# The Dynamics of Democratization

DICTATORSHIP, DEVELOPMENT, AND DIFFUSION Edited by Nathan J. Brown

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*Dictatorship, Development, and Diffusion* 

Edited by Nathan J. Brown

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## The Dynamics of Democratization

#### Preface

The authors of the essays in this volume do two things at the same time: reflect on what we know about democratization and suggest where scholars should be directing their attention in the future. By casting their arguments broadly and writing in more general terms, they also hope to inform readers who are not full-time scholars of democratization.

The idea for the book grew out of a series of conferences and events held over the past three years at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs on the "Future of Democracy." Scholars, students, activists, and policy makers met and presented, deliberated, and argued over democracy and the global prospects for democratization. We noted over time that while interest in the subject was deep on many levels—public interest, policy debates, and academic research—the insights gained from decades of scholarship did not always present themselves in accessible form. There was clearly sufficient research and wisdom to justify a stocktaking project rather than just a simple review of academic literature, which would make for dry and unrewarding reading.

We therefore gathered together a group of leading scholars and asked them not only to distill what they and their colleagues had learned but also to examine what we did not know; we encouraged them to use the lacunae they uncovered to push our understandings forward.

The contributors to this volume gathered in two workshops, one at the beginning of the project (where we were joined by Marc Lichbach of the University of Maryland, who greatly enriched our discussions) and one when the contributions had been nearly completed (where we were joined by Sheri Berman of Barnard College and Cynthia McClintock of George Washington University, who offered a number of useful, broad, and specific suggestions).

Throughout we enjoyed the unstinting support of Michael Brown (the dean of the Elliott School) and Kristin Lord (the associate dean, who actively helped shape the project in its formative stages). The Cumming family, close friends of the Elliott School, provided great financial support to the initiative. Craig Kauffman, a doctoral student at George Washington, worked on behalf of the book on all levels—his contributions to the introduction and conclusion were sufficiently substantial that they bear his name as co-author; he also helped with logistical, research, and editing support. When Craig left the country to pursue his own research, Jordan Steckler saw the project through to completion.

The Johns Hopkins University Press has been faithful and steady in its support for the volume since we had our initial discussions about the possibility of publication. We were fortunate to work with a very skillful editor at the Press, Henry Tom. With his death, the scholarly world has lost a talented and accomplished figure. We are honored that this book joins so many others in serving as a standing and permanent tribute to his memory.

## The Dynamics of Democratization

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#### Introduction

#### Nathan J. Brown and Craig M. Kauffman

Over the past two decades, political scientists have become more fascinated by democracy and democratization, moving it to the center of scholarly agendas. And they have not been alone. Democratization has become a central concern of policy makers (albeit with uncertain results at best).

Indeed, democratization is one of the rare topics that have captured the interest of academics, activists, and policy makers alike. This is due in large part to the explosive spread of democracy around the world over the past thirty-five years, which has radically transformed the international political landscape from one in which democracies were the exception to one in which they are closer to the rule. The interest in democratization also reflects the strengthening of international norms casting democracy as the best available political system and associating it with many positive attributes, from human rights to economic prosperity to security. Democracy promotion received a boost after U.S. policy makers explicitly made democratization a national security issue after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Our interest has grown. But have we learned anything?

#### The Questions

In this book, we present a variety of views on what causes democratization and what democratization can deliver. While the analysis and tools vary, taken as a whole, the authors pose three questions and deliver three clear (if quite nuanced) answers:

1. What causes a democracy to emerge and then maintains it? Here our collective wisdom suggests not a single answer but instead a new set of places to look. In particular, we need to broaden not only our historical but also our geographic focus, making far better use of a wide variety of successful democratizations, unsuccessful ones, and ways in which democratic mechanisms sit quite comfortably in nondemocratic settings. And we must develop explanations that account for both continuity and change, overcoming the tendency to emphasize one or the other. When we do so, we emerge with a set of surprising findings about which institutions matter (our authors find, for instance, that the military is sometimes less of a factor and parliaments more of one than we have been led to expect). But we also develop a far greater appreciation not only of the way in which various democratic and authoritarian forms slide into each other but also of the need to integrate our understanding of both forms of government and the way they are combined. Further inquiry into democratization cannot proceed far without a more sophisticated understanding of authoritarianism.

