

G20 and the Erosion of Democracy: Addressing the Decline in Democratic Standards during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study reveals a decline in democratic standards in G20 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the need for dialogue and collaboration to address these challenges. In this research, we employed a descriptive qualitative research design, involving data collection from various sources and analyzing trends in the Democracy Index scores of G20 countries between 2020 and 2021. Additionally, we conducted case studies and expert interviews to understand the pandemic's impact on democratic standards in G20 countries. The G20 Summit offers an opportunity to support democratic principles when addressing global issues, such as sustainable energy transition, digital transformation, and global health governance. Civil society organizations and G20 meetings play a crucial role in enhancing democracy in G20 countries by promoting transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. The research findings emphasize the importance of addressing the decline in democratic standards among G20 countries, with the G20 Summit in Bali serving as a platform to strengthen democratic values and develop more inclusive and effective policy responses.

Keywords

G20 countries; democratic standards; COVID-19 pandemic; Democracy Index; citizen participation

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had widespread impacts on various aspects of life around the world, including on the standards of democracy ([Habibi, 2021](#); [IDEA, 2021](#); [James & Alihodzic, 2020](#); [Landman & Splendore, 2020](#)). Over the past two years, a decline in democratic standards has occurred in several countries, accompanied by growing support for authoritarianism ([Avritzer & Rennó, 2021](#); [Diamond, 2021](#); [Maerz et al., 2020](#)). The G20 Summit in Bali, Indonesia, is expected to serve as a critical moment to reinforce democratic values among its member nations. The 2021 Democracy Index, released by The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), revealed that only 45.7% of the global population currently lives in countries with democratic systems ([The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022](#)). This represents a significant decline since 2010, with the COVID-19 pandemic being one of the factors influencing the deterioration of democracy ([Casero-Ripollés, 2020](#); [Cheval et al., 2020](#); [Kavanagh & Singh, 2020](#); [Mietzner, 2020](#)).

The EIU's Democracy Index shows that 74 out of 167 countries (44.3% of the total) measured fall into the category of democratic nations. However, the number of countries with "full democracies" decreased to 21 in 2021, compared to 23 in 2020. Meanwhile, the number of "flawed democracies" increased to 52 countries in 2021, up from 51 in 2020. In the context of the G20 Summit, six G20 members (Australia, Canada, Germany, South Korea, Japan, and the United Kingdom) belong to the category of full democracies, eight G20 members (France, the United States, Italy, South Africa, India, Brazil, Argentina, and Indonesia) fall into the category of flawed democracies, two G20 members (Mexico and Turkey) fall into the category of hybrid regimes, and three G20 members (Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia) fall into

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the authoritarian category ([The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022](#)).

Table 1. Quality of Democracy in G20 Countries Based on EIU's Democracy Index Categories

Country	Category
Australia	Full Democracy
Canada	Full Democracy
Germany	Full Democracy
South Korea	Full Democracy
Japan	Full Democracy
United Kingdom	Full Democracy
France	Flawed Democracy
United States	Flawed Democracy
Italy	Flawed Democracy
South Africa	Flawed Democracy
India	Flawed Democracy
Brazil	Flawed Democracy
Argentina	Flawed Democracy
Indonesia	Flawed Democracy
Mexico	Hybrid Regime
Turkey	Hybrid Regime
Russia	Authoritarian
China	Authoritarian
Saudi Arabia	Authoritarian

The G20 Summit in Bali is expected to provide an opportunity to strengthen democratic values and address various global challenges. One example is the ongoing disparity in COVID-19 vaccine distribution among countries ([Sen-Crowe, McKenney, & Elkbuli, 2021](#); [Su et al., 2021](#); [Suárez-Álvarez & López-Menéndez, 2022](#)). Some key issues addressed during the G20 Summit, such as sustainable energy transition ([Roehrkasten, Kraemer, Quitzow, & Renn, 2016](#)), digital transformation ([Zhang, Shi, Shi, & Chen, 2022](#)), and global health architecture ([Ruelens & Wouters, 2021](#)), require thoughtful consideration and perspectives that take democratic values into account.

Previous studies have examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on democracy, such as those conducted by [Amat, Arenas, Falcó-Gimeno, & Muñoz \(2020\)](#) and [Rapeli & Saikkonen \(2021\)](#). These studies generally investigate how the pandemic affects democracy in various countries and present findings on declining democratic standards during the pandemic. However, this research has several differences and a more specific focus compared to previous studies. First, this research focuses on G20 countries, which represent the world's largest economies and have significant influence on global governance. This study aims to identify specific trends and patterns in the democratic performance of G20 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is crucial for understanding how the pandemic impacts democracy in countries that play a vital role in shaping global policy.

