



# Rethinking the Premise of Democracy Promotion

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U.S. foreign policy exemplifies a broad Wilsonian consensus about the value of democracy promotion. The “forward strategy of freedom,” for example, has been the cornerstone of the Bush administration’s geopolitics, but it was not very many years earlier that President Clinton committed the United States to a policy of “democratic enlargement” aimed at growing the number of democracies in the world. Both Senators Barack Obama and John McCain were sponsors of the ADVANCE Democracy Act of 2005. Even after the debacle in Iraq, there is little dissent from the idea that the United States should work to foster a less autocratic world, which, in turn, is understood to lead to less anti-Americanism and diminished threats to U.S. interests. The principal target of these efforts in recent years has been the Greater Middle East, that broad band of Muslim-majority nations that stretches from West Africa to Southeast Asia.

This essay calls attention to a major error in reasoning and evidence that is rarely considered in the Wilsonian consensus. It is a fallacy of division: If democracy is a good thing for international security most observers assume that therefore “every step toward freedom the world makes our country safer,” to quote President Bush.<sup>1</sup> But research consistently shows that partial steps toward democratic regimes actually multiply the security threats. The encouragement of democracy will never be effective unless its proponents carefully examine the assumptions they make about the undifferentiated benefit of incremental political reforms, and tailor their strategies accordingly.

The intellectual foundation for encouraging democratization is the theory

of “democratic peace.” Note that it is not the theory of “semi-democratic peace.” The theory points to two well-established empirical relationships: Democratic political systems seldom or never fight wars against each other; and (more controversially) democracies have a greater propensity to avoid serious disputes with other countries that could boil over to war. However, these empirical regularities do not apply to countries that mix major elements of undemocratic and democratic practice.

A good example of one of these hybrid regimes from the Muslim world is the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is a religious state that abridges the freedom of worship and does not allow people to speak and write freely. Yet, within the bounds set by spiritual leaders there is lively political participation and vigorous competition for office. Another mixed regime Muslim-majority country is Nigeria. It had a competitive national election with an opposition victory in 1999, but subsequent contests in 2003 and 2007 were marred by violence and charges of fraud and other voting irregularities. Political corruption continues to be a very serious problem in Nigeria and there have been a number of high profile political assassinations. Both of these countries have taken “steps toward freedom,” in Bush’s phrase, but they are a long way from having reliable and consistent democratic institutions.

How many semi-democratic systems are there? For a reasonably precise answer we can turn to the Polity data series, which is a source for national regime typologies used widely in political science research.<sup>2</sup> Of particular utility is the *polity2* variable, a composite index for autocracy/democracy that is measured on a 21-point scale ranging

from minus ten to plus ten. The maximum score would be given to a country in which the executive is chosen in free and fair elections with universal suffrage and where there are substantial checks and balances constraining the chief executive's power. Lower scores reflect diminishing constraints on executive powers and lessening degrees of competitiveness and political participation. Over the past three decades, the average country's *polity2* score has risen by five points, indicating a substantial rise in average democratization around the world. But only some countries went over the threshold to become institutionally consistent democratic systems represented at the high end of the *polity2* scale; many others became less autocratic but not dependably democratic with open electoral competition and constitutional protections.

To determine the number of mixed regimes versus more purely democratic or authoritarian political systems, I follow the conventional coding system researchers use to sort nations into three groups: A country is classified as fully democratic if its *polity2* score is greater than six, and autocratic if *polity2* is less than minus six. Countries with in-between scores are categorized as semi-democratic. As of 2004, the latest year in the Polity IV time series, the world contained seventy-four full democracies, twenty-two autocracies, and fifty-seven semi-democratic systems, according to this coding system. That is a three-fold increase in full democracies and a two-thirds drop in autocracies since 1970—but also a doubling in the number of semi-democracies over a thirty-five year period.

