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Facing Up to the Democratic Recession

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Facing Up to the Democratic Recession

Larry Diamond (bio)

The year 2014 marked the fortieth anniversary of Portugal's Revolution of the Carnations, which inaugurated what Samuel P. Huntington dubbed the "third wave" of global democratization. Any assessment of the

state of global democracy today must begin by recognizing—even marveling at—the durability of this historic transformation. When the third wave began in 1974, only about 30 percent of the world’s independent states met the criteria of electoral democracy—a system in which citizens, through universal suffrage, can choose and replace their leaders in regular, free, fair, and meaningful elections.¹ At that time, there were only about 46 democracies in the world. Most of those were the liberal democracies of the rich West, along with a number of small island states that had been British colonies. Only a few other developing democracies existed—principally, India, Sri Lanka, Costa Rica, Colombia, Venezuela, Israel, and Turkey.

In the subsequent three decades, democracy had a remarkable global run, as the number of democracies essentially held steady or expanded every year from 1975 until 2007. Nothing like this continuous growth in democracy had ever been seen before in the history of the world. While a number of these new “democracies” were quite illiberal—in some cases, so much so that Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way regard them as “competitive authoritarian” regimes²—the positive three-decade trend was paralleled by a similarly steady and significant expansion in levels of freedom (political rights and civil liberties, as measured annually by Freedom House). In 1974, the average level of freedom in the world stood at 4.38 (on the two seven-point scales, where 1 is most free and 7 is most repressive). It then gradually improved during the 1970s and **[End Page 141]** 1980s, though it did not cross below the 4.0 midpoint until the fall of the Berlin Wall, after which it improved to 3.85 in 1990. In 25 of the 32 years between 1974 and 2005, average freedom levels improved in the world, peaking at 3.22 in 2005.

And then, around 2006, the expansion of freedom and democracy in the world came to a prolonged halt. Since 2006, there has been no net expansion in the number of electoral democracies, which has oscillated between 114 and 119 (about 60 percent of the world’s states). As we see in [Figure 1](#), the number of both electoral and liberal democracies began to decline after 2006 and then flattened out.³ Since 2006, the

average level of freedom in the world has also deteriorated slightly, leveling off at about 3.30.

There are two ways to view these empirical trends. One is to see them as constituting a period of equilibrium—freedom and democracy have not continued gaining, but neither have they experienced net declines. One could even celebrate this as an expression of the remarkable and unexpected durability of the democratic wave. Given that democracy expanded to a number of countries where the objective conditions for sustaining it are unfavorable, due either to poverty (for example, in Liberia, Malawi, and Sierra Leone) or to strategic pressures (for example, in Georgia and Mongolia), it is impressive that reasonably open and competitive political systems have survived (or revived) in so many places. As a variant of this more benign interpretation, Levitsky and Way argue in this issue of the *Journal* that democracy never actually expanded as widely as Freedom House perceived in the first place. Thus, they contend, many of the seeming failures of democracy in the last ten to fifteen years were really deteriorations or hardenings of what had been from the beginning authoritarian regimes, however competitive.

Alternatively, one can view the last decade as a period of at least incipient decline in democracy. To make this case, we need to examine not only the instability and stagnation of democracies, but also the incremental decline of democracy in what Thomas Carothers has termed the “gray zone” countries (which defy easy classification as to whether or not they are democracies),⁴ the deepening authoritarianism in the non-democracies, and the decline in the functioning and self-confidence of the world...

FACING UP TO THE DEMOCRATIC RECESSION

Larry Diamond

Larry Diamond is founding coeditor of the Journal of Democracy, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, and director of Stanford's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law.

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