

On the Democratic and Demographic Transitions

Written by Tim Dyson

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TIM DYSON, MAR 22 2013

Research on the determinants of democracy by scholars in political science and IR has generally neglected the role of demographic factors. The events of 11th September 2001 changed this situation, a little. And, recently, there has been research focussed on the politically destabilizing effects of so-called 'youth bulges' (e.g. see Cincotta 2008/09; Urdal 2006; Weber 2012). The central concern of this work has been with young men—i.e. males aged in their late teens and twenties. This is partly because this section of the population tends to be responsible for a disproportionate amount of the violence that occurs. The basic argument made in relation to youth bulges is that where young men are a relatively large fraction of the population it is more difficult to establish democracy. Furthermore, if for some reason democracy is established it is less likely to be stable.

It should be noted here that, due to considerations of basic population dynamics, countries where young people form a relatively large share of the population are also countries that have both high birth rates and high rates of population growth. Therefore, it is not just that there is a 'youth bulge', it will be a bulge that is growing quite rapidly. A consequence of this is that it may be difficult to provide sufficient job opportunities for young men—a consideration that is rightly seen as problematic.

Against this background, the research that is being reported in the present article does not contest the idea that young and rapidly growing populations are more prone to political instability and less likely to be stable democracies. One has only to think of places such as Afghanistan, Mauritania, Nigeria, Uganda, and Somalia, for example. However, rather than focussing on demographic factors which hinder the establishment of stable democratic conditions, the focus here is on demographic factors that *promote* democratization. Moreover, I am chiefly concerned with how the world's first modern democracies were established. A great deal can be gained from studying history.

Demographic Transition

First, some words are required on basic population dynamics. Perhaps the most important change that human populations have experienced during the last 250 years is the so-called 'demographic transition'. Essentially, this is the move from having high death and birth rates to having low death and birth rates. Before the demographic transition life was, to quote Hobbes, 'nasty, brutish and short'. And, on average, women would have roughly six births each during their (short) lives. The first change to occur in the demographic transition is that the death rate starts to decline (as people start to live longer). But this causes the population to grow—because the birth rate stays high for a time. The resulting situation is therefore one of demographic destabilization. This may involve a very long period of very considerable population growth.

However, usually after a period of several decades, the birth rate declines too. Essentially, this happens because women (and men) start using methods of birth control. The fall in the birth rate means that the period of demographic destabilization gradually comes to an end. It also means that the population moves from having a young age structure to having an old age structure. For example, its median (i.e. central) age (MA) might rise from, say, 20 years—a figure typical of a population *before* its birth rate declines—to, say, 40 years—a figure typical of a population that has gone right through the demographic transition.

Turning now to the politics, it is important to note that before the demographic transition *all* states were fairly

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autocratic. There is no example of a country that was democratic before the demographic transition. Therefore, *autocracy* represents the starting position. The basic argument of the present article is then as follows. First, destabilization within the demographic transition promotes the destabilization of the pre-existing—invariably autocratic—political regime. For example, as Goldstone (2003) has noted, this happens because population growth tests the management capacities of any state (e.g. in terms of collecting taxes and maintaining social order). Therefore, demographic destabilization raises the potential for political change, although it can also lead to a period of autocratic crackdown. Second, and importantly, the fall in the birth rate means: (i) that the population becomes more *adult* in terms of its age composition—and adults are more likely to want a ‘voice’ in political affairs; (ii) that *women* are released from lives previously dominated by childbirth and childcare, and consequently they are also more likely to demand a voice; and (iii) that the period of demographic destabilization eventually comes to an end—a change which underlies the return of socio-political stability, something that will help democracy if democratization is the dominant political process that is underway.

There can be no doubt that a decline in the death rate (i.e. improvement in mortality) is necessary for the attainment of stable democratic conditions. Democracy is inconceivable in circumstances where life is nasty, brutish and short. But the really crucial part of the forgoing argument relates to the political effects of the ‘second half’ of the demographic transition. That is, the period when the birth rate falls, and therefore the population ages and the rate of population growth slows. All countries in the world today are essentially at different stages of the ‘second half’ of the demographic transition. This is reflected in the fact that the median age of countries varies between roughly 20 and 40 years. The former sort of figure might hold in an African country, the latter in a country in Europe.

Measuring Democracy

So, a country’s overall progress in the demographic transition can be summarized by its median age (MA). But how is its progress with respect to democracy to be gauged? The research that is summarized here used more than one measure of democracy to confirm its basic findings. However, it is striking how subjective many measures of democracy are. Moreover, despite a lot of rhetoric, it is notable that measures of democracy used in political science often give inadequate weight to the voting rights of women, as opposed to those of men (Paxton 2000).

