DRG Learning Digest

Democratization and Backsliding: Theories and Evidence

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In the last five decades the world has seen the third wave of democratization (~1974-1991) and now the third wave of autocratization (~1994-present) (Luhrmann and Lindberg 2018). Both waves changed our understanding of why and how countries democratize or backslide. Before these waves, democratization occurred almost exclusively in wealthy, industrialized nations and autocratization occurred primarily through military coups and other drastic executive takeovers (Svolik 2014).

These third waves have broken those trends and forced scholars and practitioners to rethink theories of democratization and backsliding. What theories explain why countries move toward or away from democracy? What is the evidence for those theories? While the process of democratization and backsliding varies from case to case, in this edition we review some of the most important and widespread factors leading to democratization and backsliding, deriving implications for DRG programming. Most of these theories (even the most recent scholarship) haven't yet accounted for the positive and negative transnational impacts of new information and communications technologies on democratization and backsliding; we hope to address these issues in a future edition.

This edition of the DRG Learning Digest examines the following topics:
- Supply-side factors about elites and political institutions: Elite competition promotes democratization
- Demand-side factors about citizens' attitudes: A civic-minded, activated citizenry can support democratization
- International factors: Norms and economic connections can incentivize democratization or autocratization

Please also make use of DRG Evidence and Learning Team resources! (See text box at the end.)

Supply-side factors: Elite competition promotes democratization

The main theories explaining democratization and backsliding from the supply-side (top-down) focus on *elite competition*. Competition among political elites leads to democratization when autocrats cede political power to citizens. Autocrats cede this power for a few reasons. First, it is better to hold a bit less power than risk being ousted entirely; second, autocrats can enhance their own power vis-a-vis other elites by enfranchising citizens who will support their policies; third, due to international pressure (to be discussed later); and fourth, autocrats may prefer democratic processes due to their stability and predictability (Geddes 2011). Elite commitment to democracy can also help resist backsliding (Mainwaring and Perez-Linan 2013). Conversely, a lack of elite competition can lead to backsliding (Lehoucq and Perez-Linan 2013). Without competition, there exists no counterweight to prevent those with political power from accumulating more (Anderson et al. 2002; Van de Walle 2003).

Other theories focus on how institutions provide more or less democratic stability. Attention was initially paid to institutions like parliamentarism (versus presidentialism) and proportional representation (versus first-past-the-post) electoral systems, though most evidence shows that these institutions have little to no effect on democratic stability (Lust and Waldner 2015; Cheibub 2007). What does impact democratic stability is the distribution of power among political parties. Countries with two strong parties or with a moderate number of relatively even-strength parties are the most stable (Lust and Waldner 2015; Mainwaring 1998). Countries with one hegemonic political party are vulnerable to backsliding either because (a) the dominant party removes checks on its own power, or (b) the opposition parties, with no hope of winning an election, destabilize democracy and attempt to obtain power in other ways. And, in general, a collapse in the electoral viability of traditional political parties lays the foundation for the subversion of democracy by executive fiat (Seawright 2012). Regarding the types of autocracies that move toward democracy, military rule appears more likely than one-party states or personalistic dictatorships to move toward democracy. And authoritarian regimes that adopt electoral institutions (i.e electoral autocracies) are more likely than other autocratic regimes to move toward democracy, but are also vulnerable to backsliding as elections strengthen an autocrat's legitimacy (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Goldstone et al. 2010; Geddes 2011).

Former President Edgar Lungu of Zambia looks on during the inauguration ceremony of his successor, President Hakainde Hichilema, at the Heroes Stadium in Lusaka on August 24, 2021. As part of the ceremony, Lungu handed over the instruments of power to Hichilema following an election hailed as a triumph for democracy. Photo: Salim Dawood / AFP

What does all of this mean for DRG officers? First, DRG programs should seek to support political party systems and democratic institutions (such as an independent judiciary and national or subnational legislatures) that prevent the accumulation of power in one person or party. Elites in competition have an incentive to accept democracy when they perceive the democratic rules of conflict resolution are superior to a violent struggle for power, but if one elite group gains too much power, that group no longer has an incentive to support a democratic system that constrains them. Second, DRG support should focus on those homegrown democratic institutions that already exist (even if weak or fledgling) and seek to strengthen those institutions, rather than attempt to prescribe specific institutional designs. There is no one-size-fits-all institutional framework that prevents backsliding, and stable institutions come about as a result of competition and bargaining. Third, DRG programs should try to increase citizen power in the informal bargaining process between citizens and elites that influences political institutions. Lastly, DRG officers should work with their interagency

colleagues on public and private diplomatic messaging and engagement to promote a commitment to democracy among elites who may be in a position to subvert it.

