DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THE POST-LIBERAL ERA

Author: **Diing Dau Chol Diing**
Department of International Relations and Public Affairs, Jilin University.
Email: diingdau.student@tutamail.com
ORCID: 0009-0000-0196-6972

Author[2]: Emmanuel Kuloba Anyanzwa
School of Law, Moi University, **Email**: anyanzwa1@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed how democratic backsliding promotes international democracy in the post-liberal era. Using a mixed-methods research design, the study quantitatively analyzed data provided by Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy, and Polity IV, and finally qualitatively analyzed data provided by international responses, multilateral democracy mechanisms, and aid conditionality policies. The study also analyzed international trends between 2000 and 2024. The findings of the study indicated that democratic decline has become widespread and subtle. It also characterized democratic decline with executive aggrandizement, manipulation of elections, weak judicial independence, restricted civil society, and media capture, as opposed to abrupt authoritarian takeovers. The study also found that democracy-promotion actors and activities face increasing constraints caused by sovereignty-based narratives, decreasing liberal international institutions, and geopolitical competition. Quantitative evidence illustrated a decrease in liberal democracy in multiple regions. Qualitative evidence showed uneven sanctions, election observation, regional governance frameworks, and aid conditionality across regions. The article concluded that democracy promotion is relevant, but the adoption of a post-liberal environment is required to address the issue of international organizations' influence becoming more fragmented while domestic actors are becoming the main determinants of democratic trajectories. The article also concluded that stronger support for civil society, regional democracy-promotion initiatives, independent media, and local accountability institutions is regarded as being more sustainable as opposed to depending on external pressure only. The article also concluded that despite democratic backsliding showing a trend of decreasing, the effectiveness of democracy-promotion approaches, if properly applied, could strengthen democratic resilience.

Keywords: Africa, democracy promotion, democratic backsliding, Freedom House, governance, Polity IV, V-Dem.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Democratic backsliding is a concept that refers to the decline of democracy (democratic practices, institutions, and norms) in formal democratic settings. Democratic backsliding is characterized by legal and incremental processes such as executive aggrandizement, institutional weakening, and strategic election manipulation, which are the main practices. Contemporary democratic backsliding involves elected leaders exploiting democratic legitimacy, with the result being the consolidation of power and reduced accountability. Freedom House, Polity, and V-Dem datasets demonstrate evidence of a decrease in democracy in many countries. V-Dem reports an increase in autocratization trends. Freedom House reports continuous international declines in civil liberties and political rights. After the Cold War, strong literature on democracy promotion has been produced to address the issues resulting from democratic backsliding. In practice, international organizations, civil society, and bilateral donors have documented their efforts towards supporting democratic governance using rule-of-law programming, election observation, conditional aid, institutional reform, and capacity building. One of the most celebrated examples of democratic promotors is the European Union accession conditionality, which became a successful external democratic leverage against democratic backsliding (Daly, 2019).

Despite the success of several democratic promoters, there is still wide critics against existing democracy promotion. Several criticisms highlight democratic promoters as focusing too much on elections and therefore neglecting institutional foundations. There is also the failure of international organizations, which are seen as strengthening their objectives at the expense of domestic political development. In other cases, there are limited externally imposed reforms at the expense of domestic input. To address these issues, Meyerrose (2020) suggested the need to make democratic institutions more durable through collaborating

with local social coalitions with little dependency on external incentives (Meyerrose, 2020).

In Africa, previous scholars characterize democratic decline by weak institutions, security crises, presidential dominance, economic inequality, and clientelism. West Africa, in particular has been the most studied region in terms of democratic backlash being characterized by the history of military coups as a threat to democratic governance and legitimacy. In many other African regions, including West Africa, democratic backlash has been characterized by the solidification of power by presidents, the weakening of multi-party democracies, election manipulation, and the use of socially and psychologically constructed divisions that create unrest and thus lead to the imposition of military rule on civilians. Countries that experience these backlashes continue to have functioning democratic activities such as civic mobilization, media organizations, and courts that continue to act as democratic safeguards. The study of the post-liberal era, therefore, offers a new analytical angle into the same issue. Liberal democracy is no longer an uncontested ideology. Other state-society relations, such as nationalist agendas, populist movements, and other alternative models of governance, are currently challenging liberal democracy assumptions. Because of these outlined factors, democracy promotion continues to operate in a competitive normative space (Akinyetun, 2022).

Three theoretical perspectives, namely, Institutionalist Theory, International Diffusion Theory, and Resilience Theory, informed this article. The institutionalist theory was proposed by James March and Johan Olsen. The proponents argue that political institutions act as arenas for political interests, as well as autonomous structures guided by rules and norms responsible for shaping human behavior, political outcomes, and identities. In this study, the theory emphasizes that there is a need for checks and balances, accountability mechanisms, and judicial autonomy as democracy promoters. The article was also guided by the International diffusion theory. Everett Rogers proposed the theory in 1962. The theory states that new ideas, technologies, and practices spread across different social systems and borders over time and become adopted and implemented. In this study, the theory explains that democratic governance and practices spread across nations. In the case of democratic backlash, countries sharing borders are more likely to experience similar backlash characteristics. In West Africa, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, and Niger share borders, and as a result, democratic backlash in the form of military coups has continued to occur. In East Africa, Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda have continued to face criticism for democratic backsliding, including election manipulation and the weakening of multi-party democracy. The article was also guided by the Resilience theory. Norman Garmezy, Emmy Werner, and C.S. Holling proposed the theory in the 1970s. The theory states that individuals have the capacity to bounce back, grow, and recover after significant trauma, adversity, or stress, as opposed to having a fixed trait. The theory also states that resilience is focused on domestic institutions and actors resisting authoritarian pressures, thus the adoption of democratic promoters (Hoefer, 2022).

