

Chapter 1

Ranking the stars: The proliferation of liberal democracy

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The end of history or political decay?

After the fall of the wall in 1989, many political scientists believed that the world was definitely turning democratic. What they meant was that the world was becoming merely liberal democratic. Free and fair elections would make political participation flourish, and freedom of expression and association would create a pluralistic mode of representation – albeit in the form of indirect democratic governance of society. In short, polyarchy, government by many, as coined in 1971 by Robert Dahl, would prevail across the world sooner rather than later.

Yet, as the 21st century moves on, democratic backsliding is manifesting due to flawed institutions showing defective trends. For example, electoral manipulation is regularly noted, the rule of law is under siege, and the stateness, or effective governance, is below par (Bermeo, 2016). In short, the level of democraticness appears to be in peril. Is this indeed the case? According to *The Economist* it is, reporting the state of democracy as follows:

Democracy was dealt a major blow in 2020. Almost 70% of countries covered by The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index recorded a decline in their overall score. (...) The global average score fell to its lowest level since the index began in 2006 (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021: 3).

They are not alone in fearing the decline of liberal democracy in the 21st century. Since the latter part of the 20th century, various agencies measuring the level of democraticness have emerged, like Freedom House and recently Varieties of Democracy. They claim to record the level *and* change of democraticness globally, and their annual reports demonstrate a downward trend. Yet, the conceptualization

and concomitant measurement of democracy differ considerably (Munck and Verkuilen, 2002; OECD, 2014), which makes one wonder what the virtue and value of such rankings are. And how valid and reliable are these scales of democraticness?

In this chapter, I will first introduce the concept of polyarchy (cf. Dahl, 1971) as a comparative variable. I will discuss the results over time in view of the idea of waves of democratization (Huntington, 1993). Second, I shall examine the rankings of The Economist Intelligence Unit, Freedom House and Varieties of Democracy, all claiming to measure democraticness worldwide. The conclusion is that ‘ranking the stars’ may be useful for the media and politicians but is insufficient to understand what happens when, where and with what effect for a democratic society.

Polyarchy as a comparative variable of democraticness

In his seminal study, Robert Dahl (1971) developed a concept that could travel across the world and across time. Conceptually, two crucial dimensions are introduced: political participation and public contestation. The first dimension concerns how and to what extent the population can participate in the electoral process by the right to vote. Yet, the road to universal suffrage was often long and hesitant. This struggle was also about how the votes are translated into seats; the main difference being having a first-past-the-post electoral system (like in the UK) or Proportional Representation as is prevalent across Europe (Farrell, 2001).

The second dimension, public contestation, is related to political and civil rights. Contestation involves the room to challenge the reigning powers without being harassed or persecuted. This is essential to any democracy, but the freedom to challenge, criticize or condemn public authority is still limited in many polities. In short: If public contestation is restricted, plurality is limited, and democracy defined as polyarchy cannot function adequately.

Combined, the two dimensions define polyarchy, according to Robert Dahl, meaning *government by many*. In his view, the route toward a polyarchy is developed in sequences. In some countries, democratization begins by allowing public contestation first and electoral participation later (e.g., the UK and the Netherlands); in others, through the introduction of voting rights and conducting

elections (e.g., Germany). A third sequence concerns those polities where civil and political rights are introduced simultaneously with electing officials (as in New Zealand). This *parallel* development can be a result of decolonization, the collapse of a hegemon (as in Eastern Europe), insurrection or evaporation of dictatorship (as in Spain and Portugal).

Hence, there are three pathways toward democratization: one, by establishing participation and contestation simultaneously; two, electoral participation first and public contestation later; and three, political contestation followed by electoral participation. Over time, after the Great War in particular, the emergence of a uniform model of democracy has become the *paradigm* of liberal democracy, in which participation and contestation are seen as the central values of democraticness.

Tatu Vanhanen (2003) has developed an empirical measure of polyarchy by operationalizing the degree of electoral participation and pluralist representation.¹ Figure 1 below shows the distribution of polyarchies in 2000 and 2018 on public contestation and political participation for the 38 polities.²

The figure shows the variation across the 38 countries: The 16 polities in the upper right quadrant (Czech Republic, Israel and Spain are post-war additions) can be considered established polyarchic systems. The polities in the upper left quadrant containing Argentina and South Korea have notably developed polyarchic conditions, whereas six democracies in the lower right quadrant have backslid after 1995. The United Kingdom is one of them. The 14 polities in the lower left quadrant do not quite qualify as polyarchies. Canada and France are perhaps surprising cases. In part, this may be explained by the emergence of a dominant party and a lower turnout

1 The formula used by Vanhanen is: electoral turnout * votes non-largest parties/100. The turnout represents the extent of participation and votes for the non-largest parties the extent of pluralism.

