Understanding Politics — Chapter 9 Student Practice Pack

Democracy and Authoritarianism: Classifying and Measuring Regimes

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About this pack

This pack trains you to classify and measure regimes the way comparative researchers do: with explicit criteria, real data and a record of your judgments. It replaces the close-reading worksheet of the theory chapters with a data exercise and a case analysis.

How to use it

1. Read Chapter 9, including the box ‘Three major datasets in practice’.
2. Complete the data exercise, downloading the scores yourself from the sources named.
3. Code the chapter’s hypothetical regimes in the case analysis.
4. Take the self-test, then plan and write one essay.

Answers and marking guidance are in the Instructor Pack, available to teaching staff from www.oxterpress.com.

Data note. The pack does not reproduce any dataset. You download the scores directly from Freedom House, V-Dem and the Polity project, so you always work with the current release and its own terms of use.

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Chapter at a glance

Regimes are rules governing access to and exercise of authority; measuring them requires explicit choices about concepts, evidence and aggregation.

Dataset	What it measures	Scale	Coverage	Main limitation
Freedom House, *Freedom in the World*	Political rights and civil liberties	0–100 (40 + 60); Free, Partly Free, Not Free	Annual since 1973	One organisation’s analysts; freedom is broader than democracy
V-Dem	Five conceptions of democracy; Regimes of the World	0–1 indices; four regime types	Long historical coverage, annual updates	Expert judgment, though uncertainty is estimated

Dataset	What it measures	Scale	Coverage	Main limitation
Polity5	Authority characteristics of states	−10 to +10	1800–2018	Not updated since 2018; little on civil liberties

Key concepts to master: regime versus government; minimal and substantive democracy; polyarchy; democratic status, quality and outcomes; military, single-party, personalist and monarchical regimes; competitive and electoral authoritarianism; reliability and validity; conceptual stretching; modernisation; transitions; linkage and leverage; executive aggrandisement; autocratisation.

Data exercise: when the datasets disagree

You will compare how three datasets classify the same countries, then explain any disagreement. Allow 90 minutes.

Step 1. Choose three countries. Pick one you expect all datasets to call democratic, one you expect all to call authoritarian, and one you expect to be contested. Your tutor may assign countries.

Step 2. Collect the data. For each country, record:

- the latest Freedom House total score, status and electoral-democracy designation, from the country page at freedomhouse.org;
- the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index, Liberal Democracy Index and Regimes of the World category for the latest year, from v-dem.net or Our World in Data;
- the Polity5 score for 2018, the last year available, from systemicpeace.org.

Step 3. Record your results.

Country	FH score (0–100)	FH status	V-Dem EDI (0–1)	V-Dem LDI (0–1)	RoW category	Polity5 (2018)

Step 4. Explain. Answer in 300–500 words:

1. Where do the datasets agree, and where do they disagree?
2. For each disagreement, is the cause a different concept, a different threshold, different evidence or a different year?
3. Which dataset would you use to study (a) electoral fraud, (b) press freedom, (c) democratic breakdown in the 1930s? Why?
4. Report the uncertainty: does V-Dem's confidence interval for your contested country overlap a regime threshold?

A worked example to check your reasoning. In 2026, Freedom House rated India Partly Free with a score of 62 out of 100, while V-Dem's Regimes of the World classified it as an electoral autocracy.

Neither source is wrong: one measures freedom across rights and liberties; the other asks whether elections are free and fair enough to count as democratic.

Case analysis: coding regimes yourself

Part 1. The chapter's three imagined regimes

- **Aster:** opposition parties campaign freely, but few women hold office.
- **Bellora:** women hold many legislative seats, but candidates need approval from the governing organisation.
- **Corven:** independent parties compete, yet some regions experience intimidation.

Score each regime from 0 (absent) to 2 (fully present) on six dimensions, and give one sentence of evidence for each score.

Dimension	Aster	Bellora	Corven
Contestation			
Inclusion			
Expression			
Executive constraints			
Administrative impartiality			
Territorial consistency			

1. Apply a threshold rule: a regime is democratic only if it scores at least 1 on every dimension and 2 on contestation. Which regimes pass?
2. Now add the scores. Does the ranking change? Explain why the two methods disagree.
3. Which method better fits Dahl's idea of polyarchy?

Part 2. The opening puzzle

The chapter's opening country holds regular multiparty elections, but the governing party dominates broadcasting, public employees face pressure, organisers are selectively prosecuted, and the electoral commission rarely rules against the government.

1. Classify it using Levitsky and Way's definition of competitive authoritarianism.
2. What single piece of further evidence would most change your classification?
3. What would V-Dem's Regimes of the World need to observe to call it an electoral democracy?

Self-test

Allow 20 minutes and answer without the book.

