

# MECHANISMS IN POLITICAL PROCESSES

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■ **Abstract** Ostensibly theoretical disputes in political science often involve competing approaches to explanation, including skepticism, covering law arguments, reconstructions of propensities, system models, and explanations featuring causal mechanisms. Mechanism- and process-based accounts, including cognitive, environmental, and relational effects, deserve more attention than they have received in recent political science. Analyses of democratization illustrate these points.

## INTRODUCTION

Early in their careers, political science students commonly learn an exercise resembling the scales and arpeggios every beginning instrumentalist must master—essential for gaining a sense of the discipline, but by no means the heart of virtuoso performance. The exercise consists of identifying a phenomenon—nationalism, revolution, balance of power, or something else—then lining up two or three ostensibly competing explanations of the phenomenon. An effective performer of the exercise proposes to adjudicate among competing positions by means of logical tests, crucial cases, observations of covariation across cases, or perhaps a whole research program whose results the newcomer can report in a doctoral dissertation.

Although scales and arpeggios appear intermittently in concert pieces, no soloist who played nothing but scales and arpeggios, however skillfully, would last long on the concert circuit. Those of us who teach the political science equivalent of these exercises generally recognize their limitations, even if we continue to use them to limber our (and our students') mental sinews. Rarely can (much less does) a single inquiry offer definitive proof or disproof for any particular social-scientific theory of nationalism, revolution, balance of power, or any other political phenomenon. To assemble evidence that one's chosen opponents might recognize as definitive generally requires moving far onto the opponents' preferred epistemological, ontological, and methodological terrain. An opponent worth opposing, furthermore, usually commands a sufficiently rich array of ideas that minor adjustments in a refuted argument rapidly generate new arguments that have not yet suffered falsification. Veteran performers therefore usually learn to make their cases cumulatively, and on stages of their own choosing.

The worst, however, is yet to come. Behind many ostensibly theoretical disputes in political science lurk disagreements about the nature of valid explanations. Confrontations among advocates of realist, constructivist, and institutionalist approaches to international relations, for example, concern explanatory strategies more than directly competing propositions about how nations interact. Similarly, rampant debates about nationalism more often hinge on specifying what analysts must explain, and how, than on the relative validity of competing theories. Recent debates about democratization concern not only the choice of explanatory variables but also the very logic of explanation. Within political science as a whole, wrangles over the value of rational choice models no doubt offer the most vigorous and visible recent examples; despite challenges to specific arguments and empirical claims, the most serious of those disputes pivot on the character of valid explanations.

Rational choice advocates assume that intentional human decision making causes social processes, therefore that explanation consists of pinpointing contexts and rationales of human decisions. Some critics of rational choice accept choice-theoretic criteria of explanation but reject standard characterizations of how choices occur. Many others, however, reject the whole enterprise as irrelevant. The latter are not simply proposing alternative theories; they are reaching for other criteria of explanation. They are at best engaging metatheoretical debates.

## COMPETING VIEWS OF EXPLANATION

To clarify the issues and point to possible resolutions, this essay locates mechanism- and process-based accounts within the range of competing approaches to explanation, drawing especially on analyses of democratization. It also urges the significance of environmental and relational mechanisms as they interact with the cognitive mechanisms that have prevailed recently in political scientists' uses of mechanistic explanations.

In political science, as in social science and history at large, five views of explanation compete for attention: skepticism, covering laws, propensity, system, and mechanism.

### Skepticism

Skepticism considers political processes to be so complex, contingent, impenetrable, or particular as to defy explanation. In the skeptic's view, investigators can perhaps reconstruct the experiences of actors undergoing what they or others call democratization, but attempts at generalization will inevitably fail. Short of an extreme position, nevertheless, even a skeptic can hope to describe, interpret, or assign meaning to processes that are complex, contingent, particular, and relatively impenetrable. Thus skeptics continue to describe, interpret, and assign meaning to the Soviet Union's collapse without claiming to have explained that momentous process.

## Covering Law

In covering law accounts, explanation consists of subjecting robust empirical generalizations to higher- and higher-level generalizations, the most general of all standing as laws. In such accounts, models are invariant—they work the same under all conditions. Investigators search for necessary and sufficient conditions of stipulated outcomes, those outcomes often conceived of as dependent variables. Studies of covariation among presumed causes and presumed effects therefore serve as validity tests for proposed explanations; investigators in this tradition sometimes invoke John Stuart Mill's methods of agreement, differences, residues, and concomitant variation, despite Mill's own doubts of their applicability to human affairs.

The rules of causal inference proposed by the standard text of King et al (1994) do not require general laws, but they belong to this tradition (Ragin 2000:14). In principle, either democratization occurs in similar ways everywhere under specifiable necessary and sufficient conditions or the elements of democratization (e.g. creation of representative institutions) conform to general laws. The covering law analyst's job is to establish empirical uniformities, then to subsume them under such generalizations.

## Propensity

In propensity accounts, explanation consists of reconstructing a given actor's state at the threshold of action, with that state variously stipulated as motivation, consciousness, need, organization, or momentum. With the understanding that certain orientations of actors may be universally favorable or even essential to democratization, explaining democratization thus entails reconstructing the internal conditions of efficacious actors immediately preceding and during transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes. The actors in question may be individuals, but analysts often construct propensity accounts of organizations or other collective actors. Explanatory methods of choice then range from sympathetic interpretation to reductionism, psychological or otherwise. Thus many students of democratization seek to characterize the attitudes of major actors in democratic transitions, then to verify those characterizations through interviews, content analyses, or biographical reconstructions.

