

The Deep Roots of Democracy: Geography and the Diffusion of Political Institutions

Gerring, Apfeld, Wig, and Tollefsen

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Synthesising and building on a large body of work on the origins of representative democracy, John Gerring, Brendan Apfeld, Tore Wig, and Andreas Forø Tollefsen put forward a provocative thesis on the origins and patterns of representative democracy around the world: The availability of natural harbours plays a key role in shaping the relationship between rulers and the ruled. The authors argue that harbours facilitate the mobility of people, goods, capital, and ideas, which in turn influences economic development, the structure of the military, state-building, and openness to the world in ways which shift the balance of power towards citizens and away from rulers.

At the same time, the authors argue that the reason why only Europe developed representative democracy in the form of parliaments was to a large degree due to its aquatic geography: Compared to the rest of the world, Europe has plentiful natural harbours as well as cross-cutting navigable rivers with separate outlets to the sea, meaning that they cannot be controlled at a single chokepoint (p. 111). These geographic features meant that citizens in Europe were in a better position than people elsewhere to extract concessions from their rulers, leading to the development of representative institutions (pp. 109-123). When Europe then conquered the world, Europeans took democracy with them, but only (at least at first) for themselves – hence, democratic institutions outside of Europe grew where people of European descent were confident that they could control political outcomes under democratic rules through superior numbers (pp. 277-281); only later were these expanded to include the colonized and previously enslaved people.

Part I of the book sets out the authors' argument in detail, Part II (maritime geography) and part III (European diffusion) then each test a separate part of the argument, in both cases employing within and across-case analyses. Part IV explores alternative explanations and directly subjects the authors' theory to direct competitive tests with various arguments emerging from the large body of work on the origins of democracy.

The book is both substantively excellent and a great example of how to conduct theory-driven empirical political science research. It tackles a big question, and draws on a wide range of sources, including both secondary literature and an impressive array of quantitative data. At the same time, the book is refreshingly honest about the limitations and weaknesses of the analysis, and actively and thoroughly seeks to prove itself wrong. The key strength of the book lies in its research design, which for both parts of the argument relies on factors which can convincingly be argued to be both exogenous and prior to the outcome of interest: The geography of harbours, which historically was determined almost exclusively by the geography of coastlines and rivers, and the arrival of European settlers in colonies. This allows the authors to get around the problem of endogeneity which has always plagued research on the origins of democracy.

Weaknesses of the book are very limited. Perhaps the only real quibble is that while the authors document substantial differences in the development of representative democracy in Europe in Part II of the book, Europeans are generally treated as interchangeable in Part III. In fairness to the authors, requiring that they obtain data not only on the ethnicity and origins of the

settlers in numerous territories over extended periods of time, as they do, but that they are then also able to break down the origins of European settlers across the world into the precise part of Europe from which they originated, may be unreasonable. That said, this could be a fruitful area of future research, as the logic of the authors' argument suggests that the extent to which a European settler originated in a society where they have been exposed to the ideas and practise of early representative democracy would influence the extent to which they seek to be subject to similar rules where they settled.

In summary, this is an outstanding book which deserves to be widely read, which will stimulate debate on the origins and spread of representative democracy, and which should find its way into numerous syllabi, ranging from undergraduate to PhD-level courses.