

**Perspectives on the Pandemic Series**  
Fairmount College of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
Wichita State University

# The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Democracy in the World

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# Presentation Content

- **Differences between political systems and the outcome of the pandemic**
  - Did political structures make a difference?
  - Did political culture play a role?
- **Regime types and the impact of COVID-19**
  - Defining democracy (vs. authoritarianism)
  - Tracking the impact: the V-Dem Pandemic Index and International IDEA Monitoring System.
    - Authoritarian regimes and COVID-19
    - Democratic regimes and COVID-19
  - Specific effects: elections, protest, corruption.
- **Challenges for democracy in the post-pandemic world**
  - Government and political actors
  - Citizens and civil society



Differences between political systems  
and the outcome of the pandemic

# Explaining the Outcome of the Pandemic

Independent variables

Dependent variable

URBANIZATION  
AGE PYRAMID  
INEQUALITY  
ACCESS TO HEALTH-CARE  
EXTENT OF RESTRICTIONS

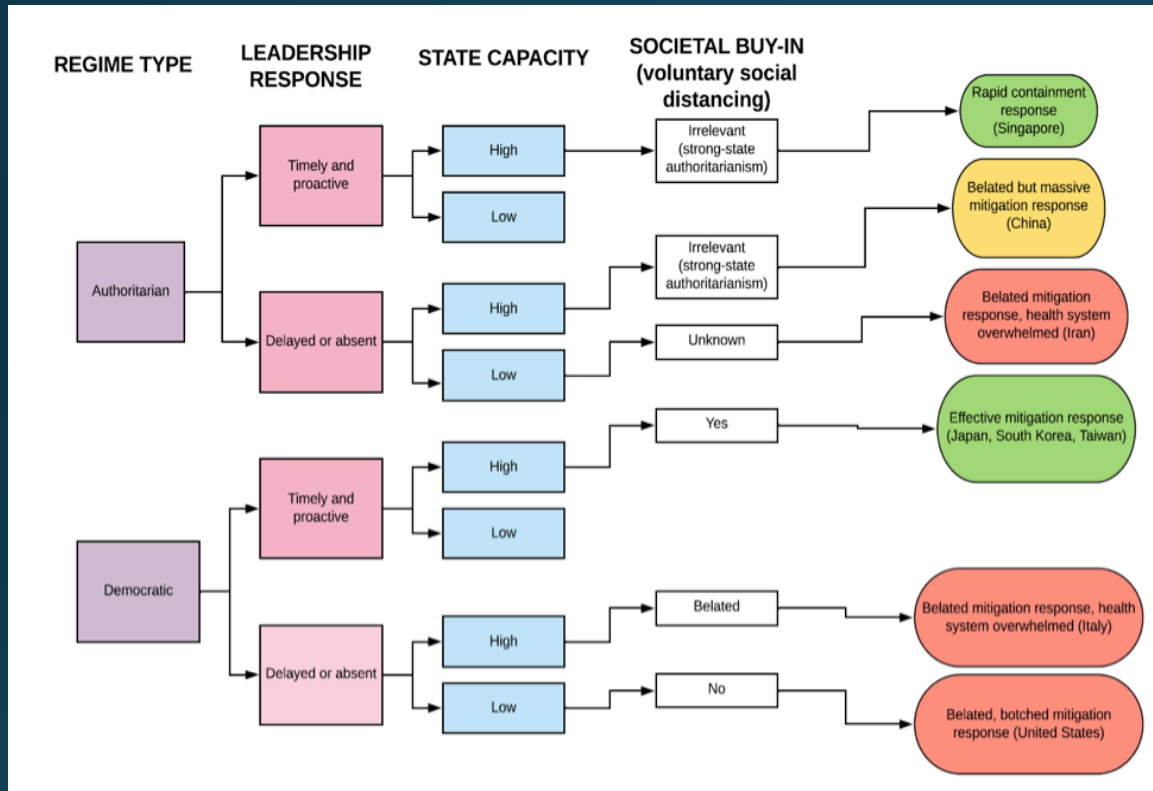
POLITICAL VARIABLES:  
STATE CAPACITY  
TYPE OF INSTITUTIONS  
& POLITICAL STRUCTURES  
POLITICAL CULTURE

PANDEMIC  
PUBLIC  
HEALTH  
OUTCOMES





# State Capacity Matters



Francis Fukuyama:

“Countries with all three—a competent state apparatus, a government that citizens trust and listen to, and effective leaders—have performed impressively, limiting the damage they have suffered.”

(The Pandemic and Political Order: It Takes a State. *99 Foreign Affairs* 26 (2020))

Source: Fenner, Sofia (Duke of Minerva, March 2020)

