

# The Expansion of American-Style Democracy: A Historical Analysis

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## Abstract

Throughout the history of civilization, democracy has played a crucial role in shaping societies, transitioning from monarchy and conquest to democratic rule, self-determination, and peaceful coexistence. As a cornerstone in American life, democracy supports core values such as religious liberty and labor rights, contributing significantly to a safer, more stable, and prosperous global environment. Alexis de Tocqueville's admiration for the individuality of American citizens, despite the past shortcomings of democracy, underscores the importance of democratic values in contemporary society. As authoritarianism threatens the world, the necessity to maintain and promote democratic values and governance becomes increasingly apparent. American-style democracy has become the beacon of hope, prosperity, and civility for emerging democracies as they often look to American democracy as the model for ensuring political freedom, the rule of law, and future individual prosperity. Countries like Estonia, which have successfully fought against authoritarian influence and maintained strong democratic systems, serve as inspirations for others striving for freedom and democratic governance. By embracing a strong sense of identity and unity, these nations demonstrate that achieving prosperity through democracy and capitalism is possible. Fostering economic independence and individualism, democratic nations can ensure long-term stability and prosperity, providing a blueprint for those battling authoritarian rule. By examining these successful democratic nations, we can better understand the benefits of democracy and the potential for future growth and stability worldwide.

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Democracy has played a crucial role in shaping the course of civilization, from the days of monarchy and conquest to the current era of self-determination, peaceful coexistence, and democratic rule. When democracy was first introduced in ancient Greece, there were far more enslaved people than free citizens, making it difficult for anybody to take part. Democracy then mostly disappeared until it reappeared in the late 18th century as “representative democracy” (Capozzi). Since then, it has been widely accepted as the preferred form of government. In modern times democracy is an essential cornerstone in American life, promoting principles like religious freedom and labor rights, and fostering a safer, more stable, and more prosperous global environment that benefits the United States and the rest of the world. (Capozzi).

American-style democracy and capitalism have become the foundation for economic and social prosperity, providing a model for other nations seeking to overcome authoritarian rule. For instance, countries like Vietnam and China have implemented modern-day socialism and communism, respectively, but they still fall short of the economic and social prosperity levels achieved in nations that have embraced American-style democracy and capitalism. Therefore, to what extent can we say that democracy and capitalism are a ticket to prosperity for nations fighting authoritarian rule? The answer is clear: democracy and capitalism provide the foundation for economic growth, individual freedom, and social advancement, and every country seeking to achieve these goals should build its future around these principles.

In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville, a French sociologist and political theorist, visited the United States to study its prisons. During his stay, he gathered a wealth of information on American society, which he later compiled into his book, “Democracy in America.” Even two centuries later, Tocqueville’s book remains a valuable tool for describing the United States to both Americans and non-Americans alike. Tocqueville’s political and social ideal was equality, and he viewed the United States as the most advanced example of equality in action. He recognized and appreciated the individuality of the American people, but he was also wary of the dangers of an atomized society, where “every citizen becomes absorbed into the mass”, losing their individuality in the process. Despite these concerns, Tocqueville’s work continues to be a seminal text in the study of American democracy and society. According to Deborah Schildkraut, a political scientist at Tufts University, “at a minimum American identity consists of two sets of norms. One involves an evolving set of beliefs that anyone can follow. These beliefs harken back to Thomas Jefferson and the ideals outlined in

the Declaration of Independence. ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.’ The other set of norms depends on attributes such as one’s race and religion” (Schildkraut). Alexis de Tocqueville’s observations of American society also support Schildkraut’s analysis. “I must say that I have often seen Americans make great and real sacrifices to the public welfare, and I have noticed a hundred instances in which they hardly ever failed to lend faithful support to one another” (Tocqueville). American identity is closely linked to patriotism, as it reflects the shared values and principles that guide the nation. These values include individualism, which promotes personal success, independence, and the ability to shape one’s own destiny. While some argue that individualism fosters a lack of concern for society’s poorest members, leading to greater economic inequality, others believe that it is essential to promoting personal freedom and autonomy.

