

## **Do all good things go together? Exploring the political, economic and social consequences of democratisation \***

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**ABSTRACT** – The latter part of the twentieth century was a period of rapid democratisation on a global scale. From the moment democratic reforms were undertaken, the attention of political science scholars mostly focused on three main lines of research: the causes of the political changes taking place, the modes of regime transitions, and the characteristics of the new political systems. A set of issues that largely remained under-researched concerns the broader implications of political reforms. Does democracy come at a cost – be it an increase in violent conflict, slower economic growth, higher inequality or anything else – or, on the contrary, are there broader, virtuous transformations triggered by democratisation processes? While the literature on democratisation does include a few hypotheses concerning the effects of democratic transitions on, say, the consolidation of state institutions, the achievement of domestic peace or the adoption of neo-liberal economic reforms, there is – with a few notable exceptions – a relative lack of theoretical elaboration and empirical research. Even more striking is the absence of any recognition that these issues share a common thread and are essentially part of the same approach to the study of democratisation. This paper examines some of the theoretical and empirical questions that lay behind the choice of taking democracy not as an endpoint, but as a starting point. The political, social and economic consequences that emerged in countries in which actual democratic change took place constitute not only a promising field of inquiry, but a crucial one for understanding the future prospects of democracy.

Over recent decades, a growing number of countries has embraced democratic institutions as a result of both domestic and external pressures. A so-called “spirit of democracy” has come to pervade the international community. Today, there is no need to espouse the notion of an “end of history” to appreciate that no other form of state is anywhere near the kind of international legitimacy that democracy enjoys, except maybe for the Islamist state in some areas of the world. Democracy, it would appear, has been gradually defeating its rivals.

It is precisely because of its widespread legitimacy and rapid expansion, however, that the question of what democracy is for will become ever more pressing in the coming future. A few years down the road, people living in recently-reformed states are likely to begin asking questions about what their new regimes have been able to deliver. Most will probably acknowledge and dearly prize the rights and freedoms that constitute the foundations of democratic life. In some places, at some times, however, others will want to look at a broader balance sheet. They will want to know whether democracy has been costing them more war, social inequality or economic stagnation, for example. They will possibly raise questions about the wisdom of adopting democratic arrangements in the face of adverse outcomes. By that time, the legitimacy that democracy currently enjoys at the global level may be eroding, and the very future of democracy may appear more shaky. But does democracy actually come at a cost? And what is, if any, the price that must be paid?

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This paper is a work in progress and sums up initial thoughts about what is hereafter termed the “consequences-of-democratisation” (COD) approach to the study of democratic change. The paper contends that:

- a) the strong normative arguments for democracy, as well as the latter’s vast empirical expansion, generated a series of myths (partly counterweighted by opposite, doomsday predictions) about democracy’s purported effects
- b) a variety of expected effects of democratisation – political, economic and social effects – have been investigated by dispersed, relatively unrelated theoretical and empirical works
- c) despite this fragmentation, such works are not only interrelated, but they constitute an unconventional, unacknowledged, essentially unified approach to the study of democratisation
- d) a focus on the “consequences of democracy” is crucial to understanding the future prospects of recent democratisation processes and of democracy at large

### **A different approach to the study of democratic change**

The latter part of the twentieth century was a period of rapid democratisation on a global scale (Huntington 1991, Diamond 1999, Grassi 2008). From transitions in Southern Europe to renewed democratisation in Latin America, from regime changes among Asian countries to the radical reforms in Eastern Europe, to the democratic experiments initiated by many African states. By the end of the millennium, several countries had introduced reforms for the adoption of formally democratic institutions. Not surprisingly, in a large number of cases such changes were façade operations that did not substantially alter existing authoritarian and neopatrimonial practices; quite often, evidence of democratic regression and of return to plain authoritarianism soon emerged (O’Donnell 1994, 1996, Collier – Levitski 1997, Zakaria 1997, 2003, van de Walle 2001, Schedler 2006). In a significant number of countries, however, actual political change took place and democratisation did eventually make substantial progress.

From the moment democratic reform processes were initiated, the attention of scholars with an interest in them mostly focused on three main lines of research, namely: the causes of the political changes taking place (the role of economic and political variables, domestic and international factors, structural or contingent causes, etc., e.g. Di Palma 1990, Huntington 1991, Rueschemeyer et al. 1992, Whitehead 1996, Doorenspleet 2005), the modes of regime transitions (the actors involved, the sequences of reforms, the degree of violence involved, the completion or interruption of processes of renewal, etc., e.g. O’Donnell – Schmitter – Whitehead 1986, Linz – Stepan 1996a, Haggard – Kaufman 1997, Bratton – van de Walle 1997), and the characteristics of the new political dispensations (the kind of institutions adopted, the way they operate, the consolidation of the new multiparty regimes, the survival of authoritarian and neopatrimonial practices, the “quality” of democracy, etc., e.g. O’Donnell 1994, 1996, Bell 1995, Diamond et al. 1997, Huntington 1997, Diamond 1999, Morlino 2003, Diamond – Morlino 2005, Schedler 2006).

A subject that has remained relatively under-researched, when not entirely unexplored at an empirical level, are the broader implications of democratic reforms. Little investigation has been conducted into the political, social and economic consequences that emerged in countries where real democratic change took place.

Democracy and democratisation have been historically and theoretically justified by referring to a multiplicity of values, including very broad ideals such as liberty or equality, but also more specific notions such as the expression of the common will, the moral development of the individual, the respect of diversity or the efficiency of decisions. Indeed, “almost all normatively desirable aspects of political life, and sometimes even of social and economic life, are credited as definitional features of democracy: representation, accountability, equality, participation, dignity, rationality, security, freedom – the list goes on” (Przeworski et al. 2000:14; cf. Held 1997, Dahl 1971, 1989, Sartori 1987:184). In this sense, these values, or “desirable aspects of life”, are somehow meant to be *directly* embodied by the introduction and the working of a democratic political system.

