



HELLENIC REPUBLIC
**National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens**

**SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION**

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Is Democracy Backsliding? The case of Greece

Maria-Anna Telli

1342201900198

Supervisor: Dr Lamprini Rori

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ABSTRACT

For the past 2 decades, democracy in the world has been declining, with some scholars arguing that a “wave of autocratization” might be taking place. Notably, many prominent liberal democracies, as well as many of Huntington’s “3rd wave democracies”, have witnessed a decline of their democratic institutions, while it has been noticed that, nowadays, the autocratization process has been transformed, becoming especially hard to discern. This thesis examines the trajectory of the Greek democracy over the past 23 years to find whether there exists evidence of democratic backsliding, by using data from three reputable democracy indexes: Polity IV, Freedom House, and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). While Greece witnessed certain levels of backsliding after the financial crisis of 2009, there is disagreement between the sources on whether it has recovered from it or not. Furthermore, the decline in indicators such as freedom of expression and government functionality raises concerns and prompts for further research on the matter.

Keywords: *democratic backsliding, autocratization, rule of law, executive aggrandizement, freedom of expression*

Introduction

For almost 20 years democracy in the world seems to be declining, reversing the positive trends of Huntington's "3rd Wave of democratization". The third wave, spanning roughly from 1974 to mid-1990s, was characterized by the widespread transition to democracy across various regions. Beginning with democratic transitions in southern European countries, gradually spreading in Latin American dictatorships and then, to East and South Asia, the world witnessed a big and rapid democratic transition culminating after the collapse of the Berlin wall in Central and Eastern European countries, the former Soviet states, and sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, for the first time in world history, the majority of states in the world became democratic, although not all of the newly established democracies were what we call "liberal", meaning having effective legislative and judicial oversight of the executive as well as protection of individual liberties and the rule of law (Lührmann, Tannenbergl and Lindberg, 2018). Almost all the countries of the 3rd wave came out of it as electoral democracies rather than liberal democracies.

The expansion of liberal democracy in the world steadily rose until its tipping point in 2006. That was the final year of democratic expansion in the world (Diamond, 2015). The rapid pattern of democratization witnessed after the collapse of the Soviet Union reversed and, not only did we witness a decline in freedoms globally, but also a more accelerated rate of democratic breakdown. The 2023 annual Freedom House report declared the decline of global freedoms for 17 consecutive years, with 2020 marking the worst year for freedom (73 countries declining against 28 witnessing improving) (Freedom House, 2023).

Even more importantly, quite an overwhelming majority of some of the largest, most powerful, and influential countries, have been regressing during the last decade and a half. Several advanced liberal democracies became less liberal, notably the most powerful liberal country, the United States, the world's most populated democracy, India, and the largest democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, Poland. Democratic regression has also entered the EU with the case of Hungary. Therefore, it has become clear that democratic decline is not a phenomenon that can happen in any state of the world.

What is especially significant, however, in the study of the quality of democracy and democratic backsliding more specifically, is the fact that the current trends in autocratization show that what we considered as standard autocratization practices are being used less. Coups or blatant electoral manipulation are not the most prominent methods used by autocrats (Bermeo, 2016). There are newer, much more obscure, and hard to detect practices, making democratic backsliding an even more difficult phenomenon to accurately observe.

Global democracy has significantly and steadily declined over the past two decades, a trend that seems far away from the optimistic path it took during the 3rd democratization wave. This change is particularly relevant in the context of influential democracies, including the United States, India, and Poland, experiencing democratic regression, challenging the notion of established democracies' unwavering stability. The prolonged erosion of democratic values and institutions underlines the need for extensive research in the topic of democratic backsliding. Moreover, the emergence of subtle and hard to measure autocratization practices adds layers of complexity to the phenomenon, demanding a more nuanced and dynamic approach to accurately observe, analyze, and address the evolving challenges to democracy. In a world where democratic decline transcends geographical boundaries, the topic assumes paramount importance for comprehending the broader implications of these trends on global governance, human rights, and international stability.

The aim of this thesis is to research the topical phenomenon of erosion of contemporary democracies, by delving into the case of Greece. Greece provides a unique political context as it is a third wave democracy, smoothly transitioning from a 7-year dictatorship in 1974 and starting a process of state modernization and strengthening of its new democratic institutions. One of the earliest member states of the European Union, entering in 1981, Greece was also the EU member-state hit by the most profound crisis in the Eurozone, with extreme levels of unemployment, severe austerity policies and extreme social phenomena, such as violent protests and the reemergence of radical political parties, with the nazi sympathizer party Golden Dawn's significant share of seats in the Greek Parliament being the most prominent example.

The thesis will begin with a comprehensive exploration of the literature on the phenomenon of democratic backsliding, define the term and examine the discussion

surrounding its measurement and the global trends. By synthesizing the existing scholarship, it hopes to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges in conceptualizing and measuring democratic backsliding.

It will next investigate how democratic backsliding happens, and, most specifically, which are the most common strategies and practices used by executives in order to erode democratic institutions. By understanding the practices that contribute to the erosion of democratic institutions and values, it aims to contribute valuable insights into the procedure of democratic decline.

Finally, there will be a focused case study on Greece, spanning the last 23 years. Drawing on the theoretical foundations established in the literature review and understanding the processes of backsliding, the target is to empirically assess whether democratic backsliding is manifested in the Greek political landscape and to what extent. This empirical examination aims to provide a practical dimension to the broader understanding of democratic backsliding, providing a preliminary analysis for future research on the causes and consequences of the quality of democracy.

This research will be conducted using a robust methodology to examine manifestations of democratic backsliding in Greece over the past 23 years. The primary data sources for this analysis will be three reputable indexes: Freedom House, V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy), and Polity IV. The inclusion of multiple indexes is intended to provide a more comprehensive and reliable assessment through a comparative lens. Freedom House's index will be a key data source, offering a comprehensive evaluation of political rights and civil liberties globally. Variables from this index will play a critical role in evaluating democratic health and potential backsliding during the selected timeframe. The V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Index brings a nuanced perspective, capturing various dimensions of democracy. The Polity IV dataset, known for its focus on the institutional aspects of governance, will be instrumental in evaluating political regimes and institutional changes. Relevant variables measuring democratic backsliding will be selected from each index, ensuring consistency and alignment with the research objectives. These may include indicators related to the erosion of political freedoms, the weakening of checks and balances, and any deviations from established democratic norms. The comparative analysis of data from the three indexes will serve as a methodological strength, allowing for cross-validation and a more nuanced

interpretation of democratic backsliding trends. Additionally, the findings from researching the indexes are to be put against academic articles written about democratic backsliding in Greece for the selected time frame, adding into the robustness of the research and offering precious insight. By using information from multiple established sources, the research aims to mitigate potential biases and enhance the overall reliability of findings.

To investigate the phenomenon of democratic backsliding in Greece, this research will use a diverse set of primary sources with a specific focus on its manifestation the past 23 years. The following primary sources selected are instrumental in providing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the dynamics of democratic backsliding, when used comparatively. Also, this will contribute to the robustness of the research.

Data from 3 reputable indexes measuring democracy in the world (Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy, Polity IV) are to be used comparatively. The annual Freedom in the World reports by Freedom House offer systematic assessments of political rights and civil liberties globally, allowing for a comparative analysis of the democratic landscape in Greece. The V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) covers many indicators related to electoral processes, liberal democracy, and participatory components that will aid in a detailed analysis of democratic backsliding. The Polity IV dataset will be crucial in evaluating political regimes and institutional changes.

Furthermore, this thesis will be drawing on secondary sources, mainly academic analyses to complement the quantitative data from indexes. These secondary sources will add qualitative insights into factors influencing democratic backsliding in Greece. By critically assessing existing research, the research aims to support quantitative data with qualitative insights, fostering a comprehensive exploration of the complexities surrounding democratic backsliding in Greece. This approach has been selected to uncover patterns, trends, and nuances in the manifestation of democratic backsliding within the Greek political landscape.

Literature Review

In the study of democratic governance, the phenomenon of democratic backsliding emerges in a subtle yet notable manner, challenging the strength of political systems worldwide. Democratic backsliding, characterized by the erosion of democratic norms and institutions, raises significant questions about the resilience and sustainability of democratic ideals. In order to navigate the complexities of the contemporary political landscapes, understanding the intricacies of democratic backsliding becomes imperative for scholars, policymakers, and citizens alike. The erosion of political freedoms, checks, and balances, and the steady decline in democratic quality pose tangible threats to the stability of states worldwide. This study seeks to unravel the intricacies of democratic backsliding and shed some light in the in the elusive practices used for the regression of democratic political systems.

By reviewing the existing literature on democratic backsliding, this thesis aims to synthesize existing knowledge and provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. There will be a thorough exploration of the definitional debates surrounding democratic backsliding, as well as the conceptualization of democracy itself, as well as deep dive into the many methodological challenges in measuring backsliding. After the literature review, the next step is to use the insights gained from it in a robust comparative analysis of democratic backsliding, with a specific focus on whether it has manifested in Greece over the past 23 years.

Definitions of Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding has always been a researched, but it is true that the term has been used by scholars much more frequently since 1990 (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner and Lust, 2018), probably due to the emergence of a significant number of new democracies in the world. Despite that, the term has not been used consistently amongst researchers, leading to many different definitions, conceptualizations and, consequently, findings. Therefore, a definition accepted by the research community, is important for a clearer understanding of this phenomenon.

On her seminal work, Nancy Bermeo (2016) gives a basic definition of democratic backsliding, as the “state led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy”. The simplicity in this definition comes to counteract the problems that rise from the broadness of this term. Waldner and Lust (2018), define backsliding, in general, as a corrosion of qualities associated with democratic governance, that can happen within any regime, and democratic backsliding as the decline in the quality of democracy within democratic regimes. Other scholars are more precise with their definition, such as Wunsch and Blanchard (2023), who put emphasis on the process of gradually dismantling checks and balances, by a leading executive. By putting the biggest emphasis on concept of freedom, Jee, Lueders and Myrick (2022) define democratic backsliding in a less strict manner, as any change in a community’s formal or informal rules that can have a negative effect on “freedom of choice, freedom from tyranny, or equality in freedom”. On the other hand, Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) propose a somewhat similar conceptualization to Waldner and Lust, using the term autocratization, as the opposite of democratization, a process that can happen within any regime. According to this conceptualization, democratic backsliding specifically refers to a process of autocratization episodes that result in the decline of a democracy, without ending in a full-on democratic breakdown.