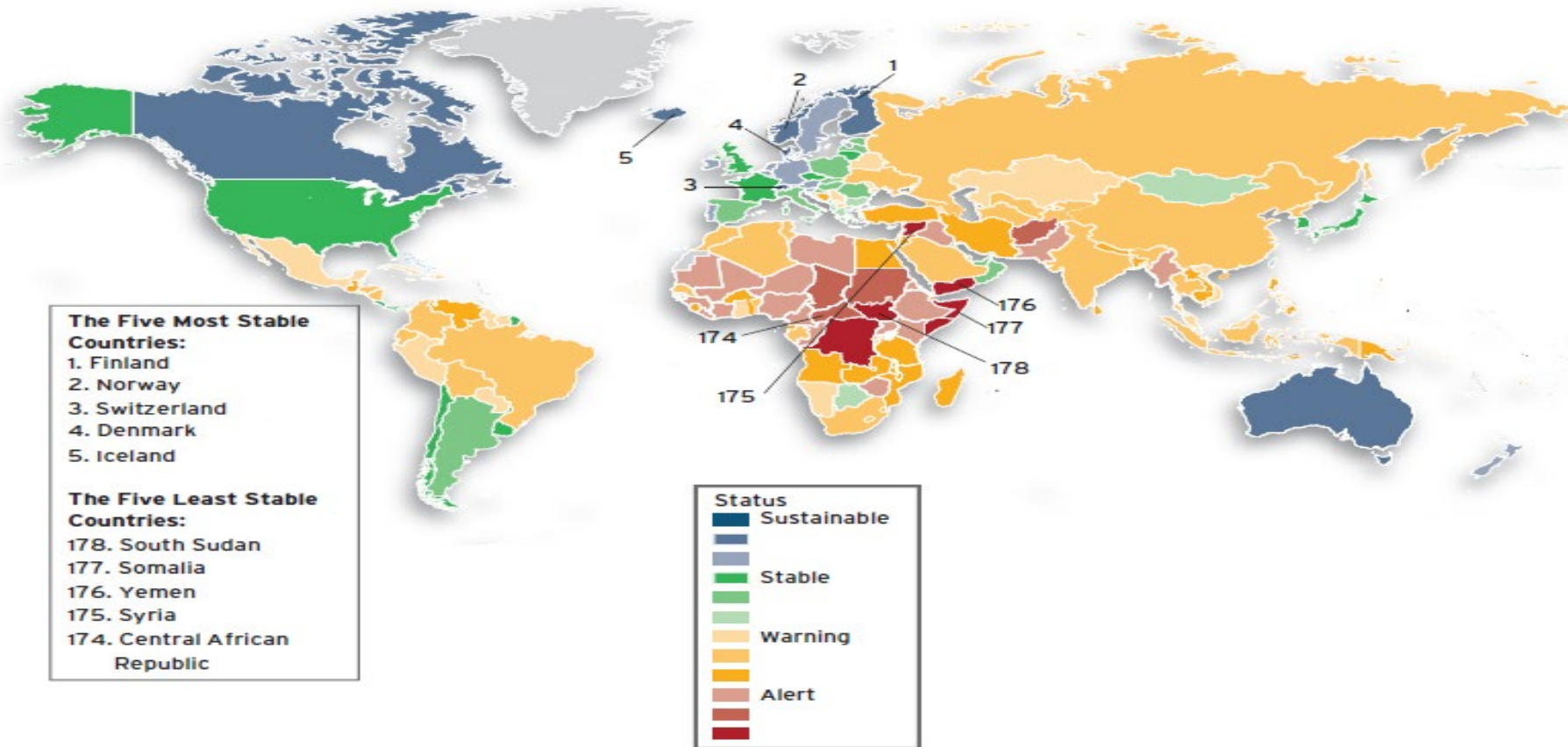
<https://duckofminerva.com/2020/03/state-regime-government-and-society-in-covid-19-response-establishing-baseline-expectations.html>



# Measuring State Capacity: the Fragile States Index

MAP 2.3

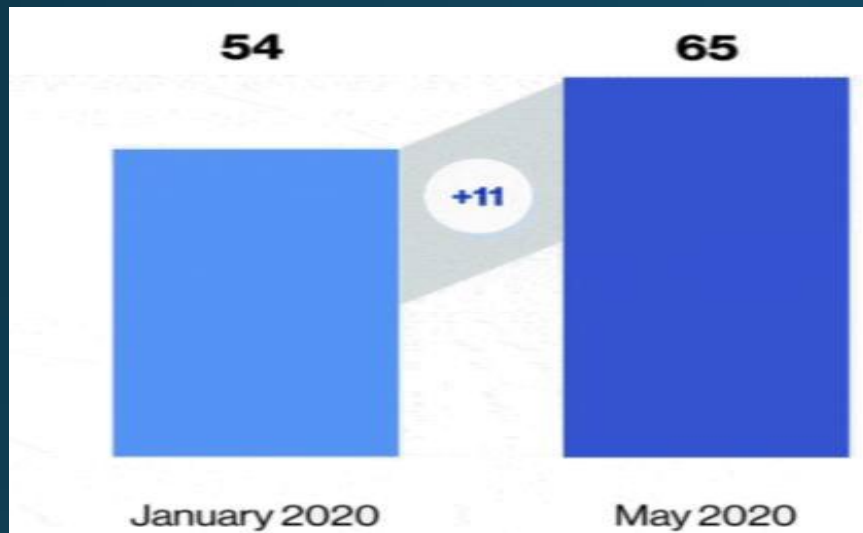
Fragile States, 2019



Source: Fund for Peace, 2019. "Fragile States Index 2019" (<http://fsi.fragilestatesindex.org/>).

