

## Universal suffrage for real? A global index of suffrage restrictions and an explanatory framework

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### Research problem

The right to vote used to be at the heart of the struggle for democracy. According to the dominant view, the struggle was crowned with success in the West by the introduction of equal voting rights for women in Europe and by the introduction of legal guarantees for the voting rights of the black population in the United States. The prevalent view is that nearly all countries 'have adopted the rule of universal suffrage' or 'provided for universal suffrage' (Coppedge and Reinicke 1991; Vanhanen 2003).

Yet, exclusions from the suffrage remain in all democracies. As noted by Dahl and others, 'no democracy allows all adults to vote' (Katz 1996; Dahl 1982). In the midst of contemporary democracies, there are consequently a large number of people with no right to participate in national elections and with no formal representation in national parliaments. Non-citizens, non-residents, prisoners and people with cognitive impairments, are excluded from political participation in most democratic countries. Moreover, of course, young people and children are vir-

tually everywhere denied access to the ballots. These exclusions are usually perceived as self-evident and non-problematic. Nevertheless, they are increasingly contested and subject to great variation among democracies. These observations provoke questions about the nature of democratic inclusion: what does the general pattern of legal exclusions from suffrage look like and how can variation in inclusion among democracies be explained?

These questions are increasingly relevant as restrictions on universal suffrage are more and more debated and challenged. In many countries lowering the voting rights age to sixteen is under consideration, as Austria did in 2007. The right to vote for non-citizens, though still uncommon, has been introduced in local elections by a number of countries (Earnest 2006). A flow of judgments from international and constitutional courts has recently invalidated laws disenfranchising prisoners (Powers 2006). An increasing number of countries are making provisions for the right and opportunity to vote for people with intellectual disabilities (Schriner et al 1997). Voting from abroad for non-residents is allowed by many if not by all democracies (Gratschew 2007). As these examples indicate, the content of 'universal suffrage' remains contested.

It is consequently highly relevant to improve our knowledge about the degree of inclusion among contemporary democracies and to explain the causes of its variation. It has been noted that the voting rights age is more often lower in old democracies compared to more recent democracies (Massicotte et al 2004). It can further be observed that universalist welfare states, such as Canada and Sweden, are among the few countries allowing prisoners and people with cognitive im-

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pairments to vote. The intriguing question to be asked is, then, if there is a robust correlation, even causal relationship, between the type of political and social institutions and the degree of democratic inclusion?

### **Purpose and outline of the project**

Surprisingly, even remarkably, the state of inclusion among contemporary democracies has never before been the subject of systematic empirical analysis of a kind that permits for ranking and testing of explanatory hypothesis. The reason for the lack of attention to the subject may be the result of the fact that suffrage restrictions are considered mostly ‘marginal’ and are not indexed in comparative rankings of democracy. The purpose of the present project is to remedy this extraordinary gap in current research on democratization. To this end the project seeks to answer fundamental descriptive and explanatory questions: How can contemporary democratic systems be ranked in terms of democratic inclusion? What explains variation in inclusion among democracies?

In order to answer these questions a new dataset is construed that gives quantitative scores along five distinct dimensions of suffrage exclusions. Building the dataset enables us to make simple descriptive inferences about the relative state of democratic inclusion among all “electoral democracies” from 1972 to 2009. The ability to rank democracies from more to less inclusive, along all relevant dimensions of democratic inclusion, is in itself of great import. The index of inclusion constitutes a significant complement to existing rankings of democracy (e.g. Freedom House, Vanhanen, and Polity IV). Furthermore, the index will be an invaluable

point of reference to normative debates on the justification of current exclusions (e.g. Schrag 2004; Schriener et al. 1997; Lopez-Guerra 2004; Manza and Uggen 2006).

In addition, the dataset will include data on institutional and aggregative properties of the cases under study. The data will be collected by the use of existing sources. The dataset created will allow for testing of various hypotheses about the connections between fundamental features of political systems, such as the fairness of elections or the protection of political liberties, and the extent to which the right vote is extended to the groups under consideration. The result will be new insights into the mechanisms explaining the opportunities for political participation offered for society’s least advantaged, namely young people, prisoners, people with intellectual disabilities, non-citizens and non-residents.

### **The research field**

Previous research of relevance includes quantitative measures of democracy, descriptive studies of suffrage rules and attempts to explain the development of democratic institutions.

