



Relationship Between ‘Civil Society’ and ‘Democratic Freedoms’

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Question

What evidence is there on the relationship between civil society and democratic freedoms?

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1. Summary

The **overall sense** from the vast array of literature that looks at the relationship between civil society and democratic freedoms is that civil society is important for democracy, but there is no “automatic flow” from one to the other. Rather, **the relationship is contingent on the nature of civil society, in addition to other dynamic, context-specific factors.**

Most of the evidence found during this rapid review was in **studies that break down this broad topic into smaller sub-questions.** They tended to be case studies that look at specific elements of ‘democratic freedoms’ (e.g., human rights, or anti-corruption), focus on specific countries, or were related to specific mechanisms (e.g., collective action) or processes (e.g., democratic regression). **Each of these sub-topics is itself a large and contested area of research.**

According to some scholars, these case studies are overwhelmingly positive about civil society’s relationship to liberal democratic norms and practices.

Some studies show that **democratic regression** occurs where the demands of a highly mobilised civil society cannot be effectively channelled by the party system or occur in contexts characterised by ethnic and regional differences or socio-economic inequalities.

The conceptual research on **defining ‘democracy’ and ‘civil society’ is an important part of the research agenda.** This is because the way these terms are defined, as well as the mechanisms through which they may be linked, inform the crafting of the hypotheses that direct the empirical work.

Large scale international comparisons reduce some of the context-specific complexity to perform quantitative analyses, and a recent project (V-Dem) is now providing a systematic set of democracy and civil society indicators to aid such work. Some findings from this type of research include evidence to show that:

- An active civil society is key to making democracy endure.
- Non-political civil society organisations (CSOs) in Africa hold elites accountable during democratisation.
- The relationship between civic associations and democracy is broadly positive and reciprocal.
- The presence of democratic CSOs prior to independence is important for later democratic consolidation.

This rapid review also found a number of case studies which **challenge the applicability of what they see as the ‘Western’ notion of ‘civil society’ to developing countries.** Some of the implications of this view are that:

- Some fundamental assumptions about civil society, such as its sharp delineation between the state and market, may not hold true in all circumstances.
- There is not so much a causal connection between civil society and democracy, rather the existence of both depends on prior material and sociological conditions that are related to the Western experience.
- Some ‘non-liberal’ processes such as clientelism may contain ‘liberal’ elements, such as providing access to powerholders.

On the need for nuance in research on civil society and democracy

“It is now clear that to comprehend democratic change around the world, one must study civil society. Yet such study often provides a one-dimensional and dangerously misleading view. Understanding civil society's role in the construction of democracy requires more complex conceptualization and nuanced theory. The simplistic antinomy between state and civil society, locked in a zero-sum struggle, will not do.

- *We need to specify more precisely what civil society is and is not, and to identify its wide variations in form and character.*
- *We need to comprehend not only the multiple ways it can serve democracy, but also the tensions and contradictions it generates and may encompass.”*

(Diamond, 1994, p.5)

Definitions: Notwithstanding the point that definitions of ‘civil society’ and ‘democracy’ are themselves actively debated, this rapid review defines democracy as **‘liberal democracy’**, which goes beyond elections to include liberal components such as equality before the law, individual liberties, rule of law, and independent judiciary and legislature that constrains the executive (Grahn and Lührmann, 2020, p.8). **Civil society** is defined as “an organizational layer of the polity that lies between the state and private life...composed of voluntary associations of people joined together in common purpose” (Coppedge et al. 2016, p.413).

2. Approaches and sub-questions on the relationship between civil society and democratic freedoms.

There are two underlying approaches to thinking about the relationship between democracy and civil society.

The idea that a vibrant civil society promotes democratic freedoms draws from **early modern European thinkers** and their analytical distinction between state, market and civil society (Dhanagare, 2001). The relationship between civil society and democracy became more intensively researched after the “third wave” of democratic transitions in the 1990s.

Bernhard et al. (2015) detect two basic approaches to the relationship between civil society and democracy:

- (1) **Cultural:** Following de Tocqueville’s writings in the Nineteenth Century (2000), voluntary **civil society associations are thought to act as “schools of democracy.”** Citizens obtain the civic skills necessary for participation in a democracy through participating in

voluntary associations (Halpern 2005). This idea was popularised by Putnam (2000) in his influential study *Bowling Alone* (over 100,000 citations), which argued that non-political civic engagement has declined in the USA since the 1950s, with implications for democratic quality.

