

## What is Democratic Consolidation?

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During the past quarter-century, the "third wave" of global democratization has brought more than 60 countries around the world from authoritarian rule toward some kind of democratic regime.<sup>1</sup> This is no small achievement, of course, but it has also become apparent that sustaining democracy is often a task as difficult as establishing it. In the immediate aftermath of all these democratic transitions, pressing concerns have quickly arisen about how to strengthen and stabilize these new regimes. With the extension of democracy to additional countries now having slowed, political scientists--and political actors in new democracies--have been increasingly focusing on what has come to be called "democratic consolidation."

Originally, the term "democratic consolidation" was meant to describe the challenge of making new democracies secure, of extending their life expectancy beyond the short term, of making them immune against the threat of authoritarian regression, of building dams against eventual "reverse waves." To this original mission of rendering democracy "the only game in town," countless other tasks have been added. As a result, the list of "problems of democratic consolidation" (as well as the corresponding list of "conditions of democratic consolidation") has expanded beyond all recognition. It has come to include such divergent items as popular legitimation, the diffusion of democratic values, the neutralization of antisystem actors, civilian supremacy over the military, the **[End Page 91]** elimination of authoritarian enclaves, party building, the organization of functional interests, the stabilization of electoral rules, the routinization of politics, the decentralization of state power, the introduction of mechanisms of direct democracy, judicial reform, the alleviation of poverty, and economic stabilization.

At this point, with people using the concept any way they like, nobody can be sure what it means to others, but all maintain the illusion of speaking to one another in some comprehensible way. While "democratic consolidation" may have been a nebulous concept since its very inception, the conceptual fog that veils the term has only become thicker and thicker the more it has spread through the academic as well as the political world. If it is true that "[n]o scientific field can advance far if the participants do not share a common understanding of key terms in the field,"<sup>2</sup> then the study of democratic consolidation, at its current state of conceptual confusion, is condemned to stagnation. The aspiring subdiscipline of "consolidology" is anchored in an unclear, inconsistent, and unbounded concept, and thus is not anchored at all, but drifting in murky waters. The use of one and the same term for vastly different things only simulates a shared common language; in fact, the reigning conceptual disorder is acting as a powerful barrier to scholarly communication, theory building, and the accumulation of knowledge.

I believe that we can order and comprehend the multiple usages and meanings of "democratic consolidation" by looking at the concrete realities as well as the practical tasks the term is meant to address. The meaning that we ascribe to the notion of democratic consolidation depends on where we stand (our empirical viewpoints) and where we aim to reach (our normative horizons). It varies according to the contexts and the goals we have in mind.

## Viewpoints and Horizons

When students of democratization seek to classify regimes, the key distinction, of course, runs between those that are democratic and those that are not (the latter often generically labeled as "authoritarian"). The most widely accepted criteria for identifying a country as democratic have been put forward by Robert Dahl--civil and political rights plus fair, competitive, and inclusive elections.<sup>3</sup> Dahl calls countries that meet these criteria "polyarchies," but they are more commonly referred to as "liberal democracies."

Two other subtypes of democracy have gained wide recognition in the scholarly literature on new democracies. On the one hand, there are all those borderline cases that possess some but not all of liberal [End Page 92] democracy's essential features, and therefore fall somewhere in between democracy and authoritarianism. I call such semidemocratic regimes "electoral democracies." This term is now generally used to describe a specific type of semidemocracy--one that manages to hold (more or less) inclusive, clean, and competitive elections but fails to uphold the political and civil freedoms essential for liberal democracy. Here, however, I will use the term "electoral democracy" more broadly as a convenient shorthand for any kind of "diminished subtype" of democracy.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, there are those "advanced democracies" that presumptively possess some positive traits over and above the minimal defining criteria of liberal democracy, and therefore rank higher in terms of democratic quality than many new democracies. This term risks idealizing and reifying the wealthy Western democracies, but even if we recognize that admiring references to "established Western democracies" often rely on stereotypes, we have to acknowledge that discursive constructs (such as "democratic normality") are social realities too.

This four-fold classification--authoritarianism, electoral democracy, liberal democracy, advanced democracy--basically corresponds to the way David Collier and Steven Levitsky have ordered the semantic universe of democracy and its subtypes. In their admirable effort to bring order to the chaos of innumerable subtypes of democracy that circulate in contemporary democratization studies (they stopped counting at 550), they have distinguished precisely these four broad regime categories (even if they label them differently).<sup>5</sup> I want to show that these broad categories also provide a basis for reordering the conceptual map of consolidation studies, and for comprehending the manifold ways students of democracy use the term "democratic consolidation."

