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Real Democracy: A Critical Realist Approach to Democracy and Democratic Theory

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an alternative general model of democracy to traditional minimalist (electoral and liberal) and deliberative theories by drawing from critical realist philosophical thought. *Realist* or *real* democracy is proposed as a societal system where preconditions exist to fully empower all citizens to realize their individual capabilities. This includes empowerment opportunities at the ballot box - but also other preconditions such as health, educational and living standards. Real democracy also separates democratic preconditions from democratic outcomes. Democratic outcomes require the absence of inequalities in power as result from the contingent interaction preconditions and human agency. The new approach is argued to provide a more holistic and dynamic concept of democracy which is also more grounded in the everyday experience of the citizen compared to traditional approaches. It reconnects democracy with theories of human development and enables a new classification of political regimes and conception of democratic politics. An initial empirical mapping of patterns of global real democracy shows evidence of rising preconditions since 1990 - but stagnation since 2010 and some signs of decline. Democratic outcomes by socio-economic position saw the most notable decline.

KEYWORDS

Democracy;
democratization;
democratic backsliding;
ontology; critical realism

Introduction

The question of “what is democracy?” is one of the most well-trodden debates in social science. And yet, at the same time, it is arguably one of the most pressing questions of our time. There has been widespread concern that many countries have witnessed democratic backsliding in recent years. We are thought to be living through

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a global age of “democratic recession” and “democratic regression.”² How democracy is defined, however, is pivotal for understanding the trajectory and history of political systems at a global or national level. “What is democracy?” matters for contemporary geopolitics. Many political regimes claim to be democratic – or to be advancing the cause of democracy through alliance, war and conflict. But critics of liberal democracy have often asked whether liberal democracy is “really democratic,” given that the social and economic benefits promised have often not always materialized. “What is democracy?” is also pivotal for understanding the causes of any backsliding – which are often differentiated into agency-based theories that focus on leaders or parties – as opposed to structurally based theories which examine shifting political culture, economics or political institutions.³ There have been calls to urgently reconceptualize democracy and rethink what democracy should mean in the twenty-first century.⁴

This article proposes the concept of *realist democracy* by drawing from critical realist philosophical thought.⁵ The approach taken to the philosophy of social science has important consequences for developing empirical concepts. The position taken to ontology (“what exists?”), epistemology (“how do we know what exists?”), the similarities between the social and natural sciences, the role of structure and agents, and the nature of causal relationships, all have important consequences for the theoretical frameworks being constructed to understand a given problem.⁶ Critical realism has grown to become established as an alternative approach to the social sciences to mainstream positivism, rational choice theory and constructivism. At its core, the approach holds that social structures always pre-exist humans and agents – but that human agency is necessary for the reproduction of social structures and is capable of changing them over time. The approach has been applied to re-understand a wide range of political problems and issues, but there has not been a full consideration of the implications of critical realism for the concept of democracy and its applied empirical study. What would a critical realist theory of democracy look like?

The article begins to provide such a new general theory of democracy, *realist or real* democracy, and an initial empirical mapping of patterns and trajectories. The article argues that the stream of critical realist work provided by Margaret Archer provide useful foundations for an alternative approach to understanding democracy to traditional approaches. However, the article also argues that major conceptual development is needed to provide a full theory of democracy. A real approach to democracy begins with micro-theoretical foundations which reject utilitarianism and rational choice theory. Humans are conceptualized as reflexive agents who are capable

²Larry Diamond, “Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective: Scope, Methods, and Causes,” *Democratization* 28, no. 1 (2021); Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016); International IDEA, “Global State of Democracy Report 2021: Building Resilience in a Pandemic Era” (Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA, 2021).

³David Waldner and Ellen Lust, “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21, no. 1 (2018).

⁴For example, see: David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends* (London, UK: Profile Books, 2018).

⁵Margaret Archer, “Morphogenesis Versus Structuration: On Combining Structure and Action,” *British Journal of Sociology* 33 (1982); *Realist Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995); *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁶Colin Hay, *Political Analysis* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

of realizing capabilities and suffering. *Realist* democracy is proposed as a society where preconditions exist to empower all citizens to be able to realize their individual capabilities. This requires the absence of prominent structure and agency relations, which predispose power to be concentrated into narrow groups or elites in a societal system – thereby disempowering citizens. These democratic preconditions are differentiated from democratic outcomes characterized by the absence of inequalities in power. This conceptualization can open up an empirical research agenda exploring trajectories, mutations, and challenges to realist democracy as the twenty-first century progresses and as societies witness major transformations. It also enables alternative classification of political regimes.

The article begins by outlining the contours of realist social theory before considering the extent to which it has been applied to concepts of democracy. A detailed exposition of critical realism is needed in order for the foundations of real democracy to be set out because some audiences may be unfamiliar with the approach. The article then sketches out the theoretical foundations of realist democracy before outlining its empirical manifestation. A methodological discussion about measuring real democracy is provided before patterns of real democracy around the world and in the United States. This serves to demonstrate some key similarities and points of departure with existing conceptions of democracy. The conclusion reflects on the lessons for the theory and practice of democracy.

What is Critical Realism?

There is no single critical realist theory. The movement is usually dated to Roy Bhaskar's 1975 canonical text, a *Realist Theory of Science*, which set out a philosophy of science.⁷ Bhaskar more directly applies his philosophy of science to the social sciences in his 1979 text *The Possibility of Naturalism* that Bhaskar.⁸ He took aim at classical empiricist approaches to social science developed by David Hume "and his heirs" as well as transcendental idealism developed by Kant and his successors. Margaret Archer developed a theory of structure and agency in a *Realist Social Theory* that used, built upon, but also departed from Bhaskar's work, by what she termed the morphogenetic approach.⁹ Her article on "Morphogenesis versus Structuration" in the *British Journal of Sociology* is attributed to providing the "germ" from which her work developed,¹⁰ which later spanned several monographs.¹¹ Andrew Sayer published important volumes to enable the philosophy to be used in empirical research.¹² Critical realism has commonly been cited as providing the epistemological and ontological position for work

⁷Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2008 [1975]), 24–30.

⁸Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (London, UK: Routledge, 2014 [1979]).

⁹Archer, *Realist Social Theory*.

¹⁰Anthony King, "The Odd Couple: Margaret Archer, Anthony Giddens and British Social Theory," *The British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. s1 (2010): 253.

¹¹Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret S. Archer, *The Relational Subject* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory; Realist Social Theory*.

¹²Andrew Sayer, *Method in Social Sciences* (London, UK: Hutchinson, 1984).

in critical political economy, such as that by Bob Jessop, who also developed his own strategic-relational approach to structure and agency.¹³ The critical realist movement has grown with networks being established worldwide. The Centre for Critical Realism was established as a charitable trust in 1996 and organized book series, journal and conference events.¹⁴ It also instigated the formation of the International Association for Critical Realism (IACR) which took over some of these activities. Elsewhere, a Critical Realism Network came to be based in the Sociology department of Yale University, directed by Philip S. Gorski.¹⁵

Space does not permit a full historiography of critical realist thought, but it is important to note that there is variation in conceptions of critical realism. One distinction that can be made is between “value-free” and normative approaches. Bhaskar’s original framework was initially focused on the possibility of realism in the social sciences. He emphasized the emancipatory dimensions of social science research only later on in his work. Critical realist authors therefore tend to follow one direction more than the other. Democracy is a normative concept which places value on ‘democratic systems’ as opposed to non-democratic systems. The normative and emancipatory pathway is therefore chosen as the premise for real democracy. The article also draws more from the work of Margaret Archer than Bhaskar and Jessop. The key anchoring features of critical realism are summarized next.

Ontology and Epistemology

Critical realism’s defining focus was originally on ontology and epistemology. This held that material objects and societal structures exist independent of, and prior to, individuals. These create *material necessities* the world. There are finite resources and humans (and non-humans) have material needs such as to eat, drink, and breathe. These material entities create generative causal powers, which are conceptualized through the term emergence. Emergence takes place when two or more entities interact or combine to cause a new entity or effect.¹⁶ The properties of entities are “emergent” because their effects are not guaranteed –they play out as a result of the interactions between humans and their social world.

A key further feature of the critical realist foundations is *ontological and epistemological depth and stratification*. The critical realist school criticized positivists for focusing on observable and temporarily confined phenomena. However, in Bhaskar’s original formulation, there are three domains of reality. The *empirical domain* consists of the observable experiences that individuals can observe and record. The *actual domain* consists of events, which may often be unobservable to the researcher. The *real domain* consists of the generative mechanisms and causal structures that influence events and experiences but may not be observable themselves.¹⁷

¹³Bob Jessop, “Institutional Re(Turns) and the Strategic - Relational Approach,” *Environment and Planning A* 33 (2001).

¹⁴Centre for Critical Realism, “Centre for Critical Realism (CCR),” <https://criticalrealismnetwork.org/ccr/>.

¹⁵Critical Realist Network, “History,” <https://criticalrealismnetwork.org/history/>.

¹⁶Dave Elder-Vass, “Emergence and the Realist Account of Cause,” *Journal of Critical Realism* 4, no. 2 (2005).

¹⁷Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, 1–2.

