Democracy, Interpretation and the *Problem* of Conceptual Ambiguity: Reflections on the V-Dem Project’s Struggles with Operationalizing Deliberative Democracy[[1]](#footnote-1)

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Democracy is a notoriously ambiguous concept. Political scientists typically see this ambiguity as a problem that restricts measurement and causal explanation, especially for the comparative study of democratization. Increasingly ambitious data collection efforts and sophisticated methodological approaches attempt to resolve this problem - nowhere more so than in the recent, award-winning, and highly prominent Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset. By contrast, ambiguity and contestation over what democracy actually means is key both to normative theorizing and to the capacity to re-examine and reimagine democratic practice during moments of crisis. Rather than attempting to pin down and measure democratic quality, we highlight instead the value of ambiguity to normative democratic theory and interpretive political science. We offer four reflections on V-Dem based on examples from the literature on deliberative democracy, which is the discipline’s most prominent attempt to reinvent and reinvigorate democratic practice amid crisis and disaffection. Our aim is not to reignite the paradigm wars or fundamentally question the validity of projects like V-Dem, but rather to illustrate how a more plural approach might augment their theoretical and empirical contribution. We conclude by offering concrete illustrations of what this might look like in practice.

**Keywords:** democracy; democratization; concept formation; V-Dem; deliberative democracy

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**Conflict of Interest Statement:** Jack Corbett has been regularly engaged as a country expert for the Pacific Islands for the annual Freedom House “Freedom in the World” Survey.The study of democracy is at the core of both a normative and empirical political science. Considerable activity is devoted to operationalizing the concept of democracy to understand systematically where this regime type occurs and how it changes over time. This empirical task typically rests on building, refining, and using cross-national indices to measure the quality of democracy. In an age defined by apparent democratic decline, this task is seemingly more urgent than ever. To safeguard and strengthen democracy, we need to better explain how and why it works in different countries and eras.

This approach is typically based on an implicit “end of history” assumption: that the version of democracy, or something very similar to it, that became pre-eminent around the world in the latter half of the 20th century, will be the model for the 21st century too. The problem lies in democracy’s ambiguity, defying simple operationalization; it is ever in motion, changing and adapting to new political and social developments.[[2]](#footnote-2) What we *mean* by democracy is not stable across space and over time. The concept is being stretched. Indeed, normative theorists have long held that democracy’s inherent ambiguity is its greatest strength as an empirically successful regime type.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is also its key virtue as a morally

compelling regime type.[[4]](#footnote-4) The point is~~:~~ that the very quality that makes democracy so attractive in theory and practice also makes it hard to operationalize. Our key argument is that efforts to measure the quality of democracy in mainstream political science would be aided by greater engagement with these alternative approaches to the study of democracy found in both normative theory and interpretive political science.

To make this case we interrogate the most recent and sophisticated attempt to solve democracy’s ambiguity problem: the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. V-Dem is exactly the type of large cross-national and cross-institutional database project that could provide credible empirical answers to some of democratization’s longest-standing puzzles. V-Dem claims to provide measurements of key variables that are unprecedented in detail because it is explicitly *historical* (captures modern history where possible), *multidimensional* (incorporates different dimensions of democracy), *disaggregated* (includes more indicators), and *transparent* (has a clear and replicable method for compiling and coding data). It is the brainchild of a consortium of eminent political scientists from across the world.[[5]](#footnote-5) In 2016 V-Dem received the Lijphart/Przeworski/Verba Dataset Award from the Comparative Politics Section of the American Political Science Association. In 2017 V-Dem released its first Annual Report. The report boasted that version 7.0 of the dataset has 18 million data points and covers 177 countries over 117 years with more than 350 indicators and 52 indices of different aspects of democracy. The project receives funding from a global network of research councils, NGOs, aid agencies, and universities. Organizations such as The World Bank, the United Nations Development Program, Transparency International, and the Swedish Democracy NGO, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, rely on its material. It is therefore likely to have significant and long-lasting policy impact.

Without doubt V-Dem is political science’s most sophisticated attempt to resolve democracy’s ambiguity problem. It attempts to address definitional ambiguity by incorporating a much broader set of criteria than any previous index. It attempts to solve data ambiguity via a rigorous and transparent set of coding procedures. If ambiguity really is a problem, then V-Dem is as close as the discipline is ever likely to get to solving it. To be sure, there is recognition that the index is not perfect—none ever are—but even in its infancy V-Dem is widely seen as more legitimate than its predecessors, with the potential to enable major scholarly and policy gains.

Yet, we posit, if the crucial normative question for democracy concerns its viability into the future, then we need empirical work that can help us discover new ways of practicing this type of politics. Indices like V-Dem, as they are currently conceived, are likely to be of limited use in this enterprise. As John Gerring, one of the key architects of V-Dem, argues, there appears to be

a fundamental tradeoff in scientific endeavor between a context of discovery (i.e., exploration, innovation) and a context of justification (i.e., appraisal, demonstration, proof, verification/falsification) (Reichenbach, 1938). Although both are acknowledged to be essential to scientific progress, the field of methodology is strongly aligned with the latter. This is because the task of justification is amenable to systematic rules that can be presented in academic journals, summarized in textbooks, and taught in courses. By contrast, the task of discovery is a comparatively anarchistic affair. There are no rules for finding new things.[[6]](#footnote-6)

To remain relevant in a world in which democracies appear to be searching for “new things,” political science is in need of tools and approaches that will assist with this more speculative and anarchistic pursuit. The good news is that such tools exist, albeit on the margins of the discipline. The bad news is that long-standing disagreements about value of discovery-oriented approaches to the study of the political world has resulted in their routine exclusion from large scale projects like V-Dem. We have no interest in apportioning blame for this state of affairs.[[7]](#footnote-7) Of greater concern is what is being lost as a result of this ongoing division of labor. Empirically, discipline-defining projects like V-Dem miss out on the rich, and potentially complementary, insights that other approaches have to offer. But, more importantly, from a normative standpoint it relegates empirical political science to the task of justification. A more plural stance could allow it to also play a theoretically constructive role in opening up new and better ways of practicing politics, democratic or otherwise.

