categorized as to whether they relate to *vertical* accountability, meaning between the government and citizens, or *horizontal* accountability, meaning between different government agencies and officials. Table 1 provides a sample of the event categories within each of the four event types.

Table 1: Sample Event Codes and Classifications for DEED

	Precursor	Symptom	Resistance	Destabilizing Events
Increases or decreases to **Horizontal Accountability**	Delegitimizing or weakening the judiciary Delegitimizing or weakening the legislature Delegitimizing or weakening subnational units Manipulation of civil service Coup or regime collapse Horizontal corruption	Reduction in judicial independence Reduction in legislative oversight Weakened civil service or integrity institutions Suspension of laws or the constitution Relaxation of term limits Revision of the constitution Reduction autonomy of subnational units	Check on executive by judiciary Check on executive by legislature Check on central power by subnational units Check on central power by civil service Post-democratic transition to new constitution	Elite infighting Challenge from extremist/populist factions Coup or regime collapse
Increases or decreases to **Vertical Accountability**	Co-optation of the opposition Mal-apportionment Electoral fraud Electoral violence Increasing control over civil society State-conducted violence or abuse Media bias Lack of legitimacy Polarization Extremist/populist parties Vertical corruption	Repression of the opposition Systemic reduction in election freedom and fairness Curtailed civil liberties Media repression No-confidence votes or decreased voter turnout Foreign military action Discrimination against minorities	Coalitions or elite pacts Increase in electoral integrity Increase in civic capacity Nonviolent protest Violent protest Increase in media protections/media liberalization	Non-state political violence Rejecting election results

To give a sense of the distribution of events across the dataset, Figure 1 shows the number of events in each of the four types from 2000 to 2020. It includes the top five event categories within each type. Note that the distribution of events may change as the dataset continues to be updated and expanded.

Figure 1: DEED Event Counts by Category and Type



Note: Counts for the most common event categories in the destabilizing event, precursor, symptom, and resistance types, aggregating across all countries and from 2000 to 2020.

A central advantage of event data is that it can shed light on—at a highly granular level—not only whether erosion is occurring but also how. This allows for transparent documentation of the different kinds of events associated with erosion and resistance, as well as the day-to-day processes through which erosion and resistance unfold over time. This is particularly important for contexts where democracy is being contested, which could get missed by broad, annualized measures focused on institutional or legal changes.

In terms of disadvantages of event data, it is harder to make comparisons across countries because events do not usefully transform into a single score assigned to each country, the way that indicators like V-Dem or Freedom House do. It is possible to compare across countries in terms of the number of events in specific categories, such as the number of events related to symptoms of erosion that undermine vertical accountability. It is harder, however, to make sense of comparisons across the total number of events since there are very different types of events in the dataset. In addition, DEED does not weigh events by severity—a successful coup and a crackdown on a protest would each be counted as a single event, even though a coup clearly signifies a higher level of erosion. Furthermore, comparing across the total number of events might be misleading if a proliferation of events reflects a country maintaining a status quo of low-quality democracy rather than a year-on-year decline in quality.

COMPARING DIAGNOSES OF DEMOCRATIC EROSION ACROSS INDICATOR TYPES

Another useful way to illustrate how these various indicators are similar, different, and complementary to each other is to plot the values of each in the same country over time. Focusing on two cases in which objective and subjective measures of erosion diverge (Turkey and Brazil), this brief shows how events data can be particularly helpful to adjudicate when different measures tell different stories of erosion. The analysis uses V-Dem as an example of expert assessments; the L&M index as an example of objective measures; and DEED as an example of event-based data.

TURKEY

As Figure 2 shows, from 2000 to 2012, the V-Dem and L&M indices for Turkey move in parallel, suggesting each data source generates the same conclusions about changes in the quality of Turkish democracy over time. Beginning around 2012, however, the V-Dem and L&M indices begin diverging sharply.

V-Dem data suggests that democracy in Turkey declined considerably after 2012. In fact, according to V-Dem, the decline in the quality of Turkish democracy is so sharp that only five other countries declined as significantly over the same period (Bolivia, Hungary, Nicaragua, Thailand, and Venezuela). Yet, despite this huge fall in the V-Dem measure, Turkish democracy remained at basically the same level from 2000 to 2020 according to the L&M objective measure.