## System

Authors of covering law and propensity accounts sometimes talk of systems, but systemic explanations, strictly speaking, consist of specifying a place for some event, structure, or process within a larger self-maintaining set of interdependent elements and showing how the event, structure, or process in question serves and/or results from interactions among the larger set of elements. Functional explanations typically qualify, since they account for the presence or persistence of some element by its positive consequences for some coherent larger set of social relations

or processes. Nevertheless, systemic accounts can avoid functionalism by making more straightforward arguments about the effects of certain kinds of relations to larger systems.

Within the realm of democratization, systemic accounts typically argue that only certain kinds of social settings sustain democracy because democratic institutions serve or express powerful values, interests, or structures within those settings. Thus analyses in the mass society tradition, now largely abandoned, treated totalitarianism and democracy as stemming from different degrees and forms of integration between ordinary people and society as a whole.

## Mechanism and Process

Mechanism- and process-based accounts explain salient features of episodes, or significant differences among them, by identifying within those episodes robust mechanisms of relatively general scope (Elster 1989, 1999; Coleman 1990; Stinchcombe 1991; Padgett & Ansell 1993; Bunge 1997; Hedström & Swedberg 1998). Similarly, they search for recurrent concatenations of mechanisms into more complex processes. Compared with covering law, propensity, and system approaches, mechanism- and process-based explanations aim at modest ends—selective explanation of salient features by means of partial causal analogies. In the analysis of democratization, for example, such mechanisms as brokerage and cross-class coalition formation compound into crucial recurrent processes, such as enlargement of polities. Later in this essay I propose an array of mechanisms and processes that figure widely in democratization.

Mechanisms, too, entail choices. A rough classification identifies three sorts of mechanism: environmental, cognitive, and relational. Environmental mechanisms are externally generated influences on conditions affecting social life; words such as disappear, enrich, expand, and disintegrate—applied not to actors but their settings—suggest the sorts of cause-effect relations in question. Cognitive mechanisms operate through alterations of individual and collective perception, and are characteristically described through words such as recognize, understand, reinterpret, and classify. Relational mechanisms alter connections among people, groups, and interpersonal networks; words such as ally, attack, subordinate, and appease give a sense of relational mechanisms.

Some advocates of mechanistic explanation (e.g. Hedström & Swedberg 1998) not only privilege cognitive mechanisms but also conceive of explanation as moving to a lower level of aggregation—explaining war, for example, by identifying mechanisms that operate at the level of the individual or the small group but aggregate into larger scale effects. The common distinction between micro foundations and macro effects springs from such a conception of explanation. That intellectual strategy has the advantage of remaining close to the main line of political science explanations and the disadvantage of ignoring a wide range of significant cause-effect connections. In fact, relational mechanisms (e.g. brokerage) and

environmental mechanisms (e.g. resource depletion) exert strong effects on political processes without any necessary connection to individual-level cognitive mechanisms.

Causal mechanisms do, to be sure, make appearances outside of mechanism-centered analyses. System theorists have often appealed to equilibrating mechanisms, although those mechanisms have proved notoriously difficult to specify and observe. Propensity explanations often incorporate cognitive mechanisms such as satisficing and rationalizing. Satisfactory covering law accounts require not only broad empirical uniformities but also mechanisms that cause those uniformities. To the extent that mechanisms become uniform and universal, furthermore, their identification starts to resemble a search for covering laws.

But two big differences between covering law and mechanism-based explanations intervene. First, practitioners of mechanistic explanation generally deny that any strong, interesting recurrences of large-scale social structures and processes occur. They therefore question the utility of seeking law-like empirical generalizations—at any level of abstraction—by comparing big chunks of history.

Second, although mechanisms by definition have uniform immediate effects, their aggregate, cumulative, and longer-term effects vary considerably depending on initial conditions and on combinations with other mechanisms. For example, the mechanism of brokerage always connects at least two social sites more directly than they were previously connected, but the activation of brokerage does not in itself guarantee more effective coordination of action at the connected sites; that depends on initial conditions and combinations with other mechanisms.

As represented by manuals, courses, and presidential addresses, approved political science doctrine generally favors some combination of propensity and covering law explanations. To explain political action means to reconstruct accurately the state of an actor—especially, but not exclusively, the intentions of a cogitating individual—at the point of action, but to locate that state as a special case of a general law concerning human behavior. Such a doctrine rests on an implausible claim: that ultimately all political processes result from extremely general uniformities in the propensities of human actors, especially individual actors. Despite more than a century of strenuous effort, political scientists have securely identified no such uniformities. But they have recurrently identified widely operating causal mechanisms and processes. Rather than continuing to search for propensity-governing covering laws, it would therefore make sense to switch whole-heartedly toward specification of mechanisms and processes.

## MECHANISMS, PROCESSES, AND EPISODES

Let us adopt a simple distinction among mechanisms, processes, and episodes.

Mechanisms form a delimited class of events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety

of situations. For example, brokerage—the joining of two or more previously less connected social sites through the intervention of third parties—constitutes a political mechanism of extremely general scope.

Processes are frequently occurring combinations or sequences of mechanisms. For example, scale shift—an alteration in the range of sites engaging in coordinated action—regularly results from a concatenation of brokerage with the mechanisms of diffusion, emulation, and attribution of similarity.

