

DEMOCRACY AND ITS PRACTICE: A GENERAL THEORY OF DEMOCRATIC RELATIVITY

Daniel Tetteh Osabu-Kle
Carleton University

DEFINING DEMOCRACY

Democracy has been defined in various ways by different people including government of the people, by the people and for the people, government with the consent of the governed, and a form of regime that derives from popular sovereignty in which ordinary citizens are endowed with the right and ability to govern themselves. It is my contention that concepts may have real, nominal and operational definitions and democracy is no exception. The real definition is concerned with the true, essential or philosophical nature of the concept. The nominal definition is concerned with what has been agreed upon by society, a particular community or by a researcher that helps to imagine and describe what the concept is. Although the nominal definition can lead to the description of the concept, it may not necessarily lead to its measurement. The operational definition specifies the indicators of the concept to enable its measurement directly or indirectly. Democracy has only one real or essential definition. Other definitions of it arise precisely because there is a difference between the real or essential meaning of democracy and the actual practice of democracy that leads to nominal and operational definitions. While the real, philosophical, ideal or essential meaning of democracy remains the same, the actual practice of democracy may be said to be in the eye of the beholder.

The essential or real meaning of democracy derives from two Greek words *demos* and *kratos*. *Demos* means *the common people* and *kratos* means *rule*. Thus, democracy essentially means the *rule* of the *common people*. As explained above, any attempt to define it otherwise is a matter of convenience and may have its roots in the difference between what democracy essentially is and how it is practiced. Defining what constitutes the *common people* and what constitutes *rule* have both been the subject of much debate. Calling the *common people* simply, *the people*, Robert Dahl questioned how *the people* are designated (Dahl, 1989, p.3) For Rustow democracy has to be preceded by national feeling or a feeling of national unity for “The people cannot decide until somebody decides who are the people.”(Rustow, 1970, pp.337-367) At the time of the ancient Greeks, the *common people* who could take part in political decision making was defined to comprise only a subset of the people as a whole, for children, prisoners, women and slaves were excluded. For the Greeks, the exclusion of certain sections of society from the definition of the *common people* was reasonable and did not render democratic practice null and void. In modern democratic practice, exclusion of certain sections of

society including foreigners and children still exists and considered reasonable. The problem in democratic practice is, therefore, what constitutes a reasonable exclusion. No matter how reasonable it is, however, exclusion undeniably enables one section of society (who may or may not be the majority) to dictate to those that are excluded. Democratic practice may therefore be conceived of as a mixture of some essence of democracy and some measure of dictatorship.

Exclusion may also be subtle and there is no place on this planet where the *common people* (interpreted as the masses) rule. Elite theorists including, the classical elite theorists Mosca, Pareto, Michel and modern elite theorists such as Mills, Porter, Field and Higley have drawn attention to the fact that, despite partisan political competition and claims of existence of democracy, it is the organized few that rule the majority comprising the unorganized masses. This dictatorship of the organized few is in effect a reference to the dictatorship component of democratic practice. The Marxist notion of a dominant class of capitalists and the notion of the executive of the modern State being “a committee for managing the affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” also substantiate the fact that democratic practice has a dictatorship component. Thus, *democratic practice is invariably a convenient product comprising some ingredients of both dictatorship and the essence of democracy.*

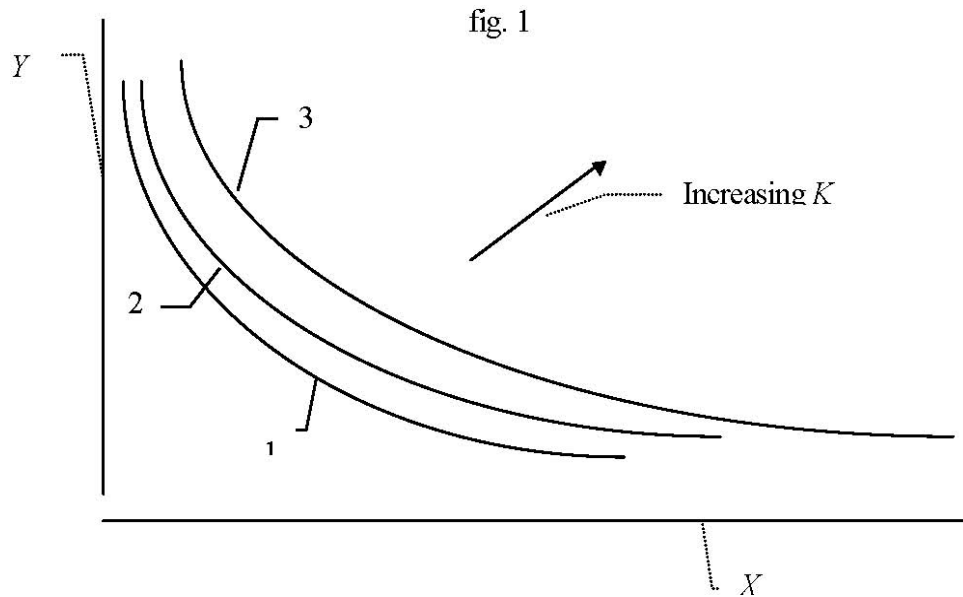
THE DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE MODEL

