

THE PUZZLE OF NON-WESTERN DEMOCRACY

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Calls for different models of democracy are becoming more prominent and widespread. The future of global politics will depend greatly on whether and how democracy can be made more effective, participative, and accountable. Many politicians, diplomats, and experts today argue in favor of non-Western models of democracy. Yet it remains unclear what such models should look like. It is more useful to think in terms of specific areas of democratic variation that can encourage democratic renewal—outside, but also within, the West.

The Push for Change

- There are several reasons why the push for non-Western democracy has become stronger in recent years. Western democracies are struggling, non-Western powers are more confident, and citizens seem to be searching for local identities to palliate the effects of globalization.
- However, the concept of non-Western democracy suffers from serious problems. It is not clear what people in other parts of the world really want that is fundamentally different from Western democracy. It is also not obvious that their desire for certain kinds of economic and social values or traditional identities requires a completely distinctive model of democracy.
- The debate over democratic variation needs to be taken more seriously. International democracy supporters have begun to search for ways of supporting different varieties of democratic reform. But they need to be less tentative in taking such efforts forward.

How to Pursue Democratic Variation

The search for democratic variation should be guided by a principle of “liberalism plus.” Different types of democracy that give greater meaning to liberalism’s core tenets of tolerance, pluralism, and justice should be supported. The search for democratic variation should not become a cloak for more illiberal democracy or semiauthoritarianism.

Thinking about democratic variation should proceed along five axes. They are personal rights; economic justice; power-sharing mechanisms; alternative forms of civic action and representation; and legal pluralism.

Western and non-Western democracies (like Brazil, India, Indonesia, and South Africa) can and should cooperate on democratic variation. Rising democracies offer several advantages in encouraging political reform, but it is not yet clear if they have useful models of democracy to share with the rest of the world.

Mutual, two-way learning is required between Western and non-Western governments and civil society actors in pursuit of better-quality democracy. The supposed division between Western and non-Western political values is less than clear-cut. In the future there must be a greater variety of democratic forms—but this variety is unlikely to split neatly along a Western versus non-Western divide.

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