Sometimes semi-democracy is a necessary but brief transitory stage before emergence of a rule-bound competitive political system, but that is not the typical pattern in Muslim-majority countries. Far more common is for them to settle into a long-term condition between autocracy and constitutional democracy. To get a better idea of how long these periods can last, I identify regime changes in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s,

using Polity IV codes and the tripartite division of regime types just mentioned. This allows me to estimate six distinct transitions: Autocracy to partial democracy, partial democracy to full democracy, and autocracy to full democracy, as well as the reverse of each. I define a transition as a shift in regime category that lasts five years or more, and which puts the country in a different category than it was in during the nearest previous episode that also lasted a minimum of five years. The five-year cut-off is based on the assumption that the national leadership will usually be replaced or renewed within that time, giving some assurance that a regime lasting that long has established itself and been stabilized. Regime interludes under five years are not counted as transitions. Since the Polity IV database extends to 2004, the most recent regime changes that can be recorded using this methodology took place in 2000. To gain some historical perspective and have a reasonable sample of cases, I take 1970 as the base year for tabulating transitions (meaning I go back to 1965 to start grouping political systems using the five-year survival rule).

During the three decades beginning in 1970, the world witnessed 116 regime changes as defined above, with thirty-two of them occurring in predominantly Muslim nations. Many countries in the world underwent more than one transition; most had none. Among the transitions in predominantly Muslim nations, only four brought about democratic systems and three of them (Mali, Nigeria, and Pakistan) barely lasted beyond the five-year baseline. The majority of these transitions resulted in semi-democratic regimes.

The mean age (in 2004) of the semi-democratic regimes among Muslim-majority nations over the 1970-2000 period was nearly fifteen years, and that does not count two long-lived regimes that had shifted into semi-democratic status before 1970. Clearly, these are not passing interregnums. The only fully democratic countries by my definition among Muslim-majority countries in 2004 are Senegal

and Turkey, possibly to be joined by Albania and Indonesia if they can make it over the five-year hurdle.

The expansion in the group of partially democratic nation states is likely to harm (or at least not benefit) international security in several ways. Partial democracies, no matter the region, represent a disproportionate amount of the world's political turmoil, according to a report from the Political Instability Task Force. In the period 1955 to 2001, mixed regimes by its tally accounted for more than one-third of all major "political instability events" (adverse shifts in patterns of governance, ethnic wars, revolutionary wars, genocides).<sup>3</sup> Other studies confirm that there are more "life-integrity violations" (such as extrajudicial executions and torture) in semi-democratic states, for example, than in either authoritarian or democratic states. Mass killings of civilians are also most common at intermediate levels of democracy, with a decline at higher levels.<sup>4</sup> These tragedies are plausibly explained as the consequence of social mobilization and expanded political participation in the absence of self-restraining governing institutions.

Social disorder in an intermediate regime often escalates into civil war, as implied by collaborative research by the Bertelsmann Foundation and the Center for Applied Policy Research at Munich University. The likelihood of armed conflicts taking place in so-called defective democracies (their definition) is more than three and a half times greater than in fully institutionalized democracies for the period 2003-2005. All intermediate regimes combined have a 20 percent higher chance for intrastate armed conflict than do autocracies, they report.<sup>5</sup> Going back further to 1946, a different study shows that semi-democratic regimes are significantly associated with an increased likelihood of civil war through 1992.<sup>6</sup> Extending the analysis to 1816, another study finds much the same pattern: Democratic regime change is strongly correlated with internal military conflict, though the prospects for civil peace improve with time if the country

evolves into an established democratic system.<sup>7</sup> Intrastate fighting is often regionally destabilizing due to refugee flows, border incursions, rising irredentist sentiment in neighboring states, and other dangers.<sup>8</sup>

A second way partial democracies may imperil international peace is more direct: A mixed regime may have a greater propensity to use military force against another nation state (or inadvertently to invite an attack against itself). A chief reason fully established democracies are thought to resolve foreign problems peacefully is because pluralism and accountability makes them attentive to the demands of the citizenry — and hence cautious in embarking on policies that might be detrimental to the majority interest, such as starting wars. Where the representative institutions are less inclusive or only partly competitive the opposite may happen since the regime is less beholden to popular sentiment. On the other hand, a mitigating factor might be that semi-democracies are too disorganized to mobilize resources to assault a neighboring nation state — though internal disorganization also could send confused signals to potential adversaries and raise the risk of invasion.

