

# Conceptualising and Assessing the State of Democracy in the World Today

Written by Bryant Edward Harden

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BRYANT EDWARD HARDEN, MAY 25 2014

The roles of popular sovereignty, political equality, and the accountability of government have been deliberated throughout history, as evidenced by Greek historian Herodotus and the delegates of the Constitutional Convention in the United States. The incorporation of democratic ideas into regimes and governments has increased in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries as regimes have demonstrated the use of these foundations of governance (IDEA, 2012 and Freedom House, 2013). There has been a transition from a deliberation of abstract ideas of governance to a proposal of models of democracy that exist in current regimes and governments around the world. As governance has been modified and altered in states throughout the world, scholars have sought to conceive a framework for examining regimes that fall outside the scope of classical democratic conceptualisations. Debates about democracy remain in academia because democracy “is a concept, an abstraction, a term with no single precise and agreed meaning”(Arblaster, 1987: 1). Robert Dahl’s polyarchy, Guillermo O’Donnell’s delegative democracy, Joseph Schumpeter’s minimalist standard, and Fareed Zakaria’s illiberal democracy are variations of democracy that seek to describe the current state of affairs of democracy. The Western idea of democracy which includes the liberal elements of the rule of law, separation of powers, and protection of basic liberties is being challenged by the rising tide of democratic governments that are not placing as much or any emphasis on incorporating these liberal ideas into their governance practices (Zakaria, 1997). Although liberal democratic tendencies are popular in the West, the idea of a liberalised democracy remains a contested conception around the world as states employ their own forms of democracy.

This paper examines the usefulness of polyarchy, delegative democracy, the minimalist standard, and illiberal democracy by comparing the core elements of each concept with current attempts to assess the state of democracy around the world. These four concepts are examined in this essay because they each seek to address the real world formations of democratic governments that have been developing around the world. Unique and helpful features are highlighted for each of the democratic concepts and then compared with the democratic assessments offered by Freedom House, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and the Polity project. These democratic assessments are used because they claim to assess the state of democracy globally. This paper argues that the four concepts of democracy include elements that are useful in the examination of democracy globally, but that Schumpeter’s minimalist approach is the most useful for assessing the state of democracy in the world because of its limited definition of democracy, as evidenced by the Polity project.

In order to effectively compare different versions of democracy and assess their usefulness in the study of democracy today, this essay is divided into two main sections. The first section examines the influential models and concepts of democracy and is divided into four subsections addressing Dahl’s polyarchy, O’Donnell’s delegative democracy, Schumpeter’s minimalist standard, and Zakaria’s illiberal democracy. Each subsection includes an explanation of the democratic models and an examination of their distinctive and constructive traits for the assessment of democracy in the world today. The second main section analyses the assessments undertaken by Freedom House, International IDEA, and the Polity project and examines their relationship with the models of polyarchal democracy, delegative democracy, the minimalist standard, and illiberal democracy. This essay will conclude by summarising the findings that supports the claim that the minimalist standard defined by Schumpeter is the most useful model for assessing the state of democracy globally.

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## Models of Democracy

### *Polyarchy*

One of the most influential versions of democracy has been Robert Dahl's polyarchy (Krouse, 1982), a term stemming from his analysis of populist democracy. Dahl contends that "running through the whole history of democratic theories is the identification of 'democracy' with political equality, popular sovereignty, and rule by majorities" (2006: 34). In *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, Dahl (2006) presents eight definitional characteristics of polyarchal democracy which are divided into the voting period, pre-voting period, post-voting period, and inter-election stage. Polyarchy is presented as an idea of democracy in contrast to an idealised, classical democracy. In an interview of Dahl by Margaret Levi (2009), Dahl explains that the conception of polyarchal democracy was in response to the increase in the number of countries with democratic aspects and a use of classical theories of democracy which were not adequate in describing governments realistically. The perceived need by Dahl to modify the academic usage of democracy, which should only be used as an ideal, brought about the term polyarchy (ibid). The definition of polyarchal democracy includes: every member of society expresses a preference through voting; all votes are weighted the same; the preference with a majority wins; the opportunity to submit alternatives; all individuals possess the same information about alternative preferences; the winning preference should be implemented or inducted requiring the losing preference to be removed; orders of elected officials are executed; and that all inter-election decisions should follow these characteristics (Dahl, 2006). These characteristics seem unattainable because of the inclusion of conditions such as every member of society expressing a preference and each member having identical knowledge about voting alternatives. Dahl recognises this fault when he writes, "no human organisation – certainly none with more than a handful of people – has ever met or is likely to meet these eight conditions" (2006: 71). In his recognition of failed attempts and rarity of reaching the level of polyarchy, Dahl introduces the use of a continuum and views the conditions as norms that can be evaluated on the basis of societal acceptance. Societal acceptance or agreement with the norms of polyarchy is deduced from the extent to which conditions are in use in families, schools, churches, clubs, and other organisations throughout the state.

