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The Quality of Democracy

AN OVERVIEW

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As democracy has spread to a majority of the world's states over the past three decades, many scholars, politicians, activists, and aid administrators have gone from asking *why* transitions happen to asking *what* the new regimes are like. How can we evaluate—and if need be, help to improve—their quality (or any regime's quality) both as governments and as *democratic* governments? This stream of theory, methodological innovation, and empirical research flows from the notions that: 1) deepening democracy is a moral good, maybe even an imperative; 2) reforms to improve democratic quality are essential if democracy is to achieve the broad and durable legitimacy that marks consolidation; and 3) long-established democracies must also reform if they are to solve their own gathering problems of public dissatisfaction and even disillusionment.

There is plainly room for controversy here. Who, after all, is to say just what makes a "good" or "high-quality" democracy? Is a universal conception of democratic quality even possible? How can efforts to think about democratic quality avoid becoming paternalistic exercises in which the older democracies take themselves for granted as models and so escape scrutiny? How can quality assessments be made useful for political reformers, civil society activists, international donors, and others hungry for practical ways to make democracies better? These are only some of the questions that pervade this growing subfield of study.

The five essays that follow are part of a collaborative effort, launched at a conference at Stanford University, to elaborate and refine the concept of democratic quality and to apply it to a series of six paired country comparisons.[1] We asked each author to discuss a particular dimension of the quality of democracy such as freedom, the rule of law, vertical accountability, responsiveness, and equality (our own list, and by no means exhaustive). We wanted each author to explain how the dimension in question relates to other dimensions in our framework, to suggest possible indicators for measuring the dimension, to identify ways in which this element of democratic quality is subverted in the real world, and to offer (where possible) policy recommendations. Our full framework features eight dimensions: the five outlined above, plus participation, competition, and horizontal accountability. Other dimensions might include transparency and the effectiveness of representation. The different aspects of democratic quality overlap, however, and we choose to treat these latter two as elements of our principal dimensions.

We attempt here to identify some of the ways in which the different elements of democracy not only overlap, but also depend upon one another, forming a system in which improvement along one dimension (such as participation) can have beneficial effects along others (such as equality and accountability). At the same time, however, there can be trade-offs between the different dimensions of democratic quality, and it is impossible to maximize all of them at once. In this sense at least, every democratic country must make an inherently value-laden choice about what *kind* of democracy it wishes to be.

Talk of a “good” or “better” democracy implies knowing what democracy is. At a minimum, democracy requires: 1) universal, adult suffrage; 2) recurring, free, competitive, and fair elections; 3) more than one serious political party; and 4) alternative sources of information.[2] If elections are to be truly meaningful, free, and fair, there must be some degree of civil and political freedom beyond the electoral arena so that citizens can articulate and organize around their political beliefs and interests. Once a country meets these basic standards, further empirical analysis can ask how well it achieves the three main goals of an ideal democracy—political and civil freedom, popular sovereignty (control over public policies and the officials who make them), and political equality (in these rights and powers)—as well as broader standards of good governance (such as transparency, legality, and responsible rule).[3] In addition to “democracy” we must define “quality” clearly. A survey of the use of the term in the industrial and marketing sectors suggests three different meanings of quality (each with different implications for empirical research):

- *procedure:* a “quality” product is the result of an exact, controlled process carried out according to precise, recurring methods and timing;
- *content*: quality inheres in the structural characteristics of a product, such as its design, materials, or functioning;
- *result*: the quality of a product or service is indirectly indicated by

the degree of customer satisfaction with it, regardless of how it is produced or its actual content.

What Is a "Quality" Democracy?