Globally, democracy has continued to be challenged since the Cold War. Expectations about the expansion of democratic governance have been replaced by democratic backsliding. Across Europe and North America, elected governments have continued to be characterized by weakening institutions responsible for checks and balances (Bartels et al., 2023). Regionally, democratic backsliding has resulted from international liberalism, whereby economic integration, democratic conditionality, and international institutions are assumed to be capable of reinforcing democratic reforms but in the end become less convincing. Emerging powers, alternative governance models, and geopolitical competition have created optional governments that compete with democratic governance, thus justifying democratic backlash. Consequently, international institutions and donor states that have been tasked with democratic promotion have reduced the leverage required to rise domestic trajectories (Torgler, 2023). In Africa, democratic practices continue to follow a complex trajectory. In the past, African states have adopted and implemented multiparty elections, decentralization initiatives, and constitutional reforms. However, in recent years, states that are more African have witnessed renewed military interventions, restrictions on opposition, declining confidence in democratic organizations, and constitutional manipulation. Countries like Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Guinea have reported fragile democratic gains. On the other hand, countries like Ghana, Mauritius, and Botswana have continued to illustrate democratic resilience despite challenging conditions (Fombad, 2022).

It was because of the presented background that this study was conducted. The study focused on the relationship between democratic backsliding and democracy promotion during the post-liberal era. The research objective was to determine the effectiveness of contemporary international democracy promotion on democratic backsliding.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review section covered conceptualizing democratic backsliding, measuring democratic backsliding, drivers of democratic backsliding, democratic backsliding in Africa, international democracy promotion, democratic resilience and civil society responses, the post-liberal era and contemporary democracy promotion, and the literature gap.

Regarding the concept of democratic backsliding, Ginsburg (2018) refers to democratic backsliding as the fall of democratic qualities within both authoritarian and democratic regimes, characterized by the retreat of democratic practices because of the restriction of criticism, the weakening of institutional safeguards, and limitations on opposition activities. Roberts et al. (2025) and Arthur (2025) define democratic backsliding as the slow deterioration of democratic norms, practices, and institutions despite the existence of formal democratic structures. Contemporary democratic backsliding is legalistic, incremental, and led by elected incumbents. Contemporary democratic backsliding occurs via constrained civil societies, executive aggrandizement, electoral manipulation, and finally, the weakening of institutional checks and balances, as opposed to abrupt regime collapse. Roberts et al. (2025) further refer to democratic backsliding as the state in which democratically elected governments use existing institutional arrangements to marginalize the opposition, weaken independent oversight bodies, and consolidate power while making public relations acts appear legitimate in terms of democracy (subversion of democracy by elected incumbents.

Regarding measures of democratic backsliding, Vachudova et al. (2024) and Roberts et al (2025) agreed on the use of comparative analysis of democracy indices to measure democratic backsliding. The two studies recommend to the use of three datasets, namely the Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), and Polity IV. These datasets provide different and, at the same time, complementary perspectives on different countries' democratic performance. The Freedom House datasets focus on civil liberties and political rights. This dataset documents the decline in global freedom. According to Vachudova et al. (2024 and Roberts et al. (2025), trends reported by the three datasets established a unifying finding that most countries are experiencing a decline in freedoms since 2006. The V-Dem dataset provides a multidimensional evaluation of democracy. The dataset identifies autocratization trends across various regions. Research concerning V-Dem data illustrates democratic decline manifestations in countries with reduced judicial independence, weakened rule of law, and constraints on freedom of expression. Finally, Polity IV is focused on the evaluation of institutional characteristics, namely, executive recruitment, political competition, and executive constraints. The datasets offer robust empirical evidence on democratic decline. Finally, Vachudova et al. (2024) established that most current studies establish that there is a democratic decline. Democratic backlash is studied in other terms, including democratic recession, divergence, and backsliding. Despite the assumption that there is a decline in democracy, it is not uniform in all countries and regions. The study by Garnett and James found limited universal electoral backsliding. Garnett and James argued that the trajectories of democratic backlash are different among countries and regions. Their findings mean that despite some electoral systems deteriorating, others remained either stable or improved. It is because of these variations that there is a need for interpretation of the provided democracy indicators.

Based on the drivers of democratic backsliding, Ginsburg (2018) found that weak accountability and executive dominance structures were the causes of democratic backsliding. It was established that democratic backlash occurs when the legislatures, judiciary, opposition parties, or media organizations are characterized by limited capacity to restrain the executive authority. Contemporary democratic backlash occurs via incremental transformations such as constitutional amendments, manipulation of elections, court-packing, and executive expansion, as opposed to dramatic institutional ruptures. Pepinsky (2025) found that populism is an influential driver of democratic backlash. Populist leaders are used to portraying themselves as "the people's" representatives against the allegedly corrupt elites or institutions. Though populism is not authoritarianism, its anti-pluralism creates tension with liberal democracy. Governments that come to power through populism frequently challenge constitutional constraints, judicial independence, and media freedom with the agenda of adopting the popular will. Arthur (2025) established that socioeconomic grievances such as inequality, government ineffectiveness, and economic insecurity strengthened anti-government movements. These factors make citizens disillusioned with democratic institutions due to their failure to generate tangible social and economic improvements. They are also driven towards the disillusioned about democratic institutions because of the government creating opportunities for leaders on false promises and unmediated political solutions. Mosca et al. (2026) revealed that the other driver of democratic backlash is political polarization. Growing affective and ideological divisions are increasing citizens' tolerance towards anti-democratic actions being undertaken by political actors. Research originating from countries such as Hungary demonstrates that democratic backsliding creates a "democratic divide," in that supporting democracy is seen as partisan polarization. In such a scenario, democratic institutions are subjected to political conflict as opposed to being neutral.