While there are some common points made within the many different definitions and conceptualizations, there is still a lot of disagreement on the research outcomes in the scholarship. This can happen as the different conceptualizations of democratic backsliding, either more specific or more general, result in vastly different operationalization and selection of indicators. In addition, not all scholars use the same theoretical frameworks, meaning that depending on the scholar, there might be a completely different trajectory of research. It is also important to pay attention to the many different conceptualizations of democracy, because, in order to define the erosion of democracy, one has to first define democracy itself.

Methodological Issues

As previously stated, the first step to understand and define democratic backsliding is to define democracy. When reviewing the existing literature on democratic backsliding, it is evident that the many conceptualizations of democratic backsliding are derived from the different conceptualizations of democracy existing in the scholarship. A definitional debate on democracy has always existed, with scholars sometimes using normative definitions instead of descriptive ones, making it difficult to reach the consensus needed for effective measurement (Coppedge et. al. 2011). Democracy is a high-profile phenomenon, and it has seen many changes from its conception until today, as well as many versions in real-life politics. Therefore, it is natural for its conceptualization to be difficult and for debates to rise on the matter. It is important to consider that the specification of a term's meaning is a sensitive process that can significantly affect the entirety of a research project.

Democracy can be conceptualized in a variety of ways depending on the theoretical framework followed by the researcher. The conceptualization can be maximalist, meaning that it includes many attributes, making it difficult to find empirical references, or it can be minimalist, where researchers omit valuable attributes for the sake of more specificity (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002). A very generalized definition of democracy has little analytical use, while an overly specified one makes it difficult to address theoretical issues. Therefore, scholars propose the choice of a conceptualization of democracy that is somewhere in-between minimalism and maximalism (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002; Coppedge et. al., 2011). However, nowadays, after having witnessed the way with which autocratic governors have been able to manipulate institutions for their own benefit (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019), researchers have stressed the importance of a sufficiently broad conceptualization of democracy (Knutsen et.al., 2023).

The most general definition of democracy can be considered “the rule of the people”, from which scholars have extracted their own derivative definitions. Consensus on a single definition remains difficult due to the inherent breadth of the term. Nevertheless, there is some agreement on the different conceptions of democracy and their attributes, which can be of aid in the selection of indicators and the effective measurement of democracy. The different conceptions of democracy, namely electoral,

liberal, majoritarian, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian, are not to be used separately as they are helpful categorizations (Coppedge et. al., 2011).

The electoral conception of democracy underscores the centrality of competition and elections, while the liberal conception highlights the role of checks and balances, transparency, civil liberties, and individual rights. In contrast, the majoritarian conception is somewhat in opposition with the liberal conception, as it focuses on centralized political institutions and vertical accountability, rooted on the idea that the majority should be the one to govern. Participatory democracy, directly derived from the notion of the “rule of the people”, is connected to voting and political participation, local governments, and election law. Deliberative democracy focuses on the decision-making process puts emphasis on institutions (e.g. media, hearings, panels) which ensure that political decisions are a product of deliberation with the public. Lastly, egalitarian democracy emphasizes on political equality seeking to guarantee equal participation, representation, and protection.

It is understandable that each conception sheds light on different aspects of democracy, and that, if one wants to have a comprehensive understanding of it, one might have to compile multiple conceptions. Moreover, there is the notion supporting that all the above conceptions should be considered as essential components of democracy. Given the many components of democracy presented above and the dangers of using an overly general conceptualities, researchers must proceed carefully when trying to measure democratic backsliding, as different conceptualizations lead to vastly different outcomes. There is evidence that the many disagreements derive from the inconsistencies when measuring democratic backsliding and the underlying conceptualization of democracy (Jee, Lueders and Myrick, 2022).

One of the most popular theoretical frameworks used in the research of democratic backsliding is Dahl’s concept of “polyarchy” (1971). Dahl’s polyarchy is defined as the set of institutional arrangements that allow public contestation and inclusiveness (Coppedge and Reinicke, 1990). While not being the exact same as democracy, polyarchy offers a similar, strong conceptualization for the quality of a political system. Dahl's polyarchy is a useful tool as it emphasizes the significance of not only free and fair elections, but also the broader conditions necessary for a vibrant democratic process. This approach acknowledges the complexities of governance and

underscores the need for ongoing citizen engagement, transparency, and the safeguarding of individual rights. Furthermore, it includes a variety of institutional requirements that agree with the literature's prevalent argument that democracy is a collage of institutions (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard and Kauffman, 2021) and that backsliding, consequently, works by eroding democracy piece by piece in a discontinuous series of incremental actions (Waldner and Lust, 2018).

The requirements for political democracy based on that concept are freedom of organization, freedom of expression, the right to vote, eligibility for public office, the right of political leaders' competition, free press, free and fair elections, and, lastly, government policy institutions relying on deliberation. These requirements act as both a conceptual and operational definition of the concept of polyarchy, helping significantly in measurement, so it is not surprising that many scholars seem to prefer this framework when working on democratic backsliding (Luhman and Lindberg, 2019; Haggard and Kauffman, 2021; Knutsen et.al. 2023). A notable mention of utilizing Dahl's polyarchy in measuring democratic backsliding is the example of the Varieties of Democracy Index (V-Dem), one of the biggest projects in measuring democracy today.

Jee, Lueders and Myrick (2022), on the other hand, start by conceptualizing democracy as freedom. They argue that democratic governance consists of three freedoms-freedom of choice, freedom from tyranny, and equality in freedom- and that each freedom's attributes can be guaranteed in a different arena of politics. The "elect" arena consists of free, fair, and contested elections, the "constraint" arena consists of intra-governmental, as well as extra-governmental constrains and, lastly, there exists the "enable" arena. The "enable" arena includes the requirement of the executive's effective power to govern and the shared understanding of facts among citizens and representatives. Other scholars view democracy as 3-dimensional concept comprising of competition, participation, and accountability (Waldner and Lust, 2018) and, subsequently, offer a more qualitative rule for measuring backsliding. Backsliding occurs, in this case, when there is degradation in at least two of the proposed dimensions of democratic governance.

Another significant challenge that rises when measuring backsliding is the choice of proper indicators. The initial step in developing measures of democracy

involves choosing the correct indicators that are able to translate the attributes of a concept into practical, operational terms. Scholars especially stress the impact of the chosen indicators in the empirical findings, as well as the need for a clear explanation for the use of the specific indicators (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002; Waldner and Lust, 2018; Jee, Lueders and Myrick, 2022). Generally, different measures of democratic backsliding derive data from many data sources, some of which are the Polity Project, Freedom House's Freedom in the World index, or the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. A problem arises, though, because the use of alternative measures is not particularly robust when viewed comparatively (Waldner and Lust, 2018). This happens due to the different conceptualizations of democracy, and, as a result, democratic backsliding in each data source and the lack of reasoning on why they were chosen (Jee, Lueders and Myrick, 2022). A possible solution for this problem suggested by the literature is the explicit justification of the conceptualization of democracy and democratic backsliding, as well as the selection of the relevant indicators, in order to identify what cases of backsliding are being measured (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002; Waldner and Lust, 2018; Jee, Lueders and Myrick, 2022).

Furthermore, many researchers disagree on the whether the indicators chosen for measuring democratic backsliding are subjective or objective. Subjective indicators are those that rely on expert coder opinions to answer questions, such as whether a particular election can be considered "free and fair" (Little and Meng, 2023). On the contrary, one should understand the share of elections with real multiparty competition as an objective indicator. The objective indicators are easily measured and are not dependent on expert judgement. While there are some scholars who believe that democratic backsliding is manifested only when it is noticeable through objective indicators (Little and Meng, 2023), others reject the argument, stating that there is inherent subjectivity in studies of democracy, and that even the selection of what is called "objective" indicators is the result of human judgement (Knutsen et.al., 2023, Munck & Verkuilen, 2002). Moreover, the selection of objective measures usual limits researchers in a minimalist conceptualization of democracy and democratic backsliding, leaving behind important attributes that can be hard to measure without expert judgement and that are crucial to the research, especially considering contemporary democratic backsliding instances.

Processes and Actions in Democratic Backsliding

When studying democratic backsliding, it is important to understand the trajectories of democratic erosion and the processes that they entail. Contemporary scholarship agrees that democracies are now declining in a much different, more elusive manner than the one they used to employ (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Lührman and Lindberg, 2019; Riaz and Rana, 2020). Contemporary democratic erosion tends to be much more gradual and under legal disguise, thus making it harder to observe. Struggling democracies may not breakdown immediately, but suffer incremental actions, leading to gradual decline, whilst successful contemporary autocrats tend to follow subtle acts to gradually undermine democratic institutions (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

Traditional processes of autocratization seem to have declined in frequency over the years, trading places with much more mild but still effective processes of democratic decline. In a world where institutional checks play a bigger part than ever before; aspiring autocrats understand the need for smarter strategies that fly under the radar. After a historical analysis, Nancy Bermeo (2016) found that, over the years, traditional coup d'états gave their place in what she called “promissory coups”, where the removal of an elected government is portrayed as a defense of democratic legality and a promise of restoration of democracy is the main excuse. However, there is little evidence on the strengthening of a state’s democracy after a coup. Additionally, there are fewer autogolpes, involving the suspension of the constitution outright by a freely elected chief executive.

The most prominent yet elusive process of democratic backsliding nowadays, is what Bermeo has called “executive aggrandizement”. This form of backsliding is witnessed when democratically elected executives with popular support weaken the checks put on executive power step-by-step, resulting in the waning of institutional changes blocking the opposition forces from challenging the executives. All of this can occur through legal procedures making it seem like part of democratic practices. Moreover, it is observed that cheating elections has also become much more subtle, with same day election fraud facing decline, while strategic manipulation of elections being increasingly more prevalent. Strategic manipulation entails actions that target the

manipulation of the electorate in favor of incumbents, a process that happens long before the elections and seldom involves any illegal action. Some of the practices used can include-among many-changing electoral rules in favor of the incumbents, obstructing media access and hampering voter registration.

