

Democracy vs Autocracy

Which is best, and who is winning?

U3A Timaru 12 September 2022

What is (liberal) democracy?

- Competitive elections with universal franchise
- Leadership selection based on meritocracy
- Civil rights (freedom to associate, freedom of belief, freedom of expression)
- Separation of powers
- Rule of Law
- “A system in which governments lose elections, and the outcome is widely accepted”

Liberal Democracy is under threat

- From external threats, in the sense of two powerful contenders that provide alternative models of government that are attractive to many (China and Russia)
- From declining legitimacy of the so-called “liberal international order”
- From internal problems that boil down to inability to deal effectively with inequality in a globalizing world

Four types of government regimes

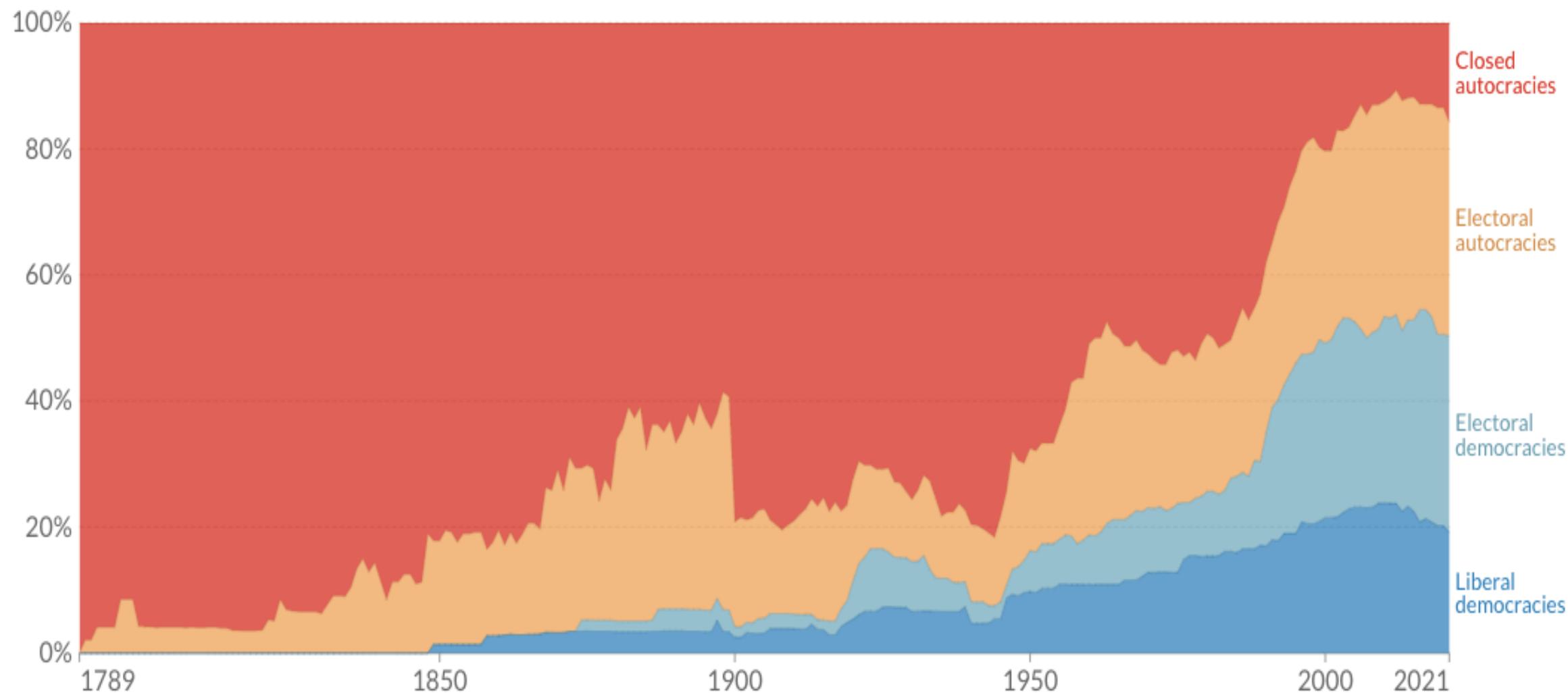
- **Liberal Democracy** (34 countries; 13% of world population)
- **Electoral Democracy** (55 countries; 17% of world population)
- **Electoral Autocracy** (60 countries; 44% of world population)
- **Closed Autocracy** (30 countries with 26% of the world population)

Liberal Democracy is not winning the numbers game

- The number of liberal democracies is down to 34 in 2021, from 42 in 2012 .
- There have not been so few since 1995 – over 26 years ago.
- The level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2021 is down to 1989 levels – ***the last 30 years of democratic advances are now eradicated***

Share of democracies and autocracies, World

Political regimes based on the criteria of the classification by Lührmann et al. (2018) and the assessment by V-Dem's experts.



