Do all good things go together?
The political, economic and social consequences of democratisation*

Giovanni M. Carbone
Università degli Studi di Milano

ABSTRACT – The latter part of the twentieth century was a period of rapid democratisation on a global scale. From the moment democratic reforms were undertaken, the attention of political science scholars mostly focused on three main lines of research: the causes of the political changes taking place, the modes of regime transitions, and the characteristics of the new political systems. A set of issues that largely remained under-researched concerns the broader implications of political reforms: does democracy come at a cost – be it an increase in violent conflict, slower economic growth, higher inequality or anything else – or, on the contrary, are there broader, virtuous transformations triggered by democratisation processes?

The political, social and economic consequences that emerged in countries in which actual democratic change took place constitute an important and promising field of inquiry. While the literature on democratisation does include a few hypotheses concerning the effects of democratic transitions on, say, the consolidation of state institutions, the strengthening of national identities, the achievement of domestic peace or the adoption of neo-liberal economic reforms, there is – with a few notable exceptions – a relative lack of theoretical elaboration and empirical research on these issues. Even more striking is the absence of any recognition that such hypotheses share a common thread and are essentially part of the same approach to the study of democratisation. The paper examines some of the theoretical and empirical questions that lay behind an approach that takes democracy not as an endpoint, but as a starting point.

This paper is a work in progress and sums up initial thoughts about what is hereafter termed the “consequences-of-democratisation” (COD) approach to the study of democratic change. The paper contends that:

a) the strong normative argument for democracy, as well as the latter’s vast empirical expansion, generated a series of myths (partly counterweighted by opposite, doomsday predictions) about democracy’s purported effects

b) a variety of expected effects of democratisation – political, economic and social effects – have been investigated by dispersed, relatively unrelated theoretical and empirical works

c) despite this fragmentation, such works are not only interrelated, but they constitute an unconventional, unacknowledged, essentially unified approach to the study of democratisation

The latter part of the twentieth century was a period of rapid democratisation on a global scale (Huntington 1991, Diamond 1999, Grassi 2008). From transitions in Southern Europe to renewed democratisation in Latin America, from regime changes among Asian countries to the radical reforms in Eastern Europe, to the democratic experiments initiated by many African states. By the end of the millennium, several countries had introduced reforms for the adoption of formally democratic institutions. Not surprisingly, in a large number of cases such changes were façade operations that did not substantially alter existing authoritarian and neopatrimonial practices; quite often, evidence of democratic regression and of return to plain authoritarianism soon emerged (O’Donnell 1994, 1996, Collier – Levitski 1997, Zakaria 1997, 2003, van de Walle 2001, Schedler 2006). In a significant number of countries, however, actual political change took place and democratisation did eventually make substantial progress.

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From the moment democratic reform processes were initiated, the attention of scholars with an interest in them mostly focused on three main lines of research, namely: the causes of the political changes taking place (the role of economic and political variables, domestic and international factors, structural or contingent causes, etc., e.g. Di Palma 1990, Huntington 1991, Rueschemeyer et al. 1992, Whitehead 1996), the modes of regime transitions (the actors involved, the sequences of reforms, the degree of violence involved, the completion or interruption of processes of renewal, etc., e.g. O’Donnell – Schmitter – Whitehead 1986, Linz – Stepan 1996a, Haggard – Kaufman 1997, Bratton – van de Walle 1997), and the characteristics of the new political dispensations (the kind of institutions adopted, the way they operate, the consolidation of the new multiparty regimes, the survival of authoritarian and neopatrimonial practices, the “quality” of democracy, etc., e.g. O’Donnell 1994, 1996, Bell 1995, Diamond et al. 1997, Huntington 1997, Diamond 1999, Morlino 2003, Diamond – Morlino 2005, Schedler 2006).

A subject that has remained relatively under-researched, when not entirely unexplored at an empirical level, are the broader implications of democratic reforms. Little investigation has been conducted into the political, social and economic consequences that emerged in countries where real democratic change took place. Democracy and democratisation have been historically and theoretically justified by referring to a multiplicity of values, including very broad ideals such as liberty or equality, but also more specific notions such as the moral development of the individual, the achievement of the common good, the respect of diversity, the efficiency of decisions (Held 1997, Dahl 1971, 1989). Indeed, as Przeworski and associates aptly observe, “almost all normatively desirable aspects of political life, and sometimes even of social and economic life, are credited as definitional features of democracy: representation, accountability, equality, participation, dignity, rationality, security, freedom – the list goes on” (2000:14). In this sense, these values, or “desirable aspects of life”, are somehow meant to be directly embodied by the introduction and the working of a democratic political system.

Yet, the very strength of normative arguments for democracy – whatever the ideals and principles such arguments draw upon – as well as the vast empirical expansion of democratic governance over the last few decades, produced a series of broader myths about democracy’s purported effects. In other words, besides what democracy may embody – be it political equality, individual freedom or something else – a democratic political system is often expected to generate a number of additional “good things” that are not exactly part of a democratic process, but rather a by-product of the latter. Democratisation may be expected to affect, for example, the consolidation of state institutions and of a shared national identity, the improvement of a rational-legal administration, the protection or achievement of domestic or international peace, the economic performance and development of a country, the introduction and implementation of economic reforms, the adoption of redistributive and poverty-reduction policies. After all, the reasoning goes, if everyone is going to have a say on the way a country is governed, why shouldn’t such self-evident public goods as peace or economic well-being be the obvious outcomes?

As Plattner (2005:77) points out, the attention of comparative politics scholars followed the progression of Third Wave democracies. Thus, over recent years, scholars shifted from the study of the causes of and the transitions to democracy to the problems of democratic consolidation, and then to more recent issues relating to the “quality of democracy” (see Figure 1). A further step may now be added to such research path. The consequences-of-democratisation (COD) approach differs from studies assessing the quality of existing democracies. In the latter analyses, “quality” refers to the development of dimensions that are supposed to be an integral part of a comprehensive notion of democracy, such as the eight such dimensions listed by Diamond and Morlino (2005): freedom, equality, rule of law, participation, competition, vertical accountability, horizontal accountability and responsiveness\(^1\). In the COD approach, by contrast, the focus is on benefits that any form of government – not just democratic governments – may in theory provide, and “the extent to which a democracy can deliver these benefits is not necessarily related to how democratic it is” (Plattner 2005:79). Democratisation is thus not observed as a dependent variable – i.e. something to be explained, as in democratisation studies focusing on the causes or on the modes of regime transitions – but as an independent variable that allegedly explains, or contributes to the explanation of, a wide range of political, economic and social effects. Democracy is not here seen as an endpoint, but as a starting point.

\(^1\) Diamond and Morlino consider “a quality democracy … one that provides its citizens a high degree of freedom, political equality, and popular control over public policies and policy makers through the legitimate and lawful functioning of stable institutions” (2005:xi).
The supposed “effects” of democratisation point at certain upshots or spin-offs that are not strictly part of contemporary definitions of what democracy is, and yet belong to a set of expectations that both scholars and laymen alike hold with regard to what the introduction of democratic politics entails. Popular expectations about what democracy can achieve typically run exceptionally high during transition processes: “newly democratizing countries … are burdened with a surfeit of expectations … citizens have been told to expect great achievements from self-government, and they generally expect these goods to materialize in a hurry. It is the fashion of political leaders during the long and dangerous struggle for democracy to overpromise…” (Gerring et al. 2005:334). On the scientific side, the theoretical literature on contemporary democratisation processes includes a number of hypotheses concerning the political, social and economic effects that the advent of democracy purportedly generates. On balance, the effects induced by democratic change are mostly considered to be positive. The introduction of democracy is thus portrayed not only as an end in itself – i.e. the direct embodiment and realisation of fundamental values – but also as an instrument, a mechanism that can facilitate the indirect achievement of other goals. Democratic change supposedly stimulates and brings about further virtuous transformations.

Some political scientists have employed notions of “regime performance” that include such transformations. In this view, the achievement of “sufficiently positive policy outputs” (e.g. economic growth and distribution) becomes an intervening variable, instrumental to building up political legitimacy and thus consolidate a new democracy. The underlying assumption is the existence of a reciprocal relationship between legitimacy and performance and thus of a possible virtuous cycle. In this sense, the beneficial consequences that may originate from the advent of democracy contribute to strengthening democratic rule, generating a situation in which positive effects feed into, and thus multiply, each other. Economic growth and re-distribution, for example, are neither part of democracy, nor of democratisation processes; yet, the dividends of faster growth and the improvement of the general welfare of the population may nurture the fragile legitimacy of a newly-reformed political regime, thus indirectly promoting democratic consolidation (Diamond 1999:78). Failure to produce substantial economic progress, by contrast, has often undermined a regime’s legitimacy and fostered the overthrow of young democracies. This approach implies that the beneficial consequences of democracy will make their appearance in a relatively short time, rather than in the long term.

