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Why do some countries democratize whereas others do not? That is the $3.6 billion question—at least to the U.S. government, which spent that amount in 2010 with the stated aim of advancing democracy, human rights, and good governance around the world (ForeignAssistance.gov). Despite the significant and growing investment by the United States and other Western governments in democracy promotion, authoritarianism is thought to be on the rise. In its annual report on democracy in the world, Freedom House (2011) stated that global freedom “worsened for the fifth consecutive year in 2010”, which was the longest period of declines since the organization’s start in 1972 (p. 2). Thus, Jan Teorell’s new book makes a timely contribution to the literature on the causes of democratization.

Democratization is a complicated process that is not easily reduced to a single set of factors. Teorell groups existing explanations of democratization (and the related phenomenon of de-democratization) into four traditions: structural theories, which emphasize socioeconomic modernization; strategic theories, which emphasize political elites’ decisions; social forces theories, which emphasize popular mobilization; and economic theories, which use deductive logic and emphasize economic inequality (pp. 3–4). Rather than contributing an entirely new theory of democratization, Teorell directly weighs the existing theories’ explanatory power against each other. In so doing, he stands out among analysts of democratization by taking seriously both the international and domestic determinants of regime change and stability since 1972.

How do the four theories fare? The findings in this sweeping analysis of the determinants of democratization between 1972 and 2006 are too numerous to fully summarize, yet for Teorell, each tradition offers some insight but an incomplete explanation of democratization’s third wave. The key triggers of democratization include economic crisis, democratization in a neighboring country, participation in democratic regional organizations, peaceful demonstrations, and multiparty systems in autocracies. Meanwhile, Muslim populations, large geographic size, oil wealth, and large amounts of trade impede democratization. Finally, socioeconomic modernization (specifically media
proliferation) and economic freedom help sustain democracy, whereas Muslim populations may reverse it (p. 145). Ultimately, although these largely slow-moving factors do not do a very good job of predicting short-term fluctuations in countries’ democracy levels—leaving considerable room for unpredictability and individual leaders’ decisions to influence outcomes—in the long run and on average, Teorell finds that they do matter (pp. 146-147).

What should policy makers take away from the findings? Even though many of Teorell’s determinants of democratization operate over the long run, he does identify several potential areas for intervention (p. 157). Democracy assistance programs that empower civil society actors that could peacefully demonstrate against authoritarian regimes make sense, as do programs that support multiparty elections. Promoting media proliferation in transitional countries is also smart. Why should a policy maker accept those recommendations? Teorell reaches his conclusions by analyzing the correlates of changes in democracy scores (an average of the Freedom House and Polity measures) in 165 countries. His research design combines cross-national, time-series statistical analyses with nine minicases.

Beyond its lessons for democratizers, this book makes at least two major scholarly contributions. The first contribution is methodological. Although his fundamental empirical strategy is to use cross-national, time-series statistical analysis to identify the correlates of countries’ democracy levels, Teorell also uses secondary research to probe nine cases more closely. He chose those cases using an elaboration and adaptation of Seawright and Gerring’s (2008) “pathway” criterion. Pathway cases are ones in which a change in democracy level is observed and where the causal factor of interest statistically is influential in the regression results (pp. 184-185). This method of case selection will be useful for future scholars, as will be Teorell’s general combination of quantitative with qualitative research to maximize inferential leverage.

There are ways that future scholars of democratization might push the combination even further. In his chapter on the relationship between popular mobilization and democratization, for example, Teorell finds that only peaceful demonstrations—not riots or strikes—are correlated with a positive change in countries’ democracy levels. But his case studies suggest that all three forms of popular mobilization are positively correlated with regime change (pp. 114-116). Is there significant error in cross-national measures of mobilization? Might the relationship between mobilization and democratization be nonlinear? Those questions remain unanswered—which is not a flaw of the current book so much as an opportunity for additional research. The disjuncture between Teorell’s quantitative and qualitative findings on
mobilization merits more attention—perhaps by using primary sources to conduct additional, thorough case studies with clear evaluation criteria. Such case studies would feed back into cross-national data collection or refined estimation strategies in the manner suggested by Lieberman (2005).

The second contribution stems from the book’s syncretic theoretical approach. Teorell’s resulting quantitative analysis is dense and sensitive to nuance. For example, 31 countries are excluded from the analysis because of missing data, but Teorell provides a model of transparency in making this limitation and others clear to his readers. In his attention to detail, the author identifies many statistical outliers, influential observations, and sensitive specifications that ought to guide future researchers. Two such findings were particularly surprising to this reader. The first surprising finding is that in his examination of the positive relationship between socioeconomic modernization and democratic stability, Teorell finds that media proliferation drives the correlation, not education levels, industrialization, infant mortality rates, urbanization, or economic development, none of which he finds is robustly related to democratic stability in the third wave. Especially given the continued interest of pundits and policy makers in the potential democratizing impact of the Internet and other types of media, this finding merits additional scrutiny. What is it about media proliferation that drives the positive relationship that Teorell identifies? Is this relationship unique to the period from 1972 to 2006 (or some subperiod within it)? Which media are essential for the causal mechanism to work?

The second surprising finding is that Teorell finds that democracy diffuses between neighbors—not across regions or the entire world. Yet the relationship between neighborhood diffusion and democratization does not seem to be affected by a country’s membership in a democratic regional organization or a neighbor’s economic crisis, economic growth, or political mobilization. Thus, the causal mechanism of neighborhood diffusion remains unclear. Furthermore, neighborhood diffusion is by far the strongest in Africa and Teorell’s finding—while being generally robust to a multitude of model specifications—holds only when he uses his combined democracy measure or the Polity measure of democracy on its own, not when he uses the Freedom House measure (p. 81). Studies of the diffusion of liberalization have already constituted a fruitful area of research at the nexus of international and comparative politics; these puzzling findings about neighborhood diffusion and democratization suggest the need for more refined theories about the diffusion of political regimes and additional empirical tests.

Despite the exhaustive empirical analyses contained within this book, an underlying question did emerge for this reader at various points. How, if
all, is the third wave of democratization different from previous eras of democratization? Or to put it another way, which of Teorell’s findings generalize to the years prior to 1972 and after 2006? On generalizing backward, explanations such as socioeconomic modernization as a cause of democratization were first developed to explain trends in regime change prior to the third wave that is Teorell’s focus. To the extent that he challenges their assumptions (e.g., with regard to media proliferation mattering rather than education or income), it is unclear if the era that he examines is unique or if there is a more general problem with modernization theory. If data will permit, pre-1972 analysis is needed in the future.

On generalizing forward, scholars of international relations will wonder what role, if any, the end of the Cold War has to do with trends in regime change and stability. Teorell notes that the international community’s engagement with democracy changed notably after the end of the Cold War (p. 156). And at least certain interventions, such as international election monitoring, have been shown to be effective through randomized field experiments (Hyde, 2010). Adding analyses that divide the sample into the Cold War and post-Cold War eras would be a fruitful way to deepen our understanding of the causal mechanisms Teorell investigates.

The extensions that this review suggests notwithstanding, Teorell’s book already offers more than enough empirical material for scholars of democratization to mull over for some time. Students of comparative and international politics alike should read this book. Building off of its eclectic theoretical and methodological approach, they will continue to build ever more precise theories and gather new data to explain some of Teorell’s most surprising findings. Until then, this book offers important answers to the $3.6 billion question.

References