Source: OWID based on Lührmann et al. (2018) and V-Dem (v12)

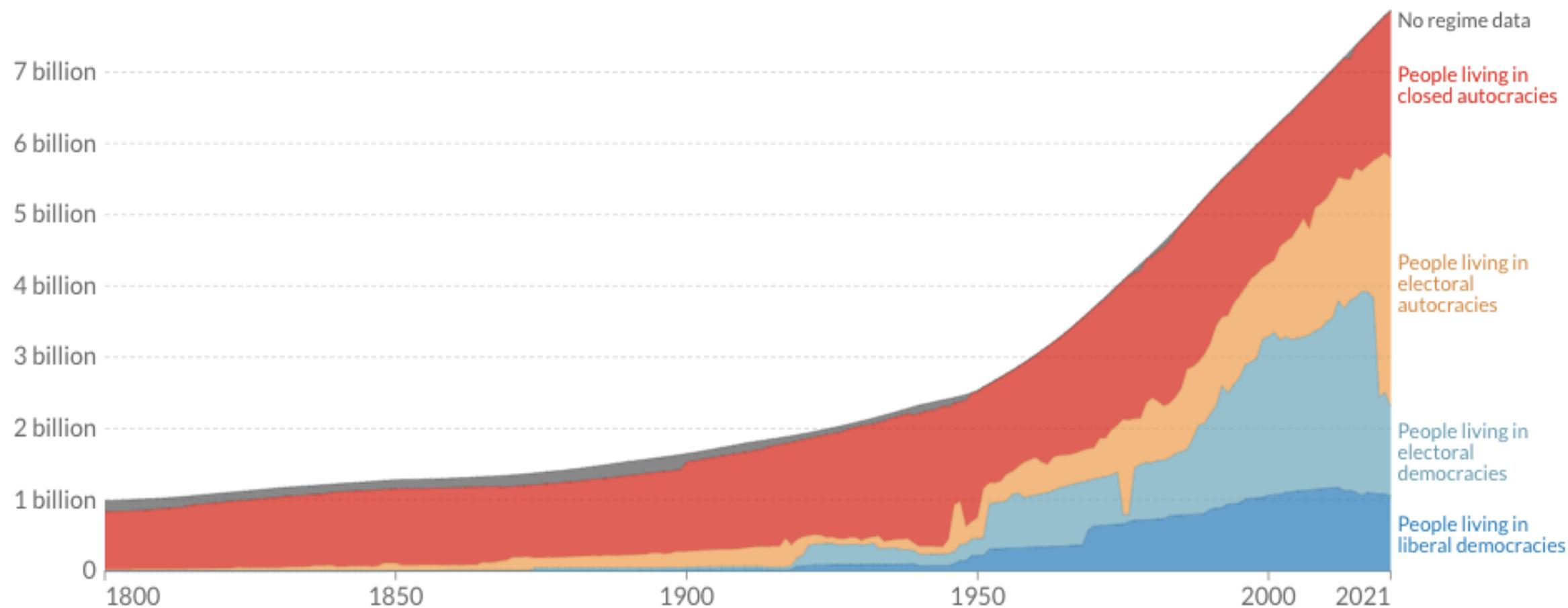
Note: The share of closed autocracies increases a lot in 1900 because V-Dem covers many more countries since then, often colonies.

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People living in democracies and autocracies, World

Political regimes based on the criteria of the classification by Lührmann et al. (2018) and the assessment by V-Dem's experts.

↻ Change region Relative



Source: OWID based on Lührmann et al. (2018) and V-Dem (v12), Gapminder (v6), HYDE (v3.2), and UN (2019).

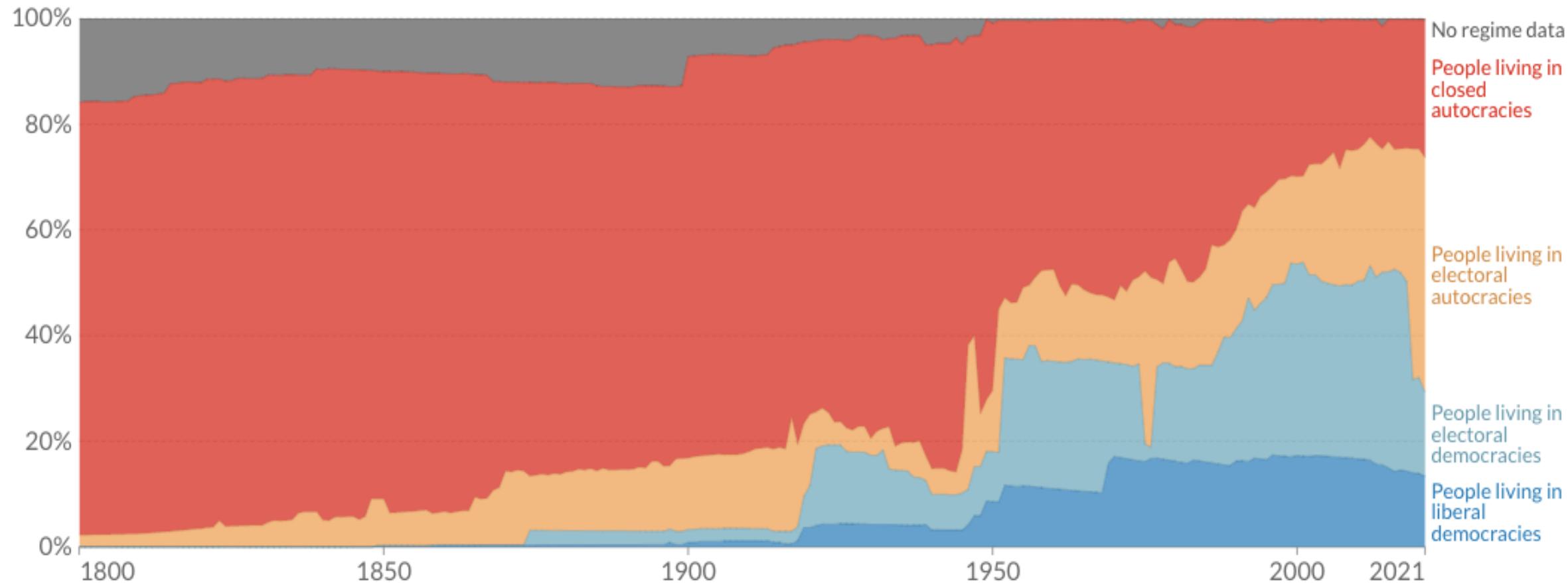
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▶ 1800 2021

