



Autocratization and Subjective Well-Being: Is There a Macro-Level Effect?

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Abstract

Much scholarly attention has recently been devoted to (democratic) backsliding and its consequences. We contribute to this growing literature by examining the relationship between backsliding in any regime (“autocratization”) and subjective well-being, broadening the discussion of this phenomenon to include its potential psychological repercussions. We highlight several theoretical mechanisms through which autocratization may be linked to subjective well-being. We estimate a series of mixed-effects models to assess whether negative changes in democracy levels are associated with variation in life satisfaction at the macro level across 165 countries between 2005 and 2023, using eight democracy measures and aggregate survey data on life satisfaction. We find no clear or statistically significant overall relationship between autocratization and subjective well-being. Upon splitting the sample by initial levels of democracy, however, we find more consistent evidence of a negative relationship between autocratization and subjective well-being when more established democracies become less democratic (4 out of 8 indicators), as opposed to mixed regimes and autocracies becoming more autocratic. These results suggest that the consequences of democratic erosion depend importantly on institutional context and on citizens’ expectations and experiences of democratic governance, and that decline in different dimensions of democracy may not be equally consequential for subjective well-being.

Keywords Autocratization · Democratic backsliding · Democracy · Subjective well-being · Life satisfaction · Human happiness

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Introduction

Does (democratic) backsliding affect human well-being? The question is of some moment as the phenomenon draws increasing attention from scholars across a wide range of areas of inquiry. While empirical research on determinants of human well-being is by no means recent, another literature on democratic backsliding has been expanding rapidly. In trying to answer the opening question, we link these two literatures with the express purpose of identifying mechanisms by which democratic backsliding, over time, may affect human well-being.

More immediately, our primary goal is to address a gap in the empirical literature on one important aspect of human well-being, subjective well-being (i.e., “happiness” and life satisfaction) at the macro level. Since the 1980s, the empirical literature exploring links between democracy in its multiple facets and subjective well-being has grown exponentially. While scholarly debates and differences of opinion abound, a rough consensus has emerged that, overall, democracy “matters” for well-being. What precisely *about* democracy affects well-being continues to be debated, from the procedural benefits (Frey and Stutzer 2000) to the alleged material benefits (Luo, 2020) to a wide range of components that enable individuals to lead better lives (e.g., Bromo, Pacek and Radcliff 2024), and indeed, to the direction of the relationship itself (Inglehart, 2009a, b; Bernhard 2024). While this literature continues to evolve, a related aspect, what, if any, impact (democratic) backsliding or autocratization over time has on well-being, has received much less scholarly attention.

The need to address this is, again, of some moment. As the 2000s continue, more countries around the world are scoring lower on the broad and wide metrics for backsliding, from the Americas (United States, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala) to Europe (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Serbia) to Asia (India, Turkey, Philippines) to Africa (Benin, Nigeria, Tanzania), to list just a few examples drawing scrutiny (e.g., Nord et al. 2025a). At the same time, recognizing that this is a fluid process with uncertain outcomes, other countries have seen their scores improve over time and some have managed to reverse autocratization (Nord et al. 2025b). Our principal question of interest is simply this: Does the process of backsliding across all regime types affect subjective well-being, and if so, why? The question is not a simple one. While democratic or authoritarian breakdowns can be dramatic and violent events, “backsliding” often involves, as Waldner and Lust (2018) put it, “relatively fine-grained degrees of change” (p. 95). It is not unreasonable to suspect that many people might not even notice such changes unless they are specific regime targets. Another possibility is that segments of the population might be willing to tolerate or even welcome such shifts (Wunsch, 2025; Wunsch, Jacob and Derksen 2025), insofar as they are perceived as hurting their “enemies,” or are aimed at certain institutions and organizations. The “psychological” argument is, therefore, not necessarily straightforward or one-directional. On the one hand, some citizens’ frustration and concerns vis-à-vis the declining state of democracy might be reflected in lower life satisfaction, as citizens are less happy as a result of backsliding and its attendant consequences. On the other hand, given that assaults on democracy are increasingly coming “from the actions of *duly elected* governments” (Haggard and Kaufman 2021: p. 1), it might

be that at least a portion of the electorate supporting these duly elected governments is happier (or feels more satisfied in life) *as a consequence* of their actions.

That said, we argue that the process of backsliding affects a range of factors that, in turn, affect subjective well-being, as catalogued in the growing literature on determinants of life satisfaction/human happiness. In what follows, we investigate these linkages in a broad sample of countries over two decades. Specifically, we estimate a series of mixed-effects models to assess whether negative changes in democracy levels in any regime, which we refer to as “autocratization events,” are associated with variation in life satisfaction at the macro level across 165 countries between 2005 and 2023 using eight different measures of democracy and aggregate survey data on life satisfaction. We also consider whether the effects of autocratization differ depending on countries’ initial levels of democratic development. To preview our results, we find no clear or statistically significant overall relationship between autocratization and subjective well-being. Upon splitting the sample by *initial* levels of democracy, we find more consistent evidence of a negative relationship between autocratization and subjective well-being *when more established democracies become less democratic* (4 out of 8 indicators), as opposed to mixed regimes and autocracies becoming more autocratic. These findings suggest that the consequences of democratic erosion depend importantly on institutional context and on citizens’ expectations and experiences of democratic governance, and that decline in different dimensions of democracy may not be equally consequential for subjective well-being.

The article proceeds as follows: we review the extant literature linking the components of backsliding to particular mechanisms known to affect subjective well-being. We describe our dataset, which is panel in nature, covering a roughly twenty-year time period, and consists of a broad range of established democracies, mixed regimes, and autocracies, and includes multiple indicators of autocratization and control variables. We then describe our methodological strategy and the models we run on life satisfaction as our dependent variable. Finally, we discuss our results, the limitations of our analysis, and implications for further empirical research into human well-being and the phenomenon of backsliding in general.

“Democratic” Backsliding and Subjective Well-Being: Challenges and Possible Mechanisms

Conceptualizing and Measuring Autocratization

“Democratic backsliding” or “de-democratization,” a process of regime change toward autocracy, has received a lot of scholarly attention in recent years (e.g., Hyde, 2020; Skaaning, 2020; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Little and Meng 2024). The debate surrounding this topic is rather lively, with scholars arguing over how to conceptualize and measure this phenomenon and questioning whether it is actually occurring on a global scale or not. We remain agnostic about many of these measurement debates. However, we explicitly acknowledge that democracy is a multidimensional concept. Contemporary measures capture different principles of democratic governance, such as electoral contestation, constraints on executive

power and minority rights, participatory inclusion, deliberative quality, and egalitarian access to political power. To the extent that we observe reductions in these different dimensions, we are concerned with how such reductions may correlate with subjective well-being, and through which mechanisms, if at all. Different dimensions of democracy may plausibly affect life satisfaction in distinct ways. Erosion of electoral competition, weakening of liberal institutions, reductions in participatory opportunities, or declines in egalitarian representation may not translate into citizens' lived experiences in an identical fashion. In what follows, we, therefore, outline how autocratization across these different democratic principles might influence subjective well-being through partially distinct psychological, institutional, and socio-economic pathways.

We begin by noting that the term “democratic backsliding” itself poses semantic issues for our project. While we are interested in the impact of ostensibly democratic regimes becoming more (or less) democratic, we are also interested in what occurs when autocracies become more (or less) autocratic. Indeed, hybrid/competitive authoritarian regimes have been scrutinized through the prism of “authoritarian backsliding,” i.e., the process by which metrics of backsliding from human rights to executive overreach worsen (Levitsky and Way 2002; Alemán & Yang, 2011; Dresden and Howard 2016). The processes and policies associated with “democratic backsliding”—increased concentration of executive power, expansion and broadened use of security forces, restrictions on human rights and civil liberties, restrictions on the sphere of public participation, and attacks on institutions of government—occur, of course, in both democratic, autocratic, and “hybrid” or “mixed” regimes alike. And, of course, reversals and mitigations of these policies and outcomes happen as well. Our goal is to understand whether these changes over time affect the extent to which citizens across countries find their lives more or less satisfying. For the remainder of this article, we will primarily use the terms “backsliding” and “autocratization,” by which we mean a process of reduction in democracy levels in *any* regime, given the sample of countries under study.

As anticipated, one major obstacle to a better understanding of the impact of this phenomenon on well-being is the lack of scholarly consensus on just precisely what it is. It follows then that this exacerbates the challenge of identifying the pathways from aspects of backsliding to human well-being. That said, there is at least broad agreement on specific areas of political governance and policy that backsliding is known to affect. Given that the process is by no means recent, scholars have had time to compile a rough list of changes attributed to backsliding. Again, while much of this change has been associated with democratic systems (hence “democratic backsliding”), it is important to note that measurable worsening in aspects of governance can and do occur in non-democratic and hybrid regimes as well. To put it another way, what is good can become bad, and what is bad can become worse (and, conversely, the opposite can happen as well).

