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Understanding and Supporting Democratic Bright Spots

Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Feldman

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

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Contents

Summary	1
Introduction	3
The Landscape of Democratic Bright Spots	4
Outcomes of the Bright Spots	15
Patterns and Policy Implications	31
Annex 1: Bright Spot Trajectories	37
Annex 2: Bright Spot Trajectories Disaggregated by Category	38
About the Authors	41
Acknowledgments	41
Notes	43
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	47

Summary

In June 2022, Samantha Power, the administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), announced an important new element of U.S. democracy policy: the United States will give special attention and support to democratic “bright spots.” The aim of this approach is to help countries move ahead successfully after they experience new democratic momentum or a democratic opening. This raises important practical policy questions about how the United States can most effectively assist bright spot countries. But prior to those lies a basic but underexplored question: What constitutes a democratic bright spot?

This paper addresses this question by offering a typology centered around four different types of political junctures:

- *Citizen mobilizations oust a leader*: where mass mobilization ousts a democratically challenged leader in the midst of their term;
- *Promising authoritarian successions*: where an authoritarian regime experiences a leadership succession that appears to open the door to democratic progress within the framework of regime continuity;
- *Blocked power grabs*: where a leader already in power attempts to extend their term or authority in contravention of existing rules or norms and is thwarted, whether by legal institutions or mass mobilization; and

- *Pivotal elections*: where a democratically backsliding or stagnant government loses power in an election.

The paper identifies countries that have fallen within each of these categories during the last ten years, describing thirty-two bright spots and the key political events that marked them. It then presents snapshot summaries of the outcomes of these various positive junctures.

Overall, fourteen of the thirty-two bright spots have made some significant democratic progress in the years since the bright spot juncture emerged. Most of the rest have neither progressed nor regressed on democracy. A few have gone markedly backward. Among the four categories, pivotal elections and blocked power grabs have more often produced lasting positive change. Cases of leaders ousted by citizen mobilizations—which have been relatively scarce—have a more mixed record. Promising authoritarian successions—also relatively rare—have not produced much significant political change.

Where bright spots end up not living up to initial hopes, it is usually because of a combination of the continuing power of entrenched undemocratic political and economic forces that survive an initial democratic opening and the weakness or lack of capability on the part of the new leaders or new parties that had promised prodemocratic change. Democratic bright spots are also sometimes thrown off track by new problematic developments, such as worsening civil conflict, that override attempts to move the country forward democratically.

This picture of the landscape of democratic bright spots over the past ten years points to multiple policy implications, including the need to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to boosting bright spots and the importance of pivotal elections and blocked power grabs as sources of democratic opportunity. More generally, the fact that dozens of bright spots have emerged during a time frame typically described in terms of a global democratic recession highlights that democracy's global prospects are heterogeneous and that a significant number of favorable opportunities to help strengthen those prospects exists.

Introduction

In June 2022, Samantha Power, the administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), announced an important new element of U.S. democracy policy: the United States will give special attention and support to democratic “bright spots.”¹ The aim of this approach is to help countries move ahead successfully after they experience new democratic momentum or a democratic opening. In the Joe Biden administration’s view, this will make democratic success more likely in such countries and, in turn, help reset the common global narrative of democracy losing ground to autocracy.

Months after announcing the new approach, Power and Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with senior representatives of eight countries that the administration described as “experiencing democratic openings”—Armenia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Malawi, Moldova, Nepal, Tanzania, and Zambia—to discuss how to advance their democratic prospects.² In a subsequent *Foreign Affairs* article, Power emphasized that when it comes to supporting democracy, “nowhere is that task more important today than in societies that have managed to elect democratic reformers or throw off autocratic or antidemocratic rule through peaceful mass protests or successful political movements.”³

This new policy thrust raises important practical questions about how the United States can most effectively assist bright spot countries. Given that the U.S. government already provides support in many contexts of democratic openings, what more can and should be done? Should the administration emphasize, for example, helping connect private actors such as philanthropies and businesses to bright spot governments to bring more resources to bear, or should it concentrate on mobilizing greater direct U.S. assistance and backing? If

the latter, should the focus be on new targeted democracy aid or greater economic support? Will USAID be able to bring other parts of the U.S. government to contribute significantly to this initiative?

But prior to those operational questions lies a basic analytic issue: what constitutes a democratic bright spot? Out of a desire to move ahead quickly and to focus on the practical issues of implementation, the administration has not elaborated a definition of what constitutes a democratic bright spot and has instead settled on some initial countries, such as those mentioned above, that it regards as obvious candidates.

To help this initiative take hold and deepen over time, and to guide other governments and organizations engaged in democracy support, it would be useful to have a framework for identifying what constitutes a bright spot and differentiating among types. This would ensure that the selection of countries accurately reflects where democratic opportunities lie in the world and help policymakers calibrate their responses to different contexts.

Furthermore, closer analytic attention to the varieties of democratic bright spots around the world can provide a better understanding of the overall state of democracy. Commentaries about democracy's global fortunes in recent years have heavily skewed negative. This is understandable, given the punishing realities of the global democratic recession.⁴ But there has been a tendency to neglect positive news about democracy. Greater attention to bright spots can help rebalance this perspective.

To that end, this paper examines political junctures during the past ten years in countries that we consider to be democratic bright spots. We purposely take a wide-angled, inclusive view of what constitutes a bright spot and offer a typology consisting of four categories: democratic uprisings, promising autocratic successions, blocked power grabs, and pivotal elections. We identify thirty-two bright spots that have fallen into these four categories during the past ten years and present snapshot summaries of the outcomes of the various positive junctures. We conclude by summarizing the overall patterns of outcomes across the four categories, extracting some lessons about why bright spots often fall short and offering several overarching guidelines for policymakers seeking to assist bright spot countries.

The Landscape of Democratic Bright Spots

The term bright spot—as the Biden administration is using it and as we use it here—denotes a political juncture that opens the clear possibility of near-term substantial improvement in the state of democracy in a country. The idea of a *juncture* is key; the term here does not refer to gradual improvements over time or to countries that have long been in better shape democratically than other countries in their region (such as the idea that Kyrgyzstan has for

many years been a relative bright spot for democracy in a Central Asia dominated by autocrats). It is a clear moment in time in which the possibility of positive forward movement on democracy has emerged.

In the popular imagination, the archetypical democratic bright spot is the ouster of a dictator by angry citizens who rise in protest against him—for example, Nicolae Ceaușescu falling in Romania in 1989 or Hosni Mubarak forced off the political stage in Egypt in 2011. However, as discussed below, such cases have been uncommon in the past ten years. The world has fewer dictators than when democracy was spreading rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s, and most of those who remain have demonstrated staying power. Reflecting the reality of an international political landscape defined not by a simple division between democracies and autocracies but instead a complex array of political hybridity and ambiguity, bright spots today are highly varied in the types of regimes or leaders they involve. They are also diverse in the mechanisms through which actors achieve positive change, such as pivotal elections and assertive institutional checks and balances, especially through the courts.

Recognizing that there are multiple ways to categorize bright spots, we take an approach that we believe can be useful for policymakers parsing the political horizon for potential prodemocratic moments. It weaves together regime starting points and vectors of change to focus on the core power dynamics of four types of political junctures:

- *Citizen mobilizations oust a leader*: where mass mobilization ousts a democratically challenged leader in the midst of their term;
- *Promising authoritarian successions*: where an authoritarian regime experiences a leadership succession that appears to open the door to democratic progress within the framework of regime continuity;
- *Blocked power grabs*: where a leader already in power attempts to extend their term or authority in contravention of existing rules or norms and is thwarted, whether by legal institutions or mass mobilization; and
- *Pivotal elections*: where a democratically backsliding or stagnant government loses power in an election.

For each of the categories, we present in this section specific country cases from the past ten years and, by doing so, paint a broad picture of recent democratic bright spots. Figure 1 shows our categories and cases. We have sought to be comprehensive in assembling these cases but do not claim to have identified all bright spots that have occurred globally in the past ten years. Moreover, there are inevitably judgment calls about whether certain encouraging developments in a country are significant enough to meet the thresholds for the different categories of bright spots. Note that this section focuses only on the initial emergence of the bright spot—not what happened to it over time. That is the subject of the subsequent section.

Figure 1. Varieties of Democratic Bright Spots

Citizen Mobilizations Oust a Leader	Promising Authoritarian Successions	Blocked Power Grabs	Pivotal Elections
<p><i>Citizens mobilize to oust an autocrat</i></p> <p>Algeria, 2019 Sudan, 2019</p>	<p>Uzbekistan, 2017 Ecuador, 2017 Zimbabwe, 2017 Ethiopia, 2018 Angola, 2018 Tanzania, 2021</p>	<p><i>Legal institutions block an antidemocratic move</i></p> <p>Sri Lanka, 2018 Malawi, 2019-20 Nepal, 2021</p>	<p><i>Elections stop a backsliding leader</i></p> <p>Gambia, 2016 Maldives, 2018 United States, 2020-21 Zambia, 2021 Slovenia, 2022 Brazil, 2022</p>
<p><i>Citizens mobilize to oust a democratically troubled but elected leader</i></p> <p>Ukraine, 2014 North Macedonia, 2015-17 Guatemala, 2015 South Korea, 2016-17 Lebanon, 2019</p>		<p><i>Mass mobilizations halt an antidemocratic move</i></p> <p>Burkina Faso, 2014 Armenia, 2018 Dominican Republic, 2019 Bolivia, 2019</p>	<p><i>Elections bring a new democratic impulse to a stagnant democracy</i></p> <p>Sri Lanka, 2015 Malaysia, 2018 Kosovo, 2019-21 Chile, 2019-20 Moldova, 2020-21 Honduras, 2021-22</p>

Citizen mobilizations oust a leader

The first category of bright spots are situations where large-scale protests force a democratically deficient leader out of power, bringing in a new leader who appears likely to be more democratic. There are two variants of such cases—those involving the ouster of a fully autocratic leader and those involving a leader who is not fully autocratic but has engaged in significant antidemocratic behavior.

