

Why Democracies Develop and Decline

Michael Coppedge, Amanda B. Edgell, Carl Henrik Knutsen, and Staffan I. Lindberg (eds.) (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 378 pages, appendixes, bibliography.

Reviewed by Anthony T. Sutton

Whence democracy? A few centuries of political philosophy invited us to imagine democracy developing stepwise from the state of nature; a few generations of civics courses portrayed it as the brainchild of European republicans reared on tales of antique Greek polities. This volume provides newly empirical answers. It will prove a handy citation for the analyst needing to source some truism about democratic development. It may inspire further rigorous exploitation of rich data sources, given its high standards and grand scope.

This volume's achievements rise from statistical analysis of V-Dem data, a recently created rating of five dimensions of democracy and hundreds of subsidiary concepts in nearly every country since 1789. The editors outline their case —expanded elsewhere^a— that V-Dem enables superior analysis because it distinguishes among dimensions of democracy, develops indicators that are conceptually valid, and aggregates the indicators logically and transparently.

Working atop this new foundation, chapter authors shape the building blocks of an answer to the question of which countries become democracies. In sequence, chapters explore hypotheses for the providential, international, economic, institutional, and social factors that cause democracy to develop. A keystone chapter integrates the findings.

Taken as a whole, the book predicts current levels of democracy in countries by looking at deep factors like geography and latitude that favor social and economic modernization, including intermediate factors such as literacy and prosperity. In turn, these tend to produce proximate factors, like civil society, political parties, and state capacity. The book further observes that democracy develops via punctuated equilibriums: a country's natural level of democracy evolves slowly alongside

socioeconomic development, opening a gap from the actual level of democracy in an inertial political system, until an economic crisis or political movement snaps the two into congruence.

John Gerring's chapter connects long-run factors to modern levels of democracy, testing many candidates before settling on latitude and natural harbors as potential causes by way of their contribution to socioeconomic modernization. Gerring also correlates democracy with European ancestry, Protestantism, and not Islam, although he suspects these latter three are proxy for other causal explanations. Together, the five long-run variables account for half the variation in levels of democracy among modern countries.

In addition to their own innate characteristics, countries are influenced by the levels of democracy among neighbors, allies, and colonizers. So finds a chapter by Coppedge, Benjamin Denison, Paul Friesen, Lucia Tiscornia, and Yang Xu. These international contributions raised democracy in Western Europe and North America by 0.2 on a 1-point scale, relative to expected levels. The authors extrapolate long-term trends from short-term numbers, however, making the finding sensitive to small initial variations.

Knutsen and Sirianne Dahlum take up the oft-repeated search for economic determinants of democracy. They ratify the present consensus that wealthier countries are more likely to *be* democracies but not more likely to *become* democracies. Rather, wealth seems to operate to prevent democratic reversals. The correlation of wealth and democracy could also be explained in the opposite direction: that is, democracy to a degree causes economic development, a point the authors note in passing here and substantiate more fully elsewhere.^b The chapter also finds unsurprising support for the idea that natural

a. See Michael Coppedge, et al., eds., *Varieties of Democracy: Measuring Two Centuries of Political Change* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

b. See Carl Henrik Knutsen, "A Business Case for Democracy Regime Type, Growth, and Growth Volatility," *Democratization* (2021);

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resources can curse a country by facilitating autocracy and surprising support for the idea that an economy dominated by agriculture is even less hospitable to democracy. Economic inequality plays no detectible role in motivating democratization or endangering existing democracies.

Institutional factors occupy Allen Hicken, Samuel Baltz, and Fabricio Vasselai, who find state capacity makes democracy more likely to develop and less likely to reverse, as does the very act of holding elections. The chapter also adds nuance to an old debate, siding with Cheibub^a in finding no general danger from presidential rather than parliamentary systems but exculpating Linz^b by noting that presidentialism is riskier for weak democracies, whereas parliamentary systems are riskier for strong democracies. The authors summarize this finding along with another—that single-party dominance is heterogeneously more dangerous than party fragmentation—by proposing that countries at low levels of democracy risk more by concentrating power than by dispersing it.

Michael Bernhard and Edgell consider social factors, deepening the evidence that civil society is helpful in creating and preserving democracy. Combining V-Dem information with NAVCO data on mass-mobilization campaigns, the authors find popular movements endanger existing regimes, making autocracies more likely to democratize and democracies more likely to autocratize. Specifically, right-wing and violent campaigns more often bring down democracies, whereas nonviolent campaigns more often build them up.

Each chapter distills data into easily grasped generalizations, sometimes creating new insights, occasionally contradicting received wisdom, and often expanding the evidentiary base for preexisting theories. As a litany of stylized facts, these findings justify the book. The editors deliver additional value by synthesizing authors' research projects, culminating in a working understanding of multiple factors operating on several timescales to produce democracy.



The reviewer: Anthony T. Sutton is a governance analyst at the CIA.

Knutsen, "Democracy and Economic Growth: A Survey of Arguments and Results," *International Area Studies Review* 15, no. 4 (2012).

a. See Jose Antonio Cheibub, *Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

b. See Juan J. Linz, "The Perils of Presidentialism," *Journal of Democracy* 1, no. 1 (1990).