

Lindberg , Daniel Pemstein , Brigitte Seim , Svend-Erik Skaaning , Jan Teorell

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Introduction*The Story of Varieties of Democracy**

Varieties of Democracy, or “V-Dem,” is a global research project producing new measures of hundreds of attributes of democracy as far back as 1789 for many countries and for almost all countries around the world from 1900 to the present. This book is a reference guide for anyone who wants to use V-Dem data wisely. It provides full information about the concepts that the data measure, what we know about the validity and reliability of the data, what they reveal about the structure of democracy and the general trends in democratization over the past 229 years, and why this explosion of information is likely to raise the standards for causal inferences in democratization research. The V-Dem team and others are already producing a series of publications and papers leveraging the distinctive strengths of these new data, so this book also calls attention to some of those first fruits.

V-Dem draws on expertise and a network of several thousand scholars across almost every country on earth to examine the nature, causes, and consequences of democracy. It radically alters the way scholars can address these questions. There has always been a severe trade-off between providing detailed, rich, nuanced evidence about a few countries based on thick concepts and generalizing about many countries with thinly defined models.¹ V-Dem makes this trade-off much less severe because V-Dem data are fine grained: they

* The primary authors of this chapter were Michael Coppedge and Staffan I. Lindberg, with contributions from Carl Henrik Knutsen.

¹ Well-known examples of qualitative studies include Collier and Collier (1991), Diamond et al. (1989), Luebbert (1987), O'Donnell et al. (1986), Rueschemeyer et al. (1992), and innumerable case studies. Important quantitative contributions include Jackman (1973), Hannan and Carroll (1981), Bollen and Jackman (1985), Hadenius (1992), Burkhart and Lewis-Beck (1994), Przeworski and Limongi (1997), Ross (2001), Gleditsch and Ward (2006), Finkel et al. (2007), and Teorell (2010). Some scholars have also used multiple methods, fleshing out regressions with case studies or testing the conclusions of small-*N* research quantitatively in large samples (e.g., Lieberman 2005).

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include hundreds of specific indicators typically measuring differences of degree that collectively depict hundreds of qualitative differences, and at the same time, the data rate most countries back to 1900 or – as is the case for 91 polities, including all large, sovereign states at the time – the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. They therefore capture both qualitative and quantitative distinctions without sacrificing geographic or historical scope. V-Dem data thus make it possible to test general hypotheses concerning democracy quantitatively without neglecting crucial qualitative distinctions.

V-Dem is distinctive in three other respects as well. First, we recognize and respect multiple conceptions of democracy that have long and distinguished intellectual pedigrees. We therefore provide five indices of democracy – and dozens of indices of separate components of these – that are specifically designed to map onto the most prevalent theories of democracy. The core index measures electoral democracy as “polyarchy,” the seminal concept defined by Robert Dahl (1971, 1989, 1998), and its seven core constitutive components.² The other four indices measure liberal, deliberative, participatory, and egalitarian democracy. A second distinctive feature is captured by the V-Dem slogan, “Global standards, local knowledge”: we rely on more than 3000 academics and other experts to code countries. Of these, more than 64 percent of the Country Experts are nationals of or residents in the countries they code. In a real sense, each country’s experts rate their own country, while at the same time, our broad concepts and complex methods to blend in-country and cross-national ratings help ensure international comparability. Finally, V-Dem is one of the very few democracy measurement programs that takes measurement error seriously. We do not pretend to have measured the attributes of democracy without error. Rather, we estimate how certain we can be about each data point, and we make this information freely available to the public.

The project is of unprecedented scope in the social sciences. The data set, which contains more than 27 million observations and continues to grow, is the world’s largest data set on democracy, human rights, and civil liberties. Behind the data set is a complex research infrastructure and many years of effort by a large organization comprising (past and present) 6 Principal Investigators, 19 Project Managers, 19 Postdoctoral Research Fellows and Research Associates, 7 Program and Data Managers, many graduate and undergraduate research assistants, 37 past and present Regional Managers, more than 160 Country Coordinators, and more than 3200 Country Experts. About 20 of these people, and the data research infrastructure, are based at the V-Dem Institute at the

² In *Democracy and Its Critics*, Dahl’s (1989) short list of the institutions necessary for polyarchy was elected officials, free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, the right to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative [sources of] information, and associational autonomy (222). In *On Democracy* (Dahl 1998), he treated the right to run for office as an implicit part of “free, fair, and [now] frequent elections.” He also expanded inclusive suffrage into “inclusive citizenship” (85).

