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Measuring Democracy through Election Outcomes

A Critique with African Data

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Cross-national measures of democracy are widely used to track the development and spread of democracy around the world and to study the causes and correlates of democratization. Most of the best-known democracy indexes have a component on election outcomes. In many measures, election outcomes make a significant contribution to a country’s overall rating, and in some, the outcomes are even decisive. However, in the first empirical test of this relationship, using data from 165 African multiparty elections in 26 countries, this article demonstrates that election outcomes are not consistently related to democracy and that the assumptions behind such a relationship are problematic. Therefore, election outcomes are a flawed shortcut to measuring democracy.

Keywords: democracy; measurement; competition; elections; Africa

The third wave of democratization has given new impetus to the measurement of democracy as scholars attempt to track the spread and development of democracy around the world (Lauth, 2004; Munck & Verkuilen, 2002, plus comments and rejoinder in same issue). Most of the best-known democracy indexes have a component on election outcomes. In many measures, election results make a significant contribution to a country’s overall rating—in some cases, they are even decisive contributions (Alvarez, Cheihub, Limongi, & Przeworski, 1996; Arat, 1991; Beck, Clarke, Groff, Keefer, & Walsh, 2000; Cutright, 1963; Cutright & Wiley, 1969; Dahl, 1971; Diamond, 2002; Gastil, 1991; Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheihub, & Limongi, 1996, 2000; Vanhanen, 1990, 1997, 2003, 2004).

Author’s Note: A previous version of this article was presented at the Division of Politics and International Relations, University of Southampton. I thank all participants, especially Ken Newton, as well as Chris Welzel and Klaus Boehnke for their helpful comments, and I thank Magdalena Cholakova and Svetlina Kirilova for research assistance.
Several of the measures of democracy that include election outcomes are widely used in research on democracy. Cutright’s index was invoked frequently in the 1960s and 1970s in research on the relationship between democracy and socioeconomic development, social mobilization, social inequality, and mass communications (Bollen, 1980). Vanhanen uses his index to explain the process of democratization, and others have used it in research on forms of government (Stepan & Skach, 1993), human rights performance (Davenport & Armstrong, 2004; Poe & Tate, 1994), and despite misgivings, the quality of democracy (Lijphart, 1999). Przeworski et al. (1996, 2000) use their classification to study regime-longevity and the relationship between political institutions and well-being.

In light of the long-standing prominence of election outcomes in measures of democracy and their recent promotion to the status of decisive factor by Przeworski et al. (2000) and Vanhanen (2003), it comes as a surprise that so far, the use of election outcomes to measure democracy has escaped systematic scholarly scrutiny. This article seeks to fill that gap through a comparison of measures of democracy based on election outcomes with measures of democracy based on other factors and an analysis of the assumptions underlying the relationship between election outcomes and democracy.

The use of election outcomes in measures of democracy is based on the expectation that a country is not democratic or at least less democratic when one party wins an overwhelming share of votes or seats or one party regularly wins an absolute legislative majority and captures the presidency. Both expectations directly link election outcomes to democracy—the first through the size of electoral victory and the second through government duration. For empirical analysis, especially across space and time, the elements of size and time are operationalized through thresholds.

Election outcomes are highly associated with democracy in the Western world, where supermajorities and prolonged one-party dominance are rare phenomena and democracy is the rule. Measures of democracy using election outcomes also have no problems detecting one-party states and other forms of dictatorship with plebiscitary elections. However, the old pattern of moderate victories, regular alternation, and democracy on one hand, versus total victories in elections without choice, absence of alternation, and dictatorship on the other, has been complicated since the end of the Cold War by the proliferation of regimes that organize multiparty elections and have parliamentary opposition but are not necessarily democratic. We do not know how well measures of democracy based on election outcomes perform in countries where election outcomes and regime type can vary independently in principle.
This article performs a first test, applying the election outcome components of the main measures of democracy to a data set of 165 multiparty elections in 26 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. As elections in Africa are known to exhibit extreme results and as dominant parties and party systems abound in this region, the African election data contain the requisite variation. Annual Freedom House and Polity IV scores are used as a benchmark. Tests are conducted using correlation analysis, a comparison of classifications, and a comparison of indications of change. Our concern is with regime type, not quality of democracy. The question is if election outcomes can correctly predict whether a country is democratic, not how democratic it is.

For all three tests, the results are disappointing. The correlation with Freedom House and Polity scores and classifications is weak; there is widespread disagreement about the state of democracy in Africa among the various measures using election outcomes, the disagreement with Freedom House and Polity classifications is high, numerous cases are evidently misclassified, and the measures tend to give a picture of erratic and sudden change that is belied by other evidence. The reasons for the disappointing performance of measures of democracy using election outcomes in Africa are sought in underlying confusion about the relationship between competitiveness, competition, and democracy.

**Measures of Democracy**

This section presents an overview, in rough chronological order, of all measures that use election outcomes to determine the presence and/or degree of democracy in a national political system. Although the precise objects of these indexes differ, all have been used by the authors and/or others as measures of democracy.

