

Measuring Regimes:

A Comparison of the Polity Set, the Democracy Index and the Failed State Index

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Modern political science relies increasingly on large statistical data sets. It is often difficult, however, to objectively measure or quantify information critical to political science models, such as regime type. By isolating specific elements of government (i.e. democracy indicators or autocracy indicators), scales like the Polity IV data set and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) “Democracy Index” can generate a democracy “score” for any regime. The second logical step with this information is to list nations in a hierarchy of regimes from most perfect democracy to most complete autocracy. By looking at completely different factors, *Foreign Policy* magazine can construct another hierarchy with similar results, called “The Failed States Index.” However, hierarchies are potentially misleading, and not useful for academic analysis. Likewise, generic indices may aggregate unnecessary data which should not affect an experiment, and thus compromise the accuracy of the results. Instead, political scientists should take care to construct models which use data restricted to that which is pertinent to the experiment.

Classification Schemes

One major academic effort to classify nations as specific regime types is the Polity IV data set, which was most recently published in 2007. According to the Polity Project’s website¹,

The Polity conceptual scheme is unique in that it examines *concomitant qualities of democratic and autocratic authority* in governing institutions, rather than discreet and mutually exclusive forms of governance. This perspective envisions a spectrum of governing authority that spans from *fully*

¹ <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>

institutionalized autocracies through mixed, or incoherent, authority regimes
(termed "anocracies") to *fully institutionalized democracies*.

The page then goes on to describe Polity's 21 point grading system, giving each nation a grade between -10 and 10. This score is based on six points of analysis which measure a state's "executive recruitment, constraints on executive authority, and political competition." It is organized into several formats, all of which require an extensive, well-documented user manual in order to comprehend and interpret correctly (Marshall, Jagers, 2007). None of these formats, however, list the evaluated governments in a comprehensive hierarchy: the one compiled data set opts instead to list the nations alphabetically.

In contrast to the Polity project, The EIU annually publishes a "Democracy Index" which uses a much longer survey for establishing each nation's respective democracy score. The sixty-question survey is composed of a combination of simple yes/no questions and yes/no with an ambiguous intermediary option. The ultimate result of the survey is a simple value between 0 and 10, and a corresponding location on the comprehensive list of nations whose populations exceed 500,000. The EIU then separates "full democracies," "flawed democracies," "hybrid regimes," and "autocracies" (Kekic 2007) in a classification system similar to Polity IV's.

Foreign Policy magazine annually compiles a "Failed State Index," which, unlike the Polity data set and Democracy Index, evaluates only the sixty least stable nations, with a larger data set encompassing the entire world in a color-coded map with five categories:

“most stable,” “stable,” “borderline,” “in danger,” and “critical.” Not surprisingly, Western Europe and North America fall entirely into the “stable” and “most stable” categories, while vast expanses of Asia, Africa, and Latin America make up the more concerning classifications. The Failed State Index looks at twelve fundamentally pessimistic risk factors for *impending state failure* on a ten-point scale (*Foreign Policy*, 2007), a departure from the more neutral-to-optimistic approach of the Polity set and the Democracy Index. These factors share no resemblance to the factors evaluated by either the Polity set or Democracy Index, and yet generate a list which is strikingly similar to (though not exactly the same as) the bottom of the Democracy Index.

The Problem with Hierarchies

Hierarchical listings can create an artificial sense of security in the belief that one nation may be “more democratic” than another, by relying on factors which may be outside the scope of the model. For instance, a political scientist comparing the effects of elections on government-funded media should look at policies that have a direct effect on elections. The overall score from the Democracy Index would be inappropriate, because the Democracy index considers both factors which have a direct effect on elections, such as freedom of speech, and factors which often coincide with but generally do not directly affect elections (such as an independent judiciary or market capitalism). The hierarchical listing might lull the researcher into evaluating only full and flawed democracies, and discounting countries which hold regular elections but do not meet the specifications to merit a spot amongst the democracies in the Democracy index. Iran, for example, holds democratic elections for its President and legislature (CIA 2009), but sits near the bottom

of the Democracy index in the “Authoritarian regimes” category (Kekic 2007). This oversight could substantively slant the results of the study toward Western media outlets, and cause the researcher to miss the potentially more interesting and valid insights.

