

The Transatlantic Divide over Democracy Promotion

In his January 2005 inaugural speech, President George W. Bush placed democracy promotion at the center of his second-term agenda.¹ Yet, with no budget or strategy offered in the days or weeks that followed, Europeans grew increasingly cynical. Given the shifting rationales for the war in Iraq emanating from the White House, it would be understandable if European leaders and the broader European public remained highly suspicious of democracy promotion, interpreting it as a repackaged commitment to the unilateral use of force as well as justification for a war and occupation that were not going as smoothly as expected. Immediately following the speech, op-eds appearing in newspapers across the continent asked skeptically, “First, they say it was Al Qaeda, then weapons of mass destruction, and now the purpose of the war is democracy?” Europeans have argued that, even if sincere, the United States has a notoriously short attention span. Democracy promotion may be the flavor of the month, but how long could this infatuation last?

Despite these doubts, EU Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso noted during his visit to the White House in October 2005 that the European Union and the United States “share the idea that our strategic partnership should serve to promote democracy, human rights, [the] rule of law, and [the] market economy around the world.”² Indeed, transatlantic cooperation on democracy promotion preceded the second Bush inaugural speech, especially following the announcement of the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative at the G-8 summit at Sea Island, Georgia, in June 2004. These trends suggest there may be grounds for further transatlantic cooperation on democracy promotion.

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The Washington Quarterly • 29:2 pp. 85–98.

The devil, of course, is in the details. In fact, the potential for conflict with the Europeans may be much more a matter of how democracy is promoted rather than whether it should be promoted. To understand why, it is important to think about how democracy promotion first ended up on the transatlantic agenda, in the wake of the democratic revolutions of 1989. The United States and the EU each came away with a unique interpretation of these events, perspectives that continue to shape their attitudes toward and experiences with democracy promotion. The United States' and Europe's divergent perspectives on and assumptions about democracy promotion, its purposes and limitations, and especially how best to implement it threaten to divide them. The U.S.-European relationship has not fully recovered from the low point it reached in February 2003, when France and Germany actively worked against a second UN Security Council resolution to approve the war in Iraq. Will democracy promotion become yet another new source of transatlantic tension, or is it an area in which the United States and Europe can work together, bridging their differences?

Transatlantic Interpretations of 1989

The differences between U.S. and European views of democracy promotion are best understood by examining their perceptions of the revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the post-Communist aftermath in the 1990s. This was the first big democracy-promotion project of the post-Cold War era.

The U.S. interpretation of 1989 is one of civil society opting for democratic government, overthrowing dictators, and rolling back the state to make room for a market economy. It was a bottom-up movement, a celebration of freedom in which people who were otherwise modern but who lived under Communist tyrannies managed to cast off the yoke of dictatorship. Across the political spectrum, Americans watched 1989, from the demonstrations in the streets to the smashing of the Berlin Wall, with a mixture of giddiness and awe. The main Soviet contribution to these events was the decision to step aside peacefully and let the course of freedom play itself out. Once the Berlin Wall fell, democracy was thought to be all but inevitable, the natural political order that would emerge from its dust. For most in the United States, the post-Communist 1990s were really an epilogue to the main event.

Poland's Solidarity trade union movement perhaps best illustrates the mental map of liberation from tyranny that the United States took away from these events. Built from below and across socioeconomic and regional lines in Poland, Solidarity eventually became the overwhelming social force that brought about the collapse of the Communist regime. The logical con-

clusion drawn from Solidarity's victory is that support for civic groups in undemocratic circumstances produces successful, democratic outcomes.

Europeans have a different perception of 1989, and their interpretation has profoundly shaped their views on democracy promotion in Iraq and elsewhere. From western Europe's perspective, democracy promotion after 1989 was primarily a top-down effort. The true *dramatis personae* of history in their reading of 1989 were found in the Kremlin and not in the streets of Warsaw or Budapest. Without then-Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev's determination to end the Cold War, there would have been no opening in the East. Political leaders and diplomats, not demonstrators, brought about regime change.