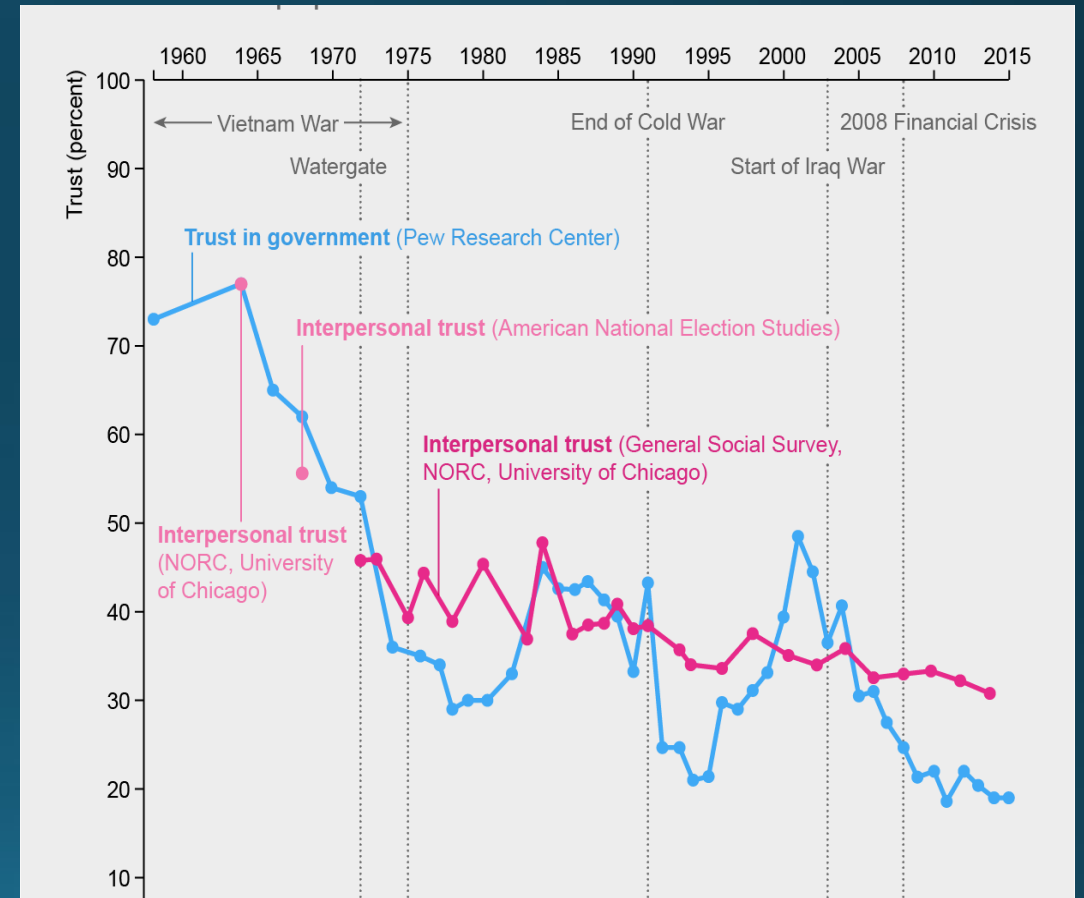
# Political Trust Matters

Double-digit increase in trust in government during the pandemic (in 11 countries)



Source: *Edelman Trust Barometer*, Spring 2020

Sample: Between April 15 and April 23, 13,200 respondents in 11 countries: Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, S. Korea, U.K. and U.S. 1,200 people were surveyed in each, 100 of which were informed public



Trust in government the United States has been declining for years.

Source: Rothstein, Trust Is The Key to Fighting the Pandemic. *Scientific American*, March 24, 2020



# Other Predictor (Political) Variables?

- Federal vs. Unitary systems:
  - Are unitary systems more effective?
- Parliamentary vs. Presidential systems:
  - Role of leadership is different
  - Role of political parties and process to achieve consensus is different
- Democratic regimes vs. authoritarian regimes?  
(Next section)

- Underlying instabilities:

“Just as individuals with preexisting conditions are more vulnerable to the virus, so too, it would seem, are countries with underlying instabilities.”

(Serhan, Y. Where the Pandemic Is Only Getting Worse, *The Atlantic*, August 6, 2020)

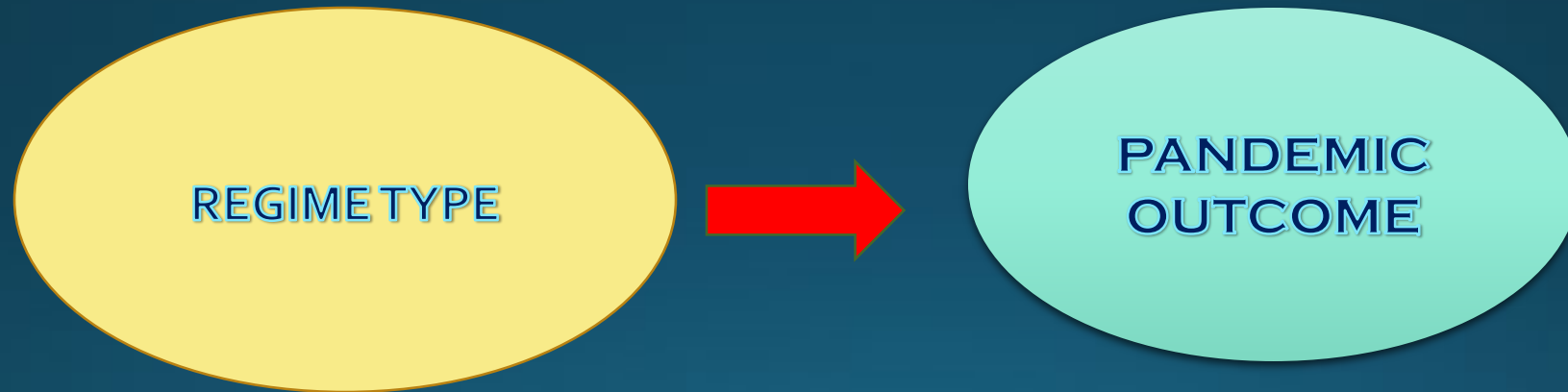


# Impact of Regime Type on the Pandemic Outcome

In terms of pandemic health outcomes, has "regime type" made a difference?  
*(regime type as predictor)*

Independent variable

Dependent variable



## Typology of Regime Types

Many forms of government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that **democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time....**

*Winston Churchill, November 1947*

### Democracy

Liberal  
Democratic  
Regimes

Electoral  
Democratic  
Regimes  
(hybrid)

### Authoritarianism

Electoral  
Authoritarian  
Regimes  
(hybrid)

Authoritarian  
Regimes



# Liberal Democratic Regimes

## Minimalist definition (Robert Dahl): inclusion and political contestation

- Control over government decisions vested in **elected officials**
- Frequent and fairly conducted **elections**
- Practically all adults have the **right to vote** in the election of officials
- Practically all adults have the **right to run for office**
- Freedom of **expression and association**
  - *Substantial freedom of belief, opinion, discussion, assembly, demonstration and petition.*
  - *Beyond elections, citizens have multiple channels for expression*
- Freedom of **information**
  - There are alternative sources of information

## Other Features - Maximalist definition:

- **Accountability**
  - *Horizontal – checks and balances*
  - *Vertical – citizens can hold authorities accountable*
- Uncertainty of **electoral outcomes**.
  - *The winner is not 'predetermined'*
- **Representation**
  - *Political minorities are allowed to participate and have representation.*
- Strong **Rule of Law**
  - *Nobody is above the law.*
  - *Efficient enforcement of laws.*
- **Political Equality**
  - *Citizens are politically equal under the law (even if in practice they have unequal political resources)*

# Electoral Democractic Regimes

(also called midrange democracies or illiberal democracies)

## Minimalist features of democracy

- They pass the **minimal threshold of democracy**, but lack some or several features of a liberal democracy.
- They hold free and fair elections, but **fall short of** strong respect for political and civil liberties, accountability, rule of law, and participation.

