

BAK10: Comparative Democratic Politics

Week 1 - Democracy: an Introduction

Leonardo Carella

The Big Questions

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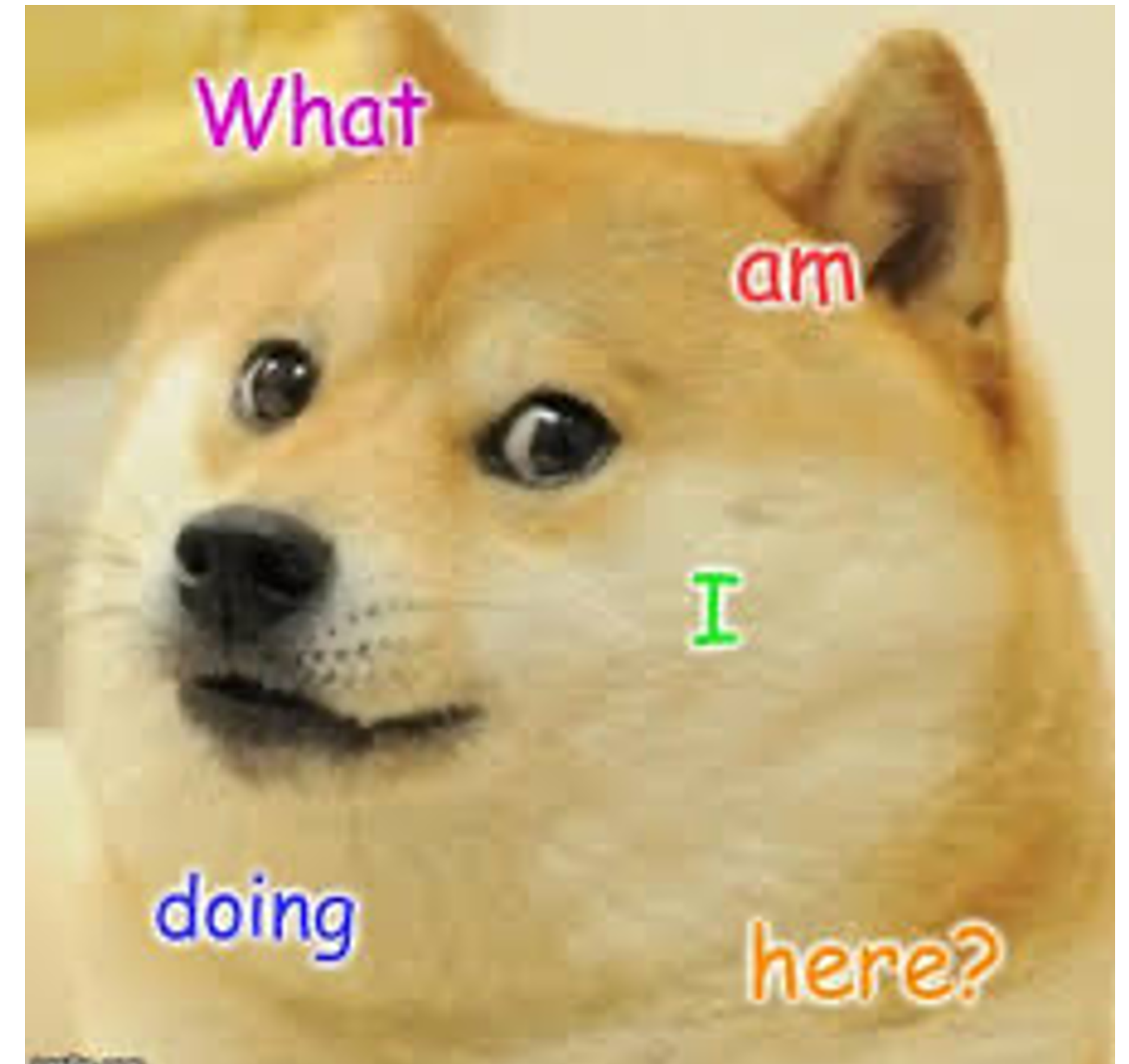
- Who am I?

The Big Questions

- Who am I?
- Who are you?

The Big Questions

- Who am I?
- Who are you?
- What are we doing here?



This Course

- What is a democracy, what isn't, and who gets to define it?
- How do democracies come about, and how do they erode?
- How do democratic institutions differ, and with what effects?
- What role do political parties play in a democracy?
- Why do people vote the way they do?
- How can we make democracies more resilient/work better?



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In the Background...



This Course

- **Assessment Structure:**

- Attendance and Participation (15%)
- In-Class Quizzes (30%) in Weeks 5, 8, 11 and 13.
- Essay Plan (15%), due in Week 9 (12 December 2025).
- Final Essay (40%), due on 27 February 2026.

This Course

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- **What I care about...**
 - Showing up, making an effort, doing the readings.
 - Developing *your own* arguments and ideas.

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 - Writing style.
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- **What I *don't* particularly care about...**
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 - That you agree with me.
- **What I *really* dislike...**
 - Academic dishonesty, taking shortcuts.

AI Policy

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- You **cannot** use AI for **any** part of **any** assessment in this course.

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- But can I just...?
 - No.

AI Policy

- You **cannot** use AI for **any** part of **any** assessment in this course.
- But can I just...?
 - No.
- Not even...?
 - **No.**

The Syllabus

- If you're unsure about anything: first check the Syllabus (on Moodle).
- Otherwise, I'm here to help:
leonardo.carella@univie.ac.at
Happy to schedule meetings for:
 - Assignments
 - Any course-related matter
 - Further study plans

[WS2025-210064-1](#) / [New section](#) / Syllabus

Syllabus

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The syllabus may be subject to changes in the course of the semester, which will be notified in class or via Moodle.

