Democracy and Dictatorship: Conceptualization and Measurement
We live in a world that generally agrees on the importance and desirability of democracy.

But it hasn’t always been like that.
The ancient Greeks were some of the first to start thinking about the merits of different forms of regime.
**Demokratia** is the Greek word meaning ‘rule by the demos.’

Although the Greek word *demos* often gets translated as ‘the people,’ it refers more specifically to the ‘common people’ – those people with little or no economic independence who are politically uneducated.

Many believed that the demos would pursue their own interests at the expense of the commonweal.
Plato did not see democracy as government by the people.

Instead, he saw it as government by the poor and uneducated against the rich and educated.

Plato believed that political decisions should be based on expertise and that allowing all people to rule would lead to mob rule and class warfare.
The Greek word demokratia often gets translated as “rule by the people” with no mention about who these people are. In Plato and Aristotle’s time, demos referred primarily to the “common people”—those people with little or no economic independence who were politically uneducated (Hanson 1989, 71). Ultimately, Plato thought that democracy would not be rule by the people but instead would be rule by the poor and uneducated against the rich and educated. In addition, he believed that the uneducated mass would be open to demagoguery, leading to short-lived democracies in which the people quickly surrender power to a tyrant (Baradat 2006, 63).

Aristotle ([350 BCE] 1996) disagreed with Plato to the extent that he believed that there were some conditions under which the will of the many could be equal to or wiser than the will of the few (1281b). This is not to say, however, that he thought highly of democracy. In his Politics, Aristotle ([350 BCE] 1996) classified regimes in regard to the number of rulers that they had, stating that government “must be in the hands of one, or of a few, or of the many” (1279a.27–28). His classification is shown in Table 5.1. He believed that regimes come in good and bad forms. In good forms of regime the rulers govern for the good of all, whereas in bad forms they govern only for the good of themselves (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1996, 1279a.17–21). The good forms of regime were monarchy, aristocracy, and politeia; the bad forms were tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1996, 1279b.4–10).

Aristotle’s Classification of Regimes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of rulers</th>
<th>Good form “For the Good of All”</th>
<th>Bad form “For the Good of the Rulers”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Monarchy</td>
<td>Tyranny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few</td>
<td>Aristocracy</td>
<td>Oligarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many</td>
<td>Politeia</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aristotle saw democracy as the most dangerous of the corrupt forms of regime.

- Democracy was class rule by the worst class.
Democracy was not associated with elections.

- Until the 18th century, democracy was seen as a regime in which offices were distributed by lot.
Democracy was viewed as obsolete.

- Democracy meant direct legislation, not representative government.
Monarchy was consistently preferred to democracy by political thinkers.
Things began to change in the **Age of Revolution** (1775-1848).

People had talked about representative government, not democracy.

But ‘democracy’ and ‘aristocracy’ came to designate the main lines of cleavage in the Age of Revolution.
The classical 3-way distinction between the one, the few, and the many was gradually replaced by the 2-way distinction between democracy and autocracy.
Research Questions

• Why are some countries democracies and others dictatorship?

• Do democracies or dictatorships produce better economic performance?

• What factors influence democratic survival?

All of these questions require that we be able to classify countries as democratic or dictatorial.
Theories about the world are based on abstract concepts.

A concept is a mental category or construct that captures the meaning of objects, events, or ideas.

Theoretical concepts cannot be observed; they exist only in our heads.
When we want to test our theoretical claims, we have to translate our concepts into concrete measures or indicators that we can actually observe.

A measure or indicator is a quantification of the thing we are interested in.

The process by which we translate a concept into a measure is called operationalization – we use a particular measure to operationalize a theoretical concept.
Democracy is an abstract theoretical concept.

What is your concept of democracy?

How should we operationalize it?
The central notion underlying our contemporary concept of democracy is that the ‘people’ rather than some subset of the people should rule.

But how should we translate this abstract concept into a practical set of criteria for classifying political regimes?
A substantive view of democracy classifies political regimes in regard to the outcomes that they produce.

