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Democratic consolidation (DC) is an elusive concept that bears many faces and wears many clothes. Students of new democracies use it to describe a wide range of tasks and realities. The present essay, however, will ignore the plurality of competing meanings that surrounds the term. It will analyze only one specific notion of DC, albeit the central, the most widespread, the classical one: the one we associate, in general terms, with the challenge of securing democracy and preventing authoritarian regressions.

At first sight, this “classical” notion of DC appears to be simple and straightforward. Yet current ways of using and conceptualizing it must be regarded as grossly inadequate. More often than not, authors define the term “consolidation” by naming just another, more or less synonymous one. Thus, in positive terms, students of DC speak about democratic stability, continuity, maintenance, survival, endurance, persistence, resilience, viability, sustainability, and irreversibility. In negative terms, they talk about democratic fragility, uncertainty, contingency, fluidity, risk-proneness, vulnerability, or about the avoidance of democratic destabilization, death, reversal, breakdown, collapse, overthrow.

The proliferation of terms and the semantic confusion it generates are disturbing. But the main problem with DC does not lie in the choice of labels but in concept building and concept usage. Most definitions of DC are no more than comfortable shorthands that remain underdeveloped and underexplained, and thus cannot, in no way, do justice to the conceptual choices and methodological complexities involved.

In the present article, the term “democratic consolidation” shall carry a specific and precise meaning: expected regime stability. In this sense, we can take a democracy to be consolidated as soon as we reach the conclusion that its probability of breakdown is very low, or the other way round, that its probability of survival is very high. In other words, democratic consolidation “reaches closure” when we, or any other relevant observers, “expect the democratic regime to last well into the foreseeable future” (Valenzuela 1992, 70).¹ This definition makes explicit, in a clear

¹ Note that this definition rests on a narrow idea of “stability”; it is only regime stability (or continuity) that counts; policies and politicians, for example, may change, as a matter of course. In addition, the concept recurs to a narrow notion of “regime”. For a democracy to be consolidated, it claims, only the very core rules that regulate access to positions of state power, namely, political elections, have to look firm and secure. It is democratic elections which have to be here to stay – regular, clean, inclusive, free, and competitive elections. Any other rules or institutions that make up a “democratic regime” may still be open to question, even if they involve choices so fundamental as those between electoral systems (proportional versus majoritarian) or forms of government (presidentialism versus parliamentarism).
and concise way, what most other concepts of DC struggle with in more obscure and implicit ways: the pivotal importance of probability estimates in the study of “democratic consolidation.” In essence, the article develops and explains some strong and fundamental implications that follow from its initial conceptual decision to anchor the notion of DC in the soft grounds of expectations and probability calculations. It explains, thus, the prospective, continuous, descriptive, cognitive, and perspective-dependent nature of “democratic consolidation.”

**A Probabilistic Concept**

Defining DC in probabilistic terms is less eccentric or even original than it may seem at first sight. Quite to the contrary, it is fully concordant, I think, with much of the literature. Numerous students of DC employ an explicit probabilistic language. They talk of probabilities, risks, dangers, chances, and uncertainties. They associate DC, for instance, with diminishing “risks of an authoritarian regression” (O’Donnell 1992, 17), subsiding “threats of destabilization” (Mainwaring et al. 1992a, 3), decreasing “success chances of authoritarian involutions” (Kasapović and Nohlen 1996, 219), a rising “likelihood” of military acquiescence (Weiner 1987, 864), a reduced “probability of breakdown” (Waldrach 1996, 65), and dissolving “uncertainties” about the continuity of the democratic game (Przeworski 1986; Schmitter 1988, 6; Whitehead 1989, 79). Clear probabilistic connotations are visible as well in many negative terms that describe the absence of democratic consolidation. Terms such as “fragility” (Whitehead 1989), “vulnerability” (Tulchin 1995, ix), or “risk-proneness” (Linz and Stepan 1996a) provide vivid labels for insecure prospects of regime survival. They are vignettes of caution or even pessimism. They portray democracies living in the shadow of an eventual (or even quite probable) disintegration under stress. In addition, the prevailing rejection of determinism we find in studies of DC (see e.g. Baloyra 1987a, 14; Diamandousos et al. 1995, 392; Gunther et al. 1995, 7f., 20f.; 1996, 155; Linz and Stepan 1996a, 6; Munck 1996, 13; Pridham 1995, 202; Schmitter 1988, 4; Sorensen 1993, 46), points to the probabilistic foundations of the subdiscipline.²

Of course, probabilistic conceptualizations of DC may be widespread, but they are not universal. The notion of “democratic consolidation” occupies the center


³ I should advert that my (recurrent) loose talk about “consolidology” as a “subdiscipline” of political science would probably not survive critical examination. Evidently, DC is a well-selling label that enjoys wide currency and provides a disperse set of authors with a – I would say, illusionary – sense of common purpose and community. But does a strong and somewhat vague term (that covers several strong and somewhat vague themes) make for a subdiscipline?
of a wide semantic field that accommodates lots of neighboring nonprobabilistic terms which many scholars use as close synonyms for DC. This applies to terms such as democratic stability, stabilization, survival, guarantee, continuity, maintenance, permanence, endurance, or persistence.  

Nevertheless it is fair to say that much of the language of consolidation studies is a probabilistic language and that much of the common usage of its key term parts from probabilistic premises. Yet students of DC seem to feel uncomfortable with the anti-deterministic assumptions they use to make. They tend to leave them implicit and shy away from their implications.

