



THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE ELECTORAL ARENA AND REGIME CHANGE: EVIDENCE FROM EUROPE AND AFRICA

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To the extent that the Covid-19 pandemic was a disruptive force that undermined governance across regimes, the global health crisis was said to have exacerbated democratic backsliding and emboldened autocratization. While a global trend towards backsliding has been widely perceived, this study is motivated by the observations that (a) there have been strong pushbacks among democracies against illiberal populism and (b) little has been done to study the resilience and/or fragility of autocratic regimes whose inherent weaknesses were exposed by the pandemic. With the help of a newly developed dataset covering elections and referendums across Europe and Africa at the national level in 2020 and 2021, the main contribution of the paper is two-fold: (1) to ascertain which factors mitigated the health and political risks posed by the pandemic irrespective of regime types in both regions, and (2) to take advantage of the most different systems design to shed light on not only the extent to which electoral integrity was adversely affected by the crisis, but also how European Union and African Union nations overwhelmed by the pandemic performed in their respective context.

Key words: Covid-19; elections; democratic backsliding; autocratization; public health; risk.

1 INTRODUCTION: MOVING BEYOND TALLYING A BIPOLAR RIVALRY

The World Health Organization (WHO) first declared Covid-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30 January 2020 and then a pandemic on 11 March 2020. By the time the disease was no longer a PHEIC, over 770 million cases have been reported, along with over 7 million deaths (Table

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1).² There is a consensus among scholars that the Covid-19 pandemic has put both democracies and autocracies under severe pressure. The unprecedented public health crisis exposed the systemic weaknesses in the global health governance and invited critical examination of the effectiveness of government responses with respect to trust, capacity, and coordination (The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response 2021; Brown and Roiser 2023; Kukovič 2022, 9; Malešič 2021, 66).

TABLE 1: COVID-19 CASES AND DEATHS

	Reported Cases	Reported Deaths
COVID-19 (Public Health Emergency of International Concern: 30 January 2020 – 5 May 2023)	775.43 million	7.05 million
<i>As of 31 December 2021 (the time frame adopted for this investigation)</i>	<i>291.67 million</i>	<i>5.52 million</i>

Source: World Health Organization <https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19/cases>.

Covid-19 has illuminated pre-existing debates about democratic backsliding and autocratization and underscored political trajectories that may turn out to be transformative in the post-pandemic years. Academics and practitioners alike have framed the unprecedented health crisis as a new round of rivalry between autocracy and democracy. As early as February 2020, when the WHO-China Joint Mission described China's response to be "the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history," (WHO 2020, 16) leading autocratic regimes including China and Russia began to use the pandemic to promote politicized narratives that centralized, top-down government control was more effective to fight the pandemic in order to reshape global public opinions about democracies which were portrayed to be slower to react to the pandemic and more reluctant to introduce restrictive measures to save lives (Huang 2021). Meanwhile, the pandemic was accompanied by a no less chronic "infodemic" consisting of waves of propaganda, conspiracy theories, and disinformation to boast about "the autocratic advantage" over democracies; the Oxford Internet Institute discovered that state-backed agencies from Russia and China were responsible for "92% of the misinformation" about the pandemic (Thompson et al. 2020; see also Cassan and Van Steenvoort 2021 and Haček 2024, 5). Informational manipulation reduced public attention to the disease and undermined national and global efforts to bring the pandemic under control. The International Press Institute (IPI)'s Covid-19 Press Freedom Tracker documented 677 press freedom violations linked to the pandemic (IPI 2021; Amnesty International 2021); accurate and timely information as the global common good needed to combat the pandemic was sacrificed when free press and freedom of expression faced the dual threats of state censorship and the viral spread of misinformation.

Thus, it was no coincidence for the Kofi Annan Foundation (2020) to issue a statement in April 2020 to warn that "democracy must not become the silent victim of the coronavirus pandemic." Even though some autocratic governments have stood out in terms of effectiveness thanks to higher state capacity and a compliant population, scholars have cautioned against simplistic but misguided conclusions (Cepaluni et al. 2020; Cheibub et al. 2020; Stasavage 2020), not least because democracies that have invested in public health protection preceding

² There are alternative measurements such as excess mortality to address the well-known problem of under-reporting. See Economist (2021), Giattino (2021) and Aizenman et al. (2022).

Covid-19 have proven to rather resilient (Wang 2019; Legido-Quigley et al. 2020). Moreover, research findings reveal that democratic regimes not only enhance health and well-being, but also perform well in health crisis because democratically elected leaders tend to acquire trust and capacity at a higher level through participation, deliberation, and accountability (Christensen and Lægreid 2020; Wang et al. 2019). Admittedly, the arrival of vaccines in the end of 2020 and early 2021 was game-changing, particularly for countries, be they autocratic or democratic, that secured adequate doses for the vaccine programme early on. Focusing on the policy responses to Covid-19, Schmotz and Tansey (2023) assert that regime type is not an important factor in the politics of policymaking and the decisiveness of policy response to bring the disease under control (also Alon et al. 2020; Ang 2020; Karabulut et al. 2020; Kavanagh and Singh 2020; Knusten and Kolvani 2022; Maerz et al. 2020). Although this may be true, as we shall see in the next section, the policy responses to the global health crisis served to strengthen the prospects of elite-led backsliding and autocratization at the expense of democratic reforms instigated by civil society and social movements. Moreover, international support for pro-democracy civil society and social movements in various parts of the world waned along with the lockdowns and border closings (Hyde 2020; Norrlöf 2020; Samuels 2023).

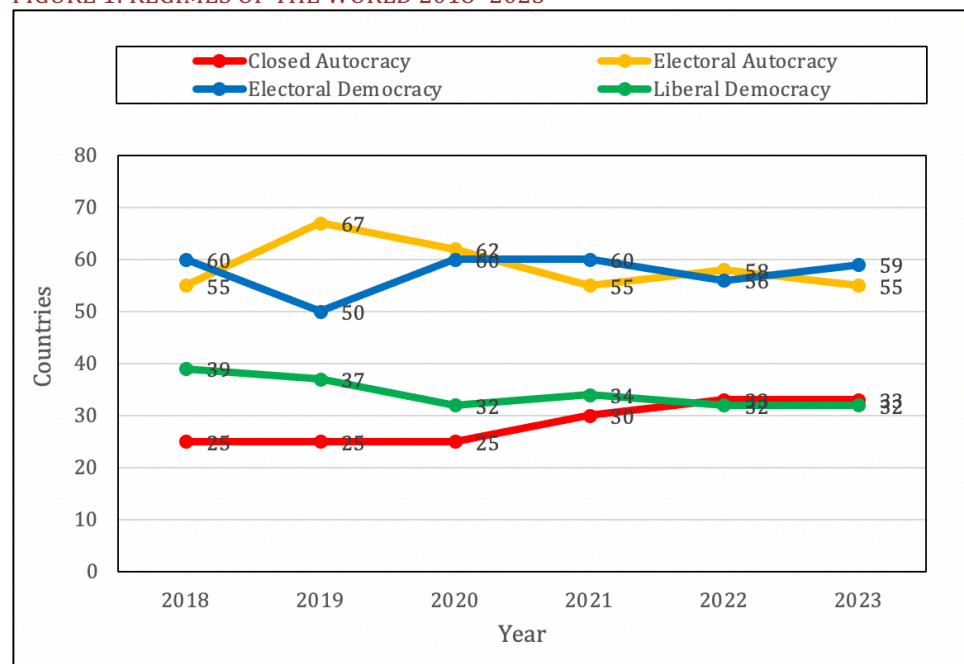
At the wake of Covid-19 in 2020, the Freedom House Index showed that about 38% of the global population lived in countries rated “Not Free,” the highest proportion since 1997, and only about a fifth lived in “Free” countries. The pandemic fuelled a global crisis for democracy as nearly 75% of the world’s population lived in a country that faced deterioration in 2020. (Freedom House 2020; Freedom House 2021; Repucci and Slipowitz 2022). The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project coined the term “Pandemic Backsliding” to highlight seven major types of violations of democratic standards and gathered high-profile episodes of both recession and resistance around the world (Edgell et al. 2020). In 2023, V-Dem reported that 27% and 44% of the world’s population lived in closed autocracies and electoral autocracies, respectively; electoral democracies and liberal democracies trailed far behind with less than one-third of the population. With more regimes undergoing autocratization than democratization on a year-to-year basis, the world has apparently drifted farther towards autocracy through executive aggrandizement, electoral manipulation, political rights violation, civil liberties restrictions, and accountability evasion (Figures 1-3; also, Lührmann et al. 2018).

