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Vanessa Boese
Matthew Wilson

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Please address comments and/or queries to:

V-Dem Institute
Department of Political Science
University of Gothenburg
Sprängkullsgatan 19, Box 711
405 30 Gothenburg
Sweden
E-mail: contact@v-dem.net

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Vanessa Boese

Matthew Wilson

University of Gothenburg

University of South Carolina

vanessa.boese@v-dem.net

wilso929@mailbox.sc.edu

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Abstract

Contestation and participation are commonly viewed as the two constituent dimensions of electoral democracy. How exactly have these two dimensions been conceptualized and measured in the literature? Are they empirically observable and do they matter for democratic development and stability? This paper answers the first of these questions and considers their implications for the second by reviewing the literature on democracy's dimensions. We highlight three issues that affect conclusions about dimensions of democracy and their relevance for understanding democratic development: First, conceptual ambiguities — substantive overlap between the two concepts — obscure the meanings of each of the two dimensions. Such ambiguities led to a second issue, which is concept-measurement mismatch. The conceptual contributions were never really met with an empirical equivalent that would allow us to properly measure the two dimensions. Scholars continue to invoke theoretical understandings from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, however, but represent them using measures that were not explicitly concerned with measuring them, which presents the third issue of concept reification. As a result of these three issues, inference about how democracy has developed and their relevance for democratic stability or for transitions to democratic rule has been difficult. Based on these issues, we provide three suggestions for future research on dimensions of democracy.

Keywords: Contestation, participation, measurement, conceptualization, inference

1 Introduction

The questions of whether democracy consists of multiple dimensions and how they work together have been of theoretical interest to scholars well before empirical measures of democracy became widely available. As political science became more quantitatively oriented, research on the topic sought to bear out the ways in which democracy has changed over time and to relate them to overall democratic development. On the whole, however, such works share little consensus on the defining attributes of democracy and how they characterize political progression.

This article reviews the early theoretical and more recent empirical work on two popular dimensions of electoral democracy. We focus on the concepts of *contestation* and *participation*, which have long been treated as generalizable features of electoral democracy. These features originated with Robert A. Dahl (1956; 1971; 1989)—specifically, in *Polyarchy* (1971)—, who characterized democracy as the product of institutional guarantees that formed two varying attributes representing the extent of competition and inclusiveness.¹ Dahl (1971) argued that historical developments in the two features shaped a country’s prospects for stable democracy. Scholars have carried forward these ideas by continuing to invoke the concepts of contestation and participation to depict democratic development, which raises the question of how our understanding of them has fared over time (Coppedge, Alvarez and Maldonado 2008; Miller 2015; Böhmelt and Ward 1996; Wong 2021).

In separate sections devoted to conceptualization, measurement, and inference, we consider how original ideas about contestation and participation have been translated into measures and empirically evaluated. First, we argue that contestation and participation are fairly open to interpretation. Dahl acknowledged that there was substantial overlap between the two components (Dahl 1971, p.4), and institutional innovations since the “third wave” of democratization have made it difficult to neatly distinguish between the two (Haggard and Kaufman 2016). **Conceptual ambiguity** — the lack of

¹We follow Dahl (1971) and others, and refer to competition and contestation interchangeably (see Dahl 1971, footnote 2, p.4). Similarly, we also refer to participation and inclusiveness interchangeably.

clearly delineated definitions for each concept — complicates a shared understanding of democracy’s dimensions by making it unclear how to discern between the two concepts.

On a measurement level, some of the first “quantitative” measures of democracy (e.g., Gurr 1974) focused on identifying differences in *authority patterns* rather than measuring contestation and participation. Additional datasets on democracy that followed were only partially concerned with the notions of contestation and participation and did not use the same indicators to represent components of democracy. Subsequent crossnational work based on those measures nevertheless used them to evaluate arguments about changes in contestation and participation, which represents a divergence between conceptualizations regarding dimensions of democracy — the motivating theory — and the criteria used to judge them. This occurred despite broad debates about concept and measurement validity on the topic (Munck and Verkuilen 2002). There is, therefore, some **concept-measurement mismatch** between early theoretical notions of contestation and participation and the multiplicity of measures by which scholars have represented components of democracy.

Taken together, conceptual ambiguity and concept-measurement mismatch strongly impair our ability to draw inferences on whether there are empirically observable dimensions of democracy and if so, how they matter for democratic development. Research on democratic development has largely been influenced by a persistent conceptualization of it (the interplay of ambiguously defined contestation and participation being a driving force) that did not perfectly correspond to the empirical approaches used to measure it. This divergence has had lasting impacts on scholars’ conclusions about democracy across countries. The ideas of contestation and participation continue to be invoked because they are intuitively appealing but they lack a clear conceptualization and empirical support, which presents a third issue of **concept reification**. The intuitive appeal of those concepts and scholars’ continued reliance on them, we argue, can in part be explained by the ease with which different results can be interpreted as supporting them.

