

Crucial Elements for Understanding Democratization and Autocratization

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Aristotle related both dependent variables: democratization and autocratization in his broader explanation of regime change. For him two factors were crucial, the number of rulers (one, a few, the masses) and their values and behavior in terms of normal times and in crises periods. Here we try to be as parsimonious as possible emphasizing the *size of the selectorate*, as Aristotle knew already. The selectorate comprises the people who have a say in selecting political leaders. In this respect selectorate theory (Bueno de Mesquita et al.) is purely formal and helps to explain both, the origins of democracy and autocracy as well as their dismissal. The size of the selectorate is the *crucial intervening variable* in linking more specific causes and circumstances for bringing about the respective states on the dependent variables. Other theoretical glimpses will be taken at crises of democracies and autocracies. The size of the electorate can be limited by (brute) force or even through abstaining from the right to vote or using it to abolish democracy for autocracy (Przeworski, Zimmermann, and Saalfeld). Here we emphasize four major blocs of variables: (1) *economic success* (Lipset, Huntington), (2) the *relative size of the consenters, dissenters, and assenters* (Easton, Wright, Linz) bolstering even badly performing democratic and autocratic regimes, (3) the *exit options and alternatives* created for and by *political and economic elites*, possibly tied to potential mass mobilization and protest action, and (4) *democratic peace theory* as to external challenges to regime change. A causal model will be developed around those factors hopefully bringing about a consistent understanding of the basic processes of democratization and autocratization.

Keywords: Political Regimes, Selectorate Theory, Economic Development, Public Goods Production

Introduction

In one of his famous quips, Einstein said one should make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler. As holds for other colleagues as well, we fail on both counts. One has to separate causes and consequences of the *type* and *size* of the selectorate from mere correlates and contingencies. Since human beings are involved, selectorates change over time. The question is whether they change rather in shorter intervals and in institutional order than solely with the death of the incumbent(s).

Theoretical Achievements

The present task consists in separating other streams of theorizing about democracy and autocracy (in dynamic perspective: democratization and autocratization) from the powerful core arguments of selectorate theory. Here only a few prominent streams are mentioned: first, there are theoretical explanations combining

structural and behavioral elements, as holds for the theory of *democratic peace* (Russett & Oneal, 2001). The *structural* elements comprise the separation of powers and institutions that allow for open elections and other rules addressing the voting procedures and the proportional transference of votes into parliamentary seats. Often these rules come with limitations on the smallest parties to stabilize majorities otherwise too small, thus allowing for majorities either of a single party or of party coalitions (Przeworski, 2019).

The *behavioral* arguments concern the participatory norms for selecting political leaders competing for offices, in short of accepting the rule of parliamentary majority. The core elements are that the people must be able to vote their current rulers out of office and replace them with new or old contenders. This implies that a loss in one election does not forbid winning in the next one. There may, however, be limits to the number of electoral turns. Thus, losing in one election does not mean a lifelong zero-sum defeat. Losers may come around with better arguments in the next round. Violence and coercion are not part of the game. In *multicultural* societies there may be protection of minorities as to cultural rights such as the use of specific languages, schooling, religious beliefs, etc.

The mixtures of structural elements and behavioral norms and patterns reoccur in the arena of foreign policy. Democracies flourish in geographical and ideological contiguity, and are endangered where democracies are surrounded by autocracies. The third key element in the theory of democratic peace is free trade arguing for nondiscriminatory behavior, not only in one's own economy but—at least in theory—in the context of a world economy. Democracies in Europe, the U.S. and in Latin America are far away from granting so much of economic freedom.

