

Graphic detail

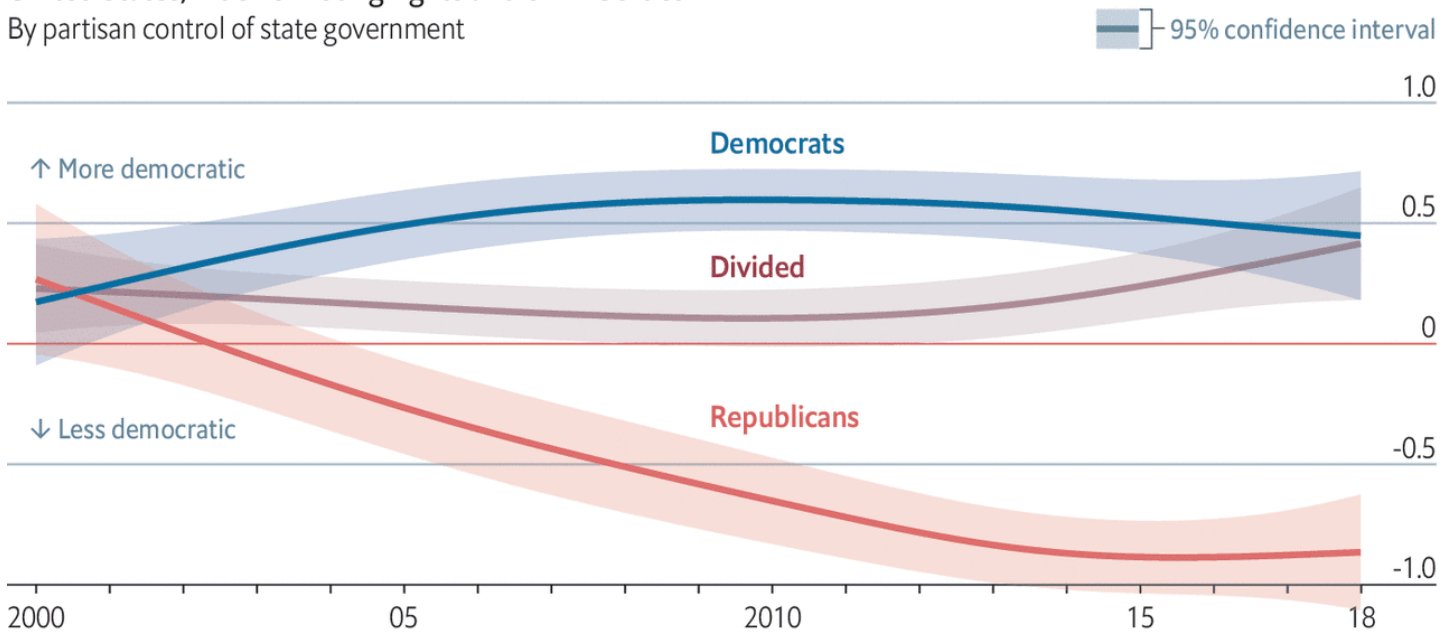
Daily chart

In America, Republican-led states are rolling back electoral and civil liberties

A new study finds a decades-long pattern of backsliding in states run by the GOP

States' rights, states' wrongs

United States, index of voting rights and civil liberties
By partisan control of state government



Source: "Laboratories of Democratic Backsliding", by Jacob Grumbach, 2021

The Economist

Apr 13th 2021



MITCH MCCONNELL, the senior senator from Kentucky, had a clear message for the company bosses opposed to a Republican law in Georgia that places new restrictions on voting: "Stay out of politics". Critics might argue that the

Republican Party is sending the same message to some voters. Since their party's losses in the 2020 election last November, Republican state lawmakers across the United States have introduced hundreds of bills limiting voting access. Georgia's bill, which was signed into law on March 25th, reduces the number of ballot dropboxes for absentee voters and gives the Republican-dominated state legislature more power over county election officials.

A new study by Jake Grumbach, a political scientist at the University of Washington, suggests that these restrictive voting laws follow a pattern in a much broader trend. Mr Grumbach developed a State Democracy Index for measuring the health of democratic institutions across all 50 states between 2000 and 2018. The index scores states based on 61 indicators of voting rights and civil liberties, such as whether citizens are allowed to vote by absentee ballot, whether felons have the right to vote after they have served their time, whether incarcerated residents are eligible for release early and whether legislative maps are gerrymandered by one party. Each indicator is fed into a statistical model that derives an overall score for electoral liberties in each state for each year.

Mr Grumbach finds that elections have been getting less democratic for two decades, almost exclusively in Republican-controlled states (see chart). The biggest drop occurred in North Carolina, where legislative districts were redrawn by the state's Republican-controlled legislature in 2011. Federal courts have since ruled that the maps were racially gerrymandered. After the 2012 elections, the state's Republican leaders passed a strict voter-ID law and curtailed access to early-voting facilities in areas with heavier concentrations of black voters, according to Mr Grumbach. These changes resulted in North Carolina's democracy score falling from one of the best in the country to one of the worst.

In Illinois, which was under unified Democratic control between 2003 and 2014, voting and electoral reforms have improved the state's score. In 2010 Republicans won a majority of the state's seats in the US House of Representatives despite losing the popular vote by ten percentage points. But after voting districts were redrawn following the 2010 census, it sent a fairer share of Democrats to Washington.