Concerning democratic backsliding in Africa, Arthur (2025) established that most African countries serve as important examples of contemporary democratic backsliding. After democratic transition during the 1990s, many African countries adopted constitutional reforms, decentralized governance, and multiparty election systems. Nevertheless, these systems have not been consistent and practical in recent years. The continent in general has continued to witness growing democratic backlash. West Africa, in particular, has fallen victim to military governance (replacing democratic governance), constitutional manipulation, declining public trust, and electoral irregularities. Arthur (2025) further established that countries like Mali, Niger, Guinea, and Burkina Faso are examples of countries with fragile democratic gains due to governance institutions failing to address the security, social, and economic concerns of their citizens. Because of the increase in socioeconomic dissatisfaction, poor governance, and declining institutional legitimacy, these countries' democracies have experienced an extreme reversal. Other countries, including Ghana, Senegal, Liberia, and Botswana, continue to show relatively stable democratic gains caused by active civil societies, healthy political competition, and functioning electoral systems; thus, an indicator of democratic resilience despite structural challenges.

Pertaining to international democracy promotion, Meyerrose (2020) notes that the post-Cold War period marked the beginning of international democracy promotion. The author further justifies democracy promotion as originating from liberalism, which notes that democratic governance is characterized by more peace, stability, and cooperation. According to Meyerrose, democracy promotion is defined as a broad number of activities aimed at improving the adoption and implementation of democratic principles and practices globally. These activities include election monitoring, electoral administration support, judicial reform, aid conditionality, governance assistance, anti-corruption initiatives, and civil society strengthening. Meyerrose (2020) further explains that international organizations, development agencies, and Western governments have conducted international democratic promotion. Prominent promoters of democracy include the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). These parties have invested a huge amount of resources towards democratization projects in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. To avoid interfering with the sovereignty of democratizing countries, these parties have mainly used election observation missions as instruments for enhancing electoral integrity and encouraging democratic norms. Despite democratic promotion efforts, there have been mixed outcomes. According to Meyerrose (2020), democracy-promotion programs continue to

prioritize electoral observations while insufficiently attending to internal (national) institutional capacity to independently ensure free and fair elections. In some cases, international organizations charged with democracy promotion are unintentionally contributing to democratic backsliding. External actors are blamed for strengthening the executive branch of government at the expense of the other arms of government's independence. Meyerrose (2020) also revealed that Aid conditionality has been a majorly criticized approach to enforcing the adoption of democratic principles. It is broadly found that governments being targeted by democratic promoting institutions tend to falsely adopt democratic reforms for the sake of securing financial and political benefits; but backslide to undermining substantive democratic principles afterwards. Pepinsky (2025) was of the opinion that geopolitics is also a major limitation to democratic promotion. The rise of competing economies and global partnerships to alter the traditional world order has reduced the previous leverage held by traditional democracy-promoters. The rise of China as an authoritarian example poses a threat to the democratic promotion by the U.S and its allies in Africa and Asia.

Relating to democratic resilience and civil society responses, recent research is increasingly addressing democratic resilience as opposed to democratization alone. Garnett and James (2025) define democratic resilience as the ability of social actors and democratic institutions to resist, reverse, and absorb authoritarian pressures. Civil societies have played the role of democratic promotion globally, especially in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa. The majority of their activities have focused on citizen mobilization against democratic backlash. Mobilizations have been for purposes of protesting, advocacy campaigns, civic education programs, and electoral monitoring initiatives. Garnett and James (2025) and Gessler and Wunsch (2025) highlighted that Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania illustrate civic mobilization towards pressuring democratic accountability against significant democratic decline. Similarly, opposition parties, independent media, courts, and local governments often provide institutional counterweights to executive overreach. Hungary and Romania are examples of democratic resistance countries under semi-competitive conditions, where there are significant institutional asymmetries and media capture (Gessler & Wunsch, 2025).

In relation to democracy promotion in the post-liberal era, democracy no longer has uncontested global legitimacy. There is an increase in competition from alternative political models, nationalist ideologies, and sovereignty-centered governance. These alternatives present citizenship, pluralism, and international cooperation. According to Pepinsky (2025), contemporary political frictions extend beyond disagreements concerning electoral competition. Democratic contestation in this case concerns competing normative visions of governance as opposed to simple disputes regarding electoral procedures. On the other hand, Meyerrose (2020) further supports the argument by Pepinsky (2025), suggesting that the new context presents significant challenges for democracy promotion. International actors no longer assume extensive consensus around liberal-democratic principles. In its place, democracy promotion continues to compete with alternative politics while also operating within a fragmented geopolitical environment that is marked by strategic competition among major powers.

There exists a number of gaps in the literature that concern the topic being studied. Substantial scholarship on both democratic backsliding and democracy promotion exists, but largely independently, with fewer studies showing systematic examination of the relationship between the two concepts in terms of the post-liberal era. Existing research has shown a major focus on domestic causes of democratic backlash. Similarly, most studies have also evaluated democracy promotion isolated from democratic backsliding. There remains the need to integrate mixed-method data analysis based on democracy backlash and promotion based on cross-national indicators.

