

From the Spring of Nations to the Arab Spring

Democratic Waves in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Sweeping democratic waves have been a recurring feature of modern regime change. But these cascades of reform have varied widely in their speed, reach, and intensity, impeding the creation of a general framework of democratic diffusion. I present a typology of diffusion that focuses on recurring causal mechanisms and highlights the parallels and contrasts among episodes of democratic diffusion. Waves are classified according to whether they were vertical or horizontal, and whether they were driven by contagion and emulation. I define these terms and classify a variety of democratic waves according to these categories. I then lay out the often-ignored yet crucial mechanisms of negative feedback (or counter-diffusion) that accompany the process, focusing on 1) the collapse of ad hoc coalitions, 2) autocratic adaptation, 3) cognitive heuristics, and 4) shifting systemic pressures. Together, these factors help explain a persistent puzzle in the study of democratization – why waves of diffusion inevitably lead to partial or total rollback and collapse.

The Arab Spring, for all its seemingly unique triumphs and disappointments, was only the latest in a long series of democratic waves. Over the last two centuries, democracy has expanded around the world through abrupt cascades of reform and revolution, sweeping across borders to produce swift and often unexpected bursts of domestic transformation. From the Atlantic Wave of the late eighteenth century to the more recent upheavals in the Middle East, these clusters of democratization have been a recurring element of modern regime change (see Table 1, next page).

Case	Year(s)	Region/Participants
1. The Atlantic Wave	1776-1799	the “Atlantic World”; North America and Western Europe. United States (1776); Ireland (1778; Irish Uprisings); Switzerland (1782); France (1789); Haiti (1791); Poland (1792); Batavia (1795), Ireland (1798)
2. Latin American Wars of Independence	1809-1824	Latin America
3. The 1820 wave	1820-1821	Southern/“peripheral” Europe. parts of Italy (Sicily, Naples, Sardinia); Greece, Spain, Portugal, Russia.
4. The 1830 wave	1830	Western and central Europe. France, Poland, Switzerland, Belgium
5. The Spring of Nations	1848	Central and western Europe
6. The Constitutional Wave	1905-1912	Russian Empire (incl. Finland, Poland, Lodz, Estonia, Latvia); Iran, Ottoman Empire, Portugal, China
7. The post-WWI wave	1919-1922	Eastern and Central Europe
8. The post-WWII wave	1945-1950	Western Europe/Japan; Latin America (until 1948 only)
9. African wave of decolonization	1955-1968	sub-Saharan Africa
10. The ‘Third’ wave	1974-1988	several regional wavelets: Southern Europe (1974-75), parts of Asia and Latin America (1980s)
11. The Post-Soviet wave	1989-1994	Eastern Europe (1989), Former Soviet Republics (1989-1991), sub-Saharan Africa (1989-94)
12. The Color Revolutions	2000-2006	Eastern Europe, Former Soviet Republics; Yugoslavia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Iran, Russia
13. The Arab Spring	2010-2012	Middle East/North Africa

Table 1: A List of Democratic Waves Since the 18th Century.

Despite their persistence, democratic waves resist easy comparisons. As the above list demonstrates, they have occurred in vastly different geographical and historical contexts. They have varied in speed, scope, intensity, and the range of their outcomes. How can we compare these turbulent and seemingly diverse democratic cascades?

This paper has two parts. I first lay out a typology of democratic waves that focuses on recurring causal mechanisms, and highlights the parallels and contrasts among episodes of democratic diffusion. Second, I present four recurring channels of *counter-diffusion*, focusing on the crucial but often-ignored forces of negative feedback that so often lead to partial or total reversals of these democratic waves. I then link the two parts together by discussing how the varieties of diffusion interact with mechanisms of counter-diffusion.

The typology of democratic waves is organized along two dimensions. The first dimension contrasts *horizontal* waves driven by neighborhood contagion and regional linkages (such as the Atlantic Wave or the Arab Spring) with *vertical* waves, which are created by sudden shifts in the structure of global hegemony (such as the 1989 wave or the African wave of decolonization of the 1960s). The second dimension contrasts *emulation-driven* and *contagion-driven* waves. In processes of emulation, external linkages are mediated through domestic factors, which serve as focal points in shaping the specific timing of transitions within a wave (as in the Color Revolutions or the Latin American wars of independence). In processes of contagion, on the other hand, external linkages temporarily over-ride the ability of domestic constraints to shape the mode or timing of transitions (as in the Spring of Nations or the post-WWI wave in Europe).

The interaction of these two categories leads to a four-fold typology of democratic waves.¹ I define and explain each of these categories in more detail below. For now, Table 2 offers a preview of the resulting distribution of the cases:

¹ Namely, the four varieties of diffusion are: horizontal contagion, horizontal emulation, vertical contagion, and vertical emulation.

	contagion	emulation
vertical diffusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • post-WWI wave (1919-21) • post-WWII wave (1945-48) • post-Soviet wave (1989-1994) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Latin American wars of independence (1809-24) • The Constitutional Wave (1905-12) • African wave of decolonization (1955-68)
horizontal diffusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Spring of Nations (1848) • The Arab Spring (2011) • The 1820-1 wave • The 1830 wave 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Atlantic Wave (1776-95) • The ‘Third’ Wave (1974-88) • Color Revolutions (2000-05)

Table 2: A Typology of Democratic Waves.

This typology, I argue, allows for more theoretically meaningful and consistent comparisons and contrasts among cases of democratic waves. It can help clarify, for instance, why neither the 1989 Velvet Revolutions or the Color Revolutions are appropriate comparisons for the Arab Spring, despite the claims of some hopeful observers, and why the 1848 Spring of Nations instead offers the closest historical parallel.²

Despite their underlying differences, what unites the vast majority of episodes of diffusion is the presence of counter-diffusion – the tendency for democratic waves to crest, collapse, and roll back. Most diffusion models focus on positive feedback as the central element of the process, emphasizing self-reinforcing tendencies that lead to cross-border cascades through various mechanisms like coercion, learning, competition, or emulation. (Simmons et al. 2006). Elkins (2008:42), for example, defines diffusion as a process in which “a democratic transition in one country increases the probability of transition in a neighboring country.” And discussing the diffusion of democracy, Brinks and Coppedge (2006:464) focus on neighbor emulation, defined as the process by which “countries tend to become more like their immediate geographic neighbors over time.”

² Weyland 2012 also argues that the closest parallel to 2011 is 1848, though he emphasizes the importance of cognitive heuristics in both waves – an argument that I examine below. I focus instead on both cases as examples of the “horizontal contagion” subtype.

Yet most democratic diffusion is defined by some degree of failure after an initial period of success. Such rollback can be total (as in the post-World War I wave), or partial but persistent (as in the African wave following the Soviet collapse). Failure is thus a key component of democratic waves, as demonstrated most recently in the Arab Spring. Understanding the dynamics of diffusion therefore requires incorporating the causes of counter-diffusion into our theories and models of democratic cascades.

I lay out four recurring channels of counter-diffusion: 1) the collapse of extraordinary ad hoc coalitions, 2) elite adaptation, 3) cognitive heuristics, and 4) shifting external pressures. Together, these factors help explain a persistent puzzle in the study of democratization – why waves of diffusion so often lead to partial or total rollback and collapse. These dynamics can also help explain a wide range of phenomena, such as the proliferation of competitive autocracies since the end of the Cold War.

Counter-diffusion, I argue, is an intrinsic component of diffusion because the initial period of transitions creates extremely powerful yet temporary incentives and opportunities for domestic reforms. The start of a wave forges powerful but unwieldy reform coalitions, threatens unsuspecting ruling groups before they have a chance to react, inflates optimistic hopes about regime change, and in some cases creates powerful international pressures for democratic reform. But as the wave continues, these same processes transform or fade away: the extraordinary pro-reform coalitions dissolve as their disparate interests come to the fore; elites learn from the experiences of others and begin to repress, pre-empt, or co-opt further protests; the initial optimism of reform movements dims and gives way to disappointment; and the international support for democratization associated with the initial part of the wave either disappears or transforms into the re-assertion of traditional geopolitical interests. The result is democratic “overstretch”, the institutional version of a stock market bubble (Figure 1):

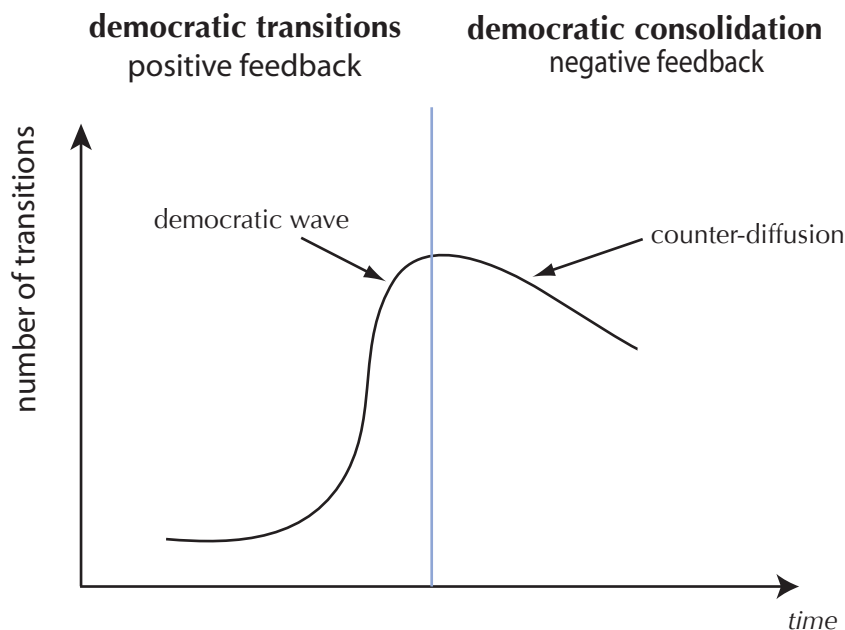


Figure 1: A Model of a Democratic Wave.

