

Journal Article Review

Democratic Stability: A Long View

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In the last century democracy went from being an odd form of government structure to the most common. We have seen various forms of democracy rise, seen many of them survive and some of them collapse. Hence, most of the democratic studies concentrate on this time period. As now even the most stable democracies of the West face instability in current times, Federica Carugati casts his eye back on the earliest known democracy, the ancient city of Athens, to explore the question of ‘can we secure democracy beyond liberalism?’.

Federica Carugati starts off by summarizing the findings on democratic stability in the modern world. To no one’s surprise the literature concludes that stable democracies are similar to liberal democracies which are linked to economic growth and strong state institutions that ensure a robust rule of law, free and fair elections, and protection of individual rights. This raises the question of if democracy stability can only exist in liberal democracies. So for comparison’s sake, Federica Carugati takes a look at the existing literature on political transitions that took place in the 15th and 16th century. Studies on these nascent and limited democracies and other local and national representative institutions help to answer questions about the existence of democratic values outside of liberal democracies today. By expanding the definition of democracy from its modern meanings, Federica Carugati distills several important points from the literature. First, the causal link between political development, state capacity and economic growth is confirmed, but post industrial levels of growth are not necessary for stability. And second, institutions enforcing credibility and transparency are fundamental to stability regardless of whether it’s a liberal democracy or not. Here, Federica Carugati notes that these pre-modern studies lack a theory change, paying greater attention to emergence of non authoritarian governments than to factors that stabilize them. Looking for answers, Federica Carugati journeys back to a primeval democracy, the Athenian democracy.

The rise, fall, restoration and recovery of Athenian democracy makes for an interesting read. The collapse of the first Athenian democracy, rise of an oligarchy, the resulting wars and civil wars paved the way for democratic principles still in practice today. A complex system of checks and balances, imposition of limits on unrestrained decision making, and perhaps the first designs of legislative institutions and law making are all direct consequences of the collapse of first Athenian democracy. At the end of the political history of Athens, Federica Carugati observes

that the democracy of Athens stabilized due to establishment of institutions that fairly resolved disputes and gave incentives for citizens' good behaviour while punishing violators. The author concludes that the case of Athens highlights the importance of the alignment between shared norms and appropriately designed institutions for stability. He also concludes that a society of differing views can reach a consensus even in disagreement to the full package of liberal values and institutions.

Overall, I think, the article is cohesive and well written in nature. Federica Carugati strives to answer one question in the whole article that, 'can we secure democracy beyond liberalism?', and he does it by looking at modern, premodern and ancient democracies. The conclusions from each period provide a consensus that institutional design is an important aspect of any democracy. I think it's a significant conclusion because it reminds me of a statement made by a consultant called in by a drill company. In his concluding remarks, the consultant gives a reminder to the company, "Gentlemen you are in the business of making holes and not in the business of making drills." What this statement neatly underscores is that there can be alternative solutions to the same problem. Similarly, I find Federica Carugati conclusions about institutional design significant in answering his question.

While I find Federica Carugati's conclusions interesting and perhaps significant, the real test of the presented conclusions from ancient democracies would be if similar conclusions can be reached by studying non authoritarian governments in modern times. Do loopholes in current institutional design also answer questions of democratic backsliding among western democracies? Is it the inefficiencies of institutional design hamper the stability of newly made democracies? Can lack of proper institutional design account for recurring problems in a democracy?

One more way to strengthen Federica Carugati's conclusions would be to back it up with empirical evidence. Correlation between democratic stability and strong institutions in modern, premodern and (if possible) ancient times. Also taking other non authoritarian governments would help in strengthening Federica Carugati's answer to his question.

In conclusion, Federica Carugati's article 'Democratic Stability: A Long View' lives upto its name, is pleasing to read and succeeds in answering the question it set out to explore. The qualitative nature of conclusions could perhaps use some quantitative backing and bringing about the answers gained from looking at the case of ancient Athens to apply them in modern cases to check their validity.

The End
