

Democracy Indicators and State Fragility

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There is an inherent tension between indicators of ‘good governance’ or ‘fragility’ or ‘weakness’ and indicators of ‘democracy.’ This is because while good governance and fragility/weakness are linear scales (from best to good to bad to worst), democracy is both non-linear and orthogonal to good governance/fragility. That is, if we range states from most democratic to least democratic, the countries with the greatest weakness (that is, highest incidence of violent conflicts and state collapse) will be in the middle range, with states being least fragile at the extremes of full democracy and full dictatorship.

Moreover, if we associate ‘good governance’ with accountability, rule of law, delivery of services to the population, and investment in human capital, we find virtually no relationship (orthogonality) between democracy and these features. Thus autocracies like China and Cuba and Vietnam have shown much higher investment in human capital and greater delivery of basic health care and other services to their population than such democracies as Haiti or Jamaica or Pakistan. Singapore represents the extreme of ‘good governance’ on almost every indicator – except democracy. At the other pole, many countries have terrible governance on almost every indicator – except democracy. Nigeria has moved between military dictatorship and relatively stable democracy with virtually no detectable impact on the quality of governance. The same is true of Pakistan, Nepal, Kenya, and a number of other very poor democracies, where corruption is rampant, social services are virtually non-existent, and human capital investment is paltry.

Democracy therefore has a very ambiguous relationship to broader issues of good governance and state fragility. We typically tend to believe that promoting democracy will enhance state legitimacy and accountability, and therefore will reduce fragility and improve governance. But that is an illusion, due to our experience in the advanced industrial democracies. In these societies democratic institutions indeed have these functions, but only because a host of less-commented upon but vital subsidiary conditions are present.

We can illustrate this point fairly easily. From Robert Dahl to Michael Coppedge, the two key dimensions of democracy have been competitiveness and inclusiveness. That is, the more it is the case that any party or leader can win an election, and anyone in society can participate in politics and run for office, the more democratic is a society. Yet these conditions do nothing to ensure legitimacy, accountability, or stability. In a society divided into competing ethnicities, everyone may be free to vote or run for office, and any group might win, but in fact participation will be channeled through competition between these ethnic or regional blocs. If one of those blocs wins, it may become wildly corrupt or grievously oppressive to competing

groups. The Polity IV scale adds a third dimension – checks on executive power – which helps a bit, but still allows of highly democratic states where a majority colludes throughout check-and-balance institutions to oppress other groups, as in the U.S. before civil rights legislation; or where an elected government is so internally divided and incompetent as to be weak and ineffective, as in the Ukraine.

For inclusive, competitive regimes to have high stability and good governance, additional features are necessary. Many of these are not readily created by institutional reform, or can be developed only by sustained efforts at reform over a period of years.

1. Low Factionalism, High Trust

Trust between citizens and government, and between political opponents, is vital if democracy is to function. Most essentially, political groups must trust that if they lose an election that is all that they lose. If elections are seen as ‘winner take all’, with the losers suffering economic deprivation, legal discrimination, and political exclusion in the future, then elections will become such a high-stakes battle that normal, peaceful competition will give way to violence and intimidation and cheating – whatever it takes to ‘win.’

In addition, citizens must trust their government not to abuse them: if elections are simply a choice between which ruthless warlord will oppress them, people will lose interest and see no point in voting except for coercion or bribes. This may be electoral competition, but without democratic content.

2. Independent Courts, Strong legislatures

If elected officials are not to run amok and wallow in corruption or to simply rule oppressively on behalf of a narrow elite, then officials must be held accountable by courts and legislatures that can and will limit their power.

3. Strong Civil Society as voluntary and non-exclusive civil organizations (open multi-node networks). Civil society can be racist and exclusionary and oppressive; or it can be open and empowering. What matters is whether civil society is an open network of voluntary associations, or a set of competing and closed groups seeking exclusive power. For example, if political parties are open and broad associations that recruit and channel diverse views into uniting political programs, they do a great deal of good. If political parties exacerbate ethnic and regional cleavages by becoming platforms for ideologically or racially exclusionary and absolutist plans (e.g. Communism, National Socialism) they are more likely to end democracy than empower it.

4. Tradition of respect for law and democratic law enforcement. Democratic societies, by empowering individuals, voluntary associations, and diverse groups, also generate a great deal of routine conflict. Individuals and groups must trust the law to settle those conflicts in an institutionalized and equitable manner. If the law is seen as bent to favor certain groups or individuals, then investments in making the laws under which people live (one crucial aspect of democracy) becomes pointless, and interest in democracy wanes.

Law enforcement must respect the legal rights of citizens as well. One of the things that differentiates democracies from dictatorships is that in the former the main role of the police is to protect citizens from crime and abuse; in the latter the main role of the police is to protect the rulers from the people.

5. Investment in citizenship identities. Democracy is popular sovereignty, but who exactly is sovereign? Democracy cannot survive as simply the rule of the strong over the weak or the majority over the minority; there must be a core of common values and respect such that all (or nearly all) feel they are members of a single society. That implies a meaningful baseline of citizenship rights that is respected and protected for all citizens, and that in turn creates a value and meaning to citizenship.

6. Adequate resources for administration and justice. Democracy is meaningless and incompetent if the government, no matter how fairly and openly chosen, cannot carry out any functions because of inadequate resources. The government must have a revenue system that on the one hand gives people and their representatives control of the purse-strings of government, and on the other still provides adequate revenues for government administration, security, law enforcement, and service provision.

7. Media that is open and competitive. Democracy requires access to information that is open and competitive, and not controlled by the government or a narrow elite.

8. Market access to resources (Minimal economic equality). Democracy cannot function if people depend on local bosses for access to critical resources and goods and services. Patronage is inevitable in human societies, but if people are dependent on only one patron and for essential goods and services, they no longer have any choice in who or what policies to support when voting. Similarly if some individuals or groups are so much richer than others that government only regards their interests as crucial democracy will fail. Freedom to make meaningful political choices rests on minimal freedom to obtain vital goods and services without recourse to a single patron (as through market purchase), and on sufficient equality that elected officials need to regard large numbers of supporters, not just a crucial few, to remain in office.

I will not say if this is a sufficient list, but it is a necessary set of conditions to avoid the deterioration of democratic states into autocracies or chaos and violence. In this sense, it is much more true that indicators of good governance are important signals for whether democracies will survive, than it is true that high levels of democracy will signal the quality or stability of government.

Still, the foundations of both good governance and effective democracy are not always things that can be measured as characteristics of institutions. Trust, the nature of social relations, and citizen identities are crucial, but difficult to measure. This is old wisdom, not new. When Alexis de Toqueville sought to explain why democracy ‘worked’ in America, he said that more important than America’s open land and abundant resources, more important than the wise development of its institutions (many of which had in fact been awkward compromises rather than brilliant designs), were American’s habits and patterns of social interaction. This remains true, and for democracies everywhere, not just in America.

Thus a set of indicators of democracy relevant to good governance and political resilience (e.g. low fragility) would have to be multi-level, and go far beyond the institutional characteristics of democratic governance. It would have to include *institutional indicators* (levels of competitiveness, inclusiveness, representativeness, limits on state and executive power); *macro-societal indicators* (political and economic inequality, intensity of ethnic/regional cleavages, levels of patronage/dependency, openness and accessibility of civil society organizations, openness and accessibility to media and information), and *attitudinal indicators* (trust in government, trust in law and law enforcement, fear of other groups/insecurity, pride in citizenship).