People living in democracies and autocracies, World

Political regimes based on the criteria of the classification by Lührmann et al. (2018) and the assessment by V-Dem's experts.

Relative



Source: OWID based on Lührmann et al. (2018) and V-Dem (v12), Gapminder (v6), HYDE (v3.2), and UN (2019).

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FIGURE 15: TOP 10 DEMOCRATIZING VS. AUTOCRATIZING COUNTRIES (3-YEAR)

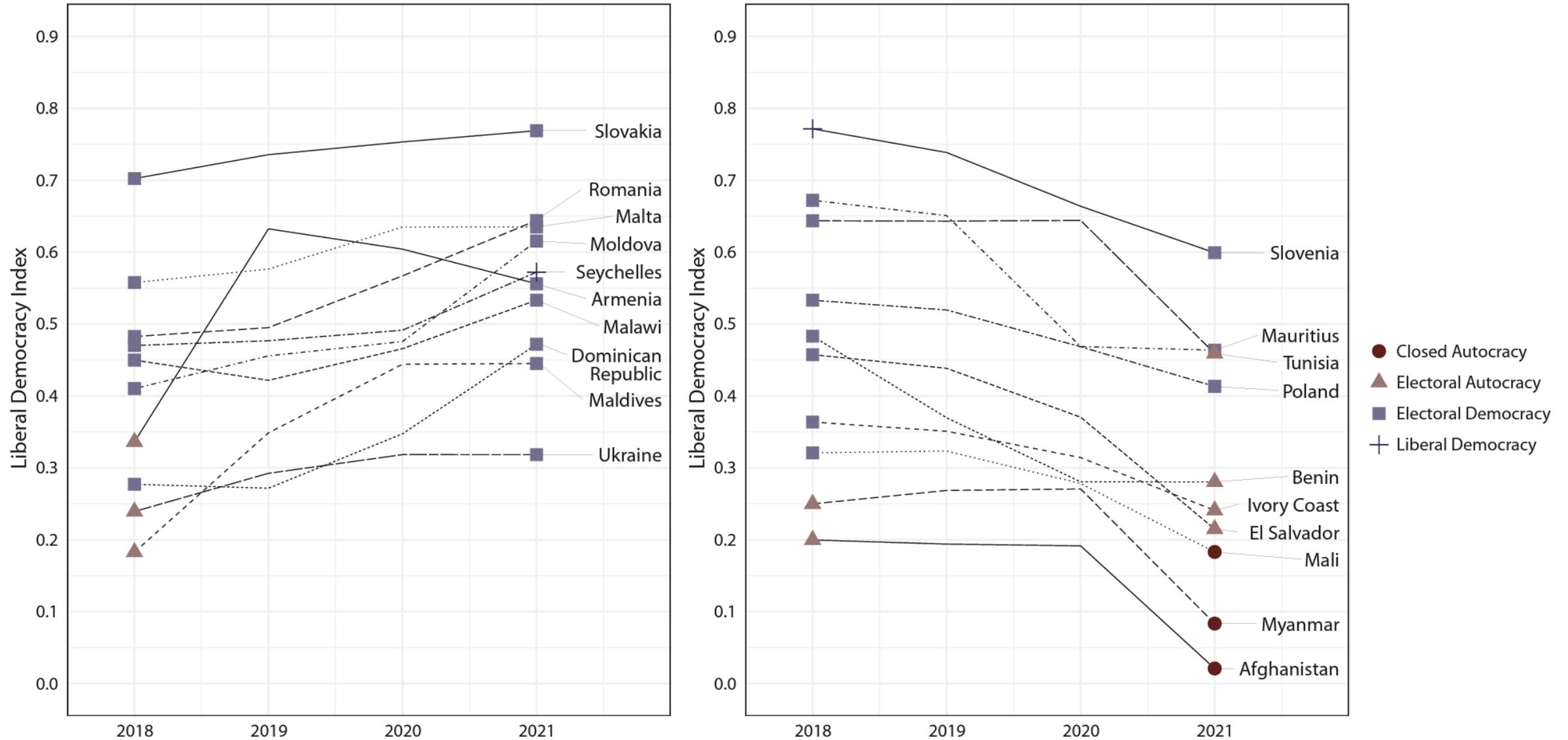
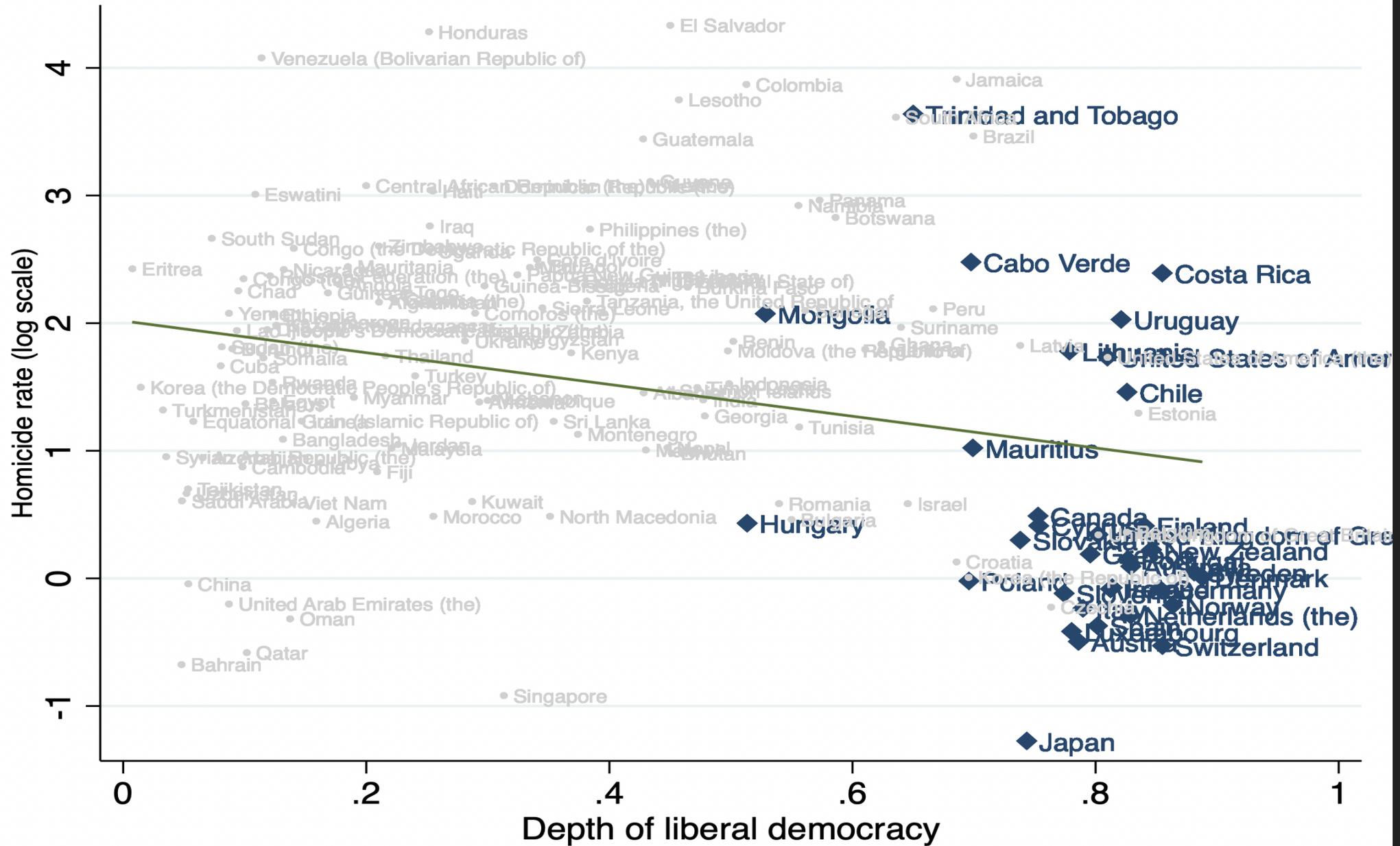


Figure 15 plots values of the liberal democracy index (LDI) for the 10 countries with the highest amount of LDI increase (left panel) and decrease (right panel) in the last 3 years. Markers and color indicate each country's regime type on the Regimes of the World index.

