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From the Spring of Nations to the Arab Spring: Building Better Typologies of Democratic Diffusion

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From the Spring of Nations to the Arab Spring:
Building Better Typologies of Democratic Diffusion

Seva Gunitsky*

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ABSTRACT

I propose a four-fold typology of democratic diffusion, centered around two dimensions: whether diffusion was vertical or horizontal, and whether it was driven by contagion or mediation. I define these terms and classify a variety of democratic waves according to these categories. This typology, I argue, allows for more theoretically-informed comparisons and contrasts among instances of diffusion. I then describe mechanisms of negative feedback (or counter-diffusion) that accompany the process, focusing on a) autocratic adaptation, b) the collapse of extraordinary ad hoc coalitions, c) cognitive heuristics, and d) shifting external pressures. Together, these factors help explain a persistent puzzle in the study of democratization – why waves of diffusion inevitably lead to partial or total rollback and collapse.

Keywords: democratic diffusion, regime waves, institutional emulation, counter-diffusion

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The hope and disappointment that accompanied the Arab Spring once again demonstrated the power of democratic diffusion. For more than two centuries, the dramatic spread and retreat of democracy across borders has profoundly shaped domestic institutions. From the Atlantic Wave of the late eighteenth century to the recent upheavals in the Middle East, democratization has often evolved through abrupt waves and surges, accompanied by equally sudden rollbacks and reversals.

How can we theorize about these turbulent, seemingly diverse, and often unsuccessful episodes of democratic cascades? This paper puts forward an integrated framework for examining democratic diffusion. I first lay out a typology of diffusion that focuses on recurring causal mechanisms, highlighting the contrasts and parallels across a range of historical cases and pointing toward integrated models of diffusion. Second, I present mechanisms of *counter-diffusion*, focusing on the crucial but often-ignored forces of negative feedback that lead to partial or total collapses of democratic waves.

The typology of democratic diffusion is organized along two dimensions. The first dimension contrasts *horizontal* and *vertical* diffusion, and focuses on the role played by sudden shifts in the international system. Namely, vertical diffusion stems from abrupt transformations in the distribution of hegemonic power (e.g., the democratic waves following the World Wars or the Soviet collapse), while horizontal diffusion occurs in the absence of such systemic shifts, and is instead driven by regional linkages and neighborhood spillover (e.g. the Arab Spring).

The second dimension, contrasting *contagion-driven* and *mediation-driven* diffusion, focuses on the influence of domestic factors in shaping the timing of diffusion. In cases of contagion, external impulses temporarily override domestic constraints, and as a result the timing of each outbreak is unrelated to internal triggers, leading to diffusion that sweeps over countries over the course of months or even weeks (e.g. the 1848 Spring of Nations). In mediation-driven diffusion, by contrast, the timing of each outbreak is conditioned by the interaction of external linkages with propitious domestic circumstances. In the Color Revolutions, for example, contested elections served as domestic focal points for coordinating protests, and thus the timing of these revolutions was shaped by domestic processes. External linkages and cross-border emulation remain crucial in these cases, since democratization in one state influences the attributes of democratization in others, but domestic factors also mediate the timing of subsequent transitions.

The interaction of these two categories leads to a four-fold categorization, each with its own peculiar dynamics, causal mechanisms, and success rates.¹ This typology can help

¹ Namely, the four categories are: 1)horizontal contagion, 2)horizontal mediation, 3)vertical contagion, and 4)vertical mediation. The two-by-two typology, with specific examples of each diffusion type, is presented in Table 1 (see page 9).

clarify why neither the 1989 Velvet Revolutions or the Color Revolutions are appropriate comparisons for the Arab Spring, despite the claims of some hopeful observers, and why the 1848 Spring of Nations instead offers the closest historical parallel.²

Beyond their underlying differences, what unites the vast majority of episodes of diffusion is the presence of counter-diffusion – the tendency for waves to crest, collapse, and roll back. The majority of diffusion models focus on positive feedback as the central element of this process. That is, they focus on self-reinforcing tendencies that lead to institutional cascades across borders via coercion, learning, competition, or emulation (Simmons et al. 2006). Simmons and Elkins (2004:171), for example, characterize the diffusion of liberalization as “the spread of liberal economic ideas and policies throughout the world”. And discussing the diffusion of democracy, Brinks and Coppedge (2006:464) focus on neighbor emulation, defined as the process by which “countries tend to become more like their immediate geographic neighbors over time”.

Yet most episodes of diffusion are defined by some degree of failure after an initial period of success. This democratic rollback can be total (as in the case of the post-WWI wave), or partial but persistent (as in the African wave following the Soviet collapse). I identify four recurring mechanisms of counter-diffusion: 1) the collapse of extraordinary ad hoc coalitions, 2) elite adaptation, 3) cognitive heuristics, and 4) shifting external pressures. Together, these factors help explain a persistent puzzle in the study of democratization – why waves of diffusion inevitably lead to partial or total rollback and collapse. These dynamics can also help explain a wide range of phenomena, such as the proliferation of competitive autocracies since the end of the Third Wave.

Counter-diffusion, I argue, is an intrinsic component of diffusion because the initial period of transitions creates extremely strong yet temporary incentives and opportunities for domestic reforms. The result is democratic “overstretch”, the institutional version of a stock market bubble. The forces that initiate the wave thus also sow the seeds of its eventual demise. Diffusion is therefore better understood as the complex interplay of positive and negative feedback rather than the unilinear process often portrayed by scholars of diffusion. To argue, as Oliver and Meyers (2003:174) do, that diffusion “is the process whereby past events make future events more likely” is to miss this crucial interplay.

The goals of this paper are therefore twofold: to build a conceptual framework for analyzing historical varieties of diffusion, and to put forward a dynamic model of diffusion that links initial successes of democratic cascades with subsequent failures of democratic

² Weyland (2012) also argues that the closest parallel to 2011 is 1848, though he emphasizes the importance of cognitive heuristics in both waves – an argument that I examine below. I focus instead on both cases as examples of the “horizontal contagion” sub-type.

consolidation. Moreover, these tasks are connected, because certain types of diffusion are associated with particular mechanisms of counter-diffusion. Elite adaptation, for example, is particularly prevalent in mediation-driven diffusion, because the predictability of domestic focal points allows rulers to anticipate (and thus pre-empt) moments of unrest. Likewise, vertical diffusion creates unique mechanisms of negative feedback, in the form of shifting systemic pressures, that are often absent in processes of horizontal diffusion. After analyzing the varieties of diffusion and the mechanisms of counter-diffusion, the last section of the paper examines the interaction of these related processes.