2 The sample (N = 38) is selected based on scores of 0.65 or better obtained from The Economist Intelligence Unit's report (2021). Second, a geographical spread was pursued to represent all continents. The total N of cases included by Vanhanen is 167. Table 2 reports all cases used in this chapter.

(this latter factor plays an alternative role in Belgium where voting is compulsory).

Figure 1: Comparing the Polyarchy Index in 1995 and 2018



Explanation: Dots represent the relative position of 38 countries according to the Vanhanen Index in 1995 and 2018 (Pearson's correlation = .61). The vertical and horizontal lines represent mean values for 1995 and 2018. The diagonal is the fitting line of the correlation ($r = .38$).

Source: Vanhanen Index of Democracy. Reading example: Argentina has improved between 1995-2018 being below the mean in 1995 and moving above the mean in 2018. Japan and South Africa, are below both means, regressing as a polyarchy during this period.

Another way to inspect Figure 1 is to consider the 'fitting line', i.e. the diagonal: Countries that are close to this line can be seen as neither improving nor backsliding. Yet, polities that are below this line are scoring lower over time and appear to be in peril of backsliding (but see also Argentina and Sweden as positive cases). In sum, Vanhanen's index of polyarchy can be used to compare levels of democraticness and over time. Although it is considered a 'thin' measurement since it consists of only two variables (OECD, 2014), it can be useful as a *descriptive* model to examine, for instance, waves of democratization and backsliding.

Waves of democratization: What goes up must come down?

Searching for patterned variation diachronically is common in comparative politics. Finding cycles is part of this exploration. Waves of democratization and reversal have become subjects of research. Samuel Huntington, a prominent representative of this search for waves of democratization,³ observes three waves: the first long wave of the 19th century ending after the First World War, a second wave after the Second World War, and a third wave beginning in the mid-1970s in Southern Europe, followed by Latin America and Asia. Huntington does not discuss the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the subsequent democratization in Eastern Europe. This latter development is the fourth wave of democratization resulting in a wave of reversal.⁴

There is consensus that the *first wave* was long, slow, and lasted up to the Great War (1914-1918). It took place in Western Europe and its 'offshoots' like the USA and the British dominions. The development toward polyarchy mainly followed the public contestation route. Universal suffrage was only hesitantly introduced later. The *second wave* occurred during the interbellum (1918-1939) and was the result of the dissolution of the German and Austrian empires and the emergence of new states mainly in Eastern Europe due to the peace treaties of 1919 (Lee, 2000). This wave did not last long, and democratization was often thwarted in Europe and led to autocratization (see Berg-Schlosser and Mitchell, 2002). The *third wave* emerged after the Second World War and lasted until the 1960s. Decolonization was a prime mover: New, independent states were born and often provided with a constitution based on the liberal model of democracy (Pinkney, 2020). Finally, the *fourth wave* has been different: First, the South European countries, Greece, Portugal, Spain, returned to the democratic fold. Yet, the sudden Fall of the Wall

3 Huntington defined a democratic wave as 'a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite directions during that period of time' (1993: 15).

4 There is an ongoing debate about what makes a 'wave', creating multifarious divisions of the time line and cut-off point and grouping of countries (see Schmidt, 2019: 391-398). I follow Huntington's concept and add that each wave knows a trend up- and downward.

in 1989 accelerated democratization across Eastern Europe as the Communist regimes transformed into constitutional democracies (de Raadt, 2009). Outside Europe, a wave of democratization in the 1990s occurred too: South Africa ended Apartheid in 1993, and in Latin America, Argentina and Chile consolidated their regained levels of democraticness in spite of economic recession and the social traumata related to the preceding dictatorship (Hybel, 2020). The question is, can these waves of democratization and reversal be observed by means of Vanhanen's data, which identifies the emergence of a polyarchy? Table 1 reports the number and averages of polyarchies for each wave.

