

Democracy and Conceptual Choices*

Matthew Draper

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Abstract

This paper evaluates conceptualizations of democracy used in empirical research, in particular the influential minimalist conception of democracy that operationalizes democracy as the occurrence of competitive elections. I find that although some degree of conceptual minimalism may be desirable for the purpose of operationalizing the definition in research, these considerations do not give the analyst carte blanche to stipulate definitions. Limitations include a desire to communicate with other researchers studying the same topic, and some degree of correspondence with the background concept as used in ordinary language.

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Introduction

In order to study a concept as multifarious and contested as democracy, political scientists have had to make careful choices in the course of their research. Most of the discussion of these choices has revolved around measurement issues. Conceptual choices have received less attention. The definition to be operationalized in research is frequently stipulated on the basis of quantities that will admit of easy measurement. However, conceptual choices are still being made. The downstream consequences of an ill-considered or hasty conceptualization are considerable, if often underappreciated. This paper examines an extreme case of this phenomenon: the well-known minimalist conception of democracy advanced by Przeworski et al. (2000).¹ I begin by reconstructing the authors' minimalist conceptualization, and continue by filling in the definitional content that they propose: competitive elections. I then evaluate these claims, showing that they are not supported by the authors' reasoning. After suggesting alternative justifications, I conclude by emphasizing the existence of multiple desiderata for concept formation.

Conceptual Preliminaries

Before discussing Przeworski et al. (2000), it will be worthwhile to distinguish between conceptualization and operationalization in research design. Social scientists naturally wish to measure the degree to which phenomena

¹My aim in choosing an extreme case is to highlight the relevant issues in a particularly vivid way.

like democracy are present or absent within states. To do this, it is necessary to conceptualize these phenomena for the purposes of research. This conceptualization will be narrower than the ‘background’ concept, which often encompasses a wide variety of diverse and potentially contradictory meanings (Adcock and Collier 2001). Because a background concept is often imprecisely stated, researchers are compelled to articulate a stipulated ‘technical’ concept which narrows the conceptual scope, providing a specific formulation of the background concept to be adopted for the present research. Researchers will stipulate explicitly what they understand the conceptual content to be, often articulating it in a way that facilitates research. Movement from the background concept to the systematized concept is known as conceptualization, whereas movement from the systematized concept to indicators is known as operationalization (Adcock and Collier 2001:530, see Figure 1 below).² In practice, however, conceptualization and operationalization are often conflated into a single conversation about measurement validity, despite warnings that this aggregation may be unwarranted.³ In the present paper, I argue that this conflation risks sacrificing conceptual clarity.

Conceptual stipulation is inevitable. A scientific approach clearly re-

²Research often proceeds through a simultaneous refinement both of systematized concepts based on the result of indicators applied to particular cases and of indicators based on increasingly-precise systematized concepts (Adcock and Collier 2001:531). This process recalls Goodman’s method of working from both ends (Goodman 1955), as well as Rawls’s reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1971).

³ “[A]rguments about the background concept and those about validity can be addressed adequately only when each is engaged on its own terms, rather than conflated into one overly broad issue” (Adcock and Collier 2001:533). In the terminology of Sartori (1984, 51–4), this involves “clarifying the semantic field”.

quires some degree of conceptual specification. It is not a deficiency for a technical definition not to pick out all the aspects of the background concept, but rather an inevitable and acceptable consequence of a scientific approach. Proper science demands tightly-articulated definitions and one-to-one correspondences, focusing on observable characteristics and identifiable phenomena. The concepts we use in everyday life may not meet these standards because they are multifarious and fraught with contradiction. For the purposes of social-scientific inquiry, then, it is necessary and even desirable that we should to some extent simplify and reduce these dimensions of variation in order to more completely understand the phenomenon under investigation. In this paper, I ask not whether this process is necessary, but rather whether it can go too far, in the sense of undermining our research objectives. I examine one particularly influential conceptualization - the “minimalist” conceptualization of democracy advanced by Alvarez et al. (1996) and Przeworski et al. (2000).⁴ The index based on this conceptualization has high measurement validity, in the sense that the operationalization and scoring of cases adequately reflect the systematized concept. Here, I will focus on its conceptualization.

⁴These papers are the source of the Democracy-Dictatorship index (DD), introduced by Alvarez et al. (1996), refined by Przeworski et al. (2000) and extended by Cheibub et al. (2010). This index is popular among scholars of comparative politics and international relations, *e.g.* Houle 2009, Haggard and Kaufman 2012.