Archer's Analytical Dualism

Archer's concept of the *analytic dualism* was a central tool for recognizing temporal ontological, and epistemological depth. Social science had adopted a starting point of either "methodological individualist" or "methodological collectivist" analysis, she argued. "Methodological individualists" would include rational choice theorists, for example, in which individuals are treated as free-floating atoms separated from society. At the other extreme, "methodological collectivist" sociologists might undertake aggregate-level analysis in which the individual is subsumed into a wider (class, ethnic, gendered, and so on) group without any reflexivity and individual free will.

Archer proposed an alternative position based around her concept of analytical dualism. This held that "the emergent properties of structures and agents are irreducible to one another."¹⁸ Structures and agents were separable, analytically speaking. However, agents could not be discussed without any consideration of the relevant structures into which they are embedded. Social structure exists prior to agents, but human agency is necessary for the reproduction and transformation of social structure.

The temporal dimension of structure-agency relationships was important but often neglected, Archer argued. The analytical dualism was proposed as a "method for examining the interplay between these strata" *over time*.¹⁹ Structure and agency interact in a three-phased, temporal sequence that she called the morphogenetic cycle.²⁰ Firstly, there is *structural conditioning* (T1) from an earlier structural context where actors' interests and being are shaped through a process of emergence. Secondly, there is *social interaction* (T2 and T3) where agents are influenced by the conditions under T1, but can use their own abilities and agency to forward their interests or bring about societal change. Thirdly, at moment T4, structural conditions are either changed as a result of this agency (morphogenesis) or not (morphostasis). The cycle then repeats as structural elaboration restarts a new morphogenetic cycle. There is, thus, some ability for agents to bring about change, but actions from agents "initiated at T2 takes place in a context not of its own making."²¹

Relationalism

A key feature of critical realism, which follows from the above points, is that it is based in and contributes towards relational sociology. Relational sociology has been defined as "the doctrine that transactions, interactions, social ties and conversations constitute the central stuff of social life."²² It contrasts with the substantialist approach to sociology, which tends to view individuals (or other social objects) as self-subsistent or self-acting entities. The analytical dualism, which holds that humans must be understood in terms of their structure-agency relations with other humans and non-human entities, is clearly relational in nature. Auerbach has argued that

¹⁸Archer, *Realist Social Theory*, 66.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 133.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*, 78.

²²Charles Tilly, *Stories, Identities, and Political Change* (Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 72.

relationalism is a significant premise and should be made explicit because there is a specific theory of good embedded in this work.²³ Individuals become “constituted” by their relationships with other members of society. Causal powers then emerge from these relationships. Relational subjects, however, can also find themselves constituted into relationships where their powers are asymmetric.

Normativity in Critical Realism

Early critical realist founding texts provided an ontology and epistemology, but the normative position was relatively under-developed. Critical realists had emphasized that social science was different to the natural science. Researchers are not independent of the subject they study as natural scientists are. The aim of social science is instead to “develop our understandings and reduce illusion.”²⁴ Research therefore enables learning – and this was often seen as a potentially positive force for social betterment and emancipation.²⁵

In her later work, however, Margaret Archer provided a specific model of the good herself when proposing the concept of a *Morphogenic Society*. This built on the concept of the importance of structure-agency relations and the relational nature of society. A Morphogenic Society would be an ideal society where various societal transformations had taken place so that citizens (as agents) were liberated by the structural constraints facing them. The achievement of a Morphogenic Society would therefore constitute, in her view, the transition to a Concrete Utopia. Her definition is therefore worth citing in length:

The full blown Morphogenic Society would be one in which the production, exploration and exploitation of ‘contingent compatibilities’ constitutes novel opportunities (jobs, roles, modi vivendi) whose take-up follows a situational logic of opportunity (the new being found more attractively advantageous than the old) and meets with little opposition because no vested interests have yet been consolidated on this novel terrain. Consequently, those exploring it are not constrained by a pre-structured context, either materially or culturally. In turn, what they make of it is not necessarily locked in conflict with what others seek to do, thus potentially allowing for win-win outcomes. Minimalistically, these would be conflict-free and maximally they would generate relational goods, emergent from their positive social relationality.²⁶

Archer made some brief empirical claims about the movement towards a Morphogenic Society. In 2017, she wrote that, while she had refrained from proclaiming the transition from late modernity to a world-wide Morphogenic Society, it was “time to remove the question mark” and that this transformation had occurred.²⁷ Four

²³Carl Auerbach, “Why Is Democracy Desirable? Neo-Aristotelian, Critical Realist, and Psychodynamic Approaches,” *Journal of Critical Realism* 19, no. 4 (2020). Donati and Archer, *The Relational Subject*.

²⁴Andrew Sayer, *Method in Social Sciences*, Revised Second Edition ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010), 169.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 169-73.

²⁶Margaret S Archer, “Introduction: Has a Morphogenic Society Arrived?,” *Morphogenesis and human flourishing* (2017): 10.

²⁷Archer 2017: 10.

years later, Archer returned to reflect on the “mess that we are in.”²⁸ She lamented political parties for being based around “centrism” and prioritizing political tactics rather than normative goals. She also provided criticism of bureaucratic regulation as being partly responsible for a decline in social integration and blasted the use of governance indicators for shaping and measuring human progress.

Human Flourishing and Capabilities

An extended critical realist normative position came to be established by other authors through the use of the concept of human flourishing and/or capacities. Christian Smith brought together phenomenology, the personalist tradition, and critical realism to develop a “critical realist personalist approach.”²⁹ He was critical of existing theories of psychology, which break up the notion of the person into multiple parts, such as their behaviors and cognitive processes. A person should instead be understood as a whole. Importantly, he therefore uses critical realism to propose that: “human bodies interacting with their environments give rise through emergence to a constellation of powerful physical and mental capacities. Those causal capacities interact in a complex ways to give rise through emergence again to the higher level reality of human personhood.”³⁰ He progressed to argue, using a critical realist account of emergence, that human beings have as many as thirty distinctive capacities. Humans have “conscious awareness” and “subconscious being” abilities. This creates “primary experience capacities” (such as “mental representation” and “volition”) alongside “secondary experience capacities” (including “intersubjective understanding” and “interest formation”). These lead to the emergence of “creating capacities” such as “language use,” “identity formation,” “love,” “aesthetic enjoyment,” and “moral judgment”.

Andrew Sayer’s analysis of *Why Things Matter to People?* is also an important point of reference given his importance in shaping the critical realist research agenda. Andrew Sayer argues that humans’ relation to the world is one of concern.³¹ Social science has increasingly seen humans in terms of utilitarian, behaviorist, and rational choice concepts of “interests,” “preferences” and “attitudes.” However, he argues, humans are naturally concerned about the quality of their social relations, their material circumstances, and well-being. Social theory and philosophy should therefore refocus on evaluating social life from the standpoint of human flourishing – or the opposite – human suffering.

²⁸Margaret S. Archer, “The Mess We Are In: How the Morphogenetic Approach Helps to Explain It,” *Journal of Critical Realism* 20, no. 4 (2021).

²⁹Christian Smith, *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

³⁰*Ibid.*, 15-16.

³¹Andrew Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Critical Realism on Democracy

Archer did not link critical realism to democracy. Her work was not connected to the literature on democratic theory, comparative politics, or human development. She did not consider what a democracy is – and how democracy was related to a Morphogenic society. In what way, for example, is a Morphogenic society democratic? How do trends towards autocratisation marry up with the move towards a Morphogenic society?

Critical realism has been linked to concepts of democracy in more recent analysis. Auerbach used critical realism to explain why democracies endure. He used the minimalist procedural definition of democracy provided by Larry Diamond as involving elections, active participation, protection for human rights, and the rule of law.³² He then used critical realism to ask what is needed to ensure that democracy survives. He argues that this is loser's consent, individuals subordinating their identity to those of others and governing through a principle that transcends binary identities. Auerbach later considered why democracy is then desirable from a critical realist perspective, in combination with ideas from Aristotle and psychoanalytic theory.³³ Deliberative democracy provides the better form of governance because it facilitates the development of citizens with the relational capacity of mutuality, he argued. Democratic institutions are preferred because they provide relational capacities for citizens. In contrast to autocracy, a democratic system would enshrine human rights into legal guarantees, and provide an opportunity to cast a ballot.

Critical realism has been used as the foundation for work in Marxism, neo-Marxism, and regulation theory, which critique liberal democracy as part of a critique of liberal democratic capitalism. The main focus of criticism has been the inequalities that capitalism creates.³⁴ Liberal democracy is often referred to as "bourgeois" democracy. It tends to be defined in terms of the specific legal political rights, including the right to private property, alongside institutionalized freedoms, that it ensures. Liberal democratic institutions are often criticized for not protecting citizens from the harsh inequalities that capitalism can create. They are also portrayed as a political barrier to revolutionary change. They provide a mechanism for political participation but in a form which do not allow economic structural conditions to be changed. "Democratic institutions thereby inhibit major ruptures," writes Bob Jessop.³⁵ Endorsing Marx, he claims that the contradiction of bourgeois democracy is that: "subaltern classes can participate in the political process on the condition that they do not use their political (read electoral and parliamentary) power to challenge the social (read economic, political and ideological) power of the dominant classes."³⁶

³²Carl Auerbach, "How Is Democracy Possible? Critical Realist, Social Psychological and Psychodynamic Approaches," *Journal of Critical Realism* 19, no. 3 (2020). Larry Diamond, *In Search of Democracy* (Routledge, 2015).

