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CHAPTER NINE

Benefits and outcomes

Introduction

We have seen throughout this book that increasingly larger numbers of people around the world have over the last four decades or so expressed a desire and have acted on that desire to establish and maintain democracy, as well as articulate a set of human rights that have become increasingly codified in and adjudicated through international law. The growth of democracy and the proliferation of human rights instruments (quite apart from their actual protection) are indicators of both the attractiveness of these ideas and achievement in their realization; however, what are the benefits and outcomes that ordinary people can expect from their own country making a transition to democracy and establishing a more rights-protective regime? In short, **cui bono**? Who benefits? And to what extent do they benefit? Do all good things come together? Or are their trade-offs between the normative achievements of establishing democracy and the realization of human rights on the one hand and real material benefits and outcomes on the other? There is an emerging global consensus that democracy is good for developmental outcomes and is seen as the preferable political system for the achievement of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGS), but is this necessarily the case? In the post-2015 era will the new Sustainable Development Goals include democratic governance as an **end in itself** or also as a **means to an end**?

This chapter seeks to address these questions and considers the benefits and outcomes associated with greater democracy and more rights-protective regimes. First, it begins with a discussion of the non-material and normative benefits associated with democracy and human rights. Second, it discusses the main findings of the democratic peace research, which shows both the international and domestic pacifying effects of democracy. Third, it examines

the overall benefits associated with having rights-protective regimes in place, especially with respect to economic distortions prevalent among market capitalist societies. Fourth, it outlines the main economic benefits of democracy with respect to poverty and famine, as well as the human-related elements of sustainable human development. Finally, it considers the mixed record with respect to the environment, where it is becoming evident that democracy makes a positive difference in reducing environmental degradation among the wealthy countries of the world, but among the poor countries, its benefits have not yet been realized.

Democracy qua democracy

Democracy has a number of internal values whose actual **value** to individuals is often intangible and difficult to measure. In talking to individuals in new democracies, there is a palpable sense of exaltation about just being able to move about without the constant fear of repression or suspicion of one's actions. Beyond this micro- and personal sense of democracy, citizens in newly democratized countries value their ability to participate and it is typical during first elections after a prolonged period of authoritarianism that citizen turnout is quite high. The media depict scenes of long queues of voters exercising their rights for the first time, or in the case of a return to democracy, exercising their rights once again. Comparative analysis has shown that there is convergence in turnout rates between established democracies and other states (see IDEA 2002). While turnout itself is a crude measure of participation and subject to influence from mandatory registration and mandatory voting laws across a variety of different countries, it does provide a first insight into a key dimension of participation. Figure 9.1 shows that average global turnout rates over time for presidential and parliamentary elections have seen a secular decline over the last few decades, while the average level of democracy has risen across the same period. For the whole period, the average turnout for both parliamentary and presidential elections is approximately 70 per cent, which in relative terms is remarkably high.

Beyond formal participation through voting, which is also something that is available across a large number of non-democracies in the world, democracy allows for a wide range of alternative forms of participation, such as public inquiries, petitions, social movement activity, voluntary associations, participatory budgeting and other forms of activity in the public sphere in which the separation between the state and the citizen becomes more blurred than in non-democratic systems as multiple entry points are available for influencing government policy. There is great value associated with these kinds of participation and the rights that make them possible, such as freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of speech and freedom of information among others. Moreover, the mere fact

FIGURE 9.1 *Voter turnout for parliamentary and presidential elections and the level of democracy, 1981–2010.*

of knowing that one **can** participate in the political system is of great value to individuals who suddenly find themselves within a new democracy.

