Diseased Democracies: Pandemic Responses and Democratic Backsliding

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Abstract

This study tries to use the case study method to explain the potential causal relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic response and democratic backsliding. The cases of the US and Japan have been chosen for this study. This study believes that the covid-19 accelerates democratic backsliding, but democratic backsliding does not mean the demise of democracy. The democratic regime needs to change with the times and should be adjusted accordingly to the times in order to maintain the elements of democracy.

Key Words

Democratic backsliding; Covid-19 government response; United States; Japan

Introduction

Global democracy is facing great challenges. According to the report *Freedom in the World 2021*, the emergence of the covid-19 pandemic coincided with the fifteenth consecutive year of decline in global freedom. Governments in various democracies have repeatedly resorted to excessive surveillance, discriminatory restrictions on freedoms such as movement and assembly, and arbitrary or violent enforcement of these restrictions. The impact of the long-term democratic decline has deepened and become increasingly global.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Economist Intelligence Unit points out that ﻿the average global score in the 2020 Democracy Index fell from 5.44 in 2019 to 5.37 in 2020. This is by far the worst global score since the index was first produced in 2006. The Economist Intelligence Unit attributes the worsening results in 2020 to government restrictions, as evidenced by the global restrictions on individual liberties and civil liberties imposed by governments in response to the covid-19 pandemic.[[2]](#footnote-2) The V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Institute, an authoritative democracy research organization, argues in their annual report that the pandemic’s direct effects on global levels of liberal democracy were limited in 2020. However, for democracy’s future, the institute believes that the final toll on democracy may turn out to be higher unless restrictions are eliminated immediately after the pandemic ends.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Increasingly, negative words describing democracy have appeared frequently in the discussions of researchers. These include phrases such as democratic recession[[4]](#footnote-4), democratic failure[[5]](#footnote-5), democratic breakdown[[6]](#footnote-6), democratic rollback[[7]](#footnote-7), democratic erosion[[8]](#footnote-8), democratic deterioration[[9]](#footnote-9), democratic reversal[[10]](#footnote-10), and democracy deficit.[[11]](#footnote-11) Related studies have noted these contrary trends in democratic development and have explained them from different perspectives. Drawing on this more recent scholarship and data, this thesis uses the term “democratic backsliding” to refer to the current contrary trends in the functioning and legitimacy of democratic regimes occurring worldwide.

Surveying democracy in the second decade of the 21st century, despite Fukuyama’s famous declaration, history has not yet ended, and the victories that liberal democracy has achieved can only properly be described as incomplete and reversible. Contemporary democracy’s encounter with the covid-19 pandemic has caused some to start thinking about democracy’s deficiencies.[[12]](#footnote-12) *How have democratic governments’ responses to the pandemic affected the functioning of democracy in the first two years of its spread? More specifically, what has been the impact of these pandemic responses on the aforementioned democratic backsliding?* These questions demand clear answers.

From the perspective of contemporary society, it is necessary to explore the relationship between democracy and the covid-19 pandemic. First, exploring the impact of covid-19 on the elements of democracy can help democratic countries to improve both their political institutions and future public health responses. Second, understanding the relationship between the pandemic and democratic backsliding may provide an important indicator of the future of this troubling trend for democracies. In addition, answering these questions will contribute to the study of democratic backsliding by improving our understanding of how the need to address a major public health emergency can potentially shape change in the values and institutions of democracy. Third, there are some reasons to believe that the covid-19 pandemic and the efforts to respond to it may have had particular impacts on democratic backsliding. Not only developing democratic countries, but also advanced democracies with long histories of democratic institutions are under threat. Even in the United States, the traditional beacon of democracy, the fairness of the democratic election process during the pandemic has been called into doubt. In the name of preventing the spread of the infection, the governments of many U.S. states imposed changes in voting practices that some have argued affected the fairness of the 2020 presidential election. In response, since that election, some of these state governments have taken steps to limit the franchise, such as changing registration rules, limiting voting locations, and redrawing election districts to enhance partisan advantage and reduce competition, among other anti-democratic reforms. These are all examples of suppression and manipulation designed to shrink the number of people who can vote.[[13]](#footnote-13) If one regards free and fair elections as a key element of democracy, it is clear that American democracy has been marred in part by the government’s response to the covid-19 pandemic and reactions to these responses. These phenomena are not accidental but public policy choices made to address the pandemic. This study provides specific case studies of democracies facing the challenge of the pandemic in order to evaluate the impact of these public health response on democratic backsliding and thus to contribute to enhancing our understanding of how this process works and how likely it is to continue to weaken democratic institutions moving forward.