Figure 1 presents this classification of regime families graphically along a one-dimensional continuum of "democraticness," with authoritarian regimes placed at one end and advanced democracies at the other.<sup>6</sup> It depicts in a graphical way how these four regime types define the empirical contexts as well as the normative horizons and practical tasks that characterize distinct conceptualizations of democratic consolidation. The two middle categories, electoral and liberal democracy, represent the empirical referents of all debate on democratic consolidation. In normative terms, authoritarianism forms the outer negative horizon that democrats in both these kinds of regimes try to avoid, and advanced democracy forms the outer positive horizon that they try to approach. In addition, electoral democracy and liberal democracy constitute normative horizons for each other. While electoral democracy appears as liberal democracy's proximate [End Page 93] horizon of avoidance, liberal democracy appears as electoral democracy's proximate horizon of attainment.

Now, those scholars who look (fearfully) from electoral or liberal democracy to authoritarianism equate democratic consolidation with avoiding an authoritarian regression, a "quick death" of

democracy. Those who look (hopefully) from electoral or liberal democracy to advanced democracy equate democratic consolidation with democratic deepening, with advances in the quality of democracy. Those who look (with concern) from liberal democracy to electoral democracy equate democratic consolidation with avoiding a "slow death" of democracy, the erosion of certain fundamental democratic features. And those who look (with impatience) from electoral democracy to liberal democracy equate democratic consolidation with completing democracy, with supplying its missing features.

We might say, tentatively, that those who are concerned with democratic stability and try to avoid regressions to either **[End Page 94]** nondemocratic or semidemocratic regimes support "negative" notions of democratic consolidation, while those who are concerned with democratic advances and try to attain progress toward either liberal or high-quality democracy sponsor "positive" notions of democratic consolidation.<sup>7</sup>

In a way, this contextual and perspective-dependent approach tries to reconstruct the concept's teleological core. Of course, I am not the first to note the teleological quality of democratic consolidation. Both Ben Schneider and Guillermo O'Donnell have repeatedly criticized the notion's "strong teleological flavor."<sup>8</sup> These critics are right. Democratic consolidation is indeed an intrinsically teleological concept. Yet I think there is nothing inherently wrong with teleology, provided that three conditions are met: First, we have to avoid veiling or obscuring it; hidden teleology is indeed bad teleology. Second, we have to dissociate teleology from any belief in inevitable progress: supporting some telos, some normative goal or practical task, is one matter; assuming "some kind of automatic or 'natural' progression" toward that goal is quite another.<sup>9</sup> Third, we have to acknowledge that the notion of democratic consolidation knows not merely one characteristic telos but many, and that this plurality of teloi accordingly defines a plurality of concepts of democratic consolidation.

### **Avoiding Democratic Breakdown**

Once a transition from authoritarian rule in a given country has reached a point where (more or less) free, fair, and competitive elections are held, democratic actors usually cannot afford to relax and enjoy the "bounded uncertainty" of democratic rule. More often than not, regime-threatening "unbounded uncertainties" persist, and the democrats' fundamental concern shifts from establishing democracy's core institutions to securing what they have achieved. For these actors, consolidating democracy means reducing the probability of its breakdown to the point where they can feel reasonably confident that democracy will persist in the near (and not-so-near) future. This preoccupation with regime survival describes the "classical" meaning of democratic consolidation. It gives coherence to a broad and crowded semantic field where a wide range of semantic labels defines this telos in either positive or negative ways. In its positive formulations, this branch of consolidation studies speaks about reaching the goal of democratic continuity, maintenance, entrenchment, survival, permanence, endurance, persistence, resilience, viability, sustainability, or irreversibility. By contrast, negative formulations invoke the necessity of moving beyond democratic fragility, instability, **[End Page 95]** uncertainty, vulnerability, reversibility, or the threat of breakdown. Whatever the differences in nuance, the unifying purpose beneath this multifaceted vocabulary is straightforward: It is basically pre-occupied with keeping democracy alive, with preventing its sudden death.