A Prospective Concept

The probabilism of consolidation studies can be traced back, I think, to one main reason. Its origins lie in the temporal perspective we students of DC tend to assume. Most of us are studying today’s “third wave” democracies. We are not looking back at historical cases, successful or not, whose outcomes are known and definitive. We are looking at contemporary cases, hopeful or not, whose outcomes are still in the making. We are not contemplating monuments of the past but future contingencies. We are not talking about given results but about uncertain scenarios. We are not dealing with finished stories but with improvised open-ended scripts. Instead of reaping the benefits of hindsight we have to bear the burden of foresight.

This means that authors who employ non-probabilistic terms such as stability or continuity either look into the future with false certainties, or they change their perspective, shifting their analytical focus from present futures to present histories, from unfolding dramas to past events. Unfortunately, those changes in time perspective often go unnoticed and misunderstood, which leads to considerable conceptual confusion.

For instance, I hold it to be erroneous and misleading to think, as many authors do, that democratic “persistence” represents a “phase” following democratic consolidation (see e.g. Diamandouros et al. 1995, 412; Gunther et al. 1995, 3; Morlino 1995, 577; Schmitter 1988). Which could be a plausible theoretical criterion for distinguishing between the two in sequential terms? It is difficult to imagine


5 To give just one recurrent example: The often-noted apparent paradox that consolidated democracies are not immune to breakdown (see e.g. Diamandouros et al. 1995, 413; Linz and Stepan 1996a, 6; Waldrauch 1996, 87) loses all of its mystery if one only accepts the probabilistic bases of DC. In a probabilistic perspective, it is nothing but a trivial point that high probabilities of surviving do exclude remaining possibilities of dying.
anyone (and none has been offered to date). Indeed, it seems much more convincing to adopt an alternative view: If we talk about democratic “persistence” it is not a different stage we are looking at but a different perspective we are looking from: Instead of looking into an uncertain future we are watching either past or present empirical realities. And it is this change of perspective, and the empirical certainties it delivers, that allows us to drop our prospective cautions and replace the probabilistic language of “consolidation” with the non-probabilistic notion of “persistence.”

The two temporal perspectives are not incompatible with each other. But they do represent “a difference that makes a difference” (Gregory Bateson). In a way they even constitute two different strands of literature: Studies of democratic performance analyze the conditions of past regime stability, while studies of democratic consolidation analyze the conditions of future regime stability. Naturally both discussions feed into each other, inform and stimulate each other, and finally correct and complement each other. But with the different time perspectives they adopt they also assume different tasks: explaining versus predicting.

In contrast to students of democratic stability, students of democratic consolidation are condemned to do what social scientists are least equipped to do: not to explain but to predict. Where lies the difference between the two tasks? His important to stress that the difference does not simply reside in the probabilistic nature of predictions. After all, all explanation in modern social science is not deterministic but probabilistic. In explanations as well as in predictons, the links we draw between causes and consequences are probabilistic.

Yet in addition to the universal probabilistic status of causal links, predictions face another, a second problem of probabilistic calculation. They face what we may call the double probabilism of both effects and causes. When we look into the future not only the effects we study are uncertain, but the causes are as well. Not only the explanatory weight, but the very existence of certain causal factors is open to question. To establish whether relevant “independent variables” will be absent or present, or present to some degree, therefore becomes a matter of probabilistic estimates. It is this “double probabilism” which makes for the heightened uncertainty that typically accompanies exercises of prediction.

All this implies that we cannot talk about prospects of democratic consolidation without defining future conditions. When we want to assess the life expectancy of a democratic regime we have first to establish the time horizon we consider and then make some assumptions about the enabling and constraining factors we are expecting to work themselves out. However, even if any analysis of DC must rest on such prior decisions, and critically depends on them for its final conclusions, students of DC have largely shied away from discussing these critical starting points. Yet if we want to generate convincing assessments of DC we have to uncover the bases of our arguments. We have to make our theoretical choices
explicit. We have to provide reasoned justification for the time frames as well as the causal variables we assume.

With respect to the time horizons we adopt we may ask, for example: Do we calculate chances of regime survival until the next national elections? The next year? The next ten years? What are reasonable time horizons? Eternity? Who bets on eternity? The long run? Even if, according to Keynes, in the long run we are all dead? How long does "the foreseeable future" (Valenzuela 1992, 70) last? And how long "an indefinite future" (O'Donnell 1996a, 36)?

With respect to future conditions we assume we may ask: Should we support hypotheses we take for realistic or those we accept as cautious? How risk-averse should we be? How optimistic can we be and how pessimistic must we? Should we normally rely on rebus sic stantibus assumptions?

The consolidological mainstream tends to emphasize the long run. And it tends to draw worst-case scenarios. Terms such as "resilience" (Gunther et al. 1995, 21), "viability" (Sunkel 1995), or "sustainability" (Przeworski 1996) suggest that a "consolidated" democracy should be able to manage pending challenges, survive interrupting crises, and adapt to changing circumstances. But should we really extend the quality label of consolidation only to "crisis-resistant" regimes (Merkel 1996a, 12) that promise to survive "even in the face of severe political and economic crises" (Linz and Stepan 1996b, 15)? Do we have good private, political, or scientific reasons that could sustain, paraphrasing Albert Hirschman, such a bias against hope?

A Continuous Concept

Conceptualizing democratic consolidation in probabilistic terms implies that we think of it as a continuous variable. Or more precisely, it implies that we think of it as a qualitative distinction drawn on the basis of a quantitative continuum.