Democratic diffusion nearly always triggers *resistance* to diffusion, and the interaction of these opposing forces fundamentally shapes both the strategies of the actors and the eventual outcomes. The cross-border spread of democracy cannot be understood apart from the resistance provoked by this spread, in the same way that the advance of globalization cannot be understood apart from resistance to globalization. In the latter case, universalism provokes particularism; in the former, contestation provokes repression and adaptation. Diffusion is therefore better understood as the complex interplay of positive and negative feedback rather than the unilinear process often portrayed by scholars of diffusion. To suggest, as Oliver and Meyers (2003:174) do, that diffusion “is the process whereby past events make future events more likely” is to miss this crucial interplay.

The diffusion of democratic protest does not necessarily mean the diffusion of democracy, even if the protestors are united in their democratic goals.³ In the cases examined here, from the Riflers of Batavia to the students in Tahrir Square, actors aggressively sought greater political accountability from the few. Yet many failed, or turned to tyrants soon after succeeding; many revolutions, as Jacques Mallet du Pan lamented, have devoured their own children. The fact

³ Hale 2013.

that Egypt has been unable to consolidate the democratic gains achieved in the early stages of the Arab Spring does not negate the democratic character of the initial revolts that overthrew Mubarak’s regime. As many scholars have noted, the factors that lead to democratic transitions may be very different from factors that shape democratic consolidation.⁴ While the outcomes of these episodes of mass contention often fell far short of true democracy, my interest here is not in diffusion as an outcome but diffusion as a *process* – the means through which external linkages and domestic factors interact to forge attempts at institutional reform.

I. A Typology of Democratic Diffusion

The early literature on regime diffusion focused on large-n aggregative statistics, often employing sophisticated quantitative techniques and spatial models. While useful in demonstrating the importance of diffusion, this approach said little about the concrete causal pathways that channeled the spread of institutions across national borders. As a recent review concludes, “while the literature has convincingly demonstrated that policies diffuse, why that occurs remains much less clear.”⁵ The initial studies of democratic diffusion thus resembled the early literature on the democratic peace – a powerful empirical regularity begging for a theoretical explanation.

Over the past few years, a “second wave” of diffusion studies has moved beyond aggregative statistics and focused on the specific mechanisms that drive the process.⁶ But while the proliferation of models and mechanisms has led to a number of improvements in the study of diffusion, it has also muddled the conceptual underpinnings of this often-amorphous concept. Theories of democratic diffusion still require much development – as has been repeatedly emphasized by scholars of diffusion. Levitsky and Way (2010:39), for example, argue that while the study of international influences on democracy has grown rapidly, “there has been little effort to either adjudicate among the various mechanisms of international influence or integrate them into a coherent theoretical framework.” (Levitsky and Way 2010:39.) And

⁴ Linz and Stepan 1996; Przeworski et.al. 1996, 2000; Rustow 1970.

⁵ Gilardi 2013, 470.

⁶ For examples of mechanism-focused studies of diffusion, see Beissinger 2007, Simmons et. al. 2006, Shipan and Volden 2008, Solingen 2012, and Weyland 2009. For examples of large-n studies of diffusion, see Brinks and Coppedge 2006, Leeson and Dean 2009, O’Loughlin et. al. 1998, Starr 1991, and Starr and Lindborg 2003.

Elkink (2011:1652) notes that “there is a significant lack of theoretical models explaining the diffusion of democracy.” Indeed, diffusion is sometimes defined as an amorphous catch-all term for any non-domestic influences on regime change. Some of the comparativist literature, for instance, situates these factors in a vague residual category, a causal last resort to be invoked when domestic explanations have been exhausted. This paper therefore seeks to clarify some of the conceptual ambiguity surrounding democratic diffusion, and to point toward more systematic ways to examine the democratic cascades that have so regularly shaped the evolution of democracy.

Horizontal versus Vertical Diffusion

The first fundamental distinction among cases of diffusion resides in the role played by dramatic transformations of the international system. The aftermath of twentieth-century geopolitical upheavals – the World Wars and the Soviet Collapse – each produced powerful, globe-spanning bursts of democratic reform. After World War I, for example, more than a dozen European states were created from fragmented monarchical empires, adopting democratic institutions like universal suffrage and parliamentary rule. Similarly, the years after World War II saw the democratization of Western Europe and Japan, and a brief resurgence of democracy in South America – a period that Huntington dubbed “the second wave” of democratization.⁷ Finally, the collapse of the Soviet system in 1989-91 led to a dramatic series of democratic revolutions in eastern Europe and a temporary surge of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. All of these cases experienced partial or total rollbacks – but in the short term, they generated strong incentives for the cross-border spread of democratic institutions. These episodes of vertical diffusion were driven by abrupt changes in the hierarchy of leading great powers, forging incentives and opportunities for bursts of domestic reforms.

Horizontal diffusion, on the other hand, occurs in the absence of geopolitical shifts and is unmoored from any broader transformations of the international order. Instead, it unfolds through shared horizontal networks and regional effects. In these cases, a spark of revolt in one country crosses national borders and spreads to neighbors or states with similar grievances and internal dynamics. The process then becomes self-reinforcing – as more countries experience

⁷ Huntington 1991.

upheaval, opposition leaders and embittered masses elsewhere update their beliefs about the possibility of success, or simply become inspired by the efforts of others, and join in the wave – a process that occurred, most recently and dramatically, in the Arab Spring. Unlike the wave that followed the aftermath of World War I, for example, democratic diffusion in the Atlantic Wave or the Color Revolutions was not driven by major hegemonic transitions.

Figure 2, below, contrasts the two models of diffusion:

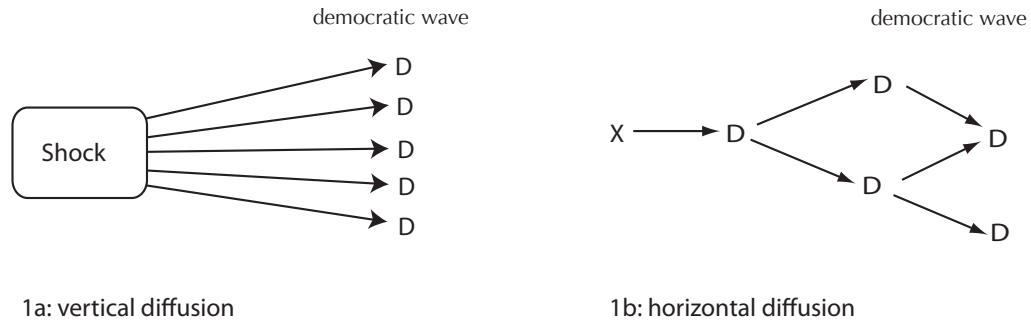


Figure 2: Models of vertical (1a) and horizontal (1b) diffusion. Each “D” represents an instance of democratization.

While vertical diffusion is a result of rapid changes in the structure of the international system, horizontal diffusion is instead rooted in the shared linkages that create channels for institutional spillover. The distinction between horizontal and vertical diffusion was well captured by Max Weber: “If at the beginning of a shower a number of people on the street put up their umbrellas at the same time,” he writes, “this would not ordinarily be a case of [social] action, but rather of all reacting in the same way to the like need of protection from the rain.”⁸ In cases of vertical diffusion, an exogenous shock creates a wave of transitions by shifting the institutional preferences and incentives of many domestic actors simultaneously. Or, as Way puts it, the 1989 revolutions were not primarily the product of a domino effect, in which revolution in one country triggered regional spillover. Rather, the revolutions were made possible by the abandonment of the Brezhnev doctrine inside the USSR, producing a major shift in the geopolitical structure of the region.⁹ Instead of a horizontal process in which a single domino

⁸ Weber 1922[1978], 23.

⁹ Way 2011.

triggered a democratic cascade, the dominoes fell because the table itself was beginning to shake.

A possible criticism of this distinction is that vertical diffusion does not constitute a “true” instance of diffusion if we take the latter to mean a process that lacks coordinated coercion. Elkins, for example, describes diffusion as a process of uncoordinated interdependence, “uncoordinated in the sense that a country’s decision to democratize is not imposed by another.” However, a number of key diffusion studies include both vertical and horizontal elements in their analysis. Simmons et al., for example, include “coercion” and “promotion” as two intrinsically vertical mechanisms of diffusion, in which asymmetries of power catalyze cross-border change, while Gilardi notes that “a significant portion of the literature considers coercion integral to diffusion.”¹⁰ Elsewhere, Elkins (2010, 981-2) himself concedes that “the transmission of policies across vertical as opposed to horizontal networks is a common theme in the diffusion literature”.