Citizens mobilize to oust an autocrat

The traditional bright spot archetype is a country where citizens rise up en masse and oust a dictator, opening the door to a democratic transition. While there have been many significant protests against authoritarian governments during the past ten years, there have only been two cases where citizen mobilization toppled a fully autocratic leader:

- *Algeria, 2019*: President Abdelaziz Bouteflika ruled Algeria autocratically during his twenty-year tenure, winning a series of sham elections that the opposition boycotted over expectations of a rigged vote. In 2008, he initiated a constitutional change that removed presidential term limits, a move that Parliament ratified. Bouteflika

suffered a stroke in 2013 that left him almost entirely incapacitated physically and mentally. In February 2019, the eighty-one-year-old president announced his intention to seek a fifth term and remain in office. More than 1 million people across the country protested Bouteflika's decision to run again and the military's deep influence on the country's politics. In April 2019, a week after the chief of staff of Algeria's army called for the president's removal, Bouteflika announced his resignation. A week later, Parliament named Abdelkader Bensalah, the speaker of the upper house, as interim president for a maximum of ninety days until elections could be held.

- *Sudan, 2019*: Four months of large-scale demonstrations against the rule of the Sudan's longtime strongman president, Omar al-Bashir, led to a military coup that ousted him in April 2019. Continued protests after the coup compelled the junta leaders to reach a power-sharing agreement. In July 2019, the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), a civilian opposition coalition, and the Transitional Military Council (TMC), the military body that replaced Bashir, signed an agreement outlining a thirty-nine-month transition period. The agreement stipulated that a TMC member would lead the country for twenty-one months followed by a civilian leader for the next eighteen months, setting May 2021 as the planned transition to civilian rule.

Citizens mobilize to oust a democratically troubled but elected leader

More common in the past ten years have been situations in which citizens mobilize in large numbers and successfully drive from power an elected leader who has evidenced serious democratic shortcomings. Various sparks give rise to such mobilizations, including revelations of large-scale corruption, egregious mismanagement, or other abuses of power by the leader or their political allies. Five such cases in the past ten years are:

- *Ukraine, 2014*: After then president Viktor Yanukovich rejected the Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians took to the streets to protest the decision, government corruption, and other abuses of power. The demonstrations, known as Ukraine's "Revolution of Dignity" (also called the "Maidan Revolution"), toppled Yanukovich's government. Petro Poroshenko, an independent, won the 2014 election that followed.
- *North Macedonia, 2015–17*: In 2015, opposition leader Zoran Zaev released wiretapped conversations in which senior government officials discussed their interference in the judiciary and media. Zaev also released records showing that the government had been running a large-scale wiretapping program. Then prime minister Nikola Gruevski resigned following mass protests. Following parliamentary elections in December 2016, the opposition formed a coalition government. Zaev became prime minister in May 2017.

- *Guatemala, 2015*: Prosecutors revealed evidence of a sizeable tax corruption ring and found that then president Otto Pérez Molina was likely at its helm. Following substantial citizen protests, Pérez Molina resigned and police arrested him in 2015. Opposition candidate Jimmy Morales won general elections held that autumn on promises to fight corruption, address childhood malnutrition, and improve education and security.
- *South Korea, 2016–17*: Investigative journalists revealed that then president Park Geun-hye was engaging in significant corruption and had given a friend and adviser inappropriate and unauthorized access to confidential government documents. Massive protests broke out, leading the National Assembly and Constitutional Court to impeach and remove Park. Moon Jae-in, of the main opposition party, won the 2017 snap election after campaigning on anticorruption.
- *Lebanon, 2019*: In October 2019, the Lebanese cabinet announced measures to address an economic crisis, including new taxes on gasoline, tobacco, and social media platforms such as WhatsApp. For ordinary citizens, these taxes were unbearable given the extreme economic pressure they were already facing. Protests over these measures morphed into larger demonstrations against political nepotism and corruption due to sectarianism, high unemployment, and poor service delivery. More than 1 million people came to the streets in anger. Twelve days after protests began, prime minister Saad Hariri resigned.

Promising authoritarian successions

Bright spots for a country’s democracy sometimes occur when a long-standing authoritarian leader leaves office, whether by retirement, death, or term limits, and the successor—although an ally of the former head of government and part of the existing power structure—embarks on an unexpected path of governance reforms and/or political liberalization. Such bright spots often hold out the promise of being important openings for prodemocratic progress in autocratic settings. Some examples are:

- *Uzbekistan, 2017*: Islam Karimov ruled Uzbekistan with an iron fist for twenty-seven years until his death in September 2016. That December, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the country’s prime minister of thirteen years who was appointed interim president after Karimov’s death, was elected president in an unfree and unfair election. Soon after the election, Mirziyoyev pursued reforms, including firing some members of the political old guard for corruption, relaxing restrictions on free speech, and freeing political prisoners.

- *Ecuador, 2017*: Ecuador's leadership change in 2017 represents a variant of this category where the leader who stepped down was democratically problematic but not fully authoritarian and the succession process was democratic. Ecuador experienced democratic backsliding starting in the late 2000s under the leadership of Rafael Correa, who came to power in 2007 and was reelected twice. Correa's presidency was characterized by harassment of opposition, degradation of civil liberties, and corruption. Facing an economic downturn and diminished popularity, Correa decided not to run in the 2017 elections and instead backed Lenín Moreno, his first term vice president. Voters elected Moreno in mostly free and fair elections that year. Correa anticipated that he would be able to maintain power from behind the scenes during Moreno's presidency. However, Moreno distanced himself from Correa's illiberal populist orientation and promised political and governance reforms.
- *Zimbabwe, 2017*: Then vice president Emmerson Mnangagwa and first lady Grace Mugabe both hoped to succeed Zimbabwe's ninety-three-year-old president, Robert Mugabe, who had led the country as president since 1987. In November 2017, Mugabe fired Mnangagwa. Members of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces who supported Mnangagwa put Mugabe under house arrest. One week later, facing imminent impeachment by Parliament, Mugabe resigned. Parliament nominated Mnangagwa to be president, and he was sworn in three days later. In his first address as president, Mnangagwa said, "The will of the people will always, always succeed. . . . Today we are witnessing the beginning of a new unfolding democracy."⁵
- *Ethiopia, 2018*: The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) had dominated Ethiopian politics since the start of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in 1995. It ruled in antidemocratic and repressive ways. In 2018, prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned. Through an internal party selection process, Abiy Ahmed, who had been a minister, a member of parliament, and a senior official in one of the main parties in the ruling coalition, became prime minister. Upon taking power, he quickly enacted several liberalizing political reforms, including releasing tens of thousands of prisoners and removing bans on opposition groups.
- *Angola, 2018*: José Eduardo dos Santos led Angola in autocratic fashion from 1979 until he retired in 2017, leaving behind a legacy of kleptocracy and repression. João Lourenço, who had served as secretary general of the ruling party and minister of defense, became president following the 2017 elections. After taking power, he implemented anticorruption reforms in 2018, including targeting family members of dos Santos.

- *Tanzania, 2021*: The Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party and its revolutionary predecessor, the Tanganyika African National Union, have led Tanzania since its independence. Ruling between 2015 and 2021, president John Magufuli took the country in a sharply authoritarian direction, stepping up repression of civil society, the media, and political opposition. When Magufuli died in 2021, domestic and international observers were cautiously optimistic that his successor, Samia Suluhu Hassan, would introduce reforms and reverse many of Magufuli's actions. Hassan voiced support for a more tolerant approach to opposition parties and spoke of the need to reopen banned media.

Blocked power grabs

The third category of bright spots are those involving the blocking of a leader's attempt to amass or extend power in an irregular way, for example by forcing a constitutional change that would allow them to prolong their rule. There are two variants within this category—those where legal institutions were primarily responsible for blocking the antidemocratic move and those where angry citizens were responsible.

Legal institutions block an antidemocratic move

Sometimes a country's judicial bodies block a move by a leader who is trying to undermine some important democratic norm or institution. For such situations to count as democratic bright spots, it is not enough for a court to rule against the executive; the leader who pushed for the antidemocratic move must also abide by the decision. Three examples are:

- *Sri Lanka, 2018*: Then president Maithripala Sirisena attempted to replace then prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe with former president Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2018. The speaker of Parliament refused to accept the legality of the ouster. Sirisena dissolved Parliament, but the Supreme Court stayed this dissolution and the Court of Appeal issued an order preventing Rajapaksa from holding the premiership. The Supreme Court then ruled that the decision to dissolve Parliament was unconstitutional and refused to vacate the ruling of the Court of Appeal. Rajapaksa dropped his claim to the premiership.
- *Malawi, 2019–20*: The 2019 elections were marked by widespread irregularities, including tampered results sheets. In February 2020, Malawi's constitutional court boldly and unexpectedly annulled the elections and ordered a new vote within 150 days. Public protests against the electoral problems also put pressure on the government. Opposition leader Lazarus Chakwera won the June 2020 presidential election by a large margin.

- *Nepal, 2021*: In 2017, the country's two Communist parties—the Marxist-Leninist faction of Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli and the Maoist faction of Pushpa Kamal Dahal—reached a power-sharing deal under which they agreed to successively hold the premiership for two and a half years each. In 2018, they merged into the Nepal Communist Party. In December 2020, however, then prime minister Oli, reluctant to hand over power, asked the president, Bidhya Devi Bhandari, to dissolve Parliament. Bhandari did so. In February 2021, the Supreme Court overturned the president's decision and reinstated Parliament. Months later, Oli lost a no-confidence vote. Amid political churning, Bhandari dissolved Parliament again. Oli continued to serve as caretaker prime minister until July 2021, when the Supreme Court reinstated Parliament and ordered Bhandari to appoint Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress party as prime minister. Bhandari did so, and Deuba won a confidence motion in Parliament the following week.

Mass mobilizations halt an antidemocratic move

Attempted presidential power grabs—typically when a leader seeks to extend their time in office beyond a constitutional limitation—are sometimes blocked by mass citizen mobilization. Attempted power grabs frequently come on top of a pattern of political failings or abuses that has already produced considerable anger among citizens.

