Term paper on Democratic Consolidation

Simone Eberhardt
General Rhetoric (major),
Political Science, Psychology (minors)
2762-1 Fairview Crescent
Vancouver, B.C.
V6T 2B9 Canada
eb_sim@yahoo.de
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Introduction

In the end of the 20th century the political world has experienced major changes. Never before there were so many countries ruled by democratic governments for such a long time. With the new regimes there have also emerged concerns about the stability and survival of young democracies which resulted in intensive studies of democratic consolidation. As Schedler puts it democratic consolidation was originally meant to

“describe the challenge of making new democracies secure, of extending their life expectancy beyond the short term, of making them immune against the threat of authoritarian regression, of building dams against eventual ‘reverse waves’.”

Yet, today there seem to be so many theories of consolidation as cases to be studied. In order to explore the wide range of theories (though my choice is surely not representative for all sorts of ideas) I will consider four of them a bit more detailed, compare them and highlight the differences: the introductory and theoretical chapters in the books by Gunther, Diamandouros and Puhle and Linz and Stepan as well as the articles by Valenzuela and Merkel. Although their notions of democratic consolidation will turn out to be quite different they are all based on rather similar definitions of democracy which are to be explained first. In the third part of this essay I will turn to some critical points regarding the chosen concepts of democracy.

The different positions on consolidation raised a lot of questions: What is democratic consolidation and has the concept still explanatory or prospective potential? What does the concept imply for the notion of democracy itself? Some problematic lines are already apparent, such as the role of Western democracies in defining the ends of consolidation and its impact on the perception of new democracies.

I. Definitions of Democracy
The probably utmost known and used definition of democracy is Dahl’s concept of polyarchies. Dahl identifies eight “guarantees” that democracy must provide in order to be responsive to all its citizens: 1. freedom to form and join organisations, 2. freedom of expression, 3. right to vote, 4. eligibility for public office, 5. right of political leaders to compete for support, 6. alternative sources of information, 7. free and fair elections, and 8. institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference. These requirements refer to basic civil freedoms (e.g. the freedom of association and expression) and a system of political competition. Along the two dimensions of public contestation and participation Dahl defines polyarchies as “relatively (but incompletely) democratized regimes, or [...] regimes that have been substantially popularized and liberalized, that is, highly inclusive and extensively open to public contestation.”

According to the notion, that a democracy is some ideal that no real polity in the world has accomplished (or at least not yet), and that the two dimensions may be insufficient to develop a theory of democracy, Dahl distinguishes the regime type described above by naming it “polyarchy”.

Another procedural conceptualisation of democracy used by Gunther et al. consists of quite similar elements: A system can be considered democratic “when it allows the free formulation of political preferences, through the use of basic freedoms of association, information, and communication, for the purpose of free competition between leaders to validate at regular intervals by nonviolent means their claim to rule, … without excluding any effective political office from that competition or prohibiting any members from the political community from expressing their preference.”

The components of this definition resemble the two dimensions of Dahl, because they focus on the centrality of political competition and civil freedoms in the democratic process. However, Linz has noted that in a fully democratic system the elected officials must have full authority to generate policies and must not be constrained by other electorally unaccountable elites.

This additional attribute is also part of the definition of a democratic transition put forward by Linz and Stepan, upon which their concept of consolidation is based, and which is completed “when sufficient agreement has been reached about political procedures to produce an elected government, when a government comes to power that is the direct result of a free and popular vote, when this government de facto has the authority to generate new policies and, and when the executive, the legislative and judicial power generated by the new democracy does not have to share power with other bodies de jure”
Again this definition is centred around elections and public contestation, but it neglects the aspect of basic civil freedoms, which are not explicitly included.

At this point I just want to state the difference between the several definitions of democracy that are used by the considered authors and will proceed with the description of their concepts of democratic consolidation.

II. Some Ideas on Consolidation

1. Gunther, Diamandouros and Puhle: The Absence of Fundamental Disagreement

Gunther et al. divide the process of democratisation into the aspects of transition and consolidation viewing transition as beginning “with the breakdown of the former authoritarian regime” and ending with the establishment of democratic institutions though this new regime may be not (yet) fully democratic. Yet when it comes to the question whether a regime is consolidated or not first the criteria of democracy as outlined above must be fulfilled. The definition of consolidation is based on the fundamental adherence of all relevant political actors to the established democratic rules.

