Defining and Developing Democracy

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The basis of a democratic state is liberty.
—Aristotle, The Politics

Since April of 1974, when the Portuguese military overthrew the Salazar/Caetano dictatorship, the number of democracies in the world has multiplied dramatically. Before the start of this global trend, there were about forty democracies. The number increased moderately through the late 1970s and early 1980s as several states experienced transitions from authoritarian rule (predominantly military) to democratic rule. In the mid-1980s, the pace of global democratic expansion accelerated markedly. By the end of 1995, there were as many as 117 democracies or as few as 76, depending on how one counts.

The Best Form of Government

... The normative perspective underlying this book is that democratization is generally a good thing and that democracy is the best form of government. However, democracy is not an unmitigated blessing. Dating back to Aristotle (and to Plato, who had even less sympathy for democracy), the key shapers of democratic political thought have held that the best realizable form of government is mixed, or constitutional, government, in which freedom is constrained by the rule of law and popular sovereignty is tempered by state institutions that produce order and stability. Aristotle saw that, in a state of pure democracy, "where the multitude have the supreme power, and supersede the law by their decrees ... demagogues spring up," and democracy degenerates into a form of despotism.

Thus, as Locke, Montesquieu, and the American Federalists asserted, only a constitutional government, restraining and dividing the temporary power of the majority, can protect individual freedom. This fundamental insight (and value) gave birth to a tradition of political thought—liberalism—and to a concept—liberal democracy—that are central to this book. As elaborated below, I use the term liberal to mean a political system in which individual and group liberties are well protected and in which there exist autonomous spheres of civil society and private life, insulated from state control.

Even if we think of democracy as simply the rule of the people, as a system for choosing government through free and fair electoral competition at regular intervals, governments chosen in this manner are generally better than those that are not. They offer the best prospect for accountable, responsive, peaceful, predictable, good governance. And, as Robert Dahl cogently observes, they promote "freedom as no feasible alternative can." ...

Up to a point consistent with the principles of constitutionalism and representative democracy, government is better when it is more democratic. This is not to argue that even electoral democracy is easily attainable in any country at any time.


6. There are certain economic, social, and cultural conditions for democracy to be viable, but they are often overstated, and we should be cautious about
However, more democracy makes government more responsive to a wider range of citizens... 

Defining Democracy

The above positive benefits of democracy derive, as Russell notes with respect to interstate peace, from both the norms and the political institutions that characterize democracies. But which democracies? For peace and development and for the just treatment of minorities, is it enough that governments come to power through free, fair, and competitive elections? Or do these objectives require other features of democracy—a rule of law, free information, civil liberties, and a distribution of power that produces a horizontal accountability of rulers to one another? What do we mean by democracy?

Conceptualizing Democracy

Just as political scientists and observers do not agree on how many democracies there are in the world, so they differ on how to classify specific regimes, the conditions for making and consolidating democracy, and the consequences of democracy for peace and development. An essential element in these debates is lack of consensus on the meaning of democracy...

...By large, most scholars and policy users of the term democracy today refer to a purely political conception of the term, and this intellectual shift back to an earlier convention has greatly facilitated progress in studying the dynamics of democracy, including the relationship between political democracy and various social and economic conditions.

Where conceptions of democracy diverge today is on the range and extent of political properties encompassed by democracy. Minimalist definitions of what I call electoral democracy descend from Joseph Schumpeter, who defined democracy as a system "for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." 32 Huntington, among others, explicitly embraces Schumpeter's emphasis on competitive elections for effective power as the essence of democracy. 33 However, Schumpeter's conception of socioeconomic criteria into the definition of democracy, see Terry Lynn Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America," Comparative Politics 23, no. 1 (1990): 2.

32. Joseph Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy, 2d ed. (New York: Harper, 1947), 269. For Schumpeter, Held explains, "the democratic citizen's lot was, quite straightforwardly, the right periodically to choose and authorize governments to act on their behalf" (Models of Democracy, 165). Schumpeter was clearly uneasy with direct political action by citizens, warning that "the electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede" (283). Thus, his "case for democracy can support, at best, only minimum political involvement: that involvement which could be considered sufficient to legitimate the right of competing elites to rule" (ibid., 168). This is, indeed, as sparse a notion of democracy as one could posit without drawing the term of meaning.

conceives expression has required periodic elaboration (or what Collier and Levitsky call "precising") to avoid inclusion of cases that do not fit the implicit meaning.

