

Democratic Quality in Stable Democracies

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Abstract The major predecessor to Ringen's and my own efforts to measure democratic quality in terms of the purpose of democracy is Robert Dahl's seminal book *Polyarchy* (1971). Measuring the quality of democracy requires two prior judgments: (1) making sure that, in terms of institutional characteristics, a country is sufficiently democratic, and that, as a minimum, it has universal suffrage, and (2) that its democracy has been uninterrupted for a minimum number of years. To an important extent, higher democratic quality can be attributed to institutional characteristics of consensus democracy, especially proportional representation.

Keywords Democratic quality · Robert Dahl · Stable democracy · Consensus democracy · Proportional representation

Stein Ringen's article is a most welcome contribution to the comparative analysis of democracy. Great strides have been made in the measurement of democracy as a decision-making system. In addition to the *Polity* project (now *Polity IV*), the annual ratings by Freedom House deserve to be mentioned. But, as Ringen correctly points out, the measurement of democratic quality in terms of the *purpose* of democracy has been neglected.

This neglect is surprising because the most basic definition of democracy is not only government *by* the people but also, as stated famously by President Abraham Lincoln, *for* the people—that is, in accordance with the

people's preferences and serving their interests. It is also implied in Robert A. Dahl's eight criteria for defining and measuring democracy in his seminal book *Polyarchy* (1971). His first seven criteria have to do with institutional features of democracy like universal suffrage, universal eligibility for public office, free elections, and freedom of expression and association—similar to the criteria used by *Polity* and Freedom House. But his eighth criterion goes beyond institutional rules to the purpose of decision-making: public policies that are responsive to the voters' preferences.

Dahl also differs from *Polity* and Freedom House in making more distinctions among the stable and consolidated democracies. Both *Polity* and Freedom House place almost all of these democracies in the same category with the highest ranking. In one respect, Dahl's approach is similar in that he ranks a large number of countries from the highest type of democracy to the lowest type of non-democracy. But there are three contrasts. First, Dahl explicitly uses his crucial eighth criterion to rank his countries. Second, he uses a more differentiated scale with thirty-one categories. Third, and most important, at the democratic end of the scale he sees clear differences of quality among thirty-two stable democracies, ranging from high of 1 to a low of 9. In effect, this is a separate nine-point scale indicating different degrees of quality among established democratic systems. To give a few examples, as of 1969, the highest ranking is given to Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden; Canada, Japan, and New Zealand are in the middle; and Colombia and Venezuela are at the bottom.

Ringen credits me with doing the “pioneering work”—praise that I appreciate, but I think that Dahl must be regarded as the major predecessor to both of us. I should also mention that, although I did show qualitative differ-

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ences among the thirty-six stable democracies in my *Patterns of Democracy* (1999), I did not attempt to construct an index similar to Dahl's or Ringen's nine-point scales. Instead, I used Dahl's index, in addition to several other indicators of democratic quality (like women's rights, socio-economic equality, and satisfaction with democracy) to demonstrate significant differences between majoritarian and consensus democracies. If I prepare an updated edition of *Patterns of Democracy*, I cannot use Dahl's index any longer because by now it is more than 40 years old. Fortunately, Ringen's index will be an excellent up-to-date replacement.

I would like to add two points to Ringen's argument. First, it is significant that all of the countries ranked by Ringen according to their degree of democratic quality are stable democracies. This choice, I believe, is not an arbitrary one. Measuring the quality of democracy is the third step in a three-step judgment. We have to begin by establishing (1) that the countries we are interested in are sufficiently democratic in terms of regime and institutional characteristics to justify being called democracies, and (2) that their democracy is firmly established. For the latter requirement, I used a nineteen-year criterion in *Patterns of Democracy*, that is, uninterrupted democracy for at least 19 years. (My initial rule was based on 20 years—a preferable round number—but I did not want to exclude India, the world's largest democracy.) Shorter or longer periods can also be defended, although, in my opinion, anything shorter than 15 years is questionable. As of 2010, all of the countries ranked by Ringen, except Mexico, satisfy the twenty-year criterion.

For the first step of judging the degree of institutional democracy, I am at least partly sympathetic to the view of *Polity* that democracy is a matter of degree and that there is a continuous scale from the worst autocracy at one end to the best democracy at the other. I also strongly believe, however, that we need to establish a threshold below which a country cannot be regarded as democratic. For instance, an essential condition for democracy—a necessary, although obviously not sufficient condition—is universal suffrage. This basic fact is often disregarded, for instance, when in his 1993 inaugural address, President Bill Clinton called the United States “the world's oldest democracy,” although universal suffrage was not firmly established until

the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Scholars often commit the same error. I must confess to have been rather lenient, and perhaps too lenient, in this respect when I treated Switzerland, Australia, and the United States as stable democracies from 1945 on, although women in pre-1971 Switzerland, Aborigines in pre-1962 Australia, and many blacks in pre-1965 America did not have the right to vote.

I am not sure where exactly the minimum threshold for institutional democracy should be drawn. My main argument is that there must be such a minimum, below which a country does not qualify as a democracy, and that it does not make sense to discuss the quality of democracy in countries whose institutions and rules are not sufficiently democratic.

My second point, much more briefly, is that institutional democracy is not only a prerequisite for judging democratic quality, but that institutions and quality are related to each other. Majoritarian and consensus democracy, both defined in institutional terms, exhibit different degrees of democratic quality. The most important institution of consensus democracy responsible for delivering this higher democratic quality for the people—in particular, better women's representation in government and higher voter turnout in elections—is proportional representation (PR). Significantly, the five countries in the top three of Ringen's nine categories of relative democratic quality—the Netherlands, New Zealand, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden—all have PR elections. PR is therefore both a strong influence for democratic quality and can itself be regarded as qualitatively superior to majoritarian elections.

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