Conceptions of Democracy

> *"Conceptual choices and changes may be intrinsically interesting, but the clearest reason to care about them is just that their non-conceptual consequences are pervasive and profound."* (Burgess and Plunkett 2013 pp. 1096-7)

> *"I suspect that we are not likely to achieve much improvement in reliable and valid measurement until we begin working with a thicker, multidimensional concept of democracy."* (Coppedge 2012 p.42)

> *"[T]he common practice of using data already coded by others is strongly associated with a tendency to simply sidestep the need to justify the choice of indicators."* (Munck 2009 p.25)

> *"[W]e seem to be particularly naive vis-a-vis the logical requirements of a world-wide comparative treatment of political science issues…In order to obtain a world-wide applicability the extension of our concepts has been broadened by obfuscating their connotation. As a result the very purpose of comparing—control—is defeated, and we are left to swim in a sea of empirical and theoretical messiness"* (Sartori 1970 pp.1052-3)

When the 2010-2014 World Values Survey asked Americans how important it was to them to live in a democracy, on a scale of 1 to 10, the average response was 8.41. When the WVS asked the same question in China, the average response was 8.43. While this might indicate a repressed yearning for democratic government in China, the next question was more concerning. When asked how democratically their country was being governed (again on a scale of 1 to 10), the average response in the United States was 6.46. In China, it was 6.43 (Inglehart 2014). Roughly equal proportions of Chinese and Americans appear to believe that their respective countries are being democratically governed. It seems unnecessary to point out that these two countries are governed in extremely different ways. What are we to make of the concept of democracy under these conditions? If a term that means everything means nothing (Dahl 1989), then how can we understand this distinction?

Democracy is a protean concept. Capacious enough to embrace direct and representative government, universal and limited franchises, constitutional monarchies and republics, its contested nature has contributed in no small part to the concept's survival for twenty-five centuries. But to measure democracy, we must identify a common substrate. It makes no sense to speak in one breath of a continuous concept applicable across centuries and in another to define its measure in uniquely contemporary terms. We wish our social science to allow for cross-cultural and cross-temporal inferences (Przeworski 2000). Political science would become incoherent if scholars working in different subfields were to use incompatible definitions of democracy. Part of the role of political theory is to avert these problems through conceptual elucidation.[1]

I propose to examine whether there exists a core background concept of democracy that is both persistent over time and consistent in meaning, such that it constitutes a suitable object of study for social science. Researchers would like to know how to operationalize this background concept to evaluate the extent to which a given society is genuinely "democratic". Social scientists frequently ask whether a state's activities are

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[1] Another aim of this approach is to facilitate two-way traffic between the conceptual and empirical sides of the discipline.

subject to popular control or are undertaken for public benefit. We wish to know whether the concept of democracy can help in this endeavor.

This is not merely an issue of academic concern. Democracy promotion ranks among the United States' highest foreign policy priorities ($2.6bn in 2012 alone), despite the fact that there is no consensus within the federal government as to exactly what constitutes democracy (Economist Intelligence Unit 2016, p.51). The high priority placed on democracy as an end in itself has led regimes around the world to define it for their own purposes, leading to robust "perceptions of democratic reality" in places whose institutional arrangements do not exactly suggest popular control (Achen and Bartels 2016 p.5). It is concerning, for instance, that survey respondents in China and the United States identify their respective countries as subject to democratic government in identical proportions.

This paper is an attempt to understand how a concept has been used. Following other scholars, I proceed on the assumption that we should judge proposed concepts in the same way that we judge models, on the basis of their utility (Coppedge 2012 p.13, Cappelen 2018 p.11). We might profitably define conceptual utility as establishing "an easy and natural correspondence between the symbols in our minds and the observable features of the real political world" (Coppedge 2012 pp.13-14). Vagueness and indeterminacy may be inescapable features of natural language (Cappelen 2013, Frege 1892). However, two possible cases are compatible with this observation. Our concepts may lack a semantic foundation altogether, or we may disagree about what exactly that foundation is. In the case of democracy, there certainly seems to be some foundation related to a notion of "popular control," broadly construed, but we also observe considerable conceptual blurring of those terms' content.

The method of conceptual engineering takes a normative[2] approach to philosophical questions, building on Carnap's method of explication and applying it to nonscientific fields (Creath 1990, Carnap 1950). Certain scholars have taken this as an opportunity to revise our topics in accordance with the principles of social justice, in (for example) procedures such as ameliorative analysis (Haslanger 2000). I will not attempt a normative project here. Instead of asking what democracy *should* mean, I will ask what it *has* meant to two particularly important groups of users – the ancient people who invented democracy for their own use, and our contemporaries who attempt to operationalize it in research. I would like eventually to extend this analysis to two additional groups of users – the scholars who considered it in the abstract during its long centuries of absence, and the revolutionaries who brought it back to life in the late eighteenth century.

In social science, operationalizations must reflect the underlying construct (Trochim and Donnelly 2006). Such reflection can be assessed via the helpful notions of face validity and content validity. In the case of democracy, assessment of face validity is subjective, and content validity is problematic. Face validity refers to whether the operationalization seems to be a good translation of the construct (Trochim and Donnelly 2006 p.67). Such

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[2] Cappelen (2018) strongly objects to this characterization, but I think it is correct. Attempts to "clean up" concepts may look positive at the outset (even to their originators), but conceptual obscurity typically masks disagreement, and resolving this disagreement requires normative discussion. Whether some conceptual engineers (Haslanger) are more normative than others (Cappelen) is a distinct question.

evaluations are not empirical, they do not admit of scientific treatment nor do they invite methodological sophistication. Content validity refers to correspondence between the operationalized concept and the content domain (Trochim and Donnelly 2006 p.67). This requires access to details regarding the content domain. Checklist approaches are common. It is difficult to see how an essentially contested concept could be susceptible to this kind of treatment in any conclusive way – virtually every item on the checklist would invite disagreement. As a result, operationalizations of democracy may not adequately reflect the underlying construct.