The definitions above imply that a good democracy accords its citizens ample freedom, political equality, and control over public policies and policy makers through the legitimate and lawful functioning of stable institutions. Such a regime will satisfy citizen expectations regarding governance *(quality of results)*; it will allow citizens, associations, and communities to enjoy extensive liberty and political equality *(quality of content)*; and it will provide a context in which the whole citizenry can judge the government's performance through mechanisms such as elections, while governmental institutions and officials hold one another legally and constitutionally accountable as well *(procedural quality).*

With the above in mind—and remembering that there is no absolutely objective way of laying out a single framework for gauging democratic quality—we identify eight dimensions on which democracies vary in quality. The rule of law, participation, competition, and vertical plus horizontal accountability are content-relevant but mainly procedural, concerned mostly with rules and practices. The next two dimensions are substantive: respect for civil and political freedoms, and the progressive implementation of greater political (and underlying it, social and economic) equality. Our last dimension, responsiveness, bridges procedure and substance by providing a basis for measuring how much or little public policies (including laws, institutions, and expenditures) correspond to citizen demands and preferences as aggregated through the political process.

Each of these dimensions may vary as to form of institutional expression and degree of development. Capturing and explaining this variation require indicators that reveal how and to what degree each dimension is present in different countries (and in different models of the good democracy). The resulting empirical data will also make it possible to track trends in the quality of democracy in individual countries over time, including the effectiveness of institutional reforms.[4]

The multidimensional nature of our framework, and of the growing number of democracy assessments that are being conducted, implies a pluralist notion of democratic quality. As we explain below, there are not only dense linkages but also trade-offs and tensions among the various dimensions of democratic quality, and democracies will differ in the normative weights they place on these various dimensions (for example, freedom versus responsiveness). There is no objective way of deriving a single framework of democratic quality, right and true for all societies.

We are now ready to explore more concretely our eight dimensions of democratic quality in three respects: the empirical definition, the conditions for the dimension to develop and thrive, and the means by which it is commonly subverted. We begin with the five procedural dimensions.

The Rule of Law. As Guillermo O'Donnell explains, under a rule of law all citizens are equal before the law, which is fairly and consistently applied to all by an independent judiciary, and the laws themselves are clear, publicly known, universal, stable, and nonretroactive. What makes a rule of law *democratic,* argues O'Donnell, is that the legal system defends the political rights and procedures of democracy, upholds everyone's civil rights, and reinforces the authority of other agencies of horizontal accountability that ensure the legality and propriety of official actions.

The rule of law is the base upon which every other dimension of democratic quality rests. There are, to be sure, several dozen "illiberal democracies" in the world today where competitive elections and popular participation coexist with considerable lawlessness and abuse of power. Yet the very illiberalism of such regimes (including their lack of truly law-based rule) imperils their democratic character. A weak rule of law will likely mean that participation by the poor and marginalized is suppressed, individual freedoms are insecure, many civic groups are unable to organize and advocate, the resourceful and well-connected are unduly favored, corruption and abuse of power run rampant, political competition is unfair, voters have a hard time holding rulers to account, and overall democratic responsiveness is gravely enfeebled.

The most important conditions aiding the development of law-based rule are the diffusion of liberal and democratic values at both popular and elite levels; strong bureaucratic traditions of competence and impartiality; and adequate institutional and economic means. These conditions are uncommon and hard to create from scratch—hence the weakness of the rule of law in many recently established democracies (and some older ones as well). The best approach is probably to work first on gradually building up the independence, capacity, and authority of law courts. But the research literature is sobering: No amount of money and training (including generous external assistance) will suffice unless democratic leaders show both political will and appropriate self-restraint. This in turn requires a mobilized and aware civil society as well as efficient tools of democratic competition so that voters can remove officials who block reform.

Participation. No regime can be a democracy unless it grants all of its adult citizens formal rights of political participation, including the franchise. But a good democracy must ensure that all citizens are in fact able to make use of these formal rights to influence the decision-making process: to vote, to organize, to assemble, to protest, and to lobby for their interests. With regard to participation, democratic quality is high when we in fact observe extensive citizen participation not only through voting but in the life of political parties and civil society organizations, in the discussion of public policy issues, in communicating with and demanding accountability from elected representatives, in monitoring official conduct, and in direct engagement with public issues at the local level.

Participation in these respects is intimately related to political equality. Even if everyone's formal rights of participation are upheld, inequalities in political resources can make it harder for lower-status individuals to exercise those rights. Thus a fundamental condition for widespread participation in a good democracy is broad diffusion of basic education and literacy, and with it a modicum of knowledge about government and public affairs. Important again, as a supporting condition, is the political culture, which should value participation and the equal worth and dignity of all citizens. The latter implies as well tolerance of political and social differences, and thus acceptance by groups and individuals that others (including weaker parties and one's adversaries) also have equal rights under law.