Yet, the very strength of normative arguments for democracy – whatever the ideals and principles such arguments draw upon – as well as the vast empirical expansion of democratic governance over the last few decades, produced a series of broader myths about democracy’s purported effects. In other words, besides what democracy may embody – be it political equality, individual freedom or something else – a democratic political system is often expected to *generate* a number of additional “good things” that are not exactly part of a democratic process, but rather a by-product of the latter. Democratisation may be expected to affect, for example, the consolidation of state institutions (Carothers 2007, Schmitter 2005, Bratton 2005), the

establishment of rational-legal administrative structures (Treisman 2000, Moreno 2002, Plumper – Martin 2003, Bohara et al. 2004, Sung 2004, Khan 2005, Shen – Williamson 2005, Blake – Martin 2006), the protection or achievement of domestic and international peace (Snyder 2000, Hegre et al. 2001, Mousseau 2001, Elbadawi – Sambanis 2002; Maoz – Russett 1993, Doyle 1983a/b, Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999, Rosato 2003), the economic performance and development of a country (Sirowy – Inkeles 1990, Barro 1996, Przeworski et al. 2000, Tavares – Wacziarg 2001, Plumper – Martin 2003, Rodrik – Wacziarg 2005), the introduction and implementation of economic reforms (Biglaiser – Danis 2002, Lundstrfm 2005, Kono 2006, Henisz – Mansfield 2006, Eichengreen – Leblang 2007), the adoption of redistributive and welfare policies (Bollen – Jackman 1985, Muller 1988, Sen 1994, Burkhart 1997, Rodrik 1999, Harmsa – Zinka 2003, Chong 2004, Gradstein – Milanovic 2004, Nelson 2007)<sup>1</sup>. After all, the reasoning goes, if everyone is going to have a say on the way a country is governed, why shouldn't such self-evident public goods as peace or economic well-being be the obvious outcomes?

As Plattner (2005:77) points out, the attention of comparative politics scholars followed the progression of Third Wave democracies. Thus, over recent years, scholars shifted from the study of the causes of and the transitions to democracy to the problems of democratic consolidation, and then to more recent issues relating to the “quality of democracy” (see Figure 1). A further step may now be added to such research path. The consequences-of-democratisation (COD) approach differs from studies assessing the quality of existing democracies. In the latter analyses, “quality” refers to the development of dimensions that are supposed to be an *integral part* of a comprehensive notion of democracy, such as the eight such dimensions listed by Diamond and Morlino (2005): freedom, equality, rule of law, participation, competition, vertical accountability, horizontal accountability and responsiveness<sup>2</sup>. In the COD approach, by contrast, the focus is on benefits that any form of government – not just democratic governments – may in theory provide, and “the extent to which a democracy can deliver these benefits is not necessarily related to how democratic it is” (Plattner 2005:79). Democratisation is thus not observed as a dependent variable – i.e. something to be explained, as in democratisation studies focusing on the causes or on the modes of regime transitions – but as an independent variable that allegedly explains, or contributes to the explanation of, a wide range of political, economic and social effects. Democracy is not here seen as an endpoint, but as a starting point.

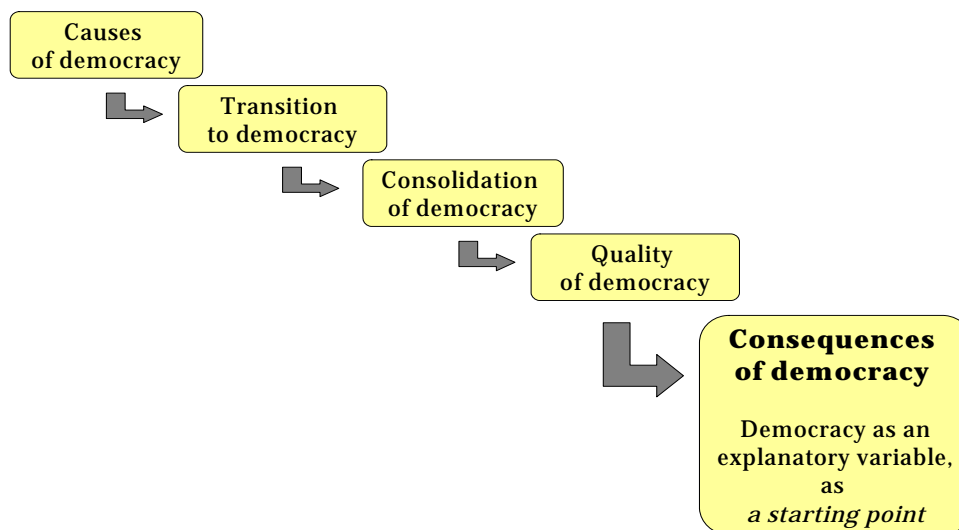


Figure 1. *Steps in the study of democratisation*

<sup>1</sup> Some of the works referred to in this paragraph provide evidence of a “negative” impact of democracy on the phenomena they investigate. See below.

<sup>2</sup> Diamond and Morlino consider “a quality democracy ... one that provides its citizens a high degree of freedom, political equality, and popular control over public policies and policy makers through the legitimate and lawful functioning of stable institutions” (2005:xi).

The supposed “effects” of democratisation point at certain upshots or spin-offs that are not strictly part of contemporary definitions of what democracy is, and yet belong to a set of expectations that both scholars and laymen alike hold with regard to what the introduction of democratic politics entails. Popular expectations about what democracy can achieve typically run exceptionally high during transition processes: “newly democratizing countries ... are burdened with a surfeit of expectations ... citizens have been told to expect great achievements from self-government, and they generally expect these goods to materialize in a hurry. It is the fashion of political leaders during the long and dangerous struggle for democracy to overpromise...” (Gerring et al. 2005:334; cf. Lipset 1959:89). On the scientific side, the theoretical literature on contemporary democratisation processes includes a number of hypotheses concerning the political, social and economic effects that the advent of democracy purportedly generates. On balance, the effects induced by democratic change are mostly considered to be positive. The introduction of democracy is thus portrayed not only as an end in itself – i.e. the direct embodiment and realisation of fundamental values – but also as an instrument, a mechanism that can facilitate the indirect achievement of other goals. Democratic change supposedly stimulates and brings about further virtuous transformations.

Expectations and speculations about the effects of democratic reforms include a good dose of myth-making. Separating myth from reality requires acknowledging that, besides or in the stead of the benign effects that may result from the introduction of democratic competition and participation, negative or perverse effects may also be caused by any democratisation process: there may be costs, or downsides, attached to efforts at reforming a country’s political sphere in a democratic direction. It cannot be ruled out, for example, that democracy may lead to rising poverty levels or to wider inequality gaps. As a matter of fact, propositions about the harmful consequences of democratisation in developing countries are far from lacking in the literature. Most notably, the concern that election-induced violent conflicts may prevail in divided societies, as well as the prospect that participatory politics may bring about poor economic performances and gradual decline, have both been strongly voiced and theoretically argued for.

