RECONCEPTUALIZING CIVIL SOCIETY AND ITS STRENGTH

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ABSTRACT

Simon M. Hoellerbauer: Reconceptualizing Civil Society and its Strength
(Under the direction of Graeme Robertson)

What is *Civil Society*? Can we assess how strong it is? Using the problems present conceptualizations of civil society entail as a point of departure, this work develops a definition that strips civil society of its normative assumptions and functional form and fits better with the reality we observe. Civil society can be thought of as a space between the state, the market, and the family that can be divided into different sectors based on the goals of the civil organizations that inhabit it. The strength of each sector can be assessed by gauging how cohesive civil society organizations within that sector are, how embedded they are in the social fabric of society, and how developed their bureaucratic capital is. This work then sketches out how this approach can be used to analyze civil society in the United States and Armenia. In sum, it presents the basis for a new research agenda aims to investigate the relationship between civil society and democracy.

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Introduction

Civil society is a concept that has come to take a central role among scholars of democratization and policy makers interested in furthering development abroad. Although the term has a long history, the concept of civil society was first linked to democracy by Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, although he did not use the term itself (Whitehead, 2004, 26). The more agency-focused literature on democratization and democratic consolidation—including democratic theorists—has highlighted the powerful role civil society plays in political development, although they argue it does so in diverse ways (Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, 1992; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Diamond, 1999; Warren, 2001; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2005; Bunce and Wolchik, 2011). In these accounts, civil society serves as a democratizing force, ensuring democratic change or democratic stability, depending on the context. Scholars, both theorists and empiricists, who have looked at civil society itself, however, have not been as quick to affirm this position (Encarnación, 2003; Armony, 2004; Lorch and Bunk, 2017; Teets, 2014; Ziegler, 2010; Spires, 2011; Dimitrovova, 2010; Cheskin and March, 2015). They nevertheless also argue forcefully about the importance of civil society, with a more nuanced focus.

A central issue is the conceptual confusion that exists around the term. As one scholar of civil society put it, "the meaning of the term has varied over time and the framing of civil society has depended on intellectual tradition and social reality" (Alagappa, 2004*a*, 26). Another stated it more bluntly:

> Suffice it to say that we are still without a single, unified and consensual, meaning for the term. To this day, most writers on 'civil society' leave me uncertain whether trade unions occupy a central or a marginal role; whether 'the media' are to be viewed as internal or external; whether the neutral rule of law is an essential precondition and support, or an utopian ideal that civil society activists should use to critique existing strictures of political manipulation; and whether political democracy sprouts from, coexists with, or threatens to pollute the dense associative principles of civil society. (Whitehead, 2004, 27-28)

This confusion has led some to call for ignoring the term entirely: "To rediscover civil society, to retrieve an archaic concept, may be an interesting exercise in intellectual history but it evades the real political challenges at the end of the twentieth century" (Kumar, 1993, 391-392). This call has not been heeded, and civil society remains a buzzword for policy developers and researchers of democracy. Understandably, as the relationship between society, citizens, and politics is worth studying in-depth.

My goal in this paper is not to engage in too much depth the theoretical literature on civil society, and I do not directly debate the merit of this or that conceptualization. This is first and foremost an empirically focused work, and I do not seek to develop civil society as a model or approach to politics (see Baker, 2002). Like all concepts, civil society as an idea only exists because we use it and because it is useful in analysis. The confusion regarding civil society is impactful, as it complicates empirical analysis, making it hard to adjudicate between the many theorized effects of civil society. In addition, and most crucially, this confusion makes it difficult to find an accurate way to assess civil society in quantitative or qualitative ways, leading to a decidedly small but very diverse array of civil society measurement strategies, which are often not as concept-driven as they should be. The empirical reality is important, in turn, because a focus solely on theory may lead us to make statements such as the one made by Arato and Cohen (2017) when they say that "populist movements and political religion are in but not necessarily of civil society" (283). To avoid such confusing phrasing, the concept of civil society must, to a certain extent, be torn from the grasping hands of theory, which has shaped it considerably, and must be freed from the normative connotations imposed on it by both theorists and empiricists. Only then can we begin to discuss ways of assessing different aspects of civil society.

My main aim in this paper is to establish a new way of thinking about civil society strength, which I assess via three dimensions and a conditioning element. Along the way, however, it is necessary first to redefine civil society, strip it of its normative implications,

and make it nonfunctional in definition. I accomplish this by forming civil society as the space between the state, the market, and the family. This space can be divided into sectors and subsectors, each made up of organizations with similar goals. This division of the civil society space is necessary in order to establish the non-monolithic nature of civil society. The three main dimensions of civil society strength are sector- and subsector-based: cohesiveness speaks to how well connected and cooperative groups within a sector are; embeddedness speaks to how well the sector is situated within the overall framework of society; and bureaucratic capital speaks to how well run the organizations in a sector are. Finally, the civil society environment, which can also vary at the sector level, impacts strength by making it harder or easier for groups to be cohesive and embedded. This paper thus provides a new language for speaking about civil society and civil society strength.

This article is constructed in the following way, roughly following the path of conceptualization laid out by Gerring (2012, 131): the second section presents a brief review of the literature on civil society, discussing both the term and the concept, with an aim to highlight the problems the inherent opaqueness of the term presents to empirical studies. In the third section, I explain how existent quantitative approaches to measuring civil society present flawed images of civil society. Then, in the fourth, I lay out a more nuanced, less normative conceptualization of civil society and sketch out a new way of thinking about civil society strength built off of that new conceptualization. Fifth, I demonstrate the utility of my proposed assessment strategy by turning to two brief vignettes—focusing on the United States and Armenia—that demonstrate variation along the different components of strength. Finally, I conclude and present the way forward for this research agenda.

On Civil Society

Although the historical development of the term and concept of civil society is not the main point of this section or of this paper, it is important to acknowledge that the scholarly and theoretic understanding of civil society, as expressed by Alagappa above, has changed considerably overtime.[1] Hobbes and Locke both use the phrase "civil society" but did so to refer to what nowadays we term political society (Whitehead, 2004, 25). The economists of the Scottish Enlightenment—Adam Ferguson chief among them—were the first to position civil society as a sphere somewhat independent from or opposite the state, but tied it solidly to the market, which was the epicenter of early state-independent operations (Whitehead, 2004, 25; Alagappa, 2004*a*, 27-28). Hegel took a similar approach to the topic, giving it a structure heavily based on guilds and unions and positioning the market-situated concept as fully separate from the state and family (Alagappa, 2004*a*, 27). Although Alexis de Tocqueville, writing at a similar time his study of democratic development in the United States, was the first theorist of civic associationism to connect it clearly with democracy, the theory of civil society would not come around again to this connection until much later. Marx, for whom civil society was still intricately tied up with the market, cast civil society as a stumbling block to the proletariat revolution, a force that had subjugated the state and that had to be cast aside (Alagappa, 2004*a*, 28). Gramsci, although starting from a similar Marxist background, twisted the discussion around civil society, seeing it "as providing a solution" to the political, social, and cultural problems posed by capitalist society (Alagappa, 2004*a*, 29).

Contemporary empirical approaches in political science in the realm of democratization, which have incorporated elements from both Tocqueville and Gramsci, can be divided into two camps. These focus mainly on function[2]: Green (2002, 456) explains

[1] See Cohen and Arato (1992), Chapter 1 of Howell and Pearce (2001), Warren (2001), Baker (2002), Burnell and Calvert (2004), and the Introduction of Alagappa (2004*b*) for a series of reviews of the history of the term and concept.

[2] Although function informs make-up, which I discuss in the next paragraph.

a "sociological version" and "political version"; Uhlin (2009) describes "recreational" vs "advocacy" civil societies; Baker (2002, 64) differentiates between "republican" and "instrumentalist" approaches.[3]. In short, the divide refers to those who conceptualize civil society as a place for the inculcation of democratic values and those who conceive of it as a counterbalance to the state. On the one hand neo-Tocquevillans—chief among them Putnam (1993, 2000)—emphasize the ability of the interaction of people in the social space to instill and teach democratic values. Scholars on the other side of the debate underline the ability of civil society groups to work as a check on the state. This leads Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992, 66) to proclaim that "high organizational density ... is an important counterweight to the state apparatus," Acemoglu and Robinson (2005, 31) to explain that civil society can help solve the collective action problem during rebellion and protect against state-takeover by hostile forces afterward, and Bunce and Wolchik (2011) to theorize that strong cohesive relationships between civil society and opposition groups in hybrid regimes can force authoritarian leaders out of power. This attitude is not confined solely to empirical studies, however; Arato and Cohen affirm that "autonomous civil society is the indispensable couterpart of a modern democratic constitutionalist polity" (2017, 284).

