What is Democracy? A Reconceptualization of the Quality of Democracy

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Works on the quality of democracy propose standards for evaluating politics beyond those encompassed by a minimal definition of democracy. Yet, what is the quality of democracy? This article first reconstructs and assesses current conceptualizations of the quality of democracy. Thereafter, it reconceptualises the quality of democracy by equating it with democracy pure and simple, positing that democracy is a synthesis of political freedom and political equality, and spelling out the implications of this substantive assumption. The proposal is to broaden the concept of democracy to address two additional spheres: government decision-making—political institutions are democratic inasmuch as a majority of citizens can change the status quo—and the social environment of politics—the social context cannot turn the principles of political freedom and equality into mere formalities. Alternative specifications of democratic standards are considered and reasons for discarding them are provided.

The statement "democracy is about more than elections" captures a crucial insight that is by now common wisdom. However, though proposals to overcome the limitations of a minimal, electoral definition of democracy abound, little progress has been made in following through on this statement by providing a clear alternative. Some proposals draw attention to newer concepts, such as governance, the quality of government, or open government. Yet these proposals rarely clarify how these concepts are related to democracy and even more rarely say much about how democracy could be reconceptualized. Indeed, the clearest thinking distinguishes the concepts of governance and quality of government from that of democracy, and has nothing novel to say about the concept of democracy. More promising is the work done on the quality of democracy, in that it seeks to develop an expanded concept of democracy that overcomes the limitations of a minimal, electoral definition of democracy. Yet conceptualizations of the quality of democracy are still far from providing a well-founded and widely accepted basis for identifying a distinct subject matter. More work is needed to elucidate the concept of quality of democracy.

This article contributes to this task, with the ultimate aim of providing a clearer focus for research in the field of comparative politics. It starts with a reconstruction and assessment of conceptualizations of the quality of democracy, and reveals that current thinking has provided some insights but is also hampered by many shortcomings. Most conceptualizations are rather ad hoc—offering a weak rationale for the inclusion and exclusion of conceptual attributes—and even incoherent—including conceptual attributes that are not consistent with each other. Some proposals are certainly more valuable than others and some offer a basis upon which to build. Nonetheless, the result of this collective effort is a wide range of proposals that convey a sense of conceptual disorder. In addition, most scholars segregate the concepts of democracy and quality

of democracy, and mistakenly suggest that they have different referents. In short, this assessment suggests the need for a thorough refocusing of research on the concept of quality of democracy.

Seeking to redress the problems with existing conceptualizations, the article provides a reconceptualization of the quality of democracy that is integrated, in that it focuses on one single overarching concept—quality of democracy is equated to democracy—seen as applicable to all countries, and deductive, in that it derives the meaning of democracy from certain substantive assumptions. More pointedly, the proposed reconceptualization posits that a political system is democratic inasmuch as it embodies the values of political freedom and political equality, and specifies democratic standards relevant to two spheres not addressed in an election-focused minimal definition of democracy: government decision-making and the social environment of politics. The main ways of thinking about democratic standards beyond the electoral sphere are considered. Yet a case is made for including, as part of the definition of democracy, political institutions that enable a majority of citizens to change the status quo, and a social context that does not turn the principles of political freedom and equality into mere formalities.

1. A Reconstruction and Assessment

A useful point of entry into the discussion of the concept of quality of democracy is offered by a strand of literature in comparative politics, launched by Lijphart's (1999) influential *Patterns of Democracy*, that presents measures of the quality of democracy. Such a selective view has its costs; it cannot encompass the range of ideas in the broader literature. Nonetheless, this literature is representative of current thinking in comparative politics and any attempt to move research forward would do well to draw lessons from this literature. Thus, this section provides a reconstruction and assessment of the concept of quality of democracy, as developed

by a select group of scholars, focused on two core questions: i) What is the *sense* of the quality of democracy, that is, what is the content of the construct? ii) What is the *reference* of the quality of democracy, that is, what objects are referred to by the construct?[1]

1.1. Sense

The selected scholars (see Table 1) tackle the challenge of specifying the sense of the quality of democracy by initially making their terms and conceptions explicit. They identify a term that designates their baseline concept of democracy, which roughly corresponds to the well-established concept of free and fair elections (Lauth is an exception). They propose a different term to designate the background concept which they draw on in formulating the new concept of quality of democracy. Additionally, they provide some clues as to their conception of the quality of democracy, that is, the ideas they draw on in formulating a systematized concept of quality of democracy.[2]

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From this starting point, scholars form a systematized concept of quality of democracy by identifying the conceptual attributes that give meaning to the concept. These conceptualizations do not rely on the same conceptual and terminological template, and hence are hard to compare. Thus, what follows is based on a reconstruction of the concepts elaborated by the authors under consideration using a conceptual framework that distinguishes different aspects of politics—whether they concern access to government offices, government decision-making, or the implementation of government decisions—and contrasts processes (e.g. whether elections are free and fair) to outcomes (e.g. whether women gain representation in parliament) (see Figure 1).

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[1] On sense and reference, see Bunge (1996: 55-57).
[2] On term, concept, and conception, see Sartori in Collier and Gerring (2009: 66-67). On background and systematized concepts, see Adcock and Collier (2001: 531-34).

The reconstructed concepts reveal a considerable amount of disagreement about the meaning of the quality of democracy (see Table 2). First, it is striking that there is little agreement concerning *how far* beyond electoral processes—the home ground of most definitions of democracy—the quality of democracy extends. All the authors agree that the quality of democracy includes some elements about the process whereby government offices are accessed beyond those usually included in minimal definitions of democracy, and practically all take an important step beyond the conventional electoral conception of democracy by including elements about the process of government decision-making. Yet there is much disagreement concerning the expansion of the concept of quality of democracy to include the process of implementation of government decisions and outcomes of the political process. The divide is exemplified by Lijphart's two concepts of quality of democracy: his well-known consensus model of democracy is a purely institutional model focused on government decision-making, while his newer proposal includes various outcomes of the political process. However, this divide runs through the rest of the conceptualizations. Indeed, the disagreement about the inclusion of attributes concerning the process of implementation of government decisions, intermediary outcomes, and final outcomes is quite profound.

