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What Is Democracy?

In 1996, five years after Kazakhstan broke away from the crumbling Soviet Union, Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev had his counselors draft a new constitution. A nationwide referendum for its approval received overwhelming support. The new constitution's very first article declares that:

1. The Republic of Kazakstan [sic] proclaims itself a democratic, secular, legal and social state whose highest values are an individual, his life, rights and freedoms.
2. The fundamental principles of the activity of the Republic are public concord and political stability, economic development for the benefit of all the nation; Kazakstan patriotism and resolution of the most important issues of the affairs of state by democratic methods including voting at an all-nation referendum or in the Parliament. (Kazakh Constitution 2006)

That prominent mention of “public concord and political stability” calls up the image of a vigorously vigilant ruler rather than a standoffish state. Nevertheless, the constitution explicitly calls Kazakhstan a democracy.

Outside observers dispute Kazakhstan's claim. The New York-based democracy-monitoring organization Freedom House annually assigns every recognized country in the world ratings from 1 (high) to 7 (low) on both political rights and civil liberties (Gastil 1991). Box 1-1 sums up the Freedom House criteria. They cover a wide range of citizen's rights and liberties, from institutionalized opposition to personal freedom. In 2005, the Freedom House report gave Kazakhstan a 6 (very low) on political

BOX 1-1. Freedom House Checklist for Political Rights and Civil Liberties
(Adapted from Karatnycky 2000: 583–585.)

Political Rights

1. Is the head of state and/or head of government or other chief authority elected through free and fair elections?
2. Are the legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?
3. Are there fair electoral laws, equal campaigning opportunities, fair polling, and honest tabulations of ballots?
4. Are the voters able to endow their freely elected representatives with real power?
5. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice and is the system open to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?
6. Is there a significant opposition vote, de facto opposition power, and a realistic possibility for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?
7. Are the people free from domination by the military, foreign powers, totalitarian parties, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group?
8. Do cultural, ethnic, religious, and other minority groups have reasonable self-determination, self-government, autonomy, or participation through informal consensus in the decision-making process?
9. (Discretionary) In traditional monarchies that have no parties or electoral process, does the system provide for consultation with the people, encourage discussion of policy, and allow the right to petition the ruler?
10. (Discretionary) Is the government or occupying power deliberately changing the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a culture or tip the political balance in favor of another group?

Civil Liberties

1. Is there freedom of assembly, demonstration, and open public discussion?
2. Is there freedom of political or quasi-political organization, including political parties, civic organizations, ad hoc issue groups, and so on?
3. Are there free trade unions and peasant organizations or equivalents and is there effective collective bargaining? Are there free professional and other private organizations?
4. Is there an independent judiciary?

5. Does the rule of law prevail in civil and criminal matters? Is the population treated equally under the law? Are police under direct civilian control?
 6. Is there protection from political terror, unjustified imprisonment, exile, or torture, whether by groups that support or oppose the system? Is there freedom from war and insurgencies?
 7. Is there freedom from extreme government indifference and corruption?
 8. Is there open and free private discussion?
 9. Is there personal autonomy? Does the state control travel, choice of residence, or choice of employment? Is there freedom from indoctrination and excessive dependency on the state?
 10. Are property rights secure? Do citizens have the right to establish private businesses? Is private business activity unduly influenced by government officials, the security forces, or organized crime?
 11. Are there personal social freedoms, including gender equality, choice of marriage partners, and size of family?
 12. Is there equality of opportunity, including freedom from exploitation by or dependency on landlords, employers, union leaders, bureaucrats, or other types of obstacles to a share of legitimate economic gains?

rights and a 5 (almost as low) on civil liberties. It called the country “not free.” Here is how the country report began:

Political parties loyal to President Nursultan Nazarbayev continued to dominate parliament following the September 2004 legislative elections, which were criticized by international monitors for failing to meet basic democratic standards. Only one opposition deputy was elected, although he refused to take his seat in protest over the flawed nature of the polls. Meanwhile, the resignations of key senior officials raised questions about internal power struggles and dissension within Nazarbayev’s government. (Freedom House Kazakhstan 2005)

Although Kazakhstan’s involvement in the international economy and international politics kept Nazarbayev from the sort of blatant public authoritarianism adopted by his Central Asian neighbors (Schatz 2006), it did not keep him from ruthless manipulation of the governmental apparatus to his own advantage. In December 2005, Nazarbayev won a third six-year presidential term with a fantastic 91 percent of the vote. Whenever we see presidential candidates winning election – and especially reelection – by majorities greater than 75 percent, we should entertain the hypothesis that the regime is conducting sham elections.