Literature review

Research into the recent countertrend in the growth of democracy was a prelude to increased scholarly interest in democratic backsliding. The early studies of democratic backsliding did not emerge as a distinct area of inquiry but were instead interspersed with related studies of democratic collapse, democratic erosion, etc. Walder and Lust point out that even though the causes of democratic transitions, democratic breakdowns, authoritarian resilience, and democratic consolidation have been debated by many researchers, existing research still lacks theories to explain democratic backsliding.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Freedom House found that 2019 was the fourteenth consecutive year of decline in global freedom (in which more countries experienced declines in freedom than increases in freedom).[[15]](#footnote-15) The number of studies related to democratic recession expanded dramatically during this period. From this point, researchers focusing on democratic backsliding increasingly separated the topic from other similar concepts to establish a separate field of study. It was in this period that democratic backsliding was given clear definitions. The most widely circulated definition is from Nancy Bermeo,who defines ‘democratic backsliding’ as “the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy”.[[16]](#footnote-16) This thesis defines democratic backsliding as the phenomenon of existing democracies becoming less democratic due to the debilitation or elimination of one or more of the following basic elements of democracy: government chosen through free and fair elections, active participation of citizens in political life, protection of human rights, and respect for the rule of law. This definition is derived from Bermeo’s understanding of democratic backsliding and Larry Diamond’s definition of democracy, which will be discussed further below.

This section will sort out the previous research on democratic backsliding from the following three perspectives:

1. Theoretical perspective: What theories or hypotheses posit factors that cause democratic backsliding to happen?

2. Empirical perspective: In which countries has democratic backsliding mainly occurred?

3.Methodological perspective: What methods have been previously used by researchers to measure democratic backsliding?

Democratic backsliding as a phenomenon is not emerge out of the void, scholars have spared no effort in exploring the causes of it. Haggard and Kaufman believe polarization is the main reason for democratic backsliding because polarization divides voters and predisposes them to allow certain actions to be taken by their leaders. Polarization here means a society is divided into two distinct opposites, with perceptions of the same thing concentrated at both extremes. Working in this vein, Greskovits argues “[b]acksliding is usually traced to the radicalization of sizeable groups within the remaining active citizenry.” [[17]](#footnote-17) Highlighting specific mechanisms, Svolik points out that the public’s ability to serve as a democratic check has been damaged by political polarization. Voters are willing to trade democratic principles for partisan benefits in a polarized constituency.[[18]](#footnote-18) Overall, polarization creates social rifts and provides a breeding ground for democratic backsliding.

Some scholars have argued that authoritarianism has had an impact on democratic backsliding. Cooley elaborates on the changes that authoritarianism has made to democratic norms.[[19]](#footnote-19) Abdullah explains democratic backsliding as an increase in the authoritarian machinations of the state in Singapore. He concludes that backsliding can happen even in non-democratic countries and it can take place without economic or military crises.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The relationship between judicial and democratic backsliding has also attracted widespread attention. Blauberger and Kelemen argue that the potential efficacy and limitations of judicial mechanisms as tools to combat democratic backsliding in EU member states.[[21]](#footnote-21) Bermeo also mentions judicial autonomy and media freedoms became prime sites for democratic backsliding.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Looking at research on democratic backsliding from an empirical perspective, developing countries are overrepresented. Scholars like Tansel[[23]](#footnote-23) , Akyuz, and Hess[[24]](#footnote-24), Gumuscu[[25]](#footnote-25)use Turkey as a case to explain democratic backsliding. Pérez-Liñán, Schmidt, and Vairo develop two indices of presidential hegemony and analyze democratic backsliding by observing the duration of democratic regimes in eighteen Latin American countries between 1925 and 2016.[[26]](#footnote-26) Corrales explains democratic backsliding through electoral irregularities in Venezuela, where he finds 117 electoral irregularities from 1999 to 2019.[[27]](#footnote-27) Castaldo chooses the case of Serbia and measures democratic backsliding by observing the transformation of democratic to non-democratic regimes [[28]](#footnote-28)