3.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

Mixed-methods design was used. A quantitative method analyzed democracy indicators retrieved from the Freedom House, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), and Polity IV. These datasets offered complementary measures regarding political rights, electoral competitiveness, civil liberties, liberal-democratic, and executive constraints performance. Trends presented covered the period between 2000 and 2024. The examination of these trends identified patterns in democratic change. The independent variable was international democracy promotion. It entailed engagement, aid conditionality, and multilateral governance. The dependent variable was democratic performance. It entailed democracy scores. Comparative descriptive analysis identified broad across regional trends. Qualitative analysis involved document analysis capturing democracy promotion policies, issued statements by international organizations, donor strategies, AU initiatives, EU governance frameworks, and election observation reports. Case illustrations from different countries were incorporated to illustrate differences in democratic trajectories and outside responses. Qualitative evidence was analyzed thematically. Key themes captured were executive aggrandizement, civil society space, media restrictions, regional democracy-support mechanisms, judicial independence, aid conditionality, and sanctions effectiveness. Triangulation between qualitative findings and quantitative indicators led to the improvement of analytical validity. Mixed methods were useful in addressing the concept of democratic backsliding being characterized by context-specific political processes and measurable institutional changes. Quantitative data showed long-term patterns. Qualitative analysis revealed how and why the changes occurred. Limitations to the study entailed differing methodologies applied across democracy indices. Limitations to the study also included the challenge faced in the process of isolating precise international interventions influencing domestic political determinants.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Democratic Backsliding

4.1.1 Freedom House Indicators

The findings from Freedom House were presented in Table 1 below. The results showed that political rights, civil liberties, and electoral integrity recorded an average decline.

Table 1: Findings based on Freedom House

Indicators	Evidences
Political Rights	Average decline

Civil Liberties	Average decline
Electoral Integrity	Average decline

Source: Freedom in the World (2024)

In Table 1 above, the average decline in political rights could be interpreted to mean that there was evidence of weakening political participation and electoral competition in most countries. Additionally, the decline in political rights meant fewer citizens had meaningful influence on leadership selection. It also meant there was a high level of deterioration in civil liberties, pointing towards tightened controls on speech, association, and the press. The decline in civil liberties could be interpreted to mean that there were high restrictions on freedom of expression, media, and the right to association. The decline in electoral integrity meant that despite the persistence of formal elections, there was a decline in democratic quality. It also meant there were rising cases of electoral violence and manipulation despite elections occurring (characterized as unhealthy competition and illegitimate).

4.1.2 Freedom House Trend: Countries Showing Democratic Change

The findings from Freedom House were presented in Figure 1 below. The findings were that most countries (52 out of 73) experiencing democratic deterioration substantially outnumbered those demonstrating improvement.

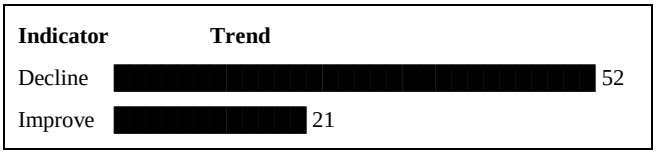


Figure 1: Freedom House Trend

Source: Freedom in the World (2024)

In Figure 1, the results meant that, in general, there is persistent freedom recession worldwide. The findings suggested that weakening democracy is common, while democratic recovery is becoming uncommon. The gap between weakening democracy and democratic recovery is significant, thus indicating huge democratic backsliding, not confined to any particular regime type or region.

4.1.3 V-Dem Autocratization Indicators

The study presented the findings on evidence of autocratization in Table 2 below. The results showed that 42 countries were undergoing autocratization. A total of 18 countries were undergoing democratization. Most countries were experiencing declining executive constraints. The majority of the countries were experiencing deteriorating freedom of expression. Finally, most countries were experiencing worsening electoral integrity.

Table 2: V-Dem Autocratization Indicators

V-Dem Indicator	Observation/trend
Autocratizing Countries	42
Democratizing Countries	18
Executive Constraints	Declining
Freedom of Expression	Deteriorating
Electoral Integrity	Worsening

Source: V-Dem Democracy Report (2024)

The finding on 42 countries that were undergoing autocratization implied that democratic decline remained a dominant trend. The finding that 18 countries were undergoing democratization meant that despite the existing improvements in the democratization principle, these improvements were less widespread. The finding that most countries were experiencing declining executive constraints implied that there was an increase in the concentration of power in the executive branches of different countries' governments. The finding that the majority of countries were experiencing deteriorating freedom of expression could be interpreted to mean that there is a decline in democratic accountability. Finally, regarding most countries were experiencing worsening electoral integrity, the finding could be interpreted to mean that elections were being maintained as formalities, given there was a lessening of democratic and healthy election competitions.

4.1.4 V-Dem Indicators on Regime Change Trends

The study presented the findings on indicators on regime change trends in Figure 2 below. The results were that the majority (42 out of 60) of countries were becoming more autocratic. On the other hand, 18 out of 60 countries were becoming more democratized.