³³Auerbach, "Why Is Democracy Desirable? Neo-Aristotelian, Critical Realist, and Psychodynamic Approaches."

³⁴for example: Andrew Sayer, *Why We Can't Afford the Rich* (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2015).

³⁵Bob Jessop, *The State: Past, Present and Future* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016), 214.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 215.

These analyses are important in tracing the economic structural relations which are found in many societies, notably those, which are overlooked by Robert Dahl and those taking a minimalist approach to defining democracy. The focus tends to be solely on economic relations, however.³⁷ Little is said about other structural relations in detail: such as unequal relations between the autocrat and citizen; the corrupt bureaucrat and the citizen, and the parliamentarian and their representatives. Race, gender, and many other relationships are analyzed less. It is also unclear what the democratic solution is. Real democracy – an approach which builds from critical realism – might differ from liberal democracy. But should it be?

Real(ist) Democracy

The next section uses the philosophical foundations from the critical realist literature set out above to propose a framework for realist democracy. This includes a model of what democracy should look like in ideal terms – and some of the ways in which an actually existing society might be defective from this ideal. Realist democracy (*real* democracy) is now outlined, and argued to hold five theoretical tenets.

New Micro-Foundations: Humans as Reflexive Agents

Critical realism was defined in terms of antagonism and opposition to many key concepts that have developed from the traditions of utilitarianism, behavioralism, and rational choice theory; but which are commonly used to underpin understandings of democracy. It follows that a starting point for the study of realist democracy is to directly reject those conceptual terms. Political systems should not be understood in terms of rational, self-interested actors – where people have prior preferences who are seeking to maximize their utility. Alternative assumptions are therefore needed here.

The micro-assumptions of real democracy are that there is material necessity in the world which creates human needs. There are needs to drink, eat, and have physical security. These material needs shape concerns for themselves and others. However, human beings are also creative, reflexive actors. They are capable of reflecting internally on their context and situation and deciding a course of action in response to this. Their situation, however, is not of their choosing (given that structural conditions will already exist). The structural context in which they find themselves, despite their ability and desire to undertake reflection, therefore has the capability of shaping their actions in ways that they may not realize. Humans' concerns are temporarily developed rather than fixed. The historical context and their institutional position will shape their positions and desires; but will not over-determine it.

³⁷although see: B. Jessop, *State Power* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007), 157–7.

Democracy as Conditions for Realizing Human Capabilities

Any ideal societal system should be one concerned about promoting human flourishing and capabilities – and avoiding human suffering. This is the logical progression of the critical realist school focus on human flourishing and capabilities. The approach fits well with the literature on conceptions of human development which also emphasized that human capabilities were important. This literature provided more detailed empirical discussions about the nature of human capabilities and also started to develop some contours of the design of the societal system which would be needed to deliver them.

The human development approach was a critique of earlier theories of development economics, which measured development in terms of country-level GDP. It involved a move from the assessment of the aggregate national state – to the individual person. Amartya Sen argued that development involved a set of connected freedoms: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, proactive security.³⁸ Freedoms were compared with “unfreedoms” which could take the form of poverty, tyranny, poor economic opportunities, systematic social deprivation, or the neglect of public facilities.³⁹ Martha Nussbaum sets out a more detailed capability approach which sought to serve as an “approach to comparative life assessment and to theorizing about basic social justice.”⁴⁰ It asked “[w]hat is each person able to do and to be?”⁴¹ Nussbaum listed ten core capabilities which are essential. These include life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation with others, concern for other species; play and recreation activities; and having control over one’s environment. The latter included political – being able to participate effectively in political choices as well as material –, having economic opportunities on a level playing field with others. The provision of these opportunities to realize capabilities provided a minimal level of social justice that any society should seek to achieve. Drawing from Wolff and De-Shalit,⁴² she pointed to the need for capability security. This is the idea “that public policy must not simply give people a capability, but give it to them in such a way that they can count on it for the future.”⁴³ Nussbaum argues that a focus on capability security focuses analysis on “political procedure and political structure: What form of political organization promotes security?”⁴⁴

It is therefore proposed that real democracy is a societal system *with the preconditions which empower citizens to realize their human capabilities*. This approach is power and ability-based. It concerns whether individuals are *able* to do or achieve particular goals. This includes their ability to shape their environment – around which most conceptions of democracy are based. It is immediately broader in nature than most

³⁸Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Martha C Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 18.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Jonathan Wolff and Avner De-Shalit, *Disadvantage* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴³Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, 42.

⁴⁴Ibid., 43.

approaches because it includes the other core capabilities. There is a threshold of capability necessary to provide a minimal level of social justice in a realist democracy.

Democracy in Terms of Structure-Agency Relations

Real democracy is a system in which individuals are empowered to realize their capabilities. However, individuals are not lone atoms. They exist as part of a societal system involving other people but also the constellation of resources, ideational frameworks, and institutional systems – or as critical realists understand it – as part of structure-agency relations. The analysis of structure and agency relations are the signature features of critical realism. They are central to the understanding of individuals, groups, and societies; and their interactions. It follows that structure-agency relations must be at the center of the discussion about individuals living in a democracy and whether societies can be deemed to be democratic as a whole.

An essential consequence of structure and agency, as Archer describes, is the involunteeristic placement of the individual into prior structural and cultural emergence. These are the results of past events, actions, and the distribution of resources. These situations are not unchangeable by individuals, as the morphogenetic approach explains, but they are shaped by them:

[W]e are quite literally born into life chances which are defined by the prior distribution of material resources: this is our situation at T1 and though alterable by T3, alterations entail altering our situations and this is not a matter of untrammelled choice but of confrontation and extrication which carry costs.⁴⁵

As she continues:

“we are always born into a system of social stratification and. that ‘privilege’ or ‘under-privilege’ are regarded as properties that people acquire involunteeristically and not as roles that they occupy through social choice” (p.277).⁴⁶

The evenness of the distribution of human opportunities to realize capabilities such as shaping their environment therefore cannot be considered without a mapping of the key structure-agency relationships embedded into society. Individuals might find themselves trapped in coercive societal structures which makes shaping their environment extremely difficult – whereas others may occupy positions of power.

Individuals and Groups

The discussion of Archer’s work has so far focussed on individuals. Her vision of the Morphogenic Society considered *individual* liberation – but not the liberation from structural conditions that societies may face at a collective level – or groups within

⁴⁵Archer, *Realist Social Theory*, 202.

⁴⁶Ibid., 277.

that society. Nussbaum's focus on capabilities is also individualistic – she asked “What is each *person* able to do and to be?”⁴⁷

Archer exercises some caution in moving to group analysis. She warns that groups cannot be treated exactly the same as individuals. The problem with an analysis of “groups” is that it assumes that the same label can be used throughout time and all of its members experience structure-agency relations identically – but this is implausible. For example, we cannot use the term “working class,” she argues, over several centuries and assume that we are still describing the same group.⁴⁸ As groups exert agency through the morphogenic cycle, the group itself takes a different form, as members of that group become re-constituted as different agents. Members of a “working class group” might cease to be “working class” over time – both in their sense of self-identity, but also in their economic situation. In short, there are analytical dangers in conflating members of the group.

Group analysis is possible, however, Archer insisted. Analytically speaking, groups can exist as “collectives sharing the same life chances.”⁴⁹ This is not meant in the sense of a statistical probability, but rather that their structural position is the same at a given moment in time. The ability of groups to experience structure-agency relations is also clear in her analysis. She distinguishes between those groups which are not mobilized, and act strategically and those which are active in decision-making (which she calls “Corporate Agents”) – as opposed to those which are passive and lack collective organisation and objectives (“Primary Agents”). Groups do therefore not begin equal, she writes, because: “the initial distributions of structural and cultural properties delineate” them.⁵⁰

The structure-agency relations facing groups in societies should therefore be an important concern when defining democracy. We should ask: are individuals less able to realize their capabilities because they are a member of a specific group, whether by choice or otherwise? If a group, albeit one which only temporarily exists analytically, is in a dire structure-agency relationship, then there are consequences for a democracy. For example, Apartheid in South Africa granted full economic and political rights to the white minority population – and placed bans on the political participation of other ethnicities. All individuals who are part of the Black majority and other groups cannot be said to have comparable opportunities to realize their capabilities as others.

It follows that *real democracy requires that prominent structure and agency relations do not systematically predispose power to be concentrated in narrow groups or elites – and disempower the broader citizenry.* The term “prominent” is important because there will be infinite structure-agency relationships dispersed across societies because of the reflexive capacity of individuals and the evolutionary nature of societies. Not all relationships can be considered in order to meet the criteria. But it equally should certainly not be limited to “public” relationships since “the personal is political” and any attempt to narrow the scope of the relationships would itself be an exertion of

⁴⁷Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, 18.

⁴⁸Archer, *Realist Social Theory*, 74.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 257.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 264.

structural power.⁵¹ The term “predispose” is used to flag contingency. As Archer stressed, agency is central to political life, and structural features of a society do not ultimately determine futures. Predisposition is therefore an important term to recognize the dynamic nature of structure-agency relations and the realization of human capabilities. This will be elaborated on below.