Expectations and speculations about the effects of democratic reforms include a good dose of myth-making. Separating myth from reality requires acknowledging that, besides or in the stead of the benign effects that may result from the introduction of democratic competition and participation, negative or perverse effects may also be caused by any democratisation process: there may be costs, or downsides, attached to efforts at reforming a country’s political sphere in a democratic direction. It cannot be ruled out, for example, that democracy may lead to rising poverty levels or to wider inequality gaps. As a matter of fact, propositions about the harmful consequences of democratisation in developing countries are far from lacking in the literature. Most notably, the concern that election-induced violent conflicts may prevail in divided societies, as well as the prospect that participatory politics may bring about poor economic performances and gradual decline, have both been strongly voiced and theoretically argued for.

The question of the corollaries of democratisation is not only relevant to academic debates, but it also has crucial policy implications. Some of the key tenets of the foreign policies of many Western countries are based on the notion that, for example, “good governance” (a concept that significantly overlaps with multiparty democracy) spurs development, or on the idea that exporting democracy promotes the preservation of peace among nations as well as within nations. These notions, however, raise a number of dilemmas, for, as pointed out, the effects of democracy may be more perverse than may at first appear. The “good governance” agenda that, from the early 1990s, shaped the debate on, and partly the practice of, international development, is based on the expectation that reforming the political sphere of least developed countries may produce a series of beneficial consequences for broader developmental processes. This view
turns upside down the orthodox standpoint of modernisation theories, according to which political development and democratisation derive from the socio-economic and cultural transformations that characterise the transition from pre-modern to modern societies (e.g. Lipset 1959, 1993, Deutsch 1961, Cutright 1963). Under the “good governance” perspective, it is the transformation of politics, through the introduction of democracy, that brings about a series of social, economic and cultural changes, and not the other way round (cf. Leftwich 1993). Are we therefore to demand the quick and uncompromising introduction of democracy in least developed countries, or are we to take into consideration that, without the prior achievement of a basic level of development and the availability of a minimum of economic resources, democratic reforms will be virtually impossible to implement?

The link between the expansion of democracy and the achievement of peace is also problematic. As Snyder observes, for example, “the centerpiece of American foreign policy in the 1990s was the claim that promoting the spread of democracy … would be an antidote to international war and civil strife. Yet, paradoxically, the 1990s turned out to be a decade of both democratization and chronic nationalist conflict” (Snyder 2000:15; cf. Talbott 1996). Was there a connection between the latter two phenomena? If so, are we willing to change policy and stop asking for democratic reforms in authoritarian countries so to avoid further conflicts, or are we going to pay the price of increased violence for the sake of establishing a morally just political regime?

It is only through a comprehensive understanding of what follows democratisation that we can answer the question of whether democracy comes at a cost or, on the contrary, whether there are broader virtuous transformations that are actually kicked off by processes of democratic change. 

Mapping the consequences of democratisation

While a certain amount of research on the effects of democratic reforms has been published, such research looks quite limited compared to that produced by scholars who take democracy as an endpoint, or a dependent variable. A large part of the work on the correlates of democracy focuses on conflicts and economic performance, while many other purported effects of democratisation are only hinted at as vague expectations, without being empirically and theoretically explored in any substantial way. Social scientists, for example, “know surprisingly little about what types of governments tend to improve the welfare of the poor” (Ross 2006:871). Studies on the impacts of democratic change also suffer from being quite scattered and fragmented, so that even for subjects such as the relationship between democracy and growth, the considerable literature that now exists is “rather dispersed” (Brunetti 1997:163). This is compounded by the relative compartmentalisation of these works, with little mutual recognition between scholars interested in the different phenomena linked to democracy, nor much cumulative efforts on what are common, underlying issues. The very existence of the unifying thread that binds together this heterogeneous, but strongly interrelated, set of hypotheses is hardly acknowledged.

Yet, the study of the consequences of democratisation constitutes both a subfield of study and a specific approach within the broader field of democratisation studies. First, it makes up a subfield insofar as it is identified by a common subject, that is, democracy and democratisation. What is distinctive here is that the latter are investigated as an explanans, rather than an explanandum as in most of the democracy literature. Because this subfield focuses on what happens from the moment democracy is established on, and because it assumes that democratic politics and its outcomes are being observed, it borders with and shares ground with the study of advanced democracies. All the same, it remains firmly rooted within the study of democratisation because the defining point is the advent of democratic regimes and the effects of “new” democracies. Secondly, the COD constitutes a specific approach, essentially informed by the neo-institutional paradigm, insofar as contributing scholars share the notion that (democratic) institutions play a key role in accounting for the various phenomena they are investigating.

To better account for the existence of such a subfield, a first, necessary task is a mapping exercise. The aim of the exercise is two-fold. On the one hand, the purpose is to pin down the supposed consequences we have been referring to, to learn what kind of theoretical frameworks have been produced, and to find out the extent to which empirical research has made progress with regard to each individual hypothesis. On the other hand, the objective is to identify the underlying unity (including common issues and dilemmas), as well as the specific differences, within the existing body of work.
To start mapping the field, a few dimensions of variation within the subfield can be identified. At a most
general level, the phenomena on which democracy allegedly has an impact can be grouped into three spheres
– namely, social, political and economic (Figure 2). A similar distinction implies an element of arbitrariness,
as some of the subject matters, such as income distribution or welfare policies, may fall in more than one
category. The main political consequences of democracy touch upon nation-building and state-building
processes, the efficiency of government, and international peace. Economically, democratisation is said to
affect the pace of development, macroeconomic policy and the adoption of neo-liberal reforms. As for its
broader social implications, the influence of democracy supposedly affects the distribution of wealth, the
adoption of welfare policies, the degree of gender equality, the protection of the environment, or even the
general happiness of the people.

Research on the COD has mostly been conducted through quantitative methods. By contrast, qualitative
comparative research and case studies, which are frequently used in the study of democratic transitions and
consolidation, are quite rare. Existing quantitative work may be tentatively divided between research centred
on big issues or macro-phenomena – examining, for example, the implications of democratic reforms for
state-building, economic development, civil strife, corruption, environment, quality of life, happiness, and so
on – and research with a more narrow focus, investigating the influence of democracy on matters such as
wages in the manufacturing sector, support for UN peacekeeping, military effectiveness, privatisation
reforms, suicide terrorism, etc. The distinction may appear somewhat misleading, as any research that
addresses major issues (say, the repercussions of democracy on health or education) eventually needs to pin
this down to empirical indicators (such as rates of infant mortality or primary-education enrolment). But the
point is that some works directly focus on relatively narrow issues, while other research only uses specific
indicators in an instrumental manner, to account for the broader phenomena that are its primary concern.

A further, tentative distinction may be drawn between research that ponders how democratic politics may
bring about the adoption of certain particular public policies (including neo-liberal economic reforms, social
services, environmental commitments, for example) and other works that investigate broader social,
economic or political outcomes that are not necessarily the result of specific policies (economic growth,
international peace, domestic conflict, happiness, etc.).

Finally, interesting questions and additional distinctions concern the temporal and spatial extension of
existing theoretical and empirical investigations. Some specific hypotheses, in other words, may hold true for
certain regions of the world, but not for others. Indeed, some hypotheses may be region-specific and account
for the role of additional factors that contribute to explaining the final effect in a certain area (cf. Bunce
2000:721). A related possibility is also that empirical research may have so far covered some geographical
areas only. The relationship between democratic and economic reform, for example, not only may have been
much more deeply examined for certain regions rather than others, but the findings themselves may also be
different according to the areas under inquiry.
In what follows, the main hypotheses concerning the consequences of democratisation found in the political science and economic literature will be first summarised and then briefly examined. The different hypotheses are clustered around major headings, such as “democracy promotes social welfare”. Each of the latter thus comprises a range of topics (e.g. inequality, social spending, health, education, human development, etc.), sometimes with significant internal variation, that are articulated as sub-hypotheses (“democracy reduces inequality”, “democracy increases social spending”, etc.). An important caveat is required here. All the hypotheses listed in Table 1 are presented as statements that imply essentially “positive” expectations about what democracy may produce. This not only reflects the prevalence of this perspective – or bias – in the work under consideration, but it is also a deliberate choice aimed at producing a more straightforward and consistent framework. The fact remains, nonetheless, that a number of these hypotheses will prove wrong either because they are empirically unfounded or, most importantly, because the opposite of what the statement implies is actually true: democracy, for example, may turn out to increase domestic war and worsen economic performance. In discussing the theoretical assertions and the empirical findings relative to each of these hypotheses, all the necessary space will be devoted to an examination of the “negative” arguments, that is, the counterhypotheses that point at the perverse implications of democratic reforms.

