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## The State of the Discipline

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# *The Great Transformation in the Study of Politics in Developing Countries*

Students of developing countries in the year 2000 were like geographers in 1520: the known world had begun changing about 25 years earlier, and we were still trying to figure it out. Just when most eyes were focused on explaining the rise of authoritarianism in developing countries, democratization began its current sweep through much of the world. More human beings currently live under democratic governance than at any previous time in recorded history. In a second equally unexpected development, many governments began to abandon state interventionist economic policies in favor of greater market orientation. On top of everything else, the Soviet empire collapsed and, with it, the only coherent competitor to capitalist economic organization. Though scholars greeted most of these changes with delight, few predicted them (cf. Fleron and Hoffman 1993; Remmer 1995; Kalyvas 1999).[1]

These real world events have led to a wholesale reevaluation of the theoretical underpinnings of the study of comparative development. This reevaluation has affected what we consider worthy of study, the set of stylized facts we accept as more or less true, our basic understanding of the economics of development, the theoretical approaches we use to explain politics, and the research methods we favor. The study of developing countries has changed almost as much during the last 25 years as the world we study.

In this essay I have three goals: to describe the political and economic transitions that have taken place, to note the effects these changes have had on theories and methods used in the study of developing countries, and to review some of the most important recent research on politics and political economy in developing countries. I shall not try to provide a comprehensive review of new work but instead to highlight interesting examples of what I consider some of the most promising directions for new research.

1. A number of scholars analyzed the fragilities and contradictions within one or another kind of authoritarianism. See, for example, O'Donnell 1978, 1979 for analyses of the potentially destabilizing tensions between alliance partners within bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes. See Kalyvas 1999 for a summary of the many descriptions of the weaknesses and dysfunctional aspects of communist regimes. No one to my knowledge, however, expected or predicted the sweep of democratization and economic reform across much of the developing world that we have witnessed.



## ■ | Then and Now: Transitions

At the beginning of 1974, identified by Huntington (1991) as the start of the "third wave" of democratization, dictatorships of one kind or another governed 82 countries.[2] Only 19 dictatorships still survived at the end of 2000. During these years, 95 authoritarian regimes disintegrated (some countries endured more than one dictatorship during the period). These transitions have resulted in 54 surviving democracies, some quite flawed but many stable and broadly competitive; 13 democracies that lasted only a short time before being overthrown in their turn; and 45 new authoritarian regimes, 17 of which lasted into the new millennium.

When authoritarian governments ruled most developing countries, few political scientists interested in these countries paid much attention to the development of theories of democratic politics. Most focused instead on other questions and debated different theoretical arguments. Although some scholars attempted to extend corporatist or pluralist concepts to authoritarian settings, most focused their attention on explaining the transition to authoritarianism, the relationships between authoritarian governments and elite economic interests, and the link between international economic forces and third world authoritarianism.[3] Those interested in developing countries thus paid little attention to the new theories being developed for the study of democratic politics in the United States and Western Europe. The behavioralist "revolution" bypassed most of those working on developing and Communist countries for the simple reason that the primary forms of evidence used by behavioralists, survey and voting data, simply did not exist. Few in the field saw the relevance of rational-choice theorization of party and legislative politics in settings in which

2. Figures here and elsewhere are drawn from a data set collected by the author that includes all authoritarian regimes except monarchies lasting three years or more, in existence at any time since 1946, in countries with a million or more inhabitants. See Geddes 1999b for more details about the data set.

3. See Stepan 1978, Schmitter 1973, and various essays in Malloy 1977, for efforts to use the corporatist framework to illuminate the relationship between authoritarian governments and major interest groups, especially labor. See especially Skilling 1966, Skilling and Griffiths 1971, and Hough 1974 for the extension and adaptation of interest group theories to explain intragovernment conflict over policy choice in the Soviet Union.

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