

## EU, American, and Canadian Approaches to Democracy Promotion: Are They Compatible?

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### Summary and overview

Canadians tend to be wary of democracy promotion. It smacks of telling others how they should govern themselves. The central message of this memo, however, is that democracy promotion is here to stay. Surveys suggest that Europeans support democracy promotion just as strongly as Americans do. It is a recurrent theme in the foreign policy of most strong liberal democratic states. Rather than pretending it does not exist, Canadians need to think about what their distinctive approach should be to democracy promotion. In doing so, it will be helpful to consider the different transatlantic models. American thinking on democracy promotion tends to favor “civil society” and be “bottom-up.” Europeans approach the matter more from the standpoint of “governance” and the “state”; it therefore appears to more “top-down.” These differences have roots in very different perceptions of past democracy promotion projects. The good news is that Canada does not need to choose between the two approaches. In fact, they are complementary. Canada could contribute to strengthening the transatlantic relationship by picking and choosing the best parts of both approaches and establishing them within the framework of an international institution.

### Democracy Promotion

In his 2005 inaugural speech, President George W. Bush placed democracy promotion at the centre of his second term agenda. Yet, with no budget or strategy offer in the days or weeks that followed, Europeans and Canadians grew increasingly cynical. Given the shifting rationales for the war in Iraq emanating from the White House, it would be understandable if European and Canadian leaders and the broader public remained highly suspicious of democracy promotion, interpreting it as a repackaged commitment to the unilateral use of force as well as justification for a war and occupation that were not going as smoothly as expected. Immediately following the speech, op-eds appearing in newspapers in Europe and Canada asked skeptically, “First, they say it was Al Qaeda, then weapons of mass destruction, and now the purpose of the war is democracy?” Europeans in particular have argued that, even if sincere, the United States has a notoriously short attention span. Democracy promotion may be the flavor of the month, but how long could this infatuation last?

It is important to recall that despite these doubts, EU Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso noted during his visit to the White House in October 2005 that the European Union and the United States “share the idea that our strategic partnership should serve to promote democracy, human rights, [the] rule of law, and [the] market economy around the world.” Indeed, transatlantic cooperation on democracy promotion preceded the second Bush inaugural speech, especially following the announcement of

the Broader Middle East and North African Initiative at the G-8 summit at Sea Island, Georgia in 2004. These trends suggest there may be grounds for further transatlantic cooperation on democracy promotion.

The devil, of course, is in the details. The key question may be how democracy is promoted rather than whether it should be promoted. To understand why, it is important to think about how democracy promotion first ended up on the transatlantic agenda, in the wake of the revolutions of 1989. The United States and the EU each came away with a unique interpretations of these events, perspectives that continue to shape their attitudes toward and experience with democracy promotion.

### Transatlantic Interpretations of 1989 and Post-Communist Democracy Promotion

The U.S. interpretation of 1989 is one of civil society opting for democratic government, overthrowing dictators, and rolling back the state to make room for a market economy. It was a bottom-up movement, a celebration of freedom in which people managed to cast off the yoke of dictatorship. The main Soviet contribution to these events was the decision to step aside peacefully and let the course of freedom play itself out. Once the Berlin Wall fell, democracy was thought to be all but inevitable, the natural order that would emerge from its dust. For most Americans, the post-Communist 1990s were really an epilogue to the main event.

Europeans have a different perception of 1989, and their interpretation has profoundly shaped their views on democracy promotion in Iraq and elsewhere. From western Europe's perspective, democracy promotion after 1989 was primarily a top-down effort. The true *dramatis personae* of history in their reading of 1989 were found in the Kremlin and not in the streets of Warsaw or Budapest. Gorbachev was the true hero of 1989. Political leaders and diplomats, not demonstrators brought about regime change.

Perhaps even more important, for west Europeans the revolutions of 1989 were only the beginning of the story. What kind of regimes would replace communist tyrannies remained an open question in 1989. In fact, hadn't the demonstrations been a bit too disorderly for comfort? Wasn't German unification something that everyone gave lip-service to but no one actually wanted? The statements and actions of then-British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and then-French president Francois Mitterrand were simply the more public side of this skepticism, something that the East Europeans noted at the time. For most Europeans then, the revolution of 1989 was not the key to democracy's promotion's story but merely its prologue. What remained to be done was the heavy lifting of creating stable institutions of democratic representation, transforming planned economies into market economies, and regulating relations among ethnic communities—in short, almost everything. This was Europe's accomplishment of the 1990s.

### Democracy Promotion American Style

Clearly, the script from which the U.S. was working in Iraq during the spring of 2003 was based on its reading of the events of 1989 in Eastern Europe: topple the leader, pull down his statue, and let civil society take over. When Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld said in April 2003, during the ransacking and looting of the Iraqi National Museum, that “freedom's untidy,” he was not being cynical or disingenuous. Rather, he was interpreting events through the dominant U.S. lens of how liberation from tyranny is

supposed to look.

Whatever the real motivation for the war, as an act of democracy promotion it was based on three premises. First, it was assumed that inhabitants of non-democratic countries (in this case, in the Middle East) want democratic citizenship. Although the idea that people in the Middle East prefer democracy over alternative regime types remains unproven in practice, there is nothing inherently wrong with this first assumption.

