Is There a Single Conception of Democracy?

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A plethora of different conceptions of democracy have been identified in the academic literature, with estimates suggesting they number over 550. This is part of the trend best described as 'democracy with adjectives' (Collier and Levitsky 1997), leading to a situation described as 'chaos' due to the many variants being posited (Schedler 1998, 92). This trend is exacerbated by the advance of democracy outside of Western Europe in the latter 20th century. All these new democracies, with their different histories and cultures, have the potential of leading to the identification of a new democratic form (Levitsky and Way 2002, 52).

In the light of this the challenge for writers is to be able to describe accurately these new forms of democracy, while ensuring this label of democracy is applied appropriately lest it is stretched to apply to non-democratic systems. This makes the question of whether there is only a single concept of democracy, or many different democracies existing independently, particularly important.

This essay will argue that there are significant advantages in accepting the existence of different types of democracy. It is more analytically and empirically useful for it enables the identification and description of the many variants of democracy in the world. Furthermore, it avoids an ethnocentric bias which assumes that a Western European model of democracy is the definitive conception of democracy, and instead allows for different cultures to develop their own democracies. However, allowing an unrestrained catalogue of democracies will create inconsistency between them, which will lead to 'conceptual ambiguity and empirical confusion' (Armony and Schamis 2005, 114).

To avoid this, a level playing field between these democracies is required to allow for variation, but within a standardised framework. Thus there must be an overarching conception, or core, of democracy to bind the variants together. This essay will argue that this core of democracy, based on Schumpeter's analysis (1976), should be a minimal one. All democracies must have competitive elections in which there is a real chance of displacing incumbents. To this minimal extent there is such a thing as democracy. From this core conception different types of democracies can be developed, building upon this minimal core with criteria such as a protected rule of law. The essay will end by explaining how important the method used to reach these goals is, for a flawed model can lead to a recurrence of the problems it is seeking to avoid, seen with the 'diminished subtypes' model (Collier and Levitsky 1997).

Allowing for many different types of democracy has significant advantages over a monolithic single conception of democracy. Firstly, and most simply, there is no consensus over what a single conception of democracy would include, nor would such a conception be able to encompass the wide variety of democracies in the world. This is especially true with the adoption of democracy by new countries in the latter 20th century which 'vary profoundly both from each other and from the democracies in advanced industrial countries' (Collier and Levitsky 1997, 430). For example, both El Salvador and Ukraine had the same democratic rating of 'party-free' from Freedom House, yet in El Salvador there were 'substantial human rights violations and the absence of civilian control over the military' and in Ukraine democratic processes were 'routinely abused or manipulated' by incumbents (Levitsky and Way 2002, 52); both countries were democratic in a sense, but were significantly different from each other.

A single conception of democracy could not capture this distinction, but through different variants of democracy we are able to 'capture diverse forms of democracy that have emerged' (Collier and Levitsky 1997, 430) and distinguish

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them from each other to allow for meaningful comparative evaluation (Møller and Skanning 2013, 142). Therefore, through many different types of democracy a greater understanding and evaluation of the democratic situation in individual countries can be facilitated, which would be impossible with a single monolithic conception of democracy.

Another benefit in allowing multiple variants is that it avoids an ethnocentric bias which assumes that one society's or culture's conception of democracy is the single valid conception of democracy; instead cultural variants are facilitated and will be described as a different type of democracy. An ethnocentric bias is seen from Huntington, who argues that 'modern democracy is a product of Western civilisation' and is characterised by the Western values of social pluralism, the rule of law and 'the separation of spiritual and temporal authority' (1997, 5). Most significantly he makes it clear that these characteristics are Western, not Asian, African or Middle Eastern; 'the characteristics may individually be found in other civilisations, but together they have existed only in the West' (1997, ibid).

The consequence of this is that a non-Western culture can only be a valid democracy if it completely adopts the Western characteristics of democracy. It cannot be a democracy based upon its own culture or history, as this would not comply with the single monolithic conception Western democracy, which is its only valid variant.

Some writers take this view further, arguing that certain non-Western cultures cannot even adopt Western characteristics to become democratic for they are fundamentally incompatible with the this Western conception of democracy. Thus Tamimi argues that democracy 'is a forbidden fruit in the Islamic lands', due to the view that ideals civil liberties and elections cannot be reconciled with the teachings of Islam (2007, 55). Similarly, Sen notes how some Asian political leaders have expressed the view that 'Asian values' are incompatible with democracy because 'Asians traditionally value discipline, not political freedom' (Sen 1999, 12).

This view that Islamic or Asian cultures are completely incompatible with democracy is indefensible if one carefully looks at their histories and teachings. Baderin shows that Islam has a rich history of democratically compliant thought, and from this that the 'Western exclusionary approach' is 'very much contradictable and not conclusively valid' (2005, 169). Similarly Sen shows that claims that 'Asian values' are incompatible with democracy 'does not bear critical scrutiny' and are often made by political leaders who want to avoid democracy for selfish reasons (1999, 14).