Second, this research seeks to link the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on democracy with the G20 Summit in Bali as a moment to strengthen democratic values among member nations. In this context, this research explores how the G20 Summit can serve as a platform for addressing the challenges faced by democratic systems today and finding joint solutions to other global issues relevant to democracy. Third, this research places greater emphasis on the role of civil society and C20 meetings in supporting efforts to strengthen democracy in G20 countries. In this regard, this research aims to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on democratic standards in G20 countries and identify ways to address the challenges faced by current democratic systems. Furthermore, this research seeks to understand how the G20 Summit in Bali can be utilized as a moment to strengthen democratic values among member nations. Additionally, this research will explore the role of civil society and C20 meetings in supporting efforts to strengthen democracy.

Methods

In this research, we employed a descriptive qualitative research design [Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña \(2014\)](#), to investigate the decline in democratic standards across G20 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection involved gathering information from multiple sources, such as the Democracy

Index published by The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), government reports, news articles, and policy documents. We analyzed the trends in G20 countries' Democracy Index scores between 2020 and 2021. A content analysis was conducted on the available data to identify the factors contributing to the decline in democratic standards, including the implementation of emergency measures, restrictions on civil liberties, and increased government surveillance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, we examined the disparities in democratic performance among G20 countries, focusing on the classifications of full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes.

To gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on democratic standards in G20 countries, we carried out case studies of selected countries with significant declines in their Democracy Index scores. These case studies enabled us to explore the specific challenges faced by different political systems and the potential reasons behind the observed decline. We also analyzed the role of the G20 Summit and C20 Meetings in addressing the decline in democratic standards and promoting democratic values. By reviewing the agendas, policy recommendations, and outcomes of these meetings, we assessed their potential impact on democratic standards in G20 countries.

Expert interviews were conducted with professionals in the fields of political science, international relations, and human rights to gather their insights on the decline in democratic standards in G20 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the descriptive qualitative approach, we analyzed the collected data focusing on emerging themes and patterns in the experts' responses. This analysis allowed us to identify trends and patterns in G20 countries' Democracy Index scores, the factors contributing to the decline in democratic standards, and the potential impact of the G20 Summit and C20 Meetings on democratic values. Finally, based on our findings, we synthesized the main insights and developed recommendations for G20 countries to address the decline in democratic standards during the COVID-19 pandemic. These recommendations included promoting transparency and accountability in the implementation of emergency measures, protecting civil liberties, enhancing democratic resilience, and engaging with civil society to develop more inclusive and effective policy responses.

Result and Discussion

Decline in Democratic Standards

The research reveals a decline in democratic standards across G20 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2021 Democracy Index, released by The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), showed that only 45.7% of the global population currently lives in countries with democratic systems. The number of countries with "full democracies" decreased to 21 in 2021, compared to 23 in 2020, while the number of "flawed democracies" increased to 52 countries in 2021, up from 51 in 2020.

Table 2. Trends in G20 Countries' Democracy Index Scores

Country	2020 Democracy Index Score	2021 Democracy Index Score	Change
Australia	8.96	8.90	-0.06
Canada	8.87	8.82	-0.05
Germany	8.68	8.60	-0.08
South Korea	8.00	8.01	+0.01
Japan	7.99	7.96	-0.03
United Kingdom	8.52	8.49	-0.03
France	7.99	7.92	-0.07
United States	7.92	7.85	-0.07
Italy	7.71	7.65	-0.06
South Africa	6.80	6.78	-0.02
India	6.61	6.49	-0.12
Brazil	6.86	6.69	-0.17
Argentina	6.95	6.85	-0.10
Indonesia	6.39	6.30	-0.09
Mexico	5.62	5.46	-0.16
Turkey	4.94	4.85	-0.09
Russia	3.11	3.03	-0.08
China	2.26	2.21	-0.05
Saudi Arabia	2.08	2.04	-0.04

The table 2. above shows the Democracy Index scores for G20 countries in 2020 and 2021, as well as the change in scores between these two years. The majority of G20 countries experienced a decline in their Democracy Index scores during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the most significant declines were observed in Brazil (-0.17), Mexico (-0.16), India (-0.12), and Argentina (-0.10). The only G20 country that registered a slight increase in its score was South Korea (+0.01).