Democratic diffusion implies a combination of temporal or spatio-temporal clustering of regime reforms, but must also contain linkages among that cluster. A cluster of transitions is by itself insufficient for demonstrating diffusion, since it may stem from parallel but independent domestic developments. Linkages among the cases, which are key for establishing the presence of diffusion, are usually defined in terms of mechanisms such as in the case of Simmons et al., and can take on a variety of forms. Some of these are horizontal, as in the case (for instance) of tax policy competition, or vertical, as in the case of regime promotion by great powers. In vertical diffusion, waves propagate through relations of asymmetric power; in horizontal diffusion, waves propagate through horizontal linkages and neighborhood effects. In both cases, clustering and linkages among cases indicate the operation of cross-border diffusion. Yet as Elkins (2013, 2) notes, “the literature on the international clustering of democracies has, under the label of ‘democratic diffusion’, been largely separate from the literature on the ‘waves of democracy’, while both point to international patterns of a clustering of political regimes.” Delineating the distinction between horizontal and vertical diffusion helps to integrate these two literatures by clarifying their similarities (as both stemming from international linkages)

¹⁰ Elkins 2008, 43; Simmons et al. 2006; Gilardi 2013, 454. In addition to ‘coercion’ and ‘promotion’, Simmons et al. 2006 include the clearly more horizontal mechanisms of ‘competition’ and ‘emulation’.

while also highlighting their salient differences (stemming from the type, character, and power relations within these linkages).

Moreover, “coercion from above” is but one element of vertical diffusion, and often its least salient component. In the wake of hegemonic transitions some countries have found democracy imposed upon them by a victorious hegemon, as was the case of Germany and Japan after World War II. Yet both empirical and historical studies show that forced impositions form only a small proportion of reforms that follow systemic transitions. (Owen 2010; Narizny 2011.) In most cases, the countries that democratized after these systemic transformations did so either due to self-interest (to ingratiate itself with the rising hegemon or to secure its aid and patronage) or because they felt that the crisis credibly demonstrated that democracy offered the more appealing path forward. The regime diffusion that accompanies vertical shocks is thus driven less by brute force and more by indirect hegemonic inducement and voluntary emulation.¹¹

Examining vertical diffusion is important even for studies that focus purely on horizontal or neighborhood effects, because vertical diffusion often leads to its horizontal counterpart. Hegemonic shocks often create incentives for an initial democratic cascade, which then leads laggards to take cues from these early democratizers and undertake their own reforms. A geopolitical shift can thus catalyze a democratic wave that perpetuates itself through horizontal diffusion. In the 1989 revolutions, for instance, Soviet foreign policy reforms served as the crucial trigger for the onset of democratization, but the process was reinforced when pro-democracy movements around the region observed the successes of their peers and were inspired to follow their example. Vertical shocks can thus lead to a process of what might be called *hybrid diffusion*, as shown in Figure 3:

¹¹ As Simmons et al. (2006, 790) note, an important channel of diffusion is the ability of powerful states to “explicitly or implicitly influence the probability that weaker nations adopt the policy they prefer by manipulating the opportunities and constraints encountered by target countries.”

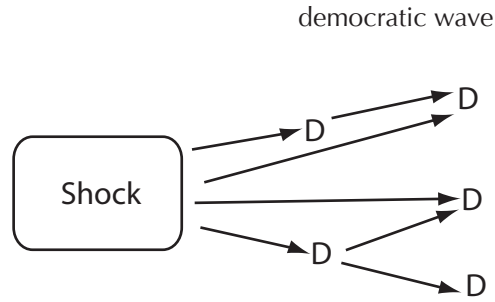


Figure 3: A model of hybrid diffusion. Geopolitical shocks can trigger regime waves which then reinforce themselves through horizontal diffusion.

In some cases, therefore, understanding horizontal diffusion is impossible without taking into account its vertical origins. The two processes can unfold jointly: to take Weber’s example, some people may open their umbrellas because they feel the rain, and others may do so because they see people opening their umbrellas. The dominos may fall because the table is shaking, but they may also knock each other over in the process. And yet even where vertical diffusion creates the conditions for horizontal spillover, the process is fundamentally different from cases where horizontal diffusion operates alone, as was the case in the Arab Spring. Most importantly, the drivers of vertical diffusion are significantly stronger than those of horizontal diffusion. Vertical diffusion creates immensely strong incentives for bursts of democratization because the tectonic realignment of global hierarchies influences institutional opportunities in many countries at once.

Even where vertical diffusion creates the conditions for horizontal spillover, therefore, the process is fundamentally different from waves driven by horizontal diffusion alone – as in the Arab Spring or the Color Revolutions, for instance. Vertical diffusion creates immensely powerful incentives for bursts of democratization because the tectonic realignment of global hierarchies influences institutional opportunities in many countries at once. It is not simply that some waves are characterized by external shocks – after all, even the Arab Spring was likely caused by a sudden and sharp increase in the prices of key commodities. Rather, the point is that a very specific kind of systemic volatility, in the form of abrupt hegemonic transitions, creates powerful incentives for regime cascades possessing features that are absent in other types of democratic waves. Given the persistent differences in the causes and outcomes of

vertical and horizontal cascades, theories of diffusion need to distinguish between episodes forged by shifts in hegemonic power from those driven by neighborhood spillover.

Contagion-Driven versus Emulation-Driven Waves

The second crucial distinction resides in the role played by domestic factors – namely, in whether the *timing* of diffusion is mediated by domestic circumstances. Contagion-driven diffusion proceeds without regard for any domestic influences, and its timing is thus unrelated to any internal causes. This is the epidemiological model of diffusion as commonly conceived in social science.¹² Democratization in one country increases the immediate likelihood of democratization in other states, producing diffusion that rapidly sweeps across borders in a matter of months or even weeks, as was the case in 1848 or 1989.

By contrast, during the Color Revolutions the timing of each subsequent upheaval was driven by flawed elections, which served as domestic focal points for the coordinated mobilization of opposition groups.¹³ Starting with the Bulldozer Revolution in Serbia in 2000, a number of countries in the post-Soviet space experienced a series of mass upheavals. In each case, the revolution followed an election widely perceived to be rigged in favor of the incumbents. While the mass movements shared many common attributes – participation by youth groups, mass mobilization, non-violence, and links with the West – the outbreak of one color revolution did not influence the timing of other outbreaks. Instead, the timing was mediated by the interaction of external linkages and propitious domestic circumstances in the form of contested elections.

In cases of contagion-driven diffusion, therefore, international factors are both necessary and sufficient for driving waves of reform. In cases of emulation-driven diffusion, however, international factors are necessary but not sufficient for inspiring reforms in the absence of favorable domestic conditions.¹⁴ The distinction between contagion and emulation is thus essential for understanding the dynamics of the Color Revolutions in the post-Soviet space, particularly when comparing them with other recent episodes like the Velvet Revolutions or the Arab Spring. In the Arab Spring, the timing of revolutionary diffusion across borders was

¹² See, e.g. Rogers 1962.

¹³ See, e.g., Hale 2005; Kuntz and Thompson 2009; Bunce and Wolchik 2011.

¹⁴ I thank Bob Keohane for this formulation.

not related to any specific internal triggers or domestic factors. While opposition leaders in post-Soviet states awaited the next flawed election to coordinate their protest efforts, no such waiting took place in the Middle East. As a result, while contagion-driven diffusion generally unfolds over months or even weeks, emulation-driven diffusion is a much more protracted process – as in the Atlantic Wave of 1776-1795, the Constitutional Wave of 1905-1912, or the Color Revolutions of 2000-2005.

Contagion-driven diffusion produces strong short-term incentives for the spread of democratic institutions that over-ride domestic constraints. The wave itself, rather than domestic windows of opportunity, serves as an international focal point for protest groups. In processes of emulation-driven diffusion, on the other hand, domestic opportunities rather than external linkages continue to play a crucial role in conditioning the timing of each subsequent outbreak. In these cases, domestic factors are able to “inoculate” against immediate reforms, making the spread of democratization contingent upon opportune moments. In both the Atlantic Wave of the late 18th century and the Color Revolutions of the early 21st century, democratic movements found ideological and organizational support in the successes of their peers, but were unable to immediately transform these linkages into regime change at home. During the Arab Spring, for example, both Russia and China employed social media to promote negative narratives of what they portrayed as Western-sponsored destabilization, and marshaled grassroots bloggers to encourage nationalist sentiment as a defense against these foreign encroachments. (Koesel and Bunce 2013:759.) Such counter-diffusion tactics may thus blunt the reach of transnational social movements that use information linkages (including social media) to spread protest tactics and mobilize supporters abroad.

A Typology of Democratic Diffusion

In sum, the causal dynamics, the timing, and the interaction of external and domestic factors all operate in different ways across these two categories of diffusion. The interaction of the two categories – horizontal versus vertical, and contagion versus emulation – produces a four-fold typology of diffusion:

	contagion	emulation
vertical diffusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • post-WWI wave (1919-21) • post-WWII wave (1945-48) • post-Soviet wave (1989-1994) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Latin American wars of independence (1809-24) • The Constitutional Wave (1905-12) • African wave of decolonization (1955-68)
horizontal diffusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Spring of Nations (1848) • The Arab Spring (2011) • The 1820-1 wave • The 1830 wave 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Atlantic Wave (1776-95) • The ‘Third’ Wave (1974-88) • Color Revolutions (2000-05)

A Typology of Democratic Waves (reprint of Table 2).

By focusing on persistent features across cases, this categorization highlights the contrasts and similarities among historical episodes of diffusion. It demonstrates, for instance, why neither the 1989 wave nor the Color Revolutions are appropriate precedents for the Arab Spring.¹⁵ Unlike in 1989, diffusion in the Arab Spring occurred in the absence of a geopolitical shift. And unlike the Color Revolutions, the timing of diffusion in the Arab Spring was not conditional upon domestic focal points. Instead, as the typology makes clear, the closest analogy to the Arab Spring is the 1848 Spring of Nations – both instances of horizontal contagion. The Spring of Nations was not driven by geopolitical shifts and stemmed instead from horizontal cross-border contagion. Its timing was largely independent of domestic circumstances, leading it to spread throughout central Europe in a matter of months.¹⁶ As an instance of horizontal contagion, the Spring of Nations was intense, swift, far-reaching, and ultimately unsuccessful, defeated by the concerted efforts of the region’s autocratic rulers. At the same time, it left a deep footprint on the subsequent evolution of European states. Given these similarities, the Arab Spring appears increasingly likely to meet the same fate. Although it may be too early to judge the long-term consequences of the Arab Spring (whose reverberations continue in Syria and beyond), in the

¹⁵ For comparisons of the Arab Spring to 1989, see Head 2011; for comparisons to the Color Revolutions, see Cheterian 2011.