Against this background, analysis of the pandemic’s impacts on the political regimes tends to gravitate to one of the two poles. On the one hand, in line with the conventional wisdom on democratic backsliding (Croissant and Haynes 2020; Willison et al. 2022), the world has witnessed the ascension of what Naím (2022, XV) calls the “3P autocrats who reach power through a reasonably democratic election and then set out to dismantle the checks on executive power through populism, polarization, and post-truth.” These self-serving political actors saw the crisis as an opportunity for personal power grab and took erratic policy measures which were aimed not at defending the democratic institutions but outmanoeuvring those who sought to stop them. Pulejo and Qurubin (2021) observed that incumbents either became more reluctant to impose or more willing to lift restrictive measures when the election was near because economic downturns were considered bad for the re-election prospects. Populists who indulged themselves in denialism, vaccine hesitancy, and conspiracy theories instead of science were responsible for the spread of the disease and excess mortality (Bayerlein et al. 2021; Bayerlein and Gyöngyösi 2020; Eberl et al. 2021;

Kavakli 2020; McKee et al. 2020; Williams 2020).

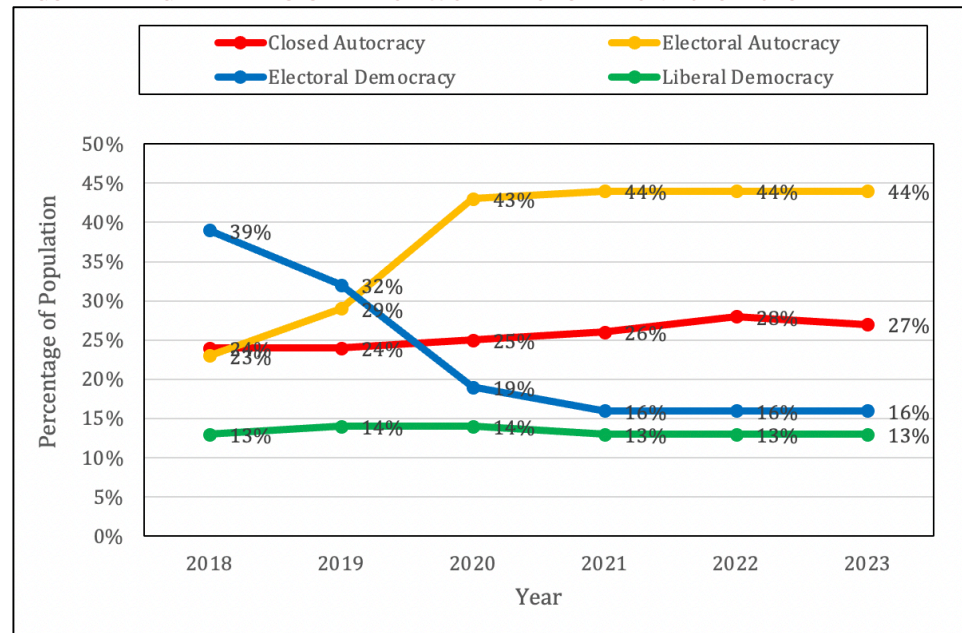
On the other hand, the growing literature has remained equivocal with competing outlooks with respect to the pandemic's impacts and the temporal decline of democratic attributes (Anghel and Schulte-Cloos 2023; Sadurski 2022, 174–205). In essence, democracies may escape from the trap of democratic backsliding and autocratization amid the pandemic and have “the 3P autocrats” repudiated given a set of conducive factors such as higher prior respect for human rights and democratic values, stronger democratic institutions whose functions were buttressed by elected and non-elected stakeholders, higher level of economic development, state capacity, social capitals, lower level of public sector corruption, as well as valued political, economic, and ideational connections with a “democratic stock” (Boese et al. 2021; Engler et al. 2021; McMann and Tisch 2023). Conversely, for weakly institutionalized or younger democracies which have struggled with underlying vulnerabilities, the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic were expected to compound the existing problems in terms of deepening distrust and fuelling popular disillusionment with the political establishment, thereby setting the stage for backsliding and autocratization. Theoretically, one may take advantage of the growing repertoire of explanatory models encompassing a wide spectrum of “theory families”—cultural, normative, institutional, leadership, political economy, social structure and political coalitions, and international (Waldner and Lust 2018) to shed light on the varying outcomes, hence uniformity, not diversity, should surprise us.

FIGURE 1: REGIMES OF THE WORLD 2018–2023



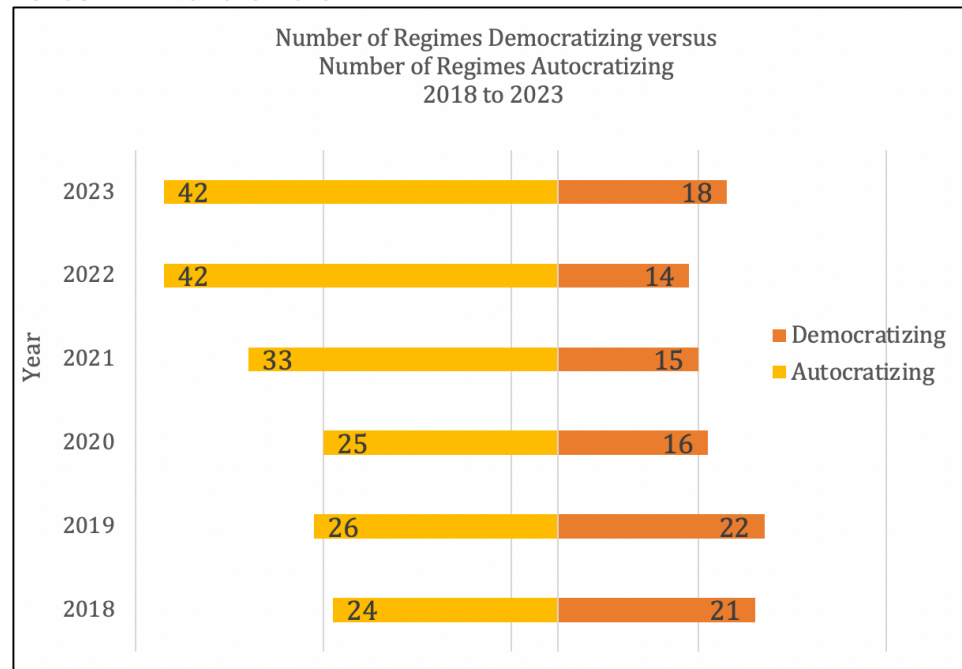
Source: Luhrmann et al. (2019); Maerz et al. (2020); Helmeier et al. (2021); Boese et al. (2022); Wiebrecht et al. (2023) and Angiolillo et al. (2024).

FIGURE 2: REGIME TYPES' SHARE OF WORLD POPULATION 2018–2023



Source: Luhrmann et al. (2019); Maerz et al. (2020); Helmeier et al. (2021); Boese et al. (2022); Wiebrecht et al. (2023) and Angiolillo et al. (2024).

FIGURE 3: NUMBER OF REGIMES DEMOCRATIZING VERSUS NUMBER OF REGIMES AUTOCRATIZING 2018–2023



Source: Luhrmann et al. (2019); Maerz et al. (2020); Helmeier et al. (2021); Boese et al. (2022); Wiebrecht et al. (2023) and Angiolillo et al. (2024).

We find both narratives dissatisfying, as the former overinterprets the causal role of the political leaders and their brinkmanship, while the latter has yet to agree on what matter most to the resilience and revitalization of democratic norm and practices. To the extent that empirical assessments are frequently limited to small-N comparisons or case-by-case election-oriented studies, singling out some weakly institutionalized new democracies risks the selection bias and the fallacy of exceptionalism which leads observers to overinterpret the positive or

negative significance of one specific moment. Hence, building on the meaningful analyses of the observed cases, it is necessary to also consider the findings of variable-oriented comparative study at a larger scale in geographical and temporal terms.

