



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Boekbespreking van: Patterns of Democracy. Government Eorms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries**

Kolk, H. van der

### **Citation**

Kolk, H. van der. (2000). Boekbespreking van: Patterns of Democracy. Government Eorms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries. *Acta Politica*, 35: 2000(3), 340-343. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450747>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450747>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Book Reviews

Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy. Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1999. ISBN 0-300-07893-5 (paperback), 0-300-07894-3 (hardback). USD 17.00.

In *Patterns of Democracy*, Arend Lijphart returns to the question whether we can distinguish between a large number of democratic systems using a limited number of variables. This question is answered in the affirmative. "The enormous variety of formal and informal rules and institutions that we find in democracies can be reduced to a clear two-dimensional pattern on the basis of the contrasts between majoritarian and consensus government" (p. 301). New in the book, compared to its direct predecessor *Democracies* (1984), is the use of this contrast to explain differences in economic performance. This question is asked because of the alleged effectiveness of majoritarian democracies, especially in non-plural societies. The answer is no: "[M]ajoritarian democracies do not outperform the consensus democracies on macroeconomic management and the control of violence (...) but the consensus democracies do clearly outperform the majoritarian democracies with regard to the quality of democracy and democratic representation (...)" (p. 301).

The outline of *Patterns of Democracy* is identical to *Democracies*. Lijphart explains that two answers are possible to the question "Who will do the governing?" (p. 1). The first answer is 'the majority of the people'. According to Lijphart, this implies that there should be two parties, partly brought about by a majoritarian electoral system, of which one forms a government. This government, as representative of the majority, should dominate parliament. Moreover, this democratic system is characterized by "a pluralist interest group system with free-for all competition among groups" (p. 3). If the majority of the people are in charge, government should be unitary and centralized, should not be hindered by a bicameral system, and should be able to change its constitution easily. Moreover, the laws adopted by the majority should not be reviewed by judicial review, neither should the financial policies be interfered with by independent central banks.

The second answer to the question how a democracy should be organized is with 'as many people as possible'. The ten variables that characterize a majoritarian system are now reversed. A consensus democracy is characterized by a multi-party system,

## Book Reviews

supported by a proportional electoral system. This enables all groups to be represented in parliament. Because of the many parties, coalitions have to be formed. And, because parliament is the true representative institution, it should dominate the government. Moreover, this system is characterized by a 'corporatist' interest group system. In order to defend minorities and give them the opportunity to 'rule themselves', government should be decentralized and the constitution, guaranteeing minority rights, should not be alterable by a simple majority. Laws should be adopted by two different chambers in parliament, in order to prevent hasty decisions by a majority. Moreover, the constitutions should protect minorities against majority decisions, making judicial review necessary. Finally, central banks should be independent, mainly responsible for rates of inflation.

After this juxtaposition of two types of democracies, Lijphart provides some typical examples and selects 36 stable democracies to test this idea. Next, he operationalizes the ten aforementioned characteristics of democracies, and measures, describes and investigates their relationships. Sometimes the operationalization of a theoretical variable is rather straightforward, but most variables are not very easy to measure. In these cases, a lot of attention is paid to the validity of his operationalizations and to alternative measures derived from different assumptions. The ten characteristics are factor-analysed to test whether a single dimension ranging from majoritarian to consensus democracy can indeed be observed. This factor analysis, however, reveals a two-dimensional factor solution. Democracies can be described using two theoretical variables: an 'executive-parties' dimension, consisting of the first five variables, and a 'federal-unitary' dimension, consisting of the rest.

A new element in *Patterns*, compared to *Democracies*, is the use of the two dimensions to explain macro-economic performance, domestic violence, and the quality of democracy, indicated by a number of variables like women's representation in politics and a rich-poor ratio (chapter sixteen). These tests reveal that majoritarian democracies do not outperform consensus democracies with respect to economic performance and domestic violence, but rate somewhat lower on several indicators of democratic quality. This finding is used in a strong defense of consensus democracies.

The book contains an enormous amount of data about various aspects of democracies. And, because it discusses all stable and established democracies, it is an important contribution to comparative politics. Three aspects of the book are less convincing: the theory used to defend the analysis, the way some of the concepts are operationalized, and the connection between different levels of analysis.