Cutright’s (1963) index of political development awards points on the basis of four variables: presence or absence of a Parliament, the composition of Parliament, recruitment of the president, and presidential support base. A country loses 1 point when the largest party in a multiparty, working legislature has 70% or more of the seats. A dominant party in Parliament also lowers the score for an appointed president. However, a directly elected president gets 1 point, even if he or she belongs to the same party that has more than 70% of the seats in Parliament. Election outcomes count for one-third of the variation in the index. There is no specification of the link between the index and the underlying conception of political development other than that development is associated with “more complex and
specialized national political institutions” (p. 255), which presumably implies the absence of a dominant party.

In a subsequent study, Cutright and Wiley (1969) construct a political representation index that builds on Cutright and adds a score for voting rights. A country gets full points for a functioning Parliament in which the largest party does not have more than 70% of the seats and the second largest has at least 20%. If either the main opposition party is too small or the largest party is too big, a country loses points. If both conditions apply, a country loses even more points. A country always loses points for the president in case of a dominant party in Parliament, even when the president belongs to the opposition.

It is not clear how the index relates to the definition of political representation as “the extent to which the executive and legislative branches of government are subject to the demands of the non-elite population” (pp. 23-24). What if an overwhelming majority of the people supports a particular party and/or a minority divides its electoral favor over a variety of minor opposition parties? How is such an outcome unrepresentative? The authors admit that “an unbalanced legislature may reflect the will of the people” (p. 42) and caution against overinterpreting the 70% rule, even though election outcomes account for nearly 40% of the final score.

In the appendix to his famous book on polyarchy, Dahl (1971) seeks to measure the two dimensions of polyarchy: contestation and participation. Three of the 10 variables Dahl borrows from Banks to measure opportunities for the opposition (contestation) involve election outcomes. First, competitiveness. An electoral system is partially competitive when one party wins 85% or more of the legislative seats and noncompetitive in case there is only one list or no elected opposition. Second, the party system. Dahl distinguishes between six types, which range in their extent of contestation from a multiparty system to a no-party state. Third, legislative effectiveness. A Parliament controlled by a dominant party is largely judged ineffective. Clearly, the three variables are connected through election outcomes, and a very high election victory will lower a country’s democratic value directly and indirectly.

The widely used Freedom House Survey of freedom in the world, originally compiled by Gastil (1991), uses two checklists, one for political and one for civic rights, to classify countries. These checklists, by Gastil’s free admission, were not developed out of any theoretical understanding of democracy but simply because data were available under these headings. Originally, 3 of the 11 political criteria were influenced by election outcomes:
the presence of multiple political parties; shifts in power through elections; and a significant opposition vote. Gastil purports,

The extent of democratic rights can... be empirically suggested by the size of the opposition vote... any group or leader that regularly receives 70% or more of the vote indicates a weak opposition and the probable existence of undemocratic barriers in the way of its further success. (p. 29)

This suspicion increases when a government receives more than 90% of the vote and becomes a certainty at 98%. Coding was admittedly highly personal and intransparent (p. 22), and categories had no fixed weight.

Currently, Freedom House (2005) has one question with variables affected by election outcomes, as part of a new subcategory political pluralism and participation: “Is there a significant opposition vote, de facto opposition power, and a realistic possibility for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?” The item combines four questions to which very different answers are possible, even for the same election. The concentration of features having to do with the balance of power and chances for alternation reduces their weight. A country can receive a maximum of 4 points for each of the 10 criteria for political rights and the 15 questions on civil liberties.

In her study of democracy and human rights in developing countries, Arat (1991) distinguishes four components of democracy: participation, inclusiveness, competitiveness, and civil liberties. Competitiveness is determined through the vote share of the largest party in a country with multiple parties and through restrictions on party competition. A country loses 1 point in case the largest party has 70% or more of the votes or there are no elections. It is difficult to estimate the weight of election outcomes in Arat’s index, which multiplies the score for participation with that of inclusiveness, adds the score for competitiveness, and subtracts a calculation of coerciveness. To the extent that the presence of a dominant party also results in a lower score for effectiveness of the legislature, the main component in Arat’s participation measure, election outcomes count double. Whether this is the case cannot be verified due to lack of information on coding decisions.

In a series of studies on the process and prospects of democratization, Vanhanen (1990, 1997, 2003, 2004) uses two variables to measure democracy: election turnout and the vote share of smaller parties in parliamentary and/or presidential elections. These scores are multiplied to arrive at an
index of democratization. Of relevance here is Vanhanen’s competition index, which is 100 minus the vote share of the largest party. Depending on the form of government in a country, Vanhanen takes into consideration parliamentary or presidential election results. In case of concurrent powers, Vanhanen includes both election results, weighting them 50-50, 25-75, or 75-25, depending on his assessment of the power balance between Parliament and the directly elected executive president. This characterization of form of government introduces a subjective element into the coding. Furthermore, it does not check for divided control. The index gives the same level of competition for elections in which one party wins both the presidential and parliamentary elections and the case where these elections are won by two different parties.