However, **this idea is difficult to prove**. Citing several studies that attempt to find empirical evidence to support the thesis that generalised civic activities leads to greater political participation, Van der Meer and Van Ingen (2009) say it may be that the type of people who participate in civic associations are more likely to also be involved in political activities, rather than a causal relationship between developing civic skills and political participation.

- (1) **Institutional**: Following Weber's approach to understanding society with reference to its institutions, writers in this tradition look to **civil society organisations' interaction with state institutions**. Compared to the cultural approach, the focus is on politically active civil society organisations, and their direct effect on "checking prerogative state power and keeping politicians accountable to the electorate" (Bernhard et al. 2015, p.10).

There is an extensive literature broadly corresponding to the Weberian approach that looks at the relationship between state and civil society from numerous angles. As Klein and Lee (2019, p.62) note, there are **also many studies which look at the ways that the state or larger political economy influences the organisation of civil society**.

Studies look at a wide variety of different elements of 'democratic freedoms' and 'civil society', making general conclusions difficult.

Many studies on civil society and **wider democratic and liberal norms and freedoms** are rich analytical case studies:

- They may describe the situation in **particular countries**, such as their role in promoting women's rights in Kenya (Presbey, 2022) or democratic regression in Indonesia (Mietzner, 2021).
- They may focus on more **specific elements of liberal norms**. Viterna et al. (2015) provide a literature review of some of the ways that civil society has been linked to wider democratic and liberal norms and freedoms, including its role in creating responsive states, strengthening democracy, defending human rights, promoting the efficient and fair distribution of basic social services, spreading progressive cultural norms, and mediating conflict between ethnic communities.
- They may **conceive of the democratic process in different ways**. For example, Wampler et al. (2019) divide democratic practice into three dimensions: participation, citizenship, and a usable state apparatus, all themselves large concepts with complex definitions. Whereas Jee et al. (2021) describe "democratic governance" in terms of three freedoms: freedom of choice, freedom from tyranny, and equality in freedom.

Croissant and Haynes (2021, p.5) note the wide variety of different measurements of democratic quality, concluding that "differences in conceptualization and operationalization lead to non-conforming classifications of cases, making it **difficult to compare research findings and to build cumulative knowledge about the causes and consequences**."

Many of the case studies provide empirical detail on how civil society keeps the state in check.

Bernhard et al. (2020) give a **summary of some of the different ways that civil society checks state power and keeps politicians accountable** to social constituencies. This includes:

- Research detailing how **civil society provides alternative forms of representation** that keep politicians responsive to citizens (i.e., Schmitter 1992; Diamond 1994; Houtzager and Lavalley 2010; Peruzzotti and Schmulovitz 2006).
- **Mechanisms** to do this include: public pressure exerted by protest and other forms of contentious politics (McAdam and Tarrow 2010); the organisation of international support and media attention (Keck and Sikkink 1998); the development of citizen-based networks to monitor and oversee government agencies (Smulovitz and Peruzzotti 2000); the utilisation of referenda and other popular initiatives for citizen legislation (Altman 2019); and direct intervention via citizen activism to pressure the bureaucracy, the courts, and politicians (Cornell and Grimes 2015).

Bernhard et al. (2020) describe the literature as showing an “**overwhelming positive assessment of civil society’s impact [on keeping the state accountable]**” (p.5).

Research also details the conditions under which civil society does not support democratic freedoms.

There are some well-documented cases where an active **civil society contributed to democratic regression**. For example, Berman (1997) demonstrated ‘civil society’s’ part in the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany (in Pedahzur, 2018).

One view is that a highly mobilised civil society may represent an opportunity for anti-democratic actors to undermine democracy where their **demands cannot be effectively channelled by the party system** or other institutions (Bernhard et al., 2020, p.5).

Citing the influential body of work by Larry Diamond in the 1990s, Mercer (2002) says that the liberal and democratic potential of civil society can be **undermined by contexts characterised by ethnic or regional differences**, particularly when accompanied by socio-economic inequalities.

