

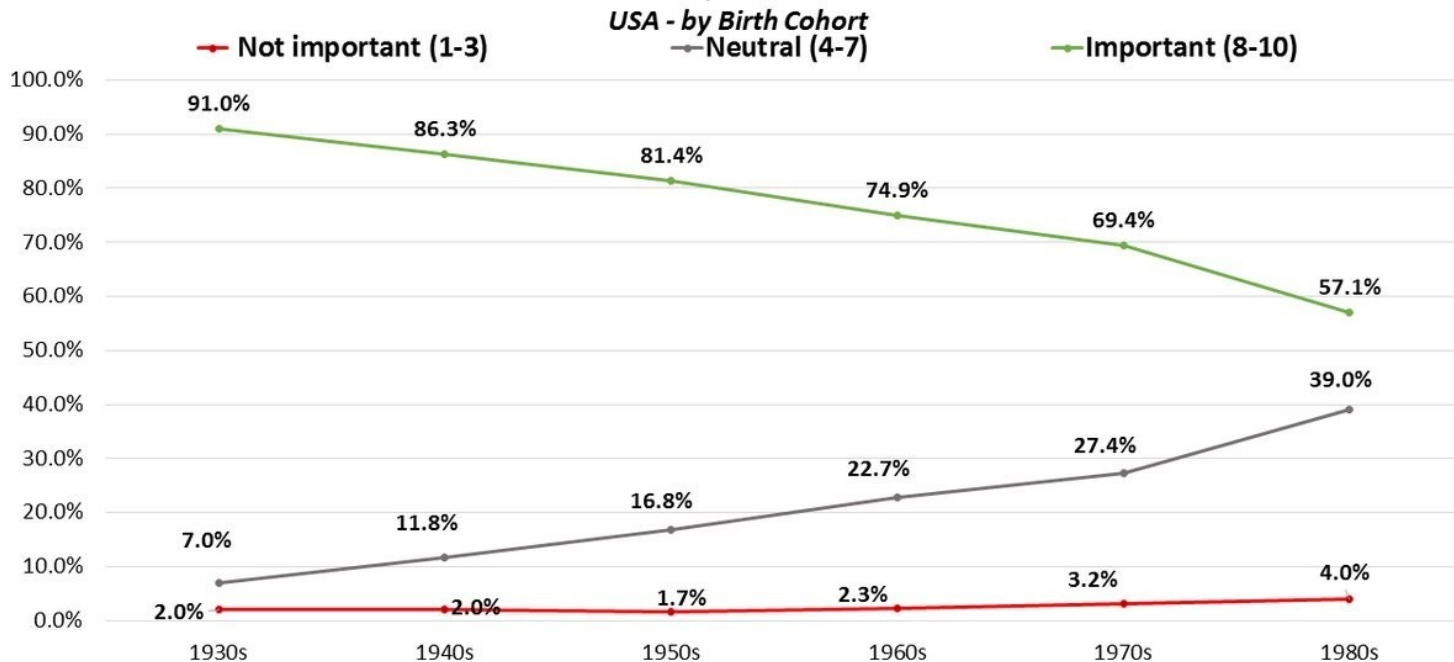
# The quality of democracy

Andrew Roberts

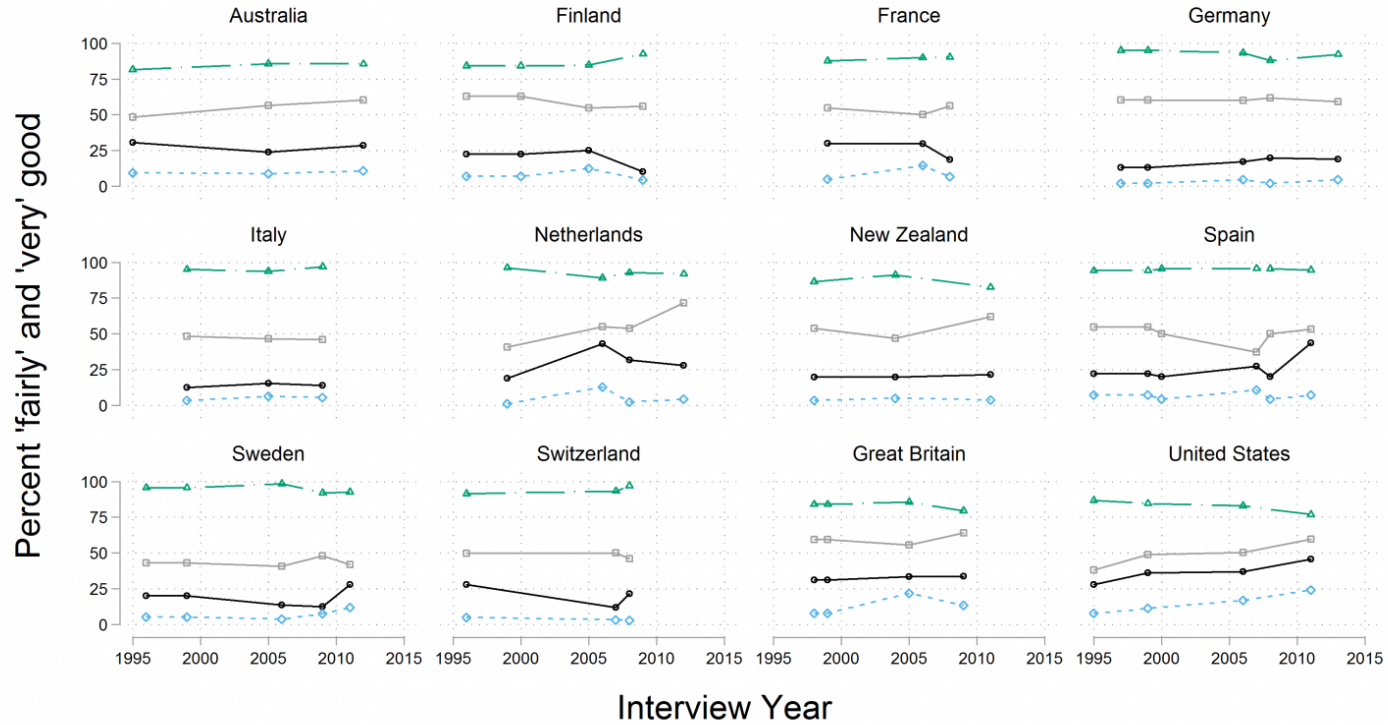
Lecture 1

# Are young people becoming less democratic?

How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? On this scale where 1 means it is "not at all important" and 10 means "absolutely important" what position would you choose?



# Or not?



—●— Strong leader
—■— Experts make decisions
- - -◇- - - Army rule
—▲— Democracy

People under the age of 35. Graph by Erik Voeten based on WVS and EVS data

Why care about democratic  
quality?

# Expectations and reality

- The Third Wave of democracy supposed to bring a new era of goodness
- But many of these new democracies not working as expected
- For example:
  - Corruption
  - Weak rule of law
  - Low participation
  - Populist parties
  - Unequal influence
  - Delegative democracy
  - Rights not protected

# Citizens displeased as well



# Conventional wisdom on postcommunist democracy

“The gulf between formal and substantive democracy is in most places the defining feature of postcommunist democratization.” – Richard Sakwa in textbook Postcommunism