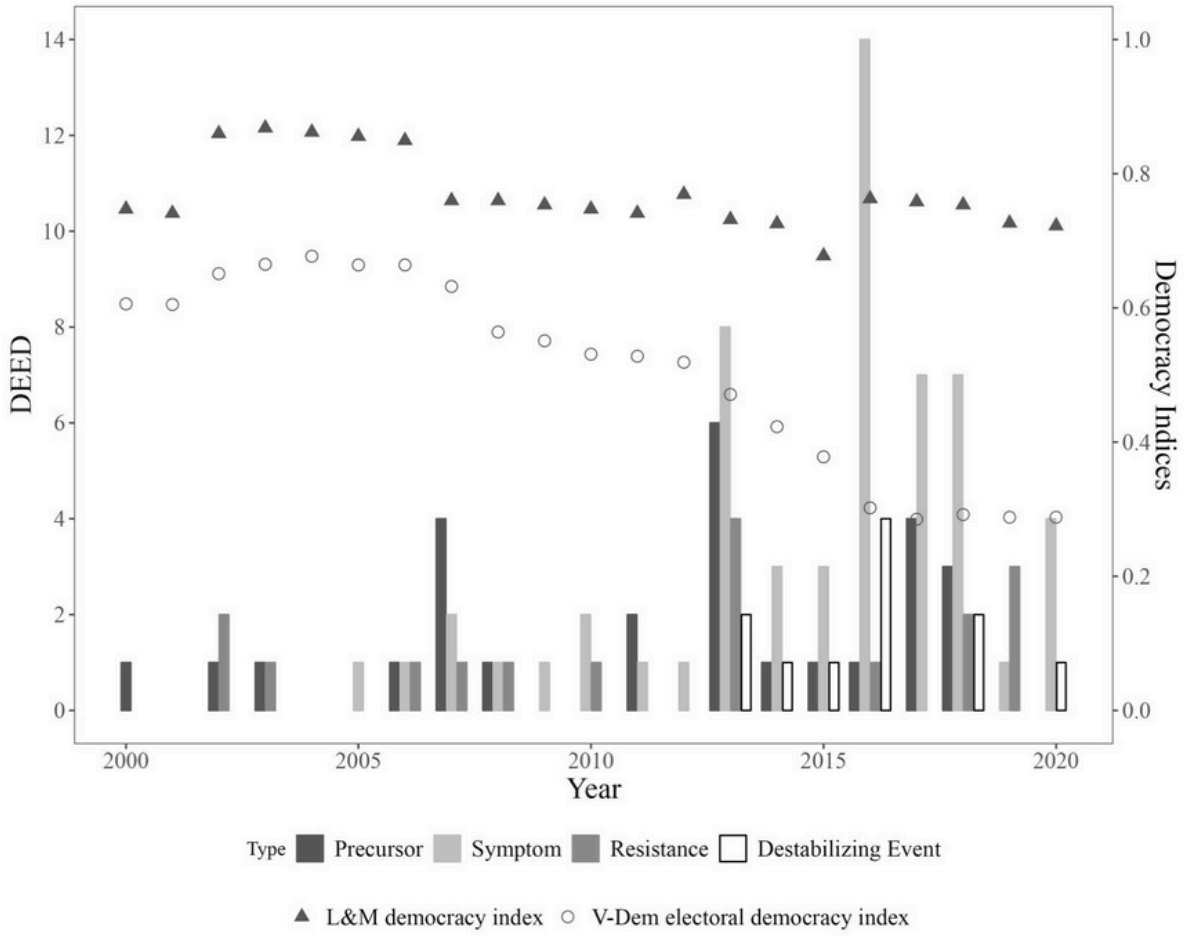
Adding the DEED events data into the analysis can help shed light on why these measures might be moving in such starkly opposite directions. During the time that the V-Dem and L&M measures moved in parallel, DEED recorded very few events. However, around the time that the measures diverge, DEED shows a large increase in events, particularly in 2013 and 2016, which correspond to a series of high-profile political incidents in the country.

The dataset documents events, beginning in May 2013, related to large protests against the government's proposed urban development plans, which were then violently repressed. The government crackdown itself then led to even more protests and continued state repression of demonstrators. The events in 2016 correspond to an attempted coup by a small faction within the military. The government's crackdown in response included instituting a state of emergency with widespread arrests of opposition actors and protestors.

The event dataset helps illuminate why the expert assessment and objective measures diverge. State repression of protest and failed coups most certainly would count as democratic erosion, and are the likely reason that V-Dem experts began to characterize Turkey as experiencing democratic backsliding.

However, the same repression and failed coups would not cause changes to the types of objective indicators used by L&M, such as lifting term limits or banning opposition parties. DEED thus helps to show how existing objective indicators are likely under-estimating democratic decline in the case of Turkey.

Figure 2: Comparing Indicators of Democratic Erosion in Turkey



Note: On the y-axis on the left-hand side, counts for all events in the precursor (gray bars), symptom (dark gray bars), resistance (light gray bars), and destabilizing event (white bar) categories in DEED (v6) for Turkey from 2000 to 2020. On the y-axis on the right-hand side, trends in the L&M (dark gray triangles) and V-Dem (white circles) indices. Both indices are scaled to range from 0 to 1.

