

Grassroots Democracy and the Task of Measurement:  
A Critical Assessment of Democracy Indices

Hayley Elszasz

Bachelor of Arts, Williams College, 2016

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of Politics

University of Virginia  
August, 2020

Committee Members:  
Professor Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner  
Professor Jennifer Rubenstein

Democracy is a contested and consequential term in political science. Scholars from different corners of the discipline have debated the meaning of this term, and from the empirical subfields, how it should be operationalized, measured, and quantified. The location of a state on the spectrum between democratic and autocratic, as decreed by the political scientist or policymaker, has tangible import. Democracy ratings are factored into decisions regarding foreign aid,<sup>1</sup> multilateral grants,<sup>2</sup> and even seemingly “apolitical” funding streams such as food assistance.<sup>3</sup> So, it matters a great deal what democracy indices measure. However, aside from more technical methodological critiques of individual democracy indices<sup>4</sup> and critiques of the overall project from the interpretivist far side of academic political science,<sup>5</sup> there has not been wholesale inquiry into the mutually reinforcing role that democracy scores play in validating elite-level, institutionalized politics in the western world while dismissing alternative forms of democracy. While there are many potential angles from which to take issue with democracy scoring, I argue that these scores systematically downplay democratic potentials housed in “developing” contexts in the “Global South.”

More specifically, democracy indicators under-value -- or ignore altogether -- the democratic role of populations (specifically, in voting, demonstrating, and protesting), while privileging the actions of the state (how the state reacts to elections and

---

<sup>1</sup> See the Millenium Challenge Corporation Selection Indicators, which include three measures from Freedom House: “Civil Liberties,” “Freedom of Information,” and “Political Rights.”

<sup>2</sup> The National Endowment for Democracy: a U.S.-based grant giving organization aimed at democracy promotion abroad.

<sup>3</sup> See the 1985 Food for Progress Act.

<sup>4</sup> Such as the issue of aggregation in Freedom House scores specifically; see Munck and Verkuilen 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Schaffer 1998, 2006.

demonstrations). Together, this privileging of state action when determining which states are “democratic” serves to downgrade states with weaker or more flexible institutions, and where grassroots politics is especially important as a site of deliberation.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in this work, I seek to understand what we “do” with these democratic populations. Do we need different scores for democratic regimes versus democratic people? How do we, as social scientists, incorporate the knowledge of democracy existing on the grassroots level, if not on the elite, institutional level? Or, do we need to give up this seeming imperative of operationalizing, measuring, and giving a score, as Lisa Wedeen has suggested? I argue that the entire enterprise of democratic ratings is highly flawed and results in biased assessments of democratic populations and potentials around the world. While normative evaluation of regimes is an important component of foreign relations and academic political science, these scores provide a weak basis for understanding democracy-related criteria. For now, I wish to point out the impact of the current system of democracy ranking, setting aside potential alternatives for further work.

Rather than critiquing a singular index like Freedom House on purely methodological grounds (this has already been done), I hope to explore how the entire enterprise as it is currently executed systematically preferences elite-level democracy and undervalues grassroots democratic potentials, which has the effect of prejudicing against “developing” polities where grassroots politics is especially important as a site of deliberation. Moreover, these scores facilitate a common slippage from

---

<sup>6</sup> Wedeen 2008.

“undemocratic government” to “undemocratic country.” This paper will proceed as follows: First, I will demonstrate the importance of democracy indices, citing their widespread use in influential corners of academic political science, which serves to validate their use in foreign policy determinations. Then, I will develop my argument about the three ways that these scores are biased, integrating evidence from Freedom House’s “Freedom in the World” report. In the conclusion, I will point towards areas for future research concerning the uneven uptake of democracy scores in foreign policy arenas.

### **The Importance of Democracy Scores**

The stakes are high in democracy scoring: democracy indices are used in academia, policy organizations, and, perhaps most importantly, they are factored into the decisions of funding and grant-giving organizations.

Evaluating and explaining democratization cross-nationally has been a preoccupation of many comparative politics scholars for at least the past decade. Both Freedom House and Polity scores have been used pervasively in “canonical” comparative politics by influential academics who seek to explain the factors that generate or stymie democracy. For example, Acemoglu and Robinson re-evaluated the influential “modernization hypothesis” in 2009 using Freedom House and Polity scores. Michael Ross, exploring the “oil curse” for democracy in 2001, used the same two indices. Thirteen years later, Liou and Musgrave (2014) took up the question of the oil curse using more advanced statistical methods, but still relied on Polity scores for the

source of their dependent variable. In 2009, Houle used Polity scores to explore the impact of economic inequality on democratic consolidation.<sup>7</sup> The list goes on.

