

## Review - A Second Look at Huntington's Third Wave Thesis

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# Review - A Second Look at Huntington's Third Wave Thesis

<https://www.e-ir.info/2010/09/23/review-a-second-look-at-huntingtons-third-wave-thesis/>

STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, SEP 23 2010

Samuel P. Huntington's 1993 book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* was heralded upon its release as an insightful and useful contribution to political science. With that in mind, and also considering the recent death of the author, it is worth taking another look at the text considering the democratisation attempts pursued by America and its allies in the Middle East in the early years of the 21st Century.

In the book 'The Third Wave' Samuel Huntington attempts to explain the process of democratisation in contemporary world politics as occurring in three distinct 'waves' beginning in the early nineteenth century and continuing into the present day. Put simply, 'a wave of democratisation is a group of transitions from non-democratic regimes to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction' (Huntington 1993: 15). In order to set the process of democratisation in an identifiable context, a dichotomous approach is used drawing heavily on Schumpeter's 'Democratic Method' which emphasises democracy as merely 'institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the peoples vote' (Schumpeter 1947: 269). Any theoretical arguments and any notion of 'classic democracy' are discarded in favour of a research based empirical study into the procedural nature of democracy. This procedural approach makes classification of regimes as democratic or otherwise 'a relatively simple task' through applying clinical bench marks and criteria. The acceptance of Huntington's thesis will rest on whether the reader agrees that elections are the inescapable essence of democracy, or rather if one associates democracy with 'fuzzy norms' such as honesty, equal participation and power, and openness (Huntington 1993: 9).

Each of the three waves in Huntington's study are distinct from each other. The first wave developed slowly from 1828-1926, beginning in the United States and was characterised by Sunshine as 'minimal democracy' in which at least 50% of the adult male population was enfranchised and a responsible executive and periodic elections were in place. A reverse wave followed spanning 1922-1942 beginning with Mussolini's march on Rome. Only four of the seventeen countries that democratised after 1910 remained democracies during the first reverse wave. The second wave of democratisation began during The Second World War prompted by the victory of The Allies, only to be usurped as 'by the late 1950's political development and regime transitions were taking on a heavily authoritarian cast.' This second reverse wave continued until the end of dictatorship in Portugal in 1974 signalled the beginning of the third wave of democratisation, beginning in Europe and spreading worldwide as 'democracy seemed to take on the character of an almost irresistible global tide moving on from one triumph to the next'. (Huntington 1993: 16-21)

In an effort to explain democratisation Huntington draws on some important observations. A 1959 study by Lipset highlighted the link between wealth and democracy. This study was tested by the World Bank in 1989, finding that out of 24 countries classified as 'high income', only 3 were non-democratic. Further out of the 42 classified as 'poor' only 2 had any experience of democracy. Countries are unlikely to enter the 'political transition zone' unless they develop at least a 'middle' level of economic development (Huntington 1993: 59-60). Similarly religion is highlighted as 'democracy was especially scarce among countries that were predominantly Muslim, Buddhist or Confucian.' The ideal of the separation of the church and state firstly in Protestantism and later in Catholicism were instrumental in the democratisation process (Huntington 1993: 72-76). The Demonstration Effect also had an important part to play, particularly during the third wave, as the growth of communication enabled pressure to be levied on non 'free'

## Review - A Second Look at Huntington's Third Wave Thesis

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

nations, 'Solidarity's struggle in Poland... had a resonance in Chile that would have been most unlikely in earlier decades' (Huntington 1993: 102).

This triumphant analysis of the democratisation process is given statistical weight as according to Huntington, in 1973 32% of the world's population lived in 'free countries'; and in 1990 when the third wave was in full flow after the fall of the Berlin Wall, this figure rose to 39%. A later study in 1994 adds weight to Huntington's thesis proclaiming that 58% of the world was democratic (Shin 1994: 135-137). It was heralded that authoritarian regimes had outgrown their populations as education and politicisation expanded and that modern liberal democracy was the only conceivable future (Fukuyama 1992: 42-43). The bulwark that had stood firm against democracy, communism was declared 'The Grand Failure' by Brzezinski. Seemingly the wave theory was empirically sound. However, a different interpretation of the evidence can also bring forward scepticism. The number of countries in the world had increased from 64 in 1922, to 130 in 1990; but almost exactly the same number of states as a ratio was democratic in 1990 as were in 1922 - 45%.