If no data on vote share are available, Vanhanen uses seat share. The alternate use of vote and seat shares introduces an ambiguity into the measurement caused by disproportionality. The electoral system also introduces a distortion in the interpretation of presidential election outcomes. Under plurality rule, a president can win with less than a majority, impossible in a two-round majority system. In addition, with the double ballot, the question arises whether to take first or second round results. Vanhanen usually uses second round results but occasionally shifts to first round results when these “reflect power relations more realistically,” again introducing a subjective element (p. 57). When there are no elections, the coder sets the vote share of the largest party at 100% and participation at 0%.

Vanhanen’s measure has two aims: to measure the degree of democracy within democracies and to differentiate between democracies and nondemocracies. For the second purpose, Vanhanen (2003) needs to establish a cut-off point:

If the share of the smaller parties is very low, for example, less than 30% of the votes cast, the dominance of the largest party is so overpowering that it is doubtful whether such a country could be regarded as a democracy. (p. 65)

For participation, the threshold is set at a turnout of 10% of total population. These cut-off points, Vanhanen admits, are arbitrary, but they are believed to be “suitable approximations for distinguishing more or less autocratic systems from systems that have crossed the minimum threshold of democracy” (ibid.). It is not clear on what this belief rests, but the cut-off point makes election outcomes decisive for regime classification.

Alvarez et al. (1996) and Przeworski et al. (1996, 2000), in publications coming out of the same project, employ four rules to determine whether a
A country is democratic: there must be an elected chief executive and legislature, more than one party, and alternation in government. A regime is classified as a dictatorship for those years during which a single party has all seats in the legislature, the ruling party or coalition wins three or more consecutive terms of office, or a previously authoritarian leader or party wins the transition elections. However, as soon as such a party loses power, the country is recoded as democratic for the entire period that party was in office and elections were held under the same rules. Retroactive coding also works the other way around. When a democratically elected government subsequently extends its rule by declaring a one-party state or a no-party state, it is considered to be authoritarian from the moment it assumes office. By consequence, a country may be differently classified for the same period when coding is repeated at a later date. For example, Przeworski et al. (2000) would have classified postwar Japan as authoritarian at any time during the four decades the Liberal Democratic Party was in power, only to reclassify Japan retrospectively as democratic after the occurrence of alternation in the early 1990s.

Przeworski et al. (2000) are aware that the alternation rule risks misclassifying countries with democratic dominant parties, as testified to in a discussion of Botswana, but they prefer to be too strict rather than too lenient. Botswana is one of only two African countries to remain democratic since independence, but Przeworski et al. code it as undemocratic because of the lack of alternation. Different from the other measures, Przeworski et al. are not interested in the quality of democracy, only in its presence.

To complete the overview of measures of democracy using election outcomes, brief mention needs to be made of recent additions. The Database of Political Institutions (Beck et al., 2000) considers a one-party Parliament undemocratic. When one party has more than 75% of the seats, the country is considered less democratic. For his six-fold typology of regimes, Diamond (2002) combines the Freedom House (2005) score with the percentage of legislative seats held by the ruling party, the vote share of the ruling party presidential candidate, and the number of years the incumbent has continuously been in power. Diamond is especially interested in distinguishing between different types of nondemocratic regimes, but it is not clear how an emphasis on election outcomes helps to achieve this, also because the criteria are applied in a self-admitted intransparent and arbitrary way.

Table 1 presents an overview of the criteria for election outcomes in the measures of democracy discussed above. To facilitate interpretation, it
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Largest Party</th>
<th>Opposition in Parliament</th>
<th>Presidential Elections</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>% Weight of Election Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cutright (1963)</td>
<td>70% ≥ seats</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>single election</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutright and Wiley (1969)</td>
<td>70% ≥ seats</td>
<td>≤ 20% seats, runner-up</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>single election</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dahl (1971) “partially competitive”</td>
<td>85% ≥ seats</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>single election</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dahl (1971) “noncompetitive”</td>
<td>100% seats</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>single election</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gastil (1991)</td>
<td>70% ≥ votes, 90% ≥ votes, 98% ≥ votes</td>
<td>“no significant opposition vote”</td>
<td>“no significant opposition vote”</td>
<td>no alternation</td>
<td>several elections</td>
<td>variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom House (2005)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>“no significant opposition vote”</td>
<td>“no significant opposition vote”</td>
<td>“no realistic possibility for opposition to gain power through elections”</td>
<td>probably more than a single election</td>
<td>10% of political rights and 4% of combined score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arat (1991)</td>
<td>70% ≥ votes</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>single election</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheihub, and Limongi (2000) “party rule”</td>
<td>100% seats</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>single election</td>
<td>decisive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Seats</td>
<td>Votes</td>
<td>Rule Description</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Przeworski et al. (2000)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>no alternation for three consecutive elections or no alternation after transition elections</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beck, Clarke, Groff, Keefer, and Walsh (2000)</td>
<td>100% seats</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>single election</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diamond (2002)</td>
<td>unspecified seats</td>
<td>unspecified votes</td>
<td>several elections high, but unspecified</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
presents those election outcomes for which a country is not considered democratic by the respective authors, despite multiparty elections. There are five criteria: the vote or seat share of the largest party in parliament, the seat share of the parliamentary opposition, vote share for the winning presidential candidate, and change in the executive (parliamentary or presidential cabinet). Combinations of criteria are limited. The next column presents the time period taken into account. The final column indicates the weight of election outcomes in the overall index of democracy where this could be determined.

