

# **Keeping up democracy! A walk- through of important factors that increase the likelihood of democratic survival.**

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## **1 Introduction**

There is no magic formula for democracy. It is never complete, and even though one country's democracy may be more robust than its neighbor's, it is never consolidated in the sense that its citizens may lean back and relax. Democracy is an everyday act. This is why attitudes, training and actions matter, and why the Democracy cake now before you is so important.

In this article, I seek to give a brief overview of the research on democracy and democratic consolidation. What factors increase the likelihood that a democracy will continue to endure? I present summaries of some findings and non-findings on the most common variables that are usually investigated to answer this question. It is important to remember that such a task will always be incomplete: There is not enough space here to cover the entire field, and I can therefore only encourage the reader to seek the sources themselves.

The article begins with definitions of *democracy* and *consolidation*. After that I go through each variable separately and present some central findings and discussions. A final section concludes the article, while the reviewed literature is listed at the end.

## **2 Defining democracy and consolidation**

For the purposes of this article, democracy will be defined in a minimalist, purely *institutional*, way. Democracy is seen here as a regime "in which governmental offices are filled as a consequence of contested elections" (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010, 69). More specifically, there are four requirements which must be met for a regime to be considered democratic: I) The chief executive is elected directly by the people, or "by a body that was itself popularly elected"; II) The legislature too is chosen by popular election; III) There is more than one party competing; IV) There must be an alternation in power under the same rules that brought the incumbent to power in the first place (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010, 69).

There is no consensus on how exactly to define democracy. However, since various *forms* of democracy are strictly speaking not the topic here, I will not delve on this discussion here (see O'Donnell 2010, Przeworski et al 2000, Dahl 1971).

Next, we need to understand what consolidation of democracy means. In this present article, consolidation simply means *to extend the life expectancy of a democracy* (Schedler 1998). What then characterises consolidation? For Adam Przeworski (1991, 51), there are three central points: Consolidation exists when I) all relevant political forces subject their interests to the uncertainty of democratic institutions; II) these relevant political forces comply with the outcomes of the democratic process; and III) conflict is processed through democratic institutions.

Linz and Stepan offer a now famous definition of consolidation as a “political situation in which (... ) democracy has become ‘the only game in town’” (1996, 5). In other words, democracy is consolidated when I) there are no attempts to violently overthrow the government; II) the people understand and believe that change can only come from the democratic process; and III) that democracy is routinized and institutionalised through laws (Linz and Stepan 1996).

What does this mean in practice? First of all, democracy is *uncertain*. The outcome of an election is not known until the votes have been cast and counted. The major political actors in a country must accept this uncertainty *before* the election, and they cannot reverse their support if the result of the election is not to their liking. Further, the politics is the only acceptable arena for conflict. This means that citizens' grievances cannot be expressed through violence, or through threats or attempts to overthrow the government. If one disagrees with a law that is being passed, one either protests peacefully, vote differently, lobby, or join a party or organisation to fight it. Lastly, democracy cannot be dependent on a single person or a few individuals. It must be institutionalised, a-personal, and protected by constitutional law.

### **3 The consolidation of democracy**

We then turn to the main question: Which conditions extend the life expectancy of a democracy? In the following discussion, the terms *survival*, *consolidation*, and *stability* will

be used interchangeably. Increasing the likelihood of survival means that a democracy becomes more consolidated.

First of all, some of the factors that cause democratisation of a country may no doubt be the same, or similar, to the factors that enhance a democracy's survival. Research on *democratisation* and *democratic survival* is therefore often overlapping, but it is important to remember that the factors that bring about democracy may not be the same that keep it alive. The following discussion is therefore concerned not with factors that increase the likelihood of democratisation, but with the factors that are commonly used to explain the consolidation of a democracy *once democracy has been established*.

### **3.1 Economic development and economic performance**

This is perhaps the least disputed of all factors argued to increase the life of democracy. The correlation between wealth and democracy is one of the most striking in all of social science: Rich countries are democratic, and democratic countries are rich. Whether or not increased economic development causes countries to democratise is, on the other hand, hotly disputed, and this topic will not be covered here (see for example Lipset 1959, Przeworski et al 2000, Boix 2011, Acemoglu et al 2009).

Przeworski et. al state that “no democracy has ever been subverted (...) regardless of everything else, in a country with a per capita income higher than that of Argentina in 1975: \$6,055” (2000, 98). This indicates a form of “threshold”, or a limit, where, if a country has a GDP higher than that threshold, the chances its democracy will collapse are close to zero.

This is a strong statement, but the argument holds a lot of support. Gasiorowski and Power (1998, 764), for example, state that “development-related socioeconomic factors have a strong, positive effect on the likelihood of consolidation [of a democracy].” Epstein et al. on their hand find that higher GDP per capita is the only factor that undoubtedly reduces the probability of democratic collapse and that a robust economy, therefore, the single most important factor for the consolidation of new democracies (Epstein et al. 2006). Likewise, Aleman and Yang (2011, 1143) assert that “[t]he effect of income level is so decisive that it dominates all other variables.”