This paper will proceed in the following way. First, I will ask and attempt to answer what exactly it means for a concept to persist over time. I will go on to examine contemporary social-science understandings of democracy, broadly construed. Then, I will examine what democracy meant to its originators, and whether any principles can be distilled from their justifications. Finally, I will compare these democratic principles with those undergirding contemporary understandings.

Conceptual Preliminaries

What might it mean to measure a concept? Philosophers have frequently made a distinction between thick and thin concepts (Williams 1985). Thick concepts encompass many facets and incorporate complex definitions, referring to many aspects of the observed phenomenon. Thin concepts, by contrast, have few facets and focus attention on only a limited number of characteristics (Coppedge 2012 p.17). Some scholars point to a tradeoff between analytic differentiation and conceptual validity, essentially an inverse variation between a concept's definitional complexity and its application (Collier and Levitsky 1999 p.434, Sartori 1970 p.104). Visualizing this inverse variation as a "ladder of generality," they argue that increased definitional complexity provides useful differentiation at the gradual expense of applicability. Failure to acknowledge this reduced applicability results in "conceptual stretching" (Sartori 1970 p.1053). One climbs the ladder of generality by broadening a concept's extension (denotation) at the expense of its intension (connotation).[3] Attempts to augment the extension without diminishing the intension yield the aforementioned conceptual stretching (Sartori 1970 p.1041).

Contrast this with the so-called conceptual realism espoused by Gary Goertz (2006). Goertz advocates determining conceptual meaning not by appeal to necessary and sufficient conditions, but rather to family resemblances (Wittgenstein 1953) and prototyping (Murphy 2002). On this non-essentialist understanding, a concept such as a game has precisely no necessary or sufficient conditions for set membership, but rather games are understood to bear a family resemblance to one another (Wittgenstein 1953). Prototyping is the common heuristic of assigning instances to categories on the basis of categorical prototypes (Goertz 2006 p.29). In both cases, the categories generated by concepts may not have clear boundaries. Goertz believes this to be a ubiquitous problem. He suggests an ontological exploration of those conceptual properties that feature in causal explanation, arguing that

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[3] Intensions do not involve facts about the world, whereas extensions do. Two concepts can have the same intention but different extensions in the sense of picking out different actual cases.

while necessary and sufficient conceptual schema depend on the logical operator "AND," the family resemblances logic depends on the logical operator "OR" (Goertz 2006 p.40). Goertz further suggests that the choice of approach be "driven by the theory of the ontology of the phenomena concerned" (Goertz 2006 p.44).

It seems that in defining democracy theorists face a choice between conceptual logics – we can embrace either substitutability or sufficiency. This is to say that we can define our concepts in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions or family resemblances, but not both. We have reasons to expect that sufficiency will undercount democracy, while substitutability may overcount it (Goertz 2006 p.117). This is the familiar choice between Type I and Type II errors. Since democracy is a multidimensional concept, we also face a choice between merely measuring distinct dimensions and aggregating all of the dimensions into a single indicator. The dimensions thus aggregated by may be historically contingent, and more diverse samples over longer timeframes are likely to cause problems for thick concepts (Coppedge 2012, p.49). A solution may be to develop quantitative indicators of thick concepts, though this seems problematic for the reasons just discussed.

There are good reasons for believing that democracy may be an example of what philosophers have called an "essentially contested concept" (Gallie 1956, Collier et al. 2006). To use such a concept is to accept the inevitability of its contestation, and indeed to expect that one's own interpretation will be merely one among many. In short, the proper use of such concepts involves disputes as to their meaning. To qualify as an essentially contested concept (pace Gallie), such a concept must be appraisive, internally complex, variously describable and admitting of modification over time. Democracy clearly seems to meet these criteria, but this need not discourage us from investigating its substrates. It may be the case that while democracy is an essentially contested concept, the bases of its internal complexity are substantially more straightforward to define and measure.

As we saw above, conceptual engineering involves change to a concept. How much change does it take to change the topic? In other words, how much can a concept change before we must conclude that we are discussing an entirely new concept? To put it differently, "Revisionism may reach a point where it becomes more perspicacious to say that a concept has been abandoned, rather than revised" (Railton 1989 p.159). Philosophers have argued that topics are broader than particular sets of intensions and extensions, and that it is therefore possible to change intensions and extensions while still referring to the same topic (Cappelen 2018 p.101). The outer limit to this process is a change in intension or extension that materially *changes* the topic under discussion. The mere fact of incremental change does not prove that the topic has been changed, but the fact of disjoint extensions is not enough to show that the topic has been preserved (Cappelen 2018 p.191). On this understanding, I can slightly revise my research question: are ancient democrats and modern social scientists discussing the same topic? If so, then we have topic continuity across the centuries, but if not, we will have to stipulate that by democracy we mean something different (intension, extension or both) than was meant by its originators.

I wish to offer a concluding thought on the role of our intuitions in conceptual definition. It seems that we have intuitive convictions about the definition of democracy (the intension) and other intuitive convictions about the democratic status of particular

countries (the extension). It seems further that these intuitions may sometimes be in conflict. Can we do anything more than choose which set of intuitions to privilege? It may be possible for us to harmonize these intuitions by "work[ing] from both ends" towards a reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1971, Goodman 1955). However, it is an open question whether the results of such a process can be called scientific.