The issues that we discuss affect international and comparative political development because they shape conclusions about important outcomes such as economic growth and the likelihood of democratic transitions and democratic survival (Armijo and Gervasoni 2010; Boix and Stokes 2003; Miller 2015; Przeworski et al. 2000; Wright 2008b).

Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2005), for example, argue that political participation in the form of multiparty competition—rather than the means of executive recruitment—may matter more for reducing human rights abuses.² Improvements in the conceptualization of democracy, the measurement and construction of continuous indices, and methods for validating the dimensionality of the data encourage scholars to more carefully consider whether contestation and participation are distinct dimensions and, if so, how they have changed over time. To this end, we offer three suggestions for future research on dimensions of democracy that may help shed light on how they contribute to important outcomes related to democratic development.

2 Concepts

The idea of democracy consisting of multiple dimensions is closely tied to the concept of democracy itself. Although disagreement about the precise concept of democracy persists, a modern-day consensus emerged on a definition of electoral democracy that saw it as a competitive struggle for votes (e.g. Schumpeter 1943; 1950). This accepted ‘minimalist’ definition emphasizes regularly held elections to fill positions of authority—namely, the executive and legislature—in which a majority of citizens choose between candidates (Przeworski 1991; Elliot 1994). Others have argued for a more ‘substantive’ or deeper conceptualization of democracy that accounts for the freedoms that enable truly competitive and participatory elections to occur (Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Morlino 2004). The substantive view treats democraticness as a quality that can vary in one or more ways.

Dahl (1956; 1961; 1971)’s contributions connected the minimalist focus on competitive elections and widespread suffrage with more a substantive conceptualization based on supporting conditions. This went beyond thinking about democracy as the formal institutions associated with it to include elements that encouraged greater

²“Elections (indexed as the highest score on the executive competition dimension) neither make a democracy nor are they inherently the best place to begin statebuilding. Instead, elections are effective when other institutional changes that ensure accountability are put into place” (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2005, pg. 456).

engagement and an enhanced competitive environment (Mackie 2009). To that end, Dahl characterized democracy as an unreachable, ideal type based on “continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens” (Dahl 1971, p.1). In their view, a *polyarchy* was the closest empirically observed approximation of this ideal type (Dahl 1971).

Dahl (1956; 1971) reasoned that eight institutional guarantees were necessary components of a polyarchy. They argued that these guarantees were required for citizens to be able to formulate and signify their preferences and to have those preferences weighted equally in the conduct of government. These guarantees include the freedom to form and join organizations, the freedom of expression, the right to vote, the right to be eligible for public office and compete for political support, alternative sources of information, free and fair elections, and institutions that are dependent upon votes and the expression of preferences. Together, the eight conditions “increase the size, number, and variety of minorities whose preferences must be taken into account by leaders in making policy choices” (Dahl 1956, p. 132). Thus, in their view, a central quality of democracy is enabling minorities to organize and lobby as well as the presence of elected representatives responding to them.

Dahl (1971) argued that the eight institutional guarantees were divisible into two dimensions — *contestation* and *participation*. Differences in the level of contestation and inclusiveness (participation), Dahl (1971) reasoned, represented different types of regimes with polyarchies, or the most democratic regimes, exhibiting high levels of both contestation and participation.³ Moreover, they theorized that differences in the development of each dimension provided a basis for explaining differences in outcomes such as democratic transition and survival. According to Dahl (1971), increasing participation first or together with contestation was more difficult because it entails a need to reconcile the preferences of a large number of people. Distributive pressures should also be greater as well, which increases the threat of dissolution and conflict (Boix 2003; Huntington 1968). Instead, increasing contestation first—i.e. elites settle the terms

³ *Closed hegemonies* exhibited low levels of contestation and participation, whereas *competitive oligarchies* had high levels of contestation and low levels of participation and *inclusive hegemonies* had the opposite.

of contestation before including the broader public—follows an easier trajectory towards polyarchy. Dahl (1971) anticipated greater stability in the contestation-first pathway to polyarchy, arguing that it should be easier to first establish political consensus among a small group of people with relatively homogeneous preferences and then open up political space.

Contestation and participation became widely accepted dimensions of democracy. This is evident in the way that subsequent datasets aggregated indicators to represent components of democracy. In a review of democracy measures, Munck and Verkuilen (2002) wrote that “the decision to draw [on Dahl’s] influential insight that democracy consists of two attributes—contestation or competition and participation or inclusion—has done much to ensure that measures of democracy are squarely focused on theoretically relevant attributes” (pg. 9).⁴ They also remained theoretically relevant through efforts to empirically verify them. A number of works assessed whether changes in contestation and participation characterize political development over time and their potential impacts on outcomes (e.g. Dahl 1971; Coppedge and Reinicke 1990; Coppedge, Alvarez and Maldonado 2008; Miller 2015; Wong 2021).