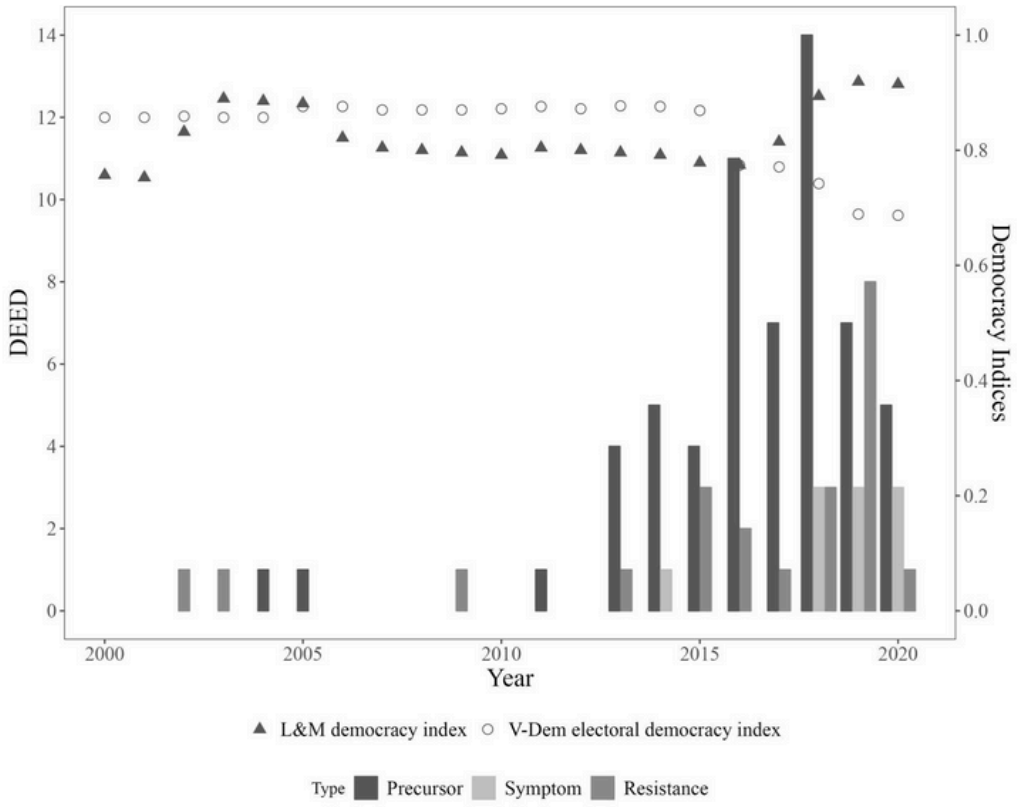
BRAZIL

Brazil is another case where DEED data can help to clarify discrepancies between expert and objective measures of erosion. As Figure 3 shows, from 2005 to 2016, the V-Dem and L&M indices move roughly in parallel. Beginning in 2016, however, they start moving in opposite directions, with the V-Dem score declining sharply while the L&M index rises. These trends continue such that by 2020, V-Dem rates Brazil's democracy as at its worst level since 2000, whereas the L&M index marks Brazil's democracy as the best it had been in that same time period.

Examining the uptick in events beginning around that time can offer insights about why the measures have diverged so significantly. The spike in events in 2018 is related to the candidacy of far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro, who ultimately won Brazil's presidency. During both his campaign and his time in office, Bolsonaro was known for using anti-democratic rhetoric. For example, he questioned democratic norms and institutions and threatened retaliation against opposition members. However, his words and threats generally did not materialize into concrete actions that undercut Brazil's democracy, at

least not in ways that can be easily measured with objective data. It is also possible that the country's institutions and its mobilized citizenry have been able to keep his anti-democratic impulses in check. Experts may have been swayed by Bolsonaro's anti-democratic words and values, and may have downgraded Brazil's democracy score accordingly. In contrast to Turkey, the event data in this case makes a different diagnosis: the expert assessments that underpin V-Dem likely over-estimate Brazil's democratic erosion.

Figure 3: Comparing Indicators of Democratic Erosion in Brazil



Note: On the y-axis on the left-hand side, counts for all events in the precursor (gray bars), symptom (dark gray bars), and resistance (light gray bars) event categories in DEED (v6) for Brazil from 2000 to 2020. (Brazil has no events from the destabilizing category during this period.) On the y-axis on the right-hand side, trends in the L&M (dark gray triangles) and V-Dem (white circles) indices. Both indices are scaled to range from 0 to 1.

TAKEAWAYS

When trying to understand whether and to what extent democratic erosion is occurring within and across countries, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers have a number of datasets and indicators to choose from. Yet, it can be difficult to understand how measures differ and why they sometimes produce divergent assessments of democratic decline.