Of course, what civil society does may not be connected so directly to what it is. Nevertheless, implicit or explicit functional definitions—if such definitions are attempted at all—of civil society abound, especially in the study of democratization. Although some scholars contest the formulation of civil society as uniformly beneficial to democracy—see Armony (2004), Berman (1997), Bermeo (2003), Huntington (2000 [1968]), and Holland and Palmer-Rubin (2015)—the prevailing trend within the democratization literature is still to emphasize the positive nature of civil society: the "normative backdrop [to civil

[3] Armony (2004, 24) lays out three types: "social capital," "third sector," and "public sphere." Although the distinctions are theoretically useful, third sector civil society—also used by Anheier (2004)—and public sphere civil society—a version of which is championed by Jur̈gen Habermas—belong to the same family, as both see civil society as a force to counter the state. They do conceptualize distinct *make-ups* of civil society, however.

society] is a liberal-democratic one" (Baker, 2004, 63).[4,5] In this vein, scholars work backward from function. Thus, in the balance schools of thought, scholars such as Lisa Raker and Jean-Francois Bayart only count organizations that interact with the state as belonging to civil society (White, 2004, 8). Putnam (1993, 2000), on the other hand, considers all social organizations as part of civil society. In the context of democratic consolidation, Diamond (1999) explicitly includes only democratic organizations within his conceptualization of civil society. Alagappa (2004*a*) states that only "groups that take collective action in pursuit of the public good" pertain to civil society (32). Unsurprisingly, some theorists and empiricists have pushed back against these definitions, pointing out that such a "restrictive" approach to civil society is problematic, muddles analysis, and biases results (Armony, 2004, 9). In addition, the study of civil society under authoritarian rule has pointed out that the liberal democratic conceptualization is flawed, as civil society can exist with—and indeed co-exist with and/or support—authoritarian rulers (Lorch and Bunk, 2017; Cheskin and March, 2015; Teets, 2014; Spires, 2011; Ziegler, 2010; Dimitrovova, 2010).

It is also critical to note here that discussion within the literature reigns as to whether civil society is inherently a Western concept. Gellner (1994) claims that it is, although Alagappa (2004*b*), in his edited volume on civil society in Asia, retorts that civil society may not look the same everywhere, although the concept remains useful. The issue again revolves around functional definitions and conceptualizations, as they are difficult to apply to all cases.

[4]Interestingly, whereas Armony, Bermeo, and Huntington provide somewhat broad-seated explanations that civil society can have destabilizing effects (in the case of Huntingon and Bermeo) and can contain non-democratic elements (Armony), Berman and Holland and Palmer-Rubin provide a more mechanism focused look at how this may occur: Berman points out recreational organizations that had abandoned politics were ripe for manipulation and co-optation by the Nazis in Weimar Germany, and Holland and Palmer-Rubin point out that civil society organizations can actually function as brokers for clientelism within weakly democratic and hybrid regimes.

[5]Gellner (See 1994, Ch. 1) for an assessment of why this normative connotation and functional form was so valuable after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Normatively and theoretically, this idea of civil society was incredibly important. Ideas inform actions, just as actions inform ideas. However, to use this idea of civil society as the definition of civil society is empirically false, as I discuss in this section.

Perhaps in order to avoid debates such as these, a trend in the literature has been to define civil society as a location, as a "sphere"—or spheres in the case of Fraser (1990)—that is situated between the market and the state, the private sector and the state, or the famly, the market, and the state (Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, 1992; Bernhard et al., 2015; Uhlin, 2009).[6] Civil society has also been put into network terms by Skocpol and Fiorina (1999) and Henderson (2003). Yet these conceptualizations still mostly fall into the trap of casting civil society as a more or less monolithic entity.

The scholars of international assistance have been the ones, almost by accident, to review and critique the traditional civil society paradigm most effectively. Although still hamstrung by the normative assumptions built into a lot of their work, focusing on the factors that facilitate or impede the strengthening and growth of civil society has allowed them to point out empirically what some political theorists have been exploring for some time, namely that civil society is not monolithic. Mendelson and Glenn (2002), investigating the impact of foreign assistance on NGOs, find that civil society thus promoted can be disconnected from the people, a similar theme that runs through the work of Ishkanian (2008, 2014). Henderson (2003) shows that civil society that received funding gains a different character from the which does not, with funded civil society growing closer together, but also more insular. Bush (2015) explains that democracy assistance changes the nature of civil society organizations that seek donor funding, making them more Western in appearance and structure. Although she does not discuss the impact of this assistance on other organizations within civil society, Aksartova (2009) does, echoing Henderson's earlier work by explaining that this funding can destabilize other civil society organizations that do not receive funding. While this work is valuable in and of itself, and while much still remains to be explored about how civil society promotion affects civil societies as a whole, these studies crucially chip at the idea that civil society can be seen as strong or weak as a whole, without considering its constituent parts. Al-

[6]Malena and Heinrich (2007, 340) interestingly cast civil society as an "arena" due to its interactive nature.

though these studies themselves do not take the step back required to fully reassess the sometimes falsely self-reinforcing nature of the civil society literature, they help realize its necessity. This, along with the literature on undemocratic civil society (e.g. Bermeo, 2003; Armony, 2004), serves to demonstrate the danger and the hollowness of the more functional approaches to civil society.

On the Assessment of Civil Society

Two broad themes, related to the above discussion, run through the assessment of civil society. The monolithic approach to civil society endemic to the democracy-civil society literature is replicated in the measurement of civil society. Furthermore the confusion about the meaning of the term is also replicated in these measures, making it quite difficult to determine what is captured by these measurements. The goal of this section is to review several civil society assessment strategies and initiatives, in order to demonstrate what work must still be done. Although some are also methodologically questionable and many of the quantitative measures are not available on a large scale, the aim is to focus more on the conceptual problems inherent in these measures.

Although the dearth of quantitative measures of civil society in the social sciences inspired Anheier to lament their lack in his 2004 book, in which he develops a measurement scheme for civil society, recent times have seen a significant proliferation of quantitative approaches. The one measure still in consistent use today that predates Anheier's complaint is Freedom House's Nations in Transit measure (Freedom House, 2018). The Nations in Transit scores seek to track the democratic development of the Eastern and Central European and Eurasian countries that emerged out of the collapse of the Soviet Union.[7] One of the subscores within the Nations in Transit project pertains to civil society. As all of the Freedom House scores, values on each dimensions are assigned

[7] Except for, interestingly, Mongolia, which was dropped after the first three editions of NIT as Freedom House "felt that the logic of the NIT findings was strengthened when [they] limited the countries to those that were located in Europe or were part of the Soviet Union" (Puddington, 2015).

by country experts, with editorial input from Freedom House. Country report authors and experts are asked to answer a series of questions on civil society and give a score between 1 and 7.

Even aside from the potential for bias in expert surveys—and the editorial control of Freedom House—The Nations in Transit civil society score is highly problematic. First, it creates an image of civil society that is not based in empirical reality. It "[a]ssesses the growth of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), their organizational capacity and financial sustainability, and the legal and political environment in which they function; the development of free trade unions; and interest group participation in the policy process" (Freedom House, 2018), implicitly pointing to an understanding of civil society based on non-governmental organizations, which excludes many groups active in the civil society space. Freedom House's understanding of civil society, in the line of Diamond, also excludes certain organizations whose values do not reflect democratic principles. with one of the questions posed to experts asking: "Is society free of excessive influence from extremist and intolerant nongovernmental institutions and organizations?" The questions themselves—which range from "Is civil society vibrant?" to "Is the education system free of political influence and propaganda"—betray a scattered conceptualization of the concept. This makes it hard to identify both what this measure actual seeks to *capture* and what the expected effect of this measured quantity is intended to be.

Another, much more recent, expert-survey-based approach is the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Coppedge et al., 2017; Pemstein et al., 2017). Among the over 300 indicators—each of which are created by treating them as latent scores in a Bayesian item response theory (IRT) model with inputs from a large number of expert coders—are ten that pertain to civil society. In contrast to Freedom House, the V-Dem project takes a very broad approach to civil society, declaring that

> The sphere of civil society lies in the public space between the private sphere and the state. Here, citizens organize in groups to pursue their collective interests and ideals. We call these groups civil society organizations (CSOs). CSOs

> include, but are by no means limited to, interest groups, labor unions, spiritual organizations (if they are engaged in civic or political activities), social movements, professional associations, charities, and other non-governmental organizations. (Coppedge et al., 2017a, 61-62)

Although civil society is still conceived of as one entity, this approach acknowledges the complexities of the term.

V-Dem uses the ten civil society indicators to create two indexes designed to measure civil society. The first, the *Core Civil Society Index*, is formed by a Bayesian factor analysis of the CSO entry and exit, CSO repression, and CSO participatory environment indicators (Bernhard et al., 2015). This measure is designed to show how "robust" civil society is, that is to say, the extent to which "civil society is able to establish autonomy from the control of the state and that citizens pursue their collective interests actively" (Bernhard et al., 2015, 10). Although clearly stated and methodologically advanced, questions remain about what this measure is designed to show. What does robustness actually mean? Is a robust civil society one that counterbalances the state? Does autonomy from the state imply an *effective* civil society? Although Bernhard et al. explain their desire to create a "single convenient indicator that captures the relative strength of civil society across observations," it is unclear what the connection is between civil society strength and robustness. The constituent indicators do not provide much enlightenment: while they establish that this measure does measure what Bernhard et al. term robustness, it is difficult to understand how these indicators connect to civil society strength on a conceptual and theoretical basis.