The diffusion of democratic protest does not necessarily mean the diffusion of democracy, even if the protestors are united in their democratic goals (Hale 2013). In the cases examined here, from the Riflers of Batavia to the students in Tahrir Square, actors aggressively sought greater political accountability from the few. Yet many failed, or turned to tyrants soon after succeeding; many revolutions, as Jacques Mallet du Pan lamented, have devoured their own children. The fact that Egypt has been unable to consolidate the democratic gains achieved in the early stages of the Arab Spring does not negate the democratic character of the initial revolts that overthrew Mubarak’s regime. As many scholars have noted, the factors that lead to democratic transitions may be very different from factors that shape democratic consolidation (Linz and Stepan 1996; Przeworski et.al. 1996, 2000; Rustow 1970). While the outcomes of these episodes of mass contention often fell far short of true democracy, my interest here is not in diffusion as an outcome but diffusion as a *process* – the means through which external linkages and domestic factors interact to forge attempts at institutional reform.

I. A Typology of Democratic Diffusion

The early literature on regime diffusion focused on large-n aggregative statistics, often employing sophisticated quantitative techniques and spatial models. And while useful in demonstrating the importance of diffusion, this approach said little about the concrete causal pathways that channeled the spread of institutions across national borders. As Giaraldi (2013:470) notes in a recent literature review, “while the literature has convincingly demonstrated that policies diffuse, why that occurs remains much less clear.” The initial studies of democratic diffusion thus resembled the early literature on the democratic peace – a powerful empirical regularity begging for a theoretical explanation.

Over the past few years, a “second wave” of diffusion studies has moved beyond aggregative statistics and focused on the specific mechanisms that drive the process.³ But

³ For examples of mechanism-focused studies of diffusion, see Beissinger (2007), Simmons et. al. (2006), Shipan and Volden (2008), Solingen (2012), and Weyland (2009). For

while the proliferation of models and mechanisms has led to a number of improvements in the study of diffusion, it has also muddled the conceptual underpinnings of this often-amorphous concept. This section presents a typology of diffusion that integrates a variety of historical episodes into a unifying theoretical framework.

Horizontal versus Vertical Diffusion

The first fundamental distinction among cases of diffusion resides in the role played by dramatic transformations of the international system. The aftermath of twentieth-century geopolitical upheavals – the World Wars and the Soviet Collapse – each produced powerful bursts of democratic reform that swept across many countries over a relatively short time. In the wake of democracy’s victory in the Great War, for example, over a dozen newly-born European states emerged from the ruins of collapsed empires and adopted democratic institutions like parliaments, civil liberties, and universal suffrage. Similarly, the years after World War II saw the democratization of Western Europe and Japan, and a brief resurgence of democracy in South America – a period that Huntington (1991) dubbed “the second wave” of democratization. Finally, the collapse of the Soviet system in 1989-91 led to a dramatic series of democratic revolutions in eastern Europe and a temporary surge of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. All of these cases experienced partial or total rollbacks – but in the short term, they generated strong incentives for the diffusion of democratic institutions. These episodes of vertical diffusion were driven by abrupt changes in the hierarchy of leading great powers, forging incentives and opportunities for bursts of domestic reforms.⁴

Horizontal diffusion, on the other hand, occurs in the absence of geopolitical shifts and is unmoored from any broader transformations of the international order. Instead, it unfolds through shared horizontal networks and regional effects. In these cases, a spark of revolt in one country crosses national borders and spreads to neighbors or states with similar grievances and internal dynamics. The process then becomes self-reinforcing – as more countries experience upheaval, opposition leaders and embittered masses elsewhere update their beliefs about the possibility of success, or simply become inspired by the efforts of others, and join in the wave – a process that occurred, most recently and dramatically, in the Arab Spring. Unlike the wave that followed the aftermath of World War I, for example, democratic diffusion in the Atlantic Wave or the Color Revolutions took place in the absence of major hegemonic transitions.

examples of large-n studies of diffusion, see Brinks and Coppedge (2006), Leeson and Dean (2009), O’Loughlin et. al. (1998), Starr (1991), and Starr and Lindborg (2003).

⁴ For a detailed look at how hegemonic shocks produce democratic waves, see Gunitsky (2014).

Figure 1, below, contrasts the two models of diffusion:

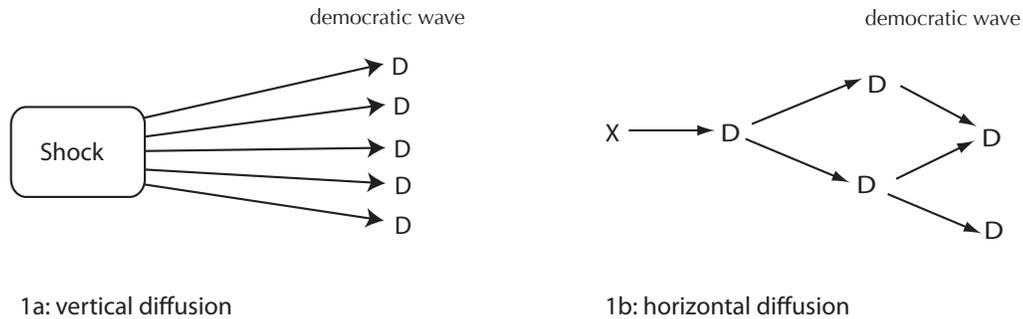


Figure 1: Models of vertical (1a) and horizontal (1b) diffusion. Each “D” represents an instance of democratization.

While vertical diffusion is a result of rapid changes in the structure of the international system, horizontal diffusion occurs in the absence of such changes and is instead rooted in the shared linkages that create channels for institutional spillover. The distinction between horizontal and vertical diffusion was well captured by Max Weber (1922[1978]:23): “If at the beginning of a shower a number of people on the street put up their umbrellas at the same time,” he writes, “this would not ordinarily be a case of [social] action, but rather of all reacting in the same way to the like need of protection from the rain.” In cases of vertical diffusion, an exogenous shock creates a wave of transitions by shifting the institutional preferences and incentives of many domestic actors simultaneously. Or, as Way (2011) puts it, the 1989 revolutions were not primarily the product of a domino effect, in which revolution in one country triggered regional spillover. Rather, the revolutions were made possible by the abandonment of the Brezhnev doctrine inside the USSR, producing a major shift in the geopolitical structure of the region. Instead of a horizontal process in which a single domino triggered a democratic cascade, the dominoes fell because the table itself was beginning to shake.