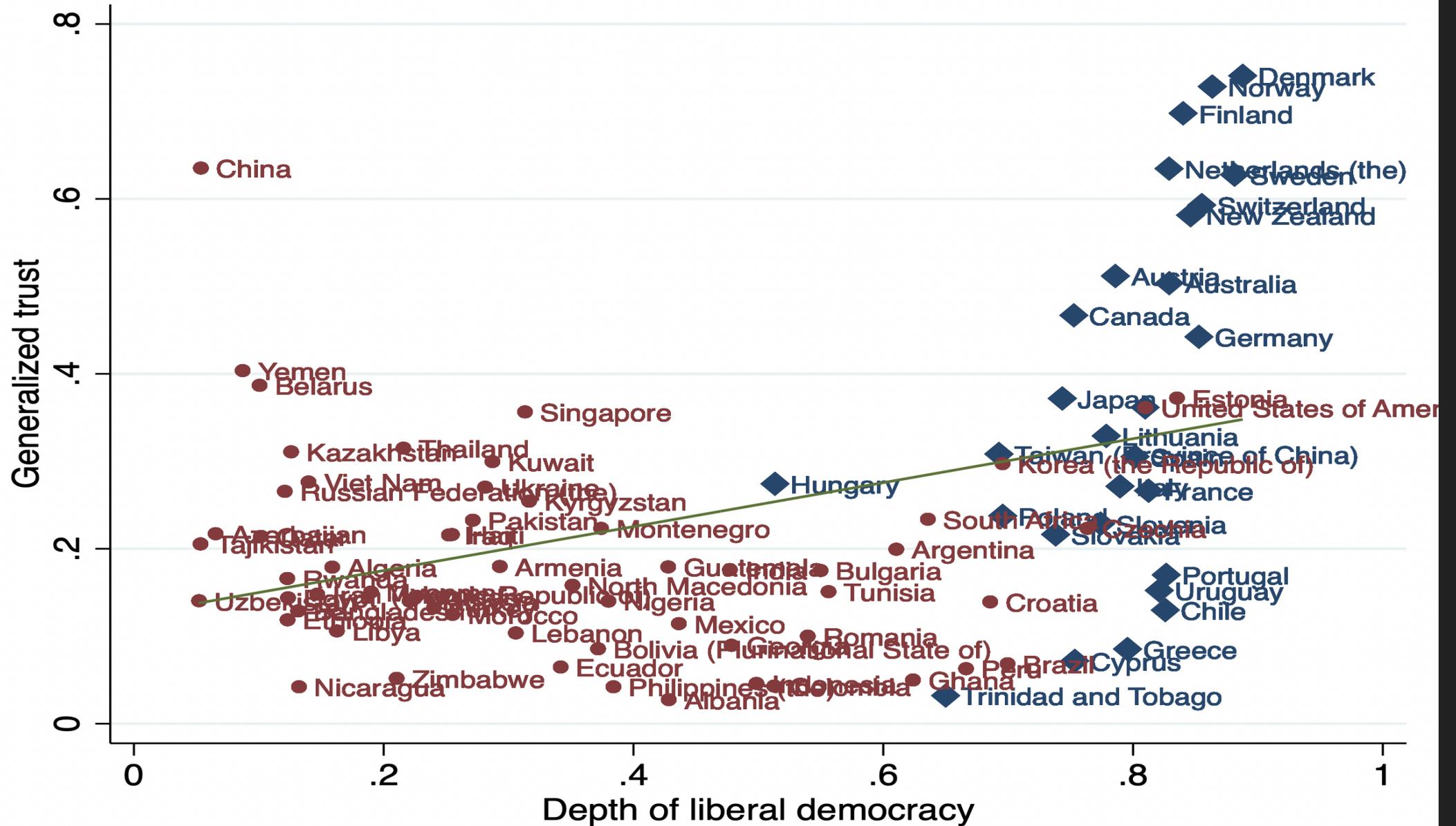
Is Liberal Democracy still “the best”?

- Still associated with the best performance in terms of well-being indicators
- Least crime-ridden
- People trust one another in liberal democracies
- Liberal democracies send their children to school
- Better handling of epidemics?

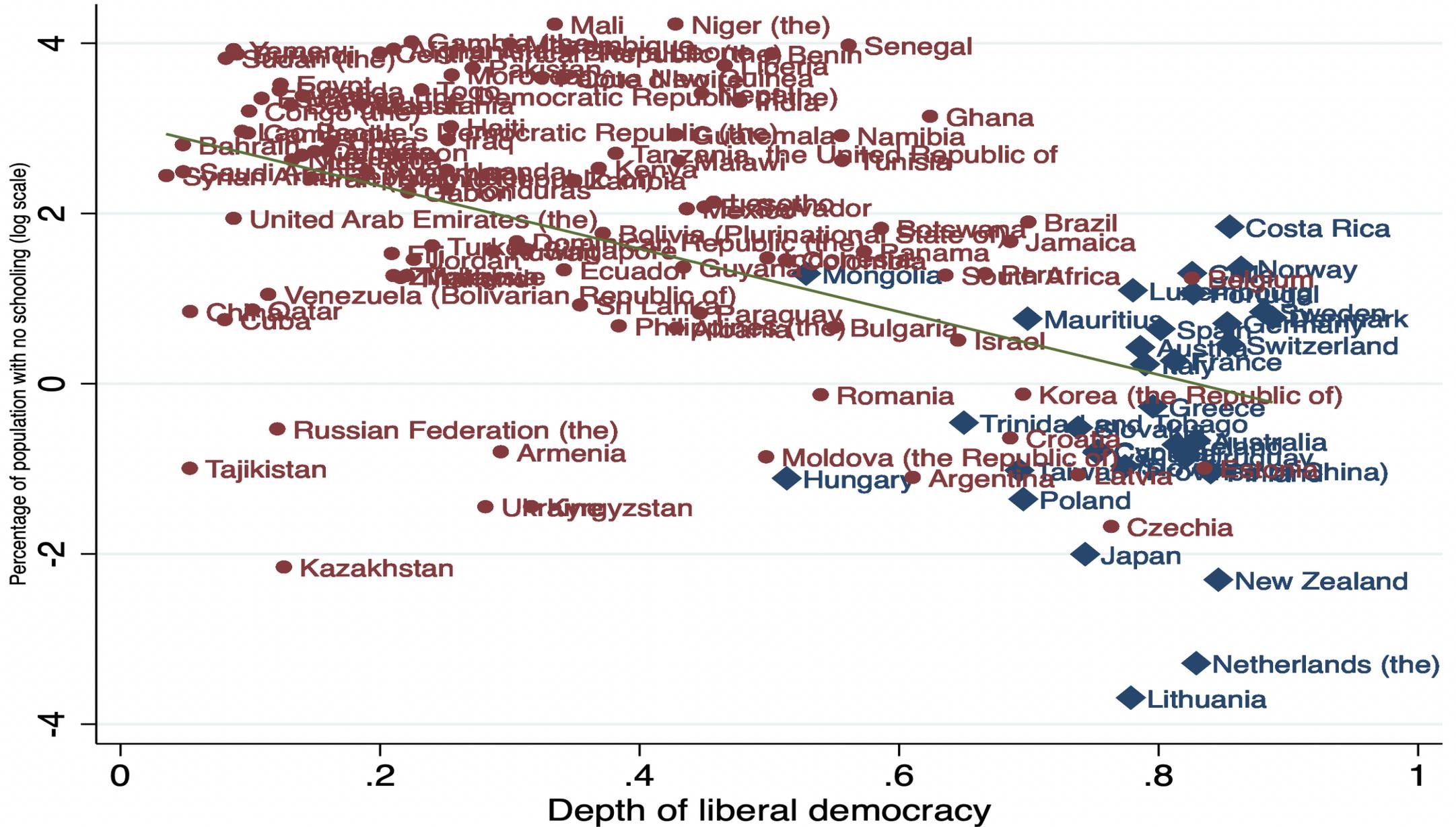
It is safer to live in a liberal democracy