It is not the purpose of this article to explore in great depth the myriad definitions of backsliding, but rather to argue for its impact on human well-being. Our aim is to examine whether reductions in democratic quality across different conceptualizations are associated with changes in subjective well-being. We draw on all the available, well-established democracy measures that accommodate the spatio-temporal

breadth of our sample. These indicators are not treated as interchangeable measures of the same phenomenon but as reflecting different dimensions of democracy. By examining them separately, we can assess whether erosion of particular democratic principles is more strongly associated with variation in subjective well-being than erosion of others. This multidimensional approach enables us to explore potential heterogeneity in how declines in specific aspects of democratic governance translate into citizens' lives.

Our summation of what scholars generally agree on as to its nature will be brief. While the list of attributes can be extensive, scholars generally focus on the following: (1) increased authority of the executive branch, (2) negative alterations to the electoral process, (3) "attacks" on political institutions and organizations (courts, oversight agencies, NGOs, as but a few examples), and (4) attacks on and/or weakening of civil rights and civil liberties (Bermeo, 2016; Ginsburg and Huq 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). All of these can occur in democracies as well as hybrid or ("competitive") authoritarian regimes. In other words, shifts forward or backward in metrics of some or all of these areas can occur in autocratic regimes as well (Dresden and Howard 2016). Taken as a whole, the literature on backsliding generally looks at changes in the concentration of power, the autonomy of key institutions and organizations, the integrity of elections, and the extent to which citizens are directly or indirectly targeted.

The expansion of global data capturing movement in these spheres over time, such as the oft-cited "Varieties of Democracy" measures, has produced a concomitant literature on the consequences of these shifts. It is to one of these—human well-being—that we turn our attention. Because different measures reflect different facets of democracy, each with its own institutional focus, ranging from electoral competition to civil liberties and egalitarian inclusion, the pathways through which their erosion might influence subjective well-being are not necessarily identical. Some mechanisms operate through political agency and participation, others through institutional trust and legal security, and still others through distributive fairness or economic stability. In what follows, we outline several of these mechanisms, recognizing that they may be activated differently depending on which democratic dimension is in decline.

Challenges in Linking Autocratization to Subjective Well-Being

The empirical literature on determinants of subjective well-being is rich with evidence for a variety of economic, political, and social factors shown to increase or decrease life satisfaction (see, for example, Diener, Diener & Diener, 1995; Veenhoven, 1996; Diener et al., 1999). Our argument, therefore, might seem a relatively straightforward one: backsliding can worsen aspects of life that people find enjoyable and/or necessary. And depending on which dimension of democracy is in decline, the channels linking autocratization to subjective well-being might differ in immediacy and gravity. However, as noted above, one potential obstacle we face is that much of what constitutes backsliding might be subtle (vs. dramatic as in full-blown regime breakdowns), and thus not even noticed, at least not immediately.

In Fig. 1, we plot the *average* annual change in eight democracy measures across 165 countries from 2005 to 2023. One can see that the magnitude of average change in democracy levels is relatively small. While, again, drastic and abrupt changes might and do occur, most notably in cases like coups and military takeovers (e.g., Myanmar in 2021), this observation is consistent with the idea that backsliding can be inconspicuous, gradual, and incremental.

In short, one fundamental challenge we face is determining the temporal horizon over which the changes associated with autocratization affect citizens' lives enough to be measurably felt and, in turn, to be expressed in improved or worsened self-perceptions of well-being. It is entirely reasonable to expect that different aspects of "backsliding" will not be observed or felt in the same manner across individuals. To complicate matters further, it is entirely reasonable that a significant number of citizens will actually tolerate backsliding outright. Wunsch (2025) outlines at least four possible reasons for this: (1) Increased partisanship and polarization; (2) Perceived economic benefits outweighing anti-democratic transgressions; (3) Backlash against perceived cultural progressiveness; (4) Varying commitments to the principles of liberal democracy. Put differently, what decreases the well-being of some may very well increase the well-being of others. It is beyond the immediate scope of this paper to make distinctions among which subsets of the population fall under each category. We do acknowledge, however, the salience of this possibility, and how and why it remains a concern.

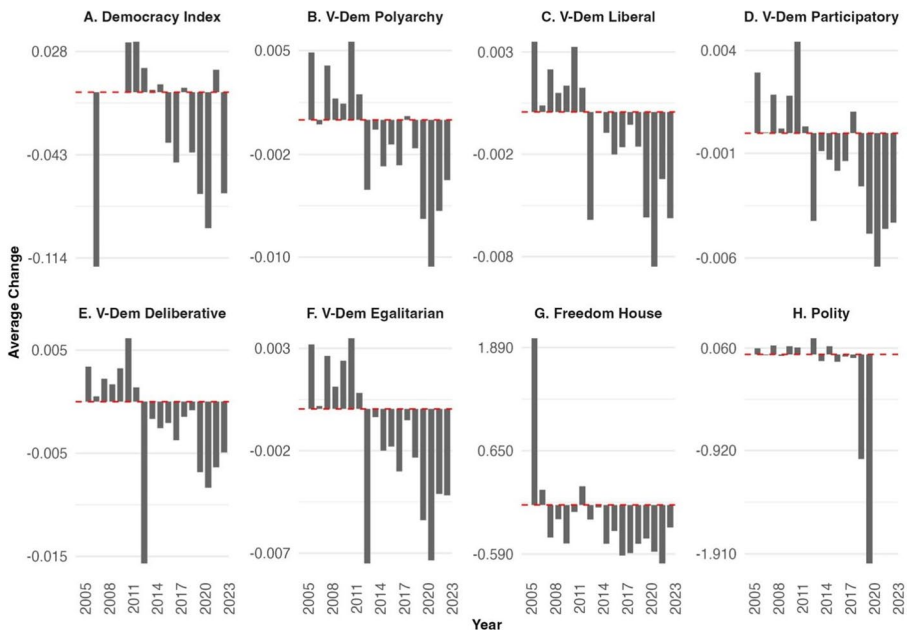


Fig. 1 Average change in democracy measures by year. *Note:* The dashed line indicates the 0 mark (no change)

Mechanisms Linking Autocratization to Subjective Well-Being

In what follows, we review some of the broad and narrower areas known to affect subjective well-being, as well as the evidence for backsliding's impact on them. At the same time, we attempt to outline some of the possible mechanisms by which backsliding or autocratization might translate into perceived changes in subjective well-being. That is to say, the extent to which democratic decline across different domains results in increases or decreases in individuals finding their lives more or less satisfying. While these domains can be analytically distinct, they are often intertwined in practice. Our aim is not to test each mechanism directly, but to clarify the plausible pathways through which erosion in different aspects of democratic governance might translate into changes in life satisfaction.

Democratic Institutions, Trust, and Political Participation

We begin with perhaps the most obvious and broadest area: “democracy” itself. While debates continue over the causal direction, and most salient mechanisms, an extensive empirical literature confirms what might seem an all too obvious finding: more, not less democracy makes people happier/more satisfied with their lives on a daily basis (Dorn et al. 2007; Haerpfer et al., 2009; Inglehart and Welzel 2009b, 2010; Inglehart and Ponarin 2013; Altman, Flavin and Radcliff 2017; Bromo, Pacek and Radcliff 2024). The precise aspects of democracy that affect well-being range from citizen participation and choice (Frey and Stutzer 2000; Dorn et al. 2008; Owen, Videras and Willemsen 2008), to policy outcomes (social and economic) and quality of governance that, in democracies, improve citizens’ quality of life overall (Lake and Baum 2001; Knutsen, 2013; Orviska, Caplanova and Hudson 2014; Hanson, 2015). Simply put, “more democracy” is better, on balance, for quality of life. Backsliding or autocratization, it goes without saying, diminishes the overall level of democracy (as captured in multiple large data sets), potentially leading to overall *lower* levels of subjective well-being. From the general to the specific, we turn now to possible consequences of backsliding that might serve as mechanisms to lower subjective well-being.

We focus on several mechanisms through which backsliding may affect factors known to be associated with human well-being. Trust in government and institutions, for example, has long been associated with higher levels of life satisfaction (Hudson, 2006; Ciziceno and Travaglini 2019; Ng et al., 2022). Backsliding, in turn, is associated with polarization, a decline in the legitimacy of political institutions in the eyes of citizens, and a rise in distrust of the ability of such institutions to function properly, or indeed at all (Gessler & Wunsch, 2025; Palacios, 2025). If regimes undergoing backsliding target specific government institutions and organizations, which in turn render them less capable of performing their necessary and designated functions, then the result is likely to be diminished trust and confidence in them, with lower levels of life satisfaction as a consequence. Such real-world examples, which have drawn scholarly and media attention alike, include assaults on judiciaries (Poland, Hungary, Israel, Mexico) and federal agencies and bureaucracies (United States). Interestingly, albeit perhaps not surprisingly, public trust and confidence are often

higher in established autocracies, due to information control, possible self-censorship, or even mistakenly perceived effectiveness (Pernia & Rye, 2026).

