

Evaluating the Performance of Political Systems—A Critique of Extant Assessment and a Search for Alternatives

Li Wei*

Faculty of Social Sciences, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

The paper reviews the critique of widely used schemes of evaluating a political system's performance, namely Polity Project and Freedom House (FH) index, highlighting their ideological bias and methodological problems. The paper then searches alternative evaluation schemes that consider input, processes and output of a political system at the national, subnational and subsystem levels. Based on the review of theoretical and empirical studies across developing and developed countries, the paper suggests a list of indicators measuring political and administrative capacity, policy and regulatory capacity, and the level of socially sustainable development.

Keywords: policy system performance, political and administrative capacity, policy and regulatory capacity, socially sustainable development

What Is Wrong About Polity Project and Freedom House (FH) Index

The widely used evaluation scheme of a political system's performance has relied heavily on a particular norm of what accounts for a good political system and what leads to democratic governance (Polity5 Project Data User Manual; Gurr, 1974): 1) competitive election of political executives; 2) multi-party competition to influence national politics; 3) decentralized government structure; 4) limitation of state control over social-economic life; 5) protecting individual freedom and human rights.

The unfortunate conceptual and methodological flaws related to these measures have been revealed and criticized by some scholars. In the case of FH index, the methodological problem includes:

1. Conceptual stretch from civil liberty to democracy, good governance and democracy;
2. Inadequate level of transparency and replicability;
3. Lack of specificity and rigorousness;
4. Coding method systematically favors Christian and western countries over Muslim and Marxist-Leninist countries (Gianno, 2010).

The ideological bias of FH index is reflected in how it is conceptually constructed from:

1. The central value of liberty;
2. The central role of civil and political rights compared to socio-economic rights;
3. Acknowledgement of formal rather than substantive rights;
4. Ignoring the value of equality (Gianno, 2010).

Underlying these biases of the FH index is the endorsement of political pluralism that characterizes

Li Wei, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Chair of Society of Sustainability, Hong Kong.

* The author can be reached at <http://www.gpa.cuhk.edu.hk/en-gb/people/academic-staff/faculty/prof-li-wei>

Western political systems rooted in Athenian democratic traditions (Dahl, 2015). Even though the FH index recognizes that the groups in society are instruments to pursue and advance individual interests (as implied by political pluralism), it fails to consider the communitarian aspect of political pluralism: Individual's healthy development requires amenable social contexts (Eisenberg, 1995).

The Polity Project, an index categorizing political systems into democratic, authoritarian and autocratic regimes has similar conceptual and methodological problems:

1. Despite Gurr, one of the Polity Project's founders, stated in his article (1974) that he had no attempt to demonstrate that "democratic", "autocratic" or highly competitive political systems are more or less good than others, nor was he concerned with the extent of political systems' authoritarian control over the society, the categories of "authoritarian regime" and "autocratic regimes" determined by the Polity Project are almost always associated with researches showing negative attitudes to such regimes, such as "corruption", "high military expenditure", "empowering autocrats" and "restricting political participation" (Inter-American Wiki, 2019; Chang & Golden, 2010; Escriba-Folch, 2012).

2. The measurement of "authority pattern" in the Polity Project only code the *state* units, rather than all *social* units as are referred to in Eckstein's definition of authority pattern of a political system (another founder of the Polity Project) (Gurr, 1974).

3. The database of the Project excludes microstates, countries with foreign interruption, countries undergoing regime transition; this reduces the Project's usefulness in explaining regime differences.

4. The Project index has low correlations with educational level, GDP per capita and population size, and therefore is inconsistent with democratic theories.

5. The Project index has also low correlation with the FH index.

Finally, like many other comparative political index projects, Polity Project and FH index dataset are confined to national level politics and to the stage of policy decisions. Therefore they provide little information about subnational politics and stages of policy formulation and implementation.

The author calls for a reflective and experimental approach towards evaluating the performance of a political system. As American philosopher John Dewey (1916, p. 8) alerts us:

"Knowing always has a particular purpose, and its solution must be a function of its conditions in connection with additional ones which are brought to bear."

As other American political scientists and public administration scholars suggest, evaluating a political system's performance shall focus on its input, processes and output (Easton, 1957). The cure for an ill-functioned political system shall be found from knowing the system's actual conditions and from trial-error experiments.

In this sense, the author urges honest researchers to suspect the doctrine that "deepening democracy is a morally good" (Diamond & Morlino, 2004). The author welcomes the brave work by Jason Brennan *Against Democracy* (2017), who observed that:

"Political participation and democratic deliberation tend to make people worse—more irrational, biased, and mean."

Search for Alternative Evaluation of Political Systems

To evaluate the performance of a political system, we can consider input, processes and output at national, subnational and subsystem levels, such as people's social network and social trust, people's beliefs in the desired forms of government, people's support of the regime, state capacity, and social-economic development

and equality.

According to Tilly (2000), democratization is associated with control of political resources (contingent on state capacity) and mobilization of non-governmental actors in public politics. As Stokke (2009) points out, democracy does not just refer to popular representation through democratic elections, political parties and interest groups, but also refers to actual representation of people with regard to public affairs, through the mediation of social movements, community-based organizations, media, academics and traditional authorities.

For instance, Annaka and Higashijima (2017) used indicators of human well-being, such as infant mortality to evaluate a democracy's performance. Remmer (1996) used economic growth to evaluate a political system's performance. Charron, Dijkstra and Laquente (2013) found that Quality of Government index is highly correlated with social trust and social-economic development among EU member states. Based on East and Southeast Asian countries' experiences, Marsh (2006) proposed three measurable dimensions of state capacity important for democratization: political capacity, policy capacity and administrative capacity.