As this is a work in progress, the remaining part of the paper simply sketches a discussion for some of the hypotheses listed in Table 1. The paper then concludes by proposing some final reflections.

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<th>Main hypotheses</th>
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<td>Democracy enhances nation-building</td>
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<td>Democracy weakens communal identities</td>
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<td>Democracy strengthens a shared national identity</td>
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<td>Democracy strengthens administrative structures</td>
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<td>Democracy increases the material resources of the state</td>
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<td>Democracy reduces corruption and clientelism</td>
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<td>Democracy promotes domestic peace and order</td>
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<td>Democracy reduces non-state armed centres of power (warlordism)</td>
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<td>Democracy reduces political violence</td>
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<td>Democracy favours victory in war</td>
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<td>Democracy reduces military spending</td>
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Democracy increases social welfare
Democracy lowers inequality
Democracy lowers poverty levels
Democracy raises wages
Democracy raises social spending
Democracy facilitates social reform
Democracy facilitates land reform
Democracy improves human development
Democracy improves education
Democracy improves health
Democracy prevents famines

Others
Democracy improves the respect of human rights
Democracy promotes gender equality
Democracy favours the protection of the environment
Democracy improves trust and social capital
Democracy makes people happier

Table 1. The purported effects of democracy: main hypotheses in the literature.

**Democracy favours the consolidation of state institutions**

The claim that democracy enhances the consolidation of state institutions immediately raises the sensible objection that democracy can only exist after a state is already in place. Stateness is a necessary condition for democracy: “no state, no democracy”, as Linz and Stepan (1996b:14) aptly observed. In a similar vein, Huntington had earlier noted that “men may, of course, have order without liberty, but they cannot have liberty without order. Authority has to exist before it is limited” (1968:7-8; cf. Kohli 2002:117).

There is little question that states are the essential underlying frameworks upon which contemporary democracies can be built. But this is also the reason why notions of democracy do not normally include the state as a defining element: they presume the existence of a necessary minimum of stateness. Because state-building is a continuous process, however, the question then is the following: is it the case that a state has to be strongly consolidated before it can be democratised, or is it rather the case that trends towards the weakening and possible collapse of certain states can only be reversed if democratic ways of legitimising political authority are introduced (cf. Bratton 2005:1-2)?

In a recent work, Carothers sums up and rejects prescriptions for sequencing (i.e. first state consolidation, then state democratisation), while emphasising the potentially constructive role of democracy. He acknowledges that a minimal functional capacity of the state has to be in place before a country democratises, but also stresses that postponing democratisation until a well-functioning state (that is, “one with capable, impartial institutions and a solid capacity to develop, legislate, and implement effective policies”) has been established wrongly assumes that autocrats will be good at the job. In fact, dictators are inherently unsuited to contribute to the second stage of state-building – notably to the construction of an effective state bureaucracy – because an impartial, efficient, effective, autonomous and legitimate state threatens the very nature and survival of their rule (Carothers 2007:18-19).

The relationship between state-building and democratisation processes, the argument goes, is arguably of a complementary nature (Bratton 2005:1-2): while the state feeds into any process of democratisation by making it possible, democracy feeds back into state-building by shaping the latter’s trajectory. Of course, state-building is not inexorable under democracy. Particularly in new democracies, some aspects of political opening may foster state-building (e.g. state performance is promoted by accountability mechanisms, media scrutiny helps spotting state sectors that need improving, civil society organisations monitor state activities and generate new policy ideas, etc.), while some others tend to jeopardize it (including the development of party and electoral patronage or the formation of weak coalition governments) (Carothers 2007:18-20).

Overall, however, democracy is likely to favour state consolidation processes. In particular, the democratic legitimacy of elected governments can enhance the acceptance of public authority and institutions by the population, and thus smooth the progress of state institutionalisation. The legal-rational procedures for electoral legitimacy tend to reduce the personalistic and arbitrary dimensions of political power, and to favour a more complete extension and consolidation of state structures over the national territory.
Any argument about the beneficial or perverse effects of democracy on the state has to grapple with the thorny issue of how stateness or state capacity should be defined and measured. Without pretending to exhaust the subject, we may tentatively identify three key components of stateness – namely political order, basic administration, and legitimate authority – and then address the question of what the supposed effects of democracy on these dimensions are.

First, a state is in place to the (maybe limited) extent that it establishes a degree of internal political order through a monopolistic control over the means of coercion. This requires an infrastructure for the projection of state authority over the national territory, defining the scope of the reach of the state. There must be no alternative centres of political power, such as armed rebel movements or warlords that challenge the state, and the regular armed forces must be reasonably under the control of the central authority. The second dimension concerns the presence of a basic administration, or a “usable bureaucracy” (Linz – Stepan 1996a:11). This dimension refers to the capacity of state agencies in terms of functioning government structures and public service provision. The capacity-issue encompasses the question of the material basis of the state. Any state, regardless of how it is structured, requires material resources to function, and a relevant part of such resources is normally extracted from the populace through taxation. The third constitutive element is the legitimacy of state authority. State capacity requires a degree of legitimacy and trust in state institutions. In this sense, effective state authority requires the elimination not only of armed resistance to state authority – namely in the form of warlordism, insurgencies or mercenary armed forces – but also a situation where the people’s loyalty is not directed towards alternative, non-state centres of power, such as traditional, religious or ethnic authorities, at the expenses of central government authority.

Whether the effects of the introduction of democracy over state capacity in the broad sense are positive or negative is controversial:

“when a polity ‘transits’ from some form of autocracy to … something else, what happens to the capacity of its state apparatus? And, if that something else becomes some form of democracy, does that distinctive, more-or-less centralized institution with a monopoly over the legitimate use of collective violence for a specific territory and population … gain or lose in material resources, subject compliance, coercive means and/or symbolic presence? Is democracy intrinsically hostile to the state, as many liberals claim? Or, does it provide a more reliable base for the implementation of collective decisions, as many socialists and social democrats believe?” (Schmitter 2005:1)

The enforcement of domestic order is more likely where people do not feel politically excluded and thus identify with the state and its authority. In particular, the effectiveness of state agencies hinges, at least in part, upon state legitimacy. To the extent that democratic procedures reinforce the legitimacy of state institutions, they arguably contribute to strengthening the latter’s effectiveness too. Democracy, in other words, feeds into a possible virtuous cycle linking legitimacy and effectiveness (cf. Diamond 1999:77). Stronger legitimacy partly results from the fact that democratic procedures and sanctions help control arbitrary power and the diffusion of corruption: “democracy and the consequent accountability raise the costs of corrupt behavior and likely deter bribe giving, therefore limiting the number of opportunities presented for corruption” (Bohara et al. 2004:484; cf. Sung 2004, Shen – Williamson 2005, van de Walle 2007:58ff.). By making state authority more legitimate and government processes more transparent, democracies improve the revenue-raising capacity and thus the material basis of the state. This should be particularly evident with regard to direct taxation: if people are to cooperate with anybody who aims at picking from their pockets, this is most likely going to be a government that enjoys a popular mandate.

There are, however, several counterarguments to the notion that democracy benefits stateness. The adoption of formally democratic institutions may actually leave neopatrimonial, corrupt and clientelistic practices unchanged – or even promote them – when such practices remain useful to people in government (Hagopian – Mainwaring 2005, van de Walle 2001, Lindberg 2003). Rather than contributing to legitimising state institutions and improving their effectiveness, therefore, democracy may actually produce a deterioration of state authority and public services. It is argued, for example, that democracies may have inherent difficulties in raising taxes when compared to authoritarian regimes. The prevalence of corruption, lack of

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2 Bratton refers to these dimensions as the scope, capacity and legitimacy of the state (Bratton 2005:3).

3 For both theoretical arguments stressing that democracies have incentives to raise higher taxes and also more capacity to do so, as well as others stressing the opposite, that is, authoritarian governments having higher incentives and capacity to tax (Cheibub 1998).
accountability and high rates of crime may promote a tendency towards criminalising and delegitimising the state itself.

The introduction of democracy also brings about higher levels of political mobilisation and greater expectations. New social demands risk overloading, over-expanding and destabilising political institutions, leading to crisis of governability as lack of capacity of the political system to respond to democratic pressures (Crozier et al. 1975:157ff.). Even though stable democracy may help integration and state-building, democratisation processes can be very destabilising, as political competition may heighten political polarisation and conflictuality up to the point of weakening state institutions and, under extreme circumstances, bring about the full collapse of an existing state (Ottaway 1995, Zartman 1995).

Besides the possibility of a virtuous cycle, therefore, “a vicious cycle is perhaps more probable…: leaders who are less than fully committed to democracy resist responding to popular needs and, as a result, citizens withdraw still further from the orbit of an already marginal state. At worst, the decay of the state and the corruption of elites together contribute to a downward spiral of disorder and deprivation” (Bratton 2005:4).