Modern Concepts of Democracy

It is reasonable to propose the most minimal definition that classifies regimes appropriately (Ockham 1151). The economist Joseph Schumpeter proposed a particularly influential definition – that democracy "means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them" with "free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate" (Schumpeter 1942 pp.284-5). Calling this the "theory of competitive leadership," Schumpeter argues that it more adequately interprets the facts of the democratic process than any account in which the people actually govern themselves. It is worth noting that this definition is not as minimal as it might seem. To begin with, it posits two classes of agents—leaders and people. It also requires subsidiary definition of free competition, acceptance/refusal and the electorate. However, it serves as a starting point by focusing our attention on a single aspect of the democratic process (elections) to the exclusion of all others. This is to posit competitive elections as both a necessary and sufficient condition for democracy.

Another minimalist definition of democracy is offered by Adam Przeworski, who wishes to distinguish between regimes on the basis of competition (Przeworski 2000). He defines a democracy as "a regime in which those who govern are selected by contested elections" in both the executive and legislature. Genuine contestation consists of ex-ante uncertainty, ex-post irreversibility, alternation and repeatability. We are told that "governmental responsibility…to voters" is a defining feature (Przeworski 2000, p.21). Przeworski is evidently of two minds about this, because he also emphatically *rejects* notions of accountability: "the very notion of "responsiveness" or "accountability" is muddled, and…probably only some otherwise democratic governments are "accountable" in any intuitive sense of this term" (Przeworski 2000, p. 33). In this discussion, he makes a point to which we will have occasion to return, namely that "Whereas democracy is a system of political rights – these are definitional – it is not a system that necessarily furnishes the conditions for effective exercise of these rights" (Przeworski 2000, p.34). On this basis, he rejects definitions that involve notions of liberty, freedom or human rights. He ends by offering a very clear decision rule: "[d]emocracy is a system in which incumbents lose elections and leave office when the rules so dictate" (Przeworski 2000 p.54).

There is something to Przeworski's (and Schumpeter's) focus on contestation – in an earlier work Przeworski wrote that "democracy is a system in which parties lose elections" (Przeworski 1991 p.10). Electoral competition does seem to be a genuine feature of popular control, but it is easy to imagine scenarios of dramatically restricted suffrage (Ingham 2019b) that violate our democratic intuitions but pass muster under minimalist definitions. In addition, Przeworski's definition is susceptible to what we might call the "Botswana

problem," where a party has won every election since independence and we have no evidence that alternation, and thus genuine contestation, actually exists. Przeworski is frank about the choices involved – his binary measure forces a choice between Type I and Type II errors. Choosing the latter approach, he is also frank about the consequent inevitability of undercounting (Przeworski 2000 p.25). This provides compelling evidence that binary measures are unable to capture the full scope of a thick version of democracy.[4]

Collier and Adcock (1999) propose that dichotomies have traditionally been viewed as the lowest level of measurement, failing to utilize all the available information (Collier and Adcock 1999 p.538). In addition, they write that "in the face of changing social reality, shifting definitions of the subject matter, and evolving theoretical understanding and empirical knowledge, conceptualizations that initially serve to justify a dichotomy based on a particular cut point can subsequently break down (Collier and Adcock 1999, p.544). However, they believe that attempts at definitional standardization are misguided, emphasizing that scholars should instead acknowledge their conceptual schema as "real choices" (Collier and Adcock 1999 p.562).

Moving beyond minimalist definitions, others propose a "procedural minimum" definition of democracy as "fully contested elections with full suffrage and the absence of massive fraud, combined with effective guarantees of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly, and association." (Collier and Levitsky 1997 p.433). Other conceptions abound. The influential political theorist Robert Dahl proposes a thicker concept called polyarchy, treating democracy itself as an unattainable idea (Dahl 1971). Dahl proposes two dimensions – contestation and inclusiveness – with eight institutional requirements: (1) universal franchise, (2) universal eligibility for public office, (3) competition for votes, (4) free and fair elections, (5) freedom of association, (6) freedom of expression, (7) freedom of information, and (8) some connection between preferences and outcomes (Dahl 1971). This is a significant departure from minimalism, and the concept is noticeably thicker. Indeed, Dahl's polyarchy has proved attractive to researchers, perhaps because it seems to be conceptually thick enough to satisfy our intuitions but thin enough to model quantitatively.

Dahl's polyarchy concept has been adopted by the popular Polity IV measure, which defines democracy as three "essential, interdependent" elements: "the presence of institutions and procedures through which **citizens can express effective preferences** about alternative policies and leaders…the existence of **institutionalized constraints on the exercise of power** by the executive…[and] the **guarantee of civil liberties** to all citizens in their daily lives and in acts of political participation." (Polity IV Manual 2017 p.14). However, the authors explicitly reject any "necessary condition" for characterizing a political system as a democracy (Polity IV Manual 2017 p.15). Polity IV does not take legislative elections into account, nor does it consider alternation in power.

Implementing this definition leads to some oddities. The United States scored a 9 on Polity IV's democracy measure as early as 1809, and achieved a perfect 10 democracy

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[4] "…dichotomizing is radical surgery. It amputates every dimension below the cutoff and tosses all that information into a residual bin labeled "nondemocracy." If this information is truly not worth knowing, such radical surgery can be justified - for example, if it is the only way to salvage a viable indicator. But if there is serious doubt about where to cut, caution is advised" (Coppedge 2012 p.57)

("DEMOC") score between 1845 to 1849, despite the fact that 13% of Americans were owned by other Americans (1850 census). Consider also that the Bill of Rights had not yet been incorporated into state law (13th Amendment, 1865), and that many of the more fecund sources of civil rights, such as the due process clause of the 14th Amendment, had not yet been drafted or ratified (1868).