Closely associated with participation is the notion of accountability, which concerns the degree to which elected politicians and state officials can be held to account for their actions. This value can be achieved through a variety of ways, including the electoral process itself, through parliamentary committees, the courts and judicial system, special ombudsman offices and other specialized watchdog agencies (see IDEA 2008: 24). Knowing that one can ask questions, find answers and challenge officials in government on the grounds of evidence is a key feature of a mature democracy, and the possibility that officials can be removed or step down from office lends

credibility to any system of accountability. While there are many instances in which such challenges have not led to satisfactory outcomes within many democracies, the ability to challenge is available within democracies in ways that are simply not possible in non-democratic regimes, where challenges can be met with silence, misinformation or outright repression. As we saw in Chapter 6, social movements and civil society organizations have the ability to challenge governments through recognized institutional channels as well as through direct forms of protest mobilization and other manifestations of popular discontent. Democracies will naturally limit such activity should it turn violent or in the event that property rights are violated or public order breaks down; however, there is a wide range of activity that is possible among the world's democracies upon which individuals place a very high value.

We saw in Chapter 3, that there is a positive relationship between democracy and human rights, where higher levels of democracy are significantly related to better protection of physical integrity rights (see Figure 3.2). Figure 9.2 shows the time-series trends in democracy and

FIGURE 9.2 *Physical integrity rights and democracy, 1981–2010.*

physical integrity rights between 1981 and 2010, where the advance of democracy since 1981 has been steady and positive and the change in human rights has fluctuated considerably with a slight improvement in the early part of this century. The overall correlation between the score of democracy used in the figure and the scale of physical integrity rights is .39 (at the 99% level of statistical confidence), suggesting that while democracies are better at protecting this set of rights, there are still many democracies in the world with continued violations of these rights (see also Diamond 1999, 2008). Across other categories of rights, however, the picture is slightly more positive. For example, the correlation with democracy is higher for such rights as empowerment (.81), assembly and association (.75), freedom of movement (.50), freedom of religion (.47), the rights of workers (.54) and women's social rights (.47). Thus across a collection of different human rights, democracies have a better record than non-democracies, but the relationship between the two falls far short of being perfect.

While higher levels of democratic performance are evident across the world's democracies, within them, there remains great variation across many different measures of performance. Such a variation in the 'quality of democracy' (O'Donnell et al. 2004; Diamond and Morlino 2005; IDEA 2008) belies any quick observation about 'Western' biases in measures of performance or 'Western' superiority among democracies themselves. For example, studies on democratic performance show a certain amount of uniformity among Western democracies, but a remaining degree of differentiation with respect to some key indicators. Women's representation, equal access to the law and income inequality are not all better for Western democracies compared to non-Western democracies, nor are they all the same within the group of Western democracies (Foweraker and Krznaric 2003). Rather, countries such as the United States and Australia do not score very high on these measures compared to other Western democracies. Indeed, income distribution, which for many, is a basic measure of equality and linked to democratic participation is now worse than in the year that preceded the great depression (Stiglitz 2012). The United Kingdom and the United States do not score particularly well on comparative measures of prison population (incarceration rates) where variations in sentencing (particularly in the United States) show disproportionately longer rates for ethnic minority groups (see Foweraker and Krznaric 2003: 327–32). There has been a longstanding problem with the ways in which Australia treats its indigenous population that undermines the notions of equality and inclusiveness. In its report on electoral integrity, the Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security (2012) concludes that the pattern of campaign finance and the behaviour of political action committees (PACs and super-PACs) are eroding electoral integrity in the United States. Widespread commentary on the 2000 election debacle in Florida and voter registration issues associated with the 2012 elections have raised grave concerns over infringement of the right to vote that are politically motivated.

In addition to the variation in performance in Western democracies, there are additional differences across many democracies that depend on the kind of institutional design that has been adopted. Institutional design includes the kind of executive-legislative arrangements that are in place, the type of electoral system that is used and the type of political party system that has developed. First, it is possible for countries to have a **presidential system** (as in the United States and all of Latin America), a **parliamentary system** (as in the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Italy, among others) or a **mixed system** (as in France, Germany and Portugal). Second, it is possible for countries to have single-member district electoral systems (also known as 'first past the post' as in the United States or United Kingdom), proportional representation systems (as in Italy, Greece, Iceland, Belgium and all of Latin America) or mixed systems that combine features of both (as in Germany and Scotland). Third, it is possible to have dominant party systems, two-party systems, or multi-party systems, where the 'effective' number of parties in the national legislative assembly varies greatly across democracies.