We substantiate this argument over the following sections. First, we review the ways in which political science has traditionally approached the operationalization of key concepts. In doing so we highlight how, despite different philosophical bases, a more plural understanding can allow us to strengthen the empirical and normative contribution of competing methodological camps. Then, we discuss V-Dem, reflecting on what it misses by remaining wedded to a justification-orientated political science. Specifically, we argue V-Dem is: 1) multi-dimensional but not dynamic; 2) historical but not historicist; 3) disaggregated but not holistic; and 4) transparent but not reflexive. We illustrate each point with examples from the study of deliberative democracy, an explicit attempt to discover a new way of practicing democratic politics. In conclusion, we return to the core claim of the article: that rather than being a problem that political science must overcome, conceptual ambiguity is a key resource for democracy. Projects like V-Dem would, therefore, be better served by serious engagement with normative and interpretive studies.

**Operationalizing Social Science Concepts and the Ambiguity Problem**

The value of conceptual ambiguity is a philosophical question born of ontological and epistemological assumptions. We therefore start by briefly outlining what is at stake in this debate, highlighting how certain philosophical assumptions create an ambiguity problem whereas others do not.

Typically, when the discipline talks about ontological and epistemological positions, it divides itself into two competing camps that go by various names: naturalist and anti-naturalist; positivist and interpretivist, scientist and humanistic.[[8]](#footnote-8) We deliberately exclude qualitative and quantitative from this list as we primarily see this as a philosophical, not methodological, debate. We can use qualitative data to verify and falsify,[[9]](#footnote-9) just as we can use quantitative data to explore and innovate.[[10]](#footnote-10) The important distinction between the main two alternatives to studying the political world is not whether the data we use are words or numbers but rather what orientation or sensibility we bring to empirical projects.

While we self-identify with a more interpretive approach to the study of the political world, our intention is not to reignite a paradigm war. This distinction is a heuristic device only. We understand that these are somewhat caricatured distinctions that can be misleading -when attempting to empirically categorize different pieces of work; for example, many so-called positivists are interested in conceptual ambiguity,[[11]](#footnote-11) just as many so-called interpretivists[[12]](#footnote-12) are interested in conceptual precision, albeit within a well-defined context (i.e., a language group). Indeed, as Kapiszewski et al. highlight, the majority of political scientists adopt eclectic approaches in their empirical work.[[13]](#footnote-13) Our aim is to encourage, and provide a rationale for, the proliferation of such endeavors. But, for now, these well-worn heuristics are the simplest way of articulating what is at stake in this debate.

This leads us to our final disclaimer: as interpretivists, we are not against parsimonious concepts that help us explain the social world. Rather we seek to acknowledge that there are different ways of thinking about how concepts represent, or are born out of, empirical facts, and that these different ways of thinking about the relationship between concepts and facts have important implications for the types of empirical work that we do, as represented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Orientations to Political Research[[14]](#footnote-14)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Orientation** | **Sensibility**  | **Ambiguity** |  **Operationalizing Aim** | **Causation** | **Methods** |
| **Logic of justification** | *Influenced by the natural sciences (and economics)*  | *Problem to be solved* | *Precise* | *Mechanistic* | *Plural*, but a preference for quantitative analysis as the pre-eminent way of testing and verifying hypothesis. |
| **Logic of discovery** | *Influenced by the humanities*  | *Puzzle to be illuminated* | *Fuzzy* | *Holistic* | *Plural*, but a preference for qualitative analysis as the pre-eminent way of uncovering and puzzling with meaning ambiguity. |

**Why Different Orientations to Political Research Treat Ambiguity Differently**

The logic of justification is the mainstream orientation to operationalization in political science. The touchstone for its treatment of concepts is Sartori’s “ladder of abstraction”[[15]](#footnote-15) or adaptations of it.[[16]](#footnote-16) Research of this type tends to be realist-objectivist, based on invariant procedures rigorously applied, with the aim of producing scientific results. Coppedge, for example, surmises:

To operationalize a concept, we define a procedure for mapping a label or values of a variable onto observations in the real world. To measure a concept, we actually perform that operational procedure. The result is an indicator. Indicators are not necessarily numerical variables (although some are). Even a simple classification of a country as a democracy is an indicator, even when the operation that produced that classification is not explicitly defined.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The main alternative orientation tends to be subjectivist-constructivist in orientation.[[18]](#footnote-18) Schaffer, for example, argues that the goal of his interpretive approach to concept formation is to “investigate the ways in which the social world is built up linguistically and the ways in which social actors deploy concepts to pursue their goals,”[[19]](#footnote-19) while Bevir and Blakely contend that “the study of political reality is analogous to the interpretation of texts and requires narrative forms of explanation.”[[20]](#footnote-20) In short, which approach each scholar adopts will profoundly affect his or her approach to ambiguity.