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Second, it is noteworthy that scholars who agree on how far to extend the concept of quality of democracy disagree nonetheless regarding *what specific conceptual attributes* should be included. There are some recurring attributes, a testimony to the influence of some democratic theorists. Thus, the common focus on competition, participation, various civil rights, and responsiveness can be traced to Dahl (1971); and the frequent inclusion of vertical and horizontal accountability, and the rule of law, is due in part to O'Donnell (1998, 2004). However, scholars

regularly conceptualize the same aspect of politics differently. For example, some authors conceptualize government decision-making in terms of institutions but others do so in non-institutional terms. Likewise, some address final outcomes in terms of citizen perceptions—their trust or satisfaction with democracy—while others stick to objective factors.

Third, scholars disagree about *how* conceptual attributes are *related* to each other? This claim is hard to demonstrate conclusively, because scholars pay scant attention to, and are not always explicit about, the possible relationships among conceptual attributes. Yet there is surely a difference between scholars who take their cue from Dahl's (1989:167, 170) suggestion that certain civil rights might be considered preconditions of a democratic process or, for short, process preconditions, and those who see rights as outcomes of the political process.[3]

The sheer diversity of proposals is problematic; they certainly do not offer a unified view of a new research agenda. Moreover, the problem is compounded because scholars rarely engage in rigorous theorizing from established general principles. Two proposals—those by Lauth (2004: Ch. 1; 2013: 4-11) and by Bühlmann et al (2012: 520-26)—are explicitly articulated in light of fundamental theoretical principles of democracy, as elaborated in the classic tradition of political theory. Lauth (2011) adds force to his proposal by arguing why an attribute viewed by many as part of the quality of democracy—responsiveness—is actually an extraneous conceptual attribute that should be excluded. But these proposals are the exception. Several scholars propose conceptual attributes that are not consistent with their conceptions. For example, it is not clear how Levine and Molina's (2011a: 13) proposal to see women representation in government, the outcome of an electoral process, as part of the quality of democracy squares with the authors' claim that quality of democracy is a matter of "procedures and not results." Others simply disregard the need for theorizing from general principles. Thus, Roberts (2009: 39) suggests that

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[3] Compare Altman and Pérez-Liñán (2002: 88) to Morlino (2011: 205-08).

conceptual decisions can be based on subjective perceptions rather than being derived from theoretical principles, an untenable view. In turn, Ringer (2007: 26-28) states that the meaning of democracy can be gleaned in part by observing what countries called democracies do! Thus, the literature provides a large number of conceptualizations yet no way of organizing a debate around broad alternatives and no grounds for opting among alternatives.

1.2. Reference

The selected scholars have also tackled a second, less complicated but still consequential, task: the specification of the reference or domain of the quality of democracy (see the last column in Table 2).[4] In this regard, scholars are largely in agreement. The standard choice is to hold that the concept is applicable only to those cases that have been determined, through prior research, to meet the standard of the baseline concept of democracy used by each author. That is, most scholars rely on a two-step procedure, first using their baseline concept of democracy to determine if a country is democratic, something viewed as an all-or-nothing question, only then turning to the distinctive concern of research on the quality of democracy: the subtle differentiation of the degree to which certain democratic qualities are manifested in cases deemed to be democracies (Roberts 2009: 25); Levine and Molina (2011a: 2-4, 7-8).

As common as this view is (Lauth, and Bühlmann et al., are again the only exceptions), it is flawed. The quality of democracy, as all constructs in the social sciences, refers to objects. That is, the conceptual attributes of the quality of democracy correspond to properties of objects. Thus, there is no difference between the reference of any baseline concept of democracy and the quality of democracy. Just as baseline concepts of democracy are applied to all countries in the world, so too can the quality of democracy be applied to all countries in the world. Indeed, Morlino's (2011: 195, 255) use of phrases such as "a quality democracy" and "democracies

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[4] On reference, as distinct from extension, see Bunge (1996: 52-53).

without qualities" is misleading, for democracy is a possible quality of a political system but democracy—being a construct and not an object—has no possible qualities. There simply is no basis for the claim that the concept of quality of democracy should be applied only to democracies.

Treating democracy as an object, rather than a construct, is not innocuous. The decision to apply the concept of quality of democracy to cases deemed to be democracies removes from consideration a key implication of this new line of research: the possibility that the conventional description of a country as a democracy should be revised. This is a legitimate possibility. After all, inasmuch as the conceptual attributes of the quality of democracy are considered as necessary as opposed to merely contributing attributes of democracy, it is an obvious implication of research on the quality of democracy. Yet only Lauth (2013: 7, 13) explicitly addresses this option.

Additionally, the unjustified decision to censor the applicability of the concept of quality of democracy can only cloud any empirical analysis. This decision reduces the generality of any discussion of the quality of democracy and necessarily biases any analysis of the relationship between the quality of democracy and variables considered causes or consequences of the quality of democracy. Relatedly, this decision can generate a bias against democracy. Studying the quality of democracy only in countries deemed to be democracies is associated with the tendency to use a higher standard to assess this subset of countries and hence to draw attention to certain "problems of democracies"—and possibly contribute to arguments against democracy—when these might well be problems found in all countries or even ones that are actually managed better by democratic countries. In other words, it could lead to what Przeworski (2010: 16) rightly sees as ungrounded critiques of "democracy for not achieving what no political arrangement can

achieve." In short, the literature on the quality of democracy erroneously segments the empirical analysis of democracy from that of the quality of democracy.

1.3. Recapitulation

Efforts to conceptualize the quality of democracy raise important issues excluded from a minimal definition of democracy and have helped to shape a new field of research in comparative politics. Yet the catchy term "quality of democracy" has still not been turned into a well-formed and widely accepted concept. Conceptualizations rarely make theoretical arguments, based on deductive thinking, for the inclusion and exclusion of conceptual attributes and about the relationship among attributes. Thus, the collective effort at conceptualization has yielded a sprawling set of rather ad hoc proposals. Indeed, it has not even generated a structured debate on a manageable set of options derived from established general principles, a key requisite for moving research forward. Adding to this problem, scholars have misunderstood the question of the reference of the quality of democracy.