## Defective democracies

- Weak political institutions:
  - *Especially legislatures and political party systems.*
  - *Bureaucratic jobs are often distributed through clientelism.*
  - *Corruption abounds. Weak checks and balances (horizontal and vertical).*
- Weak civil society:
  - *Organized groups lack coordination*
  - *Legal protections exist in paper, but are often overlooked in practice.*
- Most third wave democracies fall in this category.
  - *Developing countries with weak state capacity (they fail to efficiently deliver basic services)*



# Electoral Authoritarian Regimes

(also called competitive authoritarian regimes)

- **Formal democratic institutions** are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority.
- Violations of standard democratic criteria are frequent enough and serious enough to create an **uneven playing field between government and opposition.**
  - Opposition may have some representation in legislature but never wins major offices.

Although elections are regularly held and are generally free of massive fraud, incumbents routinely:

- Abuse state resources
- Deny the opposition adequate media coverage
- Harass opposition candidates and their supporters
- In some cases manipulate electoral results.
- Journalists, opposition politicians, and other government critics may be spied on, threatened, harassed, or arrested.
  - *Media licenses are revoked.*
- Members of the opposition may be jailed, exiled, or—less frequently—even assaulted or murdered.
- Institutions are co-opted to favor the incumbents
  - *Packing the courts and key institutions such as the electoral authority with people who are friendly to the government.*
  - *Checks and balances eroded.*
  - *Unchecked corruption thrives.*

# Authoritarian Regimes

(also called full autocracies or dictatorships)

- **Disregard for competitive elections.**
  - *Some dictatorships try to legitimize themselves by holding façade elections (i.e. Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua in the past. Lukashenko in Belarus in August 2020)*
- **Disregard for freedoms of association and expression.**
  - *Lack of independent media. Only state media allowed.*
- **Limited political rights** (if any).
- **No room for opposition or dissent.**
- Widespread use of **repression and human rights violations** to control population.
- **No independent legislature or judiciary.**

Authoritarian regimes share certain characteristics, but they are very different depending on:

- **Who** is in charge:
  - An individual (*personalist regimes*). “Strongmen”. The main type in recent decades.
  - A party (*single party regimes*). For example China and Cuba.
  - The army (*military regimes*). For example Thailand and Myanmar.
  - A royal family (*authoritarian monarchy*). Nowadays mostly Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, etc.).
  - Totalitarian systems have mostly a thing of the past (except North Korea).
- The **ideology** of the people in charge:
  - Embrace of *free-market economy* by right-wing authoritarians. But they gain from the system (i.e. Saudi Arabia)
  - Embrace of *socialist economy* by left-wing authoritarians. But they gain from the system (i.e. Cuba)
  - Some authoritarian regimes adopt a *mixed economy* (i.e. China)

# Did regime type make a difference in the outcome of the pandemic?

- Fukuyama and Fenner say that regime type **has not** made a difference.
  - *Some democracies were also successful (i.e. South Korea)*
- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Brookings Institution experts: **too early to tell.**
  - *"The pandemic is both reopening and intensifying one of the most vital debates of the post-post-Cold War era: that over whether democracy or authoritarianism is best suited to deal with new and unprecedented threats."* (Brookings)
- Overall, authoritarian regimes reported lower per capita numbers of cases and deaths.
  - *Trustworthy data?*
  - *No independent media, limited access of outside actors.*

## The authoritarian advantage?

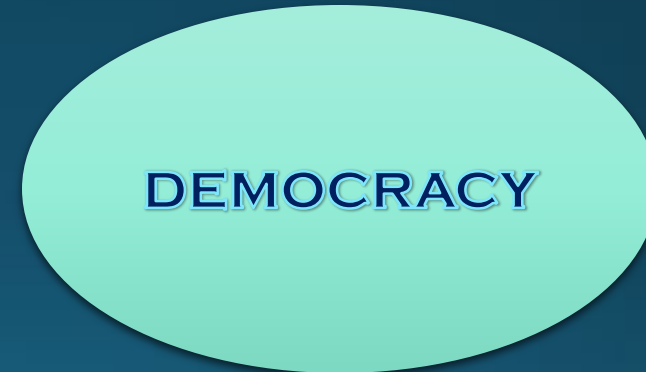
- In authoritarian regimes, policy process is faster.
  - Lack of **public debate**.
  - **Policy decisions** reflect the ruling class perspective only.
    - *No negotiations*
    - *No checks and balances*
  - **Public information** is of low quality and limited to the government perspective.
- Is the **"Chinese Model"** appealing to fragile democracies?
  - Growing economic presence in the developing world (Belt and Road Program, trade).
  - Will the 'political model' be tempting?