One possible criticism of this distinction is that vertical diffusion does not constitute a “true” instance of diffusion if we take the latter to mean a process that lacks coordinated coercion. Elkins (2008:43), for example, describes diffusion as a process of uncoordinated interdependence, “uncoordinated in the sense that a country’s decision to democratize is not imposed by another.” However, a number of diffusion studies include both vertical and horizontal elements in their analysis; Simmons et. al. (2006), for example, include “coercion” and “promotion” as two possible mechanisms of diffusion, while Gilardi (2013:454)

notes that “a significant portion of the literature considers coercion integral to diffusion.”⁵

Moreover, examining vertical diffusion is important even for studies that focus purely on horizontal or neighborhood effects, because vertical diffusion often leads to its horizontal counterpart. That is, a hegemonic shock creates incentives for an initial democratic cascade, which then leads laggards to take cues from these early democratizers and undertake their own reforms. Prompted by a geopolitical shift, the democratic wave can thus perpetuate itself through horizontal diffusion. In the 1989 revolutions, for instance, Soviet foreign policy reforms served as the crucial trigger for the onset of democratization, but the process was reinforced when pro-democracy movements around the region observed the successes of their peers and were inspired to follow their example. Vertical shocks can thus lead to a process of what might be called *hybrid diffusion*, as shown in Figure 2:

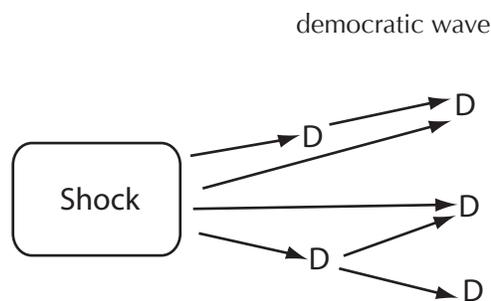


Figure 2: A model of hybrid diffusion. Geopolitical shocks can trigger regime waves which then reinforce themselves through horizontal diffusion.

In some cases, therefore, understanding horizontal diffusion is impossible without taking into account its vertical origins. The two processes can unfold jointly: to take Weber’s example, some people may open their umbrellas because they feel the rain, and others may do so because they see people opening their umbrellas. The dominos may fall because the table is shaking, but they may also knock each other over in the process.

Given this close association, why maintain a conceptual distinction between the two? The reason is that forces driving vertical diffusion are significantly stronger than the causes of horizontal diffusion. Vertical diffusion creates immensely strong incentives for bursts of democratization because the tectonic realignment of global hierarchies influences institutional opportunities in many countries at once. Both the initial dynamics of transitions and the subsequent mechanisms of counter-diffusion are consistently different in cases of vertical as opposed to horizontal diffusion, as examined in more detail in Section III, below.

⁵ Elsewhere, Elkins (2010:981-2) himself notes that “the transmission of policies across vertical as opposed to horizontal networks is a common theme in the diffusion literature”.

Boundaries between conceptual distinctions are often porous, and an argument might be made that it is difficult to distinguish the role of Soviet policy from the role of linkages among pro-democracy activists in the 1989 revolutions. In this case, however, vertical forces were a necessary pre-requisite for subsequent contagion. As Risse (1997:184) argues, “the new thinking in foreign policy and the renunciation of the Brezhnev doctrine enabled the peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe in the first place.” And according to Anderson (1999), “nothing fundamental could change in Eastern Europe so long as the Red Army remained ready to fire.” The fact that dissident groups had pushed for reforms long before 1989 only underscores the importance of the USSR, since these groups could do little to actually realize their demands until a realignment in Soviet policy. As Hale (2013:342) concludes, “archival research now makes clear we must consider Mikhail Gorbachev’s USSR as a common cause of similar democratizing events in East Europe.”

In sum, given the persistent differences in the causes and outcomes of vertical and horizontal cascades, theories of diffusion should be able to distinguish between episodes forged by geopolitical transformations from those driven by neighborhood spillover.

Contagion-Driven versus Mediation-Driven Diffusion

The second crucial distinction among varieties of diffusion resides in the role played by domestic factors – namely, in whether the *timing* of diffusion is mediated by domestic circumstances. Contagion-driven diffusion proceeds without regard for any domestic influences, and its timing is thus unrelated to any internal causes. This is the epidemiological model of diffusion as commonly conceived in social science (e.g. Rogers 1962). Democratization in one country increases the immediate likelihood of democratization in other states, producing diffusion that rapidly sweeps across borders in a matter of months or even weeks, as was the case in 1848 or 1989.

By contrast, during the Color Revolutions the timing of each subsequent upheaval was driven by flawed elections, which served as domestic focal points for the coordinated mobilization of opposition groups. (See, e.g., Hale 2005 and Bunce and Wolchik 2011). Starting with the Bulldozer Revolution in Serbia in 2000, a number of countries in the post-Soviet space experienced a series of mass upheavals. In each case, the revolution followed an election widely perceived to be rigged in favor of the incumbents. While the mass movements shared many common attributes – participation by youth groups, mass mobilization, non-violence, and links with the West – the outbreak of one color revolution did not influence the timing of other outbreaks. Instead, the timing was mediated by the interaction of external linkages and propitious domestic circumstances in the form of

contested elections.⁶

The distinction between contagion and mediation is thus essential for understanding the dynamics of the Color Revolutions in the post-Soviet space, particularly when comparing them with other recent episodes like the Velvet Revolutions or the Arab Spring. In the Arab Spring, the timing of revolutionary diffusion across borders was not related to any specific internal triggers or domestic factors. While opposition leaders in post-Soviet states awaited the next flawed election to coordinate their protest efforts, no such waiting took place in the Middle East. As a result, while contagion-driven diffusion generally unfolds over months or even weeks, mediation-driven diffusion is a much more protracted process – as in the Atlantic Wave of 1776-1795, the Constitutional Wave of 1905-1912, or the Color Revolutions of 2000-2005.

Contagion-driven diffusion thus produces strong short-term incentives for the spread of democratic institutions that over-ride domestic constraints. The wave itself, rather than domestic windows of opportunity, serves as an international focal point for protest groups. In processes of mediation-driven diffusion, on the other hand, domestic opportunities rather than external linkages continue to play a crucial role in conditioning the timing of each subsequent outbreak. In these cases, domestic factors are able to “inoculate” against immediate reforms, making the spread of democratization contingent upon opportune moments. In both the Atlantic Wave of the late 18th century and the Color Revolutions of the early 21st century, democratic movements found ideological and organizational support in the successes of their peers, but were not able to immediately transform these linkages into regime change at home. Thus the causal dynamics, the timing, and the interaction of external and domestic factors all operate in different ways in these two categories of diffusion.

⁶ The spread of constitutions offers a paradigmatic example of mediation-driven institutional diffusion. As documented by Elkins (2010), the adoption of constitutions shaped the structure and attributes of subsequent constitutions, but did not shape the timing of these adoptions themselves.

A Typology of Democratic Diffusion

The interaction of the two categories – horizontal versus vertical, and contagion versus mediation – produces a four-fold typology of diffusion:

	contagion-driven	mediation-driven
vertical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • post-WWI wave (1919) • post-WWII wave (1945) • Third Wave after 1989 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constitutional Wave (1905-1912)
horizontal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spring of Nations (1848) • Third Wave before 1989 • Arab Spring (2011) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atlantic Wave (1776-95) • Color Revolutions (2000-05)

Table 1: A typology of democratic diffusion.