Four such cases since 2013 are:

- *Burkina Faso, 2014*: President Blaise Compaoré, who took power in 1987 and won various sham elections after that, sought in 2014 to amend the constitution to remove a presidential term limit. He resigned after huge protests erupted in response to his moves.
- *Armenia, 2018*: Facing term limits, then president Serzh Sargsyan pushed through a constitutional referendum shifting executive power to the prime minister and then stood for that position. Although public discontent had been brewing for months, his official election as prime minister in 2018 triggered mass protests that quickly led to his resignation. Nikol Pashinyan, who led the protest movement against Sargsyan, was elected by the National Assembly as prime minister immediately following Sargsyan's resignation.
- *Dominican Republic, 2019*: Supporters of then president Danilo Medina called for an amendment to the constitution in 2019 to permit him to secure a third term. Mass demonstrations broke out in response, and Medina ultimately announced that he would not seek another term.

- *Bolivia, 2019*: President Evo Morales sought to amend the constitution in 2016 to legalize a potential fourth term for himself. The following year, the country's constitutional court, packed with Morales loyalists, allowed his candidacy in the next presidential elections. Morales won a plurality in the first round of voting in disputed 2019 elections, but massive protests erupted. Morales ended up resigning and fleeing the country.

In all these cases, citizen mobilization was crucial to the leaders' decisions to not pursue their antidemocratic moves, though it was not necessarily the only factor. In Bolivia, for example, Morales's decision to resign was also rooted in his loss of support from the military and police after the troubled first round of the voting.

Pivotal elections

Elections in troubled democracies sometimes produce democratic bright spots. The fourth and largest category of bright spots comprises situations where a democratically challenged incumbent leader or ruling party loses an election to a candidate or party that shows significant promise of greater adherence to democratic norms. There are two subtypes in this category based on the trajectory of the country's democracy and leadership in the years leading up to the election—places where significant democratic backsliding had occurred and places where democracy had stagnated.

Elections stop a backsliding leader

The first subtype involves the defeat of a leader or party that had taken the country on a path of democratic backsliding. Six examples are:

- *Gambia, 2016*: Yahya Jammeh, a military officer who became Gambia's president after leading a coup in 1994, was elected in 2001 and then reelected in 2006 and 2011. Jammeh jailed political opponents and civil society activists, eroded civil liberties, and amended the constitution frequently for his own political purposes. In the 2016 presidential election, opposition candidate Adama Barrow won a surprise victory. Barrow promised to reform the security sector by professionalizing the armed forces and reducing their influence in politics. He also pledged constitutional reform and greater political freedom. Jammeh ceded power only after facing strong diplomatic pressure from West African leaders and a military intervention led by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).
- *Maldives, 2018*: Under president Abdulla Yameen, who was elected in 2013, the Maldives saw mass arbitrary arrests and a crackdown on dissent that targeted political opponents and journalists. In the lead up to the 2018 presidential election, Yameen declared a state of emergency and ordered the arrest of politicians and

officials, including two justices on the Supreme Court. Yameen lost the election to Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, an opposition candidate who promised to undertake democratizing reforms, including freeing political prisoners.

- *United States, 2020–21*: The defeat of president Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election by Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden brought the end of a presidency marked by numerous antidemocratic behaviors, including attacks on legal institutions and the legitimacy of elections, abuses of presidential power, and denunciations of independent media. Biden promised to adhere to democratic principles and repair democratic institutions.
- *Zambia, 2021*: The 2021 presidential election saw the defeat of president Edgar Chagwa Lungu by the main opposition leader, Hakainde Hichilema. During his presidency, Lungu cracked down on dissent, shut down opposition newspapers, interfered with opposition rallies, and jailed journalists and opposition candidates, including Hichilema. Upon taking office, Hichilema promised to heal the country's divisions, enact police reform, root out corruption, and improve press freedom.
- *Slovenia, 2022*: Janez Janša served as prime minister three times (2004–08, 2012–13, and 2020–22). During his third premiership, Slovenia saw a deterioration of press freedom, shrinking space for civil society, and restrictions on demonstrations. In the 2022 parliamentary elections, the Freedom Movement (GS), a socially liberal green party, defeated Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party. Robert Golob, GS party leader, was elected prime minister and said that the party's objective was "a victory that will enable us to take the country back to freedom" and called the election a "referendum on democracy."⁶
- *Brazil, 2022*: Jair Bolsonaro, elected in 2018, flaunted democratic norms during his presidency. He said he would no longer accept decisions by a Supreme Federal Court justice whom he frequently demonized, promoted the militarization of government, undermined public trust in the nation's voting systems, and restricted civic space and freedom of expression. Former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, known as Lula, challenged Bolsonaro for the presidency in 2022 by casting himself as a conciliatory figure who would rebuild trust in institutions and return the country to democratic normalcy. Lula built a broad prodemocracy coalition and narrowly won the presidential election in the second round.

Elections bring a new democratic impulse to a stagnant democracy

The second subtype of election-related bright spots encompasses democracies that, while not experiencing significant backsliding, have been stuck in a dysfunctional political pattern, often suffering from systemic corruption. A parliamentary or presidential election brings to power a party and/or leader that promises to enact major reforms and creates a new sense

of democratic promise. Of course, elections often bring new people to power who promise to carry out political reforms, but many of these situations do not, in our view, rise to the level of bright spots. To be included in this category, a country must have been experiencing significant democratic stagnation for at least ten years across multiple leaders, and the new powerholders must evidence a clear intention to break with some of the major forms of political blockage. Six cases of note since 2013 are:

- *Sri Lanka, 2015*: The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) held the country's presidency from 1994 to 2005. President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga displayed increasingly authoritarian behavior, especially after 2003. Kumaratunga's successor, Rajapaksa, likewise pursued antidemocratic moves, such as removing term limits and replacing the chief justice of the Supreme Court with an ally. In November 2014, he called a presidential election two years ahead of schedule to seek an unprecedented third term. Maithripala Sirisena, a cabinet minister in the ruling SLFP and minister of health from 2010 to 2014, announced his candidacy for the presidential election as the opposition's "common candidate." Sirisena's messaging opposed Rajapaksa's usurpation of power and cronyism, and he won the election with 51.3 percent of the vote.
- *Malaysia, 2018*: Public anger had grown over the entrenched corruption by the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition that had ruled Malaysia since 1957, including over the notorious 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) corruption scandal. As a result, the Pakatan Harapan opposition coalition won a plurality of votes in the 2018 parliamentary elections and formed the first ever Malaysian government not led by the United Malays National Organisation, which had historically dominated the BN coalition.
- *Kosovo, 2019–21*: The strong showing by the Vetëvendosje ("Self-determination") party in the 2019 parliamentary elections disrupted the long rule of the Democratic Party of Kosovo. Vetëvendosje campaigned on a platform of anticorruption reform, more meritocracy in government, and more effective institution building. Vetëvendosje formed a ruling coalition that quickly broke down, leading to a new government that put Vetëvendosje in the opposition. But after that government collapsed, snap parliamentary elections in 2021 handed Vetëvendosje an even larger victory.
- *Chile, 2019–20*: The events that unfolded in Chile in 2019 and 2020 represent a complex variation that partially fits as an example of this subtype. Following large-scale protests in 2019 over the exclusionary elements of the country's economic system, 78 percent of Chileans voted in a 2020 plebiscite in favor of a constitutional convention to draft a new constitution. While not an election for the head of government, the plebiscite nonetheless produced a major new democratic impulse in response to what a significant number of citizens perceived as a stagnant political system.

- *Moldova, 2020-21*: While Moldova has had several democratic elections since independence, corrupt oligarchs began infiltrating political parties in the 1990s. By 2019, they were the dominant force in several political parties. In 2020, voters elected a new president, Maia Sandu, from one of the country’s main pro-European parties to replace pro-Russian incumbent Igor Dodon. Sandu had made anticorruption a central theme of her campaign and promised to “end the rule of thieves.”⁷ In parliamentary elections the following year, voters awarded her party a majority of seats in the national legislature.
- *Honduras, 2021-22*: The National Party ruled Honduras from 2010 to 2022 in an era of governance marked by deeply entrenched corruption and the de facto capture of government institutions by major business interests and criminal organizations. Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, of the left-wing Libre party, raised hope for a challenge to this pattern when she won the presidency in 2021 after campaigning on promises to fight corruption.

Outcomes of the Bright Spots

The political trajectories that followed these various optimistic junctures—what we call the outcomes of these bright spots—have been highly varied. Some at least partially fulfilled the democratic promise of the juncture, while others represented a closing of the door to prodemocratic change, sometimes with disheartening speed. Still others lie in a murky gray zone, marked by competing elements of progress and blockage, as well as uncertainty.

Below are short summaries of the outcomes of the cases described in the previous section. These qualitative snapshots are supplemented with data from Freedom House’s Freedom in the World index and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute’s Liberal Democracy Index for each country.⁸ The scores from the year before the bright spot emerged are compared with the most recent scores, which were released in early 2023 and cover events that occurred in 2022. Freedom House scores range from 1 to 100, with 100 being the freest. The V-Dem scores range from 0.01 to 0.99, with 0.99 being the most positive in terms of liberal democracy.

When assessing an outcome, it is difficult to know how long a period following the emergence of a democratic bright spot to consider. Important political junctures may have ramifications that extend over many years. Yet a very long-term view leads to a high degree of uncertainty regarding the causal links between the original promising events and the eventual political paths. The approach taken here incorporates the main reform developments and other major political events that occurred during the leadership term of the head of government who followed the bright spot moment (that is, the leader who came to power after the spark that made the country a bright spot).

After a citizen mobilization ousts a leader

Of the bright spot cases where a mass mobilization ousted a leader in the midst of their term, there are no resounding success stories. These cases have resulted in moderate progress at best, and even for those countries, democratic reform did not have much staying power beyond the new leader's first term.

The two cases in the past ten years of an autocrat ousted directly or indirectly by popular mobilization have not turned out well:

- *Algeria*: After Bouteflika resigned as president in April 2019, Algeria's Constitutional Council delayed the election scheduled for July after rejecting without explanation the only two candidates who filed their applications before the deadline. An election ultimately took place in December 2019, but protesters objected to all five approved candidates because, in their eyes, the candidates represented a continuation of the old guard. Former prime minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune was elected president; official statistics put the turnout below 40 percent. Authorities used the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext to restrict freedom of assembly and movement, though they intensified their crackdown on dissent even after easing lockdown measures. In September 2020, Parliament approved the text of a wide-ranging constitutional revision that was meant to placate the protesters. However, protesters rejected the proposed changes, finding that they would still leave the president with power over the judiciary and retain vaguely defined limits on freedom of information. In a referendum two months later, voters approved the new constitution, with 67 percent supporting it, though turnout was less than 24 percent. Protests resumed in March 2021, but the interior ministry banned unauthorized rallies in May and arrested more than 1,000 people in an effort to stifle the protest movement. Legislative elections in June 2021 had only 23 percent turnout.

