

DEMOCRATIZATION: THE WORLD-WIDE SPREAD OF DEMOCRACY IN THE MODERN AGE

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1. Introduction

We live today in what is, in historical terms, the “Golden Age of Democracy.” After explosive growth in the number of democracies in the 1990-1995 periods (from 70 to 114) we now find ourselves in a world with more democratic regimes than ever before. By the late 1990s there were over 120 democratic countries and, for the first time in history, the majority of the world’s population was living under democratic rule. How can we explain this amazing and unprecedented triumph of democracy on a global scale?

This essay looks at the production of limited government and, ultimately, modern liberal democracy by both local and international forces across 500 years of history, in Europe, the West, and the world. In doing so, it mixes “internalist” and “externalist” threads of analysis. The principles and practices of democratic government have undergone

important developments inside various polities as a result of ideational innovations and political movements. But democracy and democratic ideals have also been spread and maintained by forceful international action and - long before modern democracy existed - by important patterns of behavior and factors in international politics.

We might call this the story of “liberalism,” though the term itself was not invented until the early nineteenth century. This liberalism refers to a body of related political ideas, a political agenda or project with threads of continuity that can meaningfully be identified across much of history. From its early days it has stood for the rule of law, individual liberties, limits on government power, and constitutionalism. It became avowedly anti-monarchical in the European context, and came to include religious freedom and tolerance, egalitarianism, economic freedoms, mass-based political parties and elections, and ultimately universal human rights for all.

The “internal” narrative of the development of democracy has always been about ideational and philosophical developments, scholars, activists and pamphleteers, and the political movements, rebellions, revolutions, and eventually sizeable transnational social movements which they have inspired and led. Over time this activism has brought limits on tyrannical power, popular sovereignty, expansions in voting rights, and the spread of civil and political rights to all kinds of groups.

The “external,” international dimension to the story of liberalism’s and democracy’s spread is just as significant, and has two dimensions, or historical “phases.” First, there are the accidental, unintended effects of the many specific behavioral tendencies of liberal actors. These might be called the “liberal advantage”: the particular behaviors of liberal actors and their positively-selecting outcomes, especially in international affairs. Many of these have been identified by theorists of liberal international relations in the last twenty-five years. For example, liberal states do not fight each other, they are more likely to ally with each other and their alliances tend to be more durable. As open polities they tend to have more interaction across their borders, more trade, which promotes interdependence with other liberal states. Democratic leaders also tend to select their wars more carefully and are more likely to win wars they enter or initiate, because they tend to have better leaders, better soldiers and generals, with more open and accurate information systems in war-fighting. Relative transparency and openness means less debilitating rent-seeking activities in liberal states, greater material capabilities, and better trust and communication with allies. Liberal states form more durable international organizations, are more likely to obey international law, and have been key builders of international institutions across time. These behavioral tendencies and unconscious effects of liberalism are especially relevant to the early years of the historical process of democratic expansion.

Second, there is the more conscious, intentional advancement and promotion of democratic values by governments in their foreign policy, with the intention of affecting global politics. For example, at times liberal states act as full-fledged “liberal powers.” In these instances states let their liberal values guide their foreign policy rather than realist calculations; they assertively promote and even impose liberal values, human rights, constitutions and elections, and democracy upon others in their foreign policy. Liberal powers have reached a new level of ambition in the last twenty years or so, in

that they have come to be aware of and believe in the democratic peace and act intentionally to promote democracy for the purpose of achieving it. Today we have reached the level of general consciousness of the liberal advantage and the democratic peace, such that world leaders publicly discuss it and adopt democracy promotion and democratic expansion as a foreign policy.

Scholars such as Wade Huntley have recently highlighted the idea of two “phases” of a liberalism effect in world politics, in the work of the liberal philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant held that, given the advent of just a few liberal states, subsequent developments via liberal advantage mechanisms - their aversion to war and violence, their “separate peace” and durable alliances with each other, etc. - global anarchy would gradually disappear, replaced by a federal world of peaceful liberal states. Kant also identified the same likely pattern: developments would proceed piecemeal and unnoticed at first, until a consciousness emerged; at this point the “culture” of the international system would change, as democratic states became conscious of what was happening and shifted their policies to actually promote the trend. In this way the international system can be seen as a self-organizing, open system which, while perhaps anarchical in its early stages, eventually transforms itself and produces order and peace in the world around a consensus on liberal values and national democracy.

