

**Can we draw a sharp distinction between regimes that are democratic and those that are not? If so, what are the criteria? If not, why not?**

In this essay, I will argue that one should draw a sharp distinction between democracies and non-democracies. I will argue, however, that within the distinct categories, one can use a continuous measure to measure how democratic the regimes are. And that, therefore, one should be pragmatic in deciding whether they should use a continuous or dichotomous measure. Firstly, I will argue that, conceptually, the idea of democracy requires a dichotomous distinction through Sartori's argument that political systems are *bounded wholes*. Then, I will argue that it is possible for a democracy to be more or less democratic and argue that this approach leads to a constructively valid measure. Then, I will argue that hybrid regimes back up this idea that "democracy is first a question of kind before it is one of degree" (Elkins 2000) and that, with a purely continuous measure, it is very difficult to find the right cutoff point.

Sartori argues that political regimes are *bounded wholes*. He argues that there is a difference between *contraries* and *contradictories*. In the case of contraries such as hot and cold, or rich and poor, there are intermediate positions. However, in the case of contradictions such as alive and dead, or married and single, there are no intermediate positions. One cannot be halfway between married and single. He argues that democracies should be treated in this way, as a contradiction. Sartori argues that a democracy is constituted of multiple attributes, which all have to be present for a political regime to be a democracy. A democracy is a bounded whole (Sartori 1987). This does, however, not mean that these attributes cannot be present to different degrees. For instance, it is possible for married couples to love each other to a different extent (if one assumes that love would be one of the attributes required to constitute a marriage). But this does not mean that these married couples are qualitatively different. It only means that there is also a continuous scale with these attributes.

The love analogy also shows why it is necessary that there is also a dichotomous distinction. How much love is required for a couple to be regarded as married (or maybe more fittingly, as marriage is just a ceremony: how much love is required for a boyfriend and a girlfriend to regard themselves as a husband and wife)? The same is true for a democracy: how democratic does a country have to be for it to be regarded as a democracy? It is impossible to set a clear boundary for this. As a result, it matters where one places the cut-off points for outcomes in empirical tests (Elkins 2000). Therefore, it is essential, as Przeworski et al. argue (Przeworski et al. 1996), to first classify a regime as either a democracy or a non-democracy and only then distinguish, within the different categories, between more or less democratic regimes: "what makes democracy possible should not be mixed up with what makes democracy more democratic" (Sartori 1987).

**Met opmerkingen [MOU1]:** More empirical examples such as Mexico.

You don't address the main problems: go into the question what the criteria is, not only that it is possible for there to be a distinction. Answer the second part of the question.

**Met opmerkingen [MOU2]:** Nice analogy: astronomical bodies, black holes, stars, asteroid: they all have mass but there is a grey area in between them. It is up to science to decide on definitions.

The fact that a regime can be more or less democratic is important because a continuous measure can show certain things that would not have been found with a dichotomous measure. For instance, a continuous measure shows incremental changes in the likelihood of the initiation of force (Elkins 2000). This shows that there is an incremental difference between democracies. Therefore, a continuous measure has *construct validity*. An operationalization of a concept has construct validity if it yields results that are widely hypothesised to be associated with that concept. The way to classify democracy that I argue for, then, is compatible with the view, proposed by for instance Dahl, that a regime can be more or less democratic (Dahl 1998).

To illustrate this idea of the bounded whole, Sartori gives the example of the Soviet-Union and the United States. He, however, does not compare more intermediate states. Bollen and Jackman argue that a purely continuous scale is necessary to deal with these borderline cases (Bollen and Jackman 1989). They use Mexico as an example for this. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Institutional Revolutionary Party controlled the country. Power was centralised, and the opposition was repressed. However, there were still regular elections and formal political institutions. Should we then classify it as a democracy or as a dictatorship? Przeworski et al. argue that there cannot be a category halfway between democracy and dictatorship. They, however, call this ludicrous and argue, similar to how Sartori would argue, that any regimes in which executive and legislative offices are not contested are not democratic at all (Przeworski et al. 1996). They would argue the same for different types of hybrid regimes, such as competitive authoritarian regimes. These are regimes in which, contrary to a hegemonic electoral regime such as Mexico in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there are competitive elections which are free from massive fraud (Levitsky and Way 2002). Przeworski et al. would simply argue the same thing: they are not democracies.

Finally, Przeworski et al. argue that even if the true nature of democracy is continuous, a dichotomous measure is still more reliable than a continuous measure. "A finer scale generates smaller errors but more of them, a rougher scale generates larger errors but fewer of them" (Przeworski et al. 1996). Intuitively, this makes sense: a continuous scale will have a somewhat arbitrary cutoff point for democracy/dictatorship, so will sometimes wrongly categorize one for the other. However, Elkins shows that this is not necessarily the case (Elkins 2000). He takes the hypothetical example where two researchers try to classify democracies using either two categories or five categories. He shows that, although it is true that the five-category measure makes more errors, because these errors are smaller, the five-category measure is not less reliable.

This is why I advocate for a more pragmatic approach, as Collier and Adcock have also argued for (Collier and Adcock 1999). Depending on the goal of the research, the

researchers should choose either a dichotomous or a continuous measure. If the researchers are investigating, for example, regime changes, a dichotomous measure is more valuable. Conversely, if the researchers are investigating different subtypes of democracy (e.g. parliamentary or presidential), a continuous approach is useful. Please note that in the second example, because the researchers are only interested in democracies, they have already dichotomously divided regimes into democracies and dictatorships. Only after this, they use a continuous scale to differentiate between the different democracies.

In conclusion, I have argued that democracy should conceptually be understood as a bounded whole but that this does not take away from the fact that regimes can be more or less democratic. Then, I showed that hybrid regimes do not pose a problem for this dichotomic distinction and that researchers should be pragmatic to whether they use a continuous or a dichotomous measure.

### **Bibliography**

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