In 1831, the United States was not a society built on equality. Indigenous people were treated as though they were an alien race that needed to be exterminated, while slaves were considered property by their owners. Women were denied the right to vote and were subject to the authority of their husbands under the law. Tocqueville remarked that “A woman loses her freedom permanently in the shackles of marriage in America.” (Tocqueville) Only free, white adult men were considered equal in Tocqueville’s America and entitled to full citizenship privileges, rendering the country drastically different from the rest of the world. However, American democracy has made significant progress over the years and is now more inclusive than it has ever been. Women were granted the right to vote in all 50 states with the 19th Amendment in 1920, and African-Americans in the South realized their right to vote under the Fifteenth Amendment with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The fact that young people under 21 could be sent to fight and die for their country, despite not being able to vote in most elections prior to the 1970s, was also changed. Today, American-style democracy seems stronger and more vibrant than ever as Americans have fought against Nazism, totalitarianism, and communism, to name a few. In many basic respects, democracy has triumphed in the twentieth century (Allison).

The ongoing global pandemic has threatened democratic processes worldwide, putting democracy itself in critical danger. This is a concern that affects every person as the potential consequences include limitations on freedom and prosperity. Democracy worldwide cannot be overrun; freedom and prosper-

ity will be limited (Allison). In 2020, there were more nations trending towards authoritarianism than those moving towards democracy. The pandemic has sustained a five-year decline in democracy, which is unprecedented since the 1970s. A significant number of democratically elected administrations are resorting to authoritarian tactics, even in well-established democracies. The backsliding in some of the world's most powerful countries, such as Brazil and India, has been particularly concerning (Banerjee).

More democracy and freedom create a vicious loop of enhanced security, stronger economic development, and long-term relationships that benefit the United States (Capozzi). Transparent, efficient, and democratic governments lay the foundations of international stability (Capozzi). It is imperative that America's official investments in fostering democracy and governance overseas be maintained, as international democracy and governance projects have always had bipartisan support due to their benefits and strong representation of American principles dating back to the founding fathers (Norman). However, the support for these initiatives has weakened in the past decade due to the Iraq War (Norman). The recent democratic openings in the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia highlight people-driven initiatives to support civil society and responsible government rather than government-driven initiatives (Banerjee). The Eurasia Group Foundation conducted a study on foreign perceptions of the United States and its political system, revealing that emerging market democracies view the US negatively but believe that American democracy upholds the rule of law better than their own (Gel'man). While most people in authoritarian countries dislike U.S. foreign policy, the vast majority of them want more political freedom in their own nations (Gel'man). The study suggests that an "attraction" approach, rather than "promotion," is the most effective way to spread democratic values globally (Gel'man). US politicians have been more focused on other nations' laws and structures, rather than their political cultures, whereas voters are willing to sacrifice short-term security and stability for the chance to exercise their democratic rights (Gel'man). The US has historically employed military intervention to promote democratic ideals, but this approach has not taken into account the values and interests of the people they aim to influence, as evidenced by the Vietnam War. The US attempted to contain communism in Vietnam and establish a South Vietnam modeled after American democracy, ignoring the Vietnamese people's self-determination, resulting in today's socialist republic of Vietnam rooted in North Vietnam (Rowe).