Measuring Democracy in Africa

For an empirical test of the usefulness of measures of election outcomes for the identification of regime type, two sets of data are required: first, a set with election results and data on the composition of government for a particular period and range of countries; second, a separate data set that can act as a benchmark covering the same countries and period. This article examines the democratic record of sub-Saharan African states in the past 30 years, although most entries come from the 1990s and beyond. There are two reasons for focusing on African elections: first, the often extreme election results; second, the prevalence of dominant parties and party systems (Bogaards, 2004). Together, these phenomena provide the necessary variation to test the discriminatory capacity of the various measures based on election outcomes, without prejudicing the outcome. There is a wide range of regimes in Africa, ranging from brutal dictatorships to liberal democracies (van de Walle, 2002), and we would require of measures of democracy based on election outcomes that they adequately distinguish between regime type on the basis of election outcome.

The data set contains information on the outcomes of 99 parliamentary elections and 66 presidential elections in the 26 African countries that have held at least 3 consecutive multiparty elections without an extraconstitutional change of government from 1972 until the end of 2004. Three consecutive multiparty elections is the minimum for full application of Przeworski et al.’s “alternation rule.” The data set excludes no-party and one-party elections. There are four reasons for focusing on multiparty elections. First, multiparty elections are the norm since the third wave of democratization and the end of the Cold War. Even most dictatorships, no matter how unfree and unfair, now organize formal multiparty elections. Second, in Africa, there are no contemporary one-party states with plebiscitary elections.
and only two country with no-party elections: Uganda and the kingdom of Swaziland. Third, all measures of democracy using election outcomes make a separate check for no-party elections and all except Vanhanen also check for the number of parties contesting elections. Election outcomes are not used to identify no-party or one-party regimes but to distinguish democracies from nondemocracies with multiparty elections. Fourth, no-party and one-party elections are by definition not democratic and therefore lack variation on the regime variable. Their inclusion would bias the test. What we need to know is whether election outcomes reflect differences among regimes with multiparty elections.

For the test, five measures of democracy based on election outcomes are used: Arat (1991), Cutright (1963), Dahl (1971), Przeworski et al. (2000), and Vanhanen (2003). Cutright and Wiley (1969) do not differ enough from Cutright (1963) to merit separate testing, whereas Diamond’s criteria are not specific enough to allow application. Beck et al. (2000) is close to Dahl (1971), whose partially competitive and uncompetitive categories are conflated into one nondemocratic category. For all years in which parliament was elected through multiparty elections in those 26 African countries, the criteria from Table 1 have been applied by the author. In total, the data set contains information on 416 country years. All coding, except for Vanhanen until 2002, is done by this author, because codings for African countries for the other measures are either nonexistent (Arat, 1991; Cutright, 1963) or incomplete and outdated (Dahl, 1971; Przeworski et al., 2000).³

Three caveats are in order. First, all the indexes include more than just election outcomes. However, the interest here is not in the wholesale application of measures of democracy but in an empirical assessment of election outcomes in the measurement of democracy. Second, because of the exclusive interest in election outcomes, the classification of countries in this article may differ from the classification of countries based on the complete index, with the exception of Przeworski et al. (2000). Third, not all indexes specify the democratic minimum. Here, election outcomes are treated as decisive for the classification of a country as (non)democratic, thereby deliberately overstating the importance of election outcomes for Arat (1991), Cutright (1963), and Dahl (1971). For these authors, undemocratic election outcomes would merely reduce the democracy score of a country, even though they would be seen as an unmistakable sign that a regime is undemocratic in practice despite its formal trappings.

For the benchmark, two data sets are available that cover the period and countries selected for this article: Freedom House and Polity IV.⁴ Freedom House (2005) provides an annual score of freedom based on 10 criteria for
political rights and 15 questions on civil liberties. Polity uses only five indicators: competitiveness of political participation, regulation of political participation, competitiveness of the executive, openness of executive recruitment, and constraints on the chief executive. Democracy and autocracy are measured separately but scores can be subtracted to form a single summary measure.

Some limitations to the two benchmark data sets need to be noted. First, neither measures democracy as such. Freedom House (2005) surveys freedom, whereas Polity was developed to examine authority patterns. Second, both Freedom House and Polity have an intermediate category between democracy and autocracy. Freedom House uses scores from 1 (free) to 7 (not free) and three categories: free, partially free, not free. The boundaries between these categories have slightly changed with time, are not theoretically grounded, and do not correspond to any regime typology. For Polity, there is no easy interpretation of the continuum between plus 10 (democracy) and minus 10 (autocracy). Following Jaggers and Gurr (1995), the thresholds for autocracy and democracy should be put at minus 7 and plus 7, respectively. Countries with scores in between are regarded by Polity as “incoherent polities,” meaning that they mix different authority patterns. Third, Freedom House also takes into account election outcomes. This overlap is likely to increase convergence with the election outcome measures. Fourth, both measures have limitations on availability. Freedom House is available only from 1972 onwards, whereas Polity IV data are available from independence until 2003, though not for some of the small countries in this data set (Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, and the Seychelles).