Probability values run from one to zero, and survival chances of political democracies naturally embrace the same range of variation. Hypothetically countries may take on any value in between the poles and they may distribute in any way along the continuum. But the language of regime consolidation parts the continuum into two. It draws a dividing line between "high" chances of democratic continuity ("consolidated regimes") and "low" chances of democratic continuity ("fragile regimes"). And it assumes that these broad categories make sense in the real world. It assumes that most empirical cases can be grouped along this binary distinction without exerting too much classificatory violence.

However, if we assess the life expectancies of empirical political regimes, we are likely to find at any time that numerous regimes are not located close to the poles.

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6 For similar notions, see also Gunther et al. (1995, 8, 13, 16; Diamandouros et al. (1995, 389, 396), Merkel et al. (1996a, 12), Remmer (1995, 114).
but fall somewhere in between the ideal-typical extremes of expected stability and
instability. In fact, the extreme endpoints themselves are unattainable. Neither the
persistence nor the demise of a political regime can ever be a matter of absolute
certainty. Even in the case of old consolidated Western democracies, certainties
about future regime continuity—with probability values of one—are utopian (see e.g.
Schmitter 1988, 4f.; Valenzuela 1992, 59). And even the "classics" of democratic
breakdown such as Germany in 1933 or Chile in 1973 were under-determined at the
time and seem inevitable—with survival chances equal to zero—only in retrospect
(see Linz 1978).

Nevertheless there is a handful of clear cases which come quite close to the
far points of the consolidation scale and whose classification is unlikely to stir
much doubt or controversy. At present, I suppose, it is easy to agree that, say,
Sweden and the United Kingdom represent consolidated democracies, and it is still
fairly easy to accept as well that, say, Benin and Guatemala represent fragile
democracies.

The problems arise, of course, in the gray areas outside such broadly
consensual classifications. As countries move from extreme to medium values, the
distinction between "consolidated" and "unconsolidated" democracies more and
more begins to look like, and indeed comes to be, an arbitrary, artificial, and
controversial act of boundary drawing. Yet we may draw some comfort from the fact
that this is no more than conceptual business as usual: Any effort to divide a
continuous scale into discrete parts creates contested borderlines as well as contested
memberships. It gives rise to the twin question: Where should we draw the
distinction? And how should we assign cases?

Students of democratic consolidation have come to express (and discuss) the
problematic continuous nature of DC in different ways. Many authors have reflected
on the difficulty, or even impossibility, of identifying precise endpoints to the
process of consolidation (e.g. Morlino 1995, 577). Some have introduced
gradualistic qualifications into their consolidological vocabulary (e.g. Gunther et al.
1995). Others have disaggregated DC into various subdimensions (e.g. Linz and
Stepan 1996a; Pridham 1995, 169). And still others have switched the level of
analysis from national regimes to political subsystems (e.g. Schmitter 1988).

I find most of these graded treatments of DC wanting. As a rule, definitions
of thresholds between consolidated and non-consolidated democracies remain either
too precise or too vague. Quantitative qualifiers often proliferate in uncontrolled and
intransparent ways, betraying their promise of delivering greater clarity and
precision. And efforts to disaggregate DC usually leave the question unanswered of

\[7\] See Guillermo O'Donnell (1996, 161), in reference to the multiple "casually drawn"
graded categories in Gunther et al. (1995): "The authors view consolidation as a several-stage
process. [...] The democracy resulting from the transition may be simply unconsolidated, but it may
also be 'partially consolidated,' or 'substantially consolidated'; or it may be consolidated at the
how the various subdimensions or subsystemic processes relate both to each other and to the composite concept of DC.

In the face of these methodological difficulties, some authors plea for abandoning the concept of DC altogether, while other proceed to dissolve the dichotomy of consolidation versus non-consolidation (yes or no) in order to conceive DC exclusively in terms of degrees (more or less). However, if we decide to continue speaking of DC in binary terms and grouping the world into "secure" versus "fragile" democracies, how can we do that in some appropriate way? I would say we must begin with shedding illusions of numeric precision and objectivity. First, it is illusionary to believe that we can measure the prospects of regime continuity the same way we can establish, say, the survival rates of tuberculosis patients. Second, even if we were able to produce numeric probability values, it will always be less a matter of objective criteria than of "political judgement" (Laurence Whitehead, quoted in Mainwaring 1986, 6) at which point we draw the dividing line between DC and its opposite.

A Descriptive Concept

Defining DC as "expected regime stability" avoids committing two common conceptual fallacies. It conceives of DC as a descriptive concept which is not contaminated (or even collapsed) neither with causal nor with operational elements. In other words, the expected stability definition pretends to offer a "lean" notion of DC (one which is not overburdened with explanatory connotations) while avoiding a "poor" notion of DC (that reduces the meaning of DC to its operational indicators).

cational but not the regional level — all this before eventually reaching 'sufficient consolidation.' [...] I find all this confusing. [...] Beyond their own assertions, the authors give no indication that would allow us to recognize when most of their 'stages' have been reached." (O'Donnell 1996, 161).

For recommendations to bury the concept, see O'Donnell (1996a and 1996b) and Schneider (1995, 219–21). For a entirely quantitative treatment of "survival chances" and "death rates," see Przeworski et al. (1996).