Episodes are bounded streams of social life. For example, depending on our analytical purposes, we can adopt the Mexican presidential election of 2000, the 1999–2000 campaign leading to that election, or the entire period of opposition mobilization from 1988 to 2000 as the episode under examination.

Episodes sometimes acquire social significance because participants or observers construct names, boundaries, and stories corresponding to them—this revolution, that emigration, and so on. The manner in which episodes acquire shared meanings deserves close study. But we have no a priori warrant to believe that episodes grouped by similar criteria spring from similar causes. Students of episodes therefore face three logically distinct problems: (a) delineating episodes so that they provide material for coherent comparisons, (b) grouping episodes according to causal similarity and dissimilarity, and (c) explaining how some episodes acquire politically significant names and meanings.

Political scientists have invested considerable energy in the delineation of episodes. Analysts often chop continuous streams of social life into episodes according to conventions of their own making, delineating generations, social movements, fads, and the like (Azar & Ben-Dak 1973, Olzak 1989, Cioffi-Revilla 1990, Brockett 1992, Diani & Eyerman 1992, Ragin & Becker 1992, White 1993, Gerner et al 1994, Favre et al 1997, Mohr & Franzosi 1997, Franzosi 1998a,b, Hug & Wisler 1998, Rucht et al 1998, Shapiro & Markoff 1998, Oliver & Myers 1999, Rucht & Koopmans 1999, Mohr 2000). Students of democratization (e.g. Stephens 1989, Inkeles 1991, Rueschemeyer et al 1992, Lafargue 1996, Bratton & van de Walle 1997, Mueller 1997, Ramirez et al 1997, Collier 1999, López-Alves 2000) have frequently lined up ostensibly comparable episodes in different countries and periods in order to establish generalizations concerning preconditions, transitions, or democratic consolidation.

In general, analysts of mechanisms and processes regard the coherence and significance of episodes as something to be proven rather than assumed. They reject the common view that the episodes people call revolutions, social movements, or democratic transitions constitute *sui generis* phenomena, each conforming to a coherent internal logic. These analysts find that uniformly identified episodes provide convenient frames for comparison as they seek to identify crucial mechanisms and processes within them. Choice of episodes, however, crucially influences the effectiveness of such a search. It makes a large difference, for example, whether students of generational effects distinguish generations by means of arbitrary time periods or presumably critical events.

## DEMOCRATIZATION AS A CASE IN POINT

To clarify the stakes of choices among skepticism, covering law accounts, propensity explanations, system ideas, and mechanism/process explanations, it will help to narrow our empirical focus. Instead of reviewing international relations disputes, rational choice controversies, and similar well-defined sites of competing-paradigm exercises across political science, the remainder of this essay concentrates on democratization, a field of energetic inquiry where disputes over explanatory principles have not yet achieved such sophistication. This field invites attention because some of political science's brightest ideas concern democratization, yet specialists in the subject generally proceed as if they were engaged in well-joined comparisons of competing theories. (That happens, I speculate, especially where competing practical proposals lie close at hand; ostensibly competing *explanations of democratization link to competing programs for democratization.*) In fact, skepticism, covering law accounts, propensity analyses, system ideas, and mechanism/process explanations all jostle for space within the zone of democratization. Explanatory choices faced by democratization specialists pervade most of political science—indeed social science and history as a whole. Thus, we can observe the whole world in a fairly small pond.

Rather than surveying alternative approaches to democratization, I focus on exemplary recent works by Collier (1999) and Yashar (1997). Reflecting on other political scientists' attempts to explain democratization, Collier writes as if alternative theories were competing. She concludes that recent analyses have concentrated excessively on deliberate elite decisions at the expense of social processes and popular actors. Classical theorists of democracy from Aristotle onward stressed either broad historical processes or necessary structural and cultural conditions for democratization, but those classical traditions have given way to quick specifications of favorable conditions followed by extensive analyses of elite agency:

The dominant framework used in theoretical and comparative accounts, then, has not only adopted an actor-based perspective rather than a structural one but also tends to privilege certain kinds of actors: individual elites rather than collective actors, strategically defined actors rather than class-defined actors, and state actors over societal actors.

(Collier 1999:8)

More than competing explanations confront each other here. Collier is describing alternative principles of explanation, and therefore alternative specifications of what students of democratization must explain. In the accounts she criticizes (but, ironically, ultimately joins), explanation consists of specifying the motivations and actions of those power holders that proposed and enacted democratizing reforms during moments of relatively rapid and definitive movement into democratic terrain.

The field's current emphasis on strategic elite decision making marks a decided shift from once prevalent analyses of political culture, social structure, and institutional processes. Much earlier work conceived of explanation as identifying durable features of polities that caused democratization to begin, succeed, or fail. Scholars such as Rokkan and Moore once offered long-term political process explanations of democratization and its alternatives [Rokkan 1969, 1970; Moore 1993 (1966); see also Torsvik 1981, Stephens 1989, Immerfall 1992, Skocpol 1998]. By self-consciously criticizing, extending, and modifying the Moore-inspired analysis of Rueschemeyer et al (1992, 1993), Collier gestures toward that earlier tradition.

Yet Collier herself implicitly accepts most of the recent shift away from long-term explanation; she pleads mainly for inclusion of workers as sometime advocates and agents of democracy. Her concentration on temporally compact "democratic episodes" during which polities passed from nondemocratic to democratic regimes draws attention away from the long-term processes dear to Rokkan, Moore, and their followers. Collier's systematic comparison of 38 such episodes in 27 countries demonstrates how often organized workers did, indeed, participate directly and consequentially in transitions to more democratic regimes.