The question of the corollaries of democratisation is not only relevant to academic debates, but it also has crucial policy implications. Some key tenets of the foreign policies of many Western countries are based on the notion that, for example, “good governance” (a concept that significantly overlaps with multiparty democracy) spurs development, or on the idea that exporting democracy promotes the preservation of peace among nations as well as within nations. These notions, however, raise a number of dilemmas, for, as pointed out, the effects of democracy may be more perverse than may at first appear.

The “good governance” agenda that, from the early 1990s, shaped the debate on, and partly the practice of, international development, is based on the expectation that reforming the political sphere of least developed countries may produce a series of beneficial consequences for broader developmental processes. This view turns upside down the orthodox standpoint of modernisation theories, according to which political development and democratisation derive from the socio-economic and cultural transformations that characterise the transition from pre-modern to modern societies (e.g. Lipset 1959, 1993, Deutsch 1961, Cutright 1963). Under the “good governance” perspective, it is the transformation of politics, through the introduction of democracy, that brings about a series of social, economic and cultural changes, and not the other way round (cf. Leftwich 1993). Are we therefore to demand the quick and uncompromising introduction of democracy in least developed countries, or are we to take into consideration that, without the prior achievement of a basic level of development and the availability of a minimum of economic resources, democratic reforms will be virtually impossible to implement?

The link between the expansion of democracy and the achievement of peace is also problematic. As Snyder observes, for example, “the centerpiece of American foreign policy in the 1990s was the claim that promoting the spread of democracy ... would be an antidote to international war and civil strife. Yet, paradoxically, the 1990s turned out to be a decade of both democratization and chronic nationalist conflict” (Snyder 2000:15; cf. Talbott 1996). Was there a connection between the latter two phenomena? If so, are we willing to change policy and stop asking for democratic reforms in authoritarian countries so to avoid further conflicts, or are we going to pay the price of increased violence for the sake of establishing a morally just political regime?

It is only through a comprehensive understanding of what follows democratisation that we can answer the question of whether democracy comes at a cost or, on the contrary, whether there are broader virtuous transformations that are actually kicked off by processes of democratic change. Such an answer, as pointed out, represents a critical step for appreciating the prospects for the legitimization of emerging democracies and thus for the future of democracy itself.

## Mapping the consequences of democratisation

While a certain amount of research on the effects of democratic reforms has been published, such research looks quite limited compared to that produced by scholars who take democracy as an endpoint, or a dependent variable. A large part of the work on the correlates of democracy focuses on conflicts and economic performance, while many other purported effects of democratisation are only hinted at as vague expectations, without being empirically and theoretically explored in any substantial way. Social scientists, for example, “know surprisingly little about what types of governments tend to improve the welfare of the poor” (Ross 2006:871; cf. Varshney 2000:720). Studies on the impacts of democratic change also suffer from being quite scattered and fragmented, so that even for subjects such as the relationship between democracy and growth, the considerable literature that now exists is “rather dispersed” (Brunetti 1997:163). This is compounded by the relative compartmentalisation of these works, with little mutual recognition among those scholars with an interest in the different phenomena supposedly linked to democracy, nor much cumulative efforts on what are common, underlying issues. The very existence of the unifying thread that binds together this heterogeneous, but strongly interrelated, set of hypotheses is hardly acknowledged.

Yet, the study of the consequences of democratisation constitutes both a subfield of study and a specific approach within the broader field of democratisation studies. First, it makes up a subfield insofar as it is identified by a common subject, that is, democracy and democratisation. What is distinctive here is that the latter are investigated as an *explanans*, rather than an *explanandum* as in most of the democracy literature. Because this subfield focuses on what happens from the moment democracy is established on, and because it assumes that democratic politics and its outcomes are being observed, it borders with and shares ground with the study of advanced democracies. All the same, it remains firmly rooted within the study of democratisation, rather than democracy at large, because the defining point is the advent of democratic regimes and the effects of “new” democracies. Secondly, the COD constitutes a specific approach, essentially shaped by a neo-institutional paradigm, insofar as contributing scholars share the notion that (democratic) institutions play a key role in accounting for the various phenomena they are investigating.

To better account for the existence of such a subfield, a first, necessary task is a mapping exercise. The purpose of the exercise is to pin down the supposed consequences we have been referring to and to examine the underlying unity of the existing body of work – including common issues and dilemmas – as well as the specific differences within it. (A further, basic task, which is not pursued in this paper, is to learn, for each individual hypothesis, what specific theoretical frameworks have been produced and to what extent empirical research has made progress).