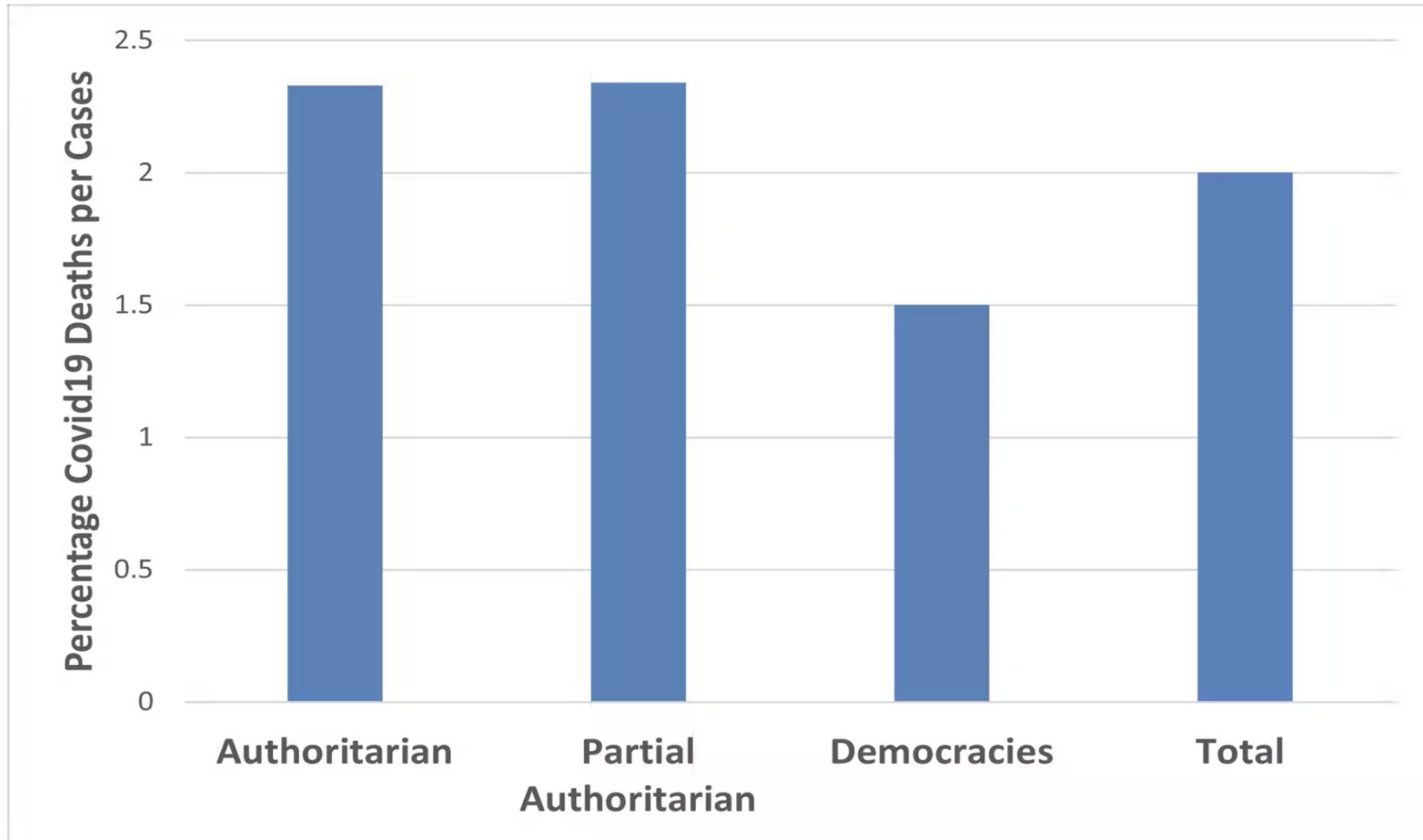
People living in liberal democracies trust others