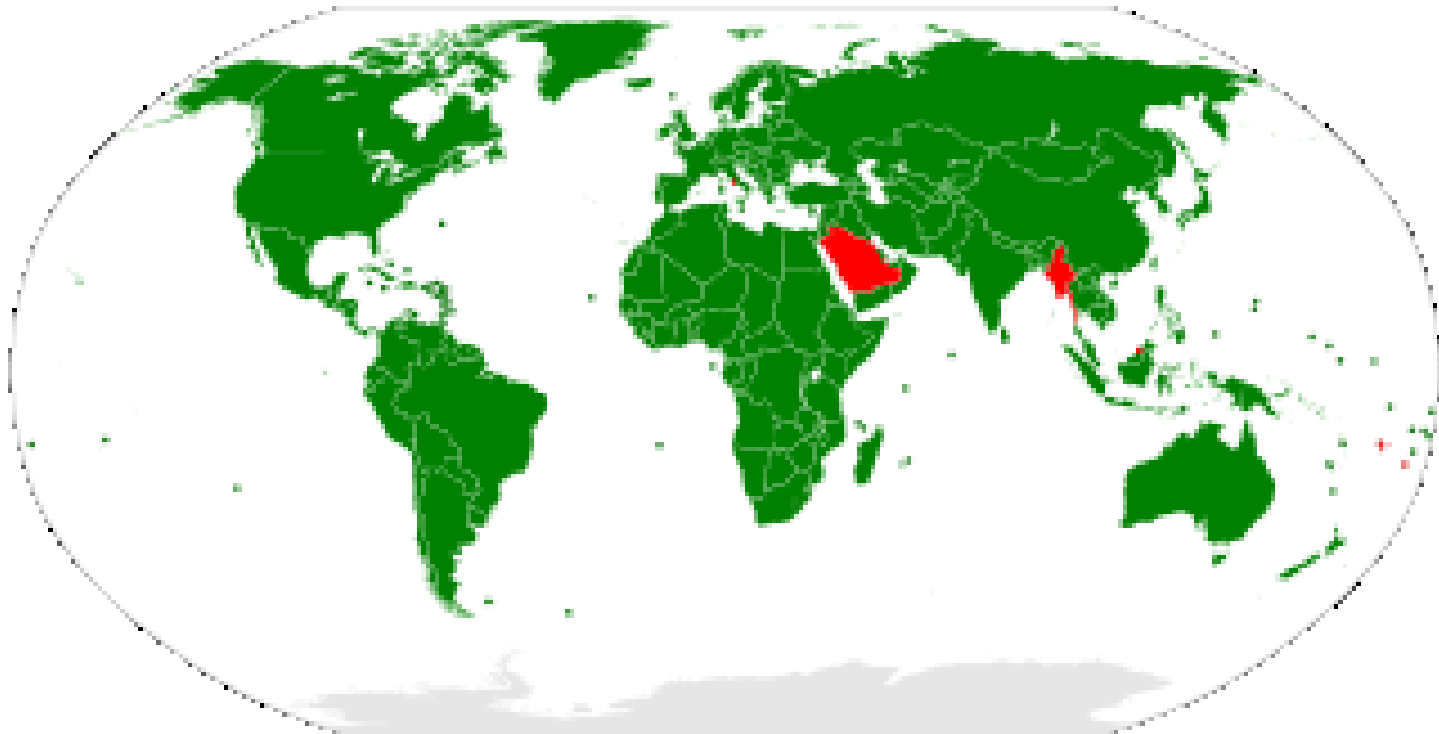
# Today's question

- How should we conceptualize the quality of democracy?
  - What are the alternative conceptions?
  - What are their advantages and disadvantages?



What is democracy?

# Countries that claim to be democratic



# “The People’s Democracies”

- Communist regimes called themselves people’s democracies
- Lenin said that people’s democracy is a million times more democratic than bourgeois democracy
- How did he justify this?
- How does China justify its claim to be more democratic than Western democracies?