This must not be taken to mean that only high development countries can be successful democracies. First of all, there are exceptions: Qatar, for example, has one of the highest GDP per capita in the world, yet is a firmly autocratic country. Benin, on the other hand, is a democracy, with one of the world's lowest GDP (X).

Secondly, a democratic regime's ability to generate economic *growth* may also lower the likelihood of collapse, even at initially low levels of development (Przeworski and Limongi 1997). This means that poorer democracies that manage to create growth might very well consolidate despite their low levels of economic development. This makes economic crisis, in the form of recession or hyperinflation, critical for the survival for both old and young democracies (Gasirowski 1995, Bernhard, Nordstrom, and Reenock 2001, Haggard and Kaufman 1995). Just a single year of negative growth can markedly affect the survival of democratic regimes (Przeworski and Limongi 1997, Gasirowski 1995). According to Svobik (2015), economic development and performance are the only factors that lower the risk of both incumbent takeover and coups, two common forms of authoritarian backsliding for new democracies.

The connection between economic development and performance, and democratic survival, is not an iron law. Robert Dahl too, argues that economic development and performance is vital for democratic survival, but he also points to two Latin American examples: Argentina, which inhabited many of the features that would increase the survival of its democracy – yet it collapsed – and Costa Rica, where democracy has survived both economic recession and crisis (Dahl 1971). In fact, many of today's western democracies, such as Norway, were at significantly lower levels of development at the moment of their democratisation than much of the literature on the topic suggest should be possible, yet they have remained remarkably stable throughout their existence (Boix and Stokes 2003). Thus, in the case of Argentina, Dahl (1971, 135) concludes that

one thing seems clear: the differences in regimes cannot be explained by appealing to the usual explanatory factors – the level of socioeconomic development, urbanization, education, size of the middle class, per capita income, and so on. Although a full explanation would surely be very complex, one crucial factor does emerge with striking clarity: Argentinians appear never to have developed a strong belief in the legitimacy of the institutions of [democracy].

Argentina is not the only examples of this. It is argued that neither level of economic development nor economic performance can explain the emergence and survival of many Latin American democracies. Instead, there are three key factors that explain the survival of the region's democracies: I) normative preferences for democracy among the key political actors – such as presidents, parties, unions, business associations, the military, and organized movements; II) the lack of actors with radical policy preferences; and III) a political context that is “favourable for democracy” (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013b).

This means that “with a normative democratic commitment on the part of powerful political players and a favourable international environment, democracy can survive in the face of daunting challenges” (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013a, 5). Inversely, it means that a democracy in favourable conditions may not survive if these same actors do not support the values of (liberal) democracy (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013b).

Economic development and performance are, all else held equal, the single most powerful explanatory factors for democratic survival. Yet, there are no natural laws in social science: Although the constraints imposed by economic structures weigh heavily on a democracy's chances of success, it does not alone determine the outcome.

### **3.2 The rule book: institutionalised political parties and regular electoral competition**

A democracy cannot be dependent on one or a few individuals – it must be *institutionalised*. Political parties are the key political actors in any democracy, and these parties and the political system should inhabit certain features that make the democracy more stable.

Firstly, there cannot be too few or too many parties. This does not mean a “right” number of parties exist: The American democracy is a two party system, while the Norwegian parliament currently consists of eight parties. Further, the parties should not be ideologically polarised. Polarisation creates deep and often unresolvable conflicts that leave little or no common ground for cooperation. Avoiding polarisation moderates political conflict, and thus renders both government and other institutions more effective. The potential loss for any party participating in the political game is also lowered.

Secondly, the parties must exert *discipline*. This means holding at bay power hungry individuals seeking to extend their influence and power for personal reasons. This is especially critical in new democracies, as they often have weak institutions that are vulnerable to this.

Thirdly, there must be regular elections. Recall two of the key features of consolidation: Major political actors subject their interests to the uncertainty of democracy, and the major political actors accept the outcome of the process. If there is no next election to win, the costs of subjecting your interests to the process of democracy and to accepting the outcome are extremely high; if you know there will be a new election in four or five years, that cost is significantly lower, thus making it easier to support democracy.

Lastly, political parties must reflect the grievances of the people. Again, this goes back to the definition of consolidation: The political sphere is the only acceptable arena for conflict. If parties do not care or are incapable of responding to people's grievances, the people will take their conflicts out of the political arena, and into the streets.

### **3.3 Ethnic fractionalisation: much debate, few results**

Few countries in the world are ethnically homogenous. The idea that fractionalised societies will have a hard time sustaining democracy hails back to Aristotle, and John Stuart Mill (2009, 344-345) argued that "Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion necessary to the working of representative government can not exist."