# Impact of the Pandemic on Democracy

Independent variable



Dependent variable



**In terms of respect for human rights and democratic liberties during the pandemic, has “regime type” mattered?**

**Democracy**

**Liberal Democratic Regimes**

**Electoral Democratic Regimes**

**Authoritarianism**

**Electoral Authoritarian Regimes**

**Authoritarian Regimes**

# Important Caveats

- 1. Democratic “backsliding”** (autocratization or democratic erosion) **was already occurring in the world** (began around 14 years ago):
  - Transformation of **previously democratic regimes** into electoral authoritarian regimes (i.e. Hungary).
  - Transformation of **electoral authoritarian regimes** into fully autocratic regimes (i.e. Venezuela, Nicaragua, Turkey).
  - **Tightening of authoritarian grip** in countries with electoral authoritarian regimes or fully authoritarian regimes (i.e. Russia, China).
  - Growing **constraints on democracy** in some democratic countries (i.e. India).
  - **Rise of populism** (with consequences on growing intolerance and polarization).
    - *Right-wing populism in advanced industrial democracies (i.e. Hungary, etc.)*
    - *Right-wing and left-wing populism in other parts of the world (i.e. Turkey, Philippines, Venezuela, etc.)*
  - **Steady decline of trust in democracy and in political institutions** across the board in democratic regimes (in advanced democracies and in developing democracies)

# Important Caveats (cont.)

## 2. The COVID-19 emergency allowed governments around the world to legally enforce restrictions to contain the pandemic:

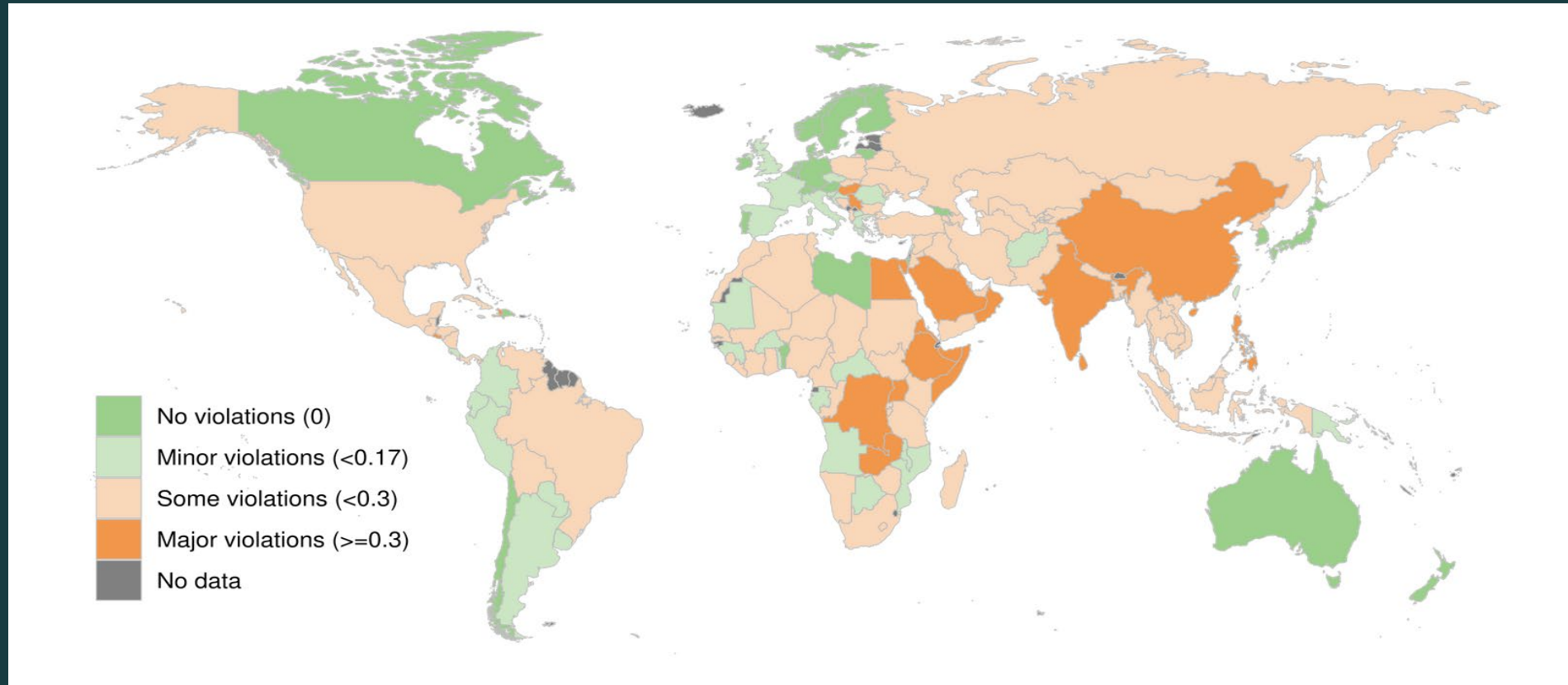
- Constitutions **allow for the implementation of restrictions** (with variations from country to country)
  - *Problems arise when governments go beyond what is permissible by domestic and international standards.*
- The **postponement of elections per se was not seen as a violation** of democratic rights, especially at the beginning of the pandemic
  - *Even countries with high democratic scores postponed elections.*