There is little or no evidence to support nor to reject the alleged existence of a relationship between democratisation and stateness or state capacity. As already observed, it is widely acknowledged that “tax … provides one of the principal lenses in measuring state capacity” (Di John 2006:1). Some analysts have thus examined the implications of democracy for the material basis of the state. Cheibub (1998) finds that democracies are no worse than dictatorships in raising taxes, while, in an unpublished paper, Schmitter concludes that democracies “produce stronger (or, more accurately, better funded) states” (Schmitter 2005:8). Yet, counter to expectations, Schmitter also suggests that democratisation does not improve state capacity to raise direct taxes. A recent study focusing on sub-Saharan Africa finds a positive relationship whereby “stronger states are associated with more democratic regimes and weaker states with regimes of lower democratic quality” (Bratton 2005:16). According to Bratton, the causal direction goes from democratisation to stateness: “it is democratization that legitimises states by obtaining for rulers the voluntary compliance of the citizenry … the state is unlikely to provide a durable order unless it is legitimised by democracy” (2005:24). Overall, however, the effects of democratisation over the strength of a state remain largely undetermined. This is not so much because research findings point at the absence of a link, but rather because very few scholars have empirically tackled the issue.

Democracy promotes international peace

International relations scholars developed a “democratic peace theory” according to which liberal and stable democratic regimes, while not rarely fighting wars against non-democratic countries, do not normally go to war against each other. This neo-Kantian theory essentially relies on the argument that polarchies are culturally and structurally inclined to solving conflicts in peaceful ways (Maoz – Russett 1993; Doyle 1983a/b). A similar, liberal stance challenges some key assumptions of realism, notably the notion that states live in a constant situation of security competition and that their behaviour is determined not by domestic factors, but by the structure of the international system (Rosato 2003:585).

A first implication of the democratic peace thesis is that any domestic process of political reform reduces the overall risk that a given country might engage in external conflict. A second implication is that exporting democracy helps enlarge the number of countries in the international system that contribute to the achievement of a global “democratic peace”. The democratic peace hypothesis, in other words, has important policy implications, for it suggests that expanding democracy abroad is a worthwhile policy for both promoting global peace as well as for the security of an individual state.

The core tenets of the democratic peace theory are at times enriched by a number of additional “empirical regularities” concerning the link between democracy and war, and notably the likelihood that democratic countries will generally fight wars less frequently, will win the wars they fight, and will keep military spending, as well as human losses and duration of wars, to a minimum. It is claimed, for example, that:

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4 Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki pointed at a looming crisis of democracy and governability in the “Trilateral societies” (the US, Europe and Japan). Crisis was intended as the lack of capacity of the political system to respond to social demands, resulting in an overexpansion of government activities and in the delegitimation of state authority (Crozier et al. 1975:157ff.).
“(1) Democracies are not at all immune from fighting wars with nondemocracies ... (2) Democracies tend to win a disproportionate share of the wars they fight ... (3) When disputes do emerge, democratic dyads choose more peaceful processes of dispute settlement than do other pairings of states ... (4) Democracies are more likely to initiate wars against autocracies than are autocracies against democracies ... (5) In wars they initiate, democracies pay fewer costs in terms of human life and fight shorter wars than nondemocratic states ... (6) Transitional democracies appear more likely to fight than stable regimes ... (7) Larger democracies seem more constrained to avoid war than do smaller democracies” (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999:791, e.a.).

At the basis of the democratic peace theory there is an empirical generalisation whose soundness is relatively well established. Yet, not only the reasons why democratic states rarely go to war with each other are still disputed, but some scholars keep questioning the very existence of a democracy-peace relationship. The debate among supporters of the democratic peace theory (and, more broadly, of democracies’ special attitude towards war) largely focuses on two distinct, if potentially complementary, explanations that may account for this empirical regularities, namely a normative account and an institutional account (Maoz – Russett 1993; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999:791; Rosato 2003).

The normative logic argues that political leaders in democratic countries tend to internalise and to become fully committed to democratic values (Doyle 1986). As a consequence, they externalise their own norms and are generally averse to the resolution of disputes through violence. When facing another democratic state, which they feel they can respect (since they have the same values) and trust (since they assume that the other side will also reason and behave in a violence-averse manner), they normally seek a negotiated settlement. The institutional logic, by contrast, is articulated by five main kinds of arguments, all descending from the notion that democratic institutions and processes make political elites accountable to their publics. Such causal arguments are: a public constraint mechanism (political leaders know their citizens are against war and behave accordingly), a group constraint mechanism (elected leaders avoid war as this is the position of highly mobilised and influential anti-war groups), a slow mobilisation mechanism (leaders are slow to use force because they need too long to mobilise people into supporting a war, and this long time helps diplomats find a peaceful compromise), a no surprise attack mechanism (surprise war operations are virtually ruled out by a public decision-making process, and time helps find peaceful solutions) and an information mechanism (because elected politicians will only go to war under certain conditions, if they do so they are extremely resolved: the two sides thus send and receive very clear signals during crisis, rather than misrepresenting the situation, and are better able to accommodate the dispute) (Rosato 2003:586-587).

An additional, institutional explanation, is provided by Bueno de Mesquita et al. (1999). The simple assumption is made that all political leaders are self-interested (i.e. they want to survive in office), but face different institutional incentives (democratic versus non-democratic). Un-elected leaders always use part of their resources to hand out private goods to members of their narrow supporting coalitions, whereas elected leaders are more ready to shift extra-resources to a war effort, trying harder to win the war, as they know their survival hinges on policy performance (or the delivery of public goods). This makes democratic states “unattractive targets”. Because of their dependence upon policy success, democratic leaders are also more selective and tend to go to war only when they are highly likely to win a conflict. Because two democracies will both tend to try hard to win a war and cannot therefore expect an easy victory, they will normally avoid to fight each other (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999).

Besides the debate taking place within the ranks of the democratic peace theorists, the existence of a link between democracy and peace is itself questioned by some scholars on the ground that it is based on a spurious relationship. The argument is not that democracies actually fight more than non-democracies, but rather that peace among democratic countries may depend upon factors other than regime type. Realist scholars, for example, observe that the vast majority of democratic dyads included in peace studies belongs to the post-1945 Western hemisphere (i.e. Western Europe and North America, with the occasional addition of Latin and Central America). Farber and Gowa (1997) note that the prolonged absence of conflict among democracies might be due to the fact that, because of their geopolitical alliances, such states had very strong shared interests which helped them contain tensions. Similarly, Rosato (2003:600) holds that the actual reason that kept these regions at peace was American hegemony, and thus replaces the idea of a democratic peace with an “imperial peace theory” (Kinsella 2005:456).

Despite some critical voices, the prevailing consensus is that significant empirical evidence exists to sustain the notion that relations among democracies – and thus the expansion of the overall number of democracies – make positive contributions towards the achievement of a more peaceful international environment.
Democracy promotes economic development

Many of the new democracies brought to life by the so-called Third Wave were set up in countries that some scholars deemed not yet “mature” for electoral, participatory politics. The underlying claim was that democracy comes at a significant economic cost and is, in this sense, a “luxury”. This sparked a renewed interest into the relationship between political democracy and economic performance, a topic whose study flourished in the course of the 1990s.

Broadly speaking, three main theoretical viewpoints have been advanced on this subject, namely a compatibility (democracy and development are mutually reinforcing), a conflict (a trade-off exists between democracy and development) and a sceptical view (the two are potentially compatible, but no universal relationship exists) (Huntington 1987, quoted in Sirowy – Inkeles 1990:128). The compatibility and the conflict perspectives, in particular, draw upon, respectively, Milton Friedman’s idea that political and economic freedoms mutually reinforce each other, and Mancur Olson’s notion that democracy shifts resources from growth-enhancing savings and investments to more immediate consumption (Plumper – Martin 2003:28). Starting from these premises, numerous detailed arguments have been articulated both in favour and against the existence of a democracy-growth linkage. As a whole, however, the cross-country literature on whether democracies grow faster, slower or much the same as authoritarian governments has been repeatedly criticised for being largely inconclusive, both theoretically and empirically (Sirowy – Inkeles 1990, Barro 1996, Brunetti 1997, Plumper – Martin 2003).