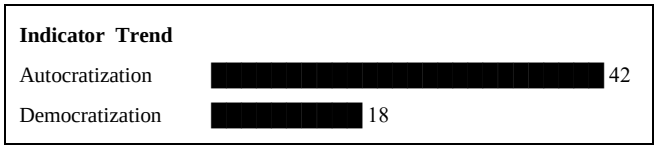


Figure 2: V-Dem Indicators on Regime Change Trends

Source: V-Dem Democracy Report (2024)

In Figure 2, the study found the existence of uneven regime changes. Autocratization was found to be outpacing democratization. The fact that most countries were becoming autocracies meant that, globally, democratic erosion is a common political direction. The finding also meant that democratic backlash was both a local and a broader trend worldwide. The finding finally meant democratic gains were becoming more limited and fragile scale-wise. Even in places where democratization occurred, the effect was not widespread enough.

4.1.5 Polity IV Findings on Democratic Stagnation

The findings on democratic stagnation were presented in Table 3 below. According to the study, most Sub-Saharan African countries' democracy was mixed, with some countries being democratized and some countries being non-democratized. Most Middle East and North Africa countries experienced limited democratic advancement. Most Eastern European countries experienced democratic regression. Finally, most Latin American countries experienced democratic stagnation.

Table 3: Polity IV Findings on Democratic Stagnation

Region	Democratic Trend
Sub-Saharan Africa	Mixed performance
Middle East and North Africa	Limited advancement
Eastern Europe	Democratic regression
Latin America	Stagnation

Source: Polity IV trend interpretation)

In Table 3, it was established that most Sub-Saharan African countries' democracy was mixed, with some countries being democratized and some countries being non-democratized. This implies that subsequent democratic setbacks and gains coexist and are thus balanced. It was also found that most Middle East and North Africa countries experienced limited democratic advancement. This finding meant that countries in the Middle East and North Africa experienced consistently low democratic consolidation. The study had also found that most Eastern European countries experienced democratic regression. The finding was interpreted to mean that most of these countries underwent executive expansion in terms of power over other branches of government and general institutional weakening and lack of independence. Finally, it was also established that most Latin American countries experienced democratic stagnation. The finding implied that most Latin American countries were characterized by uneven democratic development.

4.1.6 Regional Democratic Performance

The results were presented in Figure 3. The study established that, in general, most countries globally experienced democratic stagnation. This was then followed by a moderate number of countries experiencing democratic regression. Finally, the study also found that a small number of countries experienced democratic progress.

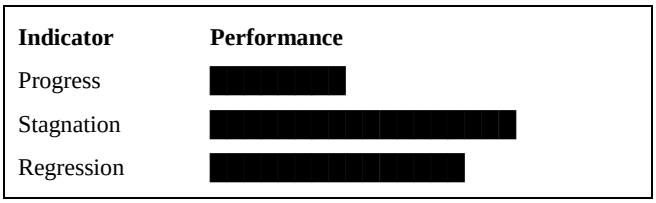


Figure 3: Polity IV Regional Pattern

Source: Polity IV trend interpretation (2025)

The main finding was that most countries globally experienced democratic stagnation. This implies that democratic stagnation is the most common indicator of democratic progress. It also meant that most political systems were neither collapsing entirely nor deepening meaningful democracy. The finding also meant that there was widespread institutional inertia. This means that existing democratic structures failed to evolve.

4.1.7 Institutional Democratic Backsliding Mechanisms

The study presented the findings on institutional democratic backsliding mechanisms. It was found that electoral manipulation mainly results in the reduction of electoral competitiveness. Restrictions on media freedom resulted in lower accountability and transparency among government institutions. Judicial interference results in weakening the rule of law. Executive aggrandizement resulted in a high concentration of power. Finally, oversight institution weakening resulted to low checks and balances.

The results imply that in general, institutional democratic backsliding mechanisms often occur because of strategic institutional manipulation as opposed to the outright dismantling of democracy. Together, these backsliding mechanisms make governments appear democratic in theory but not in practical terms. Thus, modern-day authoritarianism advances through institutional and legal means that are seen as challenging to contest directly.

4.1.8 Frequency of Democratic Backsliding Mechanisms

The study presented the frequency of democratic backsliding mechanisms in Figure 4 below. The main finding was that executive expansion was the most frequently occurring democratic backlash mechanism. This was followed by media restrictions, electoral manipulation, judicial weakening, and finally, oversight constraints in that respective order.

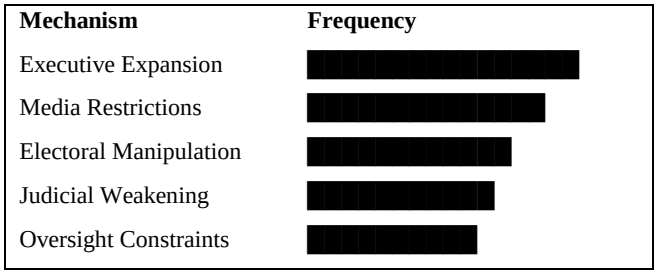


Figure 4: Common Mechanisms of Democratic Backsliding

Source: Author (2026)

The findings in Figure 4 could be interpreted to mean that executive expansion was the main threat to democracy. It also meant that executive expansion was significantly associated with the other mechanisms in that it directly impacted them as a controlling factor and the top decision maker of factors that lead to increased restrictions and weakening of other democratic institutions.

4.2 Democracy Promotion

4.2.1 Democratic Performance in Africa

The study presented the findings on democratic performance in Africa in Table 4 below. It was revealed that Ghana was an example of stable/improving democracy. Senegal was an example of a relatively stable democracy. Finally, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger were examples of declining democracies.