Edit

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[Syllabus_BAK10_03102025.pdf](#)

◀ [Announcements](#)

Directly to:



[Readings](#) ▶

The Syllabus

- *Required readings*: **should be done before class**. In-class quizzes test familiarity with the readings and class content.
- *Recommended readings*: more on material discussed in the lecture. Not required for in-class quizzes but useful catch-up if you miss a class; the place to start when you are writing the essay (plan).
- *Further readings*: Don't worry about these. At most, these will be useful for the essay (plan). There's some fairly technical stuff in some pieces, feel free to skip over.
- Some details may get updated over the course of the semester. Any major amendment, I will let you know on Moodle.

Any questions?

What is Democracy?

- Today (not so in antiquity), democracy is widely thought of as something desirable: “Government of the people, by the people, for the people” (Lincoln) – who could disagree with that?
- But also an “essentially contested concept.”
- Disagreements on the meaning of “democracy” often hide struggles to advance preferred sets of government arrangements, ideals, policies and social goals.



What is Democracy?

- Some famous 'democracies':



조선민주주의인민공화국
Democratic People's Republic of Korea



What is Democracy?

- A **substantive** view of democracy classifies political regimes in regard to the **outcomes** that they produce: e.g. social equality, participation, representation, security, freedom.
- A **procedural** view of democracy classifies political regimes in regard to their **institutions and procedures**: e.g. presence of elected bodies, or “free and fair” elections.



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Minimalist Definition

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 - “Institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote”



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 - “Institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote”
- Centres competitive processes (overt analogy with the market).
- *Elitist* perspective.





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Minimalist Definition

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- Przeworski et al.'s binary measure of (Schumpeterian) democracy:
 - The chief executive is elected (directly or indirectly).
 - The legislature is elected.
 - More than one party competes in elections.
 - At least one *alternation in power* under identical electoral rules.

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 - The legislature is elected.
 - More than one party competes in elections.
 - At least one *alternation in power* under identical electoral rules.
- Straightforward rules, but what's excluded?

Electoral democracy, 2024

Data by the [Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy](#). Electoral democracies are political systems in which citizens have the right to choose the chief executive and the legislature in multi-party, uncertain elections.



Table



Map



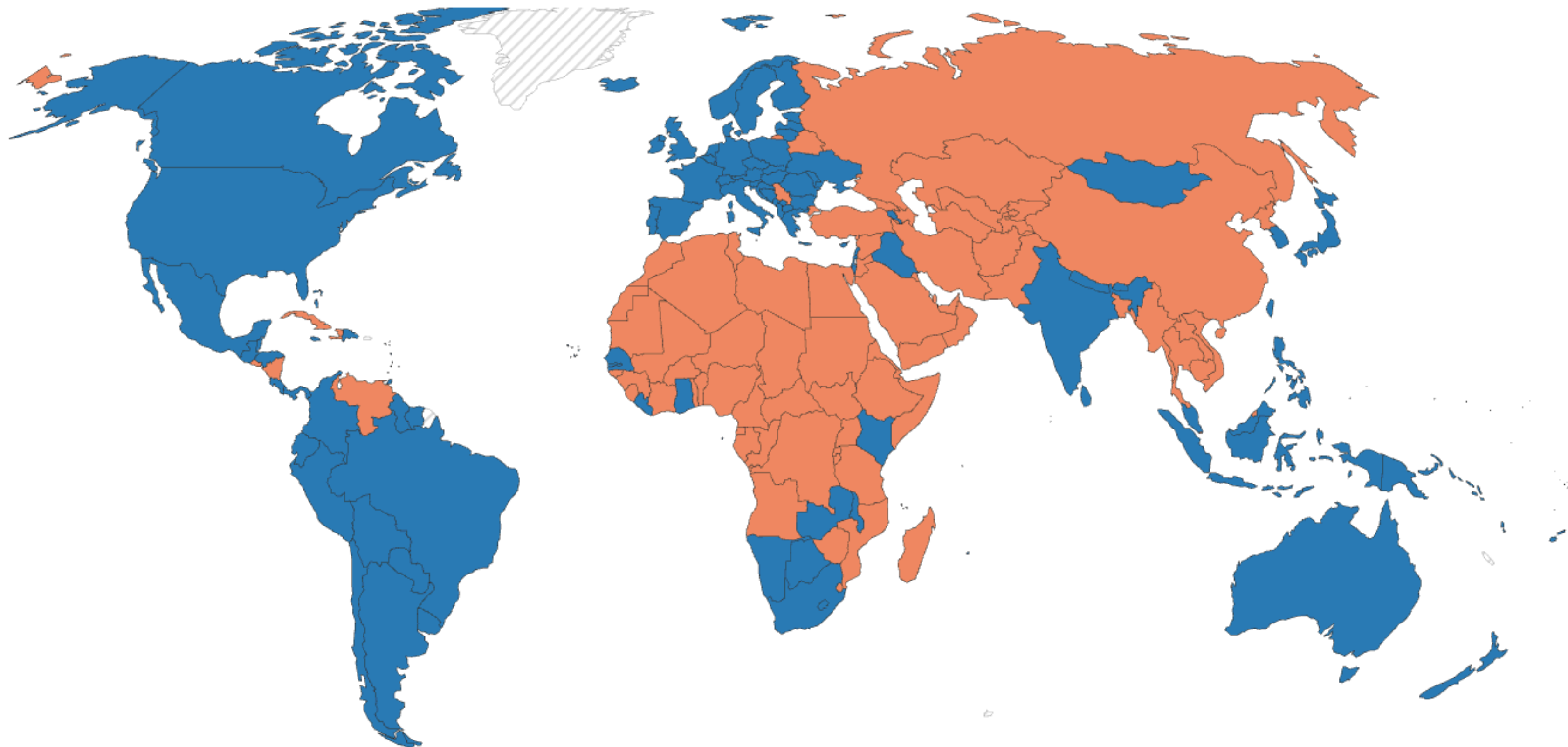
Chart

Zoom to...