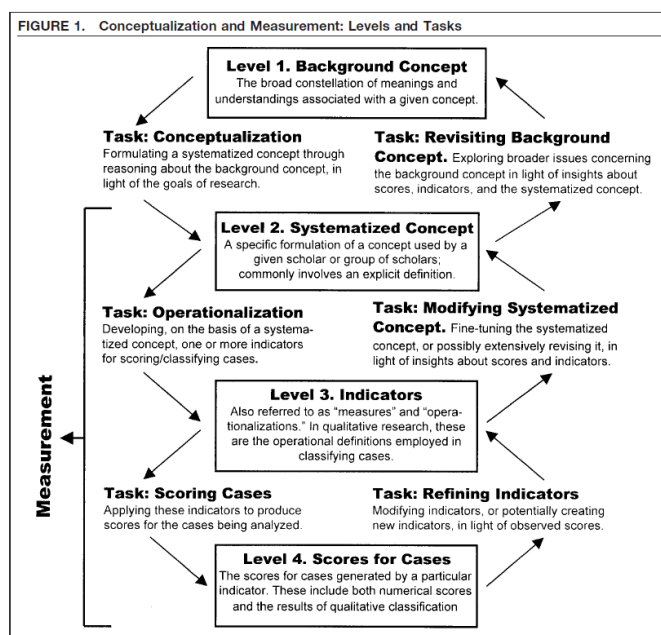


Figure 1: Source: Adcock and Collier 2001:531

Democracy: A Minimalist Conceptualization

Przeworski et al. (2000) articulate a “minimalist” conceptualization of democracy. By this, they mean that we should include as few components as possible in a candidate definition while still according with our intuitions regarding particular cases (2000:15-16; see also Przeworski 1999:12-13). These conceptual “components” are the subsidiary concepts by means of which we specify conceptual content: they give the example of contestation as a conceptual component of democracy (14). The authors contrast the minimalist approach with what we might call an “enriched” conception of democracy

that includes many of the normatively desirable aspects of modern life.⁵ For example, they cite Shapiro’s (1996:108) emphasis on the definitional criterion of improved welfare and Kelsen’s (1929:38) focus on democracy’s capacity to provide solutions to pressing social problems as examples of enriched definitions (1999:12). They reject these enriched definitions in favor of a minimalist approach.

As implemented by Przeworski et al., a minimalist conceptualization of democracy identifies the concept ‘democracy’ with one and only one of its conceptual components (2000:15). For a practical illustration, consider Figure 2. Imagine for a moment that the background concept of democracy involves just these components: contestation, accountability and participation.⁶ In this case, the minimalist approach to specification of technical concepts requires that we simply select one of these components and make it definitional. For these reasons, a minimalist approach eliminates the possibility of defining democracy as the intersection of these sets: we cannot

⁵“Our general stance is minimalist. Perusing the innumerable definitions, one discovers that ‘democracy’ has become an altar on which everyone hangs his or her favorite *ex voto*. Almost all normatively desirable aspects of political life, and sometimes even of social and economic life, are credited as definitional features of democracy: representation, accountability, equality, participation, dignity, rationality, security, freedom – the list goes on. Indeed, according to many definitions, the set of true democracies is an empty set. And from an analytical point of view, lumping all good things together is of little use. The typical research problem is to examine the relationships among them. We want to know if holding repeated elections induces governmental accountability, if participation generates equality, if freedom imbues political systems with rationality. Hence, we want to define ‘democracy’ narrowly” (2000:14). Compare Dahl (1989): “a term that means anything means nothing. And so it has become with “democracy”, which nowadays is not so much a term of restricted and specific meaning as a vague endorsement of a popular idea” (1989:2).

⁶See Dahl 1971. These components are given for illustrative purposes only.



Figure 2: Plausible conceptual components of democracy

simply say that democracy is the set of regimes in the center of Figure 2. Przeworski et al. argue that their minimalist approach means that they are forced to select one of these characteristics and make it definitional (2000:15, see also Przeworski 1999). As we will see, they ultimately select contestation.

