

Autocratization and Development*

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Abstract

This chapter reviews research on two important consequences of autocratization – economic and human developments. Does democracy promote economic growth and public health? After reviewing recent developments in this field of research, I point to three pertinent issues that need to be investigated by further research in a contemporary era of autocratization: 1) the relationship between political regimes and development in the 21st century, 2) untangling the effects of democratic institutions, and 3) illuminating the impacts of dissimilar modes of regime changes. This chapter suggests that by focusing on each of these three issues, scholars are able to further advance our understanding of the relationship between democracy and development in an era of autocratization.

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Introduction

The contemporary third wave of autocratization threatens democratic principles around the world (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). In many democracies, populist leaders have emerged in strength. Over the past decade, they have undermined institutions of representative democracy under the guise of protecting popular interests, leading to significant democratic recessions (Haggard and Kaufman 2021). In many autocracies, dictators have seemingly become more repressive, tightening their grip on power through coercive threats and resulting in autocratic consolidation (V-Dem 2022). Together, the current trend of autocratization in both democracies and autocracies poses significant risks on a global scale to human rights and political freedom, intrinsic values for human beings cultivated over the past centuries in modern history.

Let alone the imminent threats to political rights and civil liberties, autocratization also has profound impacts on a variety of economic and social consequences. Collecting 1,100 cross-country analyses that appeared in 600 journal articles published since 2000, Gerring, Knutsen, and Berge (2022)'s comprehensive review shows that the extent to which democracy brings benevolent consequences differs across various outcomes including corruption, quality of government, migration, foreign direct investment, trade, education, public spending, inflation, and inequality (Gerring, Knutsen, and Berge 2022). Among others, two distinct aspects of development—economic prosperity and public health—have been the most well-researched socio-economic outcomes, and scholars have investigated whether democracy makes a difference in causing economic growth and improving public health. What do we know about the relationship between democracy and these aspects of development? What research agendas remain in this fascinating research program in the era of autocratization?

To answer these research questions, this chapter first surveys the recent literature on political regimes and development, with a particular focus on the impacts of democracy/democratization on economic and human development.¹ Scholars have tended to emphasize different aspects

¹Most studies reviewed in this chapter focus on the effect of regime change (democratization or autocracy).

and mechanisms of democracy when explaining these two distinct dimensions of development.

On the one hand, economic growth is more closely related to the "liberalism" aspect of democratic regimes, where strong political constraints and the rule of law incentivize the government to protect citizens' property rights. Under conditions of strong horizontal accountability, citizens whose property rights are secure can focus on investment without the fear of government confiscation, thus promoting economic growth. On the other hand, public health is more closely linked to the "electoral democracy" aspect of democratic regimes. Free and fair elections allow politicians to be responsive to the needs of the majority, particularly the poor, rather than catering solely to the wealthy minority. As a result, politicians are inclined to promote social policies that improve the welfare of the poor, consequently leading to improvements in public health. With these mechanisms in mind, this chapter reviews recent empirical studies on democracy and development to assess the extent to which the empirical findings align with these theoretical expectations.

This chapter then focuses on three important issues that social scientists may address to further advance the study of democracy and development. The first issue is to explore the relationship between democracy and development in the 21st century. Given the proclaimed high policy performance of China and other autocracies, as well as the crisis of democracy in developed states, the democratic advantages on economic and health outcomes in the 21st century have been the subject of debate. However, it should be noted that modern autocrats also manipulate information, raising concerns about the measurement of outcome variables that report government performance, such as economic growth and public health. I suggest that researchers need to exercise caution in using these indicators, as conclusions drawn from cross-country quantitative analysis may be biased due to data manipulation by modern autocrats.

Second, this chapter suggests that disaggregating the subcomponents of democratic institutions enables researchers to empirically evaluate which aspects of democracy contribute to
tization) on development by estimating two-way fixed effects or equivalent methods.

improving economic and human development. Specifically, clear identification of horizontal and vertical accountability, which are two core components of democratic institutions, helps us elucidate the nuanced effects of democracy on development.

The third issue is to focus on the types, directions, and sequences of political regime changes and their impacts on development. Distinguishing between autocratization and democratization, as well as various forms of autocratization (such as abrupt changes in political regimes through coups versus gradual erosion in democratic regimes), is likely to yield differences in outcomes. Such differentiation should assist us in more accurately evaluating the impacts of contemporary autocratization on future development.

