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Are Democracies Better at Solving Problems than Non-Democratic Regimes?

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Abstract

Are democracies better at solving problems than non-democratic regimes? If so, what elements of democracies make them better? How do different political systems monitor and manage problems that are long-term? In this paper I sketch the issues in making such comparisons, and report some of the major findings at present. Then I point to possible directions for making those comparisons by linking components of the problem-solving paradigm to specific elements of democratic institutions and governance.

Key Words

government problem-solving
democratic political systems
non-democratic political systems
governmental friction
information processing

Are democracies better at solving problems than non-democratic regimes? If so, what elements of democracies make them better? We all recognize that most problems are never solved; but they can be managed in most cases. How do different political systems monitor and manage problems that are long-term? In this paper I sketch the issues in making such comparisons, and report some of the major findings at present. Then I point to possible directions for making those comparisons by linking components of the problem-solving paradigm to elements of democratic institutions and governance.

A Discipline Born in Problem-Solving, and the Costs of Getting the Problem Wrong

I would briefly note that political science is a discipline born and nurtured through its early years by a focus on problem-solving.

John W. Burgess is thought of as the founder of political science. Bringing ideas from his studies in Germany, he established the first school of political science at Columbia in 1880. He thought political science ought to be scientific, and based methods in our discipline on empiricism, buttressed by both data and careful historical examination. He had read extensively in biology and wanted to use their methods in political science. He understood institutions and wanted to use his new science to design governing institutions to fit the needs of society. Unfortunately, he got the problem wrong. Oh boy did Burgess get the problem wrong. Which caused him to get the solution wrong. Burgess was a white supremacist who learned scientific racism from his studies in the biology of the era and set about designing institutions built on the racial and class hierarchies so "good government" would prevail (Hollock 2017). If a problem is mis-diagnosed, then the solution will fail—to solve the problem, not serve the interests of white elites.

Woodrow Wilson (1987) advocated the more intensive study of governing institutions, coining the term public administration. But when he put his methods into practice, he caused a problem that did not exist. He re-segregated the civil service. (For a discussion of some of the issues that were evident at the birth of the discipline and which carried on into the present, see McClain et.al 2016).

The Chicago School, which many of us think gave rise to empirical methods even though it was Columbia, also focused on problem-solving. As one of its premier students, Herbert Simon (1987:1), put it, Charles E. Merriam, known as "the Chief," had a goal in mind. "The goal was to bring intelligence to bear upon the political process, and thereby to ensure and accelerate human progress. The method was to build a science of politics that would provide a veridical description of human behavior in the political arena." It was essential to Merriam "to apply human intelligence to the planning and management of the institutions of our society, and especially the political institutions, so critical to the whole design." Simon spent much of his career studying human problem-solving and its strengths and foibles, especially within organizations (Simon 1947; Newell and Simon 1972). Unlike Merriam, he was clear-eyed about the limitations of human cognition in reforming society.

In the 1940s and 1950s, many universities established Bureaus of Public Administration that worked to improve government effectiveness and efficiency. One such bureau at the University of Alabama funded V.O. Key's magisterial study *Southern Politics*. Key was a Chicago School product (and an undergraduate at the University of Texas). Roscoe C. Martin, the head of the Bureau of Public Administration at Alabama, justified funding *Southern Politics* thusly: "A most important element in the

context in the context of public administration is politics. . . Through the study of politics the cause of good government may be advanced, a purpose wholly appropriate to the Bureau of Public Administration as a division of a state university."

Political science was born as an enterprise designed to solve society's problems through the design of appropriate institutions and grew to adolescence in the Progressive Era. The frustrations inherent in such an ambitious undertaking led to a decline in the faith of humans to create institutions that function for the benefit of society. But the science deliberately built to sustain such an enterprise lives on today. And it survives in the study of problem-solving at the individual, group, and organizational levels.

The purpose of this paper, as I stated above, is to bring a more explicit comparative perspective to the study of problem-solving by comparing the stages of problem-solving in more democratic political systems against less democratic ones. Of course. we all recognize that democratic governance exists on a continuum, but we put this aside for the purposes of this presentation.

Components of Problem-Solving

Problem solving, whether by human decision-makers or by organizations and institutions, face a standard set of challenges. These may be thought of as stages, defined as follows.