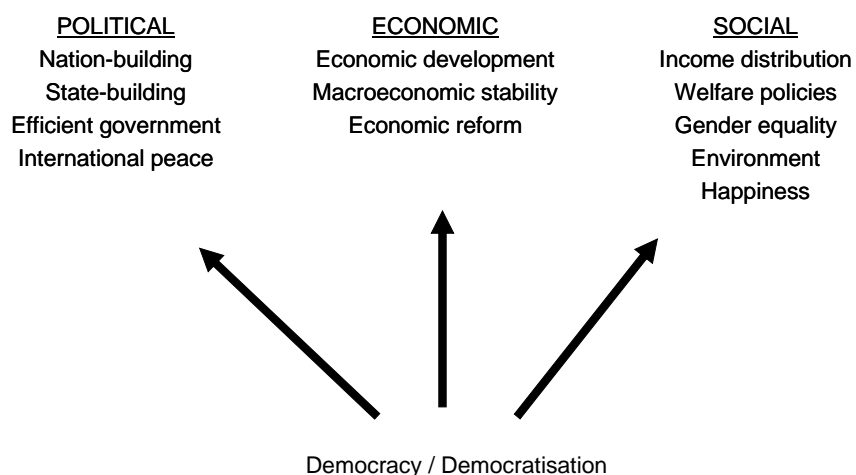


Figure 2. *Spheres of impact of democratisation*

As already mentioned, the many hypotheses on the consequences of democratisation that scholars have floated in the literature, particularly in the fields of political science and economics, differ greatly as to the degree to which they are laid out in a clear and explicit manner. Some are actually put across in vague or implicit forms<sup>3</sup>, while others are stated in precise and formalized ways. To start mapping these hypotheses, the phenomena on which democracy allegedly has an impact can be grouped, at a most general level, into three spheres – namely, social, political and economic (Figure 2). The main *political* consequences of democracy, for example, touch upon nation-building and state-building processes, the efficiency of government, or international peace. *Economically*, democratisation is said to affect the pace of development, macroeconomic policy and the adoption of neo-liberal reforms. As for its broader *social* implications, the influence of democracy supposedly shapes the distribution of wealth, the adoption of welfare policies, the degree of gender equality, the protection of the environment, or even the general happiness of the people. But the alleged consequences of democratic change are much broader than Figure 2 suggests. Table 1 identifies a (non-exhaustive) collection of over fifty different COD hypotheses. The latter are clustered around major headings, such as “democracy promotes social welfare”. Each of these thus comprises a range of topics (e.g. inequality, social spending, health, education, human development, etc.), sometimes with significant internal variation, that are articulated as sub-hypotheses (“democracy reduces inequality”, “democracy increases social spending”, etc.). An important caveat is required here. All the hypotheses listed in Table 1 are presented as statements that imply essentially “positive” expectations about what democracy may produce. This not only reflects the prevalence of this perspective – or bias – in the works under consideration, but it is also a deliberate choice aimed at producing a more straightforward and consistent framework. The fact remains, nonetheless, that a number of these hypotheses will likely prove wrong either because they are empirically unfounded or, most importantly, because the opposite of what the statement implies is actually true: democracy, for example, may turn out to increase domestic war and worsen economic performance.

<b>Main hypotheses</b>	<b>Sub-hypotheses</b>
Democracy enhances nation-building	Democracy makes state authority more legitimate Democracy weakens communal identities Democracy advances citizenship rights Democracy strengthens a shared national identity
Democracy strengthens the state	Democracy lessens the authority of non-state centres of power Democracy makes state authority more legitimate Democracy reduces <i>coups d'état</i> Democracy increases international legitimacy Democracy strengthens administrative structures Democracy increases the material resources of the state Democracy improves the rule of law Democracy reduces arbitrary rule Democracy reduces corruption and clientelism Democracy improves public service provision
Democracy promotes domestic peace and order	Democracy reduces armed conflicts Democracy reduces <i>coups d'état</i> Democracy reduces non-state armed centres of power (warlordism) Democracy reduces communal conflicts Democracy reduces political violence Democracy reduces probability of mass murder and genocide
Democracy promotes international peace	Democracy strengthens national security Democracy favours a peaceful settlement of international disputes Democracy favours peaceful settlements with other democracies Democracy favours victory in war Democracy lowers the human costs of war

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Gymah-Boadi's (2004) impressionistic discussion of the effects of Africa's democratic reforms on what he calls “quality of governance”, a notion that the author does not define properly, but includes aspects such as state- and nation-building, citizenship, civil-military relationships and policies to fight the Hiv/Aids epidemic.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Democracy reduces military spending</li> <li>Democracy promotes participation in international peacekeeping</li> <li>Democracy reduces terrorism</li> </ul>
Democracy favours economic development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Democracy raises growth rates</li> <li>Democracy stabilises growth rates</li> <li>Democracy stabilises economic policy</li> <li>Democracy improves the protection of property rights</li> <li>Democracy lowers fiscal deficits</li> <li>Democracy lowers inflation</li> <li>Democracy favours foreign investments</li> <li>Democracy makes development aid effective</li> </ul>
Democracy facilitates economic reforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Democracy promotes privatisations</li> <li>Democracy promotes economic liberalisation</li> <li>Democracy reduces taxation</li> <li>Democracy promotes trade openness</li> <li>Democracy promotes financial openness</li> </ul>
Democracy increases social welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Democracy lowers inequality</li> <li>Democracy lowers poverty levels</li> <li>Democracy raises wages</li> <li>Democracy raises social spending</li> <li>Democracy facilitates social reform</li> <li>Democracy facilitates land reform</li> <li>Democracy improves human development</li> <li>Democracy improves education</li> <li>Democracy improves health</li> <li>Democracy prevents famines</li> </ul>
Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Democracy improves the respect of human rights</li> <li>Democracy promotes gender equality</li> <li>Democracy favours the protection of the environment</li> <li>Democracy improves trust and social capital</li> <li>Democracy makes people happier</li> </ul>

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Table 1. *The purported effects of democracy: main hypotheses in the literature.*

Works on the consequences of the advent of democracy include the contributions of political scientists, international relations researchers, economists, sociologists, psychologists and scholars from other disciplines. Not surprisingly, the very way scholars belonging to the same discipline approach these issues also varies significantly. For these and other reasons, COD studies display evident and important differences in terms of the concepts, the operationalisation, the theories, the models and the data employed<sup>4</sup>. Such differences include the choice between quantitative and qualitative methods, the scope of the democracy-dependent phenomena under investigation, the level at which the supposed consequence of democracy is observed, and the breadth, in terms of time and space, of the inquiries that are carried out. Methodologically, for example, research on the COD has mostly been conducted through quantitative approaches. By contrast, qualitative comparative research and case studies, which are frequently used in the study of democratic transitions and consolidation, are quite rare. Quantitative works, on the other hand, differ as to whether research centres on big issues or macro-phenomena – examining, for example, the implications of democratic reforms for state-building, economic development, civil strife, the environment, quality of life or happiness – or, rather, it has a more narrow focus, investigating the influence of democracy on matters such as wages in the manufacturing sector, support for UN peacekeeping, military effectiveness, privatisation

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<sup>4</sup> Overviews of some such differences are presented by Sirowy and Inkeles (1990:127) with regard to analyses addressing the democracy-development connection, by Gradstein and Milanovic (2004:524ff.) for the democracy-inequality nexus, or by Eichengreen and Leblang (2007) for the democracy-globalisation linkage.

reforms, suicide terrorism, etc<sup>5</sup>. A further variation exists between research that considers how democratic politics may bring about the adoption of certain particular public policies (including neo-liberal economic reforms, social services, environmental commitments, for example) and other works that investigate broader social, economic or political outcomes that are not necessarily the result of specific policies (economic growth, international peace, domestic conflict, happiness, etc.). Distinctions also concern the temporal and spatial extension of existing theoretical and empirical investigations. Both the scope of the hypothesised relationships and the sample of the cases that are investigated are often limited either to a specific historical period (say, the 1950s and 1960s, as opposed to the 1980s and 1990s) or to certain geographical or geo-cultural areas (be it Latin America, Africa or “the West”, for example).