We can, of course, calculate "death rates" and "survival chances" of political democracies by extrapolating past experiences (see e.g. Przeworski et al. 1996). But if we want to use such results on current cases we have to introduce a wealth of restricting ceteris paribus assumptions which we do not have to make (or else, which seem less problematic) in the case of health statistics.
Etiological Fallacies

Some students of democratic consolidation have warned against the teleological connotations the concept tends to carry. They are right, at least to a certain extent. Yet, in my view, we should be more concerned about the etiological implications many of our definitions bear. In methodological terms, the “etiological fallacies” we students of DC tend to commit are more harmful than our eventual “teleological fallacies.” Most of our definitions contain some more or less explicit telos, an idea of where consolidation should lead us to. But more often than not, our definitions also contain some more or less explicit aitia, an idea of what leads to the success or failure of consolidation. Such conceptualizations, which I propose to call “causal” or “etiological,” conflate the acts of definition and explanation. They mix up defining features and causal variables.

Democratic consolidation represents one of the many “concepts of movement” (Koselleck) we find in social sciences. Other prominent examples include “revolution,” “progress,” “emancipation,” and “development.” These “terms of movement” are teleological terms; they denote some (more or less) determinate goal. But they are more than that; they also name the movement towards that goal. Their meaning is two-fold: it contains both a point of arrival and the journey that leads to it. The same happens with “democratic consolidation.” The term describes a process (the dynamics of “consolidation” in a “consolidating” democracy) as well as an achievement (the fact of “consolidation” in a “consolidated” democracy).

This double meaning of DC as both process and outcome opens the way to contrasting conceptual approaches. On the one hand, descriptive concepts try to grasp DC as a structural attribute of political regimes. This is what the “expected regime stability” definition tries to accomplish: to understand DC as a state of things. On the other hand, causal or etiological definitions place their emphasis on the dynamic side of democratic consolidation. They identify DC with the causal processes that bring it about. Some etiological conceptualizations are “closed” or “determinate.” They spell out specific (even if often broadly formulated) causes and identify DC with concrete explanatory variables (or set of explanatory variables). For example, mass legitimation: “Consolidation is the process by which democracy becomes so broadly

10 For critical remarks on the “teleological flavor” of DC, see O'Donnell (1996a and 1996b) and Schneider (1995). For an effort “to redraw the map of DC by unearthing its basic teleological coordinates” in order to distinguish different types of DC, see Schedler (1997).

11 Christoph Kotowski observed a comparable tendency with respect to definitions of the term “revolution.” Most authors, he writes, “conceive of revolutions as an extended process. That is, many of the events leading to [revolutions] and many of the events following them are all considered part of the process of revolution. ...The consequences of this is that many events that would ordinarily be considered causes and/or effects are ‘swallowed’ into the concept as defining characteristics.” (Kotowski 1984, 410).
and profoundly legitimate among its citizens that it is unlikely to break down” (Diamond, 1996, 54). Or elite consensus: “We consider a democratic regime to be consolidated when all politically significant groups regard its key political institutions as the only legitimate framework for political contestation, and adhere to democratic rules of the game” (Gunther et al. 1995, 7).

Despite their relative specificity, such etiological definitions of DC are nevertheless problematic. They postulate some causal relation by definition, instead of testing empirically whether that relation holds or not. That means that in the battle of competing causal hypotheses they take sides prematurely, at the early stage of conceptualization. And by doing so, they link causes and effects in a way which is overly rigid and closes off alternative hypotheses, immunizing itself against falsification. The causal links such “etiological” definitions state may be correct. But by melting explanation and definition, they have no way to know whether they are indeed.

However, specific etiological definitions, which spell out concrete explanatory variables, are innocent when compared to generic ones, which do not. Such “open” or “indeterminate” etiological concepts define DC as the process, any process (!), that leads to the outcome of DC (however defined). They define democratic consolidation causally without naming any concrete causes, without delimiting the universe of explanatory processes it refers to. To quote just two examples: Leonardo Morlino comprehends democratic consolidation as “the process by which the democratic regime is strengthened so as to ensure its persistence” (1995, 573), while Geoffrey Pridham defines it as “a process that diminishes the probability of reversal of democratization” (1995, 168).

The basic problem of such generic definitions is their openness, their causal indeterminacy. If I say that DC is whatever leads to DC I am free to import into my definition whatever may causally contribute to the phenomenon. If I state that DC is “the process that leads to” DC but fail to describe the concrete attributes of that process, anything may be, and actually is, included in my definition. Any variable of hypothetical causal relevance may appear as an integral part of democratic consolidation. Any factor perceived as an “indispensable” or just “supportive” condition of DC may appear as something “the process of democratic consolidation” “includes”, “involves,” or “implies” by definition. As a consequence, the conceptual boundaries of DC dissolve. The list of explanatory variables authors integrate into such generic “etiological” ideas of DC is in fact endless and the term “democratic consolidation” comes to cover a limitless number of highly demanding tasks, such as the construction of constitutional regimes, electoral rules, party systems, systems of interest mediation, civil society, the rule of law, legislative

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12 These fragmentary references are taken from Linz and Stepan’s “Five Arenas of Democratic Consolidation” (1996a, 7–15) and Pridham’s definition of “negative” consolidation (1995, 168–9).
bodies, rational state bureaucracies, and economic society (see, for example, Morlino 1995, Linz and Stepan 1996a, 7-15; Schmitter 1988).

The result of such indeterminate “etiological” exercises is quite obvious. Whatever the explanatory merit we may grant to concrete causal variables, by collapsing descriptive and explanatory statements, such exercises lead to unbounded concepts which neither serve to describe a phenomenon (because they lack an independent descriptive part while their whole meaning is tied up with the causal processes they allude to) nor to explain it (because they work as omnibus concepts, as causal containers which swallow whatever hypotheses one wishes to throw into them).