This chapter proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on political regimes and economic development, while the third section summarizes the literature on democracy and human development. The fourth section closely examines each of the three issues, discussing the most recent works and pointing out possible research avenues. Finally, the conclusion section discusses the possible implications we can draw for the contemporary era of autocratization.

Political Regimes and Economic Development

Modern democracy is a form of governance that institutionalizes checks and balances, holds free and fair elections to choose representatives, and guarantees political rights and civil liberties for citizens. Broadly speaking, this definition of democracy encompasses two dimensions ([O'Donnell 1994](#)).

The first dimension is the aspect of "liberalism," where competing representatives constrain each other to prevent the concentration of excessive power. This dimension can also be conceptualized as "horizontal accountability," which refers to the balance of power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, as well as other third-party institutions.

The second dimension is the aspect of "democracy," where politicians are accountable to

citizens through free and fair elections. This dimension is also conceptualized as "vertical accountability." In contrast, in autocracies, these two types of accountability do not fully function: political leaders face fewer constraints, and elections are manipulated to favor autocrats and their parties.

These two aspects of modern democracy have both potential advantages and disadvantages. The liberalism aspect, which constrains the use of arbitrary power, is expected to prevent the "tyranny of the majority." However, strong political constraints may also make it challenging to implement policies in a timely manner. The horizontal accountability aspect of democracy urges politicians to pursue popular preferences in order to win elections. Nevertheless, intense electoral competition can incentivize politicians to prioritize short-term gains and offer populist measures without solid policy rationale. When examining the negative aspects of these principles of modern democracy, the argument of "developmental dictatorship" arises, wherein a "smart" dictator can make swift decisions with a long-term perspective.

With these pros and cons of democracy and autocracy in mind, political scientists and economists have investigated various socio-economic consequences of different political regimes. Among these, the relationship between democracy and economic development has been one of the most extensively researched topics. In a democratic system, the rule of law prevails, ensuring effective horizontal accountability. This, in turn, secures citizens' property rights. With their property rights protected, citizens are able to focus on investment without the fear of government confiscation. This conducive environment for economic activities is expected to promote economic growth. From this perspective, it is anticipated that democracy has a positive association with economic prosperity ([North and Weingast 1989](#)).

On the other hand, democracy also involves vertical accountability. In order to win elections, governments may prioritize gaining political support from the consumption-oriented masses rather than focusing on the investment-oriented business elites. In this context, elec-

toral competition may discourage investments, which are crucial for driving economic growth. From this perspective, it is possible to expect that authoritarian regimes that prioritize the interests of investment-oriented business elites may be more conducive to economic growth compared to democratic regimes, which are incentivized to cater to the consumption-oriented masses (e.g., [de Schweinitz 1959](#); [Barro 1996](#); [Tavares and Wacziarg 2001](#)). Supporting these theoretical expectations, [Cox and Weingast \(2018\)](#) demonstrate that horizontal accountability (i.e., executive constraints) is more favorable for sustainable economic growth in the face of leadership turnover compared to vertical accountability (i.e., electoral competition).

Which of these contrasting perspectives on the effects of political regimes on economic growth is empirically supported? Social scientists have extensively explored the association between democracy and economic prosperity using global data sets of political regimes (such as the Freedom House Index, Polity Scores, and more recently the Varieties of Democracy Project's Democracy indices) and economic growth (typically measured by annual changes in GDP per capita). However, studies have yielded different results, which can be attributed to several factors.

First, each study has relied on different samples, encompassing different countries and time periods. This variation makes it challenging to draw general conclusions from a single study. Additionally, given the likelihood of many confounding factors that are correlated with both democracy and economic development, differing model specifications are likely to produce different estimates due to potential biases from omitted variables. Therefore, the empirical support for the effects of political regimes on economic growth remains inconclusive and requires careful consideration of data sources, sample composition, and model specifications.

Recent studies have made efforts to address these limitations in various ways, leading to findings that support the notion of democracy promoting economic growth. On one hand, scholars have started applying meta-analysis techniques to account for the issue of different samples. The pioneering work of [Doucouliagos and Ulubaşoğlu \(2008\)](#) presents

the first meta-analysis of the relationship between democracy and economic growth. By examining 483 estimates from 84 studies, they find that while democracy may not directly impact growth, it has a robust indirect effect. Democracy improves human capital, reduces inflation, prevents political instability, and ensures higher levels of economic freedom, all of which contribute to stimulating economic growth.