# Important Caveats (cont.)

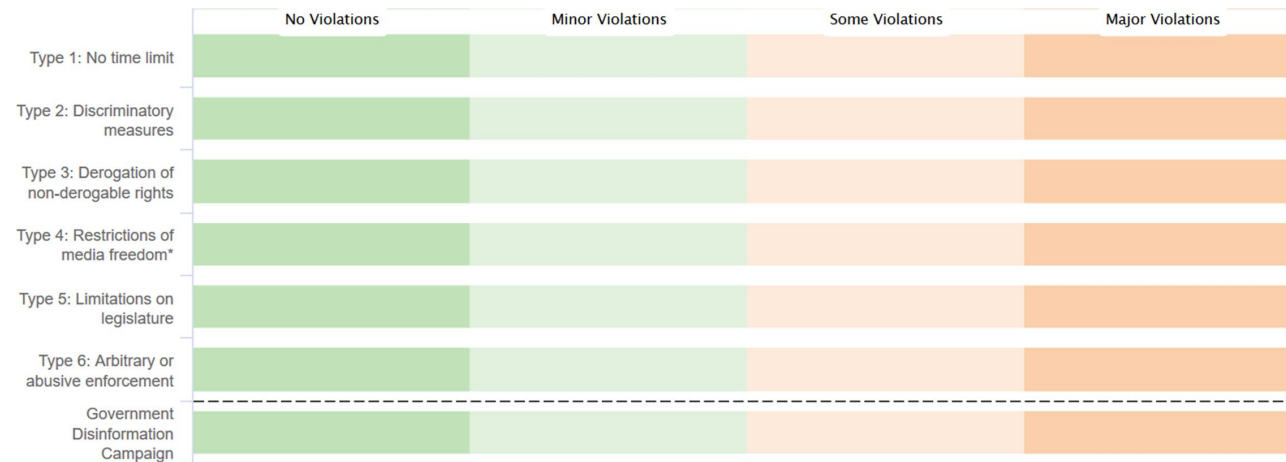
3. The measurement of the political impact of the pandemic is more difficult (and diffuse) than the measurement of the health impact or the economic impact of COVID-19.
- Some institutions have been tracking the political impact of the pandemic at the global level:
    - **V-Democracy Project** (Multi-country, based at University of Gothenburg): *Pandemic Democratic Violations Index, Pandemic Backsliding Index*
    - **International IDEA** (Headquarters in Sweden): *Classification of countries*
    - **Freedom House** (Headquarters in the U.S): *General monitoring*
  - Sources for their assessment: experts opinions, media, documents and reports.

# Pandemic Democratic Violations Index (V-Democracy Institute)



# Pandemic Democratic Violations Index Components (V-Democracy Institute)

## Pandem Component Indicators: [select country]



\*Type 4 (restrictions of media freedom) includes information on media censorship in 2019 from the V-Dem data set in order to account for structural limitations of media freedom.

# Countries with Major Violations

## Liberal Democracies

- None

## Electoral Democracies

- India (0.47) *Free 71/100*
- El Salvador (0.47) *Partly Free 66/100*
- Philippines (0.47) *Partly Free 59/100*
- Serbia (0.41) *Partly Free 66/100*
- Hungary (0.35) *Partly Free 70/100*
- Haiti (0.35) *Partly Free 38/100*

# Countries with Major Violations

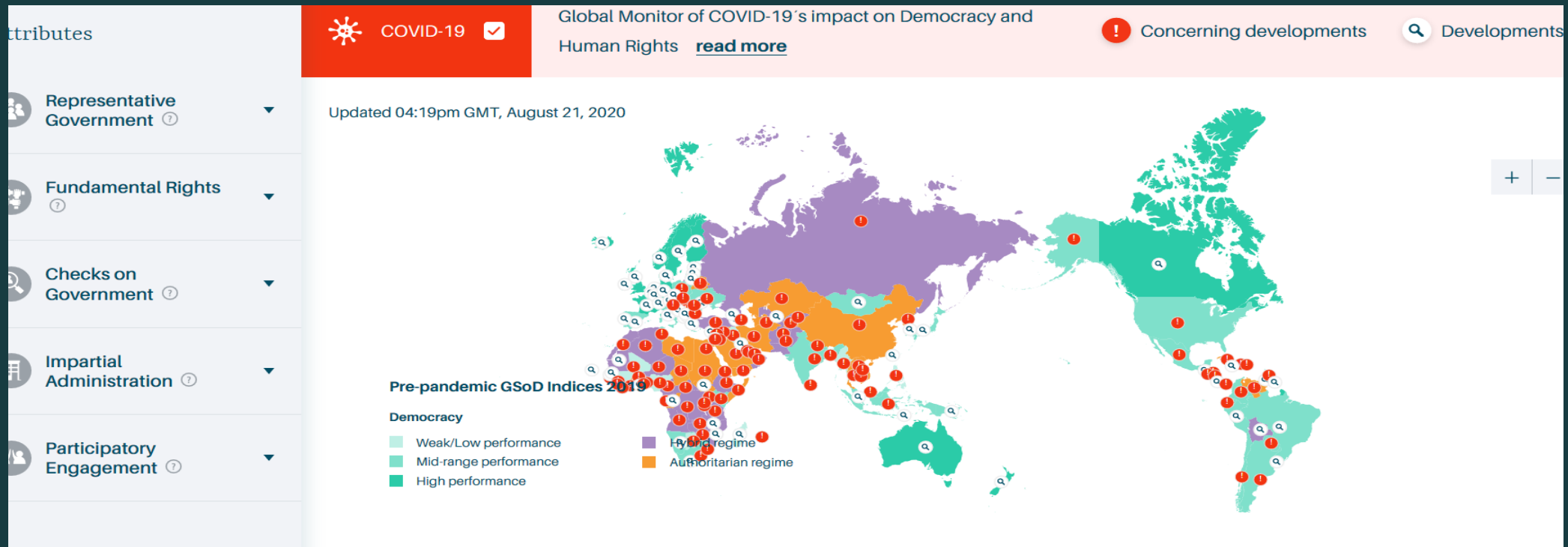
## Electoral Authoritarian Regimes

- Uganda (0.47) Not Free 34/100
- Zambia (0.41) Partly Free 24/100
- Ethiopia (0.35) Not Free 24/100

## Authoritarian Regimes

- Saudi Arabia (0.53) Not Free 7/100
- Oman (0.53) Not Free 25/100
- Eritrea (0.53) Not Free 2/100
- Democratic Republic of Congo (0.41) Not Free 18/100
- China (0.35) Not Free 10/100
- Egypt (0.35) Not Free 21/100
- Somalia (0.35) Not Free 7/100

# Global Monitor of COVID-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights (International IDEA)



# International IDEA Monitoring Examples (Electoral Democracies)

## Hungary

- **Regime Type:** Mid-range performing democracy since 1990.
- **State of emergency**

On 11 March the government declared a national "state of danger", which is a special state of emergency regulated by Hungary's constitution. Human rights organizations expressed concern that the state of emergency gave **sweeping powers to the executive without a set time limit**, which runs counter to internationally accepted standards. On 17 June Parliament voted to lift the emergency regime. Through another legal act, **parliament preserved the possibility for Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to rule by decree when necessary**. Human Rights Watch has expressed concern that in its current form, the bill would allow the government to yet again rule by decree for an undefined period of time with minimal judicial and parliamentary scrutiny.