First secretary of Kazakhstan's Communist Party under Soviet rule, Nazarbayev became Kazakh president as the country moved toward independence in 1991. From that point onward, he consolidated his autocratic power and his family's control over the country's expanding revenues from vast gas and oil deposits. As his clique grew richer, the rest of the country grew poorer (Olcott 2002, chapter 6). Nazarbayev tolerated no serious opposition from the press, civic associations, or political parties. He regularly jailed potential rivals, even among his political and economic collaborators, on charges of corruption, abuse of power, or immorality. Thugs said to work for the state frequently assaulted or murdered dissident politicians and journalists. (We begin to see why Nazarbayev's 1996 referendum did so well.)

All these conditions continued into 2006. In February of that year, a well-organized hit squad murdered Kazakh opposition leader Altynbeck Sarsenbaev and his driver-bodyguard. It soon turned out that five members of an elite unit within the intelligence service KNB (successor to the Soviet KGB) had kidnapped Sarsenbaev, and a former officer of the same unit had killed him. A top Senate administrative official admitted to organizing the abduction and murder, but opposition groups called him a scapegoat for members of even higher levels of the government. Oraz Jandosoy, collaborator with Sarsenbaev in the broad opposition front For a Just Kazakhstan (FJK) declared it "impossible" that the Senate official had acted on his own initiative. According to the news magazine *Economist*,

Instead, FJK says it believes the murder was ordered by senior government officials and has called on the interior ministry to broaden its investigation. It wants it to interrogate other public figures, including both the president's eldest daughter, Dariga Nazarbaeva, a member of parliament who had a legal dispute with Mr. Sarsenbaev, and her husband, Rakhat Aliev, who is first deputy foreign minister. Mr. Aliev has called the allegations "vile lies." (*Economist* 2006: 40)

Many Kazakhs see son-in-law and media magnate Aliev as Nazarbayev's hand-picked successor for the presidency. (As of 2006, Nazarbayev was scheduled to end his final presidential term in 2012, at the age of 71.) After the FJK staged a large, illegal demonstration in the Kazakh capital on 26 February to protest the government's inaction on the case, a court sentenced 11 FJK leaders to prison terms. Despite its sonorous self-description, Kazakhstan does not qualify as a democracy in any usual sense of the word.

For a revealing contrast with Kazakhstan, look at Jamaica. Jamaica's legislature adopted a constitution, approved by the United Kingdom's

government, shortly before the country became independent in 1962. Unlike the resounding start of Kazakhstan's constitution, the Jamaican document begins with numerous legal definitions, plus details of the transition from colony to independent state. Not until Chapter III – Fundamental Rights and Freedoms – does the constitution begin democracy talk. At that point it stipulates:

Whereas every person in Jamaica is entitled to the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual, that is to say, has the right, whatever his race, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed or sex, but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest, to each and all of the following, namely a. life, liberty, security of the person, the enjoyment of property and the protection of the law; b. freedom of conscience, of expression and of peaceful assembly and association; and c. respect for his private and family life. (Jamaica Constitution 2006)

Later sections describe familiar features in many of the world's democratic regimes: powerful parliament, executive branch responsible to parliament, competitive elections, and formally independent judiciary. Even as a British colony, Jamaica shone as an example of small-scale democracy (Sheller 2000). Jamaica still stands out from the bulk of parliamentary democracies (but resembles many other former British colonies) by having ultimate executive power formally vested in a governor-general appointed by and representing the British crown. On paper, at least, Jamaica looks more or less democratic.

Freedom House again raises some doubts. True, the 2005 country report (based on performance during the previous year) observed that "Citizens of Jamaica are able to change their government democratically" (Freedom House Jamaica 2005). It gave Jamaica a 2 (quite high) for political rights and a 3 (fairly high) for civil liberties while calling the country "free." But it attached a downward arrow to those ratings and began its description of the previous year's record in these terms:

Jamaica continued to suffer from rampant crime, high levels of unemployment, and a lack of investment in social development in 2004. The government's failure to fully extend the rule of law over its police force was evidenced by a five-year record of failure to successfully prosecute any officers on charges of extrajudicial killings, despite the force's having one of the highest per capita rates of police killings in the world. Meanwhile, a contentious succession struggle wracked the country's main opposition party. (Freedom House Jamaica 2005)

The report went on to describe voter fraud, widespread violence against women, police persecution of homosexuals, politically linked gangs, and criminality fueled by Jamaica's importance as a transit point for cocaine en route to the United States (see also Amnesty International 2001, Human

Rights Watch 2004). Jamaica's businesses suffer widespread protection rackets and property crimes. A 2002 United Nations survey of four hundred Jamaican firms found that two-thirds of all firms reported being victims of at least one property crime during 2001. Smaller firms suffered more from extortion, fraud, robbery, burglary, and arson than large ones (World Bank 2004: 89–90). If Jamaica qualifies as a democracy, it certainly counts as a troubled one.