The second assumption, however, is slightly more troubling. Given the right to elect a parliament, Washington presumed, the citizens of the Arab world will bring to power parliamentary majorities or presidents that will please the West. Yet, a quick glance to the past (Hitler) or other part of the world in the present ( Hamas, Hugo Chavez) reveals that such presumptions may be wishful thinking. Even so, this assumption may not be fatally flawed: the danger of electing non-democrats or leaders with uncivil policies is one with which all people committed to democracy must be prepared to live.

The third U.S. assumption about democracy promotion is that it is a bottom-up phenomenon. The United States tends to see stable democracy as the product of a healthy and vibrant civil society and networks of associational life. Once the dictator is removed and his coercive state apparatus is destroyed, the next logical step is to allow civil society to flourish, hold elections, and draft a constitution. The broader institutional environment in which all of this occurs is of secondary importance. Because it is difficult to run a democracy or anything else without a state that provides security, order, and the rule of law, this third assumption has proven the most problematic.

### Democracy Promotion, European Style

Europeans first thought about democracy promotion in their neighborhood after 1989. The tragedy of Yugoslavia meant that creating stable and democratic states on their periphery became the main project of European statesmen. Yet, rather than simply support civic organizations, parties, and constitution drafters throughout the region (which the United States did), the European strategy was to channel the post-Communist European elites' strong desire to join the EU into a grand project of state reconstruction and establish clear limits on domestic political behavior.

The EU strategy, which was supported by the leaders of its most powerful member states, was to concentrate on the post-Communist state, rather than on post-Communist society. Rhetoric emanating from Brussels emphasizing local initiative and stakeholder consultation notwithstanding, the entire effort was elite driven and top-down. National politics in the candidate states quickly became contests over which party was more competent to satisfy Brussels and the leading EU member states and thus pave the way for admission to the EU.

Each candidate country had to pass thousands of pages of European law into its national legislation. Even more crucially, the EU constantly monitored these laws to ensure their implementation and published regular progress reports on each issue area for all candidate states. In addition to the EU, other European organizations such as NATO, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and countless smaller international organizations produced their own country-based and issue-based reports, rendering post-communist Europe the most continuously monitored region in history.

The European preference for order over freedom was strongly embedded in the entire process of EU accession. Rather than focus on civic groups, political parties and elections, the European monitoring regime has concentrated on building up state capacity to ensure that the entire *acquis communautaire* could be implemented. Democracy still mattered and indeed was the bare minimum requirement for all candidate members. The “Copenhagen criteria,” include economic reform, minority rights, and free and fair elections. The entire process of democracy promotion, however, was to be carefully controlled and orderly. Whereas the United States regarded the democratic transitions more or less complete in the region by the mid-1990s with the second or third elections, the French, Germans, and Italians did not consider democracy in post-Communist Europe consolidated until May 1, 2004, when eight East European countries gained entry to the EU.

Enlargement has been hugely successful. Dangling the prospect of membership before potential entrants on the condition that they rebuild their states from a carefully designed menu constituted a powerful foreign policy tool in the hands of Europe’s leaders. It has permitted European elites to solve an important security problem using Europe’s soft power, which appealed to the general population.

The main flaw with EU enlargement as a democracy-promotion strategy is that it is designed more to stabilize countries that are already democratic rather than to promote “regime change” in nondemocracies. Consider, for example, its role during the Orange revolution in Ukraine. Although then-Polish president Alexander Kwasniewski acted as an advocate for Ukraine in Brussels, the EU’s role in the Orange revolution should not be overstated. The key players were the civic organization throughout Ukraine and the street demonstrators in Kiev. To some extent, the interest of outsiders may have stayed the hand of the hardliners, but EU conditionality is not the real story here. The role and influence of the US was arguably greater.

In fact, the EU has precious few policy instruments to deal with states not slated to become members in the short or medium term. Nowhere is this weakness more evident than in its Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the subsequent European Neighborhood Policy. Although the EMP’s and ENP’s primary tools of statecraft are economic reform and trade harmonization, recent initiatives have expanded the remit of the partnership to include migration, energy, security, and counterterrorism.

Yet, stabilizing and securitizing migration and borders is an older EU tendency that does little to promote democracy. In fact, despite significant discussion of political reform within the EMP’s partnership agreements, the EU has been reluctant to push any political agenda on its equally reluctant Mediterranean partners. The primary approach of the Barcelona process is government to government, rather than promoting civil society and backing democrats. Neither the EU as a whole nor its member states individually have shown a willingness to use any more of membership conditionality or even aid conditionality to reshape the political landscape of the Euro-Mediterranean region.

### Conflicting or Complementary Approaches

For democracy promotion to succeed, it will require elements of both the U.S. bottom-up emphasis on civil society and the European top-down appreciation for the role of the state. Canadians, being at once “American” and “European” are uniquely positioned to push this point and perhaps even mediate this divide in thinking across the Atlantic. Without the U.S. enthusiasm and optimism, democracy promotion will not get off the

ground, yet without European care for institution building, democratic breakthroughs will be short lived and disappointing.