- **COVID-19 Democracy & Human Rights Impact Summary**

**Two aspects of concern and seven to watch from a democracy and human rights perspective**, with particular emphasis on Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity, with emergency provisions allowing disproportionate measures to curb disinformation, including up to five years in prison. A major cause of concern has been the rule by decree by the Executive, further expanding executive power, undermining Checks on Government and potentially further deepening the country's democratic backsliding process.

## El Salvador

- **Regime Type:** Weak/low performing democracy in 2019 after alternating between low and mid-range democratic performance since 1984.
- **State of emergency**

The legislature declared a 30-day a state of emergency on 14 March 2020. On 8 June, the Supreme Court overruled competing legislative and executive decrees on the state of emergency and gave the government and the Legislative Assembly 4 days to agree on a set of measures. As of mid-June, **there is legal uncertainty over the emergency status** (see 'Checks on Government').

- **COVID-19 Democracy & Human Rights Impact Summary**

Under President Bukele, El Salvador has implemented among **the most stringent restrictions on personal freedoms to fight COVID-19 in the Americas**. Its response to the pandemic has been marked by severe enforcement and a **dangerous escalation of attacks between the executive and other branches of government**, compromising legal certainty and threatening to undermine the rule of law.

*NOTE: As of late July, President Bukele of El Salvador had the highest approval rating in countries of The Americas (over 80% approval). A political culture problem?*



# International IDEA Monitoring Examples

## (Electoral Authoritarian and Authoritarian)

### Russia

- **Regime Type:** Hybrid regime since 2004 after a period of low democratic performance between 1993 and 2003.
- **State of emergency**

**No state of emergency was declared.** However, on 31 March the State Duma (parliament) adopted a **federal law to regulate the state response to COVID-19, including a quarantine, the electoral calendar by election authorities, operation of transport, tourism, cultural events, education, and other areas.** Restrictions were eased by mid-June.

- **COVID-19 Democracy & Human Rights Impact Summary**

In a hybrid regime such as Russia's, civic and media space is already restrained and power is concentrated in the President. Further clampdown on freedom of speech, media freedom and freedom of assembly, and attempts to extend the term mandate of the President is likely to lead to deepen the country's autocratization.

### China

- **Regime Type:** Authoritarian regime since before 1975.
- **State of emergency**

No national state of emergency was declared. On 23 January 2020, the central government imposed a lockdown on Wuhan and cities nearby in Hubei, and lifted it on 8 April 2020. On 30 January 2020, 31 provinces and autonomous regions declared the highest-level public health emergency.

- **COVID-19 Democracy & Human Rights Impact Summary**

The People's Republic of China was the first country to raise the alarm about the existence of COVID-19, with the city of Wuhan in the Hubei province as the epicentre of the pandemic. Apart from several lockdowns in the Hubei province, and especially in Wuhan, the central government has used a mix of restrictive measures and technology to trace and isolate cases to stop local transmission. **After getting the virus under control in Hubei province, lockdowns and restrictions have taken place in diverse parts of the country when cases have been discovered. As an autocracy with already low levels of Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, the Government has severely limited freedom of expression and media reporting on the virus during the pandemic.** Concerns that the government is using the context of the pandemic to tighten control over Hong Kong, with the security law passed end of June, which restricts the right to protest and freedom of speech in Hong Kong. Legislative Council elections in Hong Kong (envisaged to take place September 6) have been postponed, likely by one year.

# Specific Effects on Democracy

## ELECTIONS

### *International IDEA Tracking:*

From 21 February 2020 until 23 August 2020:

- At least **70 countries and territories across the globe have decided to postpone** national and subnational elections due to COVID-19, out of which at least 28 countries and territories have decided to postpone national elections and referendums;
- At least **55 countries and territories have decided to hold** national or subnational elections despite concerns related to COVID-19 of which at least 38 have held national elections or referendums.
- At least, **20 countries and territories have held elections that were initially postponed due to concerns related to COVID-19** of which at least 12 have held national elections or referendums,

### **New Zealand delays election after virus outbreak in Auckland**



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announces a new date for national elections, during a news conference in Wellington, New Zealand, Monday, Aug. 17, 2020. | Mark Mitchell/New Zealand Herald via AP

By ASSOCIATED PRESS

08/17/2020 08:32 AM EDT

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has delayed New Zealand's elections by four weeks due to the coronavirus outbreak in Auckland.

The election had been scheduled for Sept. 19 but will now be held on Oct. 17. Opposition parties had sought a delay after the virus outbreak prompted the government last week to put Auckland under a two-week lockdown and halted election campaigning

# Specific Effects on Democracy

## PROTESTS

For several months protests **were put on hold** by the pandemic, but they have reemerged in several countries. Some directly related to issues of elections and/or democracy:

- **Belarus:** the most surprising. They are a consequence of rigged elections on August 9 (Lukashenko “won” again. Has been in power 26 years)
- **Bolivia:** supporters of former populist president Morales protested in August against the government's decision to delay the presidential election for a third time to Oct. 18. Wanted the country to go forward with the previous date, which is Sept 6. The spread of COVID-19 is still significant in Bolivia.

**But some have stalled:**

- **Hong Kong:** crackdown on pro-democracy activists after China's new security law (came into effect June 30<sup>th</sup>). Over a year of protests came to a halt.

## Citizen Wave Opposes Dictator Lukashenko, Calls For Democracy In Belarus

By [Swapnil Singh](#), Inventiva

August 24, 2020



The harsh threats from [Alexandr Lukashenko](#) have not intimidated the Belarusian public. Hundreds of thousands of people have marched this Sunday, defeating fear, through the streets of Minsk and other cities in the country to demand the resignation of the leader and the repetition of the elections.