A vast body of work has been devoted to supporting the notion that democracy is instrumental to economic growth, and thus fosters development. Specific arguments, as mentioned, are abundant and nuanced (for an overview of some of these arguments, see Tavares – Wacziarg 2001:134ff.). At the most general level, the point is made that democratic elections introduce competition and accountability mechanisms that generate incentives, for people in government, to achieve the best possible macroeconomic performance by choosing good policies, and thus tend to promote a country’s economic progress. Democracy, in other words, reduces the arbitrariness of the policy-making process by establishing channels for a bottom-up control, and thus improves the overall quality of policies. Democratic procedures, in addition, imply that rules for alternation in government are more clear and transparent. This discourages illegitimate attempts to take-over power, thus reducing political instability and uncertainty that would otherwise hinder growth. Besides underpinning political stability, democracy also strengthens the rule of law, including the protection of property rights and the enforcement of contracts, and in this way it encourages investments and the accumulation of physical capital. Democracy is further said to favour economic growth by fostering macroeconomic stability (in terms of economic policy, growth rates and inflation) and promoting trade openness. Finally, the claim is made that popular demands for a better education and a more equitable wealth distribution also contribute to accelerate growth by raising the level of human capital (and thus economic productivity) and by bringing down the level of inequality (Abdiweli – Said 2004, Desai et al. 2003, Przeworski et al. 2000, Rodrik – Wacziarg 2005, Quinn – Wolley 2001).

If any of the theories specifying the ways in which democratic governance is linked to better economic performance were correct, the key implication would be that we are not confronted with a trade-off between democracy and development: democracy would deserve being promoted not just as a universal value, but also because political reform and regime change contribute to a country’s struggle for economic development. In other words, there is no need to wait for a country to be mature for democracy. This is the position implied by the “good governance” agenda that gained prominence since the late 1980s and the early 1990s. In many developing countries, the structural adjustment programmes promoted by the international financial institutions had achieved poor results. An explanation of these failures was provided by the suggestion that economic reforms could only be effective in the presence of a functioning framework of state institutions. The role of state and politics in development processes was being entirely re-assessed, and the need for reforming governance as a key strategy for growth gained consensus. Initially, reform was meant to imply “administrative” changes that would promote transparency, rule of law and accountability. Such changes were expected to spur economic progress as well as make development aid more effective. But these ideas soon developed into full-blown arguments in favour of democratic reforms. Political competition was meant to restore incentives for political leaders to choose and implement successful policies, thus favouring economic development. The good governance agenda was turning on its head an established tradition in political science – the theories of the so-called modernisation school – whose main thesis was that economic development and social changes occurred prior to the establishment of democracy.
A radical interpretation of modernisation theories implied that substantial economic progress required authoritarian regimes, as opposed to the fragile establishment of “premature” democracies. Democracy could be dysfunctional, notably when introduced before the achievement of certain levels of development. In this view, before introducing democratic institutions, any state first needs to undergo some key socio-economic and cultural changes and make a certain amount of resources available. Accordingly, some kind of more or less benevolent “developmental dictatorship” was required in order to speed up economic progress in poor countries (cf. Huntington 1968, Wade 1990). This seemed to be proved by the experience of some Latin American countries during the 1970s (notably Chile and Brazil), by Romania in the 1950s, by East Asian countries such as South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, and even, more recently, by China. In all these cases, fast growth was directly linked to the presence of non-democratic regimes, showing that economic freedoms and property rights can be protected under authoritarian regimes as well as, if not better than, democratic states can do (Barro 1996).

The specific arguments against democracy, according to which pluralist political systems hinder growth, are almost as numerous and detailed as the arguments for democracy (for a review, see Sirowy – Inkeles 1990:129ff.). The bulk of them focuses on the assumption that democratic political systems, by extending the franchise to the lower strata of the population, open up governmental sphere to the latter’s electoral pressures. Newly enfranchised and mobilised groups – such as workers and the poor – ask for broader redistribution and for costly welfare interventions. They push for an increase in the size of government beyond a point where this becomes negative for growth. They raise pressures for higher wages and higher fiscal deficits, raising inflation, which marginally reduces economic growth. The increase in consumption also reduces savings, which hampers growth by hindering the accumulation of capital and the level of national and foreign investments. Broadly speaking, democracy makes state institutions responsive to the demands of the poor by expanding welfare policies and lowering income inequality, but do so at the expense of physical capital accumulation (Tavares – Wacziarg 2001; cf. Gasiorowski 2000; Oatley 2003; Serieux 1999; Crozier et al. 1975:157ff.; Przeworski et al. 2000 on wages).

A related set of arguments focuses on the efficiency of participatory governance. The new demands raised by democratic participation tend to overload the state. A first consequence of electoral politics is that it fosters short-term promises rather than long-term development. A second implication of democracy is that it reduces the efficiency of decisions and generates instability. A third implication is that democracy in developing societies tends to escalate social conflicts based on communal diversity, up to the point where divisions override the capacity of the government for effective action. Overall, democratic political participation reduces the degree of social order and political stability that a country needs to attract investments and promote industrial change.

All arguments pointing at the growth-retarding effects of democracy imply the existence of a trade-off and thus of a hard choice to make: if fast economic growth is what developing countries are really after, political liberty and equality should be renounced, or at least postponed for some time.

As much as the theoretical debate has been fiercely fought, several reviews of the existing body of empirical work have shown its conflicting results (Plumper – Martin 2003:28). Not much has changed since, over fifteen years ago, Sirowy and Inkeles (1990:150) summed up the findings of existing research with the following tentative conclusions: democracies do not grow faster, but it is still unclear whether they slow down economic growth or whether there is no systematic relationship.

Some recent studies appear to confirm a moderately negative effect of democracy, and thus suggest that “political freedom emerges as a sort of luxury good. Rich places consume more democracy because this good is desirable for its own sake and even though the increased political freedom may have a small adverse effect on growth. Basically, rich countries can afford the reduced rate of economic progress” (Barro 1996:24; cf. Tavares – Wacziarg 2001). Other fresh research, however, insists not only that, whether democratic or authoritarian, political regimes have actually little or no systematic impact on economic performance, but also that democracies are associated “with significant reductions in economic volatility” (Rodrik – Wacziarg 2005:50; cf. Przeworski et al. 2000). The economic outcomes produced by authoritarian regimes are much more varied than the performances of democracies. Besides the tigers (e.g. South Korea, Taiwan or Botswana), history is littered with countless instances of economically disastrous dictatorial regimes (including Chad during the 1960s, Uruguay during the 1970s, or today’s North Korea), as well as with several authoritarian countries that, over the years, alternated remarkable and dismal performances (such as Iraq, Ivory Coast or Nigeria). On the contrary, democracies are not normally as extreme, for they include a number of significant economic successes (e.g. Western Europe until the 1970s) and also cases of substantial economic failure (e.g. Latin
America during the 1980s) (Przeworski et al. 2000). Thus, Przeworski and colleagues stress that there is no economic reason to renounce democracy, while Rodrik insists that democracy is of economic value because of its capacity to reduce economic instability, i.e. the volatility of economic performance, by facilitating the management of social conflicts and the achievement of compromises (Rodrik 2000). Moreover, the argument that new democracies in poor and heterogeneous countries bring economic havoc is allegedly false, as democratic reforms actually generate a short term boost in economic growth (Rodrik – Wacziarg 2005). The reason why the political science and economics literature is largely inconclusive is possibly due to the fact that democratisation may entail both economic costs and economic benefits. In other words, even though democratic reforms impact on the sources of growth, these effects tend to counter-balance each other, explaining why democracy itself may be ambiguous (Pinto – Timmons 2005, Tavares – Wacziarg 2001:1344). To fully unravel the complex linkages between democracy and growth, one needs to specify the “channel” or endogenous variables, i.e. the mechanisms that are affected by democracy and impact on economic growth (Tavares – Wacziarg 2001:1344). It is argued, for example, that democracy promotes growth by favouring human capital accumulation and partly lowering inequality, while, at the same time, it dampens down growth by reducing physical capital accumulation and by augmenting government consumption (Tavares – Wacziarg 2001:1343).

The multifaceted character of the connection is also stressed by Plumper and Martin. They point at the possibility that a consensus may be emerging on what they call “the Barro effect”, namely an inverse u-shaped relationship whereby democracy favours growth at low levels of political liberty, but the opposite happens when certain levels of political liberty are achieved. Plumper and Martin’s aim is to provide the missing theoretical argument in support of the Barro effect. A move away from authoritarian rule and towards democratic government generates a shift of resources from “unproductive rental transfers” to the provision of growth-enhancing public goods (such as infrastructures or schooling). Further increases in the level of democracy, however, push government spending beyond the point where taxation begins to hamper investments and thus growth. In other words, “purely autocratic governments tend to over-invest in rent-seeking activities, while pure democracies have an incentive to over-invest in public goods” (Plumper – Martin 2003:44).

A different solution to the democracy-economic performance puzzle is based on the proposal to modify the way democracy is measured. While the level of democracy at any single point in time may not impact on economic growth, Gerring et al. (2005) claim that the latter is affected by an over time accumulation of democratic experience: “long-term democracy leads to stronger economic performance” (Gerring et al. 2005). We shall come back to this point in a subsequent section of the paper.

