



International Journal of Political Science and Public Administration

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Research Paper

Open Access

An Introduction to the Conceptualization of Democracy and Democratization: A Synthesis

Peter Chai¹*

¹Graduate Student and Research Assistant, Graduate School of Political Science, Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan. E-mail: peterchai@fuji.waseda.jp

Article Info

Volume 2, Issue 1, June 2022

Received : 18 April 2022

Accepted : 22 May 2022

Published : 05 June 2022

doi: [10.51483/IJPSA.2.1.2022.21-29](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJPSA.2.1.2022.21-29)

Abstract

This paper aims to provide a snapshot of how democracy and democratization have been conceptualized and understood in comparative politics through two content areas. First, with a succinct summary of the various approaches which scholars have taken to define and measure democracy, light is shed on the difficulty in guarding the minimalist components of democracy from the risks of “definitional gerrymandering” and “epistemological anarchism.” Second, with a brief overview of the existing studies around the various forms of modernization theory and their empirical findings, attention is called to the continuous refinement of methodological design to account for potential contextual and local nuances and the necessity of applying robustness and causality checks to validate statistical results. I seek to mention the classics of past political philosophers and thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, Montesquieu, the Federalists, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Stuart Mill and ensure a fair and informative representation of the works of more contemporary scholars such as Robert Dahl, Adam Przeworski, and Carles Boix, and synthesize the notoriously complex theoretical and empirical discussions around the so-called “D-word.” I also expect to demonstrate how instinctual and descriptive discussions on democratization have transformed toward a more formal and econometrical direction.

Keywords: *Democracy, Democratization, Modernization*

© 2022 Peter Chai. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

1. The Conceptualization of Democracy

There are two types of categories researchers in the field of democratization could choose to classify regimes and conceptualize democracy. The first type includes the substantive and procedural or minimalist approaches to democracy. The substantive approach focuses on the outcomes or outputs of political decision-making and the impacts of specific policies and programs, and the procedural approach focuses on the systems, institutions, and procedures through which political decisions are made. In other words, the former addresses the quality of governance, and the latter addresses the way of governance. These two approaches have served as starting points for the construction of democracy indices by international organizations and research centers to compare and rank societies. The second type includes the continuous and dichotomous or binary views of democracy. The continuous view considers regimes as points that could be placed on a continuous spectrum with full democracy on one side and full dictatorship on the other. The dichotomous view argues that regimes should only be classified either as a democracy or a dictatorship. These two approaches matter a lot for our understanding of some borderline cases which are often referred to as hybrid and mixed

*Corresponding author: Peter Chai, Graduate Student and Research Assistant, Graduate School of Political Science, Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan. E-mail: peterchai@fuji.waseda.jp

2788-8983/© 2022. Peter Chai. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

regimes or semi-democracies. Empirical researchers are likely to make decisions regarding these two types of categories when considering the validity and reliability of constructing and operationalizing their variables and choosing the forms of regression to employ.

However, the risks associated with employing the substantive and continuous approaches to democracy include the so-called “definitional gerrymandering” where researchers manipulate the definition of democracy and allow themselves to expand the definition to an unlimited level. Sometimes the technique of definitional gerrymandering could be manually applied by some authoritarian leaders to justify their state legitimacy, and one potential example is the so-called “Chinese socialist democracy.” A similar issue is the so-called “epistemological anarchism” (Collier and Adcock, 1999) that happens when these authoritarian leaders and some scholars in totalitarian regimes try to convince their citizens of the infinite ways to conceptualize democracy based on cultural relativism. Taking into account these risks, it may be a good idea for us to see democracy as possessing some exclusive and necessary traits where priority should be placed. Dahl (1971)’s conceptualization of democracy is an example of the minimalist approach which breaks down democracy into two dimensions of contestation (liberalization) and inclusion (participation). The former sheds light on the ability of citizens to organize themselves into competing blocs and associations to press for the policies and outcomes they desire. Hamilton *et al.* see such competition as some kind of “necessary evil” in exchange for some kind of “common good.” The latter sheds light on the opportunities for citizens to participate in political bargaining, negotiation, cooperation, and decision-making. In other words, the former looks at how preferences are represented through competitive institutions, especially elections, and the latter looks at how interests could be articulated through various social channels, pertaining to universal suffrage and civil society as well as freedom of speech, belief, and assembly. Dahl’s imaginary ideal type of democracy is supposed to contain both high degrees of contestation and inclusion.

