

Book Review

THE DECLINE AND RISE OF DEMOCRACY: A GLOBAL HISTORY FROM ANTIQUITY TO TODAY, BY DAVID STASAVAGE, PRINCETON, NJ: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2020.

Clay G. Wescott

Combines political science, economic and anthropological perspectives innovatively to understand why some places are democratic and others are not. He defines two types: early and modern democracy. The former occurs in weakly governed states that tend to have small scale settlements, dispersed population, and exit options for unhappy citizens. These jurisdictions are "weak" because a regime has a low rate of tax collection, often because it's difficult to determine how much tax to collect. Leaders make deals with citizens to consult with them, and in return get help in raising taxes.

Autocracy, on the other hand, thrives when citizens do not have exit option: think Egypt with citizens living along the Nile surrounded by desert. It also is more likely to occur in large, dense jurisdictions where agricultural productivity is easy to determine, and thus the appropriate tax rate. Leaders appoint and build up a bureaucracy to support the work of government. The poster child of autocracy from the get go is China, where a large, dense population growing crops easy to store at predictable levels of productivity were ideal conditions for autocrats and bureaucracy. Most middle eastern countries started as early democracies. Then the rapid conquests following the birth of Islam favored autocracy because of the increasing size of the empire, and technical advances in writing, math, and accounting allowing autocrats to collect taxes without the need for democratic consultation.

Modern democracy first appeared in the USA, building on hundreds of years of innovation in Britain including: the end of mandates, the notion of representation, and expanding those entitled to vote. A key challenge for modern democracy is that participation is widespread but shallow, leading in many settings to citizen distrust of government. Countries that started out with early democracy are more likely to adopt democracy.

This is a hugely ambitious story that inevitably leaves things out for future analysis. For example, China's autocratic history is a key feature of the argument: because of it, and because the conditions favoring it are still there today, China remains autocratic. But why is Taiwan democratic? And why do so many in Hong Kong want to be democratic?

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Most rich countries are democratic: does that mean democracy is best for economic development? No, it is an accident of history that wealth grew fastest in Europe and its offshoots, which tended to be democratic. Autocracies can also get rich, though we have not seen many cases where autocracies have broken through the middle income trap: only Singapore and Hong Kong so far, a point not discussed by Stasavage.

Then there's the question: Should aid agencies support good governance in poor countries, and if so, how should they do it? Stasavage rightly points out that governance improvements depend mainly on the work of local citizens. He also correctly points out that having low incomes isn't necessarily a barrier to democracy: France adopted modern democracy in the 19th century when its income was the same as Senegal's income when it became democratic. Yet aid programs often work to strengthen bureaucracies and tax collection in client countries, including autocracies. Is this preventing the emergence of democracy, even in places that are fertile ground because they were a site for early democracy? Governance advisors should read this work carefully.

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