Moreover, from Europe's perspective, the revolutions of 1989 in their neighboring states were only the beginning of the story. What kind of regimes would replace the decayed Communist dictatorships remained, for most West Europeans, a wide open question in the autumn of 1989. In fact, they viewed the revolutions with more than a touch of skepticism, something that East Europeans noted at the time.³ The conservative government of then-British prime minister Margaret Thatcher actively opposed German unification, and then-French president Francois Mitterrand openly worried about the impact of communism's collapse on the broader project of European integration.⁴ The demonstrations were a bit too disorderly, and German unification was something that everyone in Europe publicly supported but few actually wanted. In addition, the waning of Soviet influence in Europe reanimated a range of geopolitical questions that had remained dormant for four decades, such as German political influence in Central Europe and the Balkan peninsula and Turkey's ambitions in the Caucasus and Central Asia. For most Europeans then, the revolution of 1989 was not the key to democracy promotion's story but merely its prologue. What remained to be done was the heavy lifting of creating stable institutions of democratic representation, transforming planned economies into market economies, and, perhaps most difficult, regulating relations among ethnic communities.⁵ This was Europe's accomplishment of the 1990s.

The U.S. and the EU each came away with a unique interpretation of 1989's lessons.

Democracy Promotion, American Style

Clearly, the script from which the United States was working in Iraq during the spring of 2003 was based on its reading of the events of 1989 in Eastern

Europe: topple the leader, pull down his statue, and let civil society take over. When Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said in April 2003, during the ransacking and looting of the Iraqi National Museum, that “freedom’s untidy,”⁶ he was not being cynical or disingenuous, nor was he particularly ill informed. Rather, he was interpreting events through the dominant U.S. lens of how liberation from tyranny is supposed to look. The fact that the

statue was pulled down not by members of Iraqi civil society but by U.S. soldiers with an onlooking Iraqi mob seemed to make little difference.

Bush, in his January 2005 speech, argued that promoting the freedom of other countries was now an “urgent requirement of our nation’s security, and the calling of our time. ... So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation

and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”⁷ Bush’s emphasis on democracy promotion came out of a specific analysis of the September 11 attacks, the same analysis that provided what for some was the most compelling rationale for the war in Iraq, even more so than weapons of mass destruction and UN treaty violations. It determined that the Arab Muslim world is currently undergoing a modernization crisis, as intensified encounters with the West over the past five decades have produced an Islamic fundamentalist backlash.⁸ As a result, the region has grown exceedingly dangerous, a fact that would be regrettable but ignorable if the danger could be contained and isolated.

The September 11 attacks, however, proved that containment will not work. The Al Qaeda network is not a state, and it cannot be deterred with tanks and aircraft. The attacks were the first salvo in a last-ditch effort to prevent political and social change, an internal Middle Eastern conflict playing itself out on U.S. soil. The administration’s solution was to address the problem at its root by imposing political and social modernization from the outside, based on the fear that, unless such opening was forced on the region, more attacks could be expected. According to this analysis, the United States was to take a major Arab country ruled by a ruthless dictator who had repeatedly revealed his ambitions for conquest and force a regime change. The hope was that this would have a reverse domino effect on the rest of the Arab world, leading to political opening and greater social freedom throughout the region.⁹ It was an ambitious and audacious plan. The idea was to unleash civil society, back liberal political organizations, elimi-

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nate the tyrannical state from public life, and permit public opinion to bubble up from below, all of which would culminate in the apotheosis of democracy: the free and fair election.