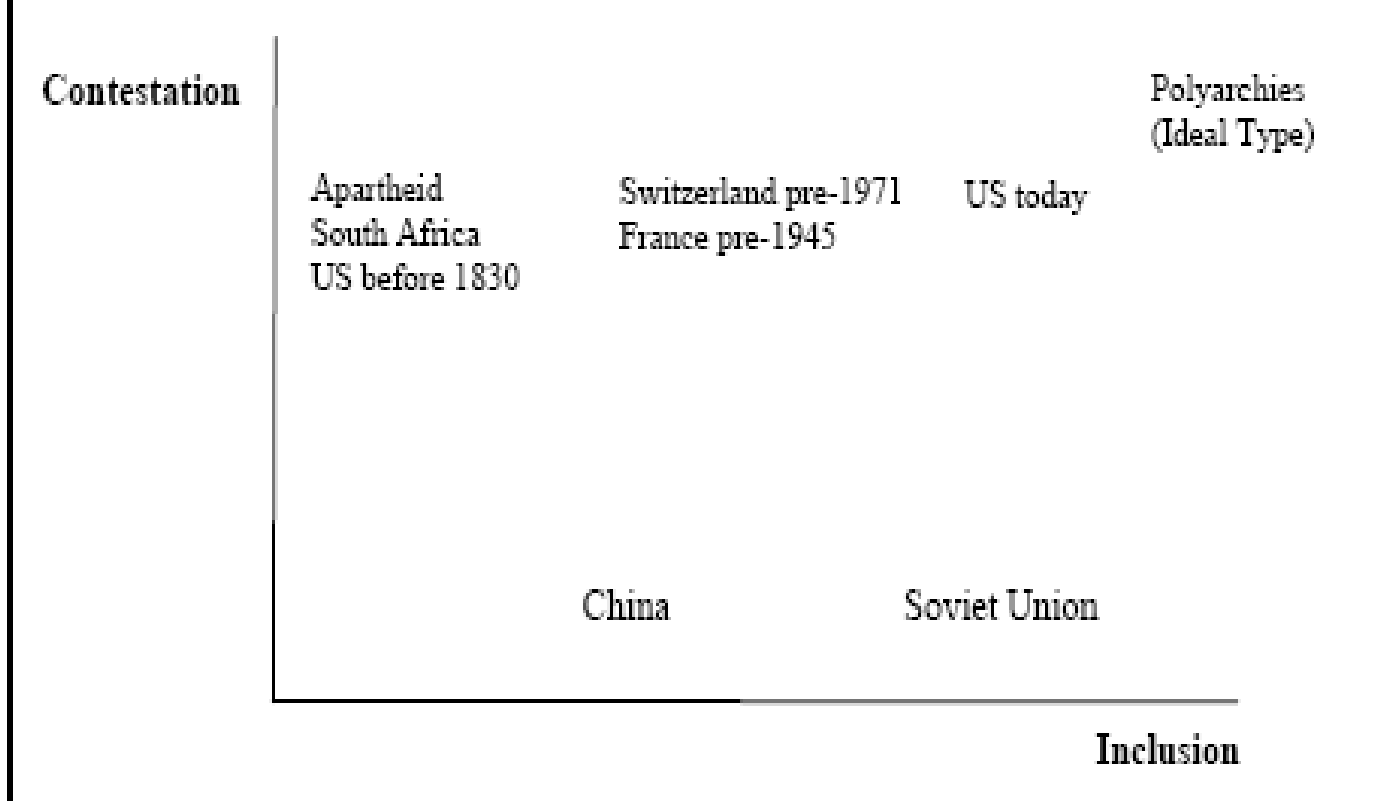
# Substantive definitions

- Source of authority
  - Democracy is will of the people (Rousseau)
  - But hard to put a finger on
- Purposes of rule
  - Democracy is form of government that realizes the common good (eg, justice)
  - But who decides what the common good is and whether it is being achieved?

# Procedural definitions

- Usually associated with Schumpeter, then Dahl, but also Kelsen
- Democracy is a specific way of making collective decisions that specifies who makes decisions and how
- Dahl – 2 dimensions
  - Contestation: free & open competition for votes
  - Inclusiveness: everyone gets a say

**Figure 5.1: Dahl's Dimensions of Contestation and Inclusion**









# The case for a minimal, procedural definition

- Empirically tractable: ie, we can measure it objectively
  - No more debates with Lenin
- Analytically useful: allows us to see what effects democracy has on other variables
  - Eg, how does economic inequality affect democracy and vice versa
- Important in and of itself
  - Competitive elections force politicians to behave moderately and heed public demands

# A working definition

System is democratic to the extent that its most powerful collective decisionmakers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote (Huntington, p. 7)

# Is the procedural definition too minimal?

- Isn't democracy more than elections?
- What could we add to definition?
  - Civil rights: does democracy make sense without freedom of speech, press, assembly?
  - Socio-economic rights/equality? Will rich people dominate if too much inequality?
  - Specific institutions: protections for minorities, checks and balances