Democratic practice involves a constant struggle between society and State in which society demands some level of the essence of democracy mixed with some level of dictatorship and the State provides what it considers a balanced mixture. Some level of dictatorship is always required as a control function to avoid anarchy. The relationship between the dictatorship component and the democracy component of democratic practice demanded by society is such that when one increases the other decreases - an inverse relationship. The amount of democracy content or level of democracy depends upon the amount of the dictatorship content or level of dictatorship. Denoting the level of democracy by *Y* and the level of dictatorship by *X*, the relationship between the two may be expressed mathematically as:

$Y = K/X.$
 Thus,
 $YX = K. (1)$
 where *K* is a constant.

This is an the equation of a rectangular hyperbola with the *level of democracy* as the dependent

variable and the *level of dictatorship* as the independent variable. For every political system, the value of the constant K is different giving rise to a family of rectangular hyperbolas. We may call K , *the democratic product constant*. A sketch of the family of rectangular hyperbolas is given in figure 1 below. The rectangular hyperbolas represent paths of democratic practice demanded by society. Once the value of K is calculated for any society, the path of democratic practice can be drawn. As explained below, the family of rectangular hyperbolas can help predict the impact on democratic practice both under challenging and harmonious conditions.



The components of democratic practice within societies may be operationalized to enable the level of democratic practice to be measured and compared. At the level of internal or local politics, the constituents of the *level of dictatorship*, X , include, the degree of regulation, the degree of centralization of political power, degree of political repression, the ability of the political executive to act without consultation, level of police brutality, and level of political violence. The constituents of the *level of democracy*, Y , include the level of cultural compatibility, freedom of speech, degree of availability of opportunity for individual participation, degree of multicultural harmony, level of tolerance of political opinion, level of respect for individual rights, degree of consensual decision making, and degree of decentralization of political power. Both the *level of dictatorship* and the *level of democracy* may be obtained indirectly through attitudinal research on their constituents. Techniques used in assessing these components may include Thurstone, Likert, and Semantic Differential Scaling available in standard textbooks on research methods. It is emphasized that without the dictatorship component, democratic practice might degenerate into mobocracy and without the democracy component, democratic practice might degenerate into tyranny. Thus, Jay M Shafritz and E.W Russell write as follows.

*As Aristotle has warned, time and again throughout history these pure democracies had been captured by **demagogues***

*and had degenerated into dictatorial tyrannies. John Adams wrote in an 1814 letter: "Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There is never a democracy that did not commit suicide." This well justified fear of "the mob" led the founders to create a **republic**, a form of government one step removed from democracy that presumably protects the people from their own passions. The frustrations of coming to grips with the concept and reality of democracy is illustrated by Winston Churchill's 1947 remark in the House of Commons: "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those forms that have been tried from time to time." (p.45)*

Despite much rhetoric to the contrary, any form of democratic practice is *a combined product of democracy and dictatorship*. Stability of democratic practice therefore depends upon a balanced combination of the *democracy* and *dictatorship* components.

