Nordregio

Towards a democracy index for the Nordic Region?

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NORDREGIO WORKING PAPER 2026:9

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http://pub.nordregio.org/wp-2026-9-democracy-index-for-nordics

Executive summary

This working paper assesses the feasibility and added value of a regionally grounded approach to democracy measurement in the Nordics. It reviews the institutional and societal characteristics associated with Nordic democracies, the pressures affecting the conditions under which they operate, and the extent to which major global indices capture gradual change in these high-performing democratic systems. It then maps practical options for improving Nordic democracy monitoring.

The review finds that a Nordic approach to democracy measurement could add value by complementing existing indices and addressing gaps in how democratic developments across the region are captured. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden remain among the world's strongest democracies, with robust electoral systems, civil liberties, rule of law and institutional quality. The available evidence provides little indication of systematic democratic backsliding across the region. At the same time, stable headline scores do not capture the full picture. Across indices and country assessments, more uneven performance and modest declines appear in areas including political participation beyond elections, minority inclusion, media freedom and pluralism, public-sector integrity, trust and accountability, and aspects of social and economic equality. Taken together, the review of existing indices, their methodologies and evidence reveals five gaps in the measurement of Nordic democracies:

- **Synthesis:** relevant evidence is fragmented across indices, surveys, datasets and country reports.
- **Sensitivity:** aggregate measures are often unable to detect gradual, uneven change near the top of the democratic-performance range.
- **Conceptualisation:** Nordic features such as universal welfare institutions, social trust, consensus-oriented governance and strong local government are only partly captured, and their relationship to democracy requires careful attention.
- **Subnational democracy:** global indices pay limited attention to the quality of democracy at the subnational level, although municipalities and regions play central roles in Nordic governance and welfare provision.
- **Geographical coverage:** Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland are rarely represented in international datasets.

Part 2 considers how each of these gaps might be addressed. Possible responses include a developing a harmonised dataset to bring fragmented evidence together; more sensitive and disaggregated indicators to capture gradual change; cautious testing of additional measures for Nordic institutional and societal features; targeted analysis of democracy at regional and local levels; and alternative forms of coverage for Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland. Further work would need to decide which gaps merit priority, where a Nordic approach would add the greatest value, and which responses are methodologically feasible given available data, expertise and resources. Not all gaps may need—or be feasible—to address within a single measurement approach.

Introduction

Image: Johannes Jansson / Norden.org

Over the past two decades, concerns about the quality and stability of democracy have gained increasing prominence in scholarly and policy debates. Even well-established democracies face pressures on democratic norms, institutions and practices, with some experiencing democratic backsliding (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025; Freedom House, 2026; International IDEA, 2025f; Nord et al., 2026). These concerns became particularly salient during the 2010s, amid growing political discontent and changing electoral behaviour, including increased support for non-traditional and anti-establishment parties (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2023).

Democracy research and measurement have, however, focused primarily on cases of democratic breakdown, paying less attention to the gradual and less visible pressures that may affect high-performing democracies (Croissant & Lott, 2025; Merkel and Lührmann, 2021). This gap warrants further attention in the Nordic context. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden consistently rank among the world's strongest democracies, with high scores for electoral integrity, the rule of law, institutional quality, and transparency (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025; Freedom House, 2026; International IDEA, 2025f; Nord et al., 2026). Their democratic systems are also associated with inclusive governance, comprehensive welfare states, high levels of social and political trust, active civil societies, strong local government, and political cultures oriented towards compromise and consensus (Christensen et al., 2025; Meinander, 2021). Against a wider backdrop of global democratic backsliding, the Nordic countries show little evidence of systematic democratic erosion. Nevertheless, they are exposed to pressures and risks that may affect the conditions under which democracy operates. This raises the further question of whether characteristics often associated with Nordic democracies contribute to democratic resilience, whether they may themselves come under strain, and whether and how they should be measured in a democracy index. To address this research and measurement gap, the paper examines both the strengths and limitations of existing approaches to democracy measurement in the Nordic context and explores practical options for a context-sensitive Nordic measurement framework that builds on existing indices.

Part 1 outlines the defining features of Nordic democracies, describes the pressures, risks and broader political and societal changes under which they are operating, and assesses how effectively major global democracy indices capture subtle and emerging developments across the region.

Part 2 builds on the measurement gaps identified in Part 1 and begins to map practical pathways towards a feasible, regionally grounded approach to democracy measurement in the Nordic countries.

Methods

This working paper is a feasibility-oriented review that draws on academic and grey literature on democracy, democratic backsliding, the Nordic model and comparative democracy measurement. The analysis was also informed by informal consultations and discussions with leading experts in democracy measurement, including representatives of index-producing organisations and democracy scholars.

About the project

This working paper forms part of Nordregio's Nordic Democracy Index project, funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers and running from January to December 2026. The project examines the feasibility and added value of a Nordic Democracy Index that reflects the distinctive characteristics, strengths, emerging pressures and future risks affecting democracy across the Nordic Region.

PART 1. NORDIC DEMOCRACIES: CONCEPT, MEASUREMENT AND TRENDS

The concept of "Nordic democracies"

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Democracy is often defined in two broad ways. In a narrow, minimalist sense, it means competitive, free and fair elections that let parties contest power and allow leadership to change, with the core institutions being electoral competition and alternation in office. In a broader, multidimensional sense, it also requires protections and practices beyond elections, such as rights and equality before the law, meaningful participation between and beyond elections, accountable and transparent government, and the rule of law (Coppedge et al., 2011; Graziano & Quaranta, 2022). Drawing on the work of the prominent democratic theorist Robert A. Dahl, the broader democracy literature emphasises citizens' equal capacity to formulate, express and have their preferences weighed in political decision-making (Coppedge et al., 2011; Dahl, 1971). Building on Giovanni Sartori's conceptualisation, it also treats democracy as a matter of degree rather than a binary category, recognising variation in the extent to which democratic principles are realised across political systems (Coppedge et al., 2011; Graziano & Quaranta, 2022; Sartori, 1962).

From this broader perspective, such complexity leaves room for different interpretations of what democracy encompasses and how it should be measured. In the Nordic context, it raises the question of whether distinctive features of the Nordic model should be incorporated as dimensions of democracy itself, treated as enabling conditions for

democratic performance, or understood as adjacent aspects of political economy and public administration. At present, the notion of "Nordic democracy" remains neither well established nor conceptually settled (Koivunen et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the Nordic model points to a relatively stable set of institutional and societal characteristics that may shape how democracy operates in the region, even when they are not democratic attributes in a strict sense.

The Nordic model emerged during the twentieth century as a distinctive approach to organising relations between the state, market and civil society. It combines a market economy with comprehensive welfare provision, coordinated wage bargaining and corporatist mechanisms of interest representation. At its core are mutually reinforcing institutions, including universal welfare services, publicly funded education and healthcare, solidaristic wage bargaining, active labour market policies, high levels of female labour-market participation, and sustained investment in human capital (Alestalo, Hort, & Kuhnle, 2009; Christensen et al., 2025; Iqbal and Todi, 2015; Östberg, 2021; Pontusson, 2011). Importantly, the model does not represent an alternative to capitalism. Rather, it embeds market economies within extensive welfare, regulatory and redistributive frameworks designed to reduce inequality and social insecurity while preserving market-based economic structures (Oppegaard & Nosrati, 2024; Shammas, 2024). Nordic democracies are therefore best viewed not as a distinct regime type but as a political tradition shaped by shared historical trajectories, institutional arrangements and normative commitments. Their features reflect the historical influence of social democracy and its enduring impact on state–society relations (Kurunmäki & Strang, 2010).

Key features of the Nordic Model

Corporatism and organised participation

A defining feature of the Nordic model is institutionalised participation through corporatist arrangements. Policymaking traditionally involves structured cooperation between governments, trade unions, employer organisations and other organised interests, creating channels of influence beyond electoral politics. This is most visible in industrial relations but also extends to sectors such as agriculture, transport and environmental policy (Christiansen et al., 2010; Christiansen, 2017). Parliamentary commissions, tripartite negotiations and advisory bodies have historically integrated organised interests into both policymaking and implementation. Key mechanisms include consultation on policy proposals, direct representation in commissions, and early-stage participation in policy formation (Christiansen & Rommetvedt, 1999; Ihlen et al., 2026). Implementation has similarly drawn on stakeholder expertise through advisory councils and boards. While this system remains influential, formal corporatist integration has weakened in recent decades (Christensen et al., 2025). Trade unions and peak organisations have lost some privileged access, replaced partly by informal networks and a broader range of civil society actors. This de-corporatisation is more evident at the national than at the local level (Östberg, 2021; Iqbal & Todi, 2015).

Nordic labour markets

Closely linked to corporatism is the coordinated structure of Nordic labour markets. Trade unions and employer organisations regulate wages and working conditions through collective bargaining, producing compressed wage structures, relatively low inequality, and stable labour relations. Wage bargaining typically occurs at sectoral or national level and often extends beyond union members (Iqbal & Todi, 2015). The system is closely integrated with welfare institutions, including unemployment insurance and active labour market policies. Nordic labour policy aims to integrate people into employment through training, mobility support and job matching, combined with income security. Industrial relations are therefore structured around negotiation rather than conflict (Pontusson, 2011; Oppegaard & Nosrati, 2024).

