



CONSTRUCTING THE MEANING OF DEMOCRACY: PROBLEMS OF CONCEPTUALIZATION

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ABSTRACT: *The standardization of democracy based on precise scholarly definitions has paradoxically produced proliferation rather than uniformity, generating numerous subtypes and prototypes. This paper examines how conceptualization difficulties in political science may lead to problematic categorizations of regimes, using Rwanda as a case study. Despite being classified as an “authoritarian regime” by the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2022 report (ranking 127th of 165 countries) and ranking 145th out of 202 countries on Varieties of Democracy's 2022 Index, Rwanda demonstrates outcomes in gender equality (61% female parliamentary representation), corruption reduction, and economic growth (10% growth in 2019) typically associated with democratic governance. Through systematic analysis of secondary data from democratic measurement organizations, this study reveals critical limitations in current assessment frameworks, particularly regarding mechanisms that favor electoral and liberal dimensions of democracy, over egalitarian and participatory dimensions. This paper does not claim Rwanda is democratic by conventional standards. It demonstrates that the Rwandan case highlights fundamental challenges with conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement of democracy, which could potentially give opportunities to autocrats to justify the prohibition and limitation of certain democratic values.*

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Conceptualization, Rwanda, Development, Africa.



INTRODUCTION

Standardizing the concept of “democracy” based on its precise definition by scholars has not produced the intended uniformity but has rather led to the emergence of several subtypes and some prototypes. These subtype concepts have led to several forms of democracy, with each one comprising a different instance with its peculiar definition. Thus, “parliamentary democracies, presidential democracies, or federal democracies can provide fully contested elections, universal suffrage, the absence of widespread fraud, and guarantees of civil liberties” (Davies, 2005) in different ways. Further on subtypes, it has been argued that democracies can be differentiated in terms of their “operational definition.” As such, there are diminished subtypes such as “limited suffrage democracy,” “male democracy,” and “illiberal democracy,” which do not meet “standard or ideal levels of democracy” (Davies, 2005), which are usually defined in liberal terms as “a form of representative democracy in which elected representatives who hold power are limited by a constitution that emphasizes protecting individual liberties, equality, and the rights of minority groups” (Wynn, 2022).

On prototypes, modern democracies like those that emerged in the United States of America tend to see their kind of democracy as a blueprint for others. For instance, American scholars judge other countries as democratic or nondemocratic on the basis of comparisons to the contemporary US political system, whereas scholars in Europe also applied and extended the concept based on the proportional representation system (Davies, 2005) prevalent on the European continent. Although attempts have been made by researchers and scholars to limit these proliferations, which stood at 550 at some point, to a maximum of three loosely defined categories, i.e., democracy, intermediate category, and non-democracy (Hudeček, 2005), the attempt has rather led to the projection and promotion of just a few criteria for democracy within the boundaries of liberal democracy with a focus on elections. As a result, several regimes have been miscategorized as non-democratic, democratic, and intermediate, under any of the dominant subtypes especially.

One case in point is Rwanda, which is the central focus of this paper. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) report in 2022, Rwanda is an authoritarian regime. Also, the regime ranks very low on Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) categorization indexes, eventually ranking 145 on the Liberal Democratic and Electoral Democratic Indexes. Meanwhile, Acemoglu et al. (2019) argue that “democracy is important for reducing poverty (SDG 1), achieving economic growth (SDG 8), and reducing inequality (SDG 10). Evidence shows that democratization produces a 20% higher increase in GDP per capita over 25 years compared to autocratic regimes,” which was well iterated by V-dem’s 2022 report.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Democracy

Democracy originates from the Greek terms “Demos” (people) and “Kratos” (rule), together denoting “rule by the people.” In Athens, the ideal took the form of direct democracy, where all free adult male citizens participated directly in decision-making. Democracy has evolved into the current form, which is mainly representative, whereby elected officials act on behalf of the broader population. Schumpeter (1942) characterized democracy as “the method by which people elect representatives in competitive elections to carry out their will.” Yet Collier



et al. (2016) argue Schumpeter's formulation is minimalist, providing a parsimonious criterion for determining whether a political system qualifies as democratic.