A third way to explain and overcome some of the contradictions in the findings of scholars working on the link between democracy and development is by examining more closely the temporal and regional factors. Kriekhaus highlights how the analysts’ choice of a specific time period is crucial, with democracy producing, on average, a negative effect on growth during the 1960s, a positive effect during the 1980s and no effect at all during the 1970s and 1990s (Kriekhaus 2004). As for geographical differences, in those regions where social groups clamour for redistribution, such as in Latin America, democracy may lead to populism and poor economic performances. Similarly, in areas of the world where state elites are generally committed to promoting rapid industrialization, as in parts of Asia, democratic pressures may hinder effective economic policy. However, in regions where neo-patrimonial practices are chronic, and notably in Sub-Saharan Africa, democracy may provide a useful mechanism for evicting grossly corrupt politicians and may therefore facilitate the achievement of higher rates of economic growth (Kriekhaus 2006; cf. Tiruneh 2006, Guseh 2005).

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5 The within-country evidence Rodrik and Wacziarg (2005) produce to show that Benin, Mali and Madagascar grew better after rather than prior to democratisation is not entirely convincing, as on average all of sub-Saharan Africa fared better, economically, during the 1990s than it did during the 1980s.

6 Plumper and Martin overemphasise Barro’s own claim when they say that his findings “demonstrated the existence” of such nonlinear relationship, as the author more cautiously talked of a “suggestion” or an “indication” of such a relationship (Barro 1996).
Democracy promotes social welfare

A crucial dimension of the introduction of a democratic system is the extension of political participation to previously-excluded social strata: by granting universal franchise, in particular, democratisation processes open up the political arena to the poor. The latter are thus formally allowed to organise their demands and raise political pressure for their needs to be addressed by government. The political inclusion and the influence of the lower social strata generates the widespread expectation that, “in democracies, the poor have more sovereign power than the men of property; for they are more numerous and the decisions of the majority prevail” (Aristotle, quoted in Bollen – Jackman 1985:1). Does the formal recognition of a political role for the worse-off actually make a difference?

At a most basic level, democratic rules help put the survival concerns of the most vulnerable on the agenda of elected governments, which are held accountable through the combination of a free flow of information, open public debates and electoral mechanisms. The claim has been famously made by Amartya Sen that democracy protects the lives of the underprivileged by working as an early-warning system that helps averting major social disasters. Even in countries as vulnerable as India or Botswana, in particular, open political systems have allegedly been instrumental to prevent the worst food crises, so that “no substantial famine has ever occurred in a country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press … [as] democracy … would spread the penalty of famine to the ruling groups and the political leadership” (Sen 1994:34; Dreze – Sen 1989). By contrast, Somalia, Ethiopia and, most notably, China are among the numerous states whose non-democratic governments, while occasionally successful in accelerating the pace of economic development, could not count on mechanisms for promptly exposing popular needs and making politicians responsive to them. These states repeatedly failed to prevent famines. The lesson Sen draws from this is that rights and needs are strongly interconnected, as “political rights can have a major role in providing incentives and information towards the solution of economic privation” (1994:32). Political rights, in other words, are urgently needed, rather than economic needs deserving priority.

Besides favouring the survival of the poorest, democracy affects expectations concerning the improvement of social welfare – including wealth distribution, human development, and so on – for the lower echelons of society. Democratisation, for example, may promote the adoption of taxation systems that are more advantageous to the worse-off, the introduction or expansion of social welfare programs, the reform of land property rights in a redistributive direction, the advancement of popular struggles that help raise workers’ wages, etc.. The impact of democratic change, in other words, may affect social policies in their broader sense, that is, including policies that shape the distribution of income (social security and fiscal policies, but also land reforms), labour policies, pensions and welfare transfer payments, housing and social services, and also gender policies for the empowerment of women.

The social sciences literature developed two main arguments concerning the effects of democracy on social welfare. The two arguments focus on the way the extension of the suffrage creates incentives for those in government to respond to bottom-up demands for: a) a more equitable distribution of income, and b) an expanded provision of social services.

The idea that a reduction of inequality within the political sphere is bound to cause a reduction of inequality in the economic sphere is apparently straightforward. The very rationale behind many of the forces that pushed for political openings in early-democratising states, between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, was that such reforms would be instrumental to addressing issues of inequality. Redistributions policies are in fact more likely under democratic rule. Some empirical findings, for example, show that popular pressures in developing countries are likely to place land reform on the agenda of elected governments (McAuslan 1998:527), and that wage increases are more easily achieved within the framework of democratic regimes (Rodrik 1999). Under authoritarian systems, by contrast, landowners or capitalists with a stake in the governing coalition are likely to prevent similar redistributive processes from taking place, as happened in Pinochet’s Chile, in post-1964 Brazil or in Iran under the Shah (Bollen – Jackman 1985:439, Gradstein – Milanovic 2004:519).

Real world countries, however, stop short of fulfilling the median voter hypothesis, which suggests that, if the median voter’s income is lower than the average income, democratic politics will bring about a redistribution of national wealth (for example, through higher tax rates) (Meltzer – Richard 1981). A number of Eastern European transitions to democracy exemplify how democratisation processes can actually contribute to expanding inequality, rather than reduce it. Neither did countries such as Taiwan or South Korea waited for democratic rule before they undertook efforts towards a more equitable distribution of resources (Gradstein and Milanovic 2004:516). The mismatch between the median voter hypothesis and
related evidence is accounted for by two main theoretical explanations. On the one hand, some scholars point at the political constraints on the capacity of the poor to actually demand and obtain redistribution. On the other hand, others stress how the poor tend to restrain themselves from radical redistribution (Harmsa – Zinka 2003; cf. Bollen – Jackson 1985). A related argument is that authoritarian regimes may be better able to protect the interests of the poor and thus to actually implement measures that will lower inequality (Beitz 1982, as in Gradstein – Milanovic 2004:521).

Democracy, however, does have an impact on inequality. While the short-term effects of democracy appear to be ambiguous, making the extent to which the relationship can be generalised problematic (Bollen – Jackman 1985, Tavares – Wacziarg 2001), substantial empirical evidence suggests that, in the long run, democracy actually reduces inequality. According to some authors, therefore, an inverse U-shaped relationship exists, or a “political Kuznets curve” (the Kuznets curve assumes an increase in inequality during the initial stages of a country’s economic development, followed by a decrease in inequality at later stages): the advent of democracy is likely to have an initial cost in terms of increased inequality, but, after some time, democracy tends to reduce the gap between the income of the rich and that of the poor, producing a more egalitarian outcome (Huntington – Nelson 1976, Muller 1988, Burkhart 1997, Chong 2004:190, Gradstein – Milanovic 2004, Acemoglu – Robinson 2002, Bourguignon – Verdier 2000).

Alongside redistributive measures, democratic politics is also expected to generate calls for an overall enlargement of the public sector. The newly-enfranchised middle and lower sections of the population are likely to demand both a general expansion in the provision of public services (including, for example, access to water or electricity) as well as a specific extension of social services (namely, health and education policies). These strata tend to benefit most from state intervention, as they are less able than the upper classes are to secure such services from alternative, non-state providers (Sirowy – Inkeles 1990:134ff. and 143ff., Stasavage 2005, Navia – Zweifel 2003). But the case against the positive effects of democracy over the welfare of the poor is not missing from the literature. Some sceptics, for example, argue that the introduction of democracy has often been accompanied by significant cuts in public spending and welfare policies, notably in the health, education or public transport sectors, as well as by the reduction of subsidies for the poor. As a result, democratisation often permitted poverty and inequality to increase (cf. Haggard – Kaufman 1995).

The empirical impact of democratic change on social services has to distinguish between the effect on the “scope” of services (i.e. spending) and the effect on their “quality” (performance). With regard to the former, a range of cross-sectional quantitative studies confirms the existence of an empirical link between democracy and higher levels of social spending (and, in this sense, the median voter hypothesis seems to be satisfied, Ross 2006:862). Contrary to expectations, however, the existence of a link between democracy and social sector performance is at best controversial. This is the case regardless of whether the relationship is examined by measuring outputs, such as rates of education enrolment or immunisation, or by looking at outcomes, like rates of literacy or infant mortality (Nelson 2007:80, Ross 2006). Some research does find that democracy has a positive impact on health (e.g. Boone 1996, Zweifel – Navia 2000, Lake – Baum 2001, Navia – Zweifel 2003, Przeworski et al. 2000, Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003), education levels (e.g. Stasavage 2005) or a country’s level of human development (Baum – Lake 2003, Ming-Chang 2006, Gerring et al. 2006). Comprehensively, however, studies addressing this subject demonstrate that money is normally not enough: the kind of electoral pressures that bring about social spending increases do not impact on other aspects of social services policies, such as institutional reforms or resource reallocations, that would improve overall performance, that is, raise the quality or equity of social services and thus the actual education or health of the population (Nelson 2007). As for why progress in the social services sector is difficult to achieve, important factors appear to include bureaucratic resistance to reform implementation or the public’s lack of interest, information or capacity to assess changes: “politicians in democracies receive signals from the public and major interest groups that favor spending and expansion, but not reallocation or reform of social services” (Nelson 2007:82). Ross (2006:870) adds that expanded (health) spending fails to impact on outcomes (infant and child mortality) because the additional public goods that are produced in response to the median voter selectively target middle income households. But the latter would buy essential health services from private providers anyway, and thus the benefit is limited. The poor, on the contrary, are not the main beneficiaries of these policies despite the fact that they have virtually no access to alternative services. He also notes that the lack of progress of policy performance indicators has implications that go beyond any specific policy sector and touch upon the overall welfare of the poor. Infant and child mortality rates, for example, are “a sensitive measure of many other conditions – including access to clean water and sanitation, indoor air quality, female education and literacy, prenatal and neonatal health services, caloric intake, disease
and, of course, income – that are hard to measure among the very poor” (Ross 2006:861). In this regard, democracy appears to fail to reach down to, and to make a difference for, the underprivileged.

