



Have State Institutions Converged Globally? Tracing the Legacy of the “End of History”

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Abstract

Motivation: More than thirty-five years ago, Francis Fukuyama published his influential essay “The End of History”, in which he argued that liberal democracy had emerged as the final and most advanced form of political organization. According to this thesis, the ideological evolution of humanity had reached its endpoint, and states around the world would inevitably converge toward democratic governance. Since then, the Berlin Wall has fallen, the Soviet Union has collapsed, new states have been established, and numerous peaceful transitions of power – as well as coups – have taken place. These developments raise a fundamental question: was Fukuyama right? Have we indeed witnessed the “end of history,” or do recent global trends suggest a more complex and contested trajectory?

Aim: The main objective of this article is to empirically examine the validity of the “end of history” thesis by assessing whether a global convergence of state institutions toward the model of liberal democracy has occurred.

Results: Between 1991 and 2024, sigma-convergence of state institutions was observed across all five dimensions analysed: Electoral Democracy, Liberal Democracy, Participatory Democracy, Deliberative Democracy, and Egalitarian Democracy. The decreasing dispersion of institutional indicators suggests that countries have become more similar in terms of democratic structures. However, this reduction in dispersion does not confirm Fukuyama’s



“end of history” thesis. Since 2012, all democracy indexes have shown a consistent downward trend, indicating a global decline in the quality of democratic governance. While decreasing dispersion is evident, it is not accompanied by a universal shift toward liberal democracy. Instead, the data suggest that states are converging toward weaker or more limited forms of democracy (often hybrid or illiberal in nature) challenging the notion of an inevitable ideological endpoint.

Keywords: Institutional Convergence, Democratization, Political Regimes, Sigma-Convergence

JEL: P16, H11, O43

1. Introduction

Approximately 2,500 years ago, Heraclitus of Ephesus introduced the concept of *panta rhei* – the idea that everything flows and that change is the only constant. This notion has been reflected not only in philosophical thought but also in the evolution of political systems, which have historically transitioned through various forms such as city-states, monarchies, autocracies, and modern nation-states. In stark contrast to this dynamic view of history, Francis Fukuyama proposed in 1989 a thesis suggesting that the ideological evolution of governance had reached its final stage. According to Fukuyama, liberal democracy had decisively defeated alternative political systems (absolute monarchy, fascism, communism, and authoritarianism) and had emerged as the ultimate and most advanced form of government.

The aim of the article is to subject Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis to empirical scrutiny by investigating whether a global convergence of state institutions toward the model of liberal democracy has occurred. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the reduction of institutional dispersion across countries, interpreted as evidence of sigma-convergence. Using data from the *Varieties of Democracy* project, a comprehensive assessment has been conducted for all countries worldwide over the period 1991–2024. The study encompasses five dimensions of democracy: electoral democracy, liberal democracy, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, and egalitarian democracy.

The article is structured as follows. Section two presents a literature review, addressing both the arguments in favour of and against the expectation of an “end of history.” Section three outlines the data sources, methodological framework, and stylized facts. Section four discusses the empirical results and their implications. The final section offers concluding remarks and identifies directions for future research.



2. Literature review

Economic and political systems have undergone continuous transformation, evolving from quasi-state structures and city-states, through monarchies, to modern nation-states (Klima, 2009). At the end of the 20th century, Francis Fukuyama, an American economist and political scientist, proposed in his 1989 essay “The End of History” the thesis that humanity had reached the end of ideological evolution (a moment he termed the “end of history”). According to this claim, liberal democracy and market capitalism represent the final form of social organization, with no viable ideological alternatives. Drawing on Hegelian philosophy and Alexandre Kojève’s interpretation of history as a dialectical process culminating in a “universal homogeneous state”, Fukuyama argued that, following the collapse of fascism and communism, no ideology remained capable of challenging liberalism. He emphasized that although not all countries had yet adopted democratic systems, the ideological struggle had concluded – liberalism had triumphed in the realm of ideas, and its global adoption was merely a matter of time (Fukuyama, 1989). This bold and unequivocal thesis has since sparked extensive analysis, praise, and criticism.

One of the most prominent critiques of Fukuyama’s argument is found in Robert Kagan’s “The Return of History and the End of Dreams”. Kagan notes that in the post–Cold War era – particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union – “the optimism was understandable and almost universal (...) after the political crackdown that began in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and disturbing signs of instability in Russia after 1993, most Americans and Europeans believed China and Russia were on a path toward liberalism” (Kagan, 2008, pp. 4–5). However, this expectation did not materialize. China, Russia, several Islamic countries, and many other states did not move toward democracy; instead, they expanded their economic, political, and (importantly!) military capabilities.