¹⁶ Robertson 1952; Rapport 2009.

short run few of its initial reforms have resulted in stable change.

As the typology demonstrates, vertical diffusion often unfolds through contagion. This occurs because cataclysmic geopolitical shifts create powerful incentives for reforms that tend to override domestic constraints. Discussing the revolutions of 1989, for example, Weyland notes that the unusual “speed and success” of the cascade can be explained by its origins as a “vertical change” associated with the withdrawal of Soviet protection of puppet regimes.¹⁷

Case Study: The Constitutional Wave (1905-12)

As a rarely-examined instance of democratic diffusion, the Constitutional Wave offers a way to illustrate how both material and ideological linkages can create bursts of democratic transitions. This wave included Russia and several of its imperial dependencies (1905), Iran (1906), the Ottoman Empire (1908), Portugal (1910), and China (1912).¹⁸ It constitutes a case of diffusion not merely because it occupied a particular period of time, but because the countries in this wave shared concrete linkages, both material and ideological, through which earlier cases shaped the attributes and opportunities for later cases. Contemporaneous cases of transitions also occurred in Argentina, Greece, and Monaco, but cannot be considered a part of the wave because they were largely domestic phenomena, divorced from any external changes in the environment.

The geopolitical shift that sparked the wave was Russia’s unexpected defeat in the Russo-Japanese war. The war marked Japan’s ascent to the small club of great powers while undermining the Tsarist government’s standing at home and abroad, precipitating the 1905 revolution.¹⁹ The disasters of the war served as a crucial catalyst for igniting the first large-scale uprisings in the country’s history. The military had traditionally acted as the regime’s most reliable ally, but the war had weakened even this stalwart support base by producing officer dissatisfaction with the regime’s unwillingness to undertake modernizing reforms. Industrialists, meanwhile,

¹⁷ Weyland 2014, 235.

¹⁸ Kurzman 2008; Sohrabi 2002; Spector 1962. Kurzman also includes Mexico’s 1911 revolution among the cases, although here the connections are more tenuous.

¹⁹ On Japan as a great power after 1905 see, for example, Carr (2001[1939]:102-3), who argues that the war signalled Japan’s “recognition as a Great Power,” while Woodruff (2005:77) argues that it marked “the beginning of the end of Western hegemony in the Orient.” Likewise, Wilson and Wells (1999) argue that the Russo-Japanese war is “widely seen as a historical turning-point” which “overturned the prevailing balance of power.”

chafed at the massive growth of foreign debt brought on by the expense of the war, while nationalists grew increasingly furious over the incompetence displayed over the course of the conflict.²⁰ The discontents forged by Russian defeats thus generated a broad anti-government coalition that succeeded in mounting a powerful challenge to the Tsarist regime.

The vertical elements of this episode of diffusion stemmed from the consequences of Russia's temporary but profound decline of relative power following the Russo-Japanese war. For hopeful democrats in Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and the imperial peripheries, the war had temporarily undermined the country's ability to suppress regional revolutionaries (as it had done so brutally in eastern Europe in 1848) by displacing most of its armed forces to the Far East. The temporary vacuum of power bolstered revolutionary and protest movements in Russian dependencies like the Grand Duchy of Finland, Łódź, Latvia, and the Governorate of Estonia. In Poland, the country's future leader Joseph Pilsudski took advantage of the disruption to lead a failed revolution. For Iranian reformers, the war offered hope that Russia's "grip on the country could be loosened," thereby reducing the threat of intervention.²¹ Indeed, the negative external influence of Russian power was muted in 1906, as the Tsarist government recovered from its recent defeat and revolution, and was thus unable to rescue the beleaguered Shah despite his calls for aid. As in 1989, therefore, a sudden decline in Russian power enabled the spread of revolutionary ideology throughout eastern Europe; but unlike that later case, the shift in power was both temporary and less drastic, enabling Nicholas II to suppress these stirrings after the conclusion of the war. By 1907, for example, the Russian government felt confident enough to intervene decisively on behalf of the Persian monarchy and landed elites. And beyond the material opportunities for reform in nations previously fearful of Russian intervention, 1905 also clarified an ideological precedent; as Foran puts it, the fact that "the only Asian constitutional state had defeated the major Western nonconstitutional one further suggested the desirability of constitutional forms of rule."²²

Like their counterparts in the Color Revolutions a century later, the pro-democracy movements of this wave drew upon each other for ideological inspiration, and explicitly exchanged tactics and protest repertoires that shaped their anti-regime strategies. The Young Turks, for

²⁰ Hart 1987, 223.

²¹ Foran 1993, 114.

²² *ibid*

instance, not only had their commitment to constitutionalism reaffirmed by the revolutions in Russia and Iran, but also drew upon these precedents to shift from their original approach of an elite “revolution from above” to a more populist mobilization strategy.²³ As a result, 1905 inaugurated “a global wave of democratic revolutions” and “gave an enormous boost to democracy movements around the world.”²⁴

Thus in both material and ideological terms Russia served as a keystone state in this wave, similar to the role played by France in 1848. In Iran, Russia’s revolution played “an inordinate role in placing revolution on the agenda.”²⁵ An Iranian prodemocracy newspaper exhorted its readers to “adopt the peoples of Russia as a model.”²⁶ In Portugal, an observer noted that events in Russia “have echoed throughout the world like a powerful recurrent cry.”²⁷ And in the Ottoman Empire, the Russian precedent both “opened the possibility for a more popularly based movement” and “suggested concrete protest strategies” such as public refusals to pay taxes and the centrality of revolutionary cadres and extra-legal groups.²⁸ The 1905 revolution, argues Marks, had “a worldwide impact”, forging opportunities for reform in Turkey, China, Iran, Afghanistan, and Korea.²⁹

After the initial catalyst of a temporary decline in Russia’s power projection, the wave continued to propagate itself through horizontal diffusion, with linkages that extended beyond Russia. For the Ottoman Empire, the Iranian precedent established the viability of Islamic constitutionalism, demonstrated the value of religious rhetoric, and served as “the ideal proof that a constitutional revolution could be at once popular and bloodless.”³⁰ In turn, Chinese reformers drew upon the lessons of Iran, Portugal, and the Ottoman Empire both as sources of inspiration and as models of revolution. In the Chinese debate over the role of monarchy, for example, the Turkish example “powerfully recommended itself for emulation” by demonstrating that the sultan’s removal was compatible with popular rule by elite parties with the support of military forces. These shared attributes and linkages separated the countries of this wave

²³ Sohrabi 2002.

²⁴ Kurzman 2008, 4.

²⁵ Sohrabi 2011, 333.

²⁶ Quoted in Spector 1962, 38.

²⁷ Quoted in Kurzman 2008, 4.

²⁸ Sohrabi 2002, 56.

²⁹ Marks 2003, 312.

³⁰ Sohrabi 2002, 58.

from other democracy movements of the same period, such as the reformist democratizations in Austria and Sweden, failed democracy movements in Afghanistan and Argentina, or the populist anti-colonial uprisings in Indonesia and Malawi. While the revolutionary movements of the Constitutional Wave drew upon disparate domestic grievances, and internal circumstances shaped the timing of diffusion, its ideology and attributes were shaped by a web of common linkages, with Russia at its center.

Given these linkages, why didn't this wave proceed through contagion, like other cases caused by vertical shocks? Two explanations are likely: first, the geopolitical shift that accompanied the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese war was not as profound as the hegemonic shocks that followed two global wars and the Soviet collapse. It thus did not produce the same powerful incentives for democratic diffusion as these later systemic upheavals. Second, at the dawn of the century the linkages among pro-democracy movements were still too frail, and their cultural contrasts too vast, to diffuse with the speed associated with contagion. As a result, the timing of later revolutions was mediated by domestic circumstances. Nevertheless, the geopolitical shock of the war created a window of opportunity for rebellion, served to reaffirm the appeal and legitimacy of constitutionalism as a path toward modernization, and facilitated the emulation of successful protest strategies.

Comparisons to other Waves

While the Atlantic wave of the late 18th century shared the Constitutional Wave's emulation-driven dynamics, it unfolded in the absence of a precipitating vertical shock (and as such, represents a case of diffusion as horizontal emulation.) The Atlantic wave included the United States (1776), France (1789), Belgium (1789), Haiti (1791), Poland (1792), and the Netherlands (1795). Countries on both sides of the Atlantic, notes one historian, were swept up "by a single revolutionary movement that shared certain common goals."³¹ Thus, despite the ever-present national differences, "there was a striking common element in these eighteenth century upheavals."³² As an example of horizontal, emulation-driven diffusion, the Atlantic Wave thus finds its closest historical equivalent in the Color Revolutions. Both occurred in the absence

³¹ Palmer 1964.

³² Markoff 1994, 4-5.

of geopolitical shocks, and both diffused through links that shaped the attributes and tactics of pro-reform movements, whose timing was nevertheless shaped by domestic opportunities.