Collier concludes that in episodes of democratization occurring between 1848 and 1931 (mainly in Europe), workers played a less central part than previous analyses—especially those of Rueschemeyer et al—have suggested. In episodes from 1974 to 1990 (mainly in Latin America), however, workers figured more centrally than today's transitologists have generally allowed. Thus Collier challenges elite-centered analyses but adopts their conception of explanation: in Collier's book, explanation consists of correctly attributing agency to crucial actors at the point of transition.

Not all challengers to elite-centered explanations travel in the same direction. Yashar (1997) joins Collier in stressing the limits of both necessary-condition and elite-centered analyses. Like Collier, furthermore, she rejects attempts to build one-size-fits-all general theories of democratization.

Grand theorizing at one time attempted to do so, by focusing on structural patterns of agrarian capitalism, industrialization, levels of development, and international capital. Subsequent middle-range theorizing maintained an emphasis on structural patterns but focused on particular sets of cases. While these grand and middle-range theories delineated general patterns that were particularly inimical to or supportive of democracy, they were less clear about the process and causal mechanisms by which particular democracies were founded. More recently, scholars have attempted to redress these problems by focusing on the particular actors involved in founding and overthrowing democracies. These agency- and process-oriented explanations, however, have assumed a largely descriptive cast and have proven less than successful in explaining the conditions under which newly founded democracies endure.

(Yashar 1997:2)



So saying, however, Yashar begins to break with Collier's analysis of democratization. She constructs a historically grounded comparison of democratization and its failures in Costa Rica and Guatemala from the 1870s to the 1950s. Both countries installed authoritarian regimes in the 1870s, both regimes resisted popular mobilization for reform during the 1930s, both installed left-populist governments in the 1940s, and in both cases, the critical transition to divergent democratic and authoritarian regimes began with concerted, armed opposition to those left-populist governments. Yashar seeks to explain both (a) divergent outcomes to similar crises and (b) subsequent survival of distinctly different regimes. In doing so she switches away from necessary conditions and elite strategies toward the operation of very general causal mechanisms within historically specific settings.

Yashar (1997) addresses two distinct questions: (a) During the period 1941–1954 (more precisely 1941–1948 in Costa Rica, 1944–1954 in Guatemala), why did a democratizing coalition come to power in Costa Rica but not in Guatemala? (b) Subsequently, why did Costa Rica continue a process of democratization while Guatemala veered into repressive authoritarianism? Her explanations center on the mechanisms that caused Costa Rica's reform coalition of the 1940s to survive and Guatemala's to splinter, both in the face of determined opposition from armed forces and members of the agrarian elite.

Yashar's answer does not lie in the more peaceful proclivities of Costa Rican elites. Although a military invasion followed by a coup did initiate Guatemala's definitive swing toward authoritarianism in 1954, it was not incremental adjustment but civil war that initiated Costa Rica's definitive swing toward democracy in 1948. The fact that the United States backed Guatemala's 1954 invasion and coup, Yashar shows, by no means explains the different fates of the two countries. Similar domestic political processes, permuted in subtly different organizational contexts, yielded dramatically disparate outcomes.

After the critical period of 1948–1954, Guatemala and Costa Rica struck off in nearly opposite directions. Backed by the United States, the Guatemalan government built up its military strength. It sought to penetrate and subdue the countryside through military and paramilitary force. During the 30 years of civil war that followed, Guatemala suffered some 100,000 deaths and 38,000 disappearances (Stanley 1996:3). Meanwhile, Costa Rica's 1949 constitution abolished the army and established civilian-controlled police forces, thus initiating a transition to relatively nonviolent domestic politics after the civil war of 1948. Government assistance programs and political party mobilization integrated Costa Rican rural dwellers into national politics. After 1954, divergences between authoritarian Guatemala and democratic Costa Rica only sharpened.

Minimizing international demonstration effects, Yashar argues that similar processes produced different outcomes in the two countries.

First, a publicly expressed division within the elite in the context of rising popular demands for political and economic inclusion precipitated the formation of democratizing reform alliances. Second, the Liberal period

shaped the reform strategies deployed and the alliances formed. Third, the balance of power within the reform coalition determined the stability of the reform coalition itself.

(Yashar 1997:70)

More concretely, in both countries agrarian elites mobilized against city-based reform governments during the 1940s, but the crucial mechanism of coalition-formation produced different outcomes in Costa Rica and Guatemala.

In Costa Rica, a split in the governing coalition left middle-class opponents of the previous populist-reformist regime in control of the governmental apparatus. Those new governors outflanked both the previous labor-communist-populist coalition and the agrarian opposition by nationalizing Costa Rican banks, imposing an emergency tax, and dismantling the army. Their government then proceeded to solidify its rural support by means of welfare programs, market controls, and party-based political mobilization. Both flanks reluctantly but durably accepted integration into the new regime.

Despite having followed a trajectory parallel to Costa Rica's into the 1940s, Guatemala later pursued a startlingly different path. As in Costa Rica, a left-populist government came to power in Guatemala during the 1940s and generated widespread elite opposition. A 1947 labor code and a 1952 agrarian reform, both liberal in conception, further stimulated antiregime mobilization by the rural oligarchy. Unlike its politically divided Costa Rican counterpart, the Guatemalan Catholic hierarchy generally aligned itself with the opposition to organized labor and to what the Church denounced as communism. Middle-class activists split among labor advocates, moderate reformers, and anticommunists.