The concept of polyarchy as described by Dahl can be useful in the assessment of democracy in the world today because its eight conditions placed on a continuum assessed by attitudes can be put into operation worldwide and with ease. The eight conditions prescribed for a polyarchal democracy describe the procedures for selecting a government. In only addressing the rules for electing a government and recognising that these conditions are not perfectly attainable, the model of polyarchy removes an accentuation of liberal ideals. Dahl (2006) emphasises the distinction between classical democracy, inclusive of freedoms and popular sovereignty, and the type of democracies that have been forming outside the West. Another useful contribution to democratic assessment by Dahl's polyarchy is the use of a continuum in determining the degree to which conditions are accepted in society. The recognition of the unattainable nature of larger societies to implement the conditions for polyarchy to perfection is addressed by Dahl's (2006) template which allows analysts to assess both the positive and negative trends of governance in a society. This concept of democracy proposes a survey of attitudinal acceptance of and implementation of the conditions in society, which makes this concept a workable assessment of the state of democracy throughout the world by means such as the distribution and collection of essays.

### *Delegative Democracy*

Delegative democracy is a model which recognises governance through delegation as opposed to representation in democracies throughout the world, in places such as "Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Philippines, Korea, and many post communist countries" (O'Donnell, 1994: 56). O'Donnell (1994) claims that delegative democracies present certain characteristics that prompt the differentiation from representative democracies. This variation describes a sense of entitlement or right by elected officials that stems from the elections. Representation involves accountability across the political board ranging from the ballot box to institutional checks against the executive's power. In contrast, executives in delegative democracies rule with limited accountability efforts from the government (O'Donnell, 1994). Although held accountable by the ballot box and a constitutionally restricted term limit, executives in a delegative democracy experience little horizontal accountability with few challenges from other state actors (O'Donnell, 1994: 62). During an executive's tenure in power, efforts for accountability "are seen by delegative

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presidents as unnecessary encumbrances to their 'mission'" (O'Donnell, 1994: 61-2). Political actors in a delegative democracy interpret elections as mandates from society that give permission to presidents to act as "the main custodian and definer of...interests" (O'Donnell, 1994: 60). O'Donnell (1994: 59) writes, "Delegative democracies rest on the premise that whoever wins election to the presidency is thereby entitled to govern as he or she sees fit". This perceived mandate from the electorate produces highly emotional elections because candidates are vying for unconstrained rule during their term.

The characteristics of a delegative democracy seem authoritarian in nature, but O'Donnell (1994) claims that these governments are democracies because they fit the criteria for a polyarchy as defined by Robert Dahl. Although free and fair elections occur in delegative democracies, the authoritarian features such as the lack of accountability and weak institutions remain prevalent. O'Donnell highlights these features when he writes, "This kind of rule has been analysed as a study of authoritarianism, under such names as caesarism, bonapartism, caudillismo, populism, and the like" (1994: 62). O'Donnell also stresses that delegative democracies "could hardly be less congenial to the building and strengthening of democratic political institutions" (1994: 62), which questions the usefulness of the concept for assessing democracy around the world.