Both measures of democracy are highly correlated (Jaggers & Gurr, 1995); also in the case of Africa (Berg-Schlosser, 2004). Both are subjective measures, unlike the objective measure of election outcomes, and as such, both are likely to suffer from bias (Bollen & Paxton, 2000). This article uses both Freedom House and Polity IV, in the conviction that these measures provide the best available approximation for our purposes, despite imperfections (McHenry, 2000). The widespread use of Freedom House and Polity data in comparative research on Africa, whether alone (Alence, 2004; Diamond, 2002; Jensen & Wantchekon, 2004) or in combination (Kuenzi & Lambright, 2005), justifies their use as reference points.

Because we are interested in regime type, we need to dichotomize the continuous measures of Freedom House and Polity (cf. Collier & Adcock, 1999). For both measures, two options are available. First, their own classificatory schemes can be dichotomized by collapsing the authoritarian, not
free and intermediary categories into one nondemocratic category. This corresponds to a measure of full democracy. Second, a minimum threshold of democracy can be established for both measures. Since 1996, Freedom House provides an annual list with countries that are minimally democratic, the so-called electoral democracies. This list contains all free countries and those partially free countries that satisfy the democratic minimum, defined in terms of meaningful and free elections with full suffrage. Unfortunately, the list is not available before 1996, the reasons for the classification are not revealed, and for partially free countries, the classification cannot be derived from the score. For Polity, Doorenspleet (2005) has developed a concept of minimal democracy. In her study on democratic transitions, Doorenspleet dichotomizes Polity by going beyond the aggregate scores, using codings on four criteria: competitiveness of executive recruitment, openness of executive recruitment, competitiveness of participation, and constraints on the power of the chief executive. To operationalize Dahl’s concept of polyarchy, she establishes the democratic minimum for each of the four Polity criteria, and all of them must be fulfilled to consider a political regime minimally democratic. This article uses Doorenspleet’s coding rules and data, available until 2001 for all countries in the data set except Equatorial Guinea and updates them to 2004.

**Results and Discussion**

To test the performance of the various measures of democracy in Africa, three techniques are employed: correlation analysis, a comparison of classifications, and a comparison of change. Correlations between measures of democracy are the most common test of validity in the literature, and traditionally, correlations have been high (Lauth, 2004). The lowest correlation between seven measures of democracy reported by Jaggers and Gurr (1995) is .72. All correlations in Table 2 are well below this level, with the exception of the correlations between the benchmark measures. Freedom House and Polity IV are highly correlated for this data set, irrespective of whether one looks at scores, classifications, or the correlation between scores and classifications. In contrast, measures of democracy using election outcomes are only weakly correlated with Polity and Freedom, again irrespective of whether one uses scores or classifications. Vanhanen’s continuous competition index proves no exception, indicating that poor correspondence does not depend on dichotomous versus continuous measurement (cf. Elkins, 2000). These findings are further evidence that indexes are growing apart in
### Table 2
**Correlations between Measures of Democracy in Africa**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Polity IV Scores</th>
<th>Freedom House Scores</th>
<th>Polity IV Classification (Doorenspleet)</th>
<th>Freedom House Classification (Electoral Democracy)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Correlation Coefficient</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Correlation Coefficient</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutright (1963)</td>
<td>.232</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>.196</td>
<td>413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dahl (1971)</td>
<td>.234</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>.250</td>
<td>413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arat (1991)</td>
<td>.297</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>.277</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanhanen Competition Index</td>
<td>.438</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>.419</td>
<td>413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polity IV scores</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>.886</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polity IV (Doorenspleet, 2005)</td>
<td>.933</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>.829</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom House (Electoral Democracy)</td>
<td>.907</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>.837</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The values in this table are Pearson correlations coefficients unless indicated otherwise. Only the election outcome components of Cutright (1963), Dahl (1971), Arat (1991), and Vanhanen (1990, 1997, 2003, 2004) are used. Freedom House (2005) combined scores for political rights and civil liberties. Polity score is democracy minus autocracy score. *N* is the number of years for which regime classifications were available for both measures. All values are significant at 0.01 level, except where indicated otherwise.

a. Spearman correlation.
b. Nonsignificant.
their ratings of Third Wave democracies in general (Gaber, 2000) and
Africa in particular (Emminghaus & Nord, 2000). The results here confirm
those of Berg-Schlosser (2004), who found that for Africa, Freedom House
and Polity are still highly correlated; Vanhanen’s index deviates from this.
This suggests a growing discrepancy between measures based on election
outcomes and those based on other indicators.