Gunther et al 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.”

This ideal of consolidation demands not only that political actors accept the democratic institutions, but also expects them to behave according to the rules.

As “ideal” may have already suggested there is a distinction between a normative notion of consolidation and a more empirical or practical one that actually allows to label certain regimes as consolidated democracies (as Gunther et al. do in the cases of Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Italy).

The norm and ideal is positively defined as the steady qualitative improvement of democracy (and therefore closer approximation to the democratic ideal), which is described as increase of
effectiveness of the institutions and broadening system support. It is tied to the goal of stability and (irreversible) persistence of democracy. Because this process can and must occur not only in unconsolidated but also in consolidated democracies Gunther et al. set the “dividing line at the point where democratic regimes are sufficiently consolidated so as to survive and remain stable in the face of such severe challenges as major economic or international crises, or even serious outbreaks of terrorist violence.”

Hence, the survival of democracy even in such challenging situations serves as an empirical indicator for consolidation, but the concept also involves the following as indicators which are to be briefly described below: the absence of antisystem forces, semiloyal organisations, and disagreement among political groups regarding the legitimacy of key institutions of the democracy. These criteria define consolidated regimes negatively by providing minimal standards which exist in a tension with the normative goals.

Antisystem parties or social movements are such that in programs, speeches by their leaders, or actions openly display that they are opposed to the democratic regime and challenge its legitimacy and institutions. The same is valid for semiloyal groups except that they stay ambiguous towards the system instead of directly rejecting it. They may accept the rules on an instrumental or conditional level but do not grant them an intrinsic value. This may result in open objection of the democracy if the institutions do not serve their interests. The third indicator is part of the definition of consolidation itself and should speak for itself. As the authors note these actors must be politically significant to be considered as obstacles to consolidation, because in all democracies exist some groups that would fit into the description of the antisystem or semiloyal organisations (who do not obey the democratic rules and reject the legitimacy of the system). But as long as they are isolated and unable to make their regime alternatives attractive for others the regime stability is not challenged.

It is not only the elites whose adherence matters, although their preferences are most important and affect the stability of the regime directly. By the possibility that the ordinary citizens
may become mobilised in the future, the attitudes of the masses are relevant to the persistence of the regime as well. Gunther et al. do not expect them as very supportive towards the system but if a significant proportion of the people would favour an authoritarian alternative or otherwise be opposed to democracy and its institutions, which could take on the form of mass-level protest and rebellion, they would regard the consolidation as incomplete. However, the possibly negative attitudes of the masses do not become crucial to the stability of the regime unless some more active political actors challenge the legitimacy of the institutions so that “the regime may be resilient and stable, despite the absence of a fully democratic mass-level political culture”, but over the long term the increasing acceptance of democratic values contributes significantly to the consolidation and decreases the likelihood of potential overthrows of the regime.

2. Linz & Stepan: Democracy as “the only game in town” or Five Arenas of a Consolidated Democracy

Following Linz and Stepan consolidation is about resolving the tasks that remain after a successful transition (see definition in I.) and means that “democracy becomes routinized and deeply internalized in social, institutional, and even in psychological life, as well as in calculations for achieving success” The authors identify three dimensions – behavioural, attitudinal and constitutional – which are centred around consolidation as “a political situation in which [...] democracy has become ‘the only game in town’”: On the behavioural level a regime is consolidated when no significant groups make any serious attempts to replace the democracy, or to establish their own state, so that no longer strategies of avoiding a democratic breakdown are central to the policies of the democratic government, whereas the constitutional dimension highlights the fact that the political actors not only openly attack the regime but furthermore become habituated to the established norms in dealing with conflicts and do not consider any other but the democratic
channels of gaining power or resolving conflicts as effective or even available. The last dimension regards the aspect of the public attitudes towards the regime which must adhere to democracy even in times of crisis.