USA DEMOC Score by Year
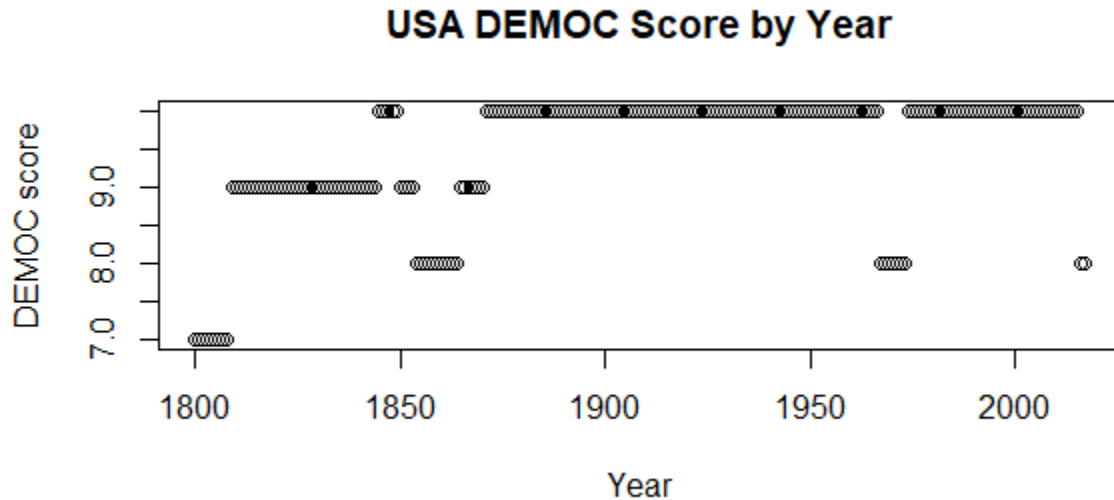
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A century later, between 1966 and 1973, the US dropped to a DEMOC score of 8, making the country less democratic than it had been in 1845. After reverting to 10 in the interim, from 2016-2017, the United States dropped to an 8 once again.[6]

Two points are evident from this cursory examination. First, Polity IV appears to be grappling with a democratic Flynn effect. Since peaking at 10 in 1845, the United States has unambiguously experienced a sustained increase in the three component measures that make up the democracy score. Citizens seem to be expressing preferences concerning policies and leaders more effectively, institutionalized constraints on executive power appear to be more robust, and civil liberties appear to be more effectively protected. During the period of the greatest actual erosion of executive constraint, from 1933 to 1955, the United States' DEMOC score remains at 10.

A global view reveals additional features. We can clearly see the stresses imposed on nascent democracies by the Napoleonic Wars, the Great War, and the Second World War. In the very long run, the DEMOC measure appears to be nearly static, but this is an artifact of the continuous entry of new, fragile states into the world system. When we examine the last 50 years, we find a more dramatic increase, again leavened by the creation of new states, particularly circa 1991.

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[5] All charts were prepared by the author using R.
[6] It is worth noting that in both 1968 and 2016 the US Presidential election was won by a right-wing candidate particularly odious to academics.

GLOBAL DEMOC Score by Year
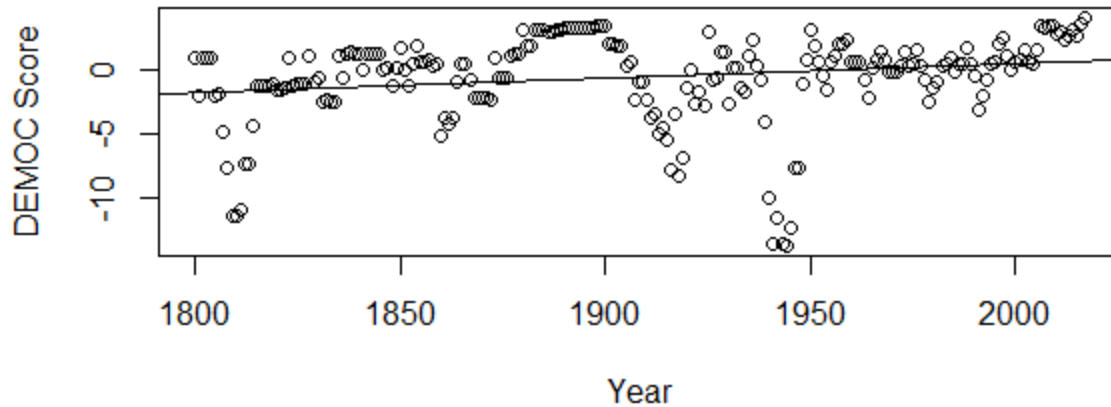
While progress might lead us to expect democracy scores to rise over time, we should not expect this process to have a ceiling. As of 2016, 34 of 116 countries (20%) have already reached a 10 DEMOC score and a 0 AUTOC score, which indicates that these states could not better realize the ideal of democracy – a curious result given our knowledge of history (Wiens 2019). Analysis of the data suggests that application of democratic principles is highly variable and subject to dramatic change over time. Polity IV appears to be useful in clear-cut cases but makes weak identifications in the middle range. It also seems curious that the authors would embrace Dahl's polyarchy measure given his definition of democracy as an unattainable ideal. Finally, scaled index measures do not seem particularly well-suited to capturing the concept of democracy, because they imply a ceiling (or floor) that may be exceeded in time.

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project identifies seven different ways of understanding democracy as "rule by the people": methods that are variously **electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian, majoritarian and consensual** (V-Dem Manual p.4). The authors provide separate indices for the first five measures, and they use additive and multiplicative aggregation formulae to construct a "polyarchy" score. Also inspired by Robert Dahl's polyarchy concept, V-Dem attempts to allow for "(partial) "compensation" in one sub-component for lack of polyarchy in the others, but also [to] punish…countries not strong in one sub-component according to the "weakest link" argument" (V-Dem Manual p.7). The authors are explicit that the decision to use additive and multiplicative terms is arbitrary.

$$\text{Electoral Democracy (polyarchy)} =$$
$$1*\text{elected executive} + .1*\text{clean elections}$$
$$+ .1*\text{freedom of expression} + .1*\text{freedom of association}$$
$$+ .1*\text{suffrage} + .5*\text{elected executive} * \text{clean elections}$$
$$* \text{freedom of expression} * \text{freedom of association} * \text{suffrage.}$$

Electoral democracy is primary, as the authors argue that "there can be no democracy without elections" (Coppedge 2015 p.586). To model this primacy, they blend electoral democracy into the scores for the other four measures. The underlying rationale is that "equal weighting of the additive terms and the multiplicative term in order to respect both the Sartorian necessary conditions logic and a family resemblance logic" (V-Dem Manual p.8). As we have seen, it is not clear that V-Dem can have it both ways on this particular point.