How *should* we decide whether Kazakhstan, Jamaica, or any other country qualifies as a democracy? The question sounds innocent, but it has serious consequences. At stake is the political standing of regimes across the world, the quality of people's lives within those regimes, and the explanation of democratization.

1. **Political standing:** Far beyond Freedom House, power holders of all sorts must know whether they are dealing with democracies or other sorts of regimes. They must know because two centuries of international political experience tell them that democracies behave differently from the rest. They meet or break their commitments differently, make war differently, respond differently to external interventions, and so on. These differences should and do affect international relations: how alliances form, who wars against whom, which countries receive foreign investment or major loans, and so on.
2. **Quality of life:** Democracy is a good in itself, since to some degree it gives a regime's population collective power to determine its own fate. On the whole, it rescues ordinary people from both the tyranny and the mayhem that have prevailed in most political regimes. Under most circumstances, furthermore, it delivers better living conditions, at least when it comes to such matters as access to education, medical care, and legal protection.
3. **Explanation:** Democratization only occurs under rare social conditions, but has profound effects on the lives of citizens; how can we identify and explain both the development of democracy and its impacts on collective life? If people define democracy and democratization mistakenly, they will botch international relations, baffle explanation, and thereby reduce people's chances for better lives.

The book you are starting to read devotes much more attention to the third problem than to the first two. Although it gives some attention to international relations and treats democracy's substantive effects in passing, it concentrates on description and explanation: How and why do

democracies form? Why do they sometimes disappear? More generally, what causes whole countries to democratize or de-democratize? Taking the entire world and a great deal of human history into its scope, this book presents a systematic analysis of the processes that generate democratic regimes. It seeks to explain variation and change in the extent and character of democracy over large blocks of human experience. It asks what difference the extent and character of democracy make to the quality of public life. It takes democracy seriously.

Definitions of Democracy

To take democracy seriously, we must know what we are talking about. Developing a precise definition of democracy is particularly important when trying – as we are here – to describe and explain variation and change in the extent and character of democracy.

Observers of democracy and democratization generally choose, implicitly or explicitly, among four main types of definitions: constitutional, substantive, procedural, and process-oriented (Andrews and Chapman 1995, Collier and Levitsky 1997, Held 1996, Inkeles 1991, O'Donnell 1999, Ortega Ortiz 2001, Schmitter and Karl 1991). A *constitutional approach* concentrates on laws a regime enacts concerning political activity. Thus we can look across history and recognize differences among oligarchies, monarchies, republics, and a number of other types by means of contrasting legal arrangements. Within democracies, furthermore, we can distinguish between constitutional monarchies, presidential systems, and parliament-centered arrangements, not to mention such variations as federal versus unitary structures. For large historical comparisons, constitutional criteria have many advantages, especially the relative visibility of constitutional forms. As the cases of Kazakhstan and Jamaica show, however, large discrepancies between announced principles and daily practices often make constitutions misleading.

Substantive approaches focus on the conditions of life and politics a given regime promotes: Does this regime promote human welfare, individual freedom, security, equity, social equality, public deliberation, and peaceful conflict resolution? If so, we might be inclined to call it democratic regardless of how its constitution reads. Two troubles follow immediately, however, from any such definitional strategy. First, how do we handle tradeoffs among these estimable principles? If a given regime is desperately poor but its citizens enjoy rough equality, should we think of it as more democratic than a fairly prosperous but fiercely unequal regime?

Second, focusing on the possible outcomes of politics undercuts any effort to learn whether some political arrangements – including democracy – promote more desirable substantive outcomes than other political arrangements. What if we actually want to know under what conditions and how regimes promote human welfare, individual freedom, security, equity, social equality, public deliberation, and peaceful conflict resolution? Later we will discuss in depth how whether a regime is democratic affects the quality of public and private life.

Advocates of *procedural definitions* single out a narrow range of governmental practices to determine whether a regime qualifies as democratic. Most procedural observers center their attention on elections, asking whether genuinely competitive elections engaging large numbers of citizens regularly produce changes in governmental personnel and policy. If elections remain a non-competitive sham and an occasion for smashing governmental opponents as in Kazakhstan, procedural analysts reject them as criteria for democracy. But if they actually cause significant governmental changes, they signal the procedural presence of democracy. (In principle one could add or substitute other consultative procedures such as referenda, recall, petition, and even opinion polls, but in practice procedural analysts focus overwhelmingly on elections.)