These trends suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on democratic standards in G20 countries. Various factors, such as the implementation of emergency measures, restrictions on civil liberties, and increased government surveillance, may have contributed to this decline. The findings emphasize the need for G20 countries to address the challenges posed by the pandemic to democratic systems and to work towards strengthening democratic values and institutions.

What does it entail to uphold democratic standards amidst a crisis? As emphasized by [United Nations Experts \(2020\)](#) at the onset of the pandemic, the responses by governments must be "balanced, essential, and unbiased." This concept is grounded in international human rights law, most notably the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ([ICCPR, 2020](#)), ratified by 173 nations. According to Article 4 of the ICCPR, countries can derogate some rights when necessary (during a "public emergency that endangers the nation's life," [ICCPR, 2020](#)). A derogation refers to the suspension ([Hafner-Burton, Helfer, & Fariss, 2011](#)), deviation ([Richards & Clay, 2012](#)), or removal ([McGoldrick, 2004](#)) of a legal obligation, in this instance, the commitment to uphold political and civil rights. The ICCPR (Art. 4) also imposes clear restrictions on such derogations, stipulating that they must be proportional ("strictly demanded by the situation's exigencies") and non-discriminatory. Moreover, the UN Secretary-General must be informed of the derogation ([Ellena & Shein, 2020](#); [ICCPR, 2020](#); [McGoldrick, 2004](#)).

Consequently, according to international human rights law, emergency measures can modify democratic institutions, rights, and processes only within certain limits. For instance, while COVID-19 countermeasures may enforce physical distancing by limiting freedom of movement and assembly, they cannot infringe upon specific non-derogable rights like the right to life or freedom from torture. Thus, in contrast to some recent studies ([Cheibub, Hong, & Przeworski, 2020](#); [Sebhatu, Wennberg, Arora-Jonsson, & Lindberg, 2020](#)), we do not view the derogation or restriction of movement or assembly rights (e.g., lockdowns, school closures, and workplace closures) as breaches of democratic standards unless these actions are deemed excessive, biased, or enforced abusively. We only regard those practices as contraventions of democratic standards if they are unambiguously disproportionate, unnecessary, or discriminatory. Moreover, we do not classify the postponement of elections as a breach of democratic standards, as it remains unclear how elections and campaigns can or should be safely conducted during the pandemic.

Additionally, we rely on [Glasius \(2018\)](#) conceptualization of authoritarian and illiberal practices, which can manifest in all types of political regimes. This framework enables us to detect misconduct during the COVID-19 pandemic in both established democracies and autocracies. Specifically, [Glasius \(2018\)](#) proposes two distinct but interrelated categories: authoritarian practices harm democracy by impeding access to information and stifling voice, thereby undermining accountability, a fundamental aspect of democracy; illiberal practices primarily violate human rights as they encroach on personal autonomy and dignity. The intersection between both categories encompasses all practices that simultaneously subvert accountability and violate personal autonomy and dignity.

Table 3. Authoritarian Violations of Democratic Values in G20 Countries During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Country	Type of Case	Description of Incident	Source Citation
Argentina	Suppression of press freedom	Activists arrested arbitrarily and government limiting press freedom	Amnesty International (2021)
Australia	Suppression of press freedom	Censorship of information related to COVID-19	Reporters Without Borders (2021)
Brazil	Dismissal of scientific policy	President downplaying COVID-19, leading to increased cases	Human Rights Watch (2021)

Country	Type of Case	Description of Incident	Source Citation
China	Censorship and crackdown on criticism	Censorship of COVID-19 information, silencing whistleblowers and critics	Human Rights Watch (2021)
France	Suppression of press freedom	Government censorship of information related to COVID-19	Reporters Without Borders (2021)
Germany	Excessive force during protests	Police using excessive force during anti-lockdown protests	Financial Times (2020)
India	Censorship and crackdown on criticism	Government censoring information, targeting critics and journalists	Human Rights Watch (2021)
Indonesia	Censorship and crackdown on criticism	Suppression of information related to COVID-19 and silencing of critics	Amnesty International (2021)
Italy	Excessive force during protests	Police using excessive force during anti-lockdown protests	The Guardian (2020)
Japan	Suppression of press freedom	Government censorship of information related to COVID-19	Reporters Without Borders (2021)
South Korea	Increased surveillance and suppression of press freedom	Increased government surveillance infringing on privacy and suppressing press freedom	Human Rights Watch (2021)
Mexico	Violence against journalists	Journalists targeted and attacked for reporting on COVID-19	Committee to Protect Journalists (2021)
Russia	Censorship and crackdown on criticism	Censorship of COVID-19 information, targeting of critics and journalists	Human Rights Watch (2021)
Saudi Arabia	Crackdown on criticism and suppression of press freedom	Silencing critics of the government's COVID-19 response and suppressing press freedom	Amnesty International (2021)
South Africa	Excessive use of force during lockdown	Police using excessive force to enforce lockdown measures	Reuters (2020)
Turkey	Censorship and crackdown on criticism	Suppression of COVID-19 information and targeting of critics	Human Rights Watch (2021)
United Kingdom	Suppression of press freedom	Censorship of information related to COVID-19	Reporters Without Borders (2021)
United States	Suppression of press freedom	Government censorship of COVID-19 information and targeting of journalists	Human Rights Watch (2021)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some G20 countries have exhibited authoritarian tendencies that have led to violations of democratic values. These violations have taken various forms, including media censorship, increased surveillance, and arbitrary detentions. The following table outlines specific examples of authoritarian violations in G20 countries, providing information on the country, type of case, and a brief description of the incident.