Thus the reality is that non-Western cultures could conceivably be democracies under a model that allows for a variety of democracies, and not a single monolithic conception of democracy. If we accept democracies, and not just a democracy, it will not be assumed that 'Western countries have a monopoly over the interpretation and practice' of democracy (Lawson 1995, 5), and so 'societies with different cultural and political traditions' can 'end up cultivating different understandings of democracy' (Shi and Lu 2010, 125).

What these different understandings will be depend on the exact nature of the culture. For Islam it could involve some sort of minimal role for religious influence in the democracy, something Huntington would reject, but is something highly important to many Muslims' sense of legitimacy (Yuchtman-Ya'ar and Alkalay 2010, 128). And an Asian form of democracy could 'more orientated towards the community' and not the individual (Lawson 1995, 14).

There are great instrumental benefits in allowing multiple conceptions of democracy in this way. As with the benefits that come with 'building human rights implementation strategies on local traditions' (Donnelly 2003, 99), building democracy on local culture, as opposed to insisting Western characteristics be adopted, is more likely to lead to democracy being accepted by those nations. They will be able to build a democracy that suits their unique cultural characteristics, which is justified by reference to their histories, teachings and beliefs. This is a particularly pertinent point following the rise of democracy following the Arab Spring. These benefits cannot occur under a single conception of democracy, which makes it seem like a hegemonic imposition from another culture.

For this reason many support an approach which takes the assertion that there is no such thing as democracy but only democracies to its extreme conclusion, advocating that there is no definition of democracy (Fagan 2009, 97). This is the approach of Connolly, who like Gallie, argues that democracy is an 'essentially contested concept', one which 'essentially involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users' (Galle 1962, 123,

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Connolly 1993, 10). From this Connolly argues that there is not a singular universal definition of democracy against which political systems can be definitively assessed. The concept of democracy is malleable and so there is no reason why 'a change in our theoretical understanding or historical situation' cannot lead to a new conception of democracy, which could happen with democracy spreading to new countries and cultures (1993, 32-4).

Fagan notes that this approach has been supported for being more 'democratic' than having a single conception of democracy, for Connolly is 'taking a pluralist stance' on democracy which can engage with political and cultural differences and is 'opposed to the imposition of elite hegemonic realities which serve to suppress…more local forms of thought and custom' (Fagan 2009, 97), as is the consequence of a Western-centric approach to democracy such as Huntington's.

However, such an extreme approach to allowing multiple types of democracy has a severe drawback. While it is desirable to facilitate pluralism, having no definition of democracy at all would make it a 'debased currency' (Schmitter 1991, 75), able to 'mean all things to all people' (Lawson 1995, 5). This is currently seen in international politics with 'the sheer range of political systems which lay claim to the title of democracy' which consequently 'raises serious questions over whether the term has any real substance or justifiable basis at all (Fagan 2009, 96).

Therefore there must be limits on what kind of political systems can be accurately described as a democracy, lest it is used as a 'protective cloak for all types of authoritarian stances' (Lawson 1995, 5) leading to 'conceptual ambiguity and empirical confusion' (Armony and Schamis 2005, 114), but within a model that still facilitates different conceptions of democracy.

Therefore, democracy requires some sort of minimal definitional core which must be satisfied in order for a nation to be classified a democracy. This will create a level playing field between conceptions of democracy so that it cannot be abused and become meaningless. With this minimal core there is such a thing as democracy, but only to the extent that it creates coherence between the different types of democracy which will be developed by building on this core by adding definitional criteria, making it a thicker conception. Therefore this model simultaneously accepts there is such a thing as democracy (only a minimal core), as well as multiple differing democracies.

The minimal core of democracy, which must be satisfied to be classified as one, is that 'individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote' (Schumpeter 1976, 269). This is undoubtedly a very minimal conception of democracy and is not a statement that such a nation would be desirable; improvements to the rule of law, human rights considerations can, and should it could be argued, be built on top of it. But this is the 'the very core of any definition of democracy – namely sovereignty of the people based on the rule of the many', and is a criteria that is common to most conceptions of democracy (Møller and Skanning 2013, 145).

However, Rose and Shin warn that Schumpter's conception of democracy 'ignored the widespread existence of unfree and unfair elections' (2001, 334). Thus, we should not fall for the assumption that elections are 'an inherently democratic institution', and instead be aware that they may be an 'institution with a formal role prescribed by the incumbent' (Morgenbesser 2013, 7). In order to do this, the word 'competitive' in this minimal definition of democracy must be expanded upon to have three consequences. There must be 'ex ante uncertainty, ex-post irreversibility and repeatability' for elections to be democratic (Przeworski 2000, 16).

