10 Things to know about elections and democracy

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Most countries today are formal democracies

An astonishing political transformation has taken place around the world over the past three decades. Today, a majority of countries are considered formal democracies.

Even the Middle East, a region that long seemed immune to democratisation, is in the midst of momentous change. The Arab Spring swept from office long standing authoritarian rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen who cumulatively had been in power for a total of 129 years.

By the end of 2011, the only countries considered autocracies were: Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Belarus, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Laos, North Korea, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Swaziland, Syria, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, and Uzbekistan.

Over one in three live in authoritarian systems

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2011, 62.4% of the world population live in democracies of some form, while 37.6% of the world population still live in authoritarian systems. China alone accounts for 51.3% of people not living in formal democratic systems.

Elections have become almost universal

In country after country, people have risked their lives to call for free elections, and elections have been held in all but five countries from 2000-2012. Clearly, there is a lot more to democracy than elections – but elections are among its most visible elements, and they have become almost universal.

The only five countries in the world (with populations greater than 500K) not to hold elections between 2000 and 2012 are: China, Eritrea, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates.

Most leaders in Africa are replaced by ballots, not bullets

While in the 1960s and 1970s approximately 75% of African leaders were ousted through violent means (coup d’états, rebellion), in the period 2000-2005 this number had dropped to 19%.

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But elections are not always peaceful

While elections may be essential in promoting legitimacy, stability and development, they can also be deeply problematic. Elections can spark violent conflict, especially when they generate ‘winner takes all’ dynamics that raise the stakes of political competition. As the example of Kenya in 2007 illustrates, this can be especially treacherous where ethnicity or other fault lines of conflict such as region or religion determine political allegiance. For example, a recent study has estimated that between 1990 and 2007 one in five elections in Sub-Saharan Africa suffered significant violence and only about 40% were entirely violence-free. Significant violence here refers to violent repression (e.g. long-term high-level arrests of party leaders, consistent use of violent intimidation, limited use of murders and assassinations, and torture) and/or highly violent campaigns, in which there are repeated, coordinated physical attacks leading to 20 or more deaths.

The quality of many of these democracies remains deeply flawed

Moreover, across much of the developing world, these democracies are democratic in form but not necessarily in substance. They have institutions that are often hollow, weak and ineffective; and their ability to perform remains mixed. These incipient democracies, which have been variously described as ‘illiberal’, ‘delegative’, or, more generally, ‘hybrid’ regimes or ‘anocracies’, constitute ambiguous systems that combine rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy, the existence of some formal democratic institutions and respect for a limited sphere of civil and political liberties with essentially illiberal or even authoritarian traits.

Alternations of power remain remarkably limited in Sub-Saharan Africa


The wealthiest countries tend to be democracies

The positive correlation between (high levels of) wealth and (established) democracy, first captured by Martin Lipset in a famous essay in 1959, is one of the strongest and most enduring relationships in the social sciences. Today, outside the petro-states, the top 25 richest countries in the world (as ranked by the World Bank) are also fully established democracies.

In fact, a democratic regime has never fallen after a certain income level is reached (US$6,055 per capita in PENN World Table dollars) – which was Argentina when it fell to bureaucratic authoritarianism in 1963. But correlation does not mean causation, and the debate about whether development leads to democracy or vice versa is ongoing.

The total number of women elected to parliament has almost doubled since 1997

As of April 2013, the top 10 countries in descending order in terms of the percentage of women in the lower or single House are: Rwanda, Andorra, Cuba, Sweden, Seychelles, Senegal, Finland, South Africa, Nicaragua, and Iceland.

Notably, some of the oldest and most established democracies in the world outside of Scandinavia have considerably fewer women in parliament than more emerging democratic systems. The United Kingdom ranks 58th in the world, with 22.5% of members of the House of Commons being women, while the United States comes in 78th place, with 17.8% women in the House of Representatives.

Expensive elections are not necessarily better

The cost of the 2012 elections in the United States (including public and private funding) came to USD$ 6,000,000,000 – which is roughly the equivalent of the entire annual GDP of some countries, including Kosovo, Rwanda, Niger, Malawi and the Kyrgyz Republic.

That makes UK election spending look microscopic by comparison. A total of £31m ($49m) was spent by all parties in the last general election in the UK in 2010 - making US spending 120 times as much, and 23 times as much per person.

The costs of the 2007 elections in Kenya were also exorbitant – coming to US$13.74 per registered voter (or US$ 29 per cast ballot). The elections in Ghana in 2008, by comparison, came to US$0.70. Yet, expensive as they were, elections in Kenya proved unable to channel conflict peacefully and unleashed a terrible wave of violence, while those in Ghana transpired without major incident.