Though there are differences this concept of consolidation quite much resembles the theory of Gunther et al., which is valid also for the notion of the possibility of further qualitative development of a consolidated democracy. However, Linz and Stepan come up with “five arenas of a consolidated democracy” which I will briefly depict below. They constitute an interrelated and mutually reinforcing system in which each arena is connected to the others making democracy not just “a regime; [but] an interacting system.” These five arenas, besides representing an ideal of a functioning democracy, become important when related to the former regime type. Linz and Stepan investigate the implications of the previous nondemocratic regime for the availability of different transition paths and the problems new democracies have to solve in order to consolidate in quite great detail and show which of the five arenas are likely to exist in a particular regime type but not in another. If some of the required characteristics were already part of the previous regime the task to craft them would not apply for the new democratic regime which makes it more likely for some countries than others to develop a consolidated democracy.

The first arena regards the conditions necessary to evolve a civil society that is groups, movements, and individuals that are “relatively autonomous from the state”. Through the articulation and advocacy of their interests the civil society becomes a resource for ideas and as a counterbalance to the officially established institutions it helps to check the state apparatus. The civil society must legitimate a political society which is not to be confused with but rather conceived of as distinct and complementary to the former. The authors consider a political society as crucial in the process of consolidation and comprise with this term the institutions of free and inclusive electoral contestation “by which society constitutes itself politically to select and monitor democratic
government.” A democracy has to be based on the rule of the law, the third arena, which must be respected by all significant actors and supported by a strong legal culture and a “spirit of constitutionalism”. The three arenas described above are virtually part of the definition of a consolidated democracy whereas the two remaining arenas, a bureaucracy usable by democratic leaders and an economical society, appear to have a more supporting function that helps to craft or maintain the other conditions. In order to collect taxes, to be capable of guaranteeing the rights of citizens, and exercise its presence in the state territory the democratic government needs a functioning and usable state bureaucracy to accomplish the public duties. Finally, the economic society would arbitrate between state and market through certain norms and institutions that would craft a regulated marker between command and pure market economy.

3. Valenzuela: Virtuous versus Perverse Institutionalisation

According to Valenzuela the process of democratisation, that is the change from authoritarian to democratic regimes, consists of two transitions:

“the first leads to the ‘installation of a democratic government’, and the second to the ‘consolidation of democracy’ or to ‘effective functioning of a democratic regime.’”

The author defines consolidation as institutionalisation that permits “the reproduction of the minimal procedures of a democracy “, that is a virtuous institutionalisation. But to avoid attaching the concept of consolidation to an ideal he conceives a consolidated democracy as one “that does not have perverse elements undermining its basic characteristics” as which he regards tutelary powers, reserved domains, major discriminations in the electoral process, and the existence of other than democratic means to constitute governments. The first three perverse forms of institutionalisation somehow undermine the authority of the elected governors while not being accountable to the public or they manipulate already the process of selecting the government. Yet they would not remain over the long run if there was not the last obstacle to consolidation: the threat
to replace the democratic government through other than democratic means, for instance by military coups or insurrections exercised by significant political actors who use this to preserve their interests (this resembles the semiloyal attitude towards democracy which accepts democratic procedures as long as they result in expected and desired ways, cf. Gunther et al.). The perverse institutions reinforce each other and thereby create a vicious cycle of institutionalisation: for example even the mere possibility of an overthrow of the democratic government forces the actors who are committed to the democratic procedures to assent to their opponents’ demands in order to avoid the reversal of the democracy into an authoritarian regime which keeps such opponents alive and powerful. To consolidate the perverse elements must be removed what happens through political confrontations that either preserve perverse elements or eliminate them. Valenzuela does not tie these confrontations to actors with one or another attitude (favouring democracy or authoritarianism) but rather to the outcome of the conflict, because their short term goals may have opposite consequences over the long run so that efforts towards consolidation could turn out to be damaging this purpose.

Valenzuela explicitly rejects linking consolidation to some ideal that could hardly be accomplished even by the Western prototypes of a consolidated democracy since every regime lacks one or another characteristic of an ideal democracy; yet he investigates a couple of conditions that facilitate consolidation which, notwithstanding that they only “facilitate” or “favour” the process, appear to determine the chances of certain countries quite a lot. Nevertheless these conditions are not part of his “delimited notion of democratic consolidation” which therefore is still conceptualised as accomplished

“when most significant actors and informed public expect the democratic process to last indefinitely, and when it is basically free of what have been called ‘perverse institutions’[…].”