In contemporary politics, horizontal checks, rights, and elections are undermined by executives through incremental legal changes and outright violation of laws and norms (Haggard and Kauffman, 2021). Backsliding reduces competition, participation, and accountability without entirely undermining the rules of the game, by targeting specific institutions, and changing them accordingly. In order to better understand democratic backsliding, it is important to grasp the specific strategies. It is said that the process of democratic backsliding starts in a very slow and imperceptible manner, especially given the fact the traditional and well-known characteristics of democracy do not seem altered in any way (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Elections do not cease to exist and the media, as well as the opposition forces, are active.

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) suggest that democratic backsliding begins with an attack towards institutions that protect the state's neutrality and the citizens' rights (judicial system, law enforcement, state intelligence). By doing so, the executives ensure that these institutions are now under the governments control and can be used as a shield. To gain the support of these institutions, the individual in power might employ strategies such as coercion, bribes, personnel reshuffling, legal proceedings and establishing additional organizations. After that, the incumbents next target are the government opponents of the government. This includes not only opposition politicians, but also big businessmen, major media outlets, intellectuals, and other influential figures. While authoritarian leaders don't necessarily eliminate their adversaries entirely, they suppress opposition through methods like bribery, intimidation, co-optation, providing positions and financial incentives. This approach seeks to diminish the strength of the opponents while discouraging critiques of the government. Last come the changes of the rules of the game, a step where incumbents proceed on reformations of the electoral system, legislations, and the constitution as a means of power consolidation. The end goal is none other than to ensure continued dominance of the ruling party, without obvious electoral fraud.

Comparative empirical research on the process of backsliding using the above framework (Riaz and Rana, 2020) has revised the proposed *modus operandi* of democratic backsliding, claiming that backsliders seem to focus particularly on constitutional manipulation. Autocrats' initial goal is to make constitutional changes to increase executive power. These changes target the following key areas: the rule of law, the judiciary and legislative branches, electoral processes and civil liberties, as well as freedom of expression and association. The next step, according to Riaz and Rana (2020) is none other than media manipulation. Compromising media freedom seems to be a key strategy for autocratization processes globally, as data from Freedom House "Freedom in the World Report" for 2023 can confirm that for the past 17 years media freedoms in the world have steadily declined, with media freedom facing challenges in no less than 157 countries and territories during 2022(Freedom House, 2023). Similarly, V-Dem's report of the same year has observed freedom of expression (which includes media freedom) to be the worst affected area in the past 10 years (V-Dem Institute, 2023).

Theoretical Approaches Explaining Democratic Backsliding

As discussed earlier in this thesis, the phenomenon of democratic backsliding is quite complex, and its exploration is extensive. The theoretical families that try to explain this phenomenon are numerous and they take into consideration a variety of factors. This study adopts the comprehensive categorization proposed by Waldner and Lust (2018). Their framework discerns six distinct theory families, each offering a different perspective on the intricate dynamics of democratization and democratic erosion. The theories discussed below include the political actors, political culture, institutions, social structures, political economy, and international factors. The use of this categorization makes understanding the several elements shaping democracy a much clearer process.

Agency based theories: Political Actors

The first family explores the supply side and, more specifically, agency-based theories. The emphasis is thus put on the decisions of the political actors under somewhat unrestricted conditions (Waldner & Lust, 2018). Scholars of this theoretical family urge for the observation of political elites rather than the citizens when researching matters of democracy protection (Bartels, 2023). Scholars claim that backsliding happens when power-seeking presidents exist without powerful institutional constraints or political competition (Fish 2001, Van de Walle 2003). By empirically examining recent cases of democratic backsliding such as Hungary, Brazil, India, Venezuela, Turkey, and the Philippines (Carothers & Press, 2022; Guriev & Treisman, 2020, Rogenhofner & Panievsky, 2020, Haggard & Kauffman, 2021, Bartels, 2023) scholars argue that democracy is endangered by political leaders' attacks. Carothers and Press (2022) suggest that leader-driven democratic backsliding is arguably one of the biggest perils for democracies over the past fifteen years, and that it can take any form.

However, there are three distinctive patterns used by leaders, as mentioned by Carothers and Press (2022). First, there is grievance-fueled illiberalism, when political figures utilize a grievance and argue that is perpetuate by the current political system, in order to convince voters that the dismantling of the existing (usually

democratic) system is necessary. Second, opportunistic authoritarianism refers to the process via which authoritarian leaders acquire power through conventional democratic routes, only for them to later oppose democracy for their political survival. Third, when groups, such as the military - sidelined during a democratic transition - use undemocratic means to reclaim power, this process is called “entrenched-interest revanchism”. One can tell from the above that, while agency-based theories find some solid empirical background, they also need to be engaging with theories from other approaches, such as institutional and/or cultural theories. Otherwise, one might lose significant insight on some deeper mechanisms of democratic backsliding.

Theories of Political Culture

Theories of political culture see people’s beliefs, attitudes, norms and practices as the driving forces of political phenomena. In the core of those theories lies the notion that culture is the main factor shaping people’s political behavior. Cultural theories focus on groups, rather than individuals, pay attention to the past, and view cultural change as a rather slow process. Therefore, the explanation for democratic backsliding based on this theoretical family, would suggest an inconsistency between the democratic status quo and the cultural values and attitudes (Waldner and Lust, 2018). Some of the most prominent explanations of democratic backsliding in the existing literature focus on the changes in citizen’s attitudes and the existence of polarization, both often taken advantage by populist politicians.

Citizens’ democratic and authoritarian values

The question of whether people’s democratic attitudes are the driving force for democratic institutions has long preoccupied researchers. The theory that democracy is grounded in the public's attitudes has its roots in antiquity with Plato’s works. Claasen (2019) has gathered a lengthy line of modern political science scholars who argue that democratic legitimacy and stability heavily rely on public support (Lipset 1959; Easton 1965; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; Diamond 1999; Mattes and Bratton 2007; Booth and Seligson 2009; Norris 2011). Empirical research based on the aforementioned theory has revealed that public attitudes and values are the ones to proceed democratic emergence and that they can help democratic institutions persevere (Claasen, 2019; Ruck et. al., 2020). Especially important for democracy seem to be the cultural values of openness to diversity and individual rights, the decline of which, or

the rise in preference for social control and conformity could also render unstable democratic institutions, as the psychological characteristics that cultivate those preferences have been found to elicit authoritarianism (Ruck et.al., 2020; Osborne et.al. 2023).

The emergence of populist leaders at least in Western societies can furthermore be explained by two central theories that take into consideration the great societal transformations occurring during the post-industrial era (Inglehart & Norris, 2018). The first one is based on the economic inequalities that have risen on the West. People feeling left behind, the so called “losers of globalizations” are characterized by emotions of resentment and insecurity, making them susceptible to populist rhetoric and extreme politicians. The second one, the theory of “cultural backlash”, describes the reactions based on the progressive cultural change captured in Inglehart’s seminal paper “The Silent Revolution” (1971) and the rise in post-materialist values. This cultural change became the trigger for a “silent counter-revolution” (Ignazi, 1992) from the people who felt most threatened by the shift from traditional values.

While, in general, political polarization is argued to be of aid to democracy, as it can mobilize political participation, polarization can as well be a threat to both the political system and social cohesion. That type of polarization is referred to as “affective polarization”, meaning the division between in-groups and out-groups based on the personal identification with a specific party, and it is both theoretically and empirically different from ideological polarization (Iyengar et. al. 2019). While it is an offshoot of partisan identity, this divide has been exacerbated over years (Iyengar et. al. 2019). Recent work on affective polarization found link between polarization and elite policy disagreements, such as economic disputes, or the recently increasing cultural issues, immigration, national identity, and multiculturalism (Gidron et. al. 2023). Contemporary polarization seems to occur when political entrepreneurs effectively highlight and activate underlying cleavages in a society, and highlight a dominant one, essentially collecting the many society differences into one front (Mccoy, 2018). Affective polarization can increase support for extremist politicians amongst the political elites and exacerbate ideological polarization to the base (Iyengar et. al., 2019). Furthermore, empirical research has shown a link between polarization, political gridlock, democratic backsliding, or democratic breakdown. Haggard and Kauffman (2021) suggest that feelings of disaffection and distrust towards democracy,

the appeal of anti-systemic players, as well as the tolerance towards deviations from democracy by both the masses and the elite in polarized societies are key factors of democratic decline. The role of political elites in this process is seen as crucial in the construction of cleavages, while at the same time, an economic crisis can also act as a catalyst for democratic backsliding (Mccoy, 2018).

Institutional Theories

When evaluating democratic institutions, it is important to understand how much they affect the levels of political accountability and efficaciousness (Waldner and Lust, 2018), especially considering the high level of prominence that executive aggrandizement disposes in degrading democracy in contemporary politics. Political accountability can be vertical (or electoral), meaning the government's accountability to the people via the electoral process or political parties; it can as well be horizontal, meaning the executive constraints put by the legislative and judicial branches of government,; finally, it can be diagonal, meaning the actions taken by institutions such that media and civil society to hold governments accountable (Walsh, 2020). Therefore, democratic backsliding can occur much more easily when the existing institutions are set in a way that undermines both the government's accountability and efficaciousness, a factor that, according to Waldner and Lust (2018) should be examined in accordance with the partisan preferences.

Corruption in a country can, moreover, fuel democratic decline. The vicious cycle of corruption weakening a state's Fish (Transparency International, 2018) eats away the state institution's efficaciousness. In addition, corruption in institutions such as the media can impact greatly to the level of diagonal accountability, effectively weakening the government's checks and balances. Not to forget that the media do play a significant part in a state's democracy, as explained previously, by them being some of the first targets in executives' autocratization efforts, only second to the judiciary and legislature. Recent empirical research confirms the relationship between strong judicial constraints on executives and democratic resilience (Boese et. al., 2021).