Fukuyama himself later revisited his “end of history” argument, acknowledging that his initial formulation underestimated the enduring influence of nationalism, religion, and identity politics. In “Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment” (Fukuyama, 2018), he argued that the struggle for recognition and identity has become a dominant force in contemporary politics, fuelling populist movements and undermining liberal democratic norms. He warned that identity-based grievances, if left unaddressed, could destabilize democratic systems and erode social cohesion. In his later work, “Liberalism and Its Discontents” (Fukuyama, 2022), he conceded that liberal democracies face internal challenges stemming from economic inequality, institutional weakness, and polarization. He noted that



liberalism has been attacked from both extremes: neoliberalism, which prioritized market freedoms at the expense of social stability, and identity-driven politics, which fragmented civic unity.

It is therefore essential to ask the questions: should we (not) expect the “end of history”? Are there mechanisms by which the world will (not) inevitably move toward liberal democracies? The answers and arguments are varied.

2.1. Why might the end of history be expected?

The triumph of liberal democracies over autocratic systems has been particularly evident in Central and Eastern Europe, where, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and a wave of systemic transformations, many states chose the path of democracy and shifted from centrally planned economies to market-based systems (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; Piątek, 2016). Concurrently, the global diffusion of the rule of law has been observed.

The rule of law, understood as a normative framework that constrains arbitrary power and ensures individual rights, has increasingly been adopted across diverse political systems, particularly in post-authoritarian and transitional societies (Godłów-Legiędź, 2017). This diffusion has not occurred randomly but has followed identifiable patterns of global norm transmission. Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett (2007) argued that legal and institutional reforms are often driven by international models and pressures rather than purely domestic needs. The rule of law has thus become a global benchmark for legitimacy, governance, and development. Tamanaha (2004) emphasizes that despite its conceptual ambiguity, the rule of law has attained near-universal rhetorical endorsement, further reinforcing its status as a cornerstone of modern statehood. Moreover, Srokosz (2014) suggests that the rule of law reflects an objective progression of social order.

The role of international organizations in promoting liberal democratic norms and the rule of law can also be interpreted as a force contributing to the global convergence of political systems. Institutions such as the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank have exerted sustained pressure on states to adopt legal and economic frameworks aligned with liberal democratic¹ principles (Simmons & Elkins, 2004). This pressure has been applied through mechanisms of conditionality, norm diffusion, and

¹ This process is neither necessarily linear nor unconditional, as illustrated by the example of natural resource abundance. Numerous studies (see: Schmoll & Swenson, 2024; Narh, 2025) have indicated that the possession of natural resources may support convergence toward liberal democracy, but only under the condition that strong institutions are in place to impose constraints on those in power. In contexts where institutional strength is lacking, the influence of elites and interest groups tends to increase (Dymitrowska, 2024), resulting in the stagnation or even reversal of democratization processes.



reputational incentives, which have incentivized governments to liberalize their economies and strengthen rule-of-law institutions (Growiec, 2005).

The processes of globalization and the liberalization of trade also support “end of history” thesis by promoting the global diffusion of liberal democratic and capitalist norms. As transnational economic integration has deepened, sovereign states have increasingly adapted their legal and institutional frameworks to accommodate the demands of international trade and investment regimes (Ip, 2010). This transformation has been particularly evident in the proliferation of foreign direct investment, which has not only facilitated economic modernization in developing countries but has also contributed to the diffusion of institutional norms associated with liberal market economies (To, 2024). FDI inflows, especially from developed economies, have exerted a positive influence on host country institutional quality, including improvements in regulatory frameworks, rule of law, and anti-corruption measures (Fon et al., 2021). These developments indicate a convergence toward liberal institutional models, driven not by coercion but by the perceived benefits of integration into the global economy.

All of this makes the expectation of the “end of history” justified, and democratization has been and continues to be the dominant systemic trend (Fukuyama, 1992; Świeca, 2008).