A range of democracies with adjectives or subtypes of democracy have been coined with the purpose of capturing contextual differences and nuances (Collier and Adcock, 1999), including presidential, parliamentary, and semi-presidential (such as premier-presidential and president-parliamentary) democracies, unicameral and bicameral democracies, unitary and federal democracies, two-party and multiparty democracies, majoritarian and consensus democracies, direct, deliberative, and representative democracies, electoral, liberal, and illiberal democracies, representative, delegative, and consociational democracies, capitalist and socialist democracies, as well as face or pseudo-democracy, just to name a few. These regimes vary across Dahl’s two dimensions of democracy, exhibit institutional variations, and may result in different socioeconomic outcomes. As Duverger (1954) and Lipset and Rokkan (1967) discuss extensively in *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* and *Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments*, the psychological and mechanical effects of voting and the outcome of the interactions among social cleavages, electoral rules, and party systems matter for the representation of voters’ preferences.

2. The Measurement of Democracy

A handful of well-known democracy indices have been created and developed to make the comparison and ranking across regions in the world possible and convenient for researchers and observers, which include Democracy-Dictatorship (DD), Polity IV, and Freedom House, just to name three. The DD measure focuses on the election of executive and legislative, and a regime is classified as a democracy if the chief executive is elected, the legislature is elected, there is more than one party, and there is an alternation in power under identical electoral rules. The Policy IV measure draws insights from Dahl’s conceptualization and addresses the contestation and inclusion dimensions, which include the competitiveness and openness of the executive recruitment, constraints that exist on the executive, and regulation and competitiveness of political participation. The Freedom House measure emphasizes on political and civil rights encompassing the electoral process, political pluralism and participation, freedom of expression, belief, and association, rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights.

While DD is a dichotomous measure, Polity IV and Freedom House are continuous measures. We could see that some measures lean toward the procedural approach of democracy whereas some toward the substantive approach, some measures emphasize more on Dahl’s contestation dimension whereas some on the inclusion dimension, and some measures pay more attention to Berlin’s “negative liberty” whereas some to “positive liberty.” We could also see that most of the existing indices place important weight on open, fair, and repeated elections, although some have also been interested in freedom of press, media, and association. We should also note that the components of these indices and the criteria for scoring regimes have been revised and updated over time to accommodate changing realities. Figures 1 and 2 extracted from Chapter 5 of Clark *et al.* (2009) show how the dichotomous DD measure looks different from Dahl’s

continuous conceptualization as well as the differences in which the three abovementioned indices have classified some borderline cases in the world in 2008. Furthermore, the six graphs in Figure 3 extracted from Moller and Skaaning (2013) demonstrate the longitudinal trends of regime distribution from 1972 to 2012 in the globe, the Americas, the Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa as classified into closed autocracies, multiparty autocracies, minimalist democracies, electoral democracies, polyarchies, and liberal democracies. They show how movements back and forth or the so-called “trendless fluctuations” in the democratic “gray zone” have been happening during the democratic “Third Wave” and a state of aggregate stagnation or standstill.

