The third wave democratization in late twentieth century samuel p huntington

The Third Wave of Democratization: A Huntingtonian Perspective on Late 20th Century Transformation

The late 20th century witnessed a dramatic surge in democratic transitions across the globe, a phenomenon Samuel P. Huntington famously termed "the third wave of democratization." This period, characterized by a rapid and widespread shift from authoritarian to democratic regimes, ignited considerable scholarly debate and continues to resonate in contemporary political discourse. Huntington's work, while influential, also drew criticism and spurred further research into the complex factors driving these transitions. This will explore Huntington's theory of the third wave, examining its key arguments, limitations, and the broader implications for understanding global political change.

Understanding Huntington's "Third Wave"

Huntington, in his seminal work *The Third Wave*, posited that the period from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s saw a distinct pattern of democratic transitions. He argued that the wave wasn't simply a random collection of independent events but a result of identifiable factors. He emphasized the role of domino effects, where the success of one transition inspired and facilitated similar movements in neighboring countries.

Key Drivers According to Huntington:

Huntington highlighted several interconnected factors contributing to the third wave: • **The failure of authoritarian regimes:** Economic stagnation, social unrest, and the spread of democratic ideals within the authoritarian states were crucial. • Erosion of legitimacy: Authoritarian regimes, often reliant on force, frequently faced declining public support due to economic hardship and the rise of new political demands. • **International pressure:** External actors, including Western democracies, played a role, albeit indirectly, through diplomatic engagement and support for democratic movements. • Regional contagion: A successful democratic transition in one country often triggered a cascade of similar events in neighboring nations, sharing similar cultural or historical contexts.

Beyond Huntington's Framework: Criticisms and Extensions

While Huntington's framework provided a useful starting point, it

wasn't without its limitations. Critics argue that his emphasis on external factors and domino effects overstated the uniformity of the process, neglecting the complex internal factors specific to each country. Furthermore, his analysis didn't adequately account for: • **Diversity of democratization trajectories:** The third wave encompassed various forms of democratic transitions, from peaceful transitions to violent revolutions. • **Social movements and civil society:** The role of grassroots activism, social movements, and the burgeoning civil society space often played a critical part, exceeding the simple domino effect. • *Economic factors:* The interplay of economic development and democratization is intricate and not adequately reflected in Huntington's work. • Cultural context: Cultural and historical specificities of each nation profoundly influenced the process of democratization.

Case Studies: Illustrating the Complexity

The transitions in Spain, Portugal, and South Korea offer valuable case studies. These countries, while experiencing similar democratic trends, had unique historical and cultural factors influencing their respective trajectories. For example: • **Spain:** Its transition followed a unique path, shaped by the Franco dictatorship's collapse and the political forces that arose amidst the decay of the authoritarian state. • Portugal: The Carnation Revolution demonstrated the power of social movements and popular uprisings. • **South Korea:** Faced with a more subtle interplay of international pressures and internal democratic movements, their transition followed a path of its own.

The Legacy of the Third Wave

The third wave left an enduring legacy, contributing significantly to the global spread of democratic ideals. The successes and failures of these transitions offer valuable lessons about the complexities of democratic transitions and the importance of considering various political and social contexts.

Future Implications for Democratization

The third wave's impact extends beyond the late 20th century, inspiring and informing ongoing debates on democratization in the 21st century. Understanding the challenges, successes, and failures of the third wave is crucial for policymakers and scholars alike in predicting and navigating future democratization processes.

Expert FAQs

1. **Q: Was Huntington's concept of the third wave overly deterministic?** A: Huntington's emphasis on the domino effect might be seen as overly deterministic. Many scholars argue that internal factors, unique sociopolitical contexts, and the role of civil society are more critical. 2. *Q: How did international actors influence the third wave?* **A:** International pressure, diplomatic engagement, and support for democratic movements played a role, but their influence was not always uniform or straightforward. 3. Q: Are there specific economic factors that contribute to the process of democratization? A: Economic development can be a catalyst, but its relationship to democratization is complex and not

straightforward. Economic inequality, for example, can be a barrier to democratic transitions. 4. *Q: How does the "third wave" relate to contemporary democratization efforts?* A: Understanding the third wave provides insights into the challenges and opportunities of democratic transitions in the 21st century. 5. *Q: What are the key factors that contribute to the success of democratic transitions?* A: There's no one-size-fits-all answer. Factors such as internal political dynamics, social mobilization, and economic conditions play crucial roles in the successful establishment of democratic institutions. **(Note: This is a starting point. A complete would require further research and referencing to support the claims made.)** Including data visualizations (charts, tables, maps) illustrating trends in democratization across regions and over time, and in-depth case studies, would enhance the significantly.