In this article, we take the growing concern about the proliferation of autocratic practices amid the Covid-19 pandemic as the point of departure. Although the initial interest is to understand why and how the unprecedented pandemic led to either postpone the elections and referendums or hold them as scheduled, as well as the impact of such decisions on electoral integrity in general terms (Ellena 2020), the inquiry has gradually developed into a systematic inquiry into how the pandemic interacted with the pre-existing political dynamics, the resultant mass electoral behaviour, and factors underpinning regime resilience and fragility. For the purpose of this investigation, the decline of democratic qualities with respect to participation, contestation, accountability, civic liberties, and political rights amount to backsliding. Three important caveats must be borne in mind: First, Ginsburg and Hug (2018) have aptly argued that “researcher must take account of those instances in which democracy survives major challenges in order to make strong causal claims about the conditions of democratic failure.” Second, Cianetti and Hanley (2021, 78) have observed that the concept of backsliding “may become a counterproductive paradigm because it reduces complex, non-linear political dynamics to movement along a linear trajectory of progress, standstill, or regression.” Third, one must pay attention not only to the relative strength of the illiberal or authoritarian forces vis-à-vis their prodemocracy counterparts, but also how the institutional and procedural guardrails are strengthened or weakened (Jacobs and Choate 2022). To our mind, democratic backsliding is related to yet still distinct from autocratization, which connotes a process of regime change presaged by the systematic dismantling of democratic institutions (Cassani and Tomini 2019).

To address the gaps identified above and to contribute to the emergent debates, we gather data from 260 elections and referendums around the world from February 2020 to December 2021 and present a set of three theoretically informed, non-mutually exclusive regression models for consideration. One of the major contributions of this paper is to show how one may make sense of the observed patterns among the electoral episodes from substantially different nations and regional blocs. We have devised a two-pronged approach combining global data analysis and the Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) which brings 14 European Union (EU) and 29 African Union (AU) member states together to demonstrate how the presumably destructive impacts of the pandemic were mitigated by institutional factors and the policy measures introduced (Anckar 2008). The basic information and descriptive statistics about the electoral episodes can be found in the Appendix; and the datasets are available from the project’s website www.hkeop2426.com. As we employ an inductive strategy which is theoretically informed, we look for the determinants of the dependent variable with an open mind, which will provide the complementary connections between variable-oriented and case-oriented inquiries in this Thematic Issue. Our investigation suggests several useful pathways for developing explanatory models based on verifiable evidence, thereby avoiding simplistic and impressionist depictions that do not do justice to complex situations resulted from the crisis.

2 COVID-19 AS A QUIET ASSASSIN OF DEMOCRACY?

The pandemic has hit the world regardless of regime types, wealth, and location. However, there is no secret that Covid-19 had been exploited by autocrats and their supporters to crackdown on the opposition (Barceló et al. 2022; Cassani 2022; Grasse et al. 2021; Kochnein and Koren 2022). Many of the radical response measures adopted by autocracies to slow down the infection and save lives have been in use in non-democratic countries to stifle the opposition and civil society for years. In the face of a global health crisis, human rights and democracy were further compromised by autocrats without bearing the costs of greater international and domestic pressure. One reason Covid-19 was considered a serious threat to democracy was that it offered a “health-enhancing” narrative for legitimizing illiberal practices which began to proliferate around the world in the preceding years (Lührmann and Linberg 2019; Lührmann et al. 2019; Maerz et al. 2020; Grasse et al. 2021). The Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) offers systematic information on policy measures such as workplace closures, travel restrictions, and restrictions on public assemblies across more than 180 countries and territories since 1 January 2020 (Hale et al. 2021). Health and security concerns were used to justify the widespread adoption of surveillance and control over ordinary citizens through compulsory and intrusive “test, track and trace” measures (Markotkin 2021). Disguised as pandemic response measures, illiberal governments and populists found it easier to carry out opportunist repression and election manipulation (Clay et al. 2022; James and Asplund 2020; Kjaerum et al. 2021).

The International Centre for Non-Profit Law (2020), which monitored how government responses to the pandemic adversely affected civil liberties and human rights, recorded emergency declarations in 110 countries, 61 countries with measures that affected privacy, 58 countries with measures that affected freedom of expression, and 153 countries with measures that affected freedom of assembly. IDEA (2021) found that nearly half of democracies resorted to emergency measures to combat Covid-19 in 2020. According to the tally made by V-Dem (Alizada et al. 2021), nine democracies registered major and 23 moderate violations of international democratic norms. 55 autocratic regimes engaged in major or moderate violations of international norms in response to the pandemic. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association (2021, 11) commented that lockdowns “heightened the risks of joining peaceful assemblies, as many countries respond to the pandemic with a national militaristic approach and enforce restrictions to movement and gatherings with excessive force and harsh penalties.” Chenoweth (2022) was concerned that the pandemic and the ensuing near-universal restrictive measures had the dual impact of accentuating the authoritarian challenges to democracies and further weakening the ability of mass movements to effectively organize the necessary push back. However, Youngs (2020a) has observed that “the pandemic has given global civil society a new sense of urgency, unleashed a spirit of civic empowerment, and prompted civil society organizations to deepen their presence in local societies.” The Carnegie Civic Research Network (2021) has documented the resilience of civil society and civic activism that sought to keep the decay and decline of democratic values and practices in check. The question remained whether the temporary restrictions introduced to fight Covid-19 set the stage for the onset of the deconsolidation of democratic regimes, as Lührmann and Rooney’s (2021, 618) longitudinal study shows that democracies were “75% more likely to erode under a state of emergency than without, marking a substantial increase in the probability of

democratic decline.”

By and large, the global crisis has risked further erosion of constraints on government powers irrespective of the existing constitutional and legal ground rules, rendering it exceedingly challenging for upholding the rule of law and for holding governments and leaders to account (Meyer-Resende 2020; Piccone 2021; World Justice Project 2020). To tackle the question: “Was Covid-19 a Quiet Assassin of Democracy?”, we begin with the dilemma confronting countries where elections and referendums were due against the backdrop of the pandemic, viz. delaying elections may be good for public health but bad for governance when postponement was to fuel polarization and undermine trust. Krimmer and his collaborators (2021, 9) surmise that “Covid-19 placed elections between a rock and a hard place: there is no easy ‘quick fix’ with this challenge.” As Covid-19 was a highly infectious disease, the last thing people wanted was to turn the polls into “super spreader events.” Few would disagree that Covid-19 tended to reduce turnout intention, raising concerns over higher abstention among the marginalized communities, risk-averse people and families, and regions that were hit badly by the disease. Moreover, holding elections and referendums during lockdowns and closures and in conditions detrimental to maintain the level-playing field could but undermine the credibility of the results. Electoral integrity cannot be guaranteed where pandemic-related restrictive measures had been used to alter scheduled election cycles, stifle the opposition, curb civic participation, and limit opportunities for independent election observation (Gottlieb 2021). While time-limited postponement made sense in most circumstances, the subsequent partisan squabbling may carry the risk of institutional uncertainties and democratic breakdown (James and Alihodzie 2020; Landman and Splendore 2020).

Knowing in advance that public gatherings of citizens, the canvassing activities, and turning out to vote on the polling day all entailed considerable risk of contracting the coronavirus, election and human rights bodies have put forward practical advice on what to do for elections and referendums to proceed with integrity, conclude with credible outcomes, and protect public health (Table 2).

TABLE 2: HOW TO PROTECT PUBLIC HEALTH AND UPHOLD ELECTORAL INTEGRITY DURING COVID-19

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|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ State emergency powers that curtail fundamental rights and conflict with the rule of law should be avoided. ❖ Electoral laws and operational guidelines should be updated to cover all contingencies relating to pandemics and other emergencies. ❖ Extra funding for elections that take place during health crises should be considered in advance. ❖ Provisions for Special Voting Arrangements (SVA) which deemed desirable. ❖ Measures should be taken to increase the number of polling stations to minimize waiting time and the gathering of too many people at one time. ❖ Arrangements should be made to ensure election observation can still occur. ❖ Health risks need to be minimized for election officials and voters. ❖ A balance needs to be found between safety and candidates’ right to campaign. ❖ Inclusive inter-party advisory committee should be set up to generate the wide political agreement. ❖ Measures should be taken to increase public compliance with safety protocols based on the public health guidelines. ❖ Safety protocols should be enforced evenly and consistently across the political spectrum. |
|---|

Source: Asian Electoral Stakeholder Forum (2020); Birch (2020); Commonwealth (2020 and 2021); Council of Europe (2020); European Parliament (2020a) and Venice Commission (2020).

