Measuring Support for Democracy in the Arab World and Across the Globe

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This paper proceeds as follows. First we offer a brief overview of the ways in which support for democracy has been measured. Second, we highlight what we understand to be some of the most useful of these techniques. Third, we suggest better ways to measure support for democracy. And finally, we conclude by offering some specific points about measuring support for democracy in a specific context—the context of the Arab world.

Measuring Support for Democracy: Current Approaches.

Measuring support for democracy has traditionally relied on two basic approaches. The first approach depends largely on straightforward questions that gauge support for democratic institutions, processes, and means. Based on one's definition of democracy—often shaped by Dahl's polyarchy or what is referred to as minimalist definitions of democracy, this approach relies on questions gauging individual levels of attitudinal support for specific democratic institutions, like free and fair elections, judicial independence, and impeachment.

While this approach has been the most widely used, it has recently been subject to growing criticism for two reasons. As the language of democracy becomes more universal, citizens across the globe also have become more well-versed in democratic discourse. Therefore, it can be unclear whether one is measuring "real" support or "politically correct" support for democracy.

Secondly, although most democracy support measures rely on what has been referred to as minimalist definitions of democracy, few have examined maximalist outcomes. Minimalist definitions define democracy in terms of its specific processes and procedures; however, we must also consider the outcomes those democratic process lead to. Recently, Condaleeza Rice clearly distinguished between the means and the ends of democratic processes when speaking of Hamas victory: "We are not against democratic elections [which brought Hamas to the helm]; we are against groups operating against democracy." Any measure of support for democracy needs to consider both the specific democratic means employed and the larger issue of the effects generated by those means.

A second approach to measuring support for democracy uses mostly value-oriented indicators as proxies for a democratic political culture. Respondents who support democracy are not necessarily democrats. They may **support democracy**, and sincerely, **without necessarily possessing a democratic political culture orientation**. The literature is replete with discussions of the attitudes, values and behavior patterns associated with a democratic political culture. Prominent among these are tolerance, civic engagement, interpersonal trust, political interest, and support for gender equality, as well as others. (Inglehart, Norris, Gibson, Seliigson, Tessler, and Jamal).

While a question beyond the scope of the present discussion is whether or not these orientations constitute a unidimensional normative and behavioral syndrome, these orientations are among the attributes associated with those who are described as **democratic citizens**, or simply democrats. Many different kinds of items have been used to measures these political culture orientations, and many are among those we are using in the Arab Barometer and other recent surveys in the Arab world.

Measuring Support for Democracy: Most Useful Approaches

We feel that examining support for democracy should involve many dimensions. Based on our experience with survey administration in the Arab world,[1] we believe that measurements that move beyond straightforward support for democratic institutional variables are necessary to achieve effective conclusions. The basic questions asked in the World Values Survey and various Barometers should remain intact; they offer useful baseline sources of data on support for democratic institutions. Questions that we have asked in the Arab world, questions gauging individual level support for the democratic system as a whole and for its many constituent parts, have been asked cross-nationally, as well.[2]

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[1] Tessler has conducted surveys in collaboration with the World Values Survey project and is PI on several-NSF funded survey projects in the Arab world that include studies in Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Palestine and Kuwait. He is also PI of the Arab Barometer Project. Jamal has conducted survey work in Palestine, Jordan and Kuwait. She is co-PI of the Arab Barometer Project.

[2] We have asked questions about support for democratic processes and institutions like elections, rights or opposition, judicial independence etc.

Furthermore, we have often used the last item in the following **two sequences from the WVS**.

I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?
(a) Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections
(b) Having experts, rather than the government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country
(c) Having the army rule
(d) Having a democratic political system

I'm going to read off some things that people sometimes say about a democratic political system. Could you please tell me if you agree strongly, agree, disagree or disagree strongly, after I read each one of them?
(a) In a democracy, the economic system functions badly
(b) Democracies are indecisive and have too much quibbling
(c) Democracies are not good at maintaining order
(d) Democracy may have problems, but it's better than any other form of government

These items have face validity and responses are highly correlated, suggesting reliability. **But potential reservations remain**. **First,** do people bring a sufficient understanding of democracy to make their answers meaningful? **Second,** since 80% or more of the respondents express support for democracy in all the Arab countries for which data are available, it is possible that too little of the existing variance in being captured. Associated with the second potential reservation is the possibly that many people are simply giving a socially acceptable or politically correct response.