Some conceptualizations are clearly preferable to others. Specifically, the works by Lauth and by Bühlmann et al. stand out with regard to how they specify both the sense and reference of the quality of democracy, and hence offer the most promising basis for cumulative conceptualizing. Nonetheless, to counter the conceptual disorder in the current literature, more needs to be done to articulate broad alternative conceptualizations and to weight the case for each alternative according to explicit criteria. In short, what is needed is further work on the concept of quality of democracy that builds on the insights of some authors and redresses the problems in the literature. This is the challenge addressed next.

2. Toward a Reconceptualization

The proposed reconceptualization of the quality of democracy resolves some problems in the literature in ways that follow directly from the prior discussion and thus do not require much elaboration. Taking the discussion about the concept of quality of democracy as a continuation of the age-old conversation about the meaning of democracy, in what follows the term "quality of democracy" is equated to and replaced by "democracy" plain and simple. Moreover, the reference of democracy is seen as involving all political systems rather than being restricted to some subset. In other words, to avoid the problems of a segmented approach to the quality of democracy, an integrated approach is adopted.

More substantially, the proposed reconceptualization, of democracy, relies on a widely accepted conception of democracy (Kelsen, 1945: 287, 1955: 25; Dahl 1956: 37; Bellamy 2007: Ch. 4, 210; Przeworski 2010: 1, 7, 11), that largely coincides with the conception of Lauth and of Bühlmann et al. Democracy is about the value of freedom. Indeed, inasmuch as the ideal of democracy is to live under a government and laws which one directly or indirectly influences, democracy is about freedom from political domination or, as Rousseau (2002 [1762]: Book 1, Ch. 8, 167) wrote, freedom understood as "obedience to a self-prescribed law." Moreover, democracy is about the value of equality, in the sense that every person who lives under a government has the same claim to freedom and thus should have his or her preference weighted equally. In other words, the proposed reconceptualization treats political freedom and political equality as primitive concepts, that is, concepts used to define other concepts.

Additionally, this reconceptualization is informed by three considerations. To counter the proliferation of ad hoc concepts, the discussion draws heavily on the classic tradition of political theory. This literature is directly relevant to the issues under discussion and it has spurred precisely the kind of debate around sharply articulated options, associated with different

conceptions, that has been lacking in the proposals discussed above. Thus, building on a literature that has not been properly tapped by comparativists, what follows reviews this debate and draws heavily on the concept of democracy articulated by theorists who conceive of democracy as a synthesis of political freedom and equality.

To avoid going over well trodden ground, the proposed reconceptualization incorporates at the outset attributes that are usually included in a minimal definition of democracy without any justification or elaboration—the matter is addressed elsewhere (Munck 2009: 55-56)—but with one caveat: to avoid confusing a part for the whole, a minimal definition of democracy is understood as a definition of electoral democracy. In other words, electoral democracy is treated as a baseline concept and the challenge at hand is framed as a search for the meaning of democracy beyond electoral democracy.

Finally, to facilitate a comparison with the conceptualizations assessed previously, the presentation draws on the framework used in the discussion of the sense of the quality of democracy (see Figure 1) and addresses the same three issues: How far does the concept of democracy extend? What specific conceptual attributes does the concept of democracy include? How are the conceptual attributes of democracy related to each other?

3. Government Decision-making

A seamless segue between a minimal and a broader definition of democracy is suggested by Bobbio (1987: 24), when he states that "the only way a meaningful discussion of democracy, as distinct from all forms of autocratic government, is possible is to consider it as characterized by a set of rules (primary or basic) which establish *who* is authorized to take collective decisions and which *procedures* are to be applied" in making collective decisions. This statement

highlights that democracy is not only about elections but also about *how* elected leaders make decisions, that is, about government decision-making. At the same time, the suggestion that democracy is also about government decision-making does not introduce a major departure with an election-focused minimal definition of democracy.

A concept of democracy that is totally silent about government decision-making runs the risk of taking at face value the not always true proposition that elections determine who actually decides government policy. Moreover, this suggestion retains a focus on procedures. Thus, a proposal to consider what democratic standards should be used in assessing government decision-making does not provoke much resistance. Nonetheless, if few scholars argue that expanding the concept of democracy to encompass government decision-making takes the concept too far, they are divided regarding what constitutes democratic government decision-making—that is, about the specific conceptual attributes such an expansion of the concept of democracy would entail. Indeed, scholars tend to adopt either a majoritarian or a juridical-constitutional conception of democracy and, based on their conception of democracy, specify democratic standards relevant to government decision-making in largely incompatible ways.

3.1. The Majoritarian Conception

Democratic theorists who adopt a majoritarian conception of democracy take as their starting point the substantive assumption that democracy is a political concept infused by the values or ideals of political freedom and equality (Kelsen 1945: 283-300; Dahl 1989; McGann 2006: Ch. 2; Bellamy 2007: Przeworski 2010: Chs. 1 and 2). That is, they rely on the conception of democracy adopted in this reconceptualization and take democracy to be a characteristic of political systems that embody the values of political freedom—citizens should have ultimate control over what issues are decided through the decision-making process—and political

equality—all citizens should have equal weight in the making of legally binding decisions. Moreover, of particular interest here, they offer a detailed account of the institutions of government decision-making that are consistent with this assumption by relying on informal and formal deduction from first principles.

At an abstract level, the substantive assumption of political freedom and equality translates, regarding government decision-making, into a concern that electoral majorities not only determine who occupies government positions but also are able to change the policy status quo. More specifically, the prospects that electoral majorities will be able to alter policy is seen as being jointly determined by the rules used i) to allocate seats, that is, to transform votes into seats, and ii) to make laws.

The implication of the principles of political freedom and equality with regard to the *allocation of seats* in decision-making bodies is relatively straightforward. Democratic values are best met by an electoral system that ensures proportionality in the number of votes gained by parties and the number of seats allocated to parties, that is, by a system that ensures that the preferences of voters are equally represented in government (Kelsen 1945: 292-97; McGann 2006: Ch. 3). Moreover, this is not a particularly contentious point, in that the idea that elected holders of government offices reflect, as closely as possible, the diversity of views within society is widely accepted as a democratic standard. Indeed, inasmuch as advocates of a juridical-constitutional conception of democracy address this issue, they also stress the virtues of an electoral system that ensures proportionality (Ferrajoli 2011a: 179-78).