Moreover, knowing that what the incumbents chose to do and how the stakeholders responded could either mitigate or exacerbate the pandemic’s effects, *ad hoc* adjustments to the conventional methods of campaign and voting required a three-pronged approach consisting of (a) *a-prior* consensus-building among the contenders; (b) expedient changes of the electoral laws if necessary; and (c) the provision of additional resources to the electoral management bodies

(EMB) and front-line election staff trainings to help mitigate the health risk, improve people's willingness to vote by providing clear and reliable information about health and safety measures, and uphold the overall electoral integrity.

Table 3 confirms that postponement of elections and referendums in response to Covid-19 was basically regarded as a last resort, in most cases a new date was announced to allow for better preparation by the authorities and better provision of information to the stakeholders during the extra time available. All but three of the elections and referendums under examination were held during the crisis, of which 76% took place as originally scheduled. Among the first elections which took place in 2020, South Korea, Israel, and New Zealand were applauded for having upheld electoral integrity and protected public health during the pandemic. These successful stories had in common a determination to safeguard the legality of the process, promote consensus across the political spectrum, uphold citizens' rights, provide reliable information about the pandemic, seek the people's understanding and support in a wide range of mitigation measures, provide additional resources to the electoral management authority to address the prevailing health concerns, and strengthen the credibility of the outcomes (Asplund and James 2020; Asplund et al. 2021; Cox 2020; James 2021; Merkley et al. 2022; Spinelli 2021).

TABLE 3: NATIONAL ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUMS (FEBRUARY 2020 TO DECEMBER 2021)

		Postponed and held	Held as scheduled	Special voting arrangements (SVA)*	Postponed and pending
Elections	207	40	165	110	2
Africa	55	9	45	23	1
Americas	60	10	49	27	1
Asia and Middle East	38	8	30	24	0
Europe	41	8	33	29	0
Oceania	15	5	10	9	0
Referendums	53	21	31	15	1
Africa	10	9	1	2	0
Americas	5	2	3	2	0
Asia and Middle East	6	4	2	0	0
Europe	25	5	20	8	0
Oceania	7	1	5	3	1
Total	260	61 (23.5%)	196 (75.6%)	125 (48.1%)	3 (1.2%)

*SVA adopted during Covid-19 as alternative means to the conventional, in-person voting on the polling day included but not limited to early voting, proxy voting, in-country postal voting, multiple-day voting, mobile ballot box, drive-through polling stations, and overseas voting.

Source: Authors.

Where elections and referendums did take place, we ask to what extent they became "super spreader events," thereby inflicting the countries concerned a poll-related health crisis. Table 4 clearly shows that globally, the worst fears about elections and referendums spreading the disease did not come to bear, as the number of reported Covid-19 cases increased after the polling day in 109 electoral episodes but decreased or remained unchanged in 144 of them. Bearing in mind the built-in incentive among the autocrats and populists in power to conceal the severity of the crisis, "the autocratic advantage" was indeed exaggerated as we can see that nations ranked as "Free" according to Freedom House were not invariably outperformed by the "Partly Free" and "Not Free" nations.

Among the 144 electoral episodes where Covid-19 did not grow after the polling day, Special Voting Arrangement (SVA) was in use in 66 of them; in contrast, among the 109 polls where the number of cases increased, SVA was in use in 59 of them. The results are inconclusive given that SVA like postal voting, drive-through voting, and early voting was introduced in less than half of the polls under examination. To expand our inquiry into how the pandemic affected the level of turnout in comparison with the last election (excluding therefore the referendums), Table 5 shows that turnout decreased from the last national elections in most of the cases (101 out of 171). Turnout decline was the modal outcome across different types of regimes having elections during the pandemic. We further observe that SVA did not seem to have encouraged higher turnout in most cases. Nations that introduced SVA to mitigate the health risk and to encourage higher turnout amidst the pandemic are laudable, but by themselves, SVA designed to strike a balance between health protection and electoral integrity appeared to have no sizable impact with respect to mitigating the spread of the disease and incentivizing voter participation. Future study may look more closely into the independent effects of SVA on voter participation and electoral integrity during the pandemic by ascertaining who took advantage of such venues of electoral participation, who did not, and why.

TABLE 4: SPREAD OF CORONAVIRUS AFTER THE POLL (FEBRUARY 2020 TO DECEMBER 2021)

	The Number of Cases Increased after Poll	Special Voting Arrangements Available	The Number of Cases Decreased / Unchanged after Poll	Special Voting Arrangements Available
Regime Type*				
Free	46	27	61	31
Partly Free	26	13	44	16
Not Free	28	16	25	9
Unclassified	9	3	14	10
Total	109	59	144	66

*Freedom House (2021).

Source: authors.

TABLE 5: TURNOUT CHANGE AND SPECIAL VOTING ARRANGEMENTS IN 171 ELECTIONS

	Elections with Turnout Increased	Special Voting Arrangements Available	Elections with Turnout Decreased	Special Voting Arrangements Available
Regime Type*				
Free	28	18	38	26
Partly Free	25	12	27	10
Not Free	12	5	28	11
Unclassified	5	1	8	6
Elections Observed	70	36	101	53

*Freedom House (2021).

Source: authors.

Putting these initial observations together, we surmise that elections and referendums did not become “super spreaders” partially because of the effective implementation of the safety protocols to enable conventional, in-person voting (James et al. 2023), and partially because of the risk-avoidance behaviour of the electorates who for reasons of health and related concerns preferred abstention over participation (Palguta et al. 2022; Mohee 2021).

Apart from the turnout, the overall electoral integrity may be further influenced by the mobilization effects of polarization when the pandemic amplified pre-existing social and political divides between citizens who placed trust in the

incumbent leaders and others who sought change. Table 6 shows that the number of countries encountered moderate to serious threats or acts of boycott was 21 in 2020 and 17 in 2021; whilst the number of countries experienced moderate to serious threats or acts of election violence was 36 in 2020 and 22 in 2021. Clearly, hybrid, “Partly Free” regimes and autocracies were exposed to higher risk of boycott and violent clashes between rival political camps, especially when electoral manipulation by the incumbents were perceived to be serious. Opportunistic state repression riding on the back of pandemic policy responses, oftentimes combined with socioeconomic grievances, was another main cause for mass protests, boycotts, and violent clashes. On balance, democratic nations outperformed autocracies and hybrid regimes by a large margin with respect to polls free from boycott and violence (Birch 2020, 27; Casas-Zamora et al. 2020; Gottlieb 2021).

TABLE 6: NUMBER OF COUNTRIES EXPERIENCED BOYCOTT AND VIOLENCE

2020				
Threats or Acts of Boycott		Regime Type*	Threats or Acts of Violence	
Moderate to Serious	Boycott-Free		Violence-Free	Moderate to Serious
0	23	Free	18	5
8	13	Partly Free	4	17
13	4	Not Free	3	14
21	40	Subtotal	25	36
61		Countries	61	
2021				
Threats or Acts of Boycott		Regime Type*	Threats or Acts of Violence	
Moderate to Serious	Boycott-Free		Violence-Free	Moderate to Serious
0	21	Free	20	1
3	12	Partly Free	3	12
14	4	Not Free	9	9
17	37	Subtotal	32	22
54		Countries	54	

Source: Election boycott and violence data from V-Dem 14, see Coppedge 2024.

3 WHAT DID ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUMS REVEAL ABOUT ELECTORAL INTEGRITY AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN EUROPE AND AFRICA?

For a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of “pandemic elections and referendums,” we employ the Most Different Systems Design to bring together 76 electoral episodes in the EU and AU which took place during the health crisis. In the AU, where “the modal tendency among countries remains to instigate no change at all” (Arriola et al. 2022, 18), the decade before the pandemic witnessed the trend of backsliding and autocratization among electoral democracies and electoral autocracies. Collective insecurity resulting from Covid-19 was compounded by pre-existing state fragility, opportunistic repression, public sector corruption, and deep-seated divisions in society. The electoral playing field was hardly free or fair in most circumstances; political opportunism displayed by incumbents and the opposition alike undermined concerted efforts which were necessary to combat the disease (Siegle and Cook 2020; Mo Ibrahim Foundation 2023; Transparency International 2022). Self-serving autocrats were inclined to underreport deaths, conceal the level of Covid-19 infections, and manipulate information which may undermine their rule. In some cases, political opportunism threatened not only democracy but also the lives of the leaders who downplayed the severity of the disease. Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza and Tanzania’s President John Magufuli called for

prayers, rejected vaccines, and promoted ingenuous methods to fight the pandemic. Magufuli even declared the country “Covid-19 free” in May 2020. Both suspectedly died from the disease and related complications (Carlitz et al. 2021; Flisse et al. 2021). Against the background of chronic governance deficiencies, most African electoral episodes stood little chance of resisting either further backsliding or outright autocratization.