The mechanisms of the liberal advantage are related to and work with some of the general “selection mechanisms” found to be at work across the history of international relations, in dynamics of competition and socialization: the mimicry of success, exit from behaviors that aren’t helpful to group interests, a preference amongst political leaders for similar regime types (mutual empowerment), etc. However, liberal advantages are quite specific and numerous mechanisms, operating both within polities and between them. It is not clear that, at least in the early phase, they constitute selection via actor learning; they are instead piecemeal competitive advantages, largely unknown to actors or analysts through time. The repetition of these unheralded, unknown tendencies over hundreds of years has produced the world of hegemonic liberalism we see today, a world in which democracy has become, though perhaps only since the 1980s, the default solution to the main political problems of human society – domestic tranquility and international peace.

How far back in history have liberal behavioral patterns been found to be important? Spencer Weart’s *Never at War* has looked at the issue of the democratic peace across millennia and found it to have been present in the Greek city-state system. Some have also argued that pro-liberal forces have always practiced internationalism and “linkage politics,” because those who valued liberty sought to preserve it from foreign threats, perhaps even by aggressively expanding the liberal state in a Machiavellian way. John M. Owen finds elements back to the 1790s; Bruce Russett holds that the separate democratic peace emerged in the 1890s, for example, with the alliance between the US and Britain after a crisis over British Guiana and Venezuela.

This essay seeks to add to these historical treatments of the forces and factors that have helped democracy develop, establish itself, and spread to become so predominant in the world today. It may give a slight over-emphasis to early historical periods, but this is because this part of the story is much less well-known than more contemporary events.

Liberal ideals, liberal advantage and the presence of democracy have shaped international relations across time and shaped the way the world works. And liberalism has propagated itself. Indeed, liberal dominance today is such that we must consider the danger of an arrogant and self-satisfied liberal cultural imperialism, liberal empire and a homogenizing “death of difference” around the world. These suggest the need for a new “critical liberalism” to go beyond liberal complacency to improve and perfect the workings of democracy and address issues of poverty, severe economic inequality, and political alienation.

2. Early European Republicanism, to 1517

While we might start with Greek and Roman antiquity, examining the expansion of liberal ideals and democracy is best begun in the early modern period. A general medieval constitutionalism flourished in Europe in this period, based upon feudal divisions of powers between different ranks of nobility and the overlapping of church powers, and also because the era is one in which power is relatively poorly concentrated and ineffectively wielded. The Magna Carta of 1215 in England is a typical example of these established practices of consultation between kings and lesser nobility – meetings of ancient *estates* and *parlements* which were also common in all parts of Europe up into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This minimal republicanism flourished in Europe in this period, before larger centralized state construction, greater concentrations of wealth, and the ideologies of *raison d'état* and absolutism made much of Europe a more hostile place for such liberties.

Communal, oligarchical republicanism in the Italian city-state system is the most well-known instance of proto-democracy in this period. From the early twelfth century onward, many Italian city-states (Florence, Venice, Siena, Lucca, Genoa, Bologna, and others) were republics at various times and democratic in important ways. They had checks on dictatorial autocracy via public participation in decision-making, regular elections to many elected offices, separation of executive and legislative functions, with a steady turnover in positions. They were also generally “oligarchic” republics in that, of the noblemen and city folk, typically not more than one-fifth of the men living in the city would be permitted to vote, participate and hold office. The Swiss cantons were other crucial early developments in communal republicanism. Their sub-system is also one of the great exemplars of a “liberalism effect” of sorts, in that the cantons generally avoided fighting each other and instead allied to maintain their independence for over 800 years (Weart 1998).

Classical Florentine and Venetian republicanism of the fifteenth century did survive and the two occasionally helped each other, though the two regimes had important differences. Florence kept its constitution flexible and the doors to important positions relatively open, unlike Venice, which had more of an aristocratic tradition. Venice was run by the male representatives of a few hundred prominent families, with an elected prince-like figure in the *doge*. Entrance to this elite circle was formally closed in 1297, and thereafter elaborate genealogical records were consulted to verify membership. Venice would later be identified as a model of the “mixed constitution” admired in Italy and throughout Europe into the seventeenth century.

Elements of a liberalism effect in operation in Italy in this later period included a periodic, weak democratic peace. One example of republican alliances is the linking of Florence, Venice, Genoa and Siena against Milan in the 1420s and 1430s. The two major republican powers, Venice and Florence, met on the battlefield only once, in 1466, and then did not fight each other.

A second, key international dimension of republican influence was the early formulation of notions of purposeful balancing of power, to maintain the independence of states. M.S. Anderson, in his *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy*, finds the first European mention of this balancing idea by a Venetian diplomat in 1439, with the claim that Venice was pursuing precisely this strategy. Venice had a massive diplomatic operation, necessary in part because they could not conduct their diplomacy through dynastic connections and royal marriages, as did much of the rest of Europe. (Modern diplomacy and official diplomatic services are likely an invention of the early Italian republics.)