The second V-Dem measure of civil society, the *Civil society participation index* is unfortunately even more conceptually muddled (Coppedge et al., 2017a, 61-62). Confusingly, it seems to answer a series of tangentially related questions: "Are major CSOs routinely consulted by policymakers; how large is the involvement of people in CSOs; are women prevented from participating; and is legislative candidate nomination within party organization highly decentralized or made through party primaries?" The con-

nection between participation in CSOs and how CSOs participate in the policy-making process is not well established. Even less clear is how candidate nomination, which ranges from selection done "exclusively by party leaders" to selection "by constituency groups or direct primaries" is connected to the other three questions, with the link tenuous at best (Coppedge et al., 2017a, 134).[8] The Varieties of Democracy provides a very useful tool for describing civil society around the world, on a much larger scale than has ever been possible before. Its contribution is invaluable. But its measures sprout conceptual cracks.

Turning away from expert surveys somewhat, the most conceptually robust measure of civil society is arguably the CIVICUS *Civil Society Index* (Malena and Heinrich, 2007). Based on the CIVICUS Civil Society Diamond (Anheier, 2004), the CCSI measures civil society along four dimensions: structure, environment[9], values, and impact. Civil societies are assessed on these four dimensions with a combined 74 indicators based on a diverse array of statistical and qualitative sources and evaluated, ideally, by country civil society representatives (Malena and Heinrich, 2007, 348-349). The measure is not very methodologically robust. While the indicators used nominally remain the same, the "holistic" motivation of the CCSI makes it hard to reproduce across cases or years, and the sources can change based on the context and availability of data for each country (Anheier, 2004, 35-37; Malena and Heinrich, 2007, 341, 347). Granted, the goal of the CCSI is not necessarily to function as a quantitative measure in regression analysis; instead, it should serve as a tool for civil society organizations and donors to assess civil society. In the light of the theme for this section, the CCSI provides two key advancements. First, the CCSI crucially does acknowledge that non-democratic groups

[8]V-Dem also includes a *Diagonal Accountability Index*, which "covers the range of actions and mechanisms that citizens, civil society organizations (CSOs), and an independent media can use to hold the government accountable" (Coppedge et al., 2017a, 79-80; see also Lührmann, Marquardt and Mechkova, 2017). This expands the focus beyond civil society and still uses the core civil society index to measure the civil society component of diagonal accountability, thus simply shifting the problem instead of addressing it.

[9]Called "space" in Anheier (2004)

must be included in any assessment of civil society (Malena and Heinrich, 2007, 341). In addition, Anheier points out the necessity of examining civil society at different levels of analysis: "because a country has a pronounced presence of voluntary organizations in the field of human rights or some other area does not mean that it has a well-developed civil society overall" (2004, 31).

Conceptual concerns nevertheless persist. At various points, "strength," "state," and "health" of civil society are equated, yet it seems that the first is an active measure, the second a descriptive one, and the third an evaluative one. The relation between the four dimensions is also not entirely clear. To what extent do values tie into strength? To what extent does impact measure the outcome of the other three dimensions?

The most difficult obstacle for the application of the CCSI is the shear amount of work and organization involved. Over a series of three waves between 2000 and 2010, the CIVICUS organization managed to describe the civil societies of 75 different countries, although not all countries were included in each wave, making it difficult to track change over time. The intractability of the process, and the potential for pro-NGO bias, led CIVICUS to produce another measure of civil society, the *Civil Society Enabling Environment Index* (Fioramonti and Kononykhina, 2015, 473). Based on CIVICUS' conceptualization of civil society as an arena where citizens interact, the enabling environment is defined as "a set of conditions that impact on the capacity of citizens (whether individually or in an organized fashion) to participate and engage in the civil society arena in a sustained and voluntary manner" (Fioramonti and Kononykhina, 2015). Using quantitative sources to evaluate the "socio-economic" (15 sources), "socio-cultural" (6 sources), and "governance" (32 sources) environments, the Enabling Index attempts to assess the capacity of civil society organizations to act in order to achieve their aims.[10] The power of this measure is that it involves not only the legal environment of civil society (see Green

[10]The actual formula for calculating the Enabling Environment Index weights the three dimensions so that the governance dimension provides the same amount of information as the two other dimensions combined.

2002) but also cultural and economic factors that may impact civil society development. The problem—although the realizations that adjudicating between which groups belong in civil society and which do not is fruitless and that the environment plays a large role in determining civil society capacity are well-founded—is that abandoning all references to civil society organizations may also lead to misleading results. It is quite possible that civil society groups are "stronger" in nominally "weaker" environments due to characteristics of those groups themselves, and vice-versa.

A similar environment-based measure, although one that includes more references to the actual groups that the civil society space contains, is the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) CSO Sustainability Index (USAID, 2016). The Sustainability Index aims to evaluate civil society along seven dimensions: legal environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, service provision, infrastructure, and public image. A country's score is drawn up by a panel of at minimum eight representatives from that country's civil society. These representatives debate a series of indicators provided by USAID and then come to a decision on scores on the seven dimensions.

In contrast to CIVICUS' Enabling Environment Index, the Sustainability Index, as the name implies, captures the health of civil society, although the aim is still to make claims about civil society's ability to act given certain structural conditions. In this way, it faces some of the same difficulties as the Enabling Environment Index. In addition, sustainability could vary within different groupings of civil society. Furthermore, and more troubling, sustainability as seen from the donor perspective and from the persecutive of those organizations that receive funds could, as Aksartova (2009); Bush (2015); Henderson (2003); Ishkanian (2008, 2014); Mendelson and Glenn (2002) investigate, actually be negatively correlated with capacity for action.

Although much of the work on assessing civil society in the context of democratization has been qualitative in nature, little of this work has been conceptually—with respect

to civil society—rigorous, making it difficult to fully analyze the approaches taken by researchers without also analyzing their work overall.[11] While Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992), for example, present a definition of civil society, they do not provide a clear avenue for evaluating its strength, beyond stating that a denser civil society should be better able to counteract the state (6).[12] Although qualitative work is valuable, if the researchers do not clearly conceptualize what effective—in whatever way they hypothesize it should be—civil society should look like, it is easy to fall into the logical fallacy that a "successful" outcome per force implies a "successful" civil society.

As this review has shown, existing measures struggle to accommodate the conceptual fuzziness of civil society and often end up measuring something different than intended. A clearer conceptualization of civil society is needed before it can be possible to speak of assessment strategies.[13]

A New Approach to Civil Society and its Strength

From the above, it is reasonable to conclude that civil society makes the most sense as a space—attempting to adjudicate between who and who does not belong to civil society can lead to arbitrary decisions and to biased conclusions about how "civil society" behaves and how it impacts political processes. Also from the above, it is fairly straightforward to conclude that we need a more theory-, concept-driven approach to measuring civil society strength. In this section, I first introduce a novel way of thinking about civil

[11] Baiocchi, Heller and Silva (2008) do provide a way of assessing civil society in a qualitative way, although it speaks more to a civil society's relationship to the state. They examine two dimensions, self organization—which indicates how independent civil society groups are—and mode of engagement—how civil society groups interface with the state. Importantly, they apply this concept to different states within Brazil. But this measure is not directly related to this topic here.

[12] Civil society density is not a measurement strategy I assess here. It has been pointed out repeatedly that simply counting civil society organizations is misleading and depends on a very clear idea of what organizations should be counted or not. See Encarnación (2003) for a study of the link between civil society density and democratization.

[13] It should also be noted that these measures are almost exclusively used as predictors, explanatory variables, or controls. Bailer, Bodenstein and Heinrich (2012) is one of the few works that explicitly looks at civil society as an outcome in a quantitative way. A lot of work remains to be done in order to confirm what factors impact various aspects of civil society.

society. I then use that new conceptualization to conceive a new approach to civil society strength.

Reconceptualizing Civil Society

It seems clear from the previous discussion that if civil society is to be useful—or agreeable—as a concept, it must be separated from normative evaluations. We are interested only in the structure—the bones, the flesh, the organs, the nerves—and not yet in how the structures interact—the different organ systems, the flows of hormones that regulate the interaction among different parts of the body.[14] In effect, what is needed is a purely mechanical definition and conceptualization. The rest can come later. In this section I lay out such a mechanical definition. The goal is to provide us with a language with which to discuss civil society that is as free of normative claims as is possible.

In accordance with much of the recent civil society literature, I conceptualize civil society as the nebulous space that exists between the state, the family, and the market (the private sector) (Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, 1992; Anheier, 2004; Malena and Heinrich, 2007; Uhlin, 2009; Bernhard, Tzelgov, Jung, Coppedge and Lindberg, 2015).[15,16] I say this space is *nebulous*, as it its bounds are malleable and it is negative in definition; it is everything the three pillars of society are not.[17] The civil society space is populated by *civil society actors*—people, not necessarily citizens, who may or may not be in the same physical space; that is to say, civil society actors can exist online—who congregate in *civil society organizations* where they interact with other civil society actors. Although somewhat tautological, civil society actors are those individuals who are active in the civil society space. This means that individuals can move into and out of

[14] I am not advocating a functional approach to civil society. This is for illustrative purposes only.

[15] To emphasize this point: civil society is not a thing. It is not tangible, and thus not really important without interpretation. It is a space, occupied by things that are tangible, which are important.

[16] Defining civil society by what it is, or rather, where it is, rather than by what it does, helps alleviate concerns that the concept applies only to Western countries. Functional definitions of civil society are almost always unavoidably Western.