Expanding the scope of analysis to include more recent research and both published and unpublished papers, [Colagrossi, Rossignoli, and Maggioni \(2020\)](#) conduct the largest-scale meta-analysis to date, incorporating 2,047 models from 188 studies. Their findings indicate a positive and direct relationship between democracy and economic growth. They also note that the positive associations between democracy and economic development tend to be found in more recent research that employs advanced statistical techniques.

On the other hand, recent advancements in research have also contributed to the literature by employing more advanced estimation methods. Specifically, researchers have adopted various causal inference techniques to estimate the causal effects of democracy on economic development using cross-national panel data. For example, [Acemoglu et al. \(2019\)](#) employ country fixed effects and instrumental variables techniques, using regional waves of democratization as instruments. By accounting for both time-varying and time-invariant unobservable heterogeneity, they find a robust, long-term positive impact of democracy on GDP per capita.

In a similar vein, [Imai, Kim, and Wang \(2022\)](#) apply a panel matching estimator that allows for matching on various covariates between treated and control observations. Their analysis demonstrates that authoritarian reversal (i.e., transitioning from democracy to autocracy) tends to have a statistically significant, negative impact on economic growth in the short and medium term. However, the effect of democratization (i.e., transitioning from autocracy to democracy) on growth is not statistically distinguishable from zero. Although there may be some nuances in the findings, recent research employing rigorous causal inference techniques consistently suggests that democracy has a causal effect on economic growth.

These studies provide compelling evidence that supports the positive relationship between democracy and economic development.

In summary, while it is theoretically possible to assume both the negative and positive effects of democracy on economic growth, recent research indicates that democracy is likely to be associated with economic development. However, it is important to note that economic prosperity is just one dimension of development and there are other factors that contribute to the overall improvement of human welfare. The next section of the chapter shifts focus to another important aspect of development, namely popular health, which has also received significant attention and investigation from social scientists.

Political Regimes and Human Development

Human development encompasses more than just economic growth and is defined as "a process of enlarging people's choices as well as raising the level of well-being achieved" ([UN 1997](#)). In order to expand people's choices, governments need to implement various social policies that enable citizens to lead long and healthy lives, receive education, and enjoy a decent standard of living. To capture an essential aspect of human development, social scientists have conducted extensive research to understand the conditions under which governments can improve people's health. Mortality rates, particularly infant mortality rates, have been regarded as crucial indicators that reflect human development and the extent to which a government addresses poverty reduction ([Sen 2001](#); [Cutler, Deaton, and Lleras-Muney 2006](#)). These indicators are widely utilized in exploring the relationship between political regimes and human well-being.

Democracy has a positive impact on human health by holding the government accountable to voters. Competitive elections create strong redistributive pressures on governments, incentivizing them to implement pro-poor policies. This is particularly significant for health outcomes because while the wealthy can afford adequate medical care and social welfare

regardless of the political regime, the poor often lack access to necessary social welfare on their own. The introduction of fair and free elections allows politicians vying for electoral success to prioritize the needs of the majority of poor citizens over the interests of the wealthy minority (Meltzer and Richard 1981; Boix 2003). In other words, vertical accountability in democratic regimes enhances the responsiveness of politicians to the needs of the population, thereby positively influencing health outcomes.

What do empirical findings reveal about the relationship between democracy and popular health?² Earlier studies have shown that democratic governments tend to outperform their autocratic counterparts in improving the welfare of their populations. For example, studies conducted by Zweifel and Navia (2000), Przeworski et al. (2000), and Baum and Lake (2003), and Baum and Lake (2003) analyze cross-national data on regime types and infant mortality rates, consistently finding lower infant mortality rates in democracies compared to authoritarian regimes. In contrast, Ross (2006) claims that the presence of political competition and freedom within democracies may not always lead to improvements in human welfare.³

In a comprehensive review by Gerring, Knutsen, and Berge (2022) on the consequences of democracy, it is revealed that democracy is positively associated with human development in 65 out of 79 studies conducted since 2000. Therefore, the collective knowledge on democracy and popular health suggests that democracy is a robust predictor of improved health outcomes, along with other important factors such as the enhancement of human rights, transparency, reduction in corruption, and quality of government.