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University of Gothenburg, which has become the project's de facto headquarters; the rest are dispersed all over the world.

In the early years of V-Dem, the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame was one of the two founding institutions and institutional homes for the project. It was initially responsible for data collection in the Western Hemisphere, hosted workshops, and funded many students who worked on the project, as well as one of the project coordinators. In addition, the Center for Research Computing at Notre Dame developed the research database and the web interfaces that were used from 2011 to fall 2014. As the project grew, the V-Dem Institute in Gothenburg progressively assumed responsibility for these functions and became, in effect, the headquarters for the project. Recognizing the shifting roles, in 2018, the Kellogg Institute formalized its current role as the V-Dem Regional Center in North America, which supports research projects using V-Dem data and hosts speakers and occasional conferences and workshops. V-Dem regional centers had already been established in Estonia for Eastern Europe and Russia, in Kyrgyzstan for Central Asia, in Lusaka for southern Africa, and in Portugal for Southern Europe. Our networks of Regional Managers and Country Coordinators in places like Burkina Faso, Japan, Colombia, Liberia, Mozambique, the Philippines, and South Africa are also currently working to create additional regional centers.

We believe that many users of the data will be curious about how a project of this scale came together and why it has succeeded. This chapter tells that story. In the beginning, we expected that the project could be accomplished over two to three years with a few research assistants, Excel spreadsheets, and less than \$1 million. This was a miscalculation. We ended up having to create a complex research infrastructure consisting of several custom-designed web interfaces for data collection, a complex relational database for handling data, an administrative database for managing thousands of coders and hundreds of country questionnaires, a website for both internal use and social media, a custom-designed Bayesian item response theory (IRT) measurement model, many specially designed data quality control and cleaning protocols, and a V-Dem Institute with specially trained Program and Data Managers with assistants. We spent more than \$4.5 million between 2010 and 2016 to make this happen, plus an additional \$0.5 million for Historical V-Dem 2015–17, not counting the thousands of working hours invested by Principal Investigators, Project Managers, and associated researchers supported by their own universities.

Five main factors were responsible for V-Dem's success: timing, inclusion, deliberation, administrative centralization, and fund-raising. First, planning for V-Dem began at a time when both social scientists and practitioners were realizing that they needed better democracy measures. This made it possible to recruit collaborators and find funding. Second, the leaders of the project were always eager to expand the team to acquire whatever expertise they lacked and share credit with everyone who contributed. Third, the project leaders practiced

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an intensely deliberative decision-making style to ensure that all points of view were consulted and only decisions that won wide acceptance were adopted. Fourth, centralizing the execution of the agreed-upon tasks helped tremendously by streamlining processes and promoting standardization, documentation, professionalization, and coordination of a large number of intricate steps. Finally, successful fund-raising from a mix of both research foundations and bilateral and multilateral organizations has been critical.

1.1 TIMING: V-DEM EMERGED TO ADDRESS THE NEED FOR BETTER MEASURES OF DEMOCRACY

The planning for V-Dem began in 2007. Before that time, there were already hundreds of measures of democracy or aspects of democracy. Two of them – the Polity IV Index and Freedom House ratings of political rights and civil liberties – were frequently used by political scientists and practitioners who needed broad measures of democracy.³ However, practitioners such as national development agencies, international organizations, and NGOs needed metrics for assessing the effectiveness of their democracy and governance programs, which typically target specific institutions, such as elections, the courts, legislatures, political parties, and civil society organizations. Among practitioners and government representatives outside the US, and especially in parts of the Global South, there was also some wariness about whether these measures were biased toward a US-centric understanding of democracy because they have been mostly or completely funded by US government agencies.

