

Is India becoming less democratic?

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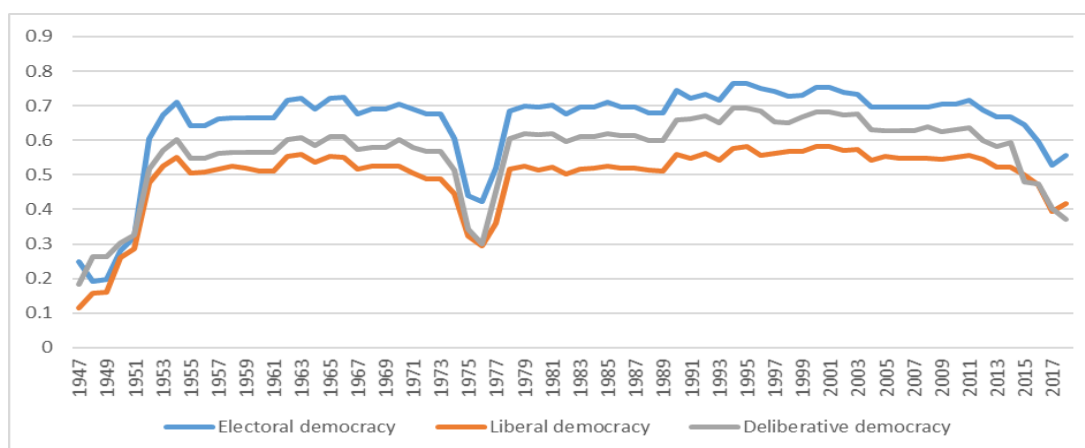
Summary

India's democracy has been deteriorating in recent years, particularly since the current National Democratic Alliance came into power in 2014. The erosion of democracy is captured by the recently released V-Dem dataset, one of the most rigorous ways of measuring democratic quality. In this paper, we analyse recent trends in key aspects of India's democracy. We conclude by pointing out that this is unlikely to have a significant impact on the forthcoming general elections.

Political activist (and former psephologist) Yogendra Yadav has warned that the forthcoming 2019 elections will represent a turning point in India's contemporary history, as [what is at stake](#) is the very idea of India as the world's largest democracy. Are Yadav's words just part of the increasingly polarising electoral campaign or are they based on hard evidence? In other words, has India's democracy been eroding during the last five years?

To answer these questions, we look at the recently released data collected by the [V-Dem project](#), one of the most rigorous attempts to 'measure' the quality of democracy across time and countries. The project constructs five main indexes, meant to grasp different aspects of a country's democratic performance. In Figure 1, we focus on three of them: the electoral democracy index, which captures the most essential element of democracy, namely whether elections are free and fair; the liberal democracy index, which measures the degree to which individual and minority rights are protected and how the executive power is kept in check by other state institutions; and the deliberative democracy index, which refers to the way in which power holders take decisions and to what extent public goods motivate the actions of the government. The indexes vary from 0 to 1 and the higher the score, the higher the quality of democracy.

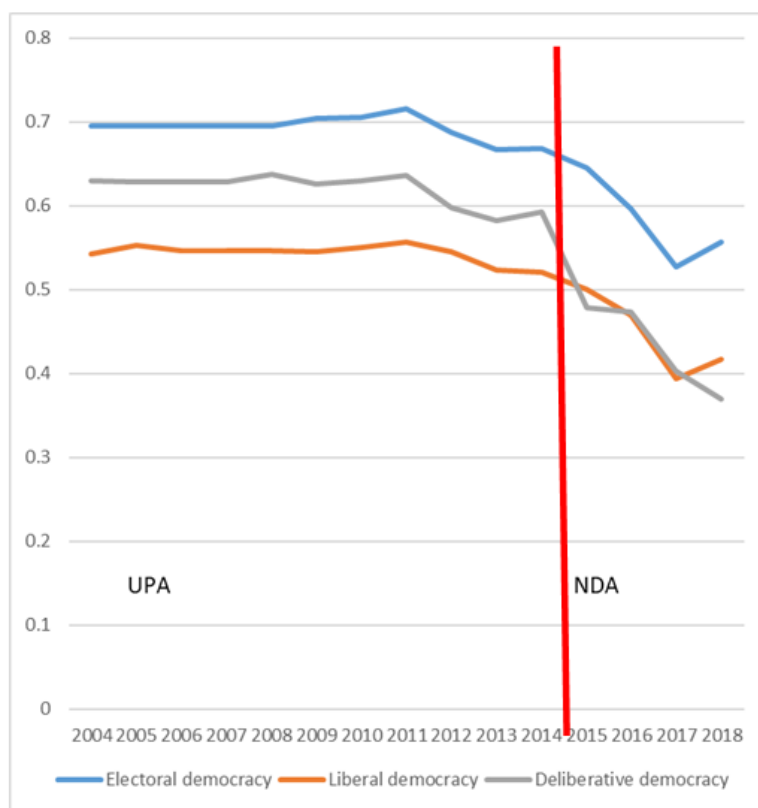
Figure 1 – Indexes of democracy, India 1947-2018



Source: V-Dem Project.