Comparative research on democratization is dominated by attempts to construe quantitative indices of democracy that allow for cross-country comparison and frequently also for comparison over time. These indices reflect a number of controversies concerned with the operationalization of the concept of democracy and, for example, the dichotomous or graded nature of the entities to which it refers (Bollen and Jackman, 1989; Teorell and Hadenius, 2005). However, the most important limitation in this context is that virtually no index takes into account the variety

of exclusions that persist. Indeed, the predominant view appears to be that ‘universal suffrage’ is compatible with ‘the usual exclusions’ (e.g. Still 1981; Coppedge and Reinicke 1991; Hadenius, 1992). Moreover, the most influential indices of democracy in use today (such as Polity IV, Freedom House and Polyarchy) characterise suffrage in terms of a binary variable, i.e. as either “universal” or “non-existent”. Clearly, a dichotomous understanding does not capture the real variety of suffrage exclusions in democracies. In order for suffrage restrictions to be explained, a graded conception of suffrage is required.

The nature of legal qualifications for participation in national elections have previously been examined in detail (Katz 1996; Massicotte et al. 2004). The value of these studies for present purposes is nevertheless limited, for two reasons. The first is that data on voting rights restrictions is analysed either by specific countries or by specific groups. No attempt is in other words made to provide a systematic overview of differences between clusters of democratic regimes. The second reason is that these studies conceptualize restrictions at the ordinal level, with no intention of providing a ranking in terms of inclusiveness. A major contribution of the proposed research project is, then, to develop the conceptual tools that makes possible descriptions of political systems in terms of more and less inclusion.

To this date, the contribution by Pamela Paxton (2003) and her colleagues constitutes a unique exception to the paltry state of studies of inclusion. Paxton’s study construes a time series of all independent countries where inclusion is ranked from one to 100. Although the study takes into account a wide range of exclusions it does not consider qualifications based on either age, citizenship or

residence. Indeed, Paxton’s study is more sensitive to exclusions found in non-democracies (e.g. based on sex or property) than exclusions found in democracies, as it does not cover the full range of exclusions currently enforced. Moreover, the study does not attempt to explain variation in inclusion.

Explanatory frameworks of democratic inclusion are dominated by studies addressing the introduction of universal adult suffrage in the early 20th century. These studies explore variations of the same basic idea, namely that suffrage expansion is the result of increasing social pressures from excluded political and economic classes (e.g. Engerman and Sokoloff 2005; Sokoloff 2002; Przeworski 2007, and more generally: Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, 1992). The hypothesis does not appear applicable to case under study here, however. As major social and economic groups are clearly enfranchised in contemporary democracies, their organisational resources cannot explain remaining variations in the extension of suffrage. Moreover, it appears unlikely that young people, people with cognitive impairments, prisoners, expatriates and non-citizens are in general able to push for inclusion themselves. Largely, a characteristic feature of the people excluded today is the lack of the political and/or economic resources that is presumed by traditional explanations of suffrage expansions.

## Research design

The aim of the descriptive part of the project is to complement existing indices of democracy by focusing exclusively on the hitherto overlooked dimension of inclusion/exclusion. Based on the dataset an index of inclusion is to be construed,

which in a single measure reflects the degree of inclusion for each particular country. The dataset will include all 'electoral democracies', currently 121 according to Freedom House (2008), and cover the years 1972 to 2008. There are three reasons for beginning in 1972. First, this is the first year when women's suffrage is the rule in all western democracies (Switzerland was the last country in 1971). Second, the 1970's and 80's provide the first examples of voting rights for the intellectually disabled and non-citizens (e.g. Sweden). Third, the Freedom House dataset of political rights and freedoms is available from 1972 and onwards.

The reason for including only countries generally recognised as democracies is that we are interested only in variations of democratic inclusion. The extent to which non-democracies display deficiencies in terms of inclusion is consequently of no relevance here. Moreover, by operationalizing 'democracy' in a minimal sense, as equal to 'electoral democracy', greater variation in the dependent variable (i.e. democratic inclusion) is introduced since the number of cases is expanded (Munck & Verkuilen 2002; Przeworski et al 2000). An additional implication of the research design is that the effects of political transitions and regime changes are ignored. By keeping the regime type constant (electoral democracy), we are unable to pose questions about the effects on inclusion of transitions from authoritarian or hybrid-regimes to democratic government. However, this is an advantage since it enables us to focus exclusively on the explanation of variation among democratic political systems and to seek explanations in their distinct features.