Justifications for Minimalism

In this section, I consider the reasons advanced by Przeworski et al. for proposing a minimalist conceptualization of democracy. Recall that we can conceive of the background concept of democracy as comprising a set of constituent conceptual components (Figure 2). Przeworski et al. (2000) argue plausibly that we might wish to understand the *interaction* of these conceptual components, and that we would be precluded from doing so by the

aggregation of all of them into a single technical concept, ‘democracy’ (15). For example, they propose that scholars might wish to consider the effects of economic equality on regime type durability (2000:33). Such a question, they argue, would be difficult to understand on any account that made economic equality part of the definition of democracy. They argue instead that many of the aspects of democracy offered as elements of prior definitions should instead be investigated empirically (rather than incorporated definitionally). As they put it, “[w]e prefer to define democracy narrowly and to study its causes and consequences” (2000:33).⁷

Przeworski et al. find conceptual minimalism desirable because they think that it maximizes the set of relationships that will be left open to empirical investigation (14-15). As just discussed, they see a tradeoff between the set of components in a definition and the set of relationships left over for empirical investigation. Because they believe that the relationships among potential definitional components of democracy are “just too interesting to be resolved by a definitional fiat” (2000:33), they wish to avoid fixing these relationships definitionally in order to leave them open for research. Elsewhere, Przeworski deepens this claim by asserting that unless the correlates of democracy are precisely coextensive (*i.e.* we only observe rule of law where we observe equality and vice versa) then we are *forced* to adopt a minimalist approach. In a discussion of “hybrid” forms of democracy, Przeworski argues

⁷See also Przeworski 2019:3-4, where he notes that observed features of democracy may be treated alternatively as definitional or as empirical.

that incomplete types (*e.g.*, “tutelary democracy,” “praetorian democracy,” etc.) are conceptually problematic because “not all good things must go together,” and that unless the phenomena in question are precisely coextensive, “some kind of definitional minimalism is unavoidable: we must choose one of the potential features as definitional and treat others as hypothetical conditions under which the selected feature is satisfied” (2019:4).

Is Minimalism Coherent?

On the interpretation above, can we say that minimalism is a coherent approach to conceptualization? Notice that the three components of democracy given in our example (contestation, accountability and participation) are themselves made up of subsidiary concepts, and that the same can be said for the subsidiary concepts themselves: it is concepts all the way down. Take the attribute that Przeworski et al. in fact choose to make definitional: contestation. Its conceptual components (*e.g.* elections, multiple parties, alternation in power) are easily construed as components of the root concept ‘democracy’ as well. The decision to hierarchize is made by the analyst and is in some sense arbitrary: we identify some conceptual components as relating to contestation, others relating to participation, and so on. Viewed this way, the term ‘minimalism’ begins to seem misleading because what looks minimal at one level of analysis is swarming with detail at a more granular level. It is unclear how exactly Przeworski et al. could make sense of the

idea of minimal content on this interpretation. We might think that they mean something like “only one member of the set of conceptual attributes of democracy,” but notice that the components of these subsidiary concepts are in some sense also components of democracy itself—we have simply arranged them in convenient groups which we label ‘contestation’, ‘participation,’ and so on. It is unclear how we would know when we had arrived at a minimal conceptualization.

A nearby notion that could accomplish the work that Przeworski et al. are asking minimalism to perform might be the idea of a ‘thin’ concept (Coppedge 2012 ch. 2 and Coppedge et al. 2016, *c.f.* Williams 1985). Conceptual ‘thinness’ refers to the dimensionality of a concept. “Thick concepts tend to be multidimensional, whereas thin concepts tend to be unidimensional. When a concept is unidimensional, its components vary together” (Coppedge 2012:23).⁸ This substitution allows us to avoid minimalism’s implications of conceptual bedrock in favor of a relative relationship where conceptual components are assumed to correlate to greater or lesser extents. Although I find this terminology useful, I am not persuaded that thin concepts are entirely unidimensional. The most that I think we can say of a thin concept is that it has fewer dimensions of variation than its thick equivalent. For any thin concept C , it seems to me possible to define some C' that is a

⁸“...the dimensions that structure a thick concept are best thought of as handy bundles of a larger number of potential dimensions. Such bundles probably hold together only for selected periods and places. The more diverse the sample and the longer the expanse of time it covers, the more likely it is to resist reduction to a small number of dimensions” (Coppedge 2012:33).

‘thinner’ version of C .⁹

We can restate a clearer version of the argument made by Przeworski et al. (2000) in the terminology of conceptual ‘thinness’. The authors believe that a properly scientific approach requires the use of thin concepts in order to foreclose as few dimensions of variation as possible from empirical investigation (2000:14-15). A natural way of expressing this concern might be ‘conceptual parsimony’ — we want concepts that have only as much content as they must have to do the work we need them to do, because this will maximize the set of empirical questions that we can then ask. Although the idea of a ‘minimal’ concept may turn out to be incoherent on closer inspection, it is arguably desirable to employ thin concepts for the purposes of social science because such concepts tend to have fewer dimensions of variation. In the next section, I evaluate this proposition.