The African Union, the African Regional Economic Communities, and other states-led regional bodies have long struggled to grow into a formidable bulwark against autocratic takeovers, military coups, and rampant corruption in the continent. In contrast, the European Commission and the European Parliament were involved in trying to coordinate Member States’ “exit strategies” through a Joint European Roadmap towards lifting Covid-19 containment measures since April 2020, with instruments such as linking a new “Rule of Law Conditionality” to EU funding, as well as naming and shaming abuse of powers by governments that were found to have jeopardized democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights (European Commission 2020; European Parliament 2020b). The EU emerged to be a more trusted body and one of the few clear beneficiaries of pandemic politics; Eurobarometer surveys found a narrow plurality of Europeans were dissatisfied with the EU’s handling of the pandemic, but they were even more dissatisfied with their national governments’ performance (European Union 2021).

Across the EU, sub-regional patterns were detectable. Specifically, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria have been closely observed as to how the pre-existing vulnerabilities, polarization, and democratic declines may deteriorate further (Cassani et al. 2023; Drinoczi and Bien-Kacala 2020, Gusati 2021; Krastev and Leonard 2021; Young et al. 2020). But surveys conducted in 15 Western European countries in March and April 2020 found that lockdowns boosted satisfaction with democracy by around 3% and the voting intention for the incumbent leaders by around 4% (Bol et al. 2020). Such EU-specific regional dynamics has brought about what Gessler and Wunsch (2023) has termed a new “democratic divide” which provides a needed focal point to mobilize and unite the opposition in defence of democracy against the incumbents who indulged in further aggrandizement. It remains to be seen whether the new focal point (that democracy is on the ballot), together with the electoral setbacks for “the 3P autocrats,” was sufficient to not only check against efforts to erode the democratic institutions, but also enhance the prospects of democratic consolidation.

Appendix A gathers the descriptive statistics pertinent to the EU and AU countries which had elections and referendums from February 2020 to December 2021. As it turned out, the doomsday scenarios for EU disintegration and democratic decline did not materialize; to be sure, there were episodes of regression in Hungary, Poland and to a lesser extent, Portugal, but democratic resilience prevailed in most cases and the EU has grown stronger in policy and institutional terms. In Africa, where autocracies and hybrid regimes have long dominated, the positive stories of Seychelles, Gambia, Malawi, and Zambia necessitate a more nuanced analysis than what the paradigm of backsliding or autocratization has offered.

Based on the descriptive statistics gathered thus far, we proceed to prepare three multiple linear regression models with reference to the growing literature to ascertain the determinants for the spread of the disease, the level of turnout, and

the overall perceptions of electoral integrity (PEI); Appendix B presents the list of variables used in the statistical models. Specifically, we designed the models with the following questions in mind:

1. How were the health risks mitigated more effectively in some cases but less in others? (Table 7)
2. What factors contributed positively to voter participation, and what factors suppressed it during Covid-19? (Table 8)
3. What factors shaped electoral integrity? (Table 9)

Appendix C explains a total of eight countries (one EU and seven AU nations) and 12 electoral episodes are not accounted for in regression models because of missing variables and/or unreliable data.

3.1 Disputing “the autocratic advantage” thesis

Table 7 reports the regression estimates of the effect of the electoral episodes in EU and AU on the spread of the disease with respect to a set of variables that can be broadly divided into (A) Pandemic-related: the number of Covid-19 cases 14-day before the poll, (B) Policy response and measures such as the state of emergency, restrictive measures as well as the coverage of the vaccine programme, and (C) Regime-related: election year, regional affiliation, the level of perceived corruption, EMB capacity, SVA, turnout, regime type, as well as the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) and the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI).³ Overall, the regression model is significant, $F(16, 56) = 77.747$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.957$. The findings show that:

- a. The number reported cases post-election or post-referendum increased infected cases 14-day before and 14-day after the polling day are found to be strongly associated ($\beta = 0.765$, $t = 14.244$, $p < 0.001$), the finding implies that 1% of increase in infected cases 14-day before the polling day is associated with an approximate 0.765% change in the infected cases 14-day after the polling day, confirming the concern that the polls, if not carefully implemented with necessary health and safety measures, could play a part in the worsening of the public health crisis.
- b. The State Emergency Index and the Stringency Index were indicative of the severity of the pandemic during the electoral cycle ($\beta = 0.918$, $t = 3.227$, $p < 0.01$, and $\beta = 0.036$, $t = 4.493$, $p < 0.01$), but it was due to specific policy measures such as “stay home requirement” ($\beta = -0.471$, $t = -2.420$, $p < 0.05$) and bans or limits on gatherings ($\beta = -1.334$, $t = -4.280$, $p < 0.01$) that the infectious disease was brought under control.
- c. Nations with higher EDI (an index which highlights accountability and transparency) and EMB capacity at the time of the elections and referendums were better prepared to protect public health and uphold free and fair elections at the same time ($\beta = -5.356$, $t = -2.563$, $p < 0.05$, and $\beta = -0.420$, $t = -3.645$, $p < 0.01$), the findings suggest that a one-unit increase in EDI results in a multiplicative change in Covid-19 cases 14-day after the polling day by a factor of $e^{-5.356} = 0.005$, whereas a one-unit increase in EMB capacity results in a multiplicative change by a factor of $e^{-0.420} = 0.657$.
- d. Conversely, nations with higher LDI, which emphasizes individual liberties

³ According to the V-Dem conceptual scheme, EDI encompasses freedom of association, clean elections, freedom of expression, elected official, and suffrage, whereas LDI reflects the quality of democracy by emphasizing the importance of protecting individual and minority rights and the limits placed on government, including constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power.

and checks on state powers, were likely to face an increase of post-election infection ($\beta = 3.789$, $t = 1.904$, $p < 0.1$), which suggests that a one-unit increase in LDI results in a multiplicative change in infection cases 14-day after the polling day by a factor of $e^{3.789} = 44.2$. In a similar vein, higher electoral integrity (PEI) where there were less restrictions throughout the electoral cycle tended to see an increase in Covid-19 cases 14-day after the polling day ($\beta = 0.040$, $t = 2.257$, $p < 0.05$), one-unit increase in PEI results in a multiplicative change in COVID cases 14-day after the polling day by a factor of $e^{0.040} = 1.04$.

- e. Factors that have no statistical significance in accounting for the variance in the Covid-19 cases reported after the electoral episodes include the vaccine programme, regional affiliation (EU, AU), election year, regime type (Autocracy, Democracy), corruption, SVA, and the level of turnout. This discovery refutes “the autocratic advantage” thesis as much as cautions against the “liberal” approach towards the pandemic.

3.2 Voters’ risk-avoidance behaviour and state responses explain turnout in pandemic elections

As we have shown above, most of the elections recorded a decline in turnout. To understand the extent to which the pandemic dissuaded voters from turning out to vote, Table 8 presents the second regression model which enlists the following variables: (A) Pandemic-related: the number of Covid-19 cases 14-day before the poll, (B) Policy response and measures similar to those used for the last model, and (C) Regime-related: election year, regional affiliation, regime type, as well as the EDI and the LDI. In sum, the regression is significant, and the model explains 45.7% of the variance in turnout, $F(10, 64) = 5.397$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.457$. The findings show that:

- a. In line with the aforementioned “risk avoidance” decisions of voters, the pandemic, which is measured by the 14-day cases prior to polling, was found to have adversely affected the level of turnout ($\beta = -0.025$, $t = -1.850$, $p < 0.1$), the finding suggests that 1% increase in 14-day cases prior to polling leads to a decrease in voter turnout by about 2.5%.
- b. The State of Emergency Index and the “stay home requirement” specifically are found to have significantly contributed to lower turnout ($\beta = -0.188$, $t = -2.819$, $p < 0.01$, and $\beta = -0.204$, $t = -4.363$, $p < 0.001$), a one-unit increase in the State of Emergency Index leads to a direct decrease in voter turnout of 18.8%, whereas the implementation of “stay home requirement” leads to a decrease in voter turnout of 20.4%. This observation agrees with the argument that the impact of pandemic on the turnout in elections and referendums was channelled through the specific mix of the response measures introduced by the government during the electoral cycle.
- c. Although voter turnout was generally lower in EU ($\beta = -0.134$, $t = -1.830$, $p < 0.1$), the pandemic-related variables provide us with better understanding about the decision-making process behind voters’ behaviour such as turnout than most of the regime-related variables which are not statistically significant at all.