It is quite possible for a political regime to have a high democracy component internally, but in its relations with the outside world to have a very high dictatorship content. For example, the political regimes of the West may be said to have high democracy components internally, but in their relations with developing countries, they tend to dictate. This is because the constituents of the *level of democracy* and the *level of dictatorship* are not the same at the local and international arenas. At the international arena, the constituents that influence the *level of dictatorship* include, the degree of international regulation, the level of economic power, the level of military power, effectiveness of intelligence, degree of dependence on external resources, degree of focus on national interest, ability to exercise veto power, degree of national pride, and degree of involvement in military alliances. The constituents that influence the *level of democracy* include the degree of reliance on diplomacy, degree of belief in the equality of nations, degree of sensitivity to international opinion, level of tolerance of the laws of individual nations, level of tolerance of the actions of individual nations, respect for the rights of individual nations, degree of respect for international conventions, and degree of respect of the United Nations. For this reason, the value of *democratic product constant, K*, is not the same at the local and international levels. Democratic practice demanded by a particular society at the international and local levels may, therefore, be quite different.

EXPLANATORY POWER OF THE MODEL

The curves are asymptotic to the axes and convey the message that there is no perfect democracy and there is no perfect dictatorship. A study of the values of *K* and its influence on the sketch of the family of rectangular hyperbolas shows that the higher its

value, the further away a curve is from the axes. For any given value of the dictatorship content of democratic practice, the higher the value of K , the higher the level of democracy. K is therefore a measure of how democratic practice has matured. The lower the value of K the closer the curves of the rectangular hyperbolas are to the axes. It implies that the same curves that are closer to the level of dictatorship axes are also closer to the level of democracy axes and sends the message that those same societies that may be quick to demand ideal democracy may be the same societies that may be quick to degenerate into chaos and requiring dictatorial control when faced with a crisis because their *democratic product constant* is lower. It explains the prevalence of coups in weaker economies as the economic crisis deepens. Also for any given value of K , the higher the level of dictatorship, the lower the level of democracy and vice versa. When K remains the same, but the dictatorship and democracy contents of its democratic practice change, a society may move along the a particular rectangular hyperbola. Thus, a society's movement along a rectangular hyperbola with K fixed implies changes in its dictatorship and democratic constituents.

Under conditions of, prosperity, peace and harmony, a country may choose to increase its democracy content and reduce its dictatorship content. It explains why the prosperity of the West has encouraged an increase in democracy content, but it is emphasized that peace and harmony are equally important. In an emergency situation such as war, more power may be concentrated in the hands of the political executive to enable quick decisions to be made without appreciable change in the nature of the political regime. This concentration of power leads to an increase in the dictatorship component and a decrease in the democracy component while K remains the same. When the challenges are overwhelming and last long enough, the dictatorship component may so increase and the democracy component so decrease that democratic practice jumps from one value of K to another. If the value of K so changes in response to changes in the dictatorship and democracy contents, then a country's democratic path may change from one rectangular hyperbola to the other. We may call this change a *regime transition* and when this regime transition changes the democracy component dramatically, a *democratic transition* may be said to have taken place. A *democratic transition* may therefore be negative or positive. The following examples illustrate these points.

After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Congress placed more power in the hands of the President of the United States to enable him deal with the emergency situation and security was tightened. These measures increased the dictatorship component and reduced the democracy component, but the political regime did not change. Hence, K remained the same and democratic practice in the United States only moved downward along the same rectangular hyperbola. The experience of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union provides an illustration of a positive transition. The resulting regime in Russia made a positive transition by both dramatically increasing the democracy component and decreasing the dictatorship component. The value of K changed in such a manner that Russia is now on an entirely different rectangular

hyperbola of democratic practice. However, Russia has to be carefully watched for as explained earlier, nation-states with lower levels of democratic maturity (low values of K) that are quick to raise their levels of democracy content are likely to increase their dictatorship content rather sharply when faced with a crisis. The situation in Chechnya, if allowed to stretch the political fabric of Russia too far, can result in a transition back to the communist dictatorship of the past. Military coups are examples of negative transitions. After a military coup, dramatic changes occur in both the democracy component and the dictatorship component. The dictatorship component increases sharply, the democracy component decreases sharply and the resulting transition is negative. However, a nasty experience with military rule may actually stimulate society to demand a democratic practice in which sharp changes on the democracy and dictatorship components may lead to a positive transition to a higher level K than before the military rule. A case in point is Ghana where experience with the military rule of Jerry John Rawlings led to Ghanaian society demanding a more reliable form of democratic constitution that both increased the democracy component and decreased the dictatorship component sharply to achieve a balance at a higher level of democratic maturity.