Table 4: Democratic Performance in Africa

Country/Region	Democratic Trend
Ghana	Stable/Improving
Senegal	Relatively Stable
Mali	Declining
Burkina Faso	Declining
Niger	Declining

Source: Freedom in the World (2024).

According to the findings, Ghana's stable/improving democracy implied that electoral transfers were peaceful, and thus assured democratic institutional continuity. Senegal's relatively stable democracy meant that competitive elections were happening, which was positive. Declining democracies seen in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger could be interpreted to mean increased military intervention, coups, political instability, and unconstitutional government transformations. Finally, the entire West African nations had a generally mixed democracy.

4.2.2 Democratic Performance

The study presented the findings on democratic performance in Figure 5 below. The results were that Ghana reported the

highest performance in terms of democracy. This was then followed by Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

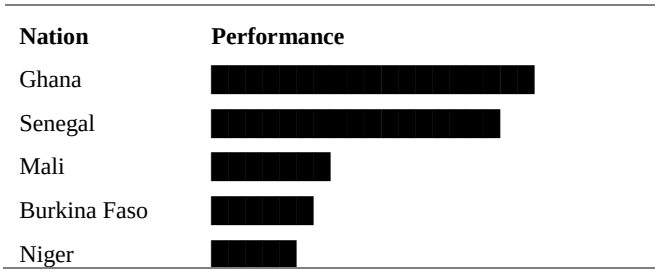


Figure 5: Variation in Democratic Outcomes in Africa

Source: Freedom in the World (2024).

The results in Figure 5 could be interpreted to mean that Ghana and Senegal had more democratic qualities and practices. On the other hand, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger continued to diminish the practice of democracy and replace democratic principles with alternative politics.

4.2.3 Effectiveness of International Democracy Promoters

The study presented the results regarding international democracy promoters. The results showed that the main international democracy promoters are aid conditionality, civil society support, diplomatic pressure, election monitoring, and sanctions. In terms of advantages, aid conditionality encourages reforms. Civil society support leads to long-term democratic resilience. Diplomatic pressure is the cause of a rise in political costs. Election monitoring is responsible for detecting irregularities. Finally, sanctions are responsible for signaling international disapproval. In terms of disadvantages, aid conditionality was found to trigger resistance. Civil society support was found to require sustained commitment. Diplomatic pressure was found to often enforce inconsistent. Election monitoring was found to limit post-election influence. Finally, sanctions were found to be circumventive of democratic policies.

The results on the effectiveness of international democracy promoters were presented in Figure 6. The result showed that civil society support was the most effective democratic promoter. This was then followed by election monitoring, aid conditionality, diplomatic pressure, and finally, sanctions.

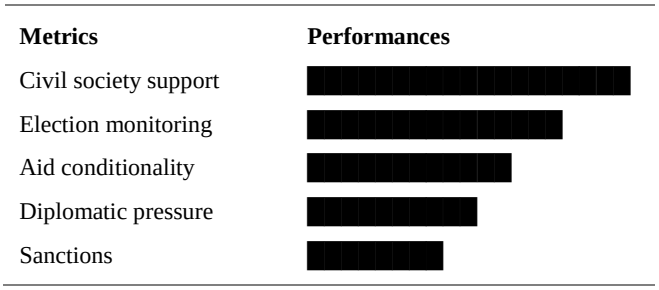


Figure 6: Effectiveness of International Democracy Promoters

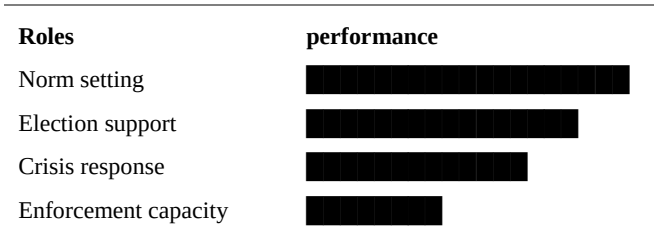
Source: Author (2026)

The main finding in Figure 6 was that civil society support was more effective in democracy promotion compared to the other promoters. The main finding meant that strengthening local civil societies ensured transparency. It was also interpreted to mean that sustainable democratic change was more successful if conducted through domestically owned organizations.

4.2.4 Multilateral Organizations

The findings on the roles of multilateral organizations established that the United Nations, the European Union, African Union, and ECOWAS played a role in democratic promotion. The findings were that the United Nations' role was mainly the setting and monitoring of democratic norms. It was also found that the role of the European Union was to condition and govern democratic standards. The African Union's main role was the governance of constitutional norms. Finally, ECOWAS's main role was to respond to political crises and coups. Despite these roles being important, they created certain constraints in the effort towards promoting democratic principles. To begin with, the roles of the United Nations are characterized by limited enforcement authority. The roles of the European Union are characterized by reduced external leverage. The problem that affects the implementation of the roles by the African Union is the nature of uneven enforcement. Finally, the role of ECOWAS faces the challenge of political divisions among states that are members of the block.

The findings on the effectiveness of multilateral institutions were presented in Figure 7. According to the findings, norm setting had the highest score. This was then followed by election support, crisis response, and enforcement capacity in their respective order.



Source: Author (2026)

Figure 7: Influence of Multilateral Institutions

The findings in Figure 7 were then interpreted to mean that multilateral institutions performed best in setting democratic norms. This was interpreted to mean that multilateral institutions are good at shaping democratic expectations and pushing for compliance. It also meant that there was weak implementation of penalties and punishments towards parties who violated democratic norms set by these organizations. In summary, these institutions are important, but lack unified effectiveness because the implementation of these democratic norms is dependent on members' political goodwill and self-driven cooperation.