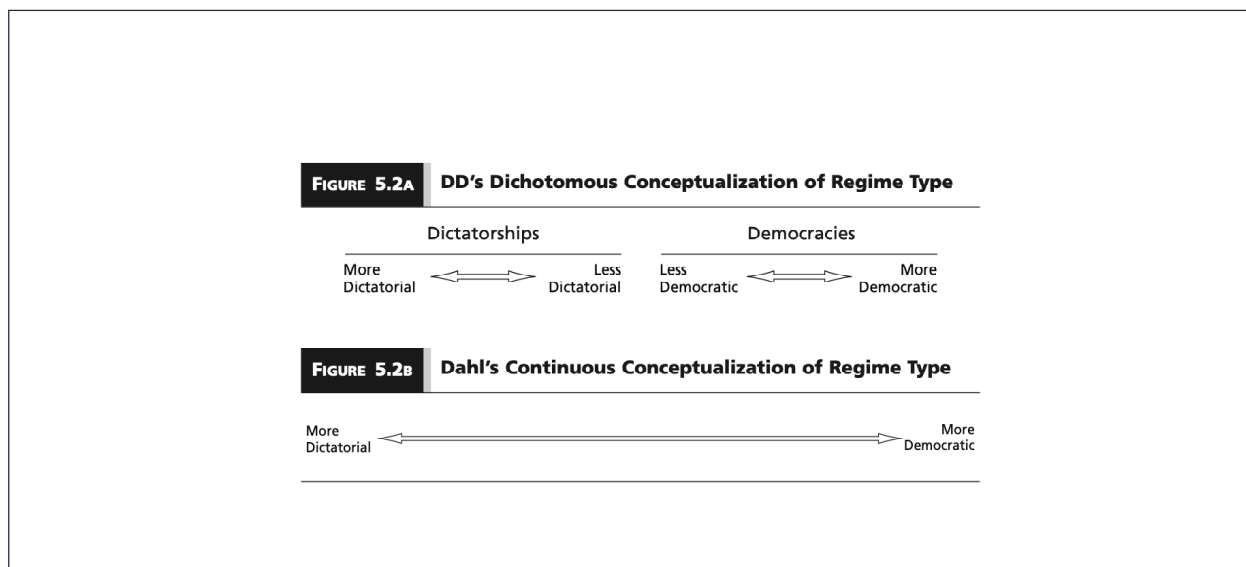


Figure 1: Dichotomous and Continuous Measures of Democracy

Source: Clark et al. (2009)

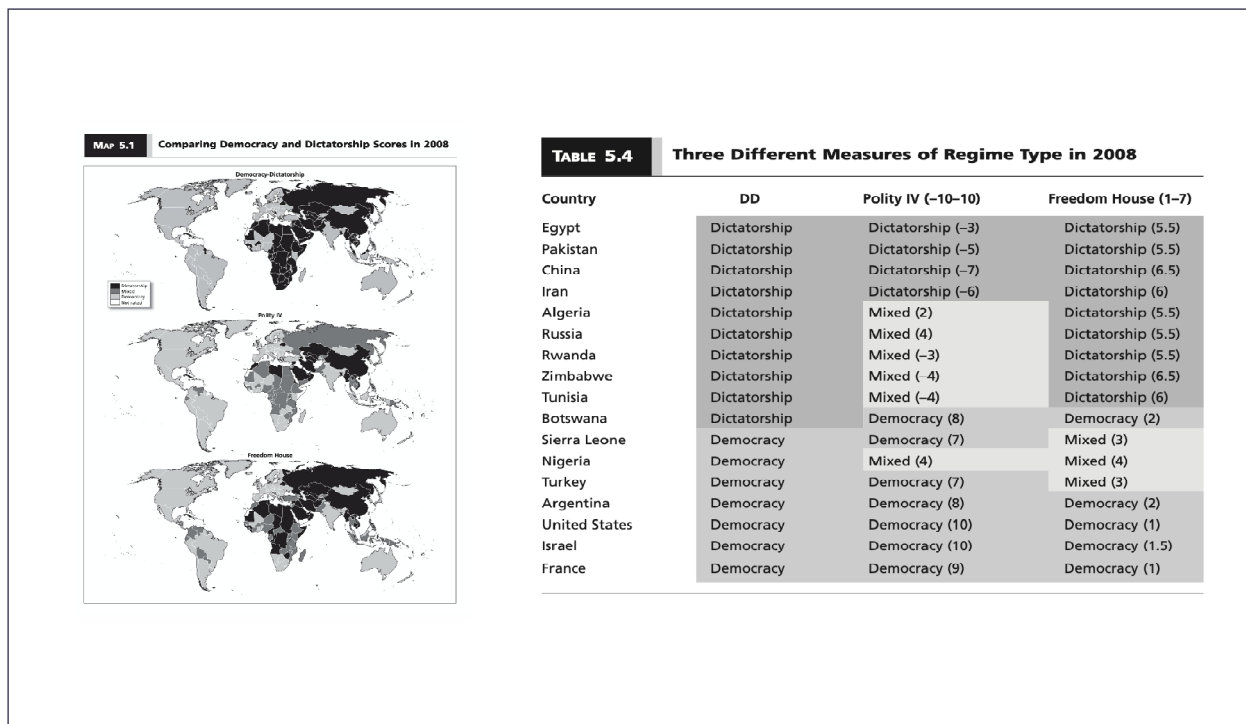


Figure 2: Different Classifications of Hybrid Regimes

Source: Clark et al. (2009)

