

# Denmark, Finland and Belgium have best democracies: study

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A new democracy barometer from the University of Zurich and the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB) shows the development of the thirty best democracies in the world. Denmark, Finland and Belgium have the highest quality of democracy, whereas Great Britain, France, Poland, South Africa and Costa Rica the lowest. Moreover, the barometer shows no evidence of a crisis of democracy.

Diagnoses of a crisis of [democracy](#) are as old as democracy itself; they are a common theme in the political discourse of the Western world. However, until now there was no instrument that allowed a systematic measurement of the quality and stability of democracy in highly developed [industrialized countries](#) across national borders and over long periods of time. A democracy barometer that has analyzed the development of the most important aspects of the world's thirty foremost democracies since 1990 has now been presented at the University of Zurich.

The barometer uses 100 empirical indicators to measure how well a country complies with the three democratic principles of freedom, equality and control as well as the nine basic functions of democracy. The comparison of thirty established democracies between 1995 and 2005 has revealed that Denmark is leading the way, followed by Finland and Belgium. "In the comparison, the lowest quality is exhibited by the democracies in Poland, South Africa and Costa Rica," says Marc Bühlmann from the University of Zurich. While Italy, as might be expected, finds itself towards the bottom end of the scale, it is surprising

that Great Britain (26th) and France (27th) are also so far down the ranking. Equally surprising is the fact that Switzerland (14th) is only mediocre and lags behind 11th- placed Germany.

## **Quality of democracy on the rise**

The democracy barometer can also be used to measure the quality of democratic systems over time. "There was, however, no evidence of an overall crisis or a decline in the quality of democracy," according to Bühlmann. Quite the contrary: if the quality of democracy in all thirty countries is seen as a whole, an increase in the quality of democracy from 1995 to 2000 can be observed and, despite a slight dip again between 2000 and 2005, it is still at a higher level in 2005 than in 1995. Consideration of the individual countries reveals that nine democracies exhibit a lower quality than in 1995 (ITA, CZE, POR, USA, CRC, FRA, IRL, AUS and GER), whereas the quality of democracy has risen in the remaining twenty-one countries.

The democracy barometer registers the differences in the quality of political participation, representation and transparency as well as those concerning the rule of law, individual liberties or the ability of a government to actually implement democratic decisions. If the countries are viewed as a whole, an increase in the quality of transparency and representation becomes apparent, but so does a slight decline in the rule of law. The positive trend can be attributed – among other things – to the ever-better integration of women in the political process and the increase in transparency virtually forced into being by citizens, audit divisions, ombudsmen, NGOs and the media. On the other hand, the rule of law is losing ground due to an increasing unequal treatment of minorities. Here, too, there are major differences between the individual countries. Positive developments are apparent in younger democracies such as South Africa and Cyprus, which are making up a lot of ground in terms of developing and protecting personal liberties, whilst a decline was

evident in George W. Bush's America and Silvio Berlusconi's Italy.

"Democracy is still a work in progress," say the two project leaders Marc Bühlmann (Zurich) and Prof. Wolfgang Merkel (Berlin). Sustainable democratization is needed, even in established democracies." Our democracy barometer shows the strengths and weaknesses of the democracies in the individual [countries](#). But it also reveals where progress and success have been achieved and where it is worth studying the best practices of successful democracies more closely," say Merkel und Bühlmann.

Country comparison (average quality of democracy 1995-2005):

Denmark: 88.3  
Finland: 87.7  
Belgium: 85.1  
Iceland: 83.5  
Sweden: 82.9  
Norway: 82.1  
Canada: 79.4  
Netherlands: 79.0  
Luxembourg: 75.2  
USA: 74.9  
Germany: 73.2  
New Zealand: 72.1  
Slovenia: 69.6  
Switzerland: 67.8  
Ireland: 67.0  
Portugal: 66.7  
Spain: 66.6  
Australia: 65.5  
Hungary: 63.2  
Austria: 63.1

Czech Republic: 58.2

Italy: 57.0

Cyprus: 55.5

Malta: 54.2

Japan: 45.8

Great Britain: 44.6

France: 42.8

Poland: 42.0

South Africa: 39.8

Costa Rica: 32.7

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