2.2. Why might the end of history not be expected?

On the other hand, there are numerous arguments indicating that the “end of history” has not occurred and is unlikely to occur. There is no single, universal mechanism for the implementation and evolution of state institutions. Despite empirical evidence supporting the long-term benefits of democracy and free markets (Przeworski, 1991; Barro, 1996; Acemoglu et al., 2019), countries reform their institutions in different directions and at varying speeds. Even when states formally adopt similar institutional frameworks, their practical functioning often diverges significantly (Rudolf, 2017). Institutions are not easily transferable between countries (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012) and are frequently locally embedded (North, 1990), which complicates or slows down institutional adaptation (Jedlińska, 2010). Even despite similar processes, such as the post-socialist transformation in Central and Eastern Europe, significant differences in political and economic structures between countries persist (Hall & Soskice, 2001), and some states exhibit a tendency toward divergence (Totleben & Piątek, 2025).

Huntington (1996) argues that civilizations, defined by deep-rooted cultural, religious, and historical identities, remain the primary fault lines of global conflict. Rather than converging toward a homogeneous liberal-democratic model, societies continue to assert distinct civilizational logics, often incompatible with Western norms. This view is reinforced by Beckert

(2010), who critiques the dominant paradigm of institutional isomorphism in sociological theory. While early institutionalist frameworks emphasized convergence through mimetic, normative, and coercive pressures, Beckert demonstrates that these same mechanisms can – and often do – produce divergent institutional outcomes. Societies adapt global models in ways that reflect local cultural repertoires (Botcheva & Martin, 2001) and historical trajectories (Pierson, 2000; Gerschewski, 2021).

The persistence of political and ideological conflicts are also identified as a major challenge to Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis. Liberal democracy, as the proposed final stage of political evolution, has been critically reassessed in light of ongoing global tensions and competing ideological frameworks. As Wawrzonkowski (2013) notes, Fukuyama’s vision tends to overlook the complexity of historical processes and the role of cultural and philosophical diversity. Similarly, Kucukozer (2005) emphasizes that movements such as political Islam illustrate how alternative models of governance and identity continue to emerge, resisting the universalization of Western liberal values. These observations suggest that history remains dynamic and contested, rather than concluded.

3. Data, stylized facts, and methods

Although measuring state institutions is not a trivial task² (Ostrom, 2005), there exist indices that enable meaningful comparisons across time and space. This analysis draws on data from the *Varieties of Democracy* project (Coppedge et al., 2025) which provides measures of various dimensions of political systems, such as indexes of: *electoral democracy* (responsive governance through clean elections and broad political freedoms), *liberal democracy* (limited state power and protected individual rights), *participatory democracy* (active citizen engagement beyond voting), *deliberative democracy* (decision-making through public reasoning and inclusive dialogue), and *egalitarian democracy* (equal access to rights, resources, and political influence across social groups). Moreover, these measures allow for the classification of countries into one of four regime types: *Liberal Democracy*, *Electoral Democracy*, *Electoral Autocracy*, and *Closed Autocracy*.

Liberal Democracy is defined by the presence of free and fair elections, alongside strong protections for civil liberties and institutional checks on executive power. Political competition is open, and governance is constrained by transparent legal and judicial systems. *Electoral Democracy* ensures mean-

² Difficulties in the empirical study of institutions have been noted by, among others, Gandhi and Przeworski (2016). They argue that authoritarian regimes sometimes adopt institutional features typical of democracies—such as the existence of multiple political parties, but this constitutes a mere illusion. In reality, no political power is distributed, and authority remains concentrated in the hands of the autocrat.

ingful electoral competition through free and fair elections, but lacks comprehensive safeguards for individual rights or effective limitations on executive authority. While democratic procedures are in place, liberal principles may be inconsistently upheld.

Electoral Autocracy maintains the formal structure of multiparty elections, yet these contests are neither genuinely competitive nor free. Political power is often concentrated, and democratic norms are routinely undermined despite the appearance of electoral legitimacy. *Closed Autocracy* is characterized by the absence of multiparty elections, with access to political power tightly controlled and concentrated in the hands of ruling elites. Public participation in governance is minimal, and opposition is typically suppressed.

Between 1991 and 2024, significant shifts were observed in the number of people living under different regime types. In the 1990s—partly as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union—an increase was recorded in the population living under both Liberal and Electoral Democracies. This trend continued until 2012, when over 1,157.7 million people resided in liberal democracies and 2,564.3 million in electoral democracies (see Chart 1). A major turning point occurred in 2017, when India was reclassified from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy, contributing substantially to the decline in the global population living under democratic regimes. By the end of the study period, in 2024, the number of people living in liberal democracies had declined to 939.2 million, a figure comparable to that of 1993.

