

# Democracy and Dictatorship: Conceptualization and Measurement

# Early Democracy vs Modern Democracy

**Common claim:** Europeans invented democracy.

**But** if we see the 'consent of the people' as the defining feature of democratic rule, then democracy is a relatively common system of rule in human societies.

It has emerged independently in different corners of the world throughout human history.

Early democracy emerged when rulers felt obliged to seek the consent of those over whom they ruled.

**David Stasavage:** Early democracy is a “system in which a ruler governed jointly with a council or assembly composed of members of society who were themselves independent from the ruler and not subject to [their] whim.”

## Early democracy:

- Ruler requires the consent of assembly members to govern.
- Limited participation.
- Direct democracy.
- Binding local mandates.
- Assembly decisions not binding.

Rulers had two distinct strategies for accessing the revenue and power they desired:

1. Where conditions were propitious, rulers could create powerful centralized states with the ability to predate on society.
2. Where conditions were less propitious, rulers were forced to rein in their predatory tendencies and seek the consent of those they governed through the use of councils and assemblies.

Early democracy tended to occur in places where it was difficult for rulers to build a state apparatus to monitor and control the population.

It was common in hunter-gatherer societies and where people were geographically dispersed and mobile.

Early democracy emerged when rulers were dependent on people with credible exit options.

## Early democracy tended to disappear:

- when societies grew in size and direct democracy became less practical.
- when rulers became less dependent on their citizenry because they found new ways to monitor and coerce the population.
- when people saw the value of their exit options fall.



Modern democracy is a political system in which representatives of the people are regularly chosen in competitive elections under universal suffrage.

## Modern democracy:

- Representative democracy, not direct democracy.
- Political inclusion, usually universal suffrage today, is much larger.
- Political participation is more episodic and largely restricted to elections.
- No binding local mandates.
- Assembly decisions, typically taken via majority rule, are binding.
- A state bureaucracy determines the day-to-day running of a country.

The key defining feature of early and modern democracy is that rulers are forced to seek the consent of the people to govern.

Rulers are forced to do this not because some constitutional rule tells them they must but because of the simple fact that they find themselves dependent on people who have credible exit options.

Modern democracy is more inclusive than early democracy largely because rulers find themselves dependent on a wider range of people with credible exit options than in the past.

In modern democracy, the consent of the people, or the authorization to rule, is provided through the regular holding of competitive elections.

# Why Elections?

Elections help us to authorize governments and hold rulers accountable.

However, they're also important because they help us to peacefully process conflicts and avoid violence.

Adam Przeworski: Suppose we determine the identity of the government with a coin toss.

The mere possibility of an alternation in power may be enough to induce competing political forces to comply with this selection process rather than seek office through force.

The 'losers' care about (1) their chances of prevailing the next time the coin is tossed, (2) the costs of fighting, and (3) the loss they'll suffer from being ruled by someone else.

If they have a sufficiently high chance of winning next time, if the costs of fighting are high, and if the loss they'll suffer isn't too great, then the losers may prefer to comply with the coin toss rather than seek power through violence.

While the 'winner' would rather not have to toss the coin again in the future, they may prefer to do so and run the risk of losing than provoke violence by usurping power.

To prevent the losers from taking up arms, the winner has an incentive to moderate their policies such that the losers don't suffer too much.

The winner also has an incentive not to abuse their incumbency power to manipulate the system (the coin) in such a way that the current losers' prospects of winning in the future fall too low.



But why elections and not just a coin toss?

But why elections and not just a coin toss?

Voting provides information about the chances each side has of prevailing in a conflict.

Election results show the losers the strength of their forces and who's on their side if they were to reject the election outcome, and they show the winner the strength of the opposition they'd face if they were to cancel future elections.

Adam Przeworski: “the miracle of democracy is that conflicting political forces obey the results of voting. People who have guns obey those without them. Incumbents risk their control of governmental offices by holding elections. Losers wait for their chance to win office. Conflicts are regulated, processed according to rules, and thus limited.”

The miracle doesn't work under all conditions!

# Transition from Early to Modern Democracy

Two events were particularly important for the transition from early democracy to modern democracy:

1. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England invented a new kind of parliament and style of governance.
2. The American colonial experience encouraged broad political inclusion.