When deciding which measures to use, it is important to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches, including their potential to introduce bias into the assessment of erosion (more of a concern with subjective data), to miss key aspects of

erosion that are hard to measure (more of a concern with objective data), or to be difficult to aggregate into a coherent picture across countries (more of a concern with event data).

Keeping these relative advantages in mind can also inform decisions about what data to use by helping users interpret cases where data sources differ in their diagnosis of backsliding. The case studies of Turkey and Brazil in this brief show how event data can help adjudicate between more subjective and objective assessments by providing a way to "look under the hood" of what is happening in particular cases, as well as making clear when we might expect subjective or objective measures to over- or under-estimate backsliding.

Finally, the choice of data could also depend on the kinds of questions that each can most usefully answer. Both more subjective and more objective measures often aggregate many different indicators into a single score per year, making them particularly useful for benchmarking countries against each other and over time. For example, policymakers can use these measures to compare a particular country's level of democracy at one point in time to other countries or regions on average, or to assess if a particular country has experienced a year-over-year decline in democratic quality. Since the event data in DEED does not create an aggregate score, it cannot easily answer these types of questions, though it can be used to study how democratic erosion plays out on the ground, for example by illuminating the concrete strategies that different actors adopt to undermine democracy or push back against erosion.

Of course, all efforts to measure democratic backsliding hinge on contentious questions about what "counts" as erosion, and no measurement approach is perfect in terms of accurately capturing all political phenomena of interest, nor doing so perfectly transparently or objectively. That said, better understanding the strengths and limitations of each approach can ensure policymakers and practitioners take full advantage of the existing data and evidence on democratic erosion when designing policy and programming.

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ABOUT THE DEMOCRATIC EROSION CONSORTIUM

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ENDNOTES

[1] Baron, Hannah, Robert A. Blair, Jessica Gottlieb, and Laura Paler. "An Events-Based Approach to Understanding Democratic Erosion." *PS: Political Science & Politics* (2023): 208-215.

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[16]Little, Andrew T., and Anne Meng. "Measuring democratic backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* (2023): 1-13.

[17] Ibid.

[18] A fuller discussion of the methodology to create DEED is included in the Supplemental Information section. More information can also be found on our website: https://www.democratic-erosion.com/event-dataset/methodology/

[19] See further discussion of coverage gaps in the Supplemental Information section.

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION: DEED METHODOLOGY

Though still in development, the current beta version (v6) of the DEED includes 5,979 events across 143 countries between 2000 and 2023. DEED follows a two-step process for identifying and coding events. First, DEED coders review three key sources: student-written case studies following a standardized template produced in DEC-led courses on democratic erosion; Freedom House annual reports; and news reports through the Access World News database (this last event-finding protocol is in the process of development).

Second, research assistants use a detailed codebook to convert these qualitative narratives into quantitative data, while maintaining rich event descriptions and corresponding sources for further qualitative information. Events are coded with categories related to either vertical accountability, meaning between the government and citizens, or horizontal accountability, meaning checks within the government itself. Table 1 in the main text includes a sample of our event codes and classifications.

DEED also classifies events into four types, to distinguish events that often precede democratic erosion (precursors) from those that constitute erosion itself (symptoms) and those that counteract erosion once it has already begun (resistance). Tracking precursors can help researchers understand when and under what conditions emerging threats to democracy materialize. Measuring resistance can help illuminate the strategies that have been more or less successful at slowing or reversing democratic decline, and can help distinguish cases of democratic stability in which there are no (or few) threats todemocracy from those in which threats are neutralized as they occur. These two types of cases may differ in important ways, but may be indistinguishable using standard democracy indicators. Finally, after incorporating authoritarian regimes into the database, we added a new event category (destabilizing), meaning events that undermine the stability of an autocratic regime. In democracies, these kinds of events likely lead to more authoritarianism, however, the impact in authoritarian regimes is unclear: if the regime responds by trying to neutralize the risk posed by the event, then it could lead to even more authoritarianism, but if the event successfully undermines the regime, the impact could be a democratic opening.

DEED includes primary source citations for the vast majority of events (93%). Sources include local and international news outlets, peer-reviewed journals in political science and area studies, and reports from think tanks and local and international NGOs. When a case study specifies a source for an event, research assistants verify the source; when it does not, they seek to identify one.

To date, DEED has uneven coverage across countries and time. For example, the dataset initially just covered democracies, and has increasingly added events of authoritarian consolidation and resistance in autocracies. DEED is also more comprehensive for some countries and years than others, and we expect patterns in the data may change with subsequent updates. The DEC will support yearly updates to DEED to add new country-years and expand or improve the description and categorization of existing events using new case studies. In addition, we are in the process of using alternative sources of information to capture events that students' case studies may have missed (i.e., "false negatives") and to remove or recategorize events that are miscoded or mistakenly included in the data ("false positives").