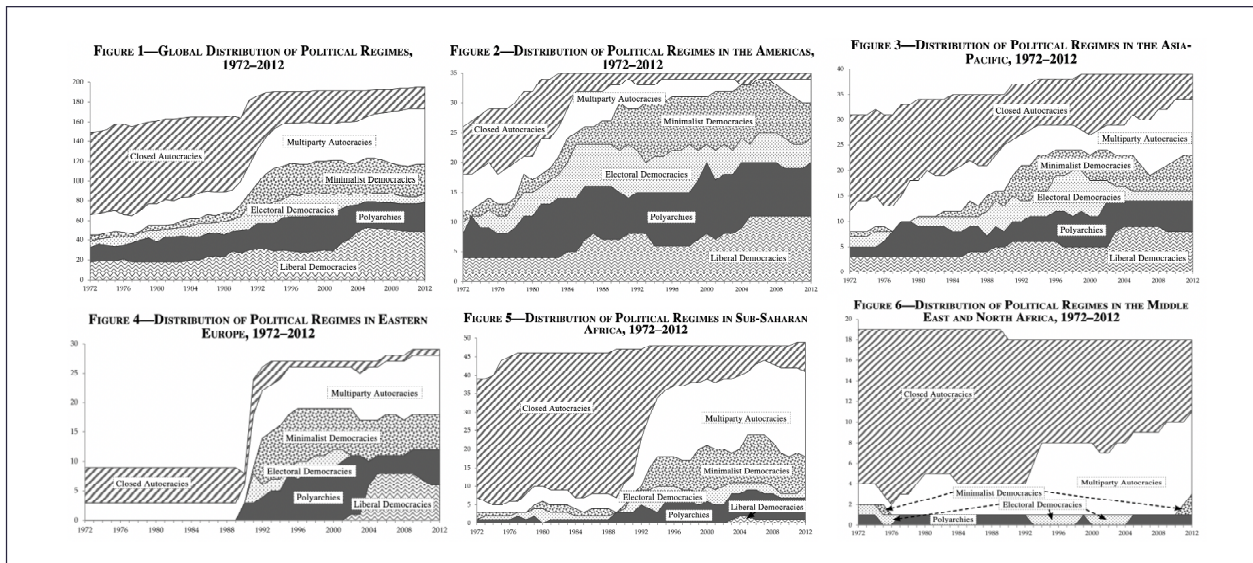


Figure 3: Longitudinal Trends of Regime Distribution

Source: Moller and Skanning (2013)

3. The Essence of Democracy

Democracy comes from the Greek word *Demokratia*, meaning the rule by the *demos*, or the “common people,” usually those with little or no economic resources and political education. Democracy was not associated with its modern and post-communist positive image when discussed in the era of Aristotle. In the ancient classic *Politics*, regimes are classified by their number of rulers and whether it is for the good of all or only the rulers, as shown by Figure 4 extracted from Chapter 5 of Clark *et al.* (2009). Unlike Aristocracy and Politeia which are seen as “good forms” of governance, oligarchy and democracy are seen as “bad forms.” We could see that the understanding of democracy and the classification of regimes have been rather dynamic in history and have been subject to the interpretations of philosophers, sociologists, politicians, and policymakers, and fruitful discussions on concepts such as democracy, republicanism, and federalism have been raised by political theorists in their classics such as Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws* and Tocqueville *Democracy in America*.

TABLE 5.1 Aristotle’s Classification of Regimes		
Number of rulers	Good form “For the Good of All”	Bad form “For the Good of the Rulers”
One	Monarchy	Tyranny
Few	Aristocracy	Oligarchy
Many	Politeia	Democracy

Figure 4: Original Understanding of Democracy by Aristotle

Source: Clark *et al.* (2009)

Democracy has been rather notoriously seen as an overarching term that encompasses various aspects of the nation, state, government, regime, and governance, and it has been associated with a package of overlapping and mutually dependent items such as accountability, representation, responsiveness, checks and balances, separation of powers, just to mention a few. I have listed the terms that seem to be often associated with democracy and separated them according to their direct or loose linkages to the three classics, Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, Hamilton’s *et al. The Federalist Papers*, and Mill’s *On Liberty*, as shown in Figures 5 and 6. It is necessary to note that this is in no way an exhaustive list. The foundation of these democratic ideals and their reliance on civic virtues or public-spiritedness includes the legitimacy and sovereignty of the state and a social contract between the ruler and the ruled to let humans

escape the state of nature and the public goods dilemma. Dahl’s contestation dimension defines how rulers are held accountable, disciplined, rewarded, and punished, and the inclusion dimension defines the size and form of the citizenry.