Problem identification. To be solved, a condition must be recognized as a problem. Governments are pummeled by an overwhelming amount of information on a multitude of situations that vie for attention—candidates for policymaking attention and categorization as problems. Attention spans of humans are limited. Organizations may implement components that allow for parallel processing of streams of information, allowing for the organization to process multiple streams of information simultaneously. Executive branch agencies and congressional committees act to facilitate such parallel processing (Jones, 2001; Jones and Baumgartner 2004; Baumgartner and Jones 2016). But this does not solve the underlying problem of limited attention and seemingly unlimited supply of problems.

Problem definition. Most public problems are multifaceted and may look different and require different solutions depending on how the problem is framed. In democracies, this is fought out in open air; in less open systems, behind closed doors.

Problem Prioritization. Out of the many situations that are characterized as problems, which ones are singled out for remediation? Out of the set defined as problems, in which order are they to be addressed? This is the agenda-setting problem.

Solution matching. What solutions are available to address a specific problem? How do decision-makers decide which solution(s) should be matched to a particular problem?

Trade-offs. What trade-offs are generated by the adoption and implementation of a policy? Are democracies better at honestly addressing these trade-offs?

Evaluation. To what extent do decision-makers evaluate the success of solutions in solving or managing a problem? Are they able to recognize that a solution to a problem may, in the words of Aaron Wildavsky, generate "policy as its own cause," In today's world, we recognize that policymaking systems addressing complex problems generate systems of interconnected causes and effects that are may not be subject to simple cause-and-effect analyses.

A final issue is often missed in the problem-solving literature in the policy processes literature: the prevention of problems that could fester until they become disasters that the political system must address.

Comparing Political Systems

Comparing political systems is difficult, even when we seek only to distinguish democratic systems from non-democratic ones (Dahl 1971). Robert Dahl offers the short list of necessary conditions (Dahl 1971: 25-26).

- "control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in elected decisions;
- elected officials are chosen frequently and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is comparatively uncommon;
- practically all adults have the right to run for elective offices in the government;
- citizens have an effectively enforceable right to express themselves on political matters broadly defined;
- they also have effective rights to seek out alternative sources of information and to form relatively independent associations or organizations, including independent political parties and interest groups."

I would add the requirements that citizens and political leaders are subject to the same body of consistent law and that the extent of public corruption is limited and enforced by an independent agency.

If we sorted out political systems along these general lines, would we find the democratic group of countries do better solving public problems than the non-democratic group? The necessary comparisons among systems must fall along the components of the problem-solving process laid out above. If there are differences, what features cause those them?

A subsidiary question is whether parliamentary or presidential democracies do better in solving problems.

The Aspects of Political Systems that Foster or Impede Problem-Solving

Individual problem-solving is accomplished using heuristics, cognitive short-cuts that humans use to explore the problem-space and adopt solutions (Simon and Newell 1970). Institutions can compensate for the failure of these heuristics to explore the full problem-space and connect the best solution to the problem, but they can also fall into the same traps as the boundedly rational human problem-solver (Jones 2001). In comparing democracies and non-democracies, we look for institutional arrangements that

compensate for human foibles in defining complex problems and matching proper solutions to those problems.

There are two ways to compare the problem-solving capacities of democracies. One is to divide democracies from non-democracies and assess the differences for one or more variable. The second is to start with the components of political systems and examine the results.

A key example of the first approach is economist Amartya Sen's postulate that democracies do not suffer from famines. He noted two facets of democracies that led them to avoid famines: electoral incentives and the free flow of information (Sen 1981; Ebersole 2015). Several other studies have examined an issue and explored if democracies differ in performance on those issues and if so, why. These include maintaining the general peace, fostering economic growth among others (Jones, Epp, and Baumgartner 2019).

The second approach is to isolate the components that lead to effective problem-solving and connect them to outcomes that distinguish democratic systems from non-democratic systems. Scholars have studied two components that are linked to problem-solving.

Institutional Friction

The first component is the extent of friction or resistance to making decisions in the political system. Friction leads to delay and gridlock, but we observe this as a long period of seeming stability. Ignoring or explicitly delaying action on the problem can lead to a crisis. The crisis can lead to rapid overinvestment in frantic attempts to stanch the damage inflicted by the crisis.

An important implication from the extensive work done on friction is that *policy punctuations are pathological* (Jones and Baumgartner 2005, 2012). They indicate that long periods of underinvestment in incremental amelioration have led to the crisis. This is not always the case; sometimes a crisis really is unexpected. More often the conditions leading to the crisis have suffered a lack of attention or deliberate halting of proposed action on the problem. This allows errors, deviations from a solution, to accumulate. As errors accumulate, the potential problem evolves toward crisis. Some level of friction in the decision-making system is functional; moving too fast to address a problem may lead to instability based in overreaction (Jones, Thomas, and Wolfe 2014).

