

POLITY IV, 1800-1999

Comments on Munck and Verkuilen

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Polity IV (which includes 161 countries for the period 1800-1999) represents the latest generation in the well-known Polity data series that was originally designed by Ted Robert Gurr, building on conceptual work by Harry Eckstein, and introduced in an article titled "Persistence and Change in Political Systems, 1800-1971" (Gurr, 1974; see also Eckstein & Gurr, 1975). The format of the Polity data set has been transformed over the past 30 years from its original focus on persistence and change in the polity as the unit of analysis (i.e., polity-case format) to its present focus on the state and changes in the institutional nature of its successive regimes (i.e., annual time-series, country-year format). The original Polity I was reestablished in the early 1990s through the efforts of an external team of researchers under the direction of Nils Petter Gleditsch, who developed an alternative version, Polity III_d (McLaughlin, Gates, Hegre, Gissinger, & Gleditsch, 1998). This new version has increased the accuracy and confidence of the data by reexamining the historical record and identifying and reporting the exact dates of polity changes. These enhancements have been incorporated in the recent Polity IV data series.

The foundational unit of analysis employed within this project is the polity, a subset of the class of "authority patterns." Authority patterns are composed of four clusters of dimensions, each of which involves at least one dimension and in several cases numerous subdimensions as well: (a) The influence cluster concerns those attempts made by rulers and ruled to influence each others' behavior as well as the aftereffects of those attempts

(Eckstein & Gurr, 1975, chap. 2); (b) the inequality cluster concerns the extent of the ruler's control over the ruled (Eckstein & Gurr 1975, chap. 3); (c) the structure and processes of direction cluster concerns the manner in which the rulers actually arrive at directions/directives (Eckstein & Gurr, 1975, chaps. 4 and 5); and (d) the boundary exchange cluster concerns the mechanism by which rulers are recruited (Eckstein & Gurr, 1975, chaps. 6). The most consistently used components in the polity project and the ones that are addressed most directly in the Munck and Verkuilen article concern Clusters 1 and 4.

The Polity IV indicator for democracy and autocracy is a composite score of different characteristics (see Table 1). Although Munck and Verkuilen mention the basic attributes in their Table 3, by failing to provide the underlying categories, they make it appear as if there were no logic behind the coding procedure; thus we provide them here. From the table, it is clear that different combinations capture distinct authority structures, being sensitive to the many forms that political systems might take. Different scholars tend to use the indicators in different ways; some use the summary democracy and autocracy indicators, and others have used individual components (e.g., executive constraints).

RESPONDING TO THE CRITICISMS

Munck and Verkuilen criticized the earlier Polity III data but (after receiving some comments from us) later revised their article to account for enhancements incorporated in the Polity IV series (beginning with the year 1999 updates). These enhancements in many instances anticipated the authors' criticisms, but not all of them. We respond to their criticisms briefly below, as these underscore improvements made (and yet to be made) to the data series. Because we were constrained in our response within this article (for spatial reasons), a more complete version of our comments has been made available on the Polity Web page (www.bsos.umd.edu/cidcm/polity).

Minimalist definition: Omission of the participation dimension. To begin, Munck and Verkuilen argue that the omission of one of Dahl's two core dimensions of democracy, namely, participation or inclusion, is a "particularly grave problem for the Polity index" (p. 11). In fact, our measure does include a component that addresses this factor (identified within Table 1 as "competitiveness of political participation," which is "the extent to which alternative preferences for policy and leadership can be pursued in the political arena" (Marshall & Jaggers, 2000, p. 24), and "regulation of political par-

Table 1
Summary Coding Rules for Polity Democracy and Autocracy Indicators

Authority Dimension	Σ Democracy Points	Σ Autocracy Points
Competitiveness of political participation		
Competitive	3	0
Transitional	2	0
Factional	1	0
Restricted	0	1
Suppressed	0	2
Not applicable	0	0
Regulation of political participation		
Regulated	0	0
Factional/transitional	0	0
Factional/restricted	0	1
Restricted	0	2
Unregulated	0	0
Competitiveness of executive recruitment		
Election	2	0
Transitional	1	0
Selection	0	2
Openness of executive recruitment		
Election	1	0
Dual: Hereditary and election	1	0
Dual: Hereditary and designation	0	1
Closed	0	1
Constraints on chief executive		
Parity or subordination	4	0
Intermediate 1	3	0
Substantial	2	0
Intermediate 2	1	0
Slight moderation	0	1
Intermediate 3	0	2
Unlimited power	0	3

participation," which is the degree and type of regulation applied regarding how political preferences are expressed by subordinates (Marshall & Jagers, 2000, p. 23). Unlike the rather one-dimensional way in which participation is characterized by Munck and Verkuilen, it may take many forms that do not lend themselves easily to measurement. Polity assesses the quality of political competition by focusing on the tenor of interactions and relations among contending political groups (i.e., involving group representatives, or agents, actively engaged in determining the political agenda, whether with the government or from the opposition). Formal voting procedures are only one

highly stylized element in a complex political bargaining process among such groups and may themselves be subject to regulations that seriously restrict their supposed voluntarism. We develop this point about focusing on only certain aspects of authority patterns further within our more detailed response on our Web page.

