

The End of Regimes?: Disaggregating Democracy

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During a recent panel on the comparative politics of democracy and autocracy, I posed the question “do we still need these categories?” At first, the panelists assumed the question was rhetorical. When they realized I was serious, they were at a loss. “Of course,” one responded, “we need these now more than ever.” None disagreed that these were deeply flawed concepts incapable of capturing the complexities of our reality, but all insisted that we need them, not only for our scholarship, but for our politics. This perspective, I argue, is erroneous both in its understanding of the history of the field and in its political calculus: We need to interrogate these categories now more than ever.

The Beginning of Regimes

The real culprit, I argue, is the conceptually unstable category of a “regime,” conceived as a coherent system of rule, and the attachment of the term “democracy” to that concept. I locate the origins of the compound “democratic regime” in the Interwar period. The first occurrence of the term in the *American Political Science Review* comes in 1919, in an article entitled “The New Government in Germany.” The focus on Germany is no coincidence, as it was in the German context that the greatest threat to liberal democratic principles was perceived with the rise of social democracy. Throughout the Interwar period the idea of a democratic regime would take hold in the discipline, invoked by many as a means of reclaiming the notion of pure democracy from Marxist ideologies on the one hand and insurgent fascism on the other.

This, it must be stressed, was an innovation. Until this time, democracy, either as a noun or in its adjectival form, was only used to describe a component of a political system. Elites regularly debated the utility of the application of the democratic principle in particular areas of governance and questioned how it would combine with other components. By the Second World War, the compound was well established as a regime type and mobilized by scholars such as Joseph Schumpeter to eradicate the “dictatorship of the proletariat” from the realm of democratic theory. In doing so, this generation of scholars transformed democracy from a principle to a complete political system.

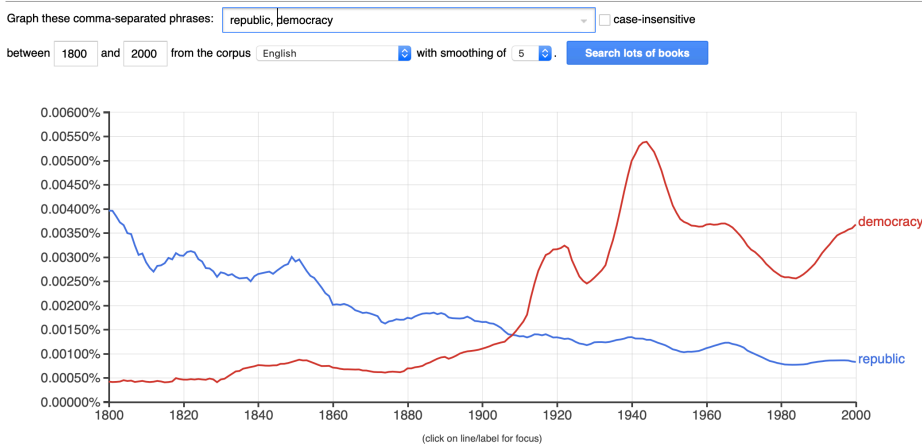
The google Ngram visualization below shows the sharp incline in the usage of the term democratic regime beginning at the time of the First World War, and the corresponding decline in the usage of the term democratic principle, which had been much more common throughout the 19th century.

Google Books Ngram Viewer



Another interesting point of contrast can be found in the chart below, which illustrates the usage of the terms republic and democracy; the former, which indicates a composite political system combining different political principles, is eclipsed in the Interwar period by the latter which indicates a singular principle of governance.

Google Books Ngram Viewer



While this could be read as the triumph of democracy itself over other political principles, I wish to suggest that it was in fact the triumph of a particular conceptualization that sought to erase the contradictions inherent in the regime. However, the ascendance of “democratic regime” as a conceptual category did not resolve the empirical reality of internal inconsistencies. Indeed, it created a distinctive dissonance between the idea of a democratic regime as an internally coherent system of rule consistently applying the democratic principle, and the reality of autocratic or exclusionary features that persist within such regimes.