Operational Fallacies

While etiological concepts collapse the acts of explanation and definition, operational concepts collapse the acts of operationalization and definition. While etiological approaches define some abstract empirical phenomenon by its causes, operational approaches define it by its indicators. In the literature on democratic consolidation, at least three kinds of operational definitions (or defining indicators) are widely circulating: the peaceful transfer of power, the absence of “serious challenges” to democracy, and the passage of time. All three variables do make some sense but only if we use them as mere limited indicators of DC, not as full embodiments of the concept. For their operational value is only relative.

First, the well-known “one-turnover test” as well as the more demanding “two-turnover test” rely on a meaningful criterion, namely, on actors actually accepting democracy as “a system in which parties lose elections” (Przeworski 1991,

13 We may illustrate the nature of such “etiological fallacies” by counter-factual analogy: Imagine a psychologist who defines the notion of a “consolidated personality” by including into her definition whatever favorable conditions she considers to be supportive or even necessary for a person to become “crisis-resistant”: economic security, a supportive social environment, favorable paths of transition from adolescence to adulthood, prior experiences with modern identity management, the consensual unification of diverging personality traits, and a general disposition to bargaining and compromise, and so forth. Under such extensive “etiological” exigencies, who, among the living, could ever claim to possess a “consolidated personality”?

14 Indeed etiological definitions systematically run the “risk of tautologies” (Guillermo O’Donnell, quoted in Mainwaring 1986, 16; see also O’Donnell 1990b, 161; and Schneider 1995, 219).

15 Thus, the concept loses any meaning independent of its measurement. A classical example is the definition of intelligence (in its ironic, constructivist reading): What is intelligence? What intelligence tests measure! Of course, the two methods of concept formation, etiological and operational, sometimes overlap. Often etiological definitions treat explanatory variables as indicators, and operational definitions rely on variables of causal relevance. Yet since the two concept families are analytically distinct it makes sense keeping and discussing them apart.
Yet both quasi-objective tests of DC are notoriously too specific and context-insensitive. They do not provide either a necessary nor a sufficient indicator for establishing DC. Above all, they tend to misclassify dominant party systems, where alternation in power may not occur in decades, as well as presidential systems (with non-reelections rules), where alternation in power may occur at each subsequent election (see Beyme 1995, 228; Gunther et al. 1995, 12; Huntington 1991, 266; Schneider 1995, 220).

Second, the absence of antidemocratic "challenges" (however defined) represents an empirical indicator of DC as problematic as any other "objective" datum. Antiregime "challenges" do not possess any unequivocal a priori meaning. The information they convey as well as the consequences they bear depend on their contexts and perceptions. Antidemocratic challenges, such as coup attempts, often lead to "precedent setting confrontations" (Valenzuela 1992, 71) that in the end—provided the democrats defeat their enemies—can make positive and even decisive contributions to democratic consolidation. Besides, the very notion itself of an antidemocratic "challenge" must be regarded an infelicitous choice of language. For the term "challenge" is a relational one. It does not describe some empirical variable in isolation but already implies that this variable represents a problem for some other empirical phenomenon. And it is the researcher who decides whether this is the case or not, for example, whether some military coup attempt represents a "serious challenge" or not. Thus, judgments about empirical degrees of democratic consolidation tend to become tautological. They maintain, in essence, that "democracy is likely to survive because I cannot see any factors ('challenges') which threaten its survival," or inversely, "democracy is likely to break down because I can make out some elements ('challenges') that threaten to bring it down." Scholars tend to reflect these methodological problems through imprecise language choices. Geoffrey Pridham, for example, states that DC includes "the containment or reduction, if not removal, of any serious challenges to democratization" (1995, 169). When do we demand containment, when reduction, when removal? And what is "seriousness" else than an implicit answer to the context-dependence of antiregime "challenges," a nebulous license to take these contexts into account.

Thirdly and finally, many authors maintain, with more or less polemical undertones, that the mere passage of time is insufficient for democracies to consolidate. But many perceive it at least as a necessary ingredient of DC and define certain, though widely and wildly varying time requirements for DC. That is, many take time seriously as a causal variable—though not all would go as far as Arturo Valenzuela affirming that "what really consolidates a democracy is [...] simply the continuity of democratic practices" (1997, 4). However, in fact, virtually nobody supports operational definitions that take democratic consolidation to be "just a
matter of time" (Przeworski et al. 1996, 50). Such simple equations are hardly more than straw concepts scholars construct in order to deconstruct them subsequently. \(^\text{16}\)

Summing up: Etiological definitions spell out causes. Operational definitions spell out symptoms. Both do violence to the descriptive concept of DC. Both fail to get at the empirical heart of DC. Both fail to measure the (perceived) likelihood of regime survival.

**A Cognitive Concept**

With “expectation” being a cognitive notion, “expected stability” represents, of course, a cognitive notion of DC. But it is worth underlining the obvious. In general, we students of democratic consolidation, when taking intersubjective attitudes into account, tend to exclude precisely the perceptual dimension the “expected stability” definition underscores. We tend to privilege normative over cognitive aspects, values over beliefs, evaluations over expectations. We tend to speak about (perceived) legitimacy and remain silent about (expected) stability. \(^\text{17}\) In other words, we tend to refrain from asking political participants directly for their observations. Or if they do, we tend to ask the wrong questions. For instance, the mass surveys we students of DC rely on usually focus on normative attitudes (regime legitimacy), to the almost complete neglect of cognitive perceptions (expected stability). In accordance with ingrained conventions of public opinion polling, we tend to ask citizens whether they like democracy or not. And from the answers we get we draw their own inferences about prospects of democratic stability. But much more often than not, we forget asking people how they themselves evaluate the chances that democracy will endure well into the future. \(^\text{18}\) We usually do not ask them questions.


