

Conceptualizing and Measuring Support for Democratic Institutions and Processes

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There can be little debate on the question of whether measuring mass support for democratic institutions and processes is an activity worthy of thought and effort. Whether democracy can take root and thrive depends mightily (but of course not exclusively) on the commitments of ordinary citizens to the institutions and processes of democracy.

Consensus has not been reached, however, on how best to measure mass support for institutions and processes. Indeed, numerous approaches can be found in the empirical literature, ranging from single-item indicators to large and complex multi-item scales. Thus, it seems entirely reasonable that the question of how best to measure support for democratic institutions and processes receive considerable additional thought and scrutiny.

Conceptualizing Democracy and Its Components

Definitions of concepts are always arbitrary, but concepts that are embedded in clear theories are more useful than concepts without such theoretical grounding. Since many theories of democracy abound (despite quite considerable agreement across various theories), I begin my consideration of measuring support for democratic institutions and processes with a brief explication of how I understand democracy.

By “democracy” I mean a political system that grants unimpaired opportunities for all full citizens

1. to formulate their preferences
2. to signify their preferences to their fellow citizens and the government by individual and collective action
3. to have their preferences weighed equally in the conduct of the government, that is, weighted with no discrimination because of the content or source of the preference (Dahl 1971, 1,2).

Democracies need not allow all political interests equal *influence* over public policies, but they must allow all political interests *equal opportunity to compete* for the control of public policies. Or as Mueller

(1992, 985, emphasis in original) put it: “*democracy – government that is necessarily responsive – takes effect when people agree not to use violence to overthrow the government and when the government leaves them free to criticize, to pressure, and to try to replace it by any other means.*”

Robert Dahl has proposed a list of cultural values he believes are conducive to democratic development¹, citing the following as important to the evolution of democracy (or “polyarchy”)²: (1) belief in the legitimacy of the institutions of democracy – public contestation and participation; (2) beliefs about authority relationships between government and the governed; (3) confidence in the capacity of the government to deal effectively with the country's problems; (4) political and interpersonal trust; and (5) belief in the possibility and desirability of political cooperation mixed with a belief in the legitimacy of conflict.³ More simply put, a democratic citizen is one who believes in individual liberty and who is politically tolerant, who holds a certain amount of distrust of political authority but at the same time is trustful of fellow citizens, who is obedient but nonetheless willing to assert rights against the state, who views the state as constrained by legality, and who supports basic democratic institutions and processes (see Dalton 1994). Though there are undoubtedly those who would quibble with this list, it would be largely on the need to supplement the roster rather than delete items from it.⁴

In order to think about the cultural implications of these institutional guarantees I have reorganize

¹Dahl, and many others, actually focus on the beliefs of “political activists” (see Gibson and Duch 1991). I agree that political activists are of special importance, but the values of ordinary citizens are important nonetheless (as Dahl himself notes: “This concern [for the beliefs of political activists] does not mean that the beliefs held among the less influential strata are irrelevant, but only that a stronger case can be made for treating the beliefs of the politically most active and involved strata as an important explanatory factor” (1971, 127)), and I will not distinguish leaders from followers in this discussion of the theoretical literature.

²For simplicity, I have substituted the word “democracy” for Dahl's “polyarchy.”

³See also Dahl 1989, 262, for a more expansive re-statement of the importance of these attributes.

⁴As Rose (1992, 13) put it: “Democracy presupposes a civil society, a recognition by the state that individuals, informal groups, and formal institutions should be free to pursue their interests and ideas independent of the state in most spheres of life.”

them just a bit. A democratic political culture is a set of norms that encourages the formation of individual and collective preferences, and the submission of those preferences to the political arena for satisfaction, within the context of support for a set of institutional arrangements for political decision making that is responsive to these preferences. At the stage of preference formation and articulation, I focus on attitudes toward *democratic rights and liberties*; institutional arrangements are operationalized as *support for democratic institutions*. Each of these represents a component of a democratic political culture.