### **Towards a common theoretical framework**

In spite of the many dimensions of “internal” differentiation, are the individual hypotheses on the correlates of democratisation based on a common underlying framework? A number of fundamental elements that COD studies share can indeed be identified. For a start, as already pointed out, they all have in common a focus on democracy as an explanatory variable as well as an underlying neo-institutional argument hinting that, regardless of the relevance that individual authors may assign to sociological, rational, psychological or other factors, democratic reforms may have important implications that go beyond the change of regime itself. The latter contention largely revolves around a few basic assumptions, including the following: a) leaders in government want to stay in power; b) democratisation expands the share of the population with the power to sanction those in government; c) democratisation offers mechanisms to hold government leaders accountable, including free speech, free press and elections; d) democratisation offers one or more government-in-waiting as electoral alternatives competing with ruling leaders; e) elected leaders are (or are perceived to be) more responsive than unelected leaders as they adopt (or pretend to adopt) policies that are more in line with popular preferences. It is out of these suppositions that many scholars expect democracy to produce, more or less directly, positive consequences. But the perverse effects of democratisation that other scholars prefer to emphasise are also related to the aforementioned assumptions: either the latter lead them to predict negative consequences (e.g. popular participation may imply that leaders adopt measures unfavourable to economic growth) or else these assumptions are criticised and openly challenged (e.g. voters may not actually be capable of sanctioning elected leaders, and thus expectations that democracy will promote positive policy outcomes are misplaced).

All COD studies also share an obvious concern with what is meant by democracy and democratisation, a fundamental issue for democratisation studies at large. Democratic reforms certainly cannot be taken at face value. Before looking into the correlates of democratisation, any empirical inquiry needs to cast doubts on the belief that the democratic changes that several states formally introduced over the last few decades were really significant and relevant: for any specific country, the extent of the democratic renewal that reforms actually brought about needs investigating. This, in turn, requires thinking through the classic issue of how democracy is conceptualised and measured.

Some of the scholars contributing to the various strands of the COD subfield do squarely address the question of how to define democracy. The vast majority of authors, however, deals with it as a non-central issue and quickly settles for adopting one or the other of the best known operational definitions and measurements of democracy, from the Bollen index of political democracy to the well-known measures devised by the Polity project or by the Freedom House. Notable exceptions include Przeworski et al. (2000), who compiled a whole new dataset based on their own criteria for determining a country’s regime type. But most COD scholars are more concerned with issues relating to methodological techniques or, at times, with definitional and measurement issues relating to the dependent variable they are working on (e.g. state- or nation-building, welfare policies and outcomes, etc.). To put it the way Munck and Verkuilen (2002:5-6) do, “quantitative researchers have paid sparse attention to the quality of the data on democracy that they analyze

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<sup>5</sup> The distinction between research with a narrow focus and research with a focus on macro-phenomena may appear somewhat misleading, as any research that addresses major issues (say, the repercussions of democracy on health or education) eventually needs to pin this down to empirical indicators (such as rates of infant mortality or primary-education enrolment). But the point is that some works directly focus on relatively narrow issues, while other research only uses specific indicators in an instrumental manner, to account for the broader phenomena that are its primary concern.



... problems of causal inference have overshadowed the equally important problems of conceptualization and measurement [of democracy]”.

Nevertheless, the debates on the concept of democracy within the COD literature raise three specific and important questions. The first one concerns the definition of democracy itself, and in particular the breadth of the notion of democracy that should be adopted. The point relates to the crucially important need to separate what democracy *is* from what democracy *generates*. The question, therefore, is whether the latter should include such items as stateness, political order, rule of law, basic resources, human rights, gender parity or egalitarianism as constitutive parts, or, if not, what the relationship between the latter and democracy is meant to be. The abovementioned elements are often found as “borderline features” on the margins of notions of democracy. But are they pre-requisites, constitutive parts or possible consequences of democracy? Arguing in favour of a parsimonious definition of democracy, Huntington points out that:

“elections, open, free and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable *sine qua non*. Governments produced by elections may be inefficient, corrupt, shortsighted, irresponsible, dominated by special interests, and incapable of adopting policies demanded by the public good. These qualities make such governments undesirable but they do not make them undemocratic. Democracy is one public virtue, not the only one, and the relation of democracy to other public virtues and vices can only be understood if democracy is clearly distinguished from the other characteristics of political systems” (Huntington 1991:10).

In this vein, therefore, investigations into the consequences of democratic change require that the independent variable be demarcated in a particularly economical way. A procedural, Schumpeterian notion of democracy as institutionalised political competition with free and fair elections and universal franchise should ideally be adopted. Many scholars are led by this view when they use standard measurements such as those provided by the Polity project or by the “political rights” component of the Freedom House index (as opposed to the expanded notion of democracy that underlies the FH’s overall regime classification), albeit the latter are often used in problematic ways (cf. Doorenspleet 2005:13-36 and Bogaards 2007).

The focus of COD is not on democracy per se, but on democratisation and its effects, that is, on what the *introduction* of democracy supposedly generates, on what happens the moment a given country moves beyond the threshold of minimal democracy. Of course, a transition process may simply be the beginning of a country’s democratisation, as the latter proceeds with further consolidation and deepening of an increasingly democratic and liberal regime. But states can also remain stuck in and stabilise a minimally-democratic system, and even easily slide back towards authoritarianism.