Given that fertility rates are significantly lower in wealthier, democratic countries (OECD, 2024), the share of the global population living under democratic regimes has been decreasing (see Chart 2). After an initial rise (peaking in 1996, when 17.59% of the world's population lived in liberal democracies) a steady downward trend has persisted. Currently, only 11.57% of the global population resides in liberal democracies, and 16.64% in electoral democracies. This indicates that even if the number of countries classified as democratic is increasing (Acemoglu et al., 2019; Boese et al., 2022), both the absolute number and the global share of people living in democratic regimes are declining (Angiolillo et al., 2024). Thus far, Fukuyama's "end of history" seems not to have occurred.

The verification of institutional convergence of the state is most commonly conducted through sigma-convergence analysis (Pérez-Moreno et al., 2021), although beta-convergence (Savoia & Sen, 2016) is also employed. Fukuyama referred to the process of the 'universalization' of state institutions (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 4), which provides a theoretical rationale for the application of the sigma-convergence approach in the empirical section of this study. This method is particularly useful, as sigma-convergence captures changes in the dispersion of the examined variable over time. Formally, the standard deviation (as a measure of dispersion) of institutional indicators was estimated for each year t according to the following formula:

$$\sigma_t = \sqrt{\frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N (INST_{i,t} - \overline{INST}_t)^2} \quad (\#1)$$

where: – the standard deviation, t – time, N – the number of countries, $INST$ – the measure of state institutions.

Subsequently, the parameters of the equation were estimated using the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method, in accordance with the following formula:

$$\sigma_t = \alpha + \beta \cdot t + \varepsilon_t \quad (\#2)$$

A negative and statistically significant β coefficient indicates a decreasing dispersion of state institutions over time, which, in effect, implies the presence of sigma-convergence. Conversely, a positive coefficient suggests the occurrence of divergence.

4. Results

At the initial stage, standard deviations were calculated for the five democracy indexes (see: Chart 3): Electoral Democracy (*ElecDem*), Liberal Democracy (*LibDem*), Participatory Democracy (*PartDem*), Deliberative Democracy (*DelibDem*), and Egalitarian Democracy (*EgalDem*). A clear downward trend in the dispersion of all variables is observable, although the rate of decline varies. The *LibDem*, *PartDem*, *DelibDem*, and *EgalDem* indexes exhibit relatively stable downward trajectories, with the exception of the COVID-19 period. Interestingly, the dispersion of *ElecDem*, after an initial decline, has been steadily increasing since 2019.

In the next step, linear regression equations (#2) were estimated for each of the indexes under study. The results are presented in Table 1. The sigma-convergence parameter was negative and statistically significant at the 99% confidence level for all indexes, indicating that institutional convergence occurred between 1991 and 2024. The models demonstrated a high degree of fit to the empirical data, with R^2 values ranging from 0.7026 to 0.8993.

However, these results do not allow for a definitive conclusion regarding the realization of the “end of history” thesis. While countries around the world are indeed becoming more similar in terms of how various aspects of democracy are assessed (as dispersion declines), this does not imply the triumph of liberal democracy as envisioned by Fukuyama. On the contrary, the data reveal a significant deterioration in the quality of democracy since approximately 2012. Chart 4 shows that after initial improvements, all indexes have been declining, suggesting that convergence is occurring not toward



the ideal of liberal democracy, but rather toward its weaker or more flawed manifestations.

This paradoxical trend suggests a form of convergence that is structural but not normative. To clarify, structural convergence is understood as the increasing similarity in formal institutional frameworks across countries, as reflected in the declining dispersion of democracy indexes. Normative convergence, by contrast, is associated with the alignment of these frameworks with liberal-democratic principles, including strong civil liberties, effective checks and balances, and adherence to the rule of law. Based on the results, it can be observed that structural convergence has occurred, whereas normative convergence has not been achieved and may even be reversing, given the global deterioration in democratic quality. In this context, convergence reflects homogenization in form, but not necessarily in democratic function.

Importantly, while the observed decline in democratic quality challenges the assumption of an inevitable triumph of liberal democracy, it does not necessarily falsify the thesis in its entirety. The data may indicate that convergence is occurring, but toward a different configuration of democracy: potentially more limited, hybrid, or illiberal in nature. This suggests that the nature of democracy itself might be evolving rather than disappearing, and convergence could reflect adaptation to new global conditions rather than a reversal of historical progress. Consequently, the interpretation of these trends requires caution: sigma-convergence confirms increasing similarity among states, yet the substantive meaning of this similarity appears to be changing.

