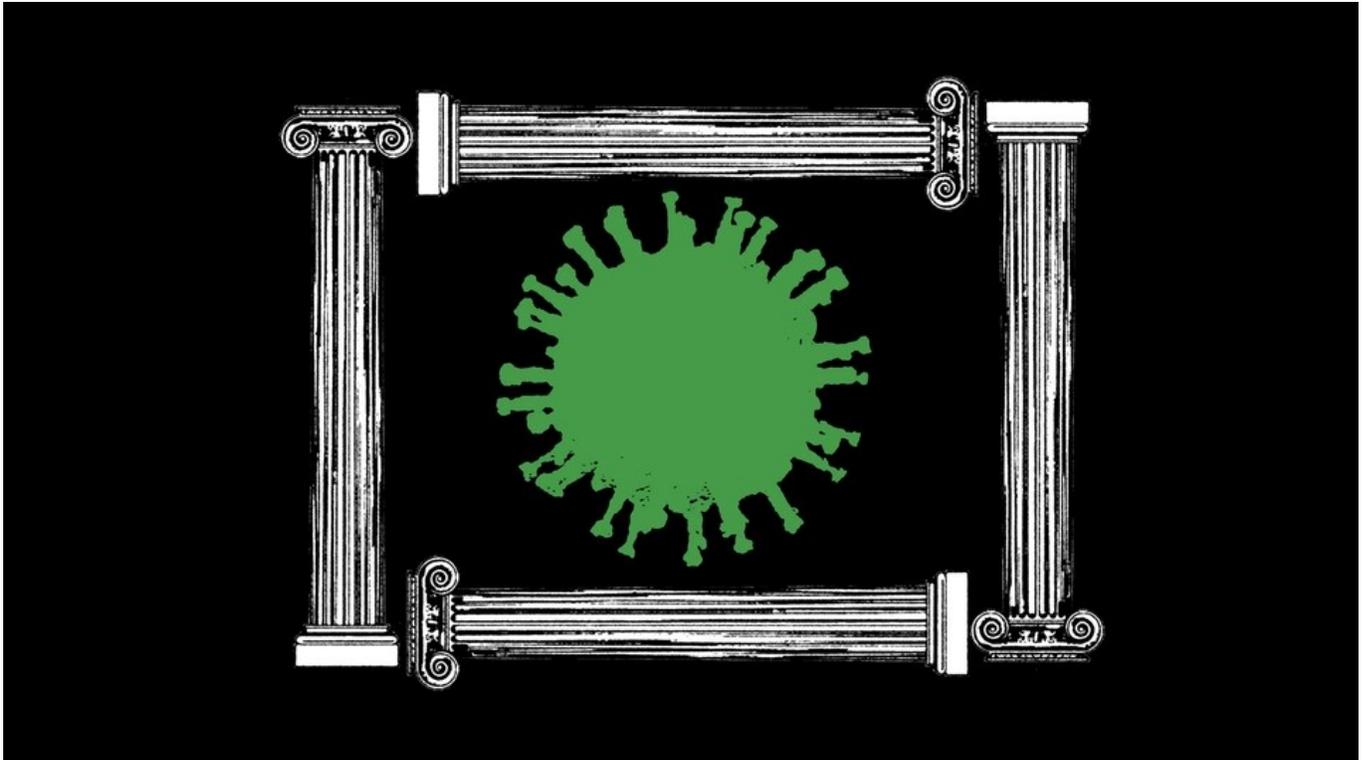


The Myth That Democracies Bungled the Pandemic

Justin Esarey

The argument that authoritarian governments outperform democracies in a crisis has found new life during the coronavirus pandemic. The data tell a different story.



The Atlantic

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The idea that dictatorships get things done while democracies dither has an ancient provenance and enduring appeal. When times were tough in the ancient Roman republic, the Senate [appointed a strongman](#) with virtually unlimited powers (but a temporary term of office) to tackle the crisis. Abraham Lincoln, the savior of American democracy and the Great Emancipator, [suspended the writ of habeas corpus and arbitrarily jailed dissenters](#) to maintain the Union's resolve to win the American Civil War. The Italian dictator Benito Mussolini supposedly ["made the trains run on time"](#)—democracies cannot always do the same.

The argument that authoritarian governments outperform democracies in a crisis has found new life during the coronavirus pandemic, especially [within the Chinese government](#). The *Global Times*, a newspaper published by the Chinese Communist Party [as an arm of the People's Daily](#), [stated bluntly](#) that Western countries "failed to prevent the virus from spreading in their countries ... as a result of their governance systems" and that "the West cannot have a government that is as powerful as China's." Indeed, China's reported deaths from COVID-19 are remarkably low, [just under 5,700](#) in a country of more than a billion people. In case the implication is too subtle, the paper has also [directly said](#) that "systematic advantages, including top-down effective governance and ability to mobilize social resources" are behind China's success. Meanwhile, the United States—the world's most powerful democracy—is [well into its fourth wave](#) of mass hospitalizations and deaths; [more than 660,000 Americans are dead](#) of the disease as of this writing. A recent article in *Foreign Policy* (hardly a bastion of authoritarianism) argued that nations with "collective discipline, deference to authority, and faith in the state" are the ones that have succeeded in confronting this public-health crisis, even though democracy itself is not to blame. Similarly, [Francis Fukuyama thinks](#) that it is not necessarily democracy but "whether citizens trust their leaders, and whether those leaders preside over a competent and effective state," that is crucial to defeating a pandemic.