Global V-Dem Polyarchy Score by Year
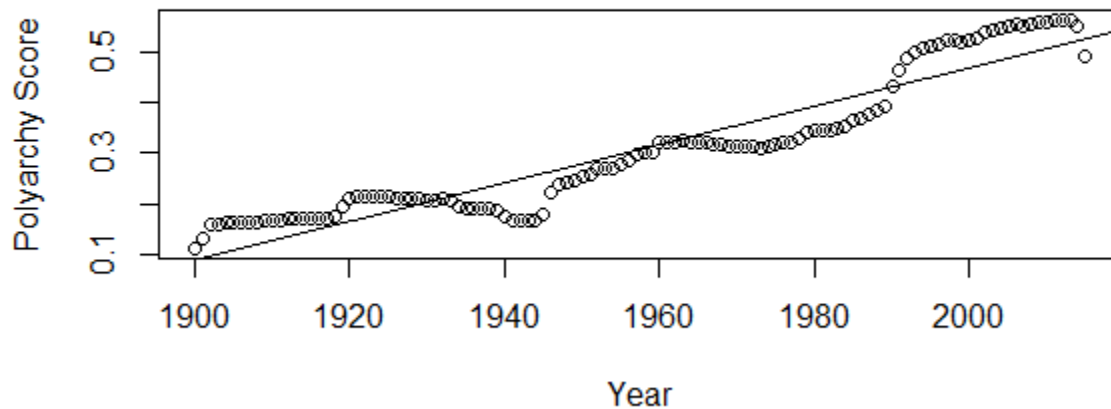
The V-Dem project inevitably makes normative choices in their index construction. For instance, the participatory element score is higher in jurisdictions that practice government by popular referendum, such as Switzerland and Uruguay. (Coppedge 2015 p.585). This raises an interesting tension with their decision to privilege the electoral measure – a country that practiced genuine direct democracy (to the exclusion of elected representatives) would actually see its score fall. Another tension is the establishment of elections as a necessary condition. Other indices also adopt this approach, notably The Economist Intelligence Unit, which argues that "measures of democracy that reflect [only] the state of political freedoms and civil liberties are not thick enough." Arguing that political participation and minimally-functional governance are not taken into account by existing indices, they propose a five-category index including pluralism, civil liberties, functional governance, political participation and political culture (The Economist Intelligence Unit p.53). Perhaps most notable is their ultimately instrumental definition – they construe democracy as "a set of practices and principles that institutionalize, and thereby, ultimately, protect freedom. (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2016 p.51)

It may seem that these indices lack only the kitchen sink. Indeed, as Adam Przeworski has observed, "Almost all normatively desirable aspects of political life, and sometimes even of social and economic life, are credited as definitional features of democracy" (Przeworski 2000 p.14). He further observed that whichever measure we choose, the classification results of contemporary states are strikingly similar, with

correlations higher than 90% (Przeworski 2000, p.56). This should give us hope, as correlation across separate indices may imply the existence of a strong underlying concept. It is important to keep in mind that the choice of dichotomous or multidimensional measure is fundamentally arbitrary, guided by our desired use of the concept (see Collier and Adcock 1999). Some scholars argue that the indicators currently available capture only a thin version of democracy (c.f. Coppedge 2012).

A notable flaw in these indices is the use of fundamentally arbitrary aggregation procedures. While I am instinctively sympathetic to the features included, purely numerical aggregation mechanisms miss something crucial about the interaction of the constituent elements. Goertz criticizes Polity IV and similar measures for defining democracy in terms of the polity concept (which involves necessary and sufficient conditions) but defining their operationalization in additive or "family resemblance" terms (Goertz 2006 p.97). He labels this type of error "concept-measure inconsistency," and argues that it is particularly common in the case of democracy, an "undertheorized concept." Goertz contrasts "classical" conceptual logics based on the logical operator "AND," with family resemblance logics based on the logical operator "OR" (Goertz 2006 p.105). He argues that the logical form of our aggregation should correspond to the logical form of the concept, and that this is largely not done at present: "While the necessary and sufficient conditions perspective has dominated the concept side of things an implicit family resemblance strategy has guided most quantitative measure construction"[7] (Goertz 2006 p.126).

As an alternative, it seems intuitively sensible that we should organize these elements vertically on the basis of their level of abstraction, and determine how the component parts relate to one another, as well as to the conceptual whole (Munck 2009 p.21). Subordinating less-abstract attributes to those at a higher level of abstraction concretizes these higher-level attributes, and indicators should be selected at the lowest possible level of generality (Munck 2009 p.24). On this view, conceptual aggregation would only be permissible in cases where "the disaggregate scores, taken by themselves, are parts of a whole and that their meaning is understood only when the parts are considered in context" (Munck 2009 p.31). One implication here might be that democracy itself is a relative value, requiring our analysis to go beyond democracy (Munck 2009 p.120). This is potentially contentious. By acknowledging values other than democracy, we implicitly undercut the normative assumption that more democracy is always better, and we will have to justify democracy "in relation to other political values" (Munck 2009 p.128).