2D

3D



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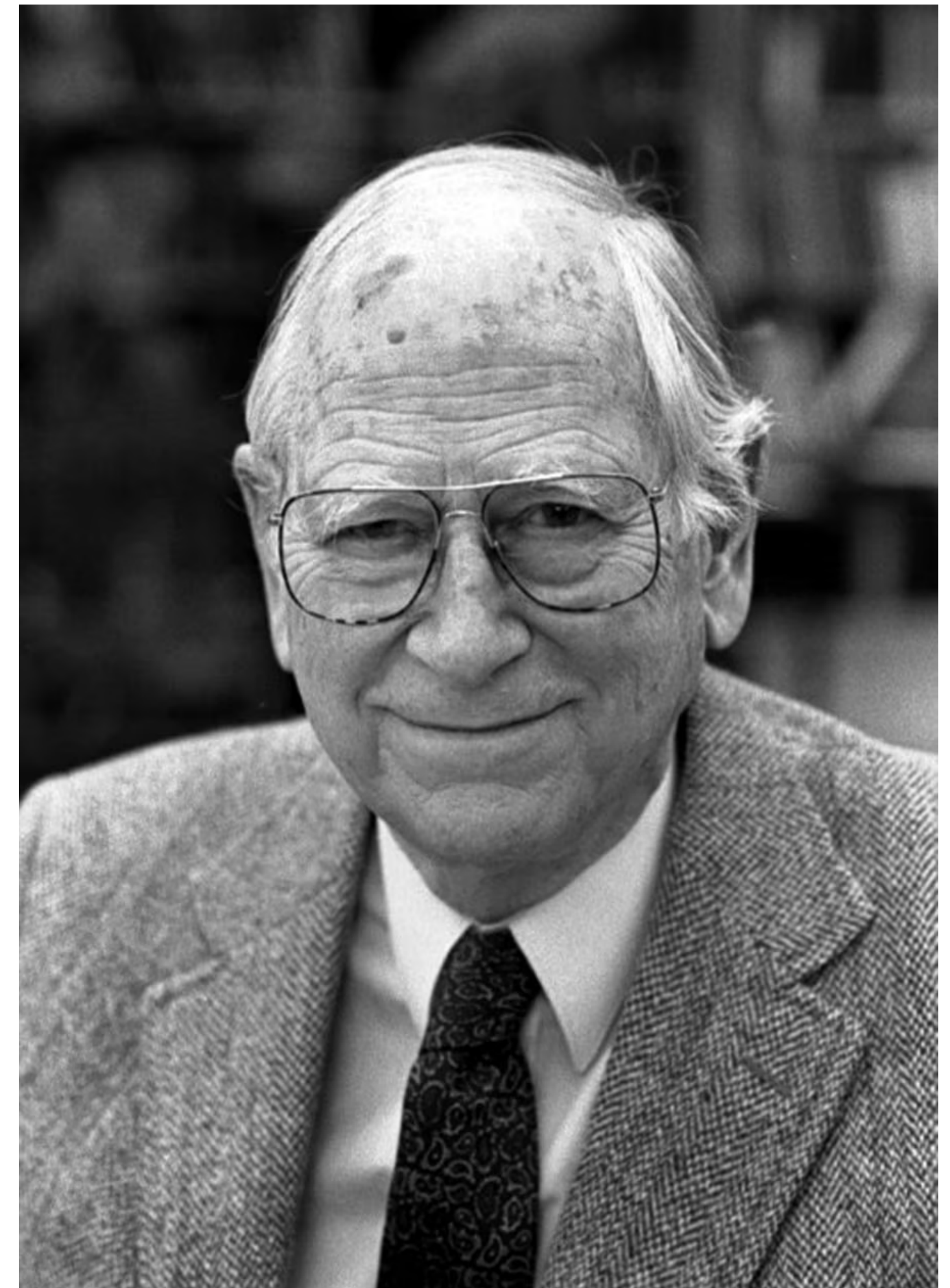


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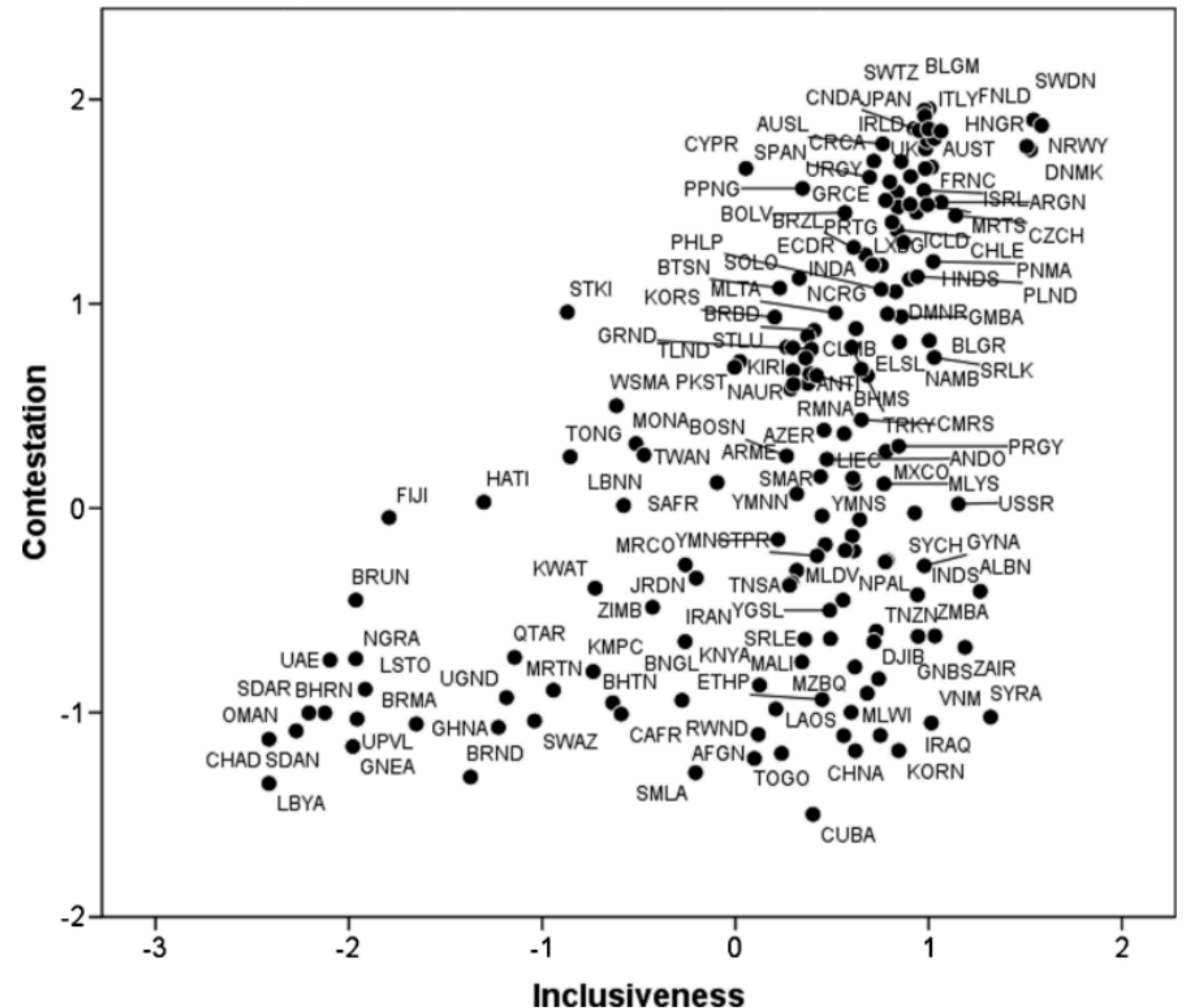
Polyarchy