The model of delegative democracy is more useful for describing authoritarian characteristics that are prevailing in many regimes throughout the world than it is for the assessment of democracy globally. While employing the criteria for Dahl's polyarchy, O'Donnell's model describes political leaders that are rejecting a Western model of liberalism which seeks to limit a government's power. In contrast to a limited power scheme, executives in delegative democracies work to extend their power and limit accountability configurations. The use of Dahl's criteria for polyarchal democracy further questions the usefulness of the model for assessing the state of democracy. Its reliance on other models for assessing democracy supports its classification as a model of description for regimes with a strong executive and a lack of accountability. Therefore, the usefulness of delegative democracy is limited as a tool for democratic assessment, but the traits of minimalism and focus of executive authority contribute and bolster other concepts such as the minimalist standard of democracy described by Schumpeter.

## *Minimalist Standard*

Joseph Schumpeter's contribution to the conceptualisation of democracy is the minimalist standard, which claims to focus on a truer, more realistic standard for democracy as opposed to 18<sup>th</sup> century conceptualisations that focus on a common good (2003: 253). Schumpeter defines the 18<sup>th</sup> century concept of the democratic method as an

"institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realises the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will" (2003: 250).

The major contention for Schumpeter with 18<sup>th</sup> century concepts of democracy involves the unrealistic nature of a common good in society. The existence of a common good in society is described as an "obvious beacon light of policy, which is always simple to define and which every normal person can be made to see by means of rational argument" (Schumpeter, 2003: 250). Schumpeter rebukes claims of a common good and writes, "There is...no such thing as a uniquely determined common good that all people could agree on or be made to agree on by the force of rational argument" (2003: 251). The minimalist standard as outlined by Schumpeter in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* defines the democratic method as an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (2003: 269). This minimalist approach to democracy places a limit on the value-laden, normative concepts of democracy that were used to describe democracy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Schumpeter's concept does not address equality and freedoms, but rather solely focuses on the role of producing a government (Vreeland, 2003). He writes that "the role of the people is to produce a government, or else an intermediate body which in turn will produce a national executive or government" (Schumpeter, 2003: 269). The account of the minimalist standard highlights

"the ways that elite groups and parties may be able to preside over a formally democratic institutional arrangement, providing some measure of political competition, but certainly not fulfilling the values of equality, participation, or human development" (Medearis, 1997: 820).

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Similar to competition found in the economic sphere, political life is also purely based on competition “for the allegiance of the people” (Schumpeter, 271). Schumpeter further simplifies the minimalist standard of democracy to “a free competition for a free vote” (2003: 271). This competition of leadership that is the core of the minimalist standard for democracy therefore removes any observance of a common good and observes only a freedom to participate in the competition.

The usefulness of Schumpeter’s minimalist description in the assessment of democracy is exhibited in its observability, simplicity, and recognition of elitism (Medearis, 1997: 819). The minimalist standard, when compared to polyarchy, delegative democracy and illiberal democracy, is the most useful in assessing the state of democracy globally because it limits the definition of democracy by focusing on a democratic method and recognising that the goal of a democracy is to produce a government. The exclusion of a common good and consensus in society in Schumpeter’s definition of the democracy method makes it possible for this concept of democracy to assess the state of democracy in the world based on the existence of a competition that leads to the formation of a government.

## *Illiberal Democracy*

Fareed Zakaria presents the term illiberal democracy for classifying regimes and governments that diverge from the concept of democracy promulgated by the West. Democracy to the West has been based on free and fair elections, but also “by the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property” (Zakaria, 1997). The point of Zakaria’s article in *Foreign Affairs* is that democracy has flourished while constitutional liberalism has receded from focus and prevalence in democratising countries. Zakaria (1997) distinguishes between democracy and constitutional liberalism when he writes that constitutional liberalism “is not about the procedures for selecting government, but rather government’s goals.” The goals of separation of powers, rule of law, and protection of basic liberties have not been as prevalent in democratising states as the pursuance of free and fair elections. Zakaria emphasises this point when he writes that “it appears that many countries are settling into a form of government that mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a substantial degree of illiberalism” (1997). Democracy, as free and fair elections, must include basic freedoms of speech and assembly, but further aspects of liberalism should be kept for the analysing of the level of constitutional liberalism present in governments. Zakaria (1997) writes that “to go beyond this minimalist definition and label a country democratic only if it guarantees a comprehensive catalog of social, political, economic, and religious rights turns the word democracy into a badge of honour rather than a descriptive category”. As the reach of illiberalism is extended, Zakaria stresses that without a liberal notion of freedom and the rule of law, the presence of free and fair elections is “a small consolation” (1997).