2018-2022

Freedom House **-2** 34 → 32

V-Dem **-0.03** .16 → .13

- *Sudan*: Nearly four years after Bashir was removed from power, Sudan is still led by a military council and the much-anticipated transition to elected citizen rule remains elusive. In October 2020, the transitional government—including both TMC and FFC elements—and several rebel factions signed the Juba Agreement, which specified stipulations for the future constitutional process and power-sharing arrangements. It also reset the thirty-nine-month transition to the date when the Juba Agreement was signed, postponing full civilian rule until early 2024. But in October 2021, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan led a coup and arrested civilian

prime minister Abdalla Hamdok. Junta and civilian leaders reached further agreements in November 2021 and December 2022 to pave the way for a democratic transition that will, theoretically, take place by the end of 2024. But serious doubts remain about whether these agreements will be fulfilled.

2018-2022

Freedom House **+3** 7 → 10 V-Dem **-0.03** .10 → .07

The five cases of citizen mobilization against democratically troubled but elected leaders have had mixed outcomes, with North Macedonia, South Korea, and Ukraine being somewhat positive, and Guatemala and Lebanon being less so.

- *Ukraine*: Poroshenko, elected in the wake of the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, carried out some of the changes that citizens had demanded. He signed the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and instituted some anticorruption reforms, such as creating the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, passing a law that compelled public officials to detail their assets, and forming the National Agency on Corruption Prevention to review those declarations. However, Poroshenko failed or was unable to tackle the deep structures of oligarchy and corruption. Greater scrutiny of corruption spurred investigations that found misdeeds committed by people close to Poroshenko. This, combined with the war with Russia-backed separatists in the Donbas and an economic crisis, soured voters on Poroshenko. Volodymyr Zelenskyy defeated him in the 2019 presidential election.

2013-2022

Freedom House **-5** 55 → 50 V-Dem **-0.03** .26 → .23

- *North Macedonia*: Since taking power in 2017, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) party—led at the time by Zaev—has made some reforms but not all that it promised. The government passed several political reform strategies and action plans in 2018, and the parliament passed some measures in line with those action plans. The government reached the historic Prespa Agreement with Greece in 2018, which obliged the country to change its name from Macedonia to North Macedonia in return for Greece withdrawing its veto over the country's accession to the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). While North Macedonia joined NATO in March 2020, France—and later Bulgaria—blocked its EU accession, dampening public enthusiasm for reform efforts and the credibility of the SDSM government. In February 2020, the parliament adopted a law on public prosecution, which passed control of major corruption and organized

crime cases to the public prosecutor's office. The European Commission wrote in 2022, "Implementation of the updated action plan on the judicial reform strategy has continued but needs to become more systematic."⁹ The SDSM government has been embroiled in several corruption scandals involving people close to Zaev.

2014-2022

Freedom House **+8** 60 → 68 V-Dem **+0.08** .28 → .36

- *Guatemala*: Morales, the leader who succeeded Pérez Molina in 2015, did not deliver on promised anticorruption reforms. He dismantled the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), the institution whose investigations triggered the 2015 protest movement. Conservative legislators leveled dubious charges against anticorruption prosecutor Thelma Aldana, disqualifying her from running in the 2019 presidential election. Ultraconservative candidate Alejandro Giammattei won that election. Human Rights Watch concluded in March 2022 that Guatemala's democracy is "hanging by a thread."¹⁰

2014-2022

Freedom House **-6** 55 → 49 V-Dem **-0.17** .43 → .26

- *South Korea*: After winning snap elections in 2017, Moon implemented some anti-corruption reforms, such as creating the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials to probe corrupt acts committed by current and former senior officials. However, his administration was also dogged by scandals. For example, then justice minister Choo Mi-ae suspended then prosecutor general Yoon Suk-yeol after he began investigating corruption allegations that could have been harmful to the Democratic Party. In 2019, the public relations manager for Moon's presidential campaign was found guilty of manipulating public opinion in favor of Moon, a crime for which he was sentenced to prison. Moon pardoned former president Park and paroled Lee Jae-yong, the Samsung heir who bribed Park. The conservatives regained power in the 2022 election with Yoon being elected president.

2015-2022

Freedom House **+0** 83 → 83 V-Dem **+0.12** .61 → .73

- *Lebanon*: The 17 October Revolution of 2019 failed to alter the sectarian divisions or entrenched corruption that have long defined Lebanon's political system. Then prime minister Saad Hariri resigned in the wake of protests and was replaced by Hassan Diab. In August 2020, a devastating explosion of ammonium nitrate

stored in the Port of Beirut killed more than 200 people and left an estimated 300,000 people unhoused. The blast—and the political response to it—highlighted Lebanon’s dysfunctional patterns of governance caused by its corruption, sectarianism, and consociational political system. Diab resigned six days after the explosion but stayed on as caretaker prime minister until a new government was formed. After Hariri and Mustapha Adib both failed to form a government, Najib Mikati assumed the premiership in September 2021. That year, the World Bank Group’s Lebanon Economic Monitor report wrote that the country’s economic crisis was likely to rank in the top ten—possibly top three—most severe crises globally since the mid-nineteenth century.¹¹

2018-2022

Freedom House **-2** 45 → 43

V-Dem **-0.04** .30 → .26

After a promising authoritarian succession

In the four cases where successors to longtime autocrats showed some initial reform promise, positive steps were sometimes achieved, but not systemic change. Uzbekistan has carried out some political liberalization, and Angola has taken some anticorruption steps. Yet, in both cases, the authoritarian structures of power remain in place. Ethiopia and Zimbabwe have been major disappointments. In a fifth case, Ecuador, the replaced leader had been less autocratic and less entrenched than in these other cases and some significant gains were made.

- *Uzbekistan*: Since becoming president in 2016, Mirziyoyev has implemented several economic and administrative reforms with the goal of making Uzbekistan “slightly more prosperous, reputable, and globally integrated.”¹² These include allowing human rights monitors into the country, improving freedom of travel with neighboring states, dismissing the head of the infamous National Security Service and convicting five senior officials from the service on torture charges, releasing political prisoners, introducing a gender quota in the legislature, and indicting some prosecutors for corruption and graft. While positive, these reforms have not changed the core authoritarian structures of power in Uzbekistan. Mirziyoyev won reelection in 2021 with 80 percent of the vote; observers found the election “lacked genuine competition” and had “significant procedural irregularities.”¹³

2016-2022

Freedom House **+9** 3 → 12

V-Dem **+0.04** .04 → .08

- Ecuador*: After becoming president in 2017, Moreno lowered the partisan temperature of Ecuadorian politics and walked back some of the illiberal elements of his predecessor’s rule. Moreno promised a new era of press freedom and urged journalists to embrace their watchdog function by investigating government corruption. In 2018, the National Assembly approved reforms to the country’s highly repressive Communication Law and eliminated the Superintendency of Information and Communication, the body responsible for monitoring media and enforcing the law. Moreno also called a referendum for proposals that barred officials convicted of corruption from politics and reinstated presidential term limits; their passage effectively blocked Correa from reentering Ecuadorian politics. However, some critics believed that the moves were antidemocratic and meant to target Moreno’s biggest political rival.¹⁴ In March 2019, Moreno was implicated in a corruption scandal when a local news outlet published papers showing a link between Moreno and INA Investment Corp, a Panama tax haven.¹⁵

2016-2022



- Zimbabwe*: Mnangagwa has failed to deliver on his early promises of democratic reforms and rules autocratically. He won the country’s 2018 elections, though observers deemed them neither free nor fair. Mnangagwa’s government continues to suppress protests and punish independent journalists.¹⁶ A 2020 RAND report found, “Repression has increased and the economy continues to sink. With the old guard and military still firmly in power—and both benefiting from perches atop the highly cartelized and patronage-based economy—genuine reform is unlikely in the next one to three years under present conditions in Zimbabwe.”¹⁷

2016-2022



- Ethiopia*: Events of the past several years have shattered the early hopes that Abiy’s assumption of the presidency in 2018 would lead to political liberalization or democratization. In 2019, Abiy dissolved the EPRDF coalition and formed the new Prosperity Party without the powerful Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which had dominated Ethiopia’s politics and the EPRDF for the preceding twenty-seven years. Citing the COVID-19 pandemic, Abiy postponed the 2020 general elections. TPLF leaders rejected the postponement and held elections in the Tigray region. Tensions boiled over in November 2020 when TPLF fighters attacked the Ethiopian National Defense Forces’ Northern Command headquarters in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray. A disastrous war followed. According to a January 2023 analytic note in the Council on Foreign Relations’ Global Conflict Tracker, “Widespread famine is rapidly unfolding across [Tigray]; accusations persist that

the Abiy government is intentionally imposing mass starvation as a tactic of war through aid blockades. Communications blackouts make it difficult to discern the true cost of the war on the ground.”¹⁸ A November 2021 report by the UN human rights office and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission found various offenses including the use of rape as a weapon of war, violence against children, and ethnically targeted killings.¹⁹

2017-2022

Freedom House +9 12 → 21

V-Dem +0.06 .10 → .16

- *Angola*: Under Lourenço, Angola has made some progress on countering corruption. The Angolan government officials claim that they have recovered \$11 billion stolen from state coffers, especially from the sovereign wealth fund.²⁰ Lourenço oversaw the cancellation of several contracts awarded under opaque circumstances. The anticorruption efforts have contributed to increased media attention on corruption allegations and scrutiny of public officials. But critics accuse Lourenço of selectively targeting anticorruption charges against his political rivals, namely the dos Santos family, while not targeting his allies accused of corruption.²¹ Lourenço won the 2022 presidential election with 51 percent of the vote. Observers deemed the vote free and peaceful but noted some concerns about the electoral process favoring the incumbent party.²²

2017-2022

Freedom House +2 26 → 28

V-Dem +0.02 .16 → .18

- *Tanzania*: Since assuming power in 2021, Hassan has implemented certain reforms to open space for independent media, such as lifting bans on four newspapers that were imposed during Magufuli’s tenure. However, Hassan has not significantly altered the autocratic course that Magufuli set. According to a March 2022 analysis by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the government suspended a newspaper in August 2021 for reporting that Hassan may not seek a full term in upcoming elections and suspended a different publication in September 2021 for identifying a man who killed three security personnel as a member of the ruling party.²³ Hassan has not repealed the laws that Magufuli implemented to choke civil society and media groups. Her administration arrested opposition leader Freeman Mbowe in July 2021 before a rally for constitutional reforms, although prosecutors dropped charges against him in March 2022. Hassan did lift the ban on opposition rallies that Magufuli had imposed.