Analysis

As we have seen, Przeworski et al. (2000) wish to study relationships between the presence (or absence) of democracy and variables connected to economic development. Faced with a multifarious thick concept like democracy, they conceptualize it “minimally” on the basis of one of its component attributes.

This move is presented as a necessary choice if we wish to avoid “lumping

⁹Compare Munck and Verkuilen 2002, *infra*. Note that as presented by Coppedge, conceptual “thinness” refers only to a concept’s components and carries none of the normative content suggested by, *inter alia*, Williams 1985.

all good things together” (2000:14). But notice that (continuing with our example) there is no barrier to studying the effects of contestation, participation or accountability on a set of development variables, or indeed on each other. Notice also that these concepts are quite likely to be ‘thinner’ than democracy. Perhaps they are more suitable objects of social-scientific study. So why not simply study these concepts? Why multiply entities needlessly by introducing democracy?¹⁰ Consider the following passage:

“We want to know if holding repeated elections induces governmental accountability, if participation generates equality, if freedom imbues political systems with rationality. Hence, we want to define ‘democracy’ narrowly” (2000:14-15).

The implication is that the authors intend to use the concept ‘democracy’ to investigate these questions. But notice that by conceptualizing democracy as contested elections only, Przeworski et al. preclude themselves from using it to study the second and third research questions presented here. While participation and freedom are examples of the expansive conceptual components of democracy proposed by other scholars (compare Dahl 1971), these components are specifically excluded from Przeworski et al.’s minimalist conceptualization (indeed, as we shall see, to include them would be “confused,” or even “ludicrous” (57)). Recall our example, where we hypothesized democracy’s subsidiary components (following Dahl 1971) as contestation, participation and accountability. Such a construct would allow us to ask the above

¹⁰“Numquam ponenda est pluralitas sine necessitat” (Ockham 1495 [c.1311]).

questions in terms of democracy. However, by operationalizing democracy as contestation via elections and nothing more, the authors have eliminated the possibility of investigating the second and third of their research questions using their conceptualization of democracy. While they are of course still perfectly free to investigate these questions, they will not be able to use their conceptualization of democracy to do it.

Przeworski et al. might reply that their conceptualization, though indeed narrower in scope than Dahl's, is capable of yielding more precise results. After all, using Dahl's expansive conceptualization, we would be unable to state precisely which aspect of democracy was responsible for the effects observed. By disaggregating, they might say, it is possible to be more precise about cause and effect. However, this reply appears to be foreclosed by the authors' decision to interpret their findings in terms of democracy. If there is merit in conceptual disaggregation because it allows us to improve our precision regarding causality, surely it would be malpractice to throw this information away by simply re-aggregating at the final stage of investigation and coarsen the findings by attributing them generally to 'democracy'.

Consider also that we might be interested not simply in the effects of these phenomena (repeated elections, participation and freedom) in isolation, but that we might wish to understand the causes and effects of their combination. In other words, we might be interested in the set of regimes that exhibit all three of these phenomena because this set engages in particular behaviors or produces particular outcomes. The items in the set intersection may con-

stitute a naturalized phenomenon that we wish to investigate. Specifying bundles of components that occur together in the real world is one of the primary uses of concepts in social science, and it is difficult to see how research could proceed without grouping components together. In fact, the authors' own definition of electoral competition picks out a set intersection: the set of regimes featuring competitive elections are said to be those featuring all three of the following: "(1) ex-ante uncertainty, (2) ex-post irreversibility, and (3) repeatability" (16). Przeworski et al. seem to tacitly recognize the need to study conceptual intersections even as they declare this practice formally undesirable (2000) or even impossible (2019).¹¹

The authors' chosen conceptualization seems particularly curious in light of the above research questions, because all three of them naturally appeal to a reader's intuitions about the background concept 'democracy,' but the democracy-as-contestation conceptualization cannot address all of them. It is unclear what the "hence" in the above passage is meant to indicate. While it is of course possible that there exists an expansive concept 'democracy' that incorporates the component concepts of 'repeated elections,' 'participation' and 'freedom,' such a concept will almost certainly not be "narrow". Why would Przeworski et al. insist that a narrow conceptualization of democracy

¹¹Przeworski et al. might reply that they wish to employ logit or probit analysis on the resulting data, and that for these purposes a dichotomous variable is desirable, which could be taken to rule out combinations of variables. But notice that it is open to us to construct a binary variable on a set intersection, because we can identify a cut point between the presence of all three phenomena (repeated elections, participation and freedom) and the absence of one or more of them in any particular case. Logit and probit analysis can then proceed unhindered.

based only on elections can answer questions about the effects of freedom and participation?

