UNDERSTANDING POLITICS · CHAPTER 9

Democracy and Authoritarianism

Classifying and measuring regimes

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OPENING PUZZLE

An election without an obvious answer

What looks democratic

Multiparty elections every five years; the opposition sometimes wins local office.

What does not

Dominated broadcasting, pressured officials, selective prosecution, a compliant electoral commission.

Ask: is this country democratic? What would you need to know?

CONCEPTS

Regime, government and state

Government

Who holds office now; changes at elections.

Regime

The rules governing access to and exercise of authority.

State

The organisation claiming authority over territory (Chapter 10).

DEFINING DEMOCRACY

> *“A competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”*

Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), p. 269

Przeworski’s shorter version: democracy is a system in which parties lose elections.

DAHL · POLYARCHY

Two dimensions, both necessary

Contestation

Can opponents organise, compete and replace rulers?

Inclusion

Who has the right to take part?

Status, quality and outcomes are different questions: keep them apart.

AUTHORITARIAN VARIATION

Not all dictatorships are alike

Military

Armed forces rule collectively.

Single-party

A party controls office and resources.

Personalist

Power depends on loyalty to one leader.

Geddes (1999); monarchies added in Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2014).

> *“Incumbents’ abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents.”*

Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism* (2010), p. 5

Real competition on an uneven field: the opening puzzle’s likely category.

MEASUREMENT

Turning a concept into evidence

Reliability

Would different coders using the same rules agree?

Validity

Does the measure capture the concept?

Aggregation

Can strength on one dimension offset failure on another?

THREE MAJOR DATASETS

Different concepts, different answers

	Freedom House	V-Dem	Polity5
Measures	Rights and liberties	Five conceptions of democracy	Authority characteristics
Scale	0–100; three statuses	0–1 indices; four regime types	−10 to +10
Watch out	Freedom is broader than democracy	Expert judgment, with uncertainty	Ends in 2018

WHEN DATASETS DISAGREE

India in 2026

Freedom House

Partly Free, 62 out of 100.

V-Dem

Electoral autocracy.

Neither is wrong. Diagnose: concept, threshold, evidence or year?

CASE ANALYSIS

Threshold or sum?

Aster

Free competition; few women in office.

Bellora

Many women legislators; candidates need party approval.

Corven

Free parties; regional intimidation.

Add the scores and Bellora can look respectable. A threshold on contestation rules it out.

CHANGE AND EROSION

How democracies decline now

Executive aggrandisement

Elected leaders weaken checks one institution at a time (Bermeo, 2016).

Norm erosion

Toleration and forbearance decay before rules change (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

A third wave

Autocratisation mainly through legal steps, not coups (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019).

SEMINAR TASK · 25 MINUTES

Is the puzzle country democratic?

1. Group A codes it using Dahl’s two dimensions.
2. Group B codes it using Levitsky and Way’s definition.
3. Group C predicts how Freedom House and V-Dem would rate it, and why they might differ.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY

Is democracy a category or a matter of degree?

Plan

Distinguish status, quality and outcomes.

Test

Use two datasets on one contested case.

Judge

Thresholds for status, continuous measures for quality.

1,500 words maximum · Student Pack: essay questions