Democracy and dictatorship revisited

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Abstract We address the strengths and weaknesses of the main available measures of political regime and extend the dichotomous regime classification first introduced in Alvarez et al. (Stud. Comp. Int. Dev. 31(2):3–36, 1996). This extension focuses on how incumbents are removed from office. We argue that differences across regime measures must be taken seriously and that they should be evaluated in terms of whether they (1) serve to address important research questions, (2) can be interpreted meaningfully, and (3) are reproducible. We argue that existing measures of democracy are not interchangeable and that the choice of measure should be guided by its theoretical and empirical underpinnings. We show that the choice of regime measure matters by replicating studies published in leading journals.

Keywords Political regimes · Democracy · Dictatorship · Measurement

1 Introduction

An inspection of the main political science publications demonstrates the centrality of political regimes to the discipline’s research agenda. Considerable effort has been spent testing empirically propositions about the conditions under which political regimes emerge and survive, and their consequences for a broad set of outcomes, notably their impact in promoting economic development and international peace. Part of this effort has been possible due to
the proliferation of measures of political regimes covering a large number of countries over a relatively long period of time.

In the wake of such development, a debate has emerged over the most appropriate way to measure political regimes. Disagreement exists over what exactly should be measured and how it should be measured: What is the notion of democracy that underlies existing measures? Should a measure be continuous or categorical? If categorical, should it be dichotomous or polychotomous? Should the input into the measures be exclusively observable events or should subjective judgment be involved in generating them?

Important as these debates are, they have not been of much consequence since most scholars seem to believe that, in the end, measures of democracy are interchangeable. They correlate with each other and are believed to generate similar results when used against one another in robustness checks of empirical findings.

We disagree with this view. We believe that existing measures of political regimes are significantly different in terms of both their theoretical grounding and operationalization and, for this reason, should not be treated as interchangeable.¹ In our view, we should take the differences across measures more seriously and evaluate them in terms of whether they (1) serve to address important research questions, (2) can be interpreted meaningfully, and (3) are reproducible.

In this paper, we address the strengths and weaknesses of the main available measures of political regime and introduce a new database that extends—both in terms of country and year coverage and in terms of variables—the one first published in Alvarez et al. (1996).² The root of this dataset, which we call Democracy-Dictatorship (DD), is a minimalist dichotomous measure of political regime. The dataset also introduces various categories for each of these distinct regime types. Specifically, we present a six-fold regime classification covering 199 countries from January 1, 1946 (or date of independence) to December 31, 2008 (or date of state death/change). The panel is unbalanced because countries enter and leave the sample at different times, but there are no missing data; we codify all independent regimes for the post World War II period.

Since all the variables in the dataset are conditioned on the classification of political regimes as democracies and dictatorships, we begin by summarizing the rules that generate such a classification (Sect. 2). We then review the debates that have emerged around the measurement of political regimes, arguing that the charges commonly made against a dichotomous, minimalist measure of democracy are not valid and that there are good reasons to use it in analyses involving political regimes (Sect. 3). We argue against the substantive view of democracy that underlies the alternatives to our dichotomous measure, and show that these alternatives are based on vague and arbitrary operational rules. We argue that for all the problems the polychotomous measures entail, the middle categories actually add little information since their distributions are bimodal. For these reasons, existing measures of democracy are not interchangeable and the choice of measure should be guided by its theoretical and empirical underpinnings. In Sect. 4, we present the reasons and the rules for classifying democracies as parliamentary, mixed or presidential, and for classifying dictatorships as monarchic, military or civilian. We show that the choice of regime measure matters in Sect. 5 by replicating studies published in leading journals. Section 6 concludes.

¹As Casper and Tufis (2003) report, the use of different measures of democracy can produce different results, in spite of the fact that they are highly correlated.

²The regime classification that appeared in Alvarez et al. (1996) served as the basis for the work in Przeworski et al. (2000) and has been variously referred to as the ACLP, the Przeworski, the Democracy and Development, or DD measure. Here we will use the latter, to denote the fact that it classifies political regimes as democracies or dictatorships. We will also refer to the dataset that accompanies this paper as the DD dataset.