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Is democracy exportable?

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Abstract

Among the many aspects of the question of whether democracy is exportable, this contribution focusses on the role of the people, understood not as a unitary actor but as a heterogeneous set: the citizens. The people matters, in a different way, both in the countries to which democracy might be exported and in the democratic countries in which the question is about promoting democracy elsewhere. The mechanisms or characteristics involved in the discussion include yardstick competition, differences among citizens in the intensity of their preferences, differences among autocracies regarding intrusion into private life, citizens' assessments of future regime change, and responsiveness of elected incumbents to the views of minorities. The second part of the contribution explains why democracy promotion is more likely to work through citizens' concern with human rights abuses than with regime characteristics.

Keywords: democratization, democracy promotion, preference intensity, popular support to autocracies, yardstick competition over regimes, human rights abuses.

JEL classification: D7, F5

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1. INTRODUCTION

Replacing dictatorship with democracy is supposed to transfer the power to the people. To what extent or how strongly does the people want it? The question is often considered important when the topic is whether democracy is exportable to a given country, say China or Egypt. However, it is largely absent from the literature dealing with general processes such as democratic transition and diffusion, involving unspecified countries. There, the implicit assumption is that the people naturally gains from the power implied by democracy and thus should always desire it. If democracy is not instituted, presumably some form of repression or manipulation is at work preventing it. Based in part on these assumptions, optimism about the ubiquity of popular preferences for democracy has been eroded by the events that followed military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya or followed the so-called Arab Spring. It was challenged earlier by the success and self-confidence of the autocracies in China or Singapore.¹

The question of whether democracy is exportable arises in that context. To discuss it the present contribution is distinctive in being centered on the people -- that is, on citizens. Because of that focus, other perspectives on the said question can only be mentioned (see Geddes 2007, Barany and Moser 2009). An approach that seems particularly natural, already present in Tocqueville and Marx, is pointing to prerequisites. It can take a strong form with propositions such as: no democracy without a bourgeoisie, a middle class, an income per head at least equal to X, a rate of literacy at least equal to Y, and so on. In line with the current practice in social science, the 'threshold' approach has evolved toward the econometric study of factors that may have a significant influence on the adoption of democracy. The variables found to count are generally the same, albeit in a smoother and more conditional way (Barro 1999, Murin and Wacziarg 2014).²

Another strand neglected here treats income distribution as the main variable involved in democratization. In the more theoretical contributions, the population is divided into two categories supposed to be rational unitary actors, an assumption that facilitates recourse to game theory. In Rosendorff (2001), for instance, the question

¹ On attempts to export democracy by force, see Coyne (2007). According to Diamond (2015), a 'democratic recession' started around 2006.

² Congleton (2003) emphasizes the importance of cultural norms together with economic conditions.

raised by the process of democratization is “how and when do elites decide to negotiate a transfer to democracy?” The answer is given by a model in which the two players are the capital-owning elite and the labor-owning workers. The explanation of democratization in Acemoglu and Robinson (2005) is similar. Credibility, a game-theoretic concept, plays the main role. To avoid a revolution, elites understand that concessions to the rest of the population are necessary but also that the concessions will be considered credible only if associated with democratization, defined as an irreversible institutional transfer of decision-making power.³

The process of democratization, or more generally the process of regime change, is analyzed as less discontinuous in a number of books that combine theoretical discussions with detailed historical evidence (Huntington 1991, Voigt 1999, North *et al.* 2009, Congleton 2011). They show that the actual decisions that generate change are usually made, in a context of compromise or bargaining rather than of revolution, by individuals in power in the different branches of government or in political parties and other organizations. As a rule, the people is not directly responsible for regime change, in particular from authoritarianism to democracy or the other way around.⁴

Without disputing that point, I will assume that popular support, consent or acquiescence remains generally important. Office holders, even in autocracies, do seek and often obtain it (Arendt 1951, Breton 1996, Wintrobe 1998). It is a factor in the survival, demise or evolution of institutional arrangements. It usually inspires or constrains, at least in part, the decisions of those actors (mentioned above) who are more directly involved in regime change.⁵ Its influence is also of a contextual kind, akin to that of health condition: as a rule, the worse that condition the weaker the capacity of a body to resist attacks; likewise, the degree to which a regime benefits from popular acquiescence, consent or support has an effect on its robustness or fragility in the presence of pressure or shocks that may or may not emanate from the people itself.

³ We will eschew the concept of ‘elite’, which is convenient but overused, and which often clashes (when elites are assumed to be unitary actors) with the improved understanding of collective action that we owe to Olson (1965). Moreover, if ‘elites’ is not merely another word for ‘rulers’, we can observe that, although some autocrats favor elites against the ‘masses’, some others favor the masses against elites, or subsets thereof.