With these two considerations in mind, for the present work I began with Vanhanen’s (2003) index of democratization (ID). This measure is essentially the product of the extent to which there is political *competition* in a society (as measured by the proportion of votes that goes to political parties other than the largest one) and the level of political *participation* (measured by voter turnout, expressed as a proportion of the population). ID is certainly a ‘thin’ measure. For example, it says little about wider aspects of politics (e.g. relating to legal structures or press freedom). However, it focuses on core aspects of democracy—i.e. political competition and participation. Importantly, it is relatively objective; and equally importantly, the votes of women carry the same weight as those of men.

That said, a weakness of ID—which does not seem to have been addressed in previous research—is that it is heavily biased by a population’s age structure (which, recall, varies greatly within the demographic transition). Consider, for example, that in a young population with a median age of about 20 years only about 40 percent of the population will be of voting age, whereas in an old population with a median age of 40 years about 80 percent of the population will be of voting age. Fortunately, however, it turns out that this bias can easily be corrected by a simple standardization procedure which results in what I call an age-adjusted index of democratization (AID).

The Relationship Between Democratic and Demographic Change

With this as background, the question arises as to the relationship between movement through the demographic transition and movement through the democratic transition, compared to the influence of changes in other conventional socio-economic variables—such as per capita income, urbanization, and the level of education. The present work began by examining long-run trends in Europe and the United States over the period 1850-2005; it then considered the experience of European countries between 1890 and 1930 (i.e. the period of what is sometimes called the first surge in democracy); and, lastly, it examined international cross-sectional experience in the fairly recent period since 1980. In each of these contexts, MA performs much better than the other variables in accounting

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for variation in democracy. The poor association of per capita income with democracy—once the summary demographic measure that is MA is introduced—is particularly interesting. It chimes with other work that is increasingly suggesting that economic growth is not very important for democratization (Lutz, Cuaresma and Abbasi-Shavazi 2010).

The historical data for Europe for the period 1890-1930 are especially revealing. They are consistent with the argument outlined above—namely that structural change in the population consequent on movement through the demographic transition led to an increasing demand for a general 'voice' in politics. In short, the more adults—of both sexes—there were in the population, the stronger was the call for a voice. Thus those countries that experienced major demographic progress at this time generally experienced greater democratic progress.

That said, the historical data for Europe raises questions about both the role of increases in *human agency* and about the influence of culture and institutional structures. In this context, the adoption of birth control can be seen as representing a significant increase in personal agency. And the same can be said of giving people a more meaningful say in political affairs. When a country's birth rate comes down it is a sign that people's control over their lives is increasing. However, while the adoption of birth control in a population is ultimately reflects private negotiations between women and men which may happen quite quickly, the same increase in personal agency may take much longer to have an effect within the wider domain of a society's politics.

In this context, looking at changes in MA and AID in Europe during 1890-1930, Norway presents an interesting case. The country's achievement of democracy actually slightly preceded the rise in MA. That is, the extension of voting rights to men, and women, was especially early. Indeed, it happened more or less *simultaneously* with the fall in the country's birth rate (due to the increased use of birth control). Here one might speculate that Norway's struggle for independence (from Sweden) facilitated its early realization of democracy. This was because the struggle led to the creation of new political institutions in Norway all of a sudden (around 1913)—essentially *short-circuiting* the institutional and cultural obstacles to democracy that had to be overcome in other countries. However, at the other end of the spectrum, and despite appreciable demographic progress during 1890-1930, France, Belgium and Switzerland were fairly late in achieving a high level of democracy. In large part this was because women in these three countries were relatively late in gaining equal voting rights. In this respect, political institutions in these countries took a long time to change.

Conclusions

In concluding, no other aspect of socio-economic development was more closely related to the appearance of modern democracy than was progress in the demographic transition. Moreover, looking at modern international cross-sectional data, no other variable is more closely related to a country's democratic status than its median age. Helping a country to get through the second half of the demographic transition—by assisting its people to be able to control their own fertility, if they so wish—may help citizens to exercise agency in other areas of life, including with respect to political affairs.

That said, and of course, progress through the demographic transition does not guarantee democracy. One has only to look at countries like Cuba and Russia to see that. Such examples underscore that political forces can have powerful—and often adverse—dynamics of their own. However, even in cases like Cuba and Russia, the demographic basis for democratic change has certainly been established—and, eventually, it may well make itself felt. In contrast, no country that is still in the middle of the demographic transition—i.e. with a relatively high birth rate, an expanding population, and a low median age—can be regarded as constituting a stable democracy. For this, a country must have progressed through all or most of the demographic transition.

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