Secondly, Stepan (1986) has presented a list of 10 (or eight) paths towards arriving at democracy (Mainwaring, 1989). These paths consist of structural elements such as defeat in foreign conflict, and behavioral elements. Authoritarian leaders may initiate the steps to democratization or, e.g., might miscalculate their political moves. Neither structures nor behavioral patterns are fixed. They interact, in the best and most stable cases they reinforce each other as stressed by Eckstein (1966) in his congruence theory. He sees democracies as bolstered when structural rules are present and democratic forms of reaching decisions are also widespread in the civil institutions and in the norms and patterns of the people. Think of self-governing small political units as in Switzerland and you get the argument. The question arises, of course, as to a strict congruence or a moderated form where autocratic elements could be present. The military, business, and cultural institutions immediately come to mind.

A third line of arguments stresses the importance of shared values (Almond & Verba, 1963) and political and social trust (Easton, 1975; Putnam, 1993). Political trust and legitimacy come late and may be much quicker in leaving. They serve as a credit buffer for institutions and political leaders in times of crisis. Hopefully there are alternative actors present, a loyal and workable political opposition or other political intermediaries that represent the trust lost by the incumbents. Periodical elections are a mechanism of safeguarding this exchange of political trust. The surviving democracies in the Great Depression of the 1930s turned to the democratic political opposition or enlarged coalitions, whereas the collapsing democracies did forego such alternatives. There the political system collapsed as in Germany, Austria, and other countries (Møller, Schmotz, & Skaaning, 2015). A loyal political opposition ready to take over did simply not exist (Zimmermann & Saalfeld, 1988).

The long-term character of building and maintaining political trust can be summarized in the argument that democracy takes enormous time (Linz, 1998) and de facto is the incremental business of a daily plebiscite (Renan, 1882).

Many aspects of the potential cycles of regime types were already described by Aristotle (2008). He distinguished between the number of rulers (one, a few, and the masses) and orderly rule or disordered rule. The paths from one political regime to the other went through misdeeds and misdemeanor of the ruler(s) and the masses.

Selectorate Theory

Where then does selectorate theory come in? Selectorate theory (Buono de Mesquita et al., 2003) provides for linkages between economic efficiency, economic public needs in political systems, and the types of regime outcomes deriving from the combination of private and public goods delivery. We draw on the regime classification of Linz and Stepan (1996). Leaving out other characteristics here and focusing only on the combination of private and public goods in the economy, the following table can be set up:

Table 1

Private Goods and Public Goods Production in Political Regimes

Regime type	Private goods	Public goods
Totalitarian	Very little	Stability, yet insecure lives
Post-totalitarian	Insufficient	Stability, less insecure lives
Autocratic	Compatible	Limited in political realm
Democratic	Sufficient	Considerable
Sultanistic	None, expropriated by sultan	None, extreme insecurity

Note that these classifications are not absolutely clear-cut, even at the extremes. In essence, it is the production of public goods satisfying the population that makes for the crucial distinction and asset of democracy vis-a-vis the other regime types.

The question arises: are regimes the causes or the consequences of the combination of the mixtures of good productions? Here one could argue in many directions. The respective historical trails would have to be scrutinized carefully. Studies on early regime building stress the role of centralized coercive forces, from military and/or secret police surveillances to judicial arrangements (Fukuyama, 2011). Thus it is plausible to argue that the way to power determines which alternatives are open and later pursued. Path dependency of later regime options on earlier ones chosen easily is the result. This brings us to selectorate theory.

On the other hand, one can argue that in more developed societies it is a day-to-day matter of producing economic goods with gradual shades in forms of political regimes coming about. The production of private goods does not necessarily require a fully-developed market society with established and respected property rights. One can imagine the sole existence of private property with the *exclusive* rights of the owner holding the title to it. Yet, such an order could hardly be judged as efficient or “just”. Also the private possession of the means of production and the benefits thereof rely on a set of rules that is *non-privately* developed and guaranteed.

Distributional inequality beyond historical thresholds remains an offense (Piketty, 2022). It creates envy and frustration and could lead to violent conflict though societies have developed different mechanisms and techniques to hide the degree of inequality and life chances. Thus initial property rights in the production of goods without any consideration of public goods production and distributional mechanisms most like will end up in large gaps in supply of goods. Also economic power could not be broken and shared amongst interacting free citizens. One has to go for both sides, supply in the decentralized production and demand for the expression of public preferences amongst the population.