The Third Wave: Huntington's Enduring Legacy on Democratization

The late 20th century witnessed a remarkable global shift. Across continents, authoritarian regimes crumbled, and new democracies emerged, a phenomenon that captivated scholars and policymakers alike. Among the most influential analyses of this transformative period is Samuel P. Huntington's seminal work, "The Third Wave: Democratization and Consolidation in the Late Twentieth Century." More than just a description of events, Huntington's framework provided a powerful lens through which to understand the complex dynamics of democratic transitions, the factors that propel them, and

the challenges they face. His ideas continue to resonate today, offering valuable insights into the ongoing global struggle for self-governance.

Huntington, a distinguished political scientist, didn't just observe the "wave" of democratization; he attempted to explain its rhythm, its causes, and its consequences. His concept of the "third wave" – following earlier waves in the mid-19th century and post-World War II era – highlighted a distinct period of widespread democratic expansion that began in the mid-1970s and continued into the 1990s. This wasn't a monolithic process; it unfolded in diverse ways across different regions, from Southern Europe and Latin America to East Asia and Eastern Europe. Understanding this historical epoch requires delving into Huntington's core arguments.

Defining the "Third Wave"

What exactly constituted Huntington's "third wave"? He identified it as a transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes, which occurred in more countries during the period 1974-1991 than in any comparable period in history. This wasn't just about elections; Huntington emphasized a broader shift in political culture and institutions. He defined democracy by specific criteria, including:

1. The extent to which leaders are selected and removed through free and fair elections.
2. The extent to which civil liberties are guaranteed.
3. The extent to which political participation is broad and inclusive.

The "third wave" was characterized by a cascade effect. The

successful democratization of one country often inspired or put pressure on its neighbors to follow suit. This contagion, as it were, was a key driver of the wave's momentum.

Key Triggers and Drivers of the Third Wave

Huntington meticulously examined the various factors that contributed to this dramatic surge in democratic transitions. He moved beyond simplistic explanations, highlighting a complex interplay of forces:

The "Snowballing" Effect and Regional Contagion

One of the most powerful drivers was the phenomenon Huntington termed "snowballing" or regional contagion. The success of democratization in one country often created a ripple effect, emboldening opposition movements in neighboring authoritarian states. The fall of dictators in countries like Portugal, Spain, and Greece, for instance, created a more favorable environment for democratic change throughout Southern Europe. Similarly, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe unleashed a torrent of democratic aspirations.

Economic Development and Modernization

While not a direct cause, economic development played a crucial role. Huntington, echoing earlier modernization theories, suggested that as societies became more prosperous, urbanized, and educated, the demand for political participation and accountability tended to grow. A burgeoning middle class, often frustrated by

corruption and the lack of political freedoms, became a potent force for change. However, Huntington was careful to note that economic development was not a guarantee of democracy; it merely created a more conducive environment.

Shifts in International Power and Ideology

The global political landscape underwent seismic shifts during this era, significantly impacting the trajectory of democratization. The decline of Soviet power and the weakening of communist ideology removed a major bulwark against democratic movements in many parts of the world. The United States and other Western democracies also actively promoted democratic values and provided support to nascent democratic movements. The end of the Cold War, in particular, created a geopolitical vacuum that many saw as an opportunity for the spread of liberal democracy.

The Role of Elites and Political Actors

Crucially, Huntington emphasized that democratization was not simply an inevitable historical tide. It often depended on the agency of key political actors. The decisions of incumbent elites to negotiate transitions, the emergence of charismatic opposition leaders, and the formation of broad coalitions were all vital. Sometimes, authoritarian regimes collapsed under internal pressure; at other times, they initiated reforms themselves, often in an attempt to legitimize their rule or stave off more radical change.