1. A regime differs from a government because a regime is:
    - A. The party currently in office

- B. The rules and practices governing access to and exercise of authority
- C. The civil service
- D. The constitution's text alone

2. Schumpeter's minimal definition centres on:
    - A. Social equality
    - B. Protection of rights
    - C. Participation in every decision
    - D. A competitive struggle for the people's vote
3. Dahl's polyarchy combines:
    - A. Public contestation and inclusion
    - B. Wealth and education
    - C. Federalism and courts
    - D. Parties and interest groups
4. Competitive authoritarianism describes regimes where:
    - A. There are no elections
    - B. The military rules directly
    - C. Democratic institutions are the main route to power but incumbents' abuse of the state gives them a significant advantage
    - D. Elections are fully fair
5. Geddes's typology distinguishes:
    - A. Liberal and illiberal democracies
    - B. Federal and unitary states
    - C. Presidential and parliamentary systems
    - D. Military, single-party and personalist regimes
6. Freedom House scores countries on:
    - A. Five indices from 0 to 1
    - B. 10 political rights and 15 civil liberties indicators, totalling 100
    - C. A scale from −10 to +10
    - D. GDP per capita
7. V-Dem's indicators are based on:
    - A. Evaluations by around 3,500 country experts combined in a measurement model
    - B. Government statistics only
    - C. Opinion polls
    - D. One analyst per region
8. V-Dem's Regimes of the World categories are:
    - A. Free, Partly Free, Not Free
    - B. Autocracy, anocracy, democracy
    - C. Closed autocracy, electoral autocracy, electoral democracy, liberal democracy
    - D. Military, party, personal, monarchy
9. Polity5 scores states:
    - A. From 0 to 100, updated annually
    - B. Only on civil liberties
    - C. Using public surveys

    - D. From −10 to +10, with data ending in 2018
10. Reliability concerns:
    - A. Whether different coders using the same rules reach similar judgments
    - B. Whether a measure captures the concept
    - C. Whether data are recent
    - D. Whether the source is independent
11. Validity concerns:
    - A. Consistency between coders
    - B. Whether a measure captures the concept it claims to measure
    - C. The size of the sample
    - D. Statistical significance
12. Przeworski and Limongi found that economic development:
    - A. Always causes democratisation
    - B. Has no relationship to democracy
    - C. Helps existing democracies survive more clearly than it causes transitions
    - D. Causes authoritarianism
13. Bermeo's 'executive aggrandisement' describes:
    - A. Elected executives weakening checks on their power one institution at a time
    - B. Military coups
    - C. Foreign intervention
    - D. Election-day fraud
14. Levitsky and Way distinguish leverage from linkage, finding that:
    - A. Leverage alone explains democratisation
    - B. Neither matters
    - C. Both always point the same way
    - D. Linkage, the density of ties to the West, was the stronger democratising force
15. In 2026, Freedom House and V-Dem classified India as:
    - A. Free, and a liberal democracy
    - B. Not Free, and a closed autocracy
    - C. Partly Free, and an electoral autocracy
    - D. Free, and an electoral autocracy

Short-answer and essay questions

Short answers (100–150 words each)

1. Distinguish democratic status, democratic quality and democratic outcomes.
2. Why does a minimal definition of democracy still need conditions beyond voting?
3. What makes a hybrid regime different from an authoritarian regime that holds elections?
4. Why might authoritarian rulers keep legislatures and parties?
5. Explain the difference between reliability and validity using a democracy index.
6. Why can Freedom House and V-Dem classify the same country differently?
7. Why is Polity5 unsuitable for studying democratic erosion since 2018?

8. Explain one economic and one elite-centred explanation of democratisation.
9. How does incremental erosion differ from sudden breakdown?
10. Why should a regime not be classed as undemocratic only because the incumbent keeps winning?

Essay questions

Plan two and write one: 1,500 words, or 45 minutes under exam conditions.

1. Is democracy best understood as a category or a matter of degree?
2. Can elections strengthen authoritarian rule?
3. What evidence would establish democratic erosion?
4. Do democracy indices measure democracy, or the preferences of those who build them?
5. Does economic development cause democracy?
6. Is the current wave of autocratisation different from earlier ones?

What a first-class answer does

- States its definition of democracy and shows how the answer changes if the definition changes.
- Uses at least two datasets and explains disagreements by concept, threshold, evidence or timing.
- Distinguishes association from causation and names an alternative explanation.
- Uses a case with dates and specific institutional changes rather than general impressions.

Glossary and further reading

Term	Definition
Regime	Rules and practices governing access to and exercise of authority
Polyarchy	Dahl's term for regimes combining contestation and inclusion
Competitive authoritarianism	Real elections tilted by incumbents' abuse of the state (Levitsky and Way)
Electoral authoritarianism	Multiparty elections used as instruments of authoritarian rule (Schedler)
Conceptual stretching	Loss of discriminating power as a concept is extended (Collier and Levitsky)
Reliability	Consistency of judgments across coders
Validity	Whether a measure captures its concept
Executive aggrandisement	Elected executives weakening checks one institution at a time (Bermeo)
Autocratisation	Movement away from democracy, gradual or sudden
Linkage and leverage	Ties to the West versus vulnerability to its pressure (Levitsky and Way)

Further reading

- Dahl, R.A. (1971) *Polyarchy: participation and opposition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Levitsky, S. and Way, L.A. (2010) *Competitive authoritarianism: hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Munck, G.L. and Verkuilen, J. (2002) 'Conceptualizing and measuring democracy', *Comparative Political Studies*, 35(1), pp. 5–34.
- Bermeo, N. (2016) 'On democratic backsliding', *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), pp. 5–19.
- The current Freedom House *Freedom in the World* methodology and V-Dem *Democracy Report*, both freely available online.