Figure 5: Three Classics: Leviathan, The Federalist Papers, and On Liberty

<i>Leviathan</i> (Hobbes, 1651)	<i>The Federalist Papers</i> (Hamilton et al., 1788)		<i>On Liberty</i> (Mill, 1859)
Nation	Rule of Law	Representation / Delegation	Access
State	Constitutionalism	Principle / Agent	Inclusion
Ruler	Legislature	Aggregation	Participation
Ruled	Executive	Consensus / Compromise / Accommodation	Pluralism / Diversity
Government	Independent Judiciary	Opposition	Interest and Preference Articulation / Expression
Regime	Checks and Balances	Negotiation / Bargaining	Personal Autonomy / Independence
Sovereignty and Legitimacy	Separation of Powers	Competition / Contestation	Freedom of Speech and Association / Assembly
Consent	Presidentialism	Open and Fair Elections	Freedom of Belief
Social Contract	Parliamentarism	Parties / Factions	Alternative Information
Citizenry	Decentralization	Universal Suffrage	Liberalism
Political, Civil, and Property Rights	Republicanism	Uncertainty	Resource Distribution / Balance
Civil Society	Federalism	Transparency	Equality / Justice
Constraints	Bureaucracy	Repeatability	Transition, Survival, and Consolidation
Modernization	Market Economy	Irreversibility	Institutionalization / Regulation

Figure 6: A Table of Words Associated with Democracy

In other words, both the workings of the institutions and which segments of the population get to be invited to participate in these institutions are important. In the past, some members such as women and those in the lower social classes were not granted the franchise, the extent of political and civil rights was also more or less dependent upon demographic factors such as age, race, literacy, property ownership, and tax-paying status, and the base of citizenry expanded through reformation acts. To some extent, democracy largely relies on the aggregation of preferences, the majority rule of interests, and the consensus and compromise reached through repeated deliberations among associational, partisan, functional, territorial, collective, individual, and other channels. As a kind of intermediary between the public realm and the private sphere, civil society composes of informal and self-autonomous networks which could be vertical and horizontal. The existence and activeness of these formal and informal channels and the protection of minority rights signify democratic pluralism, availability of opposing voices, and access to alternative sources of information. The elements at the core of the democratic dream include the requirement of open, fair, and regular elections based on consistent electoral rules as well as the universal suffrage and freedoms of political participation.

Przeworski *et al.* (2000) understand the philosophy behind democracy as *ex-ante* uncertainty, *ex-post* irreversibility, and repeatability, meaning that the temporary winner has no superiority to bar the losers from taking office in the future, and the momentary losers will respect the winners’ right to make binding decisions. These three factors highlight that the incumbent parties have the chance of losing in the future, the legitimate opposition has the chance of winning in the future, and there are no arbitrary power shifts but preferably peaceful and smooth power transfers. Moreover, they highlight the necessity of established electoral rules and formula for periodical elections to follow through. All these desirable characteristics of democracy ensure that no monopoly and centralization of unlimited political power and resources take place that would endanger human rights, and members of the political realm need to consult other stakeholders and interest groups in the society to make informed decisions. As mentioned by Przeworski *et al.* (2000), a rule of thumb based on Bayes’ theorem and conditional probability would be that the probability of a country being democratic and for power alternations to occur given that the ruling party’s seat share is more than two-thirds is around 0.088, which is very low.

4. The Conceptualization of Democratization

Considerable debate has taken place in the field of comparative politics among political sociologists regarding the determinants and conditions for making democratization ready and happen. Starting from descriptive analyses through a limited number of observations and inadequate empirical treatments, the democratization literature has benefited largely from the application of statistical tools and computer science, and more recent studies have been increasingly sensitive to the limitations and deficiencies of past research such as the case selection bias, missing control variables, confusion over correlation and causation, reverse causality, and so on, leading to a so-called “paradigm shift.” To avoid overconfidence in the potential of generalizability, contemporary scholars have made extensive efforts to refine the definition, measure, operationalization, and regressions of democracy and other socioeconomic variables. Modernization theories that built upon conventional wisdom have come to capture more mathematical and econometric nuances, and modernization theorists have tried to isolate confounding factors and noises when applying datasets and statistical tests in recent decades.

First, scholars have been making a clearer distinction between democratic emergence and transition as opposed to democratic consolidation, breakdown, and backsliding. Some differences have been made between the positive meaning (no breakdown or erosion) and positive meaning (depending and improved quality) of consolidation. Second, some scholars have been breaking down historical periods and the three waves of democratization, as shown in the graphs in Figures 7 and 8 extracted from Boix (2011) and Boix and Stokes (2003). Third, some scholars have taken into account the diminishing marginal income effects and no longer assume homogeneous effects across income levels. However, not many works seem to distinguish between the so-called “socio-tropic” and “egocentric (pocketbook)” economic factors. Fourth, apart from the economic level, the explanatory variable in the modernization theories, some scholars have also written papers, with either empirical analysis or formal game theory models (and sometimes with a comparative historical approach), on some other potential endogenous and exogenous as well as top-down and bottom-up factors such as the so-called “oil curse,” “resource curse,” or even “resource blessing,” Moore (1966)’s somewhat Marxist bourgeois revolution or class struggle theory (“No Bourgeoisie, No Democracy”), elite unity, democratic diffusion or network