4.2.5 Civil Society roles towards Democratic Resilience

The findings on civil society roles towards democratic resilience established that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) were good at monitoring accountability. Independent media were good at investigative reporting. Watchdog groups were good at anti-corruption oversight. Professional associations were good at policy advocacy. Finally, social movements were good at civic mobilization.

The study presented the findings on civil society roles towards democratic resilience in Figure 8 below. The results showed that civil society groups and independent media had the highest performance. They were then followed by watchdog organizations, social movements, and professional bodies.

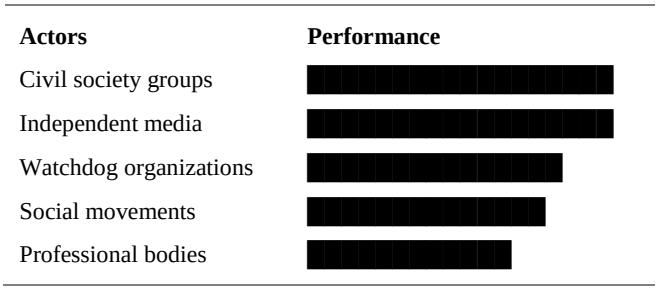


Figure 8: Democratic Resilience performance by Actors

Source: Author (2026)

In Figure 8, democratic resilience by actors showed that civil society groups and independent media were prominent supporters of democratic resilience. This meant that information, civic engagement, and monitoring were influential defenses that helped withstand democratic decline. In general, it also meant that democracy depends on both formal institutions and active societal actors who are able to detect abuse against democracy and sustain public pressure for accountability. It also meant that strong civic ecosystems served as buffers against executive constraint and decay.

4.2.6 Challenges facing Democracy Promotion

Alternative development partners were a challenge since they were responsible for reducing donor advantage. Nationalist narratives encouraged resistance to conditionality as a democracy promoter. Security priorities were the leading cause of governance becoming a secondary concern, thus killing democratic norms. Finally, economic interests were the cause of the inconsistent implementation of democratic standards.

The findings on challenges facing democracy promotion were presented in Figure 9. The results were that Geopolitical rivalry was the main challenge. This was then followed by alternative partners, security priorities, nationalist responses, and finally, economic interests.

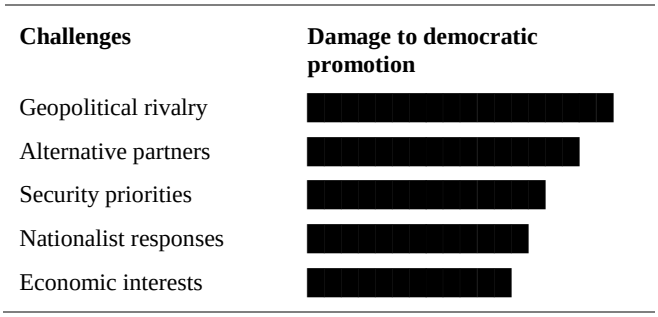


Figure 9: Challenges facing Democracy Promotion

Source: Author (2026)

The main result in Figure 9 was interpreted to mean that geopolitical competition was found to be causing a weak democratic consensus. The main finding was geopolitical rivalry, and it was interpreted to mean that the main challenge to democracy promotion resulted in governments having more space to resist Western pressure and subsequently seek support from non-Western allies. It was also interpreted to mean that democracy promotion is increasingly becoming hard due to the international environment being characterized by less cooperation and more completion. It also meant that external advantage was weakening, and democratic values were no longer a universal priority. These aspects are the cause of the reduced effectiveness of traditional reform.

4.2.7 Pathways towards Democratic Recovery

The study established the sources of democratic recovery. It was established that electoral turnover was required to achieve the restoration of healthy election competition. Judicial intervention was required to ensure the protection of the constitutional norms. Civic mobilization was required to ensure there was adequate resistance to executive overreach. Regional pressure was required in order to reverse unconstitutional actions by different parties, especially the executive. Finally, institutional resilience was required to prevent democratic collapse.

The study further measured the strength of pathways towards democratic recovery and presented the findings in Figure 10 below. The results were that Institutional resilience was the strongest pathway towards democratic recovery. This was then followed by civic mobilization, electoral turnover, judicial intervention, and regional pressure.

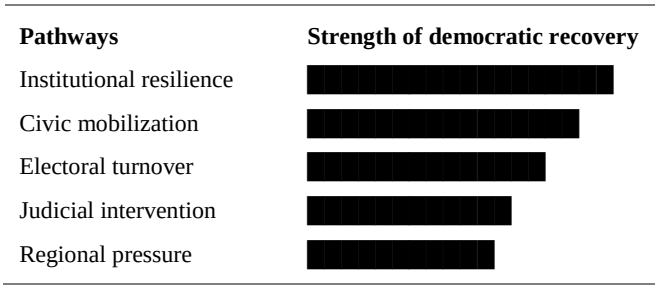


Figure 10: Pathways to Democratic Recovery

Source: Author (2026)

The main result in Figure 10 was that institutional resilience was the strongest pathway towards democratic recovery. The main finding implies that durable recovery results from within society, as opposed to external pressure alone. The overall interpretation was that democratic recovery is heavily reliant on democratic institutions remaining functional enough so as not to collapse. It was also established that democratic recovery depends on citizens mobilizing against executive overreach