Liberal democracies send their children to school



COVID deaths by political category (%)



Ratio of cumulative deaths to cases in authoritarian and democratic systems. Paul Whiteley/University of Essex, Author provided

Worldwide Vaccination Rates

As of September 14, 2021 (using latest available data after August 1, 2021)

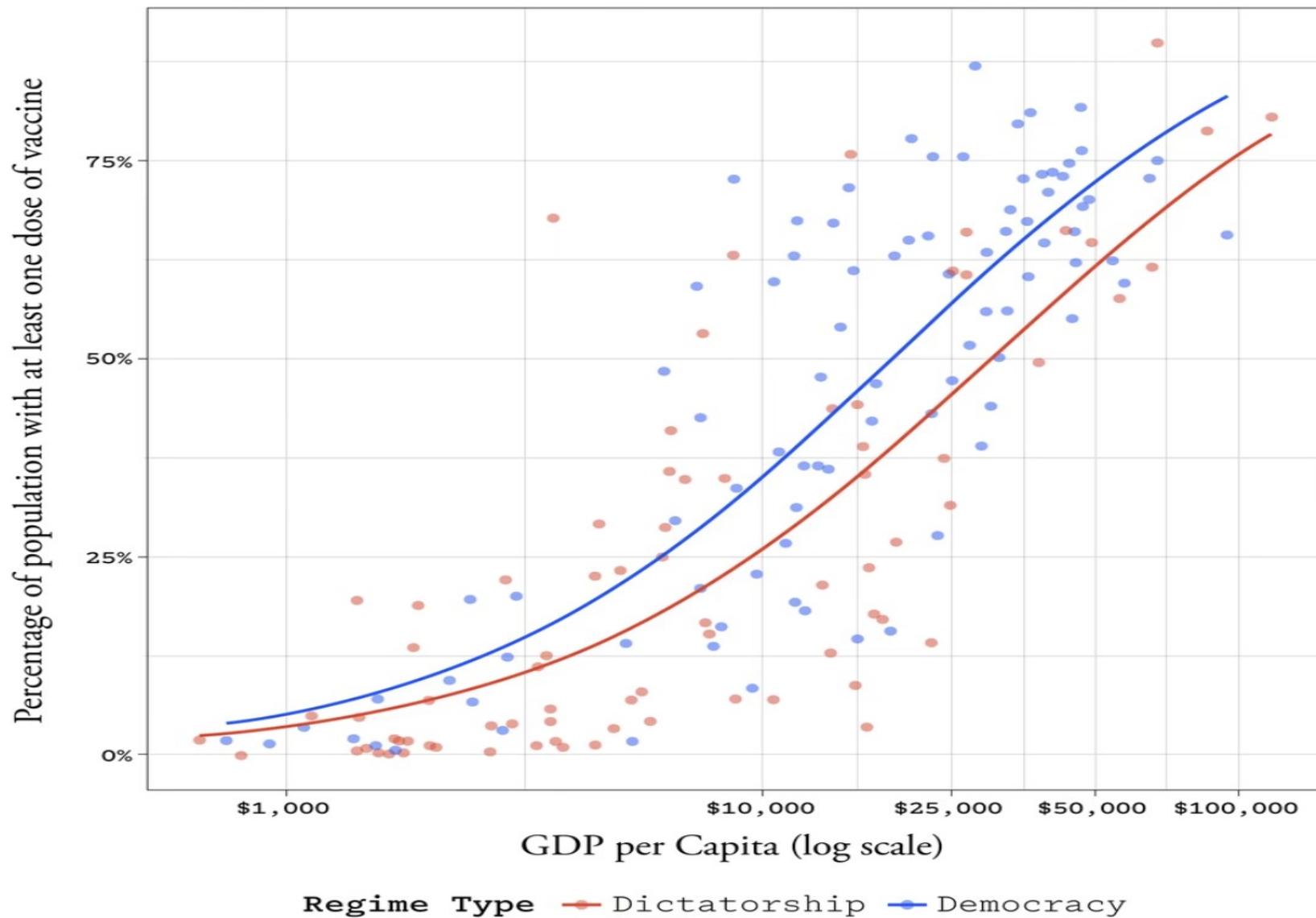


Figure 1: Worldwide vaccination rates by regime type. Each point represents a country; the lines are the prediction from a best-fit logistic model.

So, why is Liberal Democracy losing ground?

External threats, including active measures by opponents to undermine liberal democracy.

Opponents of liberal democracy have gained much confidence in recent years.

Whys is Lib Dem losing ground (cont)?