Social scientists also needed finer-grained measures of democracy. After several decades of quantitative research on democracy, social scientists had found several robust empirical relationships, most famously the positive association between democracy and per capita income and the “democratic peace” – the idea that democracies do not make war against other democracies. However, there were unresolved debates about why these associations existed. Does high income cause democratization (Boix and Stokes 2003)? Are rich democracies more likely to survive (Przeworski et al. 2000)? Or, is the income–democracy relationship a spurious one (Acemoglu et al. 2008)? Does democracy promote economic growth (Gerring et al. 2005)? Does democracy make states less war prone, or is the democratic peace a by-product of military alliances, trade, or other international ties (Reiter 2017)? One way to resolve such debates is to test competing hypotheses about the specific causal mechanisms that link these phenomena; but without measures of specific attributes of democracy, there was no way to perform such tests in large samples (Seawright 2007). And unlike practitioners, who tended to be interested mostly in the present and recent past, researchers needed very large

³ See Chapter 6 for a more complete inventory of other democracy measures.

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samples, preferably all countries, going back into history as far as possible. In addition, both practitioners and social scientists needed more transparency about how data are generated and how reliably they measure what they purport to measure (Munck and Verkuilen 2002; Trier and Jackman 2008).

The limitations of Freedom House, Polity, and other measures of democracy were widely known and often discussed among social scientists and between social scientists and practitioners. There were some efforts to produce better indices.⁴ Chapters 2 and 6 describe and evaluate many of these. As the number of democracy measures proliferated, several scholars stepped forward to critique them.⁵ There were also many professional conferences and panels to address these issues.⁶

The surge of democracy measurement activity by many researchers makes it hard to pinpoint the beginning of V-Dem in an unambiguous way.⁷ However, a reasonable starting point is the beginning of sustained collaboration between researchers who are now among the leaders of the project. In this sense, the collaboration was sparked by 2006–7 National Research Council (NRC) consultations that concluded that no democracy indicators existed that were sufficiently fine grained and reliable to assess the impact of democracy-promotion programs. The NRC's thinking was summarized in its final report (which John Gerring coauthored): "Current aggregate national indicators of

⁴ Bollen (1993), Vanhanen (1990), Coppedge and Reinicke (1990), Hadenius (1992), Cingranelli and Richards (2004), Gasiorowski (1996), ACLP (1997), Bernhard et al. (2001), Mainwaring et al. (2001), Altman and Pérez-Liñán (2002), Reich (2002), UNDP (2004), Bowman et al. (2005), and Coppedge et al. (2008), to name a few.

⁵ For example, Beetham (1994), Collier and Levitsky (1997), Gleditsch and Ward (1997), Coppedge (1999), Bollen and Paxton (2000), Elkins (2000), Foweraker and Krznaric (2000), McHenry (2000), Beetham et al. (2001), Munck and Verkuilen (2002), Berg-Schlosser (2004), Diamond and Morlino (2005), and Hadenius and Teorell (2005).

⁶ Conference on Measuring Democracy, the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, May 1988; Workshop on Indicators of Progress toward Democracy and Improved Governance, sponsored by the National Research Council, Washington, DC, May 1991; Seminar on Assessing Progress toward Democracy and Good Governance, National Research Council, Washington, DC, April 1992; panel on Concepts and Causation, co-sponsored by the Committee on Conceptual and Terminological Analysis, at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta, September 1999; panel on Big Concepts and Fine-Grained Measurement at the 2000 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC; Methodological Foundations for the Statistical Compendium of the Report on Democratic Development in Latin America, UNDP Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, Inter-American Development Bank, and International IDEA, New York, NY, August 15–16, 2002; Calidad de la democracia y desarrollo humano en América Latina, sponsored by the Proyecto Estado de la Nación and the United Nations Development Program, San José, Costa Rica, February 1–2, 2002.

⁷ A possible demarcation is the conversation between Lindberg, Coppedge, Teorell, and Altman in Santiago, Chile, in 2003 during a workshop on democracy co-organized by Axel Hadenius and David Altman. This was the first conversation on this topic among several of the future leaders of the V-Dem team. That conference finished with the ambiguous but still powerful idea that something had to be done, even though it was several years before anything concrete materialized.

