

Hellmeier, Sebastian

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[Book review] Oliver Schlenkrich. 2021. Origin and performance of democracy profiles

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Oliver Schlenkrich. 2021. Origin and performance of democracy profiles

Sebastian Hellmeier

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Democratic systems around the world are facing unprecedented challenges and pressures. According to reports from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) research institute and NGOs like Freedom House, the global quality of liberal democracy has been declining for several years. Liberal democracy, the dominant paradigm in the Western world, is challenged in several ways. First, authoritarian leaders challenge the *meaning* of democracy. Viktor Orbán, for example, propagates the idea of “illiberal democracy” to rationalize policies that undermine minority rights and solidify his grip on power under the guise of “democracy.” In a similar vein, China has recently put forth its vision of a “whole-process democracy” which does not involve nationwide elections. In addition to a struggle over the meaning of democracy, current debates center around *performance* differences between democracies and authoritarian regimes. Democracies increasingly need to make a “business case” to show that democratic institutions can deliver in a fast and globalized economy. Thus, measuring and evaluating democracy has probably never been more relevant.

Oliver Schlenkrich’s book, “Origin and Performance of Democracy Profiles,” offers a timely and important contribution to the field of comparative politics by systematically analyzing the relationship between different kinds of democratic regimes and their performance in a series of policy areas. Through his empirical analyses of over 80 democracies from 1974 to 2017, Schlenkrich challenges commonly held assumptions about the relationship between different kinds of democracies and their performance in different policy areas, and offers a nuanced understanding of the complex factors that shape democratic systems. Most importantly, his comprehensive and methodologically advanced book shows that there is no “superior” type of

✉ Dr. Sebastian Hellmeier

Abteilung Transformationen der Demokratie, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung,
Berlin, Germany

E-Mail: sebastian.hellmeier@wzb.eu

democracy. Yet, the configuration of democratic institutions does influence policy outcomes, even if the effect is rather small and only visible in the long term.

The book consists of three main parts that could be standalone contributions. The intuitive structure makes it easy for the reader to identify the most relevant aspects of this comprehensive and multi-layered oeuvre. Schlenkrich dedicates the first part of the book to the conceptualization, operationalization, and identification of different democracy profiles. His attempt is ambitious as he challenges seminal work in comparative politics, such as Lijphart's distinction between the majoritarian model and the consensus model of democracy. Schlenkrich's approach builds on the so-called Democracy Matrix that identifies three major dimensions of democratic governance (freedom, equality, control) but emphasizes trade-offs between them. In other words, there is no ideal democracy but different configurations of democratic institutions with their pros and cons. Given the centrality of the concepts for the chapters to come, a more in-depth discussion would have been helpful for readers unfamiliar with the Democracy Matrix and its conceptual underpinnings (p. 17–24). Based on that framework, Schlenkrich uses cluster analysis to identify democracy profiles empirically and classify a large number of countries accordingly. In this first part of the book, he showcases his methodological strengths by providing excellent data visualizations that guide the reader through relatively complex research methods. Several well-designed graphs show how some democracy profiles have become more prevalent over time and how they are distributed geographically (p. 33–39).

Before examining the relationship between democracy profiles and performance, Schlenkrich dedicates a whole chapter to a critical assessment of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data, forming the basis of all empirical analyses. The chapter identifies potential weaknesses of the data, such as a lack of conceptual clarity and vague questions for some specific indicators. This critical and transparent assessment is refreshing, as some work in comparative politics tries to hide the weaknesses of the underlying data. Schlenkrich concludes from this chapter—almost surprisingly—that the V-Dem data has a “sufficient degree of reliability and validity” (p. 94), despite the issues he identified. This chapter will be relevant to the thousands of users of the V-Dem data and beyond the research questions asked in this book.

In the second part of the book, Schlenkrich conceptually and empirically develops a typology of political performance, providing a comprehensive set of indicators to measure and compare policy performance in six areas, including economy, environment, and domestic security. A major contribution of this chapter is the theory-guided differentiation of performance indicators following the AGIL typology with performance dimensions such as adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latent pattern maintenance (p. 109). Schlenkrich deserves praise for carefully selecting indicators and combining them to latent scores, although in some instances, the discussion of choosing indicators is a bit lengthy. Similarly, some methodological details, such as the imputation of missing values, could have been moved to the appendix.

Part three tackles the main research question that the book raises and empirically examines the effect of democracy profiles on policy performance. The analyses of about 80 democracies from 1974 to 2017 indicate that there is no overall better-performing democracy profile. Some democracy profiles perform better in some areas,

while others are stronger in other areas. The impact of democracy profiles requires a more extended period (sometimes decades) to manifest. While the theoretical implications could have been discussed in greater detail, this is an important finding that challenges the popular belief that certain democracy profiles are inherently superior to others (p. 292–293). Schlenkrich's research suggests that various other factors determine policy performance. In the final part, the book explores the causes of different democracy profiles. The empirical findings show that several structural and cultural factors are relevant, such as British heritage.

One of the strengths of this book is its use of Bayesian statistics to cope with the complexity of the data and models. This methodological approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between democracy profiles and policy performance, taking into account uncertainty and missing data. Although the book's emphasis on methods might deter some readers without a background in quantitative methods, Schlenkrich deserves praise for the clear and well-structured description of his methodological approach.

Overall, "Origin and Performance of Democracy Profiles" is a thought-provoking and important contribution to the study of democracy and policy performance. Schlenkrich's ambitious research innovates conceptually and empirically, enhancing our knowledge about the relationship between democracy profiles and policy outcomes and providing a nuanced understanding of the complex factors that shape democratic systems. While the book does not offer clear lessons for reforming current democratic regimes, the empirical evidence refutes any dichotomized classification of democratic systems and underlines that democratic governance is more complex than some previous approaches might have suggested. While at times, the book puts too much emphasis on methodological challenges instead of engaging with the theoretical and conceptual intricacies of regime typologies, it raises the bar for the empirical study of political regimes. It will certainly inform ongoing debates about the different types of democracy and what we can expect from them when it comes to policy performance.

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