These three main areas of difference among democracies are combined in ways that can have a direct impact on democratic quality and democratic performance. For example, single-member district systems where political parties compete for a plurality of votes in each electoral district tend to produce two-party systems, such as in the United States with the Democratic and Republican Parties and in the United Kingdom with the Labour and Conservative Parties. Many argue that such party systems provide a better framework for governance since the representation of interests is divided into two main parties and the process of government is about the leadership and the opposition. In contrast, proportional representation, where parties win seats in the main legislative chamber according to the proportion of votes they received across electoral districts, tends to produce multi-party systems. In countries such as Germany, coalitions between major parties are formed to create stable governments. Many have argued that multi-party systems such as the German case tend to be more **representative** (and thus uphold a fundamental democratic principle) but are inherently **harder to govern** since multiple interests need to be accommodated through the political process and the need for coalition formation. In contrast, countries with single-member districts and two-party systems are less representative since they do not reflect the underlying proportion of support in the electorate, but are considered better for governance. There is thus a trade-off between **representation** and **governability** that all democracies confront (see Foweraker 1998).

In similar fashion, there are different advantages and disadvantages associated with presidential and parliamentary systems. Within presidential systems, there is a 'dual mandate' from the people to the government. The president and the legislative assembly are elected separately and both therefore have **independent sources of democratic legitimacy**, which at times

can lead to conflict between the two branches over policy and, in extreme cases, can lead to constitutional crises and even democratic breakdown (e.g. as in the case of Brazil in 1964 and Chile in 1973; see Cohen 1994). Within parliamentary regimes, there is a **mutual dependence** between the executive and legislative branches, where the prime minister is typically the leader of the largest party, has the confidence of the parliament and there has been a single election to determine who governs. Comparative research has shown that presidential democracies tend to breakdown more than parliamentary democracies, but that among developing countries, parliamentary regimes break down more than presidential ones. Among presidential democracies, the real problem lies in those countries that have **strong presidentialism** (i.e. many unilateral powers that are at the disposal of the president). As we saw in Chapter 4, many ‘third-wave’ democracies are also presidential democracies and among some, there has been an increasing concentration of power in the office of the president. This problem of strong presidentialism can be compounded in countries where it is combined with a large number of weak parties (see Shugart and Carey 1992; Stepan and Skach 1993). The media stories about the dysfunctionality of American democracy often focus on the frequency of what is known as ‘divided government’ where one party controls the presidency and a different party controls the Congress. Systematic research has concluded that, despite the popular perceptions, periods of divided government are no less productive and any more conflictual than periods of unified government (see McKay 1994; Landman 2008). Moreover research on presidential democracies with precisely the most difficult combination of institutions for governability (i.e. combined with weak multi-party systems) has shown that across many cases in Latin America, Africa and Asia, presidents and legislators have learnt how to form governing coalitions and to avoid the kind of gridlock and conflict that leads to democratic breakdown (see Ellis et al. 2009).