Such beliefs can constrain structural processes of democratization. For instance, competitive elections are difficult to implement in the context of widespread beliefs that diverse political parties create and exacerbate conflicts in society. Similarly, to the extent that ordinary citizens are intolerant of political diversity, democratic openness and competition are impeded. Certainly culture does not completely determine structure and practice, but it is difficult to understand the possibilities for reform without consideration of the beliefs, values, and attitudes of ordinary citizens.

Some scholars have conceptualized support for the norms of democracy as an abstract concomitant to democratic values (e.g., Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982). I take a somewhat different and broader tack, using a more variegated set of political values. The subdimensions of democratic values include: (1) support for an independent and pluralistic media; (2) support for the institution of competitive elections and a multi-party system; (3) the value attached to individual liberty; (4) support for dissent and opposition; (5) rights consciousness; (6) political tolerance; and (7) support for the rule of law. Each of these concepts is measured through an index based on multiple items.

Support for Independent and Pluralistic Media

Within the context of modern industrialized democracies, the free flow of information is crucial. For citizens to be able to evaluate their government, to hold it accountable, strong and independent sources of information are essential. Media that are dependent upon the government – either due to direct censorship or even through political control of the allocation of paper – rarely serve as an effective check

on arbitrary and autocratic government. Support for a vigorous, pluralistic media is thus an important component of basic democratic values.

Items we have used in the past include⁵:

The government should guarantee all political movements the right to publish their political agendas in the newspapers, magazines, and books. (Agree) (Reflected)

Newspapers, radio, TV should be responsible for representing all points of view, even those that some people consider subversive and dangerous. (Agree) (Reflected)

Newspapers, radio, TV should be under the control of the authorities. (Disagree)

Support for Competitive Elections and a Multi-Party System

Any list of characteristics defining democracy must include elections (Dahl 1971; Sartori 1986). As Dennis (1970, 819) notes, “if any single institution serves as popular democracy's *sine qua non* it is that of elections.” Indeed, some have even gone so far as to equate democracy with competitive, multi-party elections. According to Huntington (1984, 195), a “political system is defined as democratic to the extent that its most powerful collective decision-makers are selected through periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to

⁵The position I deem supportive of democratic institutions and processes is shown in parentheses. Whether the item has been reflected is also noted. Responses to the measures of support for democratic institutions and processes are typically collected via a five-point Likert response set, with “uncertain” as the center category. My surveys always allow two opportunities for a respondent to express uncertainty: the “uncertain” category and a “don’t know” category. Since we have never been able to find any difference between the two responses, for purposes of analysis these two responses are typically collapsed. One consequence of this strategy is that, on occasion, fairly large portions of the respondents will give uncertain/don’t know answers. By treating these as the center point on an agree–disagree scale, in the context of multiple-item indicators, few respondents are lost to missing data (and hence there is no need for data imputation). Even when respondents are not given an explicit don’t know response category, one is implicit, and most respondents at some point in an interview learn that saying that they do not know is a viable response option. The point at which this becomes known varies by respondent, since different individuals demand a don’t know response at different points in the interview. My view is that it is better to standardize the availability of the don’t know response than to make its availability idiosyncratic to each respondent.

vote.” Others agree.

Elections may be competitive without necessarily involving contests between institutionalized political parties, and earlier research on mass attitudes reveals a distinction between support for elections and support for parties as the agents of electoral competition (Dennis 1970). Especially in political systems emerging from one-party dominance, early political competition is likely to be structured around individuals rather than parties. Consequently, attitudes toward a multi-party system as a separate sub-dimension of democratic values must be tapped.