2. Does democracy make things better? Most if not all of the authors would probably answer yes. But they also insist on asking the question if making things better (particularly in the economic realm) makes things easier for democracy. And of equal interest are the specifications our authors would attach to this very general answer. Thus, a more useful—if at first glance almost evasive answer—would probably be: "On balance, and over the long term, democracy probably has some beneficial effects. But it is effect as well as cause: democracy is often rendered more stable by developments in the economic sphere." One section of the book explores these specifications and qualifications, because that is where our most helpful contribution lies.

3. Can democracy be promoted? International action can shape the possibilities for democratization and the path that democratic development takes. But it does so in some varied, unanticipated, and sometimes long-term ways that will likely frustrate conscious democracy promotion policies.

#### How Scholars Study Democratization

In the social sciences, we rarely expect broad, general, and definitive answers, but we do expect better-informed questions, more sophisticated ways of answering them, and steadily refined (if generally tentative and qualified) conclusions. Are we getting better at studying democratization?

We certainly try more. Scholars never ignored democratization, but for an extended period—in which democratic government seemed more the exception than the rule—it was rarely at the center of research agendas. Events in

the 1980s and 1990s (Samuel Huntington's "third wave")<sup>1</sup> sucked academics into studying what was occurring. Scholarly interest has therefore grown partly as a reaction to a changing world.

Early scholarship on the third wave focused on the moment of transition itself, for understandable reasons. The breakdown of authoritarian regimes and the emergence of an embryonic democratic order—whether in Greece, Argentina, Poland, Russia, Spain, or South Korea—constituted a dramatic story. And much of it was unexpected. As interest deepened, however, scholars have widened their focus considerably. They now debate how authoritarian regimes give way to more democratic ones, how democracy is consolidated, how democracies are structured and how they perform, the relationship between democracy and economic growth, and why democratic mechanisms often seem to coexist with authoritarian ones.

Of course, democracy is not solely of scholarly interest. Understanding democracy and its complex evolution has important implications for policy and politics worldwide. Democracy and democracy promotion not only have taken center stage in policy debates; they have also absorbed the energies of countless activists throughout the world. Even countries that have completed democratic transitions are now wrestling with how democratic government can endure and how it can perform and deliver on its promise of more responsive and accountable governance.

As we claim, social science in general and comparative politics specifically move forward less by the steady accretion of bits of knowledge and more by the ability to ask new and better questions and to answer them in new and better ways. Scholars generally embrace this way of proceeding, but students and policy makers are sometimes frustrated by our inability to develop clear and definitive answers to the questions we pose. We acknowledge, but do not apologize for, our proclivity to debate much more than we can resolve.

In this collection, we write as part of the scholarly tradition, as people who have learned from, contributed to, and seek to shape the way that the academy understands democratization. We are not policy makers (though many of us have advised those who do make policy). But while we are scholars, we are not using this volume as an opportunity to present the latest findings of our very specific research. In some cases, very recent and specific research is included, and in all cases our own research has deeply informed our views. But we have written this volume to present what we think we collectively are learning—and to do so not simply by summarizing the views of others but by assessing what has come before us and shoving future scholarly inquiry in the direction we think is most appropriate.

We are thus presenting a hybrid between a review of the field and cuttingedge research. We hope this compilation will be useful to our colleagues in the academy; to new students of the subject, who will learn not only what but also how the academy contributes to efforts at understanding political change; and, finally, to those who make policy.

The book is both backward looking (toward past work) and forward looking (on where we should focus on efforts)—with an emphasis on the latter. And in the conclusion, we consider the general lessons that we are able to draw. We will examine as well whether those lessons—framed as they inevitably are in the qualified, querying, and querulous ways of scholars—provide any help to those whose interests are more applied and practical.

