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Going Historical: Measuring Democraticness before the Age of Mass Democracy

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November 2016

Working Paper

SERIES 2016:38

THE VARIETIES OF DEMOCRACY INSTITUTE



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
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Going Historical: Measuring Democraticness before the Age of Mass Democracy*

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* Carl Henrik Knutsen received financial support for this research from the Research Council Norway (pnr 240505). Jørgen Møller and Svend-Erik Skaaning received financial support for this research from the Danish Council for Independent Research (11932). The authors would like to thank John Gerring, Andrej Kokkonen, Gerardo Munck, and Jan Teorell for valuable comments and suggestions.

Abstract

Most studies of democratic developments are limited to the period after World War II. However, political regimes varied according to different aspects of democracy long before the establishment of modern liberal mass democracies. We come down strongly in favor of collecting disaggregate and fine-grained historical data on democratic features. Based on a distinction between competition, participation, and constraints, we discuss previous attempts at historical measurement and address the specific challenges that pertain to scoring political regimes in, first, the “long 19th century” and, second, medieval and early modern Europe.

Introduction

Most of our inferences about comparative democratic development derive from a “biased sample”, namely the period after 1945 (Boix 2011; Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010). There is an increased recognition within political science that we can gain much from going further back in time when attempting to draw valid inferences about the causes and consequences of political institutions and regime types. This is reflected in several new data gathering projects that attempt to measure the characteristics of political institutions, leaders, and events back into the 19th century (e.g., Przeworski 2013; Goemans, Gleditsch and Chiozza 2009; Elkins, Ginsburg and Melton 2009).

The much-discussed relationship between political institutions and economic development illustrates the potential gains from employing historical data. Economic historians have proposed that as recently as 1800, the major agrarian civilizations in North America, Latin America, Western Europe, and East Asia were on par regarding economic development (Bulmer-Thomas 2014; Pomeranz 2000). Thenceforth they developed along dissimilar trajectories, and today their average levels of income and social development are worlds apart. Similarly, a reversal of fortunes occurred within Europe between the Middle Ages and the Industrial Revolution, as the North and the West overtook the South and the East in terms of economic development (De Long and Shleifer 1993).

These differing developmental trajectories correlate with salient institutional changes, such as the abolishment of absolute monarchy and extensions of the franchise. More generally, it is difficult to see how such divergences could owe to differences in culture or natural endowments alone; *prima facie* the trajectories lend support to the importance of political institutions (e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; North and Weingast 1989). However, due to a dearth of historical data little is known empirically about which particular institutions matter the most for spurring economic development. Only by going historical can we obtain sufficient information to disentangle the causes and consequences of various institutions from each other, and from potential confounders, and thereby rigorously examine more exact institutional theories of development.

These points have direct relevance for the measurement of democracy. Some scholars argue that it is meaningless to talk about the degree of democracy for countries that do not fulfill certain baseline criteria (see Collier and Adcock 1999). However, as Munck (2015) argues, democratic quality is basically a matter of democracy level, and it thus makes sense to measure democratic quality both for polities that have crossed the threshold of the category of, say,

polyarchy (Dahl 1971) and for those that have not. More particularly, we contend that political regimes varied in “democraticness” long before the advent of modern liberal mass democracies in the early 20th century (Doorenspleet 2000; Paxton 2000).

However, going historical does pose challenges. First, as we venture back in time, information needed for measuring political institutions becomes scarcer. Second, we must identify aspects of historical institutional variation that often differs from contemporary institutional designs. Third, as most historians only cover singular cases and do not use a more general vocabulary to describe these case-specific developments, we need to translate this work into something that fits our predefined conceptual containers. Fourth, historians often have an explanatory agenda of their own, meaning that a critical reading of patterns in historiography is necessary (Lustick 1996).

The upshot of this is that attention must be focused on core aspects of democracy that are both measurable based on narrative works of historians and meaningful to assign scores to prior to, say, equal and universal suffrage. Furthermore, we need to disaggregate such measures so that particular regime characteristics can be traced, irrespective of whether or not the more general whole – modern democracy – was present.