Dahl (1971) also offers a definition that emphasizes the importance of "participation and contestation." Dahl introduced "polyarchy" to capture the practical, real-world manifestation of these principles. Despite the contributions from these scholars, democratic governance has not achieved consensus regarding its core features. It continues to be reinterpreted and reshaped, resulting in meanings and practices that keep shifting. As Krouse (1982) suggests, this ongoing reinvention may help explain the different forms of democracy that exist, from transitional to consolidated forms.

Dahl also gives an ideal definition of democracy. He associates democracy strongly with participation and contestation. Dahl constructed the term "polyarchy" to describe a real-world condition marked by high levels of participation and contestation.

In spite of the conceptualization attempts made by Dahl and Schumpeter, it appears as though democratic governance, over the years, has failed to produce consensus on some of its most fundamental features and ideas as a political system. This is because democracy has a history of constant reinvention, continually shifting in meaning and practices since its emergence, which Krouse (1982) argued may account for the diverse set of democratic systems, including transitional and consolidated forms, etc., in existence.

With this said, it becomes extremely challenging to distinguish between countries as democratic and undemocratic. Regimes under Schumpeter and Dahl's definition will make elections a huge component of institutional arrangements, making elections highly competitive and the go-to method for governments to achieve legitimacy. Others, like Lindberg (2006), have also strongly held that "holding competitive elections improves civil liberties by strengthening civil society, creating democratic citizens, and providing new roles for state institutions." However, democracy goes beyond only elections. Democracy is also seen as the launchpad for development, which is especially the case in the post-industrial concept of development. Knowledge and innovation are becoming the main drivers of growth and of sustainability, and as the argument goes, countries with prevailing democratic trends along all societal axes are the true winners in the global competition for development, which is being exemplified, *inter alia*, by 35 OECD member countries.

Democratic Waves

Fukuyama (1992) argues that "science together with the struggle for recognition led to the eventual collapse of tyrannies." In Eastern Europe, the newly independent former Soviet states predominantly adopted democracy, with Russia also democratizing. But the challenge still remained regarding the form of democracy. The development of democracy has been accentuated by democratic waves, which differ in origin, intensity, and success. Some scholars identified thirteen waves that differ based on origin. Nonetheless, Huntington's concept of the "democratic wave" has become the default when transitions are being discussed. Democratic waves, according to Huntington, were "a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period of time" (Gunitsky, 2018).

The longest wave, which spanned about a century (1820–1920), was also the first of the three waves. This wave brought into being about 29 democratic states largely in the industrialized



world (Global North) “with the widening of suffrage to a large proportion of the male population.” In 1942, 12 democracies survived the reversal ushered in by Mussolini and Hitler (Gunitsky, 2018). In 1974, there were 41 democracies in a world of 150 states. 56 of those that were undemocratic later became democratic (Diamond, 2003), with Russia, Pakistan, and Sudan out of the 56 states that transitioned currently regarded largely as undemocratic (Diamond, 2003). The Allies' victory ushered in the second wave that reached its peak in 1962 with 36 countries being governed democratically. Another reversal occurred with the emergence of the Cold War, with the many proxy wars and regime overthrows.

The third wave led to the spread of democracies across continents and saw several transitions from autocratic regimes to democratic ones, marked greatly by elections. Almost three-quarters, consisting of 71 percent of the 45 new states that were created when the third wave began, were democracies, “though, in the case of the former Soviet Union, some of them, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia, were only ambiguously democratic” (Diamond, 2003). In Africa, for instance, these transitions saw countries like Ghana and Nigeria give up military regimes for democratically elected civilian governments, and the reintroduction of elections gave “meaning to the concept of political representation and the protection of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Constitution” (Bob-Millar et al., 2018). Although Schmitter and Karl (1991) argue otherwise in their theory of the “fallacy of electoralism,” according to Lindberg (2006), “elections remain the core institution of representative democracy and the only means to decide who holds legislative or executive power.” Thus, governments seek internal and external legitimacy with elections, and those who do not want to appear undemocratic try to meet the ‘electioneering’ criteria tacitly or explicitly, even to the extent of constitutional amendments, which leads us to revise our notes on the concept of democracy. More on elections: Anderson et al. (2022) opined that democracy also “depends on the loser’s consent, and the willingness of election losers to be governed by the winners can be influenced”; losers can create the illegitimacy of elections by simply refusing to accept the results. This also has become a trend in most elections in Africa and even in the recent presidential elections in the USA, where the loser refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the elections.