It was a gigantic gamble, the payoff for which has obviously not been quick, and implied a number of assumptions about democracy. First, from the U.S. perspective, democracy promotion assumed that the inhabitants of the Middle East want democratic citizenship. In the case of the war in Iraq, many in and around the administration predicted that it would be a “cakewalk” and that U.S. troops would be welcomed with “flowers” and treated as “liberators.”¹⁰ From there, it followed that democracy would replace Saddam Hussein in relatively short order. Although the idea that people in the Middle East prefer democracy over alternative regime types remains unproven in practice (the survey evidence is, however, generally supportive of the proposition), there is nothing inherently wrong with this first assumption, especially when compared with its opposite, the notion that they would rather not have self-government.¹¹

The second assumption, however, is slightly more troubling. Given the right to elect a parliament, Washington presumed, the citizens of the Arab world will bring to power parliamentary majorities or presidents that will please the West. Yet, a quick glance to the past and at other regions of the world reveals that such presumptions may be wishful thinking. Citizens of democratic countries have brought dangerous dictators to power through the ballot box, the twentieth century’s most notorious example being the election of Adolf Hitler. Moreover, from Hugo Chavez to Hamas, citizens have also voted for leaders and parties with policies seen as inimical to democracy and norms of civility.

Yet, although questionable, this second assumption may not be fatally flawed. If people want democratic governance, it is not unreasonable to assume or hope that they will elect parties that remain committed to holding subsequent elections. Even if such logic is historically and empirically unsound, the danger of electing nondemocrats or leaders with uncivil policies is one with which all people committed to democracy must be prepared to live.

The third U.S. assumption about democracy promotion is that it is a bottom-up phenomenon.¹² The United States tends to see stable democracy as the product of a healthy and vibrant civil society and networks of associational life. Once the dictator is removed and his coercive state apparatus is destroyed, the next logical and inevitable step is to allow civil society to flourish, hold elections, and draft a constitution. The broader institutional

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environment in which all of this occurs is of secondary importance. Because it is difficult to run a democracy or anything else without a state, this third assumption has proven the most problematic.¹³

Democracy Promotion, European Style

Europeans first thought about democracy promotion in their neighborhood after 1989. Because of the chaos and tragedy of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, creating stable and democratic states on their periphery became the main project of European statesmen. Yet, rather than simply support civic organizations, parties, and constitution drafters throughout the region (which the United States did, both through official assistance and nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]), the European strategy was to channel the post-Communist European elites' strong desire to join the EU into a grand project of state reconstruction and establish clear limits on domestic political behavior.

The EU strategy, which was supported by the leaders of its most powerful members, was to concentrate on the post-Communist state, rather than on post-Communist society. Rhetoric emanating from Brussels emphasizing local initiative and stakeholder consultation notwithstanding, the entire effort was elite driven and top-down. Bureaucrats from the European Commission and those seconded from member-state countries, especially the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, to ministries in the candidate countries quickly became key players in the candidate states. National politics in the candidate states during the 1990s became a contest over which party was more competent to satisfy Brussels and the leading EU member states and thus pave the way for admission to the EU.

Each candidate country had to pass thousands of pages of European law, known collectively as the *acquis communautaire*, into its national legislation. Even more crucially, the EU constantly monitored these laws to ensure their implementation and published regular progress reports on each issue area for all candidate states. In addition to the EU, other European organizations such as NATO, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and countless smaller international organizations produced their own country- and issue-based reports, rendering post-Communist Europe the most continuously and closely monitored region in history.

The European preference for order over freedom was strongly embedded in the entire process of EU accession. Rather than focus on civic groups, political parties, and elections, the European monitoring regime has concentrated on building up state capacity to ensure that the entire *acquis* could be implemented. Democracy still mattered and indeed was the bare minimum

requirement for all candidate members. The “Copenhagen criteria,” which refer to the standards set out by the member states for new applicants in the 1993 Copenhagen summit of the European Council, include economic reform, minority rights, and free and fair elections. The entire process of democracy promotion, however, was to be carefully controlled and orderly. “Accession will take place,” the European Council declared, “as soon as an associated country is able to assume the obligations of membership by satisfying the political and economic conditions required.”¹⁴ Whereas the United States regarded the democratic transitions more or less complete in the region by the mid-1990s with the second or third election or, alternatively, the peaceful transfer of power from one party to another, the French, Germans, and Italians did not consider democracy in post-Communist Europe consolidated until May 1, 2004, when eight East European countries gained entry into the EU.

The European preference for order over freedom was embedded into EU accession.