Conceptual logic: Problems of redundancy. Related to the comment above, Munck and Verkuilen also criticized Polity because “it identifies a pair of attributes . . . that grasp only one aspect of democracy” (p. 14). We disagree. Earlier versions of the Polity records (Versions II and III) reported six component variables that encapsulate the institutional authority patterns of governing regimes. These six variables replaced the original (Polity I) indicators of executive recruitment, constraints on the executive, and political competition, as information improved (the six variables would capture more detail than three indicators) and the Polity records were expanded to an annual time-series format (allowing identification of finer grain changes from year to year).

In general terms, the problems of redundancy may be better understood as patterns. The Polity project is engaged in the identification of patterns of authority. An important underlying premise is that effective authority patterns tend toward consistency, complementarity, and coherence and that a lack of characteristic redundancy is itself a problem of governance. In this scheme, incoherent or inconsistent polities are the most problematic and unstable, and indeed, these incoherent polities, or “anocracies,” have been found to be highly associated with societal failures (see, e.g., Esty et al., 1998; Gurr, 2000; Lichbach, 1984; Marshall, 1999; Zakaria, 1997). The various ordinal scale indicators that comprise the Polity coding scheme and database measure different aspects of the same thing. As such, the correspondence among the indicators is generally very high, thereby increasing confidence in the identification of distinct authority patterns. On the other hand, such concurrent measurements may also reveal important pattern anomalies. One need not accept the idea that such mixed-trait polities fall along an autocratic-democratic continuum in order to recognize the importance of understanding the properties and circumstances of the borderline cases.

Intercoder reliability issues. General issues of data validity and consistency are crucial issues in quantitative modeling and analysis. Munck and Verkuilen criticize the Polity data series “due to the failure to conduct a test of intercoder reliability” (p. 19). Although no formal tests of intercoder reliability were performed during the early coding procedures, the codes assigned by

coders have been subject to multiple review procedures to ensure that data guidelines were applied consistently, including both internal and external and pre- and postdistribution reviews. A number of codes have been reevaluated and revised as new information has become available. In the early 1990s, a team of researchers at PRIO, with training from Polity project personnel, conducted a systematic review of the Polity data as they revisited the codes in order to assign specific dates for Polity changes (the resulting data set is referred to as Polity III_d).

Although coding consistency may be enhanced through quality control procedures and review, consistency is only one of the factors that may affect validity; issues of coding precision stand at the decisional nexus between the quality of information and the application of coding rules. Intercoder reliability issues regarding the precision of code assignments can be gauged only through the conduct of more formal tests. This weakness has also been specifically addressed by enhancements of coding procedures; refer to the section "Polity IV Enhancements and Inter-Coder Reliability" of the Users' Manual for details (Marshall & Jaggers, 2000 pp. 6-8). In general, the precision of Polity IV codes is considered accurate to within 1 or 2 points on the Polity democracy and autocracy indicators. We are currently engaged in comparing Polity codes with similar codes from other data sources to identify possible errors and discrepancies across alternative indicators so as to further refine the Polity data and increase confidence in the accuracy of its codes.

Inappropriate aggregation procedure. Munck and Verkuilen note that the Polity index is based on "an explicit but nonetheless quite convoluted aggregation rule" (p. 26), that there is "no justification . . . for the weighting scheme" (p. 26), that the index is marred by conceptual problems and redundant dimensions, and that the combination of democratic and autocratic scores into a single polity score introduces yet more confusion. We disagree on the grounds that the Polity index influences relevant variables in a manner consistent with theoretically informed hypotheses regardless of which of several alternative indicators are used in the combinations. It does not exhibit the erratic qualities or produce the inconsistent results one would expect from a flawed scale. In other words, the Polity index performs consistently as we would expect a scaled measure of the quality of governance to perform in comparison to and in combination with other measures of political conditions and behaviors. Of course, performance consistency must be wedded to conceptual clarity. Polity is unique among measures of "democraticness" in that it recognizes that ideal types are very often qualified in practice, that falling short of the ideal may hold special explanatory power, and that inconsistent authority may be less effective than consistent authority. The Polity index

expands the conceptual boundary separating democratic from autocratic practices so that we may more accurately place borderline or transitional polities along the supposed continuum from tightly closed autocracies to highly open democracies.

The weighting scheme used in the construction of the Polity index is simply a summation of the qualities of democratic traits qualified by the sum of the qualities of autocratic traits. The values that contribute to the separate autocracy and democracy scales are coded on several component variables (noted in Table 1), but those components are similarly scaled from election to selection, from open to closed, from unlimited to limited, from restricted to competitive. Because there is no overlap in traits between the separate scales, the combination of those scales should not be problematic. The combination of scales simply transforms the autocratic weightings from positive to negative. Moreover, as noted by Munck and Verkuilen, individuals are not obliged to use the weighting scheme but rather are free to select and reweight components as they see fit.

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