- Robert Dahl (1971) conceptualises democracy as a concept with two **continuous** dimensions:
- **Contestation**: the extent to which citizens are free to organise themselves in order to press for the policies they want: free and fair elections, free expression and information, associational autonomy.
- **Inclusion**: the share of people who get to participate in the democratic process: active and passive voting rights.
- Prefers the term “polyarchy”: government of many.



Polyarchy

- Dahl's polyarchy is more demanding than Schumpeter's democracy. But still procedural: what matters is formal process and institutions, not outcomes.
- Real-world democracies lie on a continuum along two dimensions. Not an 'either-or', discrete concept.



Electoral democracy index, 2024

Data by [V-Dem](#). Expert estimates of the extent to which political leaders are elected under comprehensive voting rights in free and fair elections, and freedoms of association and expression are guaranteed. The index ranges from 0 to 1 (most democratic).

Table

Map

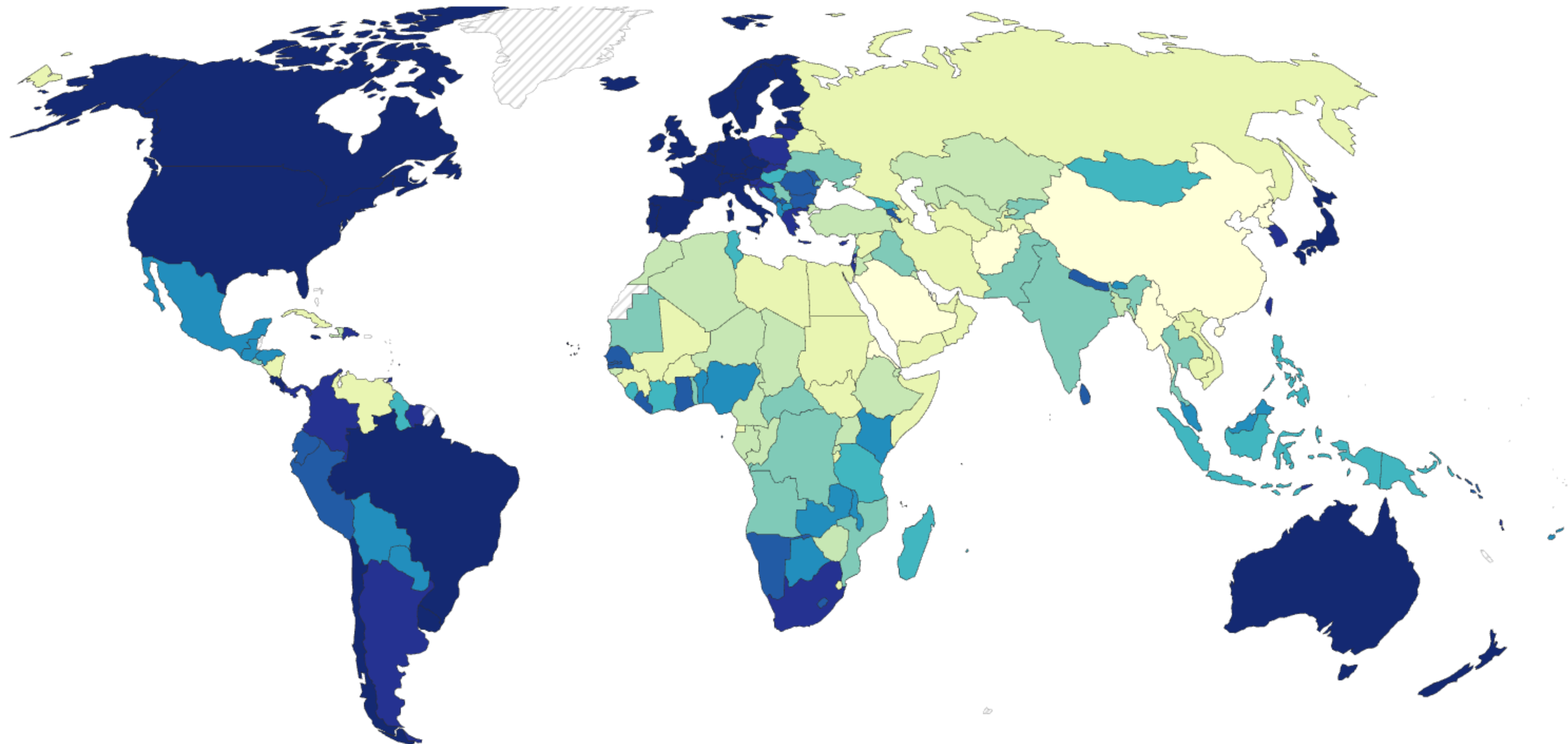
Line

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Zoom to...