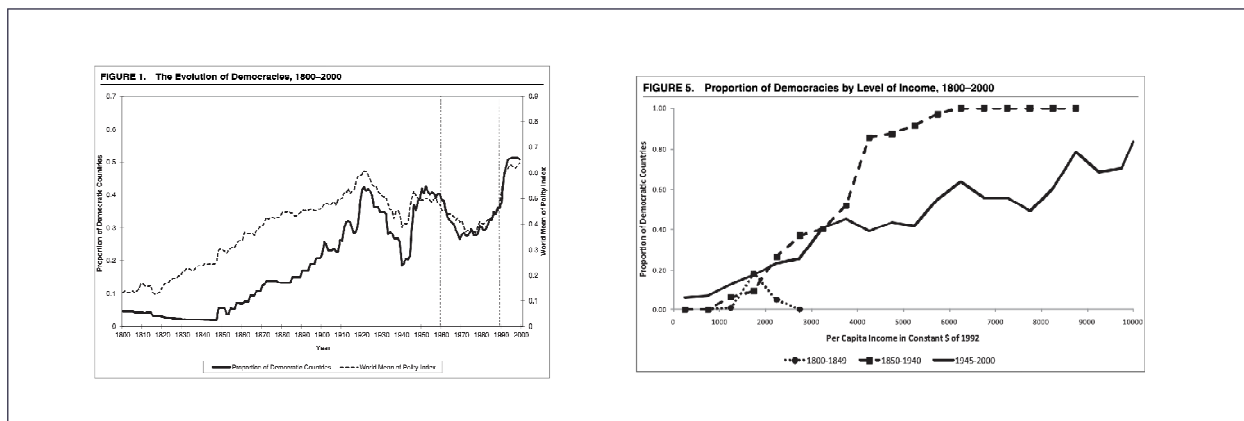


Figure 7: Waves of Democratization and Income Effects

Source: Boix (2011)

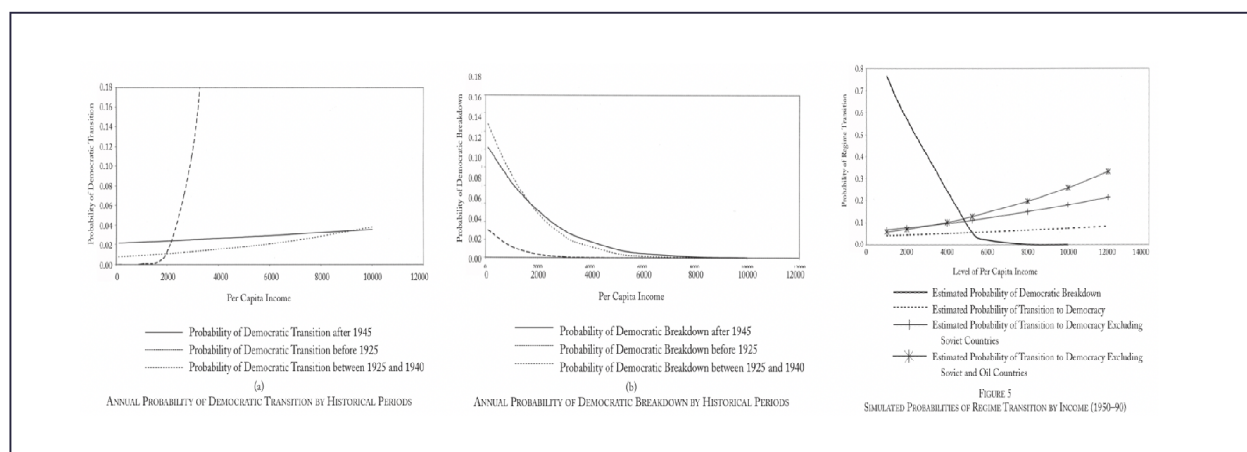


Figure 8: Probabilities of Regime Transition Across Historical Periods

Source: Boix and Stokes (2003)

effects, successful and failed coup attempts, the collaboration of authoritarian regimes, distributional inequality, and self-emancipative education. Take Przeworski *et al.* (2000)'s research as one example, it specifies ethnolinguistic fragmentation, colonial legacy, political history and past regime stability, international democratic climate, and so on in their logit regression models. Comparing their research to some other more recent studies that claim to include larger datasets and apply careful robustness and causality tests, we could indeed notice that an alternation of the sample, variables, and methodology would have important impacts on the type and strength of results we are able to receive.