A minimalist or procedural view of democracy classifies political regimes in regard to their institutions and procedures.
Robert Dahl proposed a minimalist view of democracy.

Two dimensions

1. **Contestation** captures the extent to which citizens are free to organize themselves into competing blocs in order to press for the policies and outcomes they desire.

2. **Inclusion** has to do with who gets to participate in the democratic process.
A polyarchy is a political regime with high levels of both contestation and inclusion.
Although contestation was high in South Africa under apartheid and in the United States prior to 1830 because there were multiparty elections, inclusion was low because vast segments of the population were not allowed to vote or participate. The expansion of the franchise in the United States during the 1830s represented an increase in inclusion, but substantial barriers to full inclusion remained in place until at least 1964, when the Voting Rights Act gave many African Americans de facto access to the vote for the first time. As countries located in the top left of Figure 5.1 expand the right to vote, they begin to move rightward along the inclusion dimension. For example, Liechtenstein pre-1984, Switzerland pre-1971, and France pre-1945 had high levels of contestation due to multiparty elections, but they had only moderate levels of inclusion because universal suffrage applied only to men. Most of the countries that we immediately recognize as being democracies today would be in the top right-hand corner of Figure 5.1 with high levels of both contestation and inclusion.

Dahl (1971) conceded that contestation and inclusion are only two aspects of what people take into account when they think of the concept of democracy. As a result, he was willing to drop the use of the term democracy altogether. Instead, he used the word polyarchy to describe a political regime with high levels of both contestation and inclusion. Another reason for preferring the term polyarchy was that he did not believe that any large country exhibited, or could exhibit, sufficient levels of contestation or inclusion to rightfully...

**Figure 5.1** Dahl’s Two Dimensions of Democracy: Contestation and Inclusion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Polyarchies (Ideal Type)</th>
<th>Contestation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apartheid</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liechtenstein pre-1984</td>
<td>Switzerland pre-1971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US today</td>
<td>France pre-1945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US pre-1830</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

China

Soviet Union
Three measures of democracy and dictatorship

1. Democracy-Dictatorship (DD) Measure, click here

2. Polity IV Measure, click here

3. Freedom House Measure, click here
Democracy-Dictatorship Measure

Democracies are regimes in which governmental offices are filled as a consequence of contested elections.
A country is classified as a democracy only if all of the following conditions apply:

1. The chief executive is elected.

2. The legislature is elected.

3. There is more than one party competing in the elections.

4. An alternation in power under identical electoral rules has taken place.
The DD measure builds on Dahl’s insights in two ways.

1. Minimalist view of democracy.

2. Emphasis on contestation.
The main difference with Dahl is that the DD measure treats regime type as a dichotomy.

- A **dichotomous measure** has only two discrete categories or values, such as ‘tall’ and ‘short’.

- A **continuous measure** can take on any intermediate value within a given range, such as ‘height in centimeters’.
Dahl and the DD authors are compared in Figures 5.2a and 5.2b. It is important to recognize that it is because their conceptual view of regime type is dichotomous that the DD authors choose to employ a dichotomous measure to capture it, not because they think it is impossible to determine or measure whether some regimes are more democratic than others as some have implied (Elkins 2000).

Polity IV

An alternative measure of democracy comes from Polity IV (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2016). Polity IV provides an annual measure of democracy and autocracy for 167 countries from 1800 to 2015. The Democracy and Autocracy scores for each country both range from 0 to 10. From these two measures, a Polity Score is constructed for each country. The Polity Score is calculated as the Democracy Score minus the Autocracy Score. As a result, the Polity Score for each country ranges from a minimum of –10 (as autocratic or dictatorial as possible) to a maximum of 10 (as democratic as possible). Polity IV follows Dahl in conceptualizing and measuring democracy along a continuum like the one illustrated in Figure 5.2b. In practice, though, many scholars choose to code countries as democracies if their Polity Score is +6 to +10, dictatorships if their Polity Score is –6 to –10, and as an "anocracy" or "mixed regime" if the Polity Score is between –5 and 5.3 Polity IV also follows Dahl in providing a largely minimalist, or procedural, measure of democracy.