The correlation might have been higher had the full indexes of Cutright
(1963), Dahl (1971), and Arat (1991) been used, not just their election out-
come components, and had Vanhanen’s competition index been supplemented
with his participation score, but this only implies that these indexes receive
their validity from other components, not election outcomes, which by them-
selves are only weakly correlated with the benchmark measures of democracy.
For Przeworski et al. (2000), there are no other factors to take into account,
because in a country with multiparty elections for the highest political offices,
election outcomes are all that matter for the classification of regime type.

Correlations analysis can only tell part of the story. Casper and Tufis
(2003) remind us that “despite high correlations, the use of these measures
[of democracy] can produce different results” (p. 196). A first indication of
such differences is shown in Table 3, where the various measures summa-
rize the state of democracy in African countries with multiparty elections in
the past 30 years. Depending on which election outcomes one takes into
account and where one draws the line, African countries with multiparty
elections were democratic between 74% of the time (Arat, 1991) or just
35% (Przeworski et al., 2000). Most of the negative verdicts by Przeworski
et al. are based on the lack of alternation. The number of undemocratic
years would have been even higher had not recent turnovers in Ghana,
Kenya, and Senegal triggered a recoding of these countries as democratic.
If one thinks any election won with more than 70% of votes is undemocra-
tic, then 26% of the time regimes were authoritarian (Arat, 1991). If one
uses the same threshold but takes seat share instead of vote share, then
regimes were authoritarian 53% of time (Cutright, 1963). Clearly, it matters
where one puts the threshold. Among the benchmark measures, Polity IV
rates 36% of years democratic, 58% incoherent, and only 5% as authoritar-
ian. Freedom House (2005) rates 41% of years free, 42% as partially free,
and 17% as unfree. Freedom House and Polity show that Africa is home
to a wide variety of regimes, including a fair share of free countries and
full democracies. An even larger number qualify as electoral democracy
(Freedom House) or minimal democracy (Doorenspleet, 2005).

The differences between the measures of democracy are brought out even
more clearly in Table 4, which shows the extent of disagreement expressed as
### Table 3
Democracy in Africa in Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediary</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = Number of years for which regime classifications were available for the measures. Only the election outcome components of the measures of Cutright (1963), Dahl (1971), Arat (1991), and Vanhanen (1990, 1997, 2003, 2004) are used. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding errors.
the percentage of years for which one measure codes a country as democratic and the other measure codes the same country as nondemocratic. The differences are substantial. In the first two columns, discrepancies are partially obscured because of the intermediary categories of Polity and Freedom House. When we distinguish between democracies (Polity) and free countries (Freedom House) on one hand and autocracies and unfree countries and partially free and incoherent polities on the other, disagreement is extremely high, as shown in the third and fourth columns. Disagreement ranges from 31% of country years for Przeworski et al. (2000) with Freedom House to 51% for Dahl (1971) with Polity. When a minimal definition of democracy is used for Freedom House (electoral democracy) and Polity (Doorenspleet, 2005), disagreement remains very high at levels ranging from 27% of cases for Przeworski et al. (2000) with Freedom House to 39% for Cutright (1963) with Polity. An interesting finding was that the reason for disagreement varies per measure. In comparison with the minimal definitions of democracy, Cutright (1963) and Przeworski et al. (2000) tend to be too critical, whereas Arat (1991), Dahl (1971), and Vanhanen (2003) tend to be too optimistic. In Africa, measures of democracy that rely on election outcomes often give a radically different picture from those measures that look at other criteria.5

In contrast, there are no major discrepancies between the Polity and Freedom House classifications for African countries. There are no years where Freedom House gives a verdict of unfree and Polity of democratic and vice versa. That 11% of free countries is viewed as incoherent polity and therefore coded undemocratic is largely explained by four countries with a score of 6, just below the democratic minimum set by Polity: Namibia since 1990, Benin since 1991, Mozambique since 1994, and Mali since 1997. Doorenspleet’s (2005) concept of minimal democracy based on Polity has almost perfect empirical correspondence with Freedom House’s (2005) concept of electoral democracy. This is as should be, as both explicitly aim to capture Dahl’s notion of polyarchy. Conversely, classifications based on these minimal definitions of democracy are expected to deviate from a classification based on a full notion of democracy. Disagreement in this case simply means that a sizeable part of the countries that Polity regards as incoherent polity and Freedom House as partially free is at least minimally democratic for Doorenspleet and an electoral democracy for Freedom House. For example, all four cases that just missed the threshold to full democracy for Polity are judged to be above the democratic minimum by Doorenspleet and Freedom House.