In 2014, a Republican won the governor's mansion in Illinois as part of a national

wave that left divided governments in states where Democrats previously held the "trifecta" of both houses of the legislature and the governor's mansion. This had the dual effect of increasing the average score for states under divided government, according to Mr Grumbach's analysis, and decreasing the score for Democratic-controlled states.

What explains the democratic decline? After applying a set of statistical models to the data to estimate the effects of several different variables on states' democratic performance—including political competition, polarisation, and demographic change—Mr Grumbach found that whether a state had a Republican legislative majority and Republican governor was the most reliable predictor of backsliding on important rights and liberties. The Republican-controlled state governments in Alabama, Ohio, and Wisconsin, for example, have made similar anti-democratic reforms although they are different in many other respects.

Almost everywhere they have power, the Republican party's leaders have pushed to restrict voting rights. Mr Grumbach concludes that this has been a result of a push by the national party to restrict access to the polls and gerrymander district maps while pursuing other anti-democratic moves. Given the GOP's behaviour after the 2020 election, including Donald Trump's claim that the election was stolen, the trend shows no sign of going into reverse.

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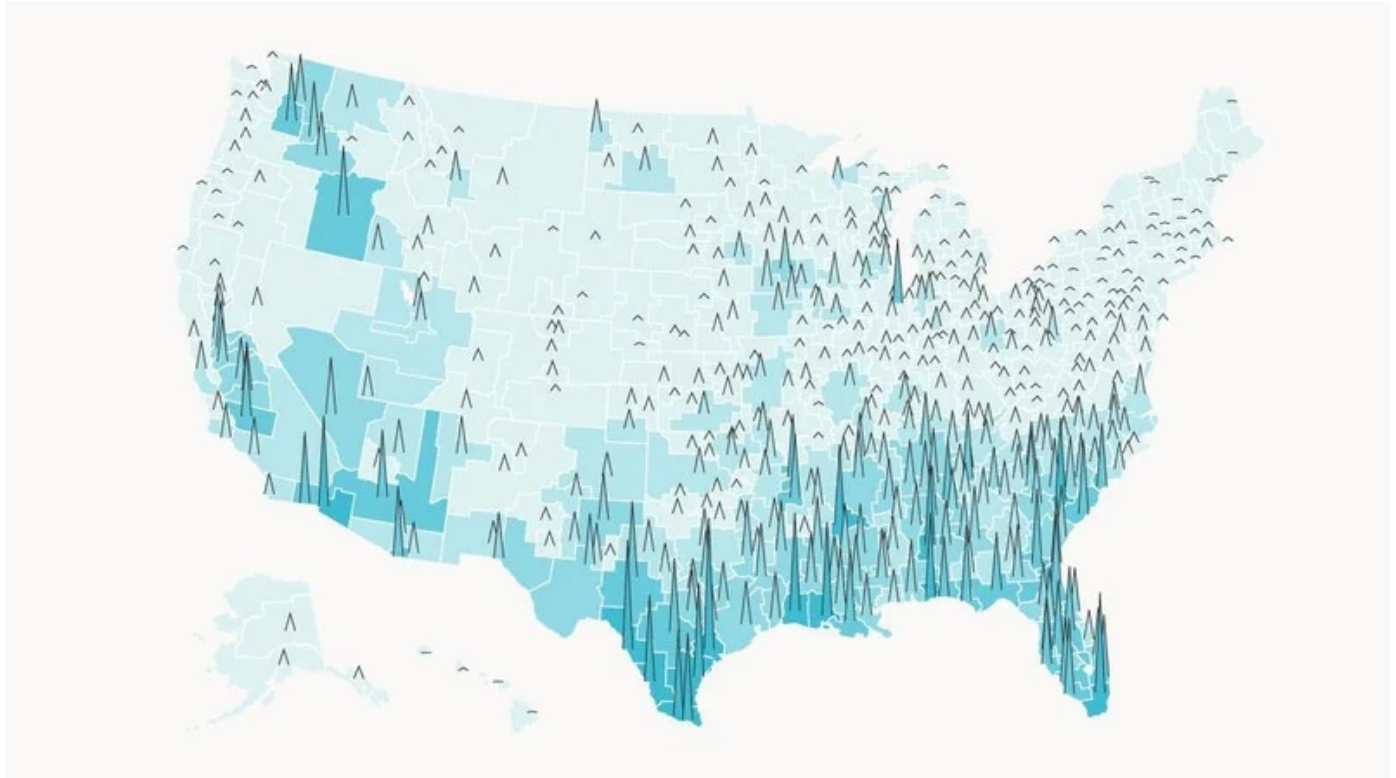
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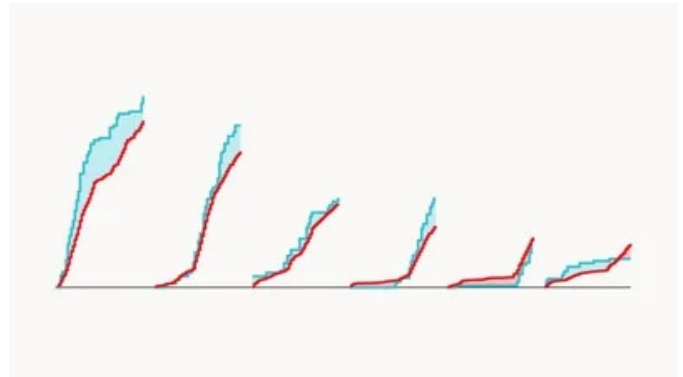
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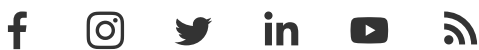
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