⁴ There are important historical episodes in which the causal impulse does emanate from citizens. A recent example is the uprising in Tunisia that triggered the so-called Arab Spring.

⁵ Even when, in the case studied, there is no uprising, the decision-makers who conceded some change can have been influenced by the fear of it, especially when made more pressing by the occurrence of actual uprisings in neighboring countries (Aidt and Jensen 2014).

Some categories of the population may be represented by organizations (parties and lobbies *e.g.*) that behave as unitary actors. Then, getting the agreement of a category can take the form of a negotiation with the organization supposed to represent it. The matter becomes quite complicated when representativeness is problematic and when a category is represented by several organizations. Anyhow, those features are abstracted from in the following discussion, which neglects altogether representation and intermediaries. The people and subsets thereof are assumed *not* to be unitary actors. Only citizens are. We refer to the degrees of support or consent given by categories but only as aggregates (weighted sums, to simplify) of the support or consent given by the individuals that make up these categories. If something like strategic thinking is involved, this is at the level of the members of the category, not of the category itself. In the discussion about democracy promotion (Section 3), some organizations are mentioned but the focus remains on the behavior or attitude of individual citizens.

The title of this contribution (is democracy exportable?) is the same as the title of a volume edited by Barany and Moser (2009).⁶ In the concluding chapter of that useful and interesting book, Bermeo criticizes the idea that democracy is something that can be exported. It is true that the exportation metaphor has serious limitations. But it orients the mind to the international dimension of regime change and to the need to investigate both sides of the matter. The organization of the paper satisfies that need in a simple way. Sections 2 and 3 are about the people or citizens on the importing and on the exporting sides respectively. The situation of citizens in the two settings is obviously different. On the importing side, citizens live under autocratic regimes and are directly concerned with their nature and that of the regimes that might replace them. On the exporting side, citizens live in democratic countries. They do have some influence on the policies adopted by their own governments toward non-democratic countries but the attention most of them give to the nature of regimes elsewhere is limited. I will argue that inasmuch as citizens in countries that are democratic have some influence on democratization in countries that are not, this will be mainly through the expression of their concern with human rights abuses rather than with violations of democratic norms.

⁶ Coyne (2007) and Hermet (2008) also have that title.

In politics as in other matters, individual decision-making involves preferences, information and constraints. Standard assumptions about them raise no particular problems when applied to individual politicians and bureaucrats. The matter is different in the case of the ordinary citizens who are our main concern. Much of the following discussion is about specific features of their preferences or views.

2. THE PEOPLE ON THE IMPORTING SIDE

The main characteristics of ‘the people’ are its large size and its heterogeneity. The degree of support, consent or acquiescence that it gives to politicians, policies or regimes must be seen as a weighted sum, or more generally an aggregate, of the support, consent or acquiescence awarded by the individuals who compose it. That characteristic of support will be assumed to be applicable to all political regimes. This does not mean of course that popular support is expressed in the same way everywhere. In the case of dictatorships, it is often very difficult to evaluate (Kuran 1989). Still, the following three aspects are quite general.

2.1. Outcomes and instruments

Citizens are in a situation of information inferiority vis-à-vis office holders. That situation may be a matter of information cost, as assumed in the voters’ rational ignorance argument, or a consequence of some information being available only to the decision-makers in charge, as generally modelled in the literature on information asymmetry and the principal-agent relation. Under information asymmetry, citizens are much more able to judge policy outcomes than to assess policy instruments or the relation between instruments and outcomes. What does that mean with regard to policy preferences? On outcomes, citizens may have genuine preferences. On policy instruments, most of them have no opinion at all or only relatively flexible preferences, akin to tentative views. However we will see that what is an instrument for most can be an outcome and an object of strong preference for some.

Even judging policy outcomes -- whether prospectively, as included in candidates’ platforms, or retrospectively, when realized -- is far from always easy. In general, some criterion or yardstick is needed. For some types of outcomes, a yardstick may be provided by comparisons over time within the same jurisdiction. For others,

relying on such comparisons is misleading. Then, comparisons over time should be replaced or complemented by comparisons across borders. When made by voters, cross-jurisdiction comparisons are the basis of a mechanism called political yardstick competition. It was originally studied and is still mostly discussed in the context of decentralization and fiscal federalism (Salmon 1987, Besley and Case 1995). It is more widely relevant though. To give an example: does the fact that, in country X, life expectancy increases by two years reflect a good performance? Office-holders as insiders may be able to answer that question by referring to the effort needed to get the result. Outside the governmental machinery, reliable information about that effort is unavailable. Citizens will have to consider what obtains in other countries. If on average the increase there is five years, considering that the performance in X is good would be mistaken. Increased life expectancy in a single country is the product of worldwide scientific progress and policies implemented in that country. To evaluate the result of these policies, citizens as outsiders must take into account the existence of the worldwide trend, which is exactly what cross-jurisdiction comparisons help them to do.