Obviously, the number of polyarchies as well as the average scores have increased over time (in part due to the birth of new states after the First and Second World War). After the fourth wave, all 38 countries included in the sample can indeed be considered democracies. Yet, the Range shows that there are considerable differences among the polities. Between 1995 and 2018, this convergent trend appears to have stalled (see also Figure 1). Another factor that may well be relevant is time. Many of the countries only (re-)democratized during the last wave (e.g., in Eastern Europe and Latin America). Hence, as Inglehart and Welzel (2005) claim, generational change appears to affect the developing political culture and the extent to which the political game is played by the rules as the only game in town.

Table 1: Average polyarchy scores by wave of democratization

Waves	1900	1920	1965	1995	2018
Average score	7.0	13.5	25.8	32.2	33.0
Range (MiniMax)	19.9	31.5	34.9	23.9	34.7
N of cases	14	31	25	38	38
Percentage	36.8	81.6	65.8	100.0	100.0

Explanation: Average scores represent the Vanhanen Index of Polyarchy. Range is the difference between the highest and lowest score of each wave. N of cases is the number of polyarchies by wave and the per cent of total (N = 38). Source: See Figure 1.

The development towards a civic culture (Almond and Verba, 1963) promoting political participation simply takes time, education and grows by generation (cf. Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Altogether, the level of democraticness has grown over time, but there are also reversing developments: What goes up appears to come down! An example is the interbellum era: There were 31 polyarchies after the First World War but only 25 in 1939. Another era of reversal is the 1960s and 1970s when a number of democratic polities across Asia, Africa and Latin America turned into autocracies (Pinkney, 2020).

In short: After several waves of democratization, we note an increase of democratic polities, if and when conceptualized as a polyarchy. We also note that after a wave of democratization, a further development beyond the minimal operationalization is often slow, and serious reversals occur. Second, the different waves are either unevenly distributed across the regions or short-lived. The third and fourth wave resulted in many 'new' democracies but also reversal towards illiberal tendencies (like in Hungary, Israel and Poland). Considering the standards of polyarchy, many polities could be typified as defective or at best as flawed democracies. Although the fourth wave looked promising, the 21st century appears to feature lower levels of democraticness. However, this development, captured by the Vanhanen index, hardly tells us to what extent the liberal democratic paradigm has emerged in full. The ambition of the so-called 'thick' approaches is to gauge comprehensively the variation in democraticness in the 21st century.⁵

Liberal democracy as the yardstick: Ranking the stars

The precursors of contemporary theories of democracy were concerned about confining the absolutist powers of the state vis-à-vis its inhabitants of the realm as well as defining the natural integrity of the individual. Eventually, these ideas were institutionalized in (individual) liberties and assigning the judiciary to oversee their maintenance. Hence, civil and political rights that were gradually

5 The terms 'thick' and 'thin' are used to depict the difference between a concept with few indicators, like Vanhanen's operationalization of polyarchy, whereas Varieties of Democracy and The Economist use many different indicators and sources (see OECD, 2014).

granted to the citizen together with the rule of law are today considered corner stones of a fully-fledged democratic polity.

These ideas were embodied in the work of the Founding Fathers of the US constitution and, for example, J.S. Mill. Probably the research by Freedom House is the core example of this persuasion. The pivotal point is that political and civil rights ought to be considered as essential to enjoy democracy. States that do not meet these criteria are seen as non-democratic if not worse, and this yardstick divides the world into good guys and bad guys. This approach is typical for the ideological contest during the Cold War between the East and the West that dominated the post-war era up to the decline and disintegration of the USSR after 1989. At the same time, this Cold War contest blurred a more objective search for measuring democraticness as a system of governance (as conceptualized by van Kersbergen and van Waarden, 2004).

Our criticism of the available measures inspecting the levels of democraticness so far shows that they tend to be *biased* (Freedom House) or *minimalist* (polyarchy) as a yardstick. Other indexes have emerged, competing by means of developing many indices and scaling devices of how complete democracies are. This type of indexing is called 'thick' measurement. Nevertheless, the value of such rankings remains questionable in terms of validity and reliability, as the evidence is based on (often unknown) experts and unclear aggregation formulas affecting the outcomes (Munck and Verkuilen, 2002). Two examples are the indexes created by The Economist and the Swedish Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem).

Their results are proudly presented as the 'truth' about the state of liberal democracy around the world. It is like a popular Dutch TV programme *Ranking the stars* or like other (often silly) listings published by the media that merely focus on the rank gained by a country rather than discuss the ranking substantially. Table 2 reports the rank orders of these four indexes, which are often used in academia.