TABLE 7: REGRESSION ESTIMATES OF THE EFFECT OF PANDEMIC-RELATED AND REGIME-RELATED VARIABLES ON THE 14-DAY INFECTION CASES REPORTED AFTER POLLING DAY

	Model
(Constant)	-1.288 (1.057)
14-day Incidence before Polling Day (log)	0.765*** (0.054)
Covid-19 Vaccine Doses Administered (% of Population)	-0.678 (0.601)
State of Emergency Index	0.918*** (0.285)
OxCGRT Stringency Index	0.036*** (0.008)
Stay Home Requirement (Yes=1, No=0)	-0.471** (0.195)
Limits on Gatherings (Yes=1, No=0)	-1.334*** (0.312)
Regional Affiliation (EU=1, AU=0)	0.223 (0.311)
Election Year (2020=1, 2021=0)	0.359 (0.247)
Regime Type (Closed & Electoral Autocracy=1, Electoral & Liberal Democracy=0)	0.020 (0.455)
Electoral Democracy Index	-5.356** (2.090)
Liberal Democracy Index	3.789* (1.990)
Corruption Perception Index score	0.017 (0.014)
Electoral Integrity Index (PEI)	0.040** (0.018)
Electoral Management Body Capacity	-0.420*** (0.115)
Special Voting Arrangements (Yes=1, No=0)	0.097 (0.198)
Turnout	-0.387 (0.522)
Adjusted R ²	0.945
N	73

F(16, 56) = 77.747, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.957$. Notes. ***, **, * denote the rejection of the null hypothesis at 1%, 5% and 10% significance level respectively.

3.3 How to Maintain Electoral Integrity in Pandemic Elections

Turning to concerns about whether electoral integrity was seriously challenged amid Covid-19, the Electoral Integrity Project's PEI, which is based on experts' assessments of eleven stages in the electoral cycle from start to finish, is the variable of interest (Garnett et al. 2023). Across the two regional blocs, Table 9 shows why PEI was not invariably undermined by the pandemic. The regression is significant, and the model explains 87.3% of the variance in PEI, $F(11, 61) = 38.255$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.873$. Specifically, the findings show that:

- PEI was strongly improved by not only regime type (the host nations' democratic credentials) ($\beta = -16.477$, $t = -8.124$, $p < 0.001$), but also for countries which took advantage of the vaccine programme to fight the pandemic and demonstrated strong EMB capacity during the election ($\beta = 14.817$, $t = 2.592$, $p < 0.05$, and $\beta = 4.751$, $t = 4.773$, $p < 0.001$). This analysis holds true also for nations undergoing a rise of Covid-19 cases 14-day after the polling day ($\beta = 3.372$, $t = 3.190$, $p < 0.01$).
- In contrast, PEI was clearly undermined where the State of Emergency measures amounted to the violations of electoral rights and distorted the playing field in favour of the incumbent ($\beta = -8.247$, $t = -3.106$, $p < 0.01$), the

data suggests that a one-unit increase in the State of Emergency Index results in a decrease of 8.247 units in PEI. Moreover, the scale of the infection 14-day before the polling day had a negative effect on PEI ($\beta = -2.024$, $t = -2.231$, $p < 0.05$)

- c. The remaining factors (regional affiliation, the Stringency Index, the year when the election happened, SVA availability, and the actual turnout) did not reach statistical significance.

Given that the pre-existing conditions between the EU and the AU were hugely different, it should not be surprising to learn that EU nations attained higher levels of PEI despite the pandemic, whilst AU nations mostly logged lower PEI levels. That said, with the help of the MDSD design, we can demonstrate how democratic nations have succeeded in upholding electoral integrity and supporting free and fair polls that protected public health. The three regression models ascertained that the electoral episodes which took place during Covid-19 did not become what many feared to be “super spreader events” to trigger a global shift of balance in favour of autocracy. Of equal importance, the alarming forecast that Covid-19 was a quiet assassin of democracy has not materialized. In most democratic countries, effective adjustments were introduced to the electoral arena in ways that upheld political rights and civil liberties and protected public health, enabling the elections and the referendums to proceed with integrity.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS: ABOUT THE THEMATIC BLOCK

Against the backdrop of a global expansion of populism and authoritarian rule, this article offers a systematic review of the extant literature to understand how Covid-19 shaped the electoral arena in general and whether the pandemic has sped up autocratization around the world. Overall, robust democracies were able to deal with the pandemic without jeopardizing democratic standards, there has been little appetite among liberal and electoral democracies to trade fundamental rights and freedoms for illiberal practices for good. Covid-19 did not become a quiet assassin of democracy, and “the autocratic advantage” thesis is therefore disputed. In the EU, in addition to national-level endeavours, supranational institutions and mechanisms provided timely and effective checks against further backsliding that might have otherwise happened. In Africa, while incumbents in non-democratic regimes were more likely to be exposed to boycott, violence and instability than their counterparts in democratic regimes, autocrats whose inherent vulnerabilities were laid bare by the spread of the disease stepped up the repression in the name of public health protection, thereby strengthening the regional and global trend towards autocratization.

To further develop the key findings of the research undertaken, we turn to in-depth country-specific analyses. The oft-mentioned trouble-making EU nations, particularly Hungary and Poland, have taken similar courses of action amid the pandemic, hence providing a valuable window of opportunity for us to acquire a better understanding of the context in which a new wave of democratic backsliding and autocratization was unleashed. In Poland, **Michał Jacuński** has conducted a series of narrative analysis of the government’s publicity campaigns in conjunction with the “Anti-Crisis Shield” which could not be easily separated from the Law and Justice government’s agenda leading up to the 2020 Presidential election. To the extent that the semantic domain of the policy environment became less transparent and inclusive, the electoral arena may no

longer be considered a level-playing field. As it turned out, Poland's erratic handling of the poll during the nation-wide lockdown was controversial and divisive. While the PiS leaders clearly sought political mileage at the expense of their political opponents, they encountered strong pushbacks which brought about higher turnout in both rounds of the election and the re-election of President Andrzej Duda by a mere 2.06% margin. **Robert Sata** and **Marta Żerkowska-Balas**'s article elucidates how the pandemic has dealt a double blow to Hungary's democratic institutions and values. Here, populism, polarization, and post-truth were on full display since Viktor Orbán and his government seemed determined to take advantage of the pandemic, and then the war on Ukraine, to consolidate not democracy but a government by decree. Moreover, the pandemic set off a new wave of "infodemic" which was saturated with pro-government discourses to justify the anti-democratic practices.

TABLE 8: REGRESSION ESTIMATES OF THE EFFECT OF THE PANDEMIC, RESPONSE MEASURES, AND REGIME-RELATED VARIABLES ON VOTER TURNOUT

	Model
(Constant)	0.747*** (0.175)
14-day Incidence before Polling Day (log)	-0.025* (0.014)
State of Emergency Index	-0.188*** (0.067)
OxCGRT Stringency Index	0.001 (0.002)
Stay Home Requirement (Yes=1, No=0)	-0.204*** (0.047)
Covid-19 Vaccine Doses Administered (% of Population)	0.039 (0.163)
Regional Affiliation (EU=1, AU=0)	-0.134* (0.073)
Election Year (2021=1, 2021=0)	-0.091 (0.058)
Regime Type (Closed & Electoral autocracy=1, Electoral & Liberal Democracy=0)	0.037 (0.099)
Electoral Democracy Index	-0.233 (0.532)
Liberal Democracy Index	0.547 (0.471)
Adjusted R ²	0.373
N	75

F(10, 64) = 5.397, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.457$. Notes. ***, **, * denote the rejection of the null hypothesis at 1%, 5% and 10% significance level respectively.