Conceptualization in Political Science

Despite the crucial role concepts play in epistemology, the identification and definition of concepts remain difficult tasks in political science. For instance, attempting “to define the concept of ideology led to the identification of more than 30 distinct definitional traits” (Gerring, 2001). Gallie (1956) also asserts that individuals devoted to partially divergent assumptions and ideas are inclined to interpret common concepts in fairly distinct ways. Conceptualizing “governance” also can be seen from different disciplinary lenses and perspectives (Demitronova, 2019). These nuances make it difficult for any concept to be singularized.

Also, on the concept of freedom, Berlin (1958) argued that no single definition of freedom could encompass all of its facets because, in political thought and action, there are positive (freedom to) and negative (freedom from) connotations of the concept. Berlin claimed that throughout history, the positive and negative ideas about freedom have evolved in different ways until, at some point, they have come into conflict with one another. Operationalization seems to be one of the ways of bringing specificity and sometimes singularity to concepts. For instance, on the concept of politics, Connolly (1974) argued that each concept in political



inquiry must be linked to a precise and clear testing operation that specifies the terms under which it will be applied. It also seeks to decide between competing definitions by determining which proposal best satisfies the operational requirement.

Unsurprisingly, democracy has become one of the concepts that have conceptual difficulties. Opposing parties assign different weights to universally accepted criteria for its application, and certain criteria that are considered essential by one party are rejected as inappropriate or secondary by another. For instance, Campbell (2019) posits that “there exists and co-exists a magnitude of patterns of regimes with various degrees of democratic features and related modes of securing societal, economic, and ecological sustainability.” Although socioeconomic development and improvement of standard of living are hugely associated with democracy, “improving quality of life can be functionally secured also under conditions of a “limited” democracy or even in non-democratic regimes” (ibid).

One reason given by Davis (2005) for the conceptualization problem in political science is that concepts have “been treated largely as unproblematic in some of the most significant and influential works of political science,” which have led to the emergence of “subtype concepts” and “prototype concepts.” The concept of “democracy” has led to other concepts like “illiberal democracies,” “democratic authoritarianism,” and “democratic peace” that have to be further conceptualized. Also, according to Collier et al. (1996), the global wave of democratization in the 1990s especially presented scholars with a major conceptual challenge. This is because so many countries moved from authoritarianism, and the concept of democracy was “applied to so many different settings.”

Osterberg-Kaufmann et al. (2020) also posited that at the core of these challenges with the conceptualization of democracy is the focus on what is specific and what is general since using “thin or thick” characteristics can lead to “omission or stretching the concepts too far beyond their original intention,” which is in line with Sartori’s (1970) argument that the lack of agreement or consensus towards the attributes of the concept of democracy leads to “conceptual stretching,” resulting in the emergence of these subtypes and prototypes.

To find a solution to the uneasy task of conceptualization, Smith and Medin (1981) offered three main methods for the comprehension of concepts—the traditional, exemplar, and probabilistic methods. The traditional method was based on the idea that “all instances of a concept shared common features, and that these common properties were essential and sufficient to define the concept.” Instances of a concept can differ in how much they share specific qualities, according to the probabilistic or prototype model. Last but not least, “there is no one representation of a whole class or concept, but only unique representations of the class's exemplars,” according to the exemplar view. The probabilistic or exemplar viewpoints are likely to be applied to many concepts in social science. Because there are so many various types of democracy around the world, a traditional approach would be difficult to apply.

Empiricism in Political Science

According to Barnes (1948), sociology and other forms of social sciences emerged as a response to the industrial revolution, which had dismantled the structure of the old societal order. Thus, the social sciences emerged “as an assistance in solving the newly created social problems, to reconstruct the disintegrating social order” (Barnes, 1948). A lot of skepticism exists about the social sciences’ scientific standing. Although philosophers and scientists continue to question the epistemic underpinnings of their respective fields, some mainly



criticize social scientists for not adopting the established scientific methodology, while others claim that by trying to emulate the natural sciences, they (social sciences) have been led to pursue incorrect methods.

For instance, Gordon (1991) asserted that the Vienna Circle Philosophers who saw physics as the archetypical science were more interested in “prescribing methodological maxims for all rational procedures of inquiry” instead of merely applying the available methods used by successful scientists and in that respect, “regarded positivist principles as applying, without amendment, to the social sciences.” The postmodernists also held the view that all knowledge is arbitrary, socially produced, negotiated, and relative. However, social sciences and humanities have generally created unique methods of knowledge justification due to the challenges they face in gathering empirical data. In essence, social scientists employ the paradigmatic approach with the addition of hermeneutics (which refers to the process of intuitively comparing a phenomenon) and discourse, which strengthens their methods (Nakamori, 2012).