Freedom House evaluations incorporate some substantive judgments about the extent to which a given country's citizens enjoy political rights and civil liberties. But when it comes to judging whether a country is an "electoral democracy," Freedom House looks for mainly procedural elements:

1. A competitive, multiparty political system
2. Universal adult suffrage for all citizens (with exceptions for restrictions that states may legitimately place on citizens for criminal offenses)
3. Regularly contested elections conducted in conditions of ballot secrecy, reasonable ballot security, and in the absence of massive voter fraud that yields results that are unrepresentative of the public will
4. Significant public access of major political parties to the electorate through the media and through generally open political campaigning (Piano and Puddington 2004: 716)

According to these criteria, in 2004 Kazakhstan failed to qualify procedurally as an electoral democracy, but Jamaica, despite its documented assaults on democratic freedoms, made the grade. Here, then, is the trouble with procedural definitions of democracy, democratization, and de-democratization: despite their crisp convenience, they work with an extremely thin conception of the political processes involved.

What Is Democracy?

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Process-oriented approaches to democracy differ significantly from constitutional, substantive, and procedural accounts. They identify some minimum set of processes that must be continuously in motion for a situation to qualify as democratic. In a classic statement, Robert Dahl stipulates five process-oriented criteria for democracy. Speaking first of how they might work in a voluntary association, he proposes:

Effective participation. Before a policy is adopted by the association, all the members must have equal and effective opportunities for making their views known to the other members as to what the policy should be.

Voting equality. When the moment arrives at which the decision about the policy will finally be made, every member must have an equal and effective opportunity to vote, and all votes must be counted as equal.

Enlightened understanding. Within reasonable limits as to time, each member must have equal and effective opportunities for learning about the relevant alternative policies and their likely consequences.

Control of the agenda. The members must have the exclusive opportunity to decide how and, if they choose, what matters are to be placed on the agenda. Thus the democratic process required by the three preceding criteria is never closed. The policies of the association are always open to change by the members, if they so choose.

Inclusion of adults. All, or at any rate most, adult permanent residents should have the full rights of citizens that are implied by the first four criteria. Before the twentieth century this criterion was unacceptable to most advocates of democracy. (Dahl 1998: 37–38)

The final standard – inclusion of adults – ironically rules out many cases that political philosophers have regularly taken as great historical models for democracy: Greek and Roman polities, Viking crews, village assemblies, and some city-states. All of them built their political deliberations by means of massive exclusion, most notably of women, slaves, and paupers. Inclusion of all (or almost all) adults basically restricts political democracy to the last few centuries.

Notice how Dahl's criteria differ from constitutional, substantive, and procedural standards for democracy. Although those of us who have attended endless meetings of voluntary associations can easily imagine the bylaws of such an association, Dahl himself specifies no constitutional forms or provisions. He carefully avoids building social prerequisites or consequences into the definition; even "enlightened understanding" refers to experience within the organization rather than prerequisites or consequences. Finally, Dahl's criteria do include the procedure of equal voting

with equal counts, but the list as a whole describes how the association works, not what techniques it adopts to accomplish its goals. It describes an interlocking set of political processes.

When Dahl moves from local associations to national regimes, he holds on to his process-oriented insights, but shifts to talk of institutions. Institutions, for Dahl, consist of practices that endure. The sort of regime that Dahl calls a “polyarchal democracy” installs six distinctive institutions: elected officials; free, fair, and frequent elections; freedom of expression; alternative sources of information; associational autonomy; and inclusive citizenship (Dahl 1998: 85, Dahl 2005: 188–189). Once again, the procedure of voting appears on the list. But taken together Dahl’s criteria for polyarchal democracy describe a working process, a series of regularized interactions among citizens and officials. These go far beyond the usual procedural standards.

Yet there is a catch. Basically, Dahl provides us with a static yes-no checklist: if a regime operates all six institutions, it counts as a democracy. If it lacks any of them, or some of them aren’t really working, it doesn’t count as a democracy. For an annual count of which regimes are in or out, such an approach can do the job even if critics raise questions about whether elections in such places as Jamaica are free and fair. Suppose, however, that we want to use process-oriented standards more ambitiously. We do not want merely to count the democratic house at a single point in time. Instead, we want to do two more demanding things: first, to compare regimes with regard to how democratic they are; second, to follow individual regimes through time, observing when and how they become more or less democratic.

Like Freedom House raters of relative political rights and civil liberties, we can reasonably ask whether some regimes rank higher or lower than others, if only to see whether those rankings correlate with other factors such as national wealth, population size, recency of independence, or geographic location. If we want insight into causes and effects of democratization or de-democratization, we have no choice but to recognize them as continuous processes rather than simple steps across a threshold in one direction or the other. In short, for purposes of comparison and explanation, we must move from a yes-no checklist to a list of crucial variables.

Most of Dahl’s standard democratic institutions – elected officials; free, fair, and frequent elections; freedom of expression; alternative sources of information; associational autonomy; and inclusive citizenship – lend themselves awkwardly to comparison and explanation. We might, of course, ask *how* free, fair, and frequent elections are, and so on down