Rethinking the Third Wave

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Ten years ago, in 2014, I had the honor of being invited to deliver the annual Alexis de Tocqueville lecture at the Institute of Political Studies. I began my lecture by remarking that 2014 was a year that witnessed the anniversaries of not one but two significant events in the history of democracy. While the largest share of scholarly and public attention focused on the 25th anniversary of the Revolutions of 1989, I pointed out that 2014 also marked the 40th anniversary of the onset of Portugal's 1974 democratic revolution. Moreover, the latter event had come to be widely recognized not just as a critical turning point in the history of Portugal, but also as the opening salvo in an unprecedented expansion in the number of the world's democratic countries.

Today, a decade later, we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Portuguese Revolution, and once again highlighting its role in kicking off the remarkable series of transitions to democracy that Samuel P. Huntington labeled the Third Wave of democratization. I think it is safe to say that no other intellectual framework has so powerfully shaped contemporary thinking about the fortunes of democracy as Huntington's thesis of the Third Wave.

In preparation for this conference, I reread Huntington's path-breaking 1991 book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. I commend it to all of you; even if you have read it before, it is worth a fresh look. In this study Huntington charts the progress of democracy over the past two centuries. He defines a democratic wave as a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes within a specified timeframe that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction. Then he identifies three such historical periods in which modern democracy spread to a large number of countries, as well as two "reverse waves" in which some of those democratic gains were eroded.

Huntington provides brief accounts of the first "long" wave, which dates roughly from 1828 to 1936, and a second shorter wave, which he places between 1943 and 1962. He makes it clear, however, that the real aim of his book is not to present an overall history of modern democracy but rather to provide an account of the democratic breakthroughs that constituted the Third Wave. Thus the focus of his analysis is on the series of 30 transitions from authoritarianism to democracy that took place in the short span between 1974 and the book's publication in 1991. This cutoff point necessarily excludes the many transitions that took place later in the 1990s; when these are added in, the number of new democracies born during the Third Wave becomes even more remarkable. According to Freedom House's Annual Survey of Freedom in the World, by 2000 the number of Free countries reached a total of 86, more than doubling the number of countries categorized as Free in 1974.

Huntington recognizes that many factors propelled the Third Wave and that these were not necessarily the same as the causes of the two earlier democratic waves. In analyzing what gave rise to the Third Wave, he especially emphasizes continuing economic development, religious changes (especially the rise of pro-democratic sentiments in the Catholic Church), and the role of external actors. Key among the latter were the Soviet Union, whose debilitation weakened its support for authoritarianism; the United States, which became more vigorous in its championing of democracy abroad; and the European Union, which made democracy a condition of membership, thus giving aspiring members a strong incentive to become and remain democratic.

Huntington also stresses a factor that originated in the second wave but persisted into the third: The triumph of the Allies in World War II, he says, "produced . . . a lasting change in the intellectual environment of politics." As he puts it, "A world democratic ethos came into being." This created severe legitimacy problems for authoritarian states and made it difficult for many of them to withstand the domestic protest movements that fueled the third wave. Meanwhile, economic growth fostered "changes in social structures, beliefs, and culture that were conducive to the emergence of democracy." On the whole, Huntington gives a convincing account of what drove the Third Wave and why it arose when it did. In

the process, he helped to make the expansion of democracy a focal point of the study of world politics.

I have begun to wonder, however, whether he and his readers gave too exalted a role to the Third Wave, which he calls in the preface "perhaps the most important global political development of the late twentieth century." An even more enthusiastic assessment was offered in 1999 by the Nobel-Prize-winning economist and philosopher Amartya Sen. Having been asked by a Japanese newspaper what was the most important thing that happened in the twentieth century, Sen answered that it was the "rise of democracy." In the distant future, Sen argued, "when people look back at what happened in [the twentieth] century, they will find it difficult not to accord primacy to the emergence of democracy as the preeminently acceptable form of governance."

Huntington himself went further still. In a 1997 article on "The Future of the Third Wave," [based upon his opening lecture here in Portugal in the series on "The Democratic Invention" organized by the Mario Soares Foundation] he called the "dramatic growth of democracy in such a short time . . . one of the most spectacular and important changes *in human history*" (italics mine).

Though I have not yet abandoned hope that future historians will give the democratic transitions of the late 20th century the kind of world-historical significance that Sen and Huntington anticipated, I have become much more pessimistic about the likelihood of such an outcome. Today it is hard to believe that, say, a century from now, the Third Wave will be regarded as demarcating a more profound shift in world politics than the two World Wars or the demise of the Soviet Union. I have even begun to doubt whether the Huntingtonian framework of democratic waves and reverse waves remains the best guide to understanding the current and likely future state of democracy in the world.

Part of my pessimism, of course, stems from what history has revealed in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. Though some scholars continue to dispute the contention that democracy is in decline, by now the evidence is overwhelming. The number of new democracies being born has fallen far behind the number of existing ones that are backsliding or collapsing. This has led to

much debate about where matters currently stand: Did the third wave come to an end? Has a third reverse wave gotten underway? Have we entered a period of stasis in which no clear picture of the wave's direction—and perhaps no wave at all--can be discerned?

