
CAMBRIDGE GOVERNANCE LABS

Atlas of Political Freedom

Fifteen maps that tell the story of human liberty
— where it stands, how it moves, and where it is
disappearing

Political Topology Project

91 countries · 225 years · 1,656 observations

February 2026

Reading the Map of Human Freedom

Maps are arguments. Every projection, every colour choice, every boundary drawn is a claim about what matters. The fifteen maps in this atlas argue that political freedom is not a fixed attribute of nations but a dynamic quantity — one that can be measured, tracked, and lost.

These maps are drawn from the Political Topology dataset: 91 countries observed over 225 years, comprising 1,656 country-year observations. They draw on Freedom House, V-Dem, the Fragile States Index, and the World Bank, synthesized into a unified framework that tracks Liberty (political freedom), Tyranny (state coercion), and Chaos (state failure) as a zero-sum system: $L + T + C = 100$.

Each map reveals a different facet of the global democratic recession now in its nineteenth consecutive year. Together, they form a portrait of a world in which freedom is retreating, autocracy is advancing, and the assumptions that guided post-Cold War optimism are being overturned by the data.

Global Liberty 2025

Liberty Scores Across 91 Countries

Choropleth map: green (L>80) through amber (L=40–80) to deep red (L<20). Each country colored by its current Political Topology Liberty score.

Source: Political Topology Index, Freedom House, V-Dem · 2025 assessment



What it reveals: The majority of humanity lives under unfree governance. The global mean of 48 — below the midpoint of the scale — means the average country is more unfree than free. Europe is a green island in a sea of amber and red. The African continent is almost entirely below 50. The Middle East and Central Asia are uniformly deep red. The Americas show a stark north-south gradient that is now fracturing as the US itself declines.

The Event Horizon

Above and Below the Critical Instability Zone ($L \approx 52-55$)

Binary classification: countries above the event horizon (blue) vs. below (red). Velocity arrows show direction and speed of movement.

Event Horizon: $L \approx 52-55$ · Recovery below: 3.0% (95% CI: 0.7-6.0%)

60

BELOW EH

31

ABOVE EH

8

CROSSED SINCE 2010

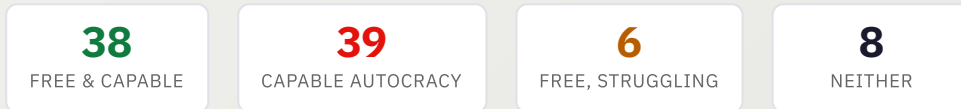
What it reveals: Two-thirds of countries in the dataset have crossed below the critical instability threshold. Below this line, the probability of self-correction drops to 3%. Eight countries that were above the event horizon in 2010 have since fallen below it, including the United States (by the PTI measure). The map makes vivid a disturbing truth: most of the world is in a zone from which historical recovery is extremely rare.

The Capable Autocracies

Liberty vs. Human Capabilities Index – The Four Quadrants

Dual panel: choropleth map colored by quadrant assignment + scatter plot of Liberty (x) vs. HCI (y). Four quadrants: Free & Capable, Capable Autocracy, Free but Struggling, Neither.

HCI: 15-indicator composite (Sen-Nussbaum framework) · Threshold: $HCI \geq 70$, $L \geq 60$

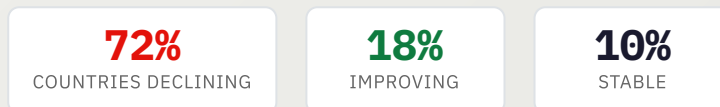


What it reveals: The great decoupling visualized. For the first time in recorded history, Capable Autocracies (39) outnumber Free and Capable states (38). The Gulf states, China, Russia, and Central Asia cluster in the upper-left: high capability, near-zero freedom. The largest gap belongs to Saudi Arabia (HCI 89, L=7). This map is the single most powerful challenge to modernization theory – the assumption that development leads to freedom.

Democratic Recession: 19 Years of Decline

Net Liberty Change, 2006–2025

Choropleth: green (improving) through white (stable) to red (declining). Darker red = faster decline.



What it reveals: The decline is not localized. Nearly three-quarters of all countries have lost liberty since 2006. The recession spans every region, every income level, and every political tradition. The few green spots — Armenia, Taiwan, Ecuador — are outnumbered and outpaced 3:1 by decliners.

Six Frames: 225 Years of Political Freedom

Global Liberty in 1800, 1900, 1945, 1989, 2010, and 2025

Small-multiple choropleth: six snapshots showing the expansion and contraction of political freedom over two centuries. Each frame uses the same colour scale for direct comparison.

Huntington wave theory overlay · AR(1) persistence model (beta=0.9564)

What it reveals: Freedom does not march forward. It surges and retreats. The 1800 frame is almost entirely red (mean $L \approx 12$). By 1989, green has spread across Europe, the Americas, and parts of Asia (mean $L \approx 45$). 2010 marks the peak (mean $L \approx 53$). By 2025, the green has visibly retreated — not to 1989 levels, but the trend is unmistakable. The current frame looks more like 2000 than 2010.

Velocity of Decline

Annualized Liberty Change, 2010–2025 (pts/yr)

Velocity map: speed tiers from freefall (≤ -2.0 /yr, darkest red) through rapid decline to slow decay to stable to improving (green).



What it reveals: Not all decline is created equal. The US stands out as the fastest-declining consolidated democracy — an extraordinary distinction for a country that was rated above 90 just fifteen years ago. Turkey, Nicaragua, and Hungary form the next tier. The velocity map answers the question: "Where is freedom disappearing fastest?" The answer is: in countries that recently had the most of it.