\(^{17}\) For affirmative statements about the importance of legitimacy for democracy’s long-term survival, see, for example, Diamond (1996, 54), Ethier (1990a), Linz and Stepan (1996a), Mainwaring (1992, 305), Munch (1996, 7), or Pridham (1990b, 112; 1995, 169).

\(^{18}\) See, for example, Linz and Stepan’s Addendum “How Citizens View Democracy” in Latin America (1996a, 221–30). However, those few surveys that do people ask for stability estimates often produce quite surprising results. For instance, I find it startling that in 1996, 61 percent of Poles (n=1057) thought it to be “possible” or even “highly probable” that parliament would be dissolved and the number of parties reduced in the next future (see Rose and Haerpfer 1996, 425). I admit that the two-dimensional question asked here looks fuzzy and overloaded, and that summing up low and high probability estimates cuts out valuable information. However, Poland, after all, is a country where experts such as Linz and Stepan have come to the conclusion that “after the 1993 election” most political actors “seem to have accepted democracy as ‘the only game in town’” (1996a, 291).
such as: What do you think, how stable is democracy today? How likely is it to survive if economic conditions deteriorate? If public order breaks down? If an alternation in government takes place? How much of a threat are actors such as the military, guerilla groups, entrepreneurs, or labor unions? And what about your own democratic commitment? How would you act in the face of democratic crises? Etcetera.

The prevailing normative approaches deal, in their negative versions, with antidemocratic actors, attitudes, discourses, and behavior, and in their positive versions, with democratic actors, attitudes, discourses, and behavior. In this perspective, consolidating democracy equals to domesticating the former and fomenting the latter. I find this problematic on three accounts.

First, the dividing line between democratic and antidemocratic actors is often fuzzy, fluid, and controversial. Therefore, in many new democracies, the very act of boundary drawing represents an openly political act, which in itself bears tangible implications for democratic consolidation.¹⁹

Second, the causal relation of these actor-centered variables to democratic stability is uncertain and controversial, too. In any case, they do not appear to constitute either necessary or sufficient conditions for regime continuity. For example, democracies may survive even in the face of precarious mass legitimacy and organized violence. And conversely, they may collapse despite of high levels of popular support and low levels of systematic violence.²⁰

Third, democratic consolidation (the process) unfolds as an interactive game. The causal weight and even the causal direction of certain behavioral variables (such as the presence of guerilla groups or antidemocratic parties) depend on how prodemocratic actors react to them. Antidemocratic actions and discourses do not have any intrinsic significance of their own. We cannot know how they affect the prospects for democratic stability if we look at them in isolation. And as soon as we begin comprehending them as elements of "an interactive sequence of moves" (Whitehead 1989, 79) we can see that their actual impact on DC may be ambivalent, paradoxical, counterintentional. Failed coups may help to prevent future coups attempts. Threats of violence may reinforce norms of peaceful conflict resolution.

¹⁹ For instance, Laurence Whitehead (1989) pleas, out of political considerations, for a generous attitude towards the integration of former authoritarian players. He condemns the "sectarian" tendency to deny or undermine the democratic credentials of political rivals in a context where very few political actors have impeccably pure records" (ibid., 77). In academic debate, middle categories such as Juan Linz' "semi-loyalty" testify to the ambiguous "gray areas" between the two poles (Linz 1978, 32).

The presence of disloyal actors may deepen the unity of the democratic coalition. Etcétera.\textsuperscript{21}

One can comprehend the consolidation of democracy as the process of institutionalizing democracy (see e.g. Schmitter 1988). Such a reading brings intriguing parallels into perspective. As in current studies of DC, the “old institutionalism” in sociology described processes of institutionalization fundamentally as normative phenomena, associated with ideas such as socialization, internalization, legitimation, value infusion, and the development of shared norms. By contrast, sociology’s “new institutionalism” places a much stronger emphasis on cognitive variables, such as habituation, the development of routines, the formation of expectations, and the convergence of perceptions (see DiMaggio and Powell 1991). In other words: It is time, it seems, for a “cognitive turn” in democratization studies as well, time for a “neo-institutionalist” rediscovery of cognitions in the research on democratic consolidation.

**Observer versus Participant Perspectives**

Until now I have remained silent with respect to one key question: If we define DC as “expected regime stability”, whose expectations are those that count? Who calculates the “low probability of breakdown” or “high probability of survival” we take to be the hallmark of democratic consolidation? Whom should we ask? Whose perceptions are the relevant, the decisive ones? Who is concept’s “social carrier”? There are basically two answers to this question.

The first possibility is: We must ask everybody. What counts for DC, and what counts as DC, is how the involved actors themselves perceive the situation. We must ask all relevant participants in the democratic process, including citizens, how secure or insecure they feel about the democratic future. We have to look for a “generalized expectation” that democracy “will continue into an indefinite future” (O’Donnell 1996, 36). DC “reaches closure” when “major political actors as well as the public at large expect the democratic regime to last well into the foreseeable future” (Valenzuela 1992, 70). In a nutshell: we conceptualize DC from an (internal) participant perspective. From this angle, the notion of consolidation resembles the concept of legitimacy. The same way as legitimacy, it appears not as an objective attribute of a given system but as a matter of subjective attribution. No political regime is intrinsically legitimate (or consolidated), but perceived to be so (or not). And the same way Max Weber spoke of a “belief in legitimacy”

\textsuperscript{21} For analyses of the “functional ambivalence” (Nohlen 1996) of (failed) coup attempts as well as of other challenges, see e.g. McClinstock (1989) on Peru, Linz and Stepan (1996a, 217) on Chile, Valenzuela (1996) on Paraguay, and Burton et al. (1992, 15-16) with respect to “elite settlements” (taking place in the wake or in anticipation of violent crises).
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(Legitimitätsglaube) we may speak here of DC as a “belief in stability” (Stabilitätsglaube).