A second possible effect might occur via backsliding or autocratization's impact on political involvement, engagement, and participation. As one of the most critical aspects of democracy, participation deals with the scope with which citizens can engage in contestation. Scholars have noted that while dramatic and sweeping changes to the rules and norms of engagement—voting, political organizing, protest, etc. are the exception rather than the rule, the parameters of citizen participation are affected nonetheless. Waldner and Lust (2018) note that competition is reduced in elections and participation is often narrowed. Carey et al. (2019) note that “the potential set of rights and principles (affected by backsliding) is vast” (p. 700), further adding that free and fair elections and voting rights and representation stand out. Restrictions on and harassment of not just voters, but those campaigning for and running for elected positions are regularly noted metrics of backsliding. Which leads to the question of why this might matter for subjective well-being.

The life-satisfaction literature provides at least one possible answer: procedural utility. The argument is relatively straightforward. While people care about the outcomes of political participation (the “what”), they also value the procedures that lead to those outcomes (the “how”). This can encompass a great many things that people derive value from: agency and autonomy, sense of efficacy (my participation “matters” because the system allows it to), a sense of procedural fairness of the participation process, and a collection of what are termed “dignity goods” such as self-respect, sense of personal control and the intrinsic value of engaging directly in politically relevant issues regardless of outcome (Lane, 1988, 2000; Stutzer and Frey 2006). In turn, this procedural utility has been shown to increase life satisfaction in citizens with expanded participation access and opportunities, compared to those who lack such access and opportunities (Frey, Benz, and Stutzer 2004). The argument here is simple: if backsliding/autocratization limits, constrains, or otherwise decreases the procedural utility of political participation, this in turn will decrease life satisfaction.

Human Rights and Civil Liberties

Perhaps one of the most widely scrutinized areas of backsliding's impact is human rights and civil liberties. Among the less surprising truisms in the empirical research on life satisfaction is that, on the whole, people enjoy more, not fewer, rights and liberties. To focus on one example, a plethora of studies find that expanded gender rights and reduced gender inequality lead to higher levels of subjective well-being (Audette et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2023; Graafland & Schilpzand, 2025). Intriguingly, scholars found the effect on life satisfaction to extend to men as well as women, the implication being that restrictions on or reversals of progress on gender rights and equality might affect the broader population, rather than a specific demographic segment. While women's rights are often on the list of those targeted by backsliding (Arat, 2022; Weldon, 2024), the erosion of human rights more broadly is viewed as one of the key traits of the process. This includes, but is certainly not limited to, restrictions on reproductive rights, freedom of assembly and movement, freedom of expression, and, in more extreme cases, an increase in violence and repression targeting specific

elements of the population, or even the population as a whole (Adhikari, King and Murdie 2024). The government of Prime Minister Orban of Hungary, for example, has targeted universities, the media, women, minorities, immigrants, and civil society in general.¹ Assaults on human rights and civil liberties may thus be taken to be one of the more direct ways autocratization can reduce life satisfaction and not merely restricted to specifically targeted groups.

Economic Conditions

While the majority of scholarly attention to backsliding focuses on political and social consequences, there may be economic ones as well. One of the most consistent findings in the empirical literature on subjective well-being is the effect of the economy—inflation, unemployment, income, and wage growth (or stagnation) on life satisfaction (Di Tella, MacCulloch and Oswald 2001, 2003; Diener, Diener & Diener, 1995; Diener et al., 1999). In fact, economists were the pioneers of empirical happiness research. Is backsliding bad for the economy? Here, we are limited by the scarcity of empirical analyses on the question, especially from a cross-national perspective. While this is not the place to revisit the democracies vs. autocracies debate regarding economic performance, there is a rough agreement that, on the whole, democracy is better for the economy than the alternative, with some important caveats. One line of reasoning suggests that the *quality* of government—transparency, lack of corruption, enhanced state capacity, etc.—improves the overall well-being of citizens by efficiently and equitably providing desired and needed services (Bjørnskov, Dreher and Fischer 2007). A second argument focuses on the *size* of government, with specific emphasis on the welfare state as a provider of services and a mitigator of the impact of economic downturns (Pacek & Radcliff, 2008).

We cannot conclusively state that backsliding affects these connections between government and individuals' economic fortunes. That said, backsliding often results in transformation (and potential disruption) within the economy, as in the case of President Milei in Argentina, who took office in December 2023, and his “heterodox” economic stance (Cinar, 2025). There is growing evidence that one consequence of backsliding, the erosion of the rule of law, can have deleterious economic and financial consequences, as risk increases for investors and firms (Mosley, 2023). As such, we leave open the possibility that backsliding might produce, or accompany, negative economic outcomes that in turn can decrease the subjective well-being of individuals.

Theoretical Expectations

Taken together, these mechanisms suggest that autocratization is more likely to reduce subjective well-being on average, insofar as it erodes institutional trust, restricts political participation, weakens rights and liberties, and may negatively affect economic conditions. At the same time, these effects are not necessarily

¹ Freedom House (2025): <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/freedom-world/2025>. Last accessed: 24 July 2026.

uniform or immediate. Because democratic backsliding is often gradual and may affect different groups in different ways, its impact on life satisfaction may be attenuated or offset in aggregate measures. Importantly, these mechanisms are also unlikely to operate instantaneously. Exactly because democratic backsliding is often gradual and subtle, and its consequences may only become salient once they translate into tangible constraints, institutional changes, or shifts in economic and social conditions, any effects on subjective well-being are likely to unfold with some delay.

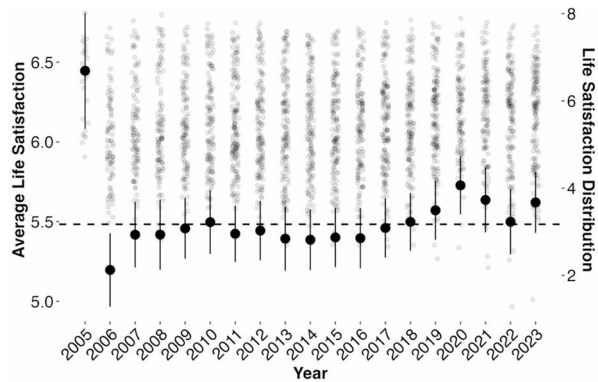
The democracy indicators we employ reflect different principles of democratic governance. Measures emphasizing electoral contestation and participation capture the extent to which citizens retain meaningful political voice and representation. Indicators focusing on liberal-democratic constraints and civil liberties reflect the protection of rights, institutional autonomy, and the rule of law. Egalitarian dimensions capture the inclusiveness and equal distribution of political power and influence. To the extent that these domains connect differently to political agency, institutional trust, legal security, social inclusion, and economic conditions (e.g., Mathonnat and Minea 2019), we might expect associations with subjective well-being to vary across measures. Again, we do not test mechanisms directly. Rather, by examining each indicator separately, we assess whether autocratization matters for subjective well-being at all and explore whether erosion in specific democratic dimensions is more clearly or more strongly associated with changes in life satisfaction, in line with existing literature (Bromo, Pacek and Radcliff 2024).

Finally, the impact of autocratization is not necessarily uniform across regime types. In established democracies, where institutional protections, civil liberties, and opportunities for political participation are deeply embedded, their erosion may be more visible to citizens and more likely to affect perceptions of political agency, procedural fairness, and institutional trust. By contrast, in regimes where such features are already limited, additional democratic deterioration may be less perceptible or may carry different implications for individuals' lived experiences. In such contexts, citizens may have adapted to lower baseline levels of democratic quality or may evaluate political developments through different reference points. We, therefore, expect the relationship between autocratization and subjective well-being may also vary depending on the initial level of democracy. In the next section, we discuss our data and research design.

Data and Research Design

Our goal is to investigate how negative changes in different dimensions of democracy, as captured by well-established democracy indicators, which we refer to as “autocratization events,” are associated with variation in life satisfaction at the macro level, if at all. To this end, we compiled a dataset covering 165 countries, including a range of established democracies, mixed regimes, and autocracies, between 2005 and 2023. The data structure is country-year.

