There Are No Alternatives to the “Western” Model of Democracy

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ARE THERE ALTERNATIVES TO THE “Western” model of democracy? This article argues that there are not, at least not democratic ones. Several core features of Western democracies are necessary conditions for a democratic regime. These features are the mechanisms that make officeholders accountable to citizens, which is the defining characteristic of democracy. The apparently universal character of these mechanisms is revealed by the fact that when these features have been absent in Western regimes, accountability disappears, and when these features are present in non-Western countries like Japan, Taiwan, and Turkey, accountability can be created and maintained. In other words, democracy rests on these mechanisms. The problem is that these mechanisms, in turn, rest on certain social conditions. Not surprisingly, stable democracies are most visible in contexts in which these social conditions are met, and are most precarious or entirely absent where they are not. Because these preconditions are not universally met, some countries may not be able to stabilize democratic processes in the foreseeable future. This is not because their cultures are inherently undemocratic or because their people are not ready for democracy—but because certain preconditions first have to be brought into being for democracy to be sustained, just as they do for economic growth or the rule of law to be sustained. This has obvious implications for current policies of democracy promotion.

Within individual countries, processes of democratization have been prominent around the world for at least a century and a half. Democratization as a foreign policy strategy is of much more recent vintage, and it has recently received a massive boost.

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Full throated calls by George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and others propose democracy as an antidote to anti-Western extremism, especially in the Muslim world.

To make sure this strategy does not seem imperialistic and insensitive, would-be democratizers regularly offer reassurances that democracy will not be a Western—especially not an American—imposition. This reassurance comes in two forms. The first and most common is the promise that democracy can be substantially adapted to local circumstances. In his second inaugural address, George W. Bush promised that, “When the soul of a nation finally speaks, the institutions that arise may reflect customs and traditions very different from our own. America will not impose our own style of government on the unwilling. Our goal instead is to help others find their own voice, attain their own freedom, and make their own way.” The same sentiment is voiced by both activists and scholars. The U.S. institution most directly charged with promoting democratization, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), says that “[d]emocracy… need not be based upon the model of the United States or any other particular country. Rather, it evolves according to the needs and traditions of diverse political cultures.” Bernard Lewis writes that, “Study of Islamic history and of the vast and rich Islamic political literature encourages the belief that it may well be possible to develop democratic institutions—not necessarily in our Western definition of that much misused term, but in one deriving from their own history and culture, and ensuring, in their way, limited government under law, consultation and openness, in a civilized and humane society.”

The second reassurance is in a sense more ambitious. It is the declaration that the basic model for democracy is not Western to begin with. Echoing a sentiment voiced by Bush, Tony Blair insists that, “Ours are not Western values. They are the universal values of the human spirit.” Since the human condition famously involves large doses of diversity, this statement implies that democracy has a meaning just fluid enough for many peoples and viewpoints to legitimately have input into its design and operation.

In both cases, these statements seem designed to reassure listeners that democracy will not be a tight, Western straightjacket; that it is defined loosely enough to permit substantial diversity—in other words, that there can be many models of democracy in addition to specific Western models. But this looseness is easily exaggerated. It is true that democracy is consistent with great variation in the specifics of institutional design such as electoral laws, in the contours of the party system, and in the content of policies eventually produced. But a regime is not a democracy in any sense, Western or otherwise, unless it effectively makes officeholders accountable to the citizenry. Political scientists Philippe Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl usefully define democracy as “a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their
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elected representatives.5 This definition begs two important questions. First, how diverse are the mechanisms that can deliver such accountability? Second, can such mechanisms be sustained in virtually all social contexts, as some authors seem to suggest?6