By focusing on persistent features across cases, this categorization highlights the contrasts and similarities among historical episodes of diffusion. It demonstrates, for instance, why neither the 1989 wave nor the Color Revolutions are appropriate precedents for the Arab Spring.⁷ Unlike in 1989, diffusion in the Arab Spring occurred in the absence of a geopolitical shift. And unlike the Color Revolutions, the timing of diffusion in the Arab Spring was not conditional upon domestic focal points. Instead, as the typology makes clear, the closest analogy to the Arab Spring is the 1848 Spring of Nations – both instances of horizontal contagion. The Spring of Nations was not driven by geopolitical shifts and stemmed instead from horizontal cross-border contagion. Its timing was largely independent of domestic circumstances, leading it to spread throughout central Europe in a matter of months (Robertson 1952; Rapport 2009). As an instance of horizontal contagion, the Spring of Nations was intense, swift, far-reaching, and ultimately unsuccessful, defeated by the concerted efforts of the region’s autocratic rulers. At the same time, it left a deep footprint on the subsequent evolution of European states. Given these similarities, the Arab Spring appears increasingly likely to meet the same fate.

As the typology demonstrates, vertical diffusion often unfolds through contagion. This occurs because cataclysmic geopolitical shifts create powerful incentives for reforms that tend to override domestic constraints. The singular instance of diffusion as vertical *mediation* is the 1905-1912 Constitutional Wave, which included Russia and several of its

⁷ For comparisons of the Arab Spring to 1989, see Head (2011); for comparisons to the Color Revolutions, see Cheterian (2011).

imperial dependencies (1905), Iran (1906), the Ottoman Empire (1908), Portugal (1910), and China (1912). (Kurzman 2008; Sohrabi 2002; Spector 1962.)⁸ It constitutes a case of diffusion not merely because it occupied a particular period of time, but because the countries in this wave shared concrete linkages, both material and ideological, through which earlier cases shaped the attributes and opportunities for later cases. Contemporaneous cases of transitions also occurred in Argentina, Greece, and Monaco, but cannot be considered a part of the wave because they were largely domestic phenomena, divorced from any external changes in the environment.

The geopolitical shift that sparked the wave was Russia's unexpected defeat in the 1904-5 Russo-Japanese war. The war marked Japan's ascent to the small club of great powers while undermining the Tsarist government's standing at home and abroad, precipitating the 1905 revolution.⁹ The disasters of the war served as a crucial catalyst for igniting the first large-scale uprisings in the country's history. The military had traditionally acted as the regime's most reliable ally, but the war had weakened even this stalwart support base by producing officer dissatisfaction with the regime's unwillingness to undertake modernizing reforms. Industrialists, meanwhile, chafed at the massive growth of foreign debt brought on by the expense of the war, while nationalists grew increasingly furious over the incompetence displayed over the course of the conflict (Hart 1987:223). The discontents forged by Russian defeats thus generated a broad anti-government coalition that succeeded in mounting a powerful challenge to the Tsarist regime.

The vertical dimensions of this episode of diffusion stemmed from the consequences of Russia's temporary but profound decline of relative power following the Russo-Japanese war. For hopeful democrats in Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and the imperial peripheries, the the war had temporarily undermined the tsar's ability to suppress regional revolutionaries (as it had done so brutally in eastern Europe in 1848) by displacing most of its armed forces to the Far East. The temporary vacuum of power bolstered revolutionary and protest movements in Russian dependencies like the Grand Duchy of Finland, Łódź, Latvia, and the Governorate of Estonia. For Iranian reformers, argues Foran (1993:114), the war offered hope that Russia's "grip on the country could be loosened," thereby reducing the threat of intervention. Indeed, the negative external influence of Russian power was muted in 1906, as the Tsarist government recovered from its recent defeat and revolution, and was thus unable to rescue the beleaguered Shah despite his calls for aid. As in 1989, therefore, a sudden decline in Russian power enabled the spread of revolutionary ideology throughout eastern Europe; but unlike that later case, the shift in power was

⁸ Kurzman (2008) also includes Mexico's 1911 revolution among the cases, although here the connections are more tenuous.

⁹ On Japan as a great power after 1905 see, for example, Carr 2001[1939]:102-3.

both temporary and less drastic, enabling Nicholas II to suppress these stirrings after the conclusion of the war. By 1907, for example, the Russian government felt confident enough to intervene decisively on behalf of the Persian monarchy and landed elites.

Beyond the material opportunities for reform in nations previously fearful of Russian intervention, 1905 also offered an ideological precedent: “The fact that the only Asian constitutional state had defeated the major Western nonconstitutional one further suggested the desirability of constitutional forms of rule” (Foran 1993:114). Like their counterparts in the Color Revolutions a century later, the pro-democracy movements of this wave drew upon each other for ideological inspiration, and explicitly exchanged tactics and protest repertoires that shaped their anti-regime strategies. The Young Turks, for instance, not only had their commitment to constitutionalism reaffirmed by the revolutions in Russia and Iran, but also drew upon precedents to shift from their original approach of an elite “revolution from above” to a more populist mobilization strategy (Sohrabi 2002). As a result, argues Kurzman (2008:4), 1905 inaugurated “a global wave of democratic revolutions” and “gave an enormous boost to democracy movements around the world.”

Thus in both material and ideological terms Russia served as a keystone state in this wave, similar to the role played by France in 1848. Russia’s revolution was “critical for Iran,” argues Sohrabi (2011:333), playing “an inordinate role in placing revolution on the agenda.” An Iranian prodemocracy newspaper exhorted its readers to “adopt the peoples of Russia as a model” (Quoted in Spector 1962:38). A Portuguese observer noted that events in Russia “have echoed throughout the world like a powerful recurrent cry” (Quoted in Kurzman 2008:4). And in the Ottoman Empire, the Russian precedent both “opened the possibility for a more popularly based movement” and “suggested concrete protest strategies” such as public refusals to pay taxes and the centrality of revolutionary cadres and extra-legal groups (Sohrabi 2002:56). The 1905 revolution, argues Marks (2003:312), had “a worldwide impact”, forging opportunities for reform in Turkey, China, Iran, Afghanistan, and Korea.

After the initial catalyst of a temporary decline in Russia’s power projection, the wave continued to propagate itself through horizontal diffusion, with linkages that extended beyond Russia. For the Ottoman Empire, the Iranian precedent established the viability of Islamic constitutionalism, demonstrated the value of religious rhetoric, and served as “the ideal proof that a constitutional revolution could be at once popular and bloodless” (Sohrabi 2002:58). In turn, Chinese reformers drew upon the lessons of Iran, Portugal, and the Ottoman Empire both as sources of inspiration and as models of revolution. In the Chinese debate over the role of monarchy, for example, the Turkish example “powerfully recommended itself for emulation” by demonstrating that the sultan’s removal was compatible with popular rule by elite parties with the support of military forces (Karl

2002:184).¹⁰ These shared attributes and linkages separated the countries of this wave from other democracy movements of the same period, such as the reformist democratizations in Austria and Sweden, failed democracy movements in Afghanistan and Argentina, or the populist anti-colonial uprisings in Indonesia and Malawi. While the revolutionary movements of the Constitutional Wave drew upon disparate domestic grievances, and internal circumstances shaped the timing of diffusion, its ideology and attributes were shaped by a web of common linkages, with Russia at its center.