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democracy, such as Freedom House or Polity scores, are neither at the right level for identifying the impacts of particular USAID DG [democracy and governance] projects nor accurate and consistent enough to track modest or short-term movements of countries toward or away from greater levels of democracy.” The group therefore advocated “developing more transparent, objective, and widely accepted indicators of changes in democratic behavior and institutions at the sectoral level” (National Research Council 2008: 4). Following up on that conclusion, the NRC and USAID asked Gerring to convene a January 27–28, 2007, workshop at Boston University to discuss whether better democracy measurement would be feasible, and if so, how it could be done. In preparation for that workshop, Gerring wrote a think piece that became the first draft of V-Dem’s 2011 *Perspectives on Politics* article. Few of the workshop attendees⁸ became involved in V-Dem, but the day the conference ended, Gerring and Coppedge continued the discussion in person and via email in the next months as they edited Gerring’s paper. As a graduate student, Coppedge had worked as an assistant to Robert Dahl to produce a measure of polyarchy (Coppedge and Reinicke 1990) and had advocated measuring disaggregated components of democracy in order to understand its dimensions (Coppedge 1999, 2007; Coppedge et al. 2008). Almost without knowing it, the conversation shifted from a hypothetical “how would one go about this?” to something they were actually trying to do.

After a slow start refining the conceptual scheme in 2007–9, the project grew quickly. Gerring convened a second workshop at Boston University in May 2009, which included Staffan I. Lindberg and Jan Teorell, who had been part of the planning since fall 2007; and Svend-Erik Skaaning, Allen Hicken, Jeffrey Staton, and Daniel Pemstein – who had since joined the conversation – as well as Gerring and Coppedge.⁹ After the second workshop, Gerring, Coppedge, Lindberg, and Teorell constituted themselves as the Principal Investigators¹⁰ and proceeded to invite other researchers to join as “Project Managers,” who would bring a combination of thematic and regional expertise to the task of writing questions for an online survey of Country Experts. By the end of 2009, Michael Bernhard, Steven M. Fish, Allen Hicken, Kelly McMann, and Pamela Paxton had become Project Managers, and later David Altman, Adam Glynn, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Daniel Pemstein, Patrick Lindenfors, Steven Wilson, and Brigitte Seim were added.¹¹ There was a strong feeling

⁸ The political scientists there were Gerardo Munck, Nicholas van de Walle, Frederick Schaffer, Richard Snyder, and Jack Goldstone, in addition to Gerring and Coppedge.

⁹ Other participants in that workshop were Jørgen Elklit, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, José Antônio Cheibub, Steven Levitsky, Adil Najam, Strom Thacker, and Margaret Sarles.

¹⁰ In early 2016, Svend-Erik Skaaning replaced Jan Teorell as a Principal Investigator. Carl Henrik Knutsen joined the Principal Investigators Board in late 2017, and Jan Teorell rejoined at the same time, bringing the number of Principal Investigators to six.

¹¹ Four people made contributions as Project Managers before leaving the project: Holli Semetko, Drew Linzer, Megan Reif, and Matthew Kroenig.

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that this was an idea whose time had come. This feeling made busy leading scholars surprisingly eager to sign on as Project Managers; and later, helped persuade funders to support the project.

The project took off in mid-2010 with a pilot study generously supported by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which we named “Varieties of Democracy” in March 2011. With a few research assistants, Excel sheets, and lots of time volunteered by the core team of scholars, we managed to collect 450,000 data points covering two countries from six regions of the world. The pilot study results were presented at a workshop at University of Gothenburg on September 30, 2011, and won the first pledges of financial support for a full-scale project from the Canadian International Development Agency, its Danish counterpart DANIDA, the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the European Commission/DEVCO.

By January 2012, the measurement scheme and indicators were finalized, our first regular staff member Natalia Stepanova (now Operations and Outreach Manager) started, and data collection began in earnest. By the fall of 2012, we had set up an organization to collect data from most countries of the world. In fall of 2013, two years after the pilot study, data collection was complete for 100 countries, our database included some 10 million records, and we did our first serious validation exercise. We brought almost all of our Regional Managers (who helped identify Country Experts) from all over the world to Gothenburg for a week, and together with all Principal Investigators, Project Managers, and methodologists including the first two postdocs Eitan Tzelgov and Yi-ting Wang, the team inspected and evaluated these records. This important milestone led to the realization that we needed to incorporate Bayesian IRT modeling to achieve cross-country and over-time comparability. Early results were presented again at a conference on October 25, 2013, at the University of Gothenburg for a mix of donor, government, and international NGO representatives, as well as interested scholars and students. Our effort to bridge academic research and the world of practitioners has thus been an ongoing effort.

