



# Varieties of Democracy

## Rethinking Democracy Measurement

By Michael Coppedge

Democracy ratings have been a side interest of mine ever since my graduate studies at Yale, where a research assistantship with Robert Dahl led to my first publication.<sup>1</sup> Years of research, teaching, and consulting in this area left me with the conviction that democratization research was increasingly brushing up against the limitations of existing democracy measures. Imagine where economists would be today if they had only a rough indicator of “prosperity” to model instead of the rich panoply of economic indicators that were developed starting in the 1930s!

In 2007, JOHN GERRING (a political scientist at Boston University) and I began wondering whether it was possible to produce better indicators of democracy. Before long, our curiosity became a commitment, which has grown into collaboration among fifteen scholars at thirteen universities on three continents (see sidebar).

Now, the Kellogg Institute is the institutional home in the US for an ambitious new project to measure democracy better—what we are calling the “Varieties of Democracy Project.”

### Why More Democracy Indicators?

Although the notion of measuring something as intangible as “democracy” may sound strange, democracy indicators abound. The best known and most widely used indicators are the indices of Political Rights and Civil Liberties, which Freedom House has been producing for all countries annually since 1972, and the Polity indices of Democracy and Autocracy. Both projects boil down selected features of what it means to be democratic into just a pair of ratings for each country and year.

While the existing measures are fine for tracking global trends and identifying regimes that are highly democratic or highly undemocratic, they are not sensitive or reliable enough for current needs.

Governments and international organizations spend billions of dollars every year on programs to foster democracy or good governance. They increasingly demand ways to assess the impact of their programs, which target specific outcomes such as competitive elections, a vibrant civil society, or judicial independence rather than “democracy” in general.

Advocacy organizations need to be able to document their claims about relatively small improvement or deterioration in human rights and democracy. They also would like measures of participatory and egalitarian versions of democracy that have been overlooked by most US-based democracy measurement projects.

And academic researchers are reaching the limits of what they can do with existing indicators of democracy. They require more specific and reliable indicators, as well as longer time-series, to test sophisticated statistical models of the causes and consequences of democracy.

### Measuring Varieties of Democracy

The Varieties of Democracy Project addresses all of these demands with four innovations.

First, rather than attempting to produce a single simple rating of “democracy,” it seeks to capture six different conceptions of democracy:

The pared-down, “minimalist” concept of *Electoral Democracy*, which is the foundation on which most of the other conceptions build;

*Liberal Democracy*, which adds guarantees of basic civil and political rights and institutes checks and balances to guard against the tyranny of the majority;

*Majoritarian Democracy*—partially at odds with Liberal Democracy—which concentrates power in the hands of the majority;

*Participatory Democracy*, which encourages the involvement of citizens in many stages of the political process;

*Deliberative Democracy*, which requires governments to give reasoned and respectful justifications for their decisions;

*Egalitarian Democracy*, which is inspired by the belief that political equality is unattainable without some degree of economic and social equality.

Second, Varieties of Democracy radically disaggregates all these concepts. Each conception is broken down into several “components”—more than thirty altogether, including such components as regular elections, competitiveness, legislative power, subnational autonomy, gender equality, and free media. These components are, in turn, broken down into 316 specific indicators, each of which is measured separately.

One of the key benefits of this degree of specificity is improved measurement reliability: one can judge more confidently whether any journalists were killed in a given year than what “level of media freedom” prevailed; one can more reliably judge whether the legislature can override an executive veto than how tight “executive constraints” were.

Third, Varieties of Democracy is designed to have very broad historical and geographic coverage. To the extent possible, it is to rate all sovereign states and most non-sovereign territories, such as colonies, from 1900 to the present.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Coppedge and Wolfgang Reinicke, “Measuring Polyarchy,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 25:1 (1990): 51–72.

This lengthy historical coverage is especially useful to scholars studying causal relationships because many of these relationships seem to unfold over decades rather than year to year or month to month. If scholars can develop a better understanding of the forces that create and sustain democracy, they will be better able to advise practitioners who seek to promote it.

Finally, this project is designed to provide systematic estimates of the precision and reliability of its ratings. Other projects simply provide a score, such as a “3,” with no indication of how accurate it is. Varieties of Democracy would say that there is an 85 percent probability that such a score is a 3, for example, or that it is a “3, give or take 0.2.” (This does not mean that the existing indicators are more certain or precise; on the contrary, it means that we have no idea how imprecise they really are.)

No other major democracy index provides such estimates of precision and reliability. Calculating this information and making it public is essential for the responsible use of such data.

## A Natural Home at Kellogg

The Kellogg Institute is a natural home for this effort, as democratization has been one of the Institute’s central themes since its founding.

Kellogg has provided crucial support for this project for more than a year. In May 2010 it awarded me the Institute’s first-ever Collaborative Faculty Grant, recently renewed, which has allowed me to seek outside funding, hire Kellogg PhD Fellow **SANDRA BOTERO** as a research assistant, and get a course release.

In addition, the grant provided funding for a new Kellogg working group on measuring democracy, which has given Kellogg fellows and graduate students opportunities to discuss the project with one another and with my outside collaborators.

Four of the collaborators gave presentations to the working group in 2010–11. Two others will be visiting fellows over the next two years: John Gerring in 2011–12 and **DAVID ALTMAN** in 2012–13. Two of Kellogg’s undergraduate International Scholars, **HAIXIAO (ERIK) WANG ’13** and **VICTORIA ANGLIN ’12**, have also worked on the project, building a database of potential country experts and helping to edit the website.