Although it has been strongly argued that the social sciences were less equipped to deal with falsified data and other abuses of empirical evidence than the natural sciences due to the absence of the ability to conduct closed-system experiments and the influence of value judgments, to mention a few, the modern ‘scientification’ of political science was widely pioneered by Charles Merriam in the 1920s. He observed that the science of the discipline had to be about doing science instead of explaining science through the adoption of the methods used in psychology. However, in the aftermath of World War II, calls to adopt empiricism in the social sciences, especially political science, intensified amidst great opposition.

Furthermore, the establishment of the American Political Science Association (APSA) signaled not only an ideological departure from several influential figures in the field but also a redefinition of how political science should relate to political practice.

Gunnell (2006) was gravely concerned about “how exactly objective science was to yield normative results and how such results were to be imparted to and deployed by political actors.” The promotion of the behaviorist approach with roots in psychology even led to Robert Dahl issuing a warning in 1961 that there was a potential lack of balance on the part of the behaviorists and that some “traditional” training might produce better, wiser scientists. It was argued further that perhaps anti-behavioralists might do better research if they acquired empirical and quantitative training in methods (Freeman, 1991).

Regarding the impact of empiricism on the discipline, Davis (2005) also contends that the discipline has not been able to predict the occurrences of future events nor has it been able to provide a rigorous theoretical basis to explain past events, which is a sharp contrast to the natural sciences. As a result of these difficulties with the discipline of political science, “...societal problems, wars, poverty have not abated; also, predictions of future predicaments have become so difficult to achieve...” (Davis, 2005). Despite the opposition to the scientific approach, it still remains the dominant form of enquiry in Political Science even today. On the contrary, Davis asserts also that the “systematic study of politics has given purpose and focus (discipline)” to the discipline.



Presidential Term Limits: The Rwanda Case in Comparative Contexts

Rwanda's governance structure includes a bicameral legislature made up of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies (Britannica, 2022). Two-thirds of the members of the Chamber of Deputies are directly elected for a five-year term. The remaining one-third are not elected directly. The National Youth Council, the Federation of the Association of the Disabled, and local government bodies are given the mandate to fill those slots. It must be noted that the local governments are responsible for electing only female representatives and twelve members of the Senate. Two members of the senate are indirectly elected by private and public universities, the president of the country selects eight members, and the Forum of Political Organizations also selects four.

Citizens who are at least 18 years old can also vote. There is also a provision in the constitution that stipulates that a minimum of "30 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies be reserved for women apart from the opportunity for women to contest for the unreserved seats as well" (Britannica, 2022). What has been less highlighted, other than the changes to presidential term limits, were changes in the tenure of senators and justices of the Supreme Court.

In Mali, contentious legislative elections in 2020 resulted in President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita being ousted from power by the military. In Guinea, Alpha Condé, who won a third term, was overthrown by Mamady Doumbouya in September 2021. In September 2022, another coup d'état happened in Burkina Faso. Apart from coups d'état, one of the turning points that has influenced the democratic development over the past three decades is the decision of incumbents to follow the rules "and step down in due time or to challenge term limits and attempt to overstay in office" (Cassani, 2020).

The African Union sought to bring the trend of unconstitutional change of government to an end through its Charter, which saw it heralded as a new era for democracy, rule of law, and good governance. Although the Charter has resulted in the traditional forms of unconstitutional change in government, especially coups d'état, being on the decline, recent cases in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Gabon have raised eyebrows, while subtle forms of unconstitutional change, such as so-called "third termism," have emerged and have become almost conventional, with the latest being in Ivory Coast. The continent has been hugely dominated by "big man" politics, especially in the post-colonial era; "presidential term limits were therefore welcomed as key instruments to deter the personalization of political power in favor of government turnover" (Casani, 2020). However, over time, the emergence of constitutional changes to extend term limits seemed to creep into the nature of democracies on the continent, and this trend has been described by scholars as "third-termism," which has become an example of the general crisis of democracy that affects the entire globe.