In accordance with its focus on the danger of coups, this first notion of democratic consolidation is concerned above all with deviant or antisystem actors who harbor antidemocratic motives. In principle, the range of actors who actually or potentially fall into this category of dangerous elements is unlimited. In Latin America, with its recent history of bureaucratic-authoritarian

regimes, fears of democratic breakdown have tended to focus on the professionals of state violence, as well as the business class, which had also acquired a solid antidemocratic reputation (until the latest cycle of democratization). But in fact, the list of (either suspected or convicted) assassins or gravediggers of democratic rule is much longer. It includes private men-at-arms (guerrillas, drug cartels, violent street protesters), elected presidents who stage military-backed *autogolpes*, and even disenchanting populations who may become tired of a democracy that has not delivered, in material terms, much more than economic hardship and social inequality. <sup>10</sup> Eliminating, neutralizing, or converting disloyal players represents the primary task of democratic-breakdown prevention. Yet taming the enemy is by no means the only practical concern associated with the stabilization of democracy. Since democratic stability is a noble and uncontroversial goal, some scholars tend to invoke anything positively valued in the name of democratic sustainability. They discuss, for example, economic performance, nation building and state building, the creation of mass legitimacy, the diffusion of democratic values, the elimination of authoritarian legacies, the institutionalization of party systems, and so forth. The list is endless. Sometimes these items are accompanied by plausible causal theories about how they affect chances for democratic survival, though often only through indirect and long chains of causation. <sup>11</sup>

### **Avoiding Democratic Erosion**

As students of democratic consolidation have been quick to recognize, focusing on the military and on classical coup politics as privileged objects of research may be morally, politically, and empirically questionable insofar as it diverts attention from other pressing issues. Moreover, it may even turn out to be a misleading perspective that looks for danger in the wrong places, and therefore overlooks real threats that hide at less traditional and less obvious sites. **[End Page 96]** Many new democracies do face the threat of illegal or pseudo-legal overthrow by antidemocratic forces. But in addition to the risk of breakdown--of dramatic, sudden, and visible relapses to authoritarian rule--many new democracies have to contend with the danger of decay, of less spectacular, more incremental, and less transparent forms of regression. While the former provokes a radical discontinuity with democratic politics (leading to open authoritarianism), the latter implies a gradual corrosion leading to fuzzy semidemocracy, to a hybrid regime somewhere between liberal democracy and dictatorship. If democratic breakdown is the dominant concern and defining horizon of avoidance of our first concept of democratic consolidation, democratic erosion occupies the same role with respect to this second concept of consolidation.

It was Guillermo O'Donnell who at the end of the 1980s put forward the first explicit formulation of this extended understanding of democratic consolidation. In his seminal essay "Transitions, Continuities, and Paradoxes," he drew attention to the threat of silent regressions from democracy to semidemocratic rule and incorporated the overcoming of this threat into his (broad) definition of democratic consolidation. Emphasizing the temporal dimension of his observation, he proposed to distinguish between "rapid deaths" and "slow deaths" of democracy. While the former referred to classical coup politics, O'Donnell described the latter as "a progressive diminution of existing spaces for the exercise of civilian power and the effectiveness of the classic guarantees of liberal constitutionalism," as a "slow and at times opaque" "process of successive authoritarian advances," which in the end would lead to a *democradura*, a repressive, facade democracy. <sup>12</sup>

What has happened since the publication of O'Donnell's article? A cynic could make the point that a few new democracies no longer face the danger of retrogressing to semidemocratic rule

because they have already arrived there. For such polities, democratic erosion is no longer a risk because it has become a reality. Irony aside, the continuing political relevance of the issue is quite evident. In a recent article, Samuel P. Huntington even went so far as to assert that with third wave democracies, "the problem is not overthrow but erosion: the intermittent or gradual weakening of democracy by those elected to lead it." <sup>13</sup>

In recent years, students of democratic consolidation have improved their knowledge about different routes the "slow deaths" of democracies may take. The reassertion of military supremacy emphasized by O'Donnell is only one possibility, even if a very real one. Other forms of erosion attack other institutional pillars of democracy. For example, state violence as well as state weakness may subvert the rule of law; the rise of hegemonic parties may [End Page 97] suffocate electoral competition; the decay of electoral institutions may affect the honesty of vote counting; incumbents may use their privileged access to state resources and to the mass media in ways that violate minimum standards of electoral fairness and equal opportunity; or the introduction of exclusionary citizenship laws may violate democratic norms of inclusiveness.