The rest of this introductory chapter, however, tilts the balance in the opposite direction—we are beginning this volume by looking a bit backward. We reflect on the record of scholarship, especially on the early reactions to the third wave because those reactions have set the agenda for much subsequent scholarship on democratization. Specifically, we seek to answer five questions:

- 1. How did political scientists approach democratization before the third wave?
- 2. How did the third wave change the scholarly agenda?
- 3. What have we come to realize that the initial agenda led us to overlook at first?
- 4. Did that agenda lead us in the right direction?
- 5. What did that agenda stress that later turned out to be less important?

#### How Political Scientists Used to Think about Democratization

The study of democracy is as old as the study of politics—indeed, many of our most basic terms and concepts about politics come from an ancient tradition of normative and empirical inquiry in which democracy was considered a possible political form (though often not a stable or just one). Partly because democracy was seen as unstable, writers on democracy beginning with Aristotle have been concerned with democratization (how democracies are born) and even more with how democracies fail or degenerate.

The modern study of democratization has shown far more normative sympathy with its subject and also has been far more inclined to see democracy as potentially quite stable. Given the greater faith in democratic stability, the interest in transitions to and away from democracy often drew less attention. And the level of interest in democracy has varied greatly.

For if democracy is a perennial concern, it has not always been central. And democratization—studying how political systems become democratic has excited, at best, episodic attention. While in the modern era democracy has generally been seen as the most appropriate form of government for developed societies, there has often been a recognition that, even in such societies, other political forms had emerged and shown (especially during the Cold War) apparent health and viability. As for the developing world, democracy was generally viewed as associated with higher levels of development and therefore something that might emerge only over the very long term.

Indeed, scholarship preceding the third wave, while it showed significant variation in approach and method, generally displayed two common features. First, it tended to explain democratization by reference to long-term factors and impersonal forces—the size of the middle class, political culture, the level of economic development, or the class structure. Democracy was seen as something that emerged rather than something that was created, and it emerged over decades or even centuries. Democracy was sometimes portrayed as possessing specific prerequisites or the outcome of complex social evolution rather than as a political system that could be purposively designed at any time.<sup>2</sup>

Second, democratization was connected not just to long-term social factors but, most commonly, to those with an economic aspect. For example, both modernization theory and dependency theory (adopted by some in the academy in conscious rebellion against modernization theory) linked democratization with political economy, albeit in very different ways—modernization theory quite loosely by positing a relationship between level of development and democracy, and dependency theory somewhat more tightly by arguing that emerging patterns in what had been viewed as the "developing world" were undermining both prosperity and democracy. And, indeed, some of the most innovative work in the 1970s and early 1980s used patterns of economic change and political economy to explain the new forms of authoritarianism that were emerging.

To be sure, there were some whose approach did not display these features. Most presciently perhaps (at least in terms of anticipating subsequent scholarship) was Dankwart Rustow's argument that democracy had no specific prerequisites, other than a sense of national unity to clearly set the boundaries of the political community; and that it was most likely when rival elites could not dominate each other but had to invent a set of rules for sharing (and ultimately alternating) in power.<sup>3</sup> Rustow's more focused and voluntaristic approach was revived at the beginning of the third wave and has remained influential.

#### The Beginnings of a Research Agenda

Political scientists who had explained the rise of authoritarianism in southern Europe and South America were taken by surprise by the collapse of authoritarianism, beginning in the mid-1970s. Many were not merely surprised but also delighted—the nationalistic, repressive, right-leaning, and occasionally bellicose authoritarian regimes of Greece, Spain, Argentina, and Chile were mourned by few scholars. A strong normative interest in democratization never completely absent but often seen as naive and even ethnocentric before the third wave—came to characterize the study of democratization, a feature it has not shed.

When scholars reached for an explanation of what seemed at first to be a regional trend rather than a global wave, they tended to leave behind the focus on political economy and deep structure that had characterized their study of authoritarianism. Partly this was because they were examining changes as they were occurring—and outcomes still seemed quite uncertain. Indeed, they were more likely to talk first about the "breakdown of authoritarianism" and then "transitions" than voice a confident expectation of "democratization."

But mild surprise turned to total astonishment as the uncertain transitions in southern Europe and South America were followed by the collapse of communist rule in central and eastern Europe. Accompanying these changes was a series of democratic breakthroughs in East Asia as well as some in sub-Saharan Africa. Something quite general—a global wave of democratization seemed to call for new approaches and understandings.