In addition to the presidential and parliamentary debate, scholars have also examined different outcomes between so-called ‘majoritarian’ and ‘consensus’ democracies (see Lijphart 1999, 2012). Majoritarian systems quite simply are those democracies in which a majority rule; a state of affairs that is made possible by particular sets of institutional arrangements and ways of ‘doing politics’ in which a ‘bare’ majority holds power. Examples of majoritarian democracies include the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Barbados. Consensus systems, in contrast, share and disperse power where the predominant way of doing politics involves inclusiveness, bargaining and compromise. Examples of consensus democracies include Switzerland and Belgium. In an analysis of 36 democracies across the basic distinction between majoritarian and consensus, Arend Lijphart (1999, 2012) has found that consensus democracies are better across a wide range of policy outcomes, such as government effectiveness, the rule of law, the control of corruption, low inflation and low unemployment (Lijphart 2012: 262–8). Moreover, consensus democracies are also better for political stability,

low internal conflict, lower levels of violence, better protection of civil liberties, income equality and women's representation and empowerment (Ibid., 270–2; 276–7). These findings are in many ways analogous to the findings outlined above with respect to institutional design and show that despite the overall superior performance of democracies for a wide range of indicators of well-being, there remains a large variation in benefits and outcomes across different kinds of democracy. In an assessment of the quality of democracy in South Asia, one of the conclusions that came from the Nepalese assessment was that 'democracy has many stories' (see CSDS 2008; IDEA 2008), and the kind of variation discussed here confirms this basic insight from Nepal.

Democratic peace

There is a longstanding claim that **democracies are more peaceful than other states**, which has become known as the 'democratic peace' proposition. The statement itself needs to be qualified in two important ways. First, it applies to the fact that democratic countries rarely, if ever, fight each other; an empirical observation which for many is 'the closest thing we have to a law in international politics' (see Levy 1989: 270, 2002: 359). Second, it applies to the fact that in any given pair, or 'dyad' of states, the presence of one democracy significantly reduces the probability of inter-state conflict (see Russett and O'Neal 2001). The overall claim (and its further qualifications) about the pacific benefits of democracy is important for our discussions here. The logic of the claim and the research that has been carried out to substantiate it are fairly straightforward. First, there is a normative argument that political elites within democracies adhere to democratic norms, which in turn lead them to prefer non-violent conflict resolution and negotiation to violent conflict. This general normative orientation is then shared by democracies that develop greater trust for one another in the international arena and leads any two democracies not to engage in violent conflict with one another (see Rosato 2003: 586). Second, there are several institutional 'logics' at play involving the inherent element of accountability within democracies that constrain leaders from engaging in warfare or conflict (see above). These institutional factors include public constraints on leaders, interest groups, difficulty in mobilizing the public for war, inability for surprise attacks and relative availability of information within the public domain (Ibid., 586–7).

Both the normative and institutional logics inherent within democracies suggest that they would be less likely to go to war with one another and that the presence of a democracy in any one dyad of states would lower the probability of inter-state conflict. These ideas have been tested and evolved over time from original studies conducted by Babst (1964, 1972) with the development of increasingly complex data sets of all the politically relevant

dyads between the late nineteenth century and the late twentieth century. One popular study on the democratic peace conducted by Russett and O'Neal (2001) compiles a database of politically relevant dyads from 1886 to 1992. For inter-state conflict, they use a measure called a 'militarised dispute', which includes all instances when one state threatens to use force, makes an expression of force or actually uses military force against another state. Alongside a measure of democracy, the analysis uses traditional 'realist' measures, such as the contiguity of the countries in each pair, the relative distance between them, the difference in power between them and any alliances that they may have. The results of the analysis show that even after controlling for these realist variables, 'two democracies are 33 per cent less likely than the average dyad to become involved in a militarised dispute'. Russett and O'Neal (2001: 275) argue that this is a conservative estimate of the 'pacific benefits of democracy', and they show further that not only are democracies less likely to fight one another, but they are even less likely to become involved in disputes than autocracies (Ibid., 276).

