

Either the People Can Pick – and Actually Remove – Those in  
Power or They Cannot: For an Overall Dichotomy of Political  
Regimes Without Any Hybrids Between Democracies and Autocracies

(Some Comments on the Recent Literature and Debate)

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In recent years the concept of hybrid regimes has become popular within comparative politics. However, to the extent that such classifications involve a hybrid of democracy and autocracy, they are vague and problematic. Taking the definition of electoral democracy as the ability of voters to pick and remove a government responsible to the people and not (mainly) to a tutelary power, and with the assumption of (near) universal suffrage, democratic classification can – and should – involve nowadays a basic (initial) dichotomous distinction between democracies and autocracies, allowing no hybrid regimes between these two.

The starting point for much analysis in this regard is the *Freedom in the World* analysis of Freedom House, which divides the world into free, partly free, and not free countries. This is a division with a clear middle category. That said, what Freedom House is measuring is a combination of political rights and civil liberties. Its political rights score is based on three subcategories (electoral process; political pluralism and participation; functioning of government) which total a potential 40 points, and which is then adjusted to a score on a one to seven scale. Its civil rights score is based on four subcategories (freedom of expression and belief; associational and organizational rights; rule of law; personal autonomy and individual rights) which total a potential 60 points, and which is then likewise adjusted to a score on a one to seven scale.

Given the wide range of factors which are aggregated together it is reasonable to assume that a country could have a middling score. Phrased differently, nothing in this approach would lead to a clear breakpoint at the middle, and indeed a country can have an overall score of exactly four on the one to seven scale (whether this comes from a four on each of political rights and civil liberties or an average that achieves this).

More crucially, what is being measured here is freedom from the perspective of individuals. As they say, "The survey measures freedom – the opportunity to act spontaneously in a variety of fields outside the control of government and other centres of potential domination ..." (Freedom House, *Freedom in the World: Methodology*). This is thus not a measure of political regimes, except in the extent to which they grant freedoms. That said, Freedom House also provides an additional measure of electoral democracy. Of course, this term is not unique to them. That said, their definition of electoral democracy involves four criteria: (1) a competitive multiparty political system; (2) universal adult suffrage; (3) regularly conducted elections conducted in conditions of ballot secrecy, reasonable ballot security, and lacking massive voter fraud; and (4) significant public access of all major political parties to the electorate through the media and through generally open political campaigning (Ibid.).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, they also have a fifth aspect – the lack of tutelary power.

This definition of electoral democracy is thus about democracy specifically and not just freedom, and it is treated as dichotomous. That is, a country is either an electoral democracy or it is not, and it must have each point to be an electoral democracy. The assumption is presumably that these points relate to each other, so that a weakness in one leads to weakness in others. Certainly, for example if the ruling party controls the media and consequently this is heavily biased (negating criterion 4) then it would be hard for the elections to be competitive (negating criterion 1). That said, the one criterion that does not seem to "fit" in the same way is the level of suffrage – this can be far from complete without necessarily negating the other aspects, and indeed was so historically. However, since universal adult suffrage is quite common today, this may not be a crucial point.

And by democracies, to emphasize, one mean regimes wherein the people have the possibility to change the government. Where this does not exist, the regime is an autocracy, even is a somewhat free and/or constitutional one. As Ottaway (2003) notes, "if power cannot be transferred by elections, there is little point in describing a country as democratic, even with qualifiers"; moreover, even if an autocracy accepts some defeats in local or regional elections, at the centre "competition is a fiction; even if elections are held, outsiders are not allowed to truly challenge the power of the incumbents".<sup>2</sup> A similar view is that of Przeworski et al. (2000), for whom a democracy is a system with more than one party wherein the opposition has a chance to win the next election.<sup>3</sup> In both cases democracy is seen as a dichotomous regime type.