[17] This also implies that these three pillars can apply pressure on civil society.

the space.[18] At any one time, civil society actors can be involved with any number of civil society organizations. Civil society organizations are not just collections of civil society actors—just as the state can take on a life of its own independent of the individuals who make up the ruling regime, so can civil society organizations. Civil society actors and civil society organizations are active in the civil society space via *civil society actions*—activities that bring them closer to their goal. Civil society actions can be workshops and seminars, tournaments, letter writing campaigns, or outreach programs.[19]

In a departure from the majority of the literature, however, I conceive of the civil society space as one divided into *sectors* and *subsectors*. The idea that civil society can be divided in meaningful ways is not new, of course. Anheier (2004), in his presentation of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation's Civil Society Diamond discusses the meso and micro levels of analysis, stating that the measurement scheme he proposes could be applied "a particular segment or sub-field [of civil society]" and "one specific organization or one specific setting" (29). He does not address in any systematic way, nor identify, these segments or sub-fields, and does not explain how they relate to the civil society space as a whole. White (2004) also identifies "the need to distinguish between different types or sectors of civil society," but does not offer a systematic way to distinguish between them (10). Nevertheless, both underline the necessity of recognizing that civil society is not monolithic; in many cases to speak of civil society as a whole is "meaningless" (White, 2004, 11).

Fraser (1990), responding to Habermas' concept of the "public sphere," goes even

[18]As seen below in section *Civil Society Strength*, the extent to which and ease with which individuals flit into and out of the space could be an important characteristic.

[19]Protest belongs to civil society, as civil society can express itself via protest—in other words, protest is a form of civil society action (Alagappa, 2004*b*, 3). Including protest within civil society does not mean they cannot be studied separately; the goal is to avoid only including organizations with the civil society space. Protest—although the extent to which it is spontaneous or organized matters—is an expression of civic interest in an outcome and by design implies association. Civil society actors can pull individuals into the civil society space for protest. Civil society actors are not the only actors who can pull individuals into the civil society space, however; convincing evidence shows that political elite can play a large role in shaping protest (see Reuter and Robertson, 2015). This idea demonstrates that the degree to which civil society actors and organizations are connected to individuals in the greater society then matters for certain aspects of civil society. I turn to Section .

further by arguing that casting civil society as one entity makes it difficult to observe and analyze the conflicts and interactions within it (66-67). In effect, the various parts of civil society may be more important—and certainly more interesting—than the whole. In addition, adapting her reasoning to the case at hand, it is possible that donors treating civil society as if it were one entity could be damaging in a causal way, to different aspects or characteristics of the groups within civil society. Here, I expand Fraser's theoretical argument in order to fit it within empirical reality.[20]

These sectors are comprised of organizations that are connected by the type of goals they pursue.[21] By goals here I mean the desired—not actual—concrete, tangible end-results of the actions taken by these organizations. These goals are not pre-specified for a civil society; there is not necessarily a distinct number of subsectors within the civil society space. These goals do not need to be positive, in a normative sense.[22] Yet, civil society can still be divided into four broad sectors that characterize families of goals (the largest common factor of the goals of the organizations within them):

1. *Recreational*: The organizations in this sector are primarily concerned with bringing individuals together for recreational or social reasons. Examples include book clubs, bowling leagues, and village music associations.
2. *Political*: These organizations pursue political ends, explicitly or implicitly, and attempt to influence political proceedings. Examples include human rights organizations, groups that push for the inclusion of women in politics, and non-governmental organizations that focus on corruption.
3. *Economic*: This sector revolves around economic pursuits. Labor unions, chambers

[20]Note that Fraser does make a normative argument. For her, casting the public sphere, especially in the liberal-democratic mold, as a singular creation damages the counter publics that have sprung into empirical existence and into conflict with this public sphere. For Fraser, it is normatively as well as empirically wrong to conceive of the public sphere as one thing, even prescriptively. I do not go as far, here, I just point out that empirically it does not make sense to treat civil society as a unitary concept.

[21]Jonas and Morton (2012, 7) talk of the "shared interest, purposes, and values" around which collective action revolves.

[22]Alagappa posits that civil society organizations operate "in pursuit of the public good (2004*a*, 32). It is unclear why that stipulation needs to be met to achieve membership status in civil society. This issue is further problematized by the fact that the public good is often difficult to establish.

of commerce, and professional associations like the APSA inhabit this sector.

4. *Religious*: Here groups are linked by their religious nature; they speak for and to the soul. Religious charitable organizations, churches,[23] and religious youth groups are examples of the civil society organizations in this sector.

Each of these sectors can then be further divided into three disparate parts: a regime-challenging part, comprised of organizations whose goals in some way seek to influence how a regime carries out policy, a regime-acquiescent part, whose organizations pursue goals orthogonal to the interests of the regime, and a regime-promoting part,[24] whose organizations pursue goals that seek to promote the goals of the regime as if they were their own.[25] A key point to emphasize is that these sectors can be compared between countries, although sectors will by no means be the same size in each country.[26] By regime here I mean, taking from O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986, 73), the general rules and structures that impact how a government functions. This approach means that these three parts will be different given regime-type, by definition. Thus, in most established democracies, the regime-acquiescent and regime-promoting will be the largest and will have implicit or explicit pro-democratic positions, and the regime-challenging part might be anti-democratic or radically democratic.[27] In authoritarian regimes, however, the

[23]Churches belong in civil society as they are organizations that bring people together. They often also have the explicit goal of reaching more people and drawing more converts into the church itself. I thank Gloria Cheung for pointing this out.

[24]In some ways, this part may be similar to so-called government organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOS) (see Cumming, 2010; Naim, 2009). The difference, however, is that these groups do not need to be sponsored or created by the government or regime.

[25]Bush (2015) distinguishes between "regime-compatible" and "regime-incompatible" aid programs in the context of democracy assistance, which is a similar point. Cheskin and March (2015) discuss "consentful contention" and "dissentful contention," with the former being contention that does not challenge the regime but seeks to work within its parameters, which is the mode in which regime-acquiescent civil society works. See also Lorch and Bunk (2017), Teets (2014), Spires (2011), and Ziegler (2010) for work that shows why even authoritarian regimes would allow regime acquiescent organizations to operate.

[26]Henderson (2003) differentiates between externally-funded and unfunded civil society groups in Russia. While this is a useful analytic approach to take, in general, this conceptualization applies to other situations as well, not just newly democratized countries. Another approach could be to divide civil society into "formal" and "informal" civil society. The issue then becomes a matter of definition once again. How does one differentiate between formal and informal civil society organizations?

[27]An alternative terminology would be to use system-challenging, system-acquiescent, and system-promoting.

regime-acquiescent parts of civil society may not take a position on the regime itself and may look more at local issues (and therefore will make no claims about democratic values), and regime-promoting parts of civil society may be expressly anti-democratic. Regime-challenging civil society groups might hold more democratic views, although this does not have to be the case. There can be regime-challenging civil society groups that want to implement goals that are just as anti-democratic as those of the current regime.[28]

The four overarching sectors—each with three parts—are important because one would expect them to be treated differently, given different regime contexts (see Dimitrovova, 2010). While political civil society may be a threat in any authoritarian regime, if the regime is able to populate political civil society with groups that support it, it may co-opt this sector in the eyes of the people (see Lorch and Bunk, 2017). In addition, while economic civil society that is too autonomous may be undesirable in some autocratic regimes, it may also be desired in advanced capitalist authoritarian regimes such as Singapore. In effect, these four sectors are useful. The sectors can certainly bleed into the other spheres of society; there are political parties that create and fund associations that carry out programs or provide grants that align with the party's ideology and goals. The boundary that defines the civil society space is porous. That said, it is still separate from the three pillars of society: political society, made up of parties, is not the same as political civil society.

In many ways, to speak of one political civil society or one religious civil society may still be too reductive—there is variation within each sector as well. Therefore, within each of these sectors exist a multitude of subsectors. These subsectors are organizations who share even concreter goals. For example, the political sector may contain a homelessness subsector and a human rights subsector, and the recreational sector may include a amateur soccer subsector. The subsectors themselves are not so easily defined nor fixed—the examples here—and later in the paper—are illustrative, not definitive.

[28]See Section for the the democraticness of a civil society sector, which is a separate quantity of interest.

The sectors also bleed into one another; labor unions, for example, are often very political in their purposes and action, although they do most of their work in the economic sector. Even supposedly non-political associations such chess clubs may involve politics—they have leadership selection procedures, rules of order. In addition, civil society organizations that ostensibly belong in one sector—such as the Orthodox Church in Russia, or soccer fan groups in Ukraine—can involve themselves in another sector. These groups have involved themselves directly in the politics of their respective countries. A similar logic applies to subsectors. Besides the organizations themselves, civil society actors can be involved with civil society organizations that span the sectors. Yet, while life is inherently political, it is not always political in the same way, nor with the same consequences.