On April 14, 2014, data for 68 countries from 1900 to 2012 were released for online graphing and analysis and data for 19 additional countries followed on November 14, 2014. At the end of 2014, we had engaged with 2153 Country Experts from 163 countries. By this time, we had funds to do our first partial update covering 2013–14 for 60 countries, and by March 2015, we released the full data for 120 countries for online graphing and analysis.

We embargoed the first data set for less than a year, following conventional practices and also to give ourselves time to find and correct any mistakes. The team got the first version of the whole data set for internal use (version 3) only in April 2015. After a final year of intensive work, on January 4, 2016, all data for 172 countries (1900–2012) became available for download online, including coder-level data and updates

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through 2014 for 113 countries (version 5). On March 31, 2016, we released version 6 with updated data through 2015 for 76 countries, and on May 10, 2017, version 7 came out with the first full update and four countries added making a total of 177 countries with coverage from 1900 to 2016 and 16 million data points on democracy.

On April 30, 2018, version 8 was released, adding several new indicators, indices, and countries. One key addition to this version was the integration of “Historical V-Dem” data. With Historical V-Dem covering the years 1789–1920 (extending to 1920 rather than 1900 to ensure 20 years of overlap with “contemporary” V-Dem coding) for up to 91 countries, this implied extending the time series of about 200 V-Dem indicators and numerous indices back into the nineteenth and late eighteenth centuries. Historical V-Dem also added about 70 new indicators, for instance on features of the bureaucracy and the support coalitions of regimes, expanding the total number of V-Dem indicators to about 450. Finally, Historical V-Dem added several currently extinct polities, mainly preunification German and Italian states, thus bringing the total number of countries covered by V-Dem up to 201.

Work on Historical V-Dem had been going on in parallel with the processes described above, starting in 2013 with planning and discussions between Gerring, Knutsen, Skaaning, and Teorell. They soon reached out to scholars outside the current V-Dem team with particular expertise relevant for the historical data collection, namely Agnes Cornell and Daniel Ziblatt, who agreed to take part in the project. The point of departure for the “historical team” was the existing *V-Dem Codebook*, and the team held successive rounds of deliberation in order to identify which questions to omit, adjust in order to fit the historical context, or create for the historical survey. Pilot surveys were conducted on Denmark and Colombia in 2014. After revisions and obtaining funding, the expert coding started in December 2015. Simultaneously, RAs in numerous countries coded factual indicators, and the Historical V-Dem team was expanded with (in sequence) Haakon Gjerløw (PhD candidate), Tore Wig (Postdoc, later Associate Professor), Sirianne Dahlum (Researcher), and Luca J. Uberti (Researcher), all hired at the University of Oslo. Communication and coordination with other members of the V-Dem team at Gothenburg and elsewhere took place from the very beginning, and intensified as the project went along, concerning, for example, adaptation of the survey interface, data cleaning, vignette construction, integration of documentation such as the country units documents, and, adjustment of the measurement model to ensure cross-time comparability.

This collaborative effort culminated in V-Dem version 8, a data set covering 201 countries, 450 indicators, and with some time series extending from the year of the French Revolution to the present. By September 2018, users had downloaded the different versions of the V-Dem data set more than 70,000 times, the website had more than 150,000 unique users, and more than 40,000

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users from 208 countries and territories had used the online analysis tools. The demand for V-Dem's new democracy indicators and indices proved to be strong.

1.2 INCLUSION

A second key to the success of the project was a commitment to expand the team to include new leaders who could bring the kinds of expertise that V-Dem needed to do the job well. Most of the added political scientists had already been making important contributions that were relevant for measuring democracy, so the growing collaboration is best seen as the merging of many separate parallel efforts, in which each participant saw an opportunity to accomplish more through their combined efforts than he or she could accomplish alone.