When orientated towards a logic of justification, scholars acknowledge conceptual ambiguity, but their inclination is to see it as a problem that obscures methodological precision. As a result, they seek to carefully define their concepts to operationalize, classify, and measure. In doing so they seek to tame ambiguity because, as Coppedge et al. argue, “If one cannot agree on what X is, one cannot measure X in an authoritative fashion.”[[21]](#footnote-21) And if one cannot measure X authoritatively, then we have no way of analyzing it through time and across countries.

By contrast, when oriented towards a logic of discovery, scholars seek to open up and puzzle with ambiguity, highlighting disagreement, disjuncture, and multiple-meanings or explanations of the social world. Rather than a single truth emerging from their research, they expect to find several, competing truths. Indeed, if the meaning of X is unambiguous, then it will likely have little explanatory value because explanations, from this perspective, require a meaning holism derived from “interpretively reconstructing the right context of beliefs and not isolating and correlating atomistic facts.”[[22]](#footnote-22) This sensibility leads to different ways of doing research on democratization. Frederic Schaffer, for example, starts from the observation that the democracy concept is so widely stretched that it rarely appears without a modifier: participatory, representative, liberal, and so on. He therefore sets about asking how democracy is understood in ordinary language in Senegal and among Wolof speakers in particular.[[23]](#footnote-23) He finds that contrary to the definition of democracy that most scholars use—

contestation and inclusiveness—the common language use of “demokaraasi” revolved around patronage, community solidarity, and expectations of material rewards from winning candidates. The point, Schaffer argues, is that differences in the way democracy is understood shapes outcomes and the function of institutions.

One common criticism of the type of work Schaffer exemplifies, however, and one that is used to differentiate between approaches, is that it is not oriented towards developing *causal* explanations. Goertz, for example, responding to Schaffer, argues that:

To analyze how people, say Wolofs in Gambia [sic], differ in their concept of democracy, is interesting to me if that somehow “matters.” Mattering is that it influences behavior or is influenced by something. These are causal questions. I am interested in differences in meaning and concepts, but only those that somehow matter in causal explanations, hypotheses and theories.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The unstated view here is that discovery-oriented research cannot provide a *causal* account of the topic under study but can only elucidate *understanding*. We join a growing chorus of scholars who seek to push back against this characterization of descriptive work as lacking the ability to tell a causal story.[[25]](#footnote-25) Indeed, we believe that acknowledging how this approach makes causal claims is critical if the discipline is to recognize the merits of complementary research traditions. But we also concede that in a logic of discovery orientation the causal story is told differently. This difference in the meaning of causation is an extension of the views each orientation holds about conceptual ambiguity.

For political scientists working in the logic of justification, the need to resolve ambiguity stems from their belief that the aim of research is to formulate a general law that observes and measures the effect of one variable on another. Their view of causation is thus derivative of the natural sciences. The logic of discovery, by contrast, rejects this mechanistic view of the universe. It is inherently skeptical of the idea that the laws of nature apply to the social world of human affairs. They instead seek to provide a holistic understanding of how and why agents act on beliefs that are situated within webs of belief, discourse, or traditions.[[26]](#footnote-26)

**How We Can Engage across the Different Logics to Open up Ambiguity**

Having argued that there are approaches to political science well-suited to grappling with ambiguity in empirical operationalization, we want to stress that these approaches should not carry on only in parallel. We have presented justification/discovery as a binary, involving two distinct orientations to social science research. In political science practice, they often exist as separate epistemic communities. These approaches have distinct academic conferences, favor distinct journals, and so on. Our overarching point, though, is that the two communities can and should be in productive engagement as well in order to grapple with something as important and complex as democratization and democratic quality. In particular, the capacity of discovery-oriented research to explore and open up conceptual ambiguity can help justification-oriented research to adapt to changing political dynamics.

One such example of productive engagement—and one we will draw on at length throughout to exemplify our points—can be found in the literature on deliberative democracy. This is a rare topic area where justification-oriented political scientists regularly rub shoulders with normative theorists and interpretive political scientists. As a consequence of informed and constructive critique, empirical measures of deliberative democratic quality have evolved and become much more sophisticated in the last three decades.[[27]](#footnote-27) In turn, theorists have refined their ideas and interpretive researchers have reconsidered the boundaries of their exploration in response to empirical findings. The dialogue continues. The field as a whole represents the sort of iterative, evolving approach to operationalizing concepts that we think comparative political science as a whole could seek to emulate. We turn now to think about the justification-discovery distinction, and its implications, in relation to the V-Dem project.

**V-Dem: More and Better Data as a Solution to Ambiguity**

V-Dem is an archetypal example of a logic of justification approach to democracy’s ambiguity problem. Its designers explain:

In the wake of the Cold War, democracy has gained the status of a mantra. Perhaps no other concept is as central to policymakers and scholars. Yet there is no consensus about how to conceptualize and measure regimes such that meaningful comparisons can be made through time and across countries. Skeptics may wonder if such comparisons are possible at all.

