Commentary

DEMOCRACY AND DIMENSIONS
Comments on Munck and Verkuilen

MICHAEL COPPEDGE
University of Notre Dame

Democracy is probably the most complex concept in political science. It has not been and may never be measured in all its many-faceted, multidimensional glory. Munck and Verkuilen, however, lay the groundwork for improved measurement by defining excellent standards for measuring democracy well and using these standards to evaluate a comprehensive set of indicators. Their analysis suggests that we should be less trusting of the indicators we have, which tend to be simplistic, opaque, vulnerable to bias, and haphazardly related to theory, especially when they apply to an extensive range of countries and years. Although their analysis does not solidly confirm their worst suspicions, Munck and Verkuilen make a persuasive case that the worst suspicions cannot be disconfirmed either. They then make many constructive suggestions for measuring democracy more validly and reliably.

Almost all of their suggestions, if implemented, would improve the next generation of democracy indicators, but some of their suggestions would lead to more dramatic improvement than others. The three suggestions with the greatest potential are those that address the central challenge of measuring democracy: measuring it in multiple dimensions. These are Munck and Verkuilen's calls to strike a balance between minimalist and maximalist definitions of democracy, choose an appropriate level of measurement, and aggregate components validly.

Munck and Verkuilen correctly observe that almost all democracy indicators aim to operationalize a minimalist concept of democracy, which tends to be purely institutional and procedural, corresponding roughly to the definition of polyarchy (Dahl, 1989, pp. 218-224). Reducing democracy to polyarchy was a very useful and productive step 30 years ago: The complexity of democracy fomented controversy and paralysis for those beginning to

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study it empirically, and simplifying the concept made measurement—and analysis—possible on a large scale for the first time. But minimalist definitions have become less useful for studying emerging questions about the quality of democracy.[1] The recently enlarged genus polyarchy now contains cases of flagrantly disparate democratic quality, yet minimalist definitions provide us with no standard for distinguishing the more democratic cases from the less democratic ones.

Polyarchy is only a two-dimensional shadow of democracy on the wall of our conceptual cave. The first dimension (or attribute, in Munck and Verkuilen's terminology), contestation, has hidden qualities that have been ignored or taken for granted. Surely contestation depends in part on the number and quality of choices presented on a ballot, democratic selection of candidates, certain kinds of public campaign financing, guaranteed media access for all parties, and opportunities for opposition parties to gain a foothold at lower levels of government; yet none of these institutions is commonly considered in democracy indicators. There are also shadow dimensions of democracy implied by the notion of contestation but rarely explicitly considered, such as the independence of elected authorities from the armed forces and other unelected authorities, the responsiveness of civil servants to the direction of democratically elected governments, and national autonomy vis-à-vis the international system. These are relevant for democracy because it does not matter how a government was chosen if it has no power. This relative power of elected officials would have to be a distinct dimension of democracy because it varies across polyarchies that are similar with respect to contestation—for example, Germany and Uruguay, or Colombia and Chile. There are also other qualities, such as federalism, that may not make a regime more democratic but may make it differently democratic, as Lijphart (1999, pp. 243-250) has argued.

Polyarchy itself has two dimensions—participation or inclusiveness, in addition to contestation—but we often forget the second dimension (Coppedge & Reinicke, 1990). As Munck and Verkuilen point out, many indicators simply ignore this dimension, and those that consider it rarely look beyond the breadth of the suffrage. But inclusiveness should be more than just voting (or eligibility for public office, which Dahl, 1989, included). How about inclusion in the basic rights of citizens, which entail both rights to a fair trial, to due process, to be heard and treated with respect by public officials, and to be notified when important actions are about to be taken, as well as rights not to be arbitrarily arrested or imprisoned or discriminatorily con-

1. I am grateful to participants in the Quality of Democracy Working Group at the Kellogg Institute of the University of Notre Dame for feedback on my incipient ideas on these themes.

scripted? To complicate matters, inclusiveness itself may consist of two dimensions—the proportion of people possessing a right and the degree to which they possess it—that together would define a distribution of rights akin to a distribution of wealth.

One should not go further into the territory of social and economic democracy and collective citizenship rights, which in my opinion would cross the line into maximalism. The additional institutional criteria mentioned above would probably be sufficient to enable us to distinguish between high- and low-quality democracies around the world. Still, these expanded institutional criteria alone probably require five conceptual dimensions: contestation, breadth of inclusion, fullness of inclusion, relative power of officials, and division of powers (Lijpart's [1999] unitary-federal dimension). The temptation to simplify the task of measurement by pruning the definition is practically irresistible.