Enlargement has been hugely successful. Dangling the prospect of membership before potential entrants on the condition that they rebuild their states from a carefully designed menu constituted a powerful foreign policy tool in the hands of Europe’s leaders. It has permitted European elites to solve an important security problem using Europe’s soft power, which appealed to the general population. It has stabilized and helped democratize Europe’s peripheries. Although potential member states nominally negotiated with the EU, the regime of conditionality and monitoring ensured that it was a highly one-sided power relationship from which, short of refusing membership altogether, candidate members could not escape once these negotiations began. Membership conditionality provided the broader framework in which all political discussion in the candidate member states of central Europe took place. This remains true in the four candidate states today: Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, and most importantly Turkey.

The main flaw with EU enlargement as a democracy-promotion strategy is that it is designed more to stabilize countries that are already democratic rather than to promote regime change in nondemocracies, rendering its status as a democracy-promotion strategy rather ambiguous. Consider, for example, the role of the EU in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004. At first glance, the EU played a significant role. The turning point in this revolution was the decision of the Ukrainian government to re-run the national election in the face of overwhelming evidence that the results of the fall 2004 election had been falsified. The role of former Polish president Alexander Kwasniewski, who had carefully nurtured a sophisticated new *Ostpolitik* for

Poland to foster freedom and peace in the countries to Poland's east, was especially noteworthy. Kwasniewski's interest in the matter convinced other European member state leaders and the EU itself to apply a steady modicum of pressure on Ukraine's political leadership to hold new elections. In this version of the EU influence argument, Ukraine's leaders, even under authoritarian president Leonid Kuchma, were particularly susceptible to pressure from Brussels because they were publicly committed to strong ties with

Overwhelming focus on elections has tended to obscure what happens after they occur.

the EU and had repeatedly stated their desire for eventual membership. As a result, Ukraine held new elections; and the real winner, Victor Yushchenko, became president.

Yet, the EU's role in the Orange Revolution should not be overstated. The key players in the Orange Revolution were the civic organizations throughout Ukraine and the street demonstrators in the capital, Kiev. To some extent, the interest of outsiders may have stayed the hand of the hard-liners, but

EU conditionality is not really the primary story here. In fact, EU membership for Ukraine is not in the cards for the next two decades. Moreover, the role and influence of the United States, through its support of NGOs and the opposition, was arguably greater than that of the EU.¹⁵ Although the EU could, both in the present and the future, play a larger role in helping Ukraine's democrats consolidate their rule and prevent a return to power of an authoritarian clique, without the carrot of membership conditionality, it is difficult to identify the instruments they plan to use to accomplish this.

The EU has precious few policy instruments to deal with states not slated to become members in the short or medium term. Nowhere is this weakness more evident than in its Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and the subsequent European Neighborhood Policy. Established in 1995, the EMP, also known as the Barcelona Process, was inspired by a desire to prevent instability on Europe's southern flank. The initiative sought to establish a framework for cooperation among EU member states and 12 Mediterranean signatories, mostly through bilateral partnership agreements.¹⁶ After 2001, there was discussion within the EU about using the EMP framework to exert democratizing pressure on its eight Arab state signatories. Although the EMP's primary tools of statecraft are economic reform and trade harmonization, recent initiatives have expanded the remit of the partnership to include migration, energy, and security and counterterrorism.

Yet, stabilizing and securitizing migration and borders is an older EU tendency that does little to promote democracy. In fact, despite significant dis-

cussion of political reform within the EMP's partnership agreements, the EU has been reluctant to push any political agenda on its equally reluctant Mediterranean partners. The primary approach of the EMP is government to government, rather than promoting civil society. Neither the EU as a whole nor its member states individually have shown a willingness to use any form of membership conditionality or even aid conditionality to reshape the political landscape of the region.¹⁷

Conflicting or Complementary Approaches?

For democracy promotion to succeed, it will require elements both of the U.S. bottom-up emphasis on civil society and the European top-down appreciation for the role of the state. Without U.S. enthusiasm and optimism, democracy promotion will not get off the ground, yet without European care for institution building, democratic breakthroughs will be short lived and disappointing.