In his article about deficient democracies Merkel develops a distinct concept of democracy – the liberal-constitutional democracy – and classifies certain types by their deficits as so called “defekte Demokratien”. He is not exactly concerned with the process of democratic consolidation but his concept highlights some interesting aspects of democracy which are worth consideration. In fact the development of deficient subtypes of democracy is related to the investigation of consolidation insofar as it regards these flawed democracies as unconsolidated as opposed to consolidated regimes: Merkel’s approach to democracy is aimed at “the differentiation of liberal versus illiberal, defective versus functioning, consolidated versus unstable democracies”, which tells some characteristics of consolidated democracies, such as stability and well-functioning, as well. Some pages later he locates deficient democracies in the “grey area between consolidated democracies and authoritarian regimes” Thus it appears to be legitimate to deem Merkel’s approach as a concept of consolidation.

Basically Merkel expands the definition of democracy to include the notion of constitutionalism: he argues that the concept of polyarchy takes into account only the vertical dimension of legitimacy between electorate and elected officials but neglects the horizontal dimension of separation of powers trough the constitutional state and protected fundamental rights. Furthermore, his definition includes the criterion of full authority of the elected government which was mentioned above. By creating this demanding definition of democracy Merkel highlights the tension between the constitutional and the democratic element: he conceives the sovereignty of the people (free contestation and participation) as confined by constitutionalism which in turn is necessary to protect democracy from itself. To put this in other words: like Odysseus who decided to let himself fettered at the mast to avoid self-destruction, democracy must preserve itself from being democratically abolished, as it has happened in White Russia where the people agreed in a referendum to limit the prerogatives of the parliament and increase the power of the president whose
might was almost uncontrollable after these changes. Thus the element of constitutionalism becomes crucial to the survival of democracy and part of its definition.

Some of the defective subtypes of democracy are in some respects similar to the conditions of consolidation put forward by the other authors: the distinct features of Merkel’s “Domaenendemokratie” for example are the perverse institutions (reserved domains and tutelary powers) Valenzuela’s. Yet, the one type Merkel is especially interested in are so called illiberal democracies, which violate the constitutional principal by circumventing the parliament, undermining the separation of powers, or infringe fundamental freedoms of its citizens, because although they fulfil Dahl’s criteria of democracy they simultaneously have apparent flaws that are contradictory to democratic values in a fundamental way (cf. the given example) but can be covered within the concept of liberal-constitutional democracies.

III. Consolidation under Criticism

1. The Teleological Flavour

Although the described concepts of consolidation have some points in common they do not agree in many essential issues: indeed, one could say that there seem to be as many theories of what a consolidated democracy is as theorists in this field. This has provoked a lot criticism and many attempts to come up with a notion of consolidation that would actually allow to make some statements about how far certain regimes have succeeded in their efforts towards consolidation and why some succeed and others not. Especially the development of the “new” democracies in Latin America has posed many problems because some of them exist in a state of “protracted unconsolidation” since two decades and do not fit into the theoretical framework.
One fundamental problem of many consolidation theories (e.g. Gunther et al., Linz & Stepan) is the link between Western democracies and the goals of consolidation to which new democracies are compared and assessed. Besides neglecting the difficulties inherent in taking Western democracies as prototypes of democracy this also implies a teleological element: in order to become stable functioning democracies new regimes must consolidate or, to take another perspective, unconsolidated democracies are viewed as per se fragile and endangered. Hence, regimes that do not move towards consolidation “are seen as stunted, frozen, protractedly unconsolidated”. As soon as consolidation is seen as continued progress towards a defined goal which can be some ideal end or full democratisation (for which the old democracies are the models) all new regimes are not only supposed to undergo this process but also located somewhere on the way to this end. Hence, these “unconsolidated, noninstitutionalized, or poorly institutionalized” democracies are defined negatively in comparison with that end or goal as lacking something that consolidated democracies have achieved. Linked to the assumption that unconsolidated democracies are unstable and fragile these concepts of consolidation just do not work in reality since many so called unconsolidated democracies survive since several decades.