There is considerable evidence that more authoritarian governments suffer more large, abrupt policy changes than do democratic ones. The evidence is particularly convincing when policy punctuations are examined over time within one political system that moves from authoritarian to democratic, or from democratic to authoritarian. Lam and Chan (2015) studied quantitively various policymaking venues in Hong Kong through three periods: British colonial, democratic self-government, and Beijing control.

They found that during all periods policy punctuations occurred, but the punctuations were less severe in the self-governing period. In a study of Hungarian budget distributions across time, Miklos Sebok and Tamas Berki (2018) found more muted changes in budget distributions during periods of democratic rule.

Political systems can experience different levels of resistance during different stages of the policy process, a phenomenon termed the *progressive friction hypothesis* (Jones, Epp, and Baumgartner, 2019). In the U.S., it is relatively easy to get a problem on the national agenda, but quite hard to enact a solution (Jones, Sulkin, and Larsen 2003). Problem identification is subject to open debate and oftentimes legislative hearings, whereas matching solutions to problems is a much more difficult enterprise. In the U.S., this is the difference between holding a congressional hearing and enacting a statute. This seems to be true in European democracies as well (Frank R. Baumgartner, Christian Breunig, Christoffer Green-Pederson, Bryan D. Jones, Peter B. Mortensen, Michiel Nuytemans, and Stefaan Walgrave 2009). This implies that problem identification is comparatively easy in democracies.

Dahl notes that regular elections are necessary if a political system is to be regarded as democratic, but what the elected officials do in office matters as well. Do they represent the public, or are they unaccountable? Because of the importance of representation in democracies, political scientists have produced a large body of research on the topic.

Representational studies almost always have focused on the connection between the public's positions on major issues and the policy outputs on those issues. In these studies, both public opinion and public policy are assessed as issue positions or, more broadly, ideological locations on a scale (see Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Missing from this perspective is the match between how the public prioritizes issues and the policy outputs of government, a key component of the problem-solving approach (Jones, Larsen and Wilkerson 2009).

A second issue is where the match occurs in the policy process. Government may be responsive in the policy definition stage but fail to produce outputs that match public priorities. It is possible that in non-democratic regimes the match may be weaker in in non-democratic regimes than in democratic ones.

The available evidence suggests that the connection between public priorities and attention to those priorities weakens substantially over the lawmaking process. Using data from the U.S. Policy Agendas Project, Jones, Larsen, and Wilkerson (2009) assessed the correspondence between the policy priorities of the public (using Gallup's most important problem data) and the attention that different policy venues pay to these issues. They found that as friction increases in the policy venue, the correspondence correlation between the priorities of the public and the policy priorities established in the policy venue decreased. The average correspondence correlation between public priorities and attention to the issue was but 0.33 for congressional hearings, but only 0.02 for statutes.

We may draw the following inferences from the policy friction studies:

- ***Generalization*:** friction, institutional or otherwise, leads to long periods of stasis and associated explosive policy changes.
- ***Speculation*:** Sometimes the problem can be ignored. When it cannot, the political system must play "catch-up," leading to large policy punctuations. This is reflected in sharp changes in the solution space, indicated by changes in budgetary commitments.
- ***Conclusion*:** Policy punctuations are pathological. Non-democratic political systems are more subject to such pathologies.

The Role of Information

The second component is information flow from diverse sources. Kwan Nok Chan and Shuang Zhao authored a pathbreaking paper in 2015 pointing to the authoritarian's information disadvantage. Focusing government spending by the People's Republic of China, they report high levels of instability in the policy process, higher than similar studies in democratic countries. They attribute this condition to the unreliability of information on problems—causing a deficit in the problem identification process.

Furthermore, they find higher levels of budgetary punctuations in Chinese provinces facing fewer signs of social unrest. Social unrest is an important indicator of problems, as are demonstrations and civil disobedience in democratic societies. Amartya Sen singled out the deficit of information as a key component of the Great Chinese Famine (1958-62) due to the lack of incentives for local officials to provide that information.

A key finding in the literature on decision-making from both studies from the laboratory and in the field is the key role that the diversity of decision-makers plays (Page 2007). The role of diversity in group decision-making and problem-solving suggests that we ought to examine political institutions for inclusion of diversity in those institutions, because of the role of diversity in solving collective action problems—a project that Lin Ostrom spent much of her scholarly career doing (Ostrom 2005).