[Zeynep Tufekci: How the coronavirus revealed authoritarianism's fatal flaw](#)

The idea that top-down societies have handled COVID-19 better may explain in part why [governance around the world has become more autocratic since the start of the pandemic](#): People crave decisive action. Those in democracies who resist decisive action, such as vaccine mandates, often appeal to [their right to personal freedom](#), despite the fact that [vaccine mandates are both ethically and historically compatible with democracy](#). Meanwhile, Western news outlets announce that ["America has failed at collective action"](#) or that ["the U.S. has failed to persuade Americans to get vaccines."](#) Even Francis Collins, the director of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, [said that the U.S. is "failing" on COVID](#) because of low vaccination rates. The pressure this criticism creates for democratic governments to be more forceful must be immense. Still, in 2020, most countries that had been designated as "free" [by Freedom House](#) stayed that way: Reductions in political rights and civil liberties were most marked in dictatorships and hybrid regimes.

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Should the world turn to dictatorship to beat back the pandemic and the many other challenges we face? Even if dictatorships *were* better than democracies at fighting the pandemic, that wouldn't be reason enough to replace presidents with politburos and parliaments with juntas. Freedom, equal representation, and civil rights are more important than ruthlessly enforced public-health measures. Nevertheless, the bold, resolute governance that autocracy supposedly offers may be tempting. The glamour of that dark path conflicts with the fact that, despite the negative publicity they have faced, democracies *are at least as effective* at vaccinating their citizens as non-democracies. [Our World in Data](#), a collaboration between researchers at Oxford University and the Global Change Data Lab, provides [up-to-date information](#) on the proportion of each country's citizens who have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, as well as on their GDP per capita. [Experts from the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg](#) classify regimes on the basis of their adherence to free elections and protection of individual rights, making it possible to compare the performance of democratic regimes with that of autocratic ones. At the same level of economic prosperity, democracies are on average comparable to or slightly better than their autocratic counterparts in terms of how much of their population has been vaccinated. Some democracies have underperformed their peers, but others have overperformed. The same is true for dictatorships.

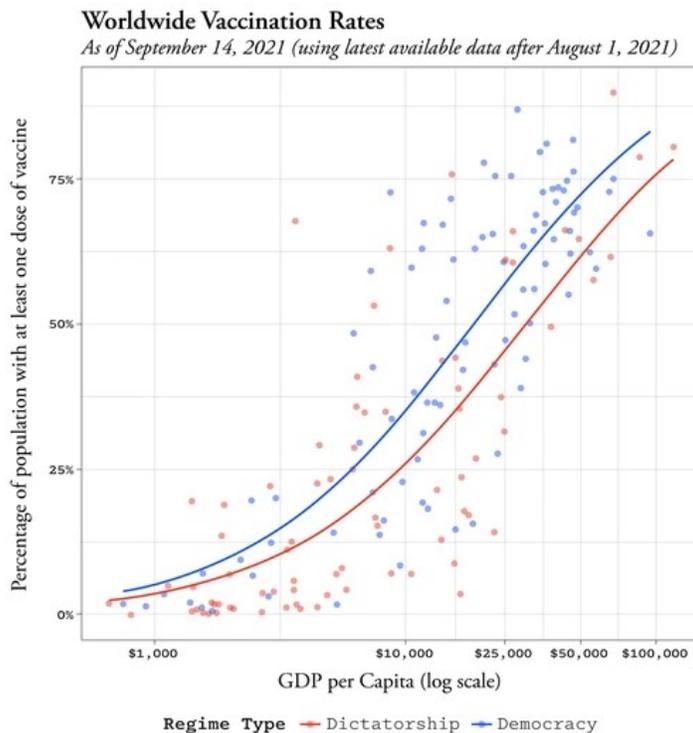


Figure 1: Worldwide vaccination rates by regime type. Each point represents a country; the lines are the prediction from a best-fit logistic model.

In fact, though it may be surprising to many, democracies have [proved that they have the edge](#) in many aspects of this crisis, including the initial containment of spread and compliance with measures designed to limit transmission. They are also better at preventing deaths from COVID-19. [Democracies have reported more fatalities from the disease than have autocracies](#), but these reports are complicated by autocracies' tendency to [fudge](#) their [data](#) to make things look better. One way of getting around that problem is to estimate how many more people died in 2020 (when the pandemic broke out) compared with previous years. This is [precisely what Ariel Karlinsky and Dmitry Kobak](#) did. Although excess mortality is an imperfect measure of COVID deaths and available for fewer countries than the fatality data are (Russia is included but China is not), it is a harder number to falsify. Karlinsky and Kobak's data can be used to compare democracies with dictatorships in their percentage of excess deaths during the pandemic. And at every level of GDP per capita, democracies do at least as well as, and sometimes better than, dictatorships.