Of course, there can thus be honest scholarly debate about whether the elections have been (sufficiently) free and fair in a given country. One option here is to follow Diamond, and refer to these as "ambiguous regimes", ambiguous "in the sense that they fall on the blurry boundary between electoral democracy and competitive authoritarianism, with independent

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<sup>2</sup> Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), page 15.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Przeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

observers disagreeing over how to classify them".<sup>4</sup> That said, Diamond notes that "ambiguous regimes" are (but) a residual category and that one could classify virtually all of these as competitive authoritarian.<sup>5</sup>

The issue thus comes down to the extent of competition – not merely that there is some or even a fair bit (as would be found under competitive authoritarianism), but whether this is sufficient for the opposition to truly challenge the government for national power, as Ottaway says. For example, Venezuela was one of Diamond's cases of an ambiguous regime, and there has been strong debate about the extent of competitiveness there under Chávez – not least because the opposition did win the referendum of 2007 (see the analysis and discussion of Venezuela in Hidalgo 2009 and LeDuc et al. 2010).<sup>6</sup> However, if the 2007 referendum is seen as a "second order" vote since it was not about who would hold national power then, following from the discussion of Ottaway, it does not negate the electoral authoritarian nature of the regime, with its intimidation of voters and lack of press freedom. In short, there are strong scholarly arguments for viewing democracy as a dichotomous variable, but this does result in some challenging decisions about specific classifications.

However, there are various scholars and rankings that define democracy (and autocracy) in a way that allows for an intermediate, hybrid category. Wigell (2008) defines two dimensions of democracy: electoralism (concerning free, fair, and competitive elections, suffrage, and lack of tutelary powers) and constitutionalism (concerning civil liberties, judicial independence, and lack of corruption).<sup>7</sup> Thus a fully

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<sup>4</sup> Larry Diamond, "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes", *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 13: 2 (April 2002), pp. 21-35 [quote from page 26].

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-26.

<sup>6</sup> Manuel Hidalgo, "Hugo Chávez's 'Petro-Socialism'", *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 20: 2 (April 2009), pp. 78-92.; Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi, and Pippa Norris, "Introduction: Building and Sustaining Democracy", Chapter 1 in LeDuc, Niemi, and Norris, eds., *Comparing Democracies 3: Elections and Voting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: SAGE, 2010), pp. 4-6.

<sup>7</sup> Mikael Wigell, "Mapping 'Hybrid Regimes': Regime Types and Concepts in Comparative Politics", *Democratization*, Volume

democratic regime has both electoralism and constitutionalism (what could also be called liberalism), whereas a purely autocratic regime has neither. Wigell thus defines two hybrid regime types: electoral-autocratic regimes (such as Argentina under Perón or Venezuela today under Chávez) have electoralism but not constitutionalism; conversely constitutional-oligarchic regimes (such as late nineteenth century European constitutional monarchies or Singapore today) have constitutionalism but not electoralism. Thus his two intermediate categories can be viewed as hybrid regimes. Certainly the notion of constitutional-oligarchic regimes is reasonable both conceptually and in terms of the suggested examples. Electoral-autocratic regimes are less clear, though, in the sense that Wigell calls them "autocratic" not democratic but also states (page 244) that they "fulfil the minimal electoral conditions" of a democracy – that is, free and fair elections, et cetera. This makes them sound similar to an electoral (but not liberal) democracy. Yet it is hard to argue that elections were fair in Perón's Argentina (post the 1946 election in which he came to power), especially in terms of media censorship and lack of opposition access to the media.

Another recent example of hybrid regimes is that of Morlino (2009).<sup>8</sup> Morlino builds on Freedom House, that is, their four criteria of electoral democracy noted above. He defines a hybrid regime as "a set of institutions that have been persistent, be they stable or unstable, for about a decade ... and are characterized by the break-up of limited pluralism and forms of independent, autonomous participation, but the absence of at least one of the four aspects of a minimal democracy" (page 282). That said, Morlino speaks not to the absence of such features but more the lack of completeness. Indeed, Morlino seems to specify minimal democracy as minimal *liberal* democracy, and he does use the phrase "minimal liberal democracies" (page 278). Certainly he wants to put electoral democracies in the hybrid category (*ibid.*). Moreover, he states that:

even those regimes that do not have a *maximum* score in the indicators for elections continue to be considered

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15: 2 (April 2008), pp. 230-250.