As we will see, the authors' reasons for advancing a minimalist conception of democracy are deeply entangled with their reasons for proposing elections as the conceptual content. This entanglement occurs because Przeworski et al. conflate the distinct processes of conceptualization and operationalization. The general principles of the minimalist approach are derived from the specific attributes of the concept "democracy," which on their telling is teeming with unobservable characteristics that must be eliminated to produce a viable technical concept. Although other arguments are advanced, their most persuasive argument both for minimalism and for a focus on elections is that proper science requires a focus on objective, observable phenomena. As we have just seen, Przeworski et al. believe that this requires the use of thin concepts. In the next section, I discuss the authors' arguments for a minimal conceptualization of democracy based on electoral competition, and I show that they make important conceptual choices based on these methodological criteria. These conceptual choices reveal another (implicit) rationale for the use of thin concepts in social science: a focus on observable phenomena. In the final section, I evaluate this approach.

Does a focus on observables require minimalism?

Many features are often suggested as conceptual components of democracy, including participation, full suffrage, contested elections, rule of law, repre-

sentation, equality, accountability and numerous others. Notice that we are faced with a real choice, and that conceptual minimalism does not guide us in making it – we could make a plausible ‘minimalist’ case for many of these components.

Recognizing this choice, Przeworski et al. (2000) briefly discuss three “major distinctions” in democratic political theory, focusing ultimately on contestation by means of elections as the content of their conceptualization of democracy. As they put it, “‘Democracy,’ for us, is a regime in which those who govern are selected through contested elections” (15). See also Przeworski 2019: “The view of democracy I adopt is ‘minimalist’ and ‘electoralist’: democracy is a political arrangement in which people select governments through elections and have a reasonable possibility of removing incumbent governments they do not like” (2019:5).

The authors give methodological reasons why we might wish to adopt elections as the sole component of a minimal definition of democracy. They prefer an “objective” definition of democracy focused on observables, and they wish to avoid subjective judgments about particular cases or investigation of the beliefs held by particular actors (2000:10).¹² This is methodologically useful, because observation of objective phenomena promotes inter-coder reliability even when the coding is performed by non-experts. A preference for observable phenomena leads Przeworski et al. to focus on democratic pro-

¹²Objectivity as defined here seems narrower than mere “observability”. Przeworski et al. suggest a focus on ‘observable’ characteristics (2000:12), but this appears to be a larger set than the set of genuinely objective characteristics.

cedures rather than substantive outcomes.¹³ As the observable democratic procedure *par excellence*, elections are advanced as the conceptual core. The authors argue that defining features of democracy include only the requirements that “offices be filled, directly or indirectly, by elections,” and that the government so elected be responsible “either directly to voters or to a parliament elected by them” (2000:15). This electoral competition (the authors use Dahl’s (1971) term ‘contestation’) is said, as we have seen, to include three features: “(1) ex-ante uncertainty, (2) ex-post irreversibility, and (3) repeatability” (16).

The suggestion here is that because science requires a focus on observable phenomena, we should define democracy based on the most observable aspect of democracy, which is elections. This argument seems plausible on its face. But the choice gives a great deal of weight to measurement considerations in defining the thing to be measured, which seems to conflate the processes of operationalization and conceptualization.¹⁴ What role should the availability of data play in forming our stipulated technical concepts?

It seems clear that we may want to define concepts in ways that make it easy to capture variation of interest. Stipulated technical concepts often focus on particular aspects of the background concept in order to further research goals. For example, Boix et al. (2012) define as democratic any state

¹³Procedural definitions “refer to democratic *procedures*, rather than to substantive policies or other outcomes that might be viewed as democratic” (Collier and Levitsky 1997:433).

¹⁴Other scholars have expressed reservations about the importation of measurement considerations into the conceptualization process (*e.g.* Adcock and Collier 2001).

“that has competitive elections and has enfranchised a majority of the male population” (1529).¹⁵ While this type of research-driven conceptualization seems unproblematic (provided it is clearly stated)¹⁶, it may be more problematic to choose our conceptual content entirely on the basis of available data. Say that we have data on competitive elections, and we have reasons to think that elections may be an important part of democracy. Are there any costs to just defining democracy as competitive elections and getting on with research?