### Completing Democracy

While liberal democracies face the "negative" challenge of preventing democratic erosion and regression to semidemocratic rule, "electoral democracies" face the symmetrical "positive" challenge of democratic completion, the attainment of full democratic rule. Students of electoral democracies often associate the notion of democratic consolidation with this task, with the telos of moving away from some "diminished subtype" of democracy toward a "nondiminished" democracy--or, as Guillermo O'Donnell once put it, with the accomplishment of a "second transition" from a democratic government to a democratic regime. <sup>14</sup> When they speak of democratic consolidation they tend to refer to the goal of completing a pending (i.e. incomplete) transition to democracy. In graphical terms, they tend to look not just backward to the dangers of authoritarian regression, but also forward to the promises of democratic progress. When such expectations of democratic progress do not materialize, students of consolidation tend to express this frustrating institutionalization of semidemocratic rule with notions such as democratic "freezing" or "sclerosis."

Which are the basic actors, conflicts, and sites of democratic completion? It depends on the type of "electoral democracy" in place. In Latin America, three configurations have been of special relevance. To begin with, there are those countries where the outgoing authoritarian regime was able to write certain non-democratic rules into the constitution. In such cases of constitutional defects, full democratization requires these formal authoritarian legacies to be removed. The prototypical Latin American case of constitutional semidemocracy has been Chile after 1990, and the classical study that modeled a general notion of democratic consolidation along the Chilean fault lines was J. Samuel Valenzuela's "Democratic Consolidation in Post-Transitional Settings." <sup>15</sup> In his perspective, abolishing "tutelary powers," "reserved domains," and "major discriminations" in the electoral law appeared as necessary ingredients of democratic consolidation. Since then, this notion of democratic consolidation has received widespread scholarly attention. For instance, Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan extensively analyze this constitution-centered type of [End Page 98] democratic completion under the heading of "constitutional consolidation." <sup>16</sup>

Another kind of semidemocracy that has raised peculiar challenges of democratic consolidation-as-completion is the hegemonic-party system in crisis. The Latin American cases are (or were) Mexico and Paraguay. In essence, the problem is how to tell at what point (authoritarian) hegemonic parties have become (democratic) dominant parties. Hegemonic parties, given their

reliance on state patronage, media control, repression, and ("in the last instance") electoral fraud, do not and cannot lose elections. Dominant parties, by contrast, do not but can, in principle, lose at the polls. Yet as long as alternation in power, the ultimate proof of any democratic electoral system, remains a mere possibility and does not occur in fact, entrenched suspicions will persist as to whether the incumbent party would really accept losing a national election.

While the constitutional legacies of military regimes as well as the structural legacies of hegemonic-party systems pose formidable "threshold problems" to democratizers, they involve only a handful of cases. In comparison, a third variety of democratic completion appears of more general relevance for Latin American countries: the transformation of "illiberal democracies," where the rule of law is biased and selective (or even aleatory), into liberal democracies that effectively guarantee basic political, civil, and human rights. With the notable (and debatable) exception of the three Southern Cone countries, Latin America's contemporary democracies have not followed Western Europe's historical sequence of political development: first, state building; second, legal domestication of the state; and third, democratic domestication of the state. Instead, as with many "third wave" democracies in other regions, the sequence has been the reverse. Democracies have been created in the context of states whose presence looks partial and precarious (in both territorial and social terms) and with judicial systems in place that often cannot do much more than administer the rule of lawlessness. Correspondingly, the two keys to transcending "the illiberal nature of 'democracy' in Latin America today" <sup>17</sup> are "state reform" and "judicial reform"--both fashionable terms that have already entered the vocabulary even of international financial agencies.

### **Deepening Democracy**

The notion of democratic consolidation just discussed--completing the democratic transition by traveling from electoral to liberal democracy--represents one progress-oriented, "positive" version of democratic consolidation. Moving further on the "continuum of democracy"--by deepening liberal democracy and [End Page 99] pushing it closer to advanced democracy--represents a second positive version. When we compare Latin America's contemporary democracies with more or less rosy pictures of established Western democracies, the former seem to fall short on many counts. They appear to possess (or to be possessed by) "comparative dis-advantages" in virtually every field of democratic politics. The list of presumptive structural deficits covers fields as diverse as governmental performance, public administration, judicial systems, party systems, interest groups, civil society, political culture, and styles of decision making. In all these and many other areas, most Latin American democracies look "underdeveloped" by comparison with the "advanced democracies."