In sum, contestation and participation came to be seen as fundamental aspects of democratic institutions and of theories of democratic development (Mayhew 2015). The theoretical appeal of these concepts may be explained in part by their vagueness. This is something that Dahl (1971) readily acknowledged. As a result, contestation and participation have meant different things to different scholars who apply the concepts to explain democratic outcomes. Boese et al. (Forthcoming) discuss how such ambiguities continue to affect empirical measurements of democracy to this day. This overlap and lack of clear delineation between the two concepts has been a central issue for the conceptualization of contestation and participation.

Issue 1: **Conceptual Ambiguity** — *The conceptualizations of contestation and participation are not clearly defined and still subject to a large degree of overlap.*

⁴We argue below, however, that variation among the datasets suggests otherwise.

The question of how parties and the broader public fit into the two dimensions serves as a good example to illustrate such ambiguities. For example, it is not clear how the broader electorate contributes to the contestation dimension. Dahl (1971) has been interpreted as presenting an elite-biased view of democracy in which the institutional guarantees initially applied to a few (Krouse 1982). In earlier writings (Dahl 1956; 1961), they describe an inherent tension between democracy and the ‘authoritarian-minded’ nature of the ordinary citizen (Kendall and Carey 1968; Krouse 1982). Under competition that is largely restricted to elites, “the rules, the practices, and the culture of competitive politics”⁵ as well as “[t]olerance and mutual security”⁶ were more likely to develop, Dahl argued.

Implicit in this argument is the idea that well-regulated, circumscribed competition and established authority constitute the foundations of further institutional development. The histories of many advanced democracies in Western Europe and some of the more stable countries in Latin America, in combination with election failures among newly independent countries, led a number of scholars to assert that limiting participation was a necessary step for inducing stability in new democracies (Diamond, Linz and Eds.; Dix 1994; Huntington 1968). As such, Dahl (1971) has been described as “a thinly veiled apology for the elite domination and mass apathy that suffuse the politics of Western liberal democracies” (Krouse 1982, p. 444). The emphasis on contestation for elected offices being restricted to a select few overlooks the mobility that enhanced competitiveness offers to ordinary citizens to enter and influence politics.

With respect to participation, Dahl (1971) openly acknowledged these ambiguities. They treated suffrage as the core feature but then went on to characterize participation as something more complex. For example, they recognized that “as the electorate grows, the traditional, mainly informal arrangements that worked well enough with a tiny group of voters... are simply inadequate” (pgs. 24-25) and that “the need to mobilize a bigger electorate triggers off the development of ‘modern’ party organizations” (pg. 24). Dahl (1971) further acknowledged that “[t]he right to vote in free and fair elections...partakes of

⁵Dahl (1971), p. 36.

⁶Dahl (1971), p. 37.

both dimensions” (Dahl 1971, p.4) and that “the right to participate... [is] a characteristic that cannot be interpreted except in the context of other characteristics” (Dahl 1971, p.5).

How do mass-based parties fit into the delineation of the two concepts and what are the defining features of participation, then? If Dahl (1971) was primarily thinking of contestation as elite-based competition—with citizens only choosing between candidates—then greater mass involvement (e.g. a stronger civil society and party institutionalization) represent expanded participation. To this end, Coppedge (2002) argued that “inclusiveness should be more than just voting” (pg. 36). If, on the other hand, participation includes suffrage only, then the concept of contestation is much more heavily loaded as an explanatory factor since it includes the ways in which citizen preferences are aggregated and articulated (such as mass-based parties and civil society organisations). An important question therefore concerns whether *participation* refers solely to the ability to choose between competitors or whether it also represents the ability to be involved in determining the outcomes of elections in other ways.

This conceptual ambiguity has important theoretical and empirical consequences. For one, it affects interpretations about the importance of those concepts for explaining outcomes. One interpretation might be that contestation-first development contributes to democracy by ensuring that potentially destabilizing actors first agree on the terms and make bargains that preserve government against pressures from below. If so, it underscores the importance of elite pacts as a key element of statebuilding and democratization—the need for agreement between parties before citizens choose between them (Higley and Burton 1989; North, Wallis and Weingast 2009; O’Donnell and Whitehead 1986; Razo 2008). Multiparty competition may matter here for organizing constituent preferences and preventing unrest. If, however, party development represents expanded participation by citizens, then the implications of contestation-first development might be different. It could be that contestation-first development makes democracy more likely by engendering rules, regulations, and norms that constrain the capacity of those parties to dominate or destabilize elections once citizens become more involved. This recognizes their capacity to serve as vehicles for co-optation, cultivating mass support to establish electoral dominance (Hellman 1998; Levitsky and Way 2010; Magaloni 2008). To the extent that the nature of participation has changed, it also raises the question

about whether election irregularities constitute worsening contestation or restrictions on participation (Boese et al. Forthcoming).