Other scholars pick different cut-points for deciding whether a country should be considered a democracy or an autocracy. The decision of where to place the cut-points is rarely, if ever, justified in a theoretical manner. Unfortunately, there is reason to believe that the choice of where to place the cut-points matters in empirical tests (Coppedge 1997; Elkins 2000; Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton 2010).

A continuous measure can take on any intermediate value within a given range (for example, "height in centimeters"). A dichotomous measure has only two discrete categories or values (for example, "tall" or "short").
Polity IV Measure

Polity IV provides annual measures of democracy and autocracy.

- Democracy score, 0-10.
- Autocracy score, 0-10.
Polity IV provides an annual polity score.

- Polity Score = Democracy Score − Autocracy Score.
- Polity Score ranges from -10 to 10.
A country’s polity score is based on five different attributes or dimensions.

1. Competitiveness of executive recruitment.
2. Openness of executive recruitment.
3. Regulation of political participation.
4. Competitiveness of political participation.
5. Executive constraints.

Polity IV is minimalist and captures Dahl’s notion of inclusion and contestation.
A country’s polity score is based on five different attributes or dimensions.

1. Competitiveness of executive recruitment.
2. Openness of executive recruitment.
3. Regulation of political participation.
4. Competitiveness of political participation.
5. Executive constraints.

Polity IV is minimalist. In addition to capturing Dahl’s notion of inclusion and contestation, it adds executive constraints.
What are the precise rules that generate the Polity Score? A country's Polity Score is based on five different attributes or dimensions: (a) the competitiveness of executive recruitment, (b) the openness of executive recruitment, (c) the constraints that exist on the executive, (d) the regulation of political participation, and (e) the competitiveness of political participation. Together, these dimensions capture Dahl's notion of both contestation and inclusion. By including "constraints that exist on the executive," Polity IV actually adds an additional dimension to Dahl's concept of democracy—that democratic governments must be limited governments.4 Each of Polity IV's five attributes contributes a different number of points to a country's Democracy and Autocracy scores. As an illustration, consider the "competitiveness of political participation" dimension (an indicator of the degree of contestation) and the "regulation of political participation" dimension (an indicator of the degree of inclusion) in the political system. The possible scores for these dimensions are shown in Tables 5.2 and 5.3.

If political participation is considered competitive in a country by those scholars coding it, then that country will have 3 added to its Democracy Score and 0 to its Autocracy Score.5

4. It is interesting to note that most of the variation in Polity Scores across countries actually comes from this additional "constraints on the executive" dimension (Gleditsch and Ward 1997).

5. To know precisely what is meant by competitive, transitional, factional, and so on, see the Polity IV Dataset Users' manual at http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscr/p4manualv2015.pdf (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2016).

### Table 5.2: Competitiveness of Political Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Contribution to Democracy Score</th>
<th>Contribution to Autocracy Score</th>
<th>Contribution to Polity Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factional</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suppressed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repressed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5.3: Regulation of Political Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Contribution to Democracy Score</th>
<th>Contribution to Autocracy Score</th>
<th>Contribution to Polity Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sectarian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restricted</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Freedom House Measure

Two categories:

1. Political rights.
2. Civil rights.

Based on scores for political and civil rights, Freedom House classifies countries as Free, Partly Free, and Not Free.
The amount of freedom on the political rights dimension is measured by 10 questions, each worth between 0 and 4 points.

Three categories:

2. Political pluralism and participation.
3. Functioning of government.

A country’s score out of 40 is converted to a 7-point scale.
The amount of freedom on the civil rights dimension is measured by 15 questions, each worth between 0 and 4 points.

Four categories:

1. Freedom of expression and belief.
2. Associational and organizational rights.
3. Rule of law.
4. Personal autonomy and individual rights.

A country’s score out of 60 is converted to a 7-point scale.
A country’s overall Freedom House score is the average of its political and civil rights scores.

Freedom House captures Dahl’s notion of inclusion and contestation.