To complement the top-down, elite-oriented analyses, **Lilla Tóth**, **György Lengyel**, and **Borbála Göncz** take us back to Hungary to chart the contours of public opinions with the help of survey data collected at various stages of the pandemic period. In line with the expectation that the public health crisis contributed to the phenomenon of incumbency advantage, the authors shed new light on how partisanship has decidedly shaped mass attitudes towards the Orbán government, whereby retrospective policy assessment was rendered less impactful in a deeply polarized society. In sum, in a concerted effort to address the ongoing concerns about the state of democracy, the four articles of this Thematic Block offer no room for complacency, not least because the ideological, geopolitical, and "the 3P" challenges show no sign of receding, and our objective to put forward theoretically-informed, evidence-based insights for further investigations towards the "Autocracy vs Democracy" debate during the pandemic period remains as relevant as ever.

TABLE 9: REGRESSION ESTIMATES OF THE EFFECT OF THE PANDEMIC, RESPONSE MEASURES, REGIME-RELATED VARIABLES AND ON ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

	Model
(Constant)	65.309*** (5.222)
Covid-19 Vaccine Doses Administered (% of population)	14.817** (5.717)
14-day Incidence before Polling Day (log)	-2.024** (0.907)
14-day Incidence after Polling Day (log)	3.372*** (1.057)
OxCGRT Stringency Index	-0.043 (0.058)
State of Emergency Index	-8.247*** (2.655)
Regional Affiliation (EU=1, AU=0)	-0.336 (3.000)
Regime Type (Closed & Electoral Autocracy=1, Electoral & Liberal Democracy=0)	-16.477*** (2.028)
Election Year (2020=1, 2021=0)	1.874 (2.276)
Special Voting Arrangement (Yes=1, No=0)	-2.217 (1.890)
Turnout	-11.351** (4.423)
Electoral Management Body Capacity	4.751*** (0.995)
Adjusted R ²	0.851
N	73

F(11, 61) = 38.255, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.873$. Notes. ***, **, * denote the rejection of the null hypothesis at 1%, 5% and 10% significance level respectively.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: African Union and European Union elections and referendums (February 2020 to December 2021)

TABLE A1: EU AND AU MEMBER STATES WITH NATIONAL ELECTIONS OR REFERENDUMS

EUROPEAN UNION 14 Nations / 23 Electoral Episodes		AFRICAN UNION 29 Nations / 53 Electoral Episodes	
Bulgaria		Algeria	Côte d'Ivoire
Croatia		Benin	Liberia
Cyprus		Burkina Faso	Madagascar
Czechia		Burundi	Malawi
Germany		Cameroon	Mali
Ireland		Cabo Verde	Morocco
Italy		Central African Republic	Niger
Lithuania		Chad	Republic of the Congo
The Netherlands		Comoros	São Tomé and Príncipe
Poland		Djibouti	Seychelles
Portugal		Egypt	Tanzania
Romania		Ethiopia	Togo
Slovakia		Gambia	Uganda
Slovenia		Ghana	Zambia
		Guinea	

TABLE A2: ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUMS IN EU

EU	
2020	2021
Croatia Parliamentary Election ▲ T	Bulgaria Parliamentary Election (Apr) ≤ T
Czechia Parliamentary Election (Senate Election 1st Round) ▲	Bulgaria Parliamentary Election (Jul) ▲ T
Czechia Parliamentary Election (Senate Election 2nd Round) ▲	Bulgaria Parliamentary Election (Nov) ≤ T
Ireland General Election ≤ T	Bulgaria Presidential Election (1st Round) ≤
Ireland Senate Election ▲	Bulgaria Presidential Election (2nd Round) ≤ T
Italy Referendum ▲	Cyprus Legislative Election ≤
Lithuania Parliamentary Election (1st Round) ▲ T	Czechia Legislative Election ▲ T
Lithuania Parliamentary Election (2nd Round) ▲	Germany Federal Election ≤ T
Poland Presidential Election (1st Round) ≤	Netherlands General Election ▲
Poland Presidential Election (2nd Round) ▲	Portugal Presidential Election ≤ T
Romania Parliamentary Election ≤ T*	Slovenia Referendum ▲
Slovakia Parliamentary Election ▲ T	
23 ELECTORAL EPISODES	
Covid-19 cases increased 14-day after election ▲ (13)	
Covid-19 cases decreased or no change 14-day after election ≤ (10)	
Government / Legislative Leadership Turnover T	
*Romania's Parliamentary Election (Senate and the Chamber of Deputies) was counted as one electoral episode, but data about each of the chambers in this election were entered into the regression models independently.	

TABLE A3: ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUMS IN AU

AU	
2020	2021
Algeria Referendum ▲	Algeria Legislative Election ▲
Burkina Faso Parliamentary Election ▲	Benin Presidential Election ≤
Burkina Faso Presidential Election ▲	Cabo Verde Parliamentary Election ▲
Burundi Legislative Election ≤ T	Cabo Verde Presidential Election ≤
Burundi Presidential Election ≤ T	Central African Republic Legislative Election (2nd Round) ▲
Cameroon Parliamentary Election (Reruns) ▲	Chad Presidential Election ▲
Cameroon Senate Election ≤	Djibouti Presidential Election ≤
Central African Republic Parliamentary Election ▲	Ethiopia Parliamentary Election (Jun) ≤ T
Central African Republic Presidential Election (1st Round) ▲	Ethiopia Parliamentary Election (Sept) ≤ T
Comoros Parliamentary Election (2nd Round) ≤	Gambia Presidential Election ▲
Egypt House of Representatives Election (First Phase) ▲	Côte d'Ivoire Parliamentary Election ▲ T
Egypt House of Representatives Election (Second Phase) ▲	Morocco General Election ≤ T
Egypt Senate Election (1st Round) ≤	Niger Presidential Election (2nd Round) ≤ T
Egypt Senate Election (2nd Round) ≤	Republic of The Congo Presidential Election ≤
Ghana Presidential Election ▲	São Tomé and Príncipe Presidential Election (1st Round) ▲
Ghana Parliamentary Election ▲	São Tomé and Príncipe Presidential Election (2nd Round) ▲ T
Guinea Presidential Election ≤	Uganda Presidential Election ≤
Guinea Referendum ▲	Uganda Parliamentary Election ≤
Guinea Parliamentary Election ▲	Zambia Presidential Election ≤ T
Côte d'Ivoire Presidential Election ≤	Zambia National Assembly Election ≤ T
Liberia Parliamentary Election ▲	
Liberia Referendums (8 Ballots) ≤*	
Madagascar Parliamentary Election ▲	
Malawi Presidential Election ▲ T	
Mali Parliamentary Election (1st Round) ▲ T	
Mali Parliamentary Election (2nd Round) ▲ T	
Niger Presidential Election (1st Round) ≤	
Niger National Assembly Election ≤ T	
Seychelles Parliamentary Election ≤ T	
Seychelles Presidential Election ≤ T	
Tanzania Presidential Election ≤	
Tanzania National Assembly Election ≤	
Togo Presidential Election ≤	
53 ELECTORAL EPISODES	
Covid-19 cases increased 14-day after election ▲ (25)	
Covid-19 cases decreased or no new cases 14-day after election ≤ (28)	
Government / Legislative Leadership Turnover T	
*Liberia's Referendum (8 Ballots) was counted as one electoral episode, but data about each of the ballot were entered into the regression models independently.	

TABLE A4: REGIMES STATUS OF EU AND AU AS OF 2022

	AU	EU	Total
Freedom House*			
Free	4	14	18
Partly Free	13	0	13
Not Free	12	0	12
Regime Type (Regimes of the World)#			
Liberal Democracies	1	8	9
Liberal Democracy	1	4	5
Liberal Democracy Lower Bound	0	4	4
Electoral Democracies	8	6	14
Electoral Democracy Upper Bound	2	2	4
Electoral Democracy	4	4	8
Electoral Democracy Lower Bound	2	0	2
Electoral Autocracies	16	0	16
Electoral Autocracy Upper Bound	1	0	1
Electoral Autocracy	14	0	14
Electoral Autocracy Lower Bound	1	0	1
Closed Autocracies	4	0	4
Closed Autocracy Upper Bound	0	0	0
Closed Autocracy	4	0	4

Source: *Freedom House (2023); #Papada et al. (2023).