Challenges of Democratic Consolidation

While Huntington vividly described the wave of democratization, he was also keenly aware of the inherent fragility of new democracies. The transition from authoritarianism to democracy is often just the first step; consolidating these gains is a far more arduous and complex process. He identified several key challenges:

Institutional Weakness and Lack of Tradition

Many newly democratizing countries lacked established democratic institutions, a robust civil society, or a deep-seated democratic political culture. Building these from scratch, while simultaneously dealing with economic hardship and social division, proved to be a formidable task. The absence of a strong tradition of democratic governance meant that citizens and elites alike were often navigating uncharted territory.

Economic and Social Pressures

The economic reforms that often accompanied democratization could be painful, leading to unemployment, inflation, and increased inequality. These pressures could fuel social unrest and create fertile ground for populist or authoritarian resurgence. The challenge was to balance the demands of economic liberalization with the need for social safety nets and equitable development.

The Persistence of Authoritarian Legacies

Even after the formal transition to democracy, the legacies of

authoritarian rule could linger. This could manifest in corrupt institutions, deeply entrenched vested interests, and a lingering tendency towards authoritarian behavior among some political actors. Overcoming these ingrained patterns of governance required sustained effort and commitment to democratic principles.

External Interference and Regional Instability

New democracies could also be vulnerable to external interference from hostile powers or to the destabilizing effects of regional conflicts. The interconnectedness of the global system meant that internal challenges could be exacerbated by external factors, making democratic consolidation even more precarious.

Huntington's Relevance Today

Despite the passage of time, Samuel P. Huntington's "The Third Wave" remains an indispensable resource for understanding the dynamics of democratization. His nuanced approach, which acknowledged both the broad historical forces and the critical role of political agency, continues to inform scholarly debates. In a world still grappling with democratic backsliding and the rise of illiberalism, Huntington's insights are perhaps more relevant than ever.

His emphasis on the fragility of democratic institutions and the importance of consolidation serves as a crucial reminder that democracy is not a self-sustaining entity. It requires constant nurturing, active participation, and a commitment to its underlying principles from both leaders and citizens. The challenges he identified – institutional weakness, economic pressures, and

authoritarian legacies – are still very much present in many parts of the world.

Furthermore, Huntington's analysis of the "snowballing" effect offers a valuable perspective on how democratic progress can be contagious, but also how its reversal can occur through similar mechanisms. Understanding the ebb and flow of democratic waves, the conditions that foster them, and the obstacles that impede them is essential for anyone seeking to promote and defend democratic values in the 21st century. The legacy of Huntington's "third wave" continues to shape our understanding of political change and the enduring quest for freedom and self-governance.

The Third Wave of Democratization, as articulated by political scientist Samuel P. Huntington in his seminal work, describes a transformative surge in democratic governance that unfolded across much of the globe during the late twentieth century. This wave marked a distinct departure from the political stagnation and authoritarian rule that had dominated many regions following World War II, ushering in a period of rapid and widespread institutional transformation. Huntington’s analysis captures not merely a chronological shift but a profound reconfiguration of political legitimacy, civic engagement, and state-society relations.

Origins and Historical Context of the Third Wave

Emerging most prominently in the 1970s and peaking through the

1980s and early 1990s, the third wave gained momentum amid the decline of Cold War bipolarity and the erosion of military-dominated regimes. Countries spanning Latin America, Southern Europe, parts of Africa, and eventually Eastern Europe and parts of Asia became laboratories for democratic experimentation. Huntington identified a unique convergence of factors that enabled this spread: the weakening of authoritarian strongholds, the rise of organized civil society, growing economic development that expanded the middle class, and an increasing demand for political participation rooted in human rights and self-determination. This wave was not uniform—each region adapted democratic transitions to its own historical, cultural, and institutional context—but it shared a common trajectory toward electoral pluralism and constitutional governance.

Huntington's Central Insights on Democratic Expansion

Huntington emphasized that democratization was not simply an ideological victory but a complex, often uneven process shaped by both internal pressures and external influences. One of his key insights was the concept of "democratic contagion," where successful transitions in one nation inspired reform elsewhere, creating a domino effect. He also highlighted the importance of institutional design, noting that stable democracies required not only free elections but also checks and balances, an independent judiciary, and a professional bureaucracy. Crucially, Huntington underscored that democratization was not inevitable; it depended on domestic actors—activists, reform-minded elites, and independent

media—who navigated risks and negotiated power with entrenched authoritarian forces. This nuanced view challenged simplistic narratives of inevitable progress, acknowledging backsliding and hybrid regimes that emerged in some cases.