While many scholars admit to the imperfections of cross-national democracy indices, they are often excused as the “industry standard.” A representative example of how academics have justified their selection of democracy index for their research can be found in Gerring et. al.’s 2012 article exploring how democratization affects human development. In their section on data selection, they explain, “There is no fully satisfactory measure of regime type, and the options are considerably reduced when one requires a measure that provides a large sample of countries over a long period of historical time.”<sup>8</sup> Due to these restrictions, they are forced to use Polity IV measures, supplemented with Freedom House where there are gaps. They admit two major drawbacks to using this data; one, that “the methods remain rather difficult to unpack” and two, that “there are serious questions regarding measurement error in this index.”<sup>9</sup> In these shortcomings, however, they conclude that “Polity2 is likely no worse than the rest, and probably better than most. It is, indeed, the industry standard.”<sup>10</sup> While other scholars, such as Liou and Musgrave 2014, justify their use of Polity simply with the “industry standard” argument, the fact that Gerring et. al. point out these two specific shortcomings of the data is significant. Surely, there is some reason for scholarly discomfort with the fact that the methodology behind the production of the data is “rather difficult to unpack” and that there is good reason to suspect measurement error.

---

<sup>7</sup> For other influential articles using Freedom House and Polity scores, see Epstein et. al. 2006, Boix 2011, Kennedy 2010, Miller 2012, and Gerring et. al. 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Gerring et. al. 2012, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

I argue that it is perhaps worth additional pause, particularly considering the fact that comparative politics scholars' use of existing cross-national democracy indices may legitimize them for uses the scholars themselves might find questionable.

From its origins and utilization in the academy, democracy scores are also used in the policy realm as a component of algorithms determining the distribution of foreign aid. Freedom House employees regularly testify in front of Congress and provide briefings to Department of State officials.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the Millenium Challenge Corporation (MCC), an arm of the U.S. foreign assistance industry, uses Freedom House scores as the sole source of three of its selection indicators: Civil Liberties, Freedom of Information, and Political Rights.<sup>12</sup> On its website, the MCC boasts of “hav[ing] an analytically rigorous methodology and utiliz[ing] high-quality data,” yet, it persists in unquestioningly using democracy scores from Freedom House in its evaluation, scores that have been repeatedly criticized in political science (and long before that in area studies) for *not* being methodologically rigorous or unbiased.<sup>13</sup> I think it entirely likely that the demand for rigor has been overridden by the other selection indicator concerns that the MCC articulates: public availability, broad and consistent geographic and temporal coverage, and comparability across cases. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to note that democracy scores, originating in the “rigorous” realm of social science, are funneled into foreign assistance budget considerations and influential research in comparative politics.

---

<sup>11</sup> “Our History,” Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/content/our-history>.

<sup>12</sup> “MCC Selection Indicators,” Millenium Challenge Corporation.

<sup>13</sup> See Giannone 2010, Steiner 2012.

Academics and policymakers both produce and legitimate democracy scores in a mutually-reinforcing manner. In one direction, Freedom House gains legitimacy from its connection with and validation from the academy. The section of their website explaining the origins of the “Freedom in the World” report boasts of its “methodology devised by leading social scientists.” From this academic (and therefore “rigorous” and “objective”) starting point, Freedom House lays claim to the fact that “its results always highly anticipated, it provides policymakers, journalists, and the public a comprehensive view of the global state of freedom.” Therefore, Freedom House situates their publications as providing an essential service of packaging social scientific knowledge for the policymaker and lay person.

### **What Democracy Indices Measure**

What do we really measure when we “measure” democracy? In the following section, I engage in textual analysis of democracy score reports on two of the most prominent and broadly utilized democratic indicators: free expression and electoral turnover. I will focus my analysis on Freedom House scores, which are frequently used in policy and academia, and whose annual “Freedom in the World” publication is amenable to textual analysis for the purposes of this paper. In sum, I make three related critiques of the current biases in democracy indices:

1. **Elite Focus:** Democracy scores fail to include grassroots democracy and devalue deliberative forms of democracy located within democratic *populations*

2. **Institutionalization:** Democracy scores disadvantage states with weaker or more flexible institutions, where grassroots democracy is more important for understanding citizen participation and potentials for deliberation and contestation
3. **Slippage:** The language utilized in democracy score justifications allows for the easy slippage from discussing democratic *governments* to democratic *countries*<sup>14</sup>

### *Freedom of Expression*

Free expression -- the right to protest and demonstrate without repression -- is a key component of all democracy indices that are popularly used in academia and policymaking today. These rights are central indicators under Freedom House's Civil Liberties scores ("Freedom of Expression and Belief," "Associational and Organizational Rights," and, "Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights").<sup>15</sup> It is also present in one of Polity's three essential characteristics of democracy: "the guarantee of civil liberties to all citizens in their daily lives and acts of political participation."<sup>16</sup> Of course, free expression is a broad category that includes many of Variety of Democracy's (V-Dem's) battery of democracy indicators ("Civil society participation index," "Freedom of association thick index," etc.)<sup>17</sup> Freedom of expression is an essential component of democracy that is dealt with in different ways by these three popularly utilized democracy indices; however, I will focus my textual analysis on the "Freedom in

---

<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Jen Rubenstein for her help making this point.