Various suggestions for how to pin down the core attributes of the democracy concept exist. The seminal one is Dahl’s (1971) distinction between contestation and inclusiveness (see also Rokkan 1968). A number of scholars have added a third attribute termed “control” (Lauth 2004), “consultation” (Mazucca 2010), “executive power” (Rokkan 1968), or “constraints on the executive” (North and Weingast 1989; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). We structure our discussion of the historical measurement of democracy around these three attributes, which we term *Competition*, *Participation*, and *Constraints*. We address shortcomings of existing indicators and discuss ways of coding additional features of competition, participation and constraints, first in the “long 19th century” between the French Revolution and World War I, and, second, in medieval and early modern Europe.

The long 19th century

Competition

Elections of various kinds have a long history, and we find some early examples of alternation between proto-parties, for instance between the “Hats” and “Caps” during the Swedish Age of Liberty (1718-1772). But the long 19th century was the era in which regularized presidential and parliamentary elections turned so competitive that they prompted transitions of power from incumbents to the opposition across a wider range of countries. This happened in the United States following a deeply divisive election of 1800, and by the 1830s alternations occurred in Great Britain and parts of Latin America (Przeworski 2015). These developments are covered in Przeworski’s (2013) PIPE dataset, while Vanhanen (2000) uses the largest party’s seat share to measure competition from 1810.

However, other institutional aspects of 19th century elections, not covered by extant datasets, affected the nature of the competition, for instance formal and informal restrictions on which candidates could run for office (e.g., according to income, property, education, race, or gender). Furthermore, incumbents frequently reduced the competitiveness of elections through subtle strategies like manipulating district boundaries, restricting media access, pressure in connection with open voting, using election violence, or manipulating vote counting (Goldstein 1978; Posada-Carbó and Valenzuela forthcoming). For instance, 19th century US elections were often marred by voter fraud and election violence, and “Rotten Boroughs” existed in Britain until the Reform Act of 1832.

Finally, overt and covert repression of freedoms of expression, association, and assembly are also crucial for the competitiveness of political systems. These more or less subtle competition-reducing tactics are harder to measure than government alternation with respect to reliability and cross-country equivalence. But based on historical material and knowledge, it would still be possible to code them.

Participation

The 19th century saw dramatic improvements in male franchise in many countries. Typically, the franchise was restricted based on criteria such as ethnicity, income, and property (Goldstein 1978). In some countries, such as the UK, the franchise was expanded in a stepwise manner; in other countries, such as France, changes were more abrupt.

This important indicator of participation is measurable for 19th century polities.

Nonetheless, PIPE is the only source with two comprehensive indicators of suffrage restrictions. One distinguishes between the following categories of franchise: none; estate; property only; three different combinations of property, income, taxes, educational titles, exercise of profession, and/or literacy; economically independents; and manhood suffrage. The other indicates whether other restrictions exist, based on ethnicity, territory, political observation, religion, military/police personnel, slaves, priests/nuns, or property owners.

However, even these indicators only paint a rough picture of the empirical variation in the long 19th century as there were other formal and informal barriers to voter registration and voting. For example, election violence not only *de facto* limited competition, but also reduced the ability of many citizens to partake in elections despite *de jure* voting rights. Such restrictions are partly reflected in Vanhanen's (2000) second democracy indicator, i.e., the percentage of the adult population that actually votes. However, this measure does not provide information about the particular restrictions, and it may also tap other things.

One key aspect of many 19th century elections was their indirect nature, which affected whether all individuals participated on equal terms. Voters first designated electors, who then came together – often without clear restrictions or monitoring of which candidates to vote for – to select representatives, inducing highly unequal distribution of influence between regular voters and electors. One example is Norway, which maintained an indirect election system until 1905.