Practical Implications and Regional Applications

The practical implications of Huntington's framework are evident in the diverse democratization experiences across regions. In Latin America, countries like Chile and Argentina transitioned from military rule through negotiated pacts and public mobilization, reflecting Huntington's observation of institutional compromise as a pathway. In Eastern Europe, the collapse of Soviet influence triggered rapid parliamentary reformation, though the sustainability of these democracies varied widely. In sub-Saharan Africa, democratization unfolded more cautiously, with electoral processes often coexisting with persistent patronage networks and weak state capacity. Huntington's work thus provides a lens to examine both successes and setbacks, emphasizing that democratic consolidation requires sustained civic commitment, economic stability, and responsive governance.

Enduring Benefits and Democratic Stability

One of the enduring benefits of the third wave, as Huntington's analysis reveals, lies in the enhanced political legitimacy derived from popular sovereignty. Democratization empowered citizens to

shape policies, hold leaders accountable, and participate in collective decision-making—elements crucial for long-term social stability. Empirical evidence suggests that democracies born from inclusive processes tend to foster economic development, reduce conflict, and improve human rights protections. Moreover, the spread of democratic norms contributed to a global culture of constitutionalism, encouraging judicial independence and legislative oversight. These institutional safeguards have proven vital in mitigating authoritarian resurgence and strengthening resilient governance.

Future Outlook and Contemporary Relevance

Looking ahead, Huntington's framework remains relevant in understanding current global democratic trends. While the third wave peaked in the early 1990s, its legacy continues to shape political evolution worldwide. Today's challenges—populism, digital surveillance, disinformation, and democratic fatigue—test the durability of third-wave institutions. Yet Huntington's emphasis on civic agency and institutional adaptability offers a roadmap for renewal. The future of democracy hinges on revitalizing public trust, integrating marginalized groups, and innovating governance in an era of rapid change. By revisiting the dynamics of the third wave, policymakers and civil society can better navigate the path toward sustainable, inclusive democratic renewal.

The Third Wave: Samuel P. Huntington and the Late Twentieth Century's Democratic Revolution

The late twentieth century witnessed a remarkable global phenomenon: the widespread transition of authoritarian regimes to democratic systems. This period of profound political change, often termed the "third wave of democratization," was meticulously analyzed and theorized by the eminent political scientist Samuel P. Huntington. His seminal work, published in 1991, provided a framework for understanding the complex factors driving this global democratic surge, offering insights that remain relevant for scholars and policymakers grappling with political transitions today. Huntington's analysis delves into the "why" and "how" of this unprecedented shift, exploring the catalysts, mechanisms, and eventual limitations of this democratic epoch.

Defining the Waves: A Cyclical View of Democracy

Huntington didn't just focus on the third wave; he contextualized it within a broader historical pattern. He identified two previous democratic waves, followed by periods of authoritarian resurgence, or "reverse waves." The first wave, spanning roughly from the early 19th century to the 1920s, saw the establishment of democracies in Western Europe and North America. This was followed by the "reverse wave" of the 1920s and 1930s, marked by the rise of

fascism, communism, and other authoritarian ideologies.

The second wave, beginning after World War II, saw the establishment of democracies in Western Europe and the decolonization of many former colonies, leading to democratic experimentation in newly independent nations. However, this was also succeeded by another reverse wave in the 1960s and 1970s, where many of these nascent democracies faltered and fell to military coups or authoritarian rule. This cyclical understanding is crucial to appreciating Huntington's nuanced view of democratic progress – it is not linear but often contested and prone to setbacks.