2020-2022

Freedom House +2 34 → 36

V-Dem +0.05 .31 → .36

After a blocked power grab

The blocking of an antidemocratic power grab by a democratically challenged leader, whether primarily by legal institutions or popular protest, may revitalize core democratic institutions or norms that were under threat and positively reset the power balance between the leader and those opposed to autocracy. At the same time, such junctures may not necessarily open the door to necessary, deep reforms depending on the configuration of forces in place.

In the three cases where courts blocked a major undemocratic move by the country's leader— Sri Lanka, Malawi, and Nepal—the legal actions held and the undemocratic move failed, although the outcomes were not uniformly positive.

- *Sri Lanka*: After courts blocked then president Sirisena's effort to appoint a new prime minister in 2018, both Sirisena and Rajapaksa respected the decision and recognized Wickremesinghe's premiership. In an article published immediately after the crisis, Sri Lankan political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda wrote, "The most significant feature of the Supreme Court's invalidation of three major political decisions made by Mr. Sirisena is the re-emergence of the judiciary with a clear sense of institutional autonomy and independence. . . . Sri Lanka's Supreme Court ultimately proved itself to be a reliable arbiter of disputes that have the potential to endanger democracy."²⁴ In elections the following year, political leaders, including those harmed by the 2018 court ruling, participated in the elections and respected their outcome. However, those elections did not bring prodemocracy actors to power. Former defense secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was accused of committing human rights abuses while leading the Sri Lanka Armed Forces during the end of the country's civil war, won the 2019 vote by emphasizing the need for national security. Gotabaya Rajapaksa appointed his brother, former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, as prime minister.

2017-2022

Freedom House **-1** 55 → 54 V-Dem **-0.04** .45 → .41

- *Malawi*: After a constitutional court blocked then president Peter Mutharika's effort to declare victory in the problematic 2019 elections and the opposition won the new vote in 2020, Mutharika conceded defeat, telling his supporters to "move on peacefully." The judiciary checked the executive again when, in August 2021, Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party petitioned the High Court to overturn the election. The High Court eventually dismissed the petition. However, progress on democratic reforms has recently stalled. Corruption remains endemic, with several individuals including the minister of energy being arrested in August 2021 on corruption-related charges.

2018-2022

Freedom House **+2** 64 → 66 V-Dem **+0.09** .45 → .54

- *Nepal*: Deuba remained prime minister until his term ended in late 2022. Deuba presided over what one Kathmandu-based observer characterized as a “fragile” coalition and a “non-functional” parliament.²⁵ As president, Bhandari continued to have controversial confrontations with the Federal Parliament; in September 2022, she refused to endorse a citizenship bill passed by the Federal Parliament that would give approximately 500,000 people access to citizenship documents and the right to vote. The Supreme Court was rocked by a corruption scandal in October 2021 when Chief Justice Cholendra Shamsher Rana allegedly asked for his brother-in-law, Gajendra Hamal, to be appointed to Deuba’s cabinet in exchange for the court’s decision that paved the way for Deuba’s premiership. Deuba made Hamal minister for industry, commerce, and supplies, but Hamal resigned two days after being appointed. Rana was nearly impeached, though ultimately retired at the end of his term in December.

2020-2022

Freedom House **+2** 56 → 58

V-Dem **+0.04** .46 → .50

In the cases where elected autocrats abandoned attempted power grabs after mass mobilizations, the outcomes have been fairly positive, with the Dominican Republic and Armenia being quite positive and Bolivia being less so. Burkina Faso, however, over time ended up in a strongly negative outcome.

- *Burkina Faso*: After Compaoré resigned in 2014, reasonably free and fair elections brought to power Roch Marc Christian Kaboré of the People’s Movement for Progress. The U.S. Department of State wrote in 2018 that although human rights concerns—including harsh prison sentences, child labor, and LGBTQ discrimination—remain a serious issue, “Burkina Faso has improved its human rights record and made significant strides in improving relations and pursuing legal reforms.”²⁶ Kaboré won reelection in 2020 with 57.7 percent of the vote in what observers considered to be a fair election. Freedom House noted in its 2022 report that the media environment had improved in the Kaboré era, saying, “Defamation has been decriminalized, reporters at the public broadcaster have experienced less political interference, and private outlets operate with relative freedom.”²⁷ But throughout Kaboré’s term, violent extremist attacks increased steadily. In January 2022, citing the Kaboré administration’s failure to stem the jihadist insurgency in the country, members of the Burkinabe army deposed Kaboré and made Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba the interim president. In September 2022, Captain Ibrahim Traoré and a small group of other officers in the ruling junta, dissatisfied with Damiba’s failure to stop the jihadist insurgency, led a second coup.

2013-2022

Freedom House **-23** 53 → 30

V-Dem **-0.24** .46 → .22

- Armenia*: Following the 2018 elections, Pashinyan’s government began investigating officials, including two former heads of state for corruption. In October 2019, the government approved a judicial and legal reform strategy, aimed at increasing public trust in the justice system and strengthening judicial independence, and an anticorruption strategy, which called for the creation of a new Anti-Corruption Committee. In April 2020, the parliament passed legislation expanding prosecutors’ ability to investigate corrupt acts, paving the way for authorities to file lawsuits to confiscate property from former officials acquired by corrupt means, worth an estimated total of more than \$100 million as of August 2022.²⁸ A devastating military loss against Azerbaijan in late 2020 sparked a political crisis, forcing snap elections and new electoral reforms. Generally accepted as fair, that vote kept Pashinyan in power, essentially ending the crisis through the ballot box. Not all measures have been positive, however. In June 2020, European observers expressed regret over the passage of a constitutional amendment forcing the immediate retirement of three of the country’s nine Constitutional Court judges, a move parliament took to reduce the influence of those hostile to Pashinyan’s reform agenda.²⁹ Furthermore, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war with Azerbaijan in the fall of 2020, the government introduced restrictions on the independence of journalists and freedom of expression that observers considered “manifestly excessive.”³⁰

2017-2022

Freedom House **+9** 45 → 54

V-Dem **+0.22** .23 → .45

- Dominican Republic*: After Medina gave up on his third-term gambit in the face of large demonstrations, the opposition won the next election and the country returned to its earlier pattern of relatively open, peaceful democracy. In November 2020, the Specialized Prosecutor for the Prosecution of Administrative Corruption (PEPCA) commenced “Operación Antipulpo” (Operation Anti-Octopus), which charged eleven former state officials with corruption, including Medina’s brother and sister. Freedom House reported that throughout 2021, PEPCA investigated corruption in Medina’s administration and opened several new investigations.³¹ By September, PEPCA had linked at least four sitting legislators to drug-trafficking and money-laundering networks and had suspended or removed nine officials from office.

2018-2022

Freedom House **+1** 67 → 68

V-Dem **+0.13** .28 → .46

- *Bolivia*: After Morales resigned and fled the country, Jeanine Añez Chavez, a senator and the next official in the line of succession, declared herself interim president, a move that the constitutional court affirmed. Añez said that she would only serve until a new election could be held, but she later entered the 2020 elections. Añez’s administration charged Morales in absentia with terrorism and sedition charges, a move some international observers characterized as politically motivated. The 2020 elections returned Morales’s party to power, though with a less confrontational president than Morales, Luis Arce. Morales returned to Bolivia on the day after Arce was inaugurated. Under Arce’s government, prosecutors arrested Añez on terrorism and sedition charges that the U.S. Department of State, among others, considered politically motivated. Añez was sentenced to ten years in prison.

2018-2022

Freedom House **-1** 67 → 66

V-Dem **+0.00** .35 → .35

After a pivotal election

Elections that oust a backsliding leader or ruling party clearly have significant potential to open the door to major reforms in democratically challenged contexts given the arrival of new leadership with a popular mandate to enact change. But achieving the promised reforms depends on the depth and range of the democratic deficiencies and the overall balance of power between the incoming and outgoing political forces. As a result, the outcomes in this category of bright spots vary widely. Gambia and the Maldives are notably positive cases, while the United States and Zambia have yet to enact the deep political reforms their new leaders promised. Slovenia holds strong promise but is still in the early days after its political reset. Brazil also holds some promise but is in even earlier days and faces a harshly polarized sociopolitical landscape.

- *Gambia*: Since becoming president in 2017, Barrow has delivered on several notable prodemocratic promises. Barrow quickly released all prisoners who had been detained without a trial. Although the death penalty is still legal in Gambia, Barrow announced his commitment to its abolition, introduced a moratorium on executions, commuted the sentences of the twenty-two individuals who remained on death row, and signed several international human rights conventions. He also reversed former president Jammeh’s decision to withdraw from the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Barrow introduced reforms to the infamous National Intelligence Agency, renaming it the State Intelligence Service and sacking several of its top leaders. The National Assembly created the National Human

Rights Commission and the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations Commission in December 2017 to investigate abuses during Jammeh’s presidency. In February 2017, the National Assembly dramatically lowered the deposits that candidates and parties are required to pay, making the political process more inclusive. However, Barrow backtracked on his promise to call new elections after three years, and in early 2020, authorities arrested demonstrators for protesting his decision to serve a full five-year term. Barrow also promised constitutional reforms, but these have stalled.