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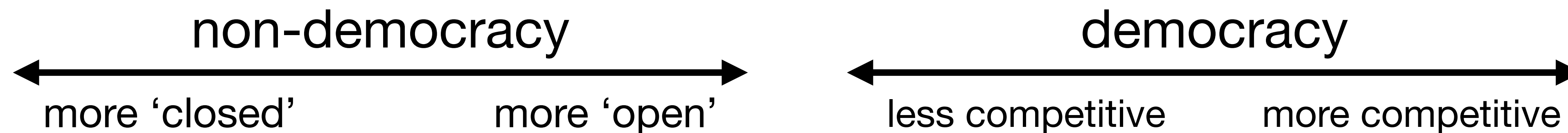
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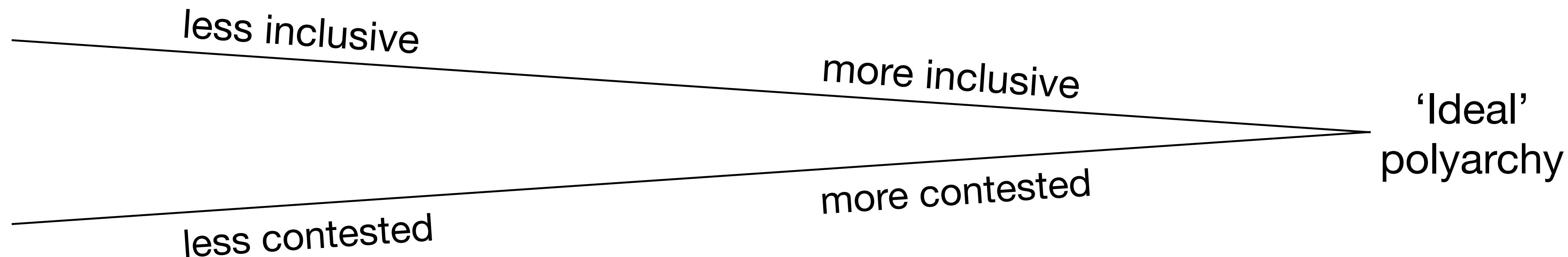
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1

- Przeworski et al.'s concept: one dimension (competition), two distinct categories, allowing for some distinctions *within* the two.

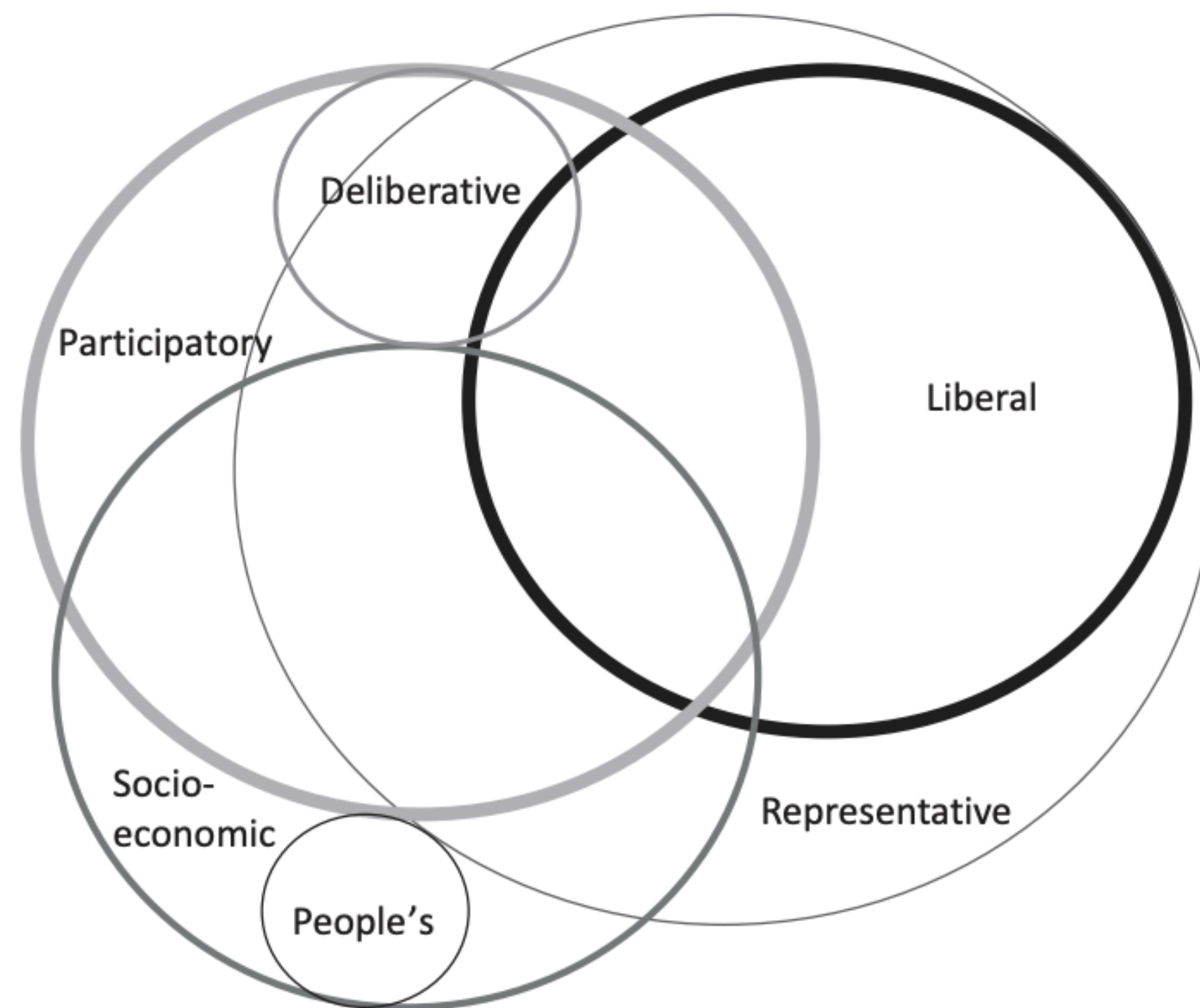


- Dahl's concept: two dimensions, continuum.