It is important to note that power can be positive sum as well as zero sum. Some members of a society may be granted legitimate structural powers via an institutional position in order to facilitate collective gain. For example, elected officials and civil servants will usually have the powers to allocate resources to projects and implement policies. Bureaucracies and the division of labor within society are necessary to make societies function, and the allocation of such powers are therefore necessary. The empirical analysis of real democracy-specific countries should examine, however, whether such elected officials and civil servants who are allocated structural power act for the mutual gain in society– or whether those institutional structures enable office-holders to exploit their position for a narrow sectional advantage, or privilege others.

Democracy as the Entirety of Structure-Agency Relations

Critical realism is not alone in having a conceptualizing of structure and agency. Theories and frameworks across the social sciences hold positions – whether explicit or unstated. There is a huge variety of positions on the structure and agency relationship.⁵² Existing approaches to defining democracy tend to only include a limited range of structure and agency relationships. Key proponents of minimalist electoral and liberal democracy broadly take an institutionalist approach. They stress that formal political institutions can shape individuals, power and behaviour. The classic example is Robert Dahl, who argues that democracy is a system characterized by the “continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as equal weights.”⁵³ This responsiveness is dependent on “all full citizens ...[having]... unimpaired opportunities” to be able to formulate their preferences, signify their preferences to their fellow citizens and the government by individual and collective action; and “have their preferences weighted equally in the conduct of government, that is, weighed with no discrimination because of the content or source of the preference.”⁵⁴ Eight institutional guarantees are therefore needed such as freedom to join organisations, freedom of express, the right to vote, alternative sources of information.

Two kinds of structure-agency relationships are therefore apparent in Dahl’s work, which are common throughout minimalist definitions of democracy. Firstly, institutional factors shape individual behaviour. Formal political institutions such as the right to

⁵¹ Adrian Leftwich, “Thinking Politically: On the Politics of Politics,” in *What Is Politics*, ed. Adrian Leftwich (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2004).

⁵²for an overview, see: Hay, *Political Analysis*, 101-34.

⁵³Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 1.

⁵⁴Ibid., 2.

vote are designated as necessary to enable citizens to be able to formulate preferences and then signify them. Informal institutions are also important because *de facto* freedom of expression is also among the institutional guarantees. Secondly, the strategic actions of others can constrain an individual. Government action (responsiveness) is argued to change as a result of the actions of citizens formulating and signifying their preferences. The range of actors involved in this analysis of electoral democracy is much more limited, however. The central structure-agency relationship for electoral democracy is the autocrat-individual citizen relationship. The citizen is thought to be weakly positioned against the autocrat. But through ballot box accountabilities, citizens are empowered, and the relationship is inverted, so that citizens are in charge.

Dahl's and others' focus on the importance of elections in partially levelling-up structure-agency relationships shows how voting feeds into any concept of democracy that is anchored around power. Electoral and constitutional protections empower citizens against autocrats. But it is also immediately obvious that his position is insufficient in grasping the range of actors who can exert power over individuals (and groups). If we are to fully explore the importance of the structure-agency relationship with democracy, then there are a wider variety of structure-agency relationships to consider, which have a bearing on our conceptualisation and prescription of a democratic state.

Figure 1 illustrates the structure-agency relationships that tend to be considered by each conception of democracy. Electoral democracy tends to focus only on the provision of elections as a way for citizens to counter the power of autocrats, as Dahl shows. But more structure-agency relationships are considered as conceptions of democracy become progressively more expansionist. Liberal democracy, for example, is not satisfied that elections are used to bring the people's choice to power – because theorists warn of the dangers of the tyranny of the majority. Minority groups can come to be oppressed by the majority, John Stuart Mill warned, and therefore, we need constitutional structures to protect and enshrine the rights of minorities.⁵⁵ Participatory theorists argued that the workplace was also an important site for democracy and that manager-worker relations could be democratized.⁵⁶ Deliberative theorists sensitized us to how the quality of discussion between citizens was important, and thereby built in this relationship. Egalitarian theorists demanded that remedies for economic inequalities were important and thereby brought in that can develop between classes.⁵⁷

Democratic theorists have therefore progressively captured more and more structure-agency relationships. The tendency, however, has been to focus on what is new about each, rather than to add to the former. A focus on discursive democracy emphasizes the nature of deliberation within society – and then is liable to ignore the other components. Egalitarian democracy, focusses on the economic rather than the

⁵⁵ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London, UK: Penguin, 1974 [1859]).

⁵⁶ Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁵⁷ Rachel Sigman and Staffan I Lindberg, "The Index of Egalitarian Democracy and Its Components: V-Dem's Conceptualization and Measurement," *V-Dem Working Paper 22* (2015).

Model of democracy	Structure-agency relationships									
	Autocrat-citizen	Majority-minority	Workplace-citizen	Citizen-citizen	Capitalist-Class	Gender	Ethnicity	Religion	Sexuality	Others
<i>Electoral</i>	X									
<i>Liberal</i>	X	X	X							
<i>Participatory</i>	X	X	X							
<i>Discursive</i>		X		X						
<i>Egalitarian</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X		
<i>Real</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Figure 1. Structure-agency relationships identified by existing models of democracy.

electoral – and has less concern about the consociationalist protections championed by constitutional theorists. Real democracy is, in effect, additive, however. It must contain each and all of these prominent structure-agency components. In doing so, it provides a more complete and holistic discussion of power and power imbalances within a society. These relationships are not exhaustive, however. There are also entrenched discriminatory and imbalanced structure-agency relationships worldwide relating to sexuality, which are often missing from traditional notions of democracy.⁵⁸ Real democracy analysis should be open to the development of new structure-agency relations in the future.

Political Agency in Democracy: Separating Democratic Preconditions and Outcomes

An approach based on critical realism, real democracy, should also embed agency and *contingency* into its definition. As Archer argues, societal outcomes are the result of the interaction of structure and agency. Actors are reflective agents. They are able to respond to the actions of others, and develop meanings and internal narratives about their roles and purposes. But it also follows that they are prone to mistakes, gaffes, and errors of strategy. They may prefer a quiet life and never mobilize. The effects of institutions may change through institutional drift and they might be aware. Nussbaum argues at the micro level that while societies should foster and support the realization of capabilities – it does not guarantee that individuals realize them. Work and endeavour are necessary.

It is therefore proposed that real democracy involves a separation between democratic preconditions and democratic outcomes. *Democratic preconditions* are the prior political, social, and cultural structural environments which shape relations prior to the conduct of politics. In a fully democratic society, all citizens are empowered by all of the necessary preconditions for democracy. However, these preconditions may also be absent, at least to some degree, in most societies. Democratic preconditions appear in [Figure 2](#) at moment T1.

At moment T2 *politics* takes place. This is the interaction of actors' political agency in the context of prior structural conditions through socio-cultural interaction. Citizens attempt to live their lives in the way that they wish, but have their choices and opportunities shaped by the agency of others and structural conditions. They may seek to influence policy, power, and formal Politics through voting, lobbying, and engaging with political parties. They may also not get involved in formal politics, but their actions are still political in the sense that the personal is political. Business groups, trade unions, pressure groups, political parties, charities, private companies, and international organizations are amongst the multitude of other actors involved in politics. Structural conditions shape politics, including actors' real and perceived interests, and the actors sense of self and identity; but do not over-determine it because there is also reflexive agency. *Democratic outcomes* are the final dispersion of power in a political system. In a fully democratic society, power will be widely and evenly dispersed, with all individuals and groups equally

⁵⁸Andrew Reynolds, *The Children of Harvey Milk: How LBGQT Politicians Changed the World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019).

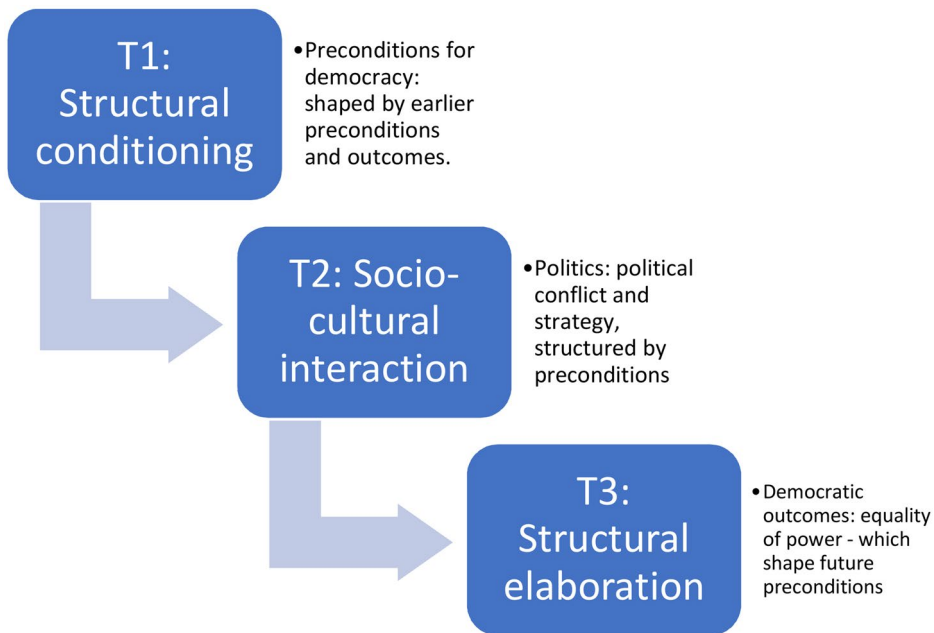


Figure 2. A morphogenetic theory of the realization of democracy. Source: author.

empowered. In non-democratic settings, power will be concentrated in the hands of a narrow group or elite. Some individuals may have little effective voice. Some groups may be marginalized. These democratic outcomes progress to shape future democratic preconditions at moment T3, as the cycle loops.