Three elements stand out. First, upon independence, India did a quantum leap towards democratic rule, despite the presence of numerous factors that are normally not associated with democracy, such as widespread poverty, extreme inequalities and mass illiteracy. Second, from 1975-77, India turned into an authoritarian state, when Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency regime. However, after the seminal 1977 elections that brought to power the first non-Congress government, the quality of India’s democracy improved steadily, especially during the 1990s, when India’s party system became more and more competitive. The third element that comes out clearly from the chart is the recent downward trend in all the indexes of democracy. In Figure 2, we focus on the most recent years, corresponding to the two terms in office of the United Progressive Alliance (2004-14) and the current National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government (2014-present).

Figure 2 – Indexes of democracy, India 2004-18

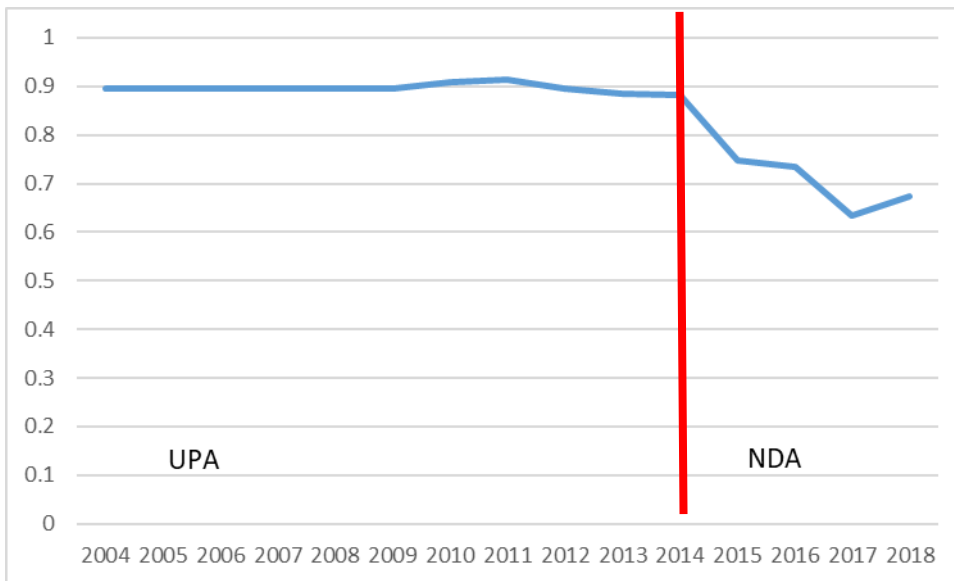


Source: V-Dem Project.

As is evident from the chart, the quality of India’s democracy started declining during the last years of the UPA government. Following 2014, there was a steep acceleration of the erosion of democracy, particularly in the deliberative democracy index, signalling a much more centralised and less inclusive decision-making process. Taken together, the decline in all three indexes signals that the forthcoming elections might be less free and fair than previous ones, not in terms of the formal conduct of elections – which comparatively remains of very high standards– but in terms of guaranteeing a level-playing field. This is particularly true in terms of the freedom of expression and protection against state violence. Both these elements are essential components of a democracy that goes to polls.

Three sub-indexes are particularly useful to illustrate this point. First, the Freedom of Expression Index (Figure 3). Here again, there is a slight downward trend starting during the second term of the UPA, followed by a steep decline after the NDA came into power.

Figure 3 – Freedom of Expression Index, India 2004-18



Source: V-Dem Project.

Two other sub-indexes are worth noting. The first one is the freedom from political killing, which measures the use of lethal force by state institutions. The second is religious organisation repression, which captures the degree to which the state (or state-sponsored groups) harasses religious organisations. While both measurements are quite crude – they do not differentiate between different kinds of violence (e.g. in conflict vis-à-vis non-conflict areas) or repression (e.g. towards religious-based extremist groups vis-à-vis mainstream religious groups) – read together, they offer a sobering reading of India’s democratic erosion (as [noted](#) by political scientist Sten Widmalm). Both indexes declined slightly since 2011, and then sharply after the NDA came into power.

As with all composite measurements, the V-Dem index is not a perfect way of measuring democracy – a quintessentially qualitative concept that can be reduced to numbers only to a certain extent. However, given the comparability of data across time, it does provide a reliable indication of the trends. In the case of India, it is clear that in recent years there has been a steep erosion of the quality of democracy. It is also worth noting that alternative indexes such as the [Press Freedom Index](#) (published by Reporters without Borders) or the [Freedom in the World Report](#) 2019 (Freedom House) point in similar directions and they all record the declining quality of India’s democracy in recent years.

It is unlikely that these trends will have a significant impact on the forthcoming general elections. On the one hand, despite the sharp decline in the indexes presented in this paper, it is clear that changes are gradual and therefore not extremely noticeable by the common voter, unlike in the mid-1970s, when Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency regime and when the drop in democratic freedom was sudden and institutionalised. Second, the most affected

by the declining quality of democracy are religious minorities, who do not vote for the NDA parties anyway.

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