Democracy, Dictatorship, and Beyond: Global Data on Regime Spells, 1946–2025

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Abstract

Why are some countries democracies, whereas others are autocracies? Why do some political regimes survive longer than others? Answering these fundamental questions in Comparative Politics requires conceptualizing and measuring not only regime types, but also when regimes begin and end. We provide a new event-based framework for identifying political regimes, which classifies regimes according to their founding events. The resulting dataset includes every regime spell between 1946 and 2025 for all independent countries in the world ($n = 834$), including short-lived spells of less than one year. Autocracies are classified by four founding events — coups, rebellions, foreign handoffs, and incumbent takeovers — rather than institutional characteristics. Democracies begin with newly free and fair elections, and we provide new standards for turnover and identifying democratic breakdown through incumbent takeover. Beyond democracy and autocracy, we identify dozens of provisional and nonsovereign spells. The data reveal striking trends in the historical distribution of regimes worldwide. Almost all democracies fall either to coups (more common during the Cold War) or incumbent takeovers (more common in recent decades). Further, this shift in how democracies die coincides with transformations in how autocracies emerge. Coup autocracies were the most common type during the Cold War but have since declined, while many foreign handoff and rebel regimes survived the fall of communism. Incumbent takeovers have recently become the most common form of autocracy, although the four autocratic types are now roughly equal in prevalence.

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