Universalism, welfare and social protection

Universalism is a defining principle of the Nordic welfare model, ensuring that social rights and public services are broadly available to residents rather than limited to narrowly targeted groups. Access is linked primarily to legal residency rather than occupational status, supporting social equality and economic efficiency through education, healthcare and income protection. Redistribution through taxation, transfers and public services seeks to equalise life chances (Alestalo, Hort, & Kuhnle, 2009; Pedersen and Kuhnle, 2017). The Nordic welfare states rank among the most extensive in the OECD. However, the model has evolved over time (Iqbal & Todi, 2015). Market mechanisms have expanded within welfare provision and socioeconomic inequalities have increased in some areas (Allelin et al., 2018; Bremberg, 2020; Slätmo et al., 2023). The long-term sustainability of the model faces several challenges (Oppegaard & Nosrati, 2024; Shammas, 2024). Core services such as healthcare, education, childcare and elderly care are largely tax-financed and labour-intensive, limiting the scope for productivity gains. Rising living standards continue to increase public expectations and demand for services, while already high tax burdens constrain the fiscal scope for further expansion. Demographic change adds further pressure. Ageing populations and persistently low fertility rates are increasing dependency ratios across the region, placing growing demands on pension systems, healthcare and long-term care provision (Bremberg, 2020; Slätmo et al., 2023; Iqbal & Todi, 2015).

Trust and civic culture

Nordic democracies are characterised by exceptionally high social and institutional trust. Despite high levels of individualism, trust remains strong, supported by universal welfare systems, inclusive institutions and administrative transparency (Alestalo, Hort & Kuhnle, 2009). Civic participation extends beyond elections to voluntary organisations, civil society and local governance processes, fostering a cooperative governance culture. Civil society functions as an intermediary between citizens and the state, supporting citizen participation (Iqbal & Todi, 2015). The logic is one of citizen representation through civil society organisations rather than direct participation. In this model, civil society is not

intended to challenge the state but rather to connect citizens and the state through organised channels of representation. While this arrangement can enhance the influence and voice of individuals, critics argue that some organisations may become too closely aligned with the state, potentially limiting their independence (Strang, 2026).

Consensus democracy and political decision-making

Nordic countries are often described as consensus democracies, characterised by proportional representation, multiparty systems, coalition governments, and frequent minority governments (Haveri, 2015; Meinander, 2021). Decision-making relies on negotiation and compromise rather than adversarial competition (Alestalo, Hort, & Kuhnle, 2009). These institutions are embedded in political cultures emphasising pragmatism, inclusion and egalitarianism. Broad cross-party agreements are common and policymaking is typically negotiated. Compared with systems that have stronger formal checks and balances, Nordic parliamentary systems allow relatively efficient reform once majorities are formed, although these are usually built through compromise (Alestalo et al., 2009).

Education, innovation and knowledge-based development

A central characteristic of the Nordic model is its emphasis on education, innovation and knowledge-based development. Public investment in education, research, infrastructure, and technology has played a central role in long-term development strategies. Post-war educational reforms aimed to develop human capital while reducing class barriers, thereby expanding equality of opportunity. Educational and economic equality are viewed as mutually reinforcing: relatively equal living conditions support learning outcomes, while investment in education contributes to productivity, technological adaptation and wage equality (Pontusson, 2011).

Gender equality

Gender equality became a defining feature of the Nordic model from the 1960s onwards through policies such as public childcare, paid parental leave and measures supporting women's labour market participation (Rauum, 2005). By enabling both women and men to combine paid work with family responsibilities, these reforms expanded economic independence and opportunities for participation in public life. They also reinforced the universal welfare state, supported high employment and—together with solidaristic wage policies—helped reduce gender pay gaps. In contrast to the male breadwinner model common in many continental European welfare states, the Nordic model has promoted the dual-earner household as the norm (Pontusson, 2011).

Expertise, evidence-based policymaking and institutional adaptation

Another feature of Nordic governance is the institutionalised use of expert knowledge in policy development and reform. This differs from corporatist participation, which

concerns the representation of organised interests in decision-making. Here, the emphasis is on how governments draw on research, administrative expertise, evaluations and commissions to define policy problems, assess alternatives and support long-term institutional learning. Government-appointed commissions, expert committees and advisory bodies have historically helped translate scientific knowledge and administrative experience into policy proposals. Recent decades have brought greater politicisation of expertise, but evidence-informed policymaking remains an important part of Nordic governance traditions (Christensen et al., 2025). Closely related to this is the Nordic capacity for institutional adaptation and reform. The Nordic countries are often described as pragmatic reformers, combining strong public institutions with a willingness to experiment with governance arrangements (de la Porte et al., 2022). In recent decades, increasing attention has been paid to co-creation, collaborative governance, anticipatory policymaking and cross-sector partnerships (Johanson et al., 2025).

Multi-level governance and local autonomy

A defining feature of Nordic democracies is strong multi-level governance, with municipalities and regions playing central roles in welfare provision, including education, healthcare and social services. Local governments have substantial autonomy and fiscal capacity, accounting for a large share of public spending and employment (Ladner et al., 2019). Governance is characterised by cooperation and trust between levels of government rather than hierarchy. Local democracy is supported by strong municipal institutions and legal frameworks guaranteeing autonomy. However, increasing regulation, demographic change and fiscal pressure have reduced discretion in some areas. Nevertheless, local government remains a cornerstone of Nordic democracies, strengthening participation, responsiveness and legitimacy through proximity to citizens (Hlynsdóttir et al., 2024).

The preceding discussion has outlined the institutional and societal features associated with Nordic democracies. Against this background, the analysis now turns to the pressures affecting the conditions under which these systems operate. It considers whether there are signs that such pressures are contributing to democratic erosion and, equally, whether existing measurement models are sufficiently developed and sensitive to capture gradual change in high-performing democracies such as those of the Nordic countries, including changes in the underlying features that may support their democratic resilience.

The global trend of democratic backsliding

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Global democracy assessments indicate a clear trend: reports from organisations such as the Economist Intelligence Unit, Freedom House and the Varieties of Democracy Institute point to a prolonged period of democratic decline, characterised not by sudden collapse but by a gradual weakening of institutions and democratic norms (Nord et al., 2026; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025; Freedom House, 2026). Furthermore, recent research suggests that global indicators may be limited in detecting democratic backsliding (Waldner & Lust, 2018).

Democratic backsliding refers to the erosion of core attributes of democratic systems, typically unfolding slowly as institutions, rights and practices that sustain democracy are undermined. Its conceptualisation depends on how democracy is defined—whether narrowly in procedural terms or more broadly as a multidimensional system—and whether decline is understood as a short-term shift or a long-term process (Knutsen et al., 2024; Waldner & Lust, 2018). Contemporary erosion in well-established democracies rarely involves overt breakdowns such as coups. Instead, it often proceeds through incremental legal and administrative changes, including adjustments to constitutions, electoral rules, media regulation, and oversight institutions, that cumulatively weaken accountability (Knutsen et al., 2024). Within these trajectories, regimes may become defective democracies, retaining formal institutions such as elections while lacking key liberal and constitutional qualities. These hybrid systems occupy a space between democracy and autocracy, where political competition continues but is increasingly constrained, gradually hollowing out democratic substance (Knutsen et al., 2024).

Nordic democracies under pressure

In the Nordic countries, there is little evidence of systematic backsliding, and they continue to rank highly across major indices (Nord et al., 2026; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025; Freedom House, 2026; Sánchez Gassen et al., 2025). However, this strong overall performance should not obscure the importance of understanding the pressures and risks that may shape the conditions under which Nordic democracies operate. The following discussion considers these pressures in relation to both domestic political change and wider global developments.

The rise of discontent

By the mid-2010s, scholars noted that Western democracies were entering an "age of discontent", marked by growing frustration with political institutions, gaps in representation and uneven socio-economic outcomes (Berman, 2021; Florida, 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2020; Solijonov, 2016; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2023). Across the Nordic Region, all five countries experienced shifts in voting behaviour during this period, including rising support for non-traditional and anti-establishment parties and the emergence of new political divisions. (Bjerkem, 2016; Meinander, 2021; Önnudóttir et al., 2021; Palonen & Sunnercrantz, 2021; Salo, 2022; Sørensen and Svendsen, 2023). These shifts show changing patterns of representation and political mobilisation; however, they become democratically significant only if they affect how institutions function, how rights are protected or how accountability is exercised.

Country-specific examples reflect these broader patterns. Iceland, hardest hit by the financial crisis, saw mass protests and the rise of several new political parties in the 2010s. In the 2010 local elections, many voters abandoned the four established parties, opting instead for new parties, abstaining or casting blank ballots (Önnudóttir et al., 2021). In Sweden, the 2010 election marked a turning point as the far-right, anti-immigration Sweden Democrats entered parliament with 5.7% of the vote. Their support doubled to 12.9% in 2014, blocking either traditional bloc from achieving a majority and grew to 17.5% in 2018 (Jylhä et al., 2019). In Norway, the 2013 parliamentary elections brought the populist Progress Party into government for the first time as part of a centre-right coalition, signalling a major political shift (Bjerkem, 2016). Finland saw the right-wing populist Finns Party gain traction in 2011, continuing its electoral success in 2015 and reaching nearly 18% of the vote in 2019, becoming the country's second-largest party (Salo, 2022). Denmark's trajectory differed somewhat: the Danish People's Party won 21% of the vote in 2015, largely in rural areas, but its support declined by 2019 after mainstream parties adopted parts of its agenda. In 2022, two new anti-establishment parties emerged, including the Denmark Democrats, who won 8.1% of the vote and explicitly targeted rural voters with an anti-urban platform (Sørensen & Svendsen, 2023). At the same time, young people across Europe consistently emerge as a structurally vulnerable group in terms of democratic participation (Bressanelli & Bernardi, 2025). In the Nordic countries, youth turnout is consistently lower than among older cohorts, especially among those in their early twenties (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2017).

Explanations for rising political discontent tend to cluster around two broad perspectives. One emphasises economic transformations, such as deindustrialisation, globalisation, automation and austerity, which have produced uneven outcomes and widened socio-economic divides (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023; O'Brien & Leichenko, 2003; Guiso et al., 2017; De Ruyter et al., 2021; Sandbu, 2020). The other highlights socio-cultural dynamics, often framed as a cultural backlash, where resistance to progressive value change generates political tensions (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Florida, 2021; Ford and Jennings, 2020; Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Immigration plays a central role in both accounts, serving as a focal point through which economic and cultural concerns are expressed (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Larsson et al., 2021; Guiso et al., 2017; Alesina & Tabellini, 2024).