Leaders who wanted to extend their terms of office frequently claimed that they were doing it because of demands from the public. However, studies have revealed that with a few exceptions, citizens in practically all African nations strongly support presidential term limits. The 2015 Afrobarometer report shows that in 34 African countries, most citizens, including those in states that have ever adopted term limits or abolished them, strongly support restricting presidents to two terms.

Term limits increased the probability of turnover in government by ensuring that the opportunity for leaders to be replaced was available. However, in 2015 alone, the leaders of



Burundi, Benin, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda all stated that they intended to forgo or work around term restrictions. However, “support for term limits was highest in Benin standing at 90%, when President Yayi Boni was reportedly contemplating removing them, while in Burkina Faso, nearly two-thirds of the country’s citizens (64 percent) expressed support for term limits, justifying the protests that ended Compaoré’s reign in October 2014. In Burundi, 62 percent supported the term limit by 2014, also justifying the widespread protests that greeted President Pierre Nkurunziza’s third-term bid.” (Afrobarometer, 2015).

But in Rwanda, the situation was very unique; the constitutional amendments that allowed Paul Kagame to stay in power until 2034 were met with support from the majority of the population. Although Kagame has been accused of intimidation, legislative vote buying, and biased electoral procedures, the constitutional amendment in Rwanda saw a successful referendum that approved the new constitution with overwhelming support from the Rwandan population, after more than 98% of Rwandans voted to lift the presidential term limit (Stubbs, 2016), while such attempts in other countries were met in some cases with protests, violence, and coups.

METHODOLOGY

This study relies on systematic analysis of secondary sources using established frameworks for measuring democracy. It draws from peer-reviewed publications such as journals, books and authoritative reports on democracy and governance. The analysis focuses on two leading organizations with expertise in assessing democratic governance: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem, 2022) and Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). These organizations also provide distinct approaches in their measurement of democracy. The EIU assesses democracy in 165 independent states and two territories using 60 indicators organized into five dimensions: “electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.” Countries are subsequently classified as “full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes or authoritarian regimes” based on their scores.

V-Dem, by contrast, provides a historically extensive and highly disaggregated dataset that spans from 1789 and covers more than 450 indicators across 202 countries. Its framework conceptualizes democracy through five criteria: “electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian” (Coppedge et al., 2011). V-Dem further relies on over 3700 country experts, consisting of “five expert coders per country year” (Marquardt, 2022), to develop the V-Dem measure of democratic qualities.

The analysis examines Rwanda’s scores across different dimensions and systematically compares them with countries receiving similar and different overall classifications to identify patterns and inconsistencies in categorization. The paper also incorporates development indicators from United Nations agencies (UNICEF), governance indicators, and corruption measures from Transparency International to assess substantive outcomes associated with democratic governance.



RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Democratic Measurement Scores

Table 1 presents Rwanda's democratic scores from EIU. Rwanda received an overall score of 2.65/10, categorizing it as an authoritarian regime and ranking it 127th out of 165 countries. Individual category scores ranged from 1.42 (Functioning of Government) to 4.38 (Civil Liberties). The low score on Functioning of Government reflects concerns about executive constraints and checks and balances, while the relatively higher Civil Liberties score acknowledges some freedoms despite restrictions on political opposition (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022).

Table 1: Democratic Scores of Rwanda by EIU

Rwanda	Score
Electoral Process	3.10
Functioning of Government	1.42
Political Participation	4.29
Political Culture	2.78
Civil Liberties	4.38
Overall Score	2.65/10
Regime Type	Authoritarian
Rank	127/165

(Source: *Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022*)

Table 2 shows Rwanda's V-Dem scores, revealing a more nuanced pattern. Rwanda ranked 145th on both the liberal democratic index (0.12) and the electoral democratic index (0.24), placing it in the bottom quartile globally. These low scores reflect assessments of limited electoral competition, restrictions on opposition parties, and constraints on media freedom (Alizada et al., 2022). However, Rwanda scored substantially higher on the Egalitarian Component Index (0.61, ranking 91st), the Participatory Component Index (0.50, ranking 105th) and the Deliberative Component Index (0.61, ranking 101st). This divergence is important, suggesting Rwanda's political system exhibits characteristics that vary dramatically across different dimensions of democracy (Coppedge et al., 2019).