The usefulness of Zakaria’s model of illiberal democracy lays in the distinction between democracy and constitutional liberalism. This separation allows scholars to use a workable definition of democracy that is useful when assessing the different governments in the world today, ranging from Western democracies to democracies that focus less on liberal ideals. The clarification between the strands of liberal democracy and illiberal democracy allows for the recognition of a push towards elections while making the distinction between governments guaranteeing the protection of liberties, the rule of law, and separation of powers and governments that ignore limits on their power. Zakaria writes, “Democratically elected regimes, often ones that have been reelected or reaffirmed through referenda, are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms” (1997).

## **Assessing Democracy**

In the previous section, this essay explained four concepts of democracy and their usefulness in examining the state of democracy around the world. This section will examine the assessments by Freedom House, International IDEA, and the Polity IV and their effectiveness in analysing democracy worldwide. In addition, this section will examine how the traits of polyarchal democracy, delegative democracy, the minimalist standard, and illiberal democracy are used by these assessments in order to better examine their usefulness in the global assessment of democracy.

## *Freedom House*

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Freedom House annually publishes the *Freedom in the World* survey, which provides an evaluation of the state of global freedom as experienced by individuals. Freedom, defined as “the opportunity to act spontaneously in a variety of fields outside the control of the government and other centres of potential domination,” is divided into the categories of civil liberties and political liberties (Freedom House, 2012). The evaluation of these liberties is based on a series of questions that include the freedoms of expression and belief; associational and organisational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy without interference from the state; free participation in the political process, which includes the right to vote freely for distinct alternatives in legitimate elections; compete for public office; join political parties and organisations; and elect representatives who have a decisive impact on public policies and are accountable to the electorate (ibid). Political and civil liberties of states are evaluated on a scale of one to seven, with one representing the most free and seven being the least free (ibid). In 2012, Freedom House classified 87 countries as free, which is 45% of the countries analysed (Freedom House, 2013). Another important feature of the *Freedom in the World* survey is the designation of electoral democracies. Based upon criteria similar to the eight conditions described by Dahl’s polyarchy, the designation of electoral democracy by Freedom House (2012) requires competitive, multiparty elections; the right to vote to all citizens; contested elections that are free from voter fraud and allow for ballot secrecy; and access to the electorate for all major political parties. Freedom House’s global reach in the assessment of the state of democracy is visible in its analysis of 195 countries and 14 territories. In 2012, Freedom House (2013) designated 118 countries as electoral democracies, which is 61% of the 195 countries examined.

The examination of Freedom House’s approach to the assessment of democracy shows that it exhibits key traits of Zakaria’s illiberal democracy and Dahl’s polyarchy being employed in their *Freedom of the World* survey. One of the most important aspects in the survey by Freedom House is its division of civil liberties and political liberties, which resembles Zakaria’s separation of democracy and constitutional liberalism in his concept of illiberal democracy. This distinction allows assessors to examine and categorise governments in a minimalist sense. Elements of Dahl’s polyarchy are employed in Freedom House’s designation of electoral democracies and in questions examined in the political liberties section of Freedom House’s survey which are similar to Dahl’s eight conditions. However, Freedom House’s questions include subjective criteria by asking surveyors if the electoral laws and framework are ‘fair’, if the people’s political choices are ‘free’ from coercion, and if there is a ‘realistic’ possibility for opposition to increase its support (Freedom House, 2012).

## *International IDEA*

International IDEA developed its methodology and framework for assessing the state of democracy in 2000. Whereas the Freedom House surveys are performed by a survey team of scholars, academics, and development professionals, International IDEA proposes a systematic assessment performed by a country’s citizens. This approach “moves away from country ranking and external judgement towards an approach of comprehensive assessment based on national assessment teams led by governments or civil society and academic institutions” (Landman, 2008: 8). This survey accepts a variance in degree of democracy by focusing on “the degree to which the people can exercise a controlling influence over public policy and policy makers, enjoy equal treatment at their hands, and have their voices heard equally” (International IDEA, 2003). International IDEA focuses on the two democratic principles of popular control and political equality from which it derives mediating values of participation, authorization, representation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and solidarity (Landman, 2008). The democratic principles and mediating values are further categorised into a framework of four pillars within which 90 questions are used for the assessment of democracy. International IDEA claims that its methodology and framework has been widely employed across regions and at different stages of democratisation since 2000 (ibid), but there are only 22 full assessments currently available (IDEA, 2012).