Some theoretical and methodological reflections

To what extent are the individual hypotheses on the correlates of democratisation based on a common underlying framework? The various works that have been briefly reviewed include the contributions of political scientists, international relations researchers, economists, sociologists, psychologists and scholars from other disciplines. The way scholars belonging to the same discipline approach these issues, in addition, also varies significantly. For these and other reasons, COD studies display evident and important differences in terms of the concepts, the operationalisation, the theories, the models and the data employed. Overviews of some such differences are presented by Sirowy and Inkeles (1990:127) with regard to analyses addressing the democracy-development connection, by Gradstein and Milanovic (2004:524ff.) for the democracy-inequality nexus, or by Eichengreen and Leblang (2007) for the democracy-globalisation linkage.

The various explanations advanced by inquiries into the impact of democratic change also differ as to the extent to which they stress the relevance of sociological, rational, psychological or other factors. Yet, all these studies adopt an underlying neo-institutional argument, namely, the notion that democratic reforms may have important implications that go beyond the change of regime itself. Such contention largely revolves around a few basic assumptions, including the following: a) leaders in government want to stay in power; b) democratisation expands the share of the population with the power to sanction those in government; c) elected leaders are (or are perceived to be) more responsive than unelected leaders as they adopt (or pretend to adopt) policies that are more in line with popular preferences.

It is out of these conjectures that many scholars expect democracy to produce, more or less directly, positive consequences. But the perverse effects of democratisation that other scholars prefer to emphasise are also related to the aforementioned assumptions: either the same assumptions lead them to predict negative consequences (e.g. popular participation may imply that leaders adopt measures unfavourable to economic growth) or else these assumptions are criticised and openly challenged (e.g. voters may not actually be capable of sanctioning elected leaders, and thus expectations that democracy will promote positive policy outcomes are misplaced).

All COD studies share a concern with what is meant by democracy and democratisation, a fundamental issue for democratisation studies at large. Democratic reforms certainly cannot be taken at face value. Before looking into the correlates of democratisation, any empirical inquiry needs to cast doubts on the belief that the democratic changes that several states formally introduced over the last few decades were actually significant and relevant: for any specific country, the extent of the democratic renewal that reforms actually brought about needs investigating. This, in turn, requires thinking through the way democracy is conceptualised and measured.

Some of the scholars contributing to the various strands of the COD subfield do squarely address the question of how to define democracy. The vast majority of authors, however, deals with it as a non-central issue and quickly settles for adopting one or the other of the best known operational definitions and measurements of democracy, from the Bollen index of political democracy (available for two years only, 1960 and 1965) to the well-known measures proposed by the Freedom House or by the Polity project (II, III and IV). Most of these scholars are more concerned with issues relating to methodological techniques or, at times, with definitional and measurement issues concerning the dependent variable they are working on (e.g. state- or nation-building, welfare policies and outcomes, etc.).

The debates on the concept of democracy within this literature, however, raise three specific and important questions. The first one concerns the definition of democracy itself, and in particular the breadth of the notion of democracy that should be adopted. The point relates to the crucially important need to separate what democracy is from what democracy generates. The question, therefore, is whether the latter should include such items as stateness, political order, rule of law, basic resources, human rights, gender parity or egalitarianism as constitutive parts, or, if not, what the relationship between the latter and democracy is meant to be. Are the abovementioned elements pre-requisites, constitutive parts or possible consequences of democracy? Arguing in favour of a parsimonious definition of democracy, Huntington points out that:

“elections, open, free and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable sine qua non. Governments produced by elections may be inefficient, corrupt, shortsighted, irresponsible,
dominated by special interests, and incapable of adopting policies demanded by the public good. These qualities make such governments undesirable but they do not make them undemocratic. Democracy is one public virtue, not the only one, and the relation of democracy to other public virtues and vices can only be understood if democracy is clearly distinguished from the other characteristics of political systems” (Huntington 1991:10).

In this vein, therefore, investigations into the consequences of democratic change require that the independent variable be demarcated in a particularly economical way. A procedural, Schumpeterian notion of democracy as institutionalised political competition through free and fair elections should ideally be adopted. Many scholars are led by this view when they employ standard measurements such as those provided by the Polity project or by the “political rights” component of the Freedom House index (as opposed to the expanded notion of democracy that underlies the FH’s overall regime classification), albeit the latter are often used in confusing and problematic ways7.

The second issue has to do with “the magnitude of the regime change” (Mansfield – Snyder 1995:17). A certain phenomenon – say, for example, the lowering of the level of poverty – may be explained not just by the fact that a given country introduced democratic institutions, but also, as an additional explanatory variable, by the extent of the political changes that the democratisation process implied. The changes undergone by State X, which moved from a form of light authoritarianism to a system of low-quality electoral democracy, may plausibly be much less crucial than those experienced by State Y, which moved from a tough authoritarian regime to a well-functioning democratic system and thus walked a much longer stretch of the democratic ladder. Where political change is more fundamental, the stimulus and the push for some kind of side-effects to make their appearance, if any, are likely to be stronger.

The third problem also relates to the need to observe what follows democratisation, a need that is distinctive to the COD approach. The well-established strategy of inspecting the degree of democracy in newly-reformed regimes appears to be a suitable strategy when one looks at democracy as an endpoint; that is, for example, when the question is whether and to what extent democracy “has been achieved” at the end of a transition route, or in the course of a consolidation process. If we are inquiring into the effects of democratic reforms, however, time becomes a crucial factor. How long does it take, after such reforms are adopted, for the expected consequences to make their appearance? There is a risk that we may focus on too short a time span, that we may too soon rush to assess the extent of the economic, social or political transformations that are supposedly ignited by democratic changes, when such transformations may still be far from being fully realised. With regard to the effects of a newly-democratised system on state capacity, for example, Schmitter rightfully asks:

“when is democratization expected to affect state capacity? During the initial period … alarming claims that ‘the state is falling apart’ because people are not paying taxes, police is not policing, civil servants were not getting paid, local notables were taking over, crime rates were going up, corruption had become rampant, court systems were paralyzed, armed forces were divided and disoriented… [but often] these worries were greatly exaggerated [as state capacity is gradually restored and] democratization … was much less debilitating than initially thought” (Schmitter 2005:2).

It follows that, when looking into the effects of democratisation, one should not seek for immediate, proximal results – as it is often implausibly assumed by proponents of interest-based arguments – but rather for distal, long-term and incremental outcomes that are generated by the cumulative, historical effects of institutions (Gerring et al. 2005:356). The short-term impact of democracy may be quite different from its long-term, durable effects. If we are not aware of this, we risk missing what are arguably the “true” effects of democratisation. With regard to inequality, for example, the claim has been made that “at least approximately 20 years of democratic experience are required for the egalitarian effect to occur” (Muller 1988:59). Countries that are now democratic, but who were not so a decade ago, may not have gone through this probable reduction of inequality yet. If they are included in a cross-national sample simply on the basis of their current “democratic status”, they would tend to dampen down any estimate of the effects of democratisation on inequality8.

7 See Bogaards (2007).
8 As for the effects of democracy on state strength, Schmitter observes that “it took most of the archeo-democracies of Western Europe and North America 200 or more years to acquire their present level of state capacity” (Schmitter 2005:3).
There is an important implicit argument here. The key distinction may not be the one between authoritarian countries and states that are currently under democratic rule, since the latter group together Britain or the United States, who developed their democratic practices over a long period of time, with any other country where multiparty democracy is maybe just a couple of years old. The crucial difference runs between countries that have cumulated a certain experience with democracy and countries that have not. Rather than simply measuring a country’s level of democracy at any given point in time, one should quantify the experience with democracy that such country has cumulated over time.