<sup>15</sup> "Methodology 2019," Freedom in the World, Freedom House.

<sup>16</sup> "Dataset Users' Manual v2016," Polity IV Project, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Codebook, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), 2019.

the World” reports from Freedom House, as this is the only agency that publishes yearly, country-by-country reports on trends in democracy.

Before critiquing Freedom House’s reports on “Freedom in the World,” it is important to know some of the history behind their production. Freedom House was founded in 1941 with the original purpose of justifying American involvement in World War II, responding to the Nazi threat in Europe, and countering isolationism. Its early members were in the government, journalism, business, and academia. According to its website, at the time of founding, “The organization’s leadership rightly believed that the spread of democracy was the best weapon against totalitarian ideologies.” Its earlier policy actions included endorsement of America’s involvement in NATO and the Marshall Plan, encouragement of the Civil Rights Movement, and opposition to McCarthyism. Freedom House became involved in international advocacy in the 1970s, and launched the “Freedom in the World” report in 1973 with the goal of providing “policymakers, journalists, and the public [with] a comprehensive view of the global state of freedom.” In the 21st century, Freedom House has maintained a staff of over 120 people and offices in a dozen countries, while maintaining its commitment to democracy promotion abroad.<sup>18</sup>

Freedom House designates Ethiopia as a country that is “Not Free,” with an overall score of 19 out of 100. Despite this still low score, the change-over in power to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed -- who won a Nobel Peace Prize this year for his peacebuilding work -- caused Ethiopia to be flagged as a country that has experienced

---

<sup>18</sup> “Our History,” Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/content/our-history>.

“breakthroughs and movements for justice,” and therefore an upgraded score from last year, in Freedom House’s 2019 report. According to the blurb,

“In Ethiopia, the monopolistic ruling party began to loosen its grip in response to three years of protest, installing a reform-minded prime minister who oversaw the lifting of a state of emergency, the release of political prisoners, and the creation of space for more public discussion of political issues.”<sup>19</sup>

Here, we can see that Ethiopia won an improved score through the actions of a ruling party that eventually gives in to protest demands. Even though citizens have been protesting in Ethiopia for three years, it has only just now experienced a break-through, when the ruling party chose -- as a unitary actor -- to respond to these protests by unilaterally and passively “installing” a new leader, apparently without any new or different action being taken by the citizens pushing for this change via protest. What changed in order to cause a recognition of their protest demands? Freedom House’s formulation leaves citizens out of the action and does not consider the grassroots to be agents of change. Further, it falls into the trap of denying democratic agency from populations acting within authoritarian or closed contexts. Whether or not a regime formally “allows for” opposition movements, citizens can assert democratic agency. Within un-democratic regimes, we can find democratic populaces. Lastly, Freedom House describes Ethiopia as a case of “positive breakthroughs in *countries*” [emphasis added]. Rather than commenting on the ways that the ruling party has come to incorporate citizen demands and create space for more opposition voices, the report explicitly frames Ethiopia, as a singular entity, becoming more democratic.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> “Freedom in the World 2019,” Freedom House.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

This is a shortcoming that Lisa Wedeen calls attention to in her work on deliberative democracy in Yemen. She makes the case that grassroots deliberation occurs even, and perhaps especially, where formalized avenues for dissent (electoral competition, demonstrations, and protests) are closed off or highly risky. In her 2008 book *Peripheral Visions*, Wedeen expands the scope of political activity to include performative politics and more informal forms of deliberation, in this case qat chews: democratic practice of the everyday in Yemen. In her formulation, qat chews are illustrative of deliberative democratic behavior because they are “occasion for reflection and revelation. They do so by providing a home for politicized debate, for entertaining competing perspectives, for discussing the question of ‘what shall we do?,’ and for thinking collectively about issues of power and responsibility.”<sup>21</sup> While Wedeen does not explicitly make an argument about the act of democratic “scoring,” she urges us to consider how the information she presents might unsettle our predetermined notions about democracy and where it occurs. She notes, “In the absence of fair and free elections, democratic persons are nevertheless produced through quotidian practices of deliberation. These acts are not embellishments of a democracy independently existing. *They are the thing itself*” [emphasis added].<sup>22</sup> The lack of strong institutional structures for political participation in Yemen means that the politics of the everyday -- outside of institutions -- matters even more, and political scientists must make note. Deliberation itself is a notable democratic practice, irrespective of the institutions it can build or

---

<sup>21</sup> Wedeen 2004, 295.