Ancient Concepts of Democracy

Democratic government was pioneered in Greece twenty-five centuries ago, and representative democracy was introduced in Western Europe and North America slightly more than two centuries ago. However, there is a lacuna of eighteen centuries between the last uses of democracy in the ancient world and its emergence in what we might call the

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[7] This is said to be traceable back to "what Ragin (2000) calls the ceiling effect of necessary conditions. This effect reduces average values as well as the variance, along with producing heteroskedasticity" (Goertz 2006 p.126). The reference is to Ragin, C. "Fuzzy Set Social Science". Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2000).

modern era. This gap in our data is difficult to explain, and makes it rather challenging to generalize across the centuries. However, following our discussion of topic continuity above, it seems clear that despite the absence of the thing itself (democratic regimes), the *concept* of democracy has existed consistently since its first recorded use in the 6th century BCE. Full exploration of the concept's evolution in the interim is beyond our purposes here, but suffice it to say that democracy tended to be defined by its critics – identified with chaos and mob rule. The legacy of this conceptual redefinition is clear from the minutes of the US Constitutional Convention, which record great apprehension regarding the possibility of anything remotely resembling "democracy" (Farrand 1911).

To its originators in classical Greece, the term *demokratia*[8] meant that the *demos*, or people, had *kratos*, power (Ober 2007). But who comprised the *demos*, and over what did they have power? The *demos* was the citizen body of Athens, consisting initially of aristocrats plus those landowners who could outfit themselves in the armor of a *hoplite,* and later incorporating those propertyless *thetes* who rowed in the Athenian navy. Women and slaves were excluded. The question of *kratos* is more vexing. Scholars suggest that this power referred to "the capacity to do things" rather than to majority rule (Ober 2007). There appear to be sound terminological grounds for rejecting a political interpretation of *demokratia* in favor of one associated with capacity. But precisely *whose* capacity remains difficult. The best definition available seems to be that *demokratia* "is the collective capacity of a public to make good things happen in the public realm" (Ober 2007).

It is difficult to separate this discussion from the political history of Athens in the 6th and 5th century BCE, which is far beyond our scope.[9] It will be sufficient for our purposes to note a few broad outlines. Athens had traditionally been ruled by kings in cooperation with an aristocratic council. As Athens prospered it began to absorb outlying villages and hamlets, eventually occupying the whole peninsula of Attica. Absorbing these additional elements put significant pressure on the existing Athenian political arrangements. Simultaneously, changes in the nature of warfare required Athenian aristocrats to enlist the class of small landholders just below them. These men, who could afford the armor and weapons of a *hoplite*, now counted politically and had to be catered to (Finley 1983). The reforms eventually engineered by an aristocrat named Solon (c. 638 – c. 558 BC) enfranchised both these small landholders (*zeugitae*) and the class just below them (*thetes*). Both would henceforth be permitted to vote in the assembly and *zeugitae* would be permitted to hold minor government offices (Fine 1983).

In the short run, these arrangements did not relieve Athens of political strife (*stasis*). The aristocrat Peisistratos (d. 528/7) disrupted Solon's constitution in 541 BCE by assuming sole authority in the state, and passed power to his sons Hippias and Hipparchus in 528. They ruled poorly, and Hipparchus was assassinated in 514. A drinking song recorded from the period praises the tyrannicides for restoring something called *isonomia*[10] (Ostwald 1969 p.96). The prefix *iso* means "equal," and *nomia* means "law" or "custom".

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[8] δημοκρατία

[9] The interested reader should consult Kagan, Donald. *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy.* New York: The Free Press (1991) or Finley, Moses. *Politics in the Ancient World.* Oxford University Press (1983).

[10] ἰσονομία

Nomia as written law was a fairly recent innovation in this period, having replaced *themis*, or divinely ordained law ("that which has been put in place") only in the preceding century. *Isonomia* is cited by other slightly later writers, notably Herodotus, who uses it to refer both to democracy and to constitutional government (Herodotus 440 BCE 3.142, 3.80, 6.83). Another early writer uses it in a quasi-medical sense, to refer to a balance among two opposites (Ostwald 1969 p.103). Thucydides opposes it to oligarchy rather than tyranny, but in a revealing contrast with Herodotus he appears to be referring only to equality among aristocrats (Thucydides 410 BCE, 3.62.3, 4.78.3).

Isonomia appears to mean something like "political equality" or "equality before the law". This political equality may have originally been restricted to aristocrats, but as the *zeugitae* and *thetes* became essential to Athens' military survival, they were admitted to political equality in turn (Finley 1983). This distinction explains why *isonomia* often accompanies *demokratia* but is not a synonym for it. We can imagine an aristocracy seething under 30 years of tyranny and demanding a return to the *isonomia* that their fathers had established. However, history encompasses many ironies. The struggle for primacy among aristocrats resumed after the expulsion of the tyrants, and an aristocrat called Isagoras[11] was elected to high political office with the intention of (re)establishing a governing aristocratic council. His opponent Cleisthenes then "took the people into his faction," (Herodotus 440 BCE 6.131), using as his slogan the very *isonomia* that had heretofore connoted *aristocratic* parity. Isagoras called in outside powers, who occupied Athens and forcibly installed an aristocratic council, but a popular movement with Cleisthenes at its head defeated Isagoras and his foreign supporters. Invocation of *isonomia* had caused the *zeugetai* and *thetes* to rise in revolution, something they had never attempted against Peisistratos or his predecessors.

A related term, *isokratia*[12], gained currency at the same time. Its first use is attested in Herodotus as a description of particular features of the Spartan and Corinthian constitutions, as well as Cleisthenes' reforms in Athens (Herodotus 440 BCE 4.26.2, 5.92.1). As we saw, *iso* means roughly "equal" and *kratos* is the root of "power". However, the word appears to have been used in an extremely specific way, to refer to the process of bicameral legislation (Ostwald 2009). Specifically, it referred to the preparation of probouleutic measures by a policymaking body and its ratification by a separate, larger and more representative body. This "checks and balances" procedure arose independently in several Greek *poleis* at the end of the sixth century BCE. It is thus not an exclusive attribute of *demokratia*, but a necessary condition for the kind of popular control that Cleisthenes was trying to establish. In the process of his democratic reforms, Cleisthenes provided for the creation of a legislative council (*boule*) that would prepare legislation for the larger assembly.