While this conclusion may seem persuasive, one must also consider the costs of not comparing in a systematic fashion. Without some way of analysing regime types through time and across countries we have no way to mark progress or regress on this vital matter, to explain it, to reveal its consequences, or to affect its future course.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In these terms, V-Dem is an impressive dataset, both in terms of the intellectual energy and resources that have been dedicated to compiling it, but also its accessibility for researchers. If there is to be a solution to democracy’s ambiguity problem, then V-Dem ought to be it. But it also follows that if V-Dem cannot solve this problem, or the problem it aims to solve is not in fact a problem, then the intellectual value of this endeavor as currently conceived must be questioned. We therefore briefly provide some background on V-Dem so as to ground the subsequent discussion.

Intellectually, the V-Dem project continues a long-standing tradition by democracy promotion NGOs (e.g., Freedom House) and positivist political science projects (e.g., Polity IV) to measure and rank democracies around the world. V-Dem seeks to differentiate itself in this increasingly crowded field. It does so by first extending existing criticism of democracy indices on the grounds that they lack precision, have limited coverage, rely on a narrow or biased set of sources, suffer from unreliable coding, and are not sufficiently transparent in how they produce aggregate measures.[[29]](#footnote-29) The combination of these shortcomings, V-Dem authors claim, means that the existing datasets lack authority. The architects of V-Dem acknowledge that these endemic problems make constructing a truly global index of democracy that is valid and precise virtually impossible. They nevertheless maintain that indices perform such an important function, both in political science and policy circles, that the rough estimates they provide are still valuable. But there is also a need to augment these sources with a new set of indicators that resolve the ambiguity problem in a different way. V-Dem is better, its designers argue, because it is *multidimensional* (incorporates different models of democracy), *disaggregated* (includes more indicators), *historical* (captures modern history where possible), and *transparent* (has a clear and replicable method for compiling and coding data). The claimed payoff is that the dataset will be more legitimate, thus making it easier for scholars and practitioners to evaluate the plausibility of findings and associated knowledge claims. And V-Dem appears to be enjoying exactly the type of legitimacy and authority within the profession that its architects envisaged.

In the discussion that follows, we suggest pause for thought in this burgeoning academic enterprise. We reflect on four little-considered problems with the V-Dem project: that it is 1) multi-dimensional but not dynamic; 2) historical but not historicist; 3) disaggregated but not holistic; and 4) transparent but not reflexive. These problems are made visible when oriented to a logic of discovery. However, they are not, we suggest, issues that can simply be attributed to distinct epistemological and ontological commitments and thus batted away as peripheral to the enterprise. Our aim is to show why they are problematic, and require deep reflection and consideration, from a logic of justification perspective too.

To make these claims we draw on examples from the burgeoning field of deliberative democracy. We have done this intentionally for three reasons. One, deliberative democrats are at the forefront of efforts to contest and reimagine what democracy ought to mean and entail. We are not expecting all readers to agree with their diagnosis or cure. Rather, we use the fast-moving conceptual discussion that has evolved in this literature to substantiate the position we advance. Two, as we will show, it is the variant of democracy with which architects and adapters of the V-Dem project have most openly and obviously struggled. It is, in this sense, a case that demonstrates the limitations of a justification-oriented approach to operationalizing democratic quality. Three, as foreshadowed above, this area has featured much more productive engagement across different approaches to political science than is typically the norm in the discipline. It therefore exemplifies the possibilities afforded by mutual engagement across the justification/discovery divide.

***The Conceptual Problem: V-Dem is Multidimensional but not Dynamic***

V-Dem aims to capture a broad multiplicity of meanings of democracy. In contrast to the Freedom House Index, which is associated with a thin account of civic and political rights, V-Dem explicitly aims to operationalize distinct models of democracy—majoritarian, liberal, deliberative, and so on. The idea is that polities will score better on some dimensions than others, providing a broader toolkit from which to assess democratic quality in more fine-grained detail.

While this effort to engage with normative theory is to be applauded—and marks V-Dem out from other such indices—the effect is misleading. It still misses the core of what normative democratic theory entails. Because it needs to develop clearly specified indicators, V-Dem has to draw on the various models of democracy as if they were fixed. In reality, normative theorizing is an open-ended and dynamic process. Democracy in all its variant models remains an essentially contested concept.[[30]](#footnote-30) *Ambiguity* is what makes democracy such a compelling normative project. Democracy’s meaning, in any variant, is always open to challenge and revision. It is an ever-evolving and adaptable ideal.

This point is easiest to demonstrate with an example. V-Dem’s architects present the deliberative model as enshrining “the core value that political decisions in pursuit of the public good should be informed by respectful and reasonable dialogue at all levels rather than by emotional appeals, solidary attachments, parochial interests, or coercion.”[[31]](#footnote-31) That roughly approximates the orthodox interpretation among deliberative democrats in the mid-2000s (when V-Dem was first being developed). However, it bears little relation to the orthodox interpretation of deliberative democracy a decade later. The deliberative project has undergone a radical transformation. Leading theorists have shifted their gaze away from isolated examples of perfect deliberation and toward a large-scale deliberative system permissive of all sorts of imperfect communicative action. They are no longer so concerned about individual moments or settings of deliberation about policy; their concern is a more holistic one entailing a wide range of practices in elite institutions, civil society, and the broader public sphere. They welcome, for example, the deliberative potential of emotional appeals, solidary attachments, parochial interests, and even, in exceptional instances, coercion.[[32]](#footnote-32) Granted, not everyone is so enamored of this new turn in deliberative theory,[[33]](#footnote-33) but even for critics, the definition underlying V-Dem’s account of deliberative democracy would already look decidedly old-fashioned and inadequate. The broader point is that no normative model is stable and settled, and that debate can in fact move quickly and in radically new directions.