An effort to explain why no real increase in the ratio of democratic countries has occurred leads Huntington to uncovering an important fact. 23 of the 29 countries that became democratised during the third wave had previous experience with democracy. This 'diverse lot' had little in common other than this factor. Further, 'Most of the countries with authoritarian systems in 1974 that did not democratise by 1990 had no previous experience with democracy' (Huntington 1993: 41-42). Perhaps what we are seeing, contrary to Fukuyama's premature predictions of the triumph of liberal democracy in 1989, is rather the consolidation of democracy in the areas of the world in which it is already familiar. Huntington also enthuses on the potential 'snowballing' effect of democracy, but retains caution stressing that a snowball can melt in unfavourable environments (Huntington 1993: 105).

Such an unfavourable environment is clearly evident in the Middle East. Huntington emphasises a duality here, arguing that the Gulf War of 1991 would surely propel liberalisation of the area (which it did not), but also conceding that 'Islamic concepts of politics differ from and contradict the premises of democratic politics'. Pakistan and Lebanon, given as examples, have been unable to uphold their democracies. Turkey remains the only exception. A half century of western interference in the Middle East has evidently also created a backlash as any democratisation there 'seems likely to produce new Islamist governments that would be much less willing to cooperate with the United States than are the current authoritarian rulers' (Gause 2005). Iran is a striking example. Free elections are held in Iran, fulfilling the criteria of procedural democracy, but there is certainly little liberalisation or civil rights as evidenced in the West in evidence. Perhaps alienating the democratic process from other important factors is not always helpful. Elections alone are not enough.

Huntington's American ethnocentrism leads him to assume that the democratisation process will, and should follow the American example as other countries want 'to imitate the winning model', 'failures of the United States would inevitably be seen as the failure of democracy' (Huntington 1993: 287). Recent ill judged foreign policies and proven reports of widespread domestic electoral fraud may now be signalling that failure (for an example see Palast 2003: 11-81). Another viewpoint highlights that the United States' prosperity is based on a model of deficit spending which 'can be hazardous for economic health'. Any attempt to promote this model, as Huntington does, should be accompanied with 'a bold face Surgeon General's warning' (Gurr 1991: 666). Bringing that point up to date considering the collapse of the western financial system in recent years is all the more concerning for Huntington's thesis. By following a model that seeming cannot set an ideal example, nor rely on the capitalism that underlines it, the world's prospective democracies are surely in trouble.

Aside from the problems of the 'established' democracies in Huntington's study, major problems abound when viewing the black and white classification of whether or not a country is democratic. Labelling many unstable countries in Latin America and others such as Thailand and Gambia as democratic is simplistic and does not tell the whole story. Many of these third wave transitions have retained strong elements of authoritarianism and better fit the classification of 'semi' or 'new' democracies. Huntington establishes the bench mark of the 'two turnover test' in which if a new democracy survives two turnovers of power, then it has consolidated satisfactorily (Huntington 1993: 267). Again, the substance of the democracy is ignored, 'if options are narrowly restricted or controlled...only the controllers are playing a meaningful role'. There is certainly evidence of this in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala

## Review - A Second Look at Huntington's Third Wave Thesis

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

and Honduras where 'popular participation was limited to ritual voting' (Chomsky 1992: 6-143). If the two turnover test is to have an actual validity, then by its measure, both Afghanistan and Iraq are by now consolidated democracies. A classification that is at odds with any measure of objective reality.