The conceptual framework employed in the project touches a controversial issue among students of democracy in the

sense that there is no general agreement about the meaning of 'democratic inclusion'. Some scholars argue that democracy denotes a system of institutionalised competition for political power that in effect allows for significant exclusions (Przeworski 2000). A rival view is that inclusion is a fundamental criterion of a democratic process that applies to all legally bound by authoritative decisions (Dahl 1989; cf. Held 1995). In this project the basic conceptual stipulation is made that a democratic people is more inclusive the larger the proportion of its members is granted participatory rights. This premise is not unusual among previous scholars in the field (Huntington 1989; Ross 1946; Oppenheim 1971; Lipset 1959).

The descriptive aim of the project marks a continuation of the tradition of measuring democracy (Munck and Verkuilen 2002). Many current indexes are designed as 'real-types' meaning that the highest score on the scale is near or identical to the highest score achieved by the most democratic political system (e.g. Freedom House). Others have adopted ideal-types indexes (e.g. The Economist index) where the maximum score is not necessarily achieved by any political system (see Campbell 2008). Here, an ideal-type index is introduced exclusively with regard for democratic inclusion.

At this stage, five dimensions of democratic inclusion are distinguished, relating to the nature of the legal qualifications found in electoral laws: residence, citizenship, mental status, penalty and age. These categories will be used in the coding of relevant suffrage regulations and will be further operationalized in order to permit of variation along the five dimensions. The idea is to measure degrees of inclusion (ordinal-level) on each dimension

and to create an additive index based on these scores. Thereby, each political system will receive an index value describing its degree of inclusion for each year. Though the variables are described at the ordinal-level, the implicit property measured – i.e. the inclusiveness of democracy – is clearly an interval-scale variable that may allow us to treat the index as such for certain purposes (King, Keohane, Verba 1994; Teorell and Svensson 2006).

The explanatory part of the project aims at testing several hypotheses explaining cross-national variation in democratic inclusion as described by the index. At this stage, no more than a preliminary characterization of the relevant independent variables can be offered. However, the general aim is to focus on the relative explanatory power of political institutions, rather than to employ explanations in terms of strategic actions of individual actors in transitory processes or major structural forces and conditions (Potter 1997; Vanhanen 1997; Haerpfer 2009).

One reason for this limitation is that transitory and structural explanations are usually invoked in order to account for variation in the overall “democraticness” of political systems. The present project, by contrast, is concerned with the democratic character of just a single aspect of a democratic political system. It may plausibly be expected that the factors explaining variation in the degree of democracy of political systems partly explain variation in the degree of democratic inclusion. But since inclusion represents just a single dimension of democracy it should be sufficient to investigate the extent to which variations in the degree of democracy is able to account for its variation. The major independent variable is thus the degree of democracy of the political system. The causal factors explaining how democratic

the system is can accordingly be bracketed.

### The explanatory framework

The first explanatory hypothesis trades on the assumption that the idea of democracy provides greater incentives for inclusion (Taylor 1998). What may accordingly be called the “unfinished democracy project” hypothesis consists in the claim that inclusion is associated with increasing levels of democracy that is to be expected only at later stages of democratization. Thus, the overall score of democracy should be decisive in predicting variations in the extension of suffrage. The hypothesis lends support from the rich literature on democracy as a predictor of human rights protections. As has been shown by for example Davenport and Armstrong (2004) the level of democracy is decisive in understanding the relationship between democratic government and human rights violations (also Poe and Tate 1994).

The importance of the overall democracy score should not let us to ignore the possibility that some specific dimension of democracy may account for most of the explained variance. It could be, for example, that the regulation and competitiveness of political opposition provides a better explanation for the degree of inclusion than the overall ‘democracy score’ – though they are plausibly strongly correlated. The most reasonable alternative is to employ both strategies and to leave it an empirical question whether the overall score of democracy or the score on some specific dimension of democracy constitutes the most powerful explanation.

If time permits, the hypothesis should also be tested by the use of data on the introduction of universal suffrage. The idea would be to correlate current levels of in-

clusion with past achievements in granting formerly excluded groups the vote. Is there a tendency to the effect that countries that extended the franchise earlier are the same countries that are more inclusive today? This expectation is nurtured by studies predicting that stable democracies, i.e. old democracies, generally achieve higher democracy scores (e.g. Cutright 1963). Though the hypothesis clearly allows for various interpretations, one version is to compare the current ranking of inclusion with a rank by the lag of women's suffrage (year of introduction of male suffrage – year of introduction of female suffrage) in order to explore whether exclusion today is related to the exclusions of the past.