While there is a struggle between the goal of generalizability and predictability of the subdiscipline comparative politics and the complexity of the involvement of a range of contextual and local factors in the modernization process, some tentative results seem to have emerged from the existing literature. First, there seems to be no fixed threshold of income level that could predict the emergence of democracies. Second, there seems to be no cultural or religious grouping that simply provides the “best” soil for democracy, and there are no cultures or religions, such as Catholicism, Confucianism, and Islam that are “fundamentally” incompatible with democracy. The observations made in Weber (2001)'s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and Huntington (1991)'s *Democracy's Third Wave* seem to lack sound empirical foundations. Cultures seem to be rather malleable and fluid rather than fixed and permanent and are rather responsive to the so-called “self-fulfilling prophecies” imposed by political leaders. On the other hand, civil society and voluntary associations could be seen as the “school” for democracy cultivating trust, connectedness, reciprocity, and public skills and may bear stronger statistical foundations for explaining democratic performance across regions by universal indices. Third, we should not expect the same statistical significance of income effects across the three waves of democracy or assume homogeneous income effects across income levels in established democracies. Fourth, although the term “income effect” could be rather informally used, it implies the association between income and democracy rather than suggesting a causal link. Correlation is different from causation, and the correlation implied here could be explained by historical development paths toward both economy and democracy, as shown by Acemoglu *et al.* (2008). Path dependence and critical junctures still seem to serve as a relevant way to explain the democratization processes in developing countries case by case. Fifth, democracy does not necessarily mean equitable economic allocation and effective governmental policymaking, especially in the short run, as discussed in the so-called “developmental state models” of the newly industrializing countries, and this may challenge the so-called “transition paradigm.”

5. Support for Democracy and Other Related Topics

It is also interesting to note that based on a review of previous papers published in English and French, Petry and Collette (2009) show that parties in democracies fulfill around 67% of their election pledges on average and seem to be reliable promise keepers, contrary to popular belief. According to them, people seem to underestimate parties' abilities to keep promises partly due to the bias in media coverage where stories of broken promises on a few important issues are weighted more heavily than kept promises on numerous less important issues to appeal to the readership. Besides, the US cases with a low average rate of fulfillment (65%) could be contrasted with the cases from Britain and Canada with a higher average rate of fulfillment (74%), drawing a distinction between the parliamentary Westminster systems and the US presidential regime. This point is addressed further by Thomson *et al.* (2012), and they show that single-majority

governments exhibit higher fulfilment rates than other government types, as shown by the graphs in Figure 9 extracted from their paper. These two studies on political parties' pledge fulfilment are only one example that demonstrates how substantial variations could be found in governmental outcomes across democracies, how chamber organizations (such as presidential and parliamentary) and government types (such as single-majority and coalition-minority) could account for democratic performance, and how public opinion and distrust toward democracies may lack statistical bases. Some other institutional and democratic performance indicators for cross-national comparisons include the "global civil society index," the World Bank indices of "government effectiveness," "rule of law," and "corruption control," and the United Nations Development Program's "gender empowerment measure" and "index of effective democracy."