One particularly salient cost associated with this choice of definitional content can be stated in terms of our ability to intervene in other conversations relating to the same subject.¹⁷ Imagine, for example, defining democracy on the basis of Olympic gold medals won by a state’s athletes. This is a minimalist definition based entirely on objective, observable data. Our intuitive objection to it stems from its remoteness from any prior use of the term “democracy”. This suggests an important counterweight to the conceptual parsimony urged by Przeworski et al.¹⁸ If we wish to remain in dialogue

¹⁵They acknowledge that this stipulation is somewhat arbitrary, but justify it by appeal to their research objectives: “The second condition (which is much less stringent than a threshold of universal suffrage among both men and women) allows us to capture the considerable cross-country variation in political conditions before World War I” (1529).

¹⁶Unfortunately, when the resulting measure is labeled with the name of the broader folk/background concept, the narrow research purposes that led to the stipulated definition are often de-emphasized.

¹⁷For more on this idea, known as ‘topic continuity,’ see the excellent treatment in Cappelen 2018, and the application to democracy in Ingham and Wiens (forthcoming).

¹⁸A promising alternative is suggested by Ingham and Wiens (forthcoming). While the definition of particular concepts may be a matter of dispute, the empirical cases picked out by them can nevertheless be a matter of widespread agreement. It may be possible to use these “anchor cases” to test our candidate definitions.

with a research community or a broader public interested in the background concept, we must employ conceptualizations that this audience would find at least tolerably consonant with their own understanding of the concept. An exclusive focus on parsimony can foreclose this goal by narrowing our conceptualization to the point where meaningful discussion of our research topic with others is impossible.¹⁹

Discussion

By conflating the processes of conceptualization and operationalization, Przeworski et al. (2000) have imported the focus on observables characteristic of operationalization into the conceptualization process, leading them to insist that we must state our systematized, technical concepts in terms of observable quantities. This conflation is unwarranted, and explains why Przeworski et al. (2000) seem to want simultaneously to say something novel about democracy and its relationship to economic development and to exercise due scientific care by conceptualizing democracy in a way that considers only observable and measurable characteristics. These conflicting impulses have led them to an odd conceptualization of democracy that is unsatisfying even on the authors' own terms, precluding a large set of the research questions with

¹⁹In rare cases, we may have compelling reasons to call for a change in topic despite (or indeed because of) the proclivities of a given research community. See Cappelen 2018 chs. 1-4 on conceptual engineering, specifically the choice between “tolerable revision” and “abandonment” (*c.f.* Railton 1989: “Revisionism may reach a point where it becomes more perspicacious to say that a concept has been abandoned, rather than revised” (158-9)).

which they began. However, Przeworski et al. overcome this difficulty effortlessly by simply ignoring the limits of their own conceptualization. Consider one of their main findings: that political instability affects economic performance only in non-democracies (211). They use this finding to overturn work by, *inter alia*, Huntington and Alesina, and reach the broad conclusion that “the same political phenomena have different meanings under different systems of political institutions” (212). If we read their conceptualization back into this finding, however, it takes on a much more limited form: the absence of competitive elections compounds the economic effects of political instability. This (responsibly-articulated) finding is a measured claim, whereas the idea that something about the thick concept ‘democracy’ is responsible for overcoming the effects of political instability is more dramatic.²⁰

Consider another of the main conclusions in Przeworski et al. (2000): that regime type does not affect economic development (178). Restated responsibly, we have the narrower claim that the presence or absence of competitive elections does not affect economic development. This more limited restate-

²⁰The somewhat *ad hoc* nature of the authors’ conceptual commitments may appear more intelligible in this light, as does their vitriolic treatment of scholars who have employed alternate conceptualizations in unrelated research. For example, Przeworski et al.’s DD index is dichotomous, in the sense that it does not admit of intermediate states between democracy and dictatorship. While other scholars have adopted this dichotomous approach (*e.g.* Geddes 1999, Huntington 1991), it has received vigorous opposition from scholars who prefer a graded understanding of the concept (*e.g.* Coppedge and Reinecke 1990, Bollen and Jackman 1989, Dahl 1971). While Bollen and Jackman (1989) conceptualize democracy as a matter of degree, Przeworski and his coauthors call this a “confused” approach because it fails to recognize that states “cannot be half-democratic: there is a natural zero point” (Alvarez et al. 1996:21), as well as “ludicrous” because the presence of borderline cases are, on their view, merely an artifact of imprecise classification rules (2000:57).

ment can be reconciled with the fact that eighteen of the 20 states with the highest per-capita GDP in 2000 were democracies, while the initial finding cannot be so reconciled without substantial contortion (supplied by the authors on pp. 178-179). Notice what is happening here: the unnoticed move from the authors' careful conceptualization back to the expansive background concept allows them to rule out alternative explanations for their findings, for example the plausible explanation that something about democracies other than (or in interaction with) their electoral competition explains their impressive economic performance. On the reading offered by Przeworski et al., this alternative explanation is not available to the reader because the authors have "occupied the field" by interpreting conclusions reached on the basis of their conceptualization to apply to the background concept itself.