The implication of the principles of political freedom and equality for the making of laws is more controversial. What is at stake is *who* decides *what* laws and *how*, or, for short, the *structure of government*. And a long-standing view of theorists who adopt a majoritarian

conception of democracy runs as follows. The principles of political freedom and equality are best approximated when legislative power resides fully in a unicameral chamber empowered to make decisions on all matters of normal politics, and especially distributive matters, based on majority rule. Alternatively, put in negative terms, democracy is diminished by countermajoritarian institutions, such as i) presidents with strong legislative powers, ii) upper chambers with strong powers, iii) rigid constitutions, and iv) courts with the power of judicial review regarding matters of normal politics (Kelsen 1945: 282, 286-87, 296, 298; May 1952; Rae 1969; McGann 2006: Chs. 2 and 4; Przeworski 2010: 31-42, Ch. 6). Indeed, as McGann (2006: 84) concludes, "majority rule is the only decision rule that is procedurally fair in terms of treating all voters and alternatives equally."

The status of deviations from pure majority rule, for example, whether they have the same meaning in the context of all substantive governmental decisions, is a matter of ongoing discussion. For example, scholars who underline the problematic nature of countermajoritarian institutions have different views about judicial review concerning democratic rights and fundamental rights. Dahl (2003: 54-55, 152-54) argues that courts with strong powers of judicial review are inconsistent with democracy but also asserts that "a supreme court should … have the authority to overturn … laws … that seriously impinge on any fundamental rights that are necessary to the existence of a democratic political system." Similarly, Przeworski (2010: 126, 145) argues that democracy is hindered when "supermajoritarian protection of the status quo extends to purely distributive issues that do not entail any fundamental rights," but that such "rights can be … guarded separately" and that "explicit rules should regulate which issues should be decided by which criteria." Yet, in contrast, others argue that issues of normal politics cannot be neatly separated from constitutional questions, that disagreements about rights are

unavoidable and that, since some procedure has to be used to sort through such disagreements, the only procedure that is consistent with democracy is one in which legislators and not judges make such decisions (Bellamy 2007: 20-26, Ch. 6).

These differences notwithstanding, scholars who advocate a majoritarian conception of democracy frame the problem of democracy in similar terms: they focus, to use Kelsen's (1945: 286, 298, 296) language, on "how an existing order can be changed" and, without disregarding concerns about minority preferences and basic rights (a matter addressed next), draw attention to how deviations from the institutions of majority rule can lead to arrangements "lacking in democratic character" and even to "minority rule." Moreover, seeing democracy fundamentally as a set of institutions that give a majority of citizens that prefer to change the status quo the power to do so, they diverge markedly from the scholars who adopt a juridical-constitutional conception of democracy.

3.2. The Juridical-constitutional Conception

The contrast between a majoritarian and a juridical-constitutional conception of democracy might seem, on the surface, not that great. After all, much of the difference hinges on a point made by advocates of a juridical-constitutional conception—"there cannot be democracy without the rule of law" (Ferrajoli 2011a: 17, my translation)—that could be considered an oversight correctable by simply adding some attribute to those proposed by advocates of a majoritarian conception. However, the difference between these conceptions is actually profound and entails incompatible implications for the concept of democracy.

The argument of advocates of a juridical-constitutional conception of democracy can be summarized as follows. In line with the well-known contrast between the rule of law and the rule of men, primacy should be given to the law over politics, and hence democracy should be

subordinated to the rule of law. Thus, what is called for is a rigid, hard-to-change constitution that mandates a system of checks and balances that includes, as a key element, courts with strong powers of judicial review (Murphy 2007: Part I; Ferrajoli 2011a: 85-88, 196-203). That is, the institutions relevant to the structure of government consistent with a juridical-constitutional conception run counter to those derived from a majoritarian conception. The countermajoritarian institutions that are a matter of concern from the perspective of a majoritarian conception are cast in a positive light by a juridical-constitutional conception.

An assessment of these contradictory positions involves complex issues, which cannot be addressed in depth here. However, some key points deserve highlighting. Advocates of a juridical-constitutional conception hold that, to avoid abuses of power and protect the weak through the law, two institutional features are key. One is the dispersal of the power held by elected officials. The reasoning is that the requirement that laws are made through the concurrence of the legislature and the executive will limit the excesses of politics. A second is the empowerment of judges entrusted with protecting the rule of law from encroachments by elected authorities. Indeed, the crux of the juridical-constitutional approach is that the excesses of politics can be externally constrained by actors who are insulated from the imperatives of democratic politics and who operate, as Ferrajoli (2011a: 211, 2011b: 363) puts is, as an external counter-power. Yet it is not the case that the laudable goals of avoiding abuses of power and protecting the weak through the law are only reached, or best reached, through the means suggested by advocates of a juridical-constitutional conception of democracy.

Because members of different branches of government may collude with each other or share the same party identity, a system of checks and balances based on a dispersal of power between the executive and legislature, and between chambers of the legislature, does not

necessarily limit abuses of power. In addition, the conflicts and disagreements that permeate politics will equally affect judges exercising the power of judicial review. Indeed, even if judges are seen as bound by a constitution, they disagree about how to interpret the constitution—disagreements that are in part grounded in ideology and even interests—and frequently make decisions by a majority vote. The key difference, then, is that political arbitrariness is replaced by judicial arbitrariness, and popular majorities are replaced by a majority of judges. In brief, a juridical-constitutional conception of democracy relies on an idealized understanding of the way political institutions might constrain the use and abuse of power by actors driven by ideology and interests.

It is also key to recognize the alternative approach to abuses of power and basic rights provided from the perspective of a majoritarian conception of democracy. The need to win a majority of votes and retain the support of voters makes politicians attentive to the preferences of the majority, and the prospects of alternation in office induces moderation and a consideration of the preferences of minorities. That is, inasmuch as politicians play by the democratic rules of the game, democracy itself has its own internal checks that endogenously constrain rulers. Moreover, since basic rights require positive action by the state, they ultimately must be supported by decisions made through democratic rules rather than by an external counter-power making a claim against democracy and, more specifically, through rules that enable rather than stifle the ability of the demos, through their representatives, to make decisions. Indeed, it bears noting that the empirical evidence does not support the view that countries with countermajoritarian institutions outperform those that more closely approximate majority rule in terms of the avoidance of abuses of power and the protection of basic rights (McGann 2006: 108, 198-99; Przeworski 2010: 144-45, 159-60). In a nutshell, the counter position of the rule of law

to democratic politics, the basic tenet of a juridical-constitutional conception of democracy, is questionable (Maravall and Przeworski 2003: 3, 9; Dahl 2003: 39, 122; Bellamy 2007: 5, 53).