Most authors who write about democratic consolidation either think about our very first notion of democratic consolidation, the stabilization of democracy, or about this last notion of democratic consolidation, the deepening of democracy. These two concepts of democratic consolidation are by far the most popular ones. In fact, the academic popularity of the former comes as no surprise. Most of Latin America's aging new democracies still have to worry about their long-term survival. As rule, however, this is no longer an immediate concern, but just one issue among many others that command political attention. Today, issues of democratic quality tend to be much more salient in everyday politics than issues of democratic survival.

### **Organizing Democracy**

The variants of "negative" consolidation that I have discussed try to prevent democratic regression toward feared horizons of avoidance. Symmetrically, the two variants of "positive"

consolidation try to achieve democratic progress toward valued horizons of attainment. *Tertium non datur?* I do not think so. In between the two pairs of concepts one can distinguish, in an uneasy intermediate position, a "neutral" usage of democratic consolidation, which comprehends democratic consolidation as the "organization" of democracy.

From this perspective, consolidating democracy calls for more than institutionalizing democracy's basic ground rules. It demands establishing democracy's specific rules and organizations. In other words, this concept of consolidation turns its attention from the procedural minima that define democratic regimes to the concrete rules and organizations that define various forms of democracy. It switches the level of analysis from regimes to subsystems, or in Philippe Schmitter's terms, to "partial regimes."<sup>18</sup> Thus democratic consolidation comes to be synonymous with "institution building." [End Page 100] It implies constructing all those big organizations that make up the characteristic infrastructure of modern liberal democracies: parties and party systems, legislative bodies, state bureaucracies, judicial systems, and systems of interest intermediation.

While Schmitter, to my knowledge, deserves the credit for introducing and developing this concept of democratic consolidation, others have followed his track, especially subdisciplinary specialists to whom this notion of democratic consolidation provides an opportunity to link up their particular scholarly concerns with the general discussion on democratic consolidation.<sup>19</sup>

This fifth notion of democratic consolidation is "self-referential" insofar as liberal democracy serves as its point of both departure and arrival. It looks, so to speak, from liberal democracy to nowhere else. Some authors are emphatic in stressing its neutrality in normative terms. Yet rather than being normatively neutral, the concept appears to be normatively ambivalent. "Organizing" democracy may bring us closer to the normative goals of preventing democratic regressions and effecting democratic advances. But it may also pull us farther away. It all depends on the concrete forms in which democracy becomes organized.

### **Post-Transitional Blues**

What picture emerges from this "teleological" reconstruction of coexisting and competing concepts of democratic consolidation? One basic finding is that the consolidation of democracy, as scholars use the term, represents a cluster concept with an intelligible structure but without a core, without a meaningful common denominator. All the notions in use part from some type or other of democratic regime, and they all aim at improving the democratic status quo. Yet their empirical context may be either liberal ("real") democracy or electoral ("semi-") democracy, and their normative horizon may be either democratic survival or democratic progress. In fact, these varying ideas of democratic consolidation do not have very much in common.

Thus the consolidation of democracy emerges as an omnibus concept, a garbage-can concept, a catch-all concept, lacking a core meaning that would unite all modes of usage. If it is indeed the case that it provides the foundation for what Schmitter has called "an embryonic subdiscipline" of political science, this discipline shares neither a substantive concern nor a methodological core. It is held together by no more than a shared domain of application. It covers all new democracies (including semidemocracies), which by definition enter the "phase of democratic consolidation" (or at least face the "problems of consolidation") as soon as they complete some [End Page 101] sort of democratic transition. In this sense, "consolidology" is no more than a label for the study of new democracies.

Worst of all, students of democratic consolidation tend to ignore the concept's irritating multiplicity of meanings. They tend to ignore the vagueness and inconsistency of usage. All use the term in whatever way best fits their own research purposes, funding needs, and advertising

strategies, while the usage of the same key term maintains the illusion of a common theoretical enterprise, a common purpose, a common language, a common "dependent variable."

One can understand the practical reasons for the current situation but in terms of scholarly research, this uncontrolled coexistence of inconsistent meanings, this case of homonymy (one word meaning many things) running wild, is an unhappy state of affairs. It is not only inimical to theory building and the accumulation of knowledge, it even frustrates such elementary operations as case classification. In terms of democratic consolidation as the term is used today, countries such as Argentina and Poland may be ranked almost anywhere. Whether to describe them as "highly consolidated" or "persistently unconsolidated" depends entirely on the notion of democratic consolidation one chooses. As matters now stand, the concept's classificatory utility is close to zero. Its boundaries are fuzzy and fluid. It does not allow us to order reality in any reliable way.