The large-n research results on this subject are not entirely consistent. Some studies suggest that countries undergoing democratic transitions are not unusually likely to be involved in wars with neighbors, and that truncated transitions do not contribute to the probability of participation in interstate hostilities.<sup>9</sup> However, other statistical evidence shows that states experiencing incomplete transitions are apt to start wars. Limited democracies appear to be inherently more aggressive than other regime types even beyond the period of regime transition, according to another study. Swings back and forth between democracy and autocracy are also found to increase a country's inclination to fight.<sup>10</sup> The net effects of democratization and semi-democracy on interstate warfare are thus questions political science has yet to

settle definitively, but it does not appear likely these factors *diminish* risks of external war in the short-run. At best, they simply may not add to the risks.

Terrorism is another third threat to world peace that the spread of democracy is supposed to alleviate. The official view in Washington is that democratic institutions offer citizens avenues for redress of grievances, so aggrieved citizens supposedly have little reason to turn to kidnapping, assassination or car bombing to settle scores. However, it is also plausible that democratic institutions create an optimal breeding ground for violent radicalism. There are disaffected elements in every society. The openness that goes with democratic practice reduces the cost to religious or other extremists of getting organized and planning and carrying out violent attacks. One reason to be particularly suspicious about partial democracies is that they have incentives to tolerate certain international terrorists on their territory. They may even sponsor international terrorists as a low-cost alternative to projecting official military force.

Quantitative researchers have tried to answer these questions; results are not favorable for semi-democracy. Peter Kurrild-Klitgaard, Mogens K. Justesen, and Robert Klemmensen have developed a model to explain the probability of terrorist attacks in different settings. It shows countries at a mid-range of democracy are more liable to experience terrorism than authoritarian or democratic countries are.<sup>11</sup> Empirical work by Alberto Abadie also finds a non-monotonic relationship between political freedom and the incidence of terrorism, indicating countries with intermediate levels of democracy are more prone to terrorism than countries with high or low levels.<sup>12</sup> These findings suggest that semi-democracy may be the worst of both worlds—unable either to repress violent dissent or to channel it into socially productive channels.

If illegal political violence does tend to

flourish in mixed regimes, it may only have a limited impact on third parties. Cross-border terrorism is the bigger concern for the United States. An important question therefore is whether partial democracies are more or less likely to serve as a sanctuary for exporting terrorism. Alan Krueger and David Laitin have written a paper on the national origins of transnational terrorism using a three-way split among regimes. They separate countries with a middle level of civil liberties—a classification similar to the concept of partial democracy used here. According to Krueger and Laitin, these mid-level countries are a more common base for attacks than are countries with either high or low levels of civil liberties. The targets, when these terrorists go international, are usually high-income nations such as the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Neoconservatives, with their emphasis on “moral clarity,” commit an either/or fallacy and ignore the existence and the security implications of partial democracy. Liberal internationalists, having made the inference that partial democracy is just a passing phase on the road to full democracy, make a comparable oversight. The literature reviewed here suggests mixed political systems present unique challenges to global peace and must be understood in their own right.

There are three broad lessons for democracy promotion policy: First only under the rarest of circumstances should military pressure be employed as a pre-emptive way to advance democracy. There are situations where military intervention is unavoidable, and that may leave the United States and its allies little choice except to try to help another country construct or reconstruct its public institutions. But we should not delude ourselves about the likelihood of a democratic political system being the result.