Fig. 2 Average life satisfaction and data distribution by year.
Note: Average life satisfaction with 95% confidence intervals (left-y axis) and life satisfaction data distribution (right-y axis) by year. The dashed line represents the average across all countries and years



Dependent Variable: Life Satisfaction

We started by populating our dataset with aggregate survey data on subjective well-being from the World Happiness Report.² “*Life Satisfaction*,” our dependent variable, is based on the Cantril scale (Cantril, 1965), where respondents are asked to imagine a ladder with numbered steps and place themselves on the step that best reflects their current life satisfaction, ranging from 0 (worst-possible life) to 10 (best-possible life). This is a widely-used measure of subjective well-being and, for all intents and purposes, a proxy for human happiness. In Fig. 2, we plot the average levels of life satisfaction and data distribution by year in the countries included in our dataset. Right away, we note that, much like the average change in democracy measures shown in Fig. 1, on average, life satisfaction does not appear to fluctuate drastically over time. This might represent a limitation for our empirical analysis because over-time variation is what we are primarily interested in for the purpose of our study.³

Autocratization Events and Control Variables

Moving on to autocratization, we do not attempt to adjudicate among competing democracy indicators or get into debates about measurement.⁴ We try to make this as fair a test as possible by using *all* the available, widely-used measures that accommodate the spatio-temporal breadth of our sample, making up a spectrum of different democratic principles. Our dataset includes eight of these: the Economist Democracy Index, five Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) measures, the Freedom in the World score by Freedom House, and the (combined) Polity score. The only restriction that we impose is that the original indicators must be continuous, as binary indicators would mainly capture full-blown regime transitions, i.e., democratic/autocratic breakdowns, which are quite rare (e.g., Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland 2010), as opposed to more subtle and gradual backsliding.

² <https://worldhappiness.report/>. Last accessed: 24 July 2026.

³ As for cross-national variation, we show a map of life satisfaction values based on the available data from 2023 in Figure 4 in the Appendix.

⁴ See Vaccaro (2021) for a discussion and comparison of established democracy indicators.

The Economist Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit), based on multiple indicators gauging pluralism, civil liberties, and political culture, ranges from 0 to 10, with higher values corresponding to better quality of democracy. The five V-Dem measures reflect different “varieties” or “principles” of democracy (polyarchy, liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian) (see Coppedge et al., 2023), ranging from 0 to 1. The Freedom in the World score by Freedom House, seeking to assess the state of civil liberties and political rights, ranges from –1 to 100. The (combined) Polity score, capturing different regime characteristics, ranges from –10 to 10.⁵ In addition to avoiding discriminating between the different democracy measures or committing to a specific one, this approach allows us to model backsliding in a relatively comprehensive way, as all these indicators capture different nuances and hues of the notion of “democracy,” which have been shown to matter for subjective well-being (Bromo, Pacek and Radcliff 2024). We thus analyze each measure separately to assess how declines in different democratic principles are associated with life satisfaction.

We start from these eight democracy indicators to operationalize autocratization. We want to examine whether autocratization events, that is, *negative changes* in democracy levels in any regime, are associated with variation in life satisfaction at the macro level. We compute the first difference for all eight indicators, capturing the change in democracy levels between year $t-1$ and year t . This is what is shown in Fig. 1. In all eight democracy measures, a positive change implies higher levels or better quality of democracy. Conversely, a negative change implies a reduction in democracy levels or quality. For each first difference, we create new variables that take value 1 when the first difference is negative (backsliding), 0 otherwise (“*Autocratization Event*”). We thus operationalize autocratization as a binary event capturing whether a country experiences any negative change in democracy in a given year, irrespective of the magnitude of that change.

From a theoretical standpoint, many of the mechanisms linking autocratization to subjective well-being, such as heightened political uncertainty, erosion of institutional trust, loss of rights, or growing polarization, are likely to be activated by the *perception* of democratic deterioration rather than by its precise magnitude. We assume that, for most citizens, what is salient is whether democratic conditions worsen *at all* in a given year and that differences in the exact magnitude of negative changes are unlikely to be meaningfully distinguishable outside of full-blown breakdowns. A binary operationalization, therefore, aligns closely with the perceptual and psychological channels through which autocratization may affect life satisfaction. Crucially, our models also include a control for successful coups at $t-1$ (including popular revolutions), which allows us to distinguish incremental forms of autocratization from large, abrupt, and highly salient regime changes. Coups represent dramatic and unmistakable ruptures in political order that are likely to have immediate and pronounced effects on subjective well-being. Controlling for these events, therefore, ensures that our autocratization variable primarily captures non-coup-related,

⁵ The Economist Democracy Index: <https://www.eiu.com/n/>. V-Dem measures: <https://www.v-dem.net/>. Freedom House score: <https://freedomhouse.org/>. Polity score: <https://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html>. Last accessed: 24 July 2026. The Polity score only covers the years 2005–2018.

often subtler democratic erosion, rather than conflating gradual backsliding with overt regime collapse.⁶ Finally, this operationalization offers a conservative test of our expectations. By abstracting from the magnitude of backsliding and accounting separately for successful coups, we ask whether any detectable, non-coup-related deterioration of democracy is systematically associated with changes in subjective well-being. The presence of statistically meaningful effects under this specification would make us more confident that the results are not driven by extreme cases.

We include a number of additional covariates which have been shown to affect life satisfaction as controls (e.g., O'Connor, 2017; Easterlin and O'Connor 2022), and that are available for the time period and the countries our study covers. These are: GDP per capita, unemployment rate, both from the World Bank Open Data, levels of social support, “healthy” life expectancy at birth, perceptions of corruption, standard explanatory factors from the World Happiness Report, and the occurrence of one-sided, two-sided, and/or non-state conflict.⁷ Each of these controls is well-documented in the empirical subjective well-being literature and, taken together, captures additional economic, political, and societal determinants of life satisfaction.

Research Design

Our basic model is:

$$Life\ Satisfaction_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Autocratization\ Event_{it-1} + \beta Z + \varepsilon,$$

where β_1 is our main effect of interest, that is, the *lagged* (one year) effect of any negative change in democracy levels on life satisfaction. This is because, depending on when a survey was administered in relation to an autocratization event, contemporaneous life satisfaction evaluations might not necessarily (or not yet) reflect any impact of backsliding. Additionally, subjective well-being is likely to respond with delay, if at all, as individuals plausibly adjust their expectations and perceptions only after political backsliding translates into tangible constraints (e.g., reduced political participation or restrictions on rights) or heightened uncertainty in their daily lives. The use of a lagged specification, therefore, aligns with our theoretical expectation that the effects of democratic backsliding may not be immediate, as well as attenuating potential reverse causality concerns. The use of a one-year lag specifically provides a conservative estimate of this delayed effect, while aligning with the annual structure of the data. At the same time, we do not claim to capture longer-

⁶ Coup data from the Coup d'État Project: <https://clinecenter.illinois.edu/project/research-themes/democracy-and-development/coup-detat-project>. The data covers successful coups between 1945 and 2026, including popular uprisings. See the Coup d'État Project codebook for details on the definition and coding of successful coups: <https://databank.illinois.edu/datafiles/qbj0t/download>. Last accessed: 24 July 2026. Our lagged coup variable captures the number of successful coups in the previous year. In practice, no country in our sample has experienced more than one successful coup in the years covered in this study with the only exception of Burkina Faso in 2022 (two coups).

⁷ <https://data.worldbank.org/>. Conflict data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program: <https://ucdp.uu.se/encyclopedia>. Last accessed: 24 July 2026.

term dynamics, which may unfold over multiple years and would require a different empirical strategy.

$\mathbf{Z}$ is a vector of controls with corresponding β coefficients. We normalize the GDP per capita variable by taking its natural logarithm. Furthermore, we include country-level random intercepts to account for unobserved differences across countries that may influence baseline levels of life satisfaction. We present some summary statistics of our dependent and independent variables in Table 1. In the next section, we present and discuss our results.

Results and Discussion

We begin by examining whether autocratization events are associated with changes in subjective well-being across the full sample of countries. Figure 3 presents the estimated coefficients for autocratization across the eight democracy indicators used in our analysis. Each panel reports the estimated effect of a negative change in democracy in year $t-1$ on life satisfaction in year t . The top row in each panel shows the estimates for the full sample of countries, while the remaining rows report estimates for subsamples defined by the initial level of democracy (autocracies, mixed regimes, and established democracies). Full model estimates, including all control variables, are reported in Table 2, Table 3, Table 4, Table 5, Table 6, Table 7, Table 8, and Table 9 in the Appendix.