U.S. democracy promotion efforts outside of the Middle East, for example, have come primarily in the form of support for those civic organizations, political parties, and NGOs that initiated the modular revolutions against the increasingly authoritarian leaders of Serbia in October 2000, Georgia in November 2003, Ukraine in November 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in March 2005.¹⁸ In each of these cases, foreign-backed NGOs and opposition parties led mass demonstrations in the street that exerted tremendous pressure on authoritarian rulers in the wake of rigged elections. The authoritarians backed down and ceded power to the opposition. In Moscow, fear arose after Ukraine's Orange Revolution that something similar would happen in Russia. President Vladimir Putin has responded to the modular revolutionary phenomenon by attacking both foreign-backed and domestically funded NGOs in Russia with tough new regulations designed to restrict their ability to operate.

Yet, although the U.S. model of civic revolution has been very successful at destabilizing semiauthoritarian states, it has enjoyed much less success in consolidating these new democracies. In countries with inefficient, corrupt, or collapsing state administrations, democratically elected parliaments have as little chance of enacting good policies as nondemocratic ones. The newly elected "democrats" quickly find themselves dependent on the same political power brokers, oligarchs, or bureaucratic machines as the people they replaced. This is what has transpired in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan and to a lesser extent in Serbia.

Few observers would claim that Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan would be better off if Slobodan Milosevic, Edvard Shevardnadze, Victor

Yanukovich, or Askar Akaev, respectively, had remained in power. Clearly, democracy promotion through mass demonstrations and elections is better than no democracy at all. It may in fact be the most efficient way to introduce democracy to countries where the elites allow elections but try to rig them. Yet, the overwhelming focus on elections has tended to obscure what happens after they occur. Elections remain a necessary condition for democracy, but they are not sufficient to guarantee its stability. Equally important is the state's capacity to carry out the will of the legislature in a fair and efficient manner. In Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, weak state institutions and high levels of corruption threaten to discredit democracy. The political dynamics in the post-Communist world have been mirrored in some places in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and even Iraq and Iran, where corrupt, rigged, or otherwise irrelevant elections have had at best an ambiguous democratizing effect.

European warnings about the single-minded U.S. focus on big events such as elections to the detriment of institution building are probably worth heeding. This is one of the major lessons derived from the field of development economics in the 1990s. The decade opened with the mantra "market good, state bad," but by the millennium's end, in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis and the meltdown of the Russian ruble and the Mexican peso, the new wisdom in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund stressed the institutional prerequisites of economic development, including rule of law, security of property rights, corporate governance, and honest and efficient regulators. This new institutional wisdom may be finding its way into U.S. thinking about democracy promotion as well, at least among renowned analysts such as Francis Fukuyama.¹⁹ The occupation of Iraq has clearly demonstrated that democracy requires public safety and security.²⁰

At the same time, however, democracy promotion will not be as clean as state building, which is a more limited consolidation strategy, and it will most likely falter if the preference is always for efficiency over participation. Introducing democracy will always be slightly messy and certainly more complex than the EU's strengthening of existing democracies in post-Communist Europe. If the Europeans are truly interested in democracy promotion, they will need to live with the measure of uncertainty and open-endedness characteristic of the transformation of subjects into citizens.

The EU is already actively thinking about developing a foreign policy and democracy-promotion strategy beyond enlargement, and recent events suggest the day when Europe's borders are "final" may not be far off.²¹ The rejection of the EU constitution treaty in France and the Netherlands in the spring of 2005 was driven at least in part by French and Dutch voters' refusal to continue to use the prospects of EU membership to shape Turkey's

domestic politics, if it means that Turkey might one day actually be allowed to join. In fact, it is possible that Turkey may be the first test case of EU democracy promotion beyond enlargement.

