Democracy Tracker Methodology

Overview of the Democracy Tracker: What is it and who is it for?

There are many sources of annual data on democratic performance – often with a reporting delay – but the policy community could benefit from more current and focused information and analysis about events to which responses are required. As part of the Global State of Democracy Initiative, International IDEA developed the Democracy Tracker as a timely and policy-directed tool for monitoring events and alerting audiences to their potential impacts on democracy and human rights. To that end, the Democracy Tracker covers 29 attributes and subattributes of democratic performance (derived from the Global State of Democracy Indices (GSoDI) framework) across 173 countries, reporting on a monthly basis. The Democracy Tracker's regional experts comprehensively study events and developing trends, using the monthly reports to highlight those that are most relevant for actors who require the most up-to-date country level analysis of how democracy is faring. While its primary audience is policy makers, we think it is useful for the media, researchers, civil society and anyone else who wishes to stay informed.

Data collection: What sources do we base our reports on?

Unlike a mere media monitoring service, the Democracy Tracker methodology concentrates the research and analysis work on the back end, providing users with carefully curated updates. The data collection process involves comprehensive collection of online news media items relating to democracy and human rights in each of 173 countries. Sources include local and international media outlets, reports from reputable NGOs and IGOs, analysis from expert organizations, and inputs from International IDEA's regionally based experts. As a first step, we leverage the continuous monitoring of online news available from the Global Database of Events Languages and Tones (GDELT), which covers online media in 65 languages, as well as a customized set of queries in Lexis Nexis Newsdesk. This is supplemented by additional manual surveys of local and international media and expert reports that cover each country and conversations and interviews with regional IDEA experts, as necessary.

Data selection and coding: What is included in a typical monthly update (and what is not)?

Events are selected for reporting on the basis that they signal a development that could impact the status quo in a country's democratic performance trend. The reports provide the user with a concise summary of the event and its significance, hyperlinked sources, a list of searchable key terms, and a series of attribute icons that visually indicate which aspects of the country's democratic performance are impacted by the event. The attribute icons are colour coded to correspond to the implications of the event for democratic performance, with green denoting an improvement, red a decline, and dark grey an unchanged trajectory. The benchmark for trajectory determinations is the established level of performance in the country in question (as measured by the GSoD Indices). The indication of improvement, decline or continuity are applicable for that month alone.

Countries that receive at least one event report will be coded with a colour (green, red, or dark grey) that reflects the overall trajectory of its democratic performance trend that month. In instances in which reported event(s) are judged to have a differential impact on a country's attributes, our coders will code the country's overall trajectory according to the following principles. Firstly, priority is given to changes in performance trajectory. This means when a reported event(s) is found to signal change in some attributes and continuity in others, the country's trajectory for that month will

be coded to reflect the change rather than the continuity. This is because the Democracy Tracker prioritises highlighting changes in the status quo. Secondly, where there are two or more attributes with performance trajectory changes in different directions (improvement and decline), the country will be coded with the colour which, in the expert opinion of our coders, reflects the most significant of these changes, when the implications of the event(s) are considered as a whole. This assessment goes beyond a simple mathematical calculation of the number of attributes registering improving and declining performance trajectories.

Additionally, the Democracy Tracker notes events that are uniquely and egregiously damaging to democracy or human rights with a red flag, irrespective of context. This category of events is limited to events such as political assassinations, coups d'etat, and the outbreak of wars. Red flags are reviewed by senior management before they are confirmed and posted.

Separately from the confirmed events whose significance is denoted by the colour coding system and the red flag, the Democracy Tracker also highlights developing situations with a high potential for negative outcomes with a warning indicator. Warning indicators do not indicate that a country's performance level on a particular indicator has already changed, but that there is an area that deserves special attention in the near future.

It is important to emphasise that the Democracy Tracker is not a news service. It purposely does not cover all democracy-related events. Rather, it selectively reports those events which signal possible changes in the status in a country's democratic performance trend.

Quality control

Difficult decisions are made at two stages of the Democracy Tracker monthly update process: in (1) choosing which events to report and in (2) interpreting the significance of those events. Our regional expert coders in the project team make these calls in the first instance. However, senior regional specialists and program managers (both at headquarters and in regional offices) check the updates for accuracy and quality. In this way, at least five individuals have verified each of the updates. Decisions concerning the application of a red flag label to a reported event are taken in consultation with International IDEA's senior management.

Country pages: Where can I find the relevant information?

Country profile overview

Monthly reports are featured on individual country pages. Each country page includes qualitative and quantitative background data to provide an overview of the countries' democracy and human rights landscapes, including the following information:

- Country briefs

    - Each country page features a brief that sets out the country's political context. Amongst other things, the briefs describe regime type, recent trends in the annual GSoDI data, relevant socio-political history, politically salient social cleavages, and an outlook on political developments to watch over the next ten years.

- Basic information boxes

    - Complementing the narrative text of the country briefs are a series of key data points describing the institutional features of a country's political system, recent elections,

the representation of women in the legislature, and the country's engagement with the United Nation's (UN) Universal Periodic Review - a mechanism for reviewing member states' human rights records.

- Human rights treaty boxes

    o Users are given a further indication of how countries engage with the international human rights system through summary information on the ratification status of three sets of human rights treaties: the UN's Core International Human Rights Treaties, the International Labour Organisation's Fundamental Conventions, and the principal regional human rights treaties.

- Democracy summit commitment tracker

    o The country profiles of countries that made public commitments for the 2021 Summit for Democracy list the number of commitments made by these countries to further the Summit's aim of defending democracy and human rights, fighting corruption and combating authoritarianism. These profiles also link to the summitfordemocracyresources.eu website, where users can find copies of all of the summit commitments and, for those countries that have submitted commitment reports, short summaries of their progress towards their commitments.

- Early warning tool

    o The Democracy Tracker's early warning tool uses the historical quantitative data (annually updated) from the GSoDI to forecast the probability of democratic breakdown and democratic backsliding over the two-year period following each annual data update (which takes place in June each year). The annual forecasts are based on a probability estimate derived from a machine learning approach that treats the occurrence of an event as a classification problem. Namely, given a series of lagged data inputs, we estimate the probability that the events in which we are interested will occur in a given year. In the months after the annual update, the forecasts are revised as necessary to account for the qualitative analysis of events that the Democracy Tracker publishes each month. In cases where a country is involved in a war (more than 1,000 battle related deaths in a year, as captured by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program), the early warning tool is deactivated, as the political context is likely to have changed beyond what the forecast can accommodate.

- Global State of Democracy Indices (GSoDI) boxes

    o The country pages also feature visualizations of key GSoDI data. Sparkline graphs show the country's performance on the GSoDI's five democracy attributes over the most recent ten-year period. A spider chart offers the user an overview of the state of democracy in the country, illustrating performance levels across the GSoDI's sixteen subattributes of democracy. An interactive timeline illustrates the country's regime classification from 1975 to the year of our most recently published data and allows users to produce a spider chart for any year.