

Democracy and COVID-19: the decisive moment

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a vast impact on many aspects of our society. The nearly 2 million deaths due to COVID-19 registered to date are not just a statistic, but a veritable human tragedy. Angela Merkel could not have made it any clearer: Germany is facing its biggest crisis since World War II. Substitute Germany with the world, and you will not lose a shred of truth. In this scenario, the demands which citizens and businesses are placing on their governments to take effective measures commensurate with the challenge that lies before us are also great. Are our political systems up to it?

To answer this question it is worth taking a step back to look at the bigger picture. We are at a unique moment in humanity's political history, for democracy is currently the dominant political system: 59% of the world's countries enjoy one form or another of democracy, only 13% are autocracies, and the remaining 28% share democratic and autocratic elements.¹

This is good news, but the situation has a less agreeable counterpoint, in that there is growing disaffection among citizens with the way their democracies are functioning. At this point in the discussion, it is worth asking whether this trend is merely a superficial public debate or whether its roots run deeper. Fortunately, an issue as fundamental as democracy itself is being monitored by numerous institutions and academia. The overall results of decades of study are undeniable.

In a recent survey by Foa *et al.* (2020),² which is based on more than 25 data sources, 3,500 national studies and spanning a period of around 50 years in advanced countries and 25 years in emerging countries, it is found that, from approximately 2011, the degree of dissatisfaction with democracy has accelerated and now reaches 57.7% of those individuals surveyed (an increase of around 20 points over a 15-year period). Although the trend is fairly widespread geographically, it is particularly pronounced in the US, Western Europe and Latin America. This is what is known in the economic literature as «democratic recession», although given that the underlying trend appears to be of a more structural rather than cyclical nature, it might be more suitable to call it «democratic decline».

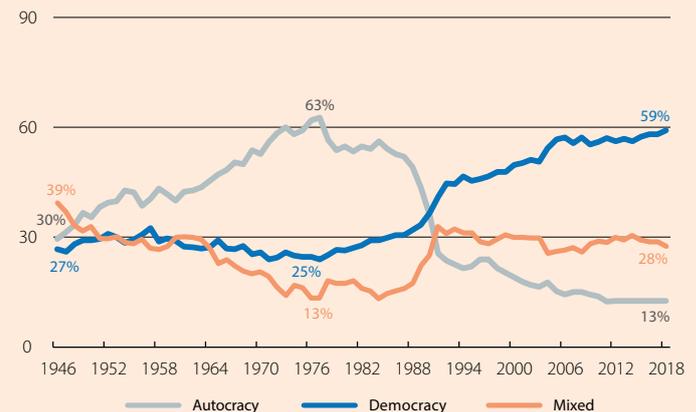
Therefore, in a world that is still largely democratic but has a growing discontent with this political system, the fundamental question is whether democracies can cope with the COVID-19 crisis with guarantees of success and thus strengthen their legitimacy and prospects for continuity or, on the contrary, whether this crisis will further accentuate the system's decline. This issue becomes even more relevant with the growing public perception that the response from autocratic models (read: China) has been more effective in the fight against the pandemic than in other countries with democratic systems.

To address this point, we must revisit the issue of citizens' dissatisfaction with democracy. Although this discontent is a clear empirical reality, there is less consensus on what the precise causes are. However, although such an analysis is beyond the scope of this Dossier, it is possible to identify an underlying reading which many studies share: the essential problem that is causing citizens' distancing from democracy is the feeling that it is failing in its essential function to address and solve the problems of the time. For instance, it is perceived to provide an inadequate response both to one-off crises, such as the refugee crisis of 2015, and to longer-term developments, such as demographic decline, the digital transition or combating climate change.

However, while this reading can be generally shared, it has the additional problem that it may be confusing two different situations. The first is that the decision-making process in a political system can make it difficult to make the most appropriate decisions. The second is that the capacity of states, and in particular that of their public administrations, might not be optimal to properly implement the political decisions that are taken.

The world's political systems

(% of countries classified within each system, 1946-2018)



Note: The countries included in the sample have a population of at least 500,000 inhabitants. Those labelled as mixed have a combination of characteristics of democratic and autocratic systems.
Source: CaixaBank Research, based on data from the Center for Systemic Peace.

1. Of all countries with a population of more than 500,000 inhabitants. Data from the Center for Systemic Peace (Polity IV project).

2. R.S. Foa, A. Klassen, M. Slade, A. Rand and R. Collins (2020). «The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020». Cambridge: Centre for the Future of Democracy.

The political causes of inadequate decision-making to deal with a crisis vary greatly, but there are two circumstances that have been shown to be repeated in democracies. The first is that democracy allows blockages to occur in the decision-making process, and to a greater extent than other political systems. Moreover, such blockages are more likely with greater political divisions in the country.³ The second circumstance, which is also relatively frequent in democracies, is the role of interest groups, which can shift political decisions away from what would be in the public's general interest.⁴

As we mentioned, these political causes are different from the state's ability to implement policies. There is ample evidence, as well as a theoretical basis, to argue that there is a clear relationship between the level of development and that ability. However,

Dissatisfaction with democracy

(% of respondents)



Note: The chart shows a measure of the level of dissatisfaction in democracies representing 2,430 million people in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, North America, East Asia and Australia. The sample of democracies remains constant.

Source: CaixaBank Research, based on data from the Centre for the Future of Democracy.

political system and culture, we will perform an empirical analysis, which will be the subject of the following two articles. Don't miss them, they throw up some surprises.

it is also true that even states with the same level of development differ in their ability to adequately develop and implement decisive policies. Moreover – and this is a crucial point – there is evidence that sociocultural factors matter in policy implementation. For example, however efficient the government administration may be, in a society that is highly biased towards individualism, policies requiring cohesive collective behaviour or greater voluntary coordination will be less successful than if collectivism were the dominant trait.⁵

Thus, on the subject in question – the response to the COVID-19 crisis and whether or not this episode could accelerate democracy's decline – it is important to analyse the relationship between decisions aimed at combating the pandemic and political determinants, the state's capacity and sociocultural traits. To shed some light on these complex relationships between an efficient response to the COVID-19 crisis, the

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3. See, for instance, J. March and J.P. Olsen (1984). «The new institutionalism: organizational factors in political life». *The American Political Science Review*, 78(3), 734-749.

4. On this matter, see M. Olson (1982). «The rise and decline of nations: economic growth, stagflation, and social rigidities». Yale University Press.

5. See Y. Gorodnichenko and G. Roland (2015). «Culture, institutions and democratization». National Bureau of Economic Research, n° w21117.