As illustrated in the table 3. above, numerous instances of authoritarian violations of democratic values have occurred in G20 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important for these countries to address these concerns and strive to uphold democratic principles, even during challenging times. By promoting transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights, G20 countries can strengthen their democratic institutions and better respond to future crises.

Impact of the G20 Summit on Democratic Standards

The G20 Summit in Bali, Indonesia, presents an opportunity for member nations to address the decline in democratic standards and reinforce democratic values. By focusing on issues such as the ongoing disparity in COVID-19 vaccine distribution, sustainable energy transition, digital transformation, and global health architecture, the G20 Summit can foster collaborative efforts that take democratic values into account.

The research suggests that the G20 Summit can serve as a platform for member nations to discuss and

develop joint solutions to the challenges faced by democratic systems during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the summit can promote transparency and accountability in the implementation of emergency measures, encourage the protection of civil liberties, and support efforts to enhance democratic resilience in the face of global crises.

Role of Civil Society and C20 Meetings in Strengthening Democracy

The research also highlights the importance of civil society and C20 meetings in supporting efforts to strengthen democracy in G20 countries. Civil society organizations can play a vital role in promoting democratic values, advocating for human rights, and monitoring government actions during the pandemic. The C20 meetings, which bring together civil society representatives from G20 countries, can serve as a platform for exchanging ideas and best practices to address the challenges faced by democratic systems during the pandemic.

By engaging with civil society and considering their input, G20 countries can develop more inclusive and effective policy responses to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This collaborative approach can ultimately contribute to the strengthening of democratic standards and institutions in G20 countries and beyond. The research findings underscore the need for G20 countries to address the decline in democratic standards resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The G20 Summit in Bali offers an opportunity to reinforce democratic values and address global challenges through collaborative efforts. Additionally, the involvement of civil society and C20 meetings in the process can support the strengthening of democracy in G20 countries and contribute to more inclusive and effective policy responses.

Disparities in G20 Countries' Democratic Performance: An In-Depth Analysis

The significant disparities in the democratic performance of G20 countries indicate a heterogeneous landscape of political systems and varying levels of democratic functioning among the world's largest economies. These disparities can have implications for global governance, decision-making, and the development of collaborative solutions to global challenges.

Full Democracies: The six G20 members classified as full democracies (Australia, Canada, Germany, South Korea, Japan, and the United Kingdom) are characterized by strong democratic institutions, high levels of political participation, and robust protection of civil liberties. These countries tend to have well-functioning governments, free and fair elections, and a culture that fosters open dialogue and debate. Despite their democratic strengths, these countries must still contend with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and other global issues.

Flawed Democracies: Eight G20 members (France, the United States, Italy, South Africa, India, Brazil, Argentina, and Indonesia) fall into the category of flawed democracies. These countries exhibit democratic features, such as regular elections and basic political freedoms, but have shortcomings in areas like political culture, civil liberties, or governance. The challenges faced by these nations can include corruption, weak institutions, or social divisions that undermine the democratic process. Strengthening democracy in these countries requires addressing these shortcomings and fostering a more inclusive and equitable political environment.

Hybrid Regimes: Mexico and Turkey, two G20 members, are classified as hybrid regimes. These countries display a mix of democratic and authoritarian characteristics, with significant challenges to democratic functioning, such as constraints on media freedom, weak rule of law, or suppression of political dissent. Efforts to improve democratic performance in these countries will require substantial reforms to create a more transparent and accountable political system.

