

BOOKS IN  
REVIEW

## LIPSET'S LEGACY

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***The Democratic Century.* By Seymour Martin Lipset and Jason M. Lakin. University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. 478 pp.**

During a scholarly career that has spanned more than half a century, Seymour Martin Lipset pioneered the comparative analysis of why democracies emerge and endure. In *The Democratic Century*, coauthored with Jason M. Lakin, Lipset continues to make outstanding contributions to the field of comparative politics. This volume revisits Lipset's many pathbreaking works and provides an extraordinarily thoughtful, data-rich, and up-to-date synthesis of scholarly knowledge about the correlates of democracy worldwide. Lakin, who was Lipset's research assistant at the time of his mentor's debilitating stroke in 2001, has done a remarkable job of communicating Lipset's vision and his fervent hope that the first hundred years of the third millennium will indeed be the democratic century.

Almost fifty years ago, in a much-cited 1959 article in the *American Political Science Review* and in his landmark study *Political Man* (1960), Lipset demonstrated the correlation between economic development and democracy. Distinguishing among stable democracies, unstable democracies, unstable dictatorships, and stable dictatorships both in Europe and the Americas, he showed how these regime types correlated with indices of wealth, industrialization, education, and urbanization. In essence, his argument was that the richer a nation is, the greater its chances of developing and sustaining democracy.

This analysis became known as "modernization theory"—arguably the only work in the field of comparative politics that has ever truly

earned the accolade of “theory.” Lipset’s argument was widely accepted in the 1960s, then contested in the 1970s after the breakdown of democratic regimes in Latin America’s wealthier nations, and ultimately reaffirmed in the 1990s as these and many other nations transited to democracy. In 2000, Lipset’s argument was reassessed by political scientist Adam Przeworski and his collaborators, who argued that economic development explains why democracy endures, but not why it emerges. In 2003, however, this argument was strongly rebutted by Carles Boix and Susan Stokes in the journal *World Politics*.

While Lipset will always be known as the founder of modernization theory, he relentlessly emphasizes—both in previous works and in *The Democratic Century*—the complex interplay between economic and cultural variables in influencing the chances of democratic government. His books *Agrarian Socialism* (1950) and *Union Democracy* (with Martin Trow and James Coleman, 1959) stressed the importance of independent voluntary associations for the development of robust political parties and democracy. In his influential edited volume *Elites in Latin America* (1967), Lipset argued that in the context of a predominantly feudal and Catholic region, elite values were ascriptive and anti-entrepreneurial, and that only when the power and privilege of traditional landholding elites were reduced would either economic growth or democracy markedly advance.

*The Democratic Century* displays Lipset and Lakin’s interest in the mix of economic and cultural variables, as well as political factors, that influence democracy. As they put it in the book’s introduction, “The study of democratization is, quite simply, an exercise in multivariate thinking.” The authors are adamant that although economic variables correlate more strongly with democracy than do cultural variables, this means not that the latter are unimportant, but rather that they are much harder to conceptualize and measure.

In *The Democratic Century*, Lipset and Lakin compare democracy to a kickball game, and the book’s three parts address different issues related to that game. The first part assesses the rules and the playing field (electoral and executive systems), the players (the political parties), and the spectators (civil society). The second part examines the socioeconomic and cultural factors that determine whether the game is played according to the rules from start to finish, or whether “the opposing sides and fans butcher each other, steal each other’s resources, and head for the hills.” The third part explores why the game has been played more successfully in the United States than in Latin America.

After thoroughly reviewing recent empirical research, Lipset and Lakin forcefully reaffirm the fundamental idea behind modernization theory: “national wealth is the single most consistent predictor of democratic success.” Compared to Latin America, the United States has long enjoyed greatly superior per-capita GDP levels, more equal landhold-

ing patterns, a greater prevalence of family farms, and more diverse commercial opportunities, and has therefore enjoyed a more stable democratic system. But Lipset and Lakin also show that in recent decades national wealth, family farming, and market economies have all advanced in Latin America, facilitating the consolidation of democracy across the continent.