Given these linkages, why didn't this wave proceed through contagion, like other cases caused by vertical shocks? Two explanations are likely: first, the geopolitical shift that accompanied the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese war was not as profound as the hegemonic shocks that followed two global wars and the Soviet collapse. It thus did not produce the same powerful incentives for democratic diffusion as these later systemic upheavals. Second, at the dawn of the century the linkages among pro-democracy movements were still too frail, and their cultural contrasts too vast, to diffuse with the speed associated with contagion. As a result, the timing of later revolutions was mediated by domestic circumstances. Nevertheless, the geopolitical shock of the war created a window of opportunity for rebellion, served to reaffirm the appeal and legitimacy of constitutionalism as a path toward modernization, and facilitated the emulation of successful protest strategies.

I've focused on the Constitutional Wave in some detail because it is an often-ignored instance of democratic diffusion, and because it illustrates how both material and ideological linkages can create bursts of democratic transitions. While the Atlantic wave of the late 18th century shared the Constitutional Wave's mediation-driven dynamics, it unfolded in the absence of a precipitating vertical shock (and as such, represents a case of diffusion as horizontal mediation.) The Atlantic wave included the United States (1776), France (1789), Belgium (1789), Haiti (1791), Poland (1792), and the Netherlands (1795). Countries on both sides of the Atlantic, writes Palmer (1964), were swept up "by a single revolutionary movement that shared certain common goals." As Markoff (1994:4-5) notes, despite the ever-present national differences, "there was a striking common element in these eighteenth century upheavals." As an example of horizontal, mediation-driven diffusion, the Atlantic Wave thus finds its closest historical equivalent in the Color Revolutions. Both occurred in the absence of geopolitical shocks, and both diffused through links that shaped the attributes and tactics of pro-reform movements, whose timing was nevertheless shaped by domestic opportunities.

¹⁰ The lessons learned also reflected what *not* to emulate; as one Chinese newspaper noted in 1910, the absence of clear goals and decisive revolutionary action had hampered the Turkish transformation (Karl 2002:184).

Likewise, the early stages of the Third Wave also unfolded through horizontal mediation, in which regional effects produced neighborhood diffusion that unfolded over a decade, beginning with Southern Europe in the mid-1970s (in Portugal, Spain, and Greece), and moving on to Asia and Latin America in the 1980s. Given the weak linkages among the Third Wave cases prior to the Velvet Revolutions, the very term appears to be a misnomer that requires further disaggregation. Rather than a single monolithic phenomenon, the Third Wave was a series of diverse wavelets whose dynamics changed significantly after 1989. It began as a series of horizontal regional transformations – distinct in timing, in underlying causes, and in the kinds of regimes that they transitioned from. In many cases, the connections among them were thin gossamer strands rather than tightly coupled linkages or shared impulses. Unlike the Spring of Nations or the Arab Spring, the Third Wave before 1989 was thus a marginal case of diffusion. However, it took on a new, powerful, distinctly global and contagion-driven character after the collapse of the Soviet system.¹¹

II. Mechanisms of Counter-Diffusion

No instance of diffusion has fully succeeded in consolidating its initial democratic gains. Total or partial failure is thus a key feature of diffusion, as demonstrated most recently in the Arab Spring. The reasons behind such failed consolidation, however, remains largely unaddressed in the diffusion literature, which focuses on mechanisms that encourage the cross-border spread of regimes while ignoring the mechanisms that push back against this process.¹² Elkins (2008:42), for example, defines diffusion as an instance where “a democratic transition in one country increases the probability of transition in a neighboring country.”

Yet this traditional view of diffusion as a unilinear and self-reinforcing process captures only half of the story. Counter-diffusion is not merely a neglected side effect of diffusion but a central component of the process itself. I outline four recurring mechanisms of counter-diffusion – collapsing ad hoc coalitions, autocratic adaptation, cognitive heuristics, and shifting external pressures – and then examine how their interaction produces the collapse of democratic waves.

¹¹ McFaul (2002:242), for example, argues that the transitions following the Soviet collapse should be treated as part of a distinct fourth wave, since “the causal mechanisms at play were so different and the regime types so varied that the postcommunist experience may be better captured by a different theory and a separate label.”

¹² For some recent exceptions, see Bunce and Wolchik (2011), Koesel and Bunce (2013), and Weyland (2012).

The Collapse of Ad Hoc Coalitions

The fervor of a democratic revolution is a powerful uniting force. It brings together diverse social and economic groups in pursuit of a single goal – the overthrow of the status quo. Such unity is especially prevalent at the beginning of a democratic wave, when both domestic and external forces combine to make the prospect of reform both viable and appealing. Historically, periods of democratic diffusion are characterized by the creation of extraordinary pro-reform coalitions, composed of social groups whose disparate preferences are set aside during the revolutionary moment. In the African democratic wave of the 1990s, for example, pro-reform movements were often a “loose, multiclass assemblage of indigenous protest groups.”¹³ Likewise, the pro-reform movements of the Constitutional Wave were “multiclass alliances of officials, army officers, merchants, and landowners” (Hart 1987:213). And Lynch (2012:70) notes that the Arab Spring was driven by “loose coalitions of disparate groups and individuals.”

But while the initial period of diffusion forges broad, multi-class coalitions, their unity often disintegrates after the moment of transition. In episodes of diffusion, domestic pro-reform coalitions function much like victorious alliances in international politics – once their purpose in defeating a common enemy has been achieved, these alliances struggle to maintain cohesion, lose their *raison d’être*, and collapse. As the Polish poet Stanislaw Lec put it, the mob shouts with one big mouth, but eats with a thousand little ones. After the moment of transition, contradictory group interests begin to re-assert themselves, making democratic consolidation an increasingly tenuous process. As Goldstone (2011:14) notes, after the “post-revolutionary honeymoon ends, divisions within the opposition start to surface” over the divisive issues of post-revolutionary governance like taxation and minority rights.

The aftermath of the Great War, for example, saw the creation of extraordinary domestic alliances that supported democratic reforms. Yet these ad hoc coalitions could not be sustained once the immediate crisis had passed and Europe entered what Karl Polanyi (2001[1944]:196) called the counter-revolutionary phase of the postwar period. “[H]ardly had the acute danger of dissolution passed and the services of the trade unions became superfluous,” he wrote, “than the middle classes tried to exclude the working class from all influence on public life.” Likewise, the pro-democracy coalitions of the Constitutional Wave were characterized by broad coalitions that united diverse social and economic interests. Yet these coalitions quickly unraveled once their purpose shifted from protest

¹³ Bratton and van de Walle (1992:420). Likewise, Wiseman (1995:5) notes that African democracy movements “represented a remarkable coalescence of political participation by all levels of society from elite to mass level.”

to the messy task of governance. Labor movements were among the first to peel away, escalating their demands for workers' rights and higher wages. The bourgeois, in turn, resented the instability produced by these strikes and the introduction of new taxes to pay for social programs. The landed gentry, traditionally hostile to democratization, quickly reverted back to monarchist tendencies under the threat of socialism. In Iran, writes Foran (1993:133), the "populist alliance fragmented into its diverse constituent elements, opening the door for successful counterrevolution by the monarchy and Russian military."