1.2.1 Thematic Expertise

The need for expanded expertise first arose when the Principal Investigators were defining the components of democracy and beginning to write survey questions to measure them. It is impossible for one scholar to master all of the literature on every democratic institution and process. Writing a battery of survey questions on each topic required deep knowledge of specialized literatures. Gerring and Coppedge could claim knowledge of democratic theory in general and parties and elections in particular. Lindberg brought a deeper specialization in elections, clientelism, and regime change, and Teorell had worked on executives, corruption, participation, public administration, and regime change. This was a good start, but they were less familiar with several other crucial areas of democracy. They therefore reached out to Svend-Erik Skaaning, who had recently produced an index of civil liberties (Skaaning 2008); Allen Hicken, a leading authority on political parties in Southeast Asia and co-founder of the Constituency-Level Elections Archive; and Michael Bernhard, known for his work on civil society. Bernhard also shouldered the burden of developing questions on sovereignty, a novel topic in democracy measurement. Pamela Paxton, who had published seminal work in sociology on women's suffrage and democratization and compiled her own data set on suffrage, agreed to cover inclusion and symbolic representation. Jeffrey Staton, who was already busy producing measures of judicial independence, joined the project. An expert on the media in Western Europe, Holli Semetko, helped define the media concepts to measure before Coppedge assumed responsibility for this area. Steven Fish and Matthew Kroenig, who had just published *The Handbook of National Legislatures* (2009), were the obvious choices to work on legislatures. Similarly, Kelly McMann's *Economic Autonomy and Democracy* (2006) included a set of subnational democracy indicators that she developed, which prepared her well to take the lead on

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subnational government. David Altman's *Direct Democracy Worldwide* (2011) was forthcoming when we belatedly realized the need to include direct democracy. Finally, although several members of the team had experience with measurement methods, the Principal Investigators chose to recruit Daniel Pemstein, who brought cutting-edge methodological expertise in democracy measurement and Bayesian statistics; Adam Glynn, a statistician with expertise on causal inference in political science; Brigitte Seim, with expertise in designing and executing social science experiments; and finally Steven Wilson, a former chief technician in Silicon Valley who switched to earn a doctorate in political science, became responsible for the V-Dem IT infrastructure.¹²

Fortunately, an early sizable research grant from the Swedish Research Council also allowed us to recruit two postdoctoral Research Fellows already in 2013 – Eitan Tzelgov and Yi-ting Wang – with training in Bayesian statistics. They were later followed by other postdocs also at the V-Dem Institute in Gothenburg who continue to be incredibly important for the project's development overall but also in particular areas: Brigitte Seim with experiments and vignettes (2014–15) and also Constanza Petrarca in the same area (2016–18); Kyle Marquardt with Bayesian measurement modeling; Anna Lührmann with policy outreach, autocratization, and the annual Democracy Report (2015–19); Rachel Sigman with new egalitarian and other indices as well as collaborations with the World Bank (2015–17); Steven Wilson on reprogramming the IT infrastructure (2016–17); Sirianne Dahlum with outreach and policy-collaborations (2017–19); and Juraj Medzihorsky, Richard Morgan, Laura Maxwell, and Matthew Wilson, who work on the new subproject *Failing and Successful Sequences of Democracy* (FASDEM).

1.2.2 Geographic Expertise

The project also needed people with expertise on world regions, which was a consideration in the recruitment of Project Managers. The team therefore included experts on Western Europe (Skaaning, Teorell, and Semetko); Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Central Asia (Fish, Bernhard, Teorell, and McMann); Latin America (Altman, Coppedge, and Staton); Africa (Lindberg); and Asia (Hicken).¹³ Area expertise helped ensure that concepts and questions would be meaningful to experts in every part of the world while still capturing the essence of key democratic concepts. Fish also led the recruitment of an International Advisory Board consisting of 21 prominent democracy

¹² No separate Project Manager was found to cover either political equality or deliberation, so Gerring and Lindberg collaborated to define them, joined by Coppedge on deliberation. Drew Linzer, the first methodologist recruited, decided to work on other projects.

¹³ For more than a year, Megan Reif shared her expertise on the Middle East and North Africa.