Against this backdrop, recent studies have advanced the literature on democracy and human development in the following two ways. First, scholars have recognized the importance of distinguishing between short-term and long-term effects of democracy (McGuire 2020). One strand of research focuses on the long-run effect of democracy on human welfare. Gerring, Thacker, and Alfaro (2012) propose three mechanisms through which cumulative experience

²For exhaustive overviews of the determinants of population health in general and the relationship between political regimes and population health in particular, see McGuire (2020) and Lynch (2023).

³García (2014)'s replication analysis suggests that the null results reported in Ross (2006) are an artifact of averaging the variables and model specifications.

of democracy leads to a reduction in infant mortality. First, leaders in new democracies face a high risk of regime change and may make short-sighted decisions, such as confiscating state resources for their political survival. Second, mature democracies foster a vigorous civil society, which strengthens political accountability between the government and citizens. Third, mature democracies institutionalize political equality across various social cleavages, promoting the fair distribution of resources beyond social diversity. [Gerring, Thacker, and Alfaro \(2012\)](#) operationalize long democratic experience by summing the Polity scores with a certain depreciation rate, and find a positive correlation between this stock of democracy variable and infant mortality rates in a dataset that includes 192 countries from 1960 to 2000. Subsequent studies using new measures of political regimes and varying depreciation rates support their findings ([Wang, Mechkova, and Andersson 2019](#); [Gerring et al. 2021](#)).

The other strand of research focuses on the effects of democratization at a certain point in time on human well-being thereafter, while assuming that pro-poor policies implemented after a democratic change take time to yield certain policy outcomes, such as reductions in infant mortality rates. Drawing from panel data covering 172 countries from 1800 to 2015, [Annaka and Higashijima \(2021\)](#) employ error correction models to conduct a statistical analysis. Their findings demonstrate that immediately after democratization, governments quickly shift their social and public policies towards pro-poor directions, and such policy changes tend to have positive impacts on long-term improvements in public health. Their analysis suggests that governments begin adopting public policy packages targeting a wider array of people immediately after democratization, and these policy changes later contribute to a gradual improvement in infant mortality rates. Conversely, when free and fair elections are undermined, autocratization leads to negative effects on infant mortality incrementally over time. Supporting these findings, [Wang, Mechkova, and Andersson \(2019\)](#) also show that democratization has both short- and long-term effects in lowering infant mortality rates.

Second, similar to the study of democracy and economic development, recent research on democracy and human development also employs causal inference techniques to iden-

tify causal relationships between political regimes and human welfare. It is reasonable to assume that numerous unobservable confounders influence both human well-being and political regimes. Furthermore, it may be the case that governments successfully improving public health are more incentivized to embark on political liberalization because the improvement of public health helps them stay in power. Therefore, the issue of reverse causality is an important concern. To mitigate these endogeneity concerns, scholars adopt instrumental variables approaches.

For instance, [Gerring et al. \(2021\)](#), [Wang, Mechkova, and Andersson \(2019\)](#), and [Miller \(2015\)](#) all use neighboring countries' scores of democracy as instruments to identify the causal effects of democratic experiences ([Gerring et al. 2021](#); [Wang, Mechkova, and Andersson 2019](#)) or experiences of multi-party elections ([Miller 2015](#)) on infant mortality rates. Similarly, [Annaka and Higashijima \(2021\)](#) use both the proportion of democracies in neighboring countries and the regional clustering tendency of democratization as instruments. Utilizing a synthetic control method on 24 countries from 1960 to 2000, [Pieters et al. \(2016\)](#) show that democratization may lead to lower infant mortality rates.

Three Remaining Issues on the Study of Autocratization and Development

The aforementioned reviews on the relationship between political regimes and development indicate that democracy causes both economic and human development. They also suggest that more recent studies that adopt rigorous causal inference methods are more in line with the benevolent effects of democracy. Based on these findings, in the face of an era of autocratization, we need to consider the following pertinent questions to further increase our understanding of democracy and development: What lessons can we draw from the general relationships between democracy and development when considering the impacts of autocratization on economic prosperity and public health in the contemporary world?