Beyond this "traditional" approach, however, we incorporate three additional dimensions to be included systematically in current assessments of democratic support. The first additional dimension, we argue, takes into account the ways in which citizens prioritize the need for democracy in their daily lives. When dealing with measurements of support for democracy, the most valid criticism concerns whether democracy is even immediately on the minds of ordinary citizens. If citizens are struggling to eat, they will not prioritize issues of democracy; therefore, it is crucial to contextualize support for democracy. Is it fair to label as non-democrats those people who believe democracy can be negotiated away in return for food on the table? In order to gauge their "real" support for democracy, existing measures must account for the priority of needs as well as hypothetical circumstances that presume the necessary conditions for democratic support. Existing measures must be based not only on attitudinal data, but also on objective measures; further, they must take into consideration key hypotheticals, that, fulfilled, would grant the basic conditions for democratic support—hypotheticals like better economic conditions, assured security, and national independence. Measuring democracy contextually rather than absolutely would address many of the concerns that critics have about the Support for Democracy Index (SDI). The challenge for scholars of public opinion and political behavior is to come up with a portable battery of factors that can systematically be used to control for the priority of needs concerns. In Iraq, most people want to restore stability first and democracy later. This doesn't make Iraqis less democratic than Iranians, for example. This may be addressed by items that ask respondents to compare the importance of democracy and democratization to other

presumably important national objectives. The following are several items that have

been used for this purpose.

Here are four additional goals. Again, state which you consider the most important, the second more important, and the third most important.
1. Developing and strengthening democratic political institutions (such as the Legislative Council, the
*   cabinet, competitive elections, etc.)*
2. Preserving traditional religious and cultural values
3. Promoting the economic well-being of ordinary citizens
4. Assuring equal rights for all citizens, regardless of religion or gender

The second feature of our argument calls for questions that gauge both individual

level support for democracy as a "system of governance" and individual democratic

norms.[3] Questions need to simultaneously gauge general patterns of support for

democracy and individual-level inclinations. A question gauging systemic support for

democracy, for instance, might ask whether respondents believe that minority rights

should be protected. A question gauging individual level support for democratic norms,

on the other hand, would ask whether respondents would be satisfied if a member of a

minority group X were elected to represent them. Again, where a question gauging

systemic support would ask whether political parties should be allowed to participate in

elections, a similar question gauging individual support would ask whether a government

should outlaw a given party because it was perceived as operating against the national

interest.

Finally, we believe that existing measures should move beyond attitudinal data

and focus more on behavioral data. To what extent do people participate? To what extent

are their reasons for participation influenced by democratic considerations? Minimalist

expectations rely on institutions, but qualitative evidence suggests that individuals link

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[3] Seligson has used this approach most systematically

overall government efficacy with personal involvement in the political system. How do citizens matter? Are they respected? In what ways? Do they want to participate as democratic citizens? Democracy implies not only that rights are supplied but also that a set of obligations and duties are associated with democratic citizenship: participation, voting, engagement, working for the communal good, respect for majority rule, and working for the benefit of society as a whole, even if it comes at the expense of one's own interests. A successful question gauging these dimensions of participation can be seen in the following for example:

What factors would you consider when voting for candidates in an election for political office? For each item on the list below, indicate whether it would be very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important in helping you to decide among candidates.

	Very important	important	Fair (between important and not important)	Not important	Not at all important	DK
Family relations	1	2	3	4	5	9
Party or faction affiliation	1	2	3	4	5	9
Level of education	1	2	3	4	5	9
Religiosity	1	2	3	4	5	9
Considers the opinions of others	1	2	3	4	5	9
Agrees with you on important issues	1	2	3	4	5	9

Measuring Support for Democracy: Refining Existing Approaches

We suggest that asking about alternatives to the SDI is a significant way to measure support for democracy. That is, support for democracy should be juxtaposed against alternative forms of government that are less democratic. Questions presenting alternative forms of governance, developed in the World Values Survey, have since been asked in multiple countries. The most reliable questions gauging support for authoritarianism tend to ask whether individuals support the rule of the Army, experts and technocrats, strong leaders, monarchs, one political party, and/or religious leaders.

Furthermore, some questions that would be particularly useful in understanding support for democracy are the trade-offs that people will make. To what extent are individuals willing to sacrifice democracy for other larger objectives? If we are dealing with impoverished societies, asking about trade-offs between democracy and economic development is perhaps less useful. We recommend asking questions that gauge specific dimensions of support for democracy and topic areas that are not specifically related to poverty. For example, surveys might ask respondents to choose the better route: human rights or security, freedom of speech or preserving moral integrity, individual freedoms or religious norms.[4]

Finally, it is vital to understand the ways individuals conceive of democracy. Support for democracy in Iran can differ from support for democracy in Egypt. To understand the extent to which individuals have comparable evaluations of democracy, it is vital to first understand what democracy means to them. Existing approaches have often relied on a series of questions asking respondents to check off all categories applicable to their conception of democracy. The responses range from better economic development to greater political freedoms. This approach is useful, but it has proven less so at the analysis stage. Again, are people who prioritize economic development less democratic? How might concerns about the economy factor into the Support for Democracy Index?