A second implication of the empirical literature is that U.S. foreign policy needs to be adapted better to particular countries’ individual circumstances. In fact this is already done pragmatically. But rather than an ad hoc

approach, which exposes the United States to charges of hypocrisy and double-dealing, it would be best to confront the issue of mixed regimes openly. Organizational support and electoral assistance might be appropriate to help consolidate a new democracy, for instance, but be wasted effort or counterproductive in a semi-democracy.

A final implication of the literature review is to take a lower profile. Partly, this means dialing back the self-righteous neoconservative oratory about freedom because it triggers a defensive response in many corners of the globe that damages U.S. standing and influence. There should be a subtle shift in orientation, from campaigning for democracy to supporting it, taking the

cues from local democratic forces as opposed to trying to get out ahead of the process as the forward strategy of freedom claims to do.

In the end rule-bound democracy is largely produced from within, not spread from the outside in a predictable manner. The Bush policy of blustering, occasionally violent, but universalistic democracy promotion wastes U.S. resources and is counterproductive in furthering the ultimate goal, which is to add to the world population of fully democratic states. The next administration needs to recognize that textured democracy promotion has a much better chance of serving U.S. national interests than does a one-dimensional blanket Wilsonianism.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> George W. Bush, "President Bush Delivers State of the Union Address" (The White House, January 31, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> The Polity IV Project is maintained by Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland, College Park, Md., <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/polity/>.

<sup>3</sup> Jack A. Goldstone, Robert Bates, Ted Robert Gurr, Michael Lustik, Monty G. Marshall, Jay Ulfelder, and Mark Woodward, "A Global Forecasting Model of Political Instability" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, September 3, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Helen Fein, "More Murder in the Middle: Life Integrity Violations and Democracy in the World," *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (February 1995), p. 177; William Easterly, Roberta Gatti, and Sergio Kurlat, "Development, Democracy, and Mass Killings," *Journal of Economic Growth*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (June 2006), p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Aurel Croissant, "Political Violence, Terrorism, and Transformation to Democracy and Market Economy: Findings of the Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2006," *Strategic Insights*, Vol. 4, No. 12 (December 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Errol A. Henderson and J. D. Singer, "Civil War in the Post-Colonial World, 1946-92," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (May 2000), p. 289.

<sup>7</sup> Håvard Hegre, Tanja Ellingsen, Scott Gates, and Nils Gleditsch, "Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816-1992," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (February 2001), p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Reported by Michael D. Ward and Kristin M. Bakke, "Predicting Civil Conflicts: On the Utility of Empirical Research" (Paper presented at the Conference on Disaggregating the Study of Civil War and Transnational Violence, University of California Institute of Global Conflict and Cooperation, San Diego, March 7-8, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> William R. Thompson and Richard Tucker, "A Tale of Two Democratic Peace Critiques," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (June 1997), p. 445; David L. Rousseau, *Democracy and War: Institutions, Norms, and the Evolution of International Conflict* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 279.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), p. 134; Sandeep Baliga, David O. Lucca, and Tomas Sjöström, "Domestic Political Survival and International Conflict: Is Democracy Good for Peace?" (Working paper, Kellogg School, Northwestern University, April 2007); Kristian Gleditsch and Michael Ward, "War and Peace in Space and Time: The Role of Democratization," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (March 2000), p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Kurrild-Klitgaard, Mogens K. Justesen, and Robert Klemmensen, "The Political Economy of Terrorism, Democracy and Freedom," *Public Choice*, Vol. 128, Nos. 1-2 (July 2006), p. 304.

<sup>12</sup> Alberto Abadie, "Poverty, Political Freedom, and the Roots of Terrorism," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 96, No. 2 (May 2006), p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> Alan B. Krueger and David D. Laitin, "Kto Kogo? A Cross-Country Study of the Origins and Targets of Terrorism," in *Suicide Missions and the Market for Martyrs*, ed. Eva-Marie Meyersson Milgrom (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, forthcoming).