There is a lengthy tradition of insisting that the accountability, rights, and participation associated with democracy can be achieved by many mechanisms. The most common mechanism is elections. But elections labeled “democratic” have included ones conducted between a hegemonic ruling party and marginalized opponents, as in PRI-dominated Mexico, or even under a single ruling party, including elections held within several versions of what some once termed “African democracy.”7 In other cases, the term democracy was applied to regimes in which merely “mobilizational” elections were conducted by parties tightly controlled from above, by elites supposedly dedicated to the general interest. These have included elections held by the Ba’athist regime in Iraq in whose last election Saddam Hussein supposedly won literally 100 percent of the vote and elections in Soviet-style “people’s democracies.”8 All these regimes have consistently numbered among those that, while called democratic, never delivered the accountability that makes democracy a distinctive and meaningful category among regime types. The sobering lesson is that forms of governance that hold elections but omit other crucial mechanisms for accomplishing accountability may be labeled “alternatives to the Western model of democracy” but end up delivering authoritarianism or worse. This category of false alternatives very much includes regimes launched in Western countries like the plebiscitary but clearly non-democratic regime of Francoist Spain.

If holding one or more votes is not sufficient to establish accountability, what other mechanisms are needed to create a state-society relationship allowing a regime to be properly called a democracy? Amid the oceans of research done on democratization, a few leading scholars have made systematic attempts to identify these mechanisms. In what remains one of the most influential accounts, Robert Dahl lists eight “institutional guarantees” for democracy to function “among large numbers of people.” Only one of these eight is “free and fair elections.” Dahl insists that for elections to actually be free and fair, citizens must also possess freedom of expression, a criteria akin to Natan Sharansky’s “town square” criteria for whether democracy is present. Further-
more, people must enjoy the freedom to “form and join organizations,” and the freedom of leaders to compete for political support, the freedom to access “alternative sources of information,” and the presence of “[i]nstitutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference.” We could add that the government must be capable of enforcing these freedoms. Only in the presence of such features can alternative agendas be offered and make themselves known. Only then can citizens know what options are available and how incumbents are performing, and only then can elections represent anything but the result of pressure and manipulation from officeholders at the top.

Individually, these criteria may sound uncontroversial, but they constitute the core features of Western democracies. After all, they imply the necessary presence of multiple, competing, free political parties; strict separation of governmental and partisan organizations and activities; substantial civil and political liberties for ideological and other minorities; a diverse and independent media broadly free from censorship; the absence of substantial reserve domains of power in non-elected hands; and an administratively effective state structure. A central point of Guillermo O’Donnell’s recent work on empirical democratic theory is that common minimalist definitions of democracy—ones which emphasize only elections and a small handful of political rights—obscure the fact that, in reality, democracy relies on a significant cluster of additional necessary “conditions external to the electoral process itself,” far beyond even freedom of expression. This is especially true when democracy is understood to involve elections not just once but on an ongoing basis, since it requires non-incumbent parties to remain free to operate, media to remain free to scrutinize and criticize, and voters to remain free to come to informed opinions and defect to a viable opposition if they choose. O’Donnell speculates that, since these additional democratic mechanisms were such pervasive features of the socio-political backdrop in democracy’s “originating countries” of the North Atlantic region, authors of minimalist definitions of democracy either take them for granted or fail to appreciate their importance from the beginning.

If Dahl, O’Donnell, and others are right, then democracy may take many forms when it comes to certain things such as the exact balance of the horizontal and vertical
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separation of powers and the contours of the party system. Moreover, a meaningful definition of democracy is not so restrictive that it dictates what policy outcomes will be produced. But it is restrictive enough that democracy cannot take on simply any form. To deliver accountability, a substantial number of core features are indispensable—though not all of them are inscribed in the formal rules of the game. When those features are absent, the regime will not end up functioning as a democracy. This means, in turn, that certain limits exist on just how much diversity the category of “democracy” really contains. Put provocatively, there are no democratic alternatives to what is routinely called the Western model of democracy, only non-democratic ones. This is not because the needed mechanisms are Western, but because the mechanisms that underpin democracies in the West constitute the mechanisms that can ensure that governments represent popular preferences expressed through some form of voting among a large number of people in any country and time-period. In Tony Blair’s formulation, these features are not Western; they are simply the features needed for democracy to function.

