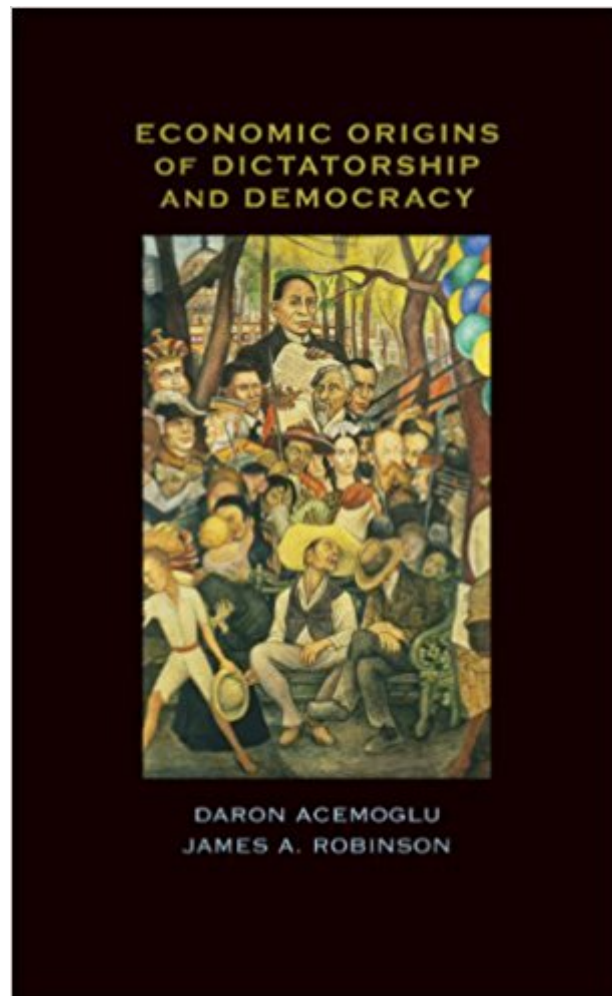




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Economic Origins Of Dictatorship And Democracy



Synopsis

This book develops a framework for analyzing the creation and consolidation of democracy. Different social groups prefer different political institutions because of the way they allocate political power and resources. Thus democracy is preferred by the majority of citizens, but opposed by elites. Dictatorship nevertheless is not stable when citizens can threaten social disorder and revolution. In response, when the costs of repression are sufficiently high and promises of concessions are not credible, elites may be forced to create democracy. By democratizing, elites credibly transfer political power to the citizens, ensuring social stability. Democracy consolidates when elites do not have strong incentive to overthrow it. These processes depend on (1) the strength of civil society, (2) the structure of political institutions, (3) the nature of political and economic crises, (4) the level of economic inequality, (5) the structure of the economy, and (6) the form and extent of globalization.

Book Information

File Size: 9183 KB

Print Length: 435 pages

Page Numbers Source ISBN: 0521855268

Simultaneous Device Usage: Up to 4 simultaneous devices, per publisher limits

Publisher: Cambridge University Press (December 19, 2005)

Publication Date: December 19, 2005

Sold by:Â Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B000SEJ4DC

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #376,999 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #98

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Customer Reviews

Economists are turning their focus of inquiry to subjects that were once the exclusive preserve of their colleagues in other social sciences--history, sociology, and political science. The title of this book, "Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy," appears to have been deliberately, even provocatively, chosen for contrast with its famous predecessor, "Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy," by the sociologist Barrington Moore. It is as if the economists are saying, "You've had your go. It is now our turn." One thing follows when economists have a go: Occam's razor is wielded ruthlessly. Occam's razor is the principle associated with a medieval Franciscan monk, William of Ockham, which extols simplicity over complexity: in his words, "plurality should not be posited without necessity." This has, over time, become an important principle in distinguishing good from less-good science, useful from less-useful descriptions of reality. Acemoglu and Robinson take this cut-the-chaff exhortation to heart. A few simple and sharp answers are provided even for the complex and difficult questions that are at the heart of the book: why and how does democracy arise? Why and how does democracy take root in some places at some times, while making only cameo appearances in others? Acemoglu and Robinson daringly reduce the determinants of democratization to three or perhaps four: the level of inequality in society; the structure of the economy (i.e. whether it is predominantly agrarian or otherwise); the kind of assets owned by the elites; and the extent of globalization. It is remarkable how many historical experiences--in Latin America, Europe, and Africa-- can be explained by the simple theory put forward by the authors.

This substantial work provides a useful review of the relevant literature, and outlines the simple but powerful idea that the political impact of different types of assets [land, labor or capital] and the costs of repression rather than democratization are key influences on the process of democratization or political repression. This approach has however already been spelt out more succinctly by Carles Boix. But unfortunately much of the book's approach is fundamentally flawed when the authors then proceed to put their ideas into models based on game theory. They rapidly lose sight of the old reality check - 'garbage in, garbage out'. No model however neatly laid out will tell us much if the initial premise is flawed, and many of the theories here are too simplified to be anything beyond a classroom exercise. The whole book is based on Median Voter Theory [MVT] - but even many distinguished scholars in this field like Alberto Alesina have been pointing out for years that MVT has never been shown to hold true in real life complexities. Some other key ideas are simply not addressed - the importance of fiscal bargaining, usually to fund foreign wars, as the origins of democracy is dismissed in one sentence, and yet is the best documented source of democratization - see major works by Charles Tilly and Robert Bates. Other more specific technical

detail - such as the ratio of voters to taxpayers, or the ratio of public employees to taxpayers, are not outlined let alone explained and yet clearly have great impact on the topic.

Acemoglu and Robinson present a clear, straightforward and compelling explanation of the conditions under which political democracy emerges from dictatorship. The strength of their analysis, as they repeated tell us, flows from their use of that key tool on the economist's workbench, the so-called rational actor model (p. 19). "We stress individual economic incentives as determining political attitudes, and we assume people behave strategically in the sense of game theory." (p. xii) Theirs is also a clear-cut class analysis, although by contrast with Karl Marx, the classes are defined mainly by their relationship to state power rather than the means of production (although that matters as well, as we shall see). "We emphasize the fundamental importance of conflict," they assert. "Different groups, sometimes social classes, have opposing interests over political outcomes and these translate into opposing interests over the form of political institutions which determine the political outcomes." (p. xii). The main social groupings in the non-democratic society, according to Acemoglu and Robinson, are the elite that controls the state and the citizens, who are blocked from exercising political power. "Nondemocracy is rule by the elite; democracy is rule by the more numerous groups who constitute the majority... In nondemocracy, the elite get the policies it wants; in democracy, the citizens have more power to get what they want." (p. xii) The authors claim that there is a single dynamic leading from nondemocracy to democracy: "We argue that this only occurs because the disenfranchised citizens can threaten the elite and force it to make concessions.... In the limit, a revolution... repression is often sufficiently costly that it is not an attractive option for elites." (p.

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