The second possibility is: We may ask anybody. Whoever happens to be around is entitled to pass judgement on the current state of democracy’s consolidation. DC is not a matter of social extension. It is not affected by who or how many people converge around certain expectations. I myself, a lone academic expert, a solitary political actor, or even an individual layperson, may form an opinion about the prospects of democratic continuity and whether my prediction seems plausible or not is not a matter of social consensus but a matter of substantial reasoning. Probably I err but possibly I have more information or a better theory at hand and I am able to convince others through “the forceless force of the better argument” (Habermas). In this case, we conceptualize DC from an (external) observer perspective.

In the former, the participant perspective, what counts is the social weight of perceptions. DC is a matter of converging expectations among all relevant actors. These perceptions are understood as indicators of DC: If all think that democracy is here to stay it is hard to believe they are all wrong (the informational value of perceptions). But they also serve as causes of DC: Social perceptions possess a self-reinforcing quality, and the larger the number of people who think that democracy is “the only game in town,” the better the chances that democracy will indeed remain “the only game in town” (the causal weight of perceptions).

By contrast, in the latter, observer perspective, what counts is the weight of arguments. DC is a matter of reasonable expectations among more or less competent observers. Their perceptions represent neither indicators nor causes. They are conclusions drawn on the basis of certain observations and rules of inference. What counts here in order to establish the presence or absence of “democratic consolidation” are not intersubjective expectations, but intersubjective arguments. An outside observer may do without social consensus; her claims do not depend on the consent of others; they are simply as plausible as the reasons she gives to support them.

Both perspectives, I think, are entirely legitimate. Indeed, both are necessary. They complement and correct each other. On the one hand, social expectations may be generalized, but nevertheless wrong. Elites as well as mass publics may harbour false illusions of stability — and thus fail to undertake timely action against the enemies of democracy. Or else, politicians and citizens may be paralyzed by false specters of instability; they may fear coup mongers which are no more than innocent “paper tigers”; or they may describe their adversaries as antidemocratic out of sheer convenience. The sober accounts of external observers may provide healthy correctives against such (politically consequential) misperceptions. They may warn dormant publics by revealing hidden dangers. Or they may reassure alarmed publics by demystifying apparent dangers.
On the other hand, widely held social expectations pose valuable challenges to our expert judgements in case the two conflict. They pose puzzles we have to resolve if we want to uphold our minority claims. If I think that neo-democracy A is on the brink of collapse while others take it as a fairly consolidated democracy, I have to make a convincing case and explain, for example, why the military is about to abandon its former neutrality while political parties are less willing than in the past to defend the system. Or if I think that oldtime democracy B is resilient against whatever challenges may arise in the near future—in opposition to those voices that warn against the dangers of right-wing populism—I have to come forward with sound arguments and explain, for example, why populism is less dangerous than it sounds and than its adversaries like to describe it.

Redressing the Balance

In the literature on democratic consolidation, only a few authors have placed explicit emphasis on internal, participant perspectives. Only few have taken the elusive variable of subjective perceptions seriously (for example, Merkel et al. 1996a, 12; Power and Powers 1988, 5; Valenzuela 1992, 70–3; Whitehead 1989). The mainstream of “consolidology” has tried to give “objective” accounts from the viewpoint of external observers. Yet the study of DC would gain substantial insights if it corrected this bias and instead, established some sort of “checks and balances” between observer and participant perspectives.

To the arguments developed above in support of such a new balance, I may add here that, in my view, we academic observers of DC cannot claim any special status, any superior knowledge, or special access to “objective” insights. We do not possess any epistemological privilege vis-à-vis other actors and observers. We look at political regimes from a different perspective than other observers or involved participants. We may (hopefully) dispose of more systematic evidence, more elaborate theories, more explicit criteria of judgement, and more reliable instruments of data collection. Our conclusions about the chances of democratic continuity may diverge or not from those of other people. They may be less prejudiced and more accurate or not. But in any case, in our job we are not doing anything that would differ substantially from what others do: observing others, and observing others

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22 For a brief discussion of converging and diverging “observer-defined” versus “actor-defined” coup probabilities, including the possibility of misperceptions on both sides, see Collier and Norden (1991, 12–14). For some hints at the possible impact of prejudice (“entrenched expectations”) on academic analyses, see Remmer (1995, 115). For a general discussion of external observer versus internal participant perspectives, see Habermas (1981, I, 152–96).
observing others, and drawing our conclusions (delivering our probability estimates) on the basis of certain rules of inference.

Both types of argument, the causal weight and diagnostic potential of lay opinions, on one hand, and the vulnerability of expert judgements, on the other, push us to incorporate participant perspectives into our scholarly accounts of democratic consolidation. Bringing participants back in, however, is by no means a simple task. First of all, it faces three unresolved theoretical challenges.

First, selecting relevant actors: Whose probabilistic calculus should we take into account? Who are the relevant actors whose expectations should enter our consolidological equations? Whom should we include? Only top officials and the military? What about party representatives, political journalists, judges, interest groups, civic associations, private entrepreneurs, or academics? And should we ask elite actors only? Or do we have to take the general public into account? Or only parts of it?