From this core conception of democracy different democracies can be described and identified by 'adding criteria, thereby moving from thinner to thicker types' (Møller and Skanning 2013, 145). Such an approach is similar to moving down Sartori's 'ladder of generality' as explained by Collier and Levitsky (1997, 435). A move down the ladder adds more 'defining attributes' to the root definition of democracy, thereby identifying different democracies, which 'are understood as full instances of the root definition of democracy', while being differentiated from other democracies (ibid, 435).

Collier and Levitsky warn that such an approach may lead to conceptual stretching, because it presumes 'the cases under discussion are definitely democracies' (ibid). However, if the core of democracy as identified in this essay is complied with, even after these new criteria have been added, then it is a democracy based on this absolute

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minimum definition.

Such an approach can incorporate some types of democracies identified in the literature. Thus Dahl's polyarchy can be seen as the core conception of competitive elections, plus civil liberties (1971), and liberal democracy is competitive elections, with human rights protections and the rule of law (Zakaria 1997, 2004). Thus the attributes that a nation has over the core conception of democracy can be shown clearly, allowing for different types of democracy to be accurately described and allowing for cultural differences in types of democracy. Furthermore the core conception of democracy ensures there is no to 'conceptual ambiguity and empirical confusion' among these different types of democracy (Armony and Schamis 2005, 114), as they are standardised and controlled through their reliance on the core.

Accuracy and clarity is also facilitated by this model in drawing a clear line between democracy and autocracy, a line which has become blurred with the multiplicity of unstandardised conceptions of democracy. This flaw is found in another model which attempts to both standardise the definition of democracy while allowing for multiple conceptions of it, the diminished subtypes model advocated by Collier and Levitsky (1997). Another point is evident at this point, the importance of the model employed. Both minimal core model and the diminished subtypes model are an attempt to standardise descriptions of democracy in the literature, while still allowing for a different democracies to exist to identify and describe the variants of democracy in the world. However the method employed to do this is crucial as it can lead to unintended problems, as the diminished subtype model does.

Instead building upwards from a minimal core conception of democracy by adding criteria, diminished subtypes work backwards from a thicker core, so the types of democracy are not 'full instances of the root conception of democracy' (1997, ibid, 437). This approach necessarily entails a thicker core of democracy as it is impossible to have a diminished form of a minimal democracy with competitive elections, while remaining a democracy. This leads to problems in distinguishing autocracies and democracies as the subtype goes further from the core concept, in that it 'merely adds shades of grey between democracy and autocracy, an operation that can be carried out *ad infinitum*' (Armony and Schamis 2005, 125). This is not the case with a minimal core, which is able to 'disaggregate most of… the grey zone' (Møller and Skanning 2013, 145).

Furthermore, the diminished subtype method has been used in an ethnocentric way, leading to similar problems as found with the Western centric single conception of democracy some advocate. The need for a thicker core conception of democracy with diminished subtypes has led writers to use Western democracies as their benchmark 'because for almost a century in the West, democracy has meant liberal democracy' (Zakaria 1997, 22). From this, new non-Western democracies are conceived as diminished versions of this benchmark Western democracy. The consequence is that 'only new democracies warrant adjectives' because they will develop first as minimal electoral democracies, and then may develop into a thicker democracy (Armony and Schamis 2005, 115). The consequence of this is that new and 'older' democracies are not considered together which 'perpetuates an ethnocentric bias where… deficits are viewed as characteristic deviations of third-wave regimes, but not of older democracies' (ibid, 126).

This is not the case with a minimal core. Instead of being compared against Western conceptions of democracy, all democracies are assessed against a minimal and neutral conception. This allows for cultural differences in various conceptions of democracy to be seen as equally valid, and not as diminished types of the benchmark Western democracy, while still allowing comparison between old and new democracies in order to determine which institutions and methods are best for thickening democracy. All this together then shows that 'competitive elections are the logical starting point for any attempt to hierarchically order the realistic definitions presently employed' by democratic scholars (Møller and Skanning 2013, 145).

In conclusion, it has been shown that there is such a thing as democracy, but there are also democracies. There are democracies to allow for accuracy in identifying and describing the many different formulations of democracy found in the nations of the world, made more important following the expansion of democracy in the latter 20th century. Also related to this is the importance of avoiding an ethnocentric and hegemonic single conception of democracy, so that new democracies can be developed to fit the cultural circumstances in those countries.

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There is such a thing as democracy though, as a minimal core conception in order to standardise these various democracies. This is to avoid conceptual confusion and inconsistency between them which could lead to chaos and the label of democracy being applied inappropriately or being abused. This minimal core of democracy is the holding of competitive elections, the outcome of which is uncertain and irreversible, and are repeated periodically. From this minimum core criteria can be added to describe different formulations of democracy identified to make the specific description of democracy thicker.

This model has two distinct advantages over other models with the same aim. It facilitates clarity, for it draws a clear line between democracy and autocracy, avoiding a 'grey zone' and descriptions such as competitive autocracy. Secondly it avoids an ethnocentric bias by having a minimal neutral determinant of democratic status.

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