It is easiest to see the contribution diversity makes in the problem identification and prioritization processes. In *The Politics of Information* (2015), Frank Baumgartner and I argued that diversity was more critical in the problem identification stage, and that expert guidance was more critical in the stage of matching solutions to the problem. There is more diversity among the general public than among experts, so wide consultation leads to more dimensions of the problem space getting articulated, but in technical matters at least, experts are generally better at designing and implementing solutions. Regulatory capture is always possible when solutions are delegated to experts, but the U.S. has put in place transparency rules and oversight by Congress that can mitigate these dangers.

Information can come in a variety of packages, and the validity of the information in those packages is critical, as are policy evaluations developed in light of those statistics (Williams 1998). Governments produce statistics that both report the actions of government (budget and expenditure data, for example), and those that monitor various aspects of society (population censuses, for example). Third parties may also produce systematic monitoring statistics. Some governments produce reliable statistics, but others cannot be trusted. In non-democratic regimes, incentives encourage the withholding of honest data.

In some cases, American institutions have evolved in a manner that fosters diverse sources of information. Congressional committees allow for the parallel processing of information. The overlapping of jurisdictions because of both the complexity of issues and the struggle among committee chairs for jurisdictional primacy add to the diversity of information within the legislative branch (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Lewallen 20xx). The increasing primacy of party government within Congress has limited the diversity of information, a situation that has caused reformers to call for the reestablishment of a stronger role for committees (LaPiera, Drutman, and Kosar, eds. 2020)

Information from outside of the government is important as well. In addition to press freedoms, the unfettered interest group system can add to the diverse information environment. The multitude of venues provide ample opportunities for interest associations to influence government through the provision of information. This can lead to information bias. To offset this, relevant interests can be built into government structures to provide both diversity and expertise (Breunig and Koski, 2024, 229-232); Jones 1985, Chapter 2). However, the line between pluralism, which is flexible enough to incorporate new interests bringing new perspectives to the table, and corporatism, which may not, is a thin line.
In comparing democracies to other regimes, the easy availability of diverse sources on government actions and the intensity of problems is a key component.

Avoiding Policy Catastrophes

Disasters are often thought as exogenous to the policymaking process, but they are often not. The beauty of incremental policy change is that the policymaking system can adjust by increasing resources in policy areas where the likelihood of severe problems is high. Anticipatory incremental policymaking can stanch the development of a problem into something worse. Such anticipatory action is possible only when government knows about the problem, does not deny it, and where decisional friction is not so high that gridlock makes addressing the problem impossible. In some cases, government enacts and administers policies that lead to a catastrophe. The dynamics of problem identification and intervention to prevent the catastrophe are the same whether the problem is caused by government action or not.

The intensity of problems and policy solutions are in a dynamic relationship. In the ideal, policies can be promulgated such that errors are corrected. When the problem gets worse, governments initiate policy action to correct the problem. But when a political system suffers from high friction, government is less likely to act on a worsening problem. Errors accumulate, and as errors accumulate the problem worsens due to lack of intervention.

Using the error accumulation model, EJ Fagan (2021) examined policy disasters of two types: physical and financial. Using two large scale datasets, he finds that physical disasters are more likely in political systems that allow for error accumulation, and that this accumulation is due to the higher levels of friction in such systems. The occurrence of financial disasters is somewhat more complex, but in both cases liberal democracies have lower risks of policy disasters, due both to lower friction and better flows of information.

The Centralization Thesis

Directly opposed to the notion that diverse information systems produce better problem-solving is the centralization thesis—the notion that centralized authority leads to better decision-making. Centralized decision-making leads to faster decision-making, but it compounds information deficits that lead to less stable outcomes. Centralized decision-making lowers the ability of a political system to attend to multiple streams of information, leading to error accumulation to problems that do not capture the attention of the centralized decision-maker. Breunig and Koski (2024) show that the failure of centralized decision-making affects states where governors have excessive power in the budgetary process. The failure of centralized decision-making seems to be a general rule, affecting centralized authority in democracies as

well as autocratic nations. It is the extensiveness of centralization in non-democratic regimes that is at issue.

Some Possible Comparisons

The purpose of this paper is to set out some potential and researchable connections between democracy and the ability to solve and prevent problems. Here are a few potential avenues for exploration, some of which have solid research behind them, some of which are more inferential.