By temporarily increasing the incentives and opportunities for ad hoc coalitions, episodes of diffusion make the post-transition collapse of these coalitions more likely. Beissinger (2013:590), for example, argues that the anti-Yanukovich "negative coalition" formed during Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution was initially successful because it mobilized against an unpopular ruler. As he writes:

[O]nce its anti-incumbency goal was achieved, the Orange coalition quickly unraveled at both elite and mass levels. Its leaders became engulfed in factional squabbles; its participants demonstrated weak commitment to the revolution's democratic master narrative...and soon broke down into the electoral factions out of which the revolution was originally composed.

Coalitional collapses have been a persistent element of democratic diffusion. While the initial period of diffusion creates strong incentives for forging powerful pro-democracy alliances, this unity becomes difficult to maintain during the difficult post-transition process of governing and distributing patronage. Ironically, the very breadth of mass mobilization that makes transitions possible in early stages of diffusion also leads to the failure of democratic consolidation. Even as the initial stage of transition binds domestic factions together, the post-revolutionary phase pulls them apart. The ephemeral nature of ad hoc coalitions suggests, counterintuitively, that diffusion-driven democratization may be more likely to fail than democratization pursued by coherent domestic groups that lack external support, as in the case of protracted peasant rebellions.

Autocratic Adaptation

Autocrats threatened by democratic diffusion rarely remain passive in the face of pressure for reforms. The initial period of diffusion often catches non-democratic incumbents by surprise, leading to increased opportunities for successful regime transitions. Yet each instance of successful democratization accomplishes two opposing tasks – it informs other pro-democracy movements about effective tactics and organizational strategies, but also reveals to elites which strategies of suppression will or will not succeed, and how seriously

they ought to prepare for the threat. Learning from the fates of their peers causes autocratic elites to update their beliefs about the necessity of suppressing the protests. This dynamic manifested itself in the Arab revolutions, where initial successes were followed by increasingly forceful efforts by autocrats to repress the uprisings. “As the Arab awakening has spread,” noted *The Economist* (2011:11) in the early stages of the wave, “each leader has sought to save his skin by being crueller than the last.” Learning from recent outcomes, dictators changed their strategies in line with their updated beliefs. A parallel process occurred in many Third Wave democracies following the Soviet collapse. In the years immediately after the end of the Cold War, pressure to democratize represented a significant challenge to authoritarian elites. But by the mid-1990s, argues Bratton (1998:168), they had “discovered ways to control the process of competitive elections so that they can win a grudging stamp of approval from Western donors but still hang on to political power.” After the defeat of Kaunda in Zambia in 1991 African leaders “began to advise each other on how to hold democratic elections without being voted out of office” (Nwokedi 1995:202).

Similarly, in a study of the Color Revolutions, Beissinger (2007) argued that the initial successes of the protests could be attributed to a process of “elite defection”. Successful cases of democratization demoralized incumbent elites by lowering expectations about their survival in office, facilitating their exit and encouraging pro-democracy bandwagging. But as the revolutions continued to spread, a dampening dynamic took hold, which Beissinger called the “elite learning” model. Over time, incumbent elites learned critical lessons from the failures and successes of their peers, and imposed additional constraints to prevent democratization from succeeding. Fear of contagion led to greater restrictions on civil society by leaders in Russia, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. As adaptive actors, these leaders soon saw the benefits of taking aggressive steps to stem the tide. They began to proactively suppress opponents, shut down democracy-promoting NGOs, establish closer relations with Russia, and bolster their own pro-regime youth groups to offset the impact of transnational youth movements. Thus strategies of autocratic “diffusion-proofing” often fall under the category of autocratic adaptation. During the Arab Spring, for example, both Russia and China employed mass media to promote negative narratives of what they portrayed as Western-sponsored destabilization, and marshalled grassroots bloggers to encourage nationalist sentiment as a defense against these foreign encroachments (Koesel and Bunce 2013:759). By shaping popular narratives and mobilizing their domestic support, autocrats have learned to rapidly adapt to heightened external threats during episodes of diffusion.

Cognitive Heuristics

The early stages of a democratic wave are often accompanied by a period of revolutionary euphoria, a moment of intense hope about the prospects for a democratic revolution. In post-World War I Europe, for instance, the spirit of democratic optimism was so strong that a year after the armistice, British historian James Bryce (1921:24) wondered whether the “trend toward democracy now widely visible is a natural trend, due to a general law of social progress”. In its initial stages, this optimism reinforces the momentum of diffusion by increasing the expectations of success among reform movements and their leaders. This self-reinforcing tendency brings more attempts at democratization into the initial period of the wave.

In the medium run, however, the initial enthusiasm generated by the wave is swiftly tempered by harsh political realities. As Weyland (2009, 2010, 2012) has argued, the early period of transitions inflates the hopes of opposition leaders and movements, leading them to undertake attempts at democratization in countries where they have negligible chances of success. As Hafner-Burton et. al. (2013:373) note, political elites are particularly prone to over-confidence. They consistently over-estimate their chances of getting a desired policy outcome, or the correctness of their interpretation of a complex situation. Overconfident beliefs may bolster determination and willpower, and this may explain its prevalence among political leaders. The literature on learning and adaptation has often emphasized that people often suffer from cognitive biases like the availability heuristic (learning from the most prominent or dramatic example rather than from the most appropriate one) or the recency heuristic (prioritizing recent events rather than historical ones, even if the latter has more to say about the success of democratic transitions.) As Levy (1994:294) notes: “People often pick superficial or perhaps even irrelevant analogies, minimize the differences between the analogy and the current situation, fail to search for alternative analogies, and stick with the analogy in spite of increasing evidence of its flaws.”

Over-optimism, availability bias, and recency bias combine to inflate the number of doomed transitions in the initial stages of democratic diffusion. The heady and hope-filled period of early diffusion leads pro-reform movements to learn the “wrong” lessons from the successes of their counterparts in neighboring states and over-estimate their chances of overthrowing autocratic regimes. The result is attempts at democratization in states that lack the conditions for successful democratic consolidation, contributing to the democratic overstretch and triggering failure in the later stages of diffusion.

Shifting External Pressures

During episodes of diffusion, external factors temporarily assume an important role in shaping domestic regimes. These systemic pressures are particularly salient in cases of vertical contagion, when the aftermath of hegemonic shocks creates powerful but temporary incentives for democratization. Yet once the unique pressures created by the hegemonic transition begin to fade, internal forces like the composition of class coalitions or the domestic economy begin to reassert their primacy. As scholars of democracy have shown, while there are few pre-requisites for democratic transitions, democratic consolidation often depends on facilitating domestic factors (see, e.g., Geddes 2007). In countries lacking the structural domestic conditions for such consolidation – a well-established middle class, a strong civil society, economic stability, or ethnic cooperation – the fading of external pressures for sustained reforms leads to the rollback of democracy.