Europe's Fracture Lines

Liberty Scores Across 23 European Countries

Detailed European map with country-level liberty scores. Hungary (52) and surrounding influence zone highlighted. Poland recovery trajectory shown.

What it reveals: Europe remains the world's freest region (mean $L=82$, $r=0.785$), but fracture lines are deepening. Hungary at $L=52$ is an outlier that exerts gravitational pull on neighbors. Poland's recovery ($L=82$ after PiS era) demonstrates that reversal is possible. The EU's east-west divide maps closely onto the former Iron Curtain, 35 years after its fall.

Asia-Pacific: The Divergence

Liberty in 15 Asia-Pacific Countries

Regional map showing extreme divergence: Taiwan (92), Japan (96), South Korea (83) vs. China (5), Myanmar (8), North Korea (2). India (62) in the middle, declining.

What it reveals: Asia-Pacific is the world's most politically diverse region. The gap between the freest (Japan, 96) and the least free (North Korea, 2) is 94 points — the widest intra-regional spread anywhere. The region contains the world's most successful autocratic modernizer (China), its fastest-growing democracy (Taiwan), and its largest eroding democracy (India).

Africa & MENA

Liberty in 25 African and Middle Eastern Countries

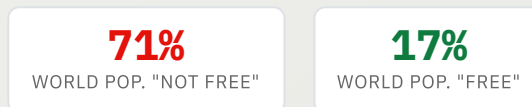
Regional map. Sub-Saharan Africa: scattered amber with a few green (Ghana, Botswana, Senegal). MENA: uniformly red. The capability-freedom gap is largest here.

What it reveals: Africa and MENA together represent the greatest challenge to the democratic project. Sub-Saharan Africa's mean Liberty is 38, its mean HCI is 62, and its trend is downward. MENA has the largest capability-freedom gap on earth: mean HCI 83 vs. mean Liberty 22 ($\Delta=+61$). Zero MENA countries qualify as Free. The Gulf states exemplify maximum decoupling — wealthy, educated, technologically advanced, and completely unfree.

Population-Weighted Liberty

What Freedom Looks Like When You Count People, Not Countries

Cartogram: countries sized by population rather than land area. China and India dominate.
Each colored by liberty score.



What it reveals: Country-count statistics flatter democracy. When weighted by population, 71% of humanity lives under governments classified as "Not Free." China (1.4B, L=5) and India (1.4B, L=62 and declining) together account for 36% of global population. Free democracies are a minority of the human species, and that minority is shrinking.

Attractor Basins: The Tristable Geography

Three Attractor Basins Mapped onto the World

Countries colored by basin: Democratic Plateau (blue, $L > 80$), Hybrid Trap (amber, $L = 20 - 70$), Tyranny Well (red, $L < 20$). Basin boundaries at $L = 80$ and $L = 20$.



What it reveals: The world divides almost equally into three political basins. The Democratic Plateau is deep and stable — countries there tend to stay. The Tyranny Well is even deeper — escape is nearly impossible. The Hybrid Trap is the zone of maximum danger: shallow, unstable, where countries can tip either direction. 32 countries sit in this precarious middle ground, including several large nations in active decline.

The Autocrat's Playbook

The Eight-Step Erosion Sequence Mapped by Country

Countries colored by their current stage in the eight-step democratic erosion model: Stage 1–2 (green), Stage 3–4 (amber), Stage 5–6 (orange), Stage 7–8 (red). Staircase descent visual overlay.

What it reveals: The autocrat's playbook is remarkably consistent across cultures, continents, and eras. The same sequence — polarize, capture media, pack courts, subordinate parliament, colonize agencies, suppress civil society, rig elections, rewrite the constitution — appears in 84% of backsliding cases. The map shows where each country sits on this staircase. The US (PTI: Stage 5), Hungary (Stage 5–6), and India (Stage 4) are all mid-sequence.

Synthesis: The State of the World

The Complete Dashboard: Liberty, Velocity, Basin, and Trajectory

Multi-layer synthesis map combining liberty score (color), velocity (arrow), basin assignment (border style), and 10-year trajectory (inset sparklines for key countries). 225-year timeline below.

12 historical event annotations · Regional mean comparisons · 2035 scenario projections

What it reveals: Everything together. The synthesis map is the atlas's culmination: a single visual that captures where every country stands, how fast it is moving, which basin it occupies, and where it is headed. The dominant color is amber and red. The dominant arrow direction is leftward (declining liberty). The few green arrows — Armenia, Taiwan, Poland — are bright but outnumbered.

What the Maps Don't Show

Maps show geography. They show boundaries and colors and gradients. They do not show the lived experience of freedom lost or freedom defended.

They do not show the journalist in Istanbul who self-censors to keep her family safe. They do not show the judge in Budapest who rules against the government knowing it will be his last case. They do not show the poll worker in Caracas who counts the votes honestly and watches the results be ignored.

These maps are tools. They reduce the complexity of political life to numbers and colors so that patterns become visible. The patterns they reveal are alarming: a world in democratic recession, a decoupling of capability from freedom, a velocity of decline that is historically unprecedented in established democracies.

But maps are not destiny. The Polish recovery shows that the staircase can be climbed back up. The Taiwanese trajectory shows that autocratic modernization can lead to democratic transition. The South Korean story shows that citizens can demand and win their freedom even from entrenched military rule.

The question these maps pose is not whether freedom is retreating — it is — but whether those who still live in free societies will recognize the pattern in time to defend what they have.

The event horizon is not a wall. It is a gradient. And we are all moving through it.

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Interactive versions at: cgl-cambridge-governance-labs-political-topology.local