# Specific Effects on Democracy

## CORRUPTION

- Third wave democracies (developing democracies) have been hit by corruption scandals linked to the pandemic.
- Even some advanced democracies have had issues during the pandemic (not necessarily related to the pandemic):

*Headline in Washington Post, August 19, 2020: Trudeau's suspension of Parliament amid ethics controversy fuels cries of 'coverup'*

*Headline in Voice of America, July 26, 2020: Spaniards Protest Against Former King Amid Corruption Allegations*

### South Africa investigates allegations of corruption linked to billions in coronavirus relief

ABC/AP Posted 26 July 2020



The money meant to be used to support South Africa's 57 million people has been linked to widespread corruption allegations. *(Reuters: Siphwe Sibeko)*

South Africa's COVID-19 response has been marred by corruption allegations around its historic \$36.6 billion economic relief package. As the country with the world's fifth-highest number of COVID-19 cases braces for more infections.

### Spread of coronavirus fuels corruption in Latin America

By JOSHUA GOODMAN, May 27, 2020



MIAMI (AP) — Even in a pandemic, there's no slowdown for swindlers in Latin America. From Argentina to Panama, a number of officials have been forced to resign as reports of fraudulent purchases of ventilators, masks and other medical supplies pile up. The thefts are driven by price-gouging from manufacturers and profiteering by politically connected middlemen who see the crisis as an opportunity for graft

# Challenges for democracy in the post-pandemic world

# Government and political actors

## In general:

- What will be the effect of the pandemic on the 'role of the state' in the economy, and in general?
  - *The end of minimalist state: neo-liberalism? (Levitsky)*
- To what extent will populism strengthen or weaken?
  - *Will divisive populist leaders prevail over unifying leaders?*
- To what extent will countries undergo regime change?
  - *Mali's coup d'état August 18, 2020. Uncommon type of regime change in 21<sup>st</sup> century.*
  - Will the democratic model have the upper-hand vis-à-vis the authoritarian model?

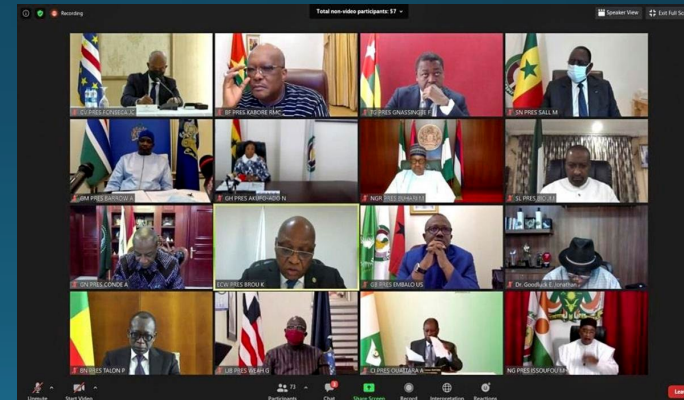
# Government and political actors

## In democratic countries:

- Will **politics undergo changes** or will it be 'business as usual'?
- Will **political parties** become less polarized?
- What will be the **national agenda**, and who the agenda setters?
- Will the policy **decision-making process** experience a different dynamic?
  - *More (or less) horizontal accountability?*
  - *Will input (demands and feedback) from society be taken more seriously by political actors?*
- Will the influence of other actors change? What will be their relationship with political actors?
  - The military: "Crisis responses may shift the balance of power between **militaries and civilian authorities**." (Carnegie Endowment)
  - **Interest groups**
  - **Extralegal groups** (from terrorist groups to human-trafficking and drug-trafficking)

## • Elections:

- When will countries get back to constitutional schedules?
- Will vote by mail increase permanently?
- Will turnout increase or decrease?
  - Will political equality decrease or increase?
    - *Lack of access to technology may widen the existing gaps*
- What will be the level and type of involvement of **external actors in domestic politics**?



This screenshot released by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) shows West African leaders participating by video conference call in the Extraordinary Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government on the Socio-Political Situation in Mali Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. Across Africa and around the world, leaders have strongly condemned this week's coup in Mali, calling for an immediate return to civilian rule and the release of ex-President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and his prime minister, Boubou Cisse.



# Citizens and civil society

(democracy cannot exist without citizens)

## What will be citizens' political behavior?

- Will democracy be a priority or are they willing to **forego democracy** for economic stability?
  - *Citizens with a democratic political culture choose to solve problems through democracy.*
  - *History tells us that not all citizens choose a democratic path to solve problems (i.e. Nazi Germany), but the embrace of democracy was fundamental in reconstruction after World War II.*
- How will **citizens react to the post-pandemic challenges**?
  - *More engagement in political process or less?*
- Will **trust in political institutions** decline or increase?

**We have seen that more trust = better pandemic outcome**  
**Will a better outcome = more trust in political institutions?**  
**Will a poor outcome = less trust?**

## Will civil society strengthen or weaken?

### Will it help democracy?

- Will **dialogue and negotiation** emerge as an option in the midst of polarized societies?
  - *Tolerance is a key component of a democratic political culture.*
- Will **'social capital'** be a positive influence on democracy?
  - *Parts of society that, without being explicitly political, foster links and bridges of common sympathy and trust.*
- What role will **social media** play?
  - *WhatsApp widely used in developing democracies: good and bad influence.*
  - *Twitter and the oversimplification of complex issues.*

# Links to Institutions (and measures)

V-Democracy Institute (Pandemic Index):

<https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/PanDem/>

International IDEA:

Global Monitoring of pandemic impact on democracy:

<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/#/indices/world-map?covid19=1>

Elections and COVID-19 Tracking:

<https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>

Freedom House

(Freedom Score – proxy of democracy level)

<https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2020>

Transparency International

(Corruption Index):

<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi>

Fragile States Index

(state capacity, among other things):

<https://fragilestatesindex.org/>

Questions?