

## **Can democracy be applied universally or are some political cultures inherently resistant to representative government?**

There has been, in the last century a large growth of states becoming democratic. Some have been relatively successful and others have not. This has been for a number of reasons which I will discuss in this essay. However, firstly, in order to judge whether universal democracy is a realistic prospect, I will define what I mean by democracy. The essay will firstly consider cases where democracy has been embraced and then states that are undemocratic, or have had failed democracies. A democracy can take, as we will see varying forms, but in general it is 'rule by the people, for the people'. There are certain practices which need to be in operation in a state in order for it to be classified as democratic. A common practice is open elections. Part of the problem is that there is no universally accepted definition of democracy which means that there can be slightly dubious states classifying themselves as democratic, when in actual fact they do not have the same or similar features to that of other democratic states. In the UK, we generally consider democracy to include features such as, freedom of speech and movement; and fair and free elections. Other countries, such as Iraq under Saddam Hussein, claimed to be democratic because they held elections, however these elections were not fair and free and thus the west did not consider them to be democratic. This is where the main problem lies and will therefore be the main focal point in this essay. Central to my argument will be whether or not there can be a universal democracy that is broadly identical across the world. In this essay I will seek to prove that because there is no universally accepted notion of what democracy actually entails, it is virtually impossible to say whether it can be enforced globally.

As I mentioned above, there has over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century been an upsurge in the number of states embracing democracy. However, this has not necessarily taken the same structure. Different countries see democracy slightly differently and thus the features that they choose to

embrace are often different to traditional democratic nations. For example, several countries in Latin America such as Venezuela and Columbia claim to be democratic although only Venezuela has the sort of features that the UK would classify as democratic. Both of these countries have more than a single party system in place and both have elections. However, in Venezuela, these elections are generally free and fair but in Columbia they are not. According to Robert Wesson, Columbia is not really a democratic nation; it simply has to go along with the tide of its neighbours and thus adopts certain aspects of democracy without fully embracing it in full.<sup>1</sup> There exists in Columbia, an oligarchy of two parties either of which usually wins. This, Wesson says is undemocratic because no more than two parties have a fair chance of winning. However if one looks at the UK for a moment, you have to go back nearly a whole century before you get to anyone other than the Conservatives or Labour in office. So based on that argument, the UK is not democratic because only one of two parties tends to be in office. I would tend to disagree because although elections are a valuable part of democracy, they are not the be all and end all of it. With this in mind, it is possible to see why democracy could be used universally in some form or another. If certain features of democracy are incompatible with a nation in terms of governance or culture, then they can just exclude certain parts. It doesn't mean that they are not democratic; they just have a different form of democracy. This is why it is extremely hard to judge whether or not a particular country is democratic or not. Despite this, there are many examples where democracy has worked in former undemocratic states and Venezuela is one of these. It took up democracy in 1958 after the ousting of Perez Jimenez. Wesson says that this was due mainly, in his view to the lessons learned, "from the unpleasant and disgraceful dictatorship of 1952-58". This could indeed be the case because citizens revolt against oppression and most revolts now, certainly post WWII, call for democracy to be instigated. If this is the case, then it may mean that people actually believe in democracy and more importantly believe that it can be adopted in their country, or as Winston Churchill once said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried

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<sup>1</sup> Wesson, Robert, Democracy in Latin America : promise and problems / Robert Wesson, New York : Praeger, 1982, page 69

from time to time."<sup>2</sup> This really sums much of the above argument up because it says that although democracy is not a perfect system and is not necessarily good, it is better than the rest and should therefore be used.

On the other hand it could be argued that democracy cannot become universal. Critics who support this argument include Juan Linz and Alfred Stephan. They argue that because democracy is such a complicated form of governance, it takes a long time to enforce it properly.<sup>3</sup> They point to countries such as Columbia who, in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had what most would see as a pretty reasonable democracy. "They had acquired a reputation for democratic stability as well as literary government."<sup>4</sup> Peter Smith in his book on democracy in Latin America says that in order for democracy to be a proven success you have to wait. He says that although there is evidence that democracy across Latin America is in place, it is not necessarily thriving, nor is it being upheld in full terms. For example, elections are taking place but they are not always fair and free which is undemocratic, but the fact that they do occur is seen as evidence that democracy is in place. Also Smith points out that it may well be surviving, but it is not thriving.<sup>5</sup> Overall economic growth has not exceeded 1.5% in the three years to 2003.<sup>6</sup> He points out that the question of endurance centres around the key issue of democratic consolidation. He says, "The simplest criterion for evaluating democratic consolidation is longevity. The longer the democracy survives, the longer it is likely to survive." This suggests that democracy is really a wait-and-see system. It takes time for a country to adapt to the new system and in some cases democracy is the complete opposite to what they are used to so it can take several decades before it is known whether or not it has been a success. Countries such as India, where a completely undemocratic system used to be in place are only just getting used to the new system of elections and voting nearly half a century on. This displays, as some argue, that democracy cannot be universal because there are some countries who will just