When we consider the full sample of 165 countries between 2005 and 2023, we do not find a statistically significant association between autocratization and life sat-

Table 1 Summary statistics

	<i>N</i>	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
<i>Dependent Variable</i>						
Life Satisfaction	2,363	5.48	5.45	1.13	1.28	8.02
<i>Autocratization Events</i>						
Democracy Index _{<i>t-1</i>}	1,897	0.37	0	0.48	0	1
V-Dem Polyarchy _{<i>t-1</i>}	2,765	0.46	0	0.50	0	1
V-Dem Liberal _{<i>t-1</i>}	2,765	0.46	0	0.50	0	1
V-Dem Participatory _{<i>t-1</i>}	2,765	0.53	1	0.50	0	1
V-Dem Deliberative _{<i>t-1</i>}	2,765	0.47	0	0.50	0	1
V-Dem Egalitarian _{<i>t-1</i>}	2,765	0.47	0	0.50	0	1
Freedom House _{<i>t-1</i>}	2,613	0.35	0	0.48	0	1
Polity Score _{<i>t-1</i>}	1,806	0.02	0	0.15	0	1
<i>Coups and Other Control Variables</i>						
Successful Coup _{<i>t-1</i>}	2,970	0.01	0	0.12	0	2
ln(GDP Per Capita)	2,335	9.40	9.50	1.15	5.53	11.68
Unemployment (%)	3,075	7.88	5.93	6.01	0.10	37.85
Social Support	2,350	0.81	0.83	0.12	0.23	0.99
Healthy Life Expectancy	2,300	63.40	65.10	6.84	6.72	74.60
Perceptions of Corruption	2,238	0.74	0.80	0.18	0.04	0.98
Conflict	3,135	0.24	0	0.43	0	1

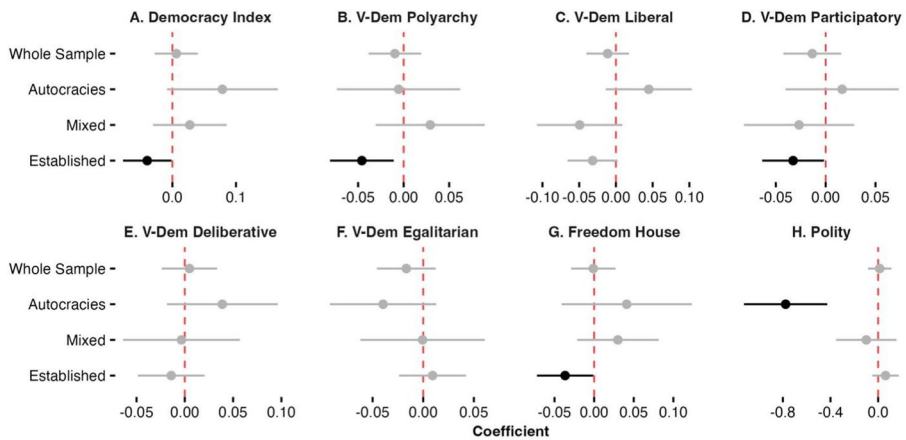


Fig. 3 Coefficient estimates of autocratization events by democracy measure. *Note:* Points represent coefficient estimates and horizontal lines denote 90% confidence intervals. Coefficients that are statistically significant at conventional levels are highlighted in black

isfaction for any of the democracy indicators. Although most estimated coefficients are negative, suggesting that democratic deterioration tends to be associated with lower levels of subjective well-being on average, the confidence intervals consistently overlap with zero. Overall, these results indicate that autocratization does not exhibit a clear macro-level association with life satisfaction when all regime types are analyzed together.

One possible explanation for the absence of a clear aggregate relationship is that, as we mentioned earlier, the consequences of democratic erosion may depend on the institutional context in which it occurs. Political institutions operate differently across regime types, and citizens' expectations likely vary accordingly. In long-standing or established democracies, where institutional features such as protection of civil liberties, competitive elections, and public involvement in the democratic process are deeply embedded, erosion may be more visible and, therefore, more likely to influence perceptions of political agency, institutional trust, or procedural fairness. Conversely, in regimes where such institutions are already limited, additional deterioration may be less perceptible or may affect citizens differently. To explore this possibility, we divide the sample into three groups based on the *initial* level of democracy for each indicator, roughly corresponding to autocracies, mixed regimes, and established democracies.⁸ The results reveal a more nuanced pattern once this heterogeneity is taken into account.

Among established democracies, autocratization is associated with statistically significant declines in life satisfaction for four of the eight democracy indicators: the Economist Democracy Index, the V-Dem Polyarchy measure, the V-Dem Participatory measure, and the Freedom House score. These indicators capture core

⁸ When the underlying data source provides commonly accepted regime thresholds in the original codebook or website, we use those thresholds, otherwise, we divide the sample into tertiles based on the initial distribution of the indicator.

democratic features such as electoral competition and accountability, political participation, and civil liberties, dimensions that are closely related to the mechanisms discussed above, and which may be particularly salient in institutionalized democratic systems. The results for mixed regimes and autocracies are instead less consistent. In several specifications, the estimated coefficients are positive, though never statistically significant. The only exception appears in the Polity specification for autocracies, where autocratization is associated with a statistically significant decline in life satisfaction.

Overall, these results suggest that the relationship between democratic erosion and subjective well-being might not be uniform across regime types: erosion in contexts where citizens have historically enjoyed relatively high levels of participation, freedoms, and institutional safeguards is associated with measurable declines in subjective well-being. Importantly, these estimates reflect the effect of relatively gradual forms of backsliding rather than abrupt regime breakdowns, since successful coups and revolutionary regime changes are controlled for separately in the models. The direction and significance of the control variables are largely in line with previous findings in the subjective well-being literature (e.g., O'Connor, 2017) (see Table 2, Table 3, Table 4, Table 5, Table 6, Table 7, Table 8, and Table 9 in the Appendix).

While the estimated effects are modest in magnitude, they are substantively meaningful when interpreted in context. As shown in Fig. 2, changes in life satisfaction at the country level tend to be relatively small over time, and even limited shifts can reflect broader changes in how individuals perceive their social, political, and economic environment. In this sense, the observed declines suggest that autocratization, particularly when it affects core features such as participation, accountability, and civil liberties, may translate into perceptible changes in aggregate life satisfaction. At the same time, the modest size of the effects is consistent with the gradual and often subtle nature of autocratization, which may not immediately or uniformly alter citizens' day-to-day experiences.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the association between backsliding and subjective well-being appears to be conditional rather than universal. The absence of a consistent association in the full sample suggests that the consequences of autocratization depend on institutional context and citizens' expectations. In other words, democratic erosion does not produce a consistent macro-level relationship with life satisfaction across all countries. However, when erosion occurs in established democracies, it is more consistently associated with declines in subjective well-being. These patterns are broadly consistent with the mechanisms discussed earlier: where democratic institutions are deeply embedded, their erosion may be more salient and visible to citizens and, therefore, more likely to affect life satisfaction through declining institutional trust, reduced opportunities for political participation, and restrictions on rights and freedoms. This helps explain why more consistent patterns emerge in established democratic regimes becoming less democratic, as opposed to mixed or autocratic regimes becoming more autocratic, even as aggregate results remain weak.

Robustness Checks

We conduct additional analyses examining non-linearity and potential reverse causality. One possibility is that the relationship between backsliding and subjective well-being is non-linear, for example, if small declines are not perceptible but larger deteriorations are. To assess this, we estimated generalized additive models (GAMs) including smooth terms of the autocratization variables.⁹ GAMs allow us to flexibly test for non-linear relationships without imposing a specific functional form. Across multiple measures of democracy, we find no consistent evidence of non-linear effects. In most specifications, the estimated degrees of freedom are approximately one, indicating a linear relationship, though most smooth terms are statistically insignificant at the conventional levels. While some isolated specifications (notably Polity) suggest mild curvature, these results are not robust across democracy indicators or samples (see Table 10 in the Appendix). This suggests that, at least at the macro level, the relationship is not driven by threshold dynamics or large marginal changes.

Although we do not make explicit causal claims, we also try to address potential reverse causality concerns to some extent. While the research on this particular topic is (still) rather exiguous, one possibility is that more unhappy individuals are more likely to support autocratic candidates, thus furthering backsliding, or that, conversely, happier individuals are less likely to support autocratic candidates. For one thing, our models feature *lagged* autocratization variables, capturing the extent to which a reduction in democracy levels at $t-1$ correlates to changes in life satisfaction at t . We also model the likelihood of autocratization events at t , conditional on levels of life satisfaction at $t-1$ plus the other control variables. The results from these additional analyses are mixed and do not reveal a consistent or systematic pattern across indicators or regime types, with estimates varying in both direction and significance. While some specifications suggest potential associations, these patterns are not robust across measures and, therefore, do not provide clear evidence of a systematic relationship in this direction (see Table 11, Table 12, Table 13, and Table 14 in the Appendix). That said, the possibility of a bidirectional relationship between subjective well-being and autocratization remains theoretically plausible and may warrant further investigation, both empirically and in terms of theoretical development.