How can we change this lamentable state of affairs? A minimal solution would be to practice "transparent toleration," to recognize the multiple meanings of democratic consolidation and to be clear and explicit about them. As Christoph Kotowski said about the concept of revolution, "If scholars do not attach the same meaning to the concept . . . they can at least specify which 'meaning' they 'mean.'" <sup>20</sup>

Such open recognition of differences may represent the only realistic way out of the conceptual mess. Perhaps democratic consolidation's "strange multiplicity" of meanings is here to stay. So long as the notion of democratic consolidation works as a generic label for the study of new democracies (and near-democracies), it would be surprising to see the scholarly community privileging one theme to the exclusion of others, and converging toward a more narrow and precise definition of the term. Most scholars would rapidly denounce such a one-sided agenda as empirically inappropriate, normatively annoying, politically unwise, and academically boring. As a consequence, any ambition to "legislate" the semantic field of democratic consolidation into unity may be doomed to failure.

In this spirit, the preceding "teleological" reconstruction of democratic consolidation would at least allow us to trace clear and **[End Page 102]** distinct melodies in the current Babylonian chorus of voices singing songs of democratic consolidation. Its farewell to "the consolidation of democracy" in the singular, and its corresponding embrace of "types of democratic consolidation" in the plural, would help us to compose our discordant songs of democratic consolidation in more conscious, more precise, and, in many cases, more modest ways.

### **Back to the Roots**

The peaceful coexistence and mutual recognition of various concepts of democratic consolidation would be preferable to the status quo of conceptual confusion. The same would be true for another option: to abandon the concept and stop talking about it. Yet both alternatives are only second-best solutions. My first-order preference would be to exercise self-restraint and to stop using the term for whatever we would like to see happen in new democracies ("the conditions of democratic consolidation") or for whatever we think is problematic in these polities ("the problems of democratic consolidation"). Rather than using the term in ambiguous and inconsistent ways, we should attach one clear meaning to it. As Giovanni Sartori declared about 15 years ago, "different things should have different names." <sup>21</sup>

I think we should return to the concept's original concern with democratic survival. We should restore its classical meaning, which is securing achieved levels of democratic rule against authoritarian regression. That means we should restrict its use to the two "negative" notions described above: avoiding democratic breakdown and avoiding democratic erosion. The term



"democratic consolidation" should refer to expectations of regime continuity--and to nothing else. Accordingly, the concept of a "consolidated democracy" should describe a democratic regime that relevant observers expect to last well into the future--and nothing else. Why should one restrict the use of "democratic consolidation" in this particular way and not another? The main reason is that all other usages of democratic consolidation (completing, organizing, and deepening democracy) are problematic and can be replaced by superior alternative concepts.

First, the process (and the challenge) of putting a partial, blocked, derailed, or truncated transition back on track falls within the purview of transition studies. There is no need to confuse matters and introduce another term for it. In addition, in semidemocracies which face the task of democratic completion, any talk about "the consolidation of democracy" is misleading. It suggests that a democratic regime is already in place (and only needs to be "consolidated") when in fact the issue at hand is constructing a fully democratic regime. **[End Page 103]**

Second, the development of democracy's subsystems, collective actors, and working rules is clearly a timely and relevant topic. But confounding the consolidation of "partial regimes" with the consolidation of democracy as a whole deprives us of an important analytic distinction. It binds together by definition two things that in fact are only loosely coupled. For example, a democracy may be secure against reversals even if its party system is still inchoate and fluid; and conversely, a democracy may break down even if its party system is highly institutionalized. Moreover, if we fuse the two levels of analysis we cannot issue reasonable judgments anymore about the consolidation of democracy's core institutions or a democratic regime as such. For, from this perspective, as long as any subsystem of democracy (be it the party system, interest organizations, the parliament, the system of government) does not show the requisite degree of consolidation (which is difficult to define other than by reference to "best" or "normal" practices in advanced democracies), we have to classify the democracy in question as "unconsolidated." And as soon as any subsystem experiences radical structural change (as Italy's party system did in the early 1990s), we are compelled to describe the polity in question as "deconsolidating." This does not seem to make much sense.