<sup>22</sup> Wedeen 2008, 3.

events it can cause (such as elections). Not all practices are instrumental towards institutional (or institutionally-recognizable) goals.<sup>23</sup>

For Wedeen, following recognition that democracy is located within everyday practices and everyday people, measuring democracy becomes a challenge that is better left unpursued. The lived experience of democracy cannot be translated or located in large-N study. She proposes: “We may want to avoid thinking about democracy as a ‘thing’ at all, or a label that we affix to a state, but rather instead on the existence or absence of democratic practices.”<sup>24</sup> While presumably the “existence or absence of democratic practices” can be measured, there is an issue here of recognition. If, as Wedeen claims, qat chews are indeed democratic practices, why do they not cause a higher democracy score in Yemen? My aim here is to point towards the elite and institutional biases of democratic recognition evident in the contemporary democracy indices.

Unlike in my work, however, Wedeen focuses her critique on the minimalist definitions of democracy as formulated by Schumpeter (1942). In the minimalist formulation, democracy consists solely of the presence of contested elections -- elections in which the opposition has “some chance of winning office as a consequence of elections.”<sup>25</sup> Rightly, Wedeen points our attention to how “there is no necessary connection between contested elections and responsiveness and accountability,”<sup>26</sup> and exclusively focusing on elections fails to provide any picture of governance or

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>25</sup> Przeworski et. al, 2000, 16, reproduced in Wedeen 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Wedeen 2014, 277.

substantive representation after the election.<sup>27</sup> Further, Wedeen argues that isolated attention to competitive elections disregards substantive deliberative practices that occur in uncompetitive political environments by making an important distinction between democratic practices and liberal values. Schumpeter's definition, while attractive in its simplicity and succinct statistical potential, reflects an adherence to liberal notions of democracy as a form of government with distinct, institutional signposts: elections, multiple political parties, electoral bodies, and courts to arbitrate any disputes under the rubric of the sacrosanct "rule of law." While none of these signposts are evident in Yemen, according to Wedeen's ethnographic fieldwork, there is a great deal of substantive deliberation about political issues occurring in informal spaces. Taking Wedeen as an exemplary starting point, I hope to expand this work by engaging with less simplistic and more policy-oriented measures of democracy: namely, Freedom House scores.

### *Electoral Competition and Turnover*

Of course, while Freedom House expands and complicates the notion of what constitutes a democratic regime to include consideration of freedom of expression and information, there remains a significant Schumpeterian vestige: concern with the presence or absence of electoral turnover.

Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" also spotlights Cameroon, this time as a country that has fallen in the rankings since last year: "Long-time president Paul Biya

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 278.

extended his rule through deeply flawed elections.”<sup>28</sup> Although elections took place in Cameroon in 2018, and 54 percent of the population turned out to vote despite fears of suppression and a boycott by a sector of the electorate,<sup>29</sup> Biya’s ability to quell dissent and emerge with a 71 percent majority renders Cameroon a watch-list country. Of course, Cameroon is not a free democracy, and its citizens face unacceptable levels of fear of violence and suppression: this reality should not be ignored or romanticized. However, Freedom House’s short blurb does not do this justice, and in fact leaves the voices of Cameroonians outside the picture. Further, Cameroon’s downgraded score serves as a punitive measure that can endanger foreign funding to the Cameroon government and NGOs and investment in Cameroonian businesses. It is worth noting that, at great personal risk, 14 percent of those who voted cast their vote for the opposition candidate.<sup>30</sup> Like in the case of Ethiopia, Freedom House collapses the difference between elite responses to political events and the status of the entire country as a democracy or non-democracy.<sup>31</sup>

As social scientists, what do we “do” with democratic populaces in places like Yemen, Ethiopia, and Cameroon? How do we incorporate them into our understanding of democracy? While I do not presume to have all the answers, I want to point out a major gap in our current conceptualization of democracy (that its unspoken qualification is elite-level democracy), and how this serves to silence and indeed punish democratic populations.

---

<sup>28</sup> “Freedom in the World 2019,” Freedom House.

<sup>29</sup> “Biya wins again in Cameroon as crackdown disrupts anglophone vote,” *The Guardian*, October 22, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> “Freedom in the World 2019,” Freedom House.