Conversely, what implications do the recent developments of democratic backsliding and autocratic consolidation have on research on democracy and development? The rest of this chapter suggests that we have at least three pertinent issues to explore in order to benefit from the dialogue between scholarly findings and reality in the midst of the third wave of autocratization.

Democracy and Development in the 21st Century

The first issue is to systematically investigate whether the positive association between democracy and development holds in the first twenty years of the 21st century. Since the beginning of the 21st century, political leaders in autocratic countries have been emphasizing their higher rates of economic growth (e.g., the Chinese model of economic development), their perceived capabilities in managing societal cleavages (e.g., the surge of populism and political discontent in mature democracies), and more recently, their prompt and swift countermeasures against the new coronavirus during the COVID-19 pandemic, in an attempt to assert their supremacy over their democratic counterparts. Examining whether the democratic advantages in economic and health performance are at risk in the 21st century holds profound implications for policymakers and contributes to the academic debate on the effects of democracy and democratization.

In this regard, [Narita and Sudo \(2021\)](#) is an important study that investigates the impact of democracy on economic growth and public health in the 21st century (2001-2020) using a quasi-experimental design. By employing five different instrumental variables for democracy that have been utilized in previous studies, the authors find that higher levels of democracy are associated with lower rates of economic growth and higher COVID-19 death rates. They also explore potential mechanisms that explain the negative association between democracy and growth, suggesting that democracy leads to slower growth through reductions in investment and trade.

Although their study provides a rigorous method for the first systematic quantitative

investigation identifying the negative causal effect of democracy on development after the 2000s, the impact of democracy on growth and public health should be carefully scrutinized. One important issue to consider is the potential for data manipulation by autocrats (Knutsen 2021). The literature on autocratic politics has revealed that modern autocrats, instead of overt repression, tend to rely more on gathering popular support by emphasizing their policy performances (Higashijima 2022). When it becomes difficult to demonstrate their competence through actual performance, autocrats may resort to various measures of manipulating information to propagate their policy competence (Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik 2016; Guriev and Treisman 2019). One such information manipulation technique is the manipulation of economic data by autocrats (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018). Recent studies have provided robust evidence suggesting that autocratic governments tend to over-report GDP growth (Magee and Doces 2015; Wallace 2016) using satellite-recorded nighttime lights data, which is a measure of economic activity immune from government manipulation. In the most comprehensive study in this line of research, Martínez (2022) demonstrates that autocracies tend to exaggerate GDP figures more than democracies by 15-30%, and such data manipulation is likely to occur on a larger scale when autocrats have incentives to do so, such as during years of low economic performance or the years before elections. Given the emerging research on data manipulation in modern authoritarian regimes, future research needs to consider the likely biases in government statistics on economic output before investigating the effect of political regimes on economic development.

In a similar vein, we need to exercise caution regarding the possibility of misreporting when studying public health. At the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, some research claimed that autocratic countries may respond more promptly to the virus by implementing extreme measures, such as school and workplace closures, cancellation of public events, restrictions on public gatherings and transportation, and compulsory lockdowns (Cheibub, Hong, and Przeworski 2020), leading to lower COVID-19-related death counts in autocracies (Narita and Sudo 2021). However, other research suggests that the positive correlation between democ-

racy and COVID-19 mortality may be a result of data manipulation by autocrats (Kapoor et al. 2020; Cassan and Steenvoort 2021). Using cross-national data covering 108 countries in 2020, Annaka (2021) demonstrates that the positive association between democracy and the total number of COVID-19 deaths becomes statistically insignificant after controlling for the degree of economic data transparency. Jain, Clarke, and Beaney (2022) report that autocracies tend to have higher death counts by utilizing excess mortality numbers, which allegedly better capture the number of COVID-19 deaths. Neumayer and Pluemper (2022) explore the gap between official COVID-19 deaths and excess mortality, finding that the unexplained gap becomes larger in authoritarian countries. Knutsen and Kolvani (2022) also provide cross-national evidence on under-reporting of COVID-19 statistics in autocracies. Given these findings, we need to carefully investigate the effects of political regimes on other indicators of public health, such as life expectancy and infant mortality rates, while acknowledging that government statistics are susceptible to data manipulation in favor of autocrats.⁴ Using data on current health expenditure, infant mortality rates, and female life expectancy from 2000 to 2015, Son and Bellinger (2022) find that autocratization in the realm of electoral democracy is positively associated with improvements in public health.