Multi-Dimensional Democracy?

- **Liberal democracy:** democracy + individual/minority rights
- **Socioeconomic democracy:** focus on substantive equality
- **Participatory democracy:** focus on citizens' engagement beyond voting (e.g. 'direct democracy')
- **Deliberative democracy:** focus on high quality of public debate

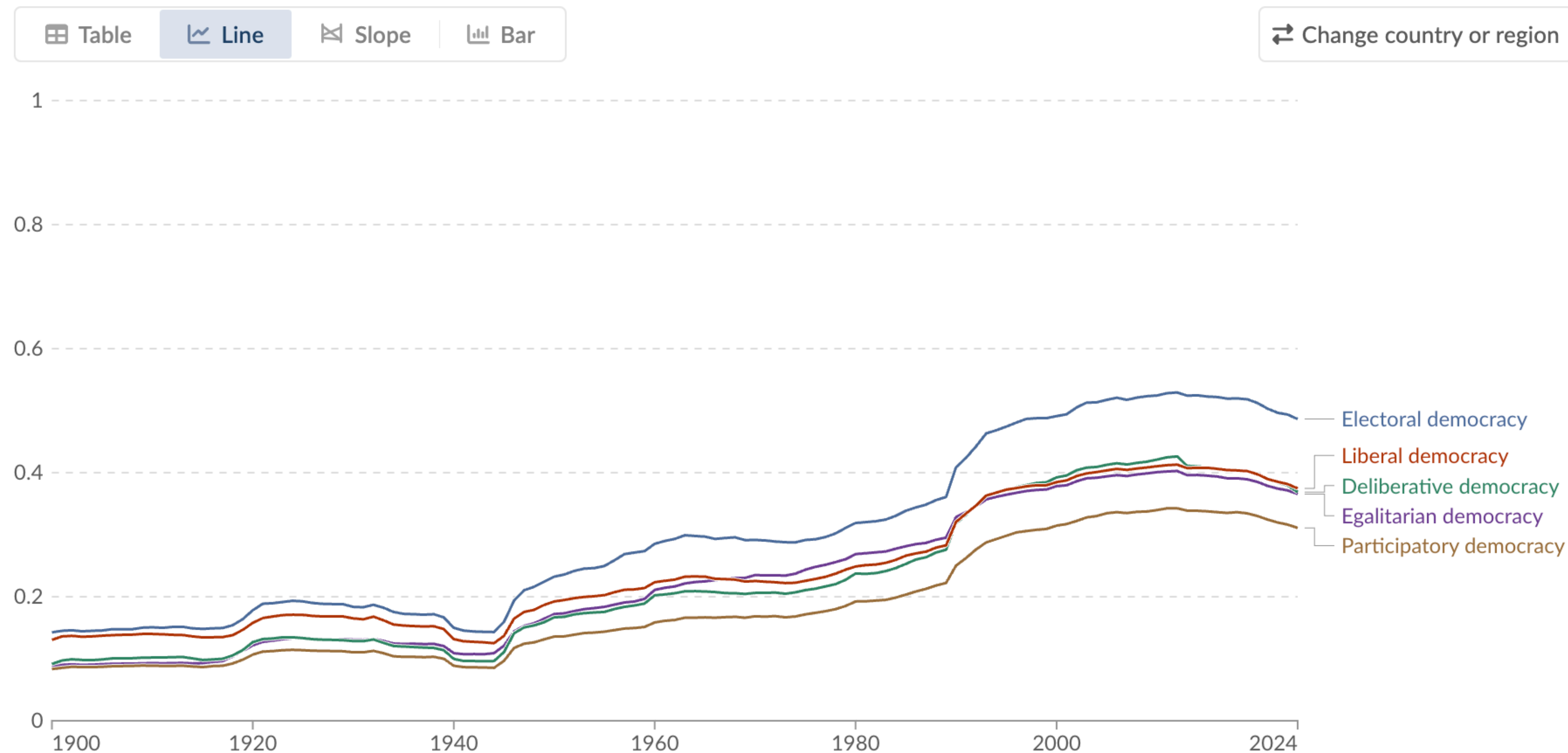


V-Dem's Approach

Varieties of democracy, World

The indices are by V-Dem, based on expert estimates, and range from 0 to 1 (most democratic).

Our World
in Data



Not everyone is happy...



Adam Przeworski
@AdamPrzeworski

Follow



Referring to V-dem as the best data source must be a joke.