Finally, the association of democratic consolidation with improvements in the quality of democracy or with democratic deepening represents the most popular "positive" notion of democratic consolidation. But it also seems to be the most problematic one. Both the concepts of "democratic quality" and "democratic deepening" are still unclear and controversial. While we have tons of literature as well as a great deal of consensus about liberal democracy's minimum standards, discussion about the standards of democratic quality is still very preliminary. Therefore, in the current state of debate, conceptualizing democratic consolidation as democratic deepening amounts to inviting a free-for-all. It permits importing into the definition of democratic consolidation, in a subjective and arbitrary way, any kinds of goals and criteria that one deems to be indispensable for a high-quality and thus "consolidated" democracy (which becomes just another vague label for "real" democracy). This cannot but lead, of course, to uncontrolled and incongruous conclusions about empirical states of democratic consolidation.

On a more fundamental level, "democracy precludes closure regarding its own identity."<sup>22</sup> It is a moving target, an open-ended, developmental kind of thing--and so is democratic deepening. Any fixed meanings we may attach to the concepts of democratic quality and democratic deepening, and any consensus we may reach about them, can only be "temporary equilibria" open to future revision. As a result, **[End Page 104]** if we associate democratic consolidation with democratic deepening, we get a concept of democratic consolidation that is open and boundless as well. In this sense, no democracy will ever be "fully consolidated," and it is quite

understandable that authors who support such a notion of democratic consolidation are highly reluctant to extend the "certificate" of democratic consolidation at all.

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## Notes

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1. See Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming), ch. 2.

2. Elinor Ostrom, "An Agenda for the Study of Institutions," *Public Choice* 48 (1986): 4.

3. Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

4. On "diminished subtypes" of democracy, see David Collier and Steven Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research," *World Politics* 49 (April 1997): 430-51.

5. See David Collier and Steven Levitsky, "Democracy 'with Adjectives': Finding Conceptual Order in Recent Comparative Research" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, 31 August-3 September 1995). This discussion does not appear in the published version of their paper, cited in note 4 above.

6. Positioning authoritarian and democratic regimes along a single continuum suggests that only quantitative differences separate these regime types. This is not a compelling assumption, however. For even if one thinks, as I do, that the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism is a qualitative one, a distinction of kind, a question of certain institutions being absent or present, one may concede that intricate problems of thresholds arise as soon as certain elements of democracy's institutional core package are either weak or absent. I should also note that the continuum looks closed on both sides while in fact it is closed only on its authoritarian side (by totalitarianism) but open on its democratic side (to future developments of democracy). In this sense, the metaphor of a horizon that I use below is "realistic" only for this open-ended side of the figure--a horizon, after all, can never be reached but recedes before the walker.

7. Note that this distinction between "positive" and "negative" consolidation is different from Geoffrey Pridham's. He associates "negative consolidation" with securing democratic survival and "positive consolidation" with legitimizing democracy at elite and mass levels. Yet the theoretical grounds of this distinction as well as the relation between the two types of democratic consolidation seem unclear. See Geoffrey Pridham, "The International Context of Democratic Consolidation: Southern Europe in Comparative Perspective," in Richard Gunther, P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, and Hans-Jürgen Puhle, eds., *The Politics of Democratic Consolidation: Southern Europe in Comparative Perspective* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 169.