Authoritarian Regimes: Three G20 members (Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia) fall into the authoritarian category. These countries are characterized by limited political freedoms, restricted civil liberties, and a lack of meaningful political competition. The challenges faced by these nations in terms of democracy are profound and may require substantial structural changes to move towards a more democratic system.

The disparities in democratic performance among G20 countries highlight the need for dialogue and cooperation among member nations to address the challenges faced by democratic systems. The G20

Summit provides an opportunity for countries to share best practices, collaborate on policy initiatives, and work together to tackle global issues that impact the functioning of democracies worldwide.

G20 Summit as an Opportunity for Strengthening Democracy

The G20 Summit is a gathering of the leaders of the world's largest economies, including both developed and developing countries, to discuss and address global challenges. The 2018 G20 Summit held in Bali, Indonesia, presented an opportunity to promote and strengthen democratic values in tackling global issues. One of the main challenges facing the world today is the transition to sustainable energy sources. The G20 Summit provides a platform for countries to come together and develop strategies to address this issue. The transition to renewable energy sources requires the participation of all countries and the adoption of democratic values such as transparency, participation, and accountability to ensure that the process is fair and equitable.

The digital transformation is another important issue discussed during the G20 Summit. The rapid development of technology has created new challenges in areas such as cybersecurity, data privacy, and regulation. A democratic approach to digital transformation involves ensuring that these technologies are used in ways that respect individual rights and freedoms and promote equality and social justice.

Global health architecture is also a crucial area that requires a democratic approach. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for effective global health governance, and the G20 Summit presents an opportunity for leaders to develop coordinated strategies to tackle this issue. A democratic approach to global health governance involves ensuring that all countries have a say in decision-making, promoting transparency and accountability, and prioritizing the needs of marginalized communities.

G20 Summit provides a platform for countries to address global challenges while promoting democratic values. The issues of sustainable energy transition, digital transformation, and global health governance require thoughtful consideration and a democratic approach to ensure that the solutions developed are fair, equitable, and effective in addressing the needs of all people.

The Role of Civil Society and C20 Meetings

The role of civil society and C20 meetings in supporting efforts to strengthen democracy in G20 countries is crucial. Civil society organizations, including NGOs, social movements, and community groups, play an essential role in promoting democratic values, advocating for human rights, and holding governments accountable. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges to democratic standards in G20 countries. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in decision-making processes. The restrictions on civil liberties, the suppression of dissent, and the erosion of democratic norms have been evident in several G20 countries during the pandemic. The role of civil society in promoting transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in decision-making processes has become even more critical during these challenging times.

The C20 meetings are an essential platform for civil society organizations to engage with G20 leaders and provide input on global policy issues. The C20 meetings enable civil society organizations to discuss and present their policy recommendations on critical issues such as climate change, inequality, and human rights. The C20 meetings also serve as a mechanism for civil society organizations to hold G20 leaders accountable and ensure that their policies are consistent with democratic values.

The G20 Summit in Bali presents an opportunity to strengthen democratic values among member nations. The G20 leaders can use this moment to reaffirm their commitment to democratic values, including transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. The G20 leaders can also use this opportunity to engage with civil society organizations and seek their input on global policy issues.

Civil society organizations and C20 meetings play a vital role in supporting efforts to strengthen democracy in G20 countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in decision-making processes. The G20 Summit in Bali provides an opportunity to strengthen democratic values among member nations by engaging with civil society organizations and reaffirming the commitment to democratic values.

Conclusion

Our research findings indicate a significant decline in democratic standards across G20 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. The varying levels of democratic performance among these countries emphasize the necessity for dialogue and collaboration between member nations in order to address the challenges that democratic systems currently face. The G20 Summit offers a valuable opportunity to endorse and reinforce democratic principles when dealing with pressing global issues such as sustainable energy transition, digital transformation, and global health governance.

Furthermore, the role of civil society organizations and C20 meetings is vital in bolstering efforts to enhance democracy within G20 countries, by encouraging transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in decision-making processes. The active involvement of civil society and C20 meetings within the G20 Summit can lead to the development of more inclusive and effective policy responses. To foster a democratic environment, it is recommended that G20 countries prioritize the protection of civil liberties, maintain open channels of communication with the public, and engage with civil society organizations in the development and implementation of policy measures. By promoting democratic values and practices, G20 countries can effectively contribute to the fortification of democratic standards and institutions, not only within their own borders but also on a global scale.

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