In sum, though advocates of a juridical-constitutional conception of democracy hold that their model of democracy—frequently called "constitutional democracy"—is superior to a democracy based on a majoritarian conception (Dworkin 1996: 15-18; Murphy 2007; Ferrajoli 2011a: 44-45, 49, 2011b), this view runs into several problems. Constitutional democracy, as understood from a juridical-constitutional perspective, is a hybrid of democracy and constitutionalism that conjoins different principles, which justify a diminished democracy, democracy constrained by countermajoritarian institutions. Yet there are theoretical (and empirical) reasons for not accepting the posited trade-off of less democracy for more rule of law. Indeed, inasmuch as democracy is seen as the embodiment of political freedom and equality, the majoritarian conception of democracy offers a better basis for reconceptualizing the quality of democracy. Thus, as a first step beyond a minimal definition of democracy, there are grounds for expanding the concept of democracy by incorporating, alongside the established minimal standards concerning access to government offices, the institutions pertaining to government decision-making defended by advocates of a majoritarian conception (see the row on government decision-making in Table 3).

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4. The Social Environment of Politics

Taking a further step to extend the concept of democracy is more controversial than specifying democratic standards for the process of government decision-making. One line of discussion focuses on the merit of extending the concept of democracy to the process of

implementation of government decisions (see Figure 1). On this issue, which is not pursued here, a strong case can be made for distinguishing democracy from matters regarding the implementation of the law (through the public administration and the courts) and state capacity (Kelsen 1945: 299-300; Mazzuca 2010: 342-44). Another line of discussion, which is addressed in this section, concerns the long-standing question whether democracy only involves procedures or also entails substantive aspects. This discussion has largely been framed in terms of a stark option between strictly procedural and expansive substantive conceptions of democracy, which are problematic in their own ways. However, there is another alternative, which differs from a strictly procedural conception, in that it addresses the social environment of politics, but also from a substantive conception, both in terms of what specific conceptual attributes it adds to the concept of democracy and how such additional attributes are related to the procedures of democracy. Indeed, much more than is the case in discussions about democratic government decision-making, arguments regarding *whether* to extend the concept of democracy by breaking with a strictly procedural definition are hard to separate from arguments regarding *what* specific conceptual attributes are proposed and *how* any additional attributes are related to other attributes of democracy.

4.1. The Expansive Substantive Conception

One response to a procedural conception of democracy is to make a case for adding, alongside any procedural standards, a substantive component to the concept of democracy. In effect, legal scholars such as Dworkin hold that "democracy is a substantive, not a merely procedural, ideal" and, hence, that a purely procedural definition of democracy offers an inadequate account of the nature and value of democracy (Dworkin 2006: 134, 1996: 7-35). Concerning the nature of democracy, these scholars see procedural definitions as being

incoherent, because "it is always possible for the democratic process [to] be revoked by means of the democratic process itself" (Ferrajoli 2011b: 357). In turn, concerning the value of democracy, procedural definitions of democracy are seen as either unable to support any axiological claim—Dworkin (2006: 155) suggests that there is simply no such thing as "a purely procedural account of political fairness"—or as supporting values that are less important than those associated with a substantive conception of democracy—for Ferrajoli (2011a: 19-20, 2011b: 360) a procedural conception of democracy only touches on secondary rights, while a substantive conception of democracy addresses primary rights. In short, critics of a procedural conception of democracy hold that it mistakenly "separates procedure from substance" (Dworkin 2006: 155), and that the solution is to recognize that democracy is not only about procedures, that is, *who* is entitled to make legally binding decisions and *how* such decisions are made, but also about the substance or results of these decisions, that is, *what* is decided (Ferrajoli 2011a: Ch. 13, 2011b: 358).

This critique of a procedural conception of democracy missed the mark. Concerning the nature of democracy, the charges simply do not hold. To state that a procedural conception leads to the incoherent position of holding that democratic procedures can be used to abolish democracy is to equate a procedural conception of democracy with the "one person, one vote, one time" slogan and to ignore that procedural definitions of democracy routinely specify that elections should be "frequent" or "regular" events (Dahl 1989: 171-73, 221). In short, some standard shortcomings attributed to a procedural conception can and have been addressed without breaking with a procedural approach.

The critique of a procedural conception of democracy for not being able to make a case about the value of democracy would appear to be more on target. After all, Schumpeter's (1942: 242) unequivocal statement that the "democratic method" is "incapable of being an end in itself,

irrespective of what decisions it will produce" appears to be a concession to critics of a procedural conception. Yet Schumpeter's instrumental approach is itself open to question. Inasmuch as it makes the value of democracy hinge on results that could also be associated with other forms of government (e.g. policies that improve the situation of the poor), it makes the value of democracy hinge on something that is not distinctive of democracy. Additionally, and most crucially, as Kelsen (2000 [1929]: 106-09, 1955: 4-5) notes, Schumpeter's instrumental approach fails to fully acknowledge the radical implications of a procedural conception. The crux of a procedural conception of democracy is that it breaks with the assumption of an instrumental approach, that the results of the political process can be taken as a given, as though there were certain absolute standards that are known independently of the political process and, hence, that different means should be assessed in terms of their ability to generate a given result. In place of this view, a procedural conception of democracy stresses that what the members of a political community prefer can only be ascertained through a political process, and that only a process based on the principles of political freedom and equality recognizes the autonomy of individuals and treats individuals as the best judges of their interests. Indeed, therein lies the key value of democracy understood in procedural terms.