To be sure, the meaning of deliberative democracy may be more dynamic than others, but given it is seeking to radically rethink how politics is practiced, this only reinforces our point about the limits of datasets like V-Dem for discovery-oriented research. The ambiguity entailed in this inherent dynamism and adaptability cannot be disciplined or controlled for. By contrast, the capacity to interact with normative democratic theory in dynamic terms is an inherent strength of a logic of discovery approach.[[34]](#footnote-34)

It is worth returning here to the recent transformation of the deliberative account to parse this point out. Many of the pioneering figures in the recent systemic turn in deliberative democratic theory themselves produce and engage with richly detailed case work in a logic of discovery mode.[[35]](#footnote-35) Scholars in this idiom have also been at the forefront of empirical

examination of the systemic account.[[36]](#footnote-36) Though much of this work has thus far been single-n in nature, there is considerable scope for holistic and contextually-sensitive medium-n comparison, too, which can help to flesh out key theoretical concerns.[[37]](#footnote-37) The key thread running through all of this productive interaction between theory and practice is a shared tolerance for and interest in the inherent ambiguity that lies at the heart of the endeavour.

***The Contextual Problem: V-Dem is Historical but not Historicist***

The dynamic nature of what democracy means is also an empirical problem. As above, if a concept like deliberative democracy is constantly being refined, then any definition is relatively fixed in a single point in time. But the purpose of indices like V-Dem is to measure changes in democracy historically. They do this by taking today’s definition and retrospectively applying it to the past. On this basis, they claim that the dataset is historically grounded, allowing us to examine trends and patterns across contexts.

The problem is that this approach relies on an implicitly teleological account of democracy. V-Dem acknowledges the obvious point that democracy meant something different in the past from what it means today. And in fact the indices can measure this by showing when key democratic moments—universal franchise, for example—came into being in different parts of the world. But to do so we rely on fixed-in-time understandings and expectations. The trouble is that the trajectory of an idea like democracy has been subject to radically evolving interpretations in practice. As Markoff puts it at the outset of his magisterial account of democratic innovation:

If we look over the history of modern democracy, we will find that those who called themselves democrats at the tail end of the eighteenth century were likely to be very suspicious of parliaments, downright hostile to competitive political parties, critical of secret ballots, uninterested or even opposed to women's suffrage, and sometimes tolerant of slavery. The claim that some institutions and not others are modes for realizing democracy is a very powerful one; but what those institutions are has been subject to considerable change.[[38]](#footnote-38)

As relates to V-Dem, we can parse this problem out again with detailed reference to the deliberative model. V-Dem tracks a polity’s deliberative qualities over time with reference to the prevalence of opportunity structures that enable inclusive discussion of common issues. In practice, it does this by ascribing deliberative qualities to certain institutional features prevalent in advanced democracies today (for example, formal consultation processes) and tracking their historical emergence. This approach obviously raises thorny questions about reliability that the V-Dem community have sought to tackle. More importantly for present purposes, and much less considered in the scholarly discussion surrounding V-Dem, this approach also raises concerns about *historicism*.

To take the most obvious example, the renaissance of deliberative democracy owes much to Habermas’s insightful account of Parisian salons and the rise of an informal public sphere.[[39]](#footnote-39) By today’s standards (i.e., those applied in exercises like V-Dem), those salons were deeply exclusionary venues—ones open only to a small subsection of the population and whose norms and mores were unapologetically elitist. V-Dem can capture this with its multiple categories for measuring consultation (0 for none and 1 for very little and narrow). While precise, this would actually miss something broader and more important about the idea of consultation. In their own historical context, the Parisian salons were radically consultative as they ushered in the emergence of a critical public sphere.[[40]](#footnote-40) In more recent times, we can track similar dynamics in Lisa Wedeen’s account of qat chewing in Yemeni society.[[41]](#footnote-41) Though Wedeen acknowledges that qat chewing is an exclusionary practice (typically only men can participate), she also acknowledges the critical role it plays (or at

least did for a time) in enabling and sustaining a kind of public sphere in the face of authoritarian institutions. Events in Yemen since Wedeen’s work suggest that parallels between Persian salons and democracy probably end there. But the key point in both examples is that what might appear exclusionary and conservative from one vantage point is actually radically inclusive and progressive from another.

This is not to say simply that indices like V-Dem are poor at measuring non-institutional forms of democratic practice. That drawback is a byproduct of the historicist assumption. Indeed, it equally applies to many institutional indicators. To take the example alluded to above, treating “consultation processes” as an historically valid indicator implies that consultation processes meant and entailed the same thing in, say, 1920, that they do today. Yet rich and detailed interpretive work on practices and processes of consultation reveals quite the opposite. In fact, it shows that the nature and meaning of consultation—the extent of inclusion, the depth of engagement, the degree of influence on agendas and outcomes—has varied immensely over time, sector, and place.[[42]](#footnote-42)

The point is that we cannot assume a clear and obvious meaning for many of the political practices captured in the V-Dem index. We would do better to treat their meaning as ambiguous, and thus examine them against their own contingent context. Such historical subtleties often evade historicist coding. Obviously, scholars who do this type of work are aware of this, describing it as unexplained variation or noise in the data. Our point is that while such noise can be controlled for, it can also be teased out and puzzled with. Both can be fruitful lines of inquiry but with different ends.