The working group, with support from Kellogg, other Notre Dame institutes, and the Office of Research, hosted a workshop in Hesburgh Center in January at which the collaborators hashed out the design of our indicators. Several members of the working group participated actively in these discussions. This academic year, working group members will have a chance to build their own democracy indices using our pilot study data.

The idea of using Kellogg resources to leverage outside funding has already borne fruit. Sweden’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has awarded the project more than \$200,000 to do a pilot study; the Swedish Central Bank’s 300th Anniversary Fund has provided additional funding for a conference to showcase the findings of the pilot study in Gothenburg in September; and the project has also received \$100,000 from the Research Council of Norway to rate the next 25 countries. The collaborators aim to obtain the rest of the \$2 million that will be needed to complete the project once the pilot study demonstrates its feasibility.

## Pilot Study Launches

Underway since January, the pilot study focuses on twelve countries in six world regions: six “easy” cases—Mexico, Russia, Japan, Sweden, South Africa, and Egypt—and six “hard” cases—Suriname, Albania, Burma, Switzerland, Ghana, and Yemen. We are attempting to code 188 of the democracy indicators for all of these countries since 1900, including colonial years.

In spring 2011, Sandra and I worked with Notre Dame’s Center for Research Computing to develop an online database and survey with which to implement the team’s research design. Public portions of the site can be seen at [www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net).

The bulk of the ratings are being supplied by some 111 country experts, who began work at the end of May. Most of the experts have social science PhDs and know their countries well; about two-thirds are citizens of those countries or reside there. Two research assistants at the Quality of Government Institute have handled most of the correspondence with the experts.

Within a week of the launch, the experts were submitting thousands of ratings a day—by early August, we had received 300,000 ratings! Preliminary analysis suggests that the project is succeeding: it is producing ratings that quite plausibly distinguish country from country, year from year, and component from component.

With support from the Kellogg Institute, the Center for Creative Computing, and the Swedish government, additional programming is underway to add user interfaces to the website. By the end of September, visitors should be able to download the data, create their own summary indices, and visualize the data in graphs and maps.

## Our Vision

If the Varieties of Democracy Project succeeds in its ambitious goals, the world will for the first time have nuanced measures of most aspects of democracy that cover the entire world and the past century. All the indicators are to be made freely available to the public.

The Varieties of Democracy team will suggest various ways to combine the specific indicators into summary indices of the many components and the six conceptions of democracy—but users will also be encouraged to use these data to create customized indices for their own applications.

Users will certainly include academic researchers, but they could well include NGOs, journalists, development agencies, and international organizations. And the Kellogg Institute may very well become known as the US home of these very useful data.

*Kellogg Faculty Fellow and Professor of Political Science Michael Coppedge is a principal investigator and one of the main instigators of the Varieties of Democracy Project. He also chairs the American Political Science Association’s Task Force on Indicators of Democracy and Governance.*

## The Project by the Numbers

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| <p><b>1</b> Team of Collaborators<br/><i>(collaborators’ areas of project expertise listed under their names)</i></p> <p><b>4</b> Principal Investigators:<br/><b>Michael Coppedge</b><br/>(University of Notre Dame)<br/><i>Latin America</i><br/><b>John Gerring</b> (Boston University)<br/><i>Deliberative Democracy</i><br/><b>Staffan I. Lindberg</b> (University of Gothenburg, Sweden and University of Florida [on leave])<br/><i>Elections; Africa</i><br/><b>Jan Teorell</b> (Lund University, Sweden)<br/><i>The Executive; Europe</i></p> <p><b>11</b> Project Managers:<br/><b>David Altman</b> (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile)<br/><i>Direct Democracy; Latin America</i><br/><b>Michael Bernhard</b><br/>(University of Florida)<br/><i>Civil Society; Sovereignty; Central &amp; Eastern Europe</i><br/><b>M. Steven Fish</b><br/>(University of California, Berkeley)<br/><i>Legislatures; Post-Soviet States</i><br/><b>Allen Hicken</b> (University of Michigan)<br/><i>Parties and Party Systems; Asia</i><br/><b>Matthew Kroenig</b><br/>(Georgetown University)<br/><i>Legislatures; Western Europe</i><br/><b>Drew Linzer</b> (Emory University)<br/><i>Measurement</i></p> | <p><b>Kelly McMann</b><br/>(Case Western Reserve University)<br/><i>Subnational Government; Russia &amp; Central Asia</i><br/><b>Pamela Paxton</b><br/>(University of Texas, Austin)<br/><i>Formal &amp; Descriptive Representation</i><br/><b>Holli Semetko</b> (Emory University)<br/><i>Media; Western Europe</i><br/><b>Svend-Erik Skanning</b><br/>(Aarhus University, Denmark)<br/><i>Civil Liberties; Western Europe</i><br/><b>Jeffrey Staton</b> (Emory University)<br/><i>The Judiciary; Latin America</i></p> <p><b>2</b> Institutional Partners:<br/>The Kellogg Institute for International Studies, University of Notre Dame<br/>The Quality of Government Institute, Gothenburg University, Sweden</p> <p><i>Plus...</i></p> <p><b>6</b> Varieties of democracy</p> <p><b>201</b> Countries</p> <p><b>212</b> Years</p> <p><b>316</b> Indicators</p> <p><b>1300</b> Country experts</p> <p><b>2</b> Million dollar budget</p> <p><b>10</b> Million ratings = Goal</p> |
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