

Paper Abstract

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Distal, Intermediate, and Proximate Causes of Democratization

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This paper is a draft, coauthored with Amanda Edgell, Carl Henrik Knutsen, and Staffan Lindberg, of the conclusion to a second V-Dem book that retests many leading hypotheses about democratization using V-Dem data.

Understanding the complex, long-term process of democratization requires distinguishing distal, intermediate, and proximate causes. Each plays a different role in a comprehensive theory. They must also be modeled appropriately, so that the proximate causes do not eclipse the distal ones. The distal causes came into being long ago, often before the modern democratic era, and are static or change slowly. It is therefore usually safe to treat them as exogenous variables. They include features of geography such as climate zone and distance from natural harbors; availability of exportable minerals; and ethnic fractionalization, Protestant population, and the proportion of population descended from Europeans. The proximate causes were brought into being more recently by human activity and can change frequently or radically, although change is usually episodic. They consist of institutions and organizations that lie on the conceptual periphery of “democracy”: things that are almost, but not quite, part of democracy itself. For this reason, they are causally proximate to democracy. Our examples are state capacity, institutionalized political parties, a vibrant civil society, and the type of electoral system. Between the distal and proximate causes lie intermediate causes. Conceptually they are completely distinct from “democracy”; but they are too dynamic and recent in origin to be treated as exogenous. In fact, they are endogenous to the most distal causes. In some ways they help shape the proximate causes. Therefore, they provide some potential causal linkages between the distal and proximate causes. They include some of the best-studied socioeconomic determinants of democracy: per capita GDP, literacy, and the development of industry vs. agriculture.

The intermediate causes partially eclipse the distal causes, in the sense that if both kinds of causes are used to explain electoral democracy, several of the distal causes lose statistical significance. In effect, the distal causes do help explain levels of democracy, but the contributions of many of them are channeled completely through the intermediate causes. In a similar way, the proximate causes completely eclipse the distal and intermediate causes. Concretely, if a country has high state capacity, institutionalized parties, vibrant civil society, and non-majoritarian elections, the level of electoral democracy can be high in the short term even if the level of socioeconomic development is low. (In the longer term, however, poor socioeconomic conditions may well erode the proximate features.)

Furthermore, the proximate institutions and organizations, especially parties and the state, tend to reinforce one another. If their contributions are all favorable to democracy, they tend to remain favorable; if they are harmful to democracy, it is hard for democracy to emerge. These proximate features form a self-reinforcing protective belt around the democratic (or non-democratic) regime. This belt helps explain why levels of democracy tend to be incremental and dramatic changes are rare. Finally, various international

networks linking countries together, such as geographic proximity and membership in international organizations, also matter for levels of democracy. Countries that are embedded in networks of similar regimes are less likely to change; those linked with dissimilar countries are more likely to change. Therefore, the striking spatial clustering of democracy and non-democracy tends to be self-reinforcing.

State Presence and Democratic Culture: A Spatial Investigation (Jacob Turner)

The relationship between state presence and individual-level democratic attitudes remains an open line of inquiry long after the third-wave of democratization. While greater access to state resources implies stronger integration into the state's legality, increased exposure to ineffective or violent state agents can have a toxic effect on notions of citizenship. This article seeks to measure the relationship between perceived access to agents of the state and individual support for democracy as the best form of government. To develop a measure of daily access to street level state organizations such as the police, firefighters, and public healthcare workers, this article uses the geocoded locations of each survey respondent in the Local Democracy Index (Índice de Democracia Local - IDL) of the city of São Paulo. Several different multilevel model specifications suggest that this measure of distance negatively correlates with support for democracy, implying that respondents living closer to state offices are more likely to express pro-democratic views while controlling for important socio-economic characteristics. These results suggest that a higher level of access to state agents and the services they provide could promote certain dimensions of democratic citizenship, though the relationship can be negated when those interactions are mostly violent in nature.