For Huntington, democratisation is merely agreement by the elite 'that democracy is the least worse form of government for their societies and for themselves'. It will only spread if those who exercise power want it to. He denounces popular uprisings that result in democracy as 'seldom' successful (Huntington 1993: 316). His elitism even stretches to the extreme that 'democracy can be created even if the people do not want it' (Huntington 1993: 36). This is a controversial argument as surely any democracy can only survive when the mass public is committed to it. Again drawing on the Afghanistan/Iraq example, the top down imposition of 'democracy' via elections in those countries has not met with an entrenched and effective democratic process in an organic sense, but rather a corrupt and unstable house of cards in both cases. Huntington's seemingly nostalgic reminiscence of a 'golden age' of democracy in which governments could function smoothly amongst the privileged classes without the interference of 'ignorant and meddling outsiders' (Chomsky 1997: 93) is clearly archaic.

Further criticism of the theories in 'The Third Wave' come predominantly on Huntington's insistence that 'an overwhelmingly democratic world is likely to be a world free of international violence' emphasising a correlation in democratisation and improved international relations (Huntington 1993: 29). Reiter disagrees strongly. Using the 'Weibull Analysis of the transition to Democracy', a 32 year study into the associations of democracy and conflict (amongst other things) worldwide he emphasises that the spread of democracy does not reduce the level of conflict experienced by authoritarian regimes. Rejecting liberal international relations theory he states 'there is no indirect effect of democracy causing peace causing democracy' (Reiter 2001: 945-946). Added weight to this is the alarming fact that the United States has itself embarked on a series of wars in order to force democracy on authoritarian states. Democracies may not wage war against each other, but they are often aggressors in wars with 'undesirable' administrations that lead to greater instability internationally. Huntington dismisses much of his assumptions in reference to this argument in a later publication, stressing that only 15% of the world resides in 'zones of peace' (Huntington 1997: 32), hardly a triumph for democratisation and liberalisation.

It seems that Huntington's romantic elitist notion of democracy and the democratisation of the world is somewhat idealistic and out of touch with the reality of the situation today. Relying so heavily on Schumpeter's work, Huntington could do with remembering Schumpeter's own words 'democracy thrives in social patterns that display certain characteristics and it might well be doubted whether there is any sense in asking how it would fare in others that lack those characteristics' (Schumpeter 1947: 290). The wave theory seems to have broken on every shore on which it is compatible. The non-democratic world of today is not attributed with so much of the optimism of the post Cold War years. The ability of America, with which Huntington entrusts the survival of democracy, to promote the process of democratisation and western liberal culture is declining as Islamic fundamentalism and global hostility to the imposition of western values grows and offers an alternative. The democratic method may adequately describe the workings of a clinical process, but it pigeon-holes a vast diversity of forms of governance under the term 'democracy' and yet falls far short of capturing the essence of the word and its importance. With so little of the global population living in consolidated democratised societies perhaps it is time to accept that democracy is not a unitary phenomenon, nor is it as successful as is widely perceived.

### References

Chomsky, N. (1992). *Deterring Democracy*. London: Vintage.

Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Gause, G.F. (2005). 'Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?', *Foreign Affairs*, 84, 5:1-6.

Gurr, T.R. (1991). 'America as a model for the World? A Sceptical View', *Political Science and Politics*, 24, 4: 664-667.

## Review - A Second Look at Huntington's Third Wave Thesis

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

Huntington, S. P. (1997). *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*. London: Simon and Schuster.

Huntington, S. P. (1993). *The Third Wave: Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press.

Reiter, D. (2001). 'Does Peace Nurture Democracy?', *The Journal of Politics*, 63, 3: 935-948.

Schumpeter, J.A. (1947). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London: Henderson and Spalding.

Shin, D.C. (1994). 'On the Third Wave of Democratisation: A Synthesis and Evaluation of Recent Theory and Research', *World Politics*, 47, 1: 135-170.

---

### About the author:

**Dr Stephen McGlinchey** is the Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of E-International Relations and Senior Lecturer of International Relations at UWE Bristol. His publications include *Foundations of International Relations* (Bloomsbury 2022), *International Relations* (2017), *International Relations Theory* (2017) and *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran* (Routledge 2021, 2014). You can find him on twitter @mcglincheyst or LinkedIn.