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The Sequencing "Fallacy"

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Abstract

Countries taking the initial steps from dictatorship toward electoral politics are especially prone to civil and international war. Yet states endowed with coherent institutions—such as a functioning bureaucracy and the elements needed to construct a sound legal system—have often been able to democratize peacefully and successfully. Consequently, whenever possible, efforts to promote democracy should try to follow a sequence of building institutions before encouraging mass competitive elections. Democratizing in the wrong sequence not only risks bloodshed in the short term, but also the mobilization of durable illiberal forces with the capacity to block democratic consolidation over the long term.

Exchange

THE SEQUENCING “FALLACY”

Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder

*Edward D. Mansfield is Hum Rosen Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. Jack Snyder is Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Relations at Columbia University. They are coauthors of *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (2005).*

Trenchant articles in the January 2007 issue of the *Journal of Democracy* by two of the most astute observers of democratization and political development, Thomas Carothers and Sheri Berman, acknowledge the now widely recognized fact that countries taking early steps on the journey from dictatorship toward electoral politics are especially prone to civil and international war, violent revolution, and ethnic and sectarian bloodshed. Indeed, they accept our argument about turbulent democratization—advanced in a series of articles and two books published since 1995—and then go us one better, charging us with being too optimistic about sequencing democratic change in ways that might reduce its risks.¹

We have pointed out that not all countries experience significant violence during democratic transitions. Brazil, Chile, Hungary, Poland, South Korea, and Taiwan are recent examples of peaceful transitions. Using both statistical and case-study analyses in our book *Electing to Fight*, we showed that transitional countries that were comparatively well-endowed with the prerequisites for democratic politics, such as relatively competent and impartial state institutions, were unlikely to detour into violence. This is a story as old as democracy itself: Great Britain's nineteenth-century path toward mass electoral politics was smoothed by the preexisting strength of its legal system, representative institutions, and free press. Based on these findings, we argued that it is dangerous to push states to democratize before the necessary preconditions are in place and that prudent democracy-promotion efforts should pay special attention to fostering those preconditions.

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