Ideally, the choice in competitive elections is between two or more parties – less ideally between two or more candidates in a one-party circumstance. Most students of elections do not believe policy choices are possible (or at least easy) when elections limit choice to candidates without the benefit of differing party labels (MacKenzie 1958). Candidate choice systems can be effective as a check on the personal competence of the office holder, particularly in terms of being able to deliver services to the constituency. But such elections are considerably less effective in mandating public policy. In MacKenzie's (1958) words, lack of parties means “muddled choice” and without party labels the options to voters are not spelled out with clarity. Or as Schattschneider proclaimed: “Modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties,” and “The condition of the parties is the best possible evidence of the nature of any regime” (Schattschneider 1942).

Measures of support for a multi-party system with competitive elections include:

What our country needs is one party which will rule the country. (Disagree)

Our country would be better off if we just outlaw all political parties. (Disagree)

The party that gets the support of the majority ought not to have to share political power with the political minority. (Agree) (Reflected)

Competition between the political parties will make the political system stronger. (Agree) (Reflected)

Political parties often create conflict that doesn't really exist. (Disagree)

If elected leaders can't improve the situation in the country, than it is better to reject multiple candidate

elections altogether. (Disagree)

Valuation of Individual Liberty

Central to all definitions of democracy is individual liberty. Not only must the power of democratic states be constrained, but democracies require guaranteed opportunities for citizens – individually or in groups – to compete for political power. Individual liberty contributes to the ability to vie for power and is an important lubricant for the machinery of democracy.

But friction between individual liberty and public order often emerges, even in the most democratic polities. As citizens seek to assert their political interests, individually or in groups, disruptions often arise. Public demonstrations frequently are associated with disorder and violence, and even public expressions of unpopular ideas can be discomfiting. To the extent that citizens value freedom only when it is *not* disruptive, democratic liberty is at risk. Measures of this concept include:

Freedom of speech should be given to all political organizations, even if some of the things they say are dangerous or insulting to others in society. (Agree) (Reflected)

It is better to live in an orderly society than to allow people so much freedom that they can become disruptive. (Disagree)

Free speech is just not worth it if it means that we have to put up with the danger to society of extremist political views. (Disagree)

Society shouldn't have to put up with political views that are fundamentally different from the views of the majority. (Disagree)

Because demonstrations frequently become disorderly and disruptive, radical and extremist political groups shouldn't be allowed to demonstrate. (Disagree)

Support for Dissent and Opposition

In a democratic political system, citizens must be able to challenge the actions of government and

to dissent from those they find objectionable. In more autocratic systems, dissent and disagreement are constrained. Just as citizens do not assert a “right to rights” in such systems, they do not make a basic claim to be able to disagree with the government. Democracies require the fairly widespread endorsement of the notion that citizens ought to be able to disagree with their government and express that disagreement.

Indicators we have used to measure this concept include:

It is very good that today people have more freedom to protest against the issues they dislike. (Agree)
(Reflected)

Any disagreements undermine the society. (Disagree)

You have to be ready to accept opinions of people with new ideas; new ideas are needed for the development of the society. (Agree) (Reflected)

People should try to adjust to society’s rules rather than fighting them. (Disagree)

It is better to accept the shortcomings of the present political system since it is too dangerous to try to change it. (Disagree)

People shouldn't try to change the structure of the society, but should accept it as it is. (Disagree)

Rights Consciousness

Another important dimension of democratic values is what may be termed “rights consciousness” (see Gibson and Duch 1993). This is the degree to which citizens are willing to assert rights for themselves. To the extent that citizens are vigilant about their rights, democracy tends to flourish. In autocratic political systems, it is not the citizen who defines and claims her or his rights, but it is instead the government that extends rights to the citizen.⁶

⁶The role of rights consciousness in democratic political cultures has received only limited attention from comparative scholars. Almond and Verba (1963), for example, never explicitly address the issue of rights consciousness. However, they nonetheless incorporate a surrogate for rights consciousness in their measure of “subjective political competence,” which they present as a prerequisite to democratic

But how specifically can it be argued that a citizenry cognizant of its rights contributes to democratic government? My view is that rights consciousness contributes to democracy because it results in greater demands by the citizenry for the advancement and protection of individual and collective political, social, and economic rights. Democracies are not well served by passive citizens who are unwilling to assert their rights against intrusions by governmental and non-governmental institutions (Gibson and Duch 1993). To the extent that the authority of the government is too readily accepted, democracy is threatened. One of the most important aspects of the authority relationships between governments and the governed concerns the rights that citizens claim for themselves (see Eckstein 1966). High levels of rights consciousness constrain institutions within democracies; they define citizens as active participants in governance, not as passive recipients of governance.