Disaggregating Democracy

Classifying regimes has always been contentious. The sheer list of different indices can attest to that.¹ The aim of all such indices is to identify discrete features of political systems and offer a logic of aggregation that will allow us to place units either in a category or along a continuum. This logic can employ an additive or compound strategy; for the former, more democratic features bring you closer to democracy, and for the latter, a certain constellation of institutions is necessary for democracy. And this process will typically yield either binary, ordinal, or interval classifications.

Most would agree that the categories of democracy and autocracy contain within them significant flaws and contradictions. But in most scholarship, contradictions only rise to the level of analytical relevance in the form of hybrid regimes or temporally transient stages. For the Polity index, for example, countries with an equal balance of democratic and autocratic features (a score of 0) are seen as inherently unstable, soon to give way to one regime type or another. However, we have few tools for understanding the contradictions that persist within established democracies and autocracies.

One of the most prominent new indices in the field of democracy studies has sought to remedy this with an innovative approach to conceptualizing and measuring democracy. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project offers a multi-dimensional and disaggregated dataset that allows researchers to investigate numerous components of political systems and place them on a continuum. With over 450 indices, the dataset is rich and nuanced in ways that far surpass its predecessors. But it also struggles to break out of the regime mold. While the availability of disaggregated measures would seem to free up a considerable amount of intellectual space, in practice, few make use of it. Looking at the series of V-Dem working papers available, only 7 out of 115 offer analysis outside regime categories. To be sure, the dataset gives researchers greater flexibility in creating composites and choosing indicators that best suit their needs, and this will certainly improve analytical accuracy. But the push to aggregate is not overcome by the availability of disaggregated measures. This is because it is not the data that calls for aggregation. Rather aggregation is a convention in the field, driven by a strong theoretical orientation towards understanding movement in and out of regimes categories and a political (or normative) determination that these are the relevant categories.

Democracy and Exclusion

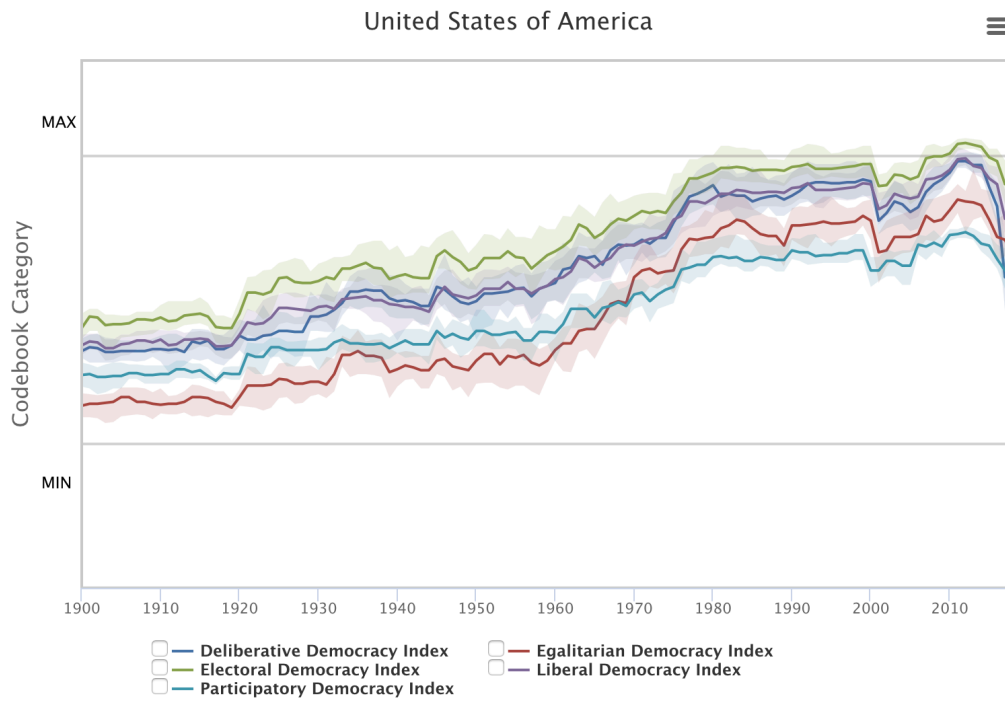
One consequence of the reluctance to disaggregate regimes is a field that cannot make sense of democracy and exclusion. This issue, which has for some time captured the attention of democratic theorists, has only recently appeared on the radar of democratization studies. The

