The Tailor Re-tailored: Reply to Lauth

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Be not the slave of Words
(Thomas Carlyle, \textit{Sartor Resartus}, Book I, Chapter 8)

We are happy to get this opportunity to reflect upon Lauth’s comment on our article on diminished subtypes of the rule of law. First of all, we would like to once again endorse Lauth and Sehring’s (2009) thoughtful attempt to conceptually classify different rule of law-types. The very point of departure for our reassessment of this work is that we know surprisingly little about how countries perform on different sub-components of the rule of law and that scholars are often too unconscious about the problems with creating and using aggregate measures, which is reflected in the fact that the conceptualization and empirical identification of functionally different rule of law subtypes has not received much attention.

We also very much appreciate Lauth’s incisive discussion of the nature of diminished subtypes and the way such diminished subtypes can be linked with a more hierarchical treatment of different kinds of concepts. We do not have the space to comment in detail on his arguments but we make the – uncontroversial – observation that his elucidations on these issues make clear that his position is significantly different from the ‘paradigmatic’ treatment of radial types and diminished subtypes by Collier &
Mahon (1993) and Collier & Levitsky (1997). Lauth might well be correct when asserting that we have been reading too much of this work into that of Lauth and Sehring (2009). However, as he also notes, a large part of our article concerns the conceptual and empirical purchase of diminished subtypes in this more general sense.

In the work that sparked our reassessment of rule of law subtypes, we show that the notion of diminished subtypes has little empirical purchase with respect to the concept of democracy (Møller & Skaaning 2010; 2011; 2013). On top of this, we argue that an Aristotelian conceptualization – what is sometimes referred to as a classical categorization – better captures the distinctions between the most influential definitions of democracy. In political science, the Aristotelian conceptualization is closely connected with the Sartorian tradition. Lauth’s comments provide an occasion for reflecting on the staying power of Sartori’s conceptual work, which is what we will concentrate on in what follows.

As Munck (2005) has convincingly pointed out, pure (or theoretical) concepts can travel much further than envisaged by Sartori (1970) in his classical article on the issue in that we can assess the degree to which a phenomenon is present even when a concept is defined in terms of individually necessary and jointly sufficient attributes (see also Goertz 2006). On the basis of a particular set of defining attributes, we can therefore score any case according to the degree to which it has the rule of law (or is democratic). However, doing so raises the question of which aggregation rule to use to combine the sub-components. If there are strong theoretical reasons for why a concept is inherently hierarchical or conforms to a logic of diminished subtypes, this must be reflected in the way the scores on the defining attributes are aggregated.

This is where the possibility of a hierarchical approach to aggregation comes to the fore. Insofar as Sartori has something to say about measurement, it is anchored in the notion of ‘bounded wholes’ (Sartori 1987: 184; Collier & Adcock 1999: 543, 558). A concept such as democracy is here measured using a binary logic in which the defining attributes are either present or absent; it is the product of these dichotomous parts rather than the sum or average of the parts which make up the whole. In his comment, Lauth discusses how conceptual gradations can be brought into typological treatments. We differ somewhat with respect to Lauth about exactly how