Even if we remain unsure of the exact makeup of the list of these mechanisms, it is evident that a number of regimes with some democratic features have possessed too few of these mechanisms, sometimes in the name of adaptation to local conditions and traditions. As a result, accountability is not reliably achieved. In recent decades, such regimes have most often taken the form of the “illiberal democracies” identified by Fareed Zakaria. Illiberal democracies hold elections but effectively deliver so few political and civil liberties that the range of political options is heavily restricted, electoral playing fields are far from level, accountability is incomplete, abuses of power are common, and the durability of competition for votes is uncertain. These regimes are sometimes called partially democratic, but they are better understood as adding to the well-known diversity of the non-democratic category of regimes.

A crucial issue facing current policymakers, especially would-be democratizers, is whether these mechanisms that deliver accountability can endure under virtually all social conditions. Democratization’s leading optimists seem to assume they can. For example, Natan Sharansky and Joshua Muravchik argue that democracy can be successfully implanted in what had once been considered inhospitable contexts; they do not discuss in detail any social condition that they consider to represent a durable obstacle to democratic stability. These theorists are suggesting, in effect, that democracy is capable of being universalized not by virtue of its loose definition—that is, not because it can be stretched and adapted almost limitlessly to local circumstances—but instead because even the criteria identified by relatively strict definitions like those above can be met in virtually all countries in all time-periods.

Evidence does not support this. Instead, a large body of research concludes that
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the mechanisms that effectively deliver accountability, in turn, rely on certain conditions for their own existence. These underlying conditions are not sufficiently met everywhere.

There is widespread disagreement as to which conditions determine the viability of multiple, free political parties, a diverse and independent media, the absence of substantial reserve domains of power, and a sufficiently strong state structure. In his wide-ranging work, Dahl has considered cultural, institutional, and socioeconomic factors that may affect whether democratic mechanisms are likely to exist and persist. From this array of factors, Samuel Huntington has famously tugged at the cultural thread. Others argue that rough economic equality is necessary for playing fields to remain somewhat level. My own work stresses the importance of the structure of socioeconomic conflict. Still others say that only robust civil societies can empower citizens to resist abuses of power. At the same time, the prominence of several “failed states” provides a reminder that democracy requires a state strong enough to enforce rights in the first place. In an innovative recent theory, O’Donnell suggests that democracy’s many “surrounding freedoms” cannot be sustained without the complex and durable roots of a legal tradition and system that entrench and defend individual rights.

In all cases, the point is that certain conditions are necessary for creating and sustaining the various mechanisms that jointly deliver accountability of governments across successive elections. Just as certain accompanying rights and institutions must be present for elections to be free and fair, so must certain conditions be present for these rights and institutions to be sustained across time. And these conditions are not met, or at least are not present to a sufficient degree, in all specific historical settings. This is not a matter of saying that any people is unsuited for democracy or not ready for it. It is simply to say that stable democracy relies on certain underlying conditions and that those conditions are not universally present. This should not be controversial given the obvious fact that stable democracy is also not universally present. Something, after all, must explain its absence in so many countries for so many years. But state-
ments like this have recently drawn criticism—for example from Natan Sharansky—as being skeptical of freedom or democracy.

Briefly consider a parallel. No one doubts that all peoples in all countries today wish for and are ready for economic growth and wealth. But bitter and expensive experience has taught us that sustained growth requires certain preconditions. It is an added source of frustration that we are not sure what all of these conditions are—current thinking emphasizes the importance of the rule of law—or how, in turn, to bring those conditions about: the rule of law must itself rely on certain conditions, but what are they? There are absolutely no grounds for writing off any country as permanently poor, just as there are none for writing off any country as permanently non-democratic. However, it is clear that not all situations are equally conducive to growth or prosperity. Pointing this out does not make one a skeptic of growth. By the same standard, saying that democracy rests on certain conditions that are not universally met does not make one a skeptic of freedom.

