

Emily Calaminus: Measuring Democracy. Developments and Examples from Latin America

Gone are the times when rankings and ratings were used as tools of measurement and identification only in the world of sports and business. Today, there are many walks of life in which we meet multifarious phenomena that call for systematic quantitative and differentiated identification and categorisation. Democratisation is one of these phenomena. Constant attempts are made to identify differences in its level and 'measure' its quality by diverse criteria, such as corruption, the freedom of the press, and governance.

But what does an index of 5.5 tell us, or the fact that a country ranks above or below another? By what parameters do we judge the 'unfreedom' of a country or the 'deficits' in its democracy? This article attempts to explain how the concept of a rating is formulated, and what purpose it may serve in the political and scientific debate. It outlines the reason why methods to measure democracy are now so highly esteemed in transition research. It describes variants in the understanding of democracy and its operationalisation in certain processes. Finally, it uses the Índice de Desarrollo Democrático de América Latina (IDD-Lat) to highlight the methods, results, and applications of democracy measurement.

The origins and objectives of democracy measurement were influenced by three aspects: The global spread of democracy as a form of government, the problems encountered in defining and characterising new regimes, and the modern tools of data processing.

Before a democracy index can be generated, it must be clearly understood what perception of democracy the measurement will be based on. Difficulties about definitions arise when a normative measurement approach is used, for while democratic governance is regarded by many as a form of government that is universally desirable, only a very few indexes treat democracy as a universal standard as this would imply a risk of viewing matters from a culturally narrowed perspective. Almost all methods are theoretically based on Robert Dahl and his concept of polyarchy with its salient characteristics of 'competition' and 'right to participation'. Going beyond Dahl, more recent methods such as the Bertelsmann Transformation Index include dimensions like statehood, stability, and political as well as societal integration as essential characteristics of democracy. Other indexes, like the freedom rankings of Freedom House, are more intuitive in design, disrupting the rigid system of analysing narrowly-defined election indicators by emphasising the idea of freedom and the rule of law. The concept of the Freedom House ratings overlaps with certain substantial definitions of democracy as well as with aspects of the notion of governance. The Índice de Desarrollo Democrático de América Latina goes even further as it uses an understanding of democracy in which actors and outputs play a leading role.

As the notion of democracy takes on so many different forms, it is difficult to fix on a single index to identify the level of democratisation. It would be a gross simplification to cram all democratic systems into a ranking that ranges from 'tyranny' to 'democracy'. Tatu Vanhanen's index, for one, uses no more than two indicators, namely the turnout at the last elections and the share of the vote won by parties that did not finish in the top ranks. Tatu Vanhanen's index is controversial, although the author quite rightly emphasises the simplicity and transparency of his method. However, there is reason to doubt whether the index exactly represents what it pretends to measure. More recent indexes, on the other hand, use a broader theoretical foundation, attempting to include democratic reality and the output of a system in their evaluation.

Published annually since 2002, the IDD-Lat is the exact opposite to Tatu Vanhanen's index in conceptual terms. Reviewing four different dimensions, it surveys 18 Latin American countries on a rating scale from one to ten. Three aspects define the understanding of democracy of the IDD-Lat:

Democracy as a method of governance, as a political system, and as an output-oriented target.

All democracy indexes including the IDD-Lat avail themselves of dimensional subdivisions. The first of these consists of formal democratic standards by which countries, in a manner of speaking, are classified as 'non-democratic' or 'democratic' which, in the latter case, enables them to be included in the index. In the second dimension, countries are ranked by their 'political rights and civil liberties'— the core criterion for evaluating the level of democracy. Going beyond legal and formal aspects, the third dimension examines the quality of a country's institutions and the political efficiency of its leadership. The fourth and last dimension, 'effective exercise of governmental power', surveys socio-economic data as a yardstick of successful governance.

Now, what are the conclusions of the 2006 IDD-Lat with regard to the development of democracy in Latin America? According to its ratings, the level of democracy has risen on average, although improvements were somewhat slower than in 2005. The countries examined may be subdivided into three groups with a high, medium, and low level of democratic development. In eleven countries, the development of democracy is rated as inferior and/or deficient.

What information can be gained from an index like the IDD-Lat? And how should it be understood? One of its special features is that its measurements concentrate on the region of Latin American culture. Perspectives come into focus only when relevant culture-specific data are taken into consideration. Although schematic, the picture which this annual publication draws of democratic developments in the region under observation does not lack differentiation. Beyond certain minimum requirements, democracy is defined as an open and unlimited concept which leaves the bipolarity of conventional definitions behind: Whether or not a country may be called democratic depends on the existence of participation processes, but the quality of its democracy is determined by the implementation of other factors. Measurements address the political sphere and the level of active players, being intended to convey impulses for reflection to the governments and those who are politically active.

In recent years, democracy measurement succeeded in establishing itself as a fully-developed sub-discipline of political science, having repaired its methodological deficits and included new perspectives in its measurements. What is more, it added subjective and qualitative factors to the standard process of data collection. Even though methodological concepts are now broader than they used to be, there is no method capable of holistically surveying the phenomena analysed. In each case, some light is thrown on no more than a limited range of characteristic properties. At the same time, knowledge of such properties may quite well be utilised politically as it facilitates, among other things, systematically monitoring the situation in developing and transforming countries or addressing the target orientation of development cooperation itself.