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## Editorial

# Current trends and challenges in studies of democracy

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There is an urgent and important need to better understand how democracy works. The importance comes from the view that, as the preferred form of government by the Western world, democracy is not only how many nations self-govern, but also the most favoured political rule for countries transitioning from other forms of governance. The urgency comes from the fact that democracies, however defined and implemented, are being tested around the globe by a variety of internal and external challenges. Internally testing democracies are issues related to democracy promotion, transition and consolidation while current external tests to successful democratic functioning arise from issues related to inequality, refugee crises, and climate change. Given the need for practical information on how democracy best functions, there should be a renewed emphasis by social scientists on democracy studies.

Yet, studying democracy in action is challenging. One challenge has to do with the sheer volume of theoretical and empirical approaches designed to capture various aspects of what it means to think, behave and feel as a democratic person. This is evident in the growing number of articles, reports, policy briefs and related documents that employ different constructs under which democratic definitions are studied. Aside from very specific actions like campaigning for a politician or voting, there is little consensus about what constitutes democratic action. Some advocate for an expansive definition that includes studying all ways in which people act as citizens, including studies ranging from learning what are the everyday topics of conversation between people, to the utilization of social media to express opinions. In this expansive definitional view, democracy is best understood as a behaviour (civic engagement), skill (competencies) or attitude (civic-mindedness, democratic orientation).

Some promising scholarship focuses on democratic citizen orientations with scholarship from cross-sectional studies of support for democracy and public opinion polls. A number of large-scale international research initiatives have been launched to measure and track a variety of public attitudes toward democracy, from support for democratic principles and values to evaluations of democratic governance, and others. Among such measures are the World Values Survey (WVS), the European Values Survey, the New Democracies Barometers, and research from the Pew Research Center and the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). These and other initiatives have produced data on a number of public attitudes that are relevant for democracy, including how citizens evaluate and relate to democratic institutions in their societies, to what extent the public understand and adhere to democratic principles in their daily lives, what proportion of citizens support democracy as a form of governance, and related phenomena.

Other promising scholarship examines democracy from a human development perspective [1]. Despite a nearly universal commitment to uphold fundamental democratic principles and build and sustain democratic institutions, only modest progress has been made in assessing how democratization efforts have impacted children, their families, and the communities in which they live. The pace of this progress is again moderated, in part, by challenges in identifying meaningful measures of democracy. While questions like – Do democratization efforts really work? How have communities benefited from democratic reforms? – appear simple, democracy remains an extremely challenging topic to evaluate. To date, the best studies on democracy and young people come from the 1999 IEA Civic Education Study and the 2009 IEA Civic and Citizenship

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Education Study, which explored how countries prepare young people to undertake their role as citizens [2, 3, 4]. Another wave of data from 25 countries is expected in 2016.

Another challenge in cross-country comparison democracy studies is figuring out the role culture plays. Cross-country studies often ignore the localized context where the most important democratic decisions are made. Because democracy means not only different things to different people, but also different things in different places, understanding local context is the first step to learning the relationship of democracy to personal and collective behaviour.

If democracy is multi-locational, only measures that have been put in various spaces at different times will capture it. This raises important questions, the answers to which can have a profound influence over the democratization agenda. For instance, if democracy is culture-, contextually and developmentally-specific (the list could be expanded), are generic or universal measures of democratic progress even useful?

Taken together, these challenges reflect the need for a consistent theoretical approach that would reflect and embrace the multifaceted nature of democratically oriented citizens. The development of such theory can be achieved through “an interdisciplinary construction with an open-minded process of enquiry” [5]. Existing scholarship serves as a valuable foundation for exploring the strengths and weaknesses of democratic functioning as well as for developing innovative approaches to measuring democratic progress that are both methodologically sound and have meaningful practical implications. Just as democratization has gained popularity as a key theme in democracy studies, so has the idea that an evaluation of some sort needs to happen in order to validate a certain approach to enhancing understanding of democratic attitudes or to justify a new law or policy that would facilitate democratic consolidation.

Traditionally, democracy has been in the academic domain of political science, which has emphasized political structures rather than the everyday meaning of democracy for citizens. Within the psychological study of human behaviour, the most promising approach comes from developmental psychology, which has begun to look at democratic orientations of young people. Other disciplines in health and social studies have begun to look at the relationships of democracy to health and well-being. To be sure, progress can be made within each discipline, but the field of democracy studies would be best served by an interdisciplinary approach, one that takes and synthesizes the findings gathered from studies scattered across the disciplines and provides new insights. There are few areas of global concern more important than understanding how nations behave as a result of what citizens view as proper democratic action.

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