One of the deans in this field, Arend Lijphart is less fatalistic than Mill, and states that it is merely "*difficult*, but (...) not at all *impossible* to achieve and maintain stable democratic government in a plural society" (1977, 1, italics in original).

This classical argument is not supported unanimously by modern political science. Some find no significant effect of ethnic fractionalisation on democratic survival (Houle 2009, Cornell et al. 2016, Bernhard, Reenock, and Nordstrom 2003), while others find that it has a significant and negative, yet weak, effect on a democracy's life span (Bernhard, Nordstrom, and Reenock 2001, Gasiorowski and Power 1998, Barro 1999). The effect of ethnic and linguistic

fractionalisation on the survival for democracy is therefore unclear. Exactly how to measure such fractionalisation can also be difficult, adding further problems to the rigorousness of any findings.

### **3.4 Presidential systems versus parliamentary systems**

In a presidential system, the executive and legislative branches are strictly separated, with the president leading the executive, while being the head of government and head of state. In a parliamentary system, the head of government leads the executive, but receives its power from the legislative branch. The literature on presidential and parliamentary systems and their implications for democratic stability is massive. The most famous is perhaps Juan Linz (1990a,b), who argued that parliamentary democracies are more stable than presidential democracies. The argument is that parliamentary democracies can more easily avoid, and, if necessary, remove, executives that “rule at the edge of the constitution,” while also providing governments with majorities necessary to “implement their programs,” (Stepan and Skach 1993, 22).

Presidential democracies, however, depend on “the ability of their leaders to govern, to inspire trust, to respect the limits of their power, and to reach an adequate degree of consensus,” yet it is precisely in presidential systems that these features “are most difficult to achieve” (Linz 1990a, 69).

Linz’ findings have been confirmed by others (Przeworski et. al 2000, Stepan and Skotch 1993), while others still are cautious about these conclusions. Though it is rare to find the *opposite* effect, more recent empirical research fail to detect any relationship between this form of institutional arrangements and the survival of democracy (Power and Gasiorowski 1997, Aleman and Yang 2011. Cornell et al. 2016). The question thus remains open, with little or no clear effect found.

An important finding in this regard is that of José Antonio Cheibub, who argues that the reason presidential democracies fail more often than parliamentary ones (he too confirms this pattern), is that presidential democracies happen to be preceded by *military dictatorship*.

This brings the *heritage* of previous institutions into the present. Cheibub concludes that there are no institutional arrangements that make presidential democracies less stable than

parliamentary democracies, all else held equal. Instead, the real reason is what he calls the “military-presidential nexus”:

It is the combination of these two facts – that democracies that follow military dictatorships are more likely to become dictatorships and that presidential democracies are more likely to follow military dictatorships – that accounts for the higher overall regime instability for presidential democracies (Cheibub 2007, 22).

In other words, presidential systems simply tend to exist in countries where democracy “of any type” would be unstable (Cheibub 2007, 160).

This latter point opens up for a new approach to the stability of democracy, which has not yet been discussed: That the *past regime* – its institutional arrangements, organisation, length, and level of oppression – may exert a lasting effect on the survival of the subsiding democracy.

### **3.5 The past: The effect of an authoritarian heritage for the survival of new democracies**

An emerging democracy does not begin with a clean slate. It carries with it a legacy from the previous non-democratic regime that preceded it. It is therefore natural to ask: Which features of the *past authoritarian regime* affect a democracy’s chance for survival?

Though it may sound like a contradiction, most dictatorships do in fact hold elections. They may vary in their competitiveness, and are neither free nor fair. Elections can be used to legitimise the current rule, and increase the survival of the dictatorship (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009, Geddes 1999). As a *legacy* however, a history of (authoritarian) elections seems vital, since “Stable democracy has never developed without an extended prior experience with autocratic or pre-independence elections,” (Miller 2015, 525).

One possible explanation to this is that only relatively *open* authoritarian regimes hold elections, and these regimes are more likely to become successful democracies than their more closed counterparts (Howard and Roessler 2006).

Either way, authoritarian regimes that allow elections to be held – although they are by definition neither free nor fair – seem to be more likely to evolve into stable and long-living democracies.



Samuel Huntington argues that having a previous experience with democracy is an advantage for the stability in the *new* democracy. Huntington (1991) identifies what he calls a “second-try pattern”. This argument suggests that there is a learning curve for democratic political actors, in that a country may learn from its previous mistakes that in one way or another caused the democracy to fail. This increases the likelihood that the second time around will produce a consolidated democracy.