Competition. In order to be a democracy at all, a political system must have regular, free, and fair electoral competition between different political parties. But democracies vary in their degree of competitiveness—in the openness of access to the electoral arena by new political forces, in the ease with which incumbents can be defeated, and in the equality of access for competing political parties to the mass media and campaign funding. Depending on the type of electoral system, democracies may allow for more or less decisive electoral alternation as well. Here we confront a trade-off within the overall goal of competition. Electoral systems based on proportional representation (PR) score well on one element of competitiveness—ease of access to the electoral arena and parliament on the part of multiple political parties—but at the expense of another element of competitiveness, namely the ease of alternation of power (or the efficiency of the electoral process), since the presence of multiple parties with relatively defined shares of the vote tends to produce a succession of coalition governments with considerable continuity in party composition over time.[5] There is no objective, *a priori* way to determine which system produces a higher quality of democracy (though Arend Lijphart argues that PR does a better job of fulfilling other dimensions of democratic quality, such as the more equal representation of women and minorities).

One condition for vigorous competition is the legal and constitutional order. In contemporary democracies, funding for parties and campaigns is so vital for electoral viability that newer parties and candidates cannot seriously compete without some fair minimum in this regard. While there is considerable skepticism about the efficacy of laws that limit campaign spending—in part because of how easily circumvented they are in new and old democracies alike—some floor of public funding for significant parties and robust requirements for the full and rapid reporting of all contributions to parties and campaigns do seem to promote greater electoral fairness and competitiveness.[6] In first-past-the-post systems, the means by which electoral districts are drawn also heavily shape competitiveness. Where partisan bodies are able to draw electoral districts to their own advantage (as in the United States), they are likely to do so in ways that will promote partisan and incumbency advantage. Of course, electoral competitiveness also depends on fairness in access to the mass media, pluralism in media ownership (and viewpoints), some dispersion of economic resources in society, and the enforcement of political rights by an independent judiciary. There is also an important linkage with horizontal accountability, because the single most important institutional guarantee of freedom and fairness (and hence competitiveness) in elections is an independent and authoritative electoral commission.[7]

Vertical Accountability. Accountability is the obligation of elected political leaders to answer for their political decisions when asked by voters or constitutional bodies. Andreas Schedler suggests that accountability has three main features: information, justification, and punishment (or compensation).[8] These roughly describe the stages in which citizens learn of public actions, hear the reasons for those actions presented by leaders, and decide whether to punish the leaders or reward them (most often by either turning them out of or continuing them in their offices).

This type of accountability is called vertical because it seems to run "upward" from citizens to leaders. As Philippe C. Schmitter notes, in modern democracies, representatives (elected and otherwise) play a crucial mediating role in the accountability relations between citizens and rulers. Political competition and participation are crucial conditions for vertical accountability. So are fairly robust levels of voter interest, information, and turnout. At the same time, vertical accountability requires political competition and power distributions that are fair enough to allow for genuine electoral alternatives at the various levels of government, and that can produce turnover or at least a serious prospect thereof. The ongoing process of monitoring, questioning, and demanding justification through the work of civil society (the media, interest groups, think tanks, and so on) requires freedom for these groups to function and a rule of law that protects them from intimidation and retribution.

Horizontal Accountability. Democratic quality—including the processes through which vertical accountability operates—also requires that officeholders must either behave lawfully and properly or answer for the contrary not only to voters, but also to other officials and state institutions that possess the expertise and legal authority needed for such a monitory role. Since one official or arm of government is answering to another in a roughly lateral way rather than as part of a regular "command-and-obedience" relationship, this is called horizontal accountability. Examples of horizontal-accountability institutions could include the legislative opposition, specific investigative committees formed by the legislature, the courts, audit agencies, a countercorruption commission, a central bank, an independent electoral administration, a state ombudsman, or various other bodies whose mission is to scrutinize and limit the power of those who govern.[9]

The vitality of horizontal accountability hinges most of all on a legal system that provides for the exertion of checks and balances by other public entities that are independent of the government, and not competing as an alternative to it. But the agencies of horizontal accountability constitute a system of their own, and if this system is to work it must have institutional capacity, training, and leadership that are at once capable, vigorous, and responsible. Like the law itself, the agencies of horizontal accountability can be used as a weapon against political opponents, but only at the possible cost of undermining the credibility enjoyed by the entire institutional network.