Debates also exist on whether a state's political system can affect its stability and the chances for democratic survival. While Linz (1990) argued about the flawed nature of presidential systems, due to their creating clashes between the 2 autonomous

governmental organs; further research countered with the argument that the real reason for parliamentary systems' stability stemmed from the context of their establishment (Mainwaring & Shugart, 1997; Cheibub, 2007). Cheibub (2007) spotted that democracies that were established after a military dictatorship were prone to become presidential, while democracies established after a civilian dictatorship were much more prone to become parliamentary, effectively highlighting that it might be the context of their democratization that has to do something with a subsequent democratic erosion phenomenon.

Theories of Political Coalitions

One of the factors taken into account when studying democracy is social heterogeneity, the formation of social groups and the conflicts resulting from that. Waldner and Lust (2018) argue that theories stemming from group conflicts emphasize on two societal divisions, one based on economic factors, such as social class, and the other, based on identity (e.g. religion, race, language). What is argued to be of importance is the formation of political coalitions formed from the existing social groups. In his seminal work, Moore (1966) suggests that a strong bourgeoisie was the key for the transition from feudalism to democracy, highlighting the importance of a coalition between social groups with democratic interests for the political system's establishment. Additionally, Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) pinpoint the importance of economic development in the establishment of social classes and therefore new coalitions capable of democratizing. Furthermore, ethnic political cleavages can be a cause of democratic instability (Bates 1974, Rabushka & Shepsle 1972). Ambitious politicians can take advantage of salient ethnic identity issues leading to ethnic chauvinism and polarization, the breakdown of democratic institutions, and interethnic political violence (Waldner and Lust, 2018).

Theories of Political Economy

The relationship between economic development and democracy has been a very prevalent topic of study for a long time. There have been many studies concerning the effects of income level and democracy that have found a positive effect of a higher income towards democratic resilience as well as democratization (Przeworski &

Limongi, 1997; Boix, 2011; Boese et. al, 2021), while at the same time there are scholars who argue that the level of income in contemporary politics cannot predict transitions to democracy (Bermeo & Yashar, 2016). Moreover, the influence of income inequality on democracy has been studied, showing mixed results on its relevance in contemporary politics (Waldner & Lust, 2018). Another strong debate points to the consequences of oil rents in a state's system of governance, with certain scholars arguing on its prodemocratic effect (Haber & Menaldo, 2011), while others claiming that oil rents, especially in South America lead to democratic backsliding (Mazzuca, 2013).

Theories based on International Factors

Theories moreover examine the impact of exogenous factors on democratic backsliding, such as international intervention, the influence of the political systems of neighboring countries and coalitions, or foreign aid. One framework analyzing the international element of regime change comes from Levitsky & Way (2006) who mostly describe differences in dynamics between Western and non-western countries. According to them, the international system operates based on leverage and linkage. Leverage constitutes the degree of a state's vulnerability to external democratization pressures, while linkage with the West describes the density of connections and cross-border flows (Levitsky & Way, 2006). Both leverage and linkage with western countries and coalitions such as the EU are factors of democratization and showcase the effects of international pressures as forces of regime change. Supplementary research on the effects of democratic vs. non-democratic neighboring regimes (Boese et. al., 2021), belonging in international organizations (Levitz & Pop-Eleches, 2009) further pinpoints them as factors of democratic resilience.

Additionally, international electoral monitoring has been heavily studied as a mechanism of democratization and democratic sustainability (Waldner & Lust, 2018). While international monitoring can be helpful in deterring electoral fraud, thus making international actors significant in sustaining democracy (Hyde, 2007), electoral fraud has not disappeared. On the contrary, contemporary efforts of electoral fraud have become more strategic, making it difficult for international observers to detect it (Bermeo, 2016). Furthermore, there is evidence in the existing literature that foreign

aid has consequences in a state's democratization process, with high levels of aid being correlated to democratic backsliding (Waldner & Lust, 2018).

Insights from the Literature

Democratic backsliding, characterized by the erosion of democratic norms and institutions, poses significant challenges to the stability of political systems worldwide. Scholars emphasize the need to understand the intricacies of democratic backsliding, considering its impact on political freedoms, individual rights, and checks, and balances. Definitions of democratic backsliding vary, reflecting the diverse perspectives within the research community. Scholars offer many different conceptualizations, emphasizing aspects like the debilitation of political institutions, corrosion of democratic qualities, dismantling of checks and balances, and changes in formal or informal rules affecting freedom and equality.

The many methodological challenges one comes to face in measuring democratic backsliding stem from the diverse conceptualizations of democracy itself. Scholars argue for a balanced conceptualization that considers multiple dimensions, incorporating electoral, liberal, majoritarian, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian conceptions. Dahl's concept of "polyarchy" stands out as a widely used theoretical framework, emphasizing on the multifaceted character of democratic government.

Other methodological issues include the selection of indicators, with debates over the subjective versus objective indicators. Scholars acknowledge the inherent subjectivity in democracy studies and suggest careful consideration in indicator selection, highlighting, in general, the importance of justifying both the conceptualization of democracy and the chosen indicators to enhance transparency and comparability.

Furthermore, the procedures of contemporary democratic backsliding are changing. Executive aggrandizement, promissory coups, and strategic manipulation of elections represent subtle, yet effective strategies employed by democratically elected executives to weaken checks on executive power. The erosion of institutions that protect state neutrality and citizens' rights serves as a starting point, followed by the suppression of opposition figures, especially the media, and subsequent changes to electoral systems and legislation.

Finally, many theoretical perspectives try to explain the complex phenomenon of democratic backsliding. Agency-based theories emphasize the decisive role of

political leaders, highlighting patterns to illiberalism and authoritarianism. Political culture theories highlight the impact of cultural values and citizen attitudes, with a special focus on affective polarization, and threats from populism. Theories of political coalitions underline the different social groups and the conflicts that stem from them. Institutional theories stress the importance of institutions and accountability (horizontal, vertical, diagonal) in democratization, whereas political economy theories emphasize the relationship between democracy and the economy. Lastly, many scholars take into consideration the impact of international factors as well as the intricate relationships between states.

This literature review highlights the intricate nature of democratic backsliding, revealing a complex phenomenon that often sparks disagreement among experts. The challenges in measuring democracy, coupled with the evolving tactics employed by executives using legal procedures to dismantle democratic institutions, have rendered the study of democratic backsliding even more ambiguous in today's politics. It is against this backdrop of complexity and ambiguity that the forthcoming case study on democratic backsliding in Greece gains significance.

The choice of Greece

The decision to focus on Greece as a case study stems from a compelling intersection of historical relevance and contemporary significance. Greece is one of the countries partaking in what Huntington (1991) described as the 3rd wave of democratization, an especially vulnerable group to democratic erosion. Modern Greek democracy as we know it debuted in 1974 after a rather smooth transition from a 7-year military junta, following the trend of many South European countries during the same period. Post-junta Greece had the difficult task of reinstating democratic institutions and trying to democratize and modernize itself virtually from scratch. Now, 50 years after the *Metapolitefsi*, the state's transition to democracy, it is quite necessary to evaluate its current condition, especially since there seem to be many debates concerning a general trend of democratic backsliding for the past 18 years.

Of course, this choice is not merely rooted in the need to do a political “check-up” to the state of the Greek democracy. Greece's strategic role in the EU and NATO, and its position in a turbulent neighborhood between Europe, the Middle East and Africa, make it necessary to be monitored, as the developments of Greek democracy can have significant effects on both European affairs and the already tumultuous East Mediterranean area.

Additionally, Greece offers a well-documented case, as far as the selected indexes are concerned, providing necessary data for a somewhat comprehensive comparative analysis. Before the investigation of the available data on the case, though, it is important that some information on the Greek Political System for the past 50 years of democracy is laid out, as this will help make some educated predictions on the state of the democratic institutions and its possible fluctuations.

The Greek political system as we know it started with the 1974 transition to democracy after 7 years of military dictatorship and an authoritarian regime before that. From then on, the biggest bet of the country was the re-establishment of democratic institutions and a process of democratization and modernization, with an end goal of turning Greece into a modern and outward-looking democracy ready for economic advancement. The political parties were then the biggest forces of democratization at

the time, as they put differences aside and built consensus, and then, a new democratic regime was established, while the political competition was based, mostly, on moderately democratic parties (Sotiropoulos, 2014).

Greek institutions have been serving the winning majoritarian governments, with almost absent checks and balances, especially for the Greek Prime Minister (Alivizatos, 2020; Featherstone & Papadimitriou, 2020), while some individual ministries have been characterized by a good amount of operational independence as well (Featherstone & Papadimitriou, 2020). However, courts can act as counterweights by revoking laws that contradict the provisions of the Constitution (Featherstone & Papadimitriou, 2020).

More recently, the “executive state law” (4622/2019) enacted by the current administration under Kyriakos Mitsotakis, establishes a hyper-concentration of powers in the hands of the executive, while it also put the National Intelligence Service (EYP), the national broadcaster ERT, and the public news agency ANA-MPA under the prime minister’s supervision. Additionally, the Wiretaps by the National Intelligence Service of a long list of the government’s political enemies, allies, and investigative journalists, have brought many concerns on the state of freedom of expression (V-dem, 2023), especially when reports on the state of media freedom have scored Greece as last among European countries (V-dem, 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Another noteworthy aspect of the executive states is the concerns about low accountability and a deficiency in transparency, particularly within fiscal administration (Rapanos & Kaplanoglou, 2020), as well as high levels of corruption (Sotiropoulos, 2019).

Furthermore, polarization has been one of the central characteristics of the post-dictatorship Greek political system (Andreadis & Stavrakakis, 2019). Some scholars suggest that this phenomenon has persisted in Greece since the inception of the modern Greek state (Papavlassopoulos, 2004). Two-partism lasted for more than 30 years (Malkoutzis, 2012), deeply shaping the Greek political landscape as well as the culture. Throughout the crisis, polarization continued to be salient, albeit manifesting through two distinct camps based on attitudes towards the Memoranda of Understanding between the Greek government and international lenders (Rori & Dinas, 2013; Rori 2016).

Additionally, populism has long been present in the Greek political system (Pappas, 2014), attracting a big part of the electorate, though after failing to deliver on

its promises, it weakened the already low levels of institutional and media trust (Ervasti, Kouvo & Venetoklis, 2018; Kalogeropoulos, Rori & Dimitrakopoulou, 2021; Demertzis et al., 2022) and contributed to the disaffection with democracy, which usually manifested with low participation levels or with political participation only under the clientelist promises of parties (Sotiropoulos, 2019).