What is clear, however, is the path dependency of basic decisions derived. Hayek (1944) in his *Road to Serfdom* elaborated on the grave consequences if initial economic freedom and thus political freedom were absent. Instead of virtual cycles of freedom and prosperity a dismal economy and society is to result. Folk wisdom sums it up nicely: those who are more intelligent and want to make money go into business. Those who also want to make money go into politics. More intelligence does not totally rule out corruption but the stakes and gains to be active and successful in an independent economic realm should work out to support political democracy. Yet, this is an intricate question and does not guarantee the persistence of political freedom. The national socialist economy and fascistic models of the political economy very well did combine considerable economic freedom with political coercion, in the end shifting production styles to the war machinery and destruction of resources. Richness is not a necessary condition for democracy to come about, poverty much less so. Nor is richness a sufficient condition. The question of how to break out of such path dependencies has in part been addressed in the list of regime changes worked out by Stepan.

The ten or eight paths according to Mainwairing (1989) often show overlap between categories as is often the case in conflict analyses. It underlines the complexity of these processes of regime demise and regime formation. In simple terms there is change from outside (war and other interference) or from within: reform from above, protest, or even revolution. It seems impossible to boil down the main factors and the accompanying ones into a convincing single model: the use of violence plays a role, military and police forces vs. protestors, the existence of a network of groups for oppositional activities. Foreign intermingling etc. makes for complex and sometimes unique scenarios. This is an experience gained from revolutionary analyses: first revolutions are outcomes that differ from revolutionary situations, and second historically, though often interlinked, revolutions come in different sets of factor combinations. Yet, a few common factors can be named, e.g., splits amongst the elites, the waning of support on the part of the coercive forces and a broad-based revolutionary coalition (Goldstone, 2003). Theory building is further complicated in that the collapse of democracy or other political regime forms and their resurgence are never mere mirror images.

The focus here is more concrete on the components of the selectorate model. Selectorate theory is crucial. It explains political regimes on the base of the size of the selectorate with large (s)electorates hopefully producing public goods as in democracies, and small only private goods as in sultanist regimes and dictatorships.

Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003) argue that the larger the selectorate, i.e. the persons deciding about the candidates to rule, the more likely democracy is to emerge. In democracies ideally the selectorate is equivalent to the electorate. In reality, however, the inner circles of decisive power are constituted by members of the selectorate. More important in the present context is the argument of Bueno de Mesquita et al. that a larger selectorate covaries with the likelihood that public goods are produced. In dictatorships such as sultanistic regimes where one person rules absolutely without any control only private goods are produced. The sultan can appropriate any private good that is available and has no interest in setting up public goods which would detract from his zero-sum perspective of political power and control.

Our arguments are rather rudimentary. Yet, by drawing on selectorate theory one can explain the dramatic decline of the Putin regime as well as the current under-performing of many Western mass democracies by the very same factors: the lack of an open and wider selectorate. The KGB environment having access to Putin, according to some journalistic accounts, has been reduced to about 10 “trustworthy” persons of an inner circle from St. Petersburg. There is some access to the public by these people, yet obviously little influence so far as to pursuing alternative paths to war-making, thus leaving the economy and society far behind other more competitive nations.

In Western regimes it is the electoral cycle which normally drives inefficient regimes out of office, often after a long period of ailment. Prominent recent examples are the conservative governments in Britain from 2010 till 2024 or the ailing “traffic light coalition” in the federal government of Germany (since 2021).

Embedding Selectorate Theory

What is to be gained from the present set of theoretical arguments in favor of selectorate theory? Selectorate theory focuses the view on two related questions across very different regimes: what mixture of public and private goods is produced and what is the resulting political regime like? One major question then is: to what extent are there prospects for regime change at all (cf. the arguments as to the different paths to democratization assembled by Stepan 1986)? A change in the selectorate is obviously the crucial element. At least it always provides the linkage to understanding the processes and changes coming about.