Moreover, some systems applied weighting of votes, as exemplified by Prussia's three-class franchise system from 1849-1918 in which voters were divided into three groups after taxes paid, giving disproportionate influence to wealthy citizens. Other examples include Belgium, the UK, and New Zealand, where plural voting was credited to privileged groups, and Sweden until 1866, where societal estate groups (noble, clerics, burghers, and farmers) voted for representatives in different chambers. These aspects, too, can be coded systematically based on historical sources, though informal limitations are difficult to score.

Constraints

A widely used cross-national measure, extending back to 1800, is Polity's XCONST indicator, tapping “the extent of institutionalized constraints on the decision-making powers of chief executives” (Marshall, Gurr and Jagers 2014: 23). XCONST ranges from 1 (“Unlimited authority”) to 7 (“Executive Parity or Subordination”), meaning that other institutions, such as legislatures, parties, courts, or noble councils have equal or greater effective authority than the chief executive in most policy areas.

The political histories of many European countries in the long 19th century demonstrate the relevance of measuring this dimension as they can be interpreted as a battle between opposition groups, often strongly represented in parliament, and the executive (the monarch and his/her cabinet), with the former trying to obtain prerogatives in various policy areas and control over the latter (Congleton 2010). One example is Norway's drawn-out 19th century fight over parliamentary control over the government, which was resolved in 1884 when the King was forced to appoint a new government led by the liberal opposition. In Latin America, fierce struggles – or the lack thereof – between different branches of government further illustrate the importance of indicators reflecting constraints.

More generally, it is important to unpack the notions of parliaments; not only did their powers vary; their composition and structure also differed from case to case. Although XCONST captures some of these differences and developments, the diverse formal and informal institutional set-ups and trajectories in the long 19th century also reveal its limitations. We need more fine-grained institutional measures of the chief executive's relationship to the legislature, the judiciary, and implementing institutional bodies, including election administration. This would also allow us to distinguish regimes where the executive is mainly constrained by institutions representing broader population groups from constraints induced by less representative institutions.

Medieval and early modern Europe

Scholars have traced features of competition, participation, and constraints all the way back to the Middle Ages (e.g., Downing 1992; Finer 1997; Mazucca 2010). Most of this work relates to medieval representative institutions. The reason for this is mainly that the workings and prerogatives of these institutions are among the best described features in a period with scarce historical data.

Competition

Medieval and early modern parliaments did not rule themselves, but legislated together with a monarch who exercised power (Myers 1975; Finer 1997). Although there was no genuine electoral competition for executive power, there was some competition for succession to the throne. Kokkonen and Sundell (2014) have coded succession orders in Europe between 1000-1800 AD, distinguishing between (i) election/selection, (ii) agnatic seniority, and (iii)

primogeniture. There is obviously a qualitative difference in competition between the first and the two others. In some polities – e.g. Poland and Hungary – parliaments had the constitutional prerogative to elect monarchs whenever one died; in other polities the choice fell to parliament when a ruling line died out (Myers 1975; Stasavage 2010).

More generally, succession crises were often settled by parliament, even for succession orders based on primogeniture (see O’Callaghan 1989). Thus, one could make more fine-grained empirical distinctions in degree of competition over succession for each of the three categories. Further, one could envisage coding other aspects of competitiveness, including the selection of representatives to parliaments and the designation of positions within parliament. This would be much more difficult to score empirically but some headway could surely be made using historical sources.

Participation

The scope of representation in medieval parliaments can be scored along two dimensions, namely the types of groups and the proportion of the population represented (see Myers 1975; Finer 1997). In some parliaments, only the high nobility and high clergy were represented. This was particularly common in the early phases of representative institutions. The usual pattern in Europe was thus one where the lower nobility and urban elites gained representation over time. The result was normally a parliament including nobles, clergy, and townsmen and divided into three different estates. But in some polities, including Denmark, Sweden, the marsh areas of Northwestern Germany, and Alpine areas of Austria and Switzerland, the free peasantry also sent representatives (Myers 1975).