While the United States may not always live up to the ideals of a perfect

democracy, the idea that a government should be “elected by, and answerable to, the people” remains central to the country’s sense of self (Schildkraut). In a democracy, leaders must act in a way that benefits the majority of people to maintain their support. If they don’t, they’ll be expelled or ousted. People in authoritarian regimes tend to assume leaders must keep just a tiny percentage of their constituents satisfied. As a result, they are less concerned about doing activities that are beneficial to the general population. Their actions benefit their friends at the expense of the wider public, which allows them to remain in power (The rise of authoritarian capitalism in the twenty-first century). This often leads to actions that primarily benefit the ruler’s inner circle, to the detriment of the broader population (The rise of authoritarian capitalism in the twenty-first century). In fact, a study by The American Journal of Economics and Sociology, which analyzed the administrations of 133 nations from 1858 to 2010, found that autocrats were either harmful or insignificant to their countries’ economies (Rowe). Democracy and capitalism are often interconnected. While a democratic government guarantees responsible political institutions and protects fundamental rights, capitalism is viewed as a means of generating wealth necessary to sustain political freedom (Norman). Both systems empower individuals. It is undeniable that capitalism is a significant driver of modern-day prosperity, innovation, and wealth creation (Norman). Competition and the pursuit of capital serve as incentives for companies to improve their efficiency, leading to benefits for both consumers in the form of lower prices and investors in the form of profits (Norman).

However, socialists argue that wealth concentration in the hands of a few capitalists results in a society with a significant number of impoverished individuals while a few wealthy individuals take advantage of them (Goldsmith). Socialists believe that greed is the driving force behind capitalism’s destruction. In contrast, capitalists believe that by placing money in the hands of hardworking and intelligent people, they will be incentivized to create newer and better products and services, with the promise of financial reward (Goldsmith). Capitalists believe in the “trickle-down” theory of wealth, while socialists believe in the “trickle-up” theory of poverty (Norman). Despite its flaws, capitalism is the most effective economic system in reducing the wealth gap and transforming the impoverished into productive members of society, both domestically and internationally (Goldsmith). Capitalism rewards excellence and encourages innovation, while socialism tends to reward mediocrity.

However, there are valid reasons to question whether democracy can main-

tain long-term economic success. The share of Western democracies in the global economy has declined to less than a third as of 2019 (Goldsmith), suggesting that American-style liberal democracy no longer dominates the world stage nearly three decades after the end of the Cold War. China's political harmful or insignificant to their countries' economies (Rowe).

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of happiness, while the United States and 19 other democratic nations rank in the top (The World Happiness Report). Furthermore, The Annual Review of Political Science, which is a peer-reviewed academic journal dating back to 1998, found that 95 percent of the Vietnamese population favors a free market economy, making Vietnam the most pro-capitalist nation in the world even though the current system is based on socialism (Norman). Democratic nations tend to promote individualism and provide greater opportunities for individual prosperity compared to non-democratic nations. As a result, countries like Vietnam may desire an American-style system that prioritizes individual success and leads to greater economic growth. Economic independence is a fundamental principle of individualism in the free market (Goldsmith). Capitalist or classical liberal societies are distinguished by economic freedom, which empowers individuals to make their own economic choices. Democracy and individualism are inherently linked, and no other political ideology or society can fully embrace them (Potter). Individualists must be free to think and act on their ideas and pursue their own happiness (Potter). Every person has the right to freedom, and democracy remains the most effective means of ensuring long-term stability and prosperity (Potter).

Many people living under autocratic regimes in countries like Venezuela, Algeria, and Hong Kong aspire to achieve a democratic system similar to that of the United States. The Estonians provide an inspiring example of a small country near Russia that has fought to maintain its independence and democracy against Russian influence for centuries. Despite the odds, the Estonian people have consistently come together to resist Russian and Soviet rule and to shape their government and way of life. Today, they continue to confront Russian influence, but they remain strong, happy, independent, and resilient with a vibrant democracy. Through this struggle, they have forged an Estonian identity similar to the American identity, demonstrating that democratic values and the pursuit of individual freedom and happiness are universal aspirations. The Estonian identity is deeply rooted in their culture, which is celebrated annually at the Estonian song and dance festival. Tens of thousands of Estonians come together to sing and dance, cherishing their freedom and their unique cultural heritage. They view this festival as a symbol of hope and unity, where they can collectively showcase their pride and resilience. The festival represents a powerful example of how a nation can create a sense of identity through their culture and traditions.

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