An understanding of democracy in terms of outcomes and preconditions advances an age-old debate in the study of democracy between minimalist and maximalist concepts of democracy. The *minimalist or procedural* approach defines a democracy in terms of the presence of specific institutional procedures.⁵⁹ Other minimalist democratic theorists, such as Adam Przeworski, also saw institutions as pivotal to a definition of democracy.⁶⁰ By contrast, the *substantive approach*, encouraged the evaluation of democratic institutions by the outcomes that they produce. David Beetham's proposed criteria was whether they achieve political equality and popular control of government.⁶¹ Rather than taking a minimalist or maximalist approach - a real democracy approach problematizes their contingent temporal interaction and connection with agency. Institutions help to realize outcomes, but they do not guarantee them because civil society, the free media, citizens, political opposition, civil servants, and other components of the state have a job to do and can be caught napping. This opens up a range of important research questions that can come from a realist

⁵⁹Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1956); R. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*; J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* (New York, NY: Harper, 2003[1942]).

⁶⁰Adam Przeworski, "Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defence," in *Democracy's Value*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordon (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. [Reprinted in Robert A. Dahl et al (eds) *The Democracy Sourcebook*], 1999).

⁶¹Beetham, "Key Principles and Indices for a Democratic Audit," 26–31.

democracy research agenda. When do democratic preconditions not deliver democratic outcomes? For example, when do women come to be enfranchised electorally, but not gain *de facto* equality in society with men? Under what conditions does that occur? In which societies have women been unsuccessful? Why?

From Theory to Empirics: Defining Conditions and Outcomes

Which democratic preconditions structure state-societal relations towards the wider dispersion of power as opposed to within a narrow elite? The identification of key structures should be subject to scientific reanalysis and adjustment as research progresses and society changes.

It is important that the key structures also include those captured by earlier theorists concerned with empowering citizens, albeit sometimes in different words. These writings often emerged from oppressive contexts and revolutionary moments to set out prominent formal and informal institutional configurations which can deliver power to a broader population as opposed to a narrow group. This has meant voting rights for all, freedom of speech and political association. However, it must also contain other material structural factors. It is suggested here that the full range of democratic preconditions will include see (Figure 3):

- *Healthcare.* The ability to live, not die prematurely, and have bodily health and bodily integrity are amongst the foremost threshold human capabilities.⁶² The absence of these preconditions is a situation of suffering. Human health is fundamental for individuals to be able to achieve any of their goals in life. A person's health can also affect their ability to contribute towards a flourishing democracy.⁶³ The real democracy approach therefore considers healthcare not as an independent variable to be studied separate from democracy – but as an essential precondition of it.
- *Education quality.* Adequate education is also a necessary for humans to be able to realize capabilities of the use of senses, imagination, thinking, and reasoning.⁶⁴ Education can also enable citizens to have good physical and mental health, acquiring strong communication skills, construct communities, and secure employment. Real democracy therefore also requires that educational provision is an essential precondition.
- *Standard of living.* Citizens living in economic poverty or deprivation have their life opportunities reduced and are unable to realize their other capabilities. As Sen argued, income poverty and capability poverty are not the same, but they cannot “be unrelated since income is such an important means to capabilities.”⁶⁵ Citizens may be formally entitled to participate within the political process, but without

⁶²Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, 33.

⁶³Luca Bernardi et al., “Down but Not yet Out: Depression, Political Efficacy, and Voting,” *Political Psychology* 44, no. 2 (2023).

⁶⁴Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, 33.

⁶⁵Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 90.



Figure 3. Components of democratic preconditions. Source: author.

sufficient educational and economic resources, they are unlikely to do so. Resources are also essential for facilitating political engagement and the use of voice.⁶⁶ Living standards are therefore also a condition of real democracy.

- **Governance.** Civil servants and bureaucrats are needed to implement policies and deliver public services to citizens. They have therefore been present in nearly all societies in some form. In some situations, civil servants may use their position to implement policies that are in the public interest. However, public sector workforces can also be riddled with corruption. Bureaucrats may take bribes, misappropriate funds, or not act in line with professional standards.⁶⁷ This can be because they are subject to threats and violence themselves. Real democracy requires the

⁶⁶Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁶⁷Susan Rose-Ackerman and Bonnie J Palifka, *Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences, and Reform* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

absence of corruption – because it otherwise structurally empowers the bureaucrat and other interests – and disempowers the citizen.

- *Electoral integrity.* Critiques of electoral democracy often argue that elections are an insufficient condition for democracy because they do not ensure real improvement in living preconditions and genuine political equality. It has also been argued that there is a danger of the “fallacy of electoralism” – that “faith that the mere holding of elections will channel political action into peaceful contests among elites, the winners of which are accorded public legitimacy.”⁶⁸ Real democracy, involves much more than just elections. However, elections remain an important mechanism for delivering democracy and to approach democracy otherwise involves throwing the “baby out with the bathwater.” Good elections facilitate individuals to realize their capabilities, in Nausbaum’s terms, to free imagination and thought by allowing citizens free speech, access to information, free media, and a full range of political parties and candidates to choose from. They can enable some control over their environment by being able to affect political institutions having a voice in political decisions by votes (or abstention), selecting representatives, and booting governments out of power. It is worth considering what excluding good elections from measures of real democracy would look like. It would turn a blind eye to electoral violence, vote rigging, gerrymandering, bans on political opposition, internet shutdowns, and racialized franchise exclusions. At an individual and aggregate level, electoral integrity strengthens structure-agency relations against the autocrat, party barons and unaccountable representatives – towards the empowerment of citizens. Many preconditions for electoral integrity will be structural constraints at moment T1 (for example: electoral laws, norms for conducting the election, professionalisation of election staff) – but the quality of the election will also be the result of strategies and agency at moment T2.
- The presence of *liberal protections.* A wider set of human rights are required, outside of elections, to ensure that citizens can fully participate in democracy. This includes equality before the law and well as protections for the rights of minorities against the dangers of majoritarianism. An important restraint on majoritarianism is the constraints on the executive branch from the legislature and judiciary.⁶⁹ Each of these legal protections at stage T1 alter the structural context against the autocrat and protect individual citizens at stage T2.
- The presence of *participatory conditions.* Being able to formally vote and participate in elections is not a guarantee that citizens will do so. Holding elections is no guarantee of how many offices within a state are up for election – or the regularity of those elections. There are often wide inequalities in who votes between rich and poor, meaning that the former get more representation.⁷⁰ Participatory conditions therefore mean a rich civil society and a broad range

⁶⁸Terry Lynn Karl, “The Hybrid Regimes of Central America,” *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1995): 73.

⁶⁹A. Lijphart, “Constitutional Design for Divided Societies,” *ibid.* 15, no. 2 (2004).

⁷⁰Kimuli Kasara and Pavithra Suryanarayan, “When Do the Rich Vote Less Than the Poor and Why? Explaining Turnout Inequality across the World,” *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015).

of elections being open to competition. A culture of high and even levels of participation and political engagement across society at stage T1 can ensure wider involvement at stage T2.

- The presence of *deliberative conditions*. The quality of deliberation is important for ensuring that decisions are made informatively and without preference to specific groups. The use of reasoned justification, consideration of counter-arguments and common good are therefore key protections against elite or discriminatory group rule.⁷¹ Deliberation therefore dismantles structural power away from policymakers who might make decisions based on narrow sectional interests.
- The *absence of disempowering cultural structures*. Societies can be dominated by values, cultural norms, and practices which privilege some actors and groups by othering and introducing hierarchies. Those structures could be based on racism, patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, or discriminatory discourses against specific religious groups.⁷² These inhibit life opportunities and therefore shape power and undermine democracy. Broader ideational, ideological, and cultural structures are also often argued to be power-laden.⁷³ Cultural norms at T1 therefore structure interactions at T2.

An assessment of democratic outcomes considers whether democracy is realized through the interaction between structure and agency. The ideal democratic outcomes are simple: political equality is understood in terms of the *de facto* distribution of power. Electoral democracy often assumes that citizens are all equal by virtue of having an equal vote. However, we are interested here in the *de facto* distribution of power. We therefore should consider whether power has effectively been evenly distributed throughout a society by gender, class, race, sexuality, or membership of other groups.

Measuring Real Democracy

In the following section, quantitative cross-national data is used to map out some trends real democracy. It asks: what are the patterns of real democracy globally? Has real democracy been in decline in the way that other forms of democracy have been claimed to be?