## **A Consideration of Multiple Democracies**

The narrative I have spun so far about the potential disparity between elite and grassroots democracy might lead us to conclude that there are in fact many democracies. Collier and Levitsky, in their 1997 article “Democracy with Adjectives,” address and evaluate the dominant strategies that scholars of democracy have used to accommodate the proliferation of new states and regime types in the international system. In this piece, they make an obvious but important point: that “the results of causal assessment can be strongly influenced by the meaning of democracy employed by the author.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, they engage in a wider conversation about whether all countries and contexts should be evaluated under the same rubric of “democracy.” The dominant academic strategies for accommodating the diversity of regimes in cross-national study fall into three categories: creating new democratic subtypes, adjusting the criteria for democracy, and shifting the overarching concept. The last strategy is what concerns us most here: applying democracy as a modifier that can be used to describe various overarching concepts, i.e. the democratic state, government, regime, situation, election, moment, or action.<sup>33</sup> This strategy is distinct from V-Dem’s, as it relates to democracy occurring in different spaces, rather than distinct “types” of democracy itself. It is also notably different from the strategy advanced by Barbara Geddes in her 2009 *Oxford Handbook* essay on the causes of democratization; while Geddes notes that the causal pathways to democracy may be different for countries

---

<sup>32</sup> Collier and Levitsky 1997, 432.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 446.

based on historical context and the type of regime that precedes democratization, she continues to emphasize that even if there are multiple causal pathways, they can be systematically located on the basis of certain variables and background characteristics.<sup>34</sup> What I am advancing here is a multi-layered and multidimensional understanding of democracy that might very well belie systematic understanding in the causal inference sense.

To what extent does it constitute a solution to these concerns to talk about democracy occurring in different spaces and institutions at different levels of society? Should social scientists be persuaded by Wedeen towards focusing on democratic practices instead of democratic states? The fear associated with shifting towards a complete focus on grassroots democracy is that one may inadvertently reward or romanticize situations in which populations must protest against corrupt or dictatorial regimes. Therefore, an important step towards answering these questions involves evaluating the role of protests: whether they are a sign of something going “wrong,” and whether they suggest democratic health or un-health. More broadly, when and why do “informal” or popular democratic practices emerge?<sup>35</sup>

Deva Woodly is a political scientist who argues in favor of considering protest movements to be a regular, healthy event within a democratic polity. In her article, “Theorizing Social Movements as Democratic Institutions,” Woodly considers social movements beyond their impact on electoral politics to get at how they affect the polity itself. She attributes misunderstandings of the role of protests to confusion about

---

<sup>34</sup> Geddes 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Thanks to Jen Rubenstein and Denise Walsh for calling attention to this point.

democracy itself: “We misperceive the structure of democratic societies as the political institutions formalized in the U.S. constitution,” instead of taking a broader view of democratic institutions. She poses the question, “What if periodic insurgency is the way that democracy survives?” Woodly’s discussion of social movements in the U.S. context is important here for thinking about the role of protests in democracies cross-nationally. Like Wedeen, Woodly contends that politics outside of institutions should be taken more seriously in political science. Social movement actors “allow us to enact citizenship, not only through performing duties, but by authoring new understandings, priorities, and even governing institutions.”<sup>36</sup>

Woodly provides us with some evidence from the Trump-era United States that protests can be an integral sign of democratic health, not just of its lack. They can generate opportunities for problem-solving and deliberation where it may otherwise be absent, as we see in the cases of Ethiopia and Yemen. Protest and demonstration constitute opportunities for engagement outside of periodic voting, and as such, they give hope that the political may be more than fleeting.<sup>37</sup> One could argue that the case of the United States under Trump is a poor one: social movements are necessary because something is very wrong. But is what’s “wrong” a lack of democracy? Is it the case that social movements only arise in response to authoritarian events?

While it is true that protest movements often emerge in response to crackdowns or restrictions on rights and freedoms,<sup>38</sup> this is not the only narrative at play: further

---

<sup>36</sup> Woodly 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Wolin 1994.