Case: A Predictably Failed State

The 2007 Polity IV country sheet² addressing North Korea scores the regime a -9, (with a score of -10 indicating the most autocratic). The Democracy Index rates North Korea the least democratic nation in the world. Neither of these evaluations is terribly surprising, but the Failed State Index does provide an interesting element of variability: North Korea isn't the top failed state. In fact, *it isn't even one of the top ten failed states*. The correspondence in locations on the respective scales is subject to the idiosyncrasies both of the individual regime and the scale. In the case of North Korea, the anomaly occurred because of border guarding. Human migration is one of the twelve factors the Failed State Index measures, and North Korea scores the lowest of any country on the list (*Foreign Policy* 2007), probably because of the strong border guard which prevents many discontented North Koreans from crossing the northern border into China or through the DMZ into the South (CIA 2009). This extremely low score offsets North Korea's other very high scores, making it appear to be more stable than it probably is. Not only does this demonstrate that hierarchical arrangements can mislead, but it also lends credence to another criticism: elements of analysis in an index like The Failed State Index or

² Because 2007 was the latest year in which updated Polity information was made available, I used the 2007 Failed State Index and Democracy Index to assure the evaluations would be based on the same anecdotal recent histories.

Democracy Index can be either wrong or misleading, especially when they are outside the scope of an experiment.

The Problem with the Polity Set

The Polity IV scale does not provide a hierarchical listing of nations, but this does not mean it avoids all potential pitfalls. Casper and Tufis (2003) applied statistical analysis to several democracy indices (including Polity IV), finding that using different indices to run the same experiment will often yield disagreeing results. This indicates that some element of the data set-construction in many (if not all) of the indices is empirically flawed, despite the fact that a hierarchical listing of these indices will often be very similar, if not virtually identical. But the hierarchy problem is not the end of the Polity set's ills.

Gleditsch and Ward (1997) discuss the dangers of trusting the Polity data outright. Polity IV is a minimalist index, seeking to limit the number of factors evaluated to the fewest needed in order to sufficiently distinguish democracies and autocracies. They contend that Polity's minimalism effectively restrict the Polity set's classifications to nations which do not adequately reflect the regime types the Polity score indicates. Specifically, Gleditsch and Ward state that according to Polity IV's measurement, democracy "is fundamentally a reflection of decisional constraints on the chief executive." Since the hallmark of democracy is not the behavior of (or constraints thereupon) the executive but the ability of the people to select their government in free and fair elections, the Polity IV data have immense potential to mislead.

In another analysis of several democracy indexes, Munck and Verkuilen (2002) briefly discuss the dichotomy between maximalist and minimalist index construction. They argue that Polity overlooks the importance of *participation* in addition to the *competition* in democracy. Interestingly, the authors of Polity responded directly to Munck and Verkuilen, claiming that the scale does, in fact, compensate for both elements of democracy. They claim the participation segment is coded into their element “Competitiveness of participation,” which helps to account for the complexity of participation involving unquantifiable components (Marshall, et al. 1999).

Unfortunately, Munck and Verkuilen look exclusively at academically-generated democracy indexes, and thus miss the fact that indexes outside the academy may tend toward the maximalist definition. The Democracy Index, with its 60 question survey, is a perfect example of this. By exploring many elements of democratic societies, the Democracy Index invests excessive and unnecessary data into the calculus, diluting the value of useful data points, and tainting the index for any model which would be unaffected in reality by any issue addressed in the survey. Likewise the Failed State Index tends toward the maximalist end of the spectrum, by looking at various factors which indicate impending or current state failure, but with a much smaller question set.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Failed State Index and Democracy Index cater to audiences beyond those in academia, and thus do not require the rigorous standards of objectivity for their respective data. They are, thus, of little use in academic research. However, they are

useful tools for the dissemination of information regarding current international affairs. A hierarchical listing of states helps to put international status into perspective. For this reason, The Democracy Index and Failed State Index need not seriously explore the insufficiencies or possible pitfalls in their methodologies. Political scientists, on the other hand, need to be held to a higher standard of academic rigor. Instead of seeking to recklessly apply aggregate data from indices like Polity, researchers devise models which minimize inquires about the qualities of a state which will affect the outcome of the experiment where such factors play no such substantive role in reality.

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