Within a deeply fragmented opposition to the regime, the military offered the strongest connections and the greatest capacity for collective action. With US backing, a small "liberation army" invaded from Honduras in June 1954. Although that force remained close to the Honduran border, within 10 days the Guatemalan army—likewise with US support—had assumed power. In telling these two contrasting stories, Yashar makes a strong case that coalition-shaping mechanisms caused crucial differences between authoritarian Guatemala and democratic Costa Rica.

Making the same comparison after the fact, other analysts frequently point to supposedly durable national differences in political economy or political culture as causes of the contrasting outcomes. Pursuing a larger comparison among El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, for example, Paige stresses differences between positions of the Guatemalan and Costa Rican coffee elites.

The Guatemalan elite was overwhelmingly landed and agrarian, with a relatively weak agro-industrial fraction. Debt servitude, serfdom, and other forms of legal bondage created class relations similar to those of the European feudal manor.... Although these relations began to change with the post-World War II rationalization of coffee, before the 1970s institutions of coerced labor inhibited popular mobilization and created a strong interest in

authoritarian political structures to control the unfree population.... The most striking contrast with the Guatemalan elite was that of Costa Rica, in which the agrarian fraction was relatively weakly developed because it lost control over substantial amounts of land to a persistent class of family farmers.... The Costa Rican elite was overwhelmingly an elite of processors. Class relations revolved around the relationship between these processors and the small holders, not between the landowners and their laborers.... Politics revolved around the gentlemanly disagreements between large and small property owners, and the elite soon found that such conflicts could be easily managed by the gradual extension of the franchise to rural property owners and the establishment of democratic institutions.

(Paige 1997:87)

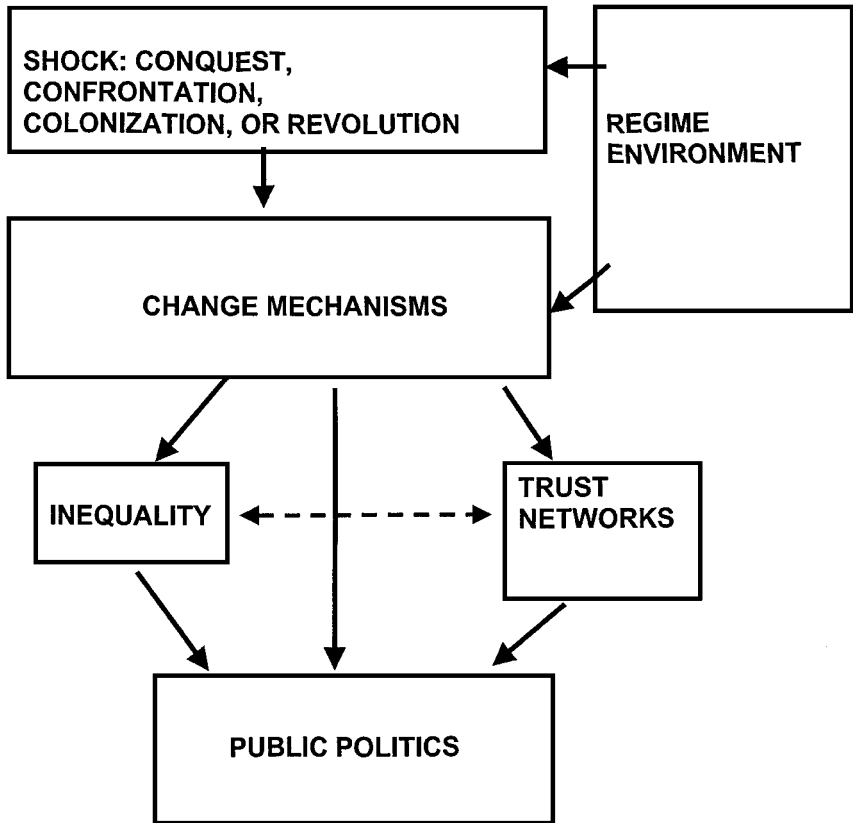
Despite his book's later concessions to the recent influence of neoliberal ideologies, Paige generally depends on durable features of class structure for his explanations of democratization or its absence. In his accounts, divergences of the 1940s and 1950s sprang from structural differences established decades earlier.

In contrast, Yashar insists on considerable similarities between the political economies and governmental regimes of Guatemala and Costa Rica up to the 1940s. Although differing political arrangements laid down by previous history strongly affected the postwar political realignments of Guatemala and Costa Rica, Yashar demonstrates dramatically widening divergences between the two polities during and after the struggles of 1941–1954.

Yashar conducts her analysis soberly, leading to the conclusion that in the two cases at hand, the longer-term outcomes of struggles over property distribution and control of the countryside—struggles not fought explicitly between advocates and opponents of democracy as such—fundamentally affected subsequent democratization and its failures. She argues sensibly that both kinds of struggle matter more generally in democratization, and urges deep historical investigations of similar causal processes elsewhere. Her account of democratization stresses a search for robust causal mechanisms rather than for general models, universally applicable necessary and sufficient conditions, or analyses of agency at crucial points of transition.

