

Prejudice and manipulation under the cloak of science: Spain's dubious "full democracy" rating and the shaky foundations of democracy indices

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«There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.»

(Mark Twain, attributing the quote to Benjamin Disraeli)

The politics of democracy ratings

There is no doubt that democracy is globally at risk. At least since the start of the Great Recession in 2007, democracy, "the most successful political idea of the 20th century"¹ has been steadily losing ground to autocracy in many countries and seeing its basic tenets eroded by democratically-elected populist rulers in others. As a natural result of this concern, democracy indices aiming to quantify something as subtle yet complex as the democratic quality of a society have not only proliferated but also become more closely watched than ever. The mainstream media regularly announce the latest democracy ratings as news worthy of their first pages, and political commentators often draw major conclusions from a given country's slide up or down a given ranking.

This has turned these ratings into a political tool. A particularly egregious case is that of Spain, whose government has repeatedly used its ranking in some democracy indices² as evidence to counter complaints that its human and civil rights credentials have substantially degraded since the October 2017 Catalan independence referendum was met with police brutality against peaceful demonstrators and a huge wave of repression and lawfare was unleashed afterwards. The case is particularly outrageous as Spain's human and civil rights violations since 2017 have repeatedly been denounced by various international institutions (e.g., Amnesty International, the UN Arbitrary Detentions Working Group, various court rulings in Belgium and Germany...) as well as international media. Regardless of the drivers and rationale behind these incidents, their sheer number, frequency, seriousness and international visibility obviously mark a discontinuity point in Spain's democratic credibility which any reliable democracy index should reflect just as faithfully as a seismograph records a seismic wave.

Yet, despite all this tangible evidence undermining Spain's credentials in this area, perhaps the most important pillar of a democratic system (for without protection for dissidents' civil rights there cannot be safety for opposition and, without opposition, there can be no democracy), democracy indices such as the Economist Intelligence Unit's³ or the Varieties of Democracy Institute's⁴ rank Spain in their latest reports among the fullest democracies on Earth – ahead of countries like France and Belgium (in the case of EIU's 2020 report⁵) or, even more surprisingly, Finland, Ireland, UK, Netherlands, France, Germany, Iceland and Austria (in the case of V-Dem's 2020 report⁶). How is this at all possible?

Peeping into the kitchen

We decided to find out by asking the authors themselves and, to this end, we contacted both the EIU and the V-Dem teams. EIU kindly acknowledged receipt of our mail but then failed to respond – which obviously only added to our concerns about this index. Conversely the V-Dem team, to their huge credit, engaged in an open, candid, transparent exchange with us– which bears witness to their high professional standards, and for which we are indeed very grateful. Although all these indices are based on flavours of the same methodology (essentially an expert opinions' poll), V-Dem is actually the most prestigious of them due to the rigour of its methodology and, from this perspective, constitutes an excellent benchmark for all other democracy indices. Precisely because of this, what we found in the course of our interaction with the V-Dem team is especially relevant.

Two findings in particular stood out for us. The first is that the definitions and architecture of the V-Dem indices are indeed sound and well thought-through. The second, however, is that there is very little control on the rating criteria, standards and rationale: experts are selected by regional managers on a confidential basis (partially due to safety concerns in some countries) and coders, who take their input and transform it into ratings, are not required to provide any rationale for their assessments, not even for any retrospective changes of previous years' ratings that they may

undertake. V-Dem does openly provide a lot of very detailed tabular information, down even to coder level, about the ratings' breakdown into their component indices... Yet the rationale for the coders' decisions, aside from the high-level comments that may appear on the annual report, is totally missing.

It would be difficult to overemphasize the relevance of these concerns. If country ratings cannot be guaranteed to abide to common standard criteria, the entire concept of ranking countries against each other loses meaning. If, in addition, coder changes may introduce unobservable changes of criteria (which may be the reason why past ratings are restated) then the use of ratings as a tool to spot democratic standards' wax or wane over time in a given country also becomes questionable. Yet, above all, the real issue is that, if ratings result from anonymous expert feedback interpreted and codified by coders who do not even need to justify their recommendations, then there is no way to weed out the impact of bias, prejudice or plain self-interest, and the ratings become just glorified personal opinions at best and, at worst, a fantastic opportunity for manipulation by whichever political or ideological allegiances manage to become dominant in the expert/coder community ascribed to a given country.