The big difference is that it employs a substantive view of democracy.
We can evaluate measures in different ways.

- Conceptualization.
- Validity.
- Reliability.
- Replicability.
Conceptualization is the process of creating mental categories that capture the meaning of objects, events, or ideas.

- Minimalist vs. substantive view of democracy.
- Dichotomous vs. continuous view of democracy.
The research question matters.

The substantive view of democracy runs into problems if the researcher wants to know how regime type influences particular outcomes.

- If we define democracy substantively in terms of, say, inequality, we cannot examine the effect of regime type on inequality without engaging in circular reasoning.
The Return of Goldilocks in . . . Civil War and the Three Regimes, click here
Identifying causes.

It is easier to identify causes with minimalist measures of democracy.

If a study using Freedom House finds a positive relationship between democracy and economic development, how do we know which of the 25 underlying attributes is driving the observed relationship?
Scholars can reasonably disagree about whether regime type is dichotomous or continuous.

Again, the research question may matter.

- Impact of economic factors on democratic transitions.
- Impact of foreign intervention on level of democracy.
Validity refers to the extent to which our measures correspond to the concepts that they are intended to reflect.

Several things are important for validity:

• Attributes.

• Aggregation issues.

• Measurement level.
You might ask whether a particular measure includes the correct attributes.

Unfortunately, there are no hard and fast rules for determining which attributes a measure should include.

At the very least, scholars should try to avoid using too many attributes because this reduces the usefulness of the measure.
Once you have chosen your attributes, how do you aggregate them into a single measure?

**Freedom House**

- Is it appropriate to weight the civil and political rights dimensions equally?

**Polity IV**

- Is it appropriate to think that moving from a 1 to a 2 on one dimension is equivalent to moving from a 3 to a 4 on another?
Once you have aggregated your attributes, you have decide the appropriate measurement level

A **nominal measure** classifies observations into discrete categories that must be mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive.

An **ordinal measure** rank-orders observations along some dimension.

An **interval measure** places observations on a scale so that we can tell how much more or less of the thing being measured each observation exhibits.
Reliability refers to the extent to which the measurement process repeatedly and consistently produces the same score for a given case.

The reliability of a measure is likely to depend on the extent to which the measure is based on observables rather subjective judgements.
valid in the sense that on “average” it captures the underlying concept, but unreliable in the sense that there might be a big difference in any two attempts to measure the phenomenon (Figure 5.3 center panel). Obviously, we would like our measures to be both valid and reliable (Figure 5.3 right panel).

The reliability of a measure is likely to vary with the extent to which the measure depends on observable facts or subjective judgments. The DD measure of regime type is likely to be highly reliable because it is based entirely on observables. For example, one only has to know whether the chief executive and legislature are elected, whether there is more than one party, and whether there has been an alternation in power under identical electoral rules to be able to code a country as a democracy or a dictatorship. Given the ease with which we can observe elections, political parties, and so on, it is highly unlikely that two individuals would code the same country differently using DD’s rules. In contrast, the measures provided by Freedom House and Polity IV are likely to be less reliable because of their reliance on the subjective judgments of the individuals coding each country. For example, Freedom House asks country experts to code countries based on things such as fair electoral rules, equal campaigning opportunities, free and independent media, and reasonable self-determination. The fact that two individuals could reasonably disagree as to the meanings of the italicized words suggests that they might code the same country differently and, hence, that the resultant measure would be unreliable. A useful way to determine whether a measure suffers from reliability problems is to empirically assess interobserver reliability by examining the degree to which different observers give consistent estimates of the same phenomenon. While Polity IV has conducted some checks for intercoder reliability in recent years, we know of no such checks from Freedom House (Coppedge et al. 2011, 251).
Replicability refers to the ability of third-party scholars to reproduce the process through which a measure is created.

Replicability is important because it allows researchers that are not party to the construction of a particular measure to independently evaluate the reliability and validity of that measure.

At a minimum, replicability requires that scholars provide clear coding rules and make their disaggregated data available.