The gravity of the economic crisis accentuated all the weaknesses of the Greek political system. Greece's implementation of almost 10 years of austerity measures put the country in a tumultuous condition, resulting in a period of social radicalization, severe polarization, and a breakdown of its party system (Dinas & Rori 2013; Teperoglou & Tsatsanis 2014; Rori 2016). Radical parties from both the left and the right gained popularity, with a case in point being the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, entering the parliament with a significant share of votes. Moreover, political violence, a phenomenon not uncommon in Greece, seems to have shown an increasing trend ever since, for both the far-right and the far-left (Rori, Georgiadou, Roumanias, 2022).

It is true, though, that, after all the strain put on it by the crisis and despite its many weaknesses, the Greek democracy persevered (Rori 2021). Whilst there are many factors that weaken the quality of democracy, as well as crises and dangers, there is no doubt that there has not been any democratic breakdown. However, as it has been mentioned earlier, democracy must be studied as a collage of institutions. Considering the many pathologies that scholars have found in Greek democracy and the number of crises that the state had to overcome, it is necessary to witness the state of Greek democratic institutions today and evaluate their trajectory over the past 23 years.

There are many indications from the recent developments that there is some level of erosion in certain areas, but, still, it is important to see the bigger picture, whether these developments are significant enough to have resulted in an instance of democratic backsliding. This research will try to reach a conclusion on this by observing data on democratic institutions from 3 established democracy indexes and inspecting whether democracy in Greece has improved or deteriorated over the past 23 years.

Methodology of Research

The methodology followed in this research is a comparative analysis of democratic backsliding indicators in Greece over the past 23 years. By utilizing reputable and popular democracy indexes – Polity IV, Freedom House, and V-Dem – the aim of this thesis is to evaluate and compare democratic backsliding indicators, starting with more broad indexes and progressively exploring more specific dimensions, in order to understand the potential variance of indicators witnessed over the years and uncover where Greek democracy is at its strongest and where it is at its weakest.

The choice of Indexes- Presentation of Chosen Databases

In order to commence the exploration of the chosen methodology, it is important to clarify the selection of specific indexes to measure democratic backsliding. This choice plays an integral part in ensuring a comprehensive and robust analysis of the phenomenon. By employing data from reputable sources such as Freedom House, V-Dem, and Polity IV, this research strategically incorporates diverse perspectives, as a measure of enhancing the reliability of this research of democratic backsliding over the past 23 years. The use of multiple indexes reflects a deliberate effort to ensure the validity of the study's findings through a comparative lens. In this section, there will be a description of the unique strengths of each index, and the overarching benefits of employing a multi-index approach to comprehensively capture the complexities of democratic backsliding.

Freedom House

Freedom House's Freedom in the World annual report measures political rights and liberties, utilizing a methodology mostly derived from the UN General Assembly's 1948 "Universal Declaration of Human Rights". Each year's report is crafted by a collaboration that involves in-house and external analysts, as well as expert advisors from academics, think tanks, and human rights communities (Freedom House, 2023).

In order to prepare reports and scores, a diverse collection of sources is employed by the analysts, a collection that includes news articles, academic analyses, reports from non-governmental organizations, and insights from individual professional contacts. Additionally, the expert scoring is set to undergo rigorous defense by both Freedom House staff and expert advisors. Thus, the final refined scores represent a consensus derived from the collective input of analysts, external advisers, and Freedom House staff.

In evaluating the state of democracy worldwide, Freedom in the World utilizes a meticulous two-tiered system encompassing scores and status. The scoring process involves an ordinal 5-point scale for each of the 10 political rights indicators and 15 civil liberties indicators, expressed in the form of questions, with a score of 0 signifying the minimal degree of freedom, and 4 representing the highest degree. The indicators are organized into subcategories of 2 main categories, political rights, and civil liberties. Under political rights, there are the subcategories of Electoral Process, Political Pluralism and Participation, and Functioning of Government. For civil liberties, the subcategories include Freedom of Expression and Belief, Associational and Organizational Rights, Rule of Law, and Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights.

The maximum score for political rights is 40 (4 for each of the 10 questions), while for civil liberties, it is 60 (4 for each of the 15 questions). Importantly, the scores from the previous edition serve as a benchmark for the current year under review. Changes in scores are typically prompted by real-world developments during the year, such as a media crackdown or the country's inaugural free and fair elections. However, subtle shifts in conditions, even without a singular event, are occasionally reflected in the scores (Freedom House, 2023).

Nevertheless, scholars have criticized several aspects of Freedom House's methodology over the years. Munck and Verkuilen (2002), especially, have argued on many methodological issues concerning this index, including the maximalism of its definitions, the lack of explanation for its choice of methodology, and the aggregation procedure. On the other hand, Giannone (2010) has argued that Freedom House's data is questionable due to a lack of political neutrality.

Polity IV

Polity IV is the latest update (speaking strictly about data on Greece) of a project based on Ted Robert Gurr's study, "Persistence and Change in Political Systems, 1800-1971." This index codes authority characteristics of states for the purpose of comparative analysis. The unit of analysis utilized is the polity, a "political or governmental organization; a society or institution with an organized government; state; body politic." (Webster's New World College Dictionary). The latest version combines essential information from the previous versions, also enhancing it by adding inter-coder reliability checks as a means to increase its consistency.

The data from this index begin in 1800 and stop in 2018, the last year when the project was updated. With a bigger focus on institutions, this index employs two 10-point indicators, one for institutionalized democracy and one for institutionalized autocracy. By combining the aforementioned indicators, the "polity" indicator is derived, which illustrates the quality of democracy in a regime. In the study of democratic backsliding, the polity indicator is the one used to research a country's democratic decline or the level of its democratization (Polity, 2020).

Although the Polity Index has been one of the most used democracy indexes in academia, it does have many limitations in its indicators, and due to its conceptualization of democracy, it can only capture medium to large differences (Herre, 2022). Moreover, its indicators mainly focus on a country's polity, executives, and political competition, making the dataset much more limited and preventing this research from comparing certain medium-level indicators from all 3 sources.

Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)

The Varieties of Democracy(V-Dem) project is managed by the V-Dem Institute, based at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. It is run by principal investigators, under whom there are project and regional managers, as well as country coordinators.

V-Dem distinguishes between five conceptions of democracy: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian, and gathers the necessary data from a variety of indicators in order to measure these conceptions. In this index democracy is treated more as a spectrum, scoring some countries as more democratic than others.

The democracy indexes of V-Dem are characterized by several levels of aggregation, with various subcomponents for each high-level democracy index. The electoral Democracy index is derived from Dahl's conceptualization of polyarchy and is comprised of indicators measuring freedom of expression, freedom of association, clean elections, and suffrage. All the other four indexes include the electoral democracy index as the electoral component and add the according component, meaning a series of indicators that constitute each conception of democracy. The liberal component consists of the rule of law, judicial constraints on the executive and legislative constraints on the executive. The participatory component includes civil society participation, direct popular vote, and local and regional government. The egalitarian component has to do with equal protection, access, and distribution of resources (V-Dem Codebook v13, 2023).

Additionally, the V-Dem dataset covers a variety of indicators that have an immediate connection to democracy and its nuances, including media freedoms, civil liberties, accountability, and corruption levels. While being much newer than the other democracy indexes, there are scholars who argue that V-Dem's measurements perform much better than the ones from the older indexes like Freedom House and Polity (Boese, 2019).

All in all, the above democracy indexes have both good and bad qualities. After all, democracy is a much-discussed and extremely complex phenomenon whose measurement, as noted earlier, creates many debates and confusion in the academic community. By describing the indexes used and their approaches this study aims to be transparent about the choice of indicators of democracy to be used, and to present both the strengths and the weaknesses of this approach.


General Democratic Backsliding Indicators

The first step of the analysis is to examine the variation of democracy from 2000 to 2023 in Greece, by utilizing the more aggregated general indicators from each source. Usually, when scholars use these three sources, they compare a) the POLITY variable from Polity IV, b) the Total Score from Freedom House, and c) the Electoral Democracy Index from V-Dem. In this research, the comparison will stay relatively close to the

existing literature, apart from the V-dem index that will be used. Instead of the Electoral Democracy Index, this research will use the Liberal Democracy Index, as it consists of both the Electoral Democracy Index as well as a group of indicators that constitute the “Liberal Component”.

POLITY (Polity IV): the POLITY variable is calculated by subtracting a country’s institutional autocracy score from its institutional democracy score, resulting in a unified polity scale that ranges from +10 (strongly democratic) to -10 (strongly autocratic). The Polity score can also be translated into 3 regime categories, suggested by the creators: "autocracies" (-10 to -6), "anocracies" (-5 to +5 and three special values: -66, -77 and -88), and "democracies" (+6 to +10).

Total Freedom Score (Freedom House): The Total Score from Freedom House provides an evaluation of both political rights and civil liberties. It comes on a scale from 0-100 and the categorizations from the creators have to do more with the level of freedoms rather than regimes, meaning that a country or territory’s Freedom in the World status (Free, Partially Free, Not free depends) on the aggregate Political Rights score, on a scale of 0–40, and the aggregate Civil Liberties score, on a scale of 0–60. According to Freedom House, the total of the Political Rights and Civil Liberties scores are equally weighted in this calculation, leading to the following several possible ranges:

Status	Civil Liberties score	Political Rights score						
		0-5*	6-11	12-17	18-23	24-29	30-35	36-40
	53-60	PF	PF	PF	F	F	F	F
	44-52	PF	PF	PF	PF	F	F	F
	35-43	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	F	F
	26-34	NF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	F
	17-25	NF	NF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF
	8-16	NF	NF	NF	PF	PF	PF	PF
	0-7	NF	NF	NF	NF	PF	PF	PF

KEY: F = Free, PF = Partly Free, and NF = Not Free

* It is possible for a country or territory’s total political rights score to be less than zero (between -1 and -4) if it receives mostly or all zeros for each of the 10 political rights questions and it receives a sufficiently large negative score for the political rights discretionary question. *Source: freedomhouse.org*

Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem): This index is derived from a combination of the electoral democracy index (indicators for freedom of expression, freedom of association, clean elections, and suffrage) and a liberal component based on indicators

for the rule of law, judicial constraints on the executive, as well as legislative constraints on the executive. This index focuses on individual and minority rights, evaluating democracy based on government constraints. The scale used to measure it ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 representing the lowest point on the scale and 1 representing the highest point.