A gate wide open to bias and prejudice

An example will perhaps make the seriousness of this issue clearer. In its 2017 report (Figure 1) V-Dem actually reflected the impact of the repression wave at its start (when, in fact, it had not yet reached the outrageous depths it sunk into during the following years) through reducing Spain's liberal democracy rating by 8%. In the subsequent years, however, just as repression in Spain became deeper and more widespread, the rating not only failed to reflect it but went back up steadily and then, astonishingly, in 2020 the previous years' ratings were restated after the fact to erase the major 2017 drop and turn it into a minor blip. Why? If nothing else, the change of criteria since 2017, and even more the score restatement after the fact, are substantial enough to at least beg the question. Nevertheless, when we posed this obvious question to the V-Dem team, they were not able to provide any rationale for this, nor to refer us to anyone in their team who could. They trusted, unquestioningly it seemed, their coders and their anonymous experts to provide accurate and consistent ratings without bias or prejudice... This frankly looks like a lot of faith to us.

Figure 1: Spain's V-Dem Liberal Democracy Rating 2016-2020

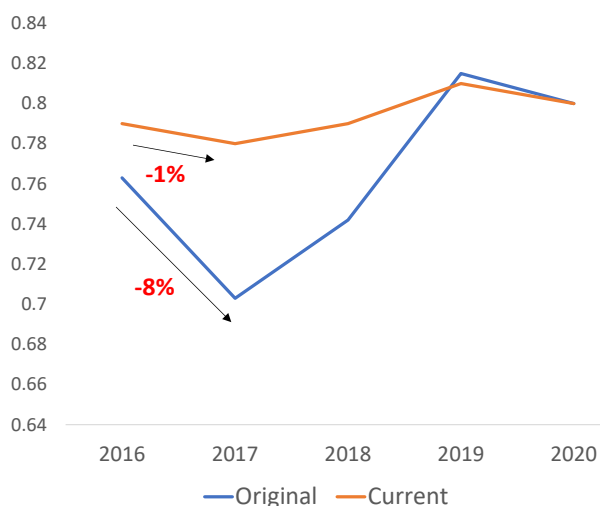
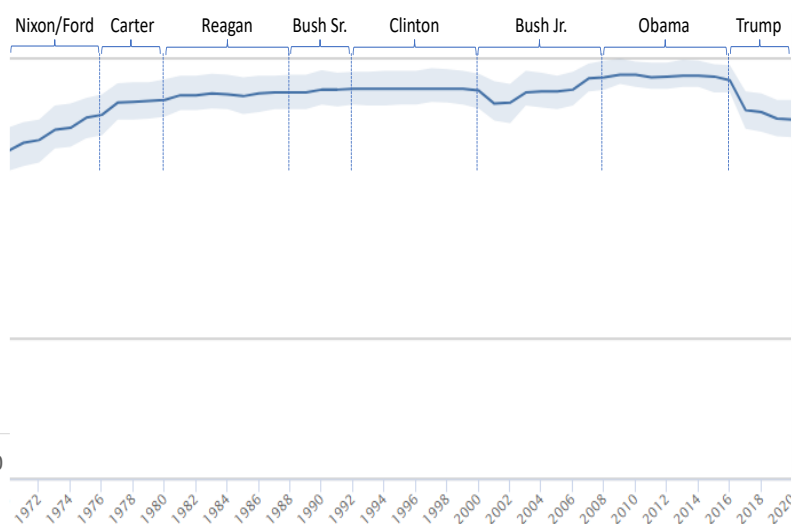


Figure 2: U.S. V-Dem Liberal Democracy Rating 1970-2020



Such a process is indeed wide open not only to bias and prejudice but also to political manipulation: indeed, to the extent expert opinions are not questioned, the composition of each country's expert team, the influence of each member's background, ideology and environment, would be crucial. Furthermore, this form of manipulation should be particularly easy to do when the victims are mostly members of a minority somehow regarded as alien or in some other way rejected by many members of the majority group, as it is the case of Catalans in Spain: under these conditions, a random selection of experts is most likely to reflect the majority views and, as a result, tend to underrate the abuses committed against members of an unpopular minority group.