More recent research highlights the spatial dimension of discontent, pointing to "geographies of discontent" shaped by territorial inequalities. Economic growth has disproportionately benefited urban centres, while many rural and peripheral regions face stagnation, population decline and reduced access to services. These conditions can erode trust and generate place-based grievances (De Lange et al., 2023; Iammarino et al., 2019; McCann, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose, 2020; Kenny & Luca, 2021).

At the same time, empirical evidence suggests that the relationship between political discontent and socio-economic or even geographical vulnerability is not straightforward. Support for populist parties appears to be only weakly associated with material disadvantage and more strongly linked to attitudes such as distrust in institutions and a preference for strong leadership. For example, older and male voters are much more likely to support anti-establishment parties (Gallego et al., 2014). In many cases, support for democracy has remained stable or even strengthened across different population groups, with no clear evidence of a widespread shift towards extreme or anti-democratic positions. The growth of populist support may therefore reflect the mobilisation and political representation of existing attitudes rather than a fundamental change in public opinion. Research particularly highlights the growing importance of representation gaps and the mobilisation of previously disengaged or underrepresented voters (Brunkert et al., 2025).

Global threats

Growing discontent in the Nordic countries is also increasingly shaped by wider global transformations. Over the past two decades, democracies around the world have experienced a succession of major shocks, including the global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, growing geopolitical tensions, armed conflicts, large-scale migration movements and accelerating climate change (Danylenko et al., 2024). At the same time, several scholars argue that the global environment has become less supportive of democracy promotion than in previous decades (Daxecker, 2023; Hyde, 2023).

Digitalisation has further amplified these dynamics by transforming the information environment. Citizens now have access to an unprecedented volume of information, yet greater access does not necessarily strengthen democratic engagement. Social media platforms and algorithmically curated information ecosystems may encourage selective exposure, reinforce existing beliefs and accelerate the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Lindberg, 2023; Maati et al., 2024). According to the 2024 Eurobarometer Youth Survey, social media is the main source of socio-political information for young people in the EU. Although many young people feel confident in their ability to identify false information, research suggests that this confidence often does not correspond to actual ability (European Parliament, 2025). At the international level, foreign interference, disinformation campaigns, cyber threats and wider geopolitical competition increasingly target democratic institutions and public debate (Daxecker, 2023; Hyde, 2023).

Recent crises have further exposed vulnerabilities in democratic governance. The COVID-19 pandemic led many governments to introduce extraordinary restrictions on movement,

assembly and other civil liberties. Although often justified by public health concerns, such measures raised questions about executive power, democratic oversight and the protection of fundamental rights. The pandemic also exacerbated social inequalities, intensified political polarisation in many countries and contributed to declining trust in public institutions. Similarly, armed conflicts, most notably Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have generated effects extending beyond the battlefield, including energy insecurity, inflationary pressures, refugee movements and heightened geopolitical tensions. Such crises can act as stress tests for democratic systems, especially when they place pressure on institutional safeguards, rights protection and accountability (Danylenko et al., 2024).

Furthermore, environmental and climate-related risks are expected to become increasingly significant sources of political and societal pressure. Climate change, extreme weather events, biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation are likely to affect economic stability, public health, food systems, infrastructure and patterns of migration. Such disruptions may intensify existing social and territorial inequalities, increase competition for resources and create new governance challenges (Brechin & Lee, 2023). Their relevance to democracy lies primarily in how political systems respond, maintain public trust and sustain social cohesion over time.

Taken together, these pressures suggest that Nordic democracies are operating under changing conditions that may gradually test their resilience, particularly in relation to participation, trust, equality, institutional capacity and social cohesion. The next section therefore examines how existing democracy indices measure democratic performance, what they reveal about the state and development of Nordic democracies, whether they detect signs of erosion or more limited strains, and where important measurement gaps remain.

Global democracy indices and Nordic trends

Image: Frame & Work / Visit Denmark

This section reviews four core democracy datasets and indices alongside six complementary sources. The core datasets are treated as the main basis for comparison because they are among the largest, most widely used and most consistent sources in democracy research: they provide broad country and temporal coverage, are regularly used in research and policy, and have transparent, publicly documented methodologies (Graziano & Quaranta, 2022; Knutsen et al., 2024). They are produced by a range of organisations, including NGO or non-profit initiatives such as Freedom House and the Center for Systemic Peace, commercial research and analysis from the Economist Intelligence Unit, and university-based research institutes such as the V-Dem Institute. The complementary sources add further perspectives on democratic performance, public perceptions, government quality, public-sector integrity and national-level measurement, either through their own data collection or by compiling and reorganising data from multiple existing sources. TiNDe is included as a national Norwegian index that illustrates how democracy measurement can be adapted to a high-performing Nordic context and extended across levels of governance.

Acknowledging the limitations of democracy indices

Democracy indices are valuable because they condense complex, multidimensional political realities into tractable summaries that are easier to interpret than extensive batteries of indicators. As composite measures, they enable cross-national comparison, tracking of change over time and benchmarking; they also facilitate communication with general audiences and help to construct coherent narratives. However, composite indices also carry important risks and constraints. If poorly constructed or loosely interpreted, they can send misleading policy messages or invite overly simplistic conclusions. Choices about concepts, indicator selection, weighting and aggregation are inherently contestable and can become politicised, with different methodological decisions often yielding different scores and rankings (OECD, European Union & European Commission Joint Research Centre, 2008). Reliance on expert judgements raises concerns about transparency, consistency and replicability; cultural and geographical biases may be

embedded in indicator design and composite scores can obscure within-country variation (Babones, 2026; Coppedge et al., 2011; Högström, 2013; OECD, European Union & European Commission Joint Research Centre, 2008).

Datasets *refer to broader collections of data, often combining multiple variables, sources and measurements into a structured system that enables comparative analysis across countries or over time.*

Indicators *are individual variables or measures within a dataset that capture a specific aspect of a concept, such as voter turnout, trust in institutions or participation rates.*

Indices *are composite measures that aggregate multiple indicators into a single score, typically using a defined methodology, in order to summarise complex phenomena such as democracy, governance quality or participation.*

Core datasets and indices

- *Freedom in the World* by Freedom House, considered a core dataset because it is one of the longest-running and most widely cited global measures of political rights and civil liberties, providing annual country scores and qualitative country assessments that help identify both stability and emerging areas of concern.
- *Polity V* by the Center for Systemic Peace, considered a core dataset because it offers exceptionally long historical coverage of regime characteristics and is widely used for analysing long-term patterns of democratic and autocratic change.
- *Democracy Index* by the Economist Intelligence Unit, considered a core dataset because it combines electoral, civil liberties, government functioning, participation and political culture dimensions in an accessible framework that captures variation beyond formal institutions.
- *V-Dem Dataset* by the Varieties of Democracy Project, considered a core dataset because it provides the most detailed multidimensional democracy dataset, with extensive indicator-level data on electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian dimensions.

Complementary indices

- *Democracy Barometer Dataset* by Democracy Barometer, included because it offers a multidimensional framework for assessing the quality of democracy, capturing freedom, equality and control using secondary data sources rather than expert assessments.

- *QoG Dataset* by the Quality of Government Institute, included because it provides comparative and subnational data on government quality, corruption, impartiality and public-service performance, which are closely related to democratic governance.
- *Global State of Democracy Indices (GSoD Indices)* by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), included because they provide a comprehensive framework for assessing democratic performance and trends by compiling and reorganising data from multiple existing sources, particularly the Varieties of Democracy Project, while complementing these with qualitative assessments.
- *Democracy Perception Index* by the Alliance of Democracies Foundation, included because it captures citizens' subjective perceptions of democracy, governance, trust, political institutions and societal challenges. This provides an important complement to expert-based assessments by revealing how democratic performance is experienced and evaluated by the public.
- *Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)* by Transparency International, included because corruption is widely recognised as a key factor influencing democratic quality, institutional trust, accountability and the rule of law. The index offers a globally comparable measure of perceived public-sector corruption.
- *Tilstandsanalyse av det norske demokratiet* (TiNDe), commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development and carried out by scholars at the Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, included as an example of national democracy measurement that adapts international frameworks to Norway and extends analysis across levels of governance.

The following approaches are not included:

- *Regimes of the World* classification, as it is embedded within the V-Dem framework
- *Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy*, due to its narrow focus on electoral components

Table 1 summarises the main characteristics of the four core datasets and indices reviewed in this section, including their coverage, conceptualisation of democracy, scoring systems and main components. Its main purpose is to show that these sources differ not only in scope and methodology, but also in how broadly they define democracy, shaping what they can reveal about Nordic democratic performance.

Table 2 complements the above overview by comparing how the core datasets are produced, including the type of assessment, the sources used, the number of coders or experts involved and the coding approach.