- [8.](#) Guillermo O'Donnell, "Illusions About Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (April 1996): 38. See also idem, "Illusions and Conceptual Flaws," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (October 1996): 160-68; and Ben Ross Schneider, "Democratic Consolidations: Some Broad Comparisons and Sweeping Arguments," *Latin American Research Review* 30 (1995): 215-34.
- [9.](#) Richard Gunther, P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, and Hans-Jürgen Puhle, "O'Donnell's 'Illusions': A Rejoinder," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (October 1996): 155. When asked, anyone will agree with this cautious note against facile assumptions of linear progress. The literature is full of warnings that nothing is certain, that reversals can happen any time, and that even "consolidated" democracies are not immune to crises, "deconsolidation," and breakdown. However, "democratic consolidation" is one of those terms that refer both to a dynamic process (a consolidating democracy) and to its result (a consolidated democracy). And when authors use it to describe not the desired outcome--the telos--of democratic consolidation but the process that leads to its attainment, it is hard to avoid connotations of progressive certainties creeping into the language. For instance, common expressions such as "the process of democratic consolidation," "the dynamics of democratic consolidation," or "the logic of democratic consolidation" tend to suggest an underlying reality that propels itself toward the promised land of consolidation.
- [10.](#) See, for example, Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); and Laurence Whitehead, "The Consolidation of Fragile Democracies: A Discussion with Illustrations," in Robert A. Pastor, ed., *Democracy in the Americas: Stopping the Pendulum* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1989), 76-95.
- [11.](#) For a critique of causal concepts that mix up the definition of democratic consolidation with its explanation, see Andreas Schedler, "Expected Regime Stability: Rethinking Democratic Consolidation" (Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, Department of Political Studies, 1998, Working Paper 81).
- [12.](#) See Guillermo O'Donnell, "Transitions, Continuities, and Paradoxes," in Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell, and J. Samuel Valenzuela, eds., *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 17-56. The quotes are from pages 19 and 33.
- [13.](#) Samuel P. Huntington, "Democracy for the Long Haul," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (April 1996): 9. Note, however, that Huntington's notion of democratic erosion is substantially wider than the one developed here and includes, for instance, executive-led coups.
- [14.](#) See O'Donnell, "Transitions," 18-19.
- [15.](#) See J. Samuel Valenzuela, "Democratic Consolidation in Post-Transitional Settings: Notion, Process, and Facilitating Conditions," in Mainwaring et al., *Issues in Democratic Consolidation*, 57-104.
- [16.](#) See Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). However, Linz and Stepan's actual analysis is often inconsistent with their own term. For example, they classify Chile (correctly, I think) as an "incomplete democracy" and not as a "constitutionally unconsolidated" one (as their notion of "constitutional consolidation" would suggest). In essence, their idea of "constitutional consolidation" is at odds with their own prior assumption on pp. 3-6 that liberal democracy forms the indispensable starting point of democratic consolidation.
- [17.](#) Diamond, "Democracy in Latin America: Degrees, Illusions, and Directions for Consolidation," in Tom Farer, ed., *Beyond Sovereignty: Collectively Defending Democracy in*

*the Americas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 73. It is instructive to take a look at the "Map of Freedom" published regularly in Freedom House's *Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*. In the 1995-96 report, of all Latin America, only Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador, Costa Rica, and Panama are colored white, indicating their status as "free" countries. All the remaining countries appear in gray shades, expressing their lower ranking as no more than "partly free" polities. See Freedom House, ed., *Freedom in the World: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties 1995-1996* (New York: Freedom House, 1996), 99.

[18](#). See, for example, Philippe C. Schmitter, "Organized Interests and Democratic Consolidation in Southern Europe," in Gunther et al., *The Politics of Democratic Consolidation*, 284-314. I think it is misleading to describe this change in the level of analysis as "disaggregation" (Schneider, *Democratic Consolidations*, 220-21). After all, the relation between fundamental rules and secondary rules is not a relation between sum and parts (as the term disaggregation suggests) but more a relation between, say, basis and superstructure.

[19](#). See Schmitter, "Organized Interests." See also, for example, Geoffrey Pridham, "Political Parties, Parliaments and Democratic Consolidation in Southern Europe: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives," in Ulrike Liebert and Maurizio Cotta, eds., *Parliament and Democratic Consolidation in Southern Europe* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1990), 225-48. This "organizational" notion of democratic consolidation often comes together with the idea that actors have to accept and become habituated to these meso- and micro-arrangements. Linz and Stepan, for example, see the "constitutional consolidation" of democracy accomplished when all political actors "become subjected to, and habituated to, the resolution of conflict within the specific laws, procedures, and institutions sanctioned by the new democratic process." See Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 6.

[20](#). Christoph M. Kotowski, "Revolution," in Giovanni Sartori, ed., *Social Science Concepts: A Systematic Analysis* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1984), 440.

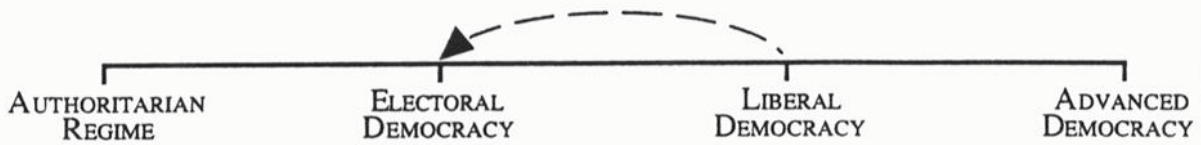
[21](#). Giovanni Sartori, "Guidelines for Concept Analysis," in Sartori, *Social Science Concepts*, 50 (see also 37-40).

[22](#). Laurence Whitehead, "The Vexed Issue of the Meaning of 'Democracy'" (unpublished manuscript, Oxford University, 1997), 17.

*Preventing Democratic Breakdown*



*Preventing Democratic Erosion*



*Completing Democracy*



*Deepening Democracy*



*Organizing Democracy*