Measuring social phenomena quantitatively is not usually associated with critical realist research methods because quantitative analysis is often attributed to being a characteristic of behaviorist social science. Andrew Sayer warns that the “recognition of the power and elegance of mathematics should not prevent us inquiring into the limits of its

⁷¹ John S Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁷² Shon Faye, *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice* (London, UK: Penguin 2021); Kimberlé W Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2017); Kerry O’Halloran, *Religious Discrimination and Cultural Context: A Common Law Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁷³ Faye, *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice*; Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings*; O’Halloran, *Religious Discrimination and Cultural Context: A Common Law Perspective*. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, vol. 8 (London, UK: Verso Books, 2014).

applicability.”⁷⁴ Critical realists can and have undertaken quantitative analysis, however. As Douglas Porpora puts it – realists can do regressions.⁷⁵ What is important is that there remains a critical realist *interpretation* of quantitative data analysis – the results do not speak for themselves because they require interpretation. Descriptive and multivariate analysis of past data does not identify “iron laws” of human behavior, which can be used to forecast the future. It presents information about past patterns of human action and past distributions of resources. These have resulted from structure, agency, and emergence – through morphogenetic processes. There is significant information lost when social phenomena is crunched and measured in quantitative variables – but this is also the same when social phenomena is captured through text and image - where emotions and sensual experiences are not captured. Every source of information (whether the format is numerical, text, visual, or a lived experience) involves some incompleteness in what is being measured and observed. The advantage of quantitative cross-national data is that it provides broad brush strokes of past phenomena in a parsimonious way. It is therefore a useful starting point to understand overall patterns of real democracy for the purposes of this article. Historical, qualitative and context specific studies remain essential for unpacking the dynamics of causal change.

In the following discussion, the quality of democracy between states is compared and charted. A key plank of comparative political science has been the comparative assessment of democracy quality between states. An index variable has commonly been used to indicate the quality of democracy for all citizens within that state. Freedom House maps of democratic quality with clearly demarcated borders have been used by global leaders to discuss public policy. These are problematic from the critical realist perspective because data points conflate structure and agency, and also remove structural relationships outside of the state, which can disempower citizens. National states remain the basic unit of governance for devising and delivering public policy, however. If social science should bring about social betterment, as critical realism proposes, then capturing the quality of democracy between national state containers is an important research activity and social practice which can contribute towards informing policy. It can identify patterns of disempowerment. The key point is that it should not be the only social practice – and the limits should be understood.

Data

Two key datasets are helpful in enabling us to gather a macroscopic overview of past trajectories. The Human Development Index, compiled by the UNDP, provides an overall measure of human development.⁷⁶ The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) dataset is constructed using raw data on health, education, and standard of living from

⁷⁴Sayer, *Method in Social Sciences*, 118.

⁷⁵Douglas Porpora, “Do Realists Run Regressions?,” in *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, ed. J. Lopez and G. Potter (London, UK: The Athlone Press, 2001).

⁷⁶UNDP, “Technical Notes: Calculating the Human Development Indices—Graphical Presentation,” (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

1990 to 2021.⁷⁷ These original materials are therefore used to measure health, education and standard of living as per [Appendix 1](#). The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) 13.0 dataset measures a range of formal and informal aspects of political institutions using expert-based scores for all countries since 1900 (and since 1789 for some variables).⁷⁸ Data from V-Dem 13.0 is used to measure public sector corruption, electoral integrity, liberal protections, participatory conditions and deliberative conditions. Existing indexes are used from within the compiled dataset for the purposes of simplicity. Cultural structures were not included in this assessment because of the lack of available data but are encouraged for future research.⁷⁹ Democratic *preconditions* are therefore calculated as the geometric mean of the eight indexes. Statistical detail is provided in [Appendix 1](#).

Democratic outcomes are measured using four questions in the V-Dem dataset – which are not used in the indexes by V-Dem. These ask experts to rate whether there is equality of political power by socio-economic group, gender, social group, and sexuality. Democratic *outcomes* are defined as the geometric mean of these four variables set out in [Appendix 2](#).

Global Patterns of Real Democracy

[Figures 4](#) and [5](#) map patterns of real democratic preconditions and outcomes around the world in 2021. An immediate difference between the real democracy and traditional approaches is the dynamic nature. Preconditions shape, but do not determine outcomes. The two maps are therefore broadly similar, but democratic preconditions and outcomes can diverge. Democratic preconditions in the USA and Australia, for example, are especially high and are shaded in darker green. This reflects high-quality health, high education, low levels of corruption, and traditional high democracy index scores. However, outcomes are comparatively lower and in light green – falling behind Nordic countries and Canada. Socio-economic, gender, sexuality and group equality is therefore under-realized in the USA and Australia. Space does not permit the use of equality-adjusted data, but this can be used in future research to examine patterns and distributions further.

Estimated real democracy scores differ from traditional indexes because they embody the actual material experiences of citizens: education, health, and living standards. Some countries therefore see a comparatively higher real democracy score than their liberal democracy score: Russia, China, and the UAE. However, they remain substantially behind the traditionally strong liberal democracies. A focus on real democracy does not therefore excuse the autocrat for not ensuring the electoral and constitutional rights of the people. It does, however, value the consequences of policies which reduce poverty, ill-health, and illiteracy.

⁷⁷The UNDP also provide inequality adjusted indexes and data which can enabled further analysis. However, only the main indexes are used here because of limitations of space and the initial nature of the analysis.

⁷⁸Michael Coppedge et al., “V-Dem Codebook V13,” (2023).

⁷⁹Ideational or cultural structures are an important part of democratic conditions which is not measured here as a separate component because of the lack of available data. This is not separately included as a question in the V-Dem project surveys. There are questions in separate surveys undertaken by the World Values Survey, Eurobarometer, Afrobarometer and specific national surveys that could be used for particular countries or periods of time – but there is no longitudinal global data. This a noticeable omission, however, this article still remains an important advance in demonstrating the broad applicability of the real concepts and approach. Moreover, some cultural structures are also captured in other dimensions such as the liberal conditions – which considers whether there is equality before the law.

Real Democratic Conditions 2021

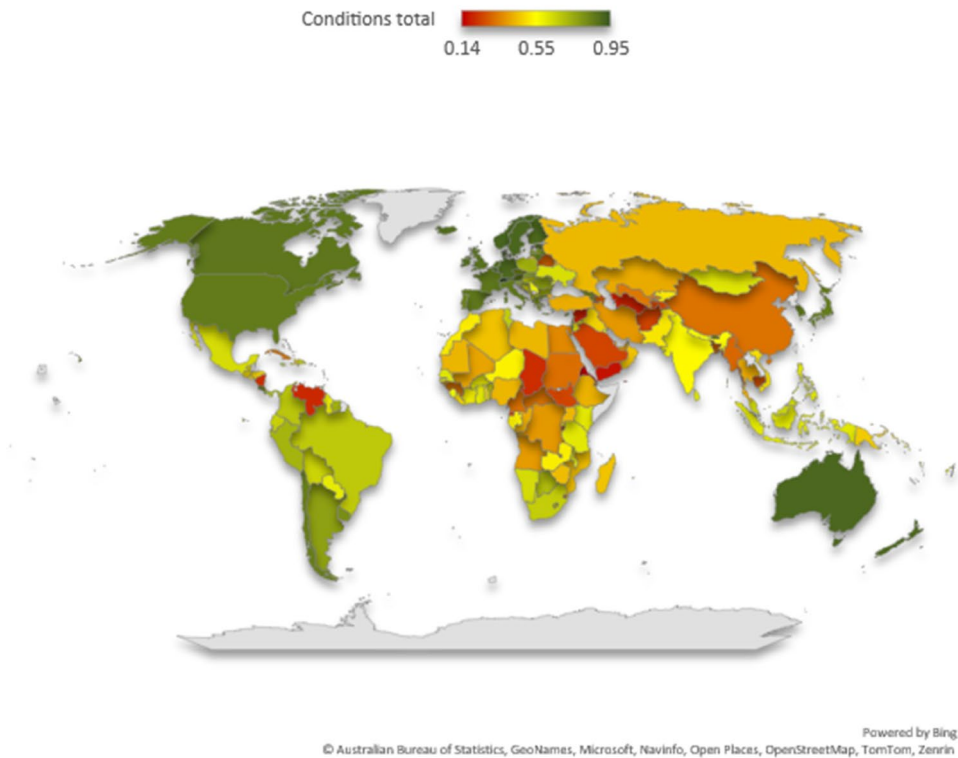


Figure 4. Estimated real democratic preconditions 2021. Source: author.

Global Trends in Real Democracy

What are the trends in real democracy? Does the liberal democratic backsliding narrative fit against the trajectories of real democracy? [Figure 6](#) maps the trends in democratic preconditions and democratic outcomes around the world from 1990 to 2021. The thick black line indicates the democratic preconditions in place. The dotted black line indicates the democratic outcomes. Other lines illustrate outcomes for specific groups. The figures show that democratic preconditions improved over the period – but that improvements began to level off in the early 2010s and saw a small decline after 2018-2021. Outcomes improved too, but much less slowly and levelled off since 2010.