Likewise, the early stages of the Third Wave also unfolded through horizontal emulation, in which regional effects produced neighborhood diffusion that unfolded over a decade, beginning with Southern Europe in the mid-1970s (in Portugal, Spain, and Greece), and moving on to Asia and Latin America in the 1980s. Given the weak linkages among the Third Wave cases prior to the Velvet Revolutions, the very term appears to be a misnomer that requires further disaggregation. Rather than a single monolithic phenomenon, the Third Wave was a series of diverse wavelets whose dynamics changed significantly after 1989. It began as a series of horizontal regional transformations – distinct in timing, in underlying causes, and in the kinds of regimes that they transitioned from. In many cases, the connections among them were thin gossamer strands rather than tightly coupled linkages or shared impulses. Unlike the Spring of Nations or the Arab Spring, the Third Wave before 1989 was thus a marginal case of diffusion. However, it took on a new, powerful, distinctly global and contagion-driven character after the collapse of the Soviet system.³³ [EXPAND]

II. Mechanisms of Counter-Diffusion

No instance of diffusion has fully succeeded in consolidating its initial democratic gains. Total or partial failure is thus a key feature of diffusion, as demonstrated most recently in the Arab Spring. The reasons behind such failed consolidation, however, remains largely unaddressed in the diffusion literature, which focuses on mechanisms that encourage the cross-border spread of regimes while ignoring the mechanisms that push back against this process.³⁴

Yet the traditional view of diffusion as a unilinear and self-reinforcing process captures only half of the story. Counter-diffusion is not merely a neglected side effect of diffusion but a central component of the process itself. I outline four recurring mechanisms of counter-diffusion – collapsing ad hoc coalitions, autocratic adaptation, cognitive heuristics, and shifting external

³³ McFaul (2002:242), for example, argues that the transitions following the Soviet collapse should be treated as part of a distinct fourth wave, since “the causal mechanisms at play were so different and the regime types so varied that the postcommunist experience may be better captured by a different theory and a separate label.”

³⁴ For some recent exceptions, see Bunce and Wolchik (2011), Koesel and Bunce (2013), and Weyland (2012).

pressures – and then examine how their interaction produces the collapse of democratic waves.

The mechanisms of counter-diffusion are not unique to democratic waves. Democratic failures can stem from the fragility of democracy-building itself, regardless of whether diffusion was implicated in the initial transition. Revolutionary coalitions, for example, can – and do – collapse in revolutions driven purely by domestic causes. Elites can adapt to threats from below even outside of democratic waves. Democratic waves, however, make the presence of such counter-diffusion even more likely. Coalitional collapses are especially prominent in episodes of diffusion because regime waves fuse together domestic and external incentives for reform, enlarging the unwieldy opposition and making it more likely to fall apart in the wake of the regime’s overthrow. Likewise, elite adaptation is a significant factor in democratic waves because incumbents can learn not only from their own experience, but from the recent successes and failures of other autocrats undergoing regime transitions as part of a wave. So while these mechanisms are plausible in cases where democratization stemmed primarily from internal dynamics, their importance in creating pushback against democratic *waves* in particular has generally been under-examined. Given the dearth of our theoretical understanding of counter-diffusion in regime waves, analyzing these mechanisms is crucial for explaining the institutional outcomes that follow turbulent cascades of regime change.

The Collapse of Ad Hoc Coalitions

The fervor of a democratic revolution is a powerful uniting force. It brings together diverse social and economic groups in pursuit of a single goal – the overthrow of the status quo. Such unity is especially prevalent at the beginning of a democratic wave, when both domestic and external forces combine to make the prospect of reform both viable and appealing. Historically, periods of democratic diffusion are characterized by the creation of extraordinary pro-reform coalitions, composed of social groups whose disparate preferences are set aside during the revolutionary moment. In the African democratic wave of the 1990s, for example, pro-reform movements were often a “loose, multiclass assemblage of indigenous protest groups” (Bratton and van de Walle 1992:420). Likewise, Wiseman (1995:5) notes that African democracy movements “represented a remarkable coalescence of political participation by all levels of society from elite to mass level.” According to Hart (1987:213), pro-reform movements of the

1905-12 Constitutional Wave were “multiclass alliances of officials, army officers, merchants, and landowners,” while Lynch (2012:70) argues that the Arab Spring was driven by “loose coalitions of disparate groups and individuals.”

But while the initial period of diffusion forges broad, multi-class coalitions, their unity often disintegrates after the moment of transition. In episodes of diffusion, domestic pro-reform coalitions function much like victorious alliances in international politics – once their purpose in defeating a common enemy has been achieved, these alliances struggle to maintain cohesion, lose their *raison d’être*, and collapse. After the moment of transition, diverse and contradictory group interests begin to re-assert themselves, making democratic consolidation an increasingly tenuous process. As the Polish poet Stanislaw Lec put it, the mob shouts with one big mouth, but eats with a thousand little ones. According to Goldstone (2011:14), after the “post-revolutionary honeymoon ends, divisions within the opposition start to surface” over the divisive issues of post-revolutionary governance like taxation and minority rights.

The aftermath of the Great War, for example, saw the creation of extraordinary domestic alliances that supported democratic reforms. Yet these ad hoc coalitions could not be sustained once the immediate crisis had passed and Europe entered what Karl Polanyi (1944:196) called the counter-revolutionary phase of the postwar period. “[H]ardly had the acute danger of dissolution passed and the services of the trade unions became superfluous,” he wrote, “than the middle classes tried to exclude the working class from all influence on public life.” Fear of radical upheaval created favorable conditions for cross-class alliances between labor and capital immediately after the war; in this period, Maier (1975:54) notes, “major industrialists found it advantageous to secure economic immunities by astute alliances with the trade-union leaders.” These uneasy communions quickly fell apart as the fear of revolution faded and labor’s help was no longer crucial for national survival. “Democracy in Europe had been shored up briefly after 1918 by an unstable coalition of international and domestic forces which was now breaking down across much of the continent,” argues Mazower (1998:23). As the decade wore on, “there were, simply, fewer and fewer committed democrats.”

Likewise, the pro-democracy coalitions of the Constitutional Wave were characterized by broad coalitions that united diverse social and economic interests. Yet these coalitions quickly unraveled once their purpose shifted from protest to the messy task of governance. Labor

movements were among the first to peel away, escalating their demands for workers' rights and higher wages. The bourgeois, in turn, resented the instability produced by these strikes and the introduction of new taxes to pay for social programs. The landed gentry, traditionally hostile to democratization, quickly reverted back to monarchist tendencies under the threat of socialism. In Iran, argues Foran (1993:133), the "populist alliance fragmented into its diverse constituent elements, opening the door for successful counterrevolution by the monarchy and Russian military."

By temporarily increasing the incentives and opportunities for ad hoc coalitions, episodes of diffusion make the post-transition collapse of these coalitions more likely. Beissinger (2013:590), for example, argues that the anti-Yanukovich "negative coalition" formed during Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution was initially successful because it mobilized against an unpopular ruler. However,

once its anti-incumbency goal was achieved, the Orange coalition quickly unraveled at both elite and mass levels. Its leaders became engulfed in factional squabbles; its participants demonstrated weak commitment to the revolution's democratic master narrative...and soon broke down into the electoral factions out of which the revolution was originally composed.

Coalitional collapses have been a persistent element of democratic diffusion. While the initial period of diffusion creates strong incentives for forging powerful pro-democracy alliances, this unity becomes difficult to maintain during the arduous post-transition process of governing and distributing patronage. Ironically, the very breadth of mass mobilization that makes transitions possible in early stages of diffusion also leads to the failure of democratic consolidation. Even as the initial stage of transition binds domestic factions together, the post-revolutionary phase pulls them apart. The ephemeral nature of ad hoc coalitions suggests that diffusion-driven democratization may be more likely to fail than democratization pursued by coherent domestic groups that lack external support, as in the case of protracted peasant rebellions.

Autocratic Adaptation

Autocrats threatened by democratic diffusion rarely remain passive in the face of pressure for reforms. The initial period of diffusion often catches non-democratic incumbents by surprise, leading to increased opportunities for successful regime transitions. Yet each instance of

successful democratization accomplishes two opposing tasks – it informs other pro-democracy movements about effective tactics and organizational strategies, but also reveals to elites which strategies of suppression will or will not succeed, and how seriously they ought to prepare for the threat. Learning from the fates of their peers causes autocratic elites to update their beliefs about the necessity of suppressing the protests. This dynamic manifested itself in the Arab revolutions, where initial successes were followed by increasingly forceful efforts by autocrats to repress the uprisings. “As the Arab awakening has spread,” noted *The Economist* (2011:11) in the early stages of the wave, “each leader has sought to save his skin by being crueller than the last.” Learning from recent outcomes, dictators changed their strategies in line with their updated beliefs.

A parallel process occurred in many Third Wave democracies following the Soviet collapse. In the years immediately after the end of the Cold War, pressure to democratize represented a significant challenge to authoritarian elites. But by the mid-1990s, argues Bratton (1998:168), they had “discovered ways to control the process of competitive elections so that they can win a grudging stamp of approval from Western donors but still hang on to political power.” After the defeat of Kaunda in Zambia in 1991 African leaders “began to advise each other on how to hold democratic elections without being voted out of office” (Nwokedi 1995:202).

