

Democracy and implementation of non-communicable disease policies

Authors' reply

We heartily welcome Simon Wigley and colleagues' comments on our Article¹ and further analysis on the association between democracy and implementation of non-communicable disease policy. Their use of four different democracy indicators helps to triangulate the Economist Intelligence Unit data that we used in our study, and provides further evidence that democracy is associated with a range of positive health outcomes.²⁻⁴ We note that the three additional measures (from the Varieties of Democracy project, Freedom House, and the World Bank) ascribe lower point values than the Economist Intelligence Unit data, but all were significant with p values of less than 0.05.

Their finding that democracies outperformed alternative forms of government in the full implementation of specific non-communicable disease policies is another interesting observation. It raises questions around the temporal association between policy implementation and government type that we intend to explore once WHO has released 5 years' worth of Non-Communicable Disease Progress Monitor data.

While citizens of many developed nations report increasing democratic dissatisfaction,⁵ Wigley and colleagues argue that "democracy is often messy, but remains better than the alternatives at addressing health challenges confronting most nations." The current evidence supports this position. 4-to-5-year election cycles and differential voter turnout can skew the priorities of elected leaders towards short-term so-called quick wins and policies that primarily benefit the socioeconomic groups with

the highest turnouts. Nevertheless, democratic leaders have an undeniable personal stake in ensuring that the health of their population is protected because they can be defenestrated for failing to act in the public interest.

Governments that are not as beholden to the whims of the public might more easily implement long-term national health plans. For instance, China, Cuba, and Rwanda have seen impressive improvements in health outcomes under successive decades of one-party rule. However, when it comes to implementing non-communicable disease policies, the aphorism ascribed to Winston Churchill still resonates, democracy seems to be "the worst form of government, except for all the others".

LNA and FG-d-S work as non-communicable disease consultants for WHO. BDN declare no competing interests.

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