## MECHANISMS OF DEMOCRATIZATION

How might a full-fledged reorientation of explanation to causal mechanisms and processes facilitate the study of democratization? Let me sketch an illustrative mechanism-based argument. Democracy, for present purposes, consists of protected consultation—relations between agents and subjects of a government in which (a) different categories of subjects enjoy relatively broad and equal access to agents, (b) governmental disposition of persons, activities, and resources within the government's purview responds to binding consultation of subjects, and (c) subjects receive protection against arbitrary action by governmental agents.



**Figure 1** A mechanism-based account of democratization. For clarity, this diagram erases the distinction between transitions to democratic regimes and survival of democratic regimes, on the assumption that the same mechanisms and processes explain transition and survival.

Democratization is any move toward protected consultation, de-democratization any move away from protected consultation.

How and why do such moves occur? Figure 1 summarizes the argument's broadest terms. Democratization, runs the argument, emerges from interacting changes in three analytically separable but interdependent sets of social relations: public politics, inequality, and networks of trust. In the course of democratization, the bulk of a government's subject population acquires binding, protected, relatively equal claims on the government's agents, activities, and resources. In a related process, categorical inequality declines in those areas of social life that either constitute or immediately support participation in public politics. Finally, a significant shift occurs in the locus of interpersonal networks on which people rely when undertaking risky, long-term enterprises such as marriage, long-distance trade, membership in crafts, and investment of savings; such networks move from evasion of governmental detection and control to involvement of government agents and

presumption that such agents will meet their long-term commitments. Only where the three sets of changes intersect does effective, durable democracy emerge.

A variety of changes, bundled together as “regime environment” in Figure 1, activate mechanisms that in turn generate incremental alterations in public politics, inequality, and networks of trust. Changes of inequality and of trust networks have independent effects on public politics. Regime environment also produces occasional shocks in the form of conquest, confrontation, colonization, or revolution. Such shocks accelerate the standard change mechanisms, thus causing relatively rapid alterations of public politics, inequality, and networks of trust. Whether incremental or abrupt, those alterations interact. Under rare but specifiable conditions, those interactions lead to democratization. Democratization is not a product but a special condition of public politics. Although these ideas emerged from my effort to explain variations in democratization and its failures across Europe since 1650, they coincide with the arguments Yashar (1997) applies to the experiences of Costa Rica and Guatemala.

What mechanisms produce the changes in question? Table 1 lists likely suspects. It includes both individual mechanisms and robust processes—sequences and combinations of mechanisms that recur over a wide range of circumstances and produce substantially similar immediate effects. Following the idea that democratization consists of changing relations between subjects and governments, the list concentrates on relational mechanisms and processes. A fuller account would include more cognitive and environmental mechanisms, for example (a) shifts in beliefs about the likelihood that governmental agents will meet their commitments and (b) increases or decreases in the government’s resource base. Since previous treatments of democratization have stressed cognitive and/or environmental mechanisms, however, it seems useful to bring out the likely importance of relational mechanisms in this discussion.

Table 1 groups mechanisms and processes in three categories: those affecting relations between categorical inequality and public politics, those affecting relations between trust networks and public politics, and those operating chiefly within public politics. The causal account, therefore, proceeds at three levels. First, any changes that increase insulation between nongovernmental inequalities and public politics, integrate interpersonal trust networks into public politics, and push public politics itself toward protected consultation promote democratization wherever they occur. Second, particular mechanisms and processes favor insulation of inequality, integration of trust networks, and transformation of public politics. Third, when confrontation, colonization, conquest, and revolution promote democratization, they do so by accelerating the same mechanisms and processes that promote incremental democratization.

Parts of this argument are deliberately tautological. To say that transformation of public politics in the direction of protected consultation promotes democratization merely restates the definition of democracy adopted here. The tautologies, however, serve important purposes. They specify what students of democratization must explain. They thereby focus the search for explanations on proximate causes of those explananda—mechanisms that directly alter connections

**TABLE 1** Sample mechanisms and processes promoting democratization<sup>a</sup>Inequality

Dissolution of coercive controls supporting current relations of exploitation and opportunity hoarding

Education and communication that alter adaptations supporting current relations of exploitation and opportunity hoarding

Education and communication that supplant existing models of organization and hence alter emulation of inequality in formation of new organizations

Equalization of assets and/or well-being across categories within the population at large

Insulation of existing categorical inequalities from public politics

Networks of Trust

Creation of external guarantees for government commitments

Incorporation and expansion of existing trust networks into the polity

Governmental absorption or destruction of previously autonomous patron-client networks

Disintegration of existing trust networks

Expansion of the population lacking access to effective trust networks for their major long-term, risky enterprises

Appearance of new long-term, risky opportunities that existing trust networks cannot handle

Substantial increase of government's resources for risk reduction and/or compensation of loss

Visible governmental meeting of commitments to the advantage of substantial new segments of the population

Public Politics

Coalition formation between segments of ruling classes and constituted political actors that are currently excluded from power

Brokerage of coalitions across unequal categories and/or distinct trust networks

Central co-optation or elimination of previously autonomous political intermediaries

Bureaucratic containment of previously autonomous military forces

Dissolution or segregation from government of nongovernmental patron-client networks

Imposition of uniform governmental structures and practices through the government's jurisdiction

Mobilization-repression-bargaining cycles during which currently excluded actors act collectively in ways that threaten survival of the government and/or its ruling classes, governmental repression fails, struggle ensues, and settlements concede political standing and/or rights to mobilized actors

Extraction-resistance-bargaining cycles during which governmental agents demand resources that are under control of nongovernmental networks and committed to nongovernmental ends, holders of those resources resist, struggle ensues, and settlements emerge in which people yield resources but receive credible guarantees with respect to constraints on future extraction

<sup>a</sup>For clarity, the table excludes negative complements of these mechanisms and processes, e.g. fortification (rather than dissolution) of coercive controls supporting current relations of exploitation and opportunity hoarding.

between trust networks and public politics, for example, and other mechanisms that shift the intersection between governmental and nongovernmental inequalities. As Collier's (1999) analysis encourages us to believe, proximate causes certainly include cognitive mechanisms and processes—but they also emphatically include relational and environmental mechanisms.