Similarly, in a study of the Color Revolutions, Beissinger (2007) argues that the initial successes of the reform movements could be attributed to a self-reinforcing process of elite defection. Successful protests demoralized incumbent elites by lowering their expectations about political survival, facilitating their exit and encouraging pro-democracy bandwagoning. But as the revolutions continued to spread, a dampening dynamic took hold. Elites began to learn critical lessons from the failures and successes of their peers, and imposed additional constraints to prevent democratization from succeeding. Fear of contagion led to greater restrictions on civil society by leaders in Russia, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. As adaptive actors, these leaders soon saw the benefits of taking aggressive steps to stem the tide. They began to proactively suppress opponents, shut down democracy-promoting NGOs, establish closer relations with Russia, and bolster their own pro-regime youth groups to offset the impact of transnational youth movements. During the Arab Spring, both Russia and China employed mass media to promote negative narratives of what they portrayed as Western-sponsored

destabilization, and marshaled grassroots bloggers to encourage nationalist sentiment as a defense against these foreign encroachments (Koesel and Bunce 2013:759). By shaping popular narratives and mobilizing their domestic support, autocrats have learned to rapidly adapt to heightened external threats during episodes of diffusion. Such counter-diffusion tactics may thus blunt the reach of transnational social movements that use information linkages (including social media) to spread protest tactics and mobilize supporters abroad.

The literature on social movements has also begun to note the dual and interactive nature of transnational linkages of contention. For example, della Porta and Tarrow (2012) have recently argued that street protests and police responses to these protests mutually shape each other, a process they call “interactive diffusion”. “Just as police forces responded to protester behavior with both repression and reform”, they write, “demonstrators adopted their performances in response to them”. A similar learning dynamic occurred in Iran during the 2009 protests, in the course of which the countrys authorities “had familiarized themselves with the tactics that would be used” and as a result could “counterbalance” them (Beachin and Polese 2010:237). Likewise, Bunce (2001:5) argues that diffusion is always “double” that is, that while successful examples “invite emulation by those who seek similar changes in their own country, they provide at the same time an instructive warning” to incumbent elites.

Cognitive Heuristics

The early stages of a democratic wave are often accompanied by a period of revolutionary euphoria, a moment of intense hope about the prospects for a democratic revolution. In post-World War I Europe, for instance, the spirit of democratic optimism was so strong that a year after the armistice, British historian James Bryce (1921:24) wondered whether the “trend toward democracy now widely visible is a natural trend, due to a general law of social progress.” Caught up in the wave of democratic optimism and Wilson’s democratic rhetoric, leaders of new states adopted institutions that had little chance of being consolidated in an atmosphere of economic uncertainty, political fragmentation, and ethnic strife. As Roberts (1999:312) writes, “Initial optimism only intensified dissatisfactions and disappointment felt with constitutional and liberal government in Europe when it seemed to fail” In its initial stages, this optimism reinforced the momentum of diffusion by increasing the expectations of success among reform

movements and their leaders. Whether in 1848 or 1919, this self-reinforcing tendency brought more attempts at democratization into the initial period of the wave.

In the medium run, however, the initial enthusiasm generated in the early stages of the wave is tempered by harsh political realities. As Weyland (2009, 2010, 2012) has argued, the early period of transitions inflates the hopes of opposition leaders and movements, leading them to undertake attempts at democratization in countries where they have negligible chances of success.

The literature on learning and adaptation has often emphasized that people often suffer from cognitive biases like the *availability heuristic* – learning from the most prominent or dramatic example rather than from the most appropriate one, or the *recency heuristic* –prioritizing recent events rather than historical ones, even if the latter has more to say about the success of democratic transitions. (See, e.g. Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982.) As Levy (1994:294) notes: “People often pick superficial or perhaps even irrelevant analogies, minimize the differences between the analogy and the current situation, fail to search for alternative analogies, and stick with the analogy in spite of increasing evidence of its flaws.” Research also suggests that political elites, such as leaders of protest movements, may be particularly prone to overconfidence (Hafner-Burton et al. 2013:373). They consistently over-estimate their chances of getting a desired policy outcome, or the correctness of their interpretation of a complex situation. Overconfident beliefs may bolster determination and willpower, and this may explain its prevalence among political leaders.

Over-optimism, availability bias, and recency bias combine to inflate the number of doomed transitions in the initial stages of democratic diffusion. The heady and hope-filled period of early diffusion leads pro-reform movements to learn the “wrong” lessons from the successes of their counterparts in neighboring states and over-estimate their chances of overthrowing autocratic regimes. The result is attempts at democratization among movements that have negligible chances for success, contributing to democratic overstretch and triggering failure in the subsequent stages of diffusion.

Shifting External Pressures

During episodes of diffusion, external factors temporarily assume an important role in shaping domestic regimes. These systemic pressures are particularly salient in the wake of abrupt hegemonic transitions, which create powerful but ephemeral incentives for democratization. The aftermath of twentieth-century geopolitical transitions – the World Wars and the Soviet Collapse – each produced powerful, globe-spanning bursts of democratic reform. After World War I, for example, more than a dozen European states were created from fragmented monarchical empires, adopting democratic institutions like universal suffrage and parliamentary rule. Similarly, the years after World War II saw the democratization of Western Europe and Japan, and a brief resurgence of democracy in South America – a period that Huntington (1991) dubbed “the second wave” of democratization. Finally, the collapse of the Soviet system in 1989-91 led to a dramatic series of democratic revolutions in eastern Europe and a temporary surge of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. All of these cases experienced partial or total rollbacks – but in the short term, they generated strong incentives for the cross-border spread of democratic institutions. These episodes of vertical diffusion were driven by abrupt changes in the hierarchy of leading great powers, forging opportunities for bursts of domestic reforms.

Yet once the unique pressures created by the hegemonic transition begin to fade, internal forces like the composition of class coalitions or the domestic economy begin to reassert their primacy. The Soviet collapse, for instance, initially created extremely powerful pressures for autocrats to adopt the trappings of democracy across Africa. The elimination of Soviet patronage damaged the neo-patrimonial networks already weakened by the economic crisis of the 1980s. Most importantly, the collapse shifted Western incentives regarding foreign aid and security assistance. Powerful states like the U.S. no longer had to prioritize anti-Communism over democracy promotion, increasing pressure on African autocrats who had used superpower rivalry to stave off reforms. At the same time, international financial institutions and aid donors became more focused on supporting accountable government, making outside assistance contingent on democratic reforms. The end of the Cold War, argues Dunning (2004:409), “marked a watershed in the politics of foreign aid in Africa.”

Thus, in the immediate wake of the collapse, dictatorial elites faced immense external

pressures to transform their regimes. As Levitsky and Way (2002:61) argue, the end of the Cold War “undermined the legitimacy of alternative regime models and created strong incentives for peripheral states to adopt formal democratic institutions.” Yet this pressure soon began to fade as Western policy-makers turned their attention elsewhere. While the end of the Cold War removed the need to prop up dictators, it also reduced the incentive to pursue democracy promotion with any sustained intensity. This was especially true for countries with weak or absent linkages to the West. Ake (1991:43), for example, noted that Africa’s “economic and strategic marginalization” might now “make the West too indifferent” about pushing for democratic reforms on the continent. Especially with the attention surrounding Eastern Europe, African states were turned into “irrelevant international clutter.” (Decalo 1992:17.)

Economically, the United States had little at stake on the continent at the end of the Cold War: exports to Africa accounted for approximately 2 percent of the U.S. total, while imports amounted to just over 2.5 percent. (Duignan and Gann 1994:18.) In the decade after the Soviet collapse, the United States was reluctant to engage itself too deeply in the developing world, stung in part by its experience in Somalia, and thus focused on “the symbolic and visible aspects of democratization” like elections. (Gros 1998:13.) By the mid-1990s, an increasingly insular U.S. saw dramatic cuts to aid flows. According to the OECD, development assistance fell from an all-time high of \$17.9 billion to an all-time low of \$9.25 billion between 1990 and 1997. The moral commitment to democracy promotion that followed the Soviet collapse was short-lived for states with few ties to the West.

In other cases, geopolitical considerations soon overtook ideological ones. In countries with substantial linkages with Africa, the ideological commitment to democracy promotion was soon overtaken by more traditional concerns about commercial interests and post-colonial influence. Western states with the largest interests in fragile new democracies took care to protect those interests in part by shielding their client states from political pressures. The French commitment to African democracy, for example, proved to be particularly short-lived. After declaring staunch support for political conditionality in November 1990, Mitterand delivered a visibly more diluted message at the next Francophone Summit. Soon countries like Benin, which actually underwent democratic transitions, saw declines in French aid, while others that managed to remain autocratic (Togo, Cameroon, Zaire) saw aid increases over the same period (Bratton

and van de Walle 1997:241-2). In certain cases, France refused to support opposition parties in its former colonies and turned instead toward loyal ruling regimes. In Cameroon, concerned that the Anglophone challenger might endanger France's position in the country's oil industry, In Cameroon, concerned that the Anglophone challenger might endanger Frances position in the countrys oil industry, French officials supported the election campaign of the incumbent Paul Biya. Despite extensive evidence of fraud that led to the suspension of American aid, France endorsing his 1992 election victory and welcomed him during a state visit to Paris the following year (Clapham 1996:203.) By mid-decade, observers could argue that "it cannot be assumed that external powers will continue to support democratic consolidation ...Western pressure for democratization is likely to be ephemeral, and there are already plentiful indications that it is on the decline" (Clapham and Wiseman 1995:228).

Likewise, in the Constitutional Wave of 1905-12, the democratic great powers of the day – Great Britain, France, and the United States – initially welcomed the democratic movements, providing both rhetorical and material assistance at key moments of transition. France, for example, delayed loan negotiations with the Russian tsar until he announced democratic reforms; the U.S. permitted the Mexican revolutionaries to organize their invasion from Texas; and Britain allowed Iranian activists to organize sit-ins inside its Tehran embassy and refused a request to protect the Portuguese king with warships, and denied the Chinese emperor an emergency loan to fight the prodemocracy movement.