Table 1: Overview of the core democracy datasets and indices

Organization	Years and countries covered	Conceptualisation of democracy	Dataset	Main index & scoring	Main components / indicators
Freedom House	1972–2026; 229 countries and territories, including microstates	**Narrow**: electoral or liberal democracy	***Freedom in the World***	Global Freedom Score (0–100 points) Classifications: not free < partly free < free; non-democracy < electoral democracy	**Political Rights (0–40)**: electoral process, political pluralism & participation, functioning of government; **Civil Liberties (0–60)**: freedom of expression & belief, associational rights, rule of law, personal autonomy & individual rights
Center for Systemic Peace	1800–2018; 192 countries	**Narrow**: electoral and liberal democracy	***Polity V Project***	Polity Score (–10 to +10), Classifications: hereditary monarchy to consolidated democracy; classification: autocracy < anocracy < democracy	**Executive recruitment** (openness, competitiveness), **constraints on executive authority**, **political participation** (regulation, competitiveness)
Economist Intelligence Unit	2006–2025; 167 countries	**Broad**: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, effective democracy	***Democracy Index***	Overall Democracy Score (0–10) Classifications: highly undemocratic to highly democratic; classification: authoritarian regime < hybrid regime < flawed democracy < full democracy	**Electoral process & pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, civil liberties**
Varieties of Democracy Institute	1789–2025; 202 countries, including non-independent territories	**Broad**: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian	***V-Dem Dataset***	Several Indices but most relevant for the Nordic Region: Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) On a spectrum: 0 to 1; highly undemocratic to highly democratic; classifies regimes as liberal democracy, electoral democracy, electoral autocracy, closed autocracy, each with multiple subindices (e.g., Liberal, Electoral, Participatory)	**Electoral democracy component** (free & fair elections, suffrage, freedoms of expression/association); **Liberal component** (rule of law, judicial constraints, legislative constraints, equality before the law);

Source: Freedom House, 2026; Center for Systemic Peace, 2026; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025; Nord et al., 2026; Graziano and Quaranta, 2022

Table 2: Methodological approaches of the core democracy datasets and indices

Index	Assessments	Basis for assessment	Number of coders/researchers	Coding approach
Freedom in the World	Primarily through evaluations by country and regional experts and in-house researchers based on different types of sources. Analysts' proposed scores are reviewed in regional meetings involving staff and expert advisers, with the final ratings representing a consensus among these participants.	Experts know the country or region well; in-house researchers have methodological expertise.	Over 100 experts and researchers participating in total; experts and researchers rely on academic research, news and NGO reports, personal conversations and on-the-ground research.	Experts answer questions about characteristics separately.
Polity V Project	Primarily through evaluations by in-house researchers based on academic literature and news reports, followed by weighting and aggregation of scores across characteristics	In-house researchers have methodological expertise.	Small core research team	Experts answer specific questions about characteristics using a detailed, predefined scale.
Democracy Index	Primarily through evaluations by in-house country experts, some evaluations by representative surveys of the general population, followed by averaging and minor weighting of scores across (sub-)characteristics	Experts know the country or region well; survey respondents provide information based on their own experiences	One or two experts per country and per year	Experts answer specific questions about sub-characteristics, using a detailed, predefined scale.
V-Dem Dataset	Primarily through evaluations by experts; some easy-to-observe characteristics assessed by in-house researchers, followed by weighting, aggregation and multiplication of scores across (sub-)characteristics	Experts (often nationals or residents) know the country and characteristics well; in-house researchers have methodological expertise.	Several experts per country, year and characteristic used (usually 5 or more since 1900, often 25 per country)	Experts answer highly specific questions about sub-characteristics, using a detailed, predefined scale. Experts also code hypothetical countries, with many coding several countries, and report their own uncertainty and personal demographic information. The project investigated expert bias and found it to be limited

Source: Freedom House, 2026; Center for Systemic Peace, 2026; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025; Nord et al., 2026; Graziano and Quaranta, 2022

Freedom House

Within the broader landscape of measurement approaches, the Freedom House index represents one of the most widely used and longest-standing efforts to assess democracy globally. The scoring process follows a two-step procedure that combines responses to a series of questions, with conversion tables used to determine country status. The assessment focuses on two dimensions—political rights and civil liberties—which broadly correspond to the eight constitutional guarantees identified by Robert Dahl (Freedom House, 2026).

Political rights are measured through 10 indicators covering electoral process, political pluralism and participation and the functioning of government, including the fairness of elections, opportunities for opposition and control of corruption. Civil liberties are measured through 15 indicators addressing freedom of expression and belief, associational rights, rule of law and personal autonomy, including media freedom, judicial independence, equality before the law, property rights and freedom of association. Each question is scored on a scale from 0 to 4 and supported by guiding questions. These assessments often require interpretation, as they combine attitudinal and behavioural elements and are not strictly anchored to quantitative data. The maximum score is 40 points for political rights and 60 points for civil liberties, producing a total of 100 points. Scores from the previous year serve as a benchmark, with changes typically introduced in response to significant developments, although gradual adjustments may also occur (Freedom House, 2026).

Freedom House scores are widely used by both media and academic researchers and are grounded in established understandings of liberal democracy. However, the structure of the questions and scoring system suggests that rankings may remain partly subjective. Another limitation is the absence of a social rights dimension, which may constrain its ability to capture broader aspects of democratic quality (Graziano & Quaranta, 2022).

Nordic democracy trends according to the index

Freedom House scores for 2017 and 2026 show that the Nordic countries remained among the world's highest-performing democracies. Finland maintained a perfect score throughout, Denmark's score remained unchanged, Norway and Sweden each declined by one point, and Iceland declined by two points while remaining in the highest category of democratic performance. Overall, the limited change suggests either that democratic backsliding has been minimal or that the measure is not well suited to detecting subtle shifts in long-established democracies (Freedom House, 2017; Freedom House, 2026).

Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland are not included in the index.

Table 3: Freedom in the World index: Nordic scores (2017 and 2026)

Country	2017	2026	Change 2017–2026
Denmark	97	97 Political rights: 40/40 Civil liberties: 57/60	0
Finland	100	100 Political rights: 40/40 Civil liberties: 60/60	0
Iceland	97	95 Political rights: 38/40 Civil liberties: 57/60	–2
Norway	100	99 Political rights: 39/40 Civil liberties: 60/60	–1
Sweden	100	99 Political rights: 40/40 Civil liberties: 59/60	–1

Source: Freedom House, 2017; Freedom House, 2026

Beyond the numerical scores, the Freedom House country reports contextualise scores by highlighting both strengths and emerging challenges within countries. Across all five Nordic countries in 2025, the overall picture is one of stable, high-quality democratic systems. Elections are consistently free and fair, political rights are well protected, and judicial independence is firmly established in both law and practice. Multiparty competition functions effectively, corruption is minimal and civil liberties such as freedom of expression, association and religion are broadly respected. At the same time, the qualitative assessments point to specific areas of concern that vary across countries but also reveal common patterns (Freedom House, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e).

Denmark stands out as highly democratic but faces persistent challenges in safeguarding the rights of immigrants and newcomers. Finland maintains strong institutional integrity and equality before the law, yet hate speech, harassment and discrimination targeting minority groups remain ongoing issues. Iceland demonstrates long-standing democratic stability, though concerns are raised about close ties between political elites and business interests, as well as concentrated media ownership, which may affect pluralism. Norway is described as one of the world's most robust democracies, but still experiences discrimination against marginalised groups, including Roma communities. Sweden continues to perform strongly across all core democratic dimensions, though rising violent crime and hate crimes are identified as recent challenges that may affect perceptions of security and social cohesion (Freedom House, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e).

Polity

Another widely used dataset in comparative political research is the Polity V index. The Polity V framework conceptualises political regimes through three main dimensions. First, executive recruitment refers to how leaders are selected, including how structured and institutionalised the process is, the extent to which multiple actors can compete for executive power, and how open access to executive office is across society. Second, constraints on executive authority capture the extent to which executive power is limited by institutional checks and balances, such as legislatures, courts and other accountability mechanisms. Third, political competition and participation address how participation is organised and contested, including the degree to which it is regulated or restricted, the ability of opposition groups to compete, and whether political competition is stable, fragmented or conflictual (Center for Systemic Peace, 2026).

Despite being widely used, the Polity dataset has several limitations. The coding process is not always fully transparent. Participation is measured primarily in terms of formal rules rather than substantive inclusion, meaning that high scores may coexist with limited broader participation. In addition, the relatively small number of variables may not fully capture the complexity and nuances of democratic development over time (Graziano & Quaranta, 2022).

Nordic democracy trends according to the index

According to the Polity index, democracy in the Nordic Region has remained stable over the period considered. The index is highly valuable for tracking long-term regime changes, particularly because of its extensive historical coverage, but it is less effective at detecting incremental democratic erosion within already consolidated democracies (Marshall & Gurr, 2020).

Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland are not included in the index.

Table 4: Polity index: Nordic scores (2005 and 2018)

Country	2005	2018	Change 2005–2018
Denmark	10	10	0
Finland	10	10	0
Iceland	-	-	-
Norway	10	10	0
Sweden	10	10	0

Source: Marshall and Gurr, 2020

Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index

The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index represents a different approach, combining a broader conceptualisation of democracy with a relatively accessible scoring system. Since 2006, the index has evaluated countries across five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of government, political participation, and political culture (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025).

In addition to standard measures of elections and rights, the index introduces dimensions that are often less explicitly addressed in other datasets. The category on functioning of government focuses on the capacity of the state to implement policies and the level of trust in institutions. Political participation includes both electoral and non-electoral forms of engagement, such as party membership, civic involvement and willingness to participate in demonstrations. Political culture assesses the extent to which societal attitudes support democratic governance and stability (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025; Graziano & Quaranta, 2022).

While these additions broaden the scope of measurement, they also introduce methodological challenges. Some questions are difficult to operationalise, sources are not always transparent, and combining different types of data may reduce reliability. Although efforts have been made to improve consistency, the index remains less suited to highly precise academic analysis (Graziano & Quaranta, 2022).

The index is based on 60 indicators grouped into five categories, with each indicator offering two or three possible responses. It provides a numerical score and ranking and classifies countries into four regime types (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025). The questions are grouped into five categories: Electoral process and pluralism; Functioning of government; Political participation; Political culture; and Civil liberties.