A major concern of students of democracy and democratization is how well indicators of democracy reflect continuity and change. This faculty is
## Table 4
Disagreement between Measures of Democracy for Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Polity IV (Three Categories)</th>
<th>Freedom House (Three Categories)</th>
<th>Polity IV (Two Categories)</th>
<th>Freedom House (Two Categories)</th>
<th>Polity (Doorenspleet)</th>
<th>Freedom House (Electoral Democracy)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cutright (1963)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dahl (1971)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arat (1991)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom House (three categories)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doorenspleet (2005)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral democracy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The values in this table are percentages of country years for which disagreement exists between paired measures. For the first and second column, only disagreement between the democratic and nondemocratic categories is counted, and disagreement with intermediary categories is ignored. Only the election outcome components of the measures of Cutright (1963), Dahl (1971), Arat (1991), and Vanhanen (1990, 1997, 2003, 2004) are used.
crucial for an analysis of the development of democracy with time and for testing theories about, for example, democratic transitions. Reich (2002) demonstrates how different measures of democracy may give very different indications of change or its absence. Table 5 presents a comparison of change between the five election outcome measures and the regime classification by Doorenspleet (2005) based on Polity data. Most striking is the overwhelming disagreement between them: Out of 98 observations of regime change, only 2 agree. When measures of democracy based on election outcomes disagree with Doorenspleet on the occurrence or direction of change, as they do in 98% of the cases here, this is normally because election outcomes trigger a reclassification of the country’s regime where Doorenspleet observes no change. There are 68 of such false indications of change. Thirty are “false alarms,” in that they indicate a regression to authoritarianism where Doorenspleet sees no change, and 38 are “false dawns,” in the sense that they indicate a democratic transition where Doorenspleet again sees no change. The classifications of Arat (1991), Cutright (1963), Dahl (1971), and Vanhanen (2003) all show the “quirky random-seeming changes” that Moore (1995, p. 9) observed for Vanhanen’s index. Przeworski et al. (2000) err in the other direction by under-reporting change. Doorenspleet lists six regime changes in this data set: democratic transitions in Ghana, Kenya, and Senegal and democratic regression in Gambia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Przeworski et al. observe none of these, partially because of their recoding rule, which changes the timing of change.

The case of South Africa clearly demonstrates how election outcomes can lead measures of democracy astray. In 2004, the African National Congress (ANC) won the third parliamentary elections after apartheid in a row, increasing its vote and seat share from an already impressive 66% in the 1999 elections to 70%. Observers agreed that the election “was testimony to the efficiency of the IEC [Independent Electoral Commission] and the maturity of South Africa’s democracy: The African Union observer team described it as ‘a benchmark’ for other African states” (Lemon, 2005, p. 325). Although many were concerned about the ANC’s continuing dominance, nobody denied that the election outcomes accurately reflected the preferences of South Africa’s citizens. However, crossing the 70% benchmark in both votes and seats triggered a recoding of South Africa as undemocratic by Arat (1991), Cutright (1963), and Vanhanen (2003). In contrast, Freedom House (2005) registers no change, with a stable score of 1.5 and the classification free. Because it was the third victory in a row for the ANC, the whole postapartheid era is recoded according to Przeworski
Table 5
Comparison of Change for Africa

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<tr>
<td>A &gt; D</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>D &gt; A</td>
<td>A &gt; D</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>D &gt; A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A &gt; D</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NC</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D &gt; A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
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</table>

Polity (Doorenspleet, 2005)

Note: A > D is regime change from authoritarianism to democracy; NC is no regime change; D > A is regime change from democracy to authoritarianism. The values in the table indicate times when one of the two paired measures shows change. Only the election outcome components of the measures of Cutright (1963), Dahl (1973), Arat (1991), and Vanhanen (1990, 1997, 2003, 2004) are used.
et al. (2000) as undemocratic, canceling in retrospect the democratic transition and obliterating any difference with the apartheid regime.

**Competitiveness, Competition, and Democracy**

How can we account for the poor performance of measures of democracy based on election outcomes in Africa? The answer cannot be the frequent occurrence of extreme political majorities and dominant party systems themselves, because these are precisely the variables that the measures of democracy tested here use to distinguish between regime types. Nor can it be the volatility of African regimes or their elusive and contested nature, as Doorenspleet’s (2005) regime classifications are stable for most of the countries in this data set and Polity and Freedom House show strong agreement on scores and classifications. The causes for the poor performance should therefore not be sought in Africa.

Neither can disagreement between indices be explained with differences in the conceptualization of democracy, because “most constructors of indices subscribe to a procedural definition of democracy” (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002, p. 9). Contestation or competition is central to the conception of democracy of both sets of measures used here. The question is not which definition of democracy one subscribes to but how one should measure contestation. Arat (1991), Cutright (1963), Dahl (1971), Przeworski et al. (2000), and Vanhanen (2003) all measure contestation through election outcomes, whereas Polity and Freedom House measure contestation through a different and broader set of indicators.

At heart of the issue are problems with the relationship between election outcomes and democracy. The measures used here posit that low competitiveness indicates lack of competition and therefore lack of democracy. Three sets of problems emerge: first, the measurement of competitiveness; second, the relationship between competitiveness and competition; and third, the relationship between competitiveness and democracy. The first problem is that measures that look exclusively at size of an electoral victory for a single election (Arat, 1991; Cutright, 1963; Dahl, 1971; and Vanhanen, 2003) fail to measure competitiveness. They would classify a country in which two parties alternate in government (both winning overwhelming majorities) as uncompetitive, whereas the substantial American literature on party competition, going back to Key (1949), would qualify such a situation as highly competitive. Also, these measures would classify a country in which the opposition wins an overwhelming victory as uncompetitive,
again contrary to intuition. In both cases, the qualification as uncompetitive would lead to a verdict of being undemocratic.