This leads to the second issue, which has to do with “the magnitude of the regime change” (Mansfield – Snyder 1995:17). A certain phenomenon – say, for example, the lowering of the level of poverty – may be explained not just by the fact that a given country introduced democratic institutions, but also, as an additional explanatory variable, by the extent of the political changes that the democratisation process implied. The changes undergone by country X, which moved from a form of light authoritarianism to a system of low-quality electoral democracy, may plausibly be much less crucial than those experienced by country Y, which moved from a tough authoritarian regime to a well-functioning democratic system and thus walked a much longer stretch of the democratic ladder. Where political change is more fundamental, the stimulus and the push for some kind of side-effects to make their appearance, if any, are likely to be stronger. The third problem also relates to the need to observe what *follows* democratisation, a need that is distinctive to the COD approach. The well-established strategy of inspecting the degree of democracy in newly-reformed regimes appears to be a suitable strategy when one looks at democracy as an endpoint; that is, for example, when the question is whether and to what extent democracy “has been achieved” at the end of a transition route, or in the course of a consolidation process. If we are inquiring into the effects of democratic reforms, however, time becomes a crucial factor. How long does it take, after such reforms are adopted, for the expected consequences to make their appearance? There is a risk that we may focus on too short a time span, that we may too soon rush to assess the extent of the economic, social or political transformations that are supposedly ignited by democratic changes, when such transformations may still be far from being fully realised. With regard to the effects of a newly-democratised system on state capacity, for example, Schmitter rightfully asks:

“*when* is democratization expected to affect state capacity? During the initial period ... alarming claims that ‘the state is falling apart’ because people are not paying taxes, police is not policing, civil servants were not getting paid, local notables were taking over, crime rates were going up, corruption

had become rampant, court systems were paralyzed, armed forces were divided and disoriented... [but often] these worries were greatly exaggerated [as state capacity is gradually restored and] democratization ... was much less debilitating than initially thought” (Schmitter 2005:2).

It follows that, when looking into the effects of democratisation, one should not seek for immediate, proximal results – as it is often implausibly assumed by proponents of interest-based arguments – but rather for distal, long-term and incremental outcomes that are generated by the cumulative, historical effects of institutions (Gerring et al. 2005:356). The short-term impact of democracy may be quite different from its long-term, durable effects. If we are not aware of this, we risk missing what are arguably the “true” effects of democratisation, if any. With regard to inequality, for example, the claim has been made that “at least approximately 20 years of democratic experience are required for the egalitarian effect to occur” (Muller 1988:59). Countries that are now democratic, but who were not so five years ago, may not have gone through this reduction of inequality yet. If they are included in a cross-national sample simply on the basis of their current “democratic status”, they would tend to dampen down any estimate of the effects of democratisation on inequality<sup>6</sup>.

There is an important, implicit argument here. The key distinction may not be the one between authoritarian countries and states that are currently under democratic rule, since the latter group together Britain or the United States, who developed their democratic practices over a long period of time, with any other country where multiparty democracy may be just a couple of years old. The crucial difference runs between countries that have cumulated a certain experience with democracy and countries that have not. Rather than simply measuring a country’s *level* of democracy at any given point in time, one should quantify the *experience* with democracy that such country has cumulated over time.

Muller (1988) calls this the “longitudinal variation in democracy”, i.e. the number of years a democratic system has been uninterruptedly in existence (or, in a somewhat more radical version, the overall number of years of democratic experience, regardless of interruptions). In a similar vein, Clague et al. (1996) and Eichengreen and Leblang (2007:15) talk of “age of democracy”, while Ferree and Singh (2007) use the notion of “institutional duration”. Gradstein and Milanovic (2004:532) also reason along these lines, while Ross (2006:866) cautiously opts for examining both the effects of a country’s degree of democracy as well as its history of democratic rule. Gerring and associates refer to a cumulated “stock of democracy” and insist that “it is the accumulated effect of these historical legacies, in addition to contemporary regime status, that ought to be of central concern if we wish to understand the causal effect of a regime type on a variety of current outcomes – social, cultural, political, or economic” (Gerring et al. 2005:325). They suggest, in particular, that any scepticism about the impact of democracy on economic growth is dispelled when one focuses on a country’s overall democratic experience, rather than just on its degree of democracy at a single point in time. Adopting a longitudinal definition can thus have a decisive impact on research findings. Time becomes a critical dimension for democratic processes to flourish. According to Nelson, for example, “sustained democracy” is necessary for underprivileged groups to develop a range of channels for participation that go beyond setting up political parties and include nongovernmental and other civil society organisations (Nelson 2007:89). In the realm of international relations, structural explanations of the democratic peace assume an immediate effect of democratic mechanisms, but normative explanations imply that time is necessary for democratic norms to mature and have an impact (cf. Maoz – Russett 1993:626,630). Studies that emphasise the time factor imply a gradual shift of focus from (new) democratisation processes to (relatively established) democracies, linking up with other sections within the political science literature.

The contradiction between, on the one hand, the notions of “stock of democracy” and “magnitude of regime change” – whereby democratisation makes progress through slow and incremental steps, and a country can experience very different levels of democratic change – and, on the other hand, a procedural concept that sees democracy as being essentially achieved once open, competitive elections are held, is only apparent. The three aspects, indeed, need to be employed in a combined fashion: while minimal democracy (status) remains the basic requirement that must be met before we venture into investigating the possible consequences of democratisation, it is then important to consider both the extent (degree) to which a country has been fully democratised as well as the length of the period (time) for which it has been democratic.

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<sup>6</sup> As for the effects of democracy on state strength, Schmitter observes that “it took most of the archeo-democracies of Western Europe and North America 200 or more years to acquire their present level of state capacity” (Schmitter 2005:3).

If we move from issues concerning our explanatory factor to considering the dependent variables that are examined by the various COD studies, at least six questions emerge with regard to the existence, the direction, the shape, the breadth, the inner nature and the potential clashes of any causal links with democracy.

The first, obvious problem concerns the actual presence of a causal link between democratisation and the dependent phenomenon under scrutiny. Rather than implying a direct connection, for example, the association between the two variables may simply be spurious. Maybe the end of the Cold war or the achievement of certain levels of development produced changes both in the political sphere of many countries, facilitating democratic reforms, as in other areas of their political, social or economic life. It may well be the case, in other words, that the very causes that ignited the process of democratisation also generated a process of redistribution, of increased conflict or some other changes that we may wrongly relate to recent democratic reforms.

Since no null nor negative impact of democratisation can be ruled out, research and debates on COD topics also have to carefully avoid any pro-democracy bias. The widespread and unambiguous normative preferability of democracy over any authoritarian alternative may generate strong prejudices that risk affecting empirical findings. In his survey of existing work on infant and child mortality rates, Ross (2006) comes across a consequential fact: non-democratic regimes with good social and economic records are frequently omitted from cross-national samples for sheer lack of data. The reason for the lack of these figures seems to lie in the fact that, compared to non-performing non-democratic states, such countries are less dependent upon external agencies as from the latter's demands for the regular publication of social and economic statistics, and thus they simply do not collect nor publish such data. This selection bias results in a tendency to overrate the performance of democratic governance. While Ross highlights the existence of this problem with regard to the assessment of health policy outcomes only, and does not explicitly consider this the result of a value preference in favour of democratic systems, the tendency to overestimate the impact of democracy may go well beyond any specific policy sector. In general, the search for the consequences of democratisation needs to ward off the interference of normative considerations with the carrying out of good research.