What scholars think composes each dimension also has downstream implications for how contestation and participation might be measured. For example, previous efforts to demonstrate changes in contestation and participation included the role of political parties under contestation and treated participation as synonymous with suffrage, for which it was often omitted (Coppedge and Reinicke 1990; Miller 2015; Wright 2008a).⁷ Though Dahl (1971) theorized that democracy may be divisible into two dimensions, other scholars suggested that it might be more complex. Coppedge (2002) argued that “[t]he first dimension..., contestation, has hidden qualities that have been ignored or taken for granted” (pg. 36) and that “inclusiveness *itself* may consist of two dimensions” (pg. 37, emphasis ours). Thus, despite their appeal for describing patterns and explaining outcomes, contestation and participation remain rather ambiguous concepts.

3 Measurement

The ability to bear out early claims about political development and the dimensionality of democracy was limited by, among other things, the novelty of empirical approaches and the lack of available data at the time. Within a few years of the publication of *Polyarchy* (Dahl 1971), however, notable contributions to the measurement of democracy occurred (Gurr 1974; Eckstein and Gurr 1975). Gurr (1974) was initially not concerned with characterizing democracy, but with identifying the patterns of authority that induced political stability within a polity. They differentiated between the openness of executive recruitment, decision constraints on the chief executive, extent of political participation, scope of governmental control, and complexity of government structures. Gurr (1974)

⁷Wright (2008b) was concerned exclusively with political competition, which they measured as the way in which participation is structured (PARCOMP from the Polity IV project). Coppedge and Reinicke (1990) resorted to focusing on contestation alone due to the observation that “[e]ighty-five percent of all countries in 1985 provided for universal suffrage, whether they held meaningful elections, approval elections, or no elections at all” (pg. 55).

nevertheless argued that differences in authority patterns enabled one to distinguish between democratic and autocratic polities, respectively characterizable by “multiple institutionalized centers of power” versus “the institutionalized monopolization of power” and anocratic polities, which lack power and institutions.

Gurr further developed this notion of authority patterns, leading to the creation of the Polity dataset. Gurr (1974) suggested that the category labels—e.g., “competitive” versus “ascriptive” forms of executive recruitment—could be used to create scales, given assumptions about their relative ordering. They advocated using the categories to develop indicators of “degree” and offered one approach, but noted that “many quite different operationalizations of the dimensions are equally or more appropriate” (Gurr 1974, p. 1486). Based on the ordering of qualitative attributes related to the competitiveness of political participation, the openness and competitiveness of executive recruitment, and constraints on the executive, Eckstein and Gurr (1975) created an eleven-point Democracy scale as well as a similar scale for Autocracy that also accounted for the regulation of participation. The annual codings of authority traits gained traction in the 1980s to quantitatively represent democracy and autocracy (Harmel 1980; Lichbach 1984) and especially so in the 1990s.⁸ In a subsequent update and extension of the Polity data, Jagers and Gurr (1995) subtracted the autocracy and democracy indices to create a single index that was employed to explain outcomes such as regime change (e.g., Gurses 2011) and conflict (e.g., Chiozza 2002).

A number of other continuous measures and indices of democracy proliferated in the 1990s, examples of which include Arat (1991), Coppedge and Reinicke (1990), Hadenius (1992), and Vanhanen (1990).⁹ Contestation and participation remained prominent attributes of democracy among emerging democracy measures—see, for example, Munck and Verkuilen (2002); Gates et al. (2006)—, but a widening gap developed with time

⁸Examples highlighted by Jagers and Gurr (1995) include Bremer (1992), Bremer (1993), Dixon (1993), Dixon and Moon (1993), Gleditsch (1995), Gurr (1993), Mansfield and Snyder (1995*b*), Mansfield and Snyder (1995*a*), Maoz and Russett (1992), Maoz and Russett (1993), Modelski and III (1991), Ray (1995), Raymond (1994), Miller (1995), and Siverson and Starr (1994).

⁹For a review of different measures of democracy, see Munck and Verkuilen (2002).

over the exact conceptualization of contestation and participation based on the measures available to evaluate them.

Conceptual ambiguity and overlap between the underlying concepts of participation and contestation contributed to differences in how measures represented them. Arat (1991), for example, measured “participation” based on executive and legislative selection, legislative effectiveness, and the competitiveness of the nomination process, and “competitiveness” based on party legitimacy and party competitiveness. Many datasets that spanned the post-WWII era also overlooked the participation dimension, since universal suffrage could be taken for granted (Munck and Verkuilen 2002).