Christian Davenport (2007) analyses the 'pacific benefits of democracy' at the domestic level and finds general support for this positive benefit of democracy, but qualifies it in several important ways. First, democracy overall does decrease the use of repression, but the decrease is most sensitive to two key features of democracy: electoral participation and competition. In other words, the ability to exercise 'voice' is an important feature of democracy that can help reduce the use of lethal repression at the domestic level; a feature in Davenport's (2007: 179) analysis that is more important than constraints on the executive branch. Second, among different kinds of repression, physical integrity rights violations (see above) are more reduced among democracies than restrictions of civil liberties. Finally, these overall positive trends can be confounded by conflict, where the presence of conflict within democracies can lead to an increase in repression (see Chapter 8 in this volume). Moreover, the pacifying effects of 'voice' are strong in the presence of violent dissent such as that from riots and guerrilla warfare, but are mushy reduced in the presence of all out civil war (Davenport 2007: 178–80).

Economic benefits

We already noted in Chapter 2 of this volume that there are particular economic benefits to democracy that reach far beyond the traditional focus on the annual growth in per capita GDP (see Donnelly 1999). We saw that democracies do not have superior growth rates to non-democracies, but because of the normative and institutional features of democracy, as well as the structure of incentives within democracies, the **quality** of economic benefits is different for democracies. In addition to Amartya Sen's observation that democracies will never experience famine (see Chapter 2),

there are strong moral and rational arguments for why democracies ought to be produce better and more equitable economic outcomes. Morally, politicians in democracies ought not to have preferences for citizens to suffer unduly. Rationally, politicians have electoral incentives for more equal economic outcomes (see Meltzer and Richard 1981; Norris 2012). Indeed, if the focus is on **sustainable human development**, with its emphasis on overall well-being of the population, then democracies do outperform non-democracies.

For example, Figure 9.3 shows the difference in the values of the human development index (HDI) for competitive and non-competitive political systems for a global sample of countries between 1980 and 2010.¹ Each curve in the figure is the distribution of the HDI, where the average value is much higher for competitive systems than non-competitive systems. The curves do cross over, such that there are some competitive systems that do not perform as well as non-competitive systems but at an aggregate level, they do. Figure 9.4 shows a comparison of distributions for caloric consumption (itself a measure of the provision of basic nutrition to the population) broken down according to regime type and levels of economic development. The figure shows that rich competitive systems have the highest levels of caloric consumption, followed by rich non-competitive countries, poor competitive countries and poor non-competitive countries. Again, there is some cross-over among the curves, but the overall ranking of systems is statistically significant. Moreover, the interaction between the

FIGURE 9.3 *Human development and executive competitiveness, 1980–2010.*

FIGURE 9.4 *Caloric intake and competitiveness, 1980–2010.*

level of development and democracy is an important one. Rich countries are better at providing basic nutrition, but within each grouping of countries, it is the more competitive systems that are superior (see also Norris 2012). In this way, among the world's rich and poor countries, democracy still offers better economic outcomes than non-democracy. Both of these sets of findings are upheld in more complex sets of analyses that control for additional factors, such as economic growth, population size and natural resource endowments.

In addition to human development and caloric consumption, Norris (2012) finds additional support for the positive effects of democracy and good governance on longevity, child mortality, the level of health, gender equality in education and education more generally. Across these welfare indicators, Norris finds superior performance for 'liberal democracies' and countries with higher levels of 'bureaucratic governance'. As above, the positive and significant findings are upheld in the presence of other explanatory factors, such as levels of economic growth and income, geographic factors (location, size and natural resource endowments), social structures (e.g. linguistic and religious divisions, human capital, population size and conflict) and cultural background. Thus, the combination of the findings in Figures 9.3 and 9.4 and those from Norris (2012) shows a great deal of support for the proposition that there are a large number of economic benefits to democracy. Across the world, democracy is a form of government that enhances the quality of developmental outcomes and measures of overall well-being.