Not that the Spanish case would be unique. Take for example the United States' V-Dem liberal democracy rating (Figure 2). Despite the continuation of the appalling anti-terrorist methods of the Bush administration during Barack Obama's presidency (methods that would have seemed unthinkable before the so-called War on Terror), despite the frequency of other incidents, such as U.S. police abuse against minorities, not changing appreciably, and despite the other features of the U.S. constitutional system remaining essentially the same, the U.S. V-Dem liberal democracy rating increases for 2009 (i.e. when Obama took office) to the highest level in the country's history, and remains there until 2016. Surely an improvement took place (although Obama failed to deliver on many of his promises in this area e.g. to close the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp) but, was liberal democracy really stronger in Obama's U.S. than, say, under Bill Clinton, when the tortures and abuses that characterised the War on Terror were almost unthinkable?

Conversely, the U.S. V-Dem liberal democracy rating drops sharply under Donald Trump's presidency (2017 to 2020) to its lowest level almost since the Vietnam War: not even the dark first years of the War on Terror are rated so low. True, human rights degraded substantially in the course of Trump's presidency (think for example of the treatment of immigrants) but, so much? Objectively, whatever one may think about presidents Clinton, Bush, Obama or Trump, it is difficult to justify these ratings on the basis of observable facts alone... but really easy when one considers the relative popularity of each one of these U.S. presidents in mainstream media: compare Obama, who won the Nobel Peace Prize when he has been less than a year in office, with Trump, often described by high-brow media as a dangerous populist leader (albeit arguably with good reason). So, are those anonymous yet largely unquestioned experts on whose personal opinions democracy indices are built even able (or willing) to separate the mainstream media's hype on a country's government from the objective assessment of that country's democratic credentials?

Media hype and political bias against observable facts

A lot of additional evidence points in the same direction. Consider, for example, Figure 3. The vertical axis represents the EIU Civil Liberties Index (one of the five subindices composing the EIU Democracy index) for year 2017, whilst the horizontal axis depicts the Human Rights Protection Score first put forward by Fariss & Schnakenberg (2014)⁷, which is built on a set of observable variables such as killings, incidents of repression or negative international sanctions and is currently available up to year 2017. Being as it is based on a set of objective data, this observations-based score may be regarded as reasonably unbiased, whereas subjective estimates are, by definition, inevitably exposed to cognitive bias, whether voluntary or involuntary. Hence, by comparing its ratings with the subjective ones provided by the EIU for exactly the same year (2017) and the same concept (human / civil rights) we can test to what extent there are systematic biases impacting subjective ratings... and, by restricting the analysis to countries within the European Economic Area, we constrain it to countries that are more comparable from an economic and social viewpoint.