The Catalysts of the Third Wave: A Multifaceted Explanation

Huntington's analysis of the third wave, which he dated from 1974 to 1990 (though he acknowledged its ongoing nature), identified a confluence of factors that propelled this unprecedented democratic expansion. These catalysts were not mutually exclusive; rather, they interacted and reinforced each other:

1. Legitimacy Crisis of Authoritarian Regimes:

A key driver was the growing inability of many authoritarian regimes to maintain their legitimacy. Whether due to economic stagnation, perceived corruption, or a failure to deliver on promises of prosperity and order, these regimes faced increasing internal dissent. The Cuban Revolution, while initially seen as a model, eventually faced its own internal challenges. Similarly, the failures of centrally planned economies in Eastern Europe eroded the credibility of communist

regimes.

2. Economic Development and the Rise of the Middle Class:

Contrary to earlier theories that linked economic development directly to democracy, Huntington argued for a more complex relationship. While not a prerequisite, sustained economic development often led to the growth of an educated, urbanized middle class. This class, with its increased aspirations for political participation and a greater stake in stability, became a potent force demanding more responsive governance. The economic successes of countries like South Korea and Taiwan, despite their initial authoritarian paths, eventually fueled demands for greater political freedoms.

3. The "Snowballing" or Contagion Effect:

Perhaps one of the most significant drivers was the demonstration effect of successful democratic transitions. When one authoritarian regime in a region democratized, it inspired and emboldened opposition movements in neighboring countries. The fall of the Marcos regime in the Philippines, for instance, had a ripple effect throughout Southeast Asia. Similarly, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and the fall of the Berlin Wall demonstrated the vulnerability of even seemingly entrenched authoritarian systems.

4. The Role of the Catholic Church and Transnational Actors:

Huntington highlighted the crucial role of the Catholic Church, particularly in the late stages of authoritarian rule in countries like

Poland and Spain. The Church provided a space for organized opposition and a moral counter-narrative to the ruling regimes. Furthermore, transnational actors, including international organizations, NGOs, and democratic activists, played a vital role in promoting democratic norms, supporting opposition movements, and monitoring elections, thereby increasing the external pressure on authoritarian governments.

5. The Actions of Key Elites and Democratic Oppositions:

Crucially, Huntington emphasized that democratization is not a spontaneous uprising but often a carefully negotiated process initiated by either reformist elements within the authoritarian regime or by organized democratic opposition forces. The ability of these groups to negotiate transitions, establish inclusive political institutions, and manage the inevitable challenges was paramount to the success of democratization.

Mechanisms of Transition: Pathways to Democracy

Huntington identified several common pathways through which transitions to democracy occurred during the third wave:

1. Transformation:

This was a top-down process where the ruling elite, recognizing the unsustainability of their regime, initiated a controlled transition to democracy. Examples include Spain and Portugal in the mid-1970s. This often involved bringing moderate opposition leaders into the

decision-making process.

2. Replacement:

This was a more confrontational process where the authoritarian regime was overthrown by revolutionary or extra-constitutional means, leading to the establishment of a new democratic order. The fall of the Duvalier regime in Haiti is an example.

3. Transplacement:

A hybrid approach, this involved a combination of negotiation and struggle between the authoritarian regime and the democratic opposition. Both sides had to make concessions to achieve a democratic outcome. Many Latin American transitions, such as those in Argentina and Brazil, fit this model.

Challenges and Limitations: The Enduring Struggle for Democracy

While celebrating the successes of the third wave, Huntington was also keenly aware of its inherent challenges and limitations. He cautioned against triumphalism, predicting that the wave would eventually recede, and new reverse waves were inevitable. His insights into these challenges remain highly pertinent:

1. The Quality of Democracy:

Not all transitions resulted in robust, liberal democracies. Some countries experienced "electoral authoritarianism," where elections

were held but lacked fairness, transparency, or genuine competition. The challenge of consolidating democratic institutions, ensuring the rule of law, and protecting civil liberties proved formidable in many post-authoritarian states. This concern is echoed in contemporary discussions about democratic backsliding.

2. The Persistence of Authoritarian Enclaves:

Huntington noted that even within the democratic wave, significant authoritarian regimes persisted. China, a major global power, remained firmly under communist rule. The global reach of democracy was not absolute, and significant parts of the world remained outside its influence.

3. The Impact of Geopolitical Shifts:

The end of the Cold War was a crucial factor in the third wave, weakening Soviet influence and creating space for democratic movements in Eastern Europe. However, Huntington's analysis implies that shifts in global power dynamics could also reverse these gains. The rise of new authoritarian models, such as China's state capitalism, presents a new challenge to democratic universality.