***The Empirical Problem: V-Dem is Disaggregated but not Holistic***

Most naturalist scholars now recognise that conceptual fuzziness is a perpetual problem.[[43]](#footnote-43) Typically this debate is seen as a trade-off between analytic precision and descriptive accuracy. V-Dem attempts to do both. It acknowledges the problems inherent in concept formation based on a logic of discovery but maintains that a) the goal is still worth pursing, and b) we can aim to get as close to reality as is possible. We question both of these assertions.

The key to V-Dem’s claim to blend accuracy and precision is disaggregation: seven high level principles of democracy and 350 measurable indicators. Deliberative democracy, for example, is measured by perceptions of whether political elites in a given country 1) appeal to the common good, 2) engage with society, 3) consult broadly, 4) use reasoned justifications, and 5) show respect for counterarguments before making a decision. This is actually an example of a relatively small number of components (the Egalitarian Democracy index, the second least complex, has more than double the number). All of these components are supposed to ensure that V-Dem’s descriptive coverage is exhaustive. And, when combined with the coding procedure they follow, and the ease of use via their interactive website, V-Dem gives the impression of both conceptual and empirical rigor.

So far so good. But this emphasis on disaggregation risks missing the forest for the trees. Put simply, the democratic quality of a polity is more than the sum of its parts. This objection is not a question of weighting—we are not just saying that some (clusters of) indicators are more important or have more reliable data than others on certain dimensions, which is again an active discussion within the V-Dem community—but one of meaning holism.

From a logic of justification perspective, of course, the move to radical disaggregation *presumes* to capture the whole. The proliferation of more and more accurate datapoints imbues the analyst with a greater degree of confidence; it resolves the ambiguity problem sufficiently such that the analyst can make robust causal claims. Seen from our perspective, though, disaggregation does no such thing. If, as we argued in the previous section, many of the indicators captured by V-Dem have historically contingent meanings, then proliferating them merely compounds this ambiguity: the complex specificity of intersection and interaction across diverse indicators serves to multiply the effects of this contingency.

Again, we can look to the issues associated with measuring deliberative democracy to make this point more concrete. The most prominent attempt using logic of justification to capture deliberative quality of different democracies has turned on a similarly sophisticated effort at disaggregation—Steiner et al.’s Discourse Quality Index (DQI), which breaks down the functions and qualities of different speech acts, as applied to legislatures and increasingly diverse settings of political debate.[[44]](#footnote-44) This work has spawned bold claims about causal mechanisms in institutional settings that promote better or worse deliberative quality. It has led to ever-more sophisticated tools of computational analysis that can handle the mountains of textual data now available online.

Inquiry in this field in a more humanist vein has revealed much greater complexity and contingency. Parkinson, for example, assesses the deliberative quality of legislatures from a very different angle. Rather than beginning with a pre-defined set of indicators, he focuses on an intersubjective account of quality in context; in other words, he sets out to explore how actors themselves (legislators and observers) make sense of deliberative quality via rich observation of the legislative chamber in practice.[[45]](#footnote-45) His analysis takes in different countries (including some of those undertaken in DQI studies). His chief contribution is to shed light on the dramaturgical aspects of public deliberation. In his analysis, the sorts of institutional variables in DQI studies are still important factors in the discussion—for example, the composition of legislatures remains important—but only insofar as they play into the broader drama. In general, though, Parkinson places more emphasis on the physical and virtual setting of the legislative chamber, and its links to wider political culture. He dwells, for instance, on how the physical settings of legislatures become culturally associated with the behaviors they typically exhibit: the close proximity of government and opposition benches in the British House of Commons, for instance, have become associated with adversarial conflict and drama. These grounded observations lead him to focus on how the different “scripts” associated with different democratic “stages” induce different sorts of “performances” from actors. His exploration of the dramaturgy metaphor enables him to craft a holistic metanarrative of deliberative democratic quality in and across the myriad legislatures (and other democratic settings) in his analysis.

***The Normative Problem: V-Dem is Transparent but not Reflexive***

Perhaps above all, the V-Dem project trumpets its greatest strength as its transparency. The project in this sense aligns with a broader disciplinary shift towards ensuring greater data access, measurement precision, and replicability. This commitment is seen as essential to the scientific integrity of the project. V-Dem’s architects admit to being internally divided about the value of higher-level indices of democratic quality. There is clear evidence of lengthy indwelling about problematic issues with measurement and reliability (albeit not of the sort that we discuss), and a degree of caution about the confidence in particular sorts of findings.[[46]](#footnote-46)

But transparency about method is no substitute for transparency about motive. The trouble is that the form of reflexivity practiced by V-Dem architects and adapters is narrowly fixated on the scientific limitations or hurdles still to be overcome (in accordance with the logic of justification). As hard as the architects of V-Dem might try, the work of measuring democratic quality can never be a detached exercise in scholarship. Democracy as a concept embodies a range of aspirations for normative theorists and political actors alike—aspirations that can be misread or flattened by minimalist approaches to empirical analysis.[[47]](#footnote-47) It is inevitably political. Indeed, as de Volo explains, the contemporary democratization literature has its roots in U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War.[[48]](#footnote-48) Democracy is a normative project, whose guiding norms are always at stake. By hiding behind transparency, V-Dem’s architects shed no light on the political commitments that inspire them to compare democratic regimes. This problem is only exacerbated by V-Dem’s commitment to multi-dimensionality. The avowed agnosticism about which model of democracy is privileged, or which ought to be preferred when trade-offs are entailed, blurs the normative purpose of the enterprise.