U.S. democracy promotion efforts outside of the Middle East, for example, have come primarily in the form of support for those civic organizations, political parties, and NGOs that initiated the “modular” revolutions against the increasingly authoritarian rulers of Serbia in October 2000, Georgia in November 2003, Ukraine in November 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in March 2005. In each of these cases, foreign-backed NGOs and opposition parties led mass demonstrations in the street that exerted pressure on authoritarian rulers in the wake of rigged elections. The authorities backed down and ceded power to the opposition.

Yet, although the U.S. model of civic revolution has been very successful at destabilizing semi-authoritarian states, it has enjoyed much less success in consolidating these new democracies. In countries with inefficient, corrupt, or collapsing state administrations, democratically elected parliaments have as little chance of enacting good policies as nondemocratic ones. The newly elected “democrats” quickly find themselves dependent on the same political power brokers, oligarchs, or bureaucratic machines as the people they replaced. This is what has transpired in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, and to a lesser extent in Serbia.

Elections remain a necessary condition for democracy, but they are not sufficient to guarantee its stability. Equally important is the state’s capacity to carry out the will of the legislature in a fair and efficient manner. In Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, weak state institutions and high level of corruption threaten to discredit democracy. The political dynamics of the post-communist world have been mirrored in some places in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and even Iraq and Iran, where corrupt, rigged, or otherwise irrelevant elections have had at best an ambiguous democratizing effect. European warnings about the single minded U.S. focus on big events such as elections to the detriment of institution building are probably worth heeding. Here, again, Canada may have an important mediating role to play.

At the same time, however, Canadians are in a position to understand that democracy promotion will not be as clean as state building, which is a more limited consolidation strategy, and it will most likely falter if the preference is always for efficiency over participation. Introducing democracy will always be slightly messy and certainly more complex than the EU’s strengthening of existing democracies in post-Communist Europe. If the Europeans are truly interested in democracy promotion, they will need to live with a measure of uncertainty and open-endedness characteristic of the transformation of subjects into citizens.

### Promotion Sharing and Canada’s Approach

Democracy promotion need not become a new source of transatlantic tension if both sides are willing to draw on the other’s strengths and experiences. It is true that Europeans may not share the U.S. zeal for democracy promotion as a project and will only reluctantly adopt policies designed to introduce democracy where it does not already exist. Moreover, there are certainly issues over which the transatlantic partners will continue to disagree, including the U.S. use of regime change in the case of especially intractable foes such as Saddam. Yet, although public opinion polls indicate that Europeans are generally wary of the US role in the world and remain especially distrustful of the current administration, they

are keen to promote democracy in the rest of the world. One opinion poll conducted by the German Marshall Fund in 2005 suggested that Europeans are even more supportive of democracy promotion than Americans. As long as they included as partners in the project, democracy promotion can even be ground on which the transatlantic alliance can be rebuilt in the decades ahead.

The outlines of the division of labor seem clear enough. Elements of the bottom-up US democracy promotion strategy that emphasizes civil society, political parties, and clean elections are most appropriate where democracy is absent or where rigged elections are used as a cover for illiberal or autocratic regimes. The European top-down strategy of democracy promotion that uses membership conditionality to promote order, good governance, and institutional capacity, even though it must evolve beyond EU enlargement, should be included in the democracy promotion repertoire to help consolidate regimes that have initiated but not completed their democratic transitions.

What is Canada's role in all of this? Should Canadians even care about democracy promotion? I believe that they should—it provides one of the few instances in which our most deeply held values can be reconciled with our most vital interests. As a “small” country next to the world's most powerful one, Canada's first instinct over the past five decades has been to embed its pursuit of values and interests in international institutions, especially the United Nations. But on the question of democracy promotion, the UN has been a dismal failure. So much so, that it has all but lost legitimacy on the question. The recent debacle over the human rights commission is but the latest in a long line of embarrassments for the UN on democracy promotion. Clearly if Canada wants to embed democracy promotion in a broader international institutional order, a different institution from the UN will have to be chosen. One that comes to mind is the Community of Democracies initiated in Warsaw in 2000. Although there remain important obstacles to breathing life into this organization (including, first, defining what exactly a democracy is, and, second, convincing the US to take it seriously), Canada would be well served by launching an initiative in this field. This does not have to come at the expense of the United Nations but clearly the UN is unequipped to deal with every collective action problem in the world, and in democracy promotion its norm of strong sovereignty even for nondemocracies makes it uniquely ill-equipped. This observation should not be cause for despair. As Francis Fukuyama has recently noted, it would indeed be surprising if one international institution could solve every collective action problem, from the environment to terrorism.

Canada is well-suited to taking up the task as North America's main sponsor of a renewed Community of Democracies. Canada's tradition of placing values at the forefront of its foreign policy makes it typically liberal democratic. Canada's respect for international institutions makes it a credible player in creating a new one or reanimating one that is moribund. Finally, Canada position between Europe and the United States, as a country that is at once “American” and “European” makes it the perfect candidate for translating and reconciling the differing transatlantic visions of democracy promotion.