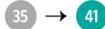
2015-2022

Freedom House +30  18 → 48

V-Dem +0.39  .11 → .50

- *Maldives*: Solih has partially delivered on the democratizing reforms he promised when he defeated Yameen in the 2018 presidential election. On his first day in office, Solih created a commission on releasing political prisoners, and many were freed as a result. Solih also created the Commission on Investigation of Murders and Enforced Disappearances, which has presented findings from various investigations into the murders and disappearances of activists and journalists, including Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla. Parliament quickly repealed the draconian 2016 Defamation Act, which levied hefty fines and prison terms for those found guilty of defamation. Solih signed into law a measure to protect whistleblowers in October 2019. Prosecutors held certain officials from Yameen’s government accountable for corruption, including the former president himself. An April 2022 Human Rights Watch report concluded that the Solih government “has taken some significant steps toward restoring civil liberties, particularly with respect to the media, [but] it has failed to confront deep-rooted corruption and the continuing influence of extremist groups and criminal gangs on the judiciary, police, and other government institutions.”³²

2017-2022

Freedom House +6  35 → 41

V-Dem +0.28  .17 → .45

- *United States*: Following his victory in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Biden succeeded in restoring democratic norms, such as respect for the rule of law, to the presidency both at the rhetorical and substantive levels. The 2022 midterm elections saw the defeat of various hardline election deniers who sought to win key posts overseeing election administration in different states. At the same time, the sharp political divide between Democrats and Republicans has made it impossible for the Biden administration to secure passage of major structural prodemocratic reforms

that Democrats hoped to implement in the aftermath of Trump's defeat in 2020, such as enhanced voter access, campaign finance reform, and the prohibition of gerrymandering. Trump and many congressional Republicans continue to deny the validity of the results of the 2020 election.

2019-2022

Freedom House **-3** 86 → 83

V-Dem **+0.02** .72 → .74

- *Zambia*: According to Freedom House's 2023 report, "Zambia's successful rotation of power through elections in 2021 led to some progress in the fight against corruption, greater transparency and access to information, and fewer restrictions on freedom of assembly in 2022." In December 2022, the National Assembly repealed the controversial law on defamation of the president, which Hichilema and his predecessor used to punish critics of the government. Hichilema also abolished the death penalty. However, the government has not repealed various other antidemocratic laws, including the Penal Code Act, the Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act, and the colonial-era Public Order Act. Under Hichilema, authorities have arrested journalists who leaked audio of an incriminating conversation between two senior officials, intimidated independent media, and denied coverage to opposition parties in the state-run media. Authorities have arrested opposition officials for insulting the president.

2020-2022

Freedom House **+2** 52 → 54

V-Dem **+0.17** .27 → .44

- *Slovenia*: The government that came to power in early 2022 has embarked on some significant prodemocratic reforms. In July 2022, the Slovenian Parliament passed an omnibus bill that repealed eleven laws passed under the Janša government, most of which had illiberal elements including those that politicized the police force, excluded environmental groups from some planning procedures, and loosened rules on purchasing weapons. In November 2022, Slovenians voted in a referendum to approve three laws by a wide margin, including a law aimed at restoring editorial independence to the national broadcaster by reducing the power of the government to appoint its governing body.

2021-2022

Freedom House **+5** 90 → 95

V-Dem **+0.11** .60 → .71

- *Brazil*: It is too early to tell how Brazilian politics will evolve in the aftermath of Bolsonaro’s defeat and Lula’s return to power in late 2022. Lula has promised to return Brazil to a more democratic path. However, on January 8, 2023, supporters of Bolsonaro stormed the country’s National Congress, presidential palace, and Supreme Court buildings. Police detained 1,500 people involved. The event demonstrated Brazil’s profound polarization and signaled the presence of antidemocratic elements in Brazil’s military and police, underlining the serious challenges that Lula faces in governing.

2021-2022

Freedom House **-1** 73 → 72 V-Dem **+0.02** .51 → .53

With respect to cases where a significant democratic impulse occurs in a stagnant democracy, the outcomes have been mostly positive. In several of these countries, especially Moldova and Honduras, entrenched antidemocratic actors have pushed back against the reform agenda that the new leader has sought to implement.

- *Sri Lanka*: Sirisena came to power as president in 2015 promising a 100-day reform program, of which his government passed several elements. In April 2015, the Sri Lankan Parliament passed the nineteenth amendment to the constitution. It stripped the president of certain powers, including the power to remove the prime minister and unilaterally dissolve Parliament; limited the scope of immunity for the president; and introduced a two-term limit on the president’s tenure. Immediately after coming to office, Sirisena ordered the country’s Telecommunication Regulatory Commission to lift a ban on news websites blocked by former president Mahinda Rajapaksa’s government. Sirisena’s government also passed the Right to Information Act in 2016, a law designed to increase transparency in government. However, the president did not accomplish all that he promised; the proposed twentieth amendment, which was supposed to open the political system to citizens, failed due to lack of support in Parliament. Sirisena also shielded soldiers from prosecution for war crimes, despite having promised not to do so. Ultimately, Sirisena sparked a constitutional crisis in 2018 by appointing Rajapaksa as prime minister, before formally sacking Wickremesinghe, the prime minister whom he had appointed.

2014-2022

Freedom House **+13** 41 → 54 V-Dem **+0.14** .27 → .41

- *Malaysia*: Under then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia’s Parliament passed several key reforms. In December 2018, Parliament repealed a section of the 1971 Universities and University Colleges Act that prohibited students from involvement in political activity on campus, although Parliament did not repeal

the entire law, leaving other academic restrictions on political activity in place. In October 2019, Parliament repealed the Anti-Fake News Act, a 2018 law that critics accused former prime minister Najib Razak of using to suppress investigations into his administration's corrupt behavior. While Mahathir originally promised to repeal the colonial-era Sedition Act—a law that criminalizes speech with “seditious tendency”—his government ultimately backtracked on this promise, as well as on promises to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Prosecutors charged Najib for his role in the 1MDB scandal; they ultimately secured a twelve-year sentence after Mahathir's premiership ended. Infighting within the ruling Pakatan Harapan coalition led Mahathir to resign as prime minister in February 2020.

2017-2022

Freedom House +8 45 → 53 V-Dem +0.11 .20 → .31

- Kosovo:* The government led by Vetëvendosje has taken some positive steps in developing strategies for public administration reform, public finance management, anticorruption legislation, and inclusive growth. Thus far, however, these reforms have had minimal impact on Kosovo's entrenched corruption and chronic mismanagement. According to the European Commission, writing in October 2022 after one year of Vetëvendosje rule, “There is a need for strong political will to continue to effectively address systemic corruption risks and a robust criminal justice response to high-level corruption.”³³ Prime Minister Albin Kurti has also faced significant challenges, including a political crisis sparked by new laws that inflamed interethnic tensions.

2018-2022

Freedom House +6 54 → 60 V-Dem +0.04 .42 → .46

- Chile:* The outcome of Chile's new democratic moment following its 2020 vote in favor of the drafting of a new constitution remains uncertain. In May 2021, Chileans elected political newcomers, independents, and activists to fill the 155-member Constitutional Convention. After deliberating for ten months, the Constitutional Convention produced an initial public draft in May 2022 and a final draft in July. In September, Chileans voted against the proposed constitution, with 62 percent against and 38 percent in favor. In December, the major parties agreed on a new path to draft a constitution; they called on Congress to appoint twenty-four experts who will create the framework for a constitutional commission.

2018-2022

Freedom House +0 94 → 94 V-Dem -0.06 .82 → .76

- Moldova*: The task of delivering on the new government’s anticorruption agenda faces significant challenges, especially entrenched, corrupt elites at all levels of government who are resistant to systemic change. The German Institute for International and Security Affairs found in November 2022 that the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) government has been “unable to secure *de facto* power even after obtaining *de jure* power by winning the 2021 elections. Although PAS defeated the kleptocrats politically, it has been confronted with the harsh realities of a corrupt justice system that operates independently, almost as a state within a state.”³⁴ The reformist government has taken some steps to address corruption. In August 2021, it launched the Independent Anti-Corruption Advisory Committee to investigate the country’s major corruption. President Maia Sandu explained the creation of the committee, saying, “Unfortunately, the state institutions that prevent and fight corruption are moving very slowly, much slower than the corrupt groups stealing (from) this country.”³⁵ In October 2022, prosecutors indicted former president Igor Dodon for corruption. In February 2023, following months of crises related to the war in neighboring Ukraine, prime minister Natalia Gavrilita resigned; Sandu quickly nominated former interior minister Dorin Recean as her replacement.

2019-2022

Freedom House **+2** 60 → 62 V-Dem **+0.18** .46 → .64

- Honduras*: Castro has taken some anticorruption steps. She oversaw the extradition of former president Juan Orlando Hernández to the United States and signed an agreement to install a UN-backed anticorruption mission in Honduras. Castro convinced Congress to repeal the “secrets law,” which restricted access to information on contracts and trusts for up to thirty years. Yet progress has been slower than Castro hoped due to the entrenched corruption in many of the country’s key institutions, such as the security forces. Concerningly, under Castro’s leadership, Congress approved an amnesty law that protects people tied to her husband’s presidential administration more than a decade earlier.

2020-2022

Freedom House **+4** 44 → 48 V-Dem **+0.17** .23 → .40

Patterns and Policy Implications

Overall, fourteen of the thirty-two bright spots have made significant democratic progress since the positive juncture emerged. Most of the rest have gone neither significantly forward nor backward on democracy. A few have gone markedly backward. Figure 2 presents these results using the V-Dem data. A central finding is that democratic bright spots can lead to significant democratic progress, but success is far from guaranteed. And what success is achieved is usually incremental reform rather than systemic renovation. In this concluding section, we analyze the track records with the different bright spot categories, draw some insights from the timelines of democratic progress in the categories, emphasize the need for strategic differentiation in efforts to help bright spots, and consider why positive junctures sometimes turn out less well than hoped. We close with a final observation about the significance of bright spots generally and the imperative of external engagement.