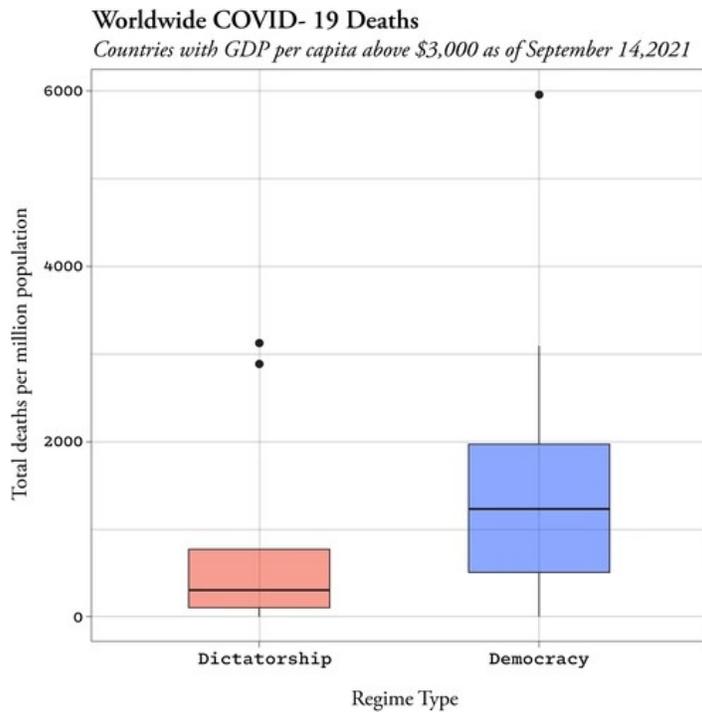


Figure 2: Worldwide COVID-19 deaths. The boxplot shows the distribution of death rates for countries sorted by regime type. The bold line in the center of the box is the median death rate; the edges of the box represent the 25th and 75th percentiles of death rates. Outliers are indicated by black dots. The poorest countries are excluded from this plot to avoid including possibly unreliable reports from states with low capacity; however, the qualitative difference in death rates between democracies and dictatorships is unchanged by this exclusion.

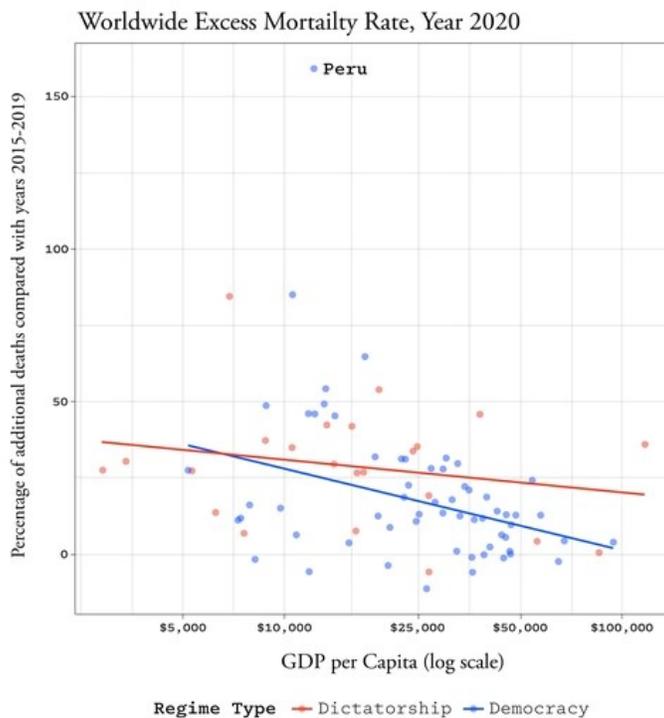


Figure 3: Worldwide excess mortality rates in 2020 by regime type. Every point represents a country. The lines are the prediction from a linear best-fit model, excluding Peru as an apparent outlier.

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The desire for swift, unified, and determined policy to fight COVID-19—and for an end to endless health restrictions—is understandable. But before we embrace authoritarianism in the name of expediency, we should remember that Mussolini did *not* actually get the trains running on time. The supposed improvements were partially mythical, partially attributable to pre-Fascism initiatives, and limited to only some

[aspects of the railway system](#). In addition to being murderous, fascist Italy and Nazi Germany were [deeply corrupt](#), even [kleptocratic](#). Democracies face criticism of their vaccination campaigns precisely because they are democracies: They have cultures of open discussion and free media. But when it comes to developing and administering the lifesaving vaccines that can stop the virus, democratic governance is working.