A notable pattern of the 1990-2021 period was that although preconditions improved, outcomes did not take the same trajectory at an aggregate level. Analysis of the components of the outcomes enable a more detailed story. There were great leaps forward (from a low starting point) in terms of power distribution by sexuality, under increasingly improving democratic preconditions. Gender equality improved too – but stalled in progress after 2010. Socioeconomic power declined starkly globally, however. This points to the importance of agency. A key role must be prescribed

Real Democratic Outcomes 2021

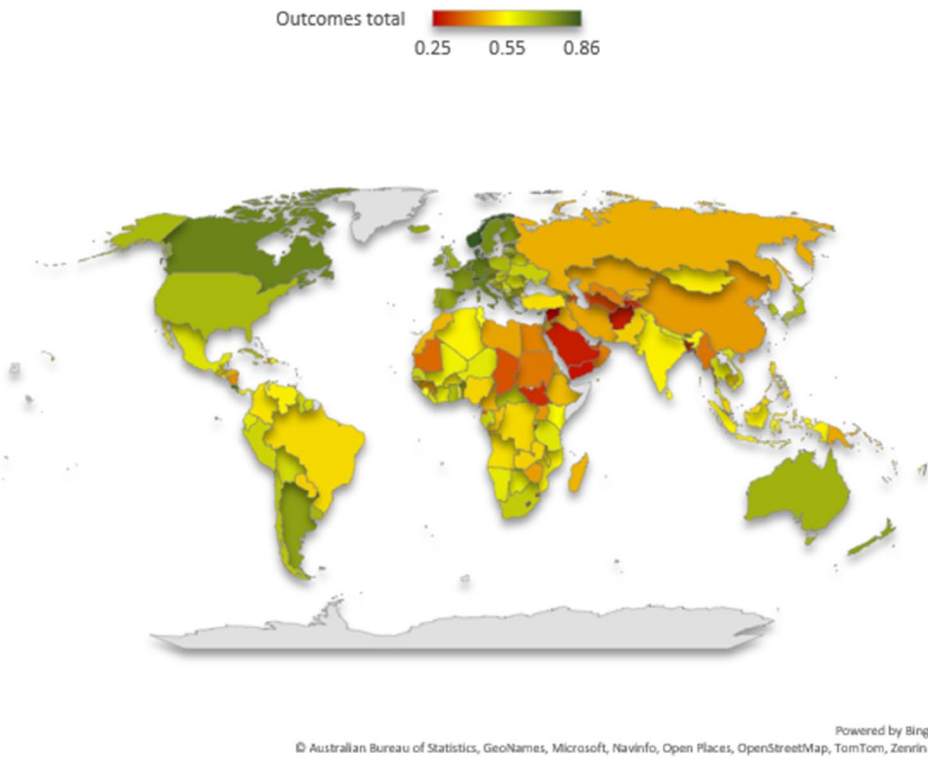


Figure 5. Estimated real democratic outcomes 2021. Source: author.

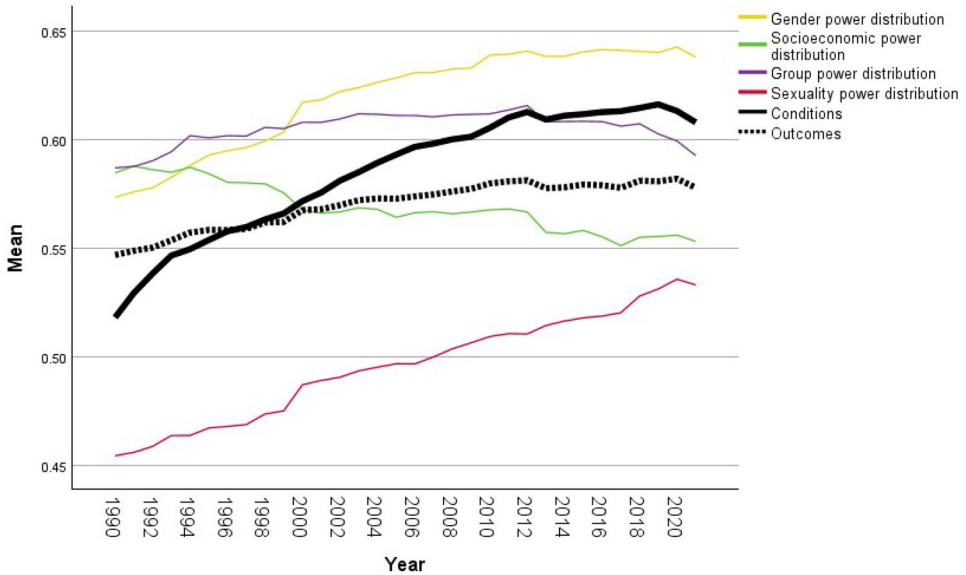


Figure 6. Democratic preconditions and outcomes around the world, 1990-2021.

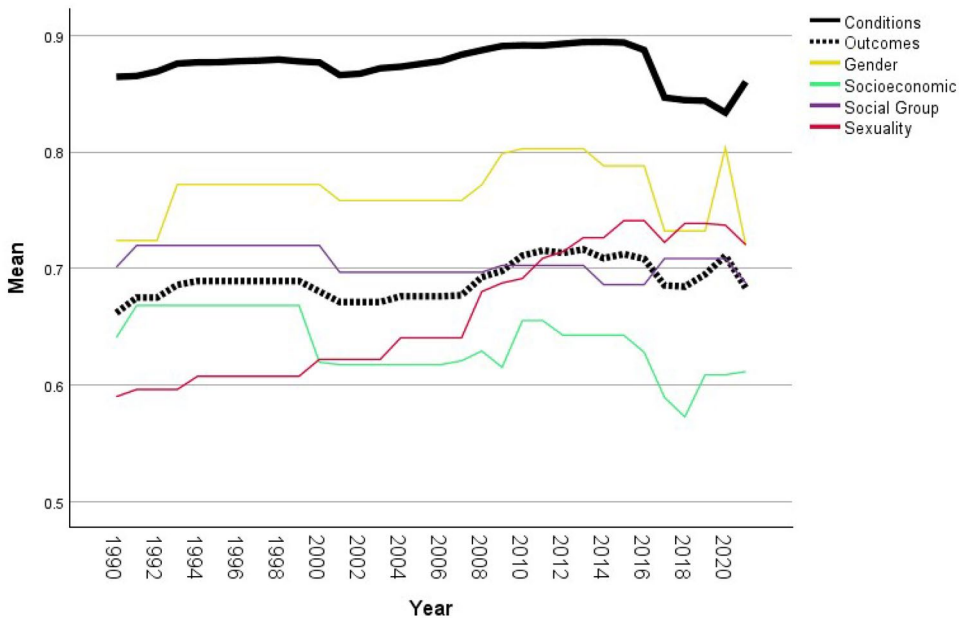


Figure 7. Changes in democratic preconditions and outcomes in the USA, 1990-2021.

to successful advocacy groups campaigning for LGBTQ+ rights around the world.⁸⁰ By contrast, those political organisations seeking to promote economic equality have been much less successful at navigating the political and economic terrain to achieve their goals against countervailing agents.

Real Democracy in the USA

Single country case study analysis further illustrates how real and traditional democracy approaches differ. Figure 7 shows real democratic quality from 1990 to 2021 in the USA to consider the pattern and interaction between democratic preconditions and outcomes. Democratic quality was broadly stable in the USA from 1990 to 2014, but there was a strong decline in democratic preconditions beginning from 2014 until 2020.

Figure 8 maps the empowerment preconditions. There was a dramatic decline in the deliberate condition component, with a recovery after 2020. These expert evaluations are likely to reflect concerns about the aggressive campaigns and partisan approach increasingly used by key actors and gatekeepers of politics.⁸¹ News outlets such as Fox and Breitbart News adopted a specific news style, and the structural development of social media and the news industry were widely thought to have contributed towards

⁸⁰Jami K Taylor, Donald P Haider-Markel, and Daniel C Lewis, *The Remarkable Rise of Transgender Rights* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018); Omar G Encarnación, "Latin America's Gay Rights Revolution," *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (2011).

⁸¹Alan Abramowitz and Jennifer McCoy, "United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump's America," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019).

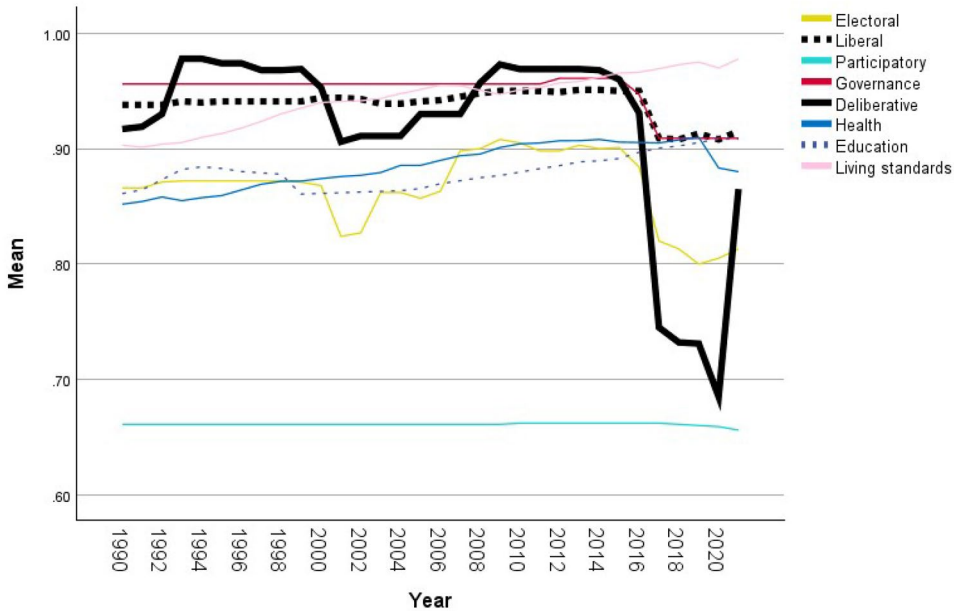


Figure 8. Changes in democratic preconditions in the USA, 1990-2021.

the undermining of deliberative democracy in the USA. Key political agents were important too. President Trump curated the destruction of deliberative democracy, argued Murdock, and adopted a governing style that aggravated hyper-partisanship.⁸² The period was also marked by a decline in election quality. Trump also undermined electoral and democratic institutions, for example, legislators passing restrictive voter ID laws in states,⁸³ sections of the Republican party⁸⁴ or partisan news agencies abdicating “its role of holding politicians accountable to the truth while accentuating the circulation of distortions and mischaracterizations.”⁸⁵ There was also a decline in the quality of governance, with the traditionally high score for corruption sliding slightly. Standards of healthcare declined during the pandemic. But living standards and educational outcomes saw a slow aggregate rise – albeit with increased inequalities.⁸⁶

The decline in democratic preconditions has not been matched with a major fall in democratic outcomes at the aggregate level. But improvements in aggregate score owed much more to progress towards equality by sexuality orientation – where progress was

⁸²Graham Murdock, “Refeudalisation Revisited: The Destruction of Deliberative Democracy,” in *The Liquefaction of Publicness* (London, UK: Routledge, 2020).