Finally, the solution offered by advocates of a substantive conception of democracy to the perceived limitations of a procedural conception introduces an irresolvable tension between the procedural and substantive components of democracy. Authors such as Dworkin and Ferrajoli follow through on their critiques of procedural definitions of democracy by adding, alongside certain procedural attributes, many substantive attributes. Indeed, in what seems like an attractive option, they suggest that, by definition, democracy includes a long list of civil and social rights: the list of rights includes everything from the prohibition of the death penalty and the right to

privacy and intimacy to the right to work, health and education (Ferrajoli 2011a: Ch. 15). Yet adding a long list of rights to democratic procedures, each right being understood as a privileged claim over an outcome, is contradictory. It places substance ahead of process and empties the meaning of democracy by leaving nothing of importance outside of the concept of democracy and nothing for citizens to choose. In other words, the expansive substantive conception of democracy proposed by legal scholars yields an incoherent concept of democracy, the very flaw advocates of a substantive conception see in procedural definitions. Put simply, when everything is a right, there is no politics; and when there is no politics, there is no democracy.

4.2. The Contextualized Procedural Conception

The problems with proposals to incorporate a substantive component to the definition of democracy notwithstanding, the limits of a purely procedural conception of democracy are too important to disregard. Democracy is a quality of the political process. Yet politics is affected by the broader society and, hence, it is imperative not to think of democracy in isolation of the social environment. That is, it is fundamental to recognize that even though democracy is a political concept, "we cannot divorce the political order from social relations," as Touraine insists, and must consider the social factors that are necessary for a democratic political process. Thus, while it is important to avoid the problem associated with a substantive conception, it is equally crucial to ward against the risk of formalism associated with purely procedural concepts of democracy by adopting a contextualized procedural conception of democracy that addresses the social environment of politics.

An amendment of the concept of democracy, so as to acknowledge that the principles of political freedom and equality are routinely affected by the social environment of politics, hinges fundamentally on two issues. One is *how* to *relate* any proposed attributes to the attributes of

democracy that refer to the process of access to government offices and government decision-making discussed previously. This is a relatively ignored issue in discussions about the concept of democracy. However, democratic theorists have provides a solution to this problem. Indeed, the contradiction of holding both that democracy is about process and that the result or content of decisions is determined outside such a process can be sidestepped, as Bobbio (1987: 25) suggests, by acknowledging that certain rights are "necessary precondition for the mainly procedural mechanisms, which characterize a democratic system, to work properly." In other words, a critical insight, that opens the way for a discussion about how democracy should be defined in light of the impact of the social environment of politics, is that any proposed attribute should be incorporated *indirectly* in the concept of democracy, as an influence on the institutional dimensions of democracy (as conveyed by the arrows connecting the social environment of politics to access to government offices and government decision-making in Table 3).

A second, more complex issue concerns *what* additional attributes should be included in the concept of democracy. It is easy to articulate the relevant criterion: the identification of a few central factors of obvious relevance to the democratic political process, and the avoidance of the view that democracy is unviable in the absence of a large number of rights. Moreover, democratic theory has already made a strong case to go beyond a strictly procedural definition of democracy by adding a few civil *rights*, of critical and broad relevance to the democratic political process: the freedoms of expression, association, assembly, and access to information (Dahl 1971: 3; Bobbio 1987: 25). How to address the impact of socio-economic factors on democracy is, however, a thorny question.

Dahl does offers nonetheless some important clues about how to think about the relationship between socio-economic factors and democracy. He distinguishes between civil rights and socio-economic factors, and assigns them a different status. He holds that civil rights, such as freedom of expression and association, are "integral" to democracy, in that they are "an essential part of the very conception of the democratic process itself," and deserve to be labeled as "primary political rights." In contrast, he sees the "vastly unequal" access to "economic means and other crucial resources" as something "external to the democratic process" and hence less central (Dahl 1989: 167, 170; italics removed). Moreover, he never formally included economic and social resources in his famous list of necessary attributes of polyarchy.

Nonetheless, Dahl (2004) repeatedly stresses that "inequalities in economic and social resources" are a problem for democracy "because those with greater resources naturally [tend] to use them to influence the political system to their advantage" and because "the existence of such inequalities [constitute] a persistent obstacle to the achievement of a satisfactory level of political equality." Furthermore, he even makes a case for considering how socio-economic factors affect whether a country should be labelled a democracy. Indeed, Dahl (2006: 75-76) explicitly states that the threat to the principle of political equality posed by inequalities in economic and social resources is such that it might "push some countries—including the United States—below the threshold at which we regard them as 'democratic'." That is, he made a case for distinguishing civil rights from socio-economic factors while acknowledging the impact of socio-economic factors on democracy.

Acknowledging that democracy entails "not just rights but also conditions," as Przeworski (2010: 66) puts it, does not solve the challenge of specifying how socio-economic *conditions* might be explicitly incorporated in the concept of democracy. Yet there are two broad

options that keep the focus squarely on the political process and avoid the problem of an overly expansive concept of democracy. One option is to articulate a democratic standard in a negative way, by itemizing the key mechanisms required to prevent the conversion of socioeconomic inequality into political inequality (Tilly 2007: 118; Przeworski 2010: 93, 98). Thus, one option is to include mechanisms such as public financing of parties and candidates, equal access of candidates to the mass media, limits on campaign donations as well as outright bans on donations from companies that do business with the state, the regulation of lobbying, and bans on the use of state resources by incumbents. Another option is to posit, in a more positive vein, that socio-economic conditions are preconditions for the proper functioning of democratic procedures, on a par with some civil rights (Sen 1999: Chs. 1 and 4; O'Donnell, 2010: Ch. 9), or, more indirectly, for the effective exercise of civil rights (Bobbio 2003: 545).

The discussion regarding the inclusion of socio-economic conditions in a definition of democracy has not yielded the sort of consensus that exists on the inclusion of a few civil rights. Yet just as voting is a restricted expression of political freedom if voters are unable to gain information about candidates and public affairs, so too is political participation a circumscribed expression of political equality if wealth is the main determinant of political influence. Thus, excluding socio-economic conditions from a definition of democracy—and hence pretending that political institutions can be impervious to economic power—is more problematic than including these conditions while some questions remain about how precisely to specify them. Indeed, a break with Dahl's hesitance to formally acknowledge the unavoidable impact of socio-economic factors on the democratic process is justified. In short, there are grounds for expanding the concept of democracy in light of the principles of political freedom and equality by incorporating in a definition of democracy, as preconditions of the procedural standards concerning access to

government offices and government decision-making, a short list of civil rights as well as a minimal set of socio-economic conditions of democracy (see Table 3).