Moreover, the observed decline in the share of the global population living under democratic regimes – despite an increase in the number of democratic states – suggests that demographic dynamics also play a role. Lower fertility rates in democratic countries, combined with population growth in autocratic regimes, have shifted the global balance, further complicating the interpretation of convergence trends.

These findings underscore the limitations of relying solely on dispersion metrics to assess institutional development. While sigma-convergence captures the narrowing of differences across countries, it does not account for the direction or desirability of change. The results suggest that institutional convergence may be occurring, but not in a way that supports the normative assumptions of the “end of history” thesis. Rather than indicating progress toward liberal democracy, the observed convergence reflects a homogenization of institutional forms that may coincide with democratic backsliding. It appears that political and historical processes are not universally pushing states toward liberal democracy. Instead, institutional convergence may be more pronounced within specific regions or among culturally or historically similar countries, rather than at the global level. This interpretation highlights the need for more nuanced analytical approaches that go beyond

global averages. In particular, the concept of convergence clubs (see: Phillips & Sul, 2007; Glawe & Wagner, 2021) offers a promising framework for identifying distinct groups of countries that follow divergent institutional trajectories. Applying such methods could reveal whether convergence is occurring within certain clusters, while divergence persists across the broader international landscape.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to evaluate the empirical validity of Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis by analysing whether state institutions have globally converged toward liberal democracy. Drawing on data from the *Varieties of Democracy* project and applying sigma-convergence methodology, the analysis revealed a statistically significant reduction in institutional dispersion across five key dimensions of democracy between 1991 and 2024. These results suggest that countries have become more similar in terms of democratic structures, at least in formal terms.

However, the observed convergence does not equate to the triumph of liberal democracy. Since approximately 2012, all democracy indexes have exhibited a consistent downward trend, indicating a deterioration in the quality of democratic governance worldwide. This paradox highlights a critical distinction between structural convergence and normative convergence. While institutional frameworks may appear increasingly aligned, their substantive functioning often diverges, with many states adopting illiberal or hybrid models that undermine democratic principles.

Moreover, the decline in the share of the global population living under democratic regimes—despite an increase in the number of democratic states—underscores the complexity of interpreting convergence trends. Demographic factors, such as lower fertility rates in democratic countries and population growth in autocratic regimes, further complicate the picture. These dynamics suggest that convergence, where it occurs, may be regional or clustered rather than global.

The findings of this study challenge the notion of an inevitable ideological endpoint and call for more nuanced approaches to analysing institutional change. Future research should consider the concept of convergence clubs, which allows for the identification of distinct trajectories among groups of countries. Such an approach would provide deeper insight into the mechanisms of institutional development and the conditions under which liberal democracy may (not) emerge as a dominant global model.



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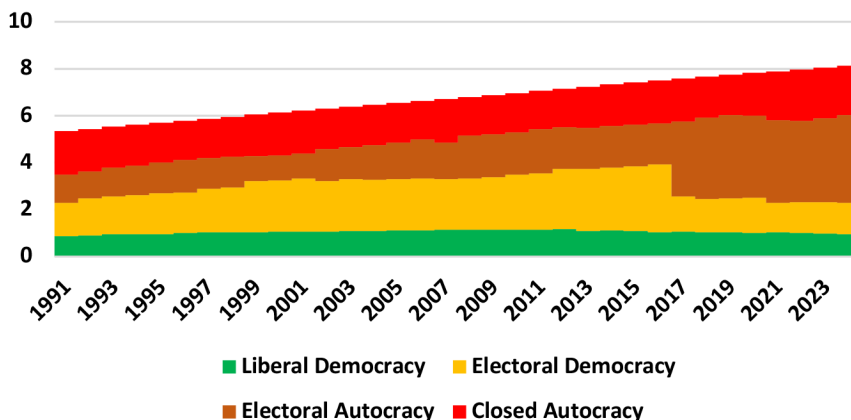
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Note: the results of this study were presented at the 8th Scientific Conference “*Institutions: theory and practice*” (11–12 September, 2025, Toruń, Poland).