Secondly, several of the alleged links, such as the democracy-development connection or the democracy-inequality one, raise questions concerning the causal direction of a possible relationship. There has been ample debate, for example, on whether the association between democracy and growth is due to economic development bringing about democratic change or the other way round. Both positions may actually hold true, as the two phenomena may be related through mutual causation. The existence of a two-way relationship, for example, has been argued with regard to democracy and income equality (Burkhart 1997, Muller 1988).

Thirdly, the shape of the relationship between democracy and a democracy-dependent element, if any, need not be linear. It may, for example, draw a U-shaped (or an inverted U-shaped) curve. Consider the connection between democratisation and domestic violence. It has been argued that regimes where a poor form of democracy has been established (and perhaps even "stabilised" for some time) is likely to be associated with higher degrees of violent conflict than both regimes with higher-quality democratic features as well as openly repressive authoritarian regimes (Hegre et al. 2001, Mousseau 2001:559; Elbadawi – Sambanis 2002).

The breadth of the relationship – and this a fourth point – need not be universal. To what extent arguments about the effects of democracy can be generalised? Some hypotheses may be region-specific and/or time-specific, or they may simply hold true for certain period of time or areas of the world, but not for others. Not only, for example, the relationship between democratic and economic reforms has been more closely examined for certain regions (e.g. Latin America or Eastern Europe) rather than others (e.g. Asia or Africa), but the findings themselves may be different depending on the geographical areas under inquiry (cf. Kriekhaus 2004, 2006). Similarly, the historical period under investigation may make a difference. The gradualism that characterised the expansion of the suffrage during the first and second waves of democratic reforms, for example, was no longer a factor in the political changes that took place since the early 1970s (Dorensplet 2005:41). Does a similar transformation in the modes of democratic change make a difference for the consequences of such processes? A broader point is that the inclusion of Western early-democratizers and countries that only recently went through democratic transitions within the same sample may at times prove problematic. The former, for example, might have walked the entire length of a specific path (e.g. an inverse-U curve relating democratic advances to reduced inequality) that new democracies may never

actually complete. Thus, the issue of the time- and space-frame of each hypothesis needs to be addressed. This relates to the larger question of what are the exact conditions under which a given relationship is expected to become manifest.

A fifth issue concerns the interrelation and overlap between the various by-products that are expected from democratisation. A degree of intertwining is most evident when we look at the causal mechanisms identified by the theoretical explanations that are put forward to account for the hypothesised relationships<sup>7</sup>. As it happens, a phenomenon that is examined as a dependent variable in one strand of the COD literature often plays the role of an intervening variable on another such strand. If, say, the argument is made that democracies increase growth or reduce conflict by affecting and lessening inequality, scholars whose main interest lies in the causes of civil wars or in the origins of good economic performance would greatly benefit from learning what researchers studying the democracy-social inequality linkage have to say. Similarly, if the claim is advanced that the macroeconomic consequences of democracy are mediated by the latter's effects on taxation policies, it may be important to understand how the democratic legitimacy of governments impacts on the extractive capacity of state institutions. Thus, a more systematic examination of the causal mechanisms implied by existing theories (as Tavares and Wacziarg 2001 do for the democracy-economic growth linkage and Rosato 2003 does for the democracy-international peace linkage) highlights the interrelations among various strands within the COD subfield of study and shows that such strands would strongly benefit from reciprocal recognition.

A final, related aspect concerns the fact that, besides some mutually reinforcing transformations (e.g. the impact of democracy on inequality may strengthen a regime's capacity to bring about or maintain internal peace), there may be plausible trade-offs between different outcomes (e.g. democracy's positive impact on inequality may negatively affect economic growth, as it is sometimes argued). To borrow from Fish and Brooks (2004:164), any such findings "might be a 'hard truth' for democratic idealists, but would nevertheless merit sober consideration". If trade-offs really exist, understanding the implications of democratic change is ever more crucial, as the distinct consequences expected from the introduction of democracy may have to be weighed against each other in assessing the desirability of political reforms: would we be willing to foster democratisation processes if we knew that, while positively reducing inequality, democracy would also tend to ignite new violent, domestic conflicts?

### **Conclusions: democratisation and its consequences ... or causes?**

Both in normative legitimacy and empirical expansion, democracy gained unprecedented momentum over recent decades. This begs the question of the broader side-effects of democratisation processes in countries that initiated reforms. Some of the effects produced by political openings have begun to be investigated, others have yet to come under closer scrutiny. A better understanding of these developments – this paper argued – is critical to determining and assessing the overall balance sheet of democratic reforms. Indeed, it is critical to appreciate the future prospects of democracy.

For its long-term survival and consolidation, any new democratic regime will have to go through, among other things, a process of gradual legitimisation. Legitimacy, in turn, can be acquired in two fundamental ways, one normative and one instrumental. On the one hand, democracy may be accepted and sustained because we believe in its inherent superiority with regard to our moral values, whether or not a regime also demonstrates a capacity to bring about specific outcomes, such as promoting international security or material well-being. In principle, the very experience of participatory and competitive politics should gradually foster elite's and popular attachment to democratic values. A perverse, opposite effect, however, cannot be ruled out: a rejection of pluralist politics may actually develop where emerging democracies suffer the rise of internal violence, an economic downturn or an expansion of inequality gaps. This leads us to the second way in which a democratic system may gain broader acceptance, that is, by promoting the achievement of particular goals, like a peaceful co-existence of diverse communities or the improvement of material life. Through the achievement of "sufficiently positive policy outputs", "regime performance"

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<sup>7</sup> As Rosato observes, "a theory is comprised of a hypothesis stipulating an association between an independent and a dependent variable and a causal logic that explains the connection between those two variables ... A causal logic is a statement about how an independent variable exerts a causal effect on a dependent variable. It elaborates a specific chain of causal mechanisms that connects these variables and takes the following form: A (the independent variable) causes B (the dependent variable) because A causes x, which causes y, which causes B" (2003:585).

becomes an intervening variable instrumental to building up political legitimacy, and thus contributes to strengthening democratic rule in emerging democracies (Diamond 1999:77-78). Economic growth and redistribution, for example, are neither part of democracy, nor of democratisation processes; yet the dividends of faster growth and the improvement of the general welfare of the population may nurture the fragile legitimacy of a newly-reformed political regime, and thus indirectly promote democratic consolidation. Legitimacy can in turn foster performance in a two-way relationship that is likely to generate a virtuous cycle. By the same token, however, failure to produce substantial economic progress has often undermined a regime's legitimacy and fostered the overthrow of young democracies. In this case, the weak performance and weak legitimacy of a country's regime may feed into each other and develop a vicious sequence<sup>8</sup>.