The seminal elaboration is Dahl's conception of 
polyarchy, which has two overt dimensions: opposition (organized contestation through regular, free, and fair elections) and participation (the right of virtually all adults to vote and contest for office). Yet embedded in these two dimensions is a third, without which the first two cannot be truly meaningful: civil liberty. Polyarchy encompasses not only freedom to vote and contest for office but also freedom to speak and publish dissenting views, freedom to form and join organizations, and alternative sources of information. Both Dahl's original formulation and a later, more comprehensive effort to measure polyarchy take seriously the nonelectoral dimensions.34

Electoral Democracy


34. Dahl, Polyarchy, 2–3. Dahl uses the term polyarchy to distinguish these systems from a more ideal form of democracy, "one of the characteristics of which is the quality of being completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens" (2).


and assembly) in order for competition and participation to be meaningful. But, typically, they do not devote much attention to them, nor do they incorporate them into actual measures of democracy. Thus (consistent with most other efforts to classify or measure regimes), Przeworski and his colleagues define democracy simply as "a regime in which winning office is filled as a consequence of contested elections" (with the proviso that real contestation requires an opposition with some nontrivial chance of winning office and that the chief executive office and legislative seats are filled by contested elections).35 Such Schumpeterian conceptions (comparing Western liberal democracies makers as well) risk committing what Terry Karl calls the "fallacy of electoralism." This flawed conception of democracy privileges elections over other dimensions of democracy and ignores the degree to which multiparty elections even if they are competitive and uncertain in outcomes—may exclude significant portions of the population from contesting for power or advancing and defending their interests, or may leave significant arenas of decision making beyond the control of elected officials.36 Philip Schmitter and Terry Karl remind us that, "however central to democracy, elections occur intermittently and only allow citizens to choose between the highly aggregated alternatives offered by political parties, which can, especially in the early stages of interpreting changes in scores over time. The appeal of a simple dichotomous measure such as that used by Przeworski and his colleagues is precisely the relative simplification of data collection and regime classification and the ability to conduct a straightforward "event history" analysis that analyzes changes toward and away from democratic regime forms. Encouragingly, the Freedom House ratings and other measures of democracy are generally highly correlated with one another (Alex Inkeles, Introduction to Measuring Democracy). In fact, Przeworski et al. report that the Freedom House combined ratings for 1972 to 1990 predict 93 percent of their regime classifications during this period ("What Makes Democracies Endure?").

36. Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, José Antonio Chebabb, and Fernando Limongi, "What Makes Democracies Endure?" Journal of Democracy 7, no. 1 (1996): 50–51. Their methodology is more comprehensively explained in Michael Alvarez, José Antonio Chebabb, Fernando Limongi, and Adam Przeworski, "Classifying Political Regimes for the AICAP Data Set," Working Paper 4, Chicago Center on Democracy, University of Chicago. Many other approaches to conceiving and measuring democracy in quantitative, cross-national analyses have also tended to rely on indicators of competition and participation (whether dichotomous, categorical, or continuous), but some of these were gravely flawed by their incorporation of substantively inappropriate indicators, such as voter turnout or political stability. (On this and other conceptual and methodological problems, see Kenneth A. Bollen, "Political Democracy: Conceptual and Measurement Trap," in Inkeles, Measuring Democracy, 3–20.)

As an alternative approach that explicitly includes the behavioral, noninstitutional dimensions of democracy, the combined Freedom House scales of political rights and civil liberties, described below, are increasingly being used in quantitative analysis. For examples, see Henry S. Rowen, "The Tide Underneath the Third Wave," Journal of Democracy 6, no. 1 (1995): 52–64; Surjit S. Bhalla, "Freedom and Economic Growth: A Virtuous Cycle?" in Hadihussein, Democracy's Victory and Crisis, 195–24. While the Freedom House data is available annually, it goes back in time only to 1972, and the criteria for scoring have become stricter over time (particularly in the 1990s), creating problems for

of a democratic transition, proliferate in a bewildering variety."38

In recent years, electoral conceptions of democracy have expanded to rule out the latter element of ambiguity or misclassification: many now exclude regimes that suffer substantial repressed domains of military (or bureaucratic, or oligarchical) power that are not accountable to elected officials.39 But still, such formulations may still fail to give due weight to political repression and marginalization, which exclude significant segments of the population—typically the poor or ethnic and regional minorities from exercising their democratic rights. One of the most rigorous and widely used measures of democracy in cross-national, quantitative research—in the "polity" data sets—acknowledges civil liberties as a major component of democracy but, because of the paucity of data, does not incorporate them.40


Freedom exists over a continuum of variation. Rights of expression, organization, and assembly vary considerably across countries that do have regular, competitive, multiparty elections in which votes are (more or less) honestly counted and in which the winning candidates exercise most of the effective power in the country. How severely repressed must a minority be for the political system to be disqualified as a polyarchy (a liberal democracy)?