Furthermore, the mere fact that there can be significant overlap between sectors is not a problem. While the civil society space can be divided, the civil society organizations in that space do not have to belong or be fixed in one part of this space. In effect, civil society is a latent concept, one that can be divided into several latent dimensions (it can be theorized as looking, to a certain extent, like a multivariate Poisson distribution, where the number of organizations in a sector governs the density of the distribution). Yet, the structure that governs to which of these dimensions an organization belongs is not defined as a mixture in itself. That is to say, an organization does not have to belong to only one sector (e.g. one dimension of the multivariate Poisson). This would mean that the structure is partially analogous to that of a Latent Dirichlet Allocation topic model. Unlike such models, however, also called mixed-membership models, the membership of a civil society organization to a sector is not sum–to–1. This means that an organization can belong equally strongly to two different sectors and belonging to one sector does not decrease an organization's membership in another sector. In other words a *multiple membership model* governs civil society sector membership for organizations. Spacially, civil society resembles a Venn diagram. The four sectors described above all

overlap, and the lower-level, issue–specific subsectors they contain also overlap within the overarching domains and overlaps. In the end, however—and what this exercise has helped underline—the important takeaway is that organizations do have latent (and in many cases explicit) sector and subsector memberships, which are empirically useful to know and about which it is useful to theorize.

This reconceptualization of civil society is not revolutionary, although perhaps it has not been done this way before. Its thrust is to guide researchers, scholars, and policy-makers by pointing out the various disparate parts of a "civil society." In addition, it unifies the discussion of authoritarian civil society and democratic civil society. To a certain extent, then, this definition is "maximal," in that it seeks to include all of civil society *as it is*. It is not, however, maximal in the "ideal" sense (see Gerring, 2012, 136-137), as a civil society missing one or more sectors that are present in other civil societies—even one of the major four—is not any less of a civil society. In this way, this conceptualization is completely descriptive. This does not mean, however, that it is not causally useful.

More work needs to be done on how civil society sectors and subsectors interact, in both authoritarian and democratic contexts. The value in dividing civil society in this way comes from the fact that the types of organizations within a certain sector may be different in nature from those involved in another. Combining all different organizations within civil society glosses over the incredible diversity inherent in it and the variation that must be studied. Even work which looks at the role civil society can play in authoritarian regimes, such as that by Lorch and Bunk (2017) and Ziegler (2010), treats civil society there as one entity. Ziegler (2010), for examples, talks about a "Central Asian model" of civil society. While it may be possible that different archetypes of civil society exist, the schema developed here allows us to compare the makeup of civil society within one overall framework.[29] This facilitates the comparison of different "models" of civil

[29]The problem—really an empirical one—posed by the concept of "models" of civil society is where different models exist when. Is there an authoritarian type of civil society and a democratic type, defined

society and the relationship and paths between them. As an extension of this point, realizing that civil society has sectors of like-minded—loosely defined—organizations allows us to investigate the ways in which these sectors interact with with the state and the actors within it. Civil society groups whose goals do not include challenging the state directly or whose goals do not threaten the way in which ruling actors pursue their own interests may be more likely to survive under conditions where political civil society has been undermined—as has been the case in Russia (Javeline and Lindemann-Komarova, 2017). Finally, differentiating between different sectors in society makes it possible to identify sectors that are more developed or—a point that will be expanded upon in the next section—stronger than others.

The causal implications and origins of this descriptive concept also need to be explored further. Clearly, the assumption and empirical fact is that not all civil societies are the same. Yet, they are also clearly different in multiple dimensions, a realization that this definition helps make possible. As such, the description, the static "make-up" of civil society, in and of itself is interesting. What leads to a certain distribution of civil society sectors in a given country? What political factors impact the size of civil society sectors? This definition, which investigates civil society in a purely descriptive way, helps us realize that these questions must still be asked.

Civil Society Strength

Civil society is a spatial and organizational concept. Civil society strength, on the other hand, to borrow from Bayesian statistics, is a quantity of interest. Once we have observed the civil society distribution, we can derive quantities of interest from it, of which strength is just one.[30,31] In other words, civil society strength comes out of the

distinctly by the regime type? If so, when does the model change? Is the model changeable?

[30]Note that this is *not* how I will go about operationalizing civil society strength—this is because performing a census, or even a survey of all civil society groups within a society is very difficult. I am working on projects that attempt to do so with individual sectors in individual countries.

[31]Examples of other quantities of interest could be civil society health, civil society robustness, or civil society density. These are different from strength in that they emphasize different aspects of civil society

state of civil society—civil society itself, as a concept, means too many things for us to effectively measure it.[32] As such, it must be addressed explicitly and separately from civil society itself. In this section, I lay out an approach to thinking of civil society strength. At the same time, I will discuss a separate quantity of interest that I term the *tenor* of civil society—how democratic a civil society sector is—as it is empirically useful to discuss in connection with civil society strength, although it is not directly related to it.

Civil society strength is empirically interesting, as much scholarship into the topic has alternatively theorized that various understandings of civil society strength are, for different reasons, favorably related to democracy (Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, 1992; Putnam, 1993; Diamond, 1999; Ottaway and Carothers, 2000), that they are in fact unfavorable to it (Huntington, 2000 [1968]; Berman, 1997), or that it depends on the context (Armony, 2004). A better understanding of civil society strength would allow us to reevaluate those theories.

What then defines strength? And what characterizes a strong civil society sector? In certain settings, defining strength by outcomes makes sense. A weightlifter who can lift 250 pounds is strong; one who can lift only 20 pounds is weak. Civil society strength is not one of those settings. Assessing civil society strength by outcomes is not theoretically sound; there are numerous factors that can impact the "success" of a civil society sector. To say that a civil society sector is strong when it has achieved its goals—for example, to say simply that political civil society in a country with a competitive authoritarian regime is strong because popular protest pushed an authoritarian leader out of power—ignores the fact that intervening variables can both confound and inflate the civil society's sector natural strength. To continue the example, if international pressure buttressed the

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that one may consider important.

[32]Measuring civil society, full stop, makes little sense without thinking of quantities of interest. Measuring civil society is not the same as measuring democracy. Regardless of the actual measurement strategy used, measures of democracy have the scale inherently built into the concept. Higher—or lower, if using Freedom House, for example—scores indicates more democracy. What would a higher or lower score of civil society indicate? Civilness? Many measures of "civil society" often have normative ideals already built into the conceptualization—something that is only true for measures of democracy in the sense that the measurers have opinions on what should actually constitute democracy.

civil society groups artificially—that is to say, if authoritarian leaders acquiesced to the demands of civil society only because of extreme top-down pressure—civil society strength could be unrelated to the outcome. In such a case, if a civil society had actually been weak, it would not be a shock to see the status quo reassert itself, perhaps given some liberalization, once the international pressure dissipates. It would also be wrong to say that a civil society sector is strong because of how productive it is. While productivity, interpreted as the number of civil society actions in which a sector partakes, is certainly an important quantity of interest, it is likely that it is also dependent on civil society strength, as the quality and reach of the actions would seem to be essential.

I define civil society strength as *civil society's capacity to pursue its goals.* A strong civil society will be better suited to pursuing its goals than a weak civil society. As should be clear at this stage, to speak of civil society strength without making reference to civil society sectors would be problematic. While the strength of civil society as a whole can be assessed, the value in building a top-down approach to civil society strength is dubious, as the only characteristic truly binding *all* of civil society together is the association of civil society actors.[33] Instead, we can speak of the strength—and the subindicators of strength to come below—of sectors and subsectors.[34] Only once we have an understanding of strong civil society sectors or subsectors can we move upwards again to look at civil society as a whole. An importance consequence of this conceptualization is that it is not directly organization based—strength is a characteristic of a sector, not of individual organizations. This does not mean that we cannot speak of strong and weak organizations using a similar vocabulary. In fact, civil society strength is full realized only via civil society organizations and their relationships. I expand on this idea below. Yet, while the strength of individual organizations is empirically interesting, this conceptualization focuses on sectors as more manageable way of breaking down the monolithic approaches

[33]In addition, Fraser (1990) forcefully argues that understanding the make-up of the various parts of civil society provides more explanatory power than just looking at civil society as a whole.

[34]This definition of strength applies equally to sectors or subsectors. For simplicity's sake, I use "sectors" in this section, but each "sector" could and should be taken as being followed by "or subsector."

to civil society.

This definition revolves around two key ideas: capacity and goals. Goals come from the definition of civil society and its sectors. As such, beyond the idea that civil society organizations want their interests represented in action, "goals" is a sector-dependent—and even organization-dependent—concept. Capacity is thus the essential element. In effect, capacity is synonymous with strength. This does not mean that more specific goals cannot vary within a sector, and that this cannot have important implications for strength, as can be seen below.

Drawing on the insights of scholars such as Ishkanian (2008, 2014) and Lee (2016), I draw up three factors that influence a civil society sector's capacity for action—its *cohesiveness*, its *embeddedness*[35], and its *bureaucratic capital*—and one that conditions that capacity—its *environment*.