Judging the rank order correlations between the rankings of the indexes, it is obvious that the polyarchy (Vanhanen) index is weakly associated with the other scaling efforts. It may be useful for comparisons over time, and, as the data are publicly available, everyone can replicate Vanhanen's efforts. This is not feasible for the Freedom House results: Experts are in large part responsible for the country

scores, and we have no access to the data. Compared with the other indexes, the outcomes of the Freedom House ranking are puzzling: Even at face value, it is hard to see that Romania, South Korea, South Africa and the USA are at the same level. In sum, both ways to rank the stars are dubious and unreliable.

This is different for both 'thick' rankings. The Spearman's Rho correlation between Varieties of Democracy and The Economist is: $r = .79$ or 62% overlap. In most cases, the differences are minor, but as the last column illustrates, a number of polities have a wide gap between them (> 6 points): Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Estonia, Israel, Japan, Lithuania, Slovakia and the USA. Eight are consolidated and long-standing democracies (even the USA in view of its recent past!), and four are younger democracies. This inspection tells us that rankings should be handled carefully. The actual scores could well be the outcome of misinterpretation, lack of sources or insufficient expertise. Who knows?

In sum, ranking the stars may well be an interesting exercise, but it is also precarious in the sense that many people (including politicians and journalists) tend to attach (too) much weight to these scores. As one can observe from the factual scores, the differences *between* cases are often too minimal to justify a ranking *per se*. In addition, all scales introduced here follow the paradigmatic concept of liberal democracy, seeking to find the holy grail. Yet, a liberal democracy is not by definition a working democracy. Keeping this caveat in mind, it is useful to observe that the rankings of liberal types of democracy demonstrate that democratic polities are not always and everywhere equally well institutionalized.

Table 2: Ranking the stars: Ranking orders of democracy scales

Country	Vanhanen Index	Freedom House	V.Dem.	Economist Index	Diff. VDem/Econ.
<i>Argentina</i>	10	30	30	33	-3
<i>Australia</i>	8	8	17	9	8
<i>Austria</i>	7	18	22	15	7
<i>Belgium</i>	1	12	11	27	-16
<i>Bulgaria</i>	29	36	37	35	2
<i>Canada</i>	25	6	25	4	21
<i>Chile</i>	35	18	22	13	9
<i>Costa Rica</i>	21	21	5	15	-10
<i>Croatia</i>	27	30	33	37	-4
<i>Czechia</i>	16	21	29	25	4
<i>Denmark</i>	3	8	1	6	-5
<i>Estonia</i>	23	16	9	23	-14
<i>Finland</i>	11	2	7	5	2
<i>France</i>	36	24	14	19	-5
<i>Germany</i>	6	16	9	11	-3
<i>Greece</i>	18	28	25	28	-3
<i>Hungary</i>	26	38	38	36	2
<i>Ireland</i>	19	8	11	7	4
<i>Israel</i>	13	37	32	23	9
<i>Italy</i>	5	24	19	24	-5
<i>Japan</i>	37	12	28	16	12

<i>Latvia</i>	24	27	25	29	-4
<i>Lithuania</i>	22	24	22	30	-8
<i>Netherlands</i>	4	6	11	9	2
<i>New Zealand</i>	33	4	5	3	2
<i>Norway</i>	9	2	3	1	2
<i>Poland</i>	31	35	37	34	3
<i>Portugal</i>	30	12	17	21	-4
<i>Romania</i>	32	33	35	38	-3
<i>Slovakia</i>	20	24	22	32	-10
<i>Slovenia</i>	34	14	32	26	6
<i>South Africa</i>	38	33	34	31	3
<i>South Korea</i>	14	33	17	18	-1
<i>Spain</i>	15	24	14	17	-3
<i>Sweden</i>	2	2	2	2	0
<i>Switzerland</i>	17	12	5	10	-5
<i>Un. Kingdom</i>	28	18	14	12	2
<i>United States</i>	12	33	28	20	8

Explanation: The index scores have been transformed into rank orders. Ties between countries result in a similar rank. The last column reports the differences by case between the VDem and Economist rankings. Correlations (Spearman's Rho) between the rankings are: Freedom House * VDem = -.76; Freedom House * Economist = .83; VDem * Economist = .79; Vanhanen * VDem = .48; Vanhanen * Freedom House = .31; Vanhanen * Economist = .36.

Sources: Freedom House; Economist Intelligence Unit; Varieties of Democracy; Polyarchy (Vanhanen) index: see Figure 1.

