Democracy Audits and Governmental Indicators

METHODS AND MEASUREMENTS

What methods are employed to develop and evaluate indicators? What methods are preferable (experts vs. surveys vs. administrative data)? What should we pay attention to: measurement errors, incomplete data, biased assumptions, etc.? How can political methodology strengthen existing indicators?

1. The third wave era has seen a burgeoning array of diagnostic tools designed to monitor the quality of democratic governance. Political indicators are now widely used by the international community, by national governments and by advocacy groups to evaluate needs and determine policy priorities, to highlight problems and identify benchmark practices, and to evaluate the effectiveness of programmatic interventions. The most commonly-used indicators focus on issues such as the existence of civil liberties and political rights, the extent of ‘good governance’, respect for human rights, perceptions of corruption, the degree of women’s empowerment, levels of civic engagement, the extent of conflict, the distribution of social capital, and many other related topics. The expansion of indicators has been accompanied by important gains in the level of conceptual sophistication, methodological transparency, scope, and geographic coverage of all these measures.

2. The range of diagnostic tools is summarized in Figure 1 below. An important distinction can be drawn between public and elite evaluations, the former using deliberative democratic audits and representative public opinion polls, while the latter relies upon ‘expert’ perceptual surveys and composite indices.
3. **Elite-level perceptual judgments are an important source of information.** Organizations commonly use standardized questionnaires distributed to ‘expert’ sources, typically including scholars and researchers, country analysts, journalists, lawyers, business executives, independent consultants, human rights observers, and NGO staff. This approach is exemplified by Freedom House’s process employing teams of researchers to assess the state of civil liberties and political rights worldwide, by Transparency International use of experts to construct the Corruption Perceptions Index, and by Reporters without Borders survey used to generate its annual Press Freedom index.\(^2\)

4. **Many indicators are also compiled from official data based on administrative records** collected by public officials, national statistical offices, and multinational organizations, for example concerning levels of voter turnout in national elections (collated by International IDEA), public access to the news media and new ICTs (UNESCO/ITU), and the proportion of women in national parliaments (IPU).

5. **Recent decades have also witnessed a substantial growth in the range and scope of cross-national public opinion surveys.** These draw upon among representative samples of the adult population in each society to monitor a wide range of democratic attitudes, values and behaviors, as well as perceptions and direct experience of good governance, corruption, public sector service delivery, and human rights. Major cross-national and time-series surveys of public opinion include the Euro-barometer and related EU surveys (which started in 1970), the European Election Study (1979), the European Values Survey and the World Values Survey (1981), the International Social Survey Programme (1985), the Global Barometers (1990 and various), the Comparative National Elections Project (1990), the European Voter and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (1995), the European Social Survey (2002), the Transatlantic Trends survey (2002), the Pew Global Attitudes project (2002), and the Gallup World Poll (2005).\(^3\) These surveys allow a representative sample of the general public to express their views about the quality of democracy in their own country, as well as to assess the performance of their government leaders, institutions, and policies, confidence in government institutions and satisfaction with democracy, patterns of political behavior and civic engagement, and social and political values.\(^4\)

6. **The use of different data sources, and their combination in certain indicators, raises many important and complex questions.** In particular, do indicators based on mass or elite surveys coincide or do they diverge? Where perceptions differ, which source provides the most legitimate, useful, valid, and reliable benchmarks for both scholars and practitioners? Elite evaluations are commonly assumed, usually implicitly, to provide the factually ‘correct’ and more reliable assessment. By contrast the public is often usually believed to be mistaken, unaware, ill-informed, or simply misguided in their judgments. The average citizen is thought to lack sufficient knowledge or sophistication to evaluate the performance of democratic governance. A recent thorough review of democracy indicators, for example, provides a comprehensive overview of the standard instruments and datasets based on expert perceptions, but it neglects to consider any role for public opinion surveys in this process.\(^5\)

7. **Clearly public evaluations can be flawed – as can expert perceptions – for multiple reasons.** Nevertheless analysis of cognitive judgments about the meaning of democracy, derived from comparing the 5th wave of the World Values Survey (2005-7) in almost 50 societies, reveals substantial agreement around the world about the principles and procedures underlying this form of governance. Moreover attitudes, values and beliefs are far from randomly distributed and meaningless; instead the WVS evidence demonstrates that longer historical experience of democratic
governance significantly strengthens an enlightened knowledge of democratic procedures, evaluations of democratic performance, and democratic values in each society.6

8. Instead of assuming that expert perceptual indicators always provide the most valid and reliable measurement, this paper concludes, more agnostically, that no single best measure or indicator of democratic governance exists for all purposes; instead, as Collier and Adcock suggest, specific choices are best justified pragmatically by the theoretical framework and analytical goals used in any study.7 The most prudent strategy is to compare the results of alternative indicators at both mass and elite levels, including those available from cross-national public opinion surveys, to see if the findings remain robust and consistent irrespective of the specific measures employed for analysis. If so, then this generates greater confidence in the reliability of the results, since the main generalizations hold irrespective of the particular measures which are used. If not, then we need to consider how far any differences in the results can be attributed to the underlying concepts and methodologies which differ among these measures.

9. Moreover the available elite-level perceptual indicators are relatively blunt instruments, whether for assessing the quality of democracy, for program performance evaluation, or for diagnosing specific problems of concern within any particular state. Public opinion polls have the distinct advantage of allowing disaggregation to highlight contrasts within sub-populations of concern, such as satisfaction with the performance of democracy among rich and poor, experience of political violence among women and men, or perception of human rights among ethnic majority and minority populations.

10. For policymakers, in some circumstances, the legitimacy derived from professionally-conducted public opinion polls may also make these preferable indicators of democratic governance.8 The use of indicators raises concern about who decides upon the rankings, whether the results are ideologically biased, and how they are constructed. Legitimacy is strengthened by transparency, by ownership of the process by national stake-holders, and by the inclusion of a wide diversity of viewpoints. Professional surveys based on representative samples of the general population in each society are usually regarded as inherently more legitimate than external polls of elite perceptions.

11. Therefore, in conclusion, social surveys can play an important role when seeking to diagnose, monitor, and strengthen the quality of democratic governance across and within many states worldwide. Representative and professional surveys of public opinion are likely to generate results which prove more politically legitimate, disaggregated, and useful for policymakers, practitioners and research analysts than expert perceptions. Social scientists need to integrate the findings of cross-national public opinion surveys into the standard expert and administrative based indicators of democratic governance.

12. The construction and analysis of cross-national and national social surveys monitoring social and political attitudes and behaviors is also an area where political scientists have accumulated a considerable reservoir of specialized technical expertise, methodological rigor, and conceptual precision – alongside the work of social psychologists, market researchers, sociologists, and related disciplines - thereby supplementing and enriching the standard econometric approaches common in the use of democratic indicators.
The University of Goteborg’s Quality of Governance Institute has developed a dedicated website and an integrated dataset collecting these indicators. See http://www.qog.pol.gu.se/ See also UNDP. 2007. Governance Indicators: A Users' Guide (2nd Edition) Oslo: UNDP.