<sup>38</sup> Consider the chant used during the Women’s March the day after the inauguration of Donald Trump: “This is what democracy looks like.”

inquiry reveals that democratic practice is a multivalent phenomenon with complex causality that is highly contextual. In the United States case, not even 56 percent of potential voters participated in the 2016 election.<sup>39</sup> Turnout rates were even lower in 2012. When considering voter participation as a component of democracy, the United States does not measure up well. Despite relatively low levels of electoral violence and overt suppression in the U.S. context, participation rates fall below those found in most other “developed” and “developing” countries that hold elections.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, something about electoral participation is uninspiring to the American polity, and social movements might provide additional avenues for deliberation and democracy that are missing at the ballot box, as evidenced by the invigoration of many electoral and non-electoral forms of participation following the 2016 election. Does the United States have a somewhat (imperfect) democratic regime, but lack a democratic populace? Or is it perhaps the other way around? Is there any meaningful way to separate, categorize, and quantify the two? The United States presents an interesting case for exploring these questions and provides a cogent call for fine-grained, qualitative analysis. Contrary to the calls of organizations like Freedom House,<sup>41</sup> the United States cannot be framed as a simple case of democratic backsliding; post-2016, numerous social movements have organized around such various causes as electoral reform, immigrant rights, protections against deportations, reproductive rights, police reform, access to safe drinking water,

---

<sup>39</sup> Desilver 2018.

<sup>40</sup> According to the International IDEA Voter Turnout Database, in their most recent presidential election, Benin had a turnout rate of over 66%, Burkina Faso 60%, Chad 66%, Ghana 69%, Kenya 80%, Rwanda 98%, Senegal 66%, Tanzania 67%, Uganda 67%, Zimbabwe 87%, etc.

<sup>41</sup> See Mike Abramowitz “The Struggle Comes Home: Attacks on Democracy in the United States,” Freedom in the World 2019, Freedom House.

environmental protection, et cetera. Further, 2018 saw historic levels of voter participation in a midterm election.<sup>42</sup>

This provides fodder for the discussion on the potential utility of considering multiple democracies. I argue that the directionality of the causal arrow between elite- and grassroots-level democracy is fraught and potentially impossible to determine. Whether oppressive governments cause participation is a tricky question and highly contextual. For example, one can easily conceive of a context in which oppression serves as a mobilizing device -- in the United States post-2016, if you will. However, oppression can be highly demobilizing at a certain level in that it places certain bodies in real physical danger (members of the opposition, the minority ethnic/religious group, the racialized other, the immigrant, etc.), thereby disincentivizing participation. Further, I argue that the slippage between the two as evidenced in the dominant democracy indices discussed earlier and their utilization in academia and policy does notable political work in terms of narrowing recognizable democracy to institutional, elite-centered, and ultimately quantifiable forms.

Democracy indices serve a particular function within the neoliberal, hegemonic state (here, I am talking about both the United States and Western Europe simultaneously). They contribute to the neo-colonial foreign assistance regime in a manner perfectly suited to the ideological preference for quantification and “objectivity” evident in both academia and policy circles. By treating the state as a unitary actor, they simplify our understanding of the globalized world into a community

---

<sup>42</sup> “Behind the 2018 U.S. Midterm Election Turnout,” U.S. Census Bureau, April 23, 2019.

of nation-states that possess or lack political and economic qualities in certain amounts that we can quantify and speak of in a “neutral” manner -- i.e. “Even if some countries do manage to register progress, almost half (43.2 percent) of Africa’s citizens live in one of the 25 countries where Sustainable Economic Opportunity has declined over the past 10 years”; “Thirty-four out of 54 African countries have improved in Overall Governance over the last decade, with 15 of these having accelerated their pace of improvement in the past five years.”<sup>43</sup> Here, we see the movement from country-level statistics to percentages of total populations, eliding key subnational differences and the complexity of complex concepts like “Sustainable Economic Opportunity” and “Overall Governance.”

Aside from the dichotomy between elite- and grassroots-level of democracy, I want to leave open the possibility for a constellation of democracies, arising from an understanding that “democracy means different things to different people”<sup>44</sup> and manifests itself in different ways; sometimes more easily observable and quantifiable to observers with particular positionalities and otherwise less so. I would like to propose that democracy occurs across a multidimensional spectrum that includes contestation, deliberation, and substantive representation operating on both elite and grassroots levels. I wish to advance the idea that “most societies have some democratic practices”<sup>45</sup> -- it is a matter of intelligibility and, far too often, quantifiability, resulting in a bias towards institutions and elite-led processes that are sometimes merely superficially democratic.

---

<sup>43</sup> Mo Ibrahim, “Governance Lags Behind Youth Expectations and Needs,” 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Ian Schapiro quoted in Wedeen 2008, 108.

<sup>45</sup> Young 2002, 5.