Building on its origins in England and America, the basic features of modern democracy have been adopted all around the world.

## Three Waves of Democracy (Samuel Huntington):

1. From early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century until shortly after World War I (Mainly in Europe, France, Britain, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, and Switzerland).
2. From World War II until the early 1960s (Austria, Brazil, Costa Rica, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Uruguay, and West Germany).
3. From the early 1970s (numerous countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, southern and eastern Europe).

Modern democracy is a relatively new phenomenon.

We shouldn't view it as some end point of political evolution.

Political institutions such as modern democracy often arise as a by-product of rulers trying to maintain their hold on power.

Rulers are constantly experimenting with different types of institutions and forms of political hierarchy in the hopes of gaining a survival advantage over their rivals.

The institutions, such as modern democracy, that we see today are simply those that have survived this process of historical competition.

Rulers modify their institutional choices in response to changes in the social, economic, and political environment.

We can expect to see rulers and state elites continue experimenting with different institutional structures to see if they can gain a competitive advantage over their rivals.

This could lead to the creation of even more democratic institutions, but it could also lead to the establishment of more dictatorial and predatory forms of political rule.



# Classifying Democracies and Dictatorships

## 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 can't 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 in which we're interested.

The process of translating a concept into a measure is called **operationalization** – we use a particular measure to operationalize a theoretical concept.

A central component of modern democracy is that rulers must seek the consent of the people to govern.

But how should we translate this abstract concept into a practical set of criteria for classifying political regimes?

# Dahl's View of Democracy and Dictatorship

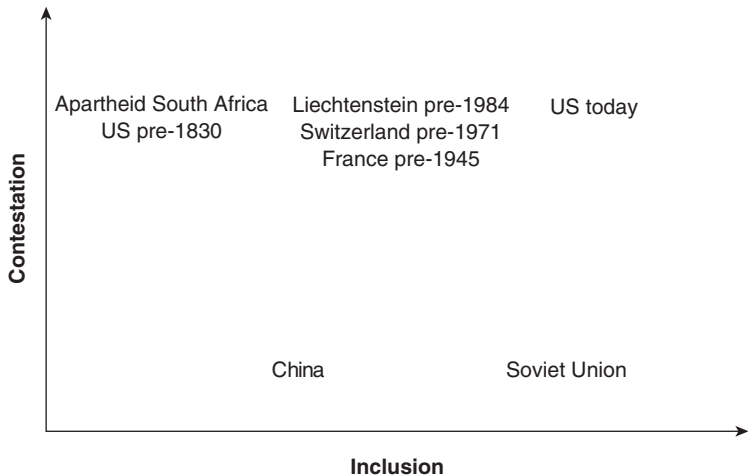
A **substantive view of democracy** classifies political regimes in regard to the outcomes that they produce.

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.





# Three measures of democracy and dictatorship

1. Democracy-Dictatorship (DD) Measure
2. Freedom House (FH) Measure
3. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Measure

# 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'.

## Comparing DD's and Dahl's Conceptualization of Regime Type

(a) DD's Dichotomous Conceptualization of Regime Type



(b) Dahl's Continuous Conceptualization of Regime Type



# 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:

1. Electoral Process.
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.

# Varieties of Democracy Measure

The measurement process behind V-Dem is more complex than that behind DD and Freedom House.

A country's annual V-Dem score depends on five core components related to (1) Freedom of Expression, (2) Freedom of Association, (3) Clean Elections, (4), the Percentage of the Population with Suffrage, and (5) Elected Officials.

# Varieties of Democracy Measure

Each of the five core components depends on several indicators and is measured on a 0-1 scale. They also come with measures of uncertainty.

The five scores are then aggregated to produce a final V-Dem score that runs from 0-1.