5. Conclusions

Political changes starting in Western Europe and the United States of America in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and extending through the momentous transformations in all regions of the world since 1974 have brought actual practices closer to the ideals of democracy. Today, more than at any time in the past, it makes sense to say that we live in a democratic age and that a large number of countries around the world—possibly more than half—are at least electoral democracies. Yet even though these changes have brought actual practices closer to democratic ideals, political institutions still embody these ideals only partially. And this gap provides the impetus for current literature on the quality of democracy.

The issues raised by this literature are not novel. For example, Dahl (1971: 2-3, 8, 1989: 220-22) distinguished between democracy as an ideal and actual democracies—which he called "polyarchies"—but also argued forcefully for an assessment of the democraticness of countries with standards beyond those included in his famous list of necessary yet insufficient attributes of democracy. Likewise, Bobbio (1987: 26-27) drew attention to "the gap between democratic ideals and 'actually existing democracy'" and went on to address the multiple "broken promises" of democracy. Indeed, these issues are as old as democratic theory. However, they could hardly be more important. What is at stake in discussions about the quality of democracy is nothing less than the revision of the minimal definition of democracy that has been widely accepted since World War II, in such a way as to narrow the gap between the ideal of democracy and what is demanded in practice of countries that aspire to be called democracies.

The implications of discussions about the quality of democracy for students of comparative politics are also vast. The post-1950 scholarship on democratization and democratic stability largely takes the concept of democracy as a given and adopts a definition quite close to a minimal definition of democracy. This strategy has been very fruitful. Inasmuch as scholars agreed about the meaning of democracy and questions about the concept of democracy could be put on hold, they could focus their energies on developing and testing explanations about why a country becomes a democracy and why democratic countries remain democracies. And the literature thus generated is a huge accomplishment; much of what we know about democracy is due to this literature. Yet the concept of democracy is not fixed, as Dahl (1989: Chs. 1 and 2) has shown, and the limitations of a minimal definition of democracy are increasingly apparent.

The limitations of a minimal definition of democracy do not translate smoothly into agreement about an alternative definition, however. Indeed, the lack of agreement concerning the concept that would anchor a broader agenda of research on democracy is clearly in evidence in the growing literature on the quality of democracy in comparative politics. For this reason, it is premature to claim that the study of democratic quality is a new unifying theme for comparative politics. We currently lack a broad concept of democracy that can rival the minimal definition of democracy, and clearly identify and delimit the subject matter of a new agenda of research.

Responding to this assessment of the state of the literature, this article argues for a reconceptualization of democracy, which takes the form of a set of democratic standards, summarized in Table 3, beyond those associated with a minimal concept of electoral democracy. Given the ad hoc nature of much thinking about the quality of democracy, this reconceptualization has self-consciously focused on sharply articulated options derived from established general principles, weighed the case for each of the alternatives, and made a case

both for a certain conceptualization of democracy and against a rival conceptualization. Given the valuable work done on democratic theory, the proposed democratic standards draw extensively on existing scholarship, especially by Kelsen, Bobbio, Dahl and Przeworski.

The proposal in this article leaves many questions open. As suggested, one obvious implication of research on the quality of democracy is the possibility that the conventional description of a country as a democracy should be revised. Yet this article says nothing about how much actual practices can deviate from democratic standards regarding government decision-making and the social environment of politics before a country is deemed not to be a democracy, and whether there are recognizable indicators that could pinpoint this key threshold. These, and other questions, are left for future research.

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Table 1. Conceptualizations of the quality of democracy I. Terms and conceptions

| Author/s * | Terms | | Conceptions of the quality of democracy (QoD) |
	For the baseline concept of democracy	For the phrase "quality of democracy"	
Lijphart I (1999)	Stable democracy	Perfect democracy	QoD is about "the degree to which … [a country with a stable democracy] approximates perfect democracy" and "consensus democracy … defined in institutional terms ... may be considered more democratic than majoritarian democracy" (Lijphart 1999: 276, 7, 2011: 18).
Lijphart II (1999)	Stable democracy	Perfect democracy	QoD is about "the degree to which … [a country with a stable democracy] approximates perfect democracy" and "democratic quality" concerns how well democracy works in promoting "the purpose of democracy" (Lijphart 1999: 276, 2011: 17).
Altman and Pérez-Liñán (2002)	Polyarchy	Democracy	QoD is about "the extent to which any given polyarchy actualizes its potential as a political regime" (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002: 86).
Morlino (2004, 2011: Chs. 7 & 8)	Democracy (minimal)	Good democracy	QoD pertains to "the degree to which [countries that meet the criteria of a minimal definition of democracy] have achieved the two main objectives of an ideal democracy: freedom and political equality" but also concerns the procedures and contents of democracy (Morlino 2004: 10-12).
Lauth (2004, 2013)		Democracy	QoD is about "the realization" of "three dimensions of democracy: political liberty, political equality and … the control of political power" (Lauth 2013: 5, 6, 8).
Ringen (2007: Chs. 1 & 6)	Electoral democracy	Good democracy	QoD is about the extent to which "a democratic polity … promote[s] and protect[s] freedom", the purpose of democracy (Ringen 2007: 5, 31).
Roberts (2009: Ch. 2)	Democracy (formal, institutional)	Democracy (actual popular rule)	QoD is about "the strength of linkages [between citizens and politicians] or alternatively the strength of popular control" (Roberts 2009: 6).
Levine and Molina (2011a, 2011b)	Democracy (minimal)	Democracy	QoD "involves other dimensions than those included in the minimal definition of democracy ... [dimensions that are needed] for a procedural democracy to function effectively" (Levine and Molina 2011a: 5, 14).
Bühlmann, Merkel, Müller and Wessels (2012)	Established democracy	Liberal and participatory democracy	QoD refers to "the degree of fullfilment … [of the] … three core principles of liberal and particpatory democracy … freedom, equality and control" (Bühlmann et al. 2012: 521).