But as in Latin America at the outset of the Cold War, or in Africa after the initial rush to support open elections, the great powers' initial enthusiasm for democratization swiftly subsided once geopolitical and economic concerns began to reassert themselves. The threat of upheaval soon led them to emphasize order and stability over the turbulence of democratization or potential threats to their economic privileges. They began to forge ties with conservative military groups and assented to (or in the American case, actively participated in) military coups in Iran, Mexico, and the Ottoman Empire. In Russia and China, meanwhile, the great powers concluded loan negotiations that circumvented the new parliaments. The desire to maintain geopolitical stability and colonial oversight quickly displaced any ideological affinities generated by the initial hegemonic transition – a pattern that would reassert itself repeatedly throughout the twentieth century.

As scholars of democracy have demonstrated, while there are few pre-requisites for democratic transitions, democratic consolidation often depends on facilitating domestic factors (e.g. Geddes 2007). In countries lacking the structural domestic conditions for such consolidation – a well-established middle class, a strong civil society, economic stability, or ethnic cooperation – the fading of external pressures for sustained reforms leads to the rollback of democracy. The shifting systemic pressures that follow hegemonic transitions are a recurring component of vertical diffusion. Both World Wars and the Soviet collapse produced extreme but temporary pressures for democratization from established democracies. Yet these pressures that faded into the background once geopolitical realities and the opportunity costs of regime promotion reasserted themselves.

While the hegemonic shock of the Soviet collapse led to partial democratization in many states, shifting external pressures (in combination with other forces of counter-diffusion) contributed to democratic stagnation and rollback. The persistence of such counter-diffusion means that the long-term historical legacy of the Soviet collapse may be not the triumph of democracy but the decline of overt despotism, accompanied by the rise of the institutional gray zone in the form of competitive autocracies and hybrid regimes

Moreover, contra Levitsky and Way's (2010) argument that stronger Western linkages encourage democratization, the outcomes – at least since the end of the Cold War – suggest that this relationship may not be a linear one. Namely, both very weak and very strong linkages discourage democratization, albeit for different reasons. In the first case, the impulse for external pressures soon fades because the lack of ties means the West had little to gain from pursuing democracy promotion. In the second case, strong linkages mean that commercial and geopolitical interests begin to take precedence over ideological ones. While total absence of linkages discourages the incentives for democracy promotion, extensive linkages produce a different set of perverse incentives, putting commercial interests above democracy promotion. The relationship between the extent of Western linkages and democratic success may thus resemble an inverted U-curve rather than a simple positive correlation. In either case, the end result is the same – the fading of external pressures for democratization after the early stages of democratic diffusion.

The Interaction of Counter-Diffusion Mechanisms

The four mechanisms of counter-diffusion rarely operate in isolation, and frequently reinforce each other. Examining the historical waves of mass contention of 1830, 1848, and 1917, Weyland argues that their failure stemmed from a combination of short-sighted reformers and cunning autocrats. On one hand, a democratic overthrow in one country “can induce established rulers elsewhere to prepare against challenges and thus stifle replications.” As a result, “many emulation efforts end up failing, and the reaction they provoke can exacerbate repression and set back the cause of democracy.” On the other hand, in the Spring of Nations revolutionary leaders pursued democratic reforms in part because of cognitive heuristics that caused them to misinterpret other examples and over-estimate their own chances of success. As he notes, “the enthusiastic hope that often erupts during waves of regime contention – ‘If they managed to do it, we can do it too!’ can be misleading” (Weyland 2009, 1155). As a result, many of these movements lacked the capacity to achieve their goals and were suppressed by the continent’s conservative rulers.

Likewise, describing the wave of democratization in Africa during the 1990s, Joseph (1997:376) notes the combined influence of fading external pressures and the collapse of pro-reform movements in newly democratic states. “As the transition process became more prolonged,” he writes,

opposition forces fragmented into ethnic and personalist groupings, while external powers were often obliged to reduce their pressure for change because of their own rivalries, as well as concerns about the upsurge of armed conflicts, collapsed states, and humanitarian emergencies.

The case of Kenya in the post-1989 African wave offers a clear illustration of how pathways of counter-diffusion can interact to suppress democratic transitions. External pressures played a key role in the country’s initial democratization. Contagion from eastern Europe soon inspired domestic opposition: in early 1990, one of the country’s religious leaders denounced the regime’s patrimonial corruption, comparing it to the failed Communist states. (Bratton and van de Walle 1997:105.) Throughout the year, the U.S. ambassador repeatedly urged the regime to undertake liberalizing reforms. In November 1991 a group of international donors met in Paris to suspend aid to Kenya and laid out explicit conditions for future assistance. A week after

the meeting, the regime repealed the ban on opposition parties and promised to hold elections the following year, the country's first since 1966. As a result, the major reform movement, the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD), transformed itself into a formal party, a united opposition that enjoyed "tremendous domestic and international support." (Brown 2001:728.)

In these early stages of diffusion, therefore, Kenya offered "the most decisive evidence of the new conditionality in Anglophone Africa." (Diamond 1995:44.) But these early gains quickly unraveled as the opposition grew increasingly fractured in the run-up to the December 1992 elections. FORD was unable to name a candidate and soon broke down along personal and ethnic lines, splintering into the Asili and Kenya factions. Moi quickly moved to capitalize on the opposition's weakness through various strategies of adaptation. Throughout the year, ethnic violence in western Kenya and the Rift Valley claimed the lives of hundreds, allegedly at Moi's instigation, in order to create an atmosphere of fear before the December elections and further fracture the opposition. He also took steps to ensure that elections were tilted in his favor – hand-picking electoral commission members, enacting election rules that favored the incumbent, and pressuring civil servants to support his regime or lose their jobs. In some cases, opposition leaders were simply paid to join the ruling party. Moi also used control of the media to receive favorable coverage from the state-monopolized radio and TV stations, and spent \$60 million to buy votes through cash and food bribes. (Brown 2001:726-7.)

As the democratic wave wore on, and the crisis of the hegemonic shock passed, incumbent adaptation was facilitated by autocratic learning not only from past events but also from each other. After the defeat of Kaunda in Zambia in 1991, for example, African rulers "began to advise each other on how to hold democratic elections without being voted out of office." (Nwokedi 1995:202.) Kaunda had reportedly advised Kenya's leader to take a harsher stance against opponents since "in his hard-won experience, gradual political openings led inexorably to the ouster of incumbent leaders." (Bratton and van de Walle 1997:181.)

Such repression was aided by waning external pressures from donors, who stressed the need for elections above all, despite potential problems and irregularities. When the opposition parties called for a boycott due to Moi's manipulation of the electoral process, they were faced with donor opposition. After spending over \$2 million on elections, donors were "determined

to see them take place, even under grossly sub-optimal conditions.” The US ambassador expressed “a common feeling that it was better to lose and be represented in parliament than not be represented at all. The idea of a boycott was quickly dropped.” (Brown 2001:732, 731.)

Thus, while at first external pressures mobilized the opposition and forced the incumbent to liberalize, these pressures soon proved inconsistent and short-sighted, enabling the incumbent to rig the electoral game in his favor. Moi quickly discovered what would soon become clear to many of his peers – that there was a wide gap for autocratic maneuvering between the bare pre-requisites of donors and the comprehensive pre-requisites of a functioning democracy. External pressures promote diffusion by creating incentives for opposition parties and elections. Yet opposition parties can compete without winning, civil society can exist without affecting reforms, and elections can be held without threatening incumbents.

Facing seven opposition candidates, Moi won with 37% of the vote. Despite reports of electoral irregularities like ballot stuffing and vote rigging, Western states acquiesced to the results. Their response demonstrated that external pressures for elections need not mean that elections be fair, and that outsiders, “will be satisfied by an extremely weak standard of democratic performance.” (Bratton and van de Walle 1997:241-2.) Following the election, external concerns placed “much more importance on stability and economic reform than on democracy,” and the subsequent mistreatment of opposition candidates received “barely a word of protest from outsiders.” (Brown 2001:732; Gros 1998:13.)

Kenya’s story thus encapsulates the major dynamics of how a democratic wave can spur tangible opportunities and demands for reform, and how counter-diffusion can successfully block such demands. As the case demonstrates, mechanisms of failed consolidation generally interact and reinforce each other to counter the spread of democratization (see Figure 5, next page):

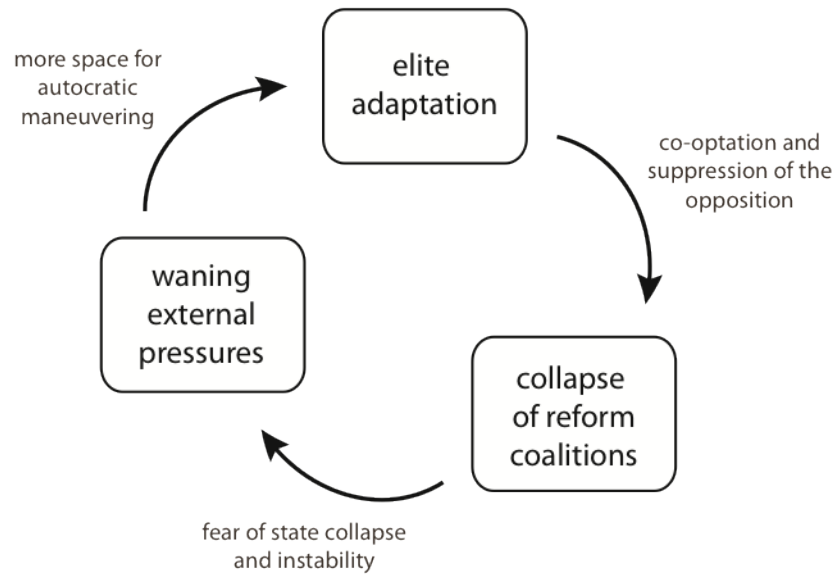


Figure 5. The interaction of counter-diffusion forces in Kenya.