# Democracy's flaws

- Inefficient (campaigns, elections, patronage)
- Ineffective (checks and balances)
  - May need strong authority for state-building, economic reform
- Bad policy choices (uninformed citizens, lobbies)
  - Democratizing states more likely to fight wars
- Creates conflict
  - Can use liberal rights to promote hate (Rwanda)
- Unstable (regular changes of government)
- Ugly (sausages and laws)

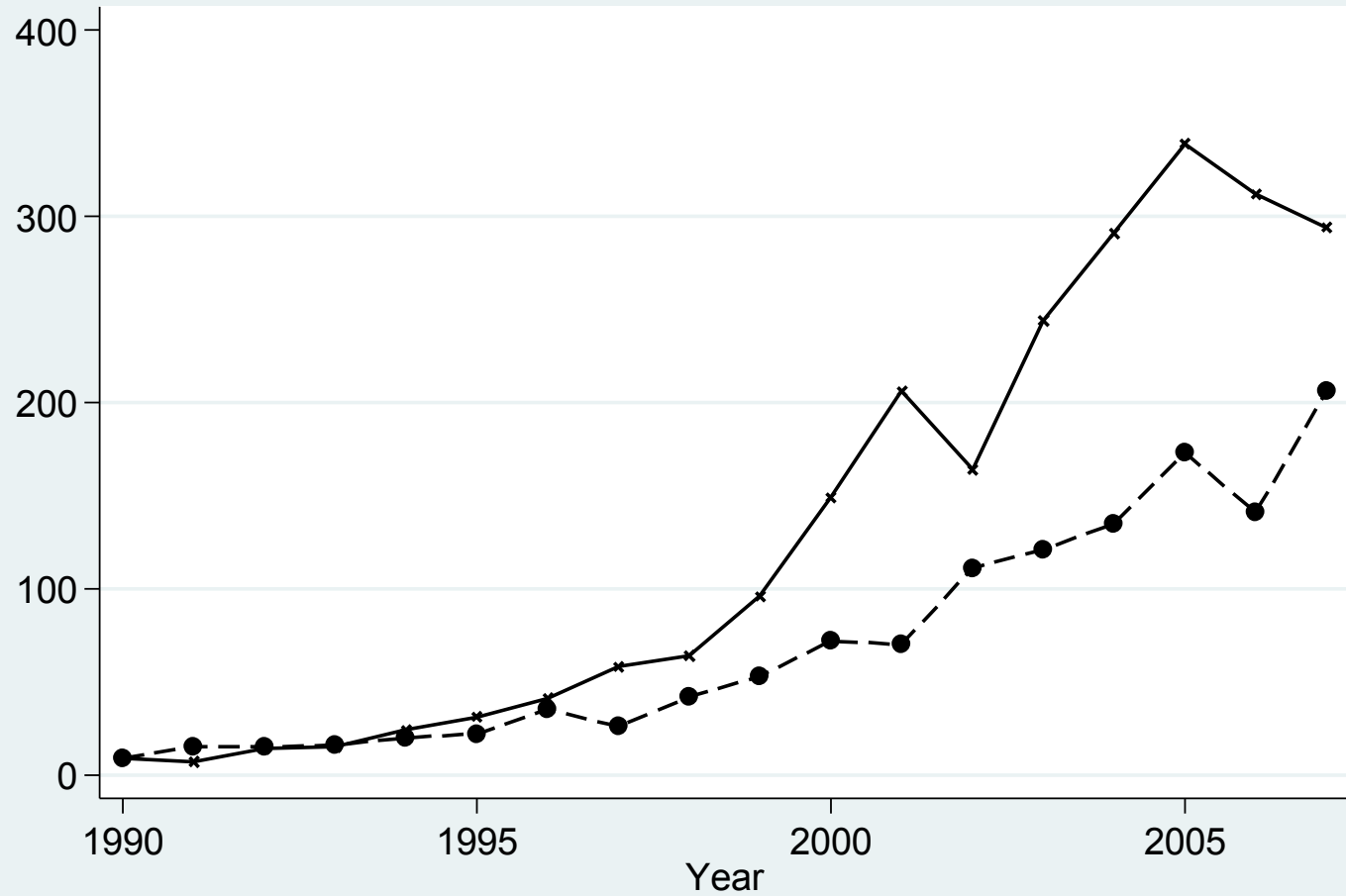
# Arguments for democracy

- Prevents long-term tyranny
- Preserves liberal rights
- People are best judges of own interests
- Fair terms of social contract (Rawls)
- Produces best policies (wisdom of crowds, Condorcet)
- Increases legitimacy of government
- Prevents wars (democratic peace)
- An end in itself (zoon politikon)
- Better than other systems

What is democratic quality?

# Increasing scholarly attention to quality of democracy

- Increasing use of terms “quality of democracy” and “democratic quality”
  - 15,000 scholarly papers
  - Particularly prominent since 1999
- Why?
  - New democracies not working as we would expect/hope
- But lack of a standard definition
  - Often simply all good things about a society



—\*— Quality of Democracy    - -●- - Democratic Quality



# Properties of a good definition

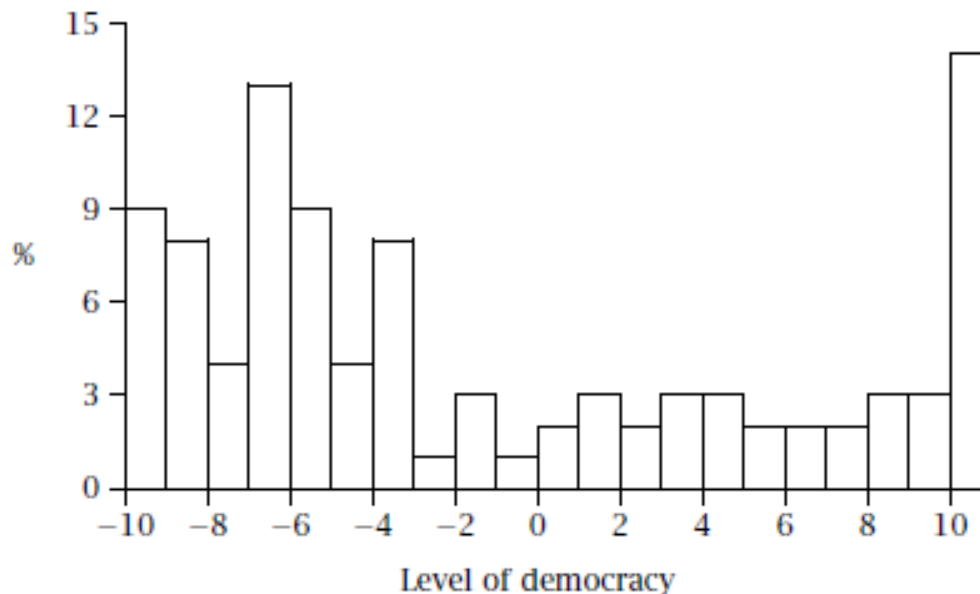
- Three qualities
  - Should go beyond the existence of democracy
  - Should be specific to democratic states
  - Should derive from nature/purpose of democracy
- Quality as procedures
- Quality as preconditions
- Quality as outcomes
- Quality as linkages

# Quality as procedures

- Based on procedural definition of democracy
  - Thus, how free & competitive elections, number and enforcement of civil rights
- Examples: Freedom House scores, voter turnout, number of parties, horizontal accountability (checks & balances)
- Advantages
  - We can often measure this objectively
- Problems
  - Actually measures whether democracy exists
    - China or Egypt as low-quality democracy
  - Arguments for dichotomous measure

# Definitions of democracy and quality of democracy

- Freedom House and Polity both give many countries the maximum score
- But they are not perfect democracies



# Quality as preconditions

- Claim that democracy cannot function well without certain characteristics
  - E.g., rule of law, corruption, socio-economic equality
- Advantages
  - Allows us to improve democracy and suggest changes
- Problems
  - What does it mean for democracy to function well?
  - Not about democracy per se
  - Claims about causality that need to be proved
  - Not specific to democracies – affect all regime types