In developing countries with acute technological scarcity and overwhelming economic challenges, it may be expected that the political systems may tend to have a high dictatorship component and a low democracy component. This tendency has been referred to variously as one party rule, personal rule, and neopatrimonial rule. While one party regimes have existed, personal rule and neopatrimonial rule may be only in the eyes of the beholder. Since the hyperbolas are asymptotic to the *level of dictatorship* axis, there can be no perfect dictatorship and personal rule is just impossible. Given that every dictator needs the cooperation of others and discussions take place between the dictator and his political colleagues, the democracy content can never be zero. Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle explain neopatrimonial rule as “those hybrid political systems in which the customs and patterns of patrimonialism coexist with, and suffuse, rational legal institutions.” (Bratton and Walle, 1997, p.62) These neopatrimonial systems are supposed to characterize the political regimes of Africa. They explain patrimonial political systems as those in which “an individual rules by dint of personal prestige and power; ordinary folks are treated as extensions of the “big mans” household with no rights or privileges other than those bestowed by the ruler. Authority is entirely personalized, shaped by the ruler’s preferences rather than codified systems of laws.” (Bratton and Walle, 1997, p.61). They seem to forget that neopatrimonial tendencies also exist in the developed countries of the West and there is no country in the world where the political system is not a hybrid and political outcomes are not shaped by the preferences of the political executive. Party loyalty and the powers of Presidents and Prime Ministers are all reflections of neopatrimonialism. Hence, neopatrimonialism is a universal phenomenon which exists in varying degrees. It is the democracy and dictatorship contents that make the difference.

Moreover, it is not economics and technology alone that influence or shape the democracy and dictatorship contents of democratic practice. For example, the indigenous political systems of Africa, by their consensual nature, have a very high democracy content and low dictatorship content. It suggests that, with peace and harmony acting as catalysts, culture plays a significant role in determining the value of the democracy component. This role played by culture is explained in detail in *Compatible Cultural Democracy: The Key to Development in Africa* (Osabu-Kle, 2000).

Despite the role of culture, there is a tendency to conceive of democracy as simply a political regime in which political representatives are freely and fairly chosen through competitive elections. This *fallacy of electoralism* leaves much to be desired. First, a political regime comprises rules that prescribe, among other things, the qualifications for engaging in politics and how politics is to be conducted. Because the rules exclude sections of the population from competing in the political arena, in practice, the representatives are not freely chosen. Secondly, the political arena cannot be said to be fair so long as the competitors are not endowed with equal resources. Thirdly, competitive elections are not a sufficient condition for democracy. Apart from the possibility of rigging, elections might actually lead to the dictatorship of the elected few or to the dictatorship of the majority of the population over visible minorities.

COMPARISON WITH DAHL'S MODEL

In *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Robert Dahl distinguished political regimes by two axes - the degree of *political competition* and the degree of *political participation* (Dahl, 1971). The axis of political competition was graduated from monopolistic regimes in which power is concentrated in the hands of a narrow elite to pluralist regimes in which power is dispersed among groups and institutions. The axis of political participation was graduated by the proportion of the population that is entitled to participate in a more or less equal plane. The higher the proportion of the population that plays a part in decision making the more inclusionary the regime type and the lower that proportion, the more exclusionary the regime type. There is some similarity between Dahl's axes and mine. His axis of degree of *political competition* may correspond to my axis of *level of dictatorship* denoted by *X* and his axis of *political participation* may correspond to my axis of *level of democracy* denoted by *Y*.

However, in Dahl's model, there is no notion of the *democratic product constant*, *K*, or possible paths along which democratic practice may follow. His descriptive model does not explain why and how under emergency situations, political decision making power tends to be concentrated in the hands of the political executive while the political regime remains the same and change only when the challenges are overwhelming. My model explains that, for a given value of *K*, democratic practice demanded by society is free to move along a rectangular hyperbola so that in emergency situations a State may choose to

alter its position on its path of democratic practice by increasing its dictatorship content and decreasing its democracy content. Dahl's model does not explain why some States that have high democracy content at the local level tend to exhibit the characteristics of dictatorship in their dealings at the international arena to the extent that they even buttress regimes with high levels of dictatorship content. My model explains that the value of K is not the same at the international level for its constituents at the local and international levels are just not the same.