⁸³states Jennifer Darrah-Okike, Nathalie Rita, and John R Logan, “The Suppressive Impacts of Voter Identification Requirements,” *Sociological Perspectives* 64, no. 4 (2021).

⁸⁴Michael Espinoza, “Donald Trump’s Impact on the Republican Party,” *Policy Studies* (2021).

⁸⁵Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “America after Trump: From “Clean” to “Dirty” Democracy?,” 42, no. 5/6: 12.

⁸⁶Zhaochen He and Yixiao Jiang, “Decomposing Income Inequality in the United States: 1968–2018,” *Empirical Economics* 65, no. 6 (2023).

made.⁸⁷ Gender equality power saw early changes, which were lost by 2021, according to the index. Power distribution by group remained even. But, there was a marked decline in socio-economic power equality. A longer-term analysis of the indexes also suggests that socio-economic, gender and social group power actually seem to have made little progress since the late 1960s and 1970s. Real democracy analysis therefore differs from traditional democracy analysis by bringing equality of socio-economic power to the fore in the USA – rather than treating it as a separate “independent variable”.

Conclusions

This article has sought to use work from the critical realist school, notably Margaret Archer’s morphogenetic approach, to construct a critical realist concept of democracy: *real or realist* democracy. This promises to make a unique and original contribution towards the classification of political regimes, politics, and power. It has sketched out some key theoretical tenets for the approach and mapped global trends and trajectories, alongside a case study of the USA.

The advantages of this approach to democracy are multi-fold. It provides a more comprehensive coverage of structure-agency power relations than many approaches, especially minimalist approaches to electoral democracy. It is a more dynamic framework because it considers the interaction between structure and agency by recognizing the difference between democratic preconditions and outcomes. Perhaps most importantly, it also speaks directly to the individual experiences of citizens in terms of their empowerment – rather than just the functioning of remote parliamentary institutions – which can appear remote to them (important though they are). An alarming trend in patterns of real democracy is the decline of equality of power by socio-economic groups around the world – including in the United States. Real democracy analysis embeds the debate about socio-economic power and equality into a debate on democratic backsliding – rather than as something which is treated as an external “independent variable”.

The empirical mapping of real democracy provides a starting point for further analysis. This should more critically incorporate data on within country inequality – since real democracy involves examining the preconditions of *all* people. Nonetheless, there are already implications for theory and practice. Firstly, the causes of democratization and democratic backsliding could be more profuse, multi-causal and complex than many accounts commonly provide. They would include shifting economic processes, constitutional reforms, technological changes as well as the breakdown in norms of political communication – to name just a few. These processes can contribute towards shaping democratic preconditions. But democratic outcomes also involve *agency* – and the strategies undertaken to navigate conflictual relations that are embedded in societies. These relations are themselves structurally conditioned. The successful (and failed) statecraft strategies of political leaders who attempt to consolidate power; actions by political

⁸⁷Reynolds, *The Children of Harvey Milk*.

opposition; the agency of organized civil society groups – all play a role. Structure and agency are therefore both central to democratisation and backsliding.

Second, it also follows that there are also a wider set of public policies required to fix democratic backsliding. Constitutional reforms and measures to prevent electoral backsliding matter. But reforms to welfare provision are similarly central because they can address structurally unequal relations in all societies around the globe. Moreover, realising real democracy requires political agency. Coalitions may need to be made and remade – strategies reconsidered – and lessons shared across borders between democratic and democracy defense movements – for real democracy to be realized.

Thirdly, national and international organizations seeking to measure democracy should reflect on the conceptions of democracy that they use in their democracy assessments.⁸⁸ They are encouraged to take a real democracy approach so that their assessments speak more directly to the everyday experience of citizens around the world. Likewise, those organizations who measure ‘development’ and set sustainable development goals are encouraged to build ‘democracy’ concepts into their measures and indexes.⁸⁹ This would recognize the value of the citizen’s voice in an age of increased inequality of political power by socio-economic groups.

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⁸⁸For example: Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2023,” (Washington DC: Freedom House, 2023); International IDEA, “Global State of Democracy 2023: The New Checks and Balances,” (Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA, 2023).

⁸⁹UNDP, *Human Development Index (DHI)* (New York, NY: UNDP, 2023).

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Appendix 1. Concept-indicator linkages to measure democratic preconditions

Concept	Measure	Detail
Healthcare quality	Life expectancy at birth.	Life expectancy at birth. Source: UNDP HDI 2023.
Education quality	Expected years of school and mean years of schooling	Expected years of schooling (years). Source: UNDP HDI 2023.
Standard of living	GNI per capita	GNI per capita. Source: UNDP HDI 2023.
Electoral integrity	VDEM electoral democracy index (v2x_polyarchy)	VDEM's expert-based index. Contains five lower-level indexes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index • Freedom of association index • Share of population with suffrage • Clean elections index • Elected officials index
Liberal protections	VDEM liberal component index (v2xl_liberal)	VDEM's expert-based index. Captures the legal rules of the game. It includes lower-level indexes for a) equality before the law and individual liberty index, b) judicial constraints on the executive index, and c) legislative constraints on the executive index.
Participatory conditions	VDEM participatory component index (v2x_partip)	VDEM's expert-based index. The <i>participatory component index</i> includes four lower-level indexes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The civil society participation index specifies whether there are barriers to participation in civil society organisations • The direct popular vote index, which covers laws regarding referendums and other popular initiatives. • The local government index considers whether local government exists, the power it has and whether it was elected. • The regional government index does the same.
Deliberative conditions	VDEM deliberative component index (v2xdl_delib)	VDEM's expert-based index. The <i>deliberative component index</i> consists of five items asking whether decisionmaking involves reasoned justification, whether the common good is considered, counterarguments are considered, whether there is consultation at elite levels and whether there are widespread public deliberations.
Good governance	VDEM Public sector corruption index (D) (v2x_pubcorr)	VDEM's expert-based index. This asks experts 'to what extent do public sector employees grant favors in exchange for bribes, kickbacks, or other material inducements, and how often do they steal, embezzle, or misappropriate public funds or other state resources for personal or family use?'. The measure is reverse-coded for this analysis so that a positive score is higher.

Appendix 2. Concept-indicator linkages to measure democratic outcomes using VDEM 12.0

Variable name	Variable ID	Question	Scale
Power distributed by gender	v2pepwrngen	Is political power distributed according to gender?	Five-point scale: 0-4. Low = 'Men have a near-monopoly on political power,' high = 'Men and women have roughly equal political power'
Power distributed by socioeconomic position	v2pepwrscs	Is political power distributed according to socioeconomic position?	Five-point scale: 0-4. Low= 'Wealthy people enjoy a virtual monopoly on political power,' high= 'Wealthy people have no more political power than those whose economic status is average or poor. Political power is more or less equally distributed across economic groups.'
Power distributed by social group	v2pepwrscoc	Is political power distributed according to social groups? (A social group is differentiated within a country by caste, ethnicity, language, race, region, religion, or some combination thereof. (It does not include identities grounded in sexual orientation or socioeconomic status.)	Five-point scale: 0-4. Low= 'Political power is monopolized by one social group comprising a minority of the population,' high= 'All social groups have roughly equal political power, or there are no strong ethnic, caste, linguistic, racial, religious, or regional differences to speak of. Social group characteristics are not relevant to politics'
Power distributed by sexual orientation	v2pepwrort	To what extent is political power distributed according to sexual orientation?	Five-point scale: 0-4. low= 'LGBTs are entirely excluded from the public sphere and thus deprived of any real political power,' high = 'LGBTs enjoy somewhat more political power than heterosexuals by virtue of greater wealth, education, and high level of organization and mobilization)'.)

Each of the variables are converted from an ordinal scale to an interval by V-Dem according to their measurement model. The resulting variable has a range as below. This was converted onto a 0-1 point scale as follows. Firstly, an assumption was made that the maximum and maximum values were -4 and 4. Secondly, 4 was added to each value to make the distribution positive and on a 0-8 scale. Thirdly, following the method used by the UNDP for the Human Development Index:

$$\text{Dimension index} = \frac{\text{actual value} - \text{minimum value}}{\text{maximum value} - \text{minimum value}}$$