

Democratic Liberalization
by
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World politics has often been said to be a dangerous “jungle.” But are its dangers a product of the absence of a world policeman or of the presence of rapacious state “beasts”? The most sensible answer is, surely, both. But while global governance tends to focus on creating new rules for the “jungle,” we should not neglect reforming the “beasts.” Indeed, one transformation that appears to have long run prospects for reforming world politics into a much more governable world is changing the character of states: democratic liberalism.

Democratic liberalism embodies constitutional government, representative institutions, minority protections and human rights and roles for private property and civil society. It is one of those great nineteenth century revolutions that, together with nationalism and industrialism, are still transforming world politics. All began in Western Europe and have swept outward with revolutionary effects. Democratic liberalism grew from the handful of constitutional regimes in the early nineteenth century to more than sixty spread around the world today. Sometimes democratic liberalism fortunately coincided with national self-determination and industrial development (as they did in post-Civil War United States and are doing now in Brazil and India). Just as often, they clashed in competing waves when democratization fostered rival nationalisms in one set of state borders, as occurred in the Austro-Hungarian empire, or industrialization advantaged one nation state over another and launched destructive rivalries, as it did between Britain and Germany before World War One.

Liberal democracy is still a revolutionary idea, being played out in South Africa and South Asia and Latin America. Its positive effects are profound and extensive, as this partial list suggests:

- It promotes peace and mutual respect among peoples. For two centuries, democracies that are committed to the ideal of individual liberty and endowed with well-established constitutional governments have tended to maintain, and likely will continue to maintain, a reliable peace with each other. This legacy of liberal peace helps account for the success of the NATO alliance in the Cold War and the end of the Cold War itself, as the USSR/Russia under Gorbachev and Yeltsin began to liberalize. It is statistically significant from a social science point of view and strategically well worth protecting and fostering.¹
- Democracy, at higher levels of participation, promotes human rights and “decreases state repression.”²
- It serves to protect the mass of a population from state indifference during a natural disaster, thus reducing the danger of large scale famine.³

¹ Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace* (Princeton, 1997), chapter 8 on “Liberal Internationalism.”

² Christian Davenport and David Armstrong, “Democracy and the Violation of Human Rights: A Statistical Analysis from 1976 to 1996,” *AJPS* 48, 3 (July 2004) 538-554.

³ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford, 1999). The strongest statement – “that democracy prevents famine” -- suffers from significant exceptions in India and elsewhere, depending on how one defines a famine.

- It tends to foster economic growth. Although there is no appreciable direct effect, democracy not only does not harm growth (as some have charged) it has robust positive indirect effects by increasing human capital (education etc.), lowering inflation, reducing political instability and enlarging economic freedom – all of which are positively associated with economic growth.⁴
- Although autocrats sometimes buy popular support with economic well-being and committed socialists maintain economic equality, expanding the democratic franchise tends, overall, to reduce economic inequality as politicians respond to the majority's demand for greater welfare.⁵
- Democracy has mixed effects on globalization. It tends to favor trade openness in developing countries (with large supplies of labor) but not necessarily in developed countries (where trade may favor the highly skilled and capital). Conversely and correspondingly, trade promotes equality in developing and inequality in developed countries.⁶

Being a democracy, however, is no cure-all. The very international respect for individual rights and shared commercial interests that establish grounds for peace among liberal democracies establish grounds for additional conflict in relations between liberal and non-liberal societies, as they do in US-Russian and US-Chinese relations today. Liberal internationalism is no recipe; it needs constant, prudent vigilance to avoid crusades and misguided interventions. Liberal Britain, France and the United States have been among the most expansionist empires, sometimes producing order and progress and at other times fostering chaos, oppression and war. The “liberation” of Iraq is only the latest in these costly adventures. We still need improvements in the governance of world politics that operate on all states.

Nor is becoming a democracy a cure-all. Globally, overall and on average, every step toward more democracy within countries reduces the chances of both international and civil war. That is the good news. But the good news needs to be qualified: where the rule of law and public institutions are weak, politicians will be tempted to use violence to achieve and hold office.⁷

⁴ Aristos Doucouliagos and Mehmet Ulubasoglu, “Democracy and Economic Growth: A Meta Analysis,” *AJPS* 52, 1 (Jan 2008): 61-83.

⁵ Mark Gradstein and Branko Milanovic, “Does Liberte = Egalite: A Survey of Empirical Links between Democracy and Inequality with some Evidence on the Transition Economies,” *Jnl. of Economic Surveys* 18:4 (2004) 515-537.

⁶ Helen Milner and Keiko Kubota, “Why the Move to Free Trade: Democracy and Trade Policy in the Developing Countries,” *Intl Organization* (Winter 2005) 59:1 107-143. And Rafael Reuveny and Quan Li, “Economic Openness, Democracy and Income Inequality,” *Comparative Political Studies* (June 2003) 36: 575-601. If trade significantly lowers the prices of import competing goods, which it does appear to do, this may make it advantageous to the majority in developed countries. Trade openness, however, may not be good for the stability of democracy (see Roberto Rigobon and Dani Rodrik, “Rule of Law, Democracy, Openness and Income,” *Economics of Transition* 13 (3) 2005: 533-564.

