

ECOWAS, the EU and liberal democracy: Challenges and constraints

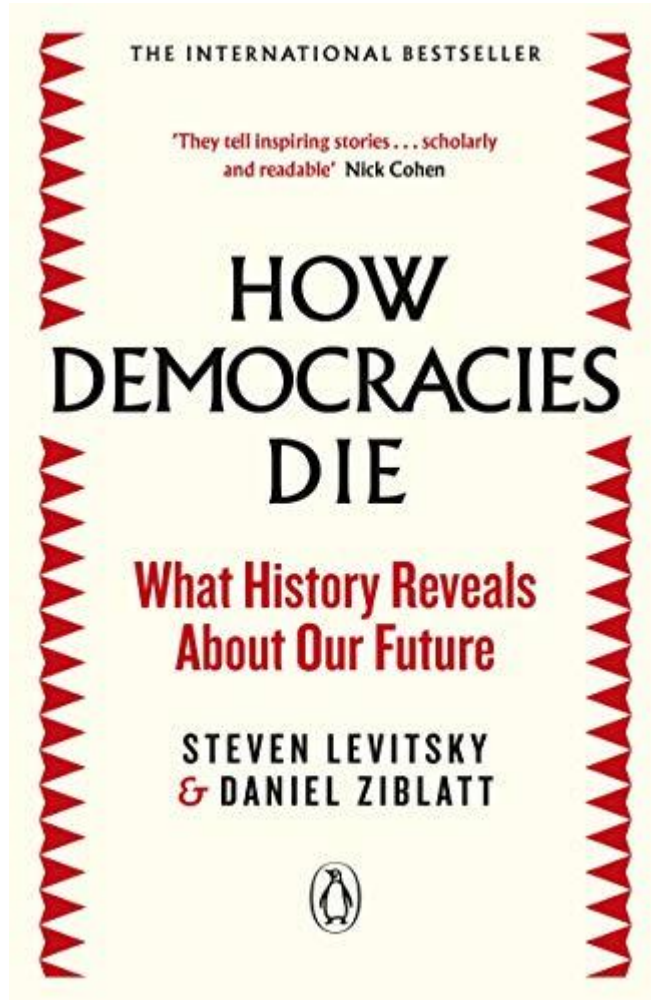
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Democratic backsliding in both Africa and the EU

- Polls by Afrobarometer show that the share of Africans who say they are free to say what they think declined from 79% in 2008 to 70% in 2018.
- Reporters Without Borders said that 22 out of the 48 sub-Saharan African countries were “bad” or “very bad” places for journalists.
- West African countries are typically more free than those in the east and central regions. However, even here, there is a rise of electoral authoritarianism. In Freedom House 2020 democracy list, Benin declined from 79th to 66th position, or from “free” to “partly free”, one of the largest drops ever for an African country. It’s a sad development since the democratization wave of the 1990s started in Benin.
- According to Varieties of Democracy Index, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia lost their status as liberal democracies and transitioned downward to be electoral democracies. Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania continued to be classified as “electoral democracies”.



More and more often, democracies do not end with a bang—in a military coup—but with a whimper: a slow, steady weakening of critical institutions, such as the judiciary and the press, and the gradual erosion of long-standing political norms.

The EU dilemmas

- Last December, Hungary and Poland threatened to veto EU's budget and the new Recovery Fund if the European Commission did not withdraw its plan to condition budgetary disbursement on adhering to the rule of law norms and principles. A last minute compromise was considered by many intellectuals as a victory of illiberal forces in Europe.
- Article 7 of the Treaty of the EU allows it to discipline a state when there is a “clear risk of a serious breach” of the bloc's values. In the worst case, a country's voting rights can be suspended. To proceed with Article 7, and move towards suspending Poland's or Hungary's voting rights, the European Commission needs the support of four-fifths of member states.
- This highlights the EU's dilemmas. Pushing too hard could trigger an anti-EU backlash—the last thing Brussels needs. Pushing too weakly allows Budapest or Warsaw to do what they want.

ECOWAS dilemmas

- In contrast to other African sub-regional organizations , ECOWAS, has on several occasions stuck up against coups. No other regional economic organization in Africa has focussed so much on democracy and good governance, introducing norms, imposing sanctions and even threatening the use of force.
- However, ECOWAS has been much less critical of recent slides towards autocracy in its member-states

Research Question

Why regional organizations largely fail to sanction their member-countries that undermine democratic norms, manipulate the judiciary, violate constitutional provisions, control the media etc.?



Can we compare EU and ECOWAS ?

- **NO:** EU has a strong supranational element and ECOWAS is largely intergovernmental
The level of economic integration in the EU is much higher
- **YES:** Their regional institutions are similar (at least in name)
In both there is a country that could act as a hegemon because of its size (Nigeria / Germany)
In how they see integration their members are divided in different 'camps' (Anglophone/Francophone in ECOWAS, North/South in EU)

Three explanations

1. Too many member states. It is difficult to reform the treaties when you have 15 or 27 members.
2. Unwillingness of the hegemon to promote such norms. Germany in EU and Nigeria in ECOWAS.
3. The definitions of “illiberal democracy” or “electoral democracy” or “democratic backsliding” remain deeply ambiguous. All these terms are ill-defined and political scientists are far from agreeing on what they mean. Freedom House, the Democracy Matrix, the Global State of Democracy Index of IDEA or the Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit use different algorithms that produce different results.