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2 House of Commons speech on Nov. 11, 1947

3 Juan Linz & Alfred Stephan, problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation, The John Hopkins University press 1996, page 38

4 Wesson, Robert, Democracy in Latin America : promise and problems / Robert Wesson, New York : Praeger, 1982, page 35

5 Smith, Peter, Democracy in Latin America, Oxford University Press 2005, page 331-332

6 Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

never accept the changes needed in order to become democratic because of their inherently undemocratic culture. This is however, a weak argument because the fact that it takes time is a good thing. It means that the system will be deeply embedded into the state and is therefore more likely to last. From my point of view, if a system is quick and easy to install, it is probably just as quick and easy to replace which leads to weak government and a crumbling country. Critics point to India and say that it is not a model democracy. Well, the upshot of that is that there is no such thing as a model democracy. In fact, India has, considering where it has come from, one of the best democracies in the world. Fair and free elections take place regularly and there is freedom of speech and movement. More than one party has the chance to win an election. In order to assess effectively how good a democracy a particular state has, it is imperative to look at the context the country has come from, because it may well be that a country has adopted democracy as a result of pressure from its neighbours or even had it imposed on them as a result of a war, E.g. Iraq. This shows that democracy cannot be universal because if it is forced on states, they will not believe in it and thus will do everything they can to do away with it and return to an undemocratic system.

What people who say democracy cannot be universally accepted say is that because of the varying cultures of different states, it is impossible for them to completely change their political system because of the deeply embedded features of the undemocratic system which are hard to get rid of. They argue that countries like India do not actually have a proper democracy in place because of cultural problems. If pure democracy was right for India, then it would have embraced it by now. However, those who argue that democracy can be universal would argue that although India and other such countries still have a long way to go in terms of cementing their democracies, they have come a long way. It seems logical to build from the bottom up rather than the top down because otherwise the system will collapse with a lack of solid foundations.

A slightly different slant to take is by looking at supranational organisations such as the EU and the UN. Carol Gould puts forward the argument that such organisations already have a form of

democracy embodied in them. She argues that because membership of such groups is voluntary, “the citizens or people of these states are indirectly represented by their appointed delegates or functionaries; and furthermore, that such bodies are, at their appropriate level “democratic”, insofar as the member states share in the decision making on a free and equal basis and in some fair manner of proportional representation.” This is a point that could be taken to mean that individual states cannot become democratic alone, so they need to join large international groupings in order to do so, or that global democracy can and does work because organisations such as the UN have a certain level of democracy.

I now turn to failed democracies. I have mentioned Columbia before. In the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, democracy appeared to be flourishing in Columbia. Where it broke down was when the export prices plummeted leading to a period of authoritarian rule in order to sort out the crisis. This shows that democracy does not work in all cases and therefore does not have the capacity to become global. If we look at Russia, we see a former communist state who is really still a communist state, but has taken on board a few democratic principles. The problem here is that communism is broadly the opposite of what democracy offers and thus the two systems are conflicting with each other. Russia has elections, but strong support is usually given by the majority party and the media to one particular candidate. In the recent presidential election, the winning candidate took over 70% of the popular vote. This is not necessarily democratic as it shows that not more than one party has a fair chance of winning. Despite that, democracy in many ways is in place in Russia, even though it is not perfect. Furthermore, even though such countries do not appear fully democratic at the moment, there is nothing that says it won't, given time, become a complete democracy. In Columbia's case, they have had a resurgence of democracy in the last 20 years. As Peter Smith said, only time can tell whether a state becomes democratic<sup>7</sup>. For some, it might be ten years, for others it might even be a century or more. The main point is that as shown here, democracy has the capacity to become universal as it is the only viable alternative to the status quo.

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7 Smith, Peter, *Democracy in Latin America*, Oxford University Press 2005, page 331-332

Overall, it is clear that it is unclear exactly what a country needs to do to be classified as democratic. It is not a perfect system and is not a rigid system, however one thing remains that at the moment the push is for democracy to be brought to the rest of the world. It has been proven in cases such as India and Venezuela that it can be achieved and thus there is nothing to say that it can't become a global system. The fact that it is not a strict system and is only a framework means that it can be adapted to suit different countries which coupled with the success stories so far proves that democracy does indeed have the potential to become universal if the current trends continue. Whether it will is another story for another day.

### **References:**

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