

# Introduction to Democratization

“Democratization” is the process by which a country changes from a non-democratic form of government to a *more* democratic one. Indicators of democratization include: free and fair elections, active civic participation, the protection of human rights, and the rule of law. Nations that undergo democratization can begin as any form of government from authoritarian dictatorships to monarchies. Sometimes democratization happens very quickly, while other times countries make slower progress in their transition.



What motivates a country to begin the process of democratization may be a result of many factors. Sometimes the motivation comes from the citizens living within the country. For example, dissatisfaction with current governments and practices may lead to an internal rise in political opposition and pro-democracy protest movements. This can cause a more radical transformation toward a democratic government. Other times the move toward democratization is inspired by new generations of leadership willing to lead the country through more gradual reform. The motivation that pushes a country toward democratization may also come from external factors. Oftentimes, a country's ability to participate in international organizations, establish diplomatic relations, and garner economic trading partners is contingent on the presence of these democratization indicators. These motivators often work in combination, as they did in both the communist Soviet Union and apartheid-era South Africa in the 1980s.

Once a country begins moving towards democratization, a key step is establishing or revising a constitution. A written document that guarantees fundamental rights to citizens, establishes the principle of rule of law, and sets up an elected government that is transparent and accountable to the people is crucial for the continued success of any democracy. Other key components include ensuring the creation of an independent judiciary, ensuring the military is under civilian control, and fostering a civil society open to free speech, free press, and free assembly. Structures need to be in place for free and fair elections and peaceful transfers of power.

An important thing to understand is that democratization is not a single event or destination on a timeline, but rather an ongoing process that requires active civic engagement, accountability of elected officials, a free press serving as a check on the government, and more. After the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin was asked what form of government the Framers had chosen for the new nation. His reply: “a republic, if you can keep it” indicated his understanding and warning that it’s possible for even the most democratic of nations to backpedal into authoritarianism if the indicators of democratization begin to erode.

When measuring the democratic health of a foreign country, there are numerous indicators of democratization that may be examined. Four of the essential indicators include:

1. **Free and Fair Elections:** A system with competitive elections, universal suffrage, voting that is free of intimidation and coercion, a transparent electoral process, and respect for the outcome of the election by the ruling authorities



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2. **Civic Participation:** High levels of active civic participation, including voter turnout
3. **Protection of Human Rights:** Safeguards for natural and individual rights, respect for minority rights, and the presence of due process of law
4. **The Rule of Law:** Laws are applied consistently, fairly, and impartially, the government and elected officials are accountable to the law, and an independent judiciary is able to act as a check on executive and legislative authority

The process of democratization is complex. While no single measure can fully capture everything, policymakers and the international community use these indicators to assess the health of democracy in a given country, or to monitor a country's progress on the road to democracy and help identify areas that may require improvement. No two countries will travel the same path towards democracy.