But tense relations between republics were just as likely in the violent environment of the Italian peninsula. Florence had its own imperial tendencies, and when it attacked Lucca in 1429, Siena went running to despotic Milan for protection. From 1434 to 1494 the Medici family and their supporters very effectively dominated the Florentine *stato*, though many of the formal practices of republicanism were retained. Florence was, paradoxically, closely allied with Milan for most of this period, and even helped crush Milan's revived communal democracy – the Ambrosian Republic of 1447-1450 – in favor of a return to ducal rule. Venice also displayed liberal imperial ambitions, and was such a power after expansion onto the Italian mainland in the first half of the 1400s that it evoked balancing behavior against itself, in occasional alliances between Florence and Milan.

These weak liberalism effects may have helped sustain republicanism in Italy, though the durable liberal league that might be expected to materialize never did. Liberal behavior patterns were also negligible in that these republics were often on opposite sides of alliances and sometimes conquered and absorbed each other. There was definitely a lack of republican solidarity at crucial times. Venice would often ally with Milan or other forces when it was seeking territorial gains; other republics did the same.

In 1494 the French invasion of the peninsula shook all Italy. Florence overthrew the Medici and instituted a more broadly-based republican constitution that lasted intermittently to 1530. By 1530 only Lucca, Siena, Venice and Florence remained as republics, and the period can be said to have ended with the termination of Florentine democracy by the Medicis in 1533. Though the Venetian republic lasted another two centuries – it was alone. The Italian state system and its varieties of republican democracy were ultimately unable to survive, being destroyed by: 1) the expansion of aggressive, despotic Milan after 1385; 2) the concentration of wealth in illiberal families with dynastic ambitions like the Medicis; and 3) the meddling of France and the Holy Roman Empire in peninsular affairs, neither of which were liberal influences.

Early Italian republicanism was of course quite incomplete by modern standards. We do not yet have key developments like broad rights of participation or equality before the law, nor a general recognition of the rights of self government. There was some

sense of liberal solidarity amongst republics, but it was weakly developed. These ideas would not become powerful until much later.

3. Early Modern Democracy, 1517-1814

The story of democratic practices in the early modern period is largely one of stasis or retreat. The bases of medieval constitutionalism withered in this period and absolutism became dominant. The end of the Hundred Years War between France and England in 1453 marked the rise of royal power in both places. England's parliament met less frequently thereafter, and Louis XI (r.1461-1483) adopted a "raison d'état" style of politics and centralized power.

The next important events in the transnational development of democracy arrive almost simultaneously, in the Protestant Reformation (1517) and the rise of Charles V and Habsburg power (1519). The first produced a deep division in European society, the second created a new possibility of "universal monarchy" or trans-European empire. These two factors combined to break the dominance of Catholicism and force the creation of a power balancing system in Europe which ultimately provided the space for important Protestant republican experiments to emerge. Here, in the face of the counter-Reformation and rising absolutism, liberal political thought continued to innovate.

Protestants were not necessarily liberal themselves, especially in the immediate regimes of Luther or Calvin. But noblemen throughout Europe embraced new Protestant creeds as a rebellion against their monarchs and rising absolutism that was replacing the old feudal decentralization and power-sharing. Protestants also fought domination of Europe and allied to beat back the hegemonic designs of Emperor Charles V (r.1519-1556) and Philip II of Spain (r.1556-1598). They also fought Inquisition-style policies in places like the Spanish Netherlands and France. Thanks to developments like the Treaty of Augsburg (1555), Arblaster notes that the common rule for much of the sixteenth century was "une roi, une foi, une loi" ("one king, one faith, one law") and a new kind of territorially-defined theocracy was born with the counter-Reformation and Inquisition amongst Catholic states and in Luther's intolerance and Calvin's theocratic city-state in Geneva. The Dutch had broken this code by the 1570s with more tolerant religious regulation. The Edict of Nantes (in effect from 1598 to 1685) is also important in establishing tolerance in France.

Eventually a rebirth of liberal political ideals occurs as well. Did Christendom have to fall apart first for liberal ideals to prosper? Probably not. The historical role of the Reformation was to splinter Catholic Europe and introduce a powerful individual-level identity – varying religious affiliations – into European international relations. The Reformation is therefore essential to explaining the Westphalian revolution, the cutting of Europe into delineated, "sovereign" territorial units; Westphalian sovereignty results from Protestantism. In addition, without it and the challenge of religious diversity there might also have been no separation of church and state or Enlightenment. Was early modern sovereignty also a key development in making democracy itself possible? Yes and no. The creation of states as "containers" was important in creating spaces for liberal ideas to germinate, but the notion that non-intervention in your neighbor's affairs protected early democracy within these territories is unfounded, since there was external

meddling in “domestic” political affairs – forceful regime change - well into the nineteenth century and beyond.

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Biographical Sketch

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