Elsewhere, scholars empirically represented aspects of democracy without reference to contestation and participation as core components.¹⁰ For Alvarez et al. (1996), democraticness in the minimalist sense was represented by the extent to which the executive and legislature are elected, while others distinguished between political liberties and the selection process (Bollen 1980). Still others, such as Freedom House, qualified countries based on political rights and civil liberties. Subsequent discussion emerged in the literature about the differences between the various democracy measures and issues related to concept and measurement validity (Adcock and Collier 2001; Bollen 1993; Casper and Tufis 2003; Elkins 2000; Munck and Verkuilen 2002; Schmitter and Karl 1991).¹¹

The variety of datasets that present democracy as comprising different components make it difficult to say whether the concepts of contestation and participation are observable as distinct dimensions across them and whether they have empirical value for explaining democratic development. Scholars may have been influenced by the way in which Dahl (1971) conceived of democratic dimensions but did not share a consensus on how to represent them. The set of theoretically relevant attributes encompassed by

¹⁰It bears mentioning that Dahl does not seem to be a leading inspiration behind the Polity data, as Dahl was never mentioned in the codebook or the presentation of data, though they were cited in Jaggers and Gurr (1995).

¹¹To date, there still does not seem to be a consensus over how to adequately measure democracy; see, for example, Skaaning (2018).

different datasets is quite broad, and the ability to use them to validate arguments about specific dimensions of democracy is unclear.

Issue 2: **Concept-Measurement Mismatch** — *Various operationalizations of democratic features were not focused on the same criteria, and measures increasingly diverged from one another due to the lack of an established consensus.*

The multiplicity of measures that did not perfectly align with theorized concepts inspired efforts to identify latent estimates of democracy and associated dimensions from multiple sources (Bollen 1993; Coppedge, Alvarez and Maldonado 2008; Miller 2015; Pemstein, Meserve and Melton 2010; Teorell et al. 2019). Some therefore began to combine related attributes to approximate conceptual dimensions. This approached the dimensions question by using latent representations of inclusiveness and competitiveness to bear out arguments about trends in democratic development.¹² Coppedge, Alvarez and Maldonado (2008), for example, used principal component analysis on multiple measures of democracy attributes between 1950 and 2000 and identified two dimensions that they interpreted as representing contestation and inclusiveness, concluding that the placement of regimes and patterns over time validated Dahl (1971). Similarly, Miller (2015) used principal component analysis on a variety of indicators of democracy—closely resembling the approach of Coppedge, Alvarez and Maldonado (2008)—, to produce composite measures of contestation and participation from 1815 onward, noting that higher levels of contestation over participation occurred in electoral regimes prior to 1940, after which participation overshadowed contestation.

Nevertheless, the composite measures differed considerably from theoretical depictions of them. For example, the latent estimates of participation that Coppedge, Alvarez and Maldonado (2008) and Miller (2015) created came from disparate sources that included adult suffrage, legislative selection, women’s political rights, effective executive

¹²The latent-variable approach to measurement acknowledges that particular constructs are difficult to observe and leverages multiple measures of related (correlated) phenomena to represent an underlying concept (Pemstein, Meserve and Melton 2010).

selection, and an index of participation, while their estimates of contestation incorporated *Political Rights* from Freedom House, *Competitiveness of Participation* and *Executive Constraints* from Polity, and measures of party legitimacy and legislative effectiveness (Banks 1976).

Though it can help to reduce idiosyncratic errors and uncertainty between measures, the effectiveness of the latent-variable approach as a form of validation depends on whether they are focused on the same concepts. Insofar as various datasets operationalized the concepts of contestation and participation differently (if at all), combining them together using a latent-variable approach incorporates different definitions and measurements that could make the latent indicators *less* valid representations of specific dimensions. That is to say, it may exacerbate the discrepancy between the definition and measurement of specific concepts, making it less clear what the dimensions are and how they support or undermine specific theoretical expectations. The latent-variable approach improved on validating and testing the concepts in some ways but entailed combining several different attributes from varied sources that diverged from how they were initially conceptualized by scholars such as Dahl (1971).

There is a variety of measures that capture some element of democracy and that were guided, to different extents, by the intuition that contestation and participation constitute recognizable aspects of democratic development. They also vary in the extent to which they correspond to each other and to those concepts, in part because of vagueness about how to characterize them (the problem of conceptual ambiguity noted above). As a result of this concept-measurement mismatch, few have come close to providing an empirical basis for evaluating whether those concepts appropriately describe historical democratic development. For many theoretical applications such measures may be valid, but when it comes to specific dimensions there is a problem of concept mismatch—of measures that do not perfectly align with what they purport to measure. According to Treier and Jackman (2008), “a good measure of democracy should identify the appropriate attributes that constitute democracy, each represented by multiple observed indicators; have a well-conceived view of the appropriate level of measurement for the indicators and the resulting scale; and should properly aggregate the indicators into a scale without

loss of information” (p.202).¹³ Without much loss of generality, these evaluation criteria can be extended to other social science concepts, including the ideas of contestation and participation. Numerous measures that seemed focused on those attributes are available, but due to discrepancies, do not meet the standards for empirically demonstrating their existence as distinct dimensions of democracy.