Does science require thin concepts?

As I have emphasized, the concepts we use in everyday life are multifarious and fraught with contradiction. For the purposes of social-scientific inquiry, it is necessary and even desirable that we should to some extent simplify and reduce these dimensions of variation in order to more completely understand the phenomenon under investigation. The proper question is instead whether there are any limits to our freedom to stipulate for research purposes. Complex or unobservable concepts resist operationalization, and some simplification seems inevitable. However, it must surely be possible for this process of simplification and reduction to undermine research goals by concealing

variation that a more differentiated conceptualization would capture. Thus the amount of simplification desirable in a given context should be given at least partly by our research objectives.²¹

While conceptual parsimony is appealing, some scholars caution against a stipulated technical concept that omits theoretically relevant attributes. For example, we are told that “[c]oncept specification [should] avoid maximalist definitions (the inclusion of theoretically irrelevant attributes) or minimalist definitions (the exclusion of theoretically relevant attributes)... the most useful—if admittedly flexible—methodological suggestion that can be offered is that scholars should avoid the extremes of including too much or too little in a definition relative to their theoretical goals” (Munck and Verkuilen 2002:8-9).

For these reasons, although a focus on observable characteristics appears to be the correct approach, it seems clear that we need not take a minimalist approach to do so. Why not simply aggregate observable characteristics from more than one conceptual component, say from contestation *and* participation, as done by Boix et al. (2012)? In addition, if we *do* choose to take a

²¹ “In sum, there is no readily available default position an analyst can adopt. Rather, the selection of the level of aggregation is an explicit choice that must be justified in light of the need to balance the desire for parsimony and the concern with underlying dimensionality and differentiation... The standard practice with regard to the selection of the level of aggregation has been to proceed as though parsimony were the only consideration, fully warranting a decision to push the process of aggregation to the highest level possible so as to reduce the disaggregate data into one single score... No theoretical justification for the choice of level of aggregation is offered, and no real attempt is made to test whether aggregation to the highest possible level is appropriate. Doubtless this comes from a desire to use multiple regression or related techniques to analyze the data. However, *this puts the statistical cart before the theoretical horse*” (Munck and Verkuilen 2002:22, my italics).

minimalist approach, we need not focus only on elections. We can focus on observable phenomena of many kinds, and if we choose to focus on elections, it must be for some reason beyond their mere observability.

As we saw above, Przeworski et al. are certain that the presence of non-coextensive components forces us to simply pick one of them to make definitional and treat others as “hypothetical conditions under which the selected feature is satisfied” (2019:4). The distorting effects of this approach should now be apparent. By selecting elections as the essential component, the authors exclude all other covariates of democracy from the possibility of essential status, and by so doing diminish them as objects of interest for the social-scientific study of democracy. For these reasons, they are led to entangle themselves in contradictions by arguing both that the covariates of democracy are important dependent variables that an election-based construct will enable them to study, and that they are simultaneously mere surface perturbations caused by the underlying phenomenon of electoral competition.²²

In another example of this contradiction, Przeworski et al. (2000) insist

²²For example, we might be inclined to include the rule of law as a definitional element of democracy, but Przeworski argues that doing so would a) prevent us from investigating the relationship between the rule of law and democracy, and b) force us to investigate powerful actors’ opaque reasons for compliance. However, he then explains that this apparently independent criterion is reducible to elections anyway. As he puts it, “whether politicians do or do not comply with the instructions of constitutional justices is a contingent outcome of their electoral incentives” (2019:6). Because compliance is a function of electoral incentives, any apparent “rule of law” is really traceable back to an electoral mechanism, because politicians obey judicial rulings only when such obedience is in their electoral interest.

that democracy requires governmental responsibility to voters (15), but then go on to say that ‘responsibility’ and inchoate concepts like it ought not to be core definitional features of a technical concept of democracy (33).²³ We can see the authors straining to satisfy our intuitions regarding the background concept ‘democracy’ while simultaneously suppressing aspects of that background concept that do not seem sufficiently observable or objective to pass scientific muster. If we cannot measure accountability objectively, runs the thinking, it must be excluded from our definition on methodological grounds, but since this would cause our readers’ understandings of democracy and our own to come apart dramatically, we will keep them onside by arguing that the background concept never included accountability in the first place. This is conceptual reengineering of the background concept to accord with the authors’ stipulated technical concept, which was itself stipulated on methodological rather than conceptual grounds. Whatever we may think of this move, it clearly creates difficulty for these authors in communicating and discussing their findings with researchers employing the unmodified background concept.