By employing a comparative approach in this analysis, this thesis wishes to observe the manifestation of distinct outcomes arising from diverse conceptualizations. The comparison of trends and outcomes across Polity, Freedom House, and V-dem, enhances the robustness of the findings and identifies areas of convergence or divergence. The same procedure will be conducted when examining medium-level indicators, although the comparison may not be covered by all three sources, as some have a much more minimal coverage than others.

Medium-Level Democratic Backsliding Indicators

The second step of the analysis involves examining subcategories within the indexes. The focus is on certain indicators that the literature has highlighted as significant to pinpoint specific areas of democratic health or deterioration. In order to view each of the chosen indicators in a comparative manner, it is necessary to sometimes use more than one variable from the datasets, due to their different methodologies and conceptualizations.

Electoral Process: The quality of the electoral process is often indicative of the overall health of democratic practices within a nation. Therefore, by evaluating this indicator, meaning the quality of elections and the selection of an executive, it is possible to witness significant changes and to hypothesize about the state of democracy. The data for this indicator are derived from all 3 sources.

Polity IV	Freedom House	V-Dem
EXREC - how institutionalized, competitive, and open are	A. Electoral process	v2xel_frefair - clean elections index

the mechanisms for selecting a political leader.		
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Functioning of Government-Executive constraints: Constraints on the executive serve as a key element in democratic governance and play a pivotal role in shaping political stability and ensuring the effective functioning of democratic institutions. Furthermore, executive constraints contribute to the transparency, accountability, and reduction of corruption within democratic institutions, therefore enhancing their overall functionality. As previously stated, executive aggrandizement is one of the most prominent strategies used to erode democratic institutions, making this indicator crucial for this research. For this indicator, there will be used data from all three indexes.

Polity IV	Freedom House	V-Dem
EXCONST	C. Functioning of government (includes Restraints, Transparency, Corruption)	v2x_jucon - Judicial constraints on the executive
		v2xlg_legcon - Legislative constraints on the executive
		v2x_corr - Political corruption index

Participation: The various forms of political participation constitute a key factor of a healthy democratic government, as the simplest definition of democracy is none other than the rule of the people. Changes in participation, thus, could be correlated with democratic backsliding. The data for this indicator are derived from all 3 sources.

Polity IV	Freedom House	V-Dem
POLCOMP- institutionalization, or regulation, of political competition and government restriction on political competition	B. Political Pluralism and Participation	v2x_partip - Participatory component

Freedom of expression: The choice of freedom of expression as an indicator has to do with the strategies used by executives when trying to erode democratic institutions. As stated before, media and the freedom of expression are some of the first institutions targeted. The data will be gathered from Freedom House and V-dem, as this indicator is not measured by Polity.

Polity IV	Freedom House	V-Dem
-	D. Freedom of Expression	v2x_freexp – Freedom of expression

Freedom of Association: By observing the state of freedom of association one can possibly discern any signs of authoritarianism, since a decline in these freedoms may mean executive attacks in opposition, or on civil society. The data for this indicator are derived from freedom House and V-dem as it is not measured by Polity.

Polity IV	Freedom House	V-Dem
-	D. Freedom of Association	v2x_frassoc_thick – Freedom of association

Rule of Law: The Rule of Law will be used as a pivotal indicator as it has long been utilized as a metric for the quality and resilience of legal and political systems. The data used for this indicator will be derived from Freedom House and V-dem, as it is not measured by Polity.

Polity IV	Freedom House	V-Dem
-	F. Rule of Law	v2x_rule – Rule of Law

Individual rights: By selecting individual rights as an indicator, this research aims to assess how well a democratic system safeguards fundamental freedoms, liberties, and protections for individuals.

Polity IV	Freedom House	V-Dem
-	G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights	v2xcl_rol - Equality before the law and individual liberty index

Choice of Time-Frame

The selection of the time frame spanning from 2000 to 2023 is deliberate and based on its capacity to capture a moderately large time in Greek history, big enough to discern any substantial variation of the indicators. This timeframe is chosen for its substantial duration, allowing for a thorough examination of Greece's democratic evolution. Starting from the early years of the new millennium, the analysis extends through the profound economic crisis, and, by extending the investigation beyond the crisis years well into 2023, the selected time-frame allows for the observation of post-crisis developments.

Limitations

Undoubtedly, this research faces certain limitations due to the differences that one encounters when choosing to view three different democracy indexes. All the indexes employ distinct frameworks and methodologies to measure democracy, making it quite challenging to compare them directly. Their differences can be found in their conceptualizations, the levels of aggregation, and the number of indicators they measure. Moreover, the variations in data availability among the selected indexes provide yet another challenge, as each index provides data for a different time frame. While Polity IV provides data up to 2018, V-Dem covers the period from 2000 to 2022, and Freedom House spans from 2006 to 2023. It is, thus, necessary to take this into consideration when interpreting trends and patterns, as certain years may not be represented across all sources.

Results and Discussion

The results from this research are summarized in the following figures:

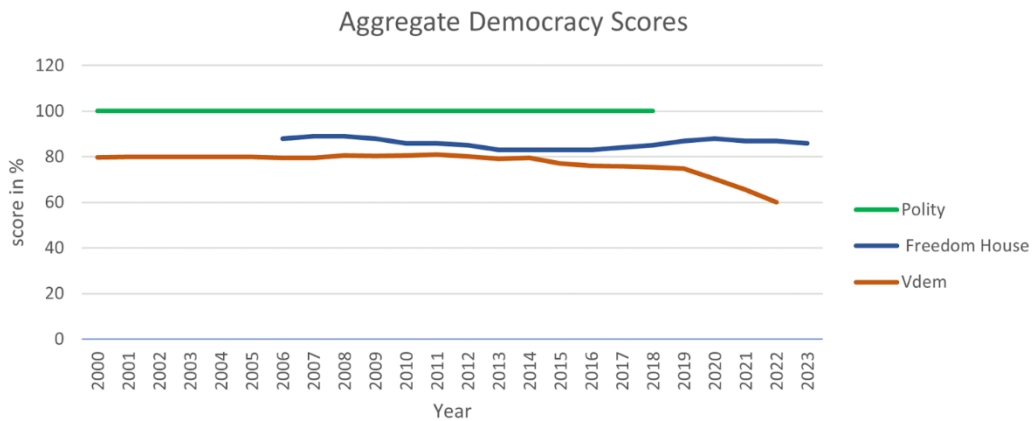


Figure 1. General Democratic Backsliding Indicators

Figure 1 shows the evolution of aggregate democracy scores from the three selected indexes during the selected time frame 2000-2023. Polity scores have overall stayed the same, classifying Greece as a strongly democratic regime from 2000 to 2018. Freedom House data begin in 2006 with a total score of 88/100, witness a drop to 83 during the period 2013-2016 and then, recover the original score of 88 in 2020, only to witness another smaller drop, reaching 86 in 2023. The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index commences with a score of 0,798 in 2000, peaks in 2011 with 0,811 and follows a steady decline after that, reaching 0,6 in 2022. This means that, between 2011 and 2022, V-Dem presented a substantial 21,9% decline in Liberal Democracy. Additionally, it is interesting how V-Dem presents a much steeper decline after 2019 (from 0,748 to 0,6 in 2022), while, for the same period, Freedom House presents a comparatively minor drop (from 88 in 2019 to 86 in 2023), and Polity remains unaltered.

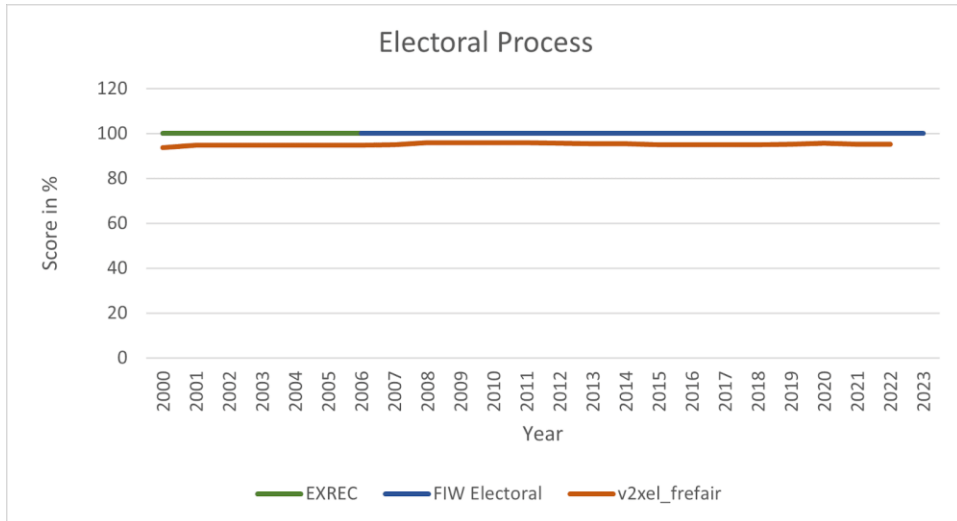


Figure 2. Electoral Process

The electoral process indicators depicted in Figure 2 exhibit stability during their time frames. Notably, both Polity and Freedom House stayed at the highest scores of the indicators (10/10 and 12/12, respectively), witnessing no discernible change throughout the periods covered. Similarly, V-Dem’s scores are quite high and witness minimal ups and downs, with the annual rate of change consistently remaining below 1%.