# Quality as societal outcomes

- Looks at policy outcomes produced by democracies
  - E.g., growth rates, equality, poverty, corruption, welfare
- Examples: Putnam, Lijphart
- Advantages
  - This is what we actually care about: quality of governance
- Problems
  - Based on controversial normative theories (eg, welfare effort, foreign policy)
  - Not specific to democracies
  - Causes are not necessarily in democratic process

# How should we assess democratic quality?

- Democracy is a system of government where people have the ability to rule through regular free elections and set of civil rights
  - Institutional potential of citizen rule
- But is the potential realized? Do citizens actually rule?
  - Since citizens do not rule directly, focus on links between citizens and politicians

# Quality as linkages

- Democratic quality = strength of linkages between citizens and politicians, or degree of popular rule
- Advantages
  - Goes beyond democracy itself
  - Specific to democracy
    - No other regime type institutionalizes these links
  - Focuses on basic processes and mechanisms of democratic governance
    - Democratic institutions designed to allow citizen rule
- Problems
  - Do we actually want this?

# Criticisms of folk theory

- Folk theory
  - Populist: Voters' preferences => policy
  - Representative: Voters' preferences => politicians => policy
- But worries about voters' preferences
  - Little information
  - Swayed by irrelevant events
  - Myopic
  - Motivated reasoning



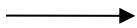
# Three linkages where citizens can rule

- Electoral accountability: incumbents rewarded/punished according to performance
  - Incentive to perform better, also remove bad governments
- Mandate responsiveness: policymakers make and follow through on clear election promises
  - Citizens have ex ante control, choose policies they desire
- Policy responsiveness: policy corresponds/changes with public opinion
  - Direct control over policy

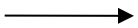
*Mandate  
Responsiveness*

*Electoral  
Accountability*

Elections



Policy



Elections



*Policy  
Responsiveness*



Public  
Preferences

Public  
Preferences

Public  
Preferences

Public  
Preferences

# Does democracy lead to strong linkages?

- Elections & civil rights give incentives for politicians to follow public will
- But, not necessarily
  - Voters may be unable to hold politicians accountable, choose future directions, or monitor performance (lack of info, rationality, civic spirit)
  - Politicians may be able to win & stay in office without program or good performance (eg, through charisma or clientelism)

# Not all good things go together

- Sometimes tradeoffs between linkages
  - Which message to send with vote – sanction or selection
  - Fulfilling promises or responding to public opinion
- But also complementarities
  - Sanctioning for breaking promises

# Do we want strong linkages?

- Substantive representation: does government act in people's best interest?
- Does it adopt the best policies, the ones that improve human welfare regardless of whether they are popular?
  - Eg, free trade is good for prosperity, but it is unpopular
- Isn't this what we should care about?

# When do strong linkages lead to best policies?

- Electoral accountability
  - High standards (but not too high) and accurate judgments of performance
- Mandate responsiveness
  - Parties present good platforms, voters are informed & intelligent, conditions don't change too much
- Policy responsiveness
  - Citizens know what the best policies are and desire them

# Other conceptions of democracy

- Deliberative: deliberation helps to create better preferences
- Civic republican: key is devotion to common good
- Epistemic: try to achieve accurate judgments
- Elitist: allow most intelligent to have extra influence
- Social democratic: produce economic equality
- Emersonian: foster independent thinking

# Other arguments for popular rule?

- Even without good citizens, strong linkages may increase legitimacy of system
- At the least allows citizens to throw bad rulers out
- Remember that democracy is not the only value



# How to read a political science article

- What is the author trying to explain? (dependent variable or outcome)
- What is the cause? (independent variable)
- What mechanism connects cause and effect, how specifically does the cause lead to the outcome?

# How to critique an article

- Selection bias: Were cases chosen from full range of outcomes?
- Omitted variables: What other factors might affect X and Y? Can you think of alternative explanations?
- Endogeneity: Could Y cause X?
- Mechanisms: What steps connect X to Y? Is there evidence for them?
- Measurement: Are measures valid and reliable?
- Falsifiability: What evidence would disprove hypothesis?