In Kenya’s case, initially powerful but waning external pressures allowed political space for adaptation by Moi, who used it to successfully intensify the pressures upon opposing coalitions. The fragmentation of opposition groups that resulted from this strategy in turn contributed to even weaker external pressures for reform, as Western concerns about stability and state collapse began to take precedence over democracy promotion.

While Kenyan opposition leaders were unable to reach a democratic breakthrough, these elements of counter-diffusion were present in a number of initial success cases – that is, instances where opposition movements managed a democratic transition but could not create a consolidated democracy. In Zambia, for example, the opposition group – the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) – defeated the Kaunda dictatorship in the 1991 elections. In the early 1990s, the country seemed poised to be a potential success story on the African continent. Yet the MMD represented a typical case of Beissinger’s “negative coalition”. It was a hodge-podge of “disparate elements and interests” (Ihonvbere 2003a:66) that included businessmen, religious leaders, students and workers united by a single common factor – their desire to discredit, delegitimize, and defeat the Kaunda regime. But once that task had been accomplished, the party fell into disarray. Plagued by contradictions, internal conflicts, and scandals, the party steadily lost both its legitimacy and its ability to pursue political reforms.

Within a few years Chiluba had regained the dictatorial mantle held by his predecessor. Similar dynamics repeated themselves elsewhere – in countries ranging from Belarus to Malawi, seemingly successful democratic transitions that comprised a part of the post-1989 wave gave way to failure and rollback.

Unlike the literature on democratic transitions, theories of democratic consolidation – whether structural, process-oriented, or game-theoretic – have generally overlooked the international dimensions of failed consolidations, focusing instead on the domestic origins of democratic rollback. Yet for countries that democratize in episodes of diffusion, failure is often built into the conditions that facilitated the initial transitions in the first place. For example, focusing on counter-diffusion can help shed light on the rise of hybrid regimes after the Soviet collapse. These regimes experienced enormous external pressures to democratize after 1991 but quickly discovered the fickleness of these pressures once the initial euphoria wore off. Rulers soon found a way to sideline the opposition, governing coalitions collapsed under the weight of competing interests, and optimistic reformers found themselves outmatched by the constraints of their circumstances. The rise of hybrid regimes since the end of the Cold War might therefore be usefully viewed as the residue of the initial post-transition wave, the outcome of an interplay between democratic diffusion and subsequent counter-diffusion.

The dissolution of ad hoc coalitions, the fading of external pressures, the over-extension of optimistic reform movements, and strategic adaptation by undemocratic elites all combine to overturn the initial democratic momentum. Diffusion creates the conditions for its own decline by forging powerful but ephemeral incentives for democratization that dissolve or transform as the wave continues. The result is initial successes inevitably followed by failures.

III. The Interaction of Diffusion and Counter-Diffusion

The mechanisms of diffusion and subsequent counter-diffusion do not operate in isolation from each other. Exploring the connections between these two processes is thus an integral part of building an integrated explanatory framework of democratic cascades. Indeed, each element can be used to shed light on the other, since different kinds of diffusion consistently experience particular types of negative feedback.

For example, elite adaptation is likely to be more prevalent in cases of emulation-driven dif-

fusion, for two reasons: emulation-based diffusion centers around predictable domestic events, and operates on a longer time scale than contagion-based diffusion. Both factors allow autocratic rulers to anticipate and prepare for any potential challenges. It's worth noting that since the last Color Revolution in 2005, not a single electoral revolution has succeeded in overturning an incumbent regime, with failed attempts in Azerbaijan (2005), Belarus (2006), Iran (2009), and Russia (2011). This suggests that incumbent elites may have learned enough from the failures of their peers to pre-empt any future revolutions centered around flawed elections.³⁵

Moreover, vertical and horizontal diffusion types are associated with different types of counter-diffusion. Shifting external pressures, for example, are particular only to vertical diffusion, since in its initial stages these waves are driven by systemic forces. By contrast, external pressures are either nonexistent or equivocal in episodes of horizontal diffusion. This dynamic is key for understanding contrasts and parallels among different waves because horizontal diffusion has traditionally faced greater short-term negative feedback than its vertical counterpart. In the wake of the Arab Spring, for instance, a number of commentators made hopeful comparisons to Eastern Europe's *annus mirabilis*. Yet during the Cold War, Red Army presence was the major instrument of counter-diffusion in eastern Europe, employed whenever democratization threatened to spiral out of control, as it did in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, or Czechoslovakia in 1968. By the late 1980s, the abandonment of the Brezhnev doctrine removed the major impediment to democratic diffusion, which then encountered few obstacles in rapidly sweeping over the region. The international environment – aid conditionality, democracy promotion by Europe and the U.S., and the prospects of EC membership – all greatly bolstered both the appeal and the legitimacy of democratic diffusion.

In the Arab Spring, however, the role of the international environment has been far more ambivalent, and the presence of counter-diffusion far more pronounced, portending a much more uncertain outcome.³⁶ The Arab world did not witness the equivalent of a Soviet collapse; on the contrary, regional powers like Saudi Arabia have assisted their autocratic peers in suppressing protests.³⁷ The West, meanwhile, has at times reinforced the process of diffusion

³⁵ Moreover, the only successful regime overthrows in the post-Soviet space since 2005 – Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and Ukraine in early 2014 – were not cases of electoral revolution.

³⁶ Way 2011.

³⁷ Bradley 2011.

by aiding popular uprisings, most notably in the case of Libya. But in other cases like Bahrain, Yemen, or Syria, they have declined to promote democratization or counter the suppression of protests by ruling elites. In the absence of immediate systemic pressures, autocratic leaders have had more space for political manoeuvring and adjustment, adopting various strategies of both co-optation (as in Jordan and Morocco) or suppression (in Libya and Syria).³⁸

The types of democratic failure thus vary consistently between vertical and horizontal episodes of diffusion. Since the powerful initial forces of vertical diffusion overwhelm domestic resistance, the participants of these waves are more likely to achieve successful regime overthrows that subsequently fail due to coalitional collapses. Cognitive heuristics thus become less salient in such cases, since even overoptimistic democratizers can succeed through the aid of systemic and external pressures. By contrast, in horizontal diffusion the collapse of ad hoc coalitions is less prevalent because attempted transitions are less likely to succeed in overthrowing the incumbent regime. Absent systemic pressures, miscalculating reformers are more likely to fail at the transition stage rather than the consolidation stage.

As a result, both the timing and the types of negative feedback vary between cases of vertical and horizontal diffusion. After World War I or the Soviet collapse, for example, autocratic leaders had few short-term opportunities to resist the swelling tide of democratization or engage in strategies of diffusion-proofing. Failures instead came later, as initial transitions were unable to consolidate democratic gains and transformed into hybrid regimes. By contrast, in episodes of horizontal diffusion like the Arab Spring, counter-diffusion was both more immediate and more conducive to elite learning.

Conclusion

If the concept of diffusion is to escape the fate of an explanatory *deus ex machina* – an intuitively appealing but conceptually vague category – models of diffusion need to move beyond aggregative empirics or ad hoc mechanisms, and toward the theoretical elaboration of the various elements of the process, in particular the interaction between domestic and external forces, and the sequencing of this interaction over time. As this discussion shows, future scholarship would benefit from disaggregating the concept of democratic diffusion. It may be more appro-

³⁸ Saideman 2012:718.

priate to speak of “varieties of diffusion”, akin to the literature on the varieties of capitalism. Studies of diffusion also need to examine more carefully the elements of failure baked into the dynamics of diffusion. It is not simply the case that democratic rollback is common. Rather, rollback stems from the same mechanisms that create the initial wave of transitions, is therefore an inherent component of democratic waves, and should be theorized as such. The traditional view of diffusion as a unilinear and self-reinforcing process captures only half of the story.

Diffusion clearly cannot explain all instances of major regime change, and this paper is not intended to produce a universal (“covering-law”) theory of democratic diffusion. External impulses rarely operate in isolation from the internal environment through which they propagate, and the impact of diffusion is inevitably filtered through the domestic conditions of particular countries. The forces of diffusion therefore do not exercise their effects equally on all states; rather, their impact is shaped both by the strength of a country’s ties and linkages to great powers (Levitsky and Way 2010), as well as the strength and organizational capacity of domestic actors to resist external reforms.

For policy-makers, understanding the drivers of diffusion is crucial for evaluating the efficacy of external regime promotion. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, for example, was motivated at least in part by the Bush administration’s belief in their ability to spark democratic waves through forced regime change. This holds true for non-coercive measures of democracy promotion as well. If cascades of democratic reforms are embedded with a regional or global context of external linkages, focusing on the maintenance of these linkages – by aiding transnational groups or facilitating the flow of communication among domestic reformers – may be as important as supporting the particular domestic conditions thought to be conducive to reforms.

More generally, examining the causes and consequences of diffusion serves as a reminder that democratic transitions produced by diffusion are more than the sum of their parts. That is, diffusion cannot be analyzed only by comparing cases across states or regions, as it embodies multiple facets of a systemic phenomenon, driven by variations in cross-border linkages that cannot be reduced to their individual components. Examining how democracy spreads across borders can offer fundamental insights into the nature of democracy itself.

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