By the minimalist definition, Turkey, India, Sri Lanka, Colombia, and Russia qualify as democracies. But by the stricter conception of liberal democracy, all (except perhaps India as a whole) fail short. In fact, the gap between electoral and liberal democracy has grown markedly during the latter part of the third wave, forming one of its most significant but little-noticed features. As a result, human rights violations have become widespread in countries that are formally democratic.

Liberal Democracy

Electoral democracy is a civilian, constitutional system in which the legislative and chief executive offices are filled through regular, competitive, multiparty elections with universal suffrage. When widely mimicked, the concept has become popular in scholarship and policy, it has been amplified, or precisely, to various degrees by several scholars and theorists. This exercise has been constructive, but it has left behind a plethora of what Collier and Levitsky term "expanded procedural" conceptions, which do not clearly relate to one another and which occupy intermediate locations in the continuum between electoral and liberal democracy.

How does liberal democracy extend beyond these formal and intermediate conceptions? In addition to the elements of electoral democracy, it requires, first, the absence of reserved domains of power for the military or other actors not accountable to the electorate, directly or indirectly. Second, in addition to the vertical accountability of rulers to the ruled (secured mainly through elections), it requires the horizontal accountability of officeholders to one another; this constrains executive power and so helps protect constitutionalism, legality, and the deliberative process. Third, it encompasses extensive procedural and institutional mechanisms of horizontal accountability, which define an electoral outcome as uncertain with a significant opposition vote and the procedures for the rule of law.

41. Among the expanded procedural definitions that appear to bear a strong affinity to the conception of liberal democracy articulated here, but that are somewhat consistent or ambiguous about the weight given to civil liberties, are Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America," 2; Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens, Capitalist Development and Democracy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 43-44, 46.

42. Obviously, the independent power of the legislature to check and balance executive power will differ markedly between presidential and parliamentary regimes. However, even in parliamentary regimes, democratic vigor requires striking a balance between disciplined parliamentary support for the governing party and independent capacity to scrutinize and question the actions of cabinet ministers and executive agencies. For the political quality of democracy, the most important additional mechanism of horizontal accountability is an autonomous judiciary, but crucial as well are institutionalized means (often in a separate, autonomous agency) to monitor, investigate, and punish government corruption at all levels. On the concept of lateral or 'constitutional,' accountability and its importance, see Richard L. Sklar, "Developmental Democracy," Comparative Studies in Society and History 29, no. 4 (1987): 686-714; Sklar, "Towards a Theory of Developmental Democracy," in Democracy and Development: Theory and Practice, edited by Adrian Leftwich (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 25-44. For the concept and theory of "horizontal accountability," see Guillermo O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy," Journal of Democracy 5, no. 1 (1994): 60-82, and "Horizontal Accountability and New Polyarchies," in Andreas Schleifer, Larry Diamond, and Marc F. Plattner, eds., The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, forthcoming).


44. This is a particular emphasis of Schmitter and Karl, "What Democracy Is?" 78-80, but it has long been a central theme in the work and thought of democratic theorists such as Robert A. Dahl. In addition to his Polyarchies, see Dahl, Who Governs? (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); Dahl, Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy: Autonomy versus Control (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).
the state but also by organized nonstate or anti-state forces.

These ten conditions imply an eleventh: if political authority is to be constrained and balanced, individual and minority rights protected, and a rule of law assured, democracy requires a constitution that is supreme. Liberal democracies in particular "are and have to be constitutional democracies. The lack of a constitutional spirit, of an understanding of the centrality of constitutional stability, is one of the weaknesses" of many illiberal third-wave democracies in the postcommunist world, as well as in the Third World.45

Midrange Conceptions

Conceptual approaches are no longer easily dichotomized into electoral and liberal approaches. Some conceptions of democracy fall somewhere in between, explicitly incorporating basic freedoms of expression and association yet still allowing for constrictions in citizenship rights and a porous, insecure rule of law. The crucial distinction turns whether freedoms are relevant mainly to the extent that they ensure meaningful electoral competition and participation or whether they are, instead, viewed as necessary for a wider range of democratic functions.

