

The Decline and Rise of Democracy

David Stasavage

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The Decline and Rise of Democracy by David Stasavage is a monumental work about the historical evolution of political regimes and the fundamental forces that have driven such change. Spanning epochs and continents, this erudite book makes for an apt capstone to Stasavage's fine previous work on this topic, including *States of Credit* (Princeton, 2011) and *Public Debt and the Birth of the Democratic State* (Cambridge, 2003). I have learned a great deal from *The Decline and Rise of Democracy*, and am a better scholar for having read it. Social scientists, policymakers, graduate students, and undergraduates will all benefit from studying this book. It will be highly influential for many years to come.

To develop his argument, Stasavage integrates recent insights from political science, economics, economic history, anthropology, and even linguistics. Stasavage puts forth a clear and elegant framework that allows him to explain a wide variety of political phenomena across time and space. The fact that Stasavage's framework is theoretically informed by concepts in the social sciences such as incentive structures and asymmetric information distinguish it from much of the popular literature on this topic.

A core part of Stasavage's argument can be summarized as follows: sequencing matters. Democracy and autocracy are alternative modes of governance, each of which enables states to execute basic tasks such as taxation and security. If society establishes democratic practices prior to the development of a state bureaucracy, then the ruler and

citizens can build the bureaucracy jointly, and the two phenomena can complement each other. If, however, a state bureaucracy emerges first, then it is less likely that democracy will develop, since rulers – when they can – prefer to rely on government subordinates to carry out the state’s business, rather than govern collaboratively with a parliament that holds the power to restrict their actions.

Stasavage argues that early democracy took place when a ruler governed in conjunction with an independent council not subject to the leader’s whims. Three conditions made early democracy more likely to emerge. First, small polity scale, which promoted active participation. Second, a lack of information by the ruler about agricultural production, and thus the optimal amount of tax to extract. Third, the ability of individuals to move away if they did not like the ruler’s policy choices. While early democracy developed spontaneously in Africa, the Americas, and Asia, oftentimes it faded when states grew in size, when rulers improved their ability to monitor production, or when exit became more difficult. In Western Europe, however, early democracy survived because rulers were weak. European states eventually developed powerful bureaucratic structures, due in large part to external threats of military attack, but only after democratic practices were firmly rooted. Thus, consensual governance and state bureaucracy could coevolve, paving the way for the later emergence of modern democracy (which, apart from the presence of the bureaucracy, differs from early democracy in that citizen participation is intermittent).

Stasavage constructs his book across three parts, each of which contains four chapters. The first four chapters establish that early democracy was most likely to flourish when agricultural production was unpredictable or society was mobile, and that its decline was due to technological improvements such as soil mapping and land surveying that

reduced the ruler's informational disadvantage and boosted the scale and stability of society. The next four chapters account for the political divergence between medieval Europe, China, and the Middle East. While a lack of state structures compelled European rulers to govern consensually, leaders in both China and the Middle East inherited strong bureaucratic institutions that allowed them to govern autocratically. The final four chapters examine the piecemeal development of modern democracy in Great Britain and the United States, and its eventual spread worldwide. Stasavage concludes the book by drawing lessons from history for current challenges to democracy including distrust of government, backsliding to autocracy, and elite capture.

Let me now highlight two insights that Stasavage makes. The first is that distance still poses a fundamental challenge to democratic governance. Even today, distance can reduce trust in elected representatives who make public policy in far-off capitals, particularly given the loss of local news sources. The second insight is that autocratic governance need not imply an utter lack of accountability, while democratic governance need not imply definitive constraints on executive behavior. Even in the absence of consent, an autocratic government may have incentives to set performance targets and reduce corruption. Similarly, a democratically-elected leader may still test the bounds of executive authority in extraordinary ways.

Stasavage's treatment of the historical evolution of political regimes is meticulous. Yet I would have liked to hear more about the security imperative that citizens must confront when organizing the state to prevent external and internal violence. Under which conditions is society more likely to adopt democratic or autocratic structures to address this

imperative? What are the potential benefits and costs of adopting each alternative mode of governance in response to external and internal security threats?

Similarly, I would have liked to hear more about the different types of social norms that democratic and autocratic regimes might engender, and how such norms affect long-run economic development. Is autocracy more likely than democracy to promote a social norm of compliance, or does it depend? Does this type of norm bolster social stability, but at the cost of reducing technological innovation? By contrast, does democracy promote nonconformity, but at the cost of stability?

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