However, there are circumstances in which citizens – that is, many of them -- are willing to engage in cross-jurisdiction comparisons about instruments. The following pattern seems plausible: cross-jurisdiction comparisons by citizens remain exclusively about policy outcomes as long as they suggest that the government does a good job. If this is not the case, citizens, in spite of their informational handicap, turn their attention to policies adopted elsewhere. They observe associations or correlations between some of these policies and outcomes they approve of, and this generates a pressure on incumbents to try the policies that seem to work. To illustrate, suppose that country Y (perhaps China) adopts a market-friendly system and its economy grows more quickly - - growth being considered by citizens as a desired outcome and reliance on markets as an instrument. Country X has a market-unfriendly system and its economy grows slowly. Citizens in X observe the two systems and the two growth rates. They care less about the system than about the growth rate. If the government in X manages to increase the rate of growth of the economy without copying the system adopted in Y, this is fine with the people in X. If economic growth remains significantly weaker in X than it is in Y, then arises in X a popular pressure on the government to try the system that seems to deliver the desired outcome. In other words, what people in many parts of

the world like about China is not its capitalist or market orientation but the growth rate of its economy. The pressure on own governments is to get the second if need be by trying the first. That example is about growth but the same mechanism can apply to other policy outcomes.

That pattern has an explanatory power distinct from the usual explanations of policy diffusion or contagion. In these explanations, voters or citizens, even when given a role, are not supposed to make cross-jurisdiction comparisons (yardstick competition is not mentioned). Only office-holders or bureaucrats (with or without voters or citizens in mind) do. The mechanism at work is policy learning (called laboratory federalism in the decentralization context). Officials observe what is done elsewhere and may decide to adopt the policies or practices that work (in their views).

The two mechanisms often operate in the same direction. More generally, they are difficult to disentangle empirically. This explains in part that the distinction is generally absent from the literature on diffusion -- in particular on democracy diffusion (Gleditsch and Ward 2008). However, the instances of diffusion or resilience that the two mechanisms explain can also be quite different. The objectives of office holders do not always coincide with those of citizens. An extreme case is when the policies or practices incumbents imitate aim at deception, manipulation or repression, for instance a dictator learning from another one how to remain in power despite bad performance. Conversely, yardstick competition may compel change detrimental to office holders -- that is, change that they would never undertake without the pressure arising from citizens' cross-jurisdiction comparisons. Another cause of differences is that politicians and bureaucrats may learn from what they observe even in distant places whereas citizens are more likely to be only influenced by what they observe nearby (or in user-friendly league tables). Thus, the empirical finding that neighboring countries weigh more in the democracy diffusion process than more distant ones (Leeson and Dean 2009) suggests that the mechanism at work is yardstick competition (based on comparisons by citizens) rather than policy learning (based on comparisons by governments).

2.2. Preference intensity

Is democracy to be treated as an instrument or as an outcome? One way to answer that question is simply to apply to it the reasoning above. If policy outcomes are comparatively good, many citizens do not pay much attention to the political regime, which may be an autocracy or a democracy. If policy outcomes are comparatively bad, while outcomes seem better where democracy prevails, some citizens may wish that a regime change be tried. That pattern may explain some of the democracy diffusion observed.

I will discuss the matter differently by stressing a second, related, aspect of citizens' preferences. Democracy may be only an instrument for some citizens but an outcome and an object of preferences for others. In the second case, the preferences may be more or less intense. In the multidimensional version of the spatial theory of voting (Enelow and Hinich 1984), the intensity of preferences takes the form of the relative weights that individual voters attribute to issues.⁷ As explained in Salmon (2002), the relative intensity of preferences deserves particular attention when the focus is on extremism. Many people express an extreme position on some topic. However, they often attribute little weight to that position. Conversely, people generally express moderate views on many topics. But what weight do they give to moderation? Crossing positions and weights can be achieved in the framework of the spatial theory of voting by giving iso-preference contours the form of ellipses or ellipsoids. In a two-dimension space, elongated ellipses represent a tendency to monomania (no pejorative connotation intended): a small movement along one of the axes costs – *i.e.*, diminishes utility -- a lot while a large movement along the other axis costs almost nothing.⁸ By crossing monomania and position, we may have monomaniac extremists and monomaniac moderates, but also inconsequential moderates and inconsequential extremists. Support coalitions built up among categories of citizens having these characteristics tend to have very different implications.