Limitations

We acknowledge several limitations of our empirical analysis. First, its observational nature. We deliberately avoid using causal language and try to be cautious about the claims we make and do not make. Our evidence is, therefore, to be taken as suggestive. We also reiterate that we are not expressly testing mechanisms here. Second, because the dependent variable is based on aggregate survey data with

⁹ In this case, we compute first differences for all eight indicators, capturing changes in democracy levels between year $t-1$ and year t , and reverse the sign such that higher (positive) values correspond to greater backsliding. All generalized additive models include the same control variables as our main model specifications.

self-reported life satisfaction values and the autocratization variables largely based on experts' evaluations, the risk of bias and measurement error is higher compared to objective indicators (e.g., life expectancy). Third, as anticipated, while life satisfaction and the democracy measures do fluctuate over time, the magnitude of variation is relatively small, making any macro-level effect that autocratization might have potentially harder to detect. It goes without saying that our results are limited by the way happiness and democracy are measured and operationalized in the context of our analysis.

A further limitation of our analysis is its reliance on aggregate data, as well as the broader scarcity of data, both at the individual and country level, suitable for a large-scale panel study such as ours. This prevents us from exploring heterogeneous effects beyond regime- and country-level characteristics and constrains the set of controls we can add to our models. As discussed in the theory section, democratic backsliding may have uneven consequences, potentially lowering life satisfaction for some segments of the population while leaving others unaffected or even benefiting those who support the incumbent regime. Aggregate measures of life satisfaction mask these dynamics and may, therefore, attenuate observable relationships at the macro level. Addressing such heterogeneity would require individual-level survey data with sufficient temporal and cross-national coverage, which are currently not available for a study of this scope and scale. We try to mitigate potential concerns related to unobserved differences across countries by including country random effects.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this article was to bring together the literature on (democratic) backsliding and subjective well-being in order to identify possible mechanisms linking the two and assess whether autocratization is systematically associated with changes in life satisfaction at the macro level. We have endeavored to put to use the principal global datasets on democratization/autocratization and all the attendant metrics that are associated with them in order to cast the widest net possible. Drawing on a broad cross-national panel covering 165 countries between 2005 and 2023 and multiple measures of democracy, we find no clear or statistically significant overall relationship between autocratization and subjective well-being. At the same time, our results point to a more nuanced and conditional pattern. When we account for initial levels of democracy, we find that autocratization is more consistently associated with declines in life satisfaction in established democracies, particularly along dimensions related to electoral competition, participation, and civil liberties. These findings suggest that the consequences of democratic erosion depend importantly on institutional context and on citizens' expectations and experiences of democratic governance.

More broadly, our analysis highlights the difficulty of detecting macro-level effects of gradual political change on subjective well-being. Autocratization often

unfolds incrementally, and its consequences may be uneven across individuals and social groups, potentially offsetting each other in aggregate measures of life satisfaction. This may help explain the absence of a clear overall relationship in the full sample, even as more consistent patterns emerge in specific contexts. Taken together, our results indicate that the relationship between autocratization and subjective well-being is neither uniform nor straightforward, but instead conditional, context-dependent, and potentially mediated by a range of political, social, and economic mechanisms. Our findings also suggest that decline in different dimensions of democracy may not be equally consequential for subjective well-being, highlighting the value of disaggregating backsliding into its constituent components.

While we provide some robustness checks, we emphasize that our findings should be interpreted with caution, given the limitations of our analysis. As noted above, we acknowledge these limitations and present our findings for what they are: tentative evidence of associations between autocratization and aggregate life satisfaction. The larger puzzle to unravel is to weigh and test explanations for the varying nature of our findings. In the absence of detailed and specific individual survey data across the different regime types in our analysis, we can only speculate at this point and offer up what might prove to be viable reasons for these differences. If, as many argue, “healthy” democracy goes hand in hand with an equitable and efficient distribution of goods and services in the economy, then it might be reasonable to expect disruptions to this as a result of autocratization to be widely felt and seen by the general populace. Similarly, if rights and liberties that directly or indirectly enhance subjective well-being are assaulted, revoked, or even merely reduced, then this too might be keenly felt in a detrimental way.

By contrast, it very well may be the case that in more authoritarian polities, economic, social, and political deterioration becomes “normalized” to such an extent that further autocratization simply does not register, particularly if such shifts are subtle rather than violent and dramatic. Authoritarian regimes do fall, of course, so we cannot nor should not argue that increased autocratization is simply ignored. This remains, for now, one question in need of deeper and more detailed analysis: why do some regimes seem impervious to the effect of worsening conditions on the well-being of their citizens, while others do not? We hope that we have added to continuing fruitful exploration of this and related questions in a growing body of empirical research on the consequences of backsliding across the world. Future research could build on our findings by leveraging individual-level data and alternative research designs to explore how the effects of autocratization may vary across political preferences, socioeconomic status, or demographic characteristics, thereby providing a more fine-grained understanding of mechanisms and clarifying the causal dynamics linking democratic change to subjective well-being. Future research could also explore the potentially bidirectional relationship between subjective well-being and autocratization, as understanding the direction and dynamics of this relationship remains an important open question.

Appendix

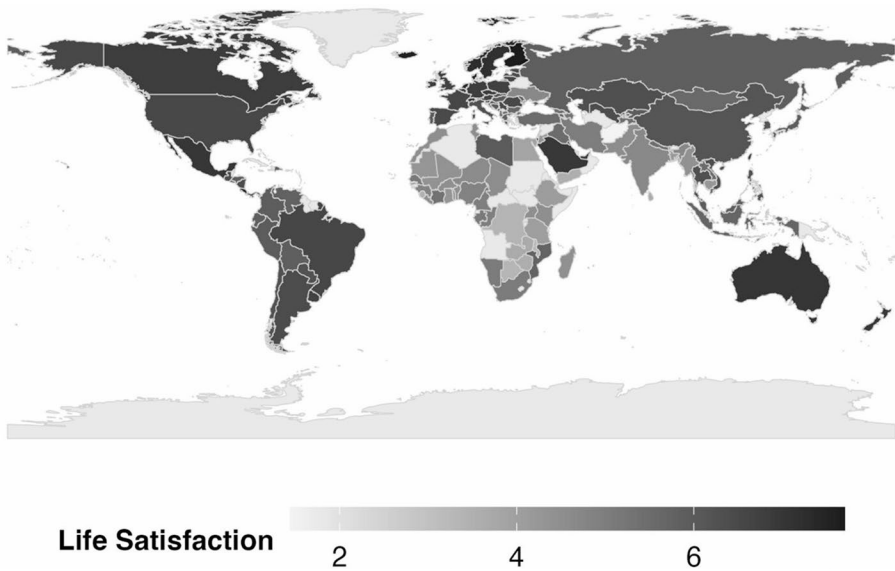


Fig. 4 Life satisfaction by Country (2023). *Note:* World Happiness Report data (<https://www.worldhappiness.report/>, last accessed: 24 July 2026)

Main Model Estimates

Table 2 Democracy index

	Whole sample	Autocracies	Mixed regimes	Established democracies
Intercept	-1.75*** (0.37)	-0.98 (0.81)	-1.09* (0.64)	-0.95 (1.18)
Autocratization Event _{t-1}	0.01 (0.02)	0.08 (0.05)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.04* (0.02)
ln(GDP Per Capita)	0.45*** (0.04)	0.46*** (0.10)	0.42*** (0.06)	0.07 (0.13)
Unemployment	-0.04*** (0.00)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)
Social Support	2.42*** (0.19)	1.41*** (0.37)	2.90*** (0.31)	3.57*** (0.36)
Healthy Life Expectancy	0.03*** (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)
Perceptions of Corruption	-0.76*** (0.14)	-0.30 (0.35)	-0.99*** (0.25)	-0.92*** (0.18)
Conflict	0.08** (0.04)	0.10 (0.08)	0.10 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.06)
Successful Coup _{t-1}	0.02 (0.08)	0.12 (0.12)	-0.19 (0.15)	
Country Random Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1493	356	581	556
Marginal R ²	0.750	0.489	0.570	0.681
Conditional R ²	0.900	0.732	0.825	0.911

Mixed-effects model estimates.
Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, ***
 $p < 0.01$