	<b>Contestation</b>	<b>Deliberation</b>	<b>Substantive Representation</b>
<b>Elite</b>	Candidate Debates	Legislative Assemblies	Quota Systems
<b>Grassroots</b>	Citizen Debates	Qat Chews	Elected Community Leaders

Table 1: Examples of potential manifestations of democracy across different levels and high-level components

There is room here for questioning the normative attachment to liberal democracy as it manifests itself in the “West.” Are there indigenous African forms of democracy that are already in practice that can be encouraged and built upon, rather than importing forms from the outside?<sup>46</sup> Have we lost entire forms and practices of democracy in Africa as they have been “forgotten, cast as failed or irrelevant because they do not produce ‘value’ legible within modern classifications”?<sup>47</sup> It is entirely possible that we have.<sup>48</sup> Of course, democracy indices and the statistical analyses they facilitate cannot accommodate a constellation of interpretive meanings, but that is entirely the point: we need to ask ourselves as social scientists what work these democracy scores do and whether they are a desirable component of our scholarship going forward. I hope that I have started down this path by exploring the work that these scores currently do and the ways that they fail to account for democratic politics of the everyday and the every person.

---

<sup>46</sup> Fayemi 2009

<sup>47</sup> Lowe 2015, 17-18.

<sup>48</sup> This paragraph has been adapted from Elszasz, “Policing the African State: Foreign Policy and the Fall of Self-Determination,” 2019.

## **Concluding Remarks and Future Research**

In the scope of this paper, I had to draw some boundaries as to not fall down the spiral of discussing the implications of foreign aid and American foreign policy. Rather than leveraging all of the justificatory weight on the use of democracy indices in foreign aid determinations, I hope to emphasize that their use is quite diffuse within policy and academia. I wish to point out that we should also be concerned that using these scores in academic political science can generate a problematic cycle of mutual reinforcement between academia and policy circles around the state of global democracy. This being said, there are debates that I refrained from entering and conclusions that I failed to draw, all of which provide opportunities for further work and engagement with the general topic of democracy scoring and its implications.

As a component of justifying the real-world import of democracy scores, I engage in the ways that they fail to provide good information for making decisions about foreign aid disbursement. Of course, it can be argued that it is necessary to judge some component of regime type when allocating funding to avoid assisting dictatorial regimes. I would contend, and this might not convince all opponents, that it is not democracy scores per se that alert U.S. Government agencies and American public to regimes that are undeserving of foreign aid under democracy-related criteria, broadly construed; there are other evident modes of determining regimes that violate human rights, some of which might prove to be less problematic, but this is beyond the scope of my research here. Despite the fact that Freedom House representatives brief

congressional and government actors, these officials do not rely solely on the exact scores for offering qualitative assessments of what governments they broadly consider to be democratic, autocratic, or violating some other norms of statehood. For example, in the most recent House of Representatives Hearing on U.S.-Africa Relations, participants expressed grave concern with the state of democracy on the Continent and “democratic backsliding” and doubled-down on the need for the United States to continue democracy promotion, particularly in the context of China’s active presence in Africa.<sup>49</sup> In the entire report, however, there was no mention of Freedom House scores or in fact democracy scores from any source to back up claims that democratic backsliding was taking place. Further research could trace how government reports use, or fail to use, the scores (beyond my discussion of the MCC criteria). Policy uptake of democracy scores is uneven, and more in-depth textual analysis and process tracing is required to locate the point at which democracy scores enter foreign policy discussions and determinations. In comparative politics, however, the use of democracy scores is more even due to the disciplinary norms of justifying claims of democratic trends using quantitative evidence.<sup>50</sup> Political scientists who carry out large-N studies of democratization cross-nationally should take care to not contribute to regime evaluations with elite and institutionalized biases, as it may legitimate the use of democracy scores that scholars themselves might not endorse. Adding caveats that

---

<sup>49</sup> “Looking Forward: U.S.-Africa Relations,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Sixteenth Congress, First Session, March 26, 2019.

<sup>50</sup> See for example Bermeo 2016, Waldner and Lust 2018, and Mechkov, Luhrmann, and Lindberg 2017 for recent works in comparative politics that use Freedom House, Polity, and V-Dem scores to leverage their arguments about democratic backsliding.

democracy data is methodologically imperfect but still “industry standard” does not suffice.<sup>51</sup>

As part of the discussion about foreign aid and democracy, it is also important to note that an increasing proportion of foreign aid in recent decades has not been given to central governments, but rather to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The same House Hearing on Africa led with a concern about how African populations “favor democracy,” and “take to the streets” to push for it, but an uncertainty of how to support these citizens.<sup>52</sup> As a component of the “New Policy Agenda” of the 1990s, funding NGOs from the “Global South” has become a popular option and is seen to bring with it associated benefits in embeddedness, efficiency, and flexibility.<sup>53</sup> More recent research indicates that philanthropists have been increasingly motivated by requirements for measurement-based effectiveness and impartiality of NGOs and other aid recipient organizations.<sup>54</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will not take a stance on the holistic enterprise of foreign aid, but rather want to alleviate concerns about evaluating states as aid recipients by remarking how assistance to civil society organizations that operate within authoritarian regimes can be a worthy move, and one that members of the U.S. legislature already discuss.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> It is worth noting that many comparative politics scholars, especially in the interpretive tradition (such as Lisa Wedeen), do give careful attention to subnational politics and contextualization of democratic practice; yet, there is still a large (and influential) tradition of studying democratization via large-N, statistical analysis.