Untangling the Effects of Democratic Institutions on Development

The second important issue for future studies on democracy and development is to disentangle the effects of political regimes on development. As discussed earlier, modern democracy encompasses two dimensions of institutions that constrain political leaders and hold them accountable to voters and other branches of government: vertical and horizontal accountability. When examining the relationship between democracy and economic development, researchers have tended to emphasize the role of horizontal accountability, assuming that

⁴That being said, it is worth noting that despite the potential for data manipulation by autocrats, the positive correlation between democracy and public health reviewed in the previous section offers strong evidence of the advantages of democracy in public health. This is because, despite the ability of autocracies to manipulate data, most research identifies positive correlations between democracy and human development.

high levels of horizontal accountability lead to a strong rule of law, which in turn secures the property rights of both elites and citizens. On the other hand, when scholars investigate the relationship between political regimes and human development, they have mostly focused on the role of vertical accountability, assuming that strong vertical accountability (i.e., free and fair elections) prompts governments to be accountable to the majority of the poor population, who prioritize the improvement of human welfare through the strengthening of public health.

Despite these differences in highlighted mechanisms in theory, scholars have primarily utilized broad measures of democracy that aggregate both dimensions of political accountability to empirically assess the effects of political regimes on economic and human development. However, since the specific democratic institutions that matter may vary depending on the outcome variables of interest, empirical analyses should also aim to identify particular components of democracy when estimating its effects. With the rapid development of cross-national data on political regimes, such as the Varieties of Democracy project, it is now feasible to disaggregate democratic institutions into their various subcomponents to more accurately test the empirical implications of theoretical expectations.

For instance, if economic growth is promoted by the strong presence of horizontal accountability, elements of horizontal accountability such as judicial independence and political constraints on the executive should exhibit a stronger positive association with GDP growth compared to the components of vertical accountability, such as the presence of free and fair elections. Conversely, if improvements in public health are induced by strengthening the mechanisms of vertical accountability, we can expect that free and fair elections would be more negatively associated with infant mortality rates than the components of horizontal accountability.

Indeed, echoing this view, recent research suggests the importance of untangling the mechanisms linking political regimes and development while pointing to dissimilar effects of the components of democracy on development. By disaggregating political regimes into

their lower-level constituents, [Boese and Eberhardt \(2022\)](#) explore which building blocks of democratic institutions are more conducive to promoting economic growth. When decomposing liberal democracy, they distinguish the electoral democracy components (i.e., vertical accountability) such as clean elections, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and suffrage from the liberal components (i.e., horizontal accountability) including legislative and judicial constraints and the rule of law. Employing a difference-in-difference estimator, they find that, although both dimensions of liberal democracy contribute to economic growth, the electoral democracy dimension tends to have stronger, long-term impacts than the liberal dimension. Specifically, freedom of expression and clean elections demonstrate stable, long-run effects on economic growth, whereas the rule of law and judicial constraints have diminishing, short-run effects. These findings suggest that, contrary to the conventional wisdom on the relationship between democracy and development, the mechanisms of vertical accountability may be more important in explaining variations in GDP growth than those of horizontal accountability. This study strongly indicates that we need more theoretical and empirical explorations on why particular aspects of democracy contribute to economic prosperity more than others.

Scholars have also begun to untangle the mechanisms through which democracy leads to improvements in public health ([McGuire 2020](#): Section 4). Using several estimators, such as a synthetic control method and fixed effects regressions, to analyze multiple indicators measuring adult health, [Bollyky et al. \(2019\)](#) find strong evidence that a particular aspect of vertical accountability, free and fair elections, contributes more to improving public health than other components of vertical accountability. Similarly, in an analysis of cross-national data covering more than 150 states from 1900 to 2012, [Gerring et al. \(2021\)](#) also find that electoral components of democracy are stronger predictors of reducing infant mortality both in the short and long term compared to deeper civic engagements such as popular participation in politics, women's empowerment, and civil society strength. A comprehensive review by [McGuire \(2020\)](#) suggests that, in addition to electoral contestation, both higher levels of

electoral participation and freedom of expression are also associated with population health. These recent studies indicate that empirical evidence aligns with the conventional wisdom regarding the effect of democracy on human development: vertical accountability plays a more significant role in explaining health outcomes than horizontal accountability.