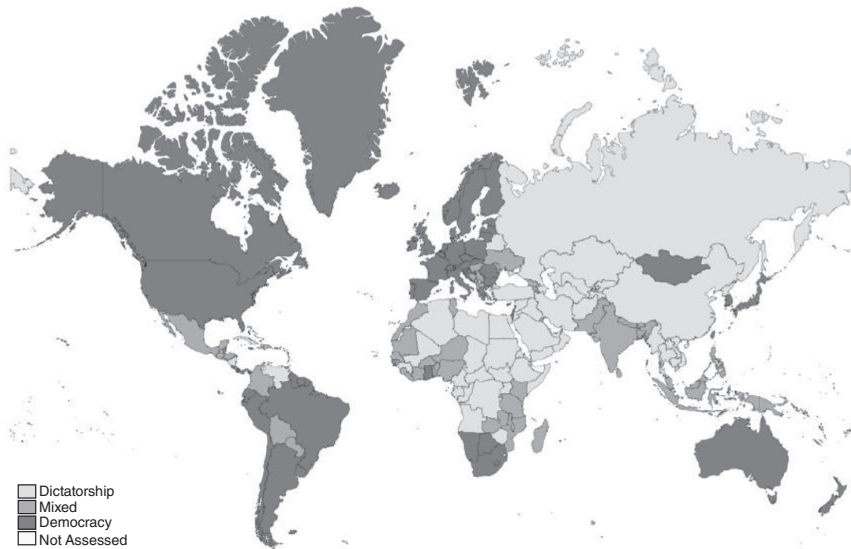
The V-Dem measure is a minimalist and procedural measure of democracy.

It captures Dahl's notion of inclusion and contestation.

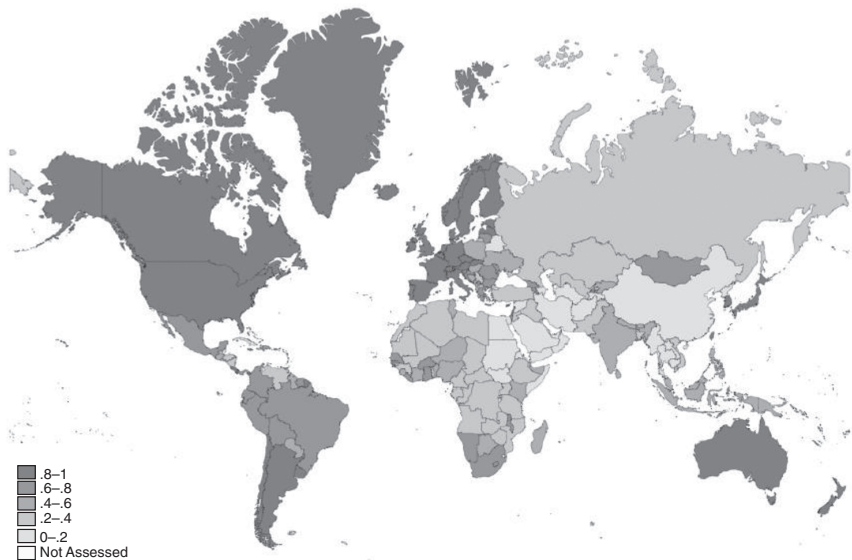
It conceptualizes and measures democracy along a continuum.