I am increasingly inclined to believe, however, that viewing the current and future state of democracy through the lens of the three waves is no longer fruitful. In fact, I want to raise a perhaps heretical question: Might the concept of the three waves of democratization, which seemed to serve us so well for almost half a century, now have outlived its usefulness?

After all, today we are well into the twenty-first century. The period analyzed in Huntington's book, the late twentieth century, ended before most of today's students were born. Huntington himself states that the generalizations drawn in his book are not "timeless truths." They were drawn from a "discrete class of events of the 1970s and 1980s," and thus their applicability is limited. The discrete events of later decades are likely to suggest different lessons.

Huntington is no Pollyanna. Far from positing a future of inevitable democratic progress, he was alert to the difficulties facing many new democracies and hence to the possibility of new reverse waves. His book even includes an uncannily accurate description of the tendencies toward disillusionment and frustration that would afflict the citizens of new democracies as the excitement of toppling dictatorship gave way to the hard slog of trying to govern democratically. Huntington clearly admits the possibility that countries that have achieved democratic transitions can move backward as well as forward. Yet the underlying spirit and tone of his book is shaped by the view that, whatever the ebbs and flows ahead, "Time is on the side of democracy."

The prime reason for this is his confidence that economic growth will persist and that economic growth favors democracy. Huntington is neither an economic determinist nor an advocate of some simplistic version of modernization theory. Still, he does not seem seriously to entertain the possibility of a large-scale "rollback" of democracy. Like most scholars of democratization of his era, he appears to have taken for granted that the long-established democracies of the

West would remain virtually impregnable. Today, however, we can no longer feel certain that, once countries have established a consolidated and deeply rooted democracy, they have crossed a kind of historical finish-line and become forever secure from serious deterioration.

The shaking of this belief in the durability of advanced democracies is chiefly responsible for today's widespread sentiment that the world has entered a period of democratic decline. Scholars like Yascha Mounk and Roberto Foa, drawing on survey data, have warned of the sagging popular support for democracy even in the most advanced countries and have argued that this poses the danger of democratic *deconsolidation*. But the strongest source of declinist sentiments lies in the rise of populism, not only in newer democracies but also in democracy's North American and European heartlands. If there is a wave that can be discerned in our current circumstances, it is a rising populist wave. And the great question of our time for democracy is how it will respond to the populist challenge.

There are many varieties of populism, of both the Left and the Right. What they all share, however, is a weak regard for the individual freedoms and minority rights essential to liberal democracy. Populists are hostile to liberalism. They may be described as illiberal democrats, at least so long as they remain wedded to the democratic principle of majority rule. If they abandon that principle, populism turns into just another species of authoritarianism. But can a liberal democracy survive if its citizens vote to bring populists to power? The cases of Poland and Brazil show that populists, even after a considerable period in office, can sometimes be overcome at the polling booths. But what if a democracy votes for populists a second or a third time? Can democracy survive the periodic return of populists to power?

Huntington had called attention to a "cyclical pattern" of regime change in which a democratic country suffers recurring military coups. In this case, he says, the country does not alternate between political systems: "The alternation of democracy and authoritarianism *is* the country's political system." Is some kind of similar cycle conceivable with populists? We do not yet have good answers to these questions. It is hard to say whether and at what point a county that elects

populists ceases to be a democracy, let alone what this means for its chances for a future democratic revival. We are likely to get a good deal more evidence about these matters in the near future, but the difficulty of deciding which regimes belong in the democratic column will continue to grow.

While the democracies try to resist the populist threat from within, they must simultaneously counter the authoritarian challenge from abroad. We seem to be heading into an era in which geopolitical competition, including war, becomes a determinative factor in the rise and fall of regimes. Perhaps this has always been the case, but during the enormous democratic expansion of 1974 to 2000 it was easy to overlook the extent to which democratic gains depended on Western military and economic power. Ukraine's travails show the kinds of obstacles that aspiring democracies can face if the international context is inhospitable.

Authoritarian countries increasingly are cooperating among themselves to undermine democratic norms and institutions. That makes it all the more imperative that free countries marshal their power to help preserve an international order in which liberal democracy can thrive. This will usually call for democracies allying with one another, but there will also be situations when geopolitical reasons require cooperation with unsavory regimes. This too is a conundrum that has long beset the democracies. But the case for cooperating with populist governments to win their support against countries like China is likely to grow even stronger.

Neither the challenge of populists at home nor that of authoritarians abroad is significantly illuminated by Huntington's thesis of the three waves. Nor does that framework help us deal with the rise of identity politics or with the new digital threats that are on the horizon. I would predict that ten years from now Portugal will have coped with all these challenges and that in 2034 the Estoril Political Forum will be celebrating the 60th anniversary of Portuguese democracy. But by then I think the emphasis on the Third Wave may be ready for an honorable retirement.