A third concept, *isegoria*[13], referred broadly to the concept of "free speech" or "equal right of speech" (Nakategawa 1988). At its narrowest, *isegoria* referred specifically to a citizen's right to speak in the assembly. The first recorded use of this word is as a term of

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[11] The name itself is significant – Isagoras connotes something like "equal public speech".
[12] ἰσοκρατία
[13] ἰσηγορία

abuse, by a writer criticizing impertinence induced by the public guarantee of free speech to slaves and foreigners in Athens (Old Oligarch 424 BCE). Like *isonomia*, the evolution of *isegoria* was from an elite to a popular concept. Solon may have introduced the procedure, but it seems more likely that Cleisthenes' reforms opened public speech from aristocrats to the whole population (Lewis 1971). Herodotus' use of the term shows a broader conception than mere speech in the assembly:

> "Athens now became strong and great. So it is proved…that *isegoria* is a valuable quality. Athenians had had no better ability of war under tyrants' rule than any of their neighbors; but, once set free from it, they became by far the strongest of all…[I]n liberty (*eleutheria*) each of them worked willingly for himself, in contrast with having intentionally acted the coward in the forced labor for a tyrant" (Herodotus 5.78)

Scholars suggest that *isegoria* was originally interpreted as equally rewarding service to the *polis*, rather than equality *tout court* (Nakategawa 1988). This allowed for increased speech for aristocrats, whose contributions were deemed to be greater. A gradual expansion ensued as visible contributions to the polis began to proliferate, with the result that a privilege that had once been notional became actual.

   Two final concepts, *autonomia*[14] and *eleutheria*[15], played a vital role in the Athenian understanding of democracy. We have so far discussed concepts that we might associate with "equality," broadly construed. *Autonomia* and *eleutheria* are by contrast closely concerned with liberty. Shortly after the reforms of Cleisthenes, and against great odds, Athens defeated a large Persian invasion force and played an instrumental part in freeing Greece from foreign oppression. Athens then formed a league of allies to guarantee the *autonomia* of the Greek *poleis* (Diodorus Siculus 15.28.4). *Autonomia* seems to refer to negative liberty at the level of the *polis*, and peace treaties of the period make frequent reference to preservation of the *autonomia* of third parties.

   The principal contrast of *eleutheros*, a free man, was *doulos*, a slave. However, the term seems to have been incorporated into a rapidly differentiated 6th century political vocabulary. *Eleutheria* denoted liberty, freedom to participate in political life and freedom from political oppression by the state or other citizens[16] (Hansen 1989). Thucydides records Pericles declaiming that "Freedom (*eleutheros*) is the hallmark of our public life…The freedom we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes..." (Thucydides 2.35). Aristotle wrote that "there are two things that are thought to be defining features of *demokratia*, the sovereignty of the majority and *eleutheria*; for justice is supposed to be equality (*ison*), and equality the sovereignty of whatever may have been decided by the multitude, and *eleutheria* doing just

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[14] αὐτονομία

[15] ἐλευθερία

[16] Isaiah Berlin argued extensively (if perhaps not perfectly consistently) that *eleutheria* had no connotations beyond the political sphere (Berlin, Isaiah. Two Concepts of Liberty (1958)). I disagree, but lack the space to press the point here.

what one likes" (Aristotle, *Politics* 1310a). Finally, we saw above that Herodotus contrasts the Athenian people's *eleutheria* with their servile condition under the tyrants.

In summary, the Greek understanding of *demokratia* was based on notions of equality and liberty. Equality was understood to mean equality before the law, procedural checks and balances, separation of powers, and an equal right of private and public speech, particularly in the assembly. Liberty was understood to mean freedom to participate fully in political life and freedom from political oppression by the state or by individuals.

It is important to bear in mind that many Greeks of the period would not have seen *demokratia* as the fullest realization of these principles. Indeed, some conservative orators opined that their contemporaries had interpreted *isegoria* as equality among unequals and *eleutheria* as license and lawlessness (Isocrates, *Areopagitikos*, 7.20). Indeed, we observe democracy emerging out of a predemocratic milieu in many Greek city states. Sparta (for instance) ruled over a subject population of disenfranchised serfs, but Spartan citizens referred to one another as *homoi*, or "similar". Norms in favor of direct participation in politics and against monopolies of power spread across the Greek world. It was only certain *poleis* (Athens among them) that these norms coalesced into a *demokratia*, but these principles were vital preconditions for its emergence.

<u>Ancient</u>	<u>Modern</u>
Equality (*isonomia, isegoria, isokratia*)	**Elections**
• Before the law • In the assembly • Free non-political speech • Separation of powers • Checks and balances	• Elections only (Przeworski) • Elections & leader competition (Schumpeter)
	Procedural Minimum
Liberty (*eleutheria, autonomia*)	• Elections, full suffrage, no massive fraud, freedom of speech, assembly and association (Collier and Levitsky)
• Participation in government • Freedom from state oppression • Freedom from private oppression	**Polyarchy**
	• Contestation and inclusiveness (Dahl) • Effective preferences, institutional constraints and civil liberties (Polity IV) • Rule by the people: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian, majoritarian and consensual (V-Dem)

