

Democracy in America – And Elsewhere

Part II – Recent Global Trends Toward Democracy

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Most Americans are probably used to viewing their own political system as a **shining example of “representative democracy”** – not only one of modern democracy’s original pioneers, but also a contemporary role model for other emerging democracies around the globe.

Of course we are also very proud of our free markets, our relative affluence, and our occasional ambitions -- at the moment, perhaps a bit muted -- to provide equal opportunities for all our citizens.

However, when we really try to market our country’s best features to the rest of the world, or teach our children to be proud of their country, it is not the economy that we brag about.

Even self-styled “conservatives” usually lead, not with glowing descriptions of perfect markets and all the opportunities for unlimited private gain, but with our **supposedly distinctive commitment to defending and expanding political democracy and**



human rights, both at home and abroad.

Indeed, one of the most important *official* justifications for our recent forays into the Middle East, as well as many other US foreign interventions, has been to help bring “[democracy](#)” to supposedly backward, undemocratic societies [like Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#) (...and before that, Haiti, Colombia, Panama, Nicaragua, Grenada, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Guyana, Guatemala, Iran, Laos, Vietnam, the Philippines...[etc. etc. etc.](#))

Even though, time and again, this noble commitment to sowing democracy abroad turns out to be pure rhetoric, it provides such an elastic cover story for all our many transgressions that it keeps on being recycled, over and over.

THE EMERGING DEMOCRACY GAP

Whatever the truth about US motives for such interventions, it may come as a surprise to learn that in the last two decades, the United States itself has actually **fallen behind** the rest of the democratic world in terms of “**best democratic practices**” and the overall representativeness of our own domestic political institutions.

Meanwhile, many developing countries have recently been making **very strong progress** toward representative democracy, without much help from us.

Indeed, in some cases, like South Africa, this progress was made in the face of opposition from many of the same neo-imperialist “patriots” who have lately voiced so much concern about transplanting democracy to the Middle East.

While we have been resting on our democratic laurels, or even slipping backwards, emerging democracies like Brazil, India, and South Africa, as well as many of our First World peers, have adopted procedures for electing governments that are much more democratic at almost every stage of the electoral process than those found in the US.



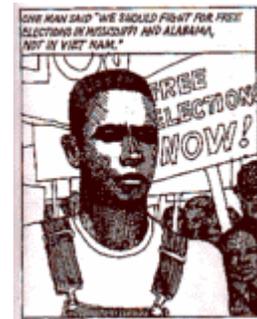
The institutions they have been improving include such bedrock elements of electoral democracy as

- (1) apportioning geographic boundaries for congressional districts;
 - (2) selecting candidates and conducting campaigns;
 - (3) qualifying and registering voters;
 - (4) establishing effective controls over campaign finance;
 - (5) providing equitable access to the public airwaves for campaign advertising;
 - (6) encouraging voter turnout;
 - (7) preventing outright vote fraud;
 - (8) insuring that votes are accurately and quickly counted – and, if necessary, recounted;
 - (9) insuring that voter preferences are fairly and proportionately represented in the legislative and executive branches of government; and
 - (10) enforcing other helpful provisions, like run-off and recall provisions.
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Of course effective democracy has **many other crucial elements** beside electoral process alone. These include (1) the relative influence of legislative, executive, and judicial branches; (2) the concrete opportunities that ordinary citizens have -- as compared with highly-organized special interests and professional lobbyists -- to influence government decisions *between* elections; (3) the respective influence of private interests, religious groups, and the state; (4) the degree to which the rule of law prevails over corruption and "insider" interests; and (5) the overall degree of political consciousness and know-how.

However, fair and open electoral processes are clearly a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for effective democracy -- all these other elements cannot make up for their absence.

We are hopeful that boosting the recognition of **this "electoral democracy gap" between the US and the rest of the democratic world** will be useful in several ways:



- It may make Americans more modest about our own accomplishments, and less patronizing about other countries;
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- It may spur us to consider that, far from preaching about democracy, we may actually have something to learn about it from other countries.
- It may provide an antidote for the recent revival of anti-democratic doctrines in the US, some of have acquired a disturbing level of influence among our political elites.
- It may help to show how own idiosyncratic version of “democracy” is exerting a profound influence on this year’s profoundly dissatisfying Presidential race.

DEMOCRATIC PRAXIS - WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE THIRD WORLD?

One useful place to start is with an assessment of best practices among the growing number of democracies around the globe. This used to be much easier than it is now. As of the early 1970s there were only about 40 countries that qualified as “representative democracies,” and most were First World countries.

Since then, however, there has been a real flowering of democratic institutions in the developing world. This was partly due to the collapse of the Soviet Empire in the late 1980s. But many more people were in fact “liberated” by the Third World debt crisis, which undermined corrupt, dictatorial regimes all over the globe, from Argentina, Brazil, and Chile to Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, and Zaire.



Voting in the Philippines, 2004

Assessments of the degree of “freedom” of individual regimes by organizations like Freedom House or the UN Development Program’s Human Development Indicators, are notoriously subjective. However, while there is plenty of room for disagreement about specific countries, there is little disagreement on the overall trend.



By 2004, about 60 percent, or 119, of the nearly 200

countries on the planet could be described as “electoral democracies,” compared with less than one-third in the early 1970s. Another 25-30 percent have made significant progress toward political freedom.