## France Versus Britain

A quick comparison of France and the British Isles from 1650 to 2000 will concretize the program of theory and research that follows. First we must decide on the units of observation. Neither polity had constant boundaries over the entire period. Even disregarding the fact that in 1650 the Fronde deprived young Louis XIV and his government of control over much of their nominal territory, the France of that time lacked Roussillon, much of Provence, Corsica, Savoy, Franche-Comté, most of Alsace-Lorraine, and significant sections of the North. Even after 1800, France's territory expanded and contracted several times.

Nor did the British polity remain constant. A traveler through the British Isles in 1650 would have seen a Scotland rebelling openly against English hegemony and a Scottish military force in northern England backing Charles Stuart's claim to succeed his father Charles I; just the previous year, England's contentious revolutionaries had united temporarily to decapitate King Charles. In Ireland, Catholic leaders were battling not only each other but also the English invading force of Oliver Cromwell. Nor—as current struggles in Ulster make clear—did territorial uncertainty cease with the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689. To trace democratization and its failures in “France” and the “British Isles” over the 350-year period requires frequent readjustment of the governments, territories, and populations at risk.

These specifications made, some important puzzles arise. Why did the French create some of the world's most widely emulated democratic institutions, yet fluctuate rapidly between relatively democratic and undemocratic regimes in 1789–1793, 1829–1832, 1847–1851, 1868–1875, and 1936–1946? Why were the same British who struggled their way to fairly stable democracy in Great Britain after 1815 never able to perform the trick in Ireland? Why did some French and British colonies end up fairly democratic and others quite authoritarian? Such questions make it clear that confrontation, conquest, colonization, and revolution all affected the prospects for democracy in France and the British Isles multiple times since 1650.

The mechanism-based program laid out above suggests answering such questions by tracing alterations in trust networks, categorical inequality, and their intersections with public politics year by year over the entire period. That procedure will not explain anything, but it will specify what must be explained. In nineteenth-century France, for example, connections between public politics and workers' trust networks as represented by mutual aid societies, trade networks, and migration systems clearly waxed and waned in rhythm with the rise and fall of protected consultation; how and why those connections changed deserve close attention from anyone who seeks to explain French democratization.

Table 1's roster of mechanisms suggests looking closely at disintegration of existing trust networks as well as governmental absorption and destruction of previously autonomous patron-client networks. France's tumultuous movement into less undemocratic institutions between the later Second Empire and World War I, for example, resulted in part from the decay of vast, clandestine networks of artisans and their replacement by legal workers' organizations integrated into public politics by means of political parties, recognized labor unions, and such institutions as Bourses du Travail.

On the British side of the Channel, the equally tumultuous 1830s provide a splendid opportunity for examination of democratizing mechanisms at work. In surprising parallels to the democratizing processes described by Yashar (1997), the British government twice quelled insurrection by engineering compromises that produced democratic consequences. First, after repeated earlier failures of campaigns for Catholic political rights, Wellington's government forced through Catholic Emancipation (1829) in response to an enormous Irish mobilization despite strong anti-Catholic organization within Great Britain itself. Then Grey's government responded to vast agitation within Great Britain—agitation inspired by and built in part on the organizational webs of Catholic Emancipation—by passing the Reform Act (1832) over the initially fierce opposition of the king, the House of Lords, and substantial portions of the national power structure. That the 1832 act excluded most of the workers who had participated in mobilization for parliamentary reform and thereby contributed to the subsequent rise of worker-based democracy-demanding Chartism only confirms the importance of examining the actual mechanisms by which democratization occurs.

## AGENDA

Adoption of mechanistic explanations has strong implications for research and analysis in political science. Let me single out four of them: (a) simultaneous downgrading and upgrading of contentious episodes as objects of study, (b) reorientation of explanations from episodes to processes, (c) comparative examination of mechanisms and processes as such, and (d) integration of cognitive, relational, and environmental mechanisms.

### Simultaneous Downgrading and Upgrading of Contentious Episodes as Objects of Study

The downgrading consists of denying *sui generis* reality to contentious episodes. As conventional or arbitrary entities, events we call revolutions, nationalist mobilizations, wars, and episodes of democratization take shape as retrospective constructions by observers, participants, and analysts. They do not have essences, natural histories, or self-motivating logics. Moreover, they intersect with more routine processes, which is all the more reason to avoid segmenting their study.

Episodes also require upgrading, however. Once we recognize that we have snipped them from their historical and social contexts, we must make explicit the



procedures and criteria that mark their beginnings, ends, boundaries, and participants. That calls for the development of expertise in delineating comparable events. The process by which a given episode acquires the standing of revolution, social movement, war, strike, or something else has political weight and content; such designations affect not only how subsequent analysts explain them but also how participants behave and how third parties react to them. Thus the social processes that label and bound episodes belong on our agenda.