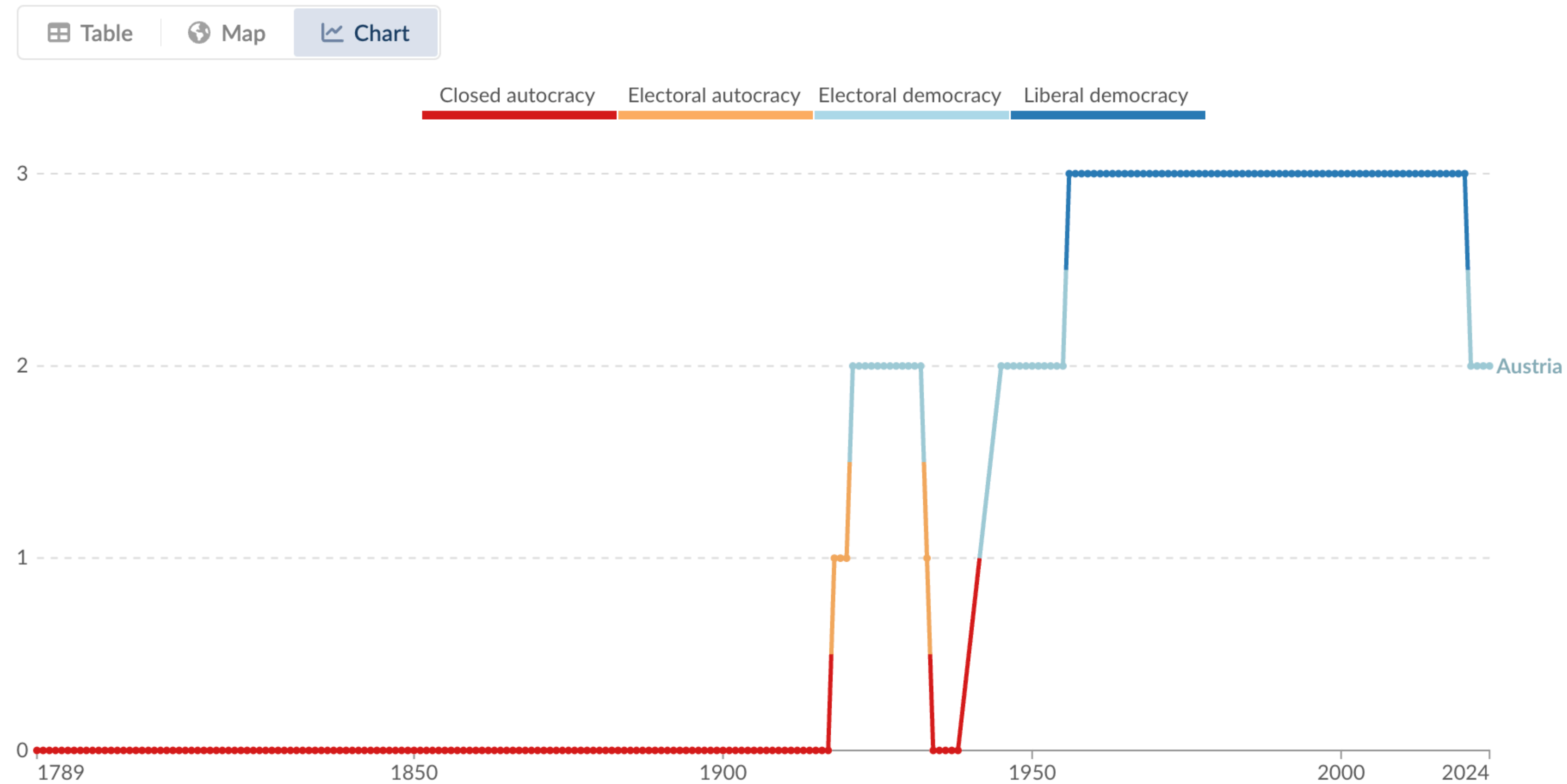
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The case of Austria

Democracy

Classification by Lührmann et al. (2018) based on expert estimates by V-Dem.

Our World
in Data



The case of Austria

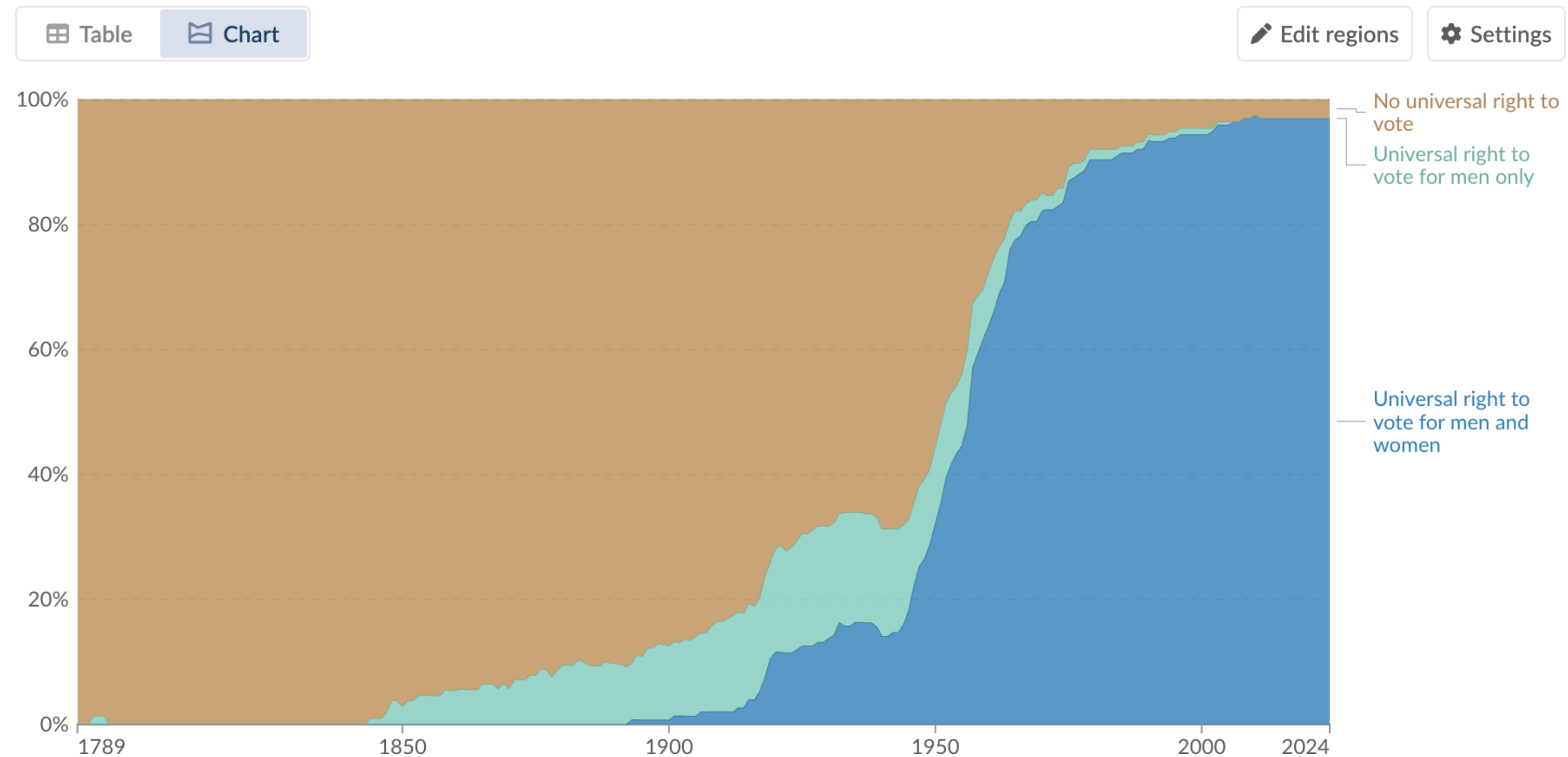
- Austria was downgraded from a liberal democracy to an electoral democracy in the University of Gothenburg's "Varieties of Democracy" (V-Dem) ranking [...] due to a deterioration in the indicator for “transparent laws with predictable enforcement”. [...] Experts surveyed by the V-Dem Institute generally give Austria the highest score of 4. Since 2005, this has also been interspersed with a score of 3, indicating that the transparency of laws and the predictability of enforcement are only "fairly pronounced," not "very pronounced". [...] From 2005 to 2017, there were nine or ten [experts], and in 2021, only two (!). Of the eight experts who left, five had always given only the highest rating of 4 – so it was enough for one of the remaining two to change from 4 to 3, and Austria had already fallen below the threshold for classification as a liberal democracy in the indicator "Transparent laws with predictable enforcement."