As we have seen, Przeworski et al. give an effective argument for focusing on observable characteristics. But this does not justify a minimalist concep-

²³We are told that “governmental responsibility either directly to voters or to a parliament elected by them is a defining feature of democracy” (Przeworski et al. 2000:15), but then we learn that “the very notion of “responsiveness” or “accountability” is muddled, and... probably only some otherwise democratic governments are “accountable” in any intuitive sense of this term,” leading to the conclusion that “we do not think that ‘accountability,’ ‘responsibility,’ ‘responsiveness,’ or ‘representation’ should be treated as definitional features of democracy. (Przeworski et al. 2000:33).

tualization. It may be that we wish to employ an “enriched” definition, but that we nevertheless seek out observable data on ‘popular control’ or ‘legislative effectiveness’. The statistical cart need not drive the theoretical horse. While science requires precision, it does not require monism. Przeworski et al.’s single-minded devotion to conceptual parsimony has led them to a conceptualization that cannot accomplish the work they ask of it. Although conceptual parsimony is an important desideratum, it must be set alongside other desiderata for research, including the need to communicate our results to others.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have used a particularly egregious example of hasty conceptualization to illustrate the negative downstream consequences of failing to recognize conceptual choices. To this end, I have identified the tacit desideratum of conceptual choice underpinning an influential instance of conceptualization. I have called this conceptual parsimony: the belief that our concepts should have only as much content as is required by our research goals. In addition, I have argued that this desideratum ought to be supplemented by the additional goal of remaining in dialogue with other researchers, implying that any methodological gains from a change in topic ought to be balanced against the concomitant reduction in our ability to communicate with others about the research subject. As we have seen, conflation of the conceptual-

ization and operationalization processes led the authors to try to eliminate unobservable characteristics from their stipulated technical definition, which forced them to adopt a definition of democracy radically at variance with the intuitions elicited by the background concept. To defend this unusual conceptualization, the authors then derive general principles of conceptualization (the ‘minimalist’ approach) from the single case of democracy. I have shown that on closer inspection, these principles of conceptualization are unwarranted. In addition, it is unclear why a minimalist conceptual form would be necessary to meet the authors’ stated desideratum of allowing for maximum independent variation of the correlates of democracy.²⁴ Finally, I have shown that even on a minimalist conception of democracy, the authors’ stated reasons for privileging elections (their procedural and observable nature) need not lead us to their conclusion, and could be construed to support a wide range of “minimal” conceptual content.

Adcock and Collier (1999) recommend that scholars “self-consciously recognize their conceptual decisions as real choices” (562). Przeworski et al. do not reach this standard. Their caustic treatment of scholars who choose to employ gradations in their conceptualizations (dismissals of their views as “ludicrous” or “confused” (57)) is strong evidence that their choice of

²⁴Specifically, it is unclear why a non-minimalist definition could not meet this criterion. In terms of holding a single definitional component constant, we might imagine choosing “popular rule” and making an equally minimalist argument for its unique importance. The difference, of course, is that such a definition would be difficult to operationalize. It is a particularly striking coincidence that Przeworski et al.’s conceptual reflections led them to elevate precisely that definitional component (elections) on which political scientists have gathered the most data.

conceptual content is not adopted tentatively with respect to a particular research question but rather held dogmatically in the manner of a prejudice. This impression is reinforced by the hasty conceptual treatment of democracy in Przeworski's other work (1999, 2019).²⁵ The slippage occurs when Przeworski et al. define the concept of democracy in the terms most congenial to their own research, but then adopt this definition as a kind of Archimedean fulcrum, using it to criticize the stipulated technical concepts proposed by other researchers not as inappropriate for their research goals but as wrong absolutely. In short, they appear to have mistaken their stipulated technical concept for the background concept itself. This process, known as conceptual reification,²⁶ is not uncommon in social science, but it is striking to see it exemplified so clearly in such an oft-cited work (6,500 citations as of May 2020). This paper reinforces the need for clear thinking about concepts, and for an explicit distinction between the conceptualization and operationalization processes in research design.

²⁵Briefly, he asserts that the background concept 'democracy' has exactly the same features as the technical concept set out in Przeworski et al. 2000 (2019:3-4).

²⁶Compare Whitehead's "fallacy of misplaced correctness" (1925:58).

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