Some scholars have also focused on observing democratic backsliding in Europe. Gora and Wilde analyze recent trends of democratic backsliding within the European Union. They find that a process of democratic backsliding is occurring within new member states and that the rule of law and independence of the judiciary is at the heart of the problem.[[29]](#footnote-29) Sedelmeier analyzes the European Union’s reactions to breaches of liberal democratic practices in Hungary and Romania during 2012–13 to assess its capacity to lock in democracy in its member states. [[30]](#footnote-30) Hungary and Poland have been analyzed as typical cases by Müller[[31]](#footnote-31) ,Herman[[32]](#footnote-32), Kelemen and Orenstein[[33]](#footnote-33), and also Meijers and Van.[[34]](#footnote-34)

From the perspective of research methods, scholars studying democratic backsliding typically prefer quantitative approaches. Gibler and Randazzo test the effects of independent judiciaries on the likelihood of democratic backsliding. They adopt a dataset of judicial constraints across 163 different countries from 1960 to 2000. Using this data, they find that the presence of an independent judiciary is consistently associated with regime stability. They define democratic backsliding as regime changes toward authoritarianism.[[35]](#footnote-35) Waldner and Lust offer a quantitative rule. Coding a case of backsliding requires degradation in at least two of three dimensions of democratic governance: competition, participation, and accountability. Viewing backsliding as composed of clearly intended efforts to change some combination of competitiveness, participation, and accountability not only provides some defense against false positives but also comports well with the empirical record.[[36]](#footnote-36) The quantitative approach is very practical as a tool to describe the extent of democratic backsliding, however, there is a greater need for a qualitative account of the democratic backsliding to clarify causal relations.

In sum, research on recent democratic backsliding before 2020 (and the onset of the covid-19 pandemic) has the following general characteristics:

1. Researchers put particular emphasis on developing countries. In developing countries, the democratic backsliding phenomena may be easy to observe, as democratic institutions are already relatively weak. Accordingly, advanced democratic countries are largely ignored in this literature. Are advanced democratic countries facing democratic backsliding? How have efforts to respond to the pandemic affected the health of democratic institutions in these countries? These questions need to be considered.
2. Covid-19 is a recent and ongoing public health emergency. Pre-2020 research thus obviously does not give a clear answer to the relationship between covid-19 pandemic and democratic backsliding. This study tries to find the potential relationship between efforts to respond to the pandemic and democratic backsliding.
3. Most researchers choose the quantitative method to measure democratic backsliding. These methods are useful tools that can measure the amount of democratic backsliding in a given case. However, it is also important to identify the causes of these changes, and clarifying a causal relationship between factors such as covid-19 responses and democratic backsliding likely requires qualitative research methods such as in-depth case research.

Some astute observers have argued that covid-19 responses have had a negative effect on democracy. Although the pandemic is still ongoing, they have started to find the specific relationship between democracy and covid-19 policies in different dimensions and tried to forecast what may happen to democracy going forward. From a macro point of view, Kavaklı observes that some governments have abused their emergency powers and weakened democratic norms during the pandemic. By analyzing the determinants of democratic violations in 102 countries, he finds that populist incumbents have committed significantly more democratic violations during the pandemic than non-populists have. And populist incumbents in countries with weaker pre-covid democracy and a larger number of covid-related deaths have committed more democratic violations.[[37]](#footnote-37) He regards the pandemic democratic backsliding as democratic violations and explains the relation from a populism perspective. However, populism is just a single factor in the story of democratic backsliding during the pandemic. There are limitations to the study of a single variable, and we cannot know whether populism is the only cause of democratic backsliding or not.

To discover the specific relationship between covid-19 responses and the decline of democracy, some scholars chose a single case for research. Mietzner believes that the poor response of covid-19 is the result of Indonesia’s specific process of democratic decline in the last decade. This backsliding generates some anti-democratic actors, like intensifying populist anti-scientism, religious conservatism, religiopolitical polarization, corruption, and clientelism. He focuses on the five areas of Indonesia’s democratic decline in the last few years and points out that the various aspects of Indonesian democracy’s erosion crippled the country’s covid-19 response in serious ways.[[38]](#footnote-38) This research indicates that past democratic backsliding can shape the covid-19 response adopted by the government in question. However, this thesis will focus on how these responses may shape the pattern of democratic backsliding following the onset of the pandemic.