4 Inference

The idea that democracy has different dimensions that can develop separately may be appealing, but as outlined above there is not much consensus on what they connote and how to measure them, which has important implications for inference.¹⁴ One risk is invoking an idea because it is intuitive but not empirically validating it. This implies that the theorized mechanism is not actually tested or demonstrated. One might assume that the measures and results match up with the concepts and mechanisms and wrongly infer that the results support their intuitions about them. This can occur when people assert a particular concept, aggregate items to represent it, and describe what comes out of the analysis. It is not yet clear which, if any, measures appropriately align with the notions of contestation and participation, for which that risk remains likely. Yet, those notions continue to influence empirical work on democracy and democratic development, with Wong (2021) being a recent example.

Issue 3: Concept Reification —*Scholars continue to perpetuate belief in distinct dimensions because it is appealing, though they remain ill-defined and not empirically substantiated.*

¹³Similar arguments have been made elsewhere; see, for example, Munck and Verkuilen (2002); Boese (2019); Goertz (2020).

¹⁴Similar issues have been noted with respect to the concept of democracy. Inasmuch as scholars use different representations of democracy to test questions about its causes and consequences, it affects inference because they may not be talking about the same thing (Casper and Tufis 2003).

Scholars may endeavor to operationalize and describe an idea not because it results in the greatest reduction in error among observations but because it is commonly treated as useful or valid. Collier and Adcock (1999) note that “if a particular name resonates primarily due to this tacit belief, rather than because it provides an analytically appropriate slicing of reality, then this name can become a slogan that is employed in a sloppy and uncritical manner” (p.544). Adherence to concepts such as contestation and participation may represent the reification of “bounded wholes” and not the most appropriate way to depict democratic development (Collier and Adcock 1999; Sartori 1987). That is to say, using different measures to represent a particular concept emphasizes their correspondence and shared contribution to that notion at the expense of alternative groupings. Though this is a regular part of research design and measurement, inconsistently using data and measures to create combined values places undue importance on the concept, potentially obscuring both its meaning and what we know about its effects.

The potential threats to inference created by conceptual ambiguity and concept-measurement mismatch are especially clear when considering whether how the Polity dataset might affect conclusions about contestation and participation. This is because the link between these specific conceptual dimensions and the way in which the Polity data were measured and aggregated is tenuous at best. For example, Wright (2008*b*) found that among newer democracies those with a higher initial level of competition were more durable. The author also showed that new democracies with lower levels of initial political competition were more likely to incur civil conflict. Though the authors relied on a measure of political competition from Polity that captures “the extent to which alternative preferences for policy and leadership can be pursued in the political arena” (PARCOMP), the measure refers to the Competitiveness of *Participation* and “implies a significant degree of civil interaction” (Marshall, Gurr and Jagers 2014, p.26).¹⁵ The author’s exclusive focus on the concept of contestation and the measure’s allusion to participation obscure a clear understanding of how either contributes to democratic stability.

¹⁵Emphasis added.

This issue is not unique to studies that use the Polity dataset to test arguments about contestation and participation—as noted earlier, it could also occur when aggregating data from multiple sources to represent the conceptual dimensions. In either case, the threat to inference stems from asserting a particular concept in one’s theoretical explanation and using a measure that may not adequately represent it to characterize it and test relationships. Extant conclusions about dimensions of democracy rest critically upon decisions about how to empirically represent them. The imperfect overlap between concepts and measures thus begs the question of what exactly it is about democracy that drives outcomes such as growth and regime change (Armijo and Gervasoni 2010; Boix and Stokes 2003; Miller 2015; Przeworski et al. 2000; Wright 2008*b*).

5 Revisiting Democracy’s Dimensions

There are plenty of reasons to revisit the dimensionality question. As Skaaning, Gerring and Bartusevičius (2015) note, “the goal of reducing the plenitude of characteristics associated with ‘democracy’ to a single unidimensional index is elusive...because the concept itself is multidimensional and because extant indicators are limited in their purview” (p.1494). Contestation and participation have long been tacitly agreed upon dimensions. However, conceptual ambiguities, concept-measurement mismatch, and concept reification have limited our ability to delineate and uncover theoretically *and* empirically relevant dimensions. Consequently, the role of these dimensions in providing democratic stability or supporting democratic transitions is not yet clear.