Cohesiveness captures the idea that a strong civil society sector is made up of organizations that work together to achieve their common goal. As Bunce and Wolchik (2011) explain in their book on democratizing elections in Eastern Europe, political civil society groups that were able to work better with opposition movements were more successful in pushing for political change. Civil society organizations and civil society that are more strongly interconnected will characterize stronger civil society. Because the organizations in a tightly connected sector can pool resources and coordinate actions and campaigns, they are better able to push for change that brings them closer to their goals. A sector populated by less unified civil society organization will be weaker. If organizations cannot or do not cooperate—whether simply because they are unaware of like-minded organizations' existence or because their more immediate goals and the methods they

[35] I borrow the terms "cohesiveness" and "embeddedness" from Lee (2016), who discusses civil society in the context of labor unions resisting retrenchment in advanced capitalist democracies. Lee, however, conceptualizes cohesiveness and embeddedness differently, and relates them to civil society differently, than I do here. He uses the terms to refer to labor unions, not civil society in general; cohesiveness is defined as "labor organizations' political ties with parties — the policy/government sphere," while embeddedness refers to "labor organization's ties with civic organizations" (52). Lee also states that "cohesiveness and embeddedness are not clearly differentiated during the protean stages of the authoritarian or pre-democracy eras" (52); my conceptualization of strength applies to all political regimes.

use to pursue them do not agree—they are less likely to be able to bring their plans to fruition. This means that more fractured civil society sectors are not as strong as more unified civil society sectors. It also implies that a civil society sector that is split into two ideological camps—as may be the case in countries with two main parties—is not as strong as one that is not split in this way. This is because in such split civil society sectors, the two aligned groups each spend energy and effort to combat the other group, limiting their forward, goal-oriented thrust. If we think in terms of networks, a civil society sector is strongest when its nodes (organizations) are tightly linked. To a certain extent, this conceptualization approaches the social capital framework: in rather crude terms, sectors with higher social capital will be stronger.

Cohesiveness is not enough to make a strong civil society sector. As Ishkanian (2008, 2014), points out with her discussion of "genetically engineered civil society" in the democratizing countries of Eastern Europe, many of these countries have civil society organizations that look incredibly well interconnected with one another. The problem, however, is that these organizations are not well connected to the fabric of society—they are not seen as legitimate civil society organizations by the people they are supposed to serve or on whom they would ideally call upon for support.[36] Mendelson and Glenn support this analysis: "in nearly every case [of NGO created by external funds], investigators found that the new [civil society created] institutions had weak links to their own societies" (2002, 22).

As such, a stronger civil society sector will be characterized by organizations that are more embedded in society. The embeddedness of a civil society sector is derived from two sources: the extent to which citizens participate in and view civil society organizations as legitimate, and the extent to which organizations are linked to other elements in society. First, strong civil society organizations may have a deeper well of support, and thus will be capable of executing actions with more weight. Civil society organizations can

[36]Focusing only on these organizations in discussions of civil society leads us to forget about those civil society organizations that are in fact better connected to the people, such as nationalistic groups.

be strong even without active participation by members of the society, however, as the sense of legitimacy accorded to civil society organizations that are seen as operating on behalf of the people will allow these organizations to act more forcefully. This part of embeddedness is a function of the size of the portion of society from which a sector draws its support. In other words, a civil society sector that is tightly linked to a small portion of society will not be as strong as a civil society sector tightly linked to a larger portion of society. Second, a civil society sector that has established solid links to other organizations—such as parties—and other sectors—such as th church—will be harder to deny when push comes to shove. In addition, a civil society sector filled by civil society organizations that rely on a wider arrange of funding sources, especially domestic funding sources—as opposed to the "grant eaters" that inhabit many transitioning countries—will be stronger than one where funding comes from only several sources.[37]

Missing from the concepts of cohesiveness and embeddedness are the organizations themselves. Up to this point, I have looked more at the connections between organizations and society. However, there are certain characteristics of the organizations that rationally impact their capacity to pursue their goals. Organizations, and networks of organizations, that are better organized—with clearer structure and definition of responsibilities—and better led—be it by savvier leaders or ones with better training—will be able to pursue goals more effectively than poorly led groups.[38] I combine this aspect of organizations and sectors under the concept of the bureaucratic capital of a sector. A better-run organization—and by extension, a sector or subsector made up of better-run organizations—will be better situated to establish connections with other organizations and might be better placed to embed itself in society (although the connection here is not as clear). As such, bureaucratic capital can be expected to covary with

[37]Perhaps until recently, the guns rights sector in the United States of America, spearheaded by the NRA, has been an example of an extremely strong civil society sector. It has connections to other groups, it has connections to candidates, it has connections to businesses.

[38]Note that this is not the financial capacity of a organization or sector. This is included in embeddedness and in the environment aspects of civil society strength.

cohesiveness and to some extent embeddedness. It is still a distinct concept, however, as the relationships are not guaranteed, especially as bureaucratic capital can be expected to change more quickly than cohesiveness. Together, bureaucratic capital, embeddedness, and cohesiveness determine the raw strength of a sector.

The final, crucial, conditioning element of civil society strength is the civil society environment. Here I draw most directly on the work and ideas of Fioramonti and Koninykhina (2015) and the principles of the USAID Sustainability Index. The environment has three core parts: first, the legal and institutional environment, particularly how open or closed it is; second, the trust environment, which reflects level of social trust in a country and willingness to participate in organizations; and third, the resource environment, which determines the type of funds and support on which civil society groups in a sector can rely. This aspect of civil society strength is different from the previous three because it is not a quality derived directly from civil society organizations themselves, and one over which they have little direct control.[39] Environment is different in that it only serves to provide a rough and certainly not impervious ceiling for civil society strength. As I mentioned in section *Reconceptualizing Civil Society*, the civil society space can be squeezed and limited. Yet, just as cohesiveness and embeddedness are characteristics of civil society sectors, so can the civil society environment be different for different sectors. Different parts of civil society space can be closed off while others remain more open. In the same way, citizens can show more trust or belief toward civil society organizations that belong to a certain sector. A civil society sector that is being constrained will most likely not have the potential to be as strong as one that is not as constrained. This is because the possible set of actions available to it will be lower, while its ability to establish connections with other groups and with other civil society organizations will be negatively affected. As such, environment conditions the possibility of strength, but may not impact it directly. A civil society sector will be strongest when it is made up

[39] Although the goal of a civil society sector could be to expand the civil society space, of course.

of cohesive, embedded organizations in an open civil society environment. At the same time, an open civil society sector does not guarantee a strong civil society sector. While the legal conditions for strong civil society may exist, if civil society organizations are not well connected to each other and to individuals and other societal elements, that civil society sector these organizations make up will not be strong.

This definition of civil society strength does not change across sectors, even in the recreational sector. An adult amateur soccer league, made up of individual soccer teams, will be able to organize a better tournament and thus provide entertainment to its members if it can coordinate with other recreational associations, including other soccer leagues, and if it can draw on a connection with the community for support and players. Performance against the goal is then impacted by the local rules and regulations that govern amateur sports in the area, the willingness of individuals to associate with others, and the money available from the player base and from the firms and other associations in the area that may seek to support the league.

The approach to civil society strength laid out here avoids the necessity of using directly observable actions in order to assess civil society strength, which can be a flawed assessment strategy, as addressed above. Instead, civil society strength can then be used as a predictor to assess the impact of strength on action, which is really what many theorists of civil society and democratization desire when they discuss the influence of civil society on democratization.

A Note on the Tenor of Civil Society

As discussed in section *On Civil Society*, theorists of democratization, such as Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992), Diamond (1999), and Acemoglu and Robinson (2005), often cast civil society as an inherently positive concept. It is pro-democracy, it helps hold rulers accountable, and it seeks to push against the regime in autocratic settings and to support the regime (or seek to improve it) in democratic settings. This is a needlessly

limiting approach to civil society, however, as some theorists have pointed out (see Armony, 2004; White, 2004), and I have taken great care to conceptualize civil society and civil society strength as removed from questions of democraticness. At the same time this is an empirically important concept. We can only ask questions about the impact of civil society strength on democracy (or other outcomes of interest) if we accept that not all civil society organizations support democracy—this allows us to evaluate civil society in a common framework. I cast the democraticness of civil society as the *tenor* of civil society.

The *tenor* of a civil society sector is the extent to which it is pro-democracy. Tenor again grows from the civil society organizations themselves in simple aggregate terms—the more civil society organizations in a sector are pro-democracy, the more pro-democratic the sector. The tenor does not refer to the organization of the groups themselves—that is to say, this is not a description of how democratic a group's practices are, as the two are not intrinsically linked.[40] This does imply that sectors can be at odds with one another; the economic sector could be more pro-democratic, while the political sector could be more anti-democratic. This may have empirical consequences. It also does have an implication for civil society strength: a civil society sector that is split in terms of the extent to which its constituent organizations are pro-democracy would probably not be very cohesive. In addition, it also provides a useful heuristic when comparing civil societies—and civil sociey sectors—as a whole, as it is somewhat more straightforward to interpret than the regime-affinity discussed above in section *Civil Society Strength*. Nevertheless, I do not include tenor in my definition of civil society strength, as there are many reasons a sector could be split. In addition, the tenor of a sector, while not normative per se, has normative implications, which could muddle the definition of society needlessly.

To summarize the preceding sections: Civil society is a space, filled by civil society

[40]See Armony (2004) on how anti-system civil society groups in the United States can operate democratically.

actors who congregate in civil society organizations, which have certain goals. These organizations do not all inhabit the same space. Organizations with similar goals can be grouped into sectors. The strength of these sectors can be assessed: a civil society sector is strongest when its organizations are cohesive, when its organizations are connected to the people and to other parts of society, when its organizations are well-organized, and when the portion of civil society space that sector occupies is open. Sectors have a tenor, which describes the extent to which they are pro-democratic.