Muller (1988) calls this the “longitudinal variation in democracy”, i.e. the number of years a democratic system has been uninterrupted in existence (or, in a somewhat more radical version, the overall number of years of democratic experience, regardless of interruptions). In a similar vein, Clague et al. (1996) and Eichengreen and Leblang (2007:15) talk of “age of democracy”, while Ferree and Singh (2007) use the notion of “institutional duration”. Gradstein and Milanovic (2004:532) also reason along these lines, while Ross (2006:866) cautiously opts for examining both the effects of a country’s degree of democracy as well as its history of democratic rule. Gerring and associates refer to a cumulated “stock of democracy” and insist that “it is the accumulated effect of these historical legacies, in addition to contemporary regime status, that ought to be of central concern if we wish to understand the causal effect of a regime type on a variety of current outcomes – social, cultural, political, or economic” (Gerring et al. 2005:325). They specifically suggest that any scepticism about the impact of democracy on economic growth is dispelled when one focuses on a country’s overall democratic experience, rather than just on its degree of democracy at a single point in time. Adopting a longitudinal definition can thus have a decisive impact on research findings.

The stock of democracy notion – whereby democratisation makes progress through slow and incremental steps – is the opposite of a procedural concept that sees democracy as being essentially achieved once open, competitive elections are held. Time is introduced as a critical dimension for democratic processes to flourish. According to Nelson, for example, “sustained democracy” is necessary for underprivileged groups to develop a range of channels for participation that go beyond political parties and include nongovernmental and other civil society organisations (Nelson 2007:89). In the realm of international relations, while structural explanations of the democratic peace assume an immediate effect of democratic mechanisms, normative explanations imply that time is necessary for democratic norms to mature and have an impact (Maoz and Russett 1993:626,630). Studies that emphasise the time factor implicitly shift their focus from (new) democratisation processes to (relatively established) democracies, linking up with other sections within the political science literature.

If we move from issues concerning our explanatory factor to considering the dependent variables examined by the various COD studies, at least three questions emerge with regard to the existence, the direction and the inner nature of a causal link with democracy.

The first problem concerns the actual presence of causality linking democratisation and the dependent phenomenon under scrutiny. Rather than implying a direct connection, the association between the two variables could simply be spurious. Maybe the end of the cold war or the achievement of certain levels of development, for example, produced changes both in the political sphere of many countries, facilitating democratic reforms, as in other areas of their political, social or economic life. It may well be the case, in other words, that the same causes that ignited the process of democratisation also generated a process of redistribution, of increased conflict and so on.

A second question concerns the direction of a possible causal connection. As for the relationship between democracy and growth, for example, there has been ample debate on whether it is economic development that brings about democratic change, or the other way round. Both positions may actually hold true, as the two phenomena may be associated through mutual causation.

Thirdly, an important issue concerns the apparent, significant degree of interrelation and overlap between the by-products that are expected from democratisation. This is most evident when we look at the causal mechanisms adopted by the individual theoretical explanations. As Rosato points out, “a theory is comprised of a hypothesis stipulating an association between an independent and a dependent variable and a causal logic that explains the connection between those two variables … A causal logic is a statement about how an independent variable exerts a causal effect on a dependent variable. It elaborates a specific chain of causal mechanisms that connects these variables and takes the following form: A (the independent variable) causes B (the dependent variable) because A causes x, which causes y, which causes B” (2003:585). Indeed, highlighting the inner causal mechanism is the best way of addressing the question of a possible spurious association. As it happens, however, a phenomenon that is examined as a dependent variable in one strand of the COD literature often plays the role of an intervening variable on another such strand. If, say, the
argument is made that democracies increase growth or reduce conflict by affecting and lessening inequality, scholars whose main interest lies in the causes of civil wars or in the origins of good economic performance would greatly benefit from learning what researchers studying the democracy-social inequality linkage have to say. Similarly, if the claim is advanced that the macroeconomic consequences of democracy are mediated by its effects on taxation policies, it may be important to understand how the democratic legitimacy of governments impacts on the extractive capacity of state institutions. Thus, a more systematic examination of the causal mechanisms implied by existing theories (as Tavares and Wacziarg 2001 do for the democracy-economic growth linkage and Rosato 2003 does for the democracy-international peace linkage) highlights the interrelations among various strands within the COD subfield of study and shows that such strands would strongly benefit from mutual recognition.

A related aspect concerns the fact that, besides mutually reinforcing transformations (the impact of democracy on inequality may strengthen the regime’s capacity to bring about or maintain internal peace), there may be plausible trade-offs between different outcomes (the same impact on inequality may hinder economic growth, as it is sometimes argued). If trade-offs really exist, understanding the implications of democratic change is ever more crucial, as distinct consequences expected from the introduction of democracy would have to be weighed against each other in assessing the desirability of political reforms: would we be willing to foster democratisation processes if we knew that, while positively reducing inequality, democracy would also tend to ignite new violent, domestic conflicts? Because some negative impacts of democratisation are far from excluded, research and debates on COD topics have to carefully avoid any pro-democracy bias. The unambiguous normative preferability of democracy over any authoritarian alternative may generate strong prejudices that risk affecting empirical findings. In his survey of existing work on infant and child mortality rates, Ross (2006) comes across a consequential fact: non-democratic regimes with good social and economic records are frequently omitted from cross-national samples for sheer lack of data. The reason for the lack of these statistics seems to lie in the fact that, compared to non-performing non-democratic states, such countries are less dependent upon external agencies and the latter’s demands for the regular publication of social and economic figures, and thus they simply do not collect nor publish such data. This selection bias results in a tendency to overrate the performance of democratic governance. While Ross highlights the existence of this problem with regard to the assessment of health policy outcomes only, and does not explicitly consider this the result of a value preference in favour of democratic systems, the tendency to overestimate the impact of democracy may go well beyond any specific policy sector. In general, the search for the consequences of democratisation needs to ward off the interference of normative considerations with the carrying out of good research.

**Breaking new ground**

The spread of democracy over the last few decades makes a sound understanding of its consequences ever more relevant. Some of the purported effects of democratic reforms have been mentioned and discussed in the present paper. Yet, many others have not. Several questions might be asked with regard to additional, plausible effects of democratisation processes. For example, are democratic regimes more generous than non-democratic states in dishing out aid to developing countries? Do democracies uphold international justice initiatives more strongly than authoritarian regimes do? And what is, if any, the influence of democratisation reforms on the demographics of countries that undertake them: do they speed up or slow down population growth dynamics? If there are any relationships linking the above phenomena, are such relationships of a causal nature or are they spurious correlations in which, for instance, both the dependent and the independent variables are influenced by factors such as a country’s level of development? The identification of similar questions constitutes an emerging challenge for social scientists with an interest in the multifaceted impact of democratisation.

A second manner of making progress in the way we look at the aftermath of democratic changes would require investigating whether there are specific components of democratic regimes that impact on the phenomena we have been referring to (cf. Przeworski 2000:1-4). This is a research direction partly explored by existing political science and economics literature with a focus on established democracies. In his work on majoritarian and consensual democracies, for example, Lijphart (1999) includes an analysis of their different economic performances. Persson and Tabellini (2003) similarly look at a range of economic consequences, including the changes in the size of government budgets or in the diffusion of corruption, that are produced by different electoral systems and forms of government.
The other side of the coin – and the third point – is that some of the phenomena that appear to be linked to democratisation may be more closely explored. This may be done by disaggregating them into their constitutive parts to understand, in a more specific manner, which components are affected by the advent of democratic change and which are not. We need to appreciate, for example, which kind of violent conflicts are more likely to be resolved in democratised states and which ones are not. More generally, if democratisation helps the development of certain outcomes, such as state-building, peace or economic redistribution, there is still a need to learn exactly what kind of state-building, peace or economic redistribution it fosters. State-building, for example, is not a neutral, technical problem. One of its key components is taxation: consolidating a state, among other things, normally involves increasing its resource basis. Yet, the form that such increase takes – i.e. the specific taxation system that is adopted – implies different possible political settlements and important socio-economic consequences (cf. Di John 2006:1). Both in normative legitimacy and empirical expansion, democracy gained unprecedented momentum over recent decades. This raised the question of the broader side-effects of democratisation processes in countries that initiate reforms. Some of the effects produced by political openings have began to be investigated, others have yet to come under scrutiny. A better understanding of these developments is a critical component for assessing the overall balance sheet of democratic reforms. What democracy will be able to generate, particularly in developing countries, shall crucially affect its global destiny.

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As a spin off that takes us beyond the scope of democratisation studies, political scientists may want to consider whether, for those phenomena upon which democracy appears not to have an impact, political factors other that regime type play a significant role (Ross 2006:874). With regard to the well-studied link between democracy and economic performance, for example: “the empirical literature has developed from very general measures of political institutions to rather specific properties of the political system” (Brunetti 1997:163) that are better able capture what is relevant for growth, including political variables such as government stability, political violence, policy volatility or perceptions of politics.
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