The Soviet collapse, for instance, created powerful external pressures for autocrats to adopt the trappings of democracy across Africa. The elimination of Soviet patronage damaged the neo-patrimonial networks already weakened by the economic crisis of the 1980s. Most importantly, the collapse shifted Western incentives regarding foreign aid and security assistance. Powerful states like the U.S. no longer had to prioritize anti-Communism over democracy promotion, increasing pressure on African autocrats who had used superpower rivalry to stave off reforms. At the same time, international financial institutions and aid donors became more focused on supporting accountable government, making outside assistance contingent on democratic reforms. The end of the Cold War, argues Dunning (2004:409), “marked a watershed in the politics of foreign aid in Africa.”

Thus, in the immediate wake of the collapse, dictatorial elites faced immense external pressures to transform their regimes. As Levitsky and Way (2002:61) argue, the end of the Cold War “undermined the legitimacy of alternative regime models and created strong incentives for peripheral states to adopt formal democratic institutions.” Yet this pressure soon began to fade as Western policy-makers turned their attention elsewhere. As in Latin America after World War II, geopolitical considerations soon overtook ideological ones. The French commitment to African democracy, for example, “proved to be of very short duration” (Clapham 1996:199). By mid-decade, observers could argue that “it cannot be assumed that external powers will continue to support democratic consolidation ...Western pressure for democratization is likely to be ephemeral, and there are already plentiful indications that it is on the decline” (Clapham and Wiseman 1995:228).

Likewise, in 1905 the democratic great powers of the day – Great Britain, France, and the United States – initially welcomed the democratic movements, providing both rhetorical and material assistance at key moments of transition. France, for example,

delayed loan negotiations with the tsar until he announced democratic reforms; the U.S. permitted the Mexican revolutionaries to organize their invasion from Texas; and Britain allowed Iranian activists to organize sit-ins inside its Tehran embassy, refused a request to protect the Portuguese king with warships, and denied the Chinese emperor an emergency loan to fight the prodemocracy movement. But as in Latin America after 1947, or Africa in the early 1990s, the great powers' initial enthusiasm for democratization swiftly subsided once geopolitical and economic concerns began to reassert themselves. The threat of upheaval soon led them to emphasize order and stability over the turbulence of democratization or potential threats to their economic privileges. They began to forge ties with conservative military groups and assented to (or in the American case, actively participated in) military coups in Iran, Mexico, and the Ottoman Empire. In Russia and China, meanwhile, the great powers concluded loan negotiations that circumvented the new parliaments. The desire to maintain geopolitical stability and colonial oversight quickly displaced any ideological affinities generated by the initial hegemonic transition – a pattern that would reassert itself repeatedly throughout the twentieth century.

In short, the shifting systemic pressures that follow hegemonic transitions are a recurring component of vertical diffusion. Both World Wars and the Soviet collapse produced extreme but temporary pressures for democratization from established democracies – pressures that faded into the background once geopolitical realities and the opportunity costs of regime promotion reasserted themselves.

The Interaction of Counter-Diffusion Mechanisms

The mechanisms of counter-diffusion rarely operate in isolation, and frequently reinforce each other. Examining the historical waves of mass contention of 1830, 1848, and 1917, Weyland (2009, 2010) argues that their failure stemmed from a combination of short-sighted reformers and cunning autocrats. On one hand, a democratic overthrow in one country “can induce established rulers elsewhere to prepare against challenges and thus stifle replications.” As a result, “many emulation efforts end up failing, and the reaction they provoke can exacerbate repression and set back the cause of democracy” (Weyland 2009:1155). On the other hand, in the Spring of Nations revolutionary leaders pursued democratic reforms in part because of cognitive heuristics that caused them to misinterpret other examples and over-estimate their own chances of success. As he notes, “the enthusiastic hope that often erupts during waves of regime contention – ‘If they managed to do it, we can do it too!’ can be misleading.” (Weyland 2009:1155). As a result, many of these movements lacked the capacity to achieve their goals and were suppressed by the continent's conservative rulers.

Likewise, describing the wave of democratization in Africa during the 1990s, Joseph (1997:376) noted the combined influence of fading external pressures and the collapse of pro-reform movements in newly democratic states. “As the transition process became more prolonged,” he writes,

[O]pposition forces fragmented into ethnic and personalist groupings, while external powers were often obliged to reduce their pressure for change because of their own rivalries, as well as concerns about the upsurge of armed conflicts, collapsed states, and humanitarian emergencies.

The dissolution of ad hoc coalitions, the fading of external pressures, the over-extension of optimistic reform movements, and strategic adaptation by undemocratic elites all combine to overturn the initial momentum for democracy. Diffusion, in sum, sows the seeds for its own decline by creating strong but short-lived incentives for democratization.

Undoubtedly, certain mechanisms of counter-diffusion, like the collapse of post-revolutionary coalitions, are not unique to waves. But they become especially pronounced in episodes of diffusion, since regime waves amplify opportunities for broad coalitions and optimistic over-stretch by fusing together domestic and external incentives for reform. Models of diffusion should therefore specify mechanisms of both positive and negative feedback in explaining the final outcome of this process (see Figure 3).

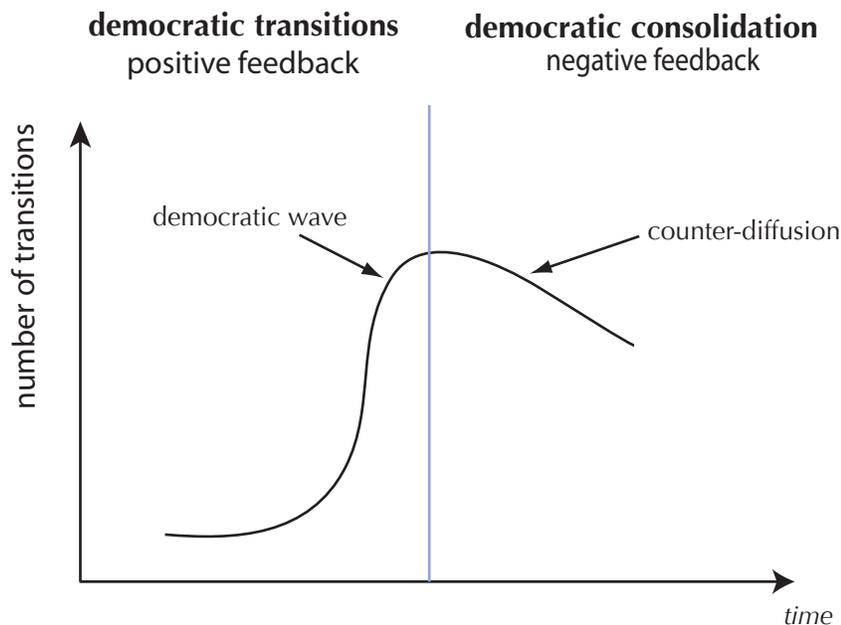


Figure 3: A model of a democratic wave. Diffusion produces positive feedback in the initial stages, leading to counter-diffusion and democratic rollback during democratic consolidation.

