
Problems of Democratization

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Democratization is one of the central phenomena of our times. Let us bring together, with the help of an attractive image, some basic facts about it, viewing it as the process whereby democratic practices have been spreading world-wide for a considerable time now.

We set out to accomplish this task with the help of the image displayed on the next page that succinctly summarizes the information about the condition and the progress of democratization at various points in time in the past century and a half. By condition we mean to indicate the relative importance of democracies in the world picture. With progress we intend to show this to be a dynamic picture that opens out a window to the future.

The image “World Democratization” is simple but it displays this crucial information in two ways. First, it shows seventeen discrete data points (in red) that depict, at ten year intervals, the proportion of the world’s peoples that at that point in

time lived in democracies. The first of these data points refers to 1840, and indicates that in that year, some 3.9 per cent of the world population lived in democratic countries, and more specifically, in the United States, and the United Kingdom, the only two that could thus be described. By the year 2000, the last of the data points, following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, that figure had risen to 57.1 per cent, and the number of democracies, to 87.

The second feature of our table is more analytical, and traces (in blue) the best part of an S-shaped curve that not only fits our “hard” data quite accurately but also extends well into the future, to the 22nd century. We might

call this the learning curve of world democratization.

Here we have two sets of basic information; so what to make of it?

Let us highlight four of its features: democratization is a powerful process; it is world-wide, it has a long reach in time, and it might be seen as a

We are at present ‘ahead of the curve’ (on the spread of democracy); the greater urgency lies with consolidating the gains of the recent past, and solidifying the links among

learning experience. We then ask: what are the implications of these arguments?

A powerful trend

A glance at the seventeen actual data points confirms, first of all, that these are not scattered or random bits of information but rather a series or sequence pointing to the existence of a trend, and not just any trend but one that is persistent and powerful. Viewed over a time span of 160 years, the trend shows both ups and downs, and registers some setbacks (including a notable one centered on the 1930s, and World War II), but overall it moves clearly, and strongly, upward. In absolute numbers, the expansive force of democracy is simply staggering, from some 40-plus million in mid-19th century, to close to 3.5 billion people at the turn to the 21st. A trend of such power is not easily reversed, or aborted.

A world-wide trend

In our chart, democracy takes off as a transatlantic project, and for a long while, appears, in the main, as a “Western” phenomenon.

But over time, and since the mid-20th century, its spread has been to most parts of the world, and (as shown) it now engages more than half of the world’s population. It has diffused via a demonstration effect because, by and large, democracies, work better, know better how to cooperate, win wars but do not engage in mass killings, fight hunger more effectively, and, on the whole, are more productive and more prosperous. That makes democratization a likely universal process spreading by imitation.

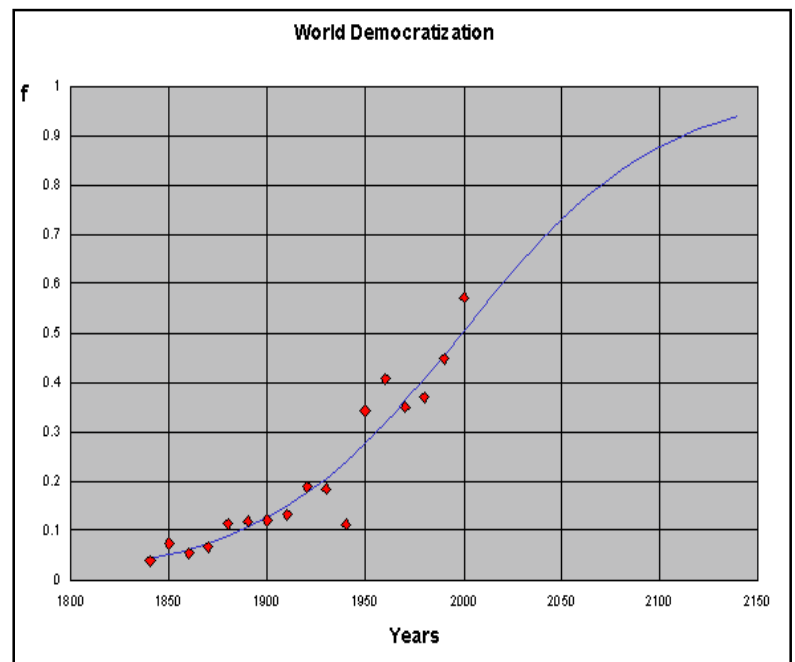
A long-term trend

Our poster “World Democratization” covers more than two centuries, making it plain that while undoubtedly powerful, this is a process whose progress is measured, deliberate, even slow, and not really to be hurried. It took over a century for democracy to move from a “market share” of under ten per cent, to a majority position (in which India plays a large role) a few years ago. We suppose that for the bulk of the world system to be ‘saturated’ with democratic practices it will take

many decades, and the path taken by China will be a key factor.