Figure 2. Outcomes of Democratic Bright Spots

Positive Outcomes	Slightly Positive and Slightly Negative Outcomes	Negative Outcomes
Gambia: +0.39 Maldives: +0.28 Ecuador: +0.22 Armenia: +0.22 Dominican Republic: +0.18 Moldova: +0.18 Zambia: +0.17 Honduras: +0.17 Sri Lanka (2015): +0.14 South Korea: +0.12 Slovenia: +0.11 Malaysia: +0.11 Malawi: +0.09 North Macedonia: +0.08	Ethiopia: +0.06 Tanzania: +0.05 Nepal: +0.04 Kosovo: +0.04 Uzbekistan: +0.04 United States: +0.02 Brazil: +0.02 Angola: +0.02 Bolivia: +0.00 Zimbabwe: -0.01 Algeria: -0.03 Ukraine: -0.03 Sudan: -0.03 Lebanon: -0.04 Sri Lanka (2018): -0.04 Chile: -0.06	Guatemala: -0.17 Burkina Faso: -0.24

Citizen mobilizations oust a leader
 Promising authoritarian successions
 Blocked power grabs
 Pivotal elections

Source: The Varieties of Democracy Institute

Track records within categories

The most emblematic kind of democratic bright spot in the public imagination—the fall of a dictator in the face of popular mobilization against their rule—has occurred only twice in the past ten years, in Sudan and Algeria, and has produced little if any democratic progress. Thus, as Western policymakers and experts debate prospects for democracy in authoritarian states such as China, Iran, and Russia, it is worth keeping in mind how rare such transitions in closed autocracies have been in recent years. Meanwhile, uprisings against democratically challenged elected leaders have been somewhat more common. These have sometimes led to positive reforms, such as in South Korea and Ukraine, but also sometimes led to major disappointments, as in Guatemala.

Second, promising leadership successions in autocratic contexts have generally produced only very limited progress—modest positive policy changes but no change in overall regime structures. This does not mean that such successions should be ignored. But external actors should be careful not to overestimate their broader prodemocratic consequences.

Third, blocking power grabs by elected autocrats or other types of semi-democratic leaders—especially leaders' attempts to extend their term beyond the established constitutional limit—has produced meaningful positive results in several cases, whether just halting backsliding or putting the country on a more positive path. This is true whether the blocking was effected by popular mobilization or legal action. Anticipating such power grabs and working in a timely, concerted fashion to help domestic prodemocratic forces head them off is a crucial role for external prodemocratic actors. The case of U.S. government engagement in the run-up to the 2022 Brazilian presidential election—which included direct warnings from senior U.S. officials to senior Brazilian military officials about negative consequences to U.S.-Brazilian relations that would result from an interruption of Brazilian democracy—is an important positive example of how to help head off a possible power grab before it occurs.³⁶

Finally, pivotal elections involving victory by prodemocracy candidates against backsliders or new democratic impulses in stagnant democracies have resulted in positive outcomes in a majority of cases and the largest number of positive outcomes overall. This is the most numerous of the four bright spot categories. It is also the hardest to draw the boundaries of given that so many candidates and parties around the world campaign on messages of democratic reform, especially anticorruption reforms. Although the positive outcomes that are achieved almost always are short of the elevated expectations that often accompany encouraging election results, the significant number of positive cases underlines the fact that elections remain a critical opportunity for achieving democratic breakthroughs, even in contexts of democratic backsliding.

Comparative timelines

We looked for further nuance in the patterns of outcomes by also examining the timelines of democratic progress or regress across the different bright spot categories. Annex 1 shows how the V-Dem liberal democracy scores of all thirty-two bright spots changed between the year before the bright spot emerged and 2022. Annex 2 shows four graphs with this information disaggregated by category.

Countries in the first category (citizen uprisings) tend to accomplish strong democratic progress over the course of several years before peaking and then gradually declining. Only two countries in this category are more democratic today than the year before their uprising. Countries in the second category (promising successions) tend to achieve some marked improvement in the new leader's first year. However, their trajectories are consistently flat after that. The third category (blocked power grabs) has the widest variations in trajectory but generally features a strong early boost followed by a moderate decline. Finally, the fourth category (pivotal elections) tend to experience their most significant gains in the first year and begin to decline by the third year.

Overall, the timelines highlight that the most productive year for democracy is usually the first year after a bright spot emerges. The implication for policymakers interested in supporting bright spots is clear: acting fast to help is essential.

The need for strategic differentiation in efforts to help

A tendency exists among policymakers and aid providers to focus on “helping democracy deliver” in their plans to boost bright spots—helping new reformist leaders or governments produce better socioeconomic outcomes relatively quickly for a wide swath of the citizenry. This may be the right approach in some bright spot contexts, where, for example, the survival of a new leader or new government depends on the legitimacy that bettering citizens' economic wellbeing may convey (though other factors may be equally important in the quest for legitimacy, such as bringing overweening elites to account). But in other types of bright spots, other strategies of assistance may be more relevant.

In contexts of promising authoritarian succession, for example, bolstering the chances of democratic progress may depend less on helping a new potentially liberalizing autocrat improve the economy quickly than on presenting them with specific incentives, such as greater international acceptance and recognition, for taking specific political reforms. Or in cases where a power grab has been blocked, increasing the chances of forward democratic momentum may depend more on whether the countervailing forces that resisted the grab—such as legal institutions or broad-based citizen coalitions—are further recognized and strengthened.

We are not attempting here to elaborate specific strategies for supporting democratic bright spots—such an account would need to work from a systematic review of what measures of support and aid were attempted in past cases and how they fared, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we are signaling that analytic differentiation of bright spot cases, as we have attempted in this paper, should help policymakers and aid providers avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to bright spots—the ever-tempting formula of “helping democracies deliver”—and concentrate instead on developing tailored approaches for different contexts.

Reasons for disappointment

The precise reasons why any particular bright spot falls short of expectations are based in the specific realities of the country’s main political actors, their sources of power and legitimacy, their interests and allies, and much more. Nevertheless, there are some overarching reasons why some bright spots fall short of hopes. These reasons are worth highlighting for policymakers looking for ways to more systematically help boost bright spots’ chances of success.

First, the underlying entrenched political and economic forces and structures that are linked to but exist below the level of the antidemocratic political leadership in a closed autocracy or electoral autocracy often weather the changes brought about by prodemocratic actions and reassert themselves over time to frustrate the attempted reforms. Many variations of this pattern exist. In the case of countries where the military exerts a major hold on the political system, forcing a junta leader out of power often does not shake the military’s deeper grip. Sudan’s recent struggles embody this familiar pattern. In cases where entrenched civilian elites have formal control of the system but work closely with the security forces behind the scenes to strangle democracy, ousting any one civilian leader rarely succeeds in disrupting those underlying forces. Guatemala is an especially telling such case where the heartening wave of anticorruption protests in 2015 produced the president’s resignation but did not break the grip of the country’s elite. In contrast, corruption in South Korea was concentrated around the leader and her immediate political circle; ousting Park produced a genuine political reset. Diagnosing the configuration and capacities of a bright spot country’s underlying structures of power is thereby critical to assessing the chances of success and the likely avenues of reversion.

Second, the new leaders or new parties that come to power and radiate the promise of prodemocratic change sometimes disappoint. They briefly shine in the bright light of some major popular impulse for change. But once the initial excitement crests and the hard work of governing starts, the light often dims. In some cases, they are simply weaker and less capable than they initially appeared to be. This appears to be the case in Honduras, where a reformist candidate has struggled to be an effective leader. Some once-promising new leaders turn out to have their own major democratic shortcomings, as proved to be the case with Morales in Guatemala. Furthermore, pro-democratic political and civic coalitions forged in

exciting moments of potential democratic change sometimes break apart or become fractious when they have the chance to enter the realm of governing. Furthermore, even skilled, well-intentioned new leaders may inherit daunting obstacles from the previous regime, such as economic wreckage or crisis.

Third, democratic bright spots are also sometimes thrown off track by new problematic events that emerge and override attempts to move the country forward democratically. This was the case in Burkina Faso in the years following Compaoré's encouraging departure from power. Violent Islamist extremists began to gain ground in the country, leading to unrest in the military and, over time, to two successive coups by disgruntled military officers. In Armenia, the outbreak of war with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region damaged reformist Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, though he was able to recover politically over time. Policymakers should take note of the link between conflict prevention and stabilization and the possibilities for democratic bright spots to survive.

Democracy up for grabs

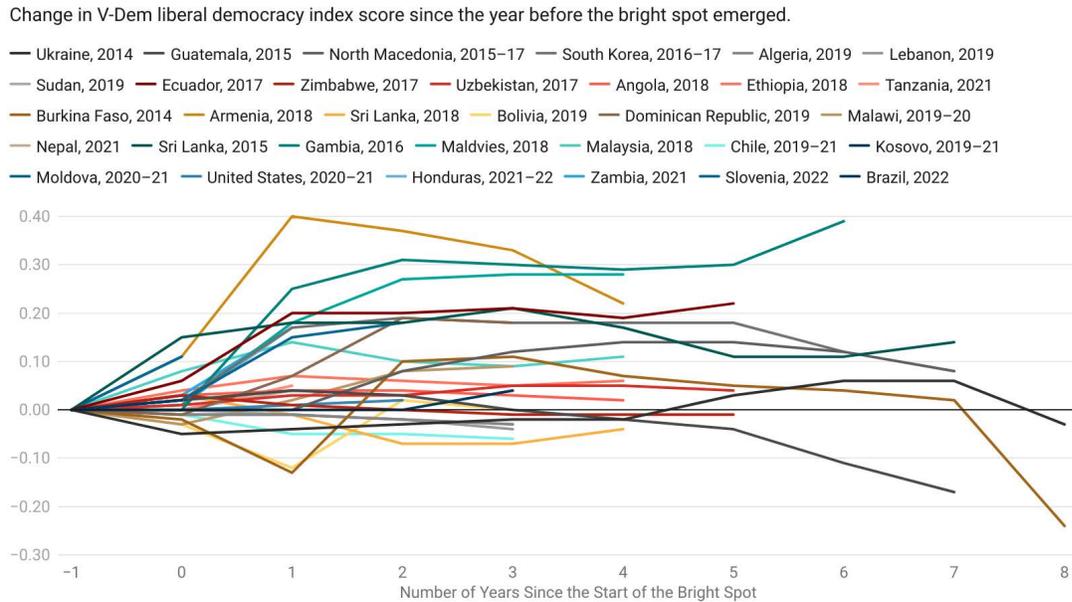
The overall success record of democratic bright spots is mixed, and few live up to the elevated hopes that usually accompany them. Yet the multitude of such openings that have emerged in the past ten years underscores that the global political trend, however daunting overall, is in fact quite heterogeneous. Positive developments and possibilities for democracy are occurring around the world on a regular basis in all kinds of political systems. It is notable that regions frequently perceived more as sources of democratic trouble than opportunity are home to many democratic openings. Close to one-third of all bright spots in the last decade have occurred in Africa, and one-third of South American countries have experienced a major positive juncture.