TABLE A5: DISTRIBUTION OF REGIME TYPES IN EUROPEAN UNION, 2020 AND 2022

	2020	2022
Bulgaria	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Democracy
Croatia	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Democracy
Cyprus	Liberal Democracy Lower Bound	Liberal Democracy Lower Bound
Czechia▲	Electoral Democracy	Liberal Democracy
Germany	Liberal Democracy	Liberal Democracy
Ireland	Liberal Democracy	Liberal Democracy
Italy	Liberal Democracy Lower Bound	Liberal Democracy Lower Bound
Lithuania	Electoral Democracy Upper Bound	Electoral Democracy Upper Bound
The Netherlands	Liberal Democracy	Liberal Democracy
Poland	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Democracy
Portugal▼	Liberal Democracy	Liberal Democracy Lower Bound
Romania	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Democracy
Slovakia	Electoral Democracy Upper Bound	Electoral Democracy Upper Bound
Slovenia	Liberal Democracy Lower Bound	Liberal Democracy Lower Bound
Regime Type ▲ Upgraded (1) ▼ Downgraded (1)		
Freedom House Ranking in 2022: Free (14), Partly Free (0), Not Free (0)		

Source: Freedom House (2023); Papada et al. (2023).

TABLE A6: DISTRIBUTION OF REGIME TYPES IN AFRICAN UNION, 2020 AND 2022 (1/2)

	2020	2022
Algeria	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy
Benin	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy
Burkina Faso▼	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
Burundi	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy
Cameroon	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy
Cabo Verde	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Democracy
Central African Republic	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy
Chad▼	Electoral Autocracy	Closed Autocracy
Comoros	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy
Djibouti	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy
Egypt	Electoral Autocracy Lower Bound	Electoral Autocracy Lower Bound
Ethiopia	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy
Gambia▲	Electoral Autocracy Upper Bound	Electoral Democracy Upper Bound
Ghana▼	Electoral Democracy Upper Bound	Electoral Democracy
Guinea▼	Electoral Autocracy	Closed Autocracy
Côte d'Ivoire	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy
Liberia	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Democracy

TABLE A6: DISTRIBUTION OF REGIME TYPES IN AFRICAN UNION, 2020 AND 2022 (2/2)

	2020	2022
Madagascar ▼	Electoral Democracy Lower Bound	Electoral Autocracy Upper Bound
Malawi ▲	Electoral Democracy Lower Bound	Electoral Democracy Upper Bound
Mali ▼	Electoral Autocracy	Closed Autocracy
Morocco	Closed Autocracy	Closed Autocracy
Niger	Electoral Democracy Lower Bound	Electoral Democracy Lower Bound
Republic of the Congo	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy
São Tomé and Príncipe	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Democracy
Seychelles	Liberal Democracy	Liberal Democracy
Tanzania	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy
Togo ▼	Electoral Autocracy Upper Bound	Electoral Autocracy
Uganda	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy
Zambia ▲	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Democracy Lower Bound
Regime Type ▲ Upgraded (3) ▼ Downgraded (7)		
Freedom House Ranking in 2022: Free (4), Partly Free (13), Not Free (12)		

Source: Freedom House (2023); Papada et al. (2023).

Appendix B: Description of the variables used in the regression models (1/2)

Variable	Description	Details
Dependent Variables		
14-Day Incidents after Poling Day (logged)	Natural logarithm of the total number of reported Covid-19 cases during the 14 days period after election / population * 100000.	Figures from Our World in Data cross-checked with independent reports available.
Voter Turnout	The percentage of eligible voters who cast their ballot.	Official figures cross-checked with independent news and observation reports available.
Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI)	A score (0-100) that evaluates how well countries' electoral processes meet international standards of electoral integrity.	Data from Electoral Integrity Project, Harvard Dataverse. See Garnett 2023.
Independent Variables		
14-Day Incidents before Poling Day (logged)	Natural logarithm of the total number of reported Covid-19 cases during the 14 days period before election / population * 100000.	Figures from Our World in Data cross-checked with independent reports available.
Covid-19 Vaccine Doses Administered (% of Population)	Percentage of people who received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine as of the day of election.	Data from Our World in Data.
Regime Type	The political regime classification by considering the competitiveness of access to power (polyarchy) as well as liberal principles: 0-9, where 0 means the regime classified as closed autocracy, 9 means the regime classified as liberal democracy.	Data from Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem), see Coppedge 2024.
Liberal Democracy Index	A scale of 0 to 1 that evaluates how well the ideal of liberal democracy achieved.	Data from Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem), see Coppedge 2024.
Electoral Democracy Index	A scale of 0 to 1 that evaluates how well the ideal of electoral democracy in its fullest sense achieved	Data from Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem), see Coppedge 2024.
Stringency Index	A composite score (0-100) that normalizes how many government measures were in place as of the day of election.	Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT), Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford.

Appendix B: Description of the variables used in the regression models (2/2)

Variable	Description	Details
Independent Variables		
Cancel of Public Events	A component of the Government Response Index: 0-2, where 0 means no restriction, 2 means require cancelling of public events.	Same as above.
Stay Home Requirement	A component of the Government Response Index: 0-3, where 0 means no restriction, 3 means require not leaving house with minimal exceptions (allowed to leave once a week, or only one person can leave at a time, etc).	Same as above.
Restriction on Gathering	A component of the Government Response Index: 0-4, where 0 means no restriction, 4 means restrictions on gatherings of 10 people or less.	Same as above.
State of Emergency Index	National state of emergency was in place at any point at the election year, 0 means no state of emergency in place, 1 means a national state of emergency was in place due to natural disaster/terrorist attack/armed conflict/war/mass protest/popular uprising or other reasons.	Data from Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem), see Coppedge 2024.
Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)	A score (0-100) that evaluates the perceived levels of public sector corruption, 0 means highly corrupt, 100 means very clean.	Data from Transparency International.
Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI)	A score (0-100) that evaluates how well countries' electoral processes meet international standards of electoral integrity.	Data from Electoral Integrity Project, Harvard Dataverse. See Garnett 2023.
EMB Capacity	The extent that the Election Management Body (EMB) have sufficient staff and resources to administer a well-run national election. The values (0 to 4) are converted into an interval scale -5 to 5, where -5 means glaring deficits in staff, financial, or other resources affecting the organization across the territory, 5 means the EMB has adequate staff and other resources to administer a well-run election.	Data from Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem), see Coppedge 2024.
Special Voting Arrangements	Early voting, Proxy voting, In-country postal voting, Mobile ballot box, and Overseas Voting: 0 = No special voting arrangement in place, whereas 1 = introduced at least one of special voting arrangements.	Information from electoral management bodies, cross-checked with independent news and observation reports available.

Appendix C: Countries and electoral episodes not accounted for in regression models

Countries	Data Not Available	Reliability of Data In Doubt	Electoral Episodes Concerned
Cameroon	Turnout		Parliamentary Election Re-runs in Anglophone Regions
Comoros	OxCGRT		Parliamentary Elections (Round 1 and Round 2)
Central African Republic	Turnout		National Assembly Election
Seychelles	PEI		Parliamentary and President Elections
Slovakia		Infection cases	National Council Election
Tanzania		Infection cases	Presidential and General Assembly Election
Togo		Infection cases	Presidential Election
Sao Tome and Principe	OxCGRT		Presidential Election (Round 1 and Round 2)



VPLIV COVID-19 NA VOLILNO ARENO IN SPREMEMBO OBLASTI: DOKAZI IZ EVROPE IN AFRIKE

V kolikor je bila pandemija Covid-19 moteča sila, ki je spodkopala vladovanje med režimi, naj bi svetovna zdravstvena kriza še pospešila procese nazadovanja demokracije in pospešila procese avtokratizacije. Medtem ko je bil zaznan globalni trend nazadovanja, je prispevek motiviran z opažanji, da (a) je prišlo do močnega odpora med demokracijami proti neliberalnemu populizmu in (b) da je bilo malo storjenega za preučevanje odpornosti in/ali krhkosti avtokratskih režimov, katerih prirojene slabosti je razkrila pandemija. S pomočjo novorazvitega nabora podatkov, ki zajema volitve in referendum po Evropi in Afriki na nacionalni ravni v letih 2020 in 2021, je temeljni prispevek članka dvojen: (1) ugotoviti, kateri dejavniki so ublažili povzročena zdravstvena in politična tveganja zaradi pandemije ne glede na vrste režimov na obeh kontinentih in (2) izkoristiti najrazličnejše zasnove sistemov, da bi osvetlili ne le obseg, v katerem je kriza negativno vplivala na volilno integriteto, ampak tudi, koliko in zakaj so bile med pandemijo (pre)obremenjene države evropske in afriške unije.

Ključne besede: Covid-19; volitve; demokratično nazadovanje; avtokratizacija; javno zdravje; tveganje.