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Grand Challenge: Improving Measures of Democracy and Governance[1]

Henry E. Brady, Michael Brintnall, and Michael Coppedge[2]

"To measure is to know."
"If you can not measure it, you can not improve it."
Lord Kelvin, Sir William Thomson

Abstract

We propose a major funding effort across the social sciences to research and improve global indicators of governance and democracy. With advances in the quality and availability of data on elements of national and subnational governance and democracy and with progress on the conceptualization and design of relevant indicators and on the caliber of measurement, we can look both to transformative scholarship in the social sciences on understanding comparative and international politics, development, and social change; and to more useful guidance to practitioners who are directly engaged in changing the world.

During the final quarter of the twentieth century, the third wave of democracy transformed politics across the globe. This era was accompanied by the development of a burgeoning array of diagnostic tools and performance indicators designed to analyze and monitor the quality and performance of democracy and governance. The University of Gothenburg's Quality of Governance Institute has developed a dedicated Web site and an integrated dataset collecting most of these indicators (see http://www.qog.pol.gu.se/). Some of the indicator projects include the following initiatives.

- *The Worldwide Governance Indicators Project* at the World Bank Group reports aggregate and individual governance indicators for 212 countries and territories over the period 1996–2007 for six dimensions of government.

- *Freedom in the World* by Freedom House is a comparative assessment of global political rights and civil liberties for 193 countries and 15 territories.

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[2] Henry E. Brady is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley and the immediate past president of the American Political Science Association (APSA). Dr. Michael Brintnall is the Executive Director of APSA. Michael Coppedge is Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame and the Director of the APSA Task Force on Indicators of Democracy and Governance that was initiated by Professor Brady. All three authors are members of the Task Force. For communications about this paper, contact Dr. Michael Brintnall, American Political Science Association, 1527 New Hampshire Ave NW, Washington, DC 20036.

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- *Worldwide Press Freedom Index* by Reporters without Borders ranks 169 countries based on censorship and violence towards journalists.

- *Polity IV Project* provides extensive data on the "authority characteristics of states" for all major states from 1800–2009.

- *Global Corruption Barometer* by Transparency International is a public opinion survey that measures the extent to which the respondents believe corruption pervades public institutions.

Political indicators are now widely used by the international community, national governments, and advocacy groups. For example, these organizations collectively spend billions of dollars promoting democracy or good governance. They need accurate indicators of many attributes of states and regimes to track whether their efforts are helping, hurting, or making no difference. Indicators are also cited by a host of government institutions and policymakers. Several years ago, the US Congress urged the Secretary of State to not support the United Nations Human Rights Council and to further withhold any financial support for the Council in part because Freedom House ranked nine of the new Council member states as "not free." The Millennium Challenge Corporation uses Freedom House and Transparency International data to decide how to allocate its development assistance. References to indicators are common on the floors of the House and Senate and are even included in the text of certain bills.

Governance indicators are also foundational elements for contemporary social science research supporting comparative politics, international relations, sociology, political economy, developmental and institutional economics, methodology, measurement and statistics, and law, among other fields. Research on the causes and consequences of democracy and governance is rapidly growing in volume and sophistication, and further progress in these areas now requires greater reliability and precision. There are important questions that can barely be addressed at present due to the limitations of our indicators, and practitioners need answers to these questions. For example, it would be useful to know how best to sequence democratizing reforms. Is it prudent to promote electoral competition before a legislature is institutionalized? To demand respect for human rights before the judiciary is independent from the executive? Do competitive elections and widespread participation reduce administrative corruption? Do free markets actually enhance free societies, or is this merely appealing rhetoric?

As Lord Kelvin observed, progress in any discipline requires accurate measurement. Economics developed rapidly as a discipline in the twentieth century in large part because economists had abundant economic data at their disposal. America was the first country to incorporate a decennial census into its constitution. Economic indicators were the first to emerge from this new wealth of information including unemployment, housing starts, and household income. These preliminary indicators provided government officials with information about the effects of their economic policies. As statistical and other computational methods used to generate indicators have become more sophisticated, indicators have become more accurate and able to incorporate many different contributing factors. For example, during the 1940s the federal government conducted sophisticated measurements of the economy to produce a complex but

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very useful indicator, the Gross National Product (GNP). The GNP measured private consumption, government expenditures, gross imports and exports and has become (along with its sister indicator GDP) the gold standard of understanding the health of an economy and comparing the growth and state of competing economies. At about this same time, the federal government also devised methods for measuring employment and unemployment in the economy using establishment and personal surveys. These economic indicators continue to be evaluated and fine-tuned under the direction of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, and the United States Census Bureau, and they constitute a notable success for statistical indicators.