Based on the above review of the relevant literature, this thesis will consider the neglected cases of developed democracies. At the same time, the core concepts involved in this research should also be given specific definitions.

Coronavirus disease (covid-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected with the covid-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illnesses.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The definition of democracy is still debated by scholars and it is difficult to offer a consensus definition. This thesis understands democracy based on its core elements. Because the elements of democracy have been passed down from ancient Greece to the present, the origin of the word comes from Greek, a composite of Demos and Kratos. Since demos can be translated as “the people” (qua “native adult male residents of a polis”) and Kratos as “power,” democracy has a root meaning of “the power of the people.”[[40]](#footnote-40) In the contemporary dictionary definition, democracy “is a [system](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/ja/dictionary/english-japanese/system) of [government](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/ja/dictionary/english-japanese/government) in which all the [people](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/ja/dictionary/english-japanese/people) [choose](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/ja/dictionary/english-japanese/choose) [their](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/ja/dictionary/english-japanese/their) [leader](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/ja/dictionary/english-japanese/leader), or a [country](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/ja/dictionary/english-japanese/country) with this [system](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/ja/dictionary/english-japanese/system).”[[41]](#footnote-41) Since ancient times, the most important element of democracy is the people. With the exploration of the nature of democracy, the elements of democracy have become more diverse. Larry Diamond posits that there are four basic elements of democracy:

1) A political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections

2) The active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life

3) Protection of the human rights of all citizens

4) A rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens[[42]](#footnote-42)

These basic elements are more in line with the demands of modern people, and to a certain extent remind a democratic government that it needs to pay attention to the people’s political participation and protect the people’s political rights.

The multi-angle definitions of democratic backsliding by previous scholars are of great reference value here. Bermeo believes that democratic backsliding means the state-led debilitation or elimination of the political institutions sustaining an existing democracy.[[43]](#footnote-43) It is clearly understood here that the author of the actions that result in democratic backsliding is the state. However, debilitation or elimination of the political institutions of democracy is not just a state-led action. Other potential actors need to be considered, such as the people (voters) and the opposition parties. Walder and Lust argue that democratic backsliding connotes a process related yet still distinct from reversion to autocracy.[[44]](#footnote-44) In this way, some countries have experienced democratic backsliding but have not seen a reversion to autocracy. For example, in the 2020 US election, [Larry](https://my.vanderbilt.edu/larrybartels/) Bartels [finds](https://www.pnas.org/content/117/37/22752) that large numbers of Republicans countenance anti-democratic moves, a perspective not based on their support for President Donald Trump but rather their broader ethnic antagonism.[[45]](#footnote-45) This is a very typical democratic backsliding phenomenon even though the U.S. remains a democratic country.

Based on the discussion above, this thesis defines democratic backsliding as the phenomenon of existing democracies becoming less democratic due to the debilitation or elimination of the basic elements of democracy specified by Diamond. Democratic backsliding is thus a process of change from fuller democracy to lesser democracy. There are several reasons for choosing this definition. First, as noted above, the definition of democracy is debated, and no consensus has been reached so far. However, these elements of democracy capture its core, so starting from the elements of democracy to define democratic backsliding is perhaps the best way to accurately cover the scope of the phenomenon. Second, this definition’s focus on the elements of democracy provides a higher degree of adaptability for research methods. The research method chosen in this study is the case study method. Treating democratic backsliding as a process of change in the basic elements of democracy will limit information demands, clarify cross-case comparisons, and facilitate techniques such as congruence testing and process-tracing that will be essential to assessing causal relationships.

Methodology

This study uses the case study method to explain the potential causal relationship between the governmental responses to the pandemic and democratic backsliding. The scope of observation needs to be clarified as the covid-19 is an ongoing event. The time of detection of the first confirmed case in each country is considered the starting point, and the government response is observed for the following 24 months. The case study method is utilized based on the following three reasons. First, the case study method can use a small sample analysis to draw general conclusions. Gerring defines a case study as an intensive study of a single unit to generalize across a larger set of units.[[46]](#footnote-46) This definition clearly explains the characteristic of the case study. It is effective for a case study to derive universal conclusions by analyzing limited cases. Examining all liberal democracies as case studies would take an immeasurable amount of time and would be impractical for the purposes of this study. Using typical cases to derive conclusions related to hypotheses greatly improves research efficiency. Second, the advantages of the case study are highly adaptable to this study. George and Bennett identify four strong advantages of case methods that make them valuable in testing and developing hypotheses：