The question of how extensive liberty must be before a political system can be termed a liberal democracy is a normative and philosophical one. The key distinction is whether the political process centers on elections or whether it encompasses a much broader and more continuous play of interest articulation, representation, and contestation. If we view the latter as an essential component of democracy, then there must be adequate freedoms surrounding that broader process as well, and to use O'Donnell's language, individuals must be able to exercise their rights of citizenship not only in elections but also in obtaining "fair access to public agencies and courts," which is often denied in "informally institutionalized" polychorches.

The distinction between political and civil freedom, on the one hand, and cultural freedom (or license), on the other, is often confusion in the debate over whether democracy is inappropriate for Asia (or East Asia, or Confucian Asia, or simply Singapore) because of incompatible values. Liberal democracy does not require the comprehensively exalted status of individual rights that obtains in Western Europe and especially the United States. Thus, one may accept many of the cultural objections of advocates of the "Asian values" perspective (that Western democracies have shifted the balance too much in favor of individual rights and social entitlements over the rights of the community and the social obligations of the individual to the community) and still embrace the political and civic fundamentals of liberal democracy as articulated above.

Pseudodemocracies and Nondemocracies

An appreciation of the dynamics of regime change and the evolution of democracy must allow for a third class of regimes, which are less than minimally democratic but still distinct from purely authoritarian regimes. This requires a second cutting point, between electoral democracies and electoral regimes that have multiple parties and many other constitutional features of electoral democracy but that lack at least one key requirement: an arena of contestation sufficiently fair that the ruling party can be turned out of power. Juan Linz, Seymour Martin Lipset, and I term these regimes pseudodemocracies, "because the existence of formally democratic political institutions, such as multiparty electoral competition, masks (often in part to legitimate) the reality of authoritarian domination."46

There is wide variation among pseudodemocracies. They include semidemocracies, which more nearly approach electoral democracies in their pluralism and competitiveness, as well as what Giovanni Sartori terms "hégemonie party systems," in which a relatively institutionalized ruling party makes extensive use of coercion, patronage, media control, and other features to deny formally legal opposition parties a fair and authentic chance to compete for power.47

What distinguishes pseudodemocracies from other nondemocracies is that they tolerate legal alternative parties, which constitute at least somewhat real and independent opposition to the ruling party. Typically, this toleration is accompanied by more space for organizational pluralism and dissident activity in civil society than is the case in the most repressive authoritarian regimes. Invariably, pseudodemocracies are illiberal, but they vary in their repressiveness and in their proximity to the threshold of electoral democracy (which Mexico could well cross in its next presidential election, in the year 2000). Thus, pseudodemocracies tend to have somewhat higher levels of freedom than other authoritarian regimes.48


48. ... Taking seriously Collier and Levitsky's appeal to reduce the conceptual clutter in comparative democratic studies, we relate our categories here to similar concepts in other studies, particularly the "diminished subspecies" of democracy. Those subspecies are missing the attribute of free elections or relatively fair multiparty contestation are pseudodemocracies. Those that have real and fair multiparty competition but with limited suffrage constitute exclusionary, or oligarchic, democracy, which is not relevant to the contemporary period of universal suffrage. Those regimes without adequate civil liberties or civilian control of the military may nevertheless be electoral democracies. Care is needed to critically apply concepts, however. For example, Donald K. Emmerson's category of "illiberal democracy" would seem to be coincident with "electoral democracy" in my framework. However, as Emmerson applies the concept to what he calls "one-party democracy" in Singapore and Malaysia, the coincidence breaks down. Civil and political freedoms are so constrained in these two countries that the minimum criterion of electoral democracy (a sufficiently level electoral playing field to give opposition parties a chance at victory) is not met. See Emmerson, "Region and Recalitrance: Rethinking Democracy through Southeast Asia," Pacific Review 8, no. 2 (1995): 223-248.
Democracy in Developmental Perspective

Even liberal democracies fall short of democratic ideals. At the least liberal end of the group, they may have serious flaws in their guarantees of personal and associational freedom. And certainly ongoing practices in Italy, Japan, Belgium, France, the United States, and most other industrialized democracies underscore that even long-established and well-institutionalized democracies with the most liberal average freedom scores of 1 or 1.5 are afflicted with corruption, favoritism, and unequal access to political power, not to mention voter apathy, cynicism, and disengagement.