The need to analyze economic data spurred the increasing sophistication of econometric statistics and the limitations of sheer empirical generalization then spurred the discipline's current emphasis on theory development. Although political scientists have also introduced statistical and theoretical innovations in data-rich areas (survey research, election analysis, legislative voting, and political economy), many areas of political research are still limited by the same data scarcity that inhibited progress in economics 80 years ago. Much of the quantitative data used in comparative politics and international relations today was generated by lone scholars or small teams of scholars working on a specific project, just as non-census data used by economists was before the Great Depression. There are also some indicators, such as those created by Freedom House or Transparency International, which were developed with advocacy rather than rigorous research in mind. With a few exceptions, therefore (Correlates of War, Polity), the indicators we have do not cover the relevant universe of countries or historical periods and are not updated on a regular basis, and many are not really valid or sufficiently accurate for rigorous quantitative research.

We believe that governmental indicators could become equally useful for monitoring and studying the political health of countries. The American Political Science Task Force on Indicators of Democracy and Governance has been exploring the strengths and limitations of the current widely used governmental measures—especially in the areas of democracy or governance—and there are many other indicators dealing with delivery of services, corruption, human rights, press freedom, and state freedom that span the social, behavioral, and economic sciences. The Task Force convened a conference at the University of California, Berkeley, in October, 2009, and made preliminary reports at the 2010 American Political Science Association meetings in Washington, D.C. Our comments in this white paper are based upon our own perspectives, but they draw upon what we have learned from working with the APSA Task Force, which will report in the next six months.

We believe that the development of scientifically rigorous governmental indicators would move the study of comparative politics and international relations, and the understanding of broader social, economic and political phenomena that draw from them, forward in significant ways, just as the development of macroeconomic indicators has provided the foundation for modern macroeconomics. The following are some of the important areas for further work and research that would be transformed by state of the art indicators:

- Recognizing that macro concepts, such as democracy, often have multiple meanings such as liberal democracy, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, or social

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democracy. The same is true for other complex concepts such as governance, political stability, the rule of law, conflict, and legitimacy. Such complexity requires the development of different measures for different concepts.

- Developing multiple ways of measuring governmental performance using government statistics, nation-wide surveys, expert judgments, and other forms of data. No single indicator can capture every attribute of a complex concept, but a variety of indicators, taken together, can.

- Disaggregating measurements in at least two ways:
    - Into constituent sub-concepts such as separating evaluations of democracy into the extent of political participation, the equality of political participation, the degree of competitiveness among candidates or political parties, the freedom of the media, and the degree to which losing candidates and parties accept their defeat by relinquishing office.
    - Into regional measures, especially in larger countries, to take account of the fact that the extent of democracy may vary from one state, province, region, or even city to another.

- Developing statistical methods for analyzing the dimensionality of sets of measures thought to measure the same things.

- Evaluating the reliability of measures using both statistical and data auditing methods that consider the sources of error in data.

- Developing data infrastructure making it easier to update, audit, and share indicators.

- Developing the capabilities for social scientists to quickly obtain and analyze the multiple indicators that are now being produced by governments, international agencies, and non-governmental organizations.

We believe that a concerted effort to improve governmental indicators would significantly improve comparative and international research in the social sciences. Improved research would enable political scientists to reach across a variety of disciplines to better advance fundamental scholarship at national and subnational levels, and at the same time give more useful guidance to practitioners who are more directly engaged in changing the world. In addition, greater NSF emphasis on good measurement would provide the proper cautions and caveats for decision makers who already use these measures now for description and trend-tracking, and who are likely to use them even more in these ways in the future. Hence, we propose a major funding effort across the social sciences to research and improve these indicators. One of our hopes is that our Task Force report will lead to ongoing involvement in this area by the American Political Science Association, and we believe that this is one means by which the field of governmental indicators could be moved forward.