The second explanation to be investigated is the “constitutionalist hypothesis”. It builds on previous findings of the importance of judicial and parliamentary institutions for policy outcomes. Most importantly, the hypothesis is that institutions creating incentives for consensus between political actors produces ‘kinder and gentler kind of democracy’ that, in turn, facilitates the extension of the suffrage to formerly excluded groups (Lijphart 1999; cf. Lewin et al 2008). The mechanism at work here is widely debated. Moreover, the exact policy implications of consensus-oriented versus majoritarian democracies is controversial. Yet, the general picture is that proportional forms of representation and the stronger parties associated with such systems are typically more likely to generate policies incorporating the common good of a wider array of interests (e.g. Crepaz 1996). In this context, this is to mean that consensus systems are more likely to include marginalized groups and to offer a more inclusive suffrage. Other versions of the constitutionalist hypothesis should be

considered as well. For example, the significance of parliamentary versus presidential systems is a frequent theme in comparative research (Linz 1990). Also, it is a relevant issue whether the opportunities for judicial review, the power of constitutional courts and the entrenchment of bills of rights, is conducive to the protection of democratic rights or not (Dworkin, 2006; cf. Dahl 1989). At the least, these institutional variables should be controlled for in the analysis.

Both the unfinished democracy project and the constitutionalist hypothesis should be tested by reference to proximity. It is a common hypothesis that geographic proximity between political systems affects their development (Bremer 1992). It may consequently be conjectured that a more inclusive suffrage in neighbouring states is conducive to inclusion as well. This “contextual” hypothesis will be tested by coding for geographical location in the dataset.

In sum, the first hypothesis is that the degree of democracy is decisive, whereas the second hypothesis presumes that the kind of democracy is the vital factor. Hypothesis testing will be carried out using applicable multivariate techniques and relevant control variables (e.g. wealth, levels of education, inequality). The explanatory power of the widely studied development thesis is thereby controlled for although, if it is correct, it should correlate strongly with the “unfinished democracy” thesis (e.g. Muller 1988). In addition, it should be noted that the “unfinished democracy” and the “constitutionalist” thesis are not mutually exclusive. The best explanation for variations in democratic inclusion may incorporate a both the level of “democraticness” of the political system and the nature of the institutions by which democracy is practiced. However, the aim of

the project is to identify the determinants that provide the greatest explained variance and not necessarily to refute the one or the other hypothesis.

### Methods

The methodological challenges of the project require a brief comment. Quantitative indexes of democracy have been criticised for being unable to represent the particular dimensions in which political systems may fail (Beetham 1999). In fact, a point of criticism against prevailing quantitative measures is exactly that they tend to ignore the subtle exclusions from the vote that are still prevalent among democracies (Munck and Verkuilen 2002; Wedeen 2004). This project avoids the objection by focusing on suffrage restrictions alone – representing a single, albeit important, dimension of democracy

As note above, data on inclusion (the dependent variable) is largely available from existing sources, including organizations such as ACE Electoral Knowledge Network information about elections, IDEA (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) and IFES (International Foundation for Election Systems).

The democracy scores (independent variable) is available from multiple sources, including the Polity IV index, the Vanhanen index and the Freedom House index of political/civil rights and liberties. These indices provide data on the institutionalization of democracy (Polity), the extent of electoral participation (Vanhanen) and on the protection of political rights and freedoms (Freedom House). Recent findings indicate that differences between these measures are marginal except in identifi-

able and limited respects (Hadenius and Teorell, 2005).

However, it is essential to the project that “universal suffrage”, as it is customarily understood, is safely registered by the index. The defects of the Polity IV index in this respect are well documented (Wedeen 2004). A further desideratum of the data is that exclusions of the groups investigated here do not affect the democracy score since it would reduce the usefulness of the index as an independent variable in explaining exclusions. This is a point relevant to the Vanhanen index as it measures democracy by counting the proportion of the population that participates in general elections (Vanhanen 2000; cf. Hadenius 1992). Since it appears plausible to assume that the regulation of voting rights affects the rate of participation in elections, Vanhanen’s index is consequently inappropriate for explaining variation in the regulation of voting rights. In sum, it may appear as if the Freedom House index for political rights and freedoms (beginning in 1972) is the best candidate for the creation of an independent variable that reflects the level of democracy of distinct political systems.

The project makes a significant contribution to existing research on democratization by providing a comparative and global index of suffrage restrictions that has not before been attempted. By providing a more refined description of inclusion the project will deepen our knowledge about a hitherto overlooked dimension of democracy and its variation among established democracies. Most significantly, the project represents the first attempt to explain why some countries are more likely than others to include the “mute” members of society

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