⁷ Although there are more sophisticated spatial theories of voting (Merrill and Grofman 1999), the relative weighting approach is the most convenient for our purpose. There are also measures of intensity unrelated to the spatial perspective. Hansen *et al.* (2015) borrow from marketing a method based on 'choice experiments'. One of their results, for instance, is that voters in Denmark would "require a tax cut of \$89 per month to accept Sweden becoming richer than Denmark".

⁸ Ellipse-shaped indifference curves are used in Tullock (1970) and Congleton (1991) to analyze special-interest or single-issue voting.

Let us assume a two-dimensional space in which one axis concerns the institutional regime (more or less democratic or authoritarian, say) and the other represents an indicator of those outcomes that have a particularly direct bearing on private life – hereafter *private life outcomes*. Since that variable will play an important role in the forthcoming discussion let us be somewhat more precise about it. It refers to the degree to which purely private liberties and activities (at home or concerning leisure, religion and work) and private ownership rights are safeguarded. It does not concern those property rights that are needed for a capitalist economy or those liberties, such as freedom of expression, that have a political dimension.

Several combinations of position and intensity are particularly noteworthy. One is ingrained democracy. In it, a sizeable part of the population will behave as monomaniac democrats in the sense that they would sacrifice many aspects of private life for the purpose of maintaining democracy (the main axes of the ellipse-shaped iso-preference curves are perpendicular to the regime axis at a high level of democracy). As a rule, democracies are ingrained and thus robust when they have been established for some time. Time is needed for different reasons. Let me mention the time necessary for politicians and political parties to build up reputation, for citizens to learn from their errors and understand better the way democracy works, for past events involving democracy to generate memories and emotions favorable to it. Not all citizens, or even a majority, will have “learned to love democracy” (Svolik 2013) – that is, in our terminology to have become democracy monomaniacs -- but for a democratic regime to be robust it is necessary that many citizens have and with sufficient intensity. Young democracies are fragile; the number of citizens who have become democracy monomaniacs is insufficient. The survival of democracy is dependent on circumstances remaining favorable. In the 1930s, given the circumstances democracy survived where it was ingrained, that is had been there for a sufficiently long period of time, and collapsed where it was not, that is where it was young. Currently, in spite of the strong democratic incentives that the European Union (EU) provides, the relationship between youth and fragility remains relevant among existing member countries of the EU and even more among would-be members.

Symmetrically, an ingrained dictatorship would be one in which most people would sacrifice many aspects of personal life for the purpose of maintaining the

dictatorship. Instances certainly exist -- even though it is difficult to disentangle strong loyalty to a dictatorship and strong preferences for some categories of outcomes, as discussed below.

The configuration that tends to prevail is of a third type. Regime preferences tend to be less intense than preferences about the private life outcomes mentioned above. To satisfy the second category of preferences, most people are ready to sacrifice the first. However that characterization is incomplete. It should be complemented by an important distinction among regimes between those that have no dramatic implications on private life outcomes and those that have.⁹ In the first case, since their private way of life is not much concerned, the position of most citizens with regard to democracy or dictatorship can be moderate or extreme without being intense or robust. Depending on exogenous circumstances, that position may change relatively easily from supporting dictatorship or authoritarianism to supporting democracy and vice versa. The history of Germany during the first half of the 20th century illustrates that flexibility. The consequences of war and the fate of the Jews should not obscure the fact that regime change, from monarchy to the Federal Republic through the Weimar republic and the Third Reich had only a moderate effect on the private life of most German citizens. The same is true of Italy, another country in which democracy was not ingrained. In both instances, popular support transited relatively smoothly across regimes.¹⁰

In the second case, a major purpose of the regime is to change or regulate the private life of citizens. Instead of being ‘private life neutral’, we may call that kind of regime ‘private life intrusive’.¹¹ The logical consequence is that preferences about private life determine in part negative or positive preferences about regimes. Radical communism was perhaps the main instance. In Soviet Russia under Lenin and Stalin or in China under Mao Zedong (not to speak of Cambodia under Pol Pot), radical communism regimes changed completely and then regulated in a deeply constraining way the personal life of a large part of the population. That characteristic appealed to

⁹ The implied typology is related to but different from the one proposed in Wintrobe (1998, 2007). Comparing the two is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁰ See *e.g.* Ayçoberry (1998) and Johnson (2000) for the Nazi period, Bosworth (2005) for Italy 1915-1945. As Baehr (2004) observes, interest in ordinary life, including by Hannah Arendt, has been largely dominated by questions relative to the political positions, engagement, awareness or responsibility of ordinary Germans, which is not our subject. Obviously, the formulation in the text disregards the case of East Germany.