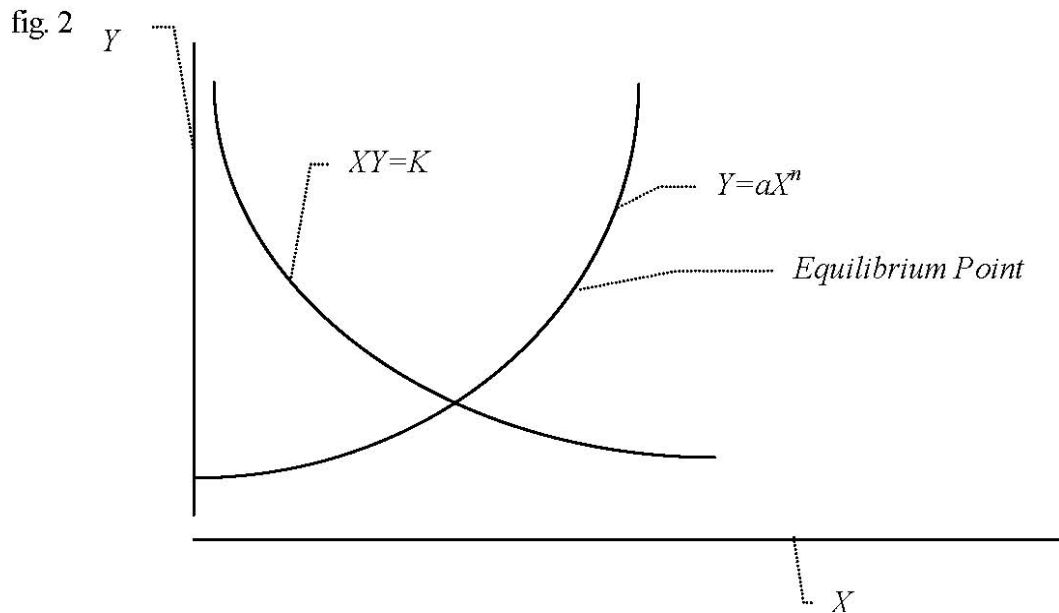
DETERMINING THE POINT OF DEMOCRATIC EQUILIBRUM

The political system of a society may move along its path of democratic practice, but at any particular period it occupies a particular point on that path. The political system as a whole may require a type of democratic practice profile specified by K , but it is the State system that, in the final analysis, permits the particular mix of democracy and dictatorship. In completely stateless societies, the dictatorship component does not exist for there is no rule, and where there is no rule, there is no democracy either for each one is for himself or herself. In such a state of anarchy or Hobsian state of nature, both the democracy and dictatorship components are zero. In general, the democratic mix permitted by the state may be represented by

$$Y = aX^n \dots\dots\dots (2)$$

where n is an index representing the willingness of the state system to respond to the democratic demands of society. We may call n the *state sensitivity index*. Since the willingness of the state may vary from one period to another and under various circumstances, the value of n may change from one period to another and under differing circumstances. When n is zero, Y equals a . Hence, a represents a particular threshold of the level of democracy permitted by the State. We may call a the *democratic threshold constant of the State*. The value of a may vary from one State to the other. For the particular case where $n = 1$, $Y = aX$ which is a straight line. The values of Y and X for the State subsystem may be obtained through an attitudinal research on the elites of the State system comprising the bureaucratic elite, the political representatives, and the leaders of political parties where such parties exist.

From equation (2), the gradient or slope of the curve, $dY/dX = aX^{n-1}$ is naX^{n-1} . Hence, the larger the value of n , the steeper the gradient of the curve. It implies that the larger the value of n , the more sensitive a state is to democratic demands, for it permits more democracy content per unit increase in dictatorship content. The equilibrium point at any time period is determined by the intersection of equations (1) and (2) as shown in figure 2 below.



At any particular time period, it is at this equilibrium point that any stable political system operates. The equilibrium point for external democracy may be determined in a similar fashion.