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[4] An example of a trade-off question that we have used is: In pursuing its work, the government may sometimes confront a situation in which it believes there is a contradiction between freedom of speech and the protection of human rights on the one hand and, on the other, what it regards to be in the national interest. Which of the following is closest to your own view about this situation? For this one—the introductory sentenced was reduced. So it starts out with: There might be a situation that arises in which…..
- Freedom of speech and respect for human rights must never be given up or abandoned
- The government may abandon or give up freedom of speech and human rights if it believes this is for the good of the country

In the Arab Barometer, we develop two batteries that attempt to give us a better understanding about the ways citizens think about democracy. This approach gets us out of the priority of needs argument that has overshadowed much of the research on support for democracy. We purposefully select democratic and non-democratic states and ask respondents to assess the degree of democracy in each country. Then, we ask them to assess the degree of democratic development in their own country. These questions offer a better comprehensive overview of the ways citizens understand democracy. If people systematically think that all countries, including Saudi Arabia and France, are democratic, then it is obvious that there is a fundamental problem with the way citizens assess democracy. If individuals are skeptical about levels of democracy in Saudi Arabia, however, we might be led to believe they have a more precise notion of democracy. Responses will indicate whether or not respondents understand the meaning of democracy well enough categorize countries properly. These questions also address concerns about whether individuals simply pay lip-service to democracy because of its global appeal. These survey items we use in the Arab Barometer are listed below.

Using a 10-point scale, please give your opinion about the degree to which each of the following countries is a democracy: 1 means complete dictatorship and 10 means complete democracy. (SHOWCARD) (Do not read: Does not understand the question, Can't choose & Decline to answer)

In your opinion how much of a democracy is France (*Read out options. Only one option to be chosen.*)

Complete   Complete
Dictatorship   Democracy

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
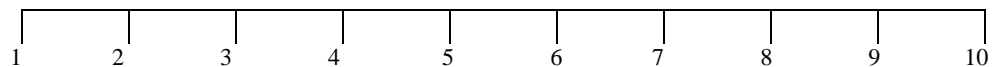
97. Does not understand the question
98. Can't choose
99. Decline to answer

The question is repeated for Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and one's own country.

Furthermore, we use a similar question to gauge the extent to which people believe democracy is suitable in their own country. [is this part of the memo, or part of the captioning?]

Here is a similar scale of 1 to 10 measuring the extent to which people think democracy is suitable for our country. If "1" means that democracy is completely unsuitable for [name of country] today and "10" means that it is completely suitable, where would you place your opinion about the degree to which democracy is suitable for our country?

Democracy   Democracy
is completely   is perfectly
unsuitable   suitable

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
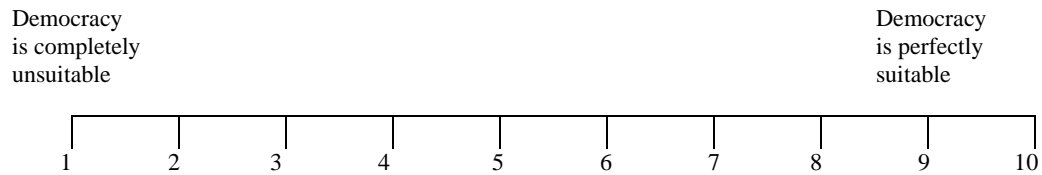
97. Does not understand the question
98. Can't choose
99. Decline to answer

Finally, different kinds of political systems can be described and respondents are then asked to evaluate each. The term "democracy" is not used. Views about democracy are then assessed by comparing judgments about democratic and other political formulae. The following item is thus included in the Arab Barometer and other surveys.

Are there any countries in the Middle East and North Africa today that have the kind of political system that, in your opinion, would be appropriate for our country? Indicate whether each of the possibilities listed below would be very appropriate, somewhat appropriate, or not appropriate.