Nordic democracy trends according to the index

Data from the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index covering the period from 2006 to 2025 show that the Nordic countries remain among the highest-performing democracies globally. All five countries consistently score above 9 out of 10, placing them firmly within the category of full democracies. However, developments within the region are not entirely uniform. Finland and Norway record slight improvements, while Denmark, Iceland and Sweden record modest declines (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025). These shifts suggest variation within a generally strong pattern of democratic performance.

Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland are not included in the index.

Table 5: EIU Democracy Index: Nordic scores (2006 and 2025)

Country	2006	2025	Global ranking 2025	Change 2006–2025
Denmark	9.52	9.42	3	-0.10
Finland	9.25	9.37	5	+0.12
Iceland	9.71	9.38	4	-0.33
Norway	9.55	9.81	1	+0.26
Sweden	9.88	9.35	6	-0.53

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025

Table 6: *EIU Democracy Index: Nordic Scores per category (2024)*

Country	Electoral process and pluralism	Functioning of government	Political participation	Political culture	Civil liberties
Denmark	10.00	9.29	8.33	9.38	9.41
Finland	10.00	9.64	7.78	9.38	9.71
Iceland	10.00	8.93	8.89	9.38	9.71
Norway	10.00	9.64	10.00	10.00	9.41
Sweden	9.58	9.64	8.33	10.00	9.41

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025

Data from the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index indicate that all Nordic countries maintain very strong democratic foundations, with (near-)perfect scores in electoral process and pluralism, confirming the robustness of their electoral systems. Across most other dimensions—functioning of government, political culture, and civil liberties—scores are consistently high and display only limited variation, reflecting stable and mature democratic institutions. The main differences emerge in political participation, where Norway stands out with a perfect score, while Finland records the

lowest level and the remaining countries fall in between. Some minor variation is also visible in specific areas, such as Iceland's slightly lower score in functioning of government and Sweden's marginally lower score in electoral process. Overall, the pattern suggests that while the Nordic countries perform uniformly well in core representative institutions, variation is more evident in the extent to which citizens actively participate in democratic processes beyond elections (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025).

Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) democracy indices

To address six key measurement challenges—definition, precision, coverage and sources, coding, aggregation, and validity and reliability testing—the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute developed a new measurement model that translates abstract democratic principles into a highly detailed and operational system. This system consists of more than 400 indicators, generated through structured questionnaires completed by nearly 200 country experts, most of whom are academics. In addition, the project classifies political regimes into four main types: liberal democracies, electoral democracies, electoral autocracies and closed autocracies (Nord et al., 2026).

The five core dimensions of democracy in V-Dem are as follows: Electoral democracy; Liberal democracy; Participatory democracy; Deliberative democracy and Egalitarian democracy.

The democracy indices produced by V-Dem are published annually and provide one of the most comprehensive datasets on democracy. They include hundreds of indicators capturing different aspects of governance, particularly the quality of democracy, inclusiveness and related socio-political dimensions (Nord et al., 2026).

The five core indices are:

- **Electoral Democracy Index**
  Measures the extent to which regimes achieve free and fair elections, alongside freedoms of expression and media independence. This index forms the foundation of all other V-Dem indices.
- **Liberal Democracy Index**
  Builds on electoral democracy by incorporating rule of law, checks and balances, and civil liberties.
- **Participatory Democracy Index**
  Assesses the degree of citizen involvement in governance through civil society, local institutions and direct democratic mechanisms.
- **Deliberative Democracy Index**
  Evaluates whether political decisions are made through reasoned debate oriented towards the public good, rather than coercion or narrow interests.
- **Egalitarian Democracy Index**
  Captures the extent to which all social groups enjoy equal access to political power, resources and freedoms.

Nordic democracy trends according to the index

Across the Nordic countries, V-Dem indices show consistently high levels of democracy, with only moderate variation between countries and components. Iceland records the lowest scores in both the Electoral and Liberal Democracy Indices, though it still performs strongly in egalitarian and deliberative dimensions.

A common pattern across all five countries is that participatory democracy scores are consistently lower than scores for the other components.

Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland are not included in the dataset.

Table 7: V-Dem democracy indices: Nordic scores (2025)

Country	Electoral Democracy Index	Liberal Democracy Index	Liberal Component	Egalitarian Component	Participatory Component	Deliberative Component
Denmark	0.91	0.88	0.98	0.97	0.71	0.96
Finland	0.85	0.81	0.96	0.81	0.64	0.90
Iceland	0.81	0.72	0.90	0.92	0.65	0.88
Norway	0.89	0.85	0.96	0.96	0.65	0.99
Sweden	0.89	0.85	0.98	0.90	0.65	0.93

Source: Nord et al., 2026

The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index shows little evidence of clear democratic backsliding among the Nordic countries over the period considered. The trajectories for Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden are largely stable, with very small, statistically insignificant declines in some cases and no change in others. Overall, the trend lines are relatively flat (Nord et al., 2026).

Table 8: V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index Nordic scores (2017 and 2025)

Country	2017	2025	Global ranking 2025	Change 2017–2025
Denmark	0.84	0.88	1	+0.04
Finland	0.78	0.81	8	+0.03
Iceland	0.73	0.72	25	–0.01
Norway	0.85	0.85	3	0.00
Sweden	0.87	0.85	2	–0.02

Source: Nord et al., 2026; Coppedge et al., 2017

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project also published country profile reports for Finland and Sweden in 2016. These reports classified both countries among the highest-performing liberal democracies, with very strong scores across electoral, liberal and deliberative dimensions. In both cases, the reports found that democratic institutions were stable, rights were well protected and public decision-making processes were generally transparent and effective. Their lowest scores were in the participatory dimension of democracy. Although still high in absolute terms, this dimension was weaker than others, indicating comparatively fewer opportunities for direct citizen influence beyond elections. Some variation was also visible in egalitarian aspects, particularly in equal access to political influence across social groups, although these differences were relatively limited (Andersson, 2016; Mechkova et al., 2016).

Democracy Barometer Quality of Democracy index

The Democracy Barometer was initiated in 2005 by the Berlin Social Science Center and the Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau. It conceptualises democracy through three core principles—freedom, equality and control—which are operationalised through nine functions: individual liberties, rule of law, and public sphere under Freedom; transparency, participation, and representation under Equality; and competition, mutual constraints, and governmental capability under Control (Democracy Barometer, n.d.).

Measurement relies on more than 100 indicators derived from secondary data sources. One distinctive feature of this approach is that it does not use expert assessments, instead drawing on official statistics and representative surveys. This reduces some concerns related to intercoder reliability, although expert assessments can also be valuable where comparable quantitative data are limited or where institutional practices require contextual interpretation (Democracy Barometer, n.d.).

Despite its comprehensive structure, the Democracy Barometer gives limited direct attention to economic equality, even though relatively low inequality is often considered important for democratic consolidation and quality (Graziano & Quaranta, 2022).

Nordic democracy trends according to the index

From 2005 to 2017, Nordic countries show minor, mixed changes rather than a clear common trend. Denmark and Finland experienced the most notable declines, while Iceland and Norway show only slight decreases. Sweden is the only country with a small improvement. Overall, the changes are limited in magnitude and indicate relative stability with slight downward movement in most cases (Engler et al., 2020).

Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland are not included in the index.

Table 9: Democracy Barometer (DB) index: Nordic score change (2005 and 2017)

Country	Change 2005–2017
Denmark	–0.3
Finland	–0.2
Iceland	–0.1
Norway	–0.1
Sweden	+0.1

Source: Engler et al., 2020

European Quality of Government Index

Alongside research on democratic quality, recent scholarship has also focused on government effectiveness, which can be understood as one component of democratic quality. A major contribution in this area is the Quality of Government (QoG) dataset, hosted by the Quality of Government Institute at the University of Gothenburg. The central concept in its framework is impartiality, defined as the principle that government officials should not consider characteristics of citizens or cases that are not explicitly stipulated in policy or law (University of Gothenburg, n.d.; Graziano & Quaranta, 2022).

However, unlike many democracy datasets, QoG does not provide a single global index of government quality. The European Quality of Government Index is based on survey data

on regional or subnational governance within the EU. The data were first gathered and published in 2010, with subsequent waves conducted in 2013, 2017, 2021 and 2024. The index is based on a large citizen survey in which respondents are asked about perceptions and experiences of public-sector corruption, as well as whether public services are delivered impartially and with good quality. The dataset currently provides data for up to 206 regions, depending on the year (University of Gothenburg, n.d.; Graziano & Quaranta, 2022).

The European Quality of Government Index is based on three main components:

- **Control of corruption**
  Measures the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including bribery and misuse of resources.
- **Government effectiveness / quality of public services**
  Assesses the quality, impartiality and reliability of public service delivery.
- **Rule of law**
  Captures confidence in and compliance with rules, including judicial independence and contract enforcement.

The conceptualisation of government quality is relatively thin and is therefore best understood as a complementary dataset that captures institutional quality rather than democracy itself (Graziano & Quaranta, 2022). Its usefulness for a Nordic framework is further limited by coverage: only Denmark, Finland and Sweden are included, while Norway, Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland are excluded.

Nordic democracy trends according to the index

Table 10: Quality of Government index Nordic scores (2010 and 2021)

Country	2010	2021	Change 2010–2021
Denmark	1.677	1.475	–0.203
Finland	1.522	1.681	+0.159
Iceland	-	-	-
Norway	-	-	-
Sweden	1.409	1.430	+0.020

Source: Charron et al., 2014; Charron et al., 2022

Norway, Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland are not included in the index.

Global State of Democracy Indices (GSoD Indices)

The International IDEA Global State of Democracy Indices (GSoD Indices), launched in 2016, provide data and analysis on democratic performance across more than 150 countries from 1975 to the present. The framework conceptualises democracy as popular control over decision-making combined with political equality and operationalises this conceptualisation through five main attributes, 28 aspects and around 100 indicators. It draws on more than 20 data sources, including Freedom House, Polity V and the Varieties of Democracy Project (International IDEA, 2025f).