<sup>8</sup> Leonardo Morlino, "Are there hybrid regimes? Or are they just an optical illusion?", *European Political Science Review*, Volume 1: 2 (July 2009), pp. 273-296.

electoral democracies [by Freedom House]. More specifically, a score equal to or above seven, out of a maximum of 12, is sufficient for partially free nations to be classified as electoral democracies. (page 278; emphasis added)

Here Morlino is referring to the fact that, indeed, for Freedom House, a country must score at least 7 out of 12 on electoral process (their Sub-category A scores) to be deemed an electoral democracy.<sup>9</sup>

In any case, Morlino is focussed on Freedom House's list of partly free counties (and thus in his sense hybrid regimes) and not their list of electoral democracies. For 2007 (the year of his data), Morlino lists 35 countries that have been longstanding hybrid regimes, that is, having been a partly free country according to Freedom House for a decade if not 15 or more years. We shall focus on this list below.

That said, analyses that are concerned with electoral democracy are basically "thin" measures of democracy, with relatively few aspects. Ultimately, where or not the people can vote out the government is a "thin" question. In contrast, some analysts prefer "thick" definitions of democracy with more measures.<sup>10</sup> These thick, multivariate measures certainly allow for countries having a(n average) score in a middle range. One such thick(er) classification is the Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy. This index is based on five categories: not only electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, and the functioning of government, but also political participation and political culture. Countries are then classified into four regime types: full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid

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<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, as of the 2009 edition of *Freedom in the World* a country also needed an overall score of at least 20 out of 40 points for the three political rights subcategories. Thus for example although Freedom House (still) gave Venezuela a 7 in 2009 for electoral process, it was dropped from the list of electoral democracies given its overall score of only 18 out of 40 for political rights.

<sup>10</sup> On the distinction between thin and thick measures, generally in comparative politics and specifically with regards to democracy, see Michael Coppedge, "Defining and Measuring Democracy", Working Paper 2 (April 2005), Committee on Concepts and Methods, IPSA/CIDE.

regimes, and authoritarian regimes. Whereas the additional categories may be relevant for democratic consolidation (as they note), they may also lead to controversial classifications. For example, looking at their 2008 list (the closest to Morlino's year of analysis), their flawed democracies category includes Botswana, but it is flawed due to low scores on political participation and political culture. In any case, for our purposes the key point is that they identify 36 hybrid regimes.

A somewhat parallel process occurs with the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI). This has five categories: democracies (which have "no major defects" and can thus be considered full), defective democracies (which seem analogous to "flawed democracies" in the EIU's Index of Democracy), highly defective democracies, moderate autocracies, and autocracies. Their notion of "highly defective democracies" involves countries that "only barely meet the minimum criteria [of democracy], suffer from significant problems with the rule of law, have limited equality of opportunity for the opposition, and often experience electoral manipulation".<sup>11</sup> This category speaks to what they call a grey zone between democracy and autocracy.

Let us now compare Morlino's list of longstanding hybrid regimes (partly free countries) to the other classifications.

Table 1: Morlino's (Longstanding) Hybrid Regimes in Comparison

country	Economist regime classification	BTI 2008 regime classification
	2008	(2007 data)
Albania	hybrid	defective democracy
Armenia	hybrid	defective democracy
Bangladesh	hybrid	highly defective dem.
Bosnia-Herz.	hybrid	defective democracy
Burkina Faso	authoritarian	defective democracy
Central Afr. Rep.	authoritarian	failed state

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<sup>11</sup> Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2008: Political Management in International Comparison*, page 26.