LOGARITHMIC TRANSFORMATION OF THE MODEL

Equation (1) is

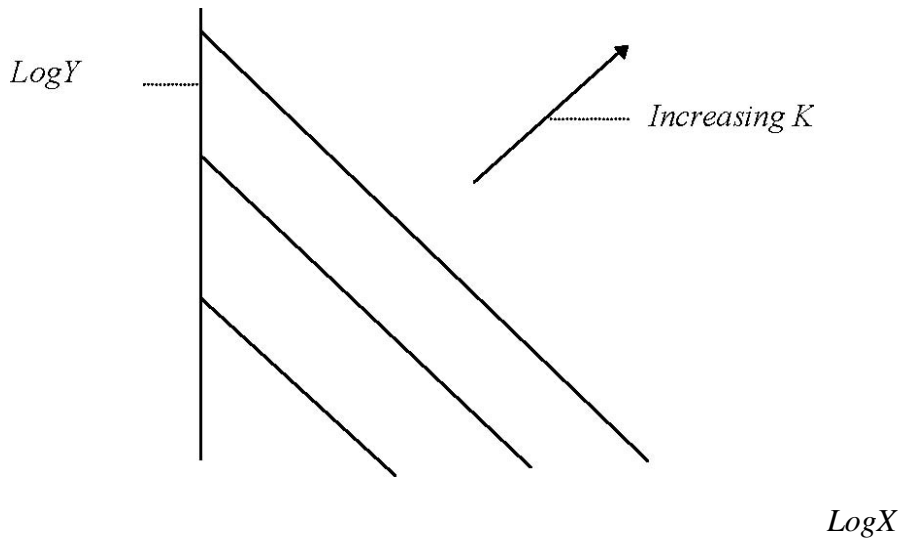
$XY = K$ where K is a constant, X is the dictatorship content and Y the democracy content.

Taking logarithms of both sides of the equation yields,

$$\text{Log}Y = -\text{Log}X + \text{Log}K$$

A plot of $\text{Log}Y$ against $\text{Log}X$ is a family of straight lines with gradient -1 and equal intercepts of $\text{Log}K$ on both the $\text{Log}X$ and $\text{Log}Y$ axes. Hence, when the value of K is known, $\text{Log}K$ can be calculated and the corresponding straight line drawn through two points, $(0, \text{Log}K)$ and $(\text{Log}K, 0)$. A sketch of these family of straight lines is shown below in figure 3.

Fig.3



The logarithmic transformation helps to explain democratic development which occurs when K decreases or increases. Positive democratic development occurs when K increases resulting in an upward shift and negative democratic development occurs when K decreases resulting in a downward shift. These shifts are very similar to the shift of the demand curve in economics.

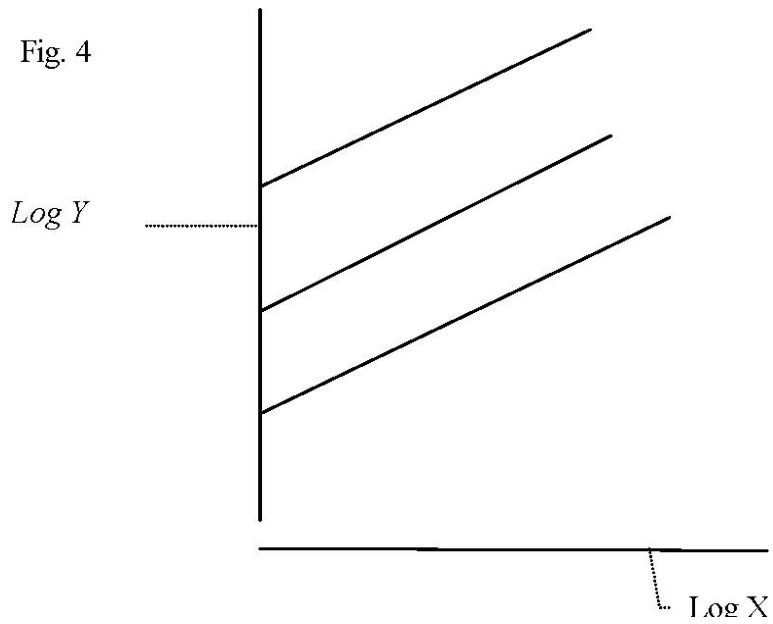
Equation (2) is

$$Y = aX^n$$

Taking logs,

$$\text{Log}Y = \text{Log}a + n\text{Log}X$$

A graph of $\text{Log}Y$ against $\text{Log}X$ is a straight line of gradient n and intercept $\text{Log} a$. A sketch of the resulting family of straight lines is shown in figure 4 below.