International legitimacy questioned

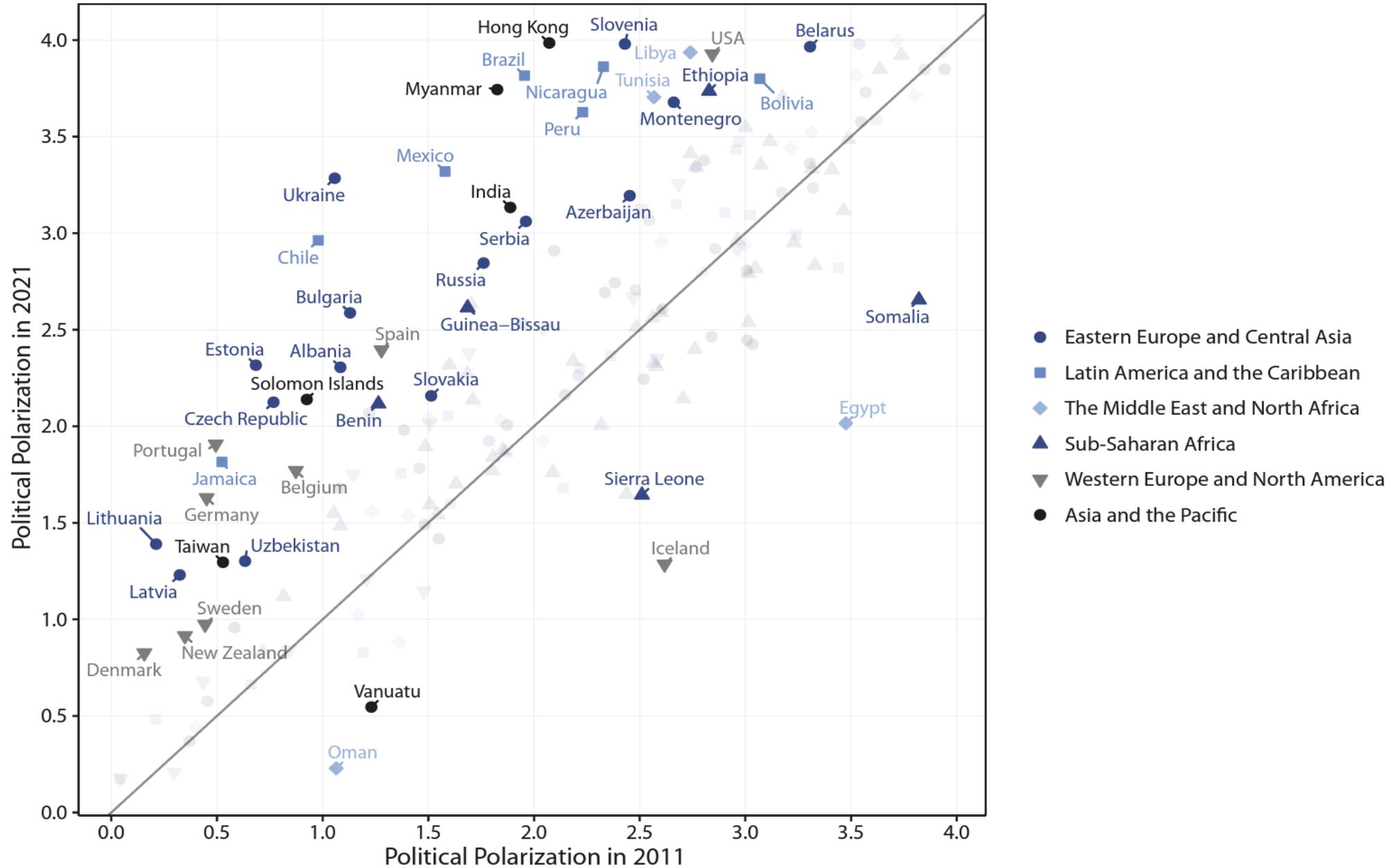
- Global financial crisis revealed the fragility of the globalized world economy
- The US policy of “going-it alone” was a major mistake
- West is perceived to be hypocritical
- So-called liberal world economic order has not solved problem of deep poverty
- Alternative models, such as Chinese state capitalism, becoming attractive

Why is liberal democracy losing ground (cont)?

Internal problems:

- a) Failure to provide adequate protection against inequalitarian effects of globalization
- b) People experienced global governance as “out there” and “far removed”
- c) The result has been populist resistance against perceived “elitism”, return of economic nationalism, and growing distrust of “experts” and governments
- d) All of the above made worse by COVID
- e) Result: Polarization is a major issue in many societies

FIGURE 21: INCREASING VS. DECREASING POLITICAL POLARIZATION, 2011-2021



Conclusion

- We have come to take liberal democracy for granted (remember “The end of history” thesis?)
- We have to reconsider what democracy means anew, both domestically and internationally
- However, the news of liberal democracy’s demise is “an exaggeration”, as Mark Twain said of rumours of his own death

Mark Twain was undecided whether to be more amused or annoyed when a Journal representative informed him today of the report in New York that he was dying in poverty in London ... The great humourist, while not perhaps very robust, is in the best of health. He said:

'I can understand perfectly how the report of my illness got about, I have even heard on good authority that I was dead. James Ross Clemens, a cousin of mine, was seriously ill two or three weeks ago in London, but is well now.

The report of my illness grew out of his illness. The report of my death was an exaggeration.'