¹¹ A regime being “private life intrusive” is close to it being “encompassing” as interpreted by Wintrobe (2007, p. 382).

some and made them support the regime. It had the opposite effect on others. Currently, radical communism is limited to North Korea. The regimes, actual or potential, perceived as privately intrusive are based on radical Islam.

2.3. Looking ahead

Getting rid of a dictatorship is only a prologue. What happens next? Democracy? Another dictatorship? Chaos? Civil war? International war? Many historical episodes demonstrate the relevance of these questions. Hitler and Mussolini were replaced by democracy, Batista by Castro, the Shah by Khomeini, Saddam Hussein by civil war and Gaddafi by chaos. Rational citizens look ahead and this has an effect on how they behave now. Their conjectures (or uncertainties) about what might happen if the regime ends play a large, often overlooked, role in the degree to which they give it their assent.

An important aspect of the matter must be stressed. Individual citizens may be concerned not only with the immediate aftermath of the regime's end but also with the trajectory that the country may follow later. For instance, suppose that the current regime of a country is a dictatorship of type A, the regime most likely to replace it first is a democracy, but this democracy has a non-negligible probability of being replaced in a second stage by a dictatorship of type B. The assumptions, inspired by methodological individualism, that we made above about the nature of the people (its large size and heterogeneity, namely) are crucial here. If the people acted as a single rational actor, as often assumed in economic theory, it could say to itself (so to say): dictatorship A will be followed by democracy, and then I (the people) will decide sovereignly between sticking to democracy or accepting to move to a dictatorship of type B. Inasmuch as I (the people) keep on disliking dictatorships of type B, I will make sure that moving to one does not happen. An individual citizen cannot reason in that way. The majority of opinion now is not necessarily the one that will emerge later. The intensity of the preferences of fellow citizens is not known. The views they entertain may not be robust. The personality of prominent individuals (e.g. Gorbachev, Milosevic, Juan Carlos, Mandela, Putin or Erdogan) may make a difference in one direction or the other. If our individual citizen is particularly hostile to dictatorships of type B this gives him or her a reason to support the status quo (dictatorship of type A) even if the short term alternative is democracy, which he or she likes better than dictatorships in general.

Let us return to the distinctions above. Assume that dictatorships of type B are very 'private life intrusive' - radical communism and radical Islamism are the main instances -- whereas dictatorships of type A are not or much less. The dictatorship in place is of type A. Democracy being followed by a dictatorship of type B is a serious possibility -- we have seen that young democracies are fragile.¹² Democracy monomaniacs will fight dictatorships whatever their type. They will fight the dictatorship in place together with radical communism monomaniacs if the type B dictatorship is based on radical communism, together with radical Islam monomaniacs if it is based on radical Islam. What will come out is uncertain.¹³ Citizens mostly concerned with private life outcomes may tend to support the dictatorship in place although they will support democracy if it comes about and if there is no offer of return to a dictatorship of type A.

In the interwar period, radical communism, in the form of bolshevism, frightened many people (not only bourgeois but also artisans, farmers, etc.). It was terrifying by its deeds but even more perhaps by the words some of its proponents used. It is understandable that many Europeans, above all concerned with private life issues, gave a high priority to the prevention of its upcoming. In Italy and Germany mistrust in the capacity of democracy to guarantee that result contributed to the support given by many people to fascism and Nazism. The fact that the propaganda of the right-winged dictatorships exploited the fear of radical communism should not hide the fact that some fear genuinely existed among the population. After the return to democracy that fear dissipated progressively because it became clear that democracy would be robust in the face of Communist type B dictatorships. In Arab countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, support to the authoritarian regimes is in part due to the fear of radical Islam. This was also true, to some extent, of the support given to the post-Ba'athist dictatorships of Iraq and Syria.

¹² We assume that democracy means liberal, 'private life neutral', democracy and that dictatorship or autocracy includes illiberal democracy and 'private life intrusive' democracy.

¹³ As noted by Przeworski (1988, pp. 63-64), "one should not forget that forces which join together to destroy a particular authoritarian regime often represent specific interests and offer distinct plans for the society" and that "the anti-authoritarian alliance" may "quickly enter a second phase during which the weaker members are purged and a new authoritarian system is established."