Table 3 V-Dem polyarchy

	Whole sample	Autocracies	Mixed regimes	Established democracies
Intercept	-0.49 (0.33)	0.65 (0.57)	-0.03 (0.66)	-0.37 (0.64)
Autocratization Event _{t-1}	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.05** (0.02)
ln(GDP Per Capita)	0.52*** (0.04)	0.43*** (0.06)	0.55*** (0.06)	0.32*** (0.08)
Unemployment	-0.04*** (0.00)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.00)
Social Support	2.41*** (0.16)	1.47*** (0.30)	3.06*** (0.29)	2.59*** (0.28)
Healthy Life Expectancy	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)
Perceptions of Corruption	-0.83*** (0.12)	-0.56* (0.25)	-1.03*** (0.26)	-1.00*** (0.16)
Conflict	0.04 (0.03)	-0.10* (0.06)	0.18*** (0.06)	0.02 (0.05)
Successful Coup _{t-1}	0.05 (0.07)	0.14 (0.13)	0.02 (0.11)	-0.13 (0.17)
Country Random Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2041	477	597	967
Marginal R ²	0.703	0.523	0.559	0.714
Conditional R ²	0.881	0.745	0.808	0.893

Mixed-effects model estimates.
Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, ***
 $p < 0.01$

Table 4 V-Dem liberal

	Whole sample	Autocracies	Mixed regimes	Established democracies
Intercept	-0.50 (0.33)	0.69 (0.50)	-0.86 (0.67)	-0.41 (1.02)
Autocratization Event _{t-1}	-0.01 (0.02)	0.04 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.02)
ln(GDP Per Capita)	0.52*** (0.04)	0.42*** (0.05)	0.76*** (0.11)	0.33*** (0.11)
Unemployment	-0.04*** (0.00)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.00)
Social Support	2.41*** (0.16)	2.03*** (0.25)	2.36*** (0.34)	3.78*** (0.34)
Healthy Life Expectancy	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Perceptions of Corruption	-0.83*** (0.12)	-0.74*** (0.22)	-1.11*** (0.26)	-0.86*** (0.16)
Conflict	0.04 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.20*** (0.07)	0.02 (0.05)
Successful Coup _{t-1}	0.05 (0.07)	0.06 (0.11)	0.04 (0.12)	
Country Random Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2041	710	591	740
Marginal R ²	0.704	0.534	0.572	0.622
Conditional R ²	0.881	0.751	0.808	0.896

Mixed-effects model estimates.
Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, ***
 $p < 0.01$

Table 5 V-Dem deliberative

	Whole sample	Autocracies	Mixed regimes	Established democracies
Intercept	-0.49 (0.33)	0.94* (0.51)	-1.26* (0.72)	0.03 (0.82)
Autocratization Event _{t-1}	0.00 (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.02)
ln(GDP Per Capita)	0.52*** (0.04)	0.41*** (0.05)	0.81*** (0.11)	0.23* (0.10)
Unemployment	-0.04*** (0.00)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.00)
Social Support	2.41*** (0.16)	1.89*** (0.26)	2.31*** (0.33)	3.66*** (0.33)
Healthy Life Expectancy	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.03* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)
Perceptions of Corruption	-0.83*** (0.12)	-0.85*** (0.23)	-0.92*** (0.26)	-0.81*** (0.17)
Conflict	0.04 (0.03)	-0.06 (0.05)	0.26*** (0.07)	0.00 (0.05)
Successful Coup _{t-1}	0.05 (0.07)	0.12 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.12)	0.01 (0.30)
Country Random Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2041	634	583	824
Marginal R ²	0.703	0.491	0.606	0.636
Conditional R ²	0.881	0.745	0.847	0.889

Mixed-effects model estimates.
Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, ***
 $p < 0.01$

Table 6 V-Dem participative

	Whole sample	Autocracies	Mixed regimes	Established democracies
Intercept	-0.50 (0.33)	0.85* (0.50)	-1.01* (0.61)	-0.49 (1.21)
Autocratization Event _{t-1}	-0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.03* (0.02)
ln(GDP Per Capita)	0.52*** (0.04)	0.42*** (0.06)	0.50*** (0.06)	0.28** (0.12)
Unemployment	-0.04*** (0.00)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.00)
Social Support	2.41*** (0.16)	2.15*** (0.25)	2.39*** (0.30)	4.66*** (0.37)
Healthy Life Expectancy	0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)
Perceptions of Corruption	-0.83*** (0.12)	-0.74*** (0.21)	-0.91*** (0.26)	-0.94*** (0.15)
Conflict	0.04 (0.03)	0.05 (0.05)	0.08 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.05)
Successful Coup _{t-1}	0.05 (0.07)	0.11 (0.10)	-0.11 (0.16)	
Country Random Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2041	699	720	622
Marginal R ²	0.703	0.555	0.518	0.628
Conditional R ²	0.881	0.759	0.783	0.900

Mixed-effects model estimates.
Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, ***
 $p < 0.01$

Table 7 V-Dem egalitarian

	Whole sample	Autocracies	Mixed regimes	Established democracies
Intercept	-0.50 (0.33)	0.61 (0.51)	-0.82 (0.69)	1.26 (1.36)
Autocratization Event _{t-1}	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.04)	0.01 (0.02)
ln(GDP Per Capita)	0.52*** (0.04)	0.44*** (0.06)	0.46*** (0.06)	0.28** (0.13)
Unemployment	-0.04*** (0.00)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.00)
Social Support	2.41*** (0.16)	2.32*** (0.24)	2.02*** (0.34)	3.52*** (0.35)
Healthy Life Expectancy	0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)
Perceptions of Corruption	-0.83*** (0.12)	-0.90*** (0.22)	-0.66** (0.26)	-0.89*** (0.16)
Conflict	0.05 (0.03)	0.03 (0.05)	0.09 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.05)
Successful Coup _{t-1}	0.05 (0.07)	0.14 (0.11)	-0.06 (0.11)	
Country Random Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2041	856	543	642
Marginal R ²	0.704	0.485	0.553	0.531
Conditional R ²	0.882	0.743	0.799	0.869

Mixed-effects model estimates.
Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, ***
 $p < 0.01$

Table 8 Freedom house

	Whole sample	Autocracies	Mixed regimes	Established democracies
Intercept	-0.61* (0.32)	-0.78 (0.70)	0.61 (0.56)	-1.55*** (0.59)
Autocratization Event _{t-1}	-0.00 (0.02)	0.04 (0.05)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.04* (0.02)
ln(GDP Per Capita)	0.50*** (0.03)	0.55*** (0.08)	0.40*** (0.05)	0.45*** (0.08)
Unemployment	-0.04*** (0.00)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.00)
Social Support	2.33*** (0.15)	1.82*** (0.35)	2.41*** (0.25)	2.79*** (0.26)
Healthy Life Expectancy	0.01 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)
Perceptions of Corruption	-0.83*** (0.11)	-0.29 (0.28)	-0.83*** (0.22)	-0.92*** (0.15)
Conflict	0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.07)	0.08 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.04)
Successful Coup _{t-1}	0.04 (0.07)	0.11 (0.14)	0.02 (0.10)	-0.17 (0.14)
Country Random Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1950	333	661	956
Marginal R ²	0.733	0.599	0.534	0.783
Conditional R ²	0.908	0.776	0.815	0.923

Mixed-effects model estimates.
Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, ***
 $p < 0.01$

Table 9 Polity

	Whole sample	Autocracies	Mixed regimes	Established democracies
Intercept	−0.43 (0.37)	0.64 (1.66)	0.37 (0.71)	−0.34 (0.49)
Autocratization Event _{t-1}	0.01 (0.06)	−0.78*** (0.21)	−0.10 (0.15)	0.06 (0.07)
ln(GDP Per Capita)	0.51*** (0.04)	0.24* (0.12)	0.42*** (0.10)	0.49*** (0.04)
Unemployment	−0.04*** (0.00)	−0.06** (0.03)	−0.02** (0.01)	−0.05*** (0.00)
Social Support	2.10*** (0.18)	1.60*** (0.54)	1.97*** (0.37)	2.17*** (0.24)
Healthy Life Expectancy	0.01 (0.01)	0.03 (0.02)	−0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Perceptions of Corruption	−0.77*** (0.13)	−0.65 (0.41)	−0.45 (0.29)	−0.95*** (0.16)
Conflict	−0.00 (0.03)	−0.06 (0.10)	0.10 (0.07)	−0.04 (0.04)
Successful Coup _{t-1}	0.03 (0.10)		−0.13 (0.21)	0.11 (0.12)
Country Random Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1412	115	337	960
Marginal R ²	0.692	0.572	0.451	0.721
Conditional R ²	0.913	0.838	0.717	0.921

Mixed-effects model estimates.