Freedom, Equality, and Responsiveness

Freedom can be seen to consist of three types of rights: political, civil, and social (or socioeconomic). Political rights include the rights to vote, to stand for office, to campaign, and to organize political parties. These rights make possible vigorous political participation and competition, and hence vertical accountability.

Essential civil rights include personal liberty, security, and privacy; freedom of thought, expression, and information; freedom of religion; freedom of assembly, association, and organization (including the right to form and join trade unions and political parties); freedom of movement and residence; and the right to legal defense and due process. There are also a number of what could be called “civil economic rights,” including not only the rights to private property and entrepreneurship, but also the rights associated with employment, the right to fair pay and time off, and the right to collective bargaining.

Assuring political and civil rights requires many of the institutional conditions of fairness and horizontal accountability discussed above with respect to participation, competition, and vertical accountability. First and foremost among these institutions is an independent, capable, and constitutionally authoritative judiciary, along with a broader legal system (and culture) that ensures a rule of law. Finally, if, as Benjamin Franklin said, “vigilance is the eternal price of liberty,” then citizens themselves—organized outside the state in civil society and assisted by institutions such as the media—must care about and stand ready to defend rights, liberties, and the integrity of the electoral process.

Equality. Many of the previous dimensions imply or require—and the very word democracy commonly symbolizes—the formal political and legal equality of all citizens. A good democracy ensures that every citizen and group has the same rights and legal protections, and also meaningful, reasonably prompt access to justice and to power. Active prohibitions against unfairness must check all efforts to discriminate invidiously on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, political orientation, or other extraneous conditions.

Equality is an ideal that is never perfectly achieved, even in strictly political terms. As Dietrich Rueschemeyer observes, individuals and groups with better education, more information, and more resources will inevitably have more power to shape public debate and preferences and to determine the choice of leaders and policies. While democracy does not demand a certain set of substantive social or economic policies, it does in practice presuppose a degree of political equality that is virtually impossible if wealth and status inequalities become too extreme. One increasingly popular solution—if newer democratic constitutions are any indication—is to mitigate inequalities by declaring that certain goods (health, education, a minimal income, and perhaps others) are "social" rights. The rub is that unlike "first-generation" political and civil rights, which can mainly be secured by the "negative" means of the state leaving people alone and staying within the limits of the law, social and economic rights burden the government with heavy positive demands to achieve costly material goals.

Political will aside, the main prerequisites for the furtherance of social rights are sufficient affluence to fund social policies and wise strategies to achieve egalitarian policy goals without destroying the freedom and efficiency that make prosperity possible in the first place. Efficiency requires that the available resources go as much as possible toward investments in physical infrastructure and especially human capital (public health and education) that will raise the productivity of the poor over time. This in turn necessitates the control of corruption, and hence strong institutions of horizontal accountability.

The key to promoting reasonable equality-enhancing measures, as Rueschemeyer notes, has historically been autonomous groups and parties committed to representing lower class and status groups. In particular, unified and strong trade unions have played an important role in winning the extension of many economic and social rights.[10] But it is also vital that the legal system protect the political and civic rights of subordinate and vulnerable groups to organize, assemble, protest, lobby, campaign, and vote.

Responsiveness is akin to vertical accountability (and hence to participation and competition), and in turn influences the degree to which citizens will be satisfied with the performance of democracy and view it as legitimate. As G. Bingham Powell, Jr., explains, democratic governments are responsive when the democratic process induces them "to make and implement policies that the citizens want." Powell sees three links in the chain of democratic responsiveness. First, choices are structured in a way that distills citizens' diverse, multidimensional policy preferences into more coherent national policy choices offered by competing political parties. Second, citizens' electoral preferences are aggregated (by varying means from one country to another) into a government of policy makers. And third, elected officials (and their appointees) then translate policy stances and commitments into actual policy outcomes.