The Utility of the Proposed Approach to Political Science: Two Vignettes

In this section, I discuss two civil society sectors in two different contexts—the United States of America and Armenia; a democracy, and a hybrid regime—in order to display both the versatility of the tools presented above and to show variation on the assessment strategy proposed. The goal is not to make causal claims; instead this sections is descriptive in nature—I will demonstrate the types of relationships that need to be studied further, using the framework I have drawn up in this paper. In doing so, however, I point out the possibility of causal relationships.

The Far-Right Subsector in the United States of America

The Southern Poverty Law Center defines the alt-right as "a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that 'white identity' is under attack by multicultural forces using 'political correctness' and 'social justice' to undermine white people and 'their' civilization" (*Alt-Right*, n.d.). The alt-right is generally seen as part of the far-right, which also generally includes the "Ku Klux Klan," "white supremacists," "neo-nazis," "white nationalists," and "neo-confederates" (Merelli, n.d.). There are many who argue convincingly that there is no real distinction between the alt-right and the

far-right, except perhaps in small degrees of activity and ideological extremism, as the effects desired and goals are similar (see, for example, Ember, 2016; Mohajer, 2017). While the distinction can be valuable for analysis of the threads within a civil society sector, I use the far-right here to refer to all such groups that hold pro-White identity values.

How does the far-right fit into civil society?[41] As its definition states, although it is in many ways most important to see the far-right as an ideology, that ideology is held and expressed by a series of groups and individuals who interact with one another and other groups and individuals in the United States and abroad. While the far-right makes claims on the state, it is not part of the state.[42] It is, also, not part of the market, nor a familial institution, nor an organized religion. As such, it operates in the space between these four pillars, dependent on the interaction of individuals in this space. While participation in actual far-right activities may not be that high—it is noteworthy that almost all far-right events see more counter protesters than far-right participants (Moskowitz, 2017)—it is true that far-right *events* are not the focal point of this sector, with the vast majority of far-right participants being active mostly online (Squirrell, 2017; *Alt-Right*, n.d.).Under which of the four umbrella sectors does the far-right belong? To the extent that the far-right has a goal, it can be seen as turning the state into a pro-white-identity state. As such, the far-right belongs to political civil society. Because the far-right advocates for a radical change to the way the state should be defined, the far-right can be considered a regime-challenging civil society subsector. It is anti-democratic in the sense that democracy represents the inclusion of all. Therefore, the far-right can be considered an anti-democratic, regime-challenging subsector of the political civil society sector.

How strong is this sector? The answer, via the organizational lens taken here, is not

[41] Folding the far-right into American civil society is by no means an innovation here. Armony's entire 2004 book deals with the subject.

[42] Some of its members may be involved or were involved with the Trump administration, such as Stephen Miller and Steve Bannon.

very, although the three dimensions of raw strength show somewhat divergent situations. The far-right is not cohesive. It is embedded in a certain part of the US public, although it is not as well embedded within the overall structure of US society.

The far-right is not united, organizationally speaking. The issue is, in part, ideological, with varying degrees of anti-democraticness, anti-semitism, and anti-immigrant attitudes in its ranks (Ford 2017; Squirrel 2017). Another related reason is the inability of any of the far-right leaders to cooperate and pool resources, often for ideological reasons. As such, the public face of the far-right, even though the election of Trump should have spurred them on, has fractured into disparate factions. The fall-out occurred as soon as the "Deploraball" that was supposed to celebrate the election of President Trump (Gray, 2017). In general, there is infighting among the intellectual leadership of the sector (see Hayden, 2018; Hatewatch Staff, 2017; Mudde, 2018; Pearce, 2016). As such, there is little to no cohesion in this subsector. In addition, this gives an idea of the lack of bureaucratic capital that can be found in the far right.

The far-right is partially embedded in society. The views it promotes seem to resonate strongly with a not insignificant portion of the American public. A Washington Post/ABC poll carried out after the attack of a member of the far-right on counter-protesters found that about 10% of Americans support the alt-right.[43]. The online presence of alt-right and far-right is significant as well, especially on the website reddit, where engagement in the The_Donald subreddit is very high (Martin, 2017; Squirrell, 2017). Furthermore, preliminary research shows that racial-resentment is strong in the areas that voted for Donald Trump (Kreitzer and Smith, 2018) and that racial resentment is a stronger predictor of voting for Donald Trump than economic factors (Green and McElwee, 2018; Sides, Tesler and Vavreck, 2017). The United States is clearly not a post-racism society, and pro-white identity rhetoric found a foothold among white Americans during the 2016 election campaign. This embeddedness is partial in the sense that

[43]http://www.langerresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/1190a1TrumpandCharlottesville.pdf

the far-right is not—yet—well-connected politically. For mainstream Republicans, the far-right remains anathema, even as they court its members as voters. In addition, the far-right as a civil society sector is isolated within US political civil society and US civil society as a whole.

Although my goal here is not to make causal claims, it is important to note two points. First, the election and campaign of Donald Trump seemed to re-invigorate hate groups in the United States, which rose from a ten-year low of 784 in 2014 to 954 in 2017, as counted by the Southern Poverty Law Center *Hate Map* (2017). It is hard to argue that the far-right sector contributed significantly to the election of Donald Trump; he simply appealed to the same base.[44] Although cursory, this point helps demonstrate the necessity of separating outcomes from causes when speaking of civil society. A fairly active and vocal far-right sector does not mean that the far-right sector was strong or effective. Second, and related, is the fact that the far-right has not managed to accomplish much since the 2016 election. Many individuals with connections to the alt-right, such as Steve Bannon, have been pushed out of the White House. In terms of policy, the Trump "administration's policies have been mostly conservative (on steroids) rather than radical-right" (Mudde, 2018). The far-right civil society sector is not strong, due to its lack of cohesion and its split-embedded nature, and that may help explain why it has not managed to achieve the changes it desires (but see Section for an analysis of why it may be more difficult for it to do so in general). Unlike in Europe, where the far-right/radical right has gained footholds in several party systems, the US far-right does not have a party organization to help it organize politically either. Any semblance of strength it does have, however, it derives from deep-seated affinities in a subset of the United States population.

It would seem that the civil society environment would be the same for all civil so-

[44]It is undeniable that the online arm of the far-right, particularly the alt-right, helped move the conversation in Donald Trump's favor (Martin, 2017). However, even here, the causality is stretched. The far-right as an ideology certainly impacted the 2016 election. It would be difficult to establish, however, that the alt-right *organizationally* affected the outcome.

ciety sectors and subsectors in the United States of America, and as such, the far-right would be affected by the environment in the same way as other civil society subsectors . This is implied by the environment measure provided by the CIVICUS Enabling Environment Index, which gives the United States the 10th best score out of the 109 countries evaluated.[45] In fact, however, the civil society environment is—fortunately—generally hostile to far-right organizations, turning against them particularly after the events in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017. Advertisers have abandoned far-right media organizations such as Breitbart over their reporting (Cox, 2017), and far-right websites and groups have found it harder and harder to raise funds online through traditional financial platforms such as Patreon and GoFundMe (Carson, 2017). Although the far-right has attempted to provide its own fundraising infrastructure, it has mostly been unsuccessful (Robertson, 2017; Roose, 2017). In other words, the environment is not uniform, just as civil society is not monolithic. This is not just the case in democratic regimes; in a similar way, government funded and supported civil society groups such as Nashi in Russia operate in a very different civil society environment than those that are not supported by the government. While this may seem obvious in some ways, the relationship between how individuals view these different types of organizations, given the disparate environments in which they operate, must still be explored.

Civil Society in Armenia

Traditional conceptualizations of civil society are easy to accommodate under the framework developed here. That which is usually termed "civil society" in Armenia by donors and scholars studying civil society in Eastern Europe is political civil society, because the greatest attention is paid to groups that attempt to affect the policy space, as Freedom House's country reports for Armenia[46] and a recent European Union grant

[45]EEI data available only for 2013: http://www.civicus.org/eei/
[46]https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2017/armenia

initiative designed to support civil society capacity in Armenia[47] attest. Furthermore, because of their definition of civil society and the hope that it will serve as a democratizing force, they generally focus on the regime-challenging portion of political civil society. This can be explicit, on part of the civil society organizations themselves—for example, the Center for the Development of Civil Society, based in Yerevan, lists "foster[ing] the concept of democracy and civil society" as one of its core objectives (Center for the Development of Civil Society, n.d.). It can also be implicit, as in the case of the Strong CSOs for Stronger Armenia organization, which promises "to increas[e] the capacities of civil society organisations (CSOs) in Armenia as independent development actors to make them more competent, more responsive to citizens' needs, and proactively supporting the country's development through practical, project-based approaches" (STRONG Civil Society Organisations for Stronger Armenia, 2016). In a hybrid regime, the ability of organizations that are not government-sponsored to respond to citizens' needs and operate independently of the government is a threat to the regime.