Unlike the literature on democratic transitions, theories of democratic consolidation – whether structural, process-oriented, or game-theoretic – have generally overlooked the international dimensions of failed consolidations, focusing instead on the domestic origins of democratic rollback. Yet for countries that democratize in episodes of diffusion, failure is often built into the conditions that facilitated the initial transitions in the first place. For example, focusing on counter-diffusion can help shed light on the rise of hybrid regimes after the Soviet collapse. These regimes experienced enormous external pressures to democratize after 1991 but quickly discovered the fickleness of these pressures once the initial euphoria wore off. Rulers soon found a way to sideline the opposition, governing coalitions collapsed under the weight of competing interests, and optimistic reformers found themselves outmatched by the constraints of their circumstances. The rise of hybrid regimes since the end of the Cold War might therefore be usefully viewed as the residue of the initial post-transition wave, the outcome of an interplay between democratic diffusion and subsequent counter-diffusion.

III. The Interaction of Diffusion and Counter-Diffusion

The varieties of diffusion and the mechanisms of subsequent counter-diffusion are clearly not unrelated elements of regime cascades. Exploring the connections between these two processes is an integral part of building a truly integrated explanatory framework of democratic diffusion. Each element can be used to shed light on the other, as different kinds of diffusion consistently experience particular types of negative feedback.

For example, elite adaptation is likely to be more prevalent in cases of mediation-driven diffusion, for two reasons: mediation-based diffusion centers around predictable domestic events, and operates on a longer time scale than contagion-based diffusion. Both factors allow autocratic rulers to anticipate and prepare for any potential challenges. It's worth noting that since the last Color Revolution in 2005, not a single electoral revolution has succeeded in overturning an incumbent regime, with failed attempts in Azerbaijan (2005), Belarus (2006), Iran (2009), and Russia (2011). This suggests that incumbent elites may have learned enough from the failures of their peers to pre-empt any future revolutions centered around flawed elections.¹⁴

Moreover, vertical and horizontal diffusion types are associated with different types of counter-diffusion. Shifting external pressures, for example, are particular only to vertical diffusion, since in its initial stages these waves are driven by systemic forces. By contrast, external pressures are either nonexistent or equivocal in episodes of horizontal diffusion.

¹⁴ Moreover, the only successful regime overthrows in the post-Soviet space since 2005 – Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and Ukraine in early 2014 – were not cases of electoral revolution.

This dynamic is key for understanding contrasts and parallels among different waves because horizontal diffusion has traditionally faced greater short-term negative feedback than its vertical counterpart. In the wake of the Arab Spring, for instance, a number of commentators made hopeful comparisons to Eastern Europe's *annus mirabilis*. Yet during the Cold War, Red Army presence was the major instrument of counter-diffusion in eastern Europe, employed whenever democratization threatened to spiral out of control, as it did in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, or Czechoslovakia in 1968. By the late 1980s, the abandonment of the Brezhnev doctrine removed the major impediment to democratic diffusion, which then encountered few obstacles in rapidly sweeping over the region. The international environment – aid conditionality, democracy promotion by Europe and the U.S., and the prospects of EC membership – all greatly bolstered both the appeal and the legitimacy of democratic diffusion.

In the Arab Spring, however, the role of the international environment has been far more ambivalent, and the presence of counter-diffusion far more pronounced, portending a much more uncertain outcome (Way 2011). The Arab world did not witness the equivalent of a Soviet collapse; on the contrary, regional powers like Saudi Arabia have assisted their autocratic peers in suppressing protests (Bradley 2011). The West, meanwhile, has at times reinforced the process of diffusion by aiding popular uprisings, most notably in the case of Libya. But in other cases like Bahrain, Yemen, or Syria, they have declined to promote democratization or counter the suppression of protests by ruling elites. In the absence of immediate systemic pressures, autocratic leaders have had more space for political manoeuvring and adjustment, adopting various strategies of both co-option (as in Jordan and Morocco) or suppression (in Libya and Syria.) (Saideman 2012:718).

The types of democratic failure thus vary consistently between vertical and horizontal episodes of diffusion. Since the powerful initial forces of vertical diffusion overwhelm domestic resistance, the participants of these waves are more likely to achieve successful regime overthrows that subsequently fail due to coalitional collapses. Cognitive heuristics thus become less salient in such cases, since even overoptimistic democratizers can succeed through the aid of systemic and external pressures. By contrast, in horizontal diffusion the collapse of ad hoc coalitions is less prevalent because attempted transitions are less likely to succeed in overthrowing the incumbent regime. Absent systemic pressures, miscalculating reformers are more likely to fail at the transition stage rather than the consolidation stage.

As a result, both the timing and the types of negative feedback vary between cases of vertical and horizontal diffusion. After World War I or the Soviet collapse, for example, autocratic leaders had few short-term opportunities to resist the swelling tide of democratization or engage in strategies of diffusion-proofing. Failures instead came later,

as initial transition were unable to consolidate democratic gains and transformed into hybrid regimes. By contrast, in episodes of horizontal diffusion like the Arab Spring, counter-diffusion was both more immediate and more conducive to elite adjustment and learning.

As these preliminary remarks suggest, future research would benefit from further exploring the ways in which various types of democratic diffusion interact with particular mechanisms of counter-diffusion.

IV. Conclusion

If the concept of diffusion is to escape the fate of an explanatory *deus ex machina* – an intuitively appealing but conceptually vague category – models of diffusion need to move beyond aggregative empirics or ad hoc mechanisms, and toward building robust and theoretically-integrated theories of the process. In this article I have sought to develop a theoretical framework for analyzing episodes of democratic diffusion. The implications for future models of regime cascades are two-fold. First, future scholarship would benefit from disaggregating the concept of diffusion based on recurring causal mechanisms, examining persistent “varieties of diffusion,” akin to the literature on the varieties of capitalism.

Second, studies of diffusion need to focus more carefully on the elements of institutional failure built into the dynamics of diffusion. Most models of diffusion continue to focus on the unilinear spread of institutions, ignoring the crucial mechanisms of counter-diffusion and negative feedback that produce democratic rollback and collapse. Moreover, these two implications are inextricably linked, because different types of diffusion are associated with particular mechanisms of counter-diffusion. Examining their interaction is thus a necessary step toward building truly dynamic models of regime waves.

More generally, examining the causes and consequences of diffusion serves as a reminder that democratic transitions produced by diffusion are more than the sum of their parts. That is, diffusion cannot be analyzed only by comparing cases across states or regions, because it represents multiple facets of a systemic phenomenon, driven by variations in the external environment and cross-country linkages that cannot be reduced to their individual components. Learning how democracy spreads, in other words, can offer fundamental insights into the nature of democracy itself.

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