Environmental outcomes

In the previous chapter, we argued that climate change and environmental degradation presented significant threats to democracy and human rights. But are democracies good for the environment? We saw that they are good for overall levels of well-being, but enhancing human well-being involves a great degree of **consumption of natural resources**, and there have been many arguments about the putative benefits of democracy for overseeing the kinds of sustainable human development that includes guardianship of the world's natural resources. Like the arguments for the democratic peace, those who argue the 'green benefits' of democracy make the case that freedom of speech and press raises awareness levels of democratic citizens, who in turn can put pressure on their respective governments for sound environmental policies. Counter-arguments suggest that democracies are prone to influence from vested interests, some of whom are from businesses operating in the energy and extractive sector, which may prevent democracies from enacting environmentally friendly policies (see, e.g. Whitford and Wong 2009: 191–2).

Testing this set of propositions involves different measures of sustainability and environmental degradation or 'stress'. For example, Whitford and Wong (2009) use measures on sustainability (the 2002 Environmental Sustainability Index or ESI), environmental systems (a combination of air and water quality, biodiversity, human impact on land), environmental stress and human vulnerability. They find that democracy has a positive impact on sustainability and systems, but not on stress and vulnerability. My own analysis for the United Nations Development Programme finds similar mixed results. For example, Figure 9.5 shows that countries with executive competitiveness on average are responsible for less water pollution than non-competitive countries. Figure 9.6 shows that if we take levels of economic development into account, rich competitive countries have lower rates of fossil fuel consumption than rich non-competitive countries, and poor competitive countries have lower rates of fossil fuel consumption than poor non-competitive countries.

This last example shows that levels of economic development are related to environmental degradation, where wealthy countries consume more of the natural environment, but democracy has a mitigating effect on that consumption. Across a variety of studies, the impact of democracy on the environment is mixed, since the consumption of natural resources and the damage that comes from that consumption will always be a function of economic development and political institutions. Moreover, a recent report from the Royal Society in the United Kingdom (2012: 9) entitled *People and the Planet* argues that human development must not be decoupled from the environment, as any large-scale demographic and economic changes will have a necessary impact on the environment. The report sees the need for

FIGURE 9.5 Water pollution and competitiveness, 1980–2010.

FIGURE 9.6 Fossil fuel consumption, wealth and competitiveness, 1980–2010.

governments to ‘develop socio-economic systems and institutions that are not dependent on continued material consumption growth’. The coupling of people, the environment *and* governance are thus of paramount importance in any consideration of the possible benefits of democracy for the environment.

Summary

The case for democracy in terms of benefits and outcomes for human well-being and citizen life is very strong indeed. This chapter has shown that across a wide variety of tangible and intangible factors, democracies are superior to non-democracies; however, as it has also shown, there are many remaining problems, differences and challenges across democracies. We saw that basic democratic values and principles have personal value to citizens and that democracies have a better record at protecting physical rights and a wide range of other human rights. We have seen that democracies have ‘pacific benefits’ in reducing inter-state and intra-state conflict. We have seen that democracies have a better record across wide range of economic variables other than a strict focus on annual growth in per capita GDP. And we have seen that within different income bands, democratic countries have a better record for environmental sustainability. This basket of positive benefits of democracy, however, must be tempered by a consideration of the great variation that still exists among democracies. Western democracies are not uniformly superior across all measures of performance. The association between democracy and human rights, despite a normative and theoretical expectation, is nowhere near a perfect one, where many democracies continue to struggle to protect people from physical integrity rights violations and other human rights violations. The kind of institutional design that is chosen can have an impact on democratic performance and represents a trade-off across democracies between the principle of representation and governability.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Boix, C. (2003) *Democracy and Redistribution*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Halperin, M., Siegle, J. and Weinstein, M. (2010) *The Democracy Advantage: How Democracies Promote Prosperity and Peace*. New York and London: Routledge.
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Note

- 1 The analysis presented here comes from a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) funded project on democratic governance and sustainable human development carried out by Todd Landman, Alejandro Quiroz Flores and Dorothea Farquhar at the Institute for Democracy and Conflict Resolution at the University of Essex. The data that appear in Figure 9.3 through Figure 9.5 are based on that study.