Second, establishing majority rules: In most cases, people will not coincide in their judgments about the prospects of democratic rule. The variance of likelihood estimates will be significant both between and within societal groups. But how should we handle different degrees of societal dissensus? How many pessimists suffice to make us diagnose non-consolidation? How many optimists do we need, in society or in a given group, to speak of democratic consolidation? Are pluralities sufficient? Or should we establish a threshold of fifty percent? Or must we even demand virtual consensus in certain key groups before we dare extending certificates of consolidation? And how should we treat the undecided and indifferent?

Third, formulating stability clauses. In new democracies, the calculus of democratic stability tends to be unstable and vulnerable; it tends to shift in response to critical events. Even in apparently stable neo-democracies, disturbing surprises such as the death of a sitting president, the assassination of a leading candidate, a

\[ \text{23} \text{ Of course, we may also refrain from calculating probabilities on the grounds that more research and more evidence is needed. Guilleromo O'Donnell, for instance, declares himself "agnostic pending better research" with respect to the "relative likelihood of breakdown" of different types of democracies (O'Donnell 1996a, 166).} \]

\[ \text{24} \text{ While analytically the distinction between inside and outside perspectives is straightforward, in practice the boundaries sometimes blur, and they do so with special force in our case, the case of academic students of DC. How do people assess prospects of regime stability? How do they form their expectations about democratic persistence? How do they reach summary judgments on democracy's life chances? The answer is, I believe, unequivocal: They do so by observing other actors. Democratic consolidation is a game of mutual observation, a circular game of cross-cutting n-order observations. I observe you observing him observing me observing you, and so forth. In this "game", the external observers par excellence, we academic scholars, do not act outside but just add another layer of observations. Our observations do not pass unobserved: They enter the consolidological game and become part of it in similar ways to other observations — if even wrapped up in an aura of objectivity, as they often are, they carry more weight than the unlicensed perceptions of presumptive non-experts.} \]
sudden currency devaluation, the irruption of street unrest, the revelation of corruption scandals, opaque statements by the head of the armed forces, or the electoral victory of a populist anti-establishment figure, may be able to trigger sudden fears of breakdown. How should we treat such situations of unstable expectations? Does it make sense to revise our diagnosis of democratic consolidation each time public opinion shifts from illusions of stability to certainties of breakdown and back?

Once we have settled these theoretical questions, in principle, if we want to explore actor perceptions, all we have to do is to follow certain routine procedures in social sciences: setting up content analyses, interviewing others, reconstructing discourses, interpreting interpretations – our standard social science exercises in “double hermeneutics” (Habermas 1981). There is nothing inherently problematic or even special in it. Yet, admittedly, analyzing public discourse and interviewing citizens as well as elite actors represents a practical challenge as much as a methodological challenge. It is highly demanding in terms of time, money, personnel, and energy. Fortunately enough, we do have some examples that show that it can be done and how. I would quote, for example, Cynthia McClintock’s 1989 essay about the prospects of DC in the “least likely” case of Peru. Her article tried to assess the chances of democratic persistence in Peru in the late eighties, combining structural data with interview data. The latter showed, above all, that military elites did not perceive the multiple structural challenges they faced (from guerrilla movements to economic decay) as calls for antidemocratic action. Instead, skepticism about the payoffs of an eventual military coup as well as fears about its potential costs made them utterly cautious and hesitant to embrace the antidemocratic option. Thus, despite Peru’s unfavorable structural background, McClintock’s interview data suggested that at this point in time the country’s “prospects of democratic consolidation in Peru” were not “bleak” at all (see McClintock 1989). The sad fact that the country’s political elite did not grasp the “fair chance” of DC it was granted, does not invalidate the author’s past optimism. It only testifies to future’s irrepressible uncertainty we try to domesticate (but never quite succeed so) with our tentative estimates of “democratic consolidation.”

Conclusion

Some time ago I adopted an economic principle of writing I find convenient, convincing, compelling: one paper, one idea. Avoid argumentative overload and never pack more than one basic idea into a paper. At a first, superficial sight, the present essay seems to violate this principle of academic action. Yet, it does not. It parts from one fundamental intuition: democratic consolidation represents a prospective, probabilistic concept. And it develops some “strong implications” this
conceptual starting points bears: the continuous, descriptive, cognitive, and perspective-dependent nature of DC.

"Concept formation stands prior to quantification," Giovanni Sartori sentenced nearly thirty years ago (Sartori 1970, 1038). And concept formation also stands prior to description and explanation. As the paper has argued at various points, prevailing conceptualizations of "democratic consolidation" are undercomplex if not outrightly misleading. They seem inappropriate both for describing, measuring, and explaining phenomena of democratic consolidation.

Standing in multiple contrast to prevailing practices, the "expected regime stability" definition proposed here pursues an ambitious goal: providing the "embryonic subdiscipline" of "consolidology" (Schmitter 1995, 14) with a solid conceptual foundation, a reliable starting point. I would consider this conceptual proposal to be a success not (only) if students of DC would adopt and further develop it (which I would not mind though) but if they would come to acknowledge the relevance of its guiding distinctions: the distinctions between determinate versus probabilistic, retrospective versus prospective, continuous versus dichotomous, descriptive versus causal and operational, cognitive versus normative concepts and between observer versus participant perspectives. In other words, the important thing is not that others accept the conclusions the article reaches but the questions it poses. If the studies of DC continue to ignore these conceptual questions, the prospects for sound description, measurement, and explanation of democracy's consolidation (or non-consolidation) are dim.
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