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# The Path of Democracy

Barbara Wejnert challenges conventional thinking on why countries become democratic, and how they fare as a result



Artwork: Tom Nick Cocotos

By Patricia Donovan



*Barbara Wejnert, Associate Professor Department of Transnational Studies*

In her off hours, which must be few, [Barbara Wejnert](#) can be spotted jogging around her Amherst neighborhood, studying Italian (her sixth language), downhill skiing, preparing for a bike trek across eastern Europe or taking “short, slow walks” with her hypoallergenic guinea pig, Mimila, who is often outfitted in a little blue jacket.

None of this would suggest Wejnert’s status as an internationally known, multiple award-winning political sociologist with a passionate interest in, among other things, democratization, and the political and economic empowerment of women in the face of global development.

Tiny, funny and energetic, Wejnert, who has degrees from Poland’s Mickiewicz University and the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, has been an associate professor of sociology in the UB Department of Global Gender Studies (since folded into the Department of Transnational Studies) since 2004. She has written or edited 11 books, four within the “Research in Political Sociology” series, related to democratizing and globalizing processes and their consequences.

Her interests first developed when she was a student in the Polish People’s Republic, where she worked with Solidarity and the remarkable 1980s’ campaign for political change that began with trade union protests and ultimately resulted in the democratization of the country.

In fact, her 2014 book, [“Diffusion and Democracy: The Past and Future of Global Democracy,”](#) presents an innovative assessment of 187 sovereign countries that challenges established thinking about the diffusion of democracy over a 200-year period.

“It has long been assumed,” she says, “that democratic reform is provoked by a nation’s literacy rate, level of national development or billions in financial aid delivered to non-democratic regimes in the hope of provoking political modification. In fact, American foreign policy is grounded in those assumptions.

“I found, however, and was able to demonstrate statistically, that the most important and influential elements in this regard have been networks—economic, educational, geographical, cultural, agricultural, etc.—between non-democratic and democratic states. It indicates that people need to understand and be connected with what they want before they will fight to get it.”

Wejnert also has two edited books out this year: the second edition of [“Safe Motherhood in a Globalized World”](#) and [“The Many Faces of Populism: Current Perspectives.”](#)

The first includes her detailed and surprising 1970-2005 cross-world analysis of women’s health in the context of globalization, which supports the contention that the cost of transition to liberal democracy is much more substantial for women than for men in terms of both economic opportunities and health.

“While we might expect maternal health to improve in a newly democratizing state, it often declines if those states were previously well-developed but authoritarian,” she says. “Why and how this occurs are critical issues because healthy, safe motherhood is a prerequisite for a healthy, productive society. We ignore this at our peril.”