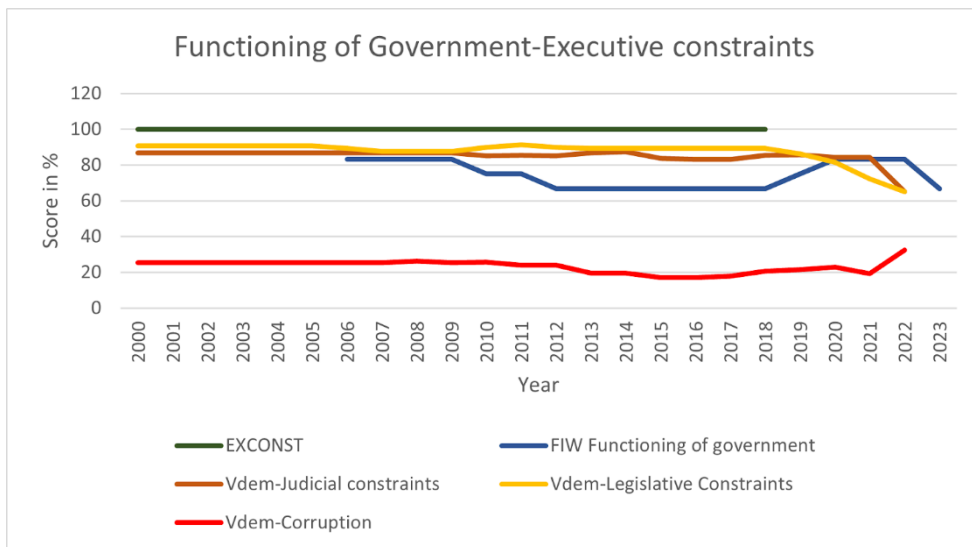


Figure 3. Functioning of Government and Executive Constraints

Figure 3 demonstrates various indicators from the three sources that illustrate the functioning of the government, encompassing transparency, executive constraints, and corruption. Polity’s one indicator covering executive constraints has not shown any

difference over the period under study, maintaining a consistent high score of 7/7. Freedom House's comprehensive indicator for the functioning of government begins a gradual decline in 2010. Dropping from 10/12 in 2009 to 9/12, the score reached its lowest point (8/12) in 2012. This score remained stable until a resurgence commenced in 2017, ultimately reaching 10/12 in 2022, only to experience a sudden 16.6% decline within a year, reverting to the score of 8/12. It is noteworthy that an equal decline is reported between 2009 to 2012 and between 2022 and 2023. The V-Dem indicators demonstrate high scores for both legislative and judicial constraints on the executive for most part of the researched timespan. However, a significant and sudden drop of 19,4% between 2021 (0,844) and 2022 (0,65) can be discerned for the judicial constraints' indicator. Simultaneously, a consistent decrease on the legislative constraints can be observed, commencing in 2018 and resulting in a decline from 0.893 to 0.651 in 2022—a decline of 24.5% over a span of four years. Finally, V-Dem's political corruption levels are relatively low, with small fluctuations over the years, although a significant increase of 13% from 2021 (0,194) to 2022 (0,324) can be detected.

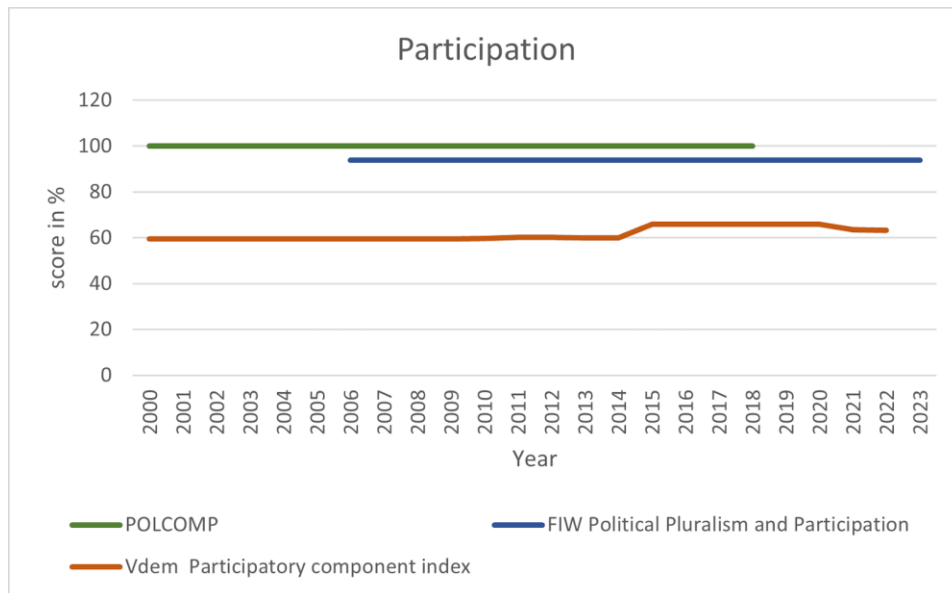


Figure 4. Participation.

The participation indicators, as illustrated in Figure 4, present stability over the years. Both Polity and Freedom House do not fluctuate at all, while their scores remain consistently high. On the other hand, V-Dem's Participatory Component begins at the

middle range of the scale and undergoes an increase of 6% from 2014 (0,6) to 2015 (0,66), experiencing small fluctuations thereafter.

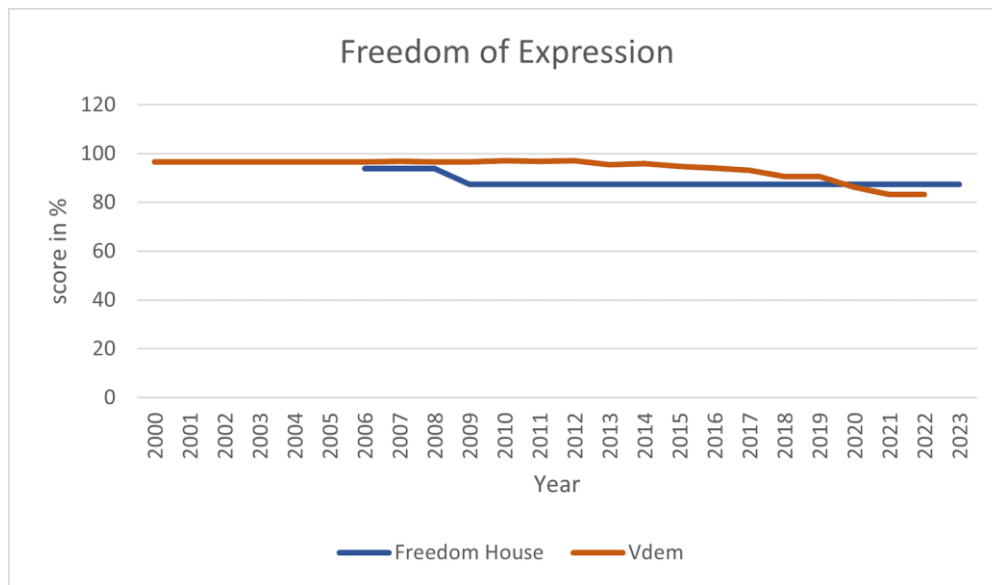


Figure 5. Freedom of expression

As presented in Figure 5, Freedom House shows that freedom of expression attained a very high score of 15/16 until 2008, subsequently undergoing a 6,3% decline to 14/16 from which it has yet to fully recover as of 2023. V-Dem’s indicator displays high levels of freedom of expression from 2000 until 2017, when a steady decline began and has persisted until 2022.

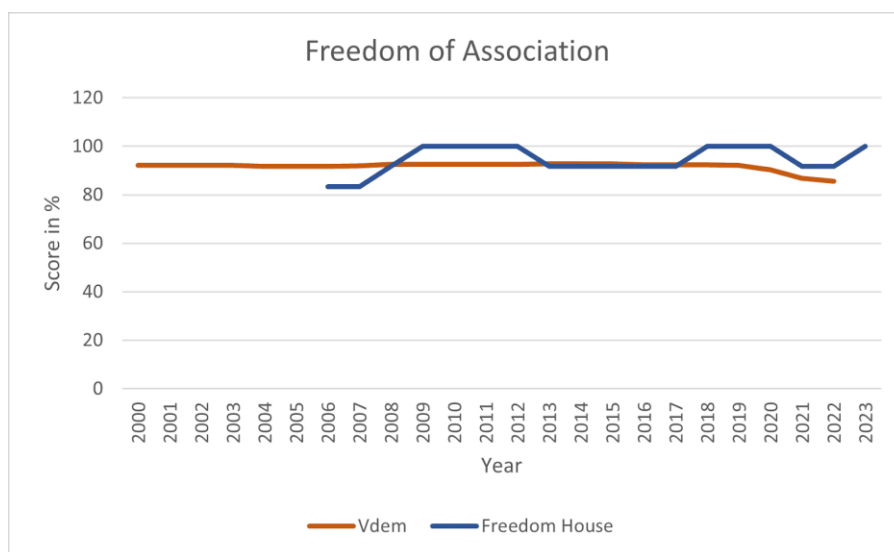


Figure 6. Freedom of Association.

In Figure 6 it is shown that Freedom House has captured many fluctuations throughout the covered time-frame, showcasing scores that range between 10 and 12 out of 12. In contrast, V-dem shows somewhat stable high score for freedom of association over the years, with a gradual decline setting in from 2019 onward, persisting through the following years.

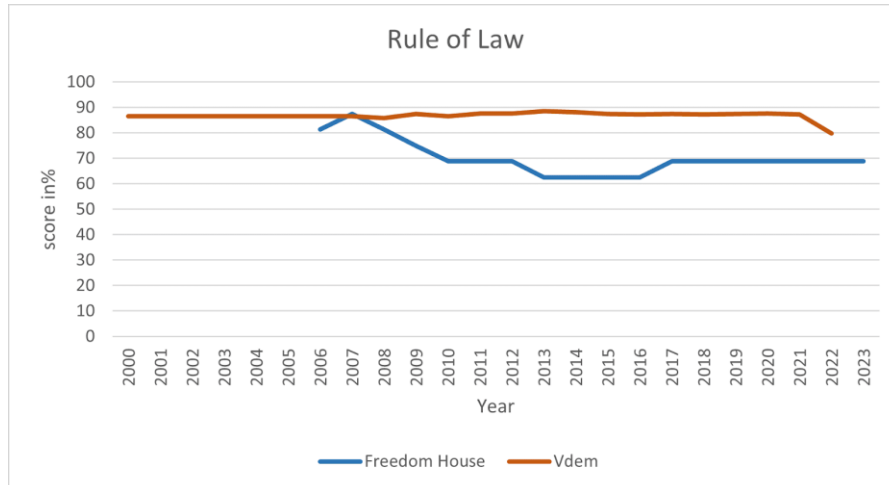


Figure 7. Rule of Law.