The state of democracy in the 21st century

To shine a better light on the developments within our universe of democratic polities, I turned to The Economist Intelligence Unit, which attempts to measure the actual *functioning* of representative government, such as popular participation, political culture and effective governance, which are part and parcel of The Economist's overall concept.⁶ The overall change between 2005-2020 is minus .21, but if one divides the sample into low, medium and high levels of democraticness,⁷ the negative scores appear in all three categories, especially the lower-level democracies (e.g. Hungary: -.93, i.e. 15% decrease!). The state of democracy is obviously worsening, albeit not in all countries. For example, Argentina and New Zealand's scores have improved; the Netherlands and Sweden's have not. In fact, only 12 of the 38 polities show higher scores than in 2005. Argentina is the exception, whereas Hungary and Poland are in decay. All in all, more democratic polities are in peril in this century!

How come? Among the potential explanations of backsliding, three factors play a role: the extent of *political participation*, the way a *political culture* has developed, and the *role of government* in terms of policy performance. The 'gap' between electors and elected is one concern. Second, the decline of a political culture promoting consensus and cooperation. Third, democracy is a means to an end: An elected government is expected to deliver; democracy without responsive and responsible government capable of making policy is an empty shell.⁸ Table 3 reports the scores for each variable and level of democraticness.

In effect, the average scores on *political culture* show the largest discrepancies, 0.21 points, between the three types of democracy. The lowest-scoring cases are in Eastern Europe, but also Britain,

6 Oddly enough, The Economist has hardly collected any information on the rule of law. Only one query out of 60 mentions the role of an independent judiciary (p. 67). This is obviously a deficiency.

7 This division is based on the overall score on liberal democracy in The Economist Index: Low is below .75 (N = 12), medium below .85 (N = 14) and full more than .85 (N = 12).

8 In other words, if democratically based decisions cannot be or are not implemented, then the concept of democracy is not very meaningful as a regime to govern a society.

Table 3: Dimensions of a democratic polity

<i>Variable</i> →	<i>Governance</i>	<i>Participation</i>	<i>Political culture</i>	<i>Liberties</i>
<i>Full – average</i>	.87	.86	.90	.93
Range	.21	.22	.25	.09
Worst case	Britain	Australia	Britain	Netherlands
<i>Medium – average</i>	.75	.72	.73	.83
Range	.35	.44	.19	.41
Worst case	Czechia	Belgium	Slovenia	Israel
<i>Low – average</i>	.60	.65	.55	.77
Range	.52	.50	.38	.68
Worst case	Romania	Lithuania	Romania	Hungary

Explanation: The scores are given for each category: full – medium – low (see footnote 7). The range statistics show the homogeneity: the lower the more homogeneous; if higher, there is a heterogeneous distribution. The countries mentioned are scoring lowest. Source: Economist Intelligence Unit (2021).

South Africa and the USA are below par in this respect. As regards *political participation*, we note that four West European polities seem to lag behind: Belgium, Greece, Portugal as well as Britain. The *governance* scores also differ considerably. Altogether, the table demonstrates that these factors are relevant to take into account instead of the overall rankings.

Towards fuller democracies or the end of the liberal model?

The main inference of employing measures to rank the stars is that backsliding can be observed in this century. This wave of *de-democratization* is like the preceding waves of democracy: They are followed by a reversing trend. Not everywhere, however, but backsliding is not a uniform process, nor is it always followed by *re-democratization* (Bermeo, 2016). The idea of waves is certainly interesting to inspect what kind of progress is made over time. Are civil and political rights established and upheld? Are elections indeed free and fair? Is a working system of rule of law in place?

Yet, the Polyarchy Index only focusses on electoral participation and party systems being more than less pluralistic. The same reproach concerns the Freedom House index, which focuses on the availability of political rights and civil liberties. However important they are, it concerns *conditions* of democratization and less the *process* to achieve policy output leading up to a governmental performance like the welfare state (Becker and van Kersbergen, 2002).

Finally, I employed The Economist Index in more detail to inspect different dimensions of democraticness. The findings show that political culture, political participation and effective governance by the democratic state are relevant for understanding processes of democratization and *de*-democratization. Making democracy work obviously requires institutions. Yet, without a well-functioning and effective state apparatus, embedded in a positive political culture where citizens can, albeit indirectly, participate meaningfully, the democratic process cannot prosper, let alone persevere in times of societal polarization and popular dissatisfaction.

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