In the real world, however, responsiveness is more complex and difficult to assess. Even well-educated and informed citizens may not always be able to identify their interests when policy choices require technical expertise to evaluate. Policy makers sometimes must weigh trade-offs between short-term preferences and long-term citizen interests. And as Powell explains, when campaign issues fall on multiple dimensions, it can be difficult for a victorious party to infer a clear policy mandate.

The conditions favoring responsiveness are similar to those that support vertical accountability—that is, a robust civil society, a functional party system, and the like. Also helpful is a government that can translate preferences, once aggregated, into policies and programs. This requires, as Powell notes, a public bureaucracy that is both skilled and honest. Strong horizontal accountability will obviously be helpful.

There are at least three orders of objective limits on responsiveness. Leaders seek to maximize their autonomy and to shape citizens' perceptions of interest in ways that are sometimes highly manipulative or even demagogic. Second, public resources may be too limited. Governing responsibly—as opposed to purely responsively—involves setting priorities and making difficult choices. Even the most committed and well-meaning democratic leaders will not be able to please everyone. Finally, globalization imposes its own constraints on popular sovereignty. Some of these are the immediate work of supranational governance institutions such as the European Union, while others (particularly in the developing world) come from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and foreign investment capital generally.

The System of Democratic Qualities

We have presented here eight different dimensions of democratic quality. In one sense, we can speak of different "qualities" of democracy, and assess the level of development of each one individually. But as we emphasize, these different dimensions densely interact and reinforce one another, ultimately converging into a system. Although it is possible to identify different types of lower-quality democracy, which are deficient in different qualities, the various dimensions are closely linked and tend to move together, either toward democratic improvement and deepening or toward decay. Where we find democracies very weak on some dimensions, such as freedom and the rule of law, they tend to be noticeably deficient on others as well.

The linkages among the different elements of democracy are so densely interactive and overlapping that it is sometimes difficult to know where one dimension ends and another begins. Without extensive protection for and facilitation of civil and political rights, many citizens will not have the ability to participate in the political process, both in the electoral arena and outside it. Unless there is fair and unimpeded access to the electoral arena, vertical accountability may be greatly diminished. This requires not only the prevention of electoral fraud, and of violence and intimidation against voters, candidates, and parties, but also—as David Beetham argues—the prevention of more subtle denigrations of electoral rights, including rights to (some measure of) equality in access to political finance and to the mass media. If, because of the accumulated unfair advantages that the ruling party enjoys, voters are not able to convert their dissatisfaction with the incumbents into electoral support for the opposition; or if any party (ruling or not) overwhelms its opponents and drowns out their messages with vastly superior funding and media access, the electoral dimension of vertical accountability may be vitiated. And if voters cannot effectively hold their rulers accountable at the polls—and put in office an opposition whose policy promises they prefer—then a crucial link will have broken in the chain of responsiveness that Powell defines.

Civil and political rights are thus critical to the vigorous participation and competition of parties, interests, and organizations that make for vertical accountability and responsiveness. They are necessary as well for horizontal accountability, in that these state agencies become more active and effective when they are reinforced, beseeched, and informed by agents of vertical accountability, particularly mass media, NGOs, and other actors in civil society.

But none of this is possible without a rule of law, wherein an impartial judiciary affirms rights and penalizes and prohibits violations of the institutional safeguards for vertical and horizontal accountability. Neither can a rule of law be sustained and the abuse of power preempted and contained without strong institutions of horizontal accountability, which also ensure that the electoral instruments of competition and vertical accountability will not be abused. At the same time, participatory citizens, voting at the polls and acting in various organized ways in civil society, are the last line of defense against potential executive efforts to subvert rule-of-law and good-governance institutions.