Rather than producing a single composite score, GSoD offers a set of mid-level indices, including representation, rights, rule of law and participation. This multidimensional structure provides analytical depth and transparency but makes aggregation and straightforward cross-country comparison more difficult than in indices designed for ranking (International IDEA, 2025f).

Because the framework relies heavily on existing datasets, particularly V-Dem, there is also a degree of conceptual overlap and limited independence in some indicators. For these reasons, GSoD is less commonly considered as a standalone benchmark of democracy. Instead, it is most effectively used as a complementary tool, allowing researchers to examine specific dimensions of democratic governance in greater detail and adding nuance to analyses that rely on more aggregate indices (Graziano & Quaranta, 2022).

Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland are not included in the indices.

Nordic democracy trends according to the index

Table 11: Global State of Democracy Indices (GSoD Indices): Nordic scores (2025)

Country	Representation Index *(and global ranking)*	Rights Index *(and global ranking)*	Rule of Law Index *(and global ranking)*	Participation Index *(and global ranking)*
Denmark	0.89 (1)	0.95 (1)	0.99 (1)	0.96 (1)
Finland	0.86 (7)	0.87 (8)	0.84 (11)	0.86 (7)
Iceland	0.78 (31)	0.79 (23)	0.81 (13)	0.75 (20)
Norway	0.88 (4)	0.91 (4)	0.86 (6)	0.91 (3)
Sweden	0.87 (5)	0.89 (6)	0.85 (9)	0.84 (10)

Source: International IDEA, 2025f

Beyond the numerical scores, International IDEA provides brief country descriptions. Across the Nordic countries, the Global State of Democracy framework indicates consistently high overall performance alongside selective, recent changes. All five countries remain in the high range across most categories and within the top quartile globally. However, some countries experienced declines in specific indicators. Sweden shows declines in civil liberties, particularly freedom of association, assembly and the press. Finland shows a decline in freedom of the press, especially related to self-censorship. Iceland shows declines in economic equality and aspects of freedom of expression, particularly academic freedom. Norway shows a decline in judicial independence, specifically in compliance with the judiciary. Denmark shows no significant change over this period. These indicator-level changes add nuance to the overall picture and help identify areas that may warrant closer attention.

Second, there are signs of evolving political dynamics within traditionally consensus-oriented systems. While coalition governance and cross-party cooperation remain central, some countries report more complex coalition formation, particularly Sweden and Iceland. Such complexity may reflect normal adaptation within proportional multiparty systems rather than democratic weakening, although it may still affect government formation, policy continuity and perceptions of political effectiveness. There is also growing prominence of issues such as immigration, environment and security in political competition, alongside increased attention to political violence, disinformation or crime in some cases, particularly in Sweden and Finland.

Third, migration and minority-related issues feature increasingly prominently in political debate and policy across multiple countries. This includes stricter or changing migration policies in some cases, notably Denmark and Finland, as well as ongoing discussions around minority rights and inclusion, such as those concerning Sámi populations and Greenlandic Inuit. Social Group Equality is repeatedly identified as an area to monitor.

Fourth, there are instances where security-related concerns intersect with rights and freedoms. In some countries, responses to crime, extremism or geopolitical pressures are accompanied by legislative or policy changes affecting migration or public order, as well as public debate about potential implications for civil liberties.

Fifth, economic equality shows variation across countries. While overall levels remain comparatively high, Sweden and Norway report increases in income inequality over time and Iceland shows a decline in economic equality, moving into the mid-range of performance. These developments do not indicate a uniform regional trend.

Sixth, gender equality remains a consistently strong area across all five countries, supported by high political representation and recent legal reforms. At the same time, persistent gender income gaps and pension differences are noted, for example in Sweden, alongside ongoing concerns such as gender-based violence in Finland and Iceland.

Finally, the country cases highlight ongoing institutional and policy adjustments in response to emerging challenges. These include legal reforms to strengthen protections for journalists, courts and minorities, policy initiatives addressing discrimination, security or participation, and continued attention to historical injustices and minority rights (International IDEA, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e).

Democracy Perception Index (DPI)

The Democracy Perception Index (DPI) is a global survey-based measure designed to capture how citizens perceive democracy and public institutions in their own countries. Produced annually by Nira Data in collaboration with the Alliance of Democracies Foundation, the DPI differs from most democracy indices by focusing on public perceptions rather than expert assessments of political institutions and democratic performance. This approach reflects the assumption that public perceptions constitute an important dimension of democratic legitimacy and provide insights into how citizens understand and evaluate political systems. The 2026 edition covers 98 countries and is based on nationally representative surveys of 94,146 respondents conducted between March and April 2026, making it one of the largest global studies of democratic attitudes currently available (DeVeaux & Jaspers, 2026).

The index is constructed around two broad dimensions: Citizen Participation and Institutional Quality. Citizen Participation captures whether individuals perceive themselves as able to engage meaningfully in political life and includes indicators relating to elections, freedom of speech, political pluralism and civic education. Institutional Quality measures perceptions of the functioning of public institutions and includes assessments of the separation of powers, the rule of law, government transparency and the peaceful transfer of power. Reporting these dimensions separately allows the DPI to distinguish between perceptions of democratic participation and evaluations of institutional performance (DeVeaux & Jaspers, 2026).

Countries are assigned a DPI score ranging from –100 to +100, where positive values indicate that favourable perceptions outweigh negative perceptions among respondents. Based on these scores, countries are grouped into five categories: Very Positive, Positive, Neutral, Negative and Very Negative. Among the Nordic countries included, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland all rank at the top of the index, indicating that public perceptions of democracy and institutional quality remain especially favourable in comparative terms (DeVeaux & Jaspers, 2026).

Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland are not included in the index.

Table 12: Nira Data Democracy Perception Index: Nordic scores (2026)

Country	2026	Global ranking 2026
Denmark	20.8	3
Finland	20	4
Iceland	-	-
Norway	23	2
Sweden	29.2	1

Source: DeVeaux and Jaspers, 2026

Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)

The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), produced by Transparency International, measures perceived levels of public-sector corruption across countries. The 2025 edition ranks 182 countries and territories on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). It aggregates perceptions from businesspeople and country experts using 13 data sources from 12 independent institutions. The underlying assessments cover bribery, misuse or diversion of public funds, anti-corruption enforcement, public-official integrity, and government accountability. Its consistent methodology since 2012 enables cross-country comparison and long-term tracking (Transparency International, 2026).

Table 13: Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) Nordic scores (2012 and 2025)

Country	2012	2025	Global ranking 2025	Change 2012–2025
Denmark	90	89	1	–1
Finland	90	88	2	–2
Iceland	82	77	10	–5
Norway	85	81	4	–4
Sweden	88	80	6	–8

Source: Transparency International, 2012; Transparency International, 2026

The Nordic countries continue to rank among the least corrupt countries in the world, with all five remaining in the global top ten in 2025. Denmark and Finland retain the strongest performance, ranking first and second globally. At the same time, all Nordic countries have experienced some decline since 2012, particularly Sweden (–8 points), Iceland (–5) and Norway (–4). Although the region continues to demonstrate exceptionally high levels of public-sector integrity, the downward trend may point to pressures related to trust, accountability, transparency or perceptions of government performance (Transparency International, 2012; Transparency International, 2026).

TiNDe: a national democracy assessment for Norway

The Norwegian *Tilstandsanalyse av det norske demokratiet* (TiNDe) provides a national example of democracy measurement adapted to a high-performing Nordic democracy. It assesses Norwegian democracy across five dimensions—electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian—and across three levels of governance: national, regional and local (Dahlum et al., 2023).

TiNDe does not produce a single overall score. Instead, it constructs separate indices for each democratic dimension and level of governance, generating 15 indices in total. This design is intended to avoid obscuring variation across dimensions and between national, regional and local levels of democracy. The framework combines cross-national datasets, Norwegian administrative and survey data, coded sources and a dedicated expert survey, bringing together evidence that was previously dispersed and filling gaps, particularly below the national level (Dahlum et al., 2023).

The framework uses V-Dem's main democracy indices as a starting point but adapts and expands them to capture finer distinctions within a high-quality democratic setting. Candidate indicators were identified by reviewing existing democracy datasets and related thematic sources, then refined by removing indicators with insufficient coverage, combining overlapping measures, organising them into a coherent hierarchy, and identifying gaps to be filled through the expert survey (Dahlum et al., 2023).

In total, TiNDe uses 568 existing indicators or indices and 142 expert-survey indicators, generating 710 inputs for its 15 indices. V-Dem is the main cross-national source, complemented by EIU data, the European Social Survey, thematic datasets on digital society and political parties, and Norwegian sources on elections, citizens, municipal organisation and local democracy. National data and the expert survey are especially important for measuring regional and local democracy in greater depth (Dahlum et al., 2023).

Norwegian democracy trends according to the index

The TiNDe findings indicate that Norwegian democracy remained highly stable during the period assessed, while also identifying several areas requiring attention. These include participation rights, regional variation in representation, limited use of direct-democracy instruments, perceptions of corruption and abuse of power, unequal political influence across social groups, and transparency around lobbying (Dahlum et al., 2023):

- TiNDe highlights limited voting rights in national parliamentary elections for long-term residents, due to citizenship criteria for voting.
- The votes of voters in some counties carry significantly less weight, in terms of the number of voters per parliamentary representative, than the votes of voters in other counties.
- The Norwegian system scores low on the use of direct-democracy instruments, such as referendums.
- Residents perceive abuse of power and corruption as widespread, perhaps especially at the local level.
- Political influence is unevenly distributed between different ethnic groups and between Norwegians with and without immigrant backgrounds.
- The influence of resource-rich lobby groups is perceived by experts as significant at several levels of governance, including national politics, where transparency around links between interest groups and politicians could be increased. One possible measure would be the introduction of a lobby register, which the Norwegian Parliament currently lacks.