4. Internal Divisions and Elite Conflicts:

Democratization often unleashes long-suppressed societal divisions and can lead to intense elite competition. The ability of new democratic governments to manage these conflicts and forge national consensus is critical for their survival. The post-transition periods in many African nations, for instance, have been marked by

ethnic strife and political instability.

Legacy and Relevance in the Twenty-First Century

Samuel P. Huntington's "The Third Wave" remains a foundational text for understanding the late twentieth-century democratic revolution. His analytical framework, with its emphasis on the interplay of global, regional, and national factors, as well as the crucial role of elite and societal actors, provides enduring insights. While the world has continued to evolve since his book's publication, the core challenges he identified – the fragility of new democracies, the enduring appeal of authoritarianism in various forms, and the cyclical nature of political change – are still highly relevant.

In an era of increasing global authoritarianism and democratic backsliding in established democracies, Huntington's work serves as a crucial reminder of the hard-won nature of democratic progress and the constant vigilance required to sustain it. His analysis of the third wave continues to inform debates about democratic transitions, consolidation, and the future of global democracy, making it an indispensable resource for anyone seeking to understand the complex dynamics of political change in the modern world. The study of Huntington's theories on democratization is essential for grasping the ebb and flow of political systems across the globe.

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The psychological impact of easy access should not be underestimated. When learning resources feel readily available, curiosity becomes less restrained. Readers explore topics without hesitation, revisit ideas more often, and engage with content more deeply. Learning becomes part of daily life rather than a separate activity.

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For long-term learners, downloadable books provide continuity. Notes remain saved, highlights preserved, and bookmarks intact across devices. This persistence supports ongoing projects and

evolving interests, allowing readers to build knowledge progressively rather than starting from scratch each time.

The role of digital books extends beyond convenience. They shape how information is valued and used. Instead of being consumed once and forgotten, digital materials are revisited, updated, and integrated into broader understanding. With **The Third Wave Democratization In Late Twentieth Century Samuel P Huntington** available digitally, knowledge remains active rather than static.

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and distribution methods.

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Questions & Answers About the third wave democratization in late twentieth century samuel p huntington

No	Question	Answer
1	What exactly is Huntington's 'third wave' of democratization, and when did it occur?	Samuel P. Huntington's 'third wave' refers to a period of widespread democratic transition that began around 1974 and continued through the late 20th century. It marked a significant shift from authoritarian rule towards democratic governance in various regions globally.
2	What were the main driving forces behind Huntington's third wave of democratization?	Huntington identified several key drivers, including: 1) failures of authoritarian regimes to deliver economic progress, 2) increased international influence of democratic norms and success stories, 3) the role of the Catholic Church in promoting human rights, and 4) the impact of the European Union's expansion.
3	Which regions were most significantly impacted by the third wave, according to Huntington?	The third wave prominently affected Southern Europe (Portugal, Spain, Greece), Latin America (including Argentina, Brazil, Chile), and East Asia (the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan). Later phases also saw transitions in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism.

4	Did Huntington's theory predict that all transitions would be successful and permanent?	No, Huntington acknowledged that democratic transitions were often fragile and could be reversed. He cautioned against assuming that every country entering the third wave would inevitably become a stable democracy, highlighting the challenges of consolidation.
5	How did the end of the Cold War relate to Huntington's third wave?	The collapse of communism and the Soviet Union, occurring towards the latter part of Huntington's identified third wave period, acted as a powerful accelerant. It removed a major ideological competitor to democracy and opened up new avenues for democratic transitions in Eastern Europe.
6	What are some common criticisms of Huntington's 'third wave' thesis?	Criticisms include: 1) overemphasis on external factors and a 'top-down' view, 2) underestimation of internal socio-economic factors and agency, 3) a tendency to generalize across diverse contexts, and 4) debates about the exact start and end points of the 'wave'.
7	Beyond Huntington, what are some key elements crucial for democratic consolidation after a transition?	Successful democratic consolidation, according to scholars who build on Huntington's work, often requires: strong institutions (independent judiciary, free press), a functioning civil society, economic development that benefits a broad segment of the population, and a commitment to democratic norms by political elites.

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