There is not now and has never been in the modern world of nation-states a perfect democracy, one in which all citizens have roughly equal political resources and in which government is completely or almost completely responsive to all citizens. This is why Robert Dahl uses the term polyarchy to characterize the more limited form of democracy that has been attained to date. Important currents in democracy’s third wave are the increased valorization of such limited political democracy as an end in itself and the growing tendency of intellectuals (even many who had once been on the Marxist left) to recognize the need for realism in what can be expected of democracy. Certainly, democracy does not produce all good things. As Linz observes, “political democracy does not necessarily assure even a reasonable approximation of what we would call a democratic society, a society with considerable equality of opportunity in all spheres.” As Schmitter and Karl argue, democracies are not necessarily more economically or administratively efficient, or more orderly and governable, than autocratic regimes.65

But by permitting widespread liberty and the real possibility of selecting alternative governments and policies, and by permitting disadvantaged groups to organize and mobilize politically, democracies (particularly liberal democracies) provide the best long-run prospects for reducing social injustices and correcting mistaken policies and corrupt practices. It is in this way, then, not to take the existence of democracy, even liberal democracy, as cause for self-congratulation. Democracy should be viewed as a developmental phenomenon. Even when a country is above the threshold of electoral (or even liberal) democracy, democratic institutions can be improved and deepened or may need to be consolidated; political competition can be made fairer and more open; participation can become more inclusive and vigorous; citizens’ knowledge, resources, and competence can grow; elected and appointed officials can be made more responsive and accountable; civil liberties can be better protected; and the rule of law can become more efficient and secure.66 Viewed in this way, continued democratic development is a challenge for all countries, including the United States; all democracies, new and established, can become more democratic.

Obviously, the improvement and invigoration of democracy will not solve all social and economic problems that societies face. But widening the scope of public deliberation, empowering historically marginalized and alienated groups, and increasing citizen competence and government responsiveness—reforms that deepen and extend democracy—may increase the sophistication of mass publics and the legitimacy (and hence the governing capacity) of elected officials.67 Beyond this, increasing citizen competence and participation in the political process will spill over into other arenas of social life. Civic engagement, such as participation in voluntary associations and community networks, generates trust, reciprocity, and cooperation, which reduce cynicism, encourage political participation, and facilitate economic development, democratic stability, and the resolution of social problems. Increasingly, social scientists view such social capital as a critical resource for dealing with the seemingly intractable problems of poverty, alienation, and crime in the United States and other industrialized democracies. Otherwise, “mutual distrust and defection, vertical dependence and exploitation, isolation and disorder, criminality and backwardness [reinforce] one another in … interminable vicious circles.”68

Viewed from a developmental perspective, the fate of democracy is open-ended. The elements of liberal democracy emerge in various sequences and degrees, at varying paces in the different countries.69 Democratic change can also move in differing directions. Just as electoral democracies can become more democratic—more liberal, constitutional, competitive, accountable, inclusive, and participatory—so they can also become less democratic—more illiberal, abusive, corrupt, exclusive, narrow, unresponsive, and unaccountable. And liberal democracies, too, can either improve or decline in their levels of political accountability, access, competitiveness, and responsiveness. There is no guarantee that democratic development moves in only one direction, and there is much to suggest that all political systems (including democracies, liberal or otherwise) become rigid, corrupt, and unresponsive in the absence of periodic reform and renewal.70 Democracy not only may lose its quality, it may even effectively disappear, not merely through the breakdown of formal institutions but also through the more insidious processes of decay.71

70. Such a developmental perspective may help to inoculate democratic theory against the tendency toward teleological thinking that Guillermo O’Donnell discerns in the literature on democratic consolidation that is, the underlying assumption that there is a particular natural path and end state of democratic development.

64. Linz, The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes, 97. Emphasis is mine.
67. In their comparative study of the restructuring of property relations in postsocialist Eastern Europe, Postsocialist Pathways (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Laszlo Brust and David Stark argue that policy coherence, effectiveness, and sustainability are fostered when executives are constrained and reforms are negotiated between governments and “deliberative associations.”
69. Sklar, “Developmental Democracy.”