Demand-side factors: A civic-minded, activated citizenry can support democratization

In the wake of popular pro-democracy movements over the past decade, activists and others have paid extra attention to demand-side factors that encourage democratization. Pro-democracy organizations often develop their programs based on a few key theories, and here we look into the evidence for some of these theories.

One theory is that if people develop a democratic political culture of attitudes, feelings, or norms in support of democracy, that should lead to their nations becoming more democratic (Inglehart and Welzel 2010). Civic education programs that promote a more democratic political culture can increase people's understanding of political processes and involvement in local politics (Finkel and Smith 2011), which may be an important intervention point for implementers to encourage democratic consolidation at the national level. Beyond civic education, trust-building programs among diverse groups of citizens can also be crucial to enabling democratization in diverse societies (Lust and Waldner 2015).

[Chocolate Colombia](#) provides families in Colombia's coca belt with alternatives to the lucrative but dangerous illegal drug trade. It is one of around 500 USAID-supported activities that aim to rebuild social connections and foster trust in government and other institutions in areas long strained by civil conflict. [Photo](#): Thomas Cristofoletti, USAID

A second popular approach is modernization theory ([Lipset 1959](#)), which proposes that rising wealth and modernization leads to democratization through two paths: (1) as people's values modernize from *traditional* to *secular* and from *survival* to *expression*, autocracies will fail as the people demand democratic reforms, and (2) where democracies already exist, rising wealth and modernization can solidify democratic politics and increase resilience. Early research focused on the first path, and more recent research on Europe and Latin America suggests that organized and empowered working classes can promote democratization ([Rueschmeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992](#)). However, growing evidence of wealthy undemocratic nations and poor democratic nations has led to recent analyses pointing more to the second path: rising incomes and modernization can protect existing democratic systems ([Przeworski and Limongi 1997](#)).

What does this mean for development practitioners? First, while rising incomes can stabilize people's lives and existing democracies, they don't necessarily cause increased desire or mobilization for democratization. Encouraging civic education seems to be an effective way to

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start democratization at local levels, with predictions that this might build up the groundswell necessary for national-level changes. At the same time, people will often prioritize security and survival over democratic and expressive values, and civic education promoting democratic values may not be effective in the absence of security and stability. Similarly, evidence from Egypt, Russia, and Bolivia suggests that it can be hard to form stable democracies when trust between citizens is low (Lust and Waldner 2015). Therefore, while education and economic growth are important factors, they may not immediately move the needle toward democratization, so activity design should carefully address the sources of instability in society.

Lastly, it may be crucial to assist existing democracies that are struggling economically, since poor economic performance can bring down regimes and decrease faith in the democratic process to solve problems. At the same time, it may be equally important not to support autocratic countries with struggling economies, but rather in these cases support mobilization for democracy, since their poor economic performance may create the appetite for political change. This can create a dilemma for development agencies such as USAID, which have multiple priorities including supporting democracy and promoting economic development.

International factors: Norms and economic connections can incentivize democratization or autocratization

While the above theories focus on internal forces affecting democratization, several hypotheses posit that international pressure can impact the likelihood of democratization or democratic backsliding. The common denominator to these hypotheses is how international pressures increase or decrease the cost of autocratization versus the cost of democratization.

One such hypothesis proposes that international pressures can lead to democratization through *leverage*, the government's susceptibility to democratic influence, and *linkage*, the density of economic, political, diplomatic, and social ties to other democracies -- along with cross-border flows of capital, information, goods, services, and people. "Linkage works by shaping domestic preferences for reform, shaping the domestic distribution of resources, strengthening democrats and weakening autocrats, and heightening the international reverberations of autocratic abuse. When leverage and linkage are high, there is strong and consistent pressure for democratization; when both are low, there is weak external pressure" (Lust and Waldner 2015). Likewise, leverage and linkage to other authoritarian regimes can lead to backsliding.