3. THE PEOPLE ON THE EXPORTING SIDE

For a large part, the diffusion of democracy is unintended, requiring no specific action from democratic governments or anybody else. It tends to be a purely intellectual or informational phenomenon. Incumbents and other decision-makers in democratic countries determine their behavior without paying attention to how the system will be perceived in non-democratic countries. Giving a bad or a good example is none of their concerns. This does not prevent the perception of how democracy works to have a significant influence on views about it in non-democratic countries. On the whole, at least until recently, the net effect has been positive: the idea of democracy is popular on all continents.¹⁴

A channel of influence also largely involuntary is based on the formation of democratic clubs. Becoming a member is desirable for economic and other reasons independent of democracy but to be admitted a country must be democratic. The main instance is the EU. The fact that admission is conditional on democracy generates a powerful democratization incentive within candidate or would-be candidate countries. Producing that incentive has nothing or little to do with the motivations the already democratic countries had to build up a democratic union. However awareness of the incentive did play a role at a later stage in the enlargement of the EU -- inspiring the decision, costly in other respects, to accept as members (or as official candidates) countries in which democratization was still fragile or incomplete.

This section is about the purposive part of influence, likely to be smaller than the unintended one. As a rule, democratization in other countries is a secondary concern of government and citizens in democratic countries. Nonetheless, indirectly, citizens do have a significant influence on the matter. The influence is indirect because it is a consequence of the attention given to abuses of human rights rather than to democracy, the two matters being largely independent as concerns but linked instrumentally.¹⁵

3.1. The limits of direct democracy promotion

¹⁴ See the evidence cited by Bermeo in Barany and Moser (2009, pp. 245-47). That evidence suffers from the superficiality weakness discussed earlier in the text: to be really meaningful, recorded opinions should be complemented by some indication on their intensity or strength.

¹⁵ The two are often confused. The universal values stressed in Sen (1999) generally concern human rights rather than democracy as his title suggests.

Democracy promotion (in a broad sense) is part of the official foreign policy of many democratic countries. To account for the limited but not insignificant extent of what is done in practice, I will formulate three propositions.

1st proposition. If we disregard concerns with elections and other channels of popular support, the governments of democratic countries have no or little interest in the democratization of authoritarian regimes.

Let me first consider the evidence often deemed capable of justifying or orienting democracy promotion efforts -- justification being mainly related to the study of effects, orientation to that of prerequisites. With regard to justification, the questions that have been investigated empirically include: are democratic countries less likely than dictatorships to get into international or civil war? less hospitable to terrorist groups? is democracy favorable to economic growth or development? Regarding the orientation of promotion efforts, the questions (some mentioned in Section 1), include: is there a relationship between capitalism and democracy? income per head and democracy? size of the middle class and democracy? education levels and democracy? ethnic or religious homogeneity and democracy?

The empirical evidence provided on these matters, whether positive, negative or mixed, is valuable to an extent. Well-established generalizations may be useful to inspire policies at an aggregate level. A confirmed positive statistical effect of democracy on development or peacefulness may justify extending to democracy promotion the agenda of organizations, such as the World Bank or the United Nations (UN), meant to deal with a large number of countries (Carothers 2009).

However in a world in which the situation of each country has many dimensions and is very specific, relying on statistical regressions operated across countries and over time may be quite misleading.¹⁶ It should not inspire policy-making toward individual countries: the particular features of a given country, even when apprehended imperfectly, are a much safer basis to decide whether making it more democratic is likely or not to make it grow quicker or be more peaceful. The relations we would like to rely upon are causal or counterfactual. In the case of country X, with all its

¹⁶ One way in which statistical evidence involving many countries over time can be misleading is by suggesting that trajectories are monotonous and smooth while at the level of individual countries this is not the case at all.

idiosyncrasies, would democratization increase or decrease the likelihood that it gets into war? Suppose that we consider as established (actually, it is not) a cross-country negative relation between democracy and getting into war, would that allow us to think that more democracy in Iran or China would reduce the probability of the country engaging in a war? Relying on cross-country econometric work to answer the question would be adventurous. Preconditions also should be interpreted with a grain of salt. They seem plausible but counterexamples readily come to mind: almost none of the preconditions mentioned above are satisfied in the case of democracies such as India or, for that matter, Indonesia.

Thus, the positive reasons to promote democracy in given countries are generally weak. By contrast, the negative reasons are strong. This is true whether we consider world order or the incentives of individual democratic countries. The international political order remains oriented toward the preservation of peace among countries whatever their political regime. International law and the use of constraints such as sanctions are almost exclusively related to that single concern (I discuss the human rights exception below). Decision-making at the international level, in particular within the UN, is constrained by the need to obtain the acquiescence of non-democratic governments. Enforcing international law is thus a sufficiently important and absorbing task. More or less related to the UN, world organizations operating in areas like trade, development, finance, communication, health care, refugees, children or the environment promote cooperation and exchange among countries again independently of their political regimes.