Lijphart uses four different arguments to postulate that there is an empirical connection between the ten variables that indicate aspects of democracy. The first is 'logic'. According to Lijphart, the variables "are deduced from the majoritarian and consensus principles" and are therefore "logically connected" (p. 2). Logic could be a valid argument for an empirical connection between the variables, however, the deduction is not presented. The second explanation of the internal coherence is that democracies were formed by 'constitutional engineers' who had a coherent idea about

the answer to the question 'who will do the governing?'. Apparently, this implies that *if* a constitutional engineer takes a position somewhere in between on the scale, *then* he also takes a position somewhere in between on all aspects of democracies. He is not willing to trade off between various institutions. This 'voluntaristic' argument is not convincing. In many cases constitutions were not formed by engineers with a coherent conception of democracy. They were the result of historical processes, and of many incoherent ideas and problems. The third type of argument used is that of causal relationships between the variables involved. The electoral system, for example, is related to the number of parties by Duverger's Law. This argument to connect institutional features is, in a way, too strong. If the variables are causally connected, why ignore their causal order and use a data reduction technique like factor analysis? The fourth and final type of argument is that a common variable, like pluralism, explains all other variables. This means, in causal terms, that the relationship between the ten variables is spurious. This argument, however, is not elaborated on in *Patterns*, although it is mentioned a few times (pp. 61, 240, 251). Moreover, the current institutions are related to current levels of pluralism and not to the level of pluralism when the constitution was formed.

Even if we assume that the theoretical variables form a meaningful, complete and closely related set of democratic institutions, some operationalizations chosen are not convincing. A first example is the operationalization of cabinet types. Majoritarian democracies are characterized by one party majority rule (type 1), while consensus democracies are characterized by oversized coalitions (type 5). There are three other types of cabinets: (type 2) minimal winning coalitions, (type 3) minority coalitions, (type 4) minority, one-party cabinets. According to Lijphart, type 3 as well as type 5 are consensual. Types 2 and 4 are placed in an intermediate position (p. 91). Because Lijphart wants to characterize countries (a point to be discussed later), it would have been appropriate to count the time the government was of type 1 and add for example half the time the cabinet was of type 2 or 4. Lijphart, however, computes the percentage of the amount of time types 1 and 2 (!) are in the government ('minimal winning cabinets'), computes the amount of time types 1 and 4 (!) ('one party governments') are in government and averages the two resulting percentages. This operationalization is not clearly related to the aforementioned theoretical ideas.

A second example is the operationalization of executive dominance. In a majoritarian democracy the executive is dominant, while in a consensus democracy the legislative dominates the executive. Executive dominance is operationalized by the durability of a cabinet. Lijphart, however, also cites Taylor and Herman stating that "a considerable empirical study would be necessary before it could be said that [cabinet durability] was an indicator of *anything*" (p. 130). Lijphart, however, does not offer a 'considerable empirical study' to assess whether cabinet durability is a good indicator of executive dominance, nor does he offer any other argument. Lijphart himself is unhappy with this operationalization. Cabinet durability is not a good measure of executive dominance in presidential systems. It is also assumed not to exceed the level

in the United Kingdom (p. 133-134). Therefore, eleven of the thirty-six countries are assigned values of executive dominance on additional *ad hoc* arguments.

A third general topic to be discussed is the distinction between 'levels of analysis'. Although one can debate whether it is possible to formulate theories about systems without reference to lower levels, Lijphart does not make a proper distinction between levels of analysis. He uses hypotheses at a lower level, without explicating his 'bridge-assumptions' to the level of 'democracies'. He expects, for example, a relationship between the number of effective parties and the composition of a coalition. Multiparty systems will have coalition governments (or one party minority governments), while two party systems will have one-party governments. The units of this hypothesis are 'electoral periods'. In order to test this hypothesis, however, the 'mean effective number of parties' over the past decades is related to the 'percentage of minimal winning coalitions'. This leads to an enormous reduction of variance, overestimating the explanatory power of the hypothesis. A second example is the 'averaging' of institutional features over time. The number of chambers in a parliament is a characteristic of a country. But how should institutional change be incorporated? Sweden, for example, changed its medium strength bi-cameral system into a uni-cameral system in 1970. Lijphart simply averages this into a 'weak bi-cameral system', a system Sweden never had. The problem is not just that this averaging does not take into account the proper levels of analysis, but that it will in some cases overestimate the true relationship between variables.

Despite these three general points of critique, this successor to *Democracies* will further stimulate the debate about democracies. It offers insight into the role of consensus in established democracies and explicates some arguments to be used by constitutional engineers. Its discussion of some aspects of democracies are enlightening, and some strongly held opinions, like the policy effectiveness of one-party governments, are theoretically and empirically put into question.

Henk van der Kolk

Beate Kohler-Koch and Rainer Eising (eds.), *The Transformation of Governance in the European Union*. London and New York: Routledge 1999. 0-415-21548-X. £ 60.00.

The time is certainly ripe for a 'break-through' book on the European Union. Everyone is complaining that the dialogue between intergovernmentalism and neo-functionalism, which has long provided the basic structure for theoretical controversies over the dynamics of European integration, is no longer capable of performing that task. Moravcsik's recent effort (*The Choice for Europe*, 1998) to revive the former by 'liberalizing' its assumptions concerning national interest formation may have improved its descriptive content, but has at the same time only muddled our analytical