5.0 DISCUSSION

Bermeo (2024) and Gerring et al. (2024) supported the findings presented by Freedom House. According to Bermeo (2024), the decline in democracy is systemic. The author added that civil liberties and political rights were the main deteriorating democratic aspects in many countries. The consistency of this pattern (declining trend) results from backsliding unfolding through gradual institutional erosion and not abrupt regime collapse. Gerring et al. (2024) report that executive overreach, declining electoral integrity, and weakened liberties were regarded as the central aspects of contemporary democratic decline. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) and Bermeo (2024) agreed with the findings presented by V-Dem. According to Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), autocratization is occurring more frequently than democratization. Contemporary regime change results from legalistic and incremental mechanisms that replace democracy by weakening executive constraints, electoral

competitiveness, and media freedom. Bermeo (2024) further explains that democratic decline dominates the global trajectory. Several studies agree with the results presented by the Polity IV. According to Gerring et al. (2024), democratic change is characterized as being uneven across regions. It also established that democratic stagnation and regression appear more common than democratic sustainability and progress. Jee et al. (2024) found that backsliding differs by institutional and country context. The authors caution against characterizing democratic decline as uniform. According to Bermeo (2024), democratic performance relies on domestic institutional resilience, the strength of accountability, and political competition as opposed to regime labels alone.

Keck (2024), Rakner and Gloppen (2025), and Frantzeskakis et al. 2025) supported the result that backsliding occurs gradually as opposed to suddenly. All three studies revealed that incumbents are used to preserving democratic appearance in order to weaken the other arms of government, as well as the autonomy enjoyed by the media and electoral integrity. According to the studies, modern authoritarianism is characterized by institutional manipulation (replacing overt coups), thus making it difficult to detect or resist. Afrobarometer (2025), Rakner and Gloppen (2025), and Cheeseman and Desrosiers (2026) agree that countries such as Senegal and Ghana remain comparatively democratically resilient. These studies potray the resilience with strong civic space, institutional continuity, and competitive elections. On the other hand, the same studies also agree with this study's findings that countries such as Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso are characterized by declining democracies because of increased cases of coups, executive aggrandizement, and constitutional manipulation. According to Keck (2024), media capture, executive expansion, judicial interference, and electoral manipulation are core backsliding mechanisms in many countries. Frantzeskakis et al. (2025) and Rakner and Gloppen (2025) share the opinion that such mechanisms are weakening accountability and thus reducing democratic practices.

Corda (2024) and Hartwell et al. (2026) explain that external pressures had the most effective domestic promotion as opposed to coercion alone. The two studies rejected sanctions, conditionality, and aid suspensions as the most effective democratic promoters since they are also part of democratic violations. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2025), on the other hand, agreed that election monitoring and civil society support are the most durable democratic promoters due to their ability to build internal resilience and accountability. Cottiero et al. (2024) and Pattison (2025) supported the findings that multilateral organizations are good in norm setting. They state that multilateral organizations shape democratic expectations and at the same level, condemn democratic backlash. The two studies agreed that the effectiveness of multilateral organizations in democratic promotion is dependent on member self-cooperation and political will. Rakner and Gloppen (2025), Vachudova et al. (2024), and Afrobarometer (2025) revealed that independent media, social movements, and watchdog organizations exposing democratic abuses sustain democratic norms and mobilize resistance against democratic backsliding.

Pattison (2025) and Cottiero et al. (2024) supported the findings that post-liberal-era democracy promotion occurs in a more fragmented global environment. The two studies agree that geopolitical competition, security priorities, alternative partners, and nationalist narratives are causing a decrease in liberal democratic actors. Finally, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2025) revealed that electoral turnover, regional pressure, judicial intervention, and civic mobilization are capable of reversing and slowing down democratic backsliding.

CONCLUSION

This study was on democratic backsliding and international democracy promotion in the post-liberal era. Mixed methods were used in the analysis of both democratic backlash and international democratic promotion. Evidence from three datasets, namely, the Freedom House, the Polity IV, and V-Dem agreed on the significant democratic backlashing across various regions. Democratic decline occurs through institutional erosion. Quantitative evidence showed declines in democratic performance. Freedom House reveal reducing civil liberties and political rights. V-Dem showed increased autocratization and growing executive authority. Polity showed a trend in democratic stagnation and regression. The results showed that democratic backsliding occurs through governments employing gradual institutional strategies, namely, electoral rules, reducing judicial autonomy, weakening oversight agencies, and restricting media freedom. These actions preserve formal democratic procedures aimed at undermining substantive democratic accountability. Despite increased democratic backlash, responses are misprioritized. International responses prioritize election monitoring, aid conditionality, and diplomatic pressure, which are not adequate. Governments that have been marked as practicing democratic backsliding have increasingly used economic and political actors to reduce dependence on democracy-promoting actors. The study also found that multinational organizations continue to adopt normative expectations regarding democratic principles. Civil society organizations were found to be significant actors in promoting democracy, backed by independent media, watchdog groups, social movements, and professional associations. In the post-liberal era, democratic backlash is characterized by intensified geopolitical rivalry, and competing governance models are major factors reducing liberal-democratic norms. International actors prioritize security, economic interests, and migration management at the expense of governance concerns. These competing priorities consistently undermine democracy promotion. Despite these democratic backlashes, democratic recovery remained possible. According to the study, electoral turnover, regional pressure, judicial interventions, and civic mobilization have shown success in reversing and slowing democratic backsliding.

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