⁷ For the first generalization, see Bruce Russett and John O’Neal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: Norton, 2001), chap. 3. For the second, Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” *International Security* 20 (1): 5-38.

Democracy is thus a vital source of transformation with enormous upside and downside potential. The question remains: how to foster the first and avoid the second? Let us begin by what we need to avoid and conclude with what we can reasonably expect to do to promote sustainable democratization.

First, we need to avoid a repeat of the Bush Administration's "forced democratization." Following the Iraq fiasco, it is unlikely to be repeated soon, but the ethical and practical lessons still need to be absorbed. Self-government should mean authentic "self" government, not laws and regulations imposed by foreigners, even if well-meaning. And, practically, forcing democracy tends not to work. Democracy is not only government "for" and "of," it is government "by" the people. Unless the people see themselves as a people and are prepared to pay taxes, defend their borders and abide by majority rule, democracy is not sustainable. When even well-meaning foreigners seek to liberate a country whose people haven't been able to liberate themselves, they fall into one of three traps. The newly designated forces of freedom, pulled from foreign knapsacks, find that they cannot rule and, as in Iraq, a civil war follows the liberating invasion. Or, second, the new freedom faction finds that it can stay in power only with foreign support. So, rather than free, it has become a cog in an imperial machine. Or, third, the freedom faction learns that to stay in power it must govern as the previous dictators did, autocratically, by force. The liberating invaders are thus responsible not only for the costs in lives and money of the invasion but for an invasion that has literally done no good, produced a civil war, a colony or one more tyranny with a new ideological label attached.⁸

Second, we should also avoid Senator McCain's "League of Democracies." It is a strategy of democratic association likely to do more harm than good. Few if any of the world's major challenges can be met by dividing democratic sheep from nondemocratic goats. Effective trade negotiations and effective arms control need to include all the world's major producers that are prepared to abide by agreed rules, whether they are democratic or not. Meeting the challenge of climate change will require the cooperation not just of the established democratic powers of Europe, Japan and the US, but also of China and Russia and democratizing states in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Indeed, the very hope of a peacefully democratizing world rests on persuading patriotic autocrats in nondemocracies that their countries will be better off if they transfer authority to their peoples. Refusing to negotiate and shunning a potential Gorbachev or a new DeKlerk is not the best way to win their confidence.

Democratic transformation is best fostered peacefully. It spreads by good example, by incentives and assistance. Promoting democracy is best done indirectly through trade, investment and foreign aid. These can help diversify societies. Diversified growing societies tend to demand responsive governance, over the long run. Thus among the most powerful weapons in the arsenal of international democratic transformation -- the shock troops of genuine democratization -- are students, tourists and business investors. They build bridges to their friends and associates overseas. They

⁸ These are JS Mill's famous (1859!) insights from "Nonintervention." Intervention, however, will sometimes be justified to stop a genocide or remove an aggressive regime following a defensive war, such as the democratizations of Germany and Japan that followed World War Two.

send a message of solidarity and opportunity to subjects who are prepared to take the risks of becoming citizens. Indirectly, building the institutions of the rule of law, a free press and education also contributes. Bilateral assistance can play a valuable role in this if it is carefully planned with local actors in the lead.⁹ And the “Community of Democracies” usefully serves as a “trade” association encouraging coordination among and promotion of democracies, without undermining multilateral institutions.¹⁰

For direct promotion, multilateral assistance is particularly useful because it frees the recipient organization from the taint of foreign control. The recently established UN Democracy Fund has an especially significant role in this endeavor. Authorized at the 2005 World Summit in a unanimous General Assembly resolution, it distributes about \$30 million per year, predominantly to civil society organizations who apply for a grant to promote measures such as voter education and mobilization. Directed by a small staff of UN officials, it is overseen by a board uniquely composed of the seven leading state donors, six other states representing the rest of the UN membership, two civil society organizations, and a few individuals appointed personally by the Secretary-General.¹¹

Strategies like these, not invasion, are the best prospects for expanding the zone of peace among fellow democracies and reaping the benefits of democratization.

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⁹ Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Carnegie, 1999) and see the symposium sponsored by the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, *Multilateral Strategies to Promote Democracy* (Carnegie, 2004)

¹⁰ The “Warsaw Declaration” and the “Seoul Plan of Action” outline its activities.

¹¹ See the UNDEF website at <http://www.un.org/democracyfund/index.htm>. Disclosure: I am currently one of the Secretary-General’s personal representatives and the chair of the board of UNDEF. These comments do not represent the views of either UNDEF, its donors or the UN.