1. Their potential for achieving high conceptual validity
2. Their strong procedures for fostering new hypotheses
3. Their value as a useful means to closely examine the hypothesized role of causal mechanisms in the context of individual cases
4. Their capacity for addressing causal complexity.[[47]](#footnote-47)

As generally known, many fuzzy variables cannot be measured precisely, such as democracy, authority, and power. Case studies allow for conceptual refinements with a higher level of validity over a smaller number of cases.[[48]](#footnote-48) The abstract concept of democratic backsliding can be expressed specifically through concrete case studies. For example, the storming of Capitol Hill in 2021 is a typical example of democratic backsliding. Elections are one of the elements of democracy, and violence resulting from dissatisfaction with the results is a concrete manifestation of democratic backsliding. It is clear that the destruction of the elements of democracy leads to democratic backsliding, and there is no doubt that the causal relationship can be established.

The cases of the US and Japan have been chosen for this study. These two countries were selected for the study for several reasons. Firstly, as liberal democracies, their basic conditions are broadly similar. The liberal democracies represented by the United States and Japan were very successful in the second half of the 20th century, improving the lives of their people dramatically. Democracies in developed liberal democracies are thought to be infallible, so they are often ignored in studies of democratic backsliding. And with developed economies and robust health care systems, both countries have sufficient material conditions to implement relevant policies if the government introduces them. Whether the same policies in two countries with similar objective conditions have different effects on democratic backsliding is very valuable to study. Using these two countries as cases, it is possible to test the applicability of past theories of democratic backsliding to developed liberal democracies without having to consider the added complexity of differing accesses to the resources necessary to fight the pandemic.

Secondly, as beacons of liberal democracy, both the United States and Japan have huge influence, and their actions against the pandemic are so exemplary that the rest of the world will look to them to fight the pandemic. Japan's democracy is very representative of democracy in East Asia, and the U.S. is world-renowned for its democratic regime. Both countries have a long history of democracy and relatively stable democratic regimes, and the likelihood of one of these democratic regimes completely transforming into a non-democratic one is low. When it comes to the set of liberal democracies in the world today, understanding trends in democratic backsliding in these two cases can be said to be of intrinsic importance.

Thirdly，the United States and Japan have special characteristics relevant to the pandemic (See Appendix A). They are the most populous of the developed liberal democracies. According to the latest release of the V-dem dataset (v11), 32 states and regions was defined as “Liberal Democracy”. [[49]](#footnote-49) Among them, those with a GDP per capita greater than $40,000 are considered liberal democracies with the most developed economies. Among these most economically developed liberal democracies, only Japan and the United States are countries with a population of more than 100 million. A large population base means that large population movements pose a huge challenge for infectious disease control. In the fight against infectious diseases, states with large populations have more difficulty in developing government policies compared to countries with small populations. So in the fight against covid-19, Japan and the United States face more daunting challenges in crafting and implementing their responses relative to the less populous developed liberal democracies.

Finally, it is an indisputable fact that the main actors in the fight against the pandemic are sovereign states. We can see that no matter how influential multinational companies or NGOs are, their impact in the fight against the pandemic is limited. Even the World Health Organization has played only a constructive role in the pandemic by providing information and allocating supplies. Specific policies on how to fight the spread of the disease are developed and implemented by sovereign states. Our research question is to examine the response of various democratic governments to the pandemic, so the sovereign state is reasonably the unit of study in this study when it comes to case selection. However, there is variation in state organization and the allocation of power across different levels of government across the developed liberal democracies, in particular between unitary, parliamentary systems of government and federal, presidential systems. The choice of the US and Japan as cases allows for the consideration of how the pandemic response may have shaped democratic backsliding in both unitary system (Japan) and a federal one (U.S.). This distinction is important. For example, the U.S. state governments are the specific enforcers of pandemic control and have the power to declare a local state of emergency, set up evacuation and shelter areas, and implement strict local controls to reduce the spread of disease and cut off infection pathways. This is something the federal government cannot do because local states have control over local justice and police. There are also local state governments that coordinate local medical departments and resources for treatment, but each state has a different epidemic situation and its own strengths. So the federal government is needed to give the necessary material, technical, and human support, including the use of federal troops. These federal support forces and resources are also subject to the direction and allocation of state governments. In Japan, major pandemic response, such as the declaration of regional states of emergency, are determined ultimately by the national government, and the decision-making power and resources available to prefectural and local governments to fight the pandemic are far less abundant. As both developed liberal democracies, the premise of comparing parliamentary and presidential systems and observing the responses of governments under these different systems is one of the reasons for choosing Japan and the United States as cases.