Appendix

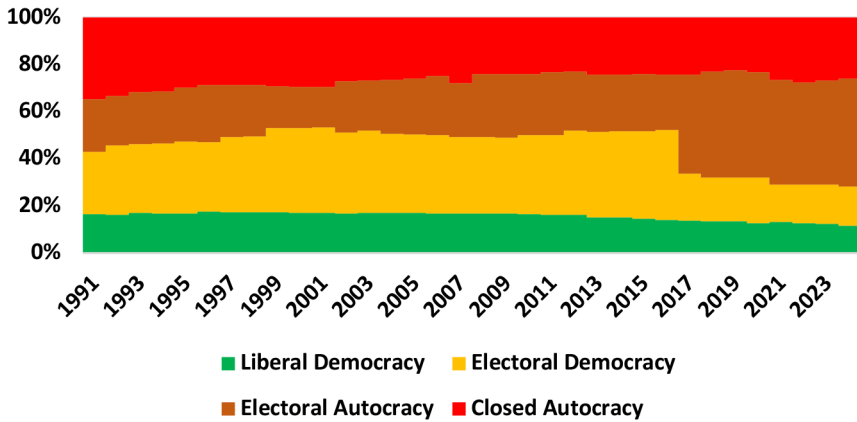
Chart 1. Global population by type of political regime, 1991–2024 (in billions)



Source: Own preparation based on Varieties of Democracy (2025) and World Bank (2025) data.

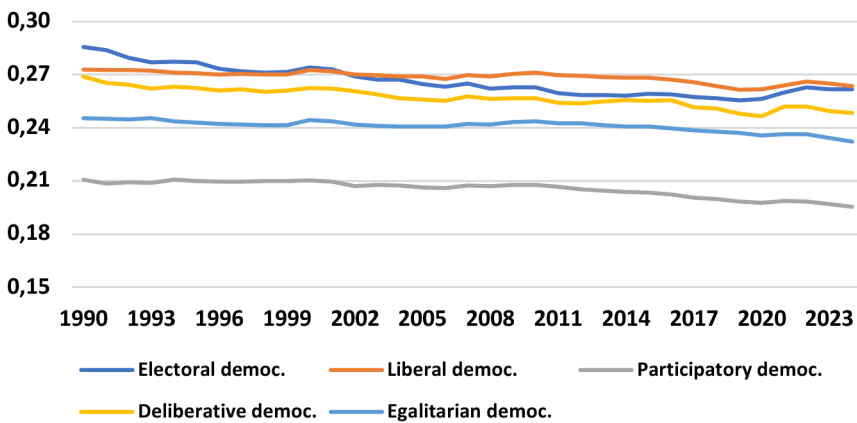


Chart 2. Share of global population by political regime type, 1991-2024



Source: Own preparation based on Varieties of Democracy (2025) and World Bank (2025) data.

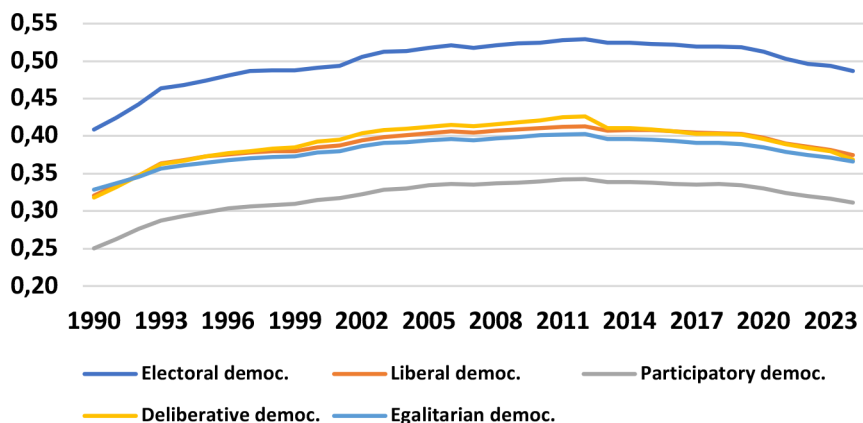
Chart 3. Standard deviation of democracy indexes, 1991-2024



Source: Own preparation based on Varieties of Democracy (2025) data.



Chart 4. Average of democracy indexes, 1991–2024



Source: Own preparation based on Varieties of Democracy (2025) data.

Table 1. Estimated coefficients for sigma-convergence regressions

Measure	α	β	R ²
Electoral democracy	1.7368*** (0.1196)	-0.0007*** (0.0001)	0.8208
Liberal democracy	0.7992*** (0.0542)	-0.0003*** (0.0000)	0.7439
Participatory democracy	1.0232*** (0.0619)	-0.0004*** (0.0000)	0.8409
Deliberative democracy	1.2531*** (0.0580)	-0.0005*** (0.0000)	0.8993
Egalitarian democracy	0.7661*** (0.0595)	-0.0003*** (0.0000)	0.7026

Standard errors in parenthesis; *p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01

Source: Own preparation based on Varieties of Democracy (2025) data.