Apart from relying on internet archival data and opinion survey, the political system evaluation project can also identify conceptual dimensions and indicators' values by systematically reviewing country research studies using qualitative and mixed methods of data collection and analysis. In addition to FH index and Polity Project, alternative indices, such as Economist Intelligent Unit Democracy Index, Quality of Government Index, the World Bank Governance Indicators, Asian Barometer Survey, and Quality of Life Index, shall also be used for reliability and validity check.

Varied country performance with regard to Covid-19 pandemic control provides a case of alternative evaluation approach focusing on the performance of a livelihood-related policy subsystem within a political system. Studies show that coercion measures of lockdowns, contrary to the liberal ideals of what accounts for an effective health policy, in fact raise people's trust and support to government; the higher level coercion measures correlate with better performance in Covid-19 pandemic control (Kavanagh & Singh, 2020). Similarly, scholars find that government stringency and cultural tightness, rather than regime type proposed by the Polity Project, explain the reduced death from Covid-19 (Gelfand et al., 2021).

In a nutshell, the current categorization of regime type needs adjustment to have a better link with government performance. The author proposes to use the following indicators to evaluate the performance of a political system:

The Indicators Measuring Political and Administrative Capacity

a) The political capacity refers to formal and informal institutions that mediate citizens' engagement and provide executive authority legitimacy and decisiveness; it covers political culture, political party and the formation of executive authority (Marsh, 2006). It can be measured by the political parties' control over economic resources, membership and volunteer size and experiences, network ties to non-political organizations, control of government executive/advisory positions, public support and satisfaction towards governing parties and political executives, public attitude towards formation of executive authority, advocacy campaigning by community-based organizations, interest groups and political parties (Postle & Beresfold, 2007).

b) The administrative capacity refers to capability of the administrative agencies to efficiently and effectively implement executive decisions and fulfill the objective of government agenda (Dimitrova, 2002). It can be measured by the public officers' educational level, value orientation towards citizen involvement and social equity, pay level, the public personnel strength/population ratio, political control over their tenure and career

advancement, level of administrative authority's corruption, use of outsourcing in service delivery, skills and knowledge training, effective implementation of e-government, revenue extraction capacity and efficiency (Yang & Callahan, 2007; Fossett & Thompson, 2006; Papadakis, 2015; Broms, 2017; Easter, 2002; Sehuppan, 2009).

The Indicators Measuring Policy and Regulatory Capacity

Policy and regulatory capacity refers to the analytical, operational and political skills, resources and capabilities necessary to perform policy and regulatory functions, at the individual, organizational and system levels (Wu, Ramesh, & Howlett, 2018). It can be measured at the political system and policy subsystem level.

i) At the input stage:

Surveying government officials, experts, and non-governmental stakeholders' knowledge and skills of influencing policy processes, conducting policy analysis and evaluation, public communication, negotiation management; measuring the scope and transparency of participation and influence of policy analysts, professionals and experts, interest groups, general public; measuring financial resources committed to policy analysis and evaluation (e.g., Halligan, 1995; Aberbach & Rockman, 1989; Han & Ye, 2017).

ii) At the process stage:

Investigating whether mechanisms of stakeholder engagement, public communication, evidenced-based policymaking, feedback from targeted population, effective resource and performance management system are in place; the number of public consultation documents; responsiveness to public demands, alternative policy preferences, and watchdogs' criticism in policy development; inclusiveness to minority group and layperson's views and knowledge, and cross-sectoral involvement in policy formulation (e.g., Pierre, 1998; Levidow & Carr, 2007).

iii) At the output and outcome stage:

The quantity and significance of policy/regulatory changes passed by the legislature or issued by the executive governments; public support of passed policies/regulations (output); the extent of the progressive objectives of policy/regulations (e.g., Zhao, 2018; Heckman, 2010).

The Indicators Measuring Socially Sustainable Development

Socially sustainable development refers to the development of sustainable community underpinned by social equity and justice, and envisaged to provide a setting for long-term, and broadly defined equitable, inclusive and sustainable human activity (Dempsey, Bramley, Power, & Brown, 2011):

The level of socially sustainable development can be measured by:

1) The level of social capital possessed by individuals, including trust in public officials to care about all citizens, trust in people's ability to resolve conflicts and handle truths, trust in the fundamental fairness of the social system, and trust in one's family's ability to care for its needs (Pierce, Lovrich Jr., & Moon Jr., 2002).

2) Employment and fair distribution of income, education and training, social inclusion, health, residential stability, active community organizations, social networks, equal and open access to local public, private volunteer and community services, sustainable urban design, environmental quality, diversity and growth of economy, people's participation, representation and leadership in local affairs (Colantonio & Dixon, 2009).

3) The level of violent social movements/protests and secretive terrorist attacks, the level of political, financial and military resources that supports such protests/attacks, the degree of political polarization among the media, social organizations and the public, the number of strikes and the political aims of the strikes, state (particularly the police) capacity to pacify the violence and conflicts (Tejerina, 2001).

Conclusions

The paper reviews the widely used evaluation schemes of a political system's performance, namely Polity Project and FH index. It highlights their ideological bias and methodological problems. The paper has proposed alternative evaluation schemes that consider input, processes and output of a political system at the national, subnational and subsystem levels. These alternative schemes include indicators measuring political and administrative capacity, policy and regulatory capacity, and the level of socially sustainable development.

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