In Figure 1 five major causal variables have been combined to jointly explain the coming about of democratization, or of autocratization in case of failure. Numerous other variables could be listed as briefly touched upon in the preceding discussion. Just assume the different paths to democratization spelled out by Stepan (1986) were to be further differentiated according to their forms of selectorates and the regime outcomes emanating from this, and then put in a ranking order. Also feedback effects are omitted, e.g., from public goods to the selectorate. Only the dominant causal direction is addressed.

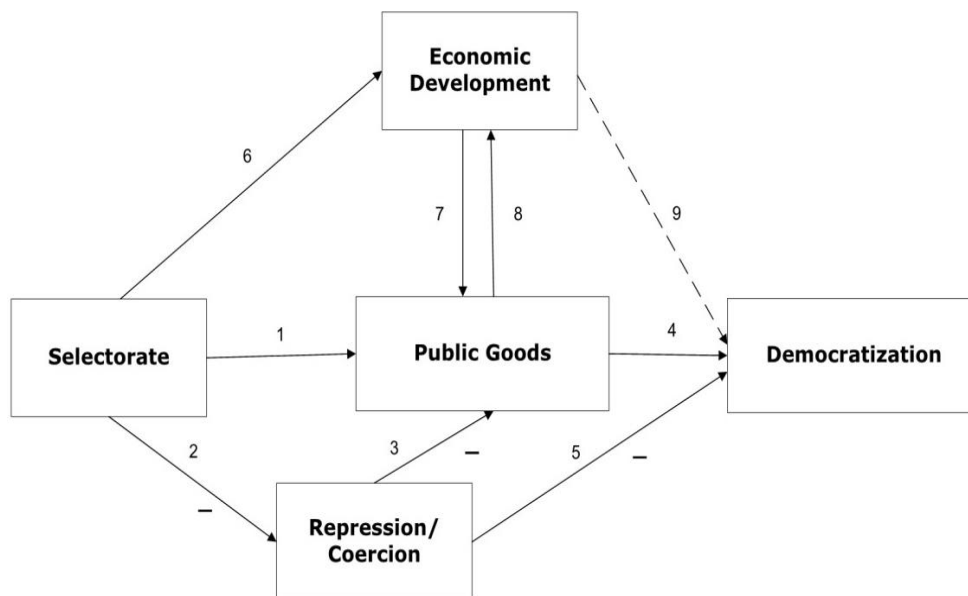


Figure 1. Selectorates and regime-outcomes of public goods production.

Path 1 from the size of the selectorate to the mixture of public goods is the central argument of Bueno et al. Path 4 denotes the respective regime outcomes as summarized in Table 1. “Democratization” stands here for the category of *possible regime outcomes*, depending on the two antecedent variables: *size of the selectorate* and *mixture of goods production*. If *repression and coercion* enter the game, either in the use of governmental violence or mere suppression of popular dissent, then according to path 2 a small selectorate is more prone to defending its position by drawing on repression and coercion. This in turn impedes public goods production (path

3) and the chances for democratization. Path 4 and path 5 become dominant. The upper half in Figure 1 exposes the prominent linkages caused by economic development (path 6 and path 9) and mediated via the effects on public goods production (path 7 and path 8) and democratization (path 4) as the decisive offspring. In a nutshell there are *two essential distinctions of democracy* from the other regime forms mentioned here. Democracy is the *only system* allowing for a *peaceful, orderly popular-backed change of government* and for producing *public goods*. The production of public goods in autocracies is notably limited vis-a-vis democracies, though not impossible under (rare) benevolent autocrats. That is an everlasting debate, irrespective of the notable arguments raised by Linz (1975) on bolstering autocracy as a genuine form of political regime.