Discussion and Conclusions

We immediately observe substantial overlap among conceptual attributes of democracy, but also some significant differences. The most obvious difference is perhaps the easiest to deal with: modern writers put a great deal of stress on the selection of leaders by

election[17], whereas Athenian democracy was direct and personal. Much is made of this distinction, but it is something of a chimera. To begin with, it is often claimed that representation was completely unknown among the ancient Greeks (c.f. Manin 2002). This is incorrect, for several reasons. Greek *poleis* frequently nominated and empowered ambassadors to negotiate treaties; they also delegated (some) sovereignty upwards to religious and political leagues (*symmachiae*) which were governed by councils of representatives. Finally, the centerpieces of Greek cultural life – the religious and cultural festivals sponsored by shrines such as Delphi – were also organized by representatives from the various *poleis* involved. Next, it is also often claimed that representation is the *sine qua non* of modern democracy. It was not understood this way by its innovators, but was rather seen as a practical mechanism to circumvent two related problems – the vast size of modern mass publics and the low level of political efficacy widespread among them (Manin 2002). Both of these problems have been substantially ameliorated by technological development. This is all to say that the distinction between direct and representative democracy is a matter of mechanism, not substance. It is legally all one whether I act personally or direct my representative to act on my behalf. We should not let the specter of potential principal-agent problems distract us from the broad similarities between personal and representative mechanisms.

The extent of the franchise is also less pressing than it appears. The "full suffrage" embraced by moderns excludes children, criminals and immigrants. This may appear insufferably restrictive to future ages. In 5th-century BCE Athens, women and slaves were denied the right to vote. However, the suffrage experienced by citizens was substantially fuller and more profound than the suffrage on offer in modern states, in the sense that personal participation in politics gave each actor a profound stake in the consequences of collective decisions (Hansen 1989). Rather than seeing ourselves at the morally satisfying "full suffrage" end of the spectrum, I argue that our own age has significantly "fuller suffrage" than ancient Athens, but that both we and they may seem like barbarians to future ages for denying the participatory political rights of animals or the unborn. In addition, the content of that suffrage was much more meaningful to an Athenian citizen than it is to a contemporary American or European.[18] Przeworski is correct to assert that by defining democracy as a *summum bonum* we tend to associate all good things with its definition. Full suffrage is an inarguably good thing, but it is not a core element of the concept of democracy as it has been understood over time. Broad suffrage, however, may be essential.

The Polity IV criteria of effective preferences, institutional constraints and civil liberties bear a remarkable resemblance to the Greek trifecta of *isonomia*, *isegoria* and *isokratia*. Leaving aside the electoral criterion, even V-Dem's more complex measures seem to track the *iso*-compounds and *eleutheria*. This provides an answer to the question with which I began: it seems that ancient and modern democrats are genuinely discussing the same topic. The topic appears to be the processual requirements for a state to reliably

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[17] But consider V-Dem's efforts to rank government by popular referendum as more democratic – this would be a modern endorsement of direct democracy were it not paired (incoherently) with a blended elections measure.

[18] I hope to develop this point more fully in future work.

produce outcomes that would appear "good" to its citizen body.[19] On this view, both Schumpeter and Przeworski appear to be attempting to change the topic (Ingham 2019b). Indeed, most contemporary political science indices of democracy appear to feature substantial concept-measure inconsistency, sometimes via mismatches between their conceptual logics and index construction (Polity IV) and sometimes within the very definition itself (V-Dem, Przeworski).

The foregoing research appears to also indicate that democracy is not an essentially contested concept (contra Collier 2006). Its essence actually appears to be definable in four words – *isonomia, isegoria, isokratia and eleutheria*. It seems to me that these principles consistently appear in definitions of democracy drawn both from ancient Athens and (in translation) from contemporary political science. Nor do I think that most users of the term expect it to be contested. In fact, I think most users of the term would imagine that there exist sound definitions to ground their conceptual intuitions. It remains for political theory to provide these definitions. A fruitful approach is suggested by Munck (2009): political theorists should justify democracy in relation to other values, rather than reify it definitionally. The value of democracy actually appears to hang on the things it enables us to do – as Ober put it, our collective capacity to make good things happen in our *polis*.

I agree with Goertz – concept measure consistency is as important as reliability and external validity, and is basic to any sound research design. Part of the role of political theory is to help political scientists define and operationalize concepts, and concept-measure consistency appears to pick out the precise point at which something is currently being lost in translation. As for conflicts between our definitional intension and our particularized intension, these appear to be artifacts of the popularity of the democratic concept among mass publics. When even communist dictatorships feel compelled to call themselves democratic people's republics, terminological confusion is bound to result. This is a scenario where usage cannot guide us, because usage has become so broad as to be meaningless (Dahl 1989). We should instead evaluate usage by the criterion of topic continuity. Permissible uses of the term "democracy" will not deviate too far from the concept "democracy" which, as we have seen, appears to have definitional consistency over time.

It seems clear that our conceptual logic should guide our measure construction. It also seems clear that the concept of democracy fits uncomfortably into Sartorian necessary conditions logic. It appears to me to be a better candidate for Wittgenstein's family resemblance model. V-Dem's attempts to split the difference on this point appear to be incoherent. As we have seen, there is no *sine qua non* of democracy. Survey respondents in China might, for instance, define democracy as outcomes that benefit the public. We now have a diagnosis of the problem with which we began. These survey respondents may simply be discussing a different topic. Specifically, they are using the term "democracy" with a distinct intension from the manner in which it has historically been used. It may well be legitimate for a government to confer great benefits on its people. But this is not democracy as it has been understood for twenty-five centuries. If democracy has become a status-conferring concept, it is doubly important to ensure a clear definition because states

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[19] Importantly not simply a majority of the citizen body – this would violate *isokratia*.

will have an incentive to claim that their government is democratic when it is not. While folk theories of democracy are not susceptible to the critiques we have made here, it is my hope that political scientists, at least, will be persuaded that topic continuity is a vital precondition for use of the label "democracy".

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