The examination of International IDEA’s state of democracy methodology captures a distinctive trait of polyarchy, which is to assess the degree of polyarchy by examining the acceptance of polyarchal conditions in society. This suggestion for an assessment of acceptance at the grassroots level bypasses elitist tendencies in other models of democracy. This idea is demonstrated in the survey questions and methodology proposed by International IDEA. The 90 survey questions in the assessment framework are all structured in a comparative style by asking how much, to what degree, and how accessible are, which allows survey participants to have a response of degree. This citizen-led

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methodology allows for a more accurate assessment and understanding of the acceptance of democratic conditions as norms within a society. However, the usefulness of International IDEA's methodology, with its similarities to Dahl's assessment of societal norms, for the assessment of democracy globally is questionable because of its complexity. In an overview of the framework, International IDEA recognises this problem:

"Assessing the quality of democracy is a large and complex task that involves many stakeholders and is affected by a variety of national and context-specific factors, including the size of the country (population and geography), its level of economic development, its type of societal cleavages and level of fragmentation, and its history of democracy and democratic stability" (Landman, 2008: 16).

This sense of complexity explains the unsatisfactory global reach, with only 22 full assessments currently available by International IDEA.

## *Polity IV*

The Polity project codes and analyses "authority characteristics of states in the world system for purposes of comparative, quantitative analysis" (Polity IV Project, 2013). The most recent data collection project is Polity IV, which examined the characteristics of political regimes using a scale of autocratic and democratic tendencies from 1800 to 2012. The inclusion of qualities of autocratic authority alongside democratic authority is useful because of the variation of democratic elements in regimes around the world. A polity score on a 21-point scale, ranging from autocracies to democracies, is formulated based on "six component measures that record key qualities of executive recruitment, constraints on executive authority, and political competition" (ibid). The importance of the Polity assessment stems from its global reach and comparative traits as a "living, data collection effort" (ibid). The Polity IV dataset currently contains data for 167 countries, reaching all major states with a population of at least 500,000 in the global system. The Polity project's data collection and recognition that autocratic and democratic regimes are not mutually exclusive remains valuable to researchers as it has become "the most widely used resource for monitoring regime change and studying the effects of regime authority" (Marshall, 2013: 1). The project writes:

"...different countries have different mixes and qualities of governing authority; the ideal types are rarely observed in practice. Even though some countries may have mixed features of openness, competitiveness, and regulation, the core qualities of democracy and autocracy can be viewed as defining opposite ends of a governance scale" (Marshall, 2011: 8).

The Polity project codes countries according to indicators of democratic and autocratic elements. The project examines competitiveness of political participation, the openness and competitiveness or regulation of executive recruitment, and constraints on the chief executive (Marshall, 2013). A third indicator, POLITY, is derived from the democratic and autocratic codes by subtracting the value assigned to autocracy from the value assigned to democracy. This POLITY figure then "provides a single regime score that ranges from +10 to -10", which are associated with full democracy and full autocracy (ibid: 14). In 2011, the Polity project classified 95 countries as democratic, which is 57.6% of the 165 countries included in the databank (Marshall, 2011).

The Polity project demonstrates the usefulness of Schumpeter's minimalist standard, while incorporating aspects of O'Donnell's delegative democracy. The Polity project excludes measures of freedom and development and focuses on a standard for producing a government. This analysis restricts its assessment to executive recruitment, executive authority and political competition, which corresponds to Schumpeter's core focus of the production of a government. The usefulness of Schumpeter's minimalist standard is further supported in the global reach of the Polity project and its comparative traits. The Polity databank is publicly accessible and the data is published in various formats including the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), which is widely used in academia for statistical analysis. Aspects of O'Donnell's delegative democracy are scattered throughout the methodology of the Polity project as it focuses on the executive and includes autocratic tendencies in its coding. However, other traits of delegative democracy such as weak institutions and lack of accountability remain difficult to evaluate across a vast number of states and these conditions are not examined by the Polity project.