Table 2: Democratic Scores of Rwanda by V-Dem

Indicator	Rank	Score	sd+/-
Liberal democratic index	145/202	0.12	0.022
Electoral democratic Index	145/202	0.24	0.027
Liberal component index	140/202	0.32	0.07
Egalitarian Component Index	91/202	0.61	0.009
Participatory Component Index	105/202	0.5	0.072
Deliberative Component Index	101/202	0.61	0.62

(Source: *Varieties of Democracy, 2022*)



DISCUSSION

Davies (2005) argues that “efforts to increase definitional and operational precision for the concept of democracy produce rather odd results.” For example, some scholars argue, “both the United States and Switzerland were liberal for the period of the eighteenth century, although women could not vote and the United States maintained the institution of slavery” (Davies, 2005). Though times have changed, this argument shows that ranking a country as democratic depends on several factors, including the cultural and moral stance of a country at a particular time. Rwandans have consistently demonstrated that Kagame is the best man going forward based on his developmental records, history of the country, and even his international reputation despite grave concerns about human rights. In spite of concerns about abuse of incumbency and limitation of opposition rights, a referendum in 2015 and subsequent presidential election victory for Paul Kagame at an overwhelming 98% (Britannica, 2022), demonstrates that he has the support of Rwandans.

Additionally, in established democracies like the USA, scholars have also asserted that “what is really driving the definitions of contemporary American political scientists’ understanding of the concept of democracy” emerges from how they see contemporary America as a prototype for democracy. “America receives virtually perfect scores on the democracy scale” (Oren, 1995). The datasets of democratic and autocratic regimes do not reflect the application of ‘neutral’ and ‘precise’ coding protocols. On other democratic scales, such as the EIU, America ranked 30th, far behind Italy. This demonstrates that democracy has problems and contextual factors may differ, leading to the emergence of several imperfect and illiberal democracies.

Furthermore, it has been argued that true democracy is not practiced anywhere. For instance, in spite of arguments for broad participation, voting in many countries does not include individuals who are below 18 years. The Polity Project adopts a minimalist approach, focusing on a smaller number of countries since the 19th century (EIU, 2007). Also, Freedom House measures “electoral democracy,” which is also narrow (EIU, 2007). On these electoral metrics, age restrictions and even the rights of prisoners to vote also raise several questions regarding what true democracies are, and if true democracies do not exist, then whose standard or what prototype has been applied to countries such as Rwanda?

Also, those who oppose the kind of democracy being practiced in Rwanda make the argument that the opposition has been weakened and Rwanda has essentially become a one-party state where the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) has dominated elections since 1994. Amnesty International reports that the RPF “has consolidated its control over Rwanda’s political system, leaving little room for political opposition. Dissenting voices, whether in politics, the media or civil society, have been systematically silenced.” However, a quick glance at Botswana, which has been hailed as an “African Miracle” because of its economic growth and political stability, reveals that in nearly 58 years after independence, there was no change in government. The Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) was the dominant ruling party for many years. The opposition had been institutionally weak until this order was disrupted by Duma Boko’s Umbrella for Democratic Change in 2024. Also, the president was chosen indirectly by the ruling party under the BDP. The parliament was dependent on the presidency. While the president had the power to dismiss the legislature, the legislature did not have the same power (Good & Taylor, 2010). In spite of these dimensions of the democracy practiced in Botswana, it ranked 30th above and just below the Czech Republic, on EIU’s democratic index in 2022.



The argument has also been made that when it comes to economic development, democracy plays a vital role in “reducing poverty (SDG 1), achieving economic growth (SDG 8), and reducing inequality (SDG 10).” According to Coppedge et al. (2022) and Acemoglu et al. (2019), “evidence shows that democratization produces a 20% higher increase in GDP per capita over 25 years compared to autocratic regimes.” In the period under review, Rwanda, recovering from a civil war and genocide, experienced rapid economic growth exceeding 10% in 2018, mainly driven by public investment and an effective national strategy (BTI, 2022). This economic growth has outpaced other East African Community member states primarily because Rwanda receives more foreign aid and is also guided by a long-term developmental strategy focused on modernizing agriculture and becoming a “knowledge-based economy” while attaining a middle-income status. Beyond economic growth, there has also been progress in education, health care and curbing the population, while it has also invested in restructuring its mining sector (BTI, 2022).