A Short History of Democracy

Countries that have universal voting rights, World

Our World
in Data

This does not consider elections being postponed, informal restrictions on voting rights, or legal restrictions based on age, criminal conviction, disability, or local residency.

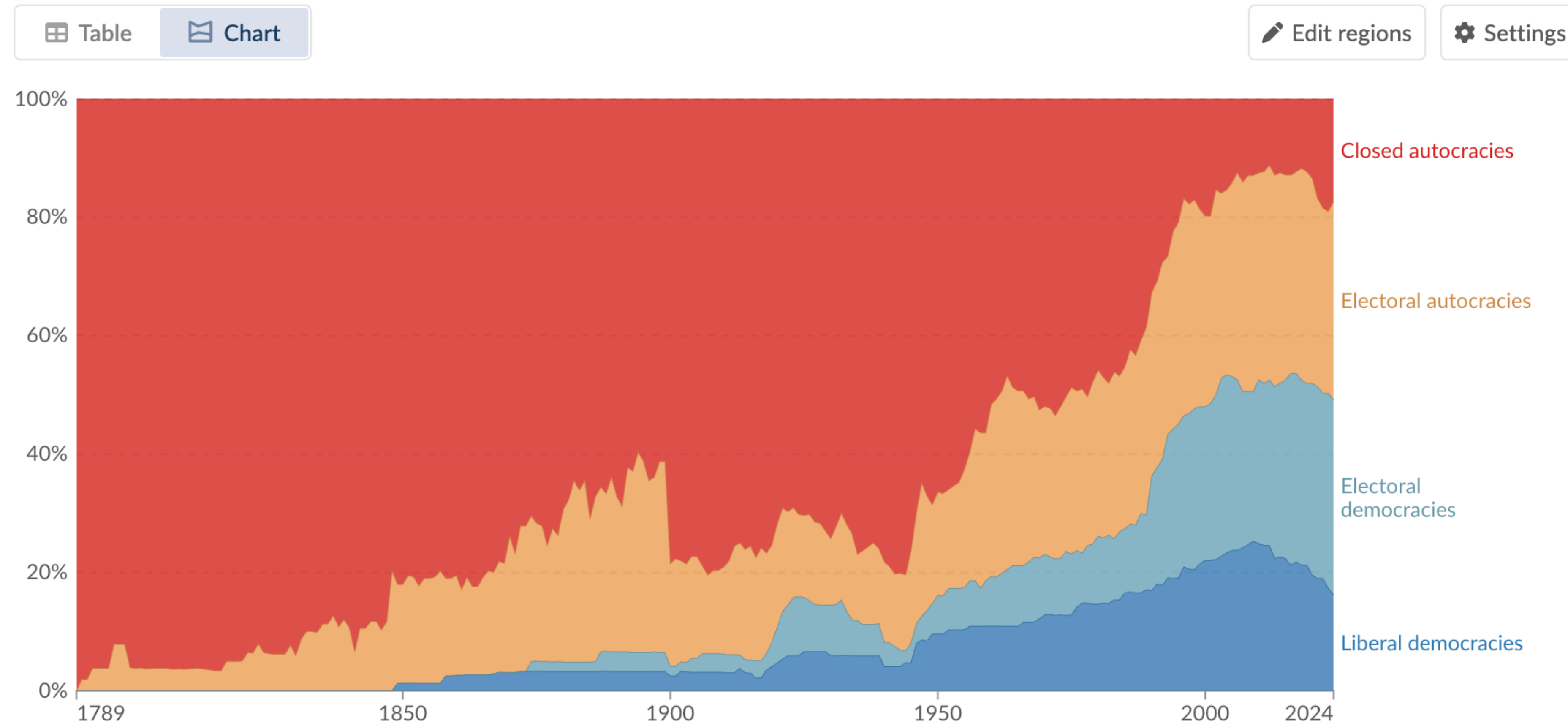


A Short History of Democracy

Countries that are democracies and autocracies, World

Our World
in Data

Classification by Lührmann et al. (2018) based on expert estimates by V-Dem.



Summing up...

- Democracy is a contested description of political regimes
 - A discrete concept or a continuum?
 - Only one dimension (Schumpeter), two (Dahl), or many (V-Dem)?
 - Only a matter of procedure or also including outcomes?
- Prevalence of democracy has increased over time, but not linearly: waves of democratisation, followed by democratic recessions.

Thank you for your kind attention!