1. A parliamentary system in which nationalist, left-wing, and Islamic political parties all compete in elections.
2. A parliamentary system in which only Islamic political parties and factions compete in elections
3. A system with a strong president and military in which elections and competition among political parties are not important
4. A system governed by Islamic law in which there are no political parties or elections

Measuring Support for Democracy: Evidence from the Arab World

In our attempt to gauge support for democracy in the Arab world, we are careful to incorporate these concerns in our questionnaires. We spend ample time understanding what people believe democracy is or isn't. We include questions about alternative, less

democratic forms of governance and questions that assess both systemic support for democracy and individual dispositions toward democratic norms. Further, we include narrow (minimalist) and more encompassing (maximalist) definitions of democracy in our surveys. Finally, we attempt to gauge both attitudes and behaviors. The challenge for us is to continue to administer questions that have been successfully asked elsewhere. By taking this multi-tiered and multi-faceted approach to measuring support for democracy, we believe we have a more nuanced measure of democratic support.

In addition to all the concerns and issues we have laid out above, two other factors are more specific to the context of the Arab world and must be included when we examine support for democracy there. The first involves the role of religion (Islam). To what extent is support of Islam/political Islam and religiosity not compatible with democracy? And the second involves authoritarian legacies. Arab countries by and large are shaped by long histories of authoritarianism. We are not dealing with democratic countries. In essence, we are dealing with citizenries who have had very little experience with democracy.

In order to gauge the impact Islam (and its different forms) has on support for democracy, it is essential to first understand the extent to which citizens believe that Islam is compatible with democracy. Citizens across the region do believe that Islam has an important role to play in governance, but the question remains whether this support for Islam undermines support for democracy. Tessler has shown that people with strong religious beliefs are <u>not</u> less supportive of democracy (2002). Muslims who support democracy may or **may not have a secular conception of democracy** in mind. Given the strong relationship between religion and politics in both Islamic political thought and

political life in Muslim-majority countries, it is important to ask (1) about the extent to which respondents believe that **Islam should play an important role in political life**, and (2) whether and how these views are **related to assessments of democracy**.[5]

We ask a variety of questions that attempt to precisely measure the extent to which support for religion might undermine support for democracy:

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	DK
Men of religion should not influence how people vote in elections	1	2	3	4	5
It would be better for the country if more people with strong religious beliefs held public office	1	2	3	4	5
Men of religion should have no influence over the decisions of the government	1	2	3	4	5

In your opinion, how important is each of the following principles as a guide for making the laws of our country?

	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	not important	Not important at all	DK
The government and parliament should make laws according to the people's wishes	1	2	3	4	5	9
The government should implement Only the laws of the shari'a	1	2	3	4	5	9

To examine the extent and legacy of authoritarianism it is vital to include attitudinal measures objective indicators on support for this non-democratic form of governance. Research from surveys in a number of Arab countries (Tessler and Gao

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[5] While there is broad support for democracy in the Arab world, as noted, respondents in most countries tend to be **fairly evenly divided** between those who support political Islam and those who do not. Further, **the two sets of judgments are not strongly related**. Taken together, these findings indicate that there tends to be **a roughly equal proportion of** individuals who support democracy but do not support political Islam, those who might be termed **"secular democrats"**; and individuals who support democracy and do support political Islam, those who might be termed **"Islamic democrats"** (Tessler and Gao 2005b). There are some cross-national differences with respect to secular and Islamic democrats but research to date in the Arab world suggests that these are not large.

It is also worth noting that secular democrats are not more likely than Islamic democrats to possess the attitudes and values associated with a democratic political culture. In other words, **being an Islamic democrat does not make one less likely**, or more likely, to be a **"genuine democrat."**

2005a, Tessler 2006, Jamal forthcoming) report only a weak correlation between support for democracy and the possession of these democratic political culture orientations. Those who do are termed **"genuine democrats,"** whereas those who express support for democracy but do not possess democratic attitudes and values are termed **"instrumental democrats."**

In addition, analyses from surveys in the Arab world find that respondents who support democracy **sometimes also express non-democratic attitudes**. For example, some individuals who express support or even strong support for democracy in response to the WVS items also express strong support for "Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections" (Tessler and Benstead, Under Review)

While this might reflect a lack of understanding of what democracy means, it is more likely that most respondents do support democracy but are **concerned about the consequences of a democratic transition** – either that it will be destabilizing or that it will create winners and losers and they may be among the later. In this context, they want democracy with guidance or continuity or security. Respondents who support democracy but also want a strong and to some extent undemocratic leader have been termed **"security democrats."** Research in the Arab world shows that the proportion of security democrats varies across countries as a function of national circumstances, and also that the within-country profile of security democrats varies as a function of the country's political and economic circumstances. In the Arab Barometer, we are well aware of these nuances and have designed our surveys accordingly.