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Generalized Additive Models (Non-Linearity)**Table 10** GAM smooth terms results

Democracy measure	Sample	EDF	F	<i>p</i> -value
Democracy Index	Whole	1.00	3.12	0.08
	Autocracies	1.00	0.88	0.35
	Mixed	1.00	5.50	0.02
V-Dem Polyarchy	Established	1.00	0.77	0.38
	Whole	1.00	0.18	0.67
	Autocracies	1.00	0.22	0.64
	Mixed	1.00	1.04	0.31
V-Dem Liberal	Established	4.15	1.50	0.19
	Whole	1.00	0.52	0.47
	Autocracies	3.89	1.28	0.30
	Mixed	1.00	0.37	0.54
V-Dem Participatory	Established	1.00	1.60	0.21
	Whole	1.20	0.13	0.90
	Autocracies	5.28	1.44	0.17
	Mixed	1.00	0.00	0.97
V-Dem Deliberative	Established	1.00	0.41	0.52
	Whole	1.00	0.00	1.00
	Autocracies	2.12	0.57	0.54
	Mixed	1.00	0.72	0.40
V-Dem Egalitarian	Established	1.00	0.00	0.95
	Whole	1.18	0.70	0.52
	Autocracies	1.91	0.30	0.66
	Mixed	1.00	0.05	0.82
Freedom House	Established	1.00	0.49	0.49
	Whole	4.65	1.07	0.29
	Autocracies	2.93	0.91	0.36
	Mixed	1.00	0.21	0.64
Polity	Established	1.70	2.06	0.12
	Whole	5.15	1.88	0.07
	Autocracies	/	/	/
	Mixed	1.00	0.22	0.64
	Established	8.35	2.19	0.02

The effective degrees of freedom (EDF) indicate the flexibility of the estimated smooth terms. Values close to 1 correspond to approximately linear relationships, whereas values greater than 1 indicate increasing curvature

Table 11 Likelihood of autocratization events at t (Whole Sample)

	Democ- racy index	V-Dem polyarchy	V- Dem liberal	V-Dem participatory	V-Dem deliberative	V-Dem egalitarian	Free- dom house	Polity
Intercept	-0.03 (0.18)	0.27 (0.17)	0.33* (0.18)	0.38** (0.18)	0.18 (0.17)	0.14 (0.18)	0.51*** (0.17)	-0.00 (0.00)
Life Satis- faction _{$t-1$}	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.00** (0.00)
ln(GDP per capita)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.00)
Unem- ployment	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00** (0.00)
Social Support	0.09 (0.17)	-0.23 (0.16)	-0.20 (0.16)	-0.03 (0.16)	-0.19 (0.15)	-0.19 (0.16)	-0.08 (0.16)	0.00 (0.00)
Healthy Life Ex- pectancy	0.01** (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Percep- tions of Corruption	0.26*** (0.08)	0.16** (0.08)	0.11 (0.08)	0.12 (0.08)	0.23*** (0.08)	0.18** (0.08)	0.14* (0.08)	-0.00 (0.00)
Conflict	0.09*** (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.15*** (0.03)	0.00 (0.00)
Successful Coups _{$t-1$}	-0.03 (0.11)	0.10 (0.10)	0.08 (0.10)	-0.01 (0.10)	-0.01 (0.10)	0.07 (0.10)	0.25** (0.11)	-0.00 (0.00)
Country Random Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observa- tions	1523	1851	1851	1851	1851	1851	1847	1167
Marginal R ²	0.023	0.009	0.005	0.009	0.007	0.008	0.033	0.015
Condi- tional R ²	0.046	0.034	0.042	0.044	0.024	0.046		

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Reverse Causality

Table 12 Likelihood of autocratization events at t (Autocracies)

	De- moc- racy index	V-Dem polyarchy	V-Dem liberal	V-Dem participatory	V-Dem deliberative	V-Dem egalitarian	Free- dom house	Polity
Intercept	-0.51 (0.38)	-0.01 (0.34)	0.24 (0.27)	0.55** (0.27)	-0.26 (0.30)	0.27 (0.29)	0.64 (0.44)	0.00 (0.00)
Life Satisfac- tion _{t-1}	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.04)	0.07* (0.04)	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.00 (0.00)
ln(GDP per capita)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.11* (0.06)	0.00 (0.00)
Unem- ployment	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00*** (0.00)
Social Support	0.40 (0.27)	-0.32 (0.28)	-0.28 (0.20)	0.01 (0.21)	-0.20 (0.22)	-0.24 (0.21)	-0.23 (0.38)	-0.00 (0.00)
Healthy Life Ex- pectancy	0.01 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.00* (0.00)
Percep- tions of Corrup- tion	0.16 (0.21)	0.45** (0.19)	0.34*** (0.13)	0.28** (0.13)	0.43** (0.17)	0.25 (0.17)	-0.21 (0.23)	-0.00*** (0.00)
Conflict	0.12** (0.05)	0.12** (0.05)	0.14*** (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	0.10** (0.05)	0.06 (0.04)	0.09 (0.07)	0.00*** (0.00)
Suc- cessful Coups _{t-1}	-0.06 (0.14)	0.03 (0.17)	0.03 (0.13)	-0.08 (0.12)	-0.02 (0.14)	0.06 (0.14)	0.22 (0.21)	
Country Random Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observa- tions	350	423	633	627	571	767	306	96
Marginal R ²	0.031	0.041	0.036	0.027	0.029	0.011	0.029	0.820
Condi- tional R ²		0.059		0.036	0.041	0.050		

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 13 Likelihood of autocratization events at t (Mixed)

	De- moc- racy index	V-Dem polyarchy	V- Dem liberal	V-Dem participatory	V-Dem deliberative	V-Dem egalitarian	Free- dom house	Polity
Intercept	0.04 (0.37)	0.69** (0.31)	0.57 (0.38)	0.90*** (0.31)	0.70** (0.32)	0.40 (0.38)	0.16 (0.31)	-0.00 (0.00)
Life Satisfaction _{$t-1$}	0.07** (0.04)	0.05 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	0.05 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.00 (0.00)
ln(GDP per capita)	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.17*** (0.04)	0.03 (0.08)	0.03 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.06)	0.03 (0.05)	0.00 (0.04)	-0.00 (0.00)
Unemployment	-0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.01* (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Social Support	-0.36 (0.28)	-0.10 (0.25)	-0.02 (0.31)	0.04 (0.25)	-0.24 (0.28)	-0.15 (0.29)	0.36 (0.26)	0.00 (0.00)
Healthy Life Expectancy	0.01 (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)
Perceptions of Corruption	0.20 (0.20)	-0.05 (0.16)	-0.32 (0.26)	-0.57** (0.22)	0.12 (0.17)	0.26 (0.18)	-0.08 (0.18)	0.00 (0.00)
Conflict	0.06 (0.05)	0.00 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.06)	0.01 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.05 (0.06)	0.12** (0.05)	-0.00 (0.00)
Successful Coups _{$t-1$}	-0.01 (0.17)	-0.01 (0.15)	0.18 (0.16)	0.15 (0.18)	-0.03 (0.16)	0.06 (0.15)	0.18 (0.17)	-0.00 (0.00)
Country Random Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	595	547	545	650	524	496	629	277
Marginal R ²	0.022	0.032	0.008	0.025	0.008	0.015	0.019	0.025
Conditional R ²	0.080	0.045	0.070	0.062	0.033	0.057		

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 14 Likelihood of autocratization events at t (Established Democracies)

	De- moc- racy index	V-Dem polyarchy	V- Dem liberal	V-Dem participatory	V-Dem deliberative	V-Dem egalitar- ian	Free- dom house	Polity
Intercept	-0.38 (0.60)	0.77** (0.32)	1.07* (0.58)	0.29 (1.15)	0.60 (0.38)	-0.38 (1.14)	0.69** (0.29)	0.00 (0.00)
Life Sat- isfac- tion _{t-1}	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.07** (0.03)	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.04)	0.02 (0.05)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.00)
ln(GDP per capita)	0.04 (0.07)	0.03 (0.05)	0.01 (0.07)	0.02 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.09)	0.05 (0.05)	-0.00* (0.00)
Unem- ploy- ment	-0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Social Support	0.68* (0.40)	-0.47 (0.30)	-0.41 (0.47)	0.52 (0.62)	-0.11 (0.38)	-0.25 (0.58)	-0.55** (0.27)	0.00* (0.00)
Healthy Life Expec- tancy	-0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	-0.01* (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)
Percep- tions of Corrup- tion	0.26** (0.12)	-0.02 (0.12)	-0.11 (0.14)	0.14 (0.17)	0.06 (0.12)	0.08 (0.16)	0.26** (0.11)	-0.00 (0.00)
Conflict	0.13* (0.07)	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.08)	-0.07 (0.09)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.08)	0.16*** (0.05)	0.00* (0.00)
Suc- cessful Coups _{t-1}		0.40 (0.25)			0.38 (0.50)		0.37* (0.22)	-0.00 (0.00)
Country Ran- dom Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	578	881	673	574	756	588	912	794
Margin- al R ²	0.028	0.027	0.014	0.013	0.011	0.009	0.058	0.025
Condi- tional R ²		0.042	0.042	0.046	0.019	0.035		

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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