Policymakers and political experts weighed down by the troubled state of democracy globally should keep this in mind and respond accordingly. Democracy remains very much up for grabs in dozens of countries around the world, and a significant number of favorable opportunities exist at any one moment. The need for analytically well-informed, timely, and determined support from external actors committed to helping make the most of these possibilities, such as that now being attempted by the Biden administration, is high.

Annex 1: Bright Spot Trajectories

The chart tracks the changes in countries' V-Dem liberal democracy scores from the year before the bright spot emerged until 2022.

Figure 3. Trajectory of Democratic Bright Spots



Annex 2: Bright Spot Trajectories Disaggregated by Category

The four charts track the changes in countries' V-Dem liberal democracy scores from the year before the bright spot emerged until 2022. Each chart shows the trajectories of countries in each category described in this paper.

Figure 4. Trajectory of Citizen Mobilization Bright Spots

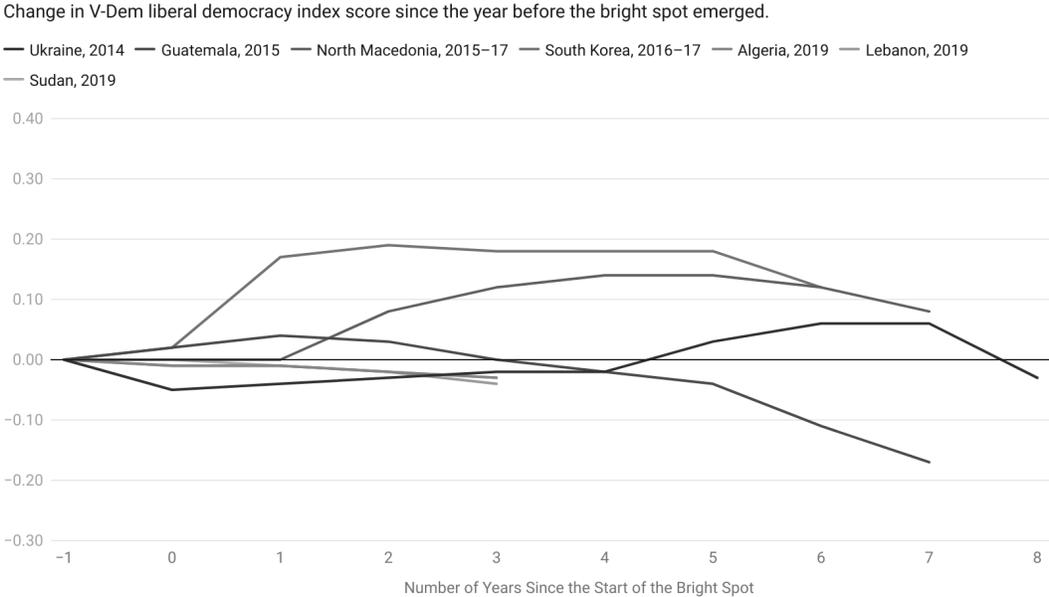


Figure 5. Trajectory of Promising Authoritarian Succession Bright Spots

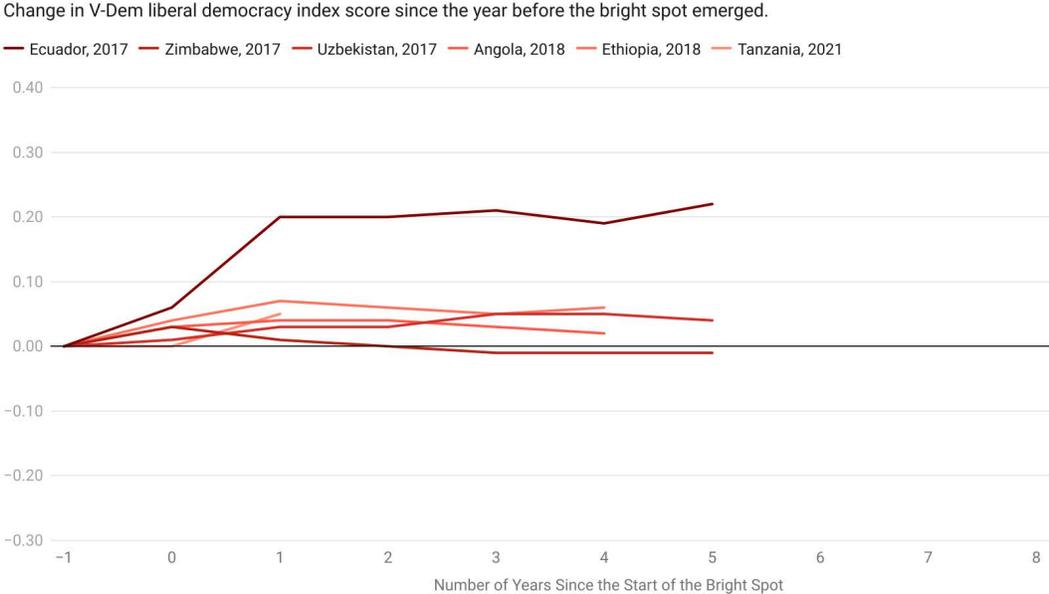


Figure 6. Trajectory of Blocked Power Grab Bright Spots

Change in V-Dem liberal democracy index score since the year before the bright spot emerged.

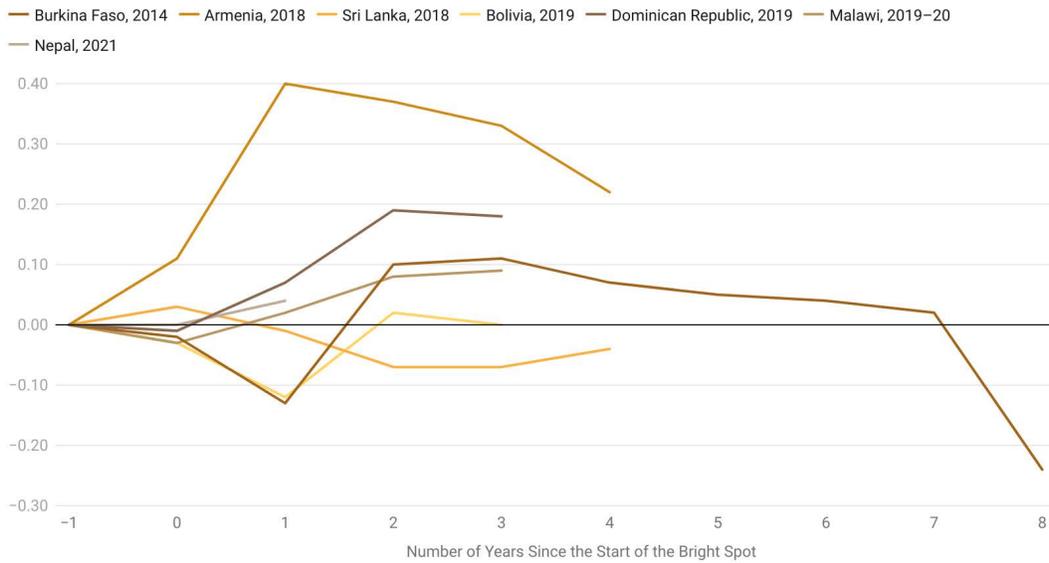
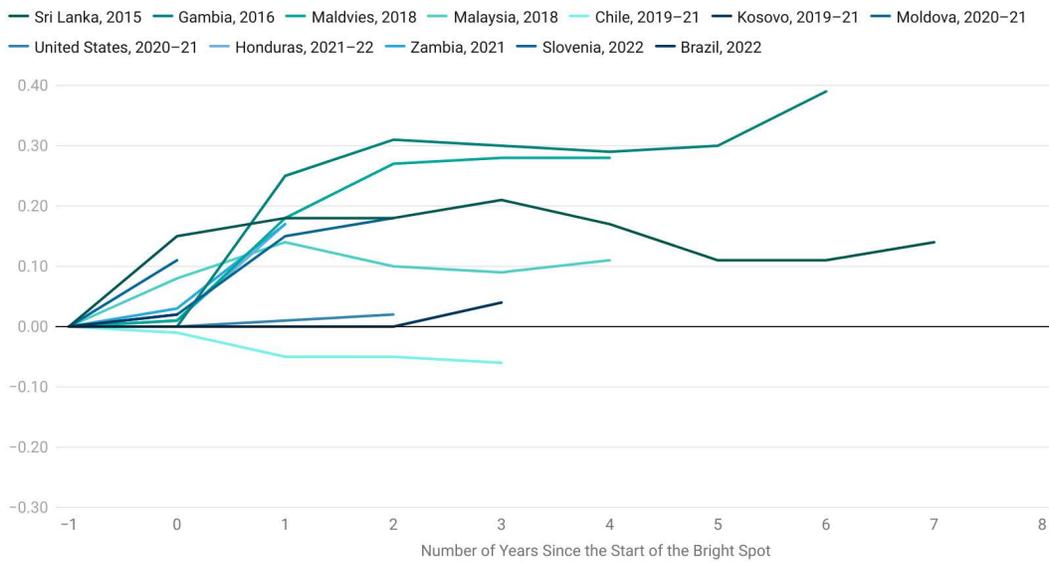


Figure 7. Trajectory of Pivotal Election Bright Spots

Change in V-Dem liberal democracy index score since the year before the bright spot emerged.



About the Authors

Thomas Carothers, co-director of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program, is a leading expert on comparative democratization and international support for democracy. He is the author of many books and articles on these topics and has served as an adviser or consultant to numerous organizations engaged in supporting democracy worldwide.

Benjamin Feldman is a James C. Gaither Junior Fellow in the Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program at Carnegie. He is a graduate of Cornell University and a specialist in comparative politics.

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