As per Figure 7, a notable disparity emerges between the two sources regarding the rule of law indicator. V-dem portrays a consistently high and stable score for the period spanning 2000-2021, followed by a noteworthy drop of 7,5% in 2022. On the contrary, Freedom House showcases a gradual descent from the indicators peak in 2007 (14/16) to its lowest point during 2013-2016 (10/16), with a small improvement in 2017 (11/16), from which it hasn't diverged ever since. It is notable that in only three years (2007-2010) Freedom House recorded a substantial 18,7% decline in the rule of law indicator from 14/16 to 11/16.

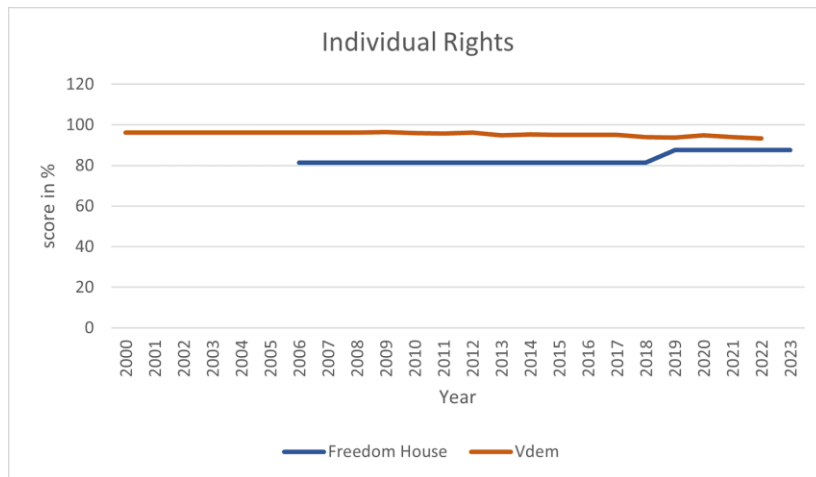


Figure 8. Individual Rights.

Lastly, Figure 8 showcases the trajectory of the human rights indicators. Both sources assign high scores to individual rights in Greece, with V-Dem’s indicator surpassing that of Freedom House. V-Dem exhibits stability over the years, characterized by minimal fluctuations. Freedom House’s score, while also remaining quite stable, demonstrated a notable rise of 6,2% in 2019.

All in all, after scrutinizing data from all three democracy indexes, one can tell that many of the initial criticisms for the indexes’ methodologies are reflected in the findings. Polity scores consistently affirm Greece as a strongly democratic regime and the few medium level indicators that it offers remain unchanged over the selected time frame, while Freedom House and V-dem scores fluctuate much more easily. That cannot come as a surprise as Polity’s conception of democracy is quite narrow and the differences that can be captured have to be less subtle.

In contrast, V-dem’s view of democracy as a spectrum allows for a more nuanced approach, while Freedom House’s freedom-based approach and the many attributes for each indicator also help in capturing certain smaller changes. Therefore, one might not be able to discern earlier stages of democratic backsliding through Polity, as the changes are much more elusive, while, on the other hand, it is important not to overinterpret the slight fluctuations from V-Dem without examining further.

Moreover, one must consider that Polity data stop in 2018, while some of the most noticeable changes captured by Freedom House and V-Dem can be found in the period

immediately after. Additionally, Freedom House data starts in 2006, making the period between 2000 and 2005 much harder to view comparatively.

One can see that, for the general democracy indicators, the three indexes depict conflicting results. While Polity finds that democracy in Greece has not changed in any meaningful way, Freedom House does demonstrate a case of backsliding during the economic crisis (2010-2018), from which the country has recently recovered. On the other hand, V-Dem marks a subtle decline beginning in 2014 until 2019, when it became much steeper. Notably, the 2023 report presented Greece as one of the countries with the biggest decreases in the Liberal Democracy Index in the span of 3 years (V-dem, 2023). Both Freedom House and V-dem data support the claim that the economic crisis had quite an impact on the quality of democracy in Greece, while their divergence has to do with the events of the post-crisis era.

From the chosen medium level democracy indicators, the biggest levels of variation were witnessed in the “Functioning of Government” indicator, the “Rule of Law” indicator, the “Freedom of Expression” indicator and the “Freedom of Association” indicator. In contrast, the indicators for the electoral process, participation and individual rights were both scored highly by all indicators and maintained their scores for their available time frames.

When assessing the government functionality indicators, nuanced dynamics can be seen between the indexes. Regarding executive constraints, while Polity's indicator remains stable during the covered period, V-Dem's indicators illustrate small fluctuations, particularly in the domains of legislative and judicial constraints. A sudden drop of 19.4% in the judicial constraints' indicator in 2022, as well as a consistent decline in legislative constraints from 2018 to 2022 and a rise in political corruption between 2021 and 2022 raise concerns about the strength of checks and balances. At the same time, Freedom House's comprehensive government functioning indicator also reveals fluctuations, with a notable decline in 2010 and a subsequent recovery by 2022, albeit interrupted by a sudden 16.6% drop in 2023.

Although the 2 indexes present certain differences, they both seem to capture a decline of government functionality after 2021. V-Dem pinpoints legislative and judicial constraints as the biggest indicator of liberal democracy decline in Greece, followed by the extent to which the government consults with other societal actors(V-

dem, 2023), and its compliance with the high court, While Freedom House focused on the state's inability to uphold anti-corruption laws and the lack of transparency, which the latest wiretapping incident has brought to light (Freedom House, 2023). The hyper-concentration of powers at the hands of the core executive (law 4622/2019), the decline in transparency, as illustrated by the surveillance scandal, as well as the state's treatment towards the press and members from civil society groups (Cossé, 2021; V-Dem, 2023; Freedom House, 2023), make it clear that the functioning of the Greek state as well as its checks and balances have been steadily deteriorating. The traditionally strong Greek core executive, with very few constraints, and the ever-existing presence of populism (Alivizatos, 2020; Featherstone & Papadimitriou, 2020; Pappas, 2014) could signify a certain level of path dependency.

Furthermore, the rule of law becomes a focal point of divergence between V-Dem and Freedom House. While V-Dem depicts a consistently high and stable score until 2021, a significant 7.5% decline in 2022, prompts scrutiny. In contrast, Freedom House registers a gradual descent from 2007 to 2016, with a modest improvement in 2017 that remains constant thereafter, pointing to potential challenges in sustaining legal frameworks. Given the fact that Greece has been known in scholarship for its weak rule of law tradition (Ioannidis, 2020), it is possible that Freedom House's data cover this indicator more accurately. The individual rights indicator is especially puzzling as V-dem presents a slow and slight decrease over the years while Freedom House depicts a small improvement. While not significant enough changes, it is still interesting to investigate why such a discrepancy happens. One speculative proposition is that the discrepancy lies in the different conceptualizations for the rule of law indicator by Freedom House and V-dem. While Freedom House focuses more on freedom and less on institutions, unlike V-Dem, it is possible that it captures more variation of de facto changes, not only the formal aspects.

Finally, the gradual decrease in the V-Dem freedom of expression indicator and the drop captured by Freedom House in 2009, after which the indicator remained stable, both suggest that freedom of expression in Greece has somewhat diminished in quality compared to the early years of the 21st century. This comes in accordance with many reports from various sources about the erosion of press freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2023; Dussart, 2023). V-dem's freedom of association indicator follows a similar pattern with a decline that started in 2019, explained by the Presidential Decree

placing the General Secretariat of Information and Communication under the Prime Minister. On the contrary, Freedom House's indicator displays a fluctuating pattern, aligning with V-Dem's decline in 2020-2022. However, it's worth noticing that, while Freedom House suggests a recovery in 2023, this cannot be confirmed comparatively, as V-Dem lacks data for that particular year. However, surveillance of journalists and the rise of media self-censorship are worrying developments for freedom of expression in Greece the past years (International Press Institute, 2022; V-Dem, 2023; Freedom House 2023), with many sources claiming that these are only the troubling outcomes of a long-term decline in press freedom (Stamouli, 2022), effectively confirming the Freedom House and V-Dem data.

Conclusions

In summary, the examination of general democracy indicators reveals conflicting perspectives among the three indexes. Polity's scores in all indicators remained stable, showing in practice the difficulty of this specific indicator to capture variation within democracies. However, both Freedom House and V-dem converged in highlighting a period of decline in the democratic indicator, which corresponded with the era of the Greek economic crisis. Although Freedom House's democratic decline episode seems to have stopped in 2018, reverting to its previous status, V-Dem's liberal democracy index, during the same period, witnessed a more significant decline.

When evaluating the medium level indicators in order to gain additional clarity, it is apparent that indicators, such as the electoral process and participation, did not present any variation over the years, while the individual rights indicator presents slight but troubling differences between the two indexes. Freedom House and V-Dem agree in the decrease of the functioning of government, while it has been clear that both judicial and legislative constraints on the executive weakened, especially after 2020. The rule of law scores present differences between the indexes, while the weak rule of law tradition in Greece, historically noted in scholarship, aligns more with Freedom House's depiction. Freedom of expression presents a steady decline from the start of the century by both V-Dem and Freedom House, corroborating recent reports on press freedom erosion. Lastly, freedom of association witnesses diverging patterns in 2020-2022 between the two indexes.

Based on the presented data and analysis, it seems reasonable to conclude that the overall findings do suggest some dynamics of democratic backsliding in Greece, emerging right after the Greek financial crisis. However, when considering all the three of the democratic indexes used in this research, it is not clear whether Greece has continued backsliding after the crisis or was able to recover. That said, the presence of significant indicators, particularly those highlighting the decline of executive constraints in the judiciary and legislation, along with diminished freedom of expression, demands closer scrutiny. These areas are recognized as vulnerable targets during instances of democratic backsliding in a country and their decline prompts

worry. The findings of this research and the elusive nature of democratic backsliding command further study, as one cannot make definitive deductions about the state of a country's democracy that easily, given the complex interplay of factors influencing democratic health and stability.

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