The worst tactic for coping with multidimensionality is to assume blindly that all the components are unidimensional and barrel on, adding or averaging these apples and oranges. The fruit of such efforts may turn out to be reasonable at the extremes but is likely to be a meaningless mess in the middle. A more acceptable tactic is to tolerate a low level of measurement: interval rather than ratio data, ordinal rather than interval, a 3-point scale rather than a 10-point scale, or a dichotomy rather than a scale. This tactic is available because unidimensionality is a matter of degree. Sometimes dimensions are distinct but parallel, or bundled. The tighter the bundle, the less measurement error is created when they are combined simply into an allegedly unidimensional indicator. If one is content to produce an indicator of democracy at a low level of measurement—say, a 3-point scale of democracies, semi-democracies, and nondemocracies—one can aggregate components that lie on different and fairly weakly correlated dimensions.

Dichotomies are the limiting case of this tactic. With a dichotomy, one may combine any number of dimensions safely. All that is necessary is to define a cutoff on each dimension and insist that countries be above that threshold on every dimension to qualify as democracies. But this is radical surgery. It amputates every dimension below the cutoff and tosses all that information into a residual bin labeled *nondemocracy.* If this information is truly not worth knowing, such radical surgery can be justified—for example, if it is the only way to salvage a meaningful indicator. But if there is serious doubt about where to cut, caution is advised (Collier & Adcock, 1999; Elkins, 2000).

There are two strategies besides dichotomizing for coping with multidimensionality. The easier of the two is simply to develop a different

indicator for each dimension of democracy. This strategy has the advantage of avoiding any assumptions about how these dimensions might combine to determine a country's degree of democracy. The disadvantage is that this strategy stops short of producing a single summary indicator of democracy. Paradoxically, one way to measure democracy better is therefore to stop measuring democracy and start measuring its component dimensions instead.[2]

This would not amount to an admission of defeat. If we had separate indicators of different dimensions of democracy, we could explore empirically their interrelationships, which would open up a fascinating new avenue for research. Do elected officials enjoy greater autonomy vis-à-vis the military when they are backed by a broad electoral base of support? Does federalism really allow citizens to be better represented on certain issues? Does possession of suffrage translate into effective possession of other civil and political rights? All of these are questions that should be addressed by empirical research. Such questions must be answered before any unified indicator of democracy can be developed, and it would be desirable for the answers to come from solid research rather than mere assumptions.

The development of separate indicators is, in fact, a prerequisite for the second coping strategy: appropriate aggregation of components into a single indicator of democracy. We are not yet ready to do this for a multidimensional concept of democracy.[3] Doing so requires a stronger theory (and as Munck and Verkuilen note, a tested and confirmed theory) about how dimensions of democracy combine, from which one might derive a mathematical formula. Munck and Verkuilen make some suggestive remarks about aggregation rules: correspondences between certain logical relationships and certain mathematical operations. But I suspect that a workable rule is likely to be more complex than addition and subtraction. If so, component indicators will have to be interval, if not ratio, data; otherwise, it would not be legitimate to subject them to multiplication or division, not to mention logging or exponentials (Stevens, 1946). Most measurement of democracy now is ordinal, so if we wish to develop a single indicator of democracy in several dimensions, we will have to find ways of measuring dimensions at the interval level or

2. The nature of these dimensions is still open to debate. I have suggested five dimensions, but these are based partly on my intuition. Identifying dimensions that describe democracy usefully is an iterative process of bringing theory into alignment with evidence and evidence into alignment with theory. Much more work remains to be done because the vast theoretical and smaller empirical literatures on democracy have developed in relative isolation. Each must become informed by the other to a greater extent as indicators of democratic dimensions develop.

3. A partial exception is Hadenius (1992), who made a start by combining indicators of contestation and participation in an innovative and promising fashion.

higher.[4] The highest priority for improving the measurement of democracy is therefore improving the measurement of disaggregated attributes of democracy.

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4. One way to do this is to reformulate the attributes of democracy in terms of probabilities. This would entail measuring, for example, the probability that a citizen will be allowed to vote, that votes will be counted fairly, that a writer can criticize the government without being punished, and so on. These probabilities could be either estimated reasonably or calculated from actual practices. The rules for aggregating probability data are then relatively straightforward.