Democracy-Dictatorship 2021

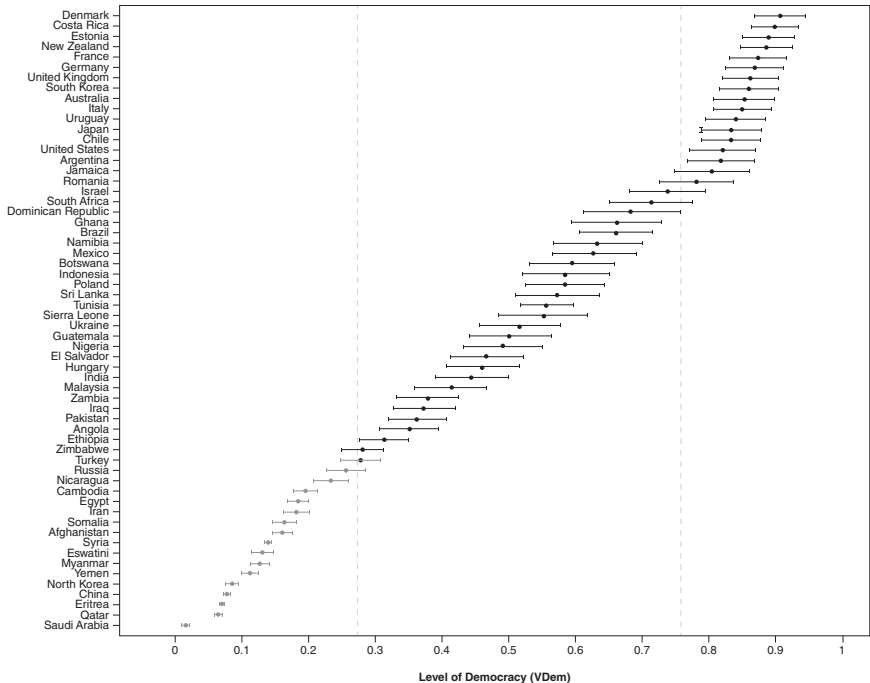


Freedom House 2021

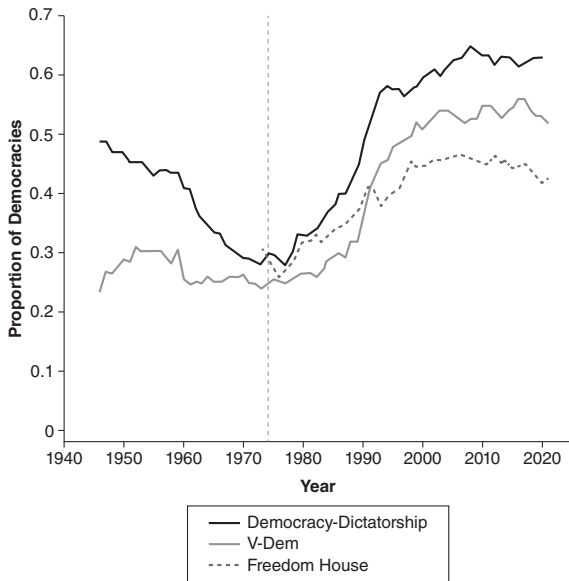


V-Dem 2021





## Proportion of Democracies Globally



# Evaluating Measures of Democracy

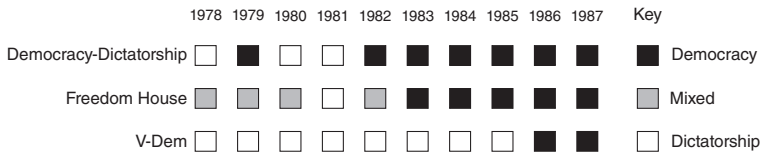
- Conceptualization
- Validity
- Reliability
- Replicability

# Conceptualization

**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.

## Democratic Classification of Bolivia, 1978-1987



Is this a problem?

## 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 can't examine the effect of regime type on inequality without engaging in circular reasoning.

## Identifying causes.

It's 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

**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've chosen your attributes, how do you aggregate them into a single measure?

DD uses a multiplicative aggregation process, whereas Freedom House uses an additive one.

- What are the implicit assumptions being made here?

Is it appropriate to weight different dimensions equally?

Once you've 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.

There's no natural order or underlying dimension to the cases.

An **ordinal measure** rank-orders observations along some underlying dimension. There's no scale or units of measurement attached to the underlying dimension.

We can know whether some case has more or less of something than some other case.

An **interval measure** has an underlying dimension that's scaled with some unit of measurement so that we can tell how much more or less of something one case has than another.

We can not only rank order cases but we can also interpret the distance or 'interval' between cases.

A **ratio measure** is the same as an interval measure except that there's a natural or absolute zero.

A natural or absolute zero signifies the complete absence of the thing being measured.

We can not only say that some case has two more units of something than another but also that some case has twice or three times as much of it as another.

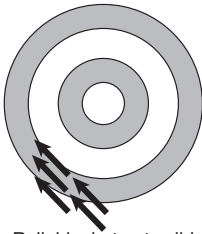
# Reliability

**Reliability** refers to the extent to which the measurement process repeatedly and consistently produces the same score for a given case.

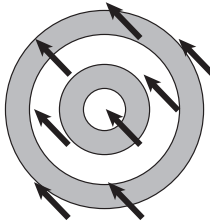
The reliability of a measure is likely to depend on the extent to which the measure is based on observables rather subjective judgements.



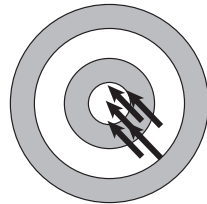
## Comparing the Reliability and Validity of Three Measures



Reliable, but not valid



Valid, but not reliable



Valid and reliable

# Replicability

**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.