The second problem is the equation of competitiveness and competition. Sartori (1976) distinguishes the two in the following way: Competition is “a structure, or a rule of the game,” whereas competitiveness is “a particular state of the game” (p. 218). According to Sartori, competition is “potential competitiveness.” Competitiveness can be measured through election outcomes; competition cannot: “the decisive element is not actual competition, and, even less, high competitiveness, but whether competition is possible” (Sartori, 1976, p. 221). Przeworski et al. (2000) define democracy in terms of uncertainty and the possibility of electoral upset; however, in their operationalization, they require this possibility to become an actuality, demand competitiveness as proof of the existence of competition, and see government defeat as evidence of what Bartolini (1999, 2000) identifies as contestability of elections and vulnerability of the government.

The lack of alternation by itself only indicates low competitiveness, not the absence of political competition as such. Przeworski et al.’s (2000) alternation rule defines a country as undemocratic when the same party wins three consecutive elections. However, the literature on party systems provides no justification for the equation of a predominant party system with an authoritarian regime (Pempel, 1990). Przeworski et al.’s alternation rule fails to distinguish between dominant party systems that maintain their rule through democratic means and dominant authoritarian party systems that do not. There is widespread concern about the negative effects of one-party dominance on the quality of democracy and the prospects of democratic consolidation (Giliomee & Simkins, 1999), but this is best treated as a hypothesis for empirical investigation.

The final problem is the relationship between competitiveness and democracy. Underlying the expectations about a relationship between regime type and the size of an electoral victory or the absence of alternation are assumptions that are rarely made explicit: that electorates are in fact willing to switch their support, that a multiparty system without a (regular) majority is the normal state of affairs in a democracy, and that any deviation from this balance of power signals hidden obstacles to political competition and the presence of an undemocratic or at least a less democratic regime.

These are strong assumptions that ignore the possibility that landslide victories reflect the true preferences of the electorate and that dominant party systems enjoy the genuine and enduring support of an electoral majority. They also ignore that oversized legislative majorities can be caused by
disproportionality of the electoral system and that inflated presidential victories can be the product of a second-round runoff between the top two candidates. Finally, no theoretical or empirical justification is provided for the thresholds that decide whether an election outcome is democratic or not. All thresholds in the relationship between election outcomes, competitiveness, and democracy are arbitrary, as most authors admit.

In sum, competition is at the heart of modern-party democracy; competitiveness is not. Competitiveness is measured through election outcomes; competition and democracy are not. To determine whether a country is democratic, we need to know whether it allows for political competition. To assess competition, we need to assess the structure and process of competition. In other words, to assess competition, we should not look at election outcomes but at the electoral process. Clearly, such an assessment should go beyond the electoral law and take into account all relevant facets of electoral administration. Fortunately, there is a growing interest in this subject (Elklit & Svensson, 1997; Lindberg, 2004; Mozaffar & Schedler, 2002).

Conclusion

The use of election outcomes to measure democracy has been criticized before. Bollen (1991) questions the validity of party composition measures such as Vanhanen’s but suggests, “it may be possible to develop more sophisticated models to relate party composition to more valid measures of political democracy” (p. 11). Hadenius (1992) is more categorical in his rejection of election outcomes and instead devises a composite index to assess the extent to which the process itself—the elections—is open, correct, and effective. Regrettably, the coding requires detailed information and is highly subjective. Hadenius’s efforts illustrate well the dilemma confronting comparative students of democracy: opt for a simple measure with loss of validity or construct a more comprehensive measure with higher information needs? This article has argued that election outcomes are a problematic shortcut to measuring democracy. Indicators based on election outcomes as they are used in many of the best-known indexes of democracy do not measure competition or even competitiveness and have great difficulties to identify regime type in countries with multiparty elections. An analysis of African election data showed that measures of democracy based on election outcomes are frequently in disagreement, correspond poorly with Freedom House and Polity classifications and scores, evidently misclassify numerous regimes, and fail to reflect continuity and change. As the
recent proliferation of regimes with multiparty elections around the globe is putting measures of democracy to the test, we would be well advised, this article suggests, not to put our trust in measures that rely on election outcomes but to focus more on the electoral process; less on competitiveness and more on the requirements for political competition.

Notes


2. Data on elections and government from Nohlen, Krennerich, and Thibaut (1999), updated with information from the African Research Bulletins, various editions of Africa South of the Sahara (London: Europa Publishers), the Interparliamentary Union at http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/parlinesearch.asp and the African Elections database at http://africanelections.tripod.com/about.html. All vote and seat shares are rounded to the next integer; seat shares are calculated as the percentage of elected seats.


5. The picture is similar for those countries, not included, that up to 2004 had organized only two consecutive multiparty elections (Chad, Ethiopia, Niger, Nigeria, and Tanzania), apart from the very low disagreement between Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheihub, and Limongi (2000) and the benchmark measures, mainly because their alternation rule could not be applied fully.


References


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