Another problematic aspect of the consolidation theories considered above is the definition of consolidation as institutionalisation, that would describe unconsolidated democracies as noninstitutionalised or poorly institutionalised, was also criticised by O'Donnell. He distinguishes a formal and an informal form of institutionalisation, the former being the close fit between established rules and the actual behaviour, the latter characterised by widely shared informal rules that guide behaviour. Thus, new democracies are not necessarily less institutionalised but rather have informal institutions: clientelism or particularism which are still important ways of assuming power in many societies and create an equilibrium of relevant forces.
So what can one conclude from the criticism presented? Since “unconsolidated” regimes seem to survive even when faced with severe challenges the only thing that appears to be certain is, that “as long as elections are institutionalized, polyarchies are likely to endure.” Instead of a teleological concept of consolidation as institutionalisation O’Donnell favours the invention of new typologies of democracy (cf. Merkel) that would describe the different characteristics positively and would enable the researcher to examine matters of endurance, performance and quality more appropriately.

2. What Kind of Democracy Would One Prefer?

In some way all concepts of consolidation deal with the issue of what kind of democracy not only is likely to survive in the future but also is wanted to persist. This becomes also relevant for considerations about full democratisation or when a democracy is “really” democratic. For instance, Valenzuela’s notion of consolidation as a process of eliminating “perverse institutions” could be said to be aimed at producing a “full” democracy compared to a type which could be named as tutelary democracy. Indeed, some of the perverse institutions appear to be rather undemocratic, especially discriminations of the electoral process, which undermine the criterion of free contestation and thereby questioning whether the considered case is actually democracy. According to this argument one would again expect such defective democracies to develop towards a completed or perfect democracy what would again invent a teleological element which was criticised above. Furthermore, it was argued that such subtypes of democracy blur the boundary between democratic and nondemocratic regimes, which is also problematic with regard to the normative basis of transition studies because it contradicts the fundamental distinction between the two regime types as being experienced in reality. This is related to the distinction of a concrete empirical democratic regime type from the ideal of governance by the people by Dahl’s definition of polyarchy which identifies
democracy as a form of governance that can be differentiated from nondemocratic regimes through particular criteria.

If one still adheres to this distinction and the notion of democracy it advocates and also follows the chain of reasoning about consolidation explained above it appears that consolidation may be something that is and will be always tied to some ideal of democracy. Additionally, if one defines as goal of consolidation the stability and persistence of the democratic procedures (as did Gunther et al. and Linz & Stepan) but has to admit that “unconsolidated” democracies survive and persist now for quite a long time again consolidation seems to pursue a norm of democracy that may well be very desirable but is still an ideal one cannot expect all democracies to accomplish (or even approximate).

Conclusion

What is a consolidated democracy? The most appropriate answer to this question seems to be an ideal type of Western liberal democracy since consolidation seems to be aimed at accomplishing a Western understanding of what democracy is. However, for apparent reasons this cannot be applied to all democratic regimes. Therefore, if one rejects the model character of Western democracies and the teleological assumption that all democracies inevitably move towards “full democratisation” (democratisation consists of the processes of transition and consolidation) on arrives at the point of rejecting the perception of young democracies as per se “fragile” and “unstable” and also opposing the description of such democracies as lacking some or all of the characteristics of a consolidated democracy. Since many unconsolidated democracies persist without breaking down the concept of consolidation must be separated from the goal of stability and persistence. Thus, one ends up with O'Donnell’s point of view: regimes that have institutionalised elections are likely to persist (they must fulfil Dahl’s criteria of democracy) and instead of expecting new democracies to consolidate in
a certain way one should rather focus on new typologies which would allow to assess the differences between polities and their particular chances of development properly.

However, it is questionable whether new types provide a more satisfying perspective. O’Donnell describes in his article illiberal democracies and the problems of particularism. What these polities lack is “horizontal accountability” or constitutionalism which makes these systems corrupt and violating liberal freedoms. Obviously such a democracy does not appeal to a more normative understanding of democracy but rather provokes thoughts about how to change it towards liberalism and constitutionalism. Hence, a concept of consolidation that would investigate the relations between the cultural and situational context and democratic development i.e. a concept that would take into account the particular situation of a polity could perhaps avoid the flaws of other concepts. Apparently democracy and consolidation remain unfinished concepts.

Literature