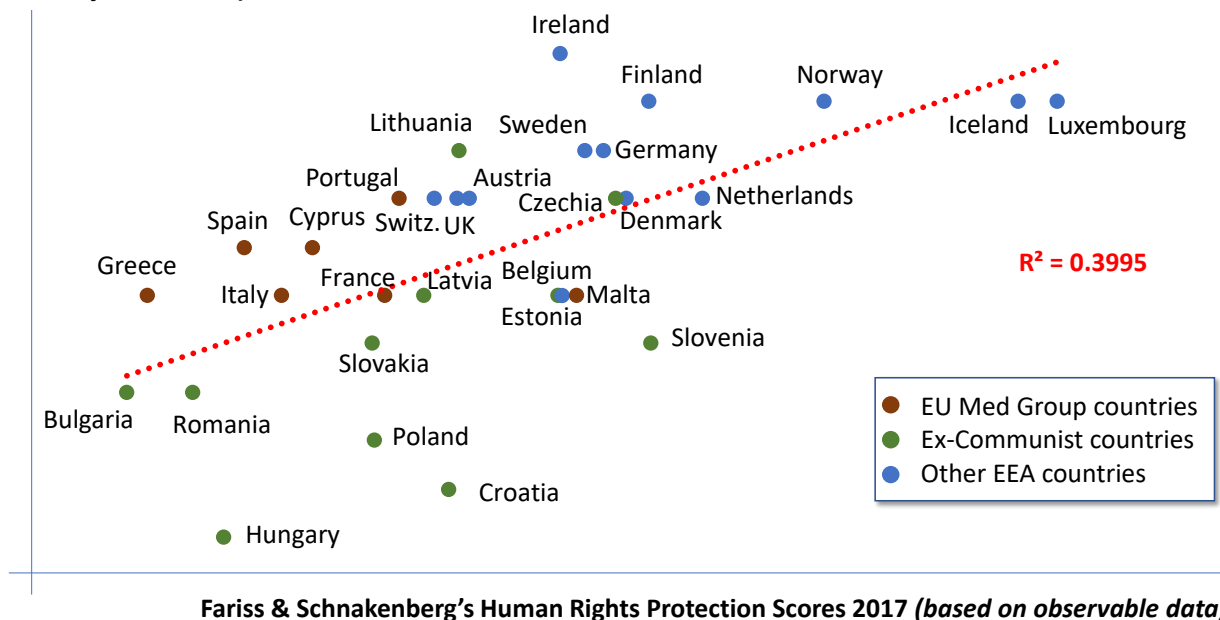
As a general observation, the correlation between the two indices is worryingly low: just under 40% of the EIU's subjective Civil Liberties index can be explained through the observable data in the Human Rights score⁸. Conceptually, if we take the Fariss & Schnakenberg data-based metric as unbiased (since it is naturally impervious to subjective opinion), this is almost as if the expert team's subjective estimate got it wrong three out of every five times – certainly not a track record bound to inspire much confidence. But the worst comes when we check which countries appear to be privileged in the EIU subjective ranking respectively. For instance, according to the more "objective" index, the worst human rights track record in the EEA (say, those to the left of Latvia) belongs to a set of countries in the south of Europe, roughly (albeit with some honourable exceptions) between the Alps and the Mediterranean Sea⁹. Yet the EIU Civil Liberties index conveys a completely different image: that EU Med Group countries have a systematically better track record than ex-Communist ones.

The comparison between pairs of country makes more visible the potential rationale behind these subjective ratings. For example, based on objective criteria Spain was in 2017 at about the same level of respect for human/civil rights as Hungary – which makes sense considering that, despite its increasingly authoritarian government (not as much in 2017 as it is today), Hungary did not order the violent repression of peaceful demonstrators, nor did it end the year with several political prisoners, as Spain did that year, so it is easy to see that one thing would balance the other. Conversely, according to the EIU's subjective view, Spain was miles ahead: it is difficult not to link this to the fact that Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian prime minister, is regularly depicted as a dangerous populist (just like Donald Trump, by the way) in

mainstream and high-brow media, whereas Mariano Rajoy, Spain’s prime minister at the time, was usually presented as a mild-mannered (if somewhat dim-witted) ruler closely aligned to Angela Merkel.

Figure 3: Comparing EIU’s Civil Liberties Index with Fariss & Schnakenberg Human Rights Protection Scores Countries within the European Economic Area (EEA), year 2017

EIU Civil Liberties Index 2017
(based on subjective views)



In a similar vein, Spain is, per objective data, miles behind Belgium in terms of human rights yet, according to the EIU’s subjective views, it is miles ahead – which feels weird considering Belgium is precisely the country that, due to its high human rights standards, the exiles of the Catalan independentist government selected as their new home where they would not be exposed to the Spanish courts’ abuse as were their colleagues who stayed. Yet here again the same hypothesis holds: Belgium, with its short-lived ministerial cabinets, long periods without a government (589 days in 2010-2011) and, between 2014 and 2018, a 4-party coalition government including even a Flemish independentist party (N-VA), is not often the darling of mainstream international media – certainly not the way Spanish high stable, non-coalition governments tend to be.

More generally, a quick glance at the diagram shows that countries perceived as having followed socially hard but economically orthodox austerity policies to exit the Eurozone crisis (e.g. Ireland, Portugal, Greece, Cyprus, Lithuania, Finland, Italy, Spain...) along the lines recommended by the so-called European Troika¹⁰ appear comparatively favoured in the EIU vertical index respective to their ranking in the more fact-based horizontal one, whereas those whose governments are generally regarded by high-brow press as led by populist parties or by coalitions involving them (e.g. Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia...) are comparatively disfavoured. This can hardly be a coincidence. It is in fact neither a novel observation nor one applicable to only one or two of the most famous indices: a 2017 study on Freedom House’s democracy scores, for example, concludes that “countries aligned with U.S. foreign policy tend to receive better scores in Freedom House than in other prominent indicators.”¹¹ and, furthermore, that “the most influential ratings often are powerful precisely because they reflect the value judgments of the powerful.”¹²

The most perverse implication comes to mind almost immediately: to the extent ranking institutions aim to become well known and influential, it would be in their interest to leave their rating process wide open to influence by the powerful (and by the media that support their views) since it would be precisely by peddling back to those media their own prejudices under the guise of scientific work (in short, by telling them what they want to hear) that these indices would capture media attention and thus become famous and influential.