Also note the dashed line from economic development to democratization (path 9). Herewith we try to cover three streams of reasoning: the Lipset (1994) hypothesis of a clear link between economic development and democratization. Two of the notable exception groups are the Arab Emirates with great wealth yet no clear democratic elements and China and her friends. One has to add the self-styled *illiberal* democracies (e.g., Venezuela or Hungary) which underline the waves of democratization, their failures, disappearance, and revival in later decades. Thus Huntington (1984) stresses with good arguments that economic development only increases the number of regime options one of them being democratization. Other effects are the maintenance and bolstering of autocratic rule, as in China.

Here we try to summarize this set of argument in the dashed line of path 9. Economic development is not a necessary characteristic of democracy, if you look at India and some very small polities, nor a sufficient one if you consider China. Of course, all these summary remarks and arguments are to be taken with more refinements.

One obtains the insight from the model in Figure 1 that the production of public goods is the *necessary* condition to arrive at democratization, by two means: one is the direct effect (path 4), the other one the indirect one with strong feedback effects through economic development (paths 7, 8, and 9).

Conclusion

As the proponents of selectorate theory confess themselves, it is a very simple and formal idea. Yet, simplicity has never been a detriment of good theorizing. Refutations should come about quickly, if there are. Stepan broadened the view as to other developmental paths to democracy. Yet, a crucial change in the selectorate always played a role. In structure, the theory has a lot in common with the theory of oligarchy as stated by Michels (1911). If you speak of selection and rule you always must consider the likelihood of oligarchy and autocracy and the other forms Aristotle had already addressed. Selectorate theory encompasses the theory of oligarchic rule (or misrule) and Aristotle comes up with path dependencies one should keep in mind. A broader selectorate overlaps with the *inclusive institutions* in the theoretical perspective of Acemoglu and Robinson (2012). The question simply is: to what degree institutions are encompassing all citizens or rather exclusive.

Another issue is that as to the potential size of the electorate, e.g., in becoming a party member and then deciding about candidates. Party leaders always have an interest in keeping this type of participation under control. Of course, through the media and private linkages and associations there are many other channels influencing the selectorate. Thus, the potential selectorate is always much bigger than the actual one, even in democracies. Bueno et al. (2003) think in terms of groups included or excluded. Wright (1976) makes the distinction between consent following Easton (1975) and *assent*, referring to the passive masses acting as a buffer against change. The latter were the will of the dissenters. Assenters reduce the access to channels of change. The potentially open and the

used access to the selectorate is the crucial difference between regimes here. There is the need for adjustment to the inner core of the selectorate to incorporate challenges from below, and generally from outside.

Regimes that produce public goods in an abundant and economically efficient way should also set a model for other regimes in international competition. Interrupting flows of international communication may hinder clear insights amongst the population, yet the competition is there and felt, e.g., in shouldering a high defense burden and still producing a high level of private consumer goods. Some polities are clearly ahead of others. This addresses the effects the production of public goods has on international competition. States failing behind in public good production suffer also the loss of highly talented people, if allowed to leave, and of poor people. Amassed starvation, though a private good to begin with, is to be counted also as a public bad. When talented parts of the population opt for exit of the country, it is also unlikely that there will be a loyal and competent opposition that can be trusted in the race for power holding after elections. Hirschman (1970) addresses these linkages in his *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*. The selectorate will become smaller and smaller in sort of a vicious circle. As to antecedent variables of the selectorate, there is *international competition*. Norms of trust and trustworthiness become relevant as spelled out in the behavioral theories of democratization.

Revolutionary experiences, especially if crowned by success, should increase the selectorate, as do trustful experiences with formerly distrusted “dangerous classes”. The failure of the Weimar Republic in defending democracy can be contrasted with manifold positive developments in the Federal Republic of Germany and a new more open world order in the West. There is the report that the highly-esteemed and powerful conservative banker Abs replied to the question of why he went to the funeral of Hans Böckler, a leading social-democratic unionist figure: times have changed, he is now our partner.

In any case, it should have become clear how fruitful the embedding of selectorate theory can be for general theorizing on democratization and autocratization.

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