From performance to measurement gaps

Image: Yadid Levy / Norden.org

Together, the findings in Part 1 provide a consistent and robust picture of the performance of Nordic democracies, while also pointing to areas where pressures may already be affecting aspects of democratic quality. Across all major datasets, including Freedom House, Polity, the Economist Intelligence Unit and the Varieties of Democracy Project, the Nordic countries rank among the highest-performing democracies globally. They display strong and stable performance across core dimensions such as electoral integrity, rule of law and civil liberties, with only minor fluctuations over time and little evidence of systematic democratic backsliding. At the same time, differences between indices and within their subcomponents reveal important nuances. More minimalist approaches tend to confirm stability, while more multidimensional frameworks capture modest variation across countries and dimensions, particularly in areas such as political participation, equality, trust, public-sector integrity, and aspects of governance quality. These lower-scoring areas do not amount to a common pattern of democratic decline, but they suggest that broader pressures on Nordic democracies are visible in parts of the measurement landscape and warrant closer monitoring.

The review of global democracy indices in Part 1 points to a number of potential measurement gaps when assessing Nordic democracies.

First, there is a **synthesis gap**. Evidence on Nordic democracy is dispersed across indices, datasets, surveys and country reports. This makes it difficult to compare findings systematically, identify recurring patterns and track developments across countries and over time.

Second, there is a **sensitivity gap**. Aggregate indices are primarily designed to capture broad institutional change and may conceal gradual or uneven developments in high-performing democracies. Headline scores can therefore remain stable despite variation across democratic dimensions.

Third, there is a **conceptual gap**. Global indices only partly capture the institutional and societal features associated with Nordic democracies. It also remains unclear whether these features constitute democratic attributes, conditions supporting democratic quality or broader characteristics of the Nordic model.

Fourth, there is a **subnational gap**. Existing indices operate mainly at the national level and do not sufficiently capture subnational variation. This limits analysis of democratic quality in the highly decentralised Nordic countries, where local and regional governments play a central role.

Fifth, there is a **coverage gap**. Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland are not consistently included in existing datasets, leaving the wider Nordic political landscape only partially represented.

These gaps provide the foundation for Part 2, which explores potential pathways towards a more context-sensitive and feasible approach to measuring democracy in the Nordic Region.

PART 2. ADDRESSING GAPS IN NORDIC DEMOCRACY MEASUREMENT

Building on Part 1, this section begins to map practical pathways towards a feasible, regionally grounded approach to democracy measurement in the Nordic countries.

From fragmented information to a Nordic overview: the synthesis gap

Image: Karin Beate Nøsterud / Norden.org

A substantial body of evidence on Nordic democracy already exists, but it is dispersed across international indices, underlying datasets, surveys and country reports. As Part 1 has shown, these sources differ in their concepts, units of analysis, geographical and temporal coverage, scoring scales and data-collection methods, making their findings difficult to compare directly. As a result, relevant signals may remain isolated within individual datasets or qualitative assessments and may not be visible in headline scores. Two approaches could address this synthesis gap. The first would develop a structured qualitative Nordic overview of existing evidence and use it as the basis for periodic assessments. The second would construct a harmonised Nordic dataset from selected indicators in existing global sources, providing the foundation for a Nordic democracy measurement framework and one or more composite indices for Nordic countries.

The first approach would systematically bring together findings from global democracy datasets, surveys and country reports within a shared analytical structure. Sources could be mapped against common democratic dimensions, levels of governance and time

periods. This would make it possible to identify recurring lower-scoring areas, assess whether concerns appear consistently across different sources, track developments over time and distinguish country-specific patterns from wider cross-Nordic trends. The output could take the form of a regularly updated Nordic democracy overview, dashboard or periodic report that combines quantitative trends with concise qualitative interpretation without producing a new overall index.

The second approach would move from evidence synthesis to the construction of a harmonised dataset and a new measurement framework for the Nordic Region. It would require a transparent process for defining the conceptual framework and screening candidate indicators. Selected indicators would need to be normalised where scales differ and organised under clearly defined dimensions. This approach could produce a common Nordic dataset and comparable country profiles without necessarily requiring extensive new data collection.

Tables 14 and 15 illustrate the potential of the first approach by showing what becomes visible when findings from different indices and country assessments are considered together. Table 14 consolidates lower-scoring areas by country, while Table 15 identifies themes that recur across the Nordic Region. Together, they not only demonstrate the potential value of systematic synthesis but also provide an initial basis for considering which dimensions and indicators might warrant closer examination in a Nordic democracy dataset.

Table 14: Lower-scoring areas identified across the indices by country

Country	Lower-scoring areas identified across indices
Denmark	Rights of immigrants and newcomers (Freedom House index); lower political participation (EIU Democracy Index); stricter migration policies and challenges related to minority inclusion (GSoD Indices); slight decline in perceived integrity and public-sector performance (CPI)
Finland	Hate speech, harassment and discrimination against minorities (Freedom House index); lowest Nordic score for political participation (EIU Democracy Index); weaker participatory democracy and limited direct citizen influence (V-Dem indices); declining press freedom and concerns regarding self-censorship (GSoD Indices); stricter migration policies (GSoD Indices); gender-based violence concerns (GSoD Indices); declining perceptions of integrity and corruption control (CPI)
Iceland	Close links between political and business elites and concentrated media ownership (Freedom House index); weaker functioning of government (EIU Democracy Index); lowest Nordic Liberal Democracy score (V-Dem indices); weaker participatory democracy (V-Dem indices); declining economic equality (GSoD Indices); declines in academic freedom and freedom of expression (GSoD Indices); increasingly fragmented coalition politics (GSoD Indices); gender-based violence concerns (GSoD Indices); worsening corruption perceptions (CPI)
Norway	Discrimination against marginalised groups, including Roma communities (Freedom House index); participatory democracy weaker than other democratic dimensions (V-Dem indices); decline in judicial independence and compliance with judicial decisions (GSoD Indices); rising income inequality (GSoD Indices); increasing corruption perceptions (CPI)
Sweden	Rising violent crime and hate-crime concerns (Freedom House index); political participation weaker than electoral and liberal dimensions (EIU Democracy Index and V-Dem indices); declines in civil liberties, particularly freedom of association, assembly and the press (GSoD Indices); more complex coalition formation and rising income inequality (GSoD Indices); persistent gender income and pension gaps (GSoD Indices); the largest Nordic decline in perceived public-sector integrity since 2012 (CPI)

Source: Freedom House, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025; Andersson, 2016; Mechkova et al., 2016; International IDEA, 2025f; DeVeaux and Jaspers, 2026; Transparency International, 2026

Table 15: Cross-Nordic lower-scoring areas

Lower-scoring area	Main indices
Lower political participation beyond elections	EIU Democracy Index, V-Dem indices, GSoD indices
Minority rights and discrimination concerns	Freedom House index, GSoD indices
Migration and integration challenges	Freedom House index, GSoD indices
Media freedom and pluralism pressures	Freedom House index, GSoD indices
Economic and social equality concerns	V-Dem, GSoD indices
Concerns about trust, accountability and institutional legitimacy	CPI, DPI
Judicial independence and rule-of-law pressures	GSoD indices
Growing concerns about disinformation, polarisation and social cohesion	GSoD indices, Freedom House index

Source: Freedom House, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025; Andersson, 2016; Mechkova et al., 2016; International IDEA, 2025f; DeVeaux and Jaspers, 2026; Transparency International, 2026

Detecting gradual change and variation: the sensitivity gap

Image: Yohan Marion / Unsplash.com

As Part 1 has illustrated, most democracy indices are designed to identify broad institutional change and support comparison across very different political systems. In high-performing democracies such as the Nordic countries, this can create ceiling effects: overall scores remain high and relatively stable even when gradual or uneven changes occur within particular democratic dimensions.

Building on the Nordic dataset approach outlined above, the next step would be to organise indicators from different sources within a detailed and conceptually coherent framework of democracy. Of the frameworks reviewed in Part 1, V-Dem provides the most elaborate and relevant backbone. Its five dimensions—electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian democracy—are theoretically established, internationally comparable and connected to an extensive hierarchy of components, subcomponents and indicators. A Nordic framework could retain this architecture while selecting the V-Dem indicators most relevant and sensitive to variation among high-performing democracies. Indicators from other global datasets and comparable Nordic or country-level sources could then be added where they deepen an existing V-Dem component, improve sensitivity within the Nordic range or fill a clearly identified gap. This would preserve conceptual coherence and international comparability while producing a richer measurement framework better suited to detecting variation across the Nordic countries.

TiNDe, the Norwegian democracy assessment, provides a practical precedent for this approach. It uses V-Dem's five dimensions as its conceptual foundation, supplements them with indicators from international and Norwegian sources, and reports disaggregated results across national, regional and local levels rather than a single overall score. A Nordic approach could apply the same logic in a more limited form, using a smaller set of regularly updated and comparable indicators (Dahlum et al., 2023).

Capturing what is distinctively Nordic: the conceptual gap

Image: Getty Images / Unsplash.com

International democracy indices do not necessarily fully capture the institutional and societal arrangements through which Nordic democracies operate. This creates a conceptual gap: features such as corporatist cooperation, universal welfare institutions, social trust, gender equality, consensus-oriented policymaking, strong local government and state capacity may matter for democratic performance, but their place in a democracy index is not self-evident.

A Nordic measurement approach would therefore need to determine explicitly how these features should be treated. Some may be understood as dimensions of democracy in their own right, others as conditions that support democratic quality, and still others as broader characteristics of the Nordic model that are better monitored separately. Building on the dataset approach outlined above, this assessment could identify where existing indicators provide sufficient coverage, where they could be deepened using available and comparable Nordic data, and where additional indicators may be needed to capture relevant Nordic democracy features that are largely absent from international sources.

The Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) offers potentially useful methodological inspiration for addressing this gap (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). Although designed primarily for developing and transition countries, its attention to consensus-building, implementation capacity and inclusive governance illustrates how a democracy framework could assess not only formal institutions and outcomes but also the quality of decision-making and governments' capacity to respond to societal challenges.

This is, however, a substantial and especially challenging gap to address. Developing specifically Nordic dimensions or indicators would go considerably further than the approaches outlined above: it would require revisiting, and potentially questioning or extending, well-established conceptualisations of democracy, including V-Dem's carefully developed five-dimensional framework. It is not self-evident that such a revision is either feasible or desirable, particularly if it weakens conceptual clarity or international comparability. A cautious first step would therefore be to assess whether additional

Nordic or country-level indicators can sharpen the measurement of existing democratic dimensions. This could include capturing forms of organised participation, local autonomy, social equality, institutional trust or consensus-oriented governance that are thinly measured in global sources, rather than treating these features as new dimensions of democracy.

Table 16 maps key Nordic model dimensions against existing global democracy indices. It indicates which features are already covered and where measurement remains partial or weak.

Table 16: Mapping Nordic model dimensions against existing global indices

Dimension	Potential components	Coverage in global indices	Main index/indices
Corporatism, organised participation and **labour-market coordination**	Trade union density; collective bargaining coverage; employer organisation density; social dialogue institutions; tripartite bargaining; strike frequency; labour-market conflict resolution	**Very weak**. Freedom of association and civil society participation are measured, but corporatist institutions and collective bargaining are largely absent.	-
Universalism, welfare state and **egalitarian foundations**	Social expenditure as a share of GDP; healthcare access; education access; childcare coverage; poverty reduction after transfers; redistribution; unemployment protection; social insurance coverage	**Partial**. Equality and inclusion are measured, but welfare-state institutions and social outcomes are largely absent.	V-Dem indices (Egalitarian Democracy), GSoD Indices (Economic Equality, Social Group Equality), Democracy Barometer (Equality)
Trust, civic culture and **social cohesion**	Trust in parliament, government and courts; voter turnout; voluntary organisation membership; interpersonal trust; corruption perceptions; social cohesion; political efficacy; democratic support	**Relatively strong**. Trust, participation, corruption and democratic attitudes are frequently measured.	EIU Democracy Index (Political Culture, Participation), DPI, CPI, GSoD Indices, Democracy Barometer
Consensus democracy and political decision-making	Electoral system proportionality; coalition governments; minority governments; government durability; legislative compromise; cross-party cooperation; consensus-building; policy continuity	**Moderate**. Electoral institutions are well covered; consensus-building and coalition governance are only partially captured.	V-Dem indices (Deliberative Democracy), Democracy Barometer (Representation, Competition), EIU Democracy Index, Polity indices
Education, innovation and **knowledge-based development**	Educational attainment; PISA scores; tertiary education; lifelong learning; R&D expenditure; patent applications; researchers per capita; digital skills; technological adoption	**Very weak / absent**. Democracy datasets rarely address these issues directly.	Limited coverage through V-Dem indices (Academic Freedom) and GSoD Indices; better measured through OECD, Eurostat and World Bank datasets

Gender equality	Female parliamentary representation; women in cabinet; gender pay gap; labour-force participation gap; leadership positions; parental leave uptake; unpaid care work; gender-based violence	**Moderate**. Political representation is covered; broader socioeconomic equality is less visible.	V-Dem indices (Egalitarian Democracy), GSoD Indices (Gender Equality), EIU Democracy Index (Women in Politics), Freedom House index
Expertise, policymaking and **institutional adaptation**	Expert committees; public consultations; evidence-based policymaking; regulatory quality; civil service professionalism; policy evaluation; strategic governance; digital government capacity	**Moderate to strong**. Administrative quality and policy deliberation are partly covered.	EIU Democracy Index (Functioning of Government), EQI/QoG indices, V-Dem indices (Deliberative Democracy), Democracy Barometer (Governmental Capability)
Multi-level governance and local autonomy	Local government expenditure; fiscal autonomy; local taxation powers; municipal responsibilities; local election turnout; regional authority; decentralisation; intergovernmental transfers	**Weak**. Most democracy indices focus on national institutions.	V-Dem subnational indicators, including subnational elections and civil liberties; EQI (regional governance quality); GSoD Indices (participation)

Bringing democracy closer to where it is practised: the subnational gap

Image: Yadid Levy / Norden.org

Most democracy indices assess institutions, rights, participation and governance at the national level. This is a significant limitation in the Nordic countries, where municipalities and regions exercise substantial responsibilities and citizens encounter democracy through local elections, public services, planning and civic participation. National results may therefore conceal territorial differences in representation, inclusion, trust, accountability and institutional capacity. Addressing the subnational gap would require a distinct analytical layer within a Nordic framework, aligned with the same democratic dimensions used at national level but adapted to institutions and data below the state level.

Two broad approaches are possible. The first would assess each country's system of decentralised democracy as a whole, producing separate national, regional and local profiles without scoring every municipality or region individually. The second would measure variation between individual municipalities or regions.

Assessing decentralised systems as a whole. A feasible first step would be to review the available subnational indicators in existing datasets, particularly V-Dem, which offers the most extensive international coverage. Measures of subnational elections, local government power, civil liberties and participatory institutions could be examined to determine what they already reveal about democracy below the national level in the Nordic Region. Existing coverage is nevertheless likely to be insufficient for a meaningful comparative assessment, making some additional data collection necessary. TiNDe provides the clearest practical model: it applies the same five democratic dimensions at national, regional and local levels and supplements international indicators with election data, administrative statistics, citizen surveys, coded institutional information and expert assessments. However, this approach does not capture differences between particular municipalities or regions (Dahlum et al., 2023).

Measuring territorial variation. A fuller approach would also assess democratic quality across individual municipalities or regions using a common set of measures aligned with the framework's democratic dimensions. This would provide greater analytical depth and reveal territorial inequalities that national or governance-level profiles could conceal. However, it would also require extensive data collection and harmonisation across different Nordic administrative systems. More feasible intermediate options would be to compare categories of territories—such as urban, rural, remote or sparsely populated areas—or to conduct in-depth measurement in a small but diverse sample of municipalities and regions in the Nordic countries. Such pilots could test the availability and comparability of indicators before any attempt at comprehensive Nordic coverage.

Completing the Nordic picture: addressing the coverage gap

Image: Mads Schmidt Rasmussen / Norden.org

Most international democracy datasets are organised around sovereign states and therefore exclude or only indirectly capture Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland. This creates a significant coverage gap: these countries have distinctive constitutional arrangements and political institutions but are not included as separate units in the major democracy datasets reviewed here. Extending the framework to them would therefore involve a more substantial data-collection challenge than adding or deepening indicators for the five Nordic states.

Comparable assessment of Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland would most likely require a dedicated data-collection strategy, potentially including an expert survey to generate measures similar to those available for the Nordic states in global datasets such as V-Dem. However, the feasibility of constructing reliable indices would depend on the availability of a sufficiently broad pool of relevant experts and adequate complementary data for each country. If the evidence base proves too limited for robust and comparable quantitative measurement, narrative country profiles may offer a more feasible alternative.

Conclusion

Image: Alberto Casetta / Unsplash.com

This working paper has examined whether there is added value in developing a regionally grounded approach to democracy measurement. The answer is cautiously affirmative. The evidence reviewed in Part 1 presents a largely stable picture of Nordic democracy: across the core datasets, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden continue to rank among the world's strongest democracies, with robust performance in electoral integrity, civil liberties, rule of law and institutional quality. There is little indication of systematic democratic backsliding across the region.

At the same time, Part 1 also shows that high aggregate scores do not capture the full picture. Several indices and country assessments point to modest declines, recurring lower-scoring areas and more uneven performance in specific dimensions, including political participation, minority inclusion, media freedom and pluralism, public-sector integrity, trust and accountability and aspects of equality. These patterns partly overlap with wider pressures discussed in the paper, such as the rise in political discontent, shifting party systems, migration and integration debates, digitalisation and disinformation, climate and energy transitions, geopolitical insecurity, and territorial inequalities. The main implication is that Nordic democracies are not experiencing a common pattern of democratic breakdown, but neither are they insulated from pressures that may already be affecting aspects of democratic quality.

Part 1 concludes by identifying five gaps in how Nordic democracy is currently measured: evidence is fragmented across sources; aggregate scores are often insufficiently sensitive to gradual or uneven change; distinctive Nordic institutional and societal features are only partly captured or conceptually unsettled; democracy below the national level is weakly measured; and Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland are inconsistently covered. Part 2 builds directly on these measurement gaps and maps a range of practical pathways towards a feasible, regionally grounded approach to democracy measurement in the Nordic countries. It considers how dispersed evidence could be synthesised, how a harmonised Nordic dataset could be structured, how sensitivity could be improved within an established conceptual framework, how Nordic-specific features and subnational democracy might be incorporated, and how the wider Nordic Region could be represented more fully.

The approaches outlined in Part 2 are not presented as a single sequential model. Some are alternatives that respond to the same gap, while others are complementary and could be combined in different ways. Further work would therefore need to determine which gaps should be prioritised, which approaches offer the greatest added value and methodological feasibility, and which combinations are realistic given available data, expertise and resources.

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About this publication

Towards a democracy index for the Nordic Region?

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Nordregio working paper 2026:9
ISBN: 978-91-8001-208-9 (digital)
ISBN: 978-91-8001-209-6 (PDF)
ISSN: 1403-2511
DOI: http://doi.org/10.6027/WP2026.9.1403-2511

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Layout: Marija Zelenkauskė, Nordregio
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