Current theorizing and recent experience suggest there are three broad conditions under which democracy is unlikely to be sustained: polarization, an overly powerful state, and an overly weak state. Polarization is the most classically cited cause of democratic breakdowns in regions with long experience in democratic instability, especially Western Europe and Latin America. Democracy is at dire risk when the major political groups in a country have agendas so mutually threatening that defeat in an election would jeopardize the losing side’s most dearly held values and interests. When this polarization exists, political groups’ support for the mechanisms required for democratic functioning is also jeopardized, since these groups may prefer a friendly authoritarian regime to losing power through democracy.19

Such conflicts may be based on religion, ethnicity, language group, or class. The past fifteen years provide two tragic examples. In Algeria, moderate and secular Muslims—to all appearances with heavy hearts—rallied behind a military coup in 1992 rather than cede power to strict Islamists through defeat in a democratic election.20 In Haiti, economic and former political elites detected a gathering social revolution and backed a military overthrow of elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991. In both cases, support for authoritarianism by a powerful segment of the society meant that even if each coup had been speedily reversed, a stable democracy would not have emerged. The underlying condition of threatening political agendas would have remained intact and renewed each segment’s willingness to consider abandoning democracy in case of defeat. It is no surprise that when the

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Haitian coup was reversed in 1994, precariousness—and not consolidation—ensued. 21

Students of rentier states in the Middle East have long pointed to the dangers of endowing states with the power made possible by massive revenues from oil and other resources. 22 These revenues give political incumbents easy access to vast resources that permit them to dominate society through both an overly powerful coercive apparatus and extensive cooptation via financial patronage. Such a system undermines the mechanisms that ensure accountability. In these cases, few sectors of society may be truly independent of state officials. As a result, independent civil society is too anemic to police the state / society boundary crucial to democracy. Such massive flows of international rents may not only help explain why non-democratic regimes are in power in many resource-laden countries. They may also suggest that any democracy that might be introduced in such a setting will be undermined as time passes, since incumbents—however democratically they rose to power—will find it tempting to use any resources at their disposal to retain office, resuming the cycle of patronage, manipulation, and domination that existed before democratization.

Overly weak states also undermine democratic processes. 23 In weak states there are no mechanisms for enforcing individual rights, enforcing policy decisions, or defending the democratic political arena from non-state challengers such as warlords—that is, there are no mechanisms ensuring that there are no private reserve domains of power. Consider such cases as Zaire/Congo late in Mobutu’s rule and since his fall, the “failed state” of Sierra Leone, Afghanistan since the breakdown of central government control over the provinces, and, perhaps, the “Sunni triangle” even after state authority has been restored elsewhere in Iraq. In these and similar cases, democracy is not possible because the states lack the social basis for enforcing rights and other mechanisms crucial to accountability.

In sum, there are democratic alternatives to the Western model of democracy in the limited sense that party systems and constitutional details will inevitably vary from one democracy to the next. This is true, of course, even among Western democracies. But there are no alternatives to a model of democracy with the core features common to Western democracies. The good news is that this still permits a great deal of national variation as is shown, for example, by the distinctiveness of Japan’s modern democracy. The bad news is that the core features crucial to democratic functioning themselves rest on social conditions that are not universally present, and we do not currently know how to create them where they are absent. This has important implications for policymakers who are operating on the assumption that democracy abroad is crucial to national security at home. 24 My analysis suggests that if democracy has been persistently absent from some countries, this is for a reason—or more likely several reasons. If the social conditions are not present for sustaining the mechanisms crucial to
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democracy's functioning, then stable democracy is unlikely to emerge until those conditions themselves emerge. If the United States and its closest allies aim to promote sustainable democracy, then the time has come to engage in the same hard thinking about preconditions like those that have belatedly come to characterize policymaking aimed at promoting sustainable economic development.

NOTES:

2. About the NED http://www.ned.org/about/about.html.
19. Alexander, Sources of Democratic Consolidation.
23. This has recently been emphasized by Francis Fukuyama, State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).
24. Like all assumptions, this one is subject to debate. For one consideration, see Gerard Alexander, “The Authoritarian Illusion,” The National Interest 77 (Fall 2004): 79-83.