Case study

This section will provide specific cases analysis of the US and Japan from democratic elements.

1. Free and fair elections.

Democratic elections are the foundation of liberal democracy. The United States and Japan held separate elections for their top leaders within 24 months of the outbreak.

In the US，49 states have introduced more than 420 measures to restrict voter access to the ballot in 2021. These proposals compress the number of days those voters must apply for or mail in their ballots, some restrict drop-off locations, some require more signatures for mail-in ballots, and some create stricter requirements for voter identification, making mail-in and early voting more difficult and creating barriers for the elderly, disabled, minorities, and others to exercise their right to vote. On March 8, 2021, NBC news reported that Georgia is proposing dozens of legislative measures that would restrict voting for African-Americans.[[50]](#footnote-50)

The results of the election were also highly controversial, as thousands of people who rejected the 2020 presidential election results, fueled by right-wing extremists, poured into the Capitol on January 6, 2021, clashing with security guards, killing five persons and injuring over 140 others, and disrupting the legal certification process. The Brookings Institution website reported in May 2021 that for the first time in nearly 100 years, 77 percent of Republican voters challenged the legitimacy of the president-elect after the 2020 U.S. presidential election, citing election fraud even though all 50 states formally certified the results.

As for election voting, Japan had a designated voting location before the pandemic. In addition to the Covid-19, the Japanese government also provided other voting methods. First, if voters are unable to go to the polls on election day. Advance voting provided not only on the day of the election, but also the day after the public announcement of the election. Second, voting by mail is a method that allows people to vote even if they are unable to attend the polls. Since June of 2021, this method has been expanded to include people who have been infected with the Covid-19, who are recuperating at home or in hotels. To begin, request a ballot by mail by contacting local municipal election office. Once it is confirmed that voters are infected with the Covid-19 and unable to leave the house, they will receive a ballot. Voters can then fill out the ballot and send it back to the election office to complete vote. The application for the ballot must be received by the electoral authority at least 4 days before the date of the vote.

Unfortunately, the government is doing its best to encourage voters to vote, but with little success. Voter turnout in Japan's elections was relatively low both before and after the pandemic. The final turnout for the House of Representatives election, which was held on October 31, was 55.93%, more than 2 percentage points higher than the previous election in 2009, but the third-lowest turnout in the postwar period.

2. The active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life.

The US census shows the data related to 2020 voting and registration in the election. During the pandemic, the 2020 US presidential election received the highest turnout in the 21st century, 66.8% of citizens aged 18 and older voted in the election.[[51]](#footnote-51) It was the largest vote in the US history, more than 159 million Americans voted. The U.S. government has taken positive action to prevent large population concentrations in the outbreak. Political participation was enhanced in the pandemic by changes in voting methods that allowed for mail-in ballots and online voting. More people are participating in the general election through non-traditional voting methods.

Compared to the United States, Japan has a different situation. In 2020, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance published data showing that Japan ranked only 139th in turnout for national parliamentary elections, making it a low-turnout country. A final turnout of 55.93% was reported by the NHK, citing information from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications concerning the primary election for the present House of Representatives. As a response of the pandemic election the Japanese government introduced an early voting system. From October 20 to 30 2021,16.62 million people voted by this method, a record high of about 980,000 more than in the last general election for the House of Representatives four years earlier. By responding in this manner, the government has fostered voter participation in politics and protected the proper functioning of the democratic regime during the pandemic.

3. Protection of the human rights of all citizens.

During the pandemic, the fairness of vaccine distribution is the basic protection of human rights. In the pandemic, minorities face very significant challenges. The CDC released a study on the difference in deaths caused by Covid-19 in December 2020. This study shows the distribution of Covid-19 deaths differs by race and ethnicity in the United States as well as by jurisdiction.[[52]](#footnote-52) Since vaccination began in the United States, vaccination rates in black communities have been much lower than in white communities. At the same time, minorities are at higher risk of contracting or dying from Covid-19. Blacks make up only 12 percent of the US population but account for 34 percent of deaths from Covid-19.[[53]](#footnote-53) The results show that the US has had a very limited response to minorities in need of help.