A learning process

Roughly connecting the dots in our chart is a blue line in the generic form of a learning curve. That curve marks not just the path of world-wide democracy over the past century and a half but also projects that path forward one century into the future, on the assumption that what we are observing is a learning process: humans settling into a cooperative mode; humans learning to live with each other. That strongly suggests that the trend we have chartered is not just a summary of events past but a process of some regularity that (jointly with others) is likely evolutionary.



Shows, at ten-yearly intervals, the proportion of the world population living in democracies (left scale).

Fitting the data is a classic learning curve.

Graph by T. Devezas, based on data in: “Democratization in long perspective’ revisited” by G. Modelski and G. Perry III, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 69 (2002), 359-376.

Democracy has for some time been a subject of contention between foreign policy Idealists and Realists. Idealists advocating the spreading of democracy speak sometimes in grandiose terms of principle, even morality, point to the record of successful societies and claim to represent the wave of the future. Realists warily eye the problems of the

day, discount the future and counsel prudence. Our presentation suggests that both sides score in that argument and that both are in effect right.

Implications

What are implications, for the next decade or two, of these basic facts about democratization?

First, if democratization is indeed such a powerful process then it might be expected to proceed, we might say, under its own steam or as might be

Number of nations scoring 8 or higher on the Polity IV scale 1800-2003

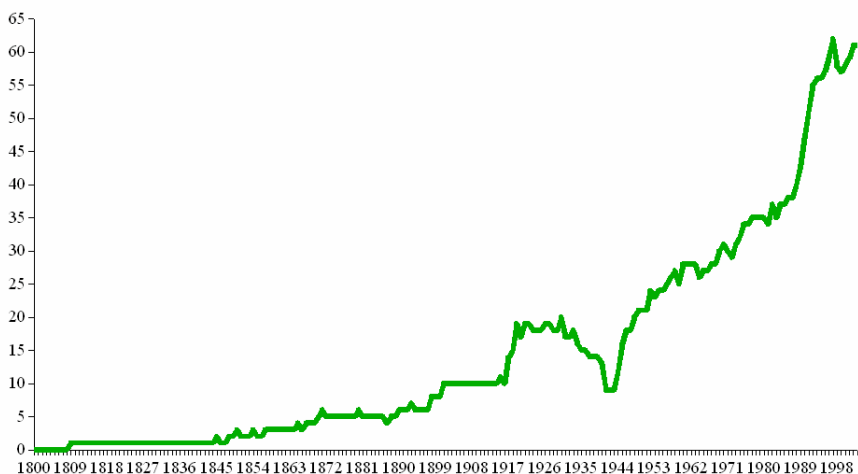


Figure: Polity Scale Measurement of Democracies, 1800-2003

This Polity IV graphic provides independent confirmation of Modelski's graphic displayed on the previous page. Polity is a widely used data series for political science research. The latest version, Polity IV, contains coded annual information on regime and authority characteristics for all independent states from 1800 to 2003.

put more technically, as a form of self-organization. That is, in the ordinary course of world events, humankind seems on track, gradually, albeit slowly, to build a growing domain of democracy, and that is why what is called for, above all else, is patience. There is no "duty to export democracy" nor is there any requirement for extraordinary measures such as costly military interventions, or risky preventive wars, to foster it. Arguably, such measures are likely to prove counter-productive rather than facilitative.

Indeed, as we look at the chart once again, we see that the point reached in the year 2000, a high point of the entire story, and following the spectacular expansion of democracy at the end of the Cold War, is well above the trend line (or the learning curve). That suggests that we may be

'ahead of schedule', and that a slowdown of the process could well lie ahead. And that suggests **caution**.

Second, and if in fact we are at present 'ahead of the curve', then the other watchword must be **consolidation**. The greater urgency lies with safeguarding and solidifying the gains of the recent past, and building up the links among existing democracies. That might take two forms: protecting the elements of the emerging global democratic community, and continuing to strengthen the institutions that have proved their value and effectiveness.

The elements of an emerging global democratic community are now in place. They include North America, the European Union, India, Japan-Korea, and Australia-New Zealand: components of what might be called an 'oceanic' grouping whose linkages are not due primarily to geographical propinquity but rather to participating in long standing networks of social, maritime and air connections. This is a prosperous and active ensemble now accounting for the majority of the world's population but its cohesion is not to be taken for granted and must be assiduously maintained in the face of rising pressure on at least two fronts: the demographic and the Islamist. Population might soon start declining both in Europe, and in Japan, reducing their weight in the democratic world. Democracy, moreover, is under challenge from the Islamists, and the Jihadists, notably so in the Middle East, but also Europe and in Central Asia.

In more narrowly political contexts, the way to consolidate the gains of the past is to cultivate, and to strengthen the institutions that have proved their worth in the past century. One example is NATO that since its inception in 1949 has been animated by strong transatlantic relationships; the organization has expanded its membership and could of course broaden its functions. Then there are the Bretton Woods institutions, and indeed the entire United Nations system that has strong potential for democratic development. In all of this, of course, the role and policies of the United States remains of key significance. □