So far, extant datasets have not covered these distinctions, although they are relatively easy to code using historical sources and reveal interesting spatial differences and temporal developments. For instance, the English knights of shires (lower nobility) and burgesses (urban elites) were first present in parliament in the mid-13th century, but were only regularly represented after 1300 (Maddicott 2010). In Castile, urban representation became more restricted over time (O’Callaghan 1989; Myers 1975). In Denmark, the free peasantry lost the right to representation in 1600, well before parliament was abolished in 1660. The population share represented in assemblies also differed starkly. In Poland-Lithuania and the Republic of Venice, an estimated 8-12 percent of the population belonged to represented groups (nobles or citizens) compared to 2-3 percent in England and France (Finer 1997: 1047). It should be possible to score such differences in general degree of representation in accrued fashion.

Constraints

Constraints on the executive varied a lot between European regimes before 1789. A crude distinction has been made between absolutist and constitutionalist monarchies (e.g., Downing 1992; Ertman 1997). Recently, more fine-grained measures of parliamentary constraints on rulers have been collected. Stasavage (2010), van Zanden et al. (2012), and Abramson and Boix (2014) code the frequency with which parliaments were convoked across Europe from the 12th century onwards, and Stasavage (2010) has also coded other attributes of parliaments, including rights to veto taxation and audit expenditure. Most of these indicators relate to aggregate units. This is problematic because medieval political units were “composite states”, which included a number of constituent units each with their representative institutions. Likewise, units have typically been scored across relatively wide time periods. However, both the constituent units and shorter time spans are increasingly being covered by data collection efforts (see Abramson and Boix 2014).

The larger problem is that numerous relevant aspects of parliamentary prerogatives have been ignored. With respect to constraints, the most fundamental distinction concerns whether parliament was a permanent assembly the ruler had to convoke at regular intervals (say, annually or biannually) or whether it was simply called at the ruler’s whim. This is not scored in any of the above-mentioned datasets. Furthermore, there were big differences in veto powers. In some parliaments, such as in Poland and Aragon, each representative had a veto (in Poland the notorious *liberum veto*), meaning that complete unanimity was required for decision making. In others, some kind of majoritarian decision making seems to have prevailed.

Regarding more specific prerogatives, some assemblies were only consulted over taxation, others won the right to be consulted in all matters of royal government – in Aragon and Catalonia, for example, including declaration of war. In many places, changes in military service or appointments of royal officials likewise needed consent in parliament (e.g., Maddicott 2010: 180). Historians have also documented the existence of freedom of speech of representatives in many medieval parliaments.

Yet other aspects of constraints could be mapped. In Catalonia after 1359, the so-called *Generalidad*, a permanent committee of the *corts*, both collected and administrated taxes (Kagay 1981: 212-43). Similarly, some monarchs recognized the right to resistance if privileges such as exemptions from taxation or right to self-government were transgressed (e.g., O’Callaghan 1989: 86). While it would be difficult to ensure high reliability, and many political units would have missing data, many such prerogatives could be coded based on qualitative distinctions.

Conclusions

The first country to introduce equal and universal suffrage for men and women was New Zealand in 1893. However, there was large empirical variation in degrees of competition, participation and constraints long before this, indeed, even before the French Revolution.

Historical work and some cross-country coding efforts – particularly for the 19th century – detail this variation, making it possible to distinguish historical regimes according to the degree of democracy or democratic quality. The omens here are promising as several ongoing data gathering projects are likely to shed further light on many of these features. For instance, Historical V-Dem, an offspring of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (www.v-dem.net), is currently gathering data on numerous disaggregated indicators back to 1800 (Knutsen et al. 2014; Teorell et al. 2014). These data will contain both objective indicators of formal-institutional features, and country-expert evaluations of the existence and functioning of formal and informal institutions relevant for measuring competition, participation, and constraints.

So far, scholars have only scratched the surface with respect to coding aspects of medieval and early modern representative institutions in Europe. Numerous additional aspects pertaining to competition, participation and constraints could be coded based on historians' narrative work, notably on medieval and early modern parliaments. New data on political regimes in and before the long 19th century would enable us to better address various empirical relationships, including those between political institutions and economic development.

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