To be sure, all good things do not go together smoothly. A government highly responsive to majority wishes, for instance, may be tempted to brush aside minority concerns or even deprive minorities of equal rights. Maximizing the procedural dimensions of popular sovereignty—participation, competition, and vertical accountability—may sometimes be bad for freedom and equality. A high-quality democracy thus does not rate infinitely high on every measure of democratic quality, but instead represents a balancing of virtues that lie in tension. As Guillermo O'Donnell has suggested, polyarchies (or by implication, good, robust democracies) "are the complex synthesis of three historical currents or traditions: democracy, liberalism, and republicanism."[11] Seen in this way, citizens and their organizations participate and compete to choose and replace their leaders and obtain responsiveness from them. That is the democratic element. But the liberal element protects the rights of all individuals and groups under the law, while the republican element (through unelected instruments of horizontal accountability) enforces the supremacy of law and ensures that public officials serve the public interest. Good democracies balance and integrate these three distinct traditions. Yet they do so with distinctive mixes and institutional designs, reminding us that democratic quality is a flexible and pluralistic concept, shaped by the normative choices of society.

Of course, vexing philosophical as well as empirical questions remain. Will a high-quality democracy necessarily produce high-quality results and citizen satisfaction? Will improvements in quality relieve the apparently growing disaffection of democratic citizens in many countries? A government may score generally well on our eight dimensions of quality—including responsiveness—yet still not entirely satisfy most citizens. This may be true for several reasons. First, as we suggested earlier, citizens do not always know what policies will produce even the sorts of outcomes that all tend to agree on, such as economic prosperity and stability with something close to full employment. Second, we live in an era when news and information reach citizens with unprecedented speed and competition for attention, generating a tendency toward sensationalism and negative exposure in the mass media. This makes the failings of democracy appear more scandalous, more often, than they would have in a previous era. Third, as we have noted, responsiveness in a democracy is intrinsically complex and multidimensional. With so many different interests in society, capable of aggregating in so many different ways, it is impossible for government to be responsive to all interests and concerns. Democracy is about competition and choice, and losers are bound to be dissatisfied, at least temporarily.

That said, we still think that at least part of the present disenchantment with democracy does concern procedures and institutions, and stems not only from more information about the failings of government, but also from higher citizen expectations of what democracy can deliver procedurally and substantively, as well as in terms of results. We believe that it is fitting for democratic citizens, who are increasingly informed and aware, to want more scope for participation; greater accountability, transparency, and competitiveness; a stronger rule of law; more freedom and equality; and more responsive—or at least reasonably responsive—government. In fact, we think the long historical evolution of democracy suggests that if citizens mobilize effectively, these aspirations for a higher quality of democracy can gradually, if still imperfectly, be achieved.

NOTES

1. The conference on the Quality of Democracy was held 10–11 October 2003 at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. A volume containing the seven essays here and six paired case-study comparisons will be published in 2005 by the Johns Hopkins University Press.

2. See for example, among a myriad of possible sources, Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

3. For a related approach, see David Beetham, "Towards a Universal Framework for Democracy Assessment," *Democratization* 11 (April 2004): 1–17.

4. These are among the purposes of a formal democracy assessment. See David Beetham, et al., eds., *International IDEA Guide to Democracy Assessment* (New York: Kluwer Law International, 2001), available at *www.idea.int/ideas_work/14_political_state.htm.*

5. See the debate among Arend Lijphart, Guy Larderet, and Quentin L. Quade in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

6. Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, "Financing Politics: A Global View," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (October 2002): 69–86; U.S. Agency for International Development, *Money and Politics: A Guide to Increasing Transparency in Emerging Democracies,* November 2003, *www.usaid.gov/our_work/democracy_and_governance/publications/pdfs/pnacr223.pdf.*

7. Robert Pastor, "A Brief History of Electoral Commissions," in Andreas Schedler, Larry Diamond, and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1999), 75–82.

8. Andreas Schedler, "Conceptualizing Accountability," in Andreas Schedler, Larry Diamond, and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *The Self-Restraining State.*

9. Andreas Schedler, Larry Diamond, and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *The Self-Restraining State.*

10. Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne H. Stephens, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

11. Guillermo O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies," in Andreas Schedler, Larry Diamond, and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *The Self-Restraining State,* 31.