¹ *1) Binary Indices:* Democracy-Dictatorship index produced by Przeworski and collaborators (Alvarez et al. 1996; Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010); Boix, Miller, and Rosato or *BMR* (2013); *2) Ordinal Indices:* Political Rights index and the Civil Liberty index, both produced by Freedom House (2013), along with the Polity2 index drawn from the Polity IV database (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2013); the Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy or *LIED* (2015) produced by Skaaning et al; and the Varieties of Democracy indices by Lindberg et al; *3) Interval Indices:* Index of Democracy produced by Vanhanen (2000), the Contestation and Inclusiveness indices produced by Coppedge, Alvarez, and Maldonado (2008), and the Unified Democracy Scores produced by Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton (2010).

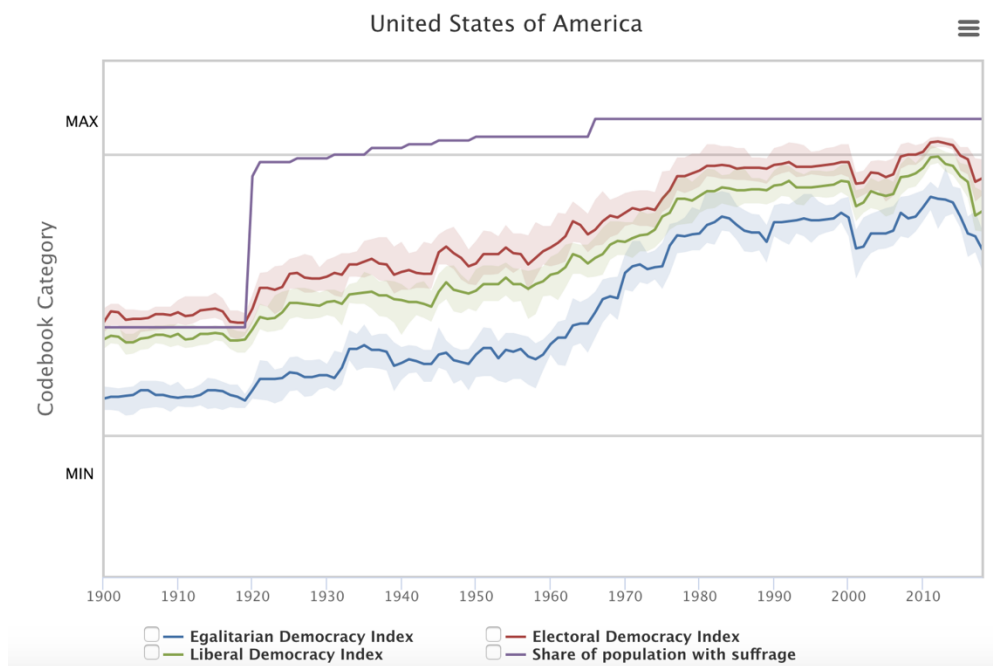
excessive focus on elections as the *sine qua non* of democracy is certainly part of the problem. But even on electoral grounds, the field struggles to systematically account for exclusion. For example, some prominent indices utilizing an electoral definition would classify the United States as a democracy from 1800 (BMR) and others not until the Voting Rights Act in 1965 (LIED). And none can make sense of the fact that the United States continues to violate the procedural minimal definition of democracy through felony disenfranchisement and systematic voter suppression, or that the right to vote is not a stable feature and historically has been rolled back for many groups.