The problem with this argument is that if a country has a legacy of previous democratic rule, it also has a legacy of previous democratic *collapse*. Anti-democratic actors have succeeded in bringing down democracy once before, and may therefore do so again. Hence, Przeworski et.al (1996) find that this form of legacy shortens the life of the new democracy. Bernhard, Nordstrom, and Reenock (2001, 790), similarly state that “multiple episodes of democracy may be indicative of inherent problems of instability.”

If there is any such effect either way, it is weak: There seems to be little clear evidence for how past transitions affect the current survival of democracy (Bernhard, Nordstrom, and Reenock 2001, Gasiorowski and Power 1998, Miller 2015, Houle 2009).

What happens in the transition from dictatorship may also effect the consolidation of the new democracy. To measure transitional violence can be difficult, and results should be interpreted with care. Data quality can be poor, and it is challenging to separate the “normal” violence which occurs in any society, from the violence that is a result of the struggle for democratization (Huntington 1991). Further, it is important to remember that violence in a transition between dictatorship and democracy does not necessarily mean a struggle between pro- and anti-democratic forces (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014).

Transitional violence can be a problematic heritage for new democracies. This is because a violent struggle against an authoritarian government does not make it *pro* democracy. Their goal need not be democracy, and therefore, their struggle may not end once democracy has been established (Linz and Stepan 1996).

Democracies that are born through violence are less likely to become stable and lasting regimes, compared to those established through negotiation. Huntington observes that

“[t]hroughout history armed revolts have almost never produced democratic regimes,” and that “Governments produced by violence [rule] by violence” (1991, 207). It seems that forced, violent transition significantly decreases the survival of the new democracy, if it were to be established, compared to non-violent, negotiated transitions (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014).

### **3.6 A military past**

The institutional arrangements of the previous authoritarian regime may also be extremely important. The abovementioned Cheibub concluded that it was not their choice of presidential systems over parliamentarism that killed emerging democracies, it was rather their military past (Cheibub 2007).

However, according to Barbara Geddes, military regimes are more likely to become stable democracies after a transition, because the military, contrary to the strong-man dictator or the ruling party, retains much of its autonomy and institutional power after the transition. For the military, therefore, a transition to democracy entails a lower risk than the one facing personalist dictators, who risk losing everything, even their lives, and they are therefore more likely to accept a transition to democracy (Geddes 1999).

Geddes and Cheibub are here at odds with each other. The picture is a complicated one, that is more nuanced and would require more space than available here. Other findings suggest that the effect of a military past may be two-sided: It increases the likelihood of a *coup*, but it lowers the risk of an *incumbent takeover* (Svolik 2015).

Not surprisingly then, there is not unanimous evidence for a clear effect. Military regimes may become more stable democracies because they are an institutionalized form of government, and are more likely to create negotiated transitions to democracy; while a personalist dictatorship, on the other hand, is non-institutionalised, dependent on one or several individuals, and also more likely to end in violence. However, a strong military that remains a power factor in the new democracy may very well intervene to restore “law and order”. Thus, military leaders with non-democratic minds remain a threat to democracy.

### **3.7 Civil society**

Civil society can loosely be defined as a space between the private sphere of the family, and the state. It is social, not political or economic, and it consists of ordinary citizens who are participating in collective actions in various forms to promote their interests, rather than elites seeking power (Diamond 1999; Bermeo 2003; Howard 2003).

A rigorous civil society is important in any democracy for several reasons. Firstly, it can balance and decentralise the power of the state. This is perhaps especially important in new democracies where proper institutions are not yet in place. Further, it can help to develop attitudes, norms, and behaviour among citizens that are needed to ease the function of the democratic institutions, and to build a platform where democracy can be played out. A healthy civil society is thus good for mediating conflict and channeling conflicting views in society into peaceful expressions (Diamond 1999). It can also enhance the legitimacy of the state and increase support for its democratic institutions (Diamond 1999, Warren 2011, Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001, Taylor 1990).

However, it is important to note that civil society can also be bad for democracy. A vibrant civil society does not in itself serve to segment democracy. Instead, it can give deprived individuals forums where they can come together, mobilise, and act. Clubs, associations, and churches can just as easily promote anti-democratic ideas. If associations, rather than bridging already established cleavages in society, instead are organised *along* these cleavages, civil society can serve to further fragment society. This will evidently not support democratic stability (Berman 1997, Chambers 2002).

Thus, a vibrant civil society is not sufficient in itself for stable democracy. The composition of the associations and ideology of its members must be taken into account, as well as the political and institutional landscape in which they operate. However, there is undoubtedly a correlation between democracy and level of civil society (Warren 2011, Howard 2003).

### **3.8 Conclusion**

As this article hopefully has shown, there are no magic recipes for democracy. Robust institutions and economic prosperity no doubt facilitates democratic consolidation, but in the end it is the people within the system that must uphold democracy. Democracies that met the so-called economic threshold still collapsed, and others that “shouldn’t have succeeded” have. This is why training and education among citizens and agency is so important.

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