Evaluating the Impact of Dissimilar Modes of Regime Change on Development

The final issue in the study of democracy and development is to conduct a more thorough investigation into whether the manner in which regime change occurs may have an impact on socio-economic consequences such as economic growth and health outcomes. As discussed thus far, existing studies have primarily focused on whether changes in the levels of democracy occur, without delving into how they occur. However, it is reasonable to consider that the processes through which autocratization or democratization unfolds significantly influence the expectations of both elites and citizens regarding government policies, which in turn impact socio-economic outcomes in the short and long term. Specifically, I will discuss two different aspects of regime change modes: (1) the distinction between autocratization and democratization, and (2) the patterns and sequences of regime transitions.

First, it may be important to distinguish between democratization and autocratization when examining the effects of regime change on economic and human developments. Previous studies have often assumed that the direction of regime change does not matter, treating both democratization (changes toward more democratic regimes) and autocratization (changes toward more autocratic regimes) as having symmetric effects. However, recent panel matching analysis by [Imai, Kim, and Wang \(2022\)](#) suggests that authoritarian reversals have a significant impact on economic growth compared to democratic transitions. If the effects of autocratization and democratization are asymmetric, it becomes crucial to investigate why and to develop theories on the mechanisms through which autocratization leads to negative outcomes in terms of economic prosperity, while democratization does not. Furthermore, there is a need for new research to explore the relationship between the direction of regime

changes and public health. Given the increasing cases of autocratization in the contemporary world, differentiating between autocratization and democratization allows us to approach the relationship between political regimes and development from a fresh perspective.

Second, it is not only the direction of political regime changes but also the manner and sequence in which these changes occur that should be considered when determining their effects on socio-economic outcomes. For example, during the second wave of autocratization (from the early 1960s until the mid-1970s), many democratic breakdowns were the result of sudden and often violent coups, which rapidly dismantled democracies by suspending multi-party elections and democratic constitutions through military interventions. In contrast, during the third wave of autocratization (from the mid-2000s until the present), autocrats have tended to gradually undermine democratic principles without resorting to overt violence. This includes tactics such as undermining judicial independence, exerting control over the media, manipulating elections, and changing constitutions to extend their stay in power beyond term limits ([Bermeo 2016](#); [Frantz 2018](#)). While each individual event in the gradual process of autocratization may not have a significant impact on development, episodes of democratic backsliding occur in a sequence ([Sato et al. 2022](#)), and therefore, may have a cumulative effect on developmental outcomes. In other words, this form of autocratization may not have immediate effects on economic growth and public health in the short run, but it may have long-lasting effects on these outcomes in the long run. On the other hand, coups and rapid forms of autocratization may have a substantial, short-term impact on economic prosperity and public health, but their long-term effects may be limited unless followed by subsequent episodes of autocratization. In this regard, the third wave of autocratization presents a new opportunity to examine whether different patterns and sequences of regime changes lead to different consequences for economic prosperity and human development.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has provided an overview of the recent developments in the study of democracy and development. The existing literature has demonstrated positive associations between democracy and both economic and human development. Building upon the general findings in this field, I have proposed three promising research avenues that can further advance this important research program in light of the contemporary wave of autocratization. First, it is crucial to conduct careful empirical tests that examine the effects of political regimes on development in the current era of autocratization, taking into account the strategic manipulation of information by autocrats. Second, there is a need to disaggregate democratic institutions in order to explore the nuanced mechanisms through which these institutions contribute to development outcomes. Lastly, it is important to identify the varying effects of regime change according to the direction of regime transitions (i.e., democratization versus autocratization), as well as the specific forms and sequences in which these changes occur. By addressing these research gaps, we can deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between political regimes and development in the context of contemporary autocratization.

In the face of the contemporary wave of autocratization, it is natural to feel pessimistic about the future of development. This sentiment is reinforced by the ample evidence demonstrating the positive impact of democracy on growth and health. However, it is important to recognize that the current wave of autocratization also presents an opportunity for scholars to gain new and valuable insights. With the availability of advanced statistical methods and high-quality cross-national data on democracy and development, there is great potential for further advancing our understanding in this field. By doing so, we can enhance our knowledge and develop more effective policy implications to counter the threats posed by autocratization.

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