Indicators of rights consciousness include:

How important it is, in your opinion, to respect the following rights and liberties?

Freedom of speech

Freedom of association of organizations, groups and unions

Freedom of religion and expression/conscience

Equality before the law

The right to protest government's actions

Right to privacy of personal correspondence, telephone conversations, etc.

The index of rights consciousness is typically just a count of the number of rights individuals rate

politics. One element of "subjective political competence" is the expectation that citizens will receive equal treatment from governmental authorities. In other words, citizens in democratic political cultures develop a conception of certain rights vis-a-vis governmental authorities: they expect to be treated just as other citizens in the polity are treated (Almond and Verba, 1963, 106). A rights-conscious citizenry also represents an important check on the exercise of arbitrary power by governmental authorities (Almond and Verba 1963, 483), and, of course, arbitrary power is anathema to democracy. The authors find that this rights consciousness was higher in the more mature democracies, the U.S. and the U.K., and less well developed in the newer democracies, Mexico and Italy.

as “very important.” The theory proposes that individuals differ in their propensity toward claiming rights, so that all the question must accomplish is to provide a sufficient number of relevant rights for differences among the respondents in this propensity to be measured.

Political Tolerance

Competitive elections and public contestation of policies can genuinely occur only if citizens are free to advocate their own political views publicly. For such freedom to prevail, citizens must be willing to tolerate the activism of groups they dislike. Tolerance – putting up with that with which one disagrees – is essential to the effective functioning of the marketplace of ideas.

Much could be said about the measurement of political tolerance, since this is one of the subfields within the study of political culture that is most highly developed (and most self conscious about psychometric issues). For instance, issues of who and what must be tolerated in a democratic society are now largely settled. Typical indicators include⁷:

Members of this group should be officially banned in your town. (Disagree)

Members of this group should be allowed to make public speeches in your town. (Agree) (Reflected)

Members of this group should be allowed to have street rallies [demonstrations] in your town. (Agree)
(Reflected)

Support for the Rule of Law

Few people are likely to reject the rule of law in principle. Survey questions that ask people whether they agree or disagree that rulers ought not to act arbitrarily or capriciously or that citizens should be free to ignore the law are unlikely to be of much use.

Instead, the difficult test of support for the rule of law involves the juxtaposition of law and some

⁷Note that the tolerance items are based on the “least-liked” measurement strategy (see for example Gibson 1998).

other valued principle. Questions are most useful when they force people to weigh the relative value of two principles; only when supporting the rule of law involves some cost can we begin to gauge how valuable the rule of law is to people.

Consequently, our surveys ask people to agree or disagree (on a five-point Likert scale) with statements pitting the rule of law against another value. In two questions, the other value was expediency.

The statements are:

The government should have some ability to bend the law in order to solve pressing social and political problems. (Disagree)

Sometimes it might be better to ignore the law and solve problems immediately rather than wait for a legal solution. (Disagree)

Another statement paired the rule of law with fairness:

Even if laws are not always fair, it is more important that government actions follow the law than that they be fair. (Agree)

Some of those who oppose the rule of law do so on grounds of pragmatism, arguing that the rule of law can be unnecessarily rigid and confining. Law must be flexible if it is to be effective. We therefore asked the respondents their opinions of the following statement.

It's alright to get around the law as long as you don't actually break it. (Disagree)

Finally, many believe that elections provide legitimacy to governments and the laws they make.