And yet the widening wave largely deepened the scholarly trends that had already emerged. First, the normative interest in democratic outcomes continued—few were interested in questioning prevailing feelings that something quite positive was occurring. If academics did not subscribe to the messianic euphoria

that seeped into politicians' speeches and newspaper columns, few denied that they were rooting for democratic outcomes.

Second, the global nature of the wave deepened the turn away from attempts to search for preconditions and prerequisites. The idea that democracy was possible only under restrictive conditions seemed at odds not only with the burgeoning global interest in building democracy but with the normative preferences of scholars for democratic governance. Similarly, the realization that democracy could break out in unexpected places accentuated a tendency against the search for long-term processes and toward shorter-term and conjunctural factors.

Third, the fact that scholars were studying events as they happened tilted the balance toward explaining processes and away from predicting outcomes. In other words, there was far more confidence analyzing the "transition" away from authoritarianism than the "consolidation" of a stable democracy. This in turn augmented the shift of focus to human agency, deliberate actions, and tactical choices: democratization came to be studied as the result of conscious decisions made by political leaders.

It is probably fair to describe this emerging set of features as a "transition paradigm," even though those held responsible for developing it—both inside and outside the academy—have disavowed some of these key elements (especially the implicit optimism).<sup>4</sup> But it should also be noted that there were attempts at correctives and modifications from the very beginning. The turn away from analyzing democratization in terms of structural factors and long-term processes, for instance, did not result in a full repudiation of any interest in the connection between political economy and democracy. Indeed, especially when attention turned from transition to consolidation, the relationship between economic performance and democratic stability loomed large.

Similarly, the focus on leaders and tactical choices left some uncomfortable democratization seemed to rely to a remarkably small extent on the demos. Correction took two forms. First, some insisted that the role of popular participation in democratic transitions should not be discounted and that it was impossible to write the history of transitions simply by focusing on the shrewd and restrained tactics of moderate leaders.<sup>5</sup> Second, *civil society*, a term at the margins of scholarly discourse in the 1970s into the 1980s, became a central concern for scholars of democracy, though the term displayed some markedly different meanings.<sup>6</sup>

#### What That Agenda Missed—But We Have Learned Since

The transition paradigm was influential indeed, but it was not really more than a set of empirically generated insights. And as scholarly debates continued, some of its blind spots became clear. The nuances of many scholarly debates often got lost when arguments entered the policy arena, however, so that scholarly refinements and reversals did not immediately enter broader policy discussions. We list here five important correctives that developed in scholarly writings about democratization over time.

1. Structural conditions may not be determinative, but they should not be ignored. The "no preconditions," "anyone can do it" thrust of the "transition paradigm" led policy makers to hope that the only requirement for "democratization was a decision by the country's political elites to move toward democracy and an ability on the part of those elites to fend off the contrary actions of remaining anti-democratic forces."<sup>7</sup> No scholar ever claimed that democratization was solely an act of will by a political elite. But the initial work focused on elite choices and strategies. And because they tended to study successful cases and dramatic moments of authoritarian collapse, a short-term voluntaristic bias crept in.

But subsequent research has undermined this voluntaristic view of the transition paradigm. While the choices of elites certainly matter, they are shaped by myriad contextual factors. Recent work focuses on the complex interaction of elites and institutions, the role of popular mobilization, and the interaction of economic and political structures and policy choices, among many other factors.

Examples of political change in less happy places such as Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan have led scholars to reemphasize the importance of structural conditions in determining the success of democratization processes. These cases, along with many other transitional democracies left unconsolidated as the third wave receded, renewed arguments for a focus on structural factors and preexisting conditions, such as social cohesion, democratic values, and sufficiently strong and well-designed political institutions, not to mention physical and economic security. There is no consensus on which conditions are most important, or how necessary they are for success, and their exact role in promoting democracy is not well understood. However, there is an increasing recognition that getting elites to agree to pursue democracy is only part of the story. The long, arduous task of sustaining and deepening democracy