At the level of individual democratic countries, the need to have good relations with non-democratic ones is compelling -- if only nowadays to secure information about terrorism. International competition, in the economic domain in particular, is also a major obstacle to making democracy count in relations with other countries.¹⁷

Finally, we can extend to the way democratic governments reason the hypothesis made above about the way citizens do: the acceptance of an authoritarian regime (in their own country in the case of citizens, in another other country in the case of democratic governments) often rests on the anticipation of what might follow its

¹⁷ As well-meaning new French administrations discovered in the past, insisting about democracy when dealing with dictatorships puts French firms at a disadvantage when other countries, such as China, or for that matter Switzerland, do not.

demise, immediately or as a second phase. Some of the effects that are dreaded are the same, civil war for instance. Others tend to be different. Thus, that democratization might exacerbate nationalism is more likely to be a concern of foreign governments than of the citizens of the country itself.

2nd proposition. Only a minority of voters in democracies have an interest in the democratization of authoritarian regimes.

Referring to our discussion above, the degree to which the nature of a regime is treated as an instrument or as an outcome, and thus an object of genuine preferences, varies across citizens. With regard not to the regime of their own country but to regimes elsewhere, we may presume that most citizens are unconcerned. Only some do care: for them democracy abroad in general or in particular countries is a desirable outcome and this has some consequences on their attitude or behavior.

Why most people do not care is obvious. A major factor is that the landscape of contemporary regimes is very complicated (see Levitsky and Way 2010). Most dictatorships or authoritarian regimes have adopted some democratic institutions (elections, a constitutional court, term limits, etc.) without becoming liberal democracies or democracies *tout court* as a result. As a consequence, instead of a clear-cut division between democracies and dictatorships, one faces a vast population of regimes, some clearly democratic and the others not or less so to various degrees or along different dimensions. Elections may be fair but the opposition harassed and the media manipulated. Constitutions may be democratically impeccable but disregarded in practice. Some autocracies are repugnant, others almost congenial. Even in countries considered clearly democratic, and having been so for a long time, the extent to which democratic mechanisms function well is often a moot point. Differentiating among political regimes is an absorbing task even for experts. Most citizens in democratic countries will not attempt to engage in it.

Still, quality newspapers do supply detailed information about manifestations of undemocratic behavior (election rigging, bypassing constitutional term limits, etc.) in foreign countries. This suggests that some people in democratic countries do care about democracy and authoritarianism abroad. The people involved are certainly relatively

few and the intensity of their concern variable. But this does not mean that they are irrelevant.

3rd proposition. The state of democracy promotion reflects the foregoing incentives.

On the one hand, foreign autocratic governments should not be antagonized. On the other, the pro-democracy concerns of some voters must find a reflection in policy-making. Since these voters are few, the fact that they count needs some explanation. When we speak of an incumbent, we do not mean an isolated human being with a necessarily limited capacity of attention but rather the head of a vast hierarchical organization such as a government or a political party. Like large multi-divisional business firms, organizations of that kind are equipped to attend to the heterogeneous preferences of multitudes. Even small constituencies receive some attention (inasmuch as economies of scale have been dealt with). On a more theoretical level, that responsiveness is captured by the probabilistic theory of voting in its multidimensional or multi-issue version. Small variations in the probability that any voter will vote for the incumbent may seem insignificant but, as a rule or as a matter of principle, they get some attention, especially when electoral competition is effective. No category is too small or no issue too secondary for *on average* to be neglected. Thus even if there are few voters interested in democracy abroad, they will normally count to a degree.

Because that degree is necessarily modest and because foreign governments must not be provoked, democracy promotion and assistance are, first, limited and, second, maintained at arm's length of political incumbents. The total resources spent for democracy promotion and assistance are very small. And institutions active in these areas are generally non-governmental even when supported financially by governments. For instance, in Europe the German foundations were left to play an important role. In the United States, the National Endowment for Democracy was created in 1983 as a non-governmental institution. The UN and the World Bank are involved in a way that does not raise serious objections from their non-democratic members.

3.2. Fighting human rights abuses as an indirect way to promote democracy

The argument takes the form of the following two additional propositions.

4th proposition: abuses of human rights abroad draw more attention than undemocratic features of political regimes.

Violations of human rights are often perceived as instrumental by the citizens of the country in which they take place. If people like the policy outcomes, they prefer to remain ignorant or not to think about the violations of human rights, generally presented by incumbents as necessary means for those outcomes. When the country is a democracy, one must often wait many years and new generations for the violations to resurface in a conspicuous way and attract the attention of many citizens (Salmon 2009). When it is an autocracy this might never happen, or rather only after a regime change.