Both the international and domestic distribution of vaccines has been problematic for the United States. As of 2021, many countries and regions are severely undersupplied with vaccine, and some less developed countries and regions are experiencing worsening pandemic. The total number of vaccines stockpiled in the United States far exceeds its domestic needs, and it has been criticized by the US and international communities for its "vaccine nationalism.". U.S. government statistics show that it has enough vaccines to vaccinate 750 million people, compared to the current population of 260 million adults. There has even been a considerable amount of vaccine waste in several areas of the United States. NBC news reported that U.S. pharmacies and state governments have discarded at least 15.1 million doses of Covid-19 vaccine since March 1.[[54]](#footnote-54) Currently, the U.S. lacks a uniform vaccine schedule at the federal level, and state regulations differ widely, so people have taken advantage of loopholes by getting vaccinated across state lines or “jumping the queue.” Even foreigners are getting vaccinated here in the U.S. According to the Guardian, the effectiveness of vaccine deployment under the Trump administration has been lukewarm, with only seven million vaccines administered in the first three weeks.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Based on the above analysis, the U.S. government's response to the issue of vaccine distribution and organized vaccination was relatively ineffective. To fight infection and death and to guarantee basic life safety, it is the basic right of every citizen to have access to vaccines to fight the pandemic. Considering this, the fundamental human rights guarantee in the U.S. needs to be improved.

Japanese vaccine distribution policy and organization are logical compared to the United States. Even though the number of vaccines received in Japan at the beginning of the pandemic was small, municipalities sent "vaccination coupons" and "notification of vaccination for Covid-19" to those who had just been vaccinated for Covid-19. The vaccination schedule for the elderly has changed two or three times in the very beginning. The original target was late March 2021, but it was later changed to April and then postponed to mid-March. Full vaccination is scheduled to begin in May, and all necessary doses will be distributed in June. As a result of confusion over distribution schedules, local authorities continuously reviewed their readiness. It became evident that municipalities were struggling to make the most of the limited housing supply when they deviated from the state's requirement of a uniform age limit for seniors and provided specific priorities based on their age and attributes.

To reduce the burden on local communities in relation to the vaccination process and to accelerate it, Japanese government provide information about “workplace vaccination.” Under this program, companies and universities administer the vaccine to employees. This policy has been criticized; many small business employees complain that it is unfair to prioritize large businesses with many employees when allocating vaccines.

Conclusion

By looking at the government's response to the pandemic over a 24-month period (January 2020 to December 2021), this study expects to find that the backsliding of democracy has experienced an accelerated process due to the impact of the covid-19 responses. However, it is important to note that democratic backsliding here is likely a stage in the development of democracy and does not mean that existing liberal democracies will abandon their democratic regimes.

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Appendix A: Classification of Liberal Democracies

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 2020 v-dem liberal democracy states | 2020 Human average GDP  | Population |
| United States of America | 63414 | 329484123 |
| Japan | 40193 | 125836021 |
| Germany | 46208 | 83240525 |
| France | 39030 | 67391582 |
| United Kingdom | 41125 | 67215293 |
| Italy | 31714 | 59554023 |
| South Korea | 31631 | 51780579 |
| Spain | 27063 | 47351567 |
| Canada | 43258 | 38005238 |
| Ghana | 2206 | 31072945 |
| Australia | 51693 | 25687041 |
| Netherlands | 52397 | 17441139 |
| Belgium | 45159 | 11555997 |
| Greece | 17623 | 10715549 |
| Sweden | 52274 | 10353442 |
| Israel | 44169 | 9216900 |
| Austria | 48587 | 8917205 |
| Switzerland | 87097 | 8636896 |
| Denmark | 61063 | 5831404 |
| Finland | 48773 | 5530719 |
| Norway | 67390 | 5379475 |
| Costa Rica | 12141 | 5094114 |
| New Zealand | 41441 | 5084300 |
| Ireland | 85268 | 4994724 |
| Uruguay | 15438 | 3473727 |
| Latvia | 17726 | 1901548 |
| Estonia | 23027 | 1331057 |
| Cyprus | 26624 | 1207361 |
| Luxembourg | 116015 | 632275 |
| Iceland | 59270 | 366425 |
| Barbados | 15374 | 287371 |

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