How strong is the regime-challenging political civil society sector in Armenia? Academic analysis and country reports from donor organizations shed significant light on the subject. In general terms, the political sector is not very cohesive. According to the Asian Development Bank analysis of Armenian political civil society from 2011, "fragmentation and competition among CSOs occur frequently." As may be expected, Armenian political civil society does not do well in terms of embeddedness. Most Armenians are not aware of the existence of the NGOs that should assist them (Paturyan, 2009). Ishkanian (2008) has shown that the Armenian NGO sector, primarily supported by outside sources, is disconnected from Armenian society and not responsive to it, and Paturyan reaffirms that "[o]verall the organisational sector of civil society can be described as fairly institutionalized but detached from the broader public" (2014, 6).

[47]https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia/24502/eu-continues-support-development-and-strengthening-civil-society-armenia_en. The grant initiative explicitly aims to "[i]ncrease monitoring capacity of civil society" and "[i]ncrease public accountability."

In the past decade, perhaps as a response to this lack of connection, civil society activists have turned to a new form of civil society organization, called "civic initiatives," which are "various issue-oriented, horizontally structured groups of individual activists united around a common, often very specific, cause (prevention of construction in a public park, preservation of an architecturally valuable building, protests against a new mine ...)" (Paturyan, 2014, 5). As Paturyan reports, these civic initiatives have had some success where formal NGOs have not. The Freedom House Nations in Transit Report for 2017 also commented on the rise of these types of organizations noting that "[i]nterestingly, these initiatives were predominantly grassroots, crowd-funded, often unrelated to formal NGOs" (Danielyan, 2017). The 2018 report also notes that "[t]he limited ability of the formal civil society sector to influence policy, and the government's continued neglect of sources of public discontent, has elevated the role of more nontraditional activism," clarifying that many of these are "antisystemic" in character (Aghekyan, 2018). Given the way strength has been presented in this paper, it should come as no surprise that those civil society organizations that have a closer link to Armenian civil society would be able to push more effectively for political change. Yet, while this development may be positive in terms of goals (of the civic initatives) accomplished, it also has worrying implications for democracy in Armenia.

The conceptualizations of civil society and civil society formulated here may help shed light on why the connection between civil society and democracy can at times appear very weak. This is because it helps clarify some of the relationships and developments necessary for civil society to push for democratization, which traditional approaches of civil society often ignore. By nature, it is harder for a national level sector (which the political, economic, recreational, and religious sectors are) to be cohesive. This is because the higher the level of analysis, the more difficult it will be for groups that share a common *general* goal to cooperate. Pulling from the case of Armenia (and also, in fact Ukraine, which are two Eastern European and Eurasian countries traditionally seen as

having relatively strong civil societies), what this may mean in terms of the relationship between civil society and democratization is that it becomes exceedingly difficult to agree on the direction democratization should take. This may lead organizations to focus on smaller issues, which seem more manageable, as has been the case in Armenia. Yet this splintering of the political civil society sector into issue sectors also impedes the ability for groups in political civil society to positively impact democratic quality—cohesion across the sector becomes more difficult. In short, civil society is stronger when it is issue-focused. However, the connection between issues and overall systemic problems is tenuous—the number of small issues that must be addressed in order to push a country toward democratic institutions is enormous. It is possible that civil society is important for the practice of democracy, but that it is only indirectly related to democratization.[48] Political civil society as a whole, as seen from the donor perspective, is at cross-purposes in important ways with the issue sectors it contains.

In addition, the location of pro-democracy groups within overall civil society, and their end-goals, makes it more difficult to impact democratization. In terms of values, goals, and methods, the far-right in the United States and the pro-democracy civil society groups in Armenia are far apart. In their orientation to the system in which they are located, however, they do share some similarities, in that both sectors are regime-challenging. These similarities may shed further light on respective political developments in each country. Regime-challenging parties that seek to change the very nature of the regime have to agree on the direction that the new regime will take, which, as the preceding paragraph points out, is difficult. Negative coalitions (Beissinger, 2013) are possible, of course, if the conditions are right. But cohesion is still important even in negative coalitions—and anti-something coalitions are weaker than pro-something coalitions, as the difference between the Ukrainian Orange and Euromaidan revolutions seems to show.

[48] Although this is tentative, it may also be that functioning civil society organizations in hybrid regimes can delay democratization because they can diffuse citizen dissatisfaction with the government (Lorch and Bunk, 2017; Teets, 2014). It would depend on how the people react to these organizations, and to whom they attribute their success.

Conclusion

Civil society is a nebulous concept. Yet the interaction of groups and individuals in the civil space is a crucial component of democracy, democratization, and authoritarianism. Unfortunately, most of the literature on civil society has taken a normative approach to the concept, either explicitly or implicitly. This, in turn, has affected how researchers have gone about assessing certain key aspects of civil society, such as civil society strength. When one investigates the conceptual underpinnings of these measures, it becomes clear that they do not alway capture the aspects of civil society that seem to be important. In addition, it is hard to connect theories of civil society to these measures, making it difficult to say if research done using them answers the questions researchers are asking. As a contribution to the literature and in order to help relieve some of the tensions inherent in it, in this paper, I have presented an approach to civil society strength that is not based on normative assumptions and is not functional in nature.

On the path toward this novel approach, it was necessary to reevaluate the concept itself, leading to several conclusions. First, civil society is not monolithic. It is comprised of civil society organizations whose goals can be used to combine them into different sectors of civil society. Each sector—and by extension civil society as many-part-entity—can be further divided into a regime-challenging part, a regime-acquiescent part, and a regime-promoting group. Finally, each sector has a tenor, which describes the extent to which a sector is democratic, in terms of values

This definition of civil society makes understanding civil society strength easier. Civil society strength is a sector-based concept, and is defined as the ability of a sector to pursue its goals. The strength of a sector is determined by the cohesiveness of civil society organizations—the extent to which they are connected and cooperate—within that sector. It is also determined by how embedded the civil society organizations in that sector are in society—both in terms of how individuals and other civil society actors see them and of how connected civil society organizations in that sector are to other sectors

and other institutionalized elements of society, such as political parties. Finally, strength is also impacted by the bureaucratic capital of the sector—how well run the organizations in it are. Embeddedness, cohesion, and bureaucratic capital make it easier for a civil society sector to achieve its goal by facilitating collective action. Although traditional conceptions of civil society capacity are important—including sources of funding and financial viability—this approach to civil society strength hypothesizes that there are other important factors involved in civil society's capacity for action.

Although they may be descriptive in nature, the vignettes do contribute to the study of civil society beyond providing an example for the analysis of civil society strength. They also provide insight into how civil society in authoritarian regimes is different from civil society in democratic regimes, and how conceiving of civil society in a standard, normative, monolithic way masks aspects of civil society that may be consequential for democratization. In democratic polities, the majority of civil society sectors will be made up of pro-democratic regime-acquiescent or regime-promoting groups. In the standard understanding of civil society, the groups in these sectors attempt to influence policy. In democratic regimes, it makes sense to divide civil society into policy subsectors. In authoritarian regimes, however, standard conceptions of civil society focus on the pro-democracy political regime-challenging sector. This sector must attempt to impact policy *and* affect regime change. In effect, standard conceptions of civil society ask much more of "civil society" in authoritarian regimes than it does of "civil society" in democratic regimes. It makes sense that pro-democracy, political civil society sectors in authoritarian regimes are "weaker" compared to similar sectors in democratic regimes because agreeing on how to challenge the authoritarian ruler and on what to make out of the country is difficult. In addition, because these groups tend to be newer, and often did not grow organically, they have little connection to society, which is reflected in the Armenia vignette. The insights provided by the vignettes thus serve to highlight once again that much remains to be done, empirically, with respect to civil society.

This approach to civil society strength underpins a new research agenda. A quantitative, but still observational, application of the assessment proposed here would involve network analysis of civil society sectors in order to measure cohesion, and survey-based network analysis of a country's citizens in order to measure embeddedness (see Calvo and Murillo, 2012). In this study, it would be important to measure the strength of a variety of sectors—those that receive donor-funding, those that are pro-democracy, those that are nationalist, etc; the nature of civil society must be respected. This can be combined with the study of democracy assistance and international aid in variety of ways to extend the qualitative research done by Henderson (2003) and Ishkanian (2008, 2014). How do the networks—both of the organizations and of the people—change and develop after an organization receives resources from abroad? Earlier work indicates that these sectors will grow more insular and disconnected, but will this always be the case? Does the regime-context matter?

It may be preemptive to sketch out hypotheses at this stage, but several do come to mind: if the environment serves as a conditioning element as specified above, then network growth should be more impaired in a more closed environment. In addition, in certain contexts, network node proliferation should actually lead to lower strength, as it is more difficult to solve the collective action problem that can thwart cohesion (e.g. Olson, 1971). It is also possible to theorize that cohesion might be more important in more democratic regimes, while embeddedness may be more important in non-democratic regimes, due to the fact that there are other resources and connections available to civil society organizations in democratic regimes. Reaching even further afield, it may be that embeddedness plays an important role in terms of backsliding. If pro-democratic civil society sectors are not embedded, but anti-democratic ones are, then it may be more likely that a country will backslide.

The conceptualization of civil society and the novel approach to civil society strength proposed here offer a new avenue of research and represent a new lens through which

to investigate the relationship between politics and civil society, and civil society and individuals.

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