

English summary of *The Assessment of the State of Norwegian Democracy*

[Tilstandsanalysen av det norske demokratiet] (TiNDe)



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Published August 2023

TiNDe is a project commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development and carried out by scholars of democracy and different dimensions of the Norwegian political system at the Department of Political Science, University of Oslo. The first round of the project was conducted from late 2020, and the report summarizing the findings as well as the democracy measures developed by the project was published in August 2023. The report authors were Carl Henrik Knutsen, Sirianne Dahlum, Elin Haugsgjerd Allern, Sara Bjønness Hagfors, Jan Erling Klausen, Martin Søyland, and Tore Wig. The second round of TiNDe started in 2024 and is currently ongoing, with an expected launch of the second report in summer 2027.

In brief, TiNDE centers on developing nuanced indices for assessing performance and change on several dimensions of democracy, at various levels of government. These indices are tailored towards assessing performance and change for democracies that are of high quality. Employing these new indices, TiNDe provides a comprehensive analysis of the state of Norwegian democracy. As such, it represents one of the most ambitious attempts to systematically map out not only the strengths of Norway's democratic system but also its weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and potential for improvement. More specifically, TiNDE develops 15 new indices of democracy, pertaining to five separate dimensions of democracy measured across three different levels of government, and then applies these measures to evaluate the situation in Norway in specific years in the 2015-2021 time-range (in the first round of the project).

The motivation of TiNDe project is grounded in the idea that no democracy is ever fully complete or perfect – a notion that was developed and justified by political theorist Robert Dahl five decades ago. Even high-quality democracies such as Norway, which consistently ranks towards the top of cross-national democracy measures, may fall far short of democratic ideals. Therefore, the degree of democracy, as well as changes in democratic properties, can be critically evaluated also for the most democratic countries in the world. For this purpose, cruder cross-national measurements of democracy (which are good at distinguishing democracies from autocracies) are of less help, and TiNDe thus engages in developing new measures of democracy that are simultaneously very nuanced (taking into account various aspects of the political system and how it works) and demanding (setting a very high threshold for receiving top scores).

There are two key questions that undergirds TiNDE's analysis of the Norwegian political systems: How democratic is Norway across different dimensions of democracy and levels of government? How resilient is Norway's democracy to threats of democratic backsliding or even democratic breakdown in the future? Concerning the latter global trends of democratic decline -- even in countries previously seen as stable democracies (e.g., the United States, Hungary, and India) -- have inspired a new wave of research into democratic vulnerabilities. Democratic decline, and even breakdown of democracy, in recent decades often happens gradually and through legal or institutional mechanisms, with incumbent elected leaders often being the main culprit, rather than via coups or other processes imposed by actors outside of elected government. This trend of democratic decline globally over the last couple of decades, and the creeping and often hard-to-detect nature of such processes, underscores the importance of assessing democratic robustness, even in countries that are regarded as high-quality democracies at the moment, such as Norway.

The goals of TiNDe can thus be summarized as follows:

- a. To develop finely tuned, disaggregated indices that can capture differences in democratic quality among highly democratic countries -- something most existing indices fail to do.
- b. To assess both democratic quality and resilience, identifying strengths and pinpointing areas where Norway may be vulnerable to democratic erosion.
- c. To provide a baseline for future monitoring, using newly constructed democracy indices that can be updated and replicated periodically.

One area where TiNDe distinguishes itself from most existing approaches to measuring democracy is by explicitly measuring the state of democracy at three levels of government, namely the national, regional, and local levels. Note that regional and local democracy indices constructed by TiNDe are not catered to measuring democracy in each specific county or municipality, but provide overall scores for the situation across counties or municipalities.

TiNDe, building on the conceptual scheme and dimensionality of democracy proposed by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, evaluates democracy along five theoretical dimensions, each reflecting a different understanding of what democracy entails. Yet TiNDe further elaborates on the conceptual structure of each dimension, providing more nuance and slightly different understandings of the contents of each dimension compared to V-Dem (as detailed in the TiNDe report). To briefly summarize the five dimensions, democracy's:

1. electoral dimension focuses on the presence of free and fair elections, voter participation, competition, and responsiveness of elected officials. It includes the integrity of the electoral process, pluralism, and whether all voices can realistically compete for power.
2. liberal dimension emphasizes civil liberties, rule of law, and checks and balances. It assesses whether state power is constrained by courts and independent institutions and whether individual rights (freedom of expression, association, religion, etc.) are protected in practice.
3. participatory dimension captures the extent to which citizens engage in political life beyond voting. This includes membership in civic organizations, activism, local consultations, and use of direct democratic tools such as referendums.
4. deliberative dimension pertains to the quality of public discourse, including the level of rational, respectful debate among elites and citizens, and the openness of political decision-making processes to reasoned input.
5. egalitarian dimension considers whether political influence is equally distributed across different social groups (e.g., by class, ethnicity, gender). It includes barriers to participation, economic inequalities that influence political access, and policy responsiveness to marginalized groups.

As noted, a key feature of TiNDe is the multilevel structure of its concepts and measures. Democracy is assessed separately at the national, regional, and local levels. This yields a total of 15 democracy indices (5 dimensions \times 3 levels), each composed of multiple components and sub-components.