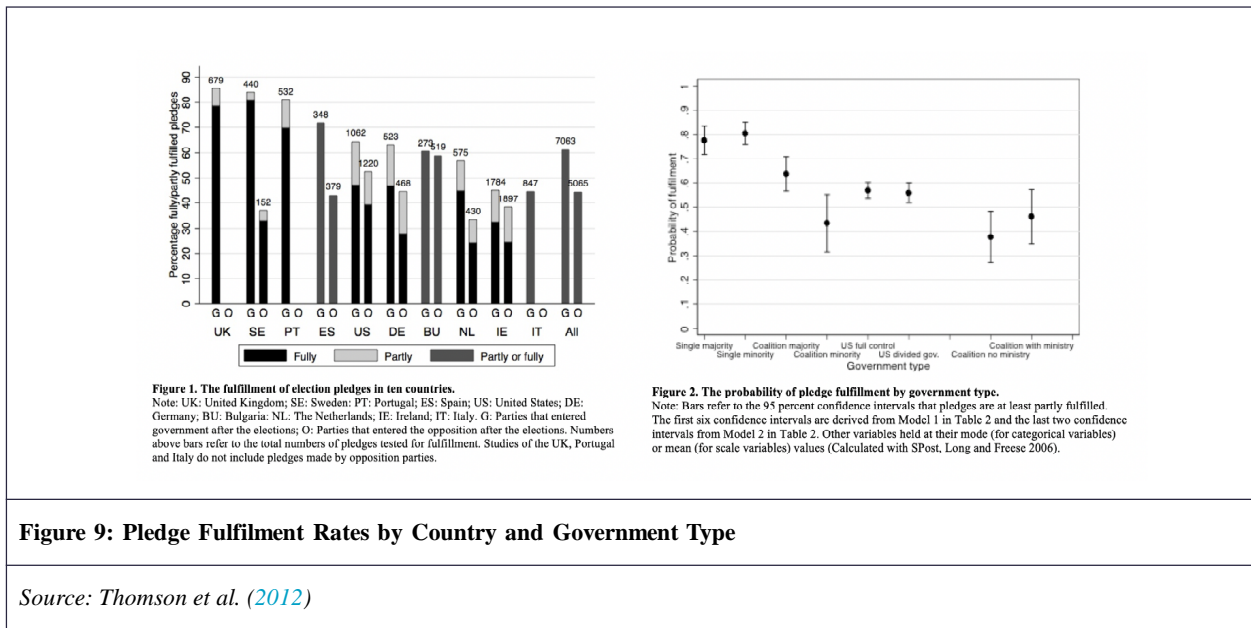


Figure 9: Pledge Fulfilment Rates by Country and Government Type

Source: Thomson et al. (2012)

6. Conclusion

Defining democracy, analyzing its prerequisites, and assessing its performance are three different but intertwined research topics. We should probably consider modernization as a broad and complex process that signifies collinearity and involves various social, economic, political, demographic, organizational, technological, and international changes at the same time, and be aware of some kind of "endogenous" or "reciprocal" relationship between culture and democracy. We should expect various forms of modernization theories to depend upon relevant local conditions, making both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies essential and meaningful. Again, the "compatible" conditions for democracy indeed depend on the stage and wave of democratization and the character of the political generation. This reminds us of the danger of overgeneralization and suggests more future observations to be made for contextual details in East and Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Central and Eastern Europe that seem to demand closer interactions among scholars of comparative politics and area studies, and while political historians and ethnographers seem to be particularly good at explaining the occurrence of individual events, it seems to be the responsibility of political scientists to construct and develop generalizable theories after all. This suggests that comparativists, historians, and fieldworkers all have a role to play in studying democratization and modernization.

Acknowledgment

This paper has benefited from courses History of Political Theory (2018 Fall) and Public Choice (2019 Fall) at the School of Political Science and Economics and Political Parties (2021 Fall), Democratization (2022 Spring), and Reading Seminar in Comparative Politics (2022 Spring) at the Graduate School of Political Science of Waseda University. I would like to thank Associate Professor Willy Jou, Professor Liang Tang, friend Zhirui Pan, and my classmates in the Seminars on Comparative Politics for their constructive comments on the earlier versions of this article.

References

- Acemoglu, D., Johnson, S., Robinson, J. A., and Yared, P. (2008). *Income and Democracy. American Economic Review.*
- Boix, C. (2011). *Democracy, Development and the International System. American Political Science Review.* 98(3), 808-842.

- Boix, C. and Stokes, S.C. (2003). *Endogenous Democratization*. *World Politics*.
- Clark, W.R., Golder, M. and Golder, S.N. (2009). *Principles of Comparative Politics*. CQ Press.
- Collier, D. and Adcock, R. (1999). *Democracy and Dichotomies: A Pragmatic Approach to Choices about Concepts*. *Annual Review of Political Science*. 2, 537-56.
- Collier, D. and Levitsky, S. (1997). *Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research*. *World Politics*, 49(3), 430-451.
- Dahl, R.A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. Yale University Press.
- Duverger, M. (1954). *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*. Wiley & Sons.
- Huntington, S.P. (1991). *Democracy's Third Wave*. *Journal of Democracy*.
- Lipset, S.M. and Rokkan, S. (1967). *Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments: An Introduction*. *In Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*. The Free Press.
- Moller, J. and Skanning, S. (2013). *The Third Wave: Inside the Numbers*. *Journal of Democracy*.
- Moore, B. (1966). *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Beacon Press.
- Petry, F. and Collette, B. (2009). *Measuring How Political Parties Keep Their Promises: A Positive Perspective from Political Science*. *In Do They Walk Like They Talk: Speech and Action in Political Processes*. Springer.
- Przeworski, A., Alvarez, M.E., Cheibub, J.A. and Limongi, F. (2000). *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990*. Cambridge University Press.
- Thomson, R., Naurin, E., Royed, T., and Thomson, R. (2012). *The Program-to-Policy Linkage: A Comparative Study of Election Pledges and Government Policies in Ten Countries*. APSA 2012 Annual Meeting Paper.
- Weber, M. (2001). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Routledge.