By contrast, provided the media or organizations such as Amnesty International make them known, violations of human rights in the rest of the world tend to be perceived as outcomes, not instruments, by the citizens of a democratic country.¹⁸ That China is a dictatorship or Russia not a liberal democracy does not arouse much attention, not to speak of emotion. But firing on students in Tiananmen Square or using polonium to poison an opponent do make the news and generate some indignation in democratic countries. So do the boat people from Vietnam, massacres in Bosnia, genocide in Rwanda, torture in Argentina and so on. Under the influence of public opinion, international law has been extended to allow the prosecution of the individuals responsible for major human rights abuses and some are actually condemned. Interestingly, some non-democratic regimes support the collective effort to reduce abuses of human rights, whereas some democracies are more reluctant to do so.

5th proposition. The effect of worldwide attention given to human rights may induce some restraint in repression and thus more scope for pro-democratic changes.

Although we argued that dictatorships that do not intrude on personal life may benefit from some acquiescence on the part of most of their citizens, it remains that no dictatorship can survive without some repression -- in the real world no dictatorship is a *timocracy* as defined in Wintrobe (1998). In practice, repression in an authoritarian regime always implies some abuses of human rights (whereas, as a rule, domestic coercion in liberal democracies does not). Inasmuch as the abuses and with them

¹⁸ Provided also, of course, that the said democratic country is not itself involved in the violations, becoming then instrumental in the eyes of most of its citizens.

repression become more costly (because of world public opinion, international justice and so on), a certain opening of society to expressions of dissent may have to be conceded. Then, opponents are jailed instead of killed. Sometimes they are allowed to leave the country and pursue their fight from abroad. Punishment for using internet or accessing foreign channels is lightened, making cross-border information more easily available to ordinary citizens. Such weakening of repression will increase somewhat the strength of forces and mechanisms that work toward democratization.¹⁹

4. CONCLUSION

To discuss whether democracy is exportable, the distinctive approach adopted here has consisted in focusing on the people or citizens. Political regimes, even autocracies, need to receive some support from citizens. This also applies in general to regime change. But on these matters, citizens are diverse. They have different views and, more importantly, strong differences in the intensity or robustness of these views. We called ‘democracy monomaniacs’ the citizens who support democracy with some intensity. In general, they are a minority even if, in democracies, their number tends to grow over time. Many citizens share a more instrumental perspective. They judge the political regime of their country on the basis of the policy outcomes they are most concerned with.

Performance, in particular of the economy, is one of these outcomes. The perception of bad comparative performance may have a negative effect on the support provided by those voters who are not democracy monomaniacs. In well-established democracies the support concerned is to incumbents. In autocracies and in young democracies, it may be to the regime itself. A category of outcomes also important to citizens is intrusion into private life. Many autocracies do not intrude very much into the private sphere of most citizens (minorities and opponents are another matter). But intruding is a defining motivation of others, radical communism in the past, radical Islamism currently. The difference between the two types of authoritarianism (those

¹⁹ In Collier and Rohner (2008) democracy has a negative technical effect on repression (some tools get banned) whereas repression is needed to prevent political violence; consequently, democracy may make a country more subject to political violence. One might be reluctant not to consider repression as a form of violence. However, we noted the possibility that many citizens perceive repression in their own country (of a kind that does not involve them privately) as a necessary instrument to obtain the outcomes they prefer. They may include the absence of open violence.

which intrude into private life and those which do not) has a strong effect on the attitude of many citizens (other than those we called democracy monomaniacs). Their support may be transferred relatively smoothly across regimes, whether democratic or authoritarian, that are not intrusive. And their fear of being subjected to regimes that are intrusive may explain their support to autocratic regimes that are not. Governments of democratic countries have not always taken the possibility sufficiently into account in their attempts at promoting democratization.

In fact, promoting democracy in other countries would not be undertaken at all by most governments of democratic countries if there were no electoral benefit associated with it. However, since only few voters are seriously concerned with the fate of democracy abroad, such benefit is likely to be limited. Thus, pressure from below to enhance democracy promotion cannot weigh much in the face of the compelling incentives the governments of democratic countries have to do nothing. Because the citizens of democratic countries are more prone to take notice of abuses of human rights and because limiting these abuses reduces the repression autocracies rely upon, democracy promotion (defined broadly) is more likely to bring results through the fight against human rights abuses than directly. It has been said that democracy should be promoted because democratic countries do not murder their inhabitants. One might want to reverse the proposition: the fight against murdering inhabitants and more generally against human right abuses has some justification in itself but it may also favor democratization as a side effect.

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