Altogether, more than 700 indicators or indices enter into these 15 democracy indices, and most of them are existing indicators or indices gathered from cross-country datasets, with V-Dem being the most prominent in terms of number of indicators supplied, or Norway-specific datasets or statistics. These indicators are then systematized, transformed, and aggregated by the research team to reflect the underlying concepts and be appropriately weighted in the new indices. In addition comes original data, notably collected via a new expert survey answered by more than 100 experts on Norwegian democracy and related topics, mainly researchers studying different parts of the Norwegian political system or democracy researchers located at Norwegian research institutions. The new indicators from this expert survey are constructed to complement current gaps in the available data, so that previously unmeasured features of the political system can be measured and included in the indices. In addition comes the TiNDe teams original coding of legal frameworks, institutional setups, and practices that do not require expert coding.

Roughly one-third of the indicators come from cross-national datasets, one-third from Norway-specific datasets, and the rest from the TiNDe expert survey and original coding.

In terms of the key findings on the Norwegian system, measured for 2015 and 2019 for the local and regional levels and 2017 and 2021 for the national level, the overall conclusion is that Norwegian democracy is consistently well-performing -- scoring highly across nearly all dimensions and levels of government – as well as very stable over the time period under study.

The above conclusion is unsurprising, given how Norway is consistently considered among the most democratic countries in the world. Yet the nuanced and demanding indices by TiNDe provides tools for highlighting – among the system’s different features – some core strengths. These include, inter alia, that electoral integrity is strong. Norway has robust election institutions, high voter turnout, and relatively fair campaign conditions across different levels of government. Furthermore, civil liberties are generally very well protected. For example, rights to free speech, assembly, and religion are well protected and widely respected. Moreover, there is very high political trust and a generally pro-democratic political culture. There is also broad participation in civil society: Norway has strong civic engagement, especially at the local level, and a healthy landscape of voluntary associations. And, Norwegian politics, at various levels of government, is characterized by high deliberative quality: Public debates tend to be substantive, respectful, and based on facts—especially in national media and political institutions. These are not the only key strengths highlighted in the TiNDe report, but they are very notable examples.

As indicated, across most indices and even their subcomponents, there were no major shifts that occurred between the two measurement periods (2015/17 and 2019/21). Democratic quality has thus, broadly speaking, remained stable at all levels of government. Yet, the TiNDe measures do indicate some changes to more specific parts of the political system, including some adverse and some positive, over the time period. For instance, there was an observed increase in threats and harassment against politicians, which can deter participation and lead to self-censorship and thus hurt democracy’s electoral dimension. A more positive change, to highlight one, was an indicated increased use of formal consultation mechanisms with civil society at the regional level. The report also highlights changes deemed to be temporary (and not indicative of future democratic quality) such as COVID-19 restrictions giving a decline in freedom of movement or an increase in the use of local referenda related to numerous municipal mergers during the period.

Given the nature of the measures constructed, and reflecting the notion that democracy is an ideal that is hard to achieve, TiNDe also pinpointed several weaknesses of Norwegian democracy and certain areas where there is larger room for improvement. Notably, Norway scores relatively low on participatory democracy, especially at the national level, as indicated also by V-Dem's existing measures on this dimension. To a large extent, this reflects that Norway ranks low in the use of referendums, citizen initiatives, and other participatory mechanisms for direct citizens influence and initiative, especially at the national level.

Among other and more specific areas highlighted in the TiNDe report, the authors mention the unequal vote weight across electoral districts in parliamentary elections; limited voting rights in national parliamentary elections for long-term residents (due to citizenship criteria for voting); fairly high perceptions of corruption and abuse of power, especially at the local level; unequal political influence across social groups, with ethnic minorities and people not born in Norway scoring disproportionately low on several indicators; and, a lack of transparency in lobbying and interest group influence, for instance at the national level.

When going beyond current trends and features of the Norwegian political system, TiNDe's original expert survey also asked questions about the future vulnerability of Norwegian democracy. In the expert survey, which was conducted in 2022, the median expert's estimate for the risk of substantial democratic decline in the next 3 years was a 5% probability. The corresponding number for 10 years into the future was a 10% probability. Thus, while Norwegian democracy is generally considered to be highly robust and resilient to various threats, the system is not considered to be immune. Hence, the report authors argue that vigilance as well as various additional safeguards would be appropriate for further mitigating the (low) risk of Norwegian democracy being undermined in the future.

In addition to the discussion of the Norwegian political system exemplified in this summary, TiNDe's report contains several discussions pertaining, more generally to, democratic resilience and decline. It also includes several methodological reflections and advice on how to construct democracy measures and how to interpret them, alongside discussions on how to communicate the inherent uncertainty involved in democracy measurement and discussions on biases associated with specific measurement instruments such as expert surveys. The report also includes reflections and discussion on how certain democracy dimensions or democracy at different levels of government may sometime be in tension, meaning that increasing levels on one dimension or at one level of government may more or less directly reduce levels on other dimensions or at other levels of government. This discussion on inherent trade-offs further underscores the point that a perfect democracy is an ideal that is – while worth striving towards – perhaps impossible to achieve in practice. At the same time, the TiNDe report underscores several ways in which Norwegian democracy may be improved in practice, and thus at least bring it somewhat close to an ideal democracy.