
Book Review

Determinants of democratization: Explaining regime change in the world, 1972–2006

Jan Teorell

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Jan Teorell's book comes closer than many others to providing plausible and sometimes intriguing answers to the often-studied question: Why countries around the globe democratized in the late twentieth century. He consciously engages in 'theoretical eclecticism' (p. 28) and tests – in separate Chapters (2–6) – social, economic and international determinants, as well as popular mobilization and authoritarian regime types. In several of these chapters, Teorell first performs large-N analyses on more than 160 countries over several decades in order to unravel patterns that hold across time and space, and then engages in within-case analyses in order to discern plausible causal mechanisms.

In Chapter 1, Teorell not only cogently summarizes the sometimes daunting variety of different – and as of now still unconnected – theories of democratization. He also makes a strong plea for a graded measure of democracy and, by virtue of that, democratization. He uses the usual suspects – Polity and Freedom House – but combines them into an index of democracy in an attempt to mitigate the well-known flaws of both democracy measures when used alone (p. 33). Teorell understands democratization as any upward movement (or, at least no downward movement, p. 32) of a country over time on his 10-point democracy scale – irrespective of whether movement occurs at the lower (non-democratic) or higher (democratic) end of the index. In order to better disentangle causal connections, Teorell distinguishes between short-run and long-run effects of his determinants, the former further divided into general effects, upturn effects and downturn effects. This represents an interesting and novel attempt at allowing for causal asymmetry, that is, the often plausible expectation that some factors foster democratization but are irrelevant for de-democratization and vice versa.

Not surprisingly, given the eclectic approach to testing theories in separate chapters, Teorell generates a long list of mutually non-exclusive findings, conveniently summarized on pp. 141–144. Some factors contribute to upturns (economic crises, peaceful mass demonstrations, democratic neighbors, democratic



regional organizations), whereas others prevent downturns (socioeconomic modernization and economic freedom). There are several interesting non-findings. For instance, contrary to existing arguments, neither social heterogeneity nor abundant natural resources, economic inequality or even armed domestic warfare turn out to be robustly related to democratization.

The share of Muslim population stands out as the only factor causally relevant for both up- and downturns (figure 7.1): a high share of Muslim population triggers downturns and impedes democratic upturns (Chapter 2). Teorell offers plausible cross-case evidence against claims in the literature that this ‘Muslim gap’ is the result of higher levels of female subordination, oil wealth, less support for democratic norms at the individual level and the like (p. 47ff.). Instead, he shows that the statistical association between democracy and share of Muslim population is largely driven by low levels of democracy in the predominantly Muslim Arab world. Of course, and as Teorell rightly points out (p. 50), this simply shifts the question to why there is an ‘Arab gap’. It would be interesting to see if Teorell’s findings changed if the time series was extended to 2012, thus capturing recent events labeled as the ‘Arab Spring’. Such out-of-sample predictions are, of course, always shaky, especially so in the absence of a clearly defined population based on theoretically argued scope conditions.

Given the enormous theoretical and empirical breadth, it is hardly surprising that some findings convince more than others. Chapter 6 on the democratizing effect of external shocks on different types of authoritarian regimes stands out because Teorell formulates and then tests his own hypotheses. Chapters 3–5, in turn, gain strength from Teorell’s multi-method approach, combining within-case and cross-case analyses. In fact, given the announcement of his ‘methods combined’ (p. 28) approach, readers might expect even more, and sometimes more detailed, case studies. Quite clearly – and as is common and perhaps unavoidable in multi-method research – Teorell imposes a hierarchy of methods, with case studies subordinated to regression analyses. All within-case analyses consist of summaries of other authors’ case studies rather than own primary data. This strategy works out better in some Chapters (3) than in others (4 and 5). The choice of sometimes suboptimal cases for within-case analyses is surprising in the light of the fact that Teorell offers an intriguing measure for identifying pathway cases (pp. 36–38 and Appendix D), a methodological innovation that hopefully will find its way into applied multi-method research.

Perhaps, the most critical feature of the book is the potential mismatch between theories and measurement of democratization. Most theories operate with the notion of democracy being qualitatively distinct from non-democracy, and thus democratization denoting a qualitative shift in a country’s political regime. In his large-N analyses, Teorell employs continuous measures of



democracy and democratization void of any threshold separating democracies from the rest. This implies that a move of, say, Norway from 8–10 on his democracy scale is treated as the same evidence for democratization as is a movement of, say, North Korea from 0–2 or Spain from 4–6. Of course, Teorell is right that the jury is still out – and most likely will always remain there – as to whether democracy, in principle, denotes a qualitatively distinct type of regime or is a quantitative matter of degree. In addition, he is right in pointing out that imposing a threshold for democracy on a continuous scale **always** is always accompanied by some degree of arbitrariness.

Yet, the latter concern could be taken care of by testing the robustness of findings *vis-à-vis* different threshold levels. Furthermore, whether democracy is a matter of degree or a qualitatively distinct type cannot be solved in abstract. Rather, the more modest aim should be that in any given research, the theoretical meaning and empirical measure are in line. Here some doubts can be raised. Already at the semantic level, it is difficult to reconcile the notion of regime change – a term that features in the title of the book – with the continuous measure of democratization. An improvement of Norway from 8–10 might be considered as (further) democratization – but it is not a regime change. More problematically, because in the large-N analyses any variation is used, regardless of where on the democracy scale it occurs, it might well be that some of the large-N (non-)findings are driven by variation that falls outside the theoretically relevant scope of the dependent variable.

For instance, in Chapter 3 on socio-economic modernization, media proliferation is found to be the only component of modernization that robustly prevents democratic downturns but is causally irrelevant for upturns. The convincing interpretation offered by Teorell is that media proliferation has no effect on authoritarian regimes because media freedom is not protected (p. 68) and only unfolds its effect in democratic settings. This theoretical interpretation rests, of course, on a qualitative distinction between democracy and autocracy. The empirical finding, however, stems from a threshold-free scale. As another example, consider the claim that a worsening economic situation and the need for policy adjustments might disrupt the ‘authoritarian bargain’ (p. 70), a support alliance between different sectors on which authoritarian regimes rest. The theoretical expectation thus is that economic crises have a distinct effect on non-democracies. Without empirically locating the difference between authoritarian and non-authoritarian regimes, though, and by using instead as evidence co-variation even if it takes place among clearly democratic cases, it is difficult to test propositions on authoritarian bargains. Further examples can be found in Chapter 4 (international determinants), when the notion of diffusion of democracy or autocracy from one country to another is invoked (p. 80f.); or when interpreting the effects of popular mobilization on democratization, which really only makes sense when



talking about mobilization within authoritarian regimes. Democratization theory does not suggest that democratic improvements of, say, Norway are caused by prior mass uprisings. Most likely, many of Teorell's findings are not driven by theoretically less relevant variation. Future research might try to find out by specifying non-linear models and/or interaction terms.

Despite these quibbles, there is no doubt that Teorell's book makes a major contribution to the already crowded field of democratization studies. The theoretical and empirical ground covered is breath-taking and in their combination with high methodological sophistication and various conceptual innovations, such as the intriguing operationalization of pathway cases and the distinction between upturns and downturn, are outstanding. His book should be considered a must-read for democratization and multi-method scholars alike.

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