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Is the Third Wave Over?

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Is the Third Wave Over?

Larry Diamond (bio)

Since the overthrow of Portugal's dictatorial regime in April 1974, the number of democracies in the world has multiplied dramatically. Before the start of this global trend toward democracy, there were roughly 40

countries that could be classified as more or less democratic. The number increased moderately through the late 1970s and early 1980s as a number of states experienced transitions from authoritarian (predominantly military) to democratic rule. In the mid-1980s, however, the pace of global democratic expansion accelerated markedly, and today there are between 76 and 117 democracies, depending on how one counts. *How one counts* is crucial, however, to thinking about whether democracy will continue to expand in the world, or even hold steady at its current level. In fact, it raises the fundamental question of what we mean by democracy.

In a seminal formulation, Samuel Huntington has dubbed this post-1974 period the “third wave” of global democratic expansion. He defines a “wave of democratization” simply as “a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period.”¹ He identifies two previous waves of democratization: a long, slow wave from 1828 to 1926 and a second wave from 1943 to 1964. Significantly, each of these ended with what he calls a “reverse wave” of democratic breakdowns (the first lasting from 1922 to 1942, the second from 1961 to 1975), in which some of the newly established (or reestablished) democracies failed. Overall, each [End Page 20] reverse wave reduced the number of democracies in the world significantly but still left more democracies in place than had existed prior to the start of the preceding democratic wave. Reverse waves do great harm to political freedom, human rights, and peace. Thus, as I will argue, preventing a reverse wave should be paramount among the policy goals of democratic actors and institutions around the world.

Conceptualizing Democracy

Essential to tracking the progress of democracy and understanding both its causes and its consequences is a high degree of conceptual clarity about the term “democracy.” Unfortunately, what prevails instead in the

burgeoning empirical and theoretical literature on democracy is conceptual confusion and disarray so serious that David Collier and Steven Levitsky have identified more than 550 “subtypes” of democracy.² Some of these nominal subtypes merely identify specific institutional features or types of full democracy, but many denote “diminished” forms of democracy that overlap with one another in a variety of ways. Fortunately, most conceptions of democracy today (in contrast with the 1960s and 1970s, for example) do converge in defining democracy as a system of political authority, separate from any social and economic features. Where conceptions still diverge fundamentally (but not always very explicitly) is in the range and extent of political attributes encompassed by democracy.

Minimalist definitions descend from Joseph Schumpeter, who defined democracy as a system “for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”³ Huntington, among others, explicitly embraces Schumpeter’s emphasis on electoral competition as the essence of democracy.⁴ Over time, however, Schumpeter’s appealingly concise definition has required periodic elaboration (or what Collier and Levitsky call “precising”) to avoid inclusion of cases that do not fit the implicit meaning. The most influential elaboration has been Robert Dahl’s concept of “polyarchy,” which requires not only extensive political competition and participation but also substantial levels of freedom (of speech, press, and the like) and pluralism that enable people to form and express their political preferences in a meaningful way.⁵

Contemporary minimalist conceptions of democracy—what I term here *electoral democracy*, as opposed to *liberal democracy*—commonly acknowledge the need for minimal levels of civil freedom in order for competition and participation to be meaningful. Typically, however, they do not devote much attention to the basic freedoms involved, nor do they attempt to incorporate them into actual measures of democracy. Such Schumpeterian conceptions—particularly common among Western policy makers who track and celebrate the expansion of democracy—risk



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