

Centuries of global democracy have been provoked by who lived next door



Barbara Wejnert's new book is based on her analysis of a wide range of data related to democratization from 167 nations on five continents from 1800 to 2005.

“Much about the reasons for democratization is misunderstood, unknown or wrong”

By Pat Donovan

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Barbara Wejnert, associate professor of transnational studies
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BUFFALO, N.Y. — It may be news to some foreign policy analysts and democracy advocates on the right and the left, but there is now concrete evidence that, repeatedly over the last 200 years, nations have moved toward democracy not for the reasons assumed for many decades (literacy levels, foreign aid, degree of national development) but because of strong networks between non-democratic states and their democratic neighbors.

“Diffusion of Democracy: The Past and Future of Global Democracy” (Cambridge University Press, 2014), by well-known political sociologist Barbara Wejnert of the University at Buffalo, is the result of her analysis of a wide range of data related to democratization from 167 nations on five continents from 1800 to 2005.

“It is very clear from this extensive research that nations consistently are drawn to democratic reform not by what is happening inside their own nations but by an attraction to what is going on in other places,” she says.

“There is much about the reasons for democratization that is misunderstood, unknown or wrong,” says Wejnert, whose 10 books, studies and essays have established her as an international expert on the subject.

“The problem is that in order to promote democracy around the world,” she says, “we have based a good deal of our foreign policy on erroneous assumptions, and for many decades have heavily funded projects that do not do what we expect them to do — encourage democracy.”

She says democratization is influenced, of course, by the extent to which citizens have access to that information about democracy available through communication networks of all kinds.

The networks may be social, cultural, religious, familial, educational or grounded in business and other kinds of exchange, she says, but historically, they have linked the non-democratic countries with democratic countries and ideas, and this has been very influential.

“Recently, the identification with and urge to emulate democratic societies has been influenced by what people see and learn via media networks. These include television, radio, films and, in particular, the Internet, since it is a vehicle for vast virtual person-to-person and country-to-country networking,” Wejnert says.

“The evidence shows that the availability of communication networks substantially increases the attraction of freedom of speech, travel, education and work to residents of non-democratic nations,” she says, “and it is this that feeds the urge toward a form of government that permits and even encourages such freedom.”

Wejnert’s study employed applied historical analyses and multilevel regression models that can be examined and downloaded from a database she created on the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). The database assesses 187 sovereign countries from 1800 to 2005 on indicators that represent the level of democracy or autocracy, socioeconomic characteristics and diffusion processes. The database can be accessed at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/20440>.

Additional indicators employed in her analysis included the amount of agricultural labor per region; democratic experience; frequency of governmental administrative adjustments (modification in membership of the national executive body without a transfer of formal power); GNP overall and GNP per capita; governmental sanctions undertaken to suppress, neutralize or eliminate a perceived threat to the government or state; nonviolent protests and demonstrations; riots; relaxation of sanctions; and extent of urbanization.

Sociologist John Markoff of the University of Pittsburgh, whose research also concerns the history of democratization says Wejnert’s range of variables is impressive and her statistical analysis meticulous.

Wejnert's past and present administrative work includes establishment and directorship of an academic program on Eastern European Research and Exchange at Cornell University, as well as the establishment, development and chairmanship of the Department of Global Gender Studies and its graduate programs at the University at Buffalo. That department is now a part of the UB Department of Transnational Studies.

Her publications include 10 books and papers in the journals Sociology, American Sociological Review, Social Networks and Annual Review of Sociology, among others, and her work has been supported by grants from major international foundations. At UB, she teaches courses on contemporary globalization, quantitative methods, global economy, violence in an engendered world, democracy and gender, and gender and society.

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