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## Conclusion

This essay explained and examined the useful traits of four concepts of democracy in their ability to explain the global state of democracy and examined the use of these concepts in assessments carried out by Freedom House, International IDEA, and the Polity project. This examination of the democratic concepts and their similarities to the assessment models offered a clear distinction of usefulness between the concepts of polyarchal, delegative, minimalist, and illiberal democracy. In general, each model of democracy is composed of characteristics helpful for assessing democracy, but some of these characteristics are not operational for an aggregation of data of a large number of countries.

Polyarchal democracy offers a minimalist approach of eight conditions assessed on a continuum, but Dahl suggests that these conditions be analysed by their acceptance as norms in society. The Polity project and the electoral democracy criteria used by Freedom House both utilise the minimalist standard and use of continuum stressed by Dahl. The assessment methodology used by International IDEA best imitates a societal examination of democratic norms, but this essay contends that this intensive 90 question survey limits the simple operational barometers needed to assess democracy globally. This limitation is displayed by the lack of global reach as International IDEA has only published 22 full assessments. The essay has suggested that the concept of delegative democracy described by O'Donnell is more useful in its explanatory power than its assessment of the state of democracy globally. Its use of Dahl's polyarchy for the examination and classification of these delegative regimes as democracies limits its use as an assessment. Despite the lack of assessment ingenuity, the minimalist traits, recognition of elite power, and authoritative inclinations in the concept of delegative democracy are present in the Polity project indicators. Zakaria's illiberal democracy supports a trend that is visible among all four models used in this essay which is the move away from democracy defined in the Western sense. Each of the concepts in this essay has separated Western liberal ideals from a basic form of democracy. However, besides supporting the case for the separation of democracy from constitutional liberalism, Zakaria's illiberal democracy does not offer any further tools for the assessment of democracy globally.

Schumpeter's minimalist standard is the most useful concept for the assessment of democracy globally because it combines key traits of polyarchal democracy, delegative democracy, and illiberal democracy. In addition, the minimalist standard excludes traits such as the evaluation of societal acceptance that limits the operationalisation of democracy assessment worldwide. The Polity project is a prime example of the operational and comparative usefulness of Schumpeter's minimalist standard. The Polity IV project includes data on countries with a population of at least 500,000 since the beginning of the 19th century and currently reaches 167 countries. This assessment is updated annually, examines the state of democracy using a minimalist standard, and using unambiguous definitions for coding that exclude normative values. This is in contrast with Freedom House, which currently reaches 195 countries and includes subjective and obscure terms such as 'fair' and 'realistic possibility' in its evaluation. However, despite these value differences, Freedom House and Polity IV are close in their assessment of the state of democracy globally. Polity IV claims that 57.6% of states are democracies in 2011 while Freedom House is 2.4 points higher at 60%. This minimal difference is likely due to the Polity project's exclusion of states with a population less than 500,000. Both the Polity project (Marshall, 2011) and Freedom House (2013) show democratic governments to be on the rise, especially since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The four concepts of democracy analysed in this essay display varying minimalist standards for the assessment of democracy globally. A separation of democracy from constitutional liberalism, prevalent in all four models and the core of Zakaria's concept of illiberal democracy, has provided a minimalist definition of democracy that is operational and able to compare a large number of countries annually as Freedom House and the Polity project have demonstrated. However, the assessments based on the minimalist standard conducted by the Polity project and Freedom House have limited any explanatory value for further differentiation between democracies. Freedom House's (2013) *Freedom in the World* attempted to include further analysis of democracy around the world in its examination of political and civil liberties and found that 45% of states are free, which is 15 points lower than the 60% of states designated as electoral democracies. In conclusion, Schumpeter's minimalist standard is the most useful concept for assessing the state of democracy globally as demonstrated by the Polity project because of its simplicity and global reach. However, this minimalist standard limits any further distinction and analysis of democracies around

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the world.

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*Written by: Bryant Edward Harden*  
*Written at: University of Warwick*  
*Written for: Peter Burnell*  
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