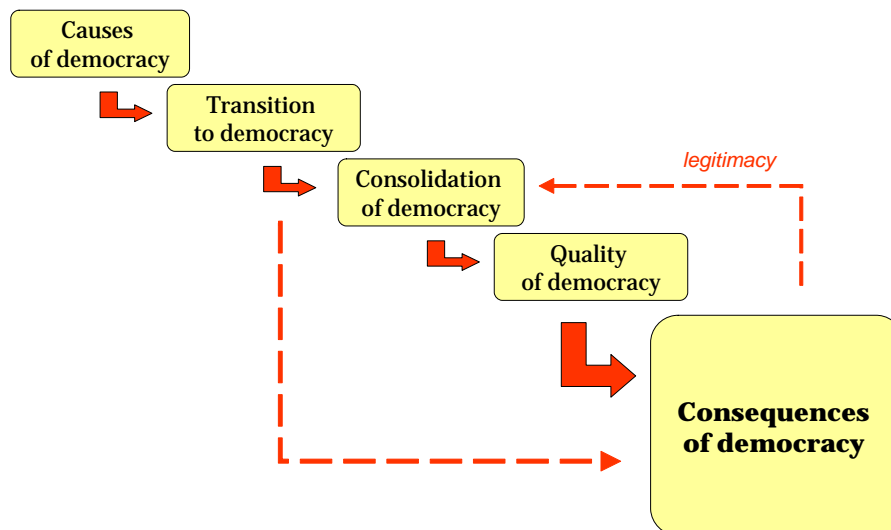


Figure 3. *The feedback effect of the consequences of democracy on the democratisation process*

While, conceptually, the normative and performance dimensions underlying the legitimacy of a democratic regime are mutually exclusive, they are not so in real-life politics. Deeply engrained democratic values would likely lead a country's elites and citizens to resist the abandonment of a participatory regime. Beyond a certain point, however, the will to stick to democratic politics is going to be overwhelmed by the disappointment generated by dismal performances as to the achievement of values other than democratic ones (security, economic progress, social equality, etc.). Of course, compared to non-democratic regimes, democratic arrangements are unique in that they offer a chance to sanction the government of the day without sacrificing the whole democratic edifice. In practice, however, this only goes so far: especially for emerging democracies, legitimacy can hardly flourish without the achievement of a minimum performance. In the latter's absence, people are likely to withdraw their support and accept the wholesale abandonment of democracy on the ground that non-democratic alternatives would ultimately prove more effective. If good things don't go together, in other words, people have to choose among them.

<sup>8</sup> In a different way, Foweraker and Krznic use "regime performance" (*liberal-democratic*) as a synonym for the "degree of democracy" achieved by a given political system, as opposed to the general performance (i.e. efficacy) of *any* political regime, whether democratic or not: "a focus on liberal democratic performance ... will exclude the values that may provide proper measures of the efficacy of *any* system of government (for example national security, social welfare, protection of the environment, even legitimacy and system support), in favour of values that are intrinsic to liberal democratic government. Liberal democratic performance then 'refers to the degree to which a system meets such democratic norms as representativeness, accountability, equality and participation' (Lijphart 1993:149)" (Foweraker – Krznic 2000:760).

Here, however, there is an important difference with the past. During the 1960s and 1970s, sceptics about the merits of liberal democracy, notably in terms of economic progress and nation-building, made claims about the advantages of alternative solutions, whether Marxist or military forms of authoritarianism. Today, even if democracy were proven to have high social, economic or political costs, few would go as far as to suggest that it can and must be renounced in favour of an openly non-democratic set up. Few, in other words, would advise fully sacrificing the fundamental values that democracy embodies so to avoid the negative by-products that the latter may generate. This is one of the reasons why not only coups d'état are increasingly rare occurrences, but pledges by the putschists that they will most quickly return the country to elections and democratic rule have become almost systematic.

Besides the ever rarer instances where democracy is formally abolished, however, two essentially different possibilities are separated by a subtle line. The first is the path of a state that takes into account the possible costs of democracy, but holds the latter firm as a non-renounceable objective of the country's political evolution. In this case, the focus would be on fine-tuning democratic progress, including its mode and timing, as well the type and shape that the emerging democracy, at different stages of the country's advancement, should appropriately assume. Spain, South Africa, Poland and South Korea, for example, may fall in this category. The second path is one in which, behind the retention of a democratic façade, the essence of democracy is actually abandoned for the sake of prioritizing other goals. Several examples exist of countries that have recently claimed "democratic" legitimacy for heterodox forms of electoral rule that allegedly incorporated concerns about the effects of Western liberal democracy. This was the case, for example, of Hugo Chavez's "Bolivarian democracy" in Venezuela, purportedly intended to redress the country's social injustices; of Yoweri Museveni's "no-party democracy" in Uganda, aimed at avoiding the conflict-enhancing effect of party-based elections in ethnically divided nations; or of Vladimir Putin's "sovereign democracy" in Russia, allegedly meant to restore civil order, state strength and economic progress in the world's largest country.

Looking at what democracy generates as by-products is crucially important to fully understand all these different political trajectories, including the possibility of finding remedies to democracy's least appealing consequences. Ultimately, however, if, where and when "good things" don't go together, democracy is more likely to be diminished, retarded or put in question. As Figure 3 shows, we can start thinking about the effects of democracy from the moment the latter is established (transition) on. A further impact upon CODs, as previously mentioned, derives from a time factor (a key dimension of consolidation itself) and from the actual degree of democracy of the new regime (including the extent to which the latter can be considered a quality democracy). Finally, through their positive or negative impact on the legitimacy of the regime, the consequences of democracy feedback into and affect the very process of consolidation of democracy. In an apparent paradox, they become an important factor, or a *cause*, of democratisation itself. What democracy will be able to generate, particularly in developing countries, shall crucially affect its destiny the world over.

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