We must also notice that choices of scale—for example, the choice among particular elections, electoral campaigns, and whole transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes as the unit of observation—significantly affect both the nature of comparisons among episodes and the likely relative prominence of various mechanisms and processes. Many mechanisms and processes operate at multiple scales; disintegration of trust networks often produces changes in small groups as well as in whole countries. But others occur much more frequently at one scale than another; commitment occurs at the scale of the individual and produces collective action at an interpersonal scale. Tactical innovation happens mainly at a local scale, followed by diffusion (a cognitive-relational process) to broader scales.

Democratization, in contrast, depends by definition on the presence of government and polity, and thus it occurs at scales from community to world region. A major challenge is to examine how the mechanisms and processes that characterize contention at one scale affect it at another—for example, between the local and the global in democratic transitions (Markoff 1996, 1999).

### Reorientation of Explanations from Episodes to Processes

Although recent analyses support retention of comparable episodes as units of observation, they also recommend abandonment of efforts to explain all salient features of whole episodes. They thereby rule out the common procedure of matching episodes to general models in order to demonstrate that the model does not fit some salient feature of the episode, then modifying the general model to improve the fit. Recent studies of democratization do not offer much hope of gaining explanatory leverage by matching whole episodes with invariant general models of mobilization, transition, or consolidation, much less with invariant general models of democratization in all its varieties.

Instead, political scientists should concentrate their explanations on selected features of episodes (for example, why rapid shifts in identity occurred) or on recurrent processes in families of episodes (for example, how and why cross-class alliances frequently create or expand revolutionary situations). In either mode, explanation consists of identifying crucial mechanisms and their combination into transforming processes.

### Comparative Examination of Mechanisms and Processes as Such

Far beyond the zone of democratization, the mechanisms and processes enumerated in Table 1 deserve comparative analysis for their own sake. Bureaucratic

containment of previously autonomous military forces, for example, seems almost a necessary condition for democratization, but it also has significant effects on the capacity of government, the likelihood of civil war, the level of domestic violence, and even the prospect that a given state will engage in international war. It would advance political inquiry to encourage comparative research into the mechanisms of bureaucratic containment while continuing close examination of historical episodes. Similarly, political science could only gain from superior comparative knowledge concerning mechanisms and processes that connect or disconnect inequalities within and outside public politics.

### Integration of Cognitive, Relational, and Environmental Mechanisms

Proceeding from the view that recent theorists of political phenomena, including democratization, have slighted relational processes, this essay deliberately emphasizes relational mechanisms. Nevertheless, my concrete analyses have repeatedly invoked combinations of relational with cognitive and/or environmental mechanisms. The mechanism called “insulation of existing categorical inequalities from public politics,” for example, inevitably includes a cognitive component defining boundaries among categories. Changing conceptions of racial, ethnic, gender, religious, or class differences therefore affect that insulation or its failure. Such shifts, furthermore, often result partly from changing balances of resources among people on opposite sides of categorical boundaries—for example, disproportionate increase of numbers or wealth on one side of the line

Under such circumstances, it is not clear in principle whether we are observing (a) two or three distinct mechanisms that frequently conjoin or (b) a combination of cognitive, relational, and environmental changes that is sufficiently invariant to justify treating it as a single robust process. Nor can we decide in general and in advance how the elements interact—whether, for example, cognitive shifts always precede relational changes or vice versa. Interaction among cognitive, relational, and environmental mechanisms presents urgent problems for theory and research on political processes.

### BACK TO FAMILIAR GROUND

Political scientists should not find the analysis of mechanisms and processes alien. Aristotle’s treatment of democracy and its ills, after all, specified mechanisms and processes by which transitions from one sort of regime to another occurred. Aristotle recognized distinctions within his major regime types, for example five types of democracy, of which the fifth

is that in which not the law, but the multitude, have the supreme power, and supersede the law by their decrees. This is a state of affairs brought about by the demagogues. For in democracies which are subject to the law the best citizens hold the first place, and there are no demagogues; but where

the laws are not supreme, there demagogues spring up. For the people becomes a monarch, and is many in one; and the many have the power in their hand, not as individuals, but collectively...this sort of democracy is to other democracies what tyranny is to other forms of monarchy.

(Barnes 1984:II, 2050–51)

Under these circumstances, furthermore, demagogues often stir up the rabble to attack the rich and thereby seize power for themselves. In this way, democracy turns into tyranny. Aristotle proceeded repeatedly from ostensibly static categories to dynamic causal processes. In thinking through the effects of different military formats, for example, he offered a shrewd causal account:

As there are four chief divisions of the common people, farmers, artisans, traders, labourers; so also there are four kinds of military forces—the cavalry, the heavy infantry, the light-armed troops, the navy. When the country is adapted for cavalry, then a strong oligarchy is likely to be established. For the security of the inhabitants depends upon a force of this sort, and only rich men can afford to keep horses. The second form of oligarchy prevails when a country is adapted to heavy infantry; for this service is better suited to the rich than to the poor. But the light-armed and the naval element are wholly democratic; and nowadays, where they are numerous, if the two parties quarrel, the oligarchy are often worsted by them in the struggle.

(Barnes 1984:II, 2096–97)

Amid the specification of favorable conditions for different sorts of regime, we find Aristotle identifying struggle-centered mechanisms by which transitions from regime to regime actually occur. A short version of my sermon therefore reads as follows: Emulate Aristotle.

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