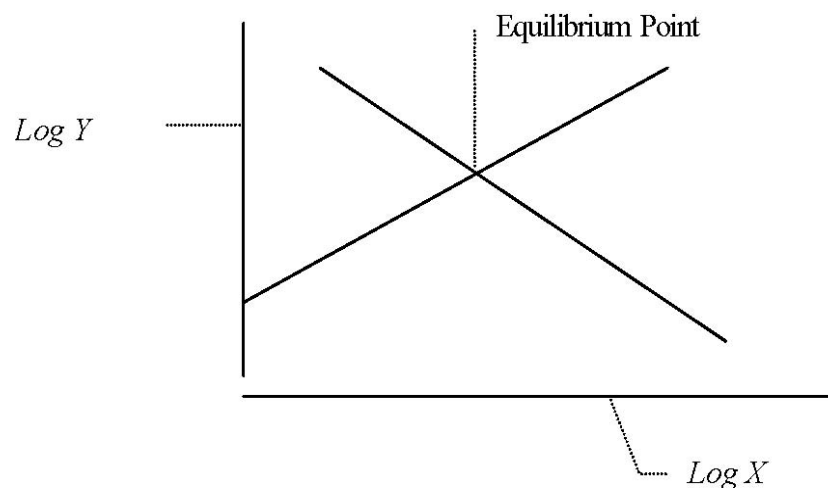
At a particular political equilibrium,

$$\text{Log} Y = - \text{Log} X + \text{Log} K = \text{Log} a + n \text{Log} X$$

$$(n+1)\text{Log} X = \text{Log} K - \text{Log} a$$

Political equilibrium is attained when corresponding lines of figure 3 and figure 4 intersect as shown below.

Fig. 5



Hence, at the point of political equilibrium,

$$\text{Log } X = (\text{Log}K - \text{Log}a)/(n+1) \dots\dots\dots (3)$$

Equation 3 enables *LogX* and, hence, *LogY* for the political equilibrium points for various countries to be calculated if the corresponding *K*, *n*, and *a* for those countries are determined through attitudinal research of their societies and their associated State systems. Thus, apart from *K*, *n*, and *a* enabling countries to be compared on their democratic practice, they enable their relative positions on a map of democracy content versus dictatorship content to be graphically determined.

CONCLUSION

Essentially, democracy is the *rule of the common people*. In practice pure democracy does not exist and democratic practice is a balanced product of some level of democracy and some level of dictatorship. Society demands democratic practice in which there is an inverse relationship between the level of democracy content and the level of dictatorship content. The dictatorship component is an indispensable control function without which democratic practice may degenerate into mobocracy. To avoid chaos and anarchy, society itself demands a reasonable mixture of some level of democracy and some level of dictatorship. The State system responds by permitting what it considers a balanced mixture compatible with the culture of society and situational variables including the level of emergency. Because culture is dynamic and situations change, both the societal demand and the response of the State are subject to change. The model discussed shows that there is always a struggle between the democratic practice demanded by society as a whole and what the State system is willing to allow. A point of political equilibrium is reached where democratic practice is in stable equilibrium. However, depending upon circumstances, the State may make some adjustments by varying the democracy and dictatorship contents along the path of a rectangular hyperbola determined by the *democratic product constant K*. The State does that by varying *a*, *the democratic threshold of the State*, and *n*, its sensitivity to democratic demands. When societal challenges are overwhelming, a positive or negative transition may occur in which *K* jumps from one value to another while *a* and *n* remain constant or change to accommodate a new equilibrium point. Thus, society determines the value of *K* (societal property) while *a* and *n* are determined by the State system (State properties). Societies may be compared on their *K* values and State subsystems may be compared on their *a* and *n* values.

While not denying class or group struggles within society itself, the model conveys the idea of a constant struggle between society and State which sometimes results in crises leading to democratic transitions from one value of *K* to another. However, a high level of *K* does not necessarily mean a high level of democracy content. Depending upon the nature of the State system, it is quite possible for a political system with a high value of *K*

to have less democracy content than a political system with a lower value of K . For this reason, democratic practice may be said to be in the eye of the beholder.

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