Problem identification and definition. Democracies differ markedly from non-democratic regimes in problem identification and definition. Pluralistic democracies are open to diverse flows of information, while non-democratic regimes generally put strong limits on multiple streams of information. To the extent that pluralistic democracies provide for the expression of group-based preferences and the detection of problems within governmental structures, the more complete a picture of problems officials will have. One policy venue in the U.S. where this is in evidence is in the bureaucratic rule-making process, which allows for formal critiques of proposed rules. A second venue is the congressional committee system. In the latter case, the centralization of leadership and the decline in the use of subcommittees and committees themselves by the House of Representatives is a cause for concern.

Problem prioritization. Problem prioritization is essentially an exercise in system-wide attention focus. Prioritization occurs in many different venues in pluralist democracies, but in non-democratic systems prioritization is organized from the top. Policy prioritization is in the hands of a small leadership cadre. This leads to a drastic attention bottleneck. Each has deficiencies. For the autocracy, if the wrong problems are prioritized, disaster awaits in other policy arenas. In democracies, the cacophony of different prioritization systems can lead to confusion. But in the latter case, mobilization may focus attention; in the former admitting that the wrong policies were prioritized can lead to magnified conflict.

Solution matching. Several elements of solution matching have received considerable research. Government budgets fund solutions. So following budget trends in various nations has proved a fruitful way to compare the problem-solving choices of various nations. Unfortunately, budget figures are not always reliable, so neither will comparisons be reliable. What is clear from modern budgetary studies is the regularity of punctuations—the budgets of all nations, states, and localities display clear evidence of policy punctuations.

The most researched component of solution matching is incrementalism, where the most important component of policy choice is past policy choices. The classic match is a simple one: last year's choice augmented by a random element (Wildavsky 1964; Padget 1980). Neither Wildavsky nor other policy scholars of the era advocated pure incrementalism as a desirable end. Wildavsky, Lindblom, and Etizoni all advocated decision-making that was rooted in the past (incrementalism; resilience) but looked forward to future challenges (anticipation).

Because incrementalism alone is not keyed to problems and stymied from doing so by institutional and ideational (which includes partisan and ideological components) friction, punctuations are often in evidence. The nature of the problem is key to the solution. If a problem is growing linearly, then

augmented a random error in a linear model can work to contain the problem. But if the problem is growing as a percentage of its base, then the resources devoted to the problem in a pure incremental model will fall behind the growth of the problem. Percentage growth in a problem implies the need for percentage growth in budgets, which results in exponential curves. One possibility for assessing the problem-solving capacities of different forms of government could be to examine the form of curves describing problem growth (where available) and budget growth. If illicit drug overdoses are growing as a percentage, yielding an exponential curve, then a linear (incremental) response from government could be insufficient.

Budgetary commitments in solving a problem can lead to lock-in, with budgets growing while problems decline in intensity. On the other hand, cutting budgetary or other policy commitments, such as regulation, can allow the problem to reemerge. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg famously warned that the Court's decision Shelby v. Holder (2013), severely weakened the Voting Rights Act of 1965, commenting that "[t]hrowing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet." She was right.

A second highly researched approach is termed the multiple streams model which has a strong component of randomness in the connection between problems and solutions. Rather than policy analysts studying a problem and offering solutions to that problem, oftentimes solutions search out problems as the advocates of a particular solution seek problems to attach their preferred solution to (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972, Kingdon, 1984; DeLeo, Zohlnhofer, and Zahariadis) 2024. Here I think a concrete prediction can be made: authoritarian governments are unlikely to tolerate the experimentation of seemingly random streams of problems and solutions, while they are likely to be common in democracies. It seems to me that such experimentation is not necessarily to be condemned, because it is one way that solutions get presented to policymakers—solutions that could be overlooked by a top-down decision-making model.

The questions of facing trade-offs in policy choices and the issues involved in policy evaluation must wait until later. Suffice it to say that new approaches to evaluation must take into account the multifaceted feedback networks in complex adaptive systems.

Matters for Discussion

The literature yields several solid propositions, but they are incompletely integrated into a stages model of governmental problem-solving. Here are a few:

- Political systems differ in their degrees of friction in the problem-solving process
- Non-democratic systems have higher institutional and ideological friction, leading to a weaker ability to adapt to changes in the problem space.
- Generally parliamentary systems experience less friction than presidential systems.

The integration of cross-national (or cross sub-units such as Mortensen and colleagues' study of Danish townships and Breunig and Koski's study of the effectiveness of centralized budgeting systems among

states) can lead to a better understanding of the role of democracies in the governmental problem-solving process.

This paper is nothing more than a call to think through some of these connections and to begin to examine the role of open democratic systems versus closed centralized ones in solving societies' problems. The framework I suggest evaluates problem-solving generally rather than issue-by-issue. Perhaps this was where political science started.

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