Under British prime minister Tony Blair's leadership of the EU presidency in the second half of 2005, Europe's leaders ultimately followed through on an earlier agreement to commence accession negotiations with Turkey and officially declare it a candidate member, but only after a good deal of backroom dealmaking among the member states. In subsequent months, the EU placed tough new conditions on Turkey's eventual entry, a recognition by Brussels that the major member states were getting cold feet. The irony of Europe's distancing itself from Turkey is that promoting EU accession for Turkey is one area where the United States has aligned itself with the European strategy of democracy promotion. Although the primary U.S. strategy of democracy promotion in other locales has been bottom-up civic revolutions, the main task for Turkey is not so much creating democracy as it is consolidating it.

U.S. attempts during 2003–2004 to convince European leaders that Turkey's admission would constitute an important and strategic contribution to democracy promotion in the Muslim world found only partial resonance. In Germany, for example, Christian Democratic leaders maintained that, because Arab states rarely followed Turkey's lead in most policy areas, admitting Turkey would do nothing for democracy promotion in the Arab Muslim world. Other European leaders, such as former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder, were already advocating Turkish accession but found that having Bush vocalize it did not aid their efforts. Elements within the French government deeply resented what they perceived as one more U.S. attempt to undermine the EU and France's power within it by foisting a large and poor country on an already strained EU. As it stands, however, if and when the EU decides to finalize its borders and refuse entry to an applicant, it will lose the one tool in their foreign policy kit that seems to work.

For the time being, Europe's leaders appear to have understood this. They have settled on a strategy of a long candidate period for Turkey and an uncertain accession date. Refusing Turkey's accession bid altogether at this point would risk destabilizing the country and needlessly strain relations with the United States. Turkey has in fact exerted tremendous efforts to make its laws conform to EU standards and ensure that its human rights record falls within European norms. Abandoning the prosecution of its most

Successful democracy promotion will require elements of U.S. and European strategies.

famous writer, Orhan Pamuk, for raising the sensitive question of the massacre of Armenians by Ottoman Turks during World War I and changing the law limiting free speech under which he is being prosecuted will be the first in a series of EU tests that Turkey will have to pass in the years to come. European governments, for their part, have assured their electorates that Turkey

will have to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria and that something short of actual membership for Turkey remains a distinct possibility. France, for example, joined the list of countries in the EU that will require a popular referendum before any new candidate states are admitted. Still, if the Europeans refuse to use the one geopolitical tool available to them in the Muslim world—the prospect of accession to the EU of a country whose population is predominantly Muslim—

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this will certainly be one more source of strain in the transatlantic relationship. The United States would therefore do well to continue to push for Turkey's admission but to do so gently and with tact.

Promotion Sharing

Democracy promotion need not become a new source of transatlantic tension if both sides are willing to draw on the other's strengths and experiences. It is true that Europeans may not share the U.S. zeal for democracy promotion as a project and will only reluctantly adopt policies designed to introduce democracy where it does not already exist. Moreover, there are certainly issues over which the transatlantic partners will continue to disagree, including the U.S. use of regime change in cases of especially intractable foes such as Saddam. Yet, although public opinion polls indicate that Europeans are generally wary of the U.S. role in the world and remain especially distrustful of the current administration, they are keen to promote democracy in the rest of the world. One opinion poll conducted by the German Marshall Fund in 2005 suggested that Europeans are even more supportive of democracy promotion than Americans.²² As long as they are included as partners in the project, democracy promotion can even be ground on which the transatlantic alliance can be rebuilt in the decades ahead.

The outlines of the division of labor seem clear enough. Elements of the bottom-up U.S. democracy-promotion strategy that emphasizes civil society, political parties, and clean elections are most appropriate where democracy is absent or where rigged or corrupt elections are used as a cover for illiberal

or autocratic regimes. The European top-down strategy of democracy promotion that uses membership conditionality to promote order, good governance, and institutional capacity, even though it must evolve beyond EU enlargement, should be included in the democracy-promotion repertoire to help consolidate regimes that have initiated but not completed their democratic transitions. If used wisely and in the proper admixture, the U.S. and European approaches to democracy promotion can provide a powerful set of foreign policy tools for a renewed transatlantic alliance.

Notes

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