Note: (*) The works are presented in chronological order so as to facilitate an assessment of the evolution of conceptualizations.
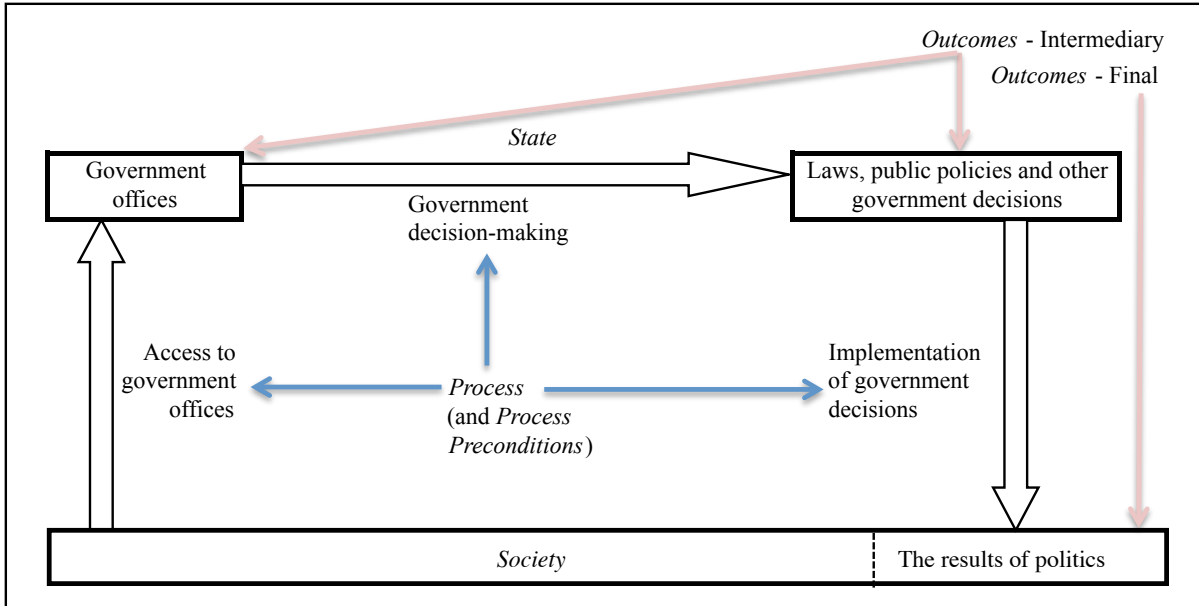
Figure 1. A framework for comparing conceptualizations of the quality of democracy

Note: The term "government" is used here in a broad sense, that is, to include more than the executive branch of government.

Table 2. Conceptualizations of the quality of democracy II. Sense and reference

Author/s *	Process preconditions	Access to government offices	Government decision-making	Implementation of government decisions	Intermediary outcomes	Final outcomes	Reference ***
Lijphart I (1999: Ch. 3)		• Proportional representation	• Coalition cabinets • Executive-legislature balance • Multiparty system • Interest group corporatism • Federal and decentralized government • Bicameralism • Constitutional rigidity • Judicial review • Central bank autonomy				QoD is relevant only in cases that meet the criteria of baseline concept
Lijphart II (1999: Ch. 16)		• Electoral participation	• Government-voter proximity • Majority support for executive • Majority rule use • Corruption		• Women representation in government • Family policy	• Economic and social inequality • Satisfaction with democracy	"
Altman and Pérez-Liñán (2002)	• Effective civil rights	• Effective participation	• Effective competition				"
Morlino (2004, 2011: Chs. 7 & 8)		• Accountability (vertical)	• Accountability (horizontal) • Rule of law/formulation of laws	• Rule of law/enforcement of laws	• Responsiveness	• Freedom • Equality	"
Lauth (2004, 2013)	• Freedom, and equal rights, of organization and communication • Freedom of, and equal chances to participate in, communication • Control by parties, civil society and an independent media	• Equal chances of participation in free elections • Equality of votes • Control by independent election review board	• Equal chances of participation in referenda • Separation of powers • Effective government (parliament)	• Effective government (rational administration)	• Equal treatment by parliament	• Equal treatment by administration • Effective administration of justice • Free access to courts, and equal rights and treatment in court	QoD is relevant in all cases
Ringen (2007: Chs. 1 & 6)	• Strength of democratic institutions/free press • Barriers to political use of economic power	• Strength of democratic institutions/ suffrage		• Government effectiveness		• Security of resources for freedom (e.g. income, health) • Trust in democracy and freedom	QoD is relevant only in cases that meet the criteria of baseline concept
Roberts (2009: Ch. 2)		• Electoral accountability			• Policy responsiveness • Mandate responsiveness		"
Levine and Molina (2011a, 2011b)	• Freedom of the press	• Electoral decision • Participation • Accountability (vertical)	• Accountability (horizontal) • Accountability (societal) • Sovereignty		• Women representation in government • Responsiveness		"
Bühlmann, Merkel, Müller and Wessels (2012)	• Individual liberty • Freedom of association and of opinion	• Competition • Participation • Representation	• Mutual constraints of constitutional powers • Transparency	• Rule of law • Governmental capability	• Representation		QoD is not relevant only in cases that meet the criteria of baseline

Note: QoD = quality of democracy, " = same as above (*) The works are presented in chronological order so as to facilitate an assessment of the evolution of conceptualizations. (**) On the distinctions used in organizing this information, see Figure 1. The placement of each conceptual attribute under a certain category is derived from an assessment of each author's discussion. (***) On the baseline concepts of democracy, see Table 1.

Table 3. A reconceptualization of the quality of democracy *

Concept	Component of the political system	Institutions, rights and conditions	Democratic standards
Democracy	Access to government offices	Elections	Elections as the only means of access to government offices
		Clean, inclusive and competitive elections	Elections devoid of violence or fraud, and based on the universal right to vote and the right to run for office without proscriptions
	Government decision-making	Allocation of seats	Elections with proportional representation
		Structure of government	Legislative decisions (regarding normal politics) are made in a unicameral legislature by a simple majority
	The social environment of politics **	Civil rights	Freedom of expression, association, assembly, and access to information
		Socio-economic conditions	Prevention of the conversion of socio-economic inequality into political inequality, and minimum level of basic capabilities

Note: (*) On terminology, the following clarifications are in order. The term "government" is used to refer to the executive and other office holders who can make law. A country that meets the democratic standards relevant to the access to government offices is called an "electoral democracy" (Munck 2009: 55-56). The democratic standards relevant to government decision-making and the social environment of politics are the new concerns pertaining to the "quality of democracy."

(**) The rights and conditions of the social environment of politics do not directly contribute to democracy; rather, they affect democracy through their impact on the two spheres of politics.