Discovery-oriented research puts less emphasis on scientific transparency—indeed, this community has shown some hostility towards moves to proliferate accepted standards of data access and research transparency in the bid to enhance replicability of political science scholarship.[[49]](#footnote-49) We do not necessarily agree with this stance.[[50]](#footnote-50) We do agree, however, with the emphasis on reflexivity being more important than transparency. Reflexivity, in this sense, entails being open about positionality and normative preferences. It entails accepting that it is not possible to operationalize a concept like democracy without making a political contribution of one’s own.

Again, we can clarify this point with reference to a specific example from the deliberative model. The fashionableness of deliberative democracy in recent times—as the dominant account in normative theory and inspiration for proponents of democratic reform[[51]](#footnote-51)—has lent an instrumentalist edge to its use in political affairs. Rich case research has shown how powerful political interests have drawn on tools associated with deliberative democracy to neutralize difficult political issues,[[52]](#footnote-52) undermine bottom-up forms of participation,[[53]](#footnote-53) disguise the retreat of government services,[[54]](#footnote-54) or maintain an illusion of citizen-centered governance.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Perhaps the most prominent example has been in relation to deliberative innovations in China. Recent analysis in a logic of justification mode has uncovered—and, despite pretensions to detached empirical assessment, implicitly celebrated—the apparent rise of deliberative practices “in an unlikely place.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Meanwhile, empirical examination of a more discovery-orientated flavor—work typically more reflexive about its normative aspirations—has drawn attention to the dark side of this development, particularly the ways in which it can enable party elites to placate critics both domestically and in the international community.[[57]](#footnote-57) Given the intense politics surrounding aid and international development, it is not at all hard to see V-Dem delivering the same sort of instrumental pay-off. The risk is that its avowed agnosticism and commitment to a version of scientific integrity obscures these political motivations and uses.

Here, then, the tables are turned: where discovery-oriented scholars wear their heart on their sleeves through a commitment to reflexivity about political positionality, the normative commitment of the V-Dem project is repressed, obscured by the rationalist language of transparency. This is perhaps best illustrated by a comparison with the much-maligned Freedom House Rankings, which, despite their well-documented apparent methodological limitations, have the singular advantage of being produced by an organization openly interested in the promotion of a particular version of liberal democratic norms and rights. The point is that at least everyone knows what Freedom House and its index stand for. V-Dem’s normative purpose, on the other hand, remains dangerously *ambiguous*.

**Conclusion**

Democracy appears to be at the crossroads, beset by crises of disengagement, populism, and nationalism, and no one approach to the study of the political world is likely to provide either the explanation or the solution.[[58]](#footnote-58) We believe that projects like V-Dem have considerable potential because of their ability to situate current crises across countries and eras. But they can also be strengthened by paying specific attention to alternative research orientations that are better placed to acknowledge and wrestle with the conceptual ambiguity required to imagine a different version of democracy. Returning to our echo chambers belies the normative enterprise that is central to the study of democracy and democratization. In this spirit, we have provided four reflections that, we posit, are of fundamental importance to the V-Dem project and the broader logic of justification mode of inquiry it represents.

We do not anticipate that advocates of this approach will find our arguments so obviously compelling that they will immediately reconsider their philosophical position and abandon the enterprise altogether—nor would we want them to. But we do hope that it will engender a degree of reflection and even circumspection about the role and place of conceptual ambiguity in social science research. If, as we have argued, conceptual ambiguity has an important function, both in empirical research but also for the normative democratic project, then this should provide cause to pause and reconsider what data like V-Dem represents and how it ought to be treated. We conclude by offering some concrete suggestions for how the V-Dem project might proceed in light of these four objections.

1. *Address the conceptual problem by engaging with normative theory*

We have illustrated how, in normative democratic theory—the reservoir on which V-Dem or any attempt to measure democratic quality must draw—democracy and its various models are essentially contested concepts. The work of normative theory is to constantly challenge, revisit, and revise their meaning. In other words, any particular strand, model, or variant of democracy is, and must remain, ambiguous. Theoretical models are not locked in time. As such, V-Dem’s claims to providing multi-dimensional indicators risk continuing the troubling tradition of empirical political science misunderstanding and misappropriating concepts from normative theory.

This is not to demand a commitment to constant recoding of the vast reams of data underpinning the V-Dem project. There are obvious pragmatic limitations to any such measure. But it would also be overkill. There is good reason to think that certain models of democracy are more stable (in normative terms) than others. However, there are few good reasons why the architects of V-Dem project could not engage in greater depth with normative theorists of democracy as part of a commitment to periodically reviewing the indices related to each model (and indeed to the range of models) covered in the project. Such a move might entail partial and occasional recoding, but it would also ensure that V-Dem does not get left behind as normative theorizing continues apace.