Additionally, democracies are necessary for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (education). According to Acemoglu et al. (2015), democratization boosts enrollment in secondary school by over 70%. Democratization “leads to greater education investment by up to 30%,” according to a further significant study by Ansell (2008). The education system in Rwanda has improved significantly. Despite ongoing challenges, Rwanda has one of the highest rates of primary school enrollment on the continent, with 98% of children in that age group enrolled (UNICEF, 2022). The nation was also a recipient of the coveted Commonwealth Education Good Practice Award in 2012 (Trines, 2019) 8,600 classrooms were built between 2009 and 2011. Science and technology are given great emphasis in addition to vocational and technical training to develop human capital and turn Rwanda into a knowledge-based economy like members of the OECD. To realize this goal, Rwanda’s government worked with Microsoft to build “smart” classrooms across the country and aimed at connecting all schools in the country by 2020.

Gender equality (SDG 5), it has been contended, is both a dividend and fundamental aspect of democracy because “democracy leads to higher levels of female political participation and representation” (Fallon et al., 2012). Democracy also produces substantial improvements in women’s civil liberties (Sundström et al., 2017). Civil liberties, in turn, provide the opportunity for women’s movements to effectively promote gender equality (Paxton et al., 2006). Rwanda has the highest number of female representatives in parliament, even compared to the Scandinavian countries.

Democracy also increases the provision of public goods and also greatly reduces corruption. According to Murshed et al. (2020), “high-quality democracies spend 100% more than closed autocracies on social protection policies benefitting the poor.” Also, McMann (2020) postulates that “while low-performing democracies are often plagued by corruption, democracies that develop strong vertical accountability mechanisms diminish corruption.” Rwanda remains one of the least corrupt countries in sub-Saharan Africa. “Rwanda has virtually eradicated major corruption, and Rwanda ranks on par with the Czech Republic and better than Italy and Greece” (Rubin, 2021) in terms of least corrupt countries. However, these two countries (Italy and Greece) ranked above Rwanda at 31 and 34 (EIU, 2022), respectively. Also, Greece ranked at 37, while Italy also ranked at 25 on all of the V-Dem (2022) indexes. This contradiction is profound.



Finally, Fukuyama (1992) identified two folds of liberal democracy, i.e., the liberal fold and the democratic fold. The liberal fold consists of generally “accepted rules that put clear limits on the way that the state can exercise power” (Fukuyama, 1992); the liberal fold can also be called the rule of law. Then the democracy fold also includes “elections to guarantee that the state represents the interest of as many of the population as possible and not just the elites that are running the state” (Fukuyama, 1992). It is clear that Kagame’s Rwanda has delivered on the democratic promise and has represented the interests of the people, and the results are there for all to see.

IMPLICATION TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

For researchers, the study demonstrates that frameworks that systematically privilege electoral and liberal dimensions of democracy over egalitarian and participatory aspects necessitate more balanced and context-sensitive measurements of democracy. For practitioners and policymakers, rigid categorizations may obscure nuanced governance realities. It is important to factor in good and effective governance elements rather than adopting a singular standard.

CONCLUSION

This paper does not claim Rwanda is democratic by liberal democracy standards. Concerns raised by Amnesty International (2021), Human Rights Watch (2021) and academic observers about opposition suppression and civil liberties limitations are serious, well documented and clearly justify low scores on electoral and liberal dimensions. The suspiciously high 98% referendum result approving term limit removal raises fundamental questions about political competition and its authenticity. However, Rwanda’s case illustrates critical questions about how democracy is conceptualized and measured. Rwanda achieves remarkable outcomes on gender equality, corruption reduction, education and poverty reduction that the broad literature associates with democracy. Conceptualization and the difficulties associated with it have made it extremely challenging for certain countries to be properly classified under any form of “democratic” measurement instrument. As seen from tables (1 and 2), Rwanda has been classified as an authoritarian regime by the EIU and scored very low on some of the V-Dem indexes with the exception of egalitarian, participatory and deliberative dimensions. This approach begs the question of how Rwanda has been able to work towards the achievement of several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), such as gender equality and representation, if it is compared to other countries in Africa that scored higher on the indexes, including, Kenya and Ghana, when Rwanda has no semblance of democracy as demanded by the criteria of liberal democratic principles.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should pursue comparative studies examining whether similar patterns emerge in other cases beyond Rwanda and develop alternative measurement frameworks focused on qualitative dimensions as well. Another focus for future research should be about how autocrats



exploit conceptualization ambiguities to legitimize authoritarian practices. Last but not least, China's political and economic model should also be compared to cases such as Rwanda.

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