<sup>52</sup> “Looking Forward: U.S.-Africa Relations,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Sixteenth Congress, First Session, March 26, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Edwards and Hulme 1996.

<sup>54</sup> Lechterman 2020.

<sup>55</sup> This is not to say that I endorse or trust American officials to carry out this project without generating new or different problematic dynamics, but rather to propose that qualifications for receiving assistance have the capacity to change.

A final area for future research that comes from this paper is exploring the impact of democracy scores on the decisions of leaders in the countries receiving the scores; this is another arena in which we can test their impact outside of the United States. In some contexts, the requirements of being “democratic” in the Freedom House sense can incentivize surface-level reforms that belie true, inclusive democratic overhaul. For example, when the requirements for competitive elections are of paramount concern for foreign donors, little consideration need be paid towards substantive representation or encouraging deliberation on all levels of society. As both the MCC selection criteria and the House of Representatives hearing illustrate, American officials continue to be concerned with the project of democracy promotion and are seeking avenues for pursuing this goal. It should be a matter of concern for political scientists that their work can legitimate the biased project of democracy scoring. I argue that academics should take more seriously the task of complicating democracy scores and explore the possibility of contextually specific, multiple democracies.

## Bibliography

“Biya wins again in Cameroon as crackdown disrupts anglophone vote,” *The Guardian*, October 22, 2018.

“Codebook,” Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), 2019.

Collier, David and Steven Levitsky, “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research,” *World Politics* 49: 1997, 430-451.

Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, Kyle L. Marquardt, Juraj Medzihorsky, Daniel Pemstein, Josefine Pernes, Johannes von Römer, Natalia Stepanova, Eitan Tzelgov, Yi-ting Wang, and Steven Wilson. 2019. “V-Dem Methodology v9”. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

“Dataset Users’ Manual v2016,” Polity IV Project.

Desilver, Drew, “U.S. trails most developed countries in voter turnout,” *Pew Research Center*, May 21, 2018.

Edwards, Michael and David Hulme, “Too Close for Comfort? The Impact of Foreign Aid on Nongovernmental Organizations,” *World Development* 12: 1996, 961-973.

Fayemi, Ademola Kazeem, “Towards an African Theory of Democracy,” *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)* 1(1), 2009.

“Freedom in the World 2019,” Freedom House.

Geddes, Barbara, “What Causes Democratization?” in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2009.

Ibrahim, Mo, “Governance Lags Behind Youth Expectations and Needs,” in *Bolstering Good Governance: The Imperative of Inclusion and Efficiency*, The Brookings Institution, 2019.

Lechterman, Theodore M., “The Effective Altruist’s Political Problem,” *Polity* 52(1): 2020, 88-115.

Lindberg, Staffan I., et al., “V-Dem: A New Way to Measure Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 25(3): 2014, 159-169.

“Looking Forward: U.S.-Africa Relations,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Sixteenth Congress, First Session, March 26, 2019.

Lowe, Lisa, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2015.

“MCC Selection Indicators,” Millenium Challenge Corporation, <https://www.mcc.gov/who-we-fund/indicators>.

“Methodology 2019,” *Freedom in the World*, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/methodology-freedom-world-2019>.

Millenium Challenge Corporation website, <https://www.mcc.gov>.

Misra, Jordan, “Behind the 2018 U.S. Midterm Election Turnout,” United States Census Bureau, April 23, 2019.

Munck, Gerardo L. and Jay Verkuilen, “Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: Evaluating Alternative Indices,” *Comparative Political Studies* 35(1): 2002, 5-34.

“Our History,” Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/content/our-history>.

Schaffer, Frederic C., *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1998.

“Voter Turnout Database,” International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout>.

Wedeen, Lisa, “Concepts and commitments in the study of democracy,” in I. Shapiro, R. Smith, T. Masoud (eds.) *Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2004.

Wedeen, Lisa, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 2008.

Wolin, Sheldon, *Fugitive Democracy: And Other Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2016.

Woodly, Deva, "Theorizing Social Movements as Democratic Institutions,"  
*Contemporary Political Theory* 17(3): 2018.

Young, Iris Marion, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2002.