Colombia	flawed dem.	highly defective dem.
Comoros	authoritarian	not classified
Ethiopia	hybrid	moderate autocracy
Fiji	hybrid	not classified
Gabon	authoritarian	not classified
Georgia	hybrid	defective democracy
Guatemala	flawed dem.	highly defective dem.
Guinea-Bissau	authoritarian	not classified
Jordan	authoritarian	autocracy
Kuwait	authoritarian	moderate autocracy
Macedonia	flawed dem.	defective democracy
Madagascar	hybrid	defective democracy
Malaysia	flawed dem.	moderate autocracy
Moldova	flawed dem.	defective democracy
Morocco	authoritarian	moderate autocracy
Mozambique	hybrid	defective democracy
Nepal	hybrid	autocracy
Nicaragua	flawed dem.	defective democracy
Nigeria	authoritarian	defective democracy
Paraguay	flawed dem.	defective democracy
Seychelles	not classified	not classified
Sierra Leone	hybrid	defective democracy
Singapore	hybrid	moderate autocracy
Sri Lanka	flawed dem.	defective democracy
Tanzania	hybrid	defective democracy
Tonga	not classified	not classified
Turkey	hybrid	defective democracy
Uganda	hybrid	defective democracy
Zambia	hybrid	defective democracy

Of this list of Morlino's, only one country – Bangladesh – is also classified as a hybrid regime by the Economist Index for 2008 and as a highly defective democracy (and thus effectively a hybrid regime) by the Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2008. That said, six other countries not on this list – Burundi, Haiti, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Russia, and Venezuela – were scored as a hybrid regime in the Economist Index and a highly defective democracy in the Bertelsmann Transformation Index. Of these additional countries, all but Russia were deemed partly free by Freedom House in their 2008 report (for the end of 2007) – but were obviously not long-lasting enough in their partly free status to make Morlino's list.<sup>12</sup> This gives us about half a

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<sup>12</sup> Russia was and still is classified as "not free".

dozen countries where there is broad description of a country as having a hybrid regime or hybrid-like status. Is this enough for a useful category?

More to the point, what if we press further and focus just on the "thin" aspects of electoral democracy? Were these few countries coherent or divided in this regard? First off, for 2007 Burundi, Haiti, Liberia, and Venezuela were considered electoral democracies by Freedom House, whereas Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia were not. In terms of the Economist Index analysis, for their electoral process and pluralism component measure Burundi, Haiti, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia did receive a "hybrid" score (from 4.0 to 5.9 out of 10). In contrast, Bangladesh, Liberia, and Venezuela all received higher scores, in the "flawed democracy" category for this component measure. As for the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, its component measure most concerned with electoral democracy is that of political participation. On this component measure, only Haiti and Russia received a "highly defective" score of less than six. Of course, all of the seven countries discussed here were classified as at least hybrid regimes overall, that is, they not were classified as autocracies in the overall BTI assessment – which is an initial partition done by the BTI focussing on several potential autocratic scenarios, the first of which is that "[f]ree elections are not held or not accepted as the process for electing rulers" (BTI 2008, page 84). Thus the only points of consensus on these specific sub-measures were that Liberia and Venezuela (ironically) were not hybrids but electoral/flawed/defective democracies. As for the other five countries, the very lack of agreement here could be argued to justify a hybrid regime status; however, it does seem more logical to use Diamond's notion of an ambiguous status which moreover does not strike one as a stable or indeed even an actual *regime* type.

In summary, then, the notion of a (stable) hybrid regime type between democracy and autocracy is unconvincing theoretically (and often based on a very broad notion of democracy) and quite limited empirically. A dichotomous variable is thus preferred.<sup>13</sup> The research focus instead should be on assessing as best as possible whatever ambiguous cases are out there. That said, even if the notion of hybrid regimes *between* democracy and

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<sup>13</sup> A dichotomous distinction also allows one to be precise on both democratic transitions and democratic breakdowns.

autocracy does not seem useful, what of hybrid regimes *within* each category? This is a matter for further debate, but it may well be of use for autocracies wherein the level of freedoms could be seen as a continuum rather than a clear dichotomy. In contrast, the theoretical distinction between liberal and electoral democracies is well developed and should remain as a dichotomy. Certainly in my own work I have found it easier to decide whether a democracy is liberal or electoral than whether an autocracy is semi-liberal or closed!<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Alan Siaroff, *Comparing Political Regimes: A Thematic Introduction to Comparative Politics*, second edition (North York, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2009).