It is perhaps more fruitful to ask researchers who make use of V-Dem’s resources, rather than the index’s architects themselves, to bear this point in mind. As with Luhrmann et al.’s thoughtful study—which makes creative use of a wide range of V-Dem indicators to measure and test a conceptually robust version of accountability[[59]](#footnote-59)

—researchers could draw together a bespoke range of indicators to better align with contemporary normative theorizing on deliberative democracy (or any other conception). In essence, we caution that V-Dem’s “models” should not be applied in sclerotic fashion.

1. *Address the contextual problem by engaging with rich area studies*

We have argued that V-Dem’s current commitment to *historical* coding further compounds the problem of a reductive and static approach to assessing democratic quality. Such a commitment assigns a present-day meaning to political practices that have evolved new connotations and associations over time. The risk is that rather than providing an enriched account of democratic context supposedly at the heart of V-Dem’s agenda, this approach actually serves to flatten it.

The obvious bulwark against this risk is far greater integration with rich qualitative literature that teases out these contextual factors. It is not enough to hope that the coders have this sort of in-country familiarity—especially since, as currently conceived and pursued, involvement in projects like V-Dem holds little appeal to such scholars anyway. As such, at least some of the vast resources being poured into V-Dem could equally be directed to research oriented toward a logic of discovery, aimed at exploring, unpacking, and displaying contextual specificity that provides rich color and deeper explanation.

If we look again to deliberative democracy for a model of what we have in mind here, perhaps the best example is a recent analysis of *gram sabhas* (open assemblies in rural India) for the World Bank.[[60]](#footnote-60) Sanyal and Rao combine an analysis of quantitative indicators with subtle, contextual description to produce a comprehensive and convincing account of the macro political impact of this deliberative cultural practice. For the wider V-Dem project, such content could even be integrated into the interactive website, adding qualitative depth to quantitative parsimony. The need is especially acute in relation to historical data, where uncertainty or lack of confidence in existing data points significantly impacts the capacity of V-Dem to tell a compelling causal narrative about democracy across many countries.

1. *Address the measurement problem by incorporating qualitative meta-analysis*

We have illustrated how V-Dem’s approach to measuring even these fixed-in-time concepts and practices remains troubling. Theirs is an effort to discipline the problem of ambiguity by radical disaggregation. But this solution risks further disconnecting measures from their assumed meaning. It results in a proliferation of measures that are not necessarily cohesive and cumulative. What’s more, the emphasis on disaggregation, in essence, risks losing the forest for the trees. It inevitably directs analytic attention to constituent parts, on the flawed presumption that more and more accurate data points will capture the whole.

An ideal supplement to quantitative disaggregation is subsequent qualitative re-aggregation—an effort to bring together diverse data points through a nuanced and contextually sensitive narrative. In this vein, we support recent efforts within V-Dem toward producing usable country reports. We simply encourage a more expansive form of meta-narrative, synonymous in political science with the work of James C. Scott, which combines theoretical parsimony with a commitment to deeper engagement with normative theory and historically contingent analysis. Such an approach requires much more than a mere qualitative summary of quantitative trends. It would entail the rich elicitation and assessment of rival accounts of democratic development. It could thus acknowledge a greater multiplicity of interpretations (which V-Dem’s analytical emphasis currently serves to elide), while still seeking to tell a compelling narrative overall.

Once more, recent scholarship in deliberative democracy points in this direction. Indeed, intriguingly one of the most recent books in the field is a collaboration between Andre Bachtiger (one of the designers of the justification-oriented Discourse Quality Index) and John Parkinson (whose discovery-oriented study we presented as a radical alternative to this work). Their combined scholarship moves well beyond the old DQI focus on individual settings of debate, and instead begins mapping and measuring deliberative quality on a systems level.[[61]](#footnote-61) It combines sophisticated quantitative methods in automated text analysis with a storytelling form of meta-analysis grounded in empirical observations to celebrate, for example, the macro-deliberative qualities of the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum.

1. *Address the normative problem by being reflexive about V-Dem’s implications and uses*

These problems culminate in what we consider the most fundamental and troubling implication of V-Dem: the commitment to scientific integrity through radical transparency obliterates the obvious *political* implications of any attempt to cut through ambiguity and assess democratic quality. The avowed agnosticism of the V-Dem project risks enabling a subtler and more covert form of instrumental influence than the cruder indices—such as Freedom House—it is meant to displace.

Our proposed solution is straightforward. It simply requires embracing reflexivity as part of the broader shift towards data access and research transparency within the discipline. Opening up about what is motivating V-Dem—about not just who V-Dem’s architects and proponents are, but how their positionality affects their political experiences and beliefs, how these experiences and beliefs inflect their interpretation and analysis, and ultimately what they are trying to achieve through this project beyond a more accurate index—will help both to contextualize the project and to temper claims and assumptions about scientific rigor. Given the prominence of V-Dem, such a move may even serve to heal old wounds and renew a more constructive discussion about standards of access and transparency across traditional divides within the discipline.

This list is not meant to be exhaustive but rather illustrative of what a more fruitful conversation across paradigmatic divides might look like. At the core of each suggestion is the belief that democracy is ephemeral, and that is no bad thing. Indeed, following Runciman, it could be argued that democracy’s ambiguity, and consequent adaptability, is actually the very thing that ensures it survives.[[62]](#footnote-62) Given the context in which democracy finds itself, this should be cause enough to reconsider the role and value of conceptual ambiguity in an empirical political science.[[63]](#footnote-63) Rather than being seen as threat to the authority and relevance of the discipline, in the current climate conceptual ambiguity might actually enhance it.

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