In reaffirming the correlation between economic development and democracy, Lipset and Lakin join today's intense scholarly debate about the reasons behind that correlation. Przeworski has argued that it is *not* a result of the emergence of prodemocratic cultural values in wealthier countries. Instead, he stresses the availability of sufficient economic opportunities outside the state to political losers, enabling democracy, despite the electoral uncertainty it entails, to be a rational choice for elites. In *The Democratic Century*, Lipset and Lakin deftly subsume Przeworski's insight into a more comprehensive interpretation: They propose that the various changes in elite attitudes concomitant with economic development include the idea that "democracy [is] one, increasingly preferable way to defuse the tensions inherent in the conflict among [opposing] groups."

Throughout their rigorous review of the scholarly literature and current political trends, Lipset and Lakin advance important arguments about political institutions and civil society. In their comparison of democracy in the United States and Latin America, they revise the current conventional wisdom that parliamentary systems are superior to presidential systems. The authors argue instead that what is problematic is not presidentialism as such, but presidentialism in conjunction with proportional representation in the legislative.

Lipset and Lakin also emphasize that, although political parties are pivotal to democratic success, they "do not act alone"; rather, they serve as mediating organizations between state and society. Political parties have been weak in Latin America in large part because they have not been based on key social cleavages. Lipset and Lakin look hopefully on the emergence in some Latin American countries of indigenous movements that in the future could become ethnically based political parties.

*The Democratic Century* also provides a vigorous critique of the vacuous, circular nature of some scholars' theses about civil society, which omit consideration of the linkages between civil society and political institutions. Although the authors see social trust as a key facilitator of civil society, they find that the sources of trust appear plentiful, diffuse, and poorly understood.

In discussing the cultural differences between the United States and Latin America, the authors follow Lipset's previous work, highlighting the differences between British and Spanish colonial rule and between Protestant and Catholic religious values. But they also acknowledge that

the Catholic Church has changed considerably, especially in the wake of Vatican II. Indeed, throughout *The Democratic Century*, the authors insist that culture can and does change. Lipset and Lakin also place considerable emphasis on the contrasting legacies of the achievement of independence—the maintenance of the nation in the United States versus the descent into disorder in much of Latin America. In addition, they point out the challenge to democratization posed by the much larger, historically repressed indigenous civilizations of Latin America.

Of course, *The Democratic Century* is not unflawed. For instance, Lipset and Lakin endorse a gradual, incremental democratization process. Although this kind of process has often proved favorable in the past, Valerie Bunce and other scholars have highlighted that democratization can be both rapid and successful, as has recently been seen in many of the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe.

Another shortcoming is the book's failure to include international factors among the variables important to democratic breakdown and survival. Especially in retrospect, it is clear that Cold War dynamics played a significant role in the demise of several Latin American democracies, and it is also clear that in recent years incentives provided by such international actors as the European Union, the Organization of American States, and the United States have been important to the emergence and maintenance of many democracies around the globe. If Lipset and Lakin had incorporated international factors into their multivariate analysis in the same spirit as they incorporate economic, cultural, and political variables, emphasizing their synergistic effects, *The Democratic Century* would have made an even greater scholarly contribution.

To a certain degree, my criticism here resembles the criticism of modernization theory by Guillermo O'Donnell and other social scientists in the 1970s. O'Donnell argued that the evolving international economic context obstructed democratization, especially for countries that were at more advanced stages of industrialization. Although O'Donnell's precise argument was ultimately proven incorrect, most scholars of Latin America agree with his fundamental insights that international factors matter and that economic growth in a capitalist context is not unproblematic for democracy.

Seymour Martin Lipset is a scholarly giant who has been advancing our understanding of democratization since the 1950s. *The Democratic Century* responds rigorously to new scholarship and new political trends, and ultimately shows how well Lipset's work has stood the test of time. In the field of political science, that is a rare feat indeed.

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