Buyers and artisans from various countries in West Africa conduct business at a trade showcase. The density of economic linkages between countries can build constituencies for democratic stability, rule of law, and rights protections. Photo: USAID West Africa Trade Hub

Similarly, membership in international organizations can sometimes support democratic reform and impede backsliding. A common example is membership in the European Union (EU) in which democratic leverage and linkages are strong. However, the experience of Slovakia in 1997-1998 (in which the EU's initial denial of membership caused Slovaks to elect a pro-EU government that enacted the reforms necessary to meet the EU's criteria for membership), as well as recent democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland, reveal that it is much more the *process of admission* that is the EU's primary source of leverage, not membership in and of itself. In an example of international organizations that lack of democratic leverage and linkage, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has not made democratic governance a condition for membership, and thus ASEAN membership has not impeded democratic backsliding in the Philippines, Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Thailand (Lust and Waldner 2015). Nonetheless, it is important to note that ASEAN has pointedly refused to invite

the Myanmar military junta to its recent summits; it will be interesting to see if this has any impact on the junta's behavior.

The availability of and conditions attached to international funds can also play an important role in democratization. After World War II, international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank began lending to less developed countries, effectively reducing governments' dependence on private investors and creating non-tax sources of revenue, and in doing so reduced pressures for democratization. The debt crisis of the 1980s significantly reduced the availability of foreign funds to, among other things, cover trade and budget deficits. As a result, governments faced pressure to adopt policies conducive to attracting investment, including credible policy commitments and secure property rights. This effectively decreased the cost of democratization relative to the cost of suppression (Geddes 2011).

Another set of hypotheses with direct implications for USAID programming explores the impact of foreign aid on democratization, distinguishing between general humanitarian aid and "democracy aid" such as support for civil society, rule of law, electoral institutions, and human rights. When it comes to positively influencing the democratization process, the majority of studies indicate that while democracy aid is helpful, humanitarian aid is generally not and may actually be harmful in that it can reduce a government's dependence on the tax revenues of its citizens, a key ingredient of democratic accountability. As above, this can create a dilemma for development agencies, which have multiple priorities including supporting freedom and relieving human suffering. The studies also show that democracy aid is most effective when supporting countries that already enjoy a certain level of democracy, as opposed to supporting transitions from autocracy to democracy (Gisselquist, Nino-Zarazua, and Samarin 2021).

Synthesis: These factors combine in unique ways in each country

All of these factors -- elite motivation, citizen demand, and international pressure -- interact to move a country toward or away from full democracy. Rising democratic values and demands for popular participation can encourage elites to support democratization. International organizations can promote this process by educating and supporting communities in their democratization efforts, and by incentivizing top-down democratization by elites. However, the specific reason a particular country in a particular time democratizes or backslides is heterogeneous (Geddes 2011). The factors that lead to democratization might differ from the factors that lead to backsliding; likewise, factors leading to the onset of democracy might not be the factors that lead to its endurance (Waldner and Lust 2018). For example, economic development increases the stability of a democratic regime and thus increases the number of

prosperous democratic countries, but has no causal effect on transitions to democracy (Przeworski et al. 2000; Geddes 2011). As the world changes, our understanding of what causes democratization and backsliding will continue to evolve.

Use Our Resources!

Welcome to the DRG Learning Digest, a newsletter to keep you informed of the latest learning, evaluation, and research in the Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG) sector. Views expressed in the external (non-USAID) publications linked in this Digest do not necessarily represent the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

Don't forget to check out our DRG Learning Menu of Services! (Link only accessible to USAID personnel.) The Menu provides information on the learning products and services the Evidence and Learning Team offers to help you fulfill your DRG learning needs. We want to help you adopt learning approaches that emphasize best fit and quality.

The Evidence and Learning Team is also excited to share our DRG Learning, Evidence, and Analysis Platform (LEAP) with you. This Platform contains inventories of programmatic approaches and indicators, evidence gap maps, and data portraits - all of which can be very useful in DRG activity design, implementation, evaluation, and adaptation. Some of these resources are still being built, so check back frequently to see what has been newly added.

We also want to share our DRG Learning Harvest with you! (Link only accessible to USAID personnel.) This inventory is a searchable database of DRG learning products, including summaries of key findings and recommendations, drop-down menus to easily find documents related to a particular country or program area, and links to the full reports on the DEC.

Our friends at the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute are also seeking to expand their research partnership with USAID on the complex nature of democracy by inviting research questions from you for V-Dem to work on. If there's a DRG technical question you've been wondering about, please submit it to the Research Wishlist now! (Link only accessible to USAID personnel.)

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We welcome your feedback on this newsletter and on our efforts to promote the accessibility, dissemination, and utilization of DRG evidence and research. Please visit the [DRG Center's website](#) for additional information or contact us at ddi.drg.elmaillist@usaid.gov.