Conversely, law made by a government one opposes and did not vote for may not be deemed worthy of support. We tested this idea with the following statement;

It is not necessary to obey the laws of a government that I did not vote for. (Disagree)

It is not necessary to obey a law you consider unjust. (Disagree)

Summary

It should first be noted that these questions rarely mention the word “democracy.” Since that

word means such different things to different people, I find it more useful to use questions asking about the concrete institutions and processes of democracy. Instead, the overarching concept has been broken down into its component parts. Attitudes toward each of these parts are then measured. Thus, support for democratic institutions and processes is a meta-concept that is comprised of attitudes toward various institutions and processes. In this sense it is useful to think of a syndrome of democratic values

Developing indices of support for democratic institutions and processes can be thought of as a multi-stage factor analytic problem. The first order factors are defined by the sub-scales, such as political tolerance.⁸ Then the second-order analysis specifies an overriding latent variable, which is overall support for democratic institutions and processes.

An important empirical question concerns how well these various dimensions of democracy are intercorrelated. One should not assume that all of these subscales are unidimensional, or, more important, that the syndrome of attitudes necessarily can be defined by a single overriding factor. In our earlier research, we have found that political tolerance is often poorly correlated with the other sub-scales, reflecting the fact that it is easier for ordinary people to accept the majority rule aspects of democracy and much harder to embrace principles of minority rights. Similarly, the rule of law sub-scale is often poorly intercorrelated, in part because the rule of law can serve dictators just as it serves democrats. The degree to which these various aspects of democracy are integrated in the minds of ordinary citizens becomes a substantive issue that is of considerable importance for the understanding a political culture in transition.

⁸These various subscales are grounded in the conventional psychometric theory. Any given item is of course composed of three types of variance: random variance, systematic variance associated with the concept (common variance), and variance that is systematic but not associated with the concept (unique variance). Random variance constitutes a threat to reliability; unique variance represents a validity threat. Only with multiple indicators of concepts can empirical estimates of validity and reliability be derived.

APPENDIX A: Support for Market-Based Institutions and Processes

It is vital that support for democratic institutions and processes not be conflated with attitudes toward economic structures. To provide some illustrations of how my approach to measuring democratic attitudes might be applied to market-based processes and institutions, I reproduce some subscales and items from our earlier research. Note that the position I deem supportive of market-based institutions and processes is shown in parentheses.

Government Social Guarantees

The government should provide everyone with a guaranteed income. (Disagree)

The government should provide children from the poor families financial support for getting a college education. (Disagree)

The government should provide a job to everyone who needs it. (Disagree)

Support for Price Mechanisms

It is better to have more goods with larger selection, even if the prices the high because they are not controlled by the government. (Agree)

It is better to have fewer goods with smaller selection, but at low, government controlled prices. (Disagree)

If a factory can't produce as many TV sets as people want to buy then the factory should increase the price of the TV sets. (Agree)

It is undesirable that private owners in our country make a lot of money by selling goods that are in high demand. (Disagree)

Income Inequality

The income gap in our country is too wide. (Disagree)

There should not be a big difference between people's incomes, even if it means that some people will work worse than they do now. (Disagree)

Big differences in incomes are necessary for the development of our country. (Agree)

Support for a Free Labor Market

I would choose a job that paid little, but from which I could not be dismissed, rather than a job which paid a lot but which could easily be lost. (Disagree)

An enterprise should be able to lay people off if it can't sell products it produces. (Agree)

Summary Attitudes Toward a Market Economy

Economic reforms should continue, even if today it means considerable hardship on the people. (Agree)

It is not important to me if we have a planned economy or a market economy, as long as it works well.
(Disagree)

I think I have few qualities that are in demand in today's economic situation in the country. (Disagree)

There is no place for me in the market economy. (Disagree)

I would not like to be friends with people who have their own business and are trying to make a lot of money. (Disagree)

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