

Terms and Ideas

- Democracy
- Inclusiveness and liberalization
- Costs of toleration vs. repression
- Legitimacy
- Parties of representation vs. integration
- Exogenous vs. endogenous democratization
- Liberal vs. electoral democracy
- Pacts

Questions

Q: What is democracy according to Dahl?

A: Dahl defines democracy as a political system that meets three criteria: citizens are able to construct their own preferences, to express these preferences either through singular or collective action, and to have the government consider them equally in its decision-making. However, because he argues that no real-world system meets these conditions in full, he introduces the concept of polyarchy to describe the closest approximation to democracy that we have. Polyarchies feature high degrees of liberalization (public contestation of government policies through an opposition) and inclusiveness (broad participation in political processes such as elections).

What are Dahl's paths to democratization?

Dahl outlines three possible paths that regimes can take to become polyarchies. In the first path, liberalization precedes inclusiveness (closed hegemony → competitive oligarchy → polyarchy). This path is the most advantageous because incumbent political elites are able to develop and internalize shared norms for competitive politics before the threat of mass mobilization is introduced. The second path sees inclusiveness precede liberalization (closed hegemony → inclusive hegemony → polyarchy). Here, the problem for democratization is that the opposition already has a mass base when the incumbent elites are forced to make the system competitive; elites are therefore more likely to perceive the opposition as an existential threat. This path is more common today because most autocratic regimes are already inclusive. The third path is a shortcut (closed hegemony → polyarchy). This path is the most unstable because neither the elites nor the masses have time to develop shared political norms, mutual trust, or organizational skills.

Q: What is the relationship between economic development and democracy?

A: Lipset argues in his modernization theory that economic development creates the social conditions for democracy; higher incomes, education, urbanization, and industrialization produce more tolerant and informed citizens with longer time horizons, as well as a legitimate political order. Przeworski and Limongi revisit this argument and distinguish between two different logics: (1) the endogenous theory, where development causes democratization, and (2) the exogenous theory, where development helps democracies survive once established. Their findings are that while democratization is not the result of economic development, once a democracy is established, its chances of survival increase with its level of wealth and rate of economic growth. Economic development thus appears to secure democracy more than create it.

Q: What role do elites play in democratization and its erosion?

A: Elites are central actors in a number of theories. For Dahl, elites in power must tolerate the opposition; democracy requires that incumbents see contestation as costing less than repression. For Teele, the expansion of the franchise (in her case, to women) results from strategic bargaining when elites find it advantageous to do so during moments of high electoral competition or political realignment. Ziblatt argues that democracy becomes a manageable risk rather than an existential threat for elites when strong conservative parties allow them to have confidence that they can win elections. Meanwhile, Varshney describes how in India, early leaders entrenched democratic values in institutions and later elites in turn developed interests in preserving them. In all of these theories, democracy depends not only on social structures but on elite bargains and actions.

Takeaways

Whereas in the past weeks we considered the strength and the role of the state, this week we changed our focus to the regime. One of the main tensions that we grappled with was between the structuralist and the voluntarist approaches: is democratization the inevitable outcome of economic development and social change, or does it emerge from the elites' strategic decisions? Our discussion concluded that wealth might not be sufficient — or, as Varshney argues, necessary — for democratization. Instead, the compromises and actions that individuals movements and leaders make might be at the heart of initial democratic transitions. However, as Przeworski and Limongi remind us, the chances for democratic survival are greater when there is sufficient economic development.

The Indian democratic experience further underscores that even after the emergence and long-term survival of democracy, the erosion of democratic principles (and liberal institutions in particular) remains a persistent threat. Next week, we will think more about democratic backsliding and the growing number of competitive authoritarian regimes around the world today.

Before then, I encourage you to further reflect on a number of questions from this week:

- To what extent is a strong state a prerequisite for democratization?
- Does democratization require violence (or the threat of violence)?
- Do democratic norms matter, or are economic interests all that count?