Voting in South Africa, 1994

Indeed, notwithstanding our present challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan, from the standpoint of global democracy, this has been a banner year. As of September 2004, 32 countries had already held nationwide elections or referenda, with 886 million people voting. (See Table 4.) By the end of 2004, another 33 countries will join the US in doing so – nearly three times as many national elections as were held each year, on average, in the 1970s.

All told, this year, more than 1.7 billion adults – 42 percent of the world’s voter-age population -- will be eligible to vote in national elections, and more than 1.1 billion will probably vote.

Of course some of these elections will be held in countries where democratic institutions and civil liberties are still highly imperfect. And some developing countries like [Russia](#) and [Venezuela](#) have

TABLE 4: GLOBAL ELECTIONS, THROUGH AUGUST 2004				
	Date	Voted	Reg. Voters	%
India	42004	387,484,626	671,524,934	58%
Indonesia	42004	124,456,342	148,000,369	84%
Russia	32004	69,581,761	108,064,281	64%
The Philippines	52004	32,347,269	43,536,028	74%
Mexico	32004	26,968,371	64,710,596	42%
France	62004	26,389,864	40,969,371	64%
Ukraine	32004	25,884,236	37,277,697	69%
Spain	32004	25,841,904	33,473,081	77%
Iran	22004	23,970,000	47,000,000	51%
Korea	42004	21,351,340	35,596,497	60%
South Africa	42004	15,863,554	20,674,926	77%
Canada	62004	13,648,151	22,295,670	61%
Taiwan	42004	13,251,719	16,507,179	80%
Algeria	42004	10,508,777	18,097,255	58%
Sri Lanka	42004	9,797,680	12,899,139	76%
Malaysia	32004	9,762,720	15,254,250	64%
Venezuela	82004	9,539,969	14,037,900	68%
Greece	32004	7,544,291	9,865,440	76%
Hungary	42004	5,685,655	8,061,101	71%
Austria	42004	4,267,612	6,030,877	71%
Dom Republic	52004	3,656,850	5,020,703	73%
Malawi	52004	3,000,000	5,742,747	52%
Bolivia	72004	2,678,449	4,458,290	60%
El Salvador	32004	2,277,473	3,442,515	66%
Slovakia	42004	2,014,619	4,204,899	48%
Georgia	12004	1,963,556	2,231,986	88%
Panama	42004	1,537,714	1,999,553	77%
Slovenia	42004	1,502,454	4,204,899	36%
Lithuania	62004	1,283,579	2,653,905	48%
Macedonia	42004	935,373	1,695,103	55%
Estonia	32004	500,686	859,714	58%
Guinea-Bissau	32004	449,924	605,018	74%
Antigua	32004	39,627	43,459	91%
TOTAL - NON US		885,986,145	1,411,039,382	63%
US	112004	105,000,000	212,000,000	50%

Source: electionguide.org, our analysis

recently been struggling between finding the right balance between democracy and national leadership, partly to undo the effects of neoliberal policies in the 1990s, or in response to terrorist threats.

But the good news is that democracy is clearly not a “luxury good.” The demand for it is very strong even in low-income countries like Bolivia, Bangladesh, Mozambique, Guatemala, and Botswana. And while self-anointed dictators, military rulers, and one-party elites or

TABLE 5: TOP 20 AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES, 2004	
	Population
China	1,305,703,756
Pakistan	160,915,090
Vietnam	83,078,754
Egypt	76,341,343
Iran	68,929,036
Ethiopia	68,369,619
Congo (Kinshasa)	58,258,693
Burma	43,331,783
Sudan	39,300,818
Morocco	32,496,531
Algeria	32,301,470
Nepal	27,161,707
Uzbekistan	26,604,810
Afghanistan	26,575,079
Uganda	26,420,525
Saudi Arabia	25,746,641
Iraq	25,404,363
Korea, North	22,815,612
Yemen	19,872,149
Syria	18,064,976
Others (N=43)	258,315,410
TOTAL	2,446,008,165

Source: US Census; our analysis

theocracies are still clinging to power in some 50-60 countries that have more than **2.4 billion residents**, such regimes are beginning to look more and more anachronistic. ([See Table 5.](#))

Interestingly, Asian dictatorships, especially China and Vietnam, now account for more than **three-fifths** of the portion of the world’s population that is still under authoritarian rule. While several Islamic countries appear on the list of authoritarian countries, they account for just one fifth of the total. Furthermore, by far the most important

ones happen to be close US "allies" like Pakistan, Egypt, Morocco and Saudi Arabia.

Evidently the simple-minded neoconservative "clash of cultures" model, which pits supposedly democratic, pluralist societies against an imaginary Islamic bloc, doesn't have much explanatory power. Evidently the US also faces some very tough choices, if it is really serious about promoting *non-discriminatory, secular democratic states* among its Islamic allies, as well as in Palestine and Israel.



A more encouraging point is that many developing countries are already providing useful lessons in democratization. Indeed, as we will see in Part III of this series, there is much to learn from the experiences of new democracies like Brazil and South Africa. These countries are undertaking bold experiments with measures like free air time for candidates, "registration-free" voting, direct Presidential elections, electronic voting, proportional representation, and the public finance of campaigns. While not all these experiments have worked out perfectly, the fact these countries have already demonstrated a capacity to innovate in "democratic design" is very encouraging.

Of course there is a long-standing tension between the US dedication to Third World democracy and its tolerance for the independence that democratic nationalism often brings. By renewing and deepening our own commitment to democracy at home, we will also protect it abroad -- even though (as in Venezuela, Russia, Iran, and perhaps eventually Iraq) it does not always produce governments that we agree with.



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