The problems of understanding exclusion in the U.S. case are compounded by the fact that the exclusion typically takes place along racial lines, a dimension that rarely factors into analyses of democratization (the same is true of gender). In addition, it is the exclusion of a minority group, and thus does not significantly move the needle for indicators looking to the inclusion of a majority of citizens as the mark of democracy. As a result, events that would violate the requirements of procedural democracy – Jim Crow laws which imposed voting restrictions, literacy tests, poll taxes, property-ownership requirements, moral character tests, and various other onerous requirements on voters – do not appear to impact the country’s regime scores any more than do major advances in voting rights.

In fact, according to the aggregate indices available through V-Dem, the history of the United States looks to be a fairly steady march towards greater democratic inclusion. Moreover, as the graph below shows, each of the indicators devised by V-Dem to understand different dimensions of democratic development shows the same trend. It is surprising to find such close correspondence among indices that are meant to measure such potentially divergent features as deliberative, electoral, participatory, egalitarian, and liberal democracy. It is also interesting that the only noticeable contradictions to the upward trajectory are found in 2000 and 2016, perhaps suggesting a bias in the perspective of country coders who likely would be more responsive to dramatic electoral events than to ongoing structural challenges.



I searched for any indicator that would reflect the impact of racial exclusion under Jim Crow or the advances made with the Voting Rights Act and found none that represented anything close to the magnitude of these events. The indicator for suffrage (see below) comes closest, but that better captures the leap in inclusion with women's suffrage. There is a bump in the 1960s around the time of the Voting Rights Act, but the U.S. is already in the "Max" zone well before that.



Could the problem be solved with a technical fix? Could we just add a new variable and weight it heavily in order to account for the impact of such events? Yes and no. Of course, greater nuance would help, and it would mean that such events are reflected in the scoring. What this kind of technical fix would not resolve, however, is the problem of internal inconsistency at the heart of such exclusion. A country that disenfranchises a racial minority is not *less* democratic; rather, it is *undemocratic* in a profound sense. The point here is not to suggest that we need a reclassification of the United States in aggregate, but to say that democratic and undemocratic features co-existed and continue to co-exist, with significant consequences for democratic politics. This needs to be reflected in our scholarship in meaningful ways.

Do Regimes Still Matter?

There are many signs that the field may be moving away from regimes as an analytical category. Shifts in how we deal with concepts and measures is evident in the introduction of the disaggregated V-Dem dataset. Even if the convention is still to aggregate, the opportunities that such data affords to conduct disaggregated studies opens the door for different

conceptualizations. Perhaps more telling is that the Polity index, widely considered to be a more constrictive measure, has announced that for the next round of scoring (Polity V), greater attention will be paid to variations within democratic regimes. In addition, the new wave of scholarship on autocratization, with its exploration of trends across regimes types, seems to be moving the field to consider political change outside the typical regime binary.

Whether or not regimes still matter for our analysis is an open question, and one that will vary by the topic of investigation, but there are signs that the use of regimes as an organizing concept is waning in the field. This is not to diminish the significance of or erase the difference between democracy and autocracy as political principles. There is no doubt that the principle of democracy still matters a great deal. It is less clear, however, that this is best understood at the level of regimes. Indeed, when we aggregate incongruent political features into overarching regime categories, we lose a great deal of what makes the differences meaningful.

Perhaps the strongest argument in favor of maintaining regime categories is still a political one. As democracy comes under attack from various directions, we may wish to hold on to this flawed but politically powerful concept even tighter. However, if we do not also take the present opportunity to interrogate these categories, we do ourselves a great disservice. The contradictions within democratic regimes become more apparent and politically salient with each passing day. And as we continue to hold on to this flawed concept, publics around the world are beginning to show indifference or worse. If we are to preserve the normative value and rhetorical force of democracy as a principle, we need to disaggregate it from democracy as a regime.