Recognition of the aforementioned issues is an important first step towards establishing more well-defined theoretical constructs and shared standards of evaluation. Outlining them supports several suggestions for advancing research on the cross-national and historical development of democracy. This is valuable for revising the question of *how* democracy develops, since scholars have portrayed democracy as developing along one (Bollen and Grandjean 1981*a*), two (Coppedge, Alvarez and Maldonado 2008; Miller 2015), three (Gates et al. 2006; Boese et al. Forthcoming), or more dimensions. Below, we discuss three avenues for improvement.

The first suggestion is to closely link theoretically and empirically relevant and consistent attributes of democratic dimensions. Fortunately, advancements in data

collection have made it possible to revisit the question of whether different attributes of democratic systems fall into empirically observable dimensions and, if so, whether they correspond to theoretical depictions such as contestation and participation. The start of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project (Coppedge et al. 2020*b*), for example, was informed by the preceding theoretical and empirical discussions on the construction of democracy indicators. Scholars who surveyed existing measures to evaluate the validity of Dahl’s arguments were central to the construction of the V-Dem data. Arguing that previous measures did not capture Dahl’s components comprehensively, Teorell et al. (2019) developed the project to estimate qualities associated with the “institutional guarantees.” One of the primary indices measures electoral democracy based on the notion of polyarchy that Dahl (1971) originally promoted (Teorell et al. 2019). According to the codebook, “[the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index] consists of five sub-components (each of these sub-components being indices themselves built from a number of indicators) that together capture Dahl’s seven institutions of polyarchy” (Coppedge et al. 2020*a*, p.27). The disaggregated nature of the V-Dem data and myriad aspects that it measures make it possible to examine relationships between them and the ways in which they have covaried over time. This, in turn, supports a reexamination of whether contestation and participation make up empirically meaningful dimensions using measures that more closely match up with the institutional guarantees that are thought to compose them.

The second suggestion is to adapt the meaning of the traditional concepts so that they travel further, which may mean moving up the ladder of abstraction (Sartori 1970). The conceptual contents of contestation and participation have likely changed over time. For example, while suffrage was a defining component of participation during the 20th century, it has decreased in importance after the fall of the Soviet Union, as almost every country has had full suffrage since (Przeworski 2008; 2009). Still, many countries are far from offering fully inclusive governance systems: today, barriers to party participation and restrictions on civil liberties remain popular methods for illiberal and autocratic leaders to impede large shares of voters from being fully engaged in the political process (Boese et al. Forthcoming). Freedom of expression and participation of civil society organizations are among the most threatened democratic attributes in the “third wave of autocratization” (Hellmeier et al. 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019) and thus constitute other ways in which citizens are hindered from being fully included in the political process.

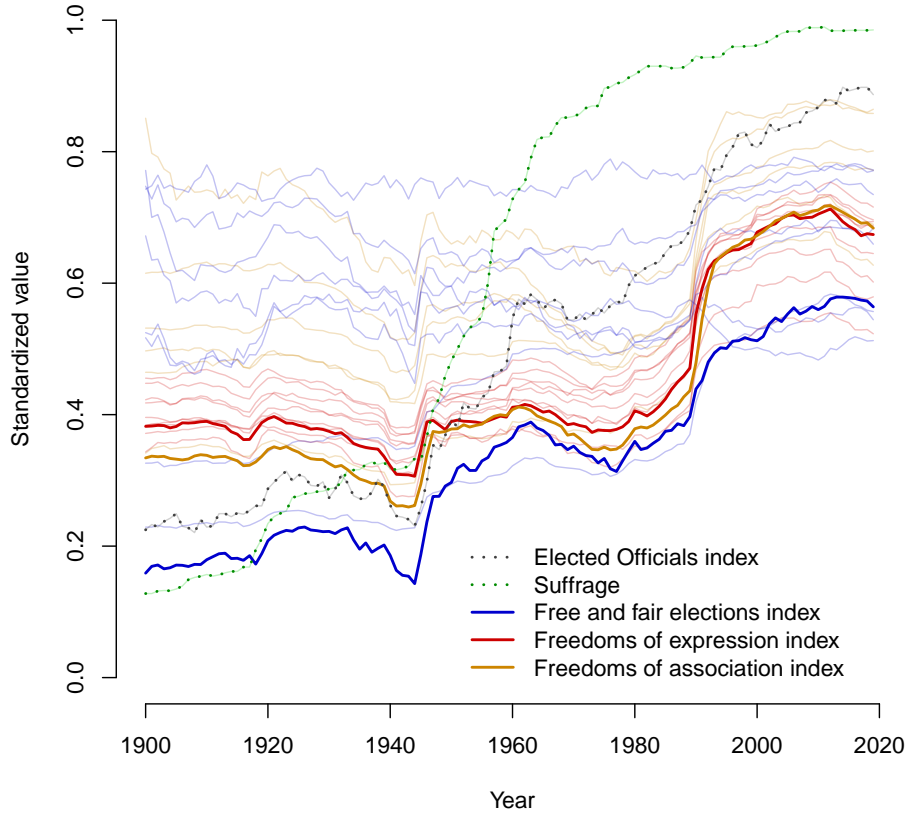


Figure 1: Average values for subindices over time.
Faint lines indicate variables that make up each subindex, denoted by color.