Conclusion: Prejudice and manipulation under the cloak of science

This is all truly disturbing. Even in the best possible scenario, it suggests that the faith so often put in the objectivity of these indices, in their ability to separate fact from hype, is substantially overrated if their experts cannot even separate the general media support or disapproval of certain governments from the specific facts related to human / civil rights – let alone to something as ethereal as “democracy.” In a less charitable interpretation, some of these ratings may well be subject to purposeful manipulation by various government agencies – since these indices’ ratings have become such politically-charged news yet the teams that produce only impose very weak controls to prevent undue influences. Given the accumulation of evidence and the obvious incentives this “less charitable” hypothesis cannot be discarded as a mere conspiracy theory: even if the authors of an index never meant to (and most likely none of them means to), their media visibility has a natural dependence on their echoing the views these media favour and, therefore, those indices that have survived and thrived until this day, those whose rankings every reputable newspaper quotes as soon as they appear, must at least to some extent conform to type.

It is hard to tell to what extent Spain’s astonishingly positive democracy ratings reflect the more or the less charitable interpretation but, based solely on the objective facts, one must conclude that Spain’s numerous recent human rights violations are simply incompatible with the “full democracy” sobriquet that democracy institutes have so generously bestowed on the Kingdom of Spain... It is sad that, by adhering to a flawed methodology, these index agencies add confusion in a field where their avowed, original aim was precisely to improve transparency. It is even sadder that such a faulty tool give the government of a flawed democracy with insufficient respect for human rights, as is Spain, the means to claim that it is, against all evidence, a “full democracy” ahead of others with much better credentials.

¹ [Democracy - What's gone wrong with democracy | Essay | The Economist](#)

² [España consolida su democracia plena y ya es la 18.ª mejor del mundo según The Economist \(thisistherealspain.com\)](#)

³ [Democracy Index 2020 - Economist Intelligence Unit \(eiu.com\)](#)

⁴ [Home | V-Dem \(v-dem.net\)](#)

⁵ EIU Democracy reports are always labelled according to the year to which they refer e.g. the EIU Democracy Index 2020 was launched in 2021.

⁶ V-Dem reports are always labelled according to the year in which they are issued, so the V-Dem Democracy Report 2020 describes the situation in 2019 and the Democracy Report 2021 describes that of 2020

⁷ The data can be easily downloaded from [Human Rights - Our World in Data](#), the original sources being Schnakenberg, K. E. & Fariss, C. J. (2014). Dynamic Patterns of Human Rights Practices. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 2(1), 1–31. and more recently Fariss, C. J. (2019). Yes, Human Rights Practices Are Improving Over Time. *American Political Science Review*

⁸ Low consistency across democracy indices has already been observed before e.g. [Does the Choice of Democracy Measure Matter? Comparisons between the Two Leading Democracy Indices, Freedom House and Polity IV | Government and Opposition | Cambridge Core](#), although both indices could be regarded as more or less equally subjective in nature

⁹ Albeit with the exception of the alpine countries themselves (i.e. Switzerland, Austria and Slovenia) as well as Croatia and the island of Malta

¹⁰ *Troika* is the name the press gave to the combination of European Commission, ECB and IMF during the Eurozone crisis

¹¹ See [Should we trust democracy ratings? New research finds hidden biases - Revista de Prensa \(almendron.com\)](#) and also a related study cited by the author [Comparing Freedom House Democracy Scores to Alternative Indices and Testing for Political Bias: Are US Allies Rated as More Democratic by Freedom House?: Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice: Vol 18, No 4 \(tandfonline.com\)](#)

¹² The original study can be found in [The Politics of Rating Freedom: Ideological Affinity, Private Authority, and the Freedom in the World Ratings | Perspectives on Politics | Cambridge Core](#)