Thus, a crucial element of any successful conceptualization of contestation and participation is a relatively high level of abstraction that allows the attributes to evolve over time, as opposed to a list of lower-level attributes whose relevance change. To illustrate this evolving nature of different aspects of democracy over time, Figure 1 plots the five sub-components of the Electoral Democracy Index. At least three major trends are apparent in the average values of those sub-indices over time. The first is the rapid increase in suffrage after World War II, which after 1980 saw little variation. This evidences the point made above that suffrage has limited explanatory power relative to other features in the 21st century. The second observation is that between 1960 and 1990 the elected officials index was higher than measures of civil liberties and election fairness. This suggests that more countries were holding elections to fill positions of power but limiting the terms on which they occurred. The third trend is the increase in liberties such as freedoms of expression and association, and election quality after 1990.

The differences in these trends underscore the question of how we might conceptualize “contestation” and “participation”: whether participation pertains exclusively to suffrage or whether it should be expanded to include other ways that citizens’ engage the political process. Improvements in citizen activity in the form of information and associational life has bearings on conclusions about the ways they might participate and how the concept of participation has changed over time, which has not been readily decided.

This points to a third suggestion, which is to abandon the traditional concepts altogether and to rely on empirically derived dimensions that make theoretical sense. If we cannot measure it correctly and if it is not stable in meaning over time—that is, if we cannot overcome the issues of conceptual ambiguities, concept mismatch and concept reification—, then we need to question the empirical value of those concepts. Instead, scholars might focus on allowing trends in the data to shape the process of abstraction and guide how we describe and think about democratic development. Examples include Bollen and Grandjean (1981*b*), who used confirmatory factor analysis to investigate the dimensionality of data on democracy and Pemstein, Meserve and Melton (2010), who combined a number of democracy scales into a latent variable that incorporates uncertainty. This offers a corrective for some of the issues that we raised here, in that it encourages scholars to develop ideas about dimensions based on patterns in the data before empirically assessing their effects, rather than using potentially incongruent measures to test ideas about dimensions.

6 Conclusion

There is widespread agreement that contestation and participation are fundamental building blocks of a minimalist standard of democracy, as defined by publicly contested elections (Boix, Miller and Rosato 2013; Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland 2010; Przeworski et al. 2000; Schumpeter 1950). Here, we develop the argument that early conceptualizations about these dimensions—and dimensions of democracy more generally—have been insufficiently tested and verified. Dahl (1971) argued that democracy developed along two lines, but subsequent empirical work became clouded by different focuses and data from alternative sources. There are several issues associated

with our understanding of dimensions of democracy and how they have changed over time, which has important implications for research on democratization and development.

Our survey of the state of the art on the conceptualization and measurement of democracy underscores a divergence between early ideas about how democracy develops (e.g., Dahl 1971) and the measures that were used to evaluate them. Few datasets were explicitly concerned with creating measures that lined up with the institutional guarantees that Dahl (1971) outlined, making it difficult to validate claims about contestation and participation existing as separate dimensions on the basis of those guarantees.¹⁶ Elaborating on the shape of democracy by constructing dimensions from multiple datasets is further complicated by the challenge of identifying the contributions of various features to each dimension. This, we argue, has had downstream effects on conclusions about the concept of democracy and patterns of democratization. Though the concepts of contestation and participation are theoretically appealing to many scholars, whether they exist as separate aspects of democracy has been obscured by challenges related to concept and measurement validity.

Here, we noted three interrelated issues that affect conclusions about democratic dimensions and about contestation and participation in particular. The first issue is conceptual *ambiguity*, or ambiguities regarding what contestation and participation actually entail. The second issue is one of conceptual *mismatch* resulting from variety in the extent to which different measures of democracy attempted to measure aspects associated with the two dimensions. Finally, the third issue is one of concept *reification*, or the persistence of aggregating different components to represent or interpreting results as confirming those concepts despite the ambiguity and mismatch. These issues, we argue, have made it difficult to revisit and test some of the original propositions about historical developments in contestation and participation. Scholars who are interested in empirically demonstrating the relationships of contestation and participation to important outcomes should think critically about how they have been measured and represented in the literature, keeping the aforementioned issues in mind. There are nevertheless

¹⁶One exception to this is Coppedge and Reinicke (1990), although they faced some limitations associated with the temporal domain of their coverage that we note elsewhere.

promising avenues to explore concerning the dimensionality of democracy—including whether other attributes such as constraints matter—for which several potential solutions and new data may help.

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