Mercer (2002) also notes that, according to the liberal view, civil society has a detrimental impact on democratic consolidation where it is “weak, underdeveloped or fragmented, or where there is severe socio-economic strain, corruption, an ineffective legal system, a tendency towards civil disruption and conflict and a lack of ‘democratic culture’” (p.7).

There is a large body of research on democratic regression, which Croissant and Haynes (2021, p.3) describe as a “new pessimism in democracy research” which follows a familiar “cycle of high euphoria and deep depression” about representative democracy.

Implications of non-democratic CSOs

“The warnings of the dangers constituted by non-democratic CSOs do not discredit theories of a positive relationship between CSO participation and democratization, but rather raise awareness about the importance of civil society nature.”

Grahn and Lührmann (2020, p.5)

3. Large scale quantitative international comparisons

Large scale comparisons using quantitative techniques reduce the multiplicity of the approaches detailed in Section Two above for comparative purposes. But their results are dependent on the hypotheses tested, and the data and methods used.

One large international study finds that an active civil society is key to making democracy endure.

Bernhard et al. (2020) **test whether an active mobilised civil society can prevent democratic breakdowns** and make democracy endure. They hypothesise that an active civil society (alongside institutionalised political parties) “intensify the accountability of elected leaders by both reinforcing the formal checks and balances, and imposing audience costs on would-be democratic defectors, thus creating additional informal channels of accountability” (p.3).

The study uses comparative data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project which is run by an international network of political scientists and researchers, and is based at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. The data covers 202 countries and 704 variables regarding democracy. It spans from 1900 to the present and is collected by contributions from over 3000 local country experts around the world (Grahn and Lührmann, 2020). This V-Dem data contains two new indices on civil society - the core civil society index (CCSI) and the civil society participation index (CSPI) and has been used in other scholarly research on civil society. See Bernhard et al. (2017) for a more detailed discussion of how this civil society data is collected.

The study’s very detailed statistical models and methodology attests to the complexity of answering such a broad question. One finding is that “**democracies with a more entrenched civil society...are associated with a 68% reduction in the hazard of breakdown**” (p.12).

The authors find that **the on-average density of active citizens exerts “a robust, independent, and substantial effect on the survival of democracies”** (p.1).

Research on non-political CSOs in Africa finds that they create greater accountability for elites during democratisation.

Pinckney et al. (2022) look at what they call “**quodidian civil society organizations**” (QCSOs). These are organisations which are “rooted in quodidian relationships that are not themselves designed to compete for political power” (p.1).

The authors argue that non-political “trade unions, religious organizations, and professional organizations have the durable mobilization infrastructures rooted in everyday social networks that are needed to generate and sustain democratic transitions” (p.4).

They further hypothesise that **QCSOs are more likely to have stable preferences for democracy** as well as the ability to coerce it from regimes that may be reluctant to do so” (p.3).

The study tests three sub-hypotheses using data from two large datasets: the V-Dem data as described above, and the Anatomy of Resistance Campaigns (ARC) Dataset which records information on 1,426 organisations that participated in violent and nonviolent events in Africa from 1990 to 2015. Coded by a group of researchers, it contains 17 variables covering organisation-level features such as type, age, leadership, goals, and interorganizational alliances (Butcher et al., 2021). Multivariate regression models are used for a number of variables.

Some **findings** (p.8) are that:

- The **participation of QCSOs in dissent is associated with larger shifts toward democracy.**
- **QCSOs are more important in political environments that restrict other sources of mobilisation,** and during periods of institutional change.

Overall, the authors say that “**we find strong evidence that QCSOs are positively correlated with democracy two to three years into the future**” (p.12).

The authors conclude that “**this work speaks to the importance of investing in the kinds of quodidian civil society networks of labour, worship, and professionalization** that can later serve as the backbone for resistance to autocracy” (p.12).

One international study finds that the relationship between civic associations and democracy is broadly positive and reciprocal.

Paxton (2002) tests two theses: that vibrant associations help create and maintain democracy; and that democracy can increase civic associational activity through a reciprocal effect. She describes associational activity as “social capital.”

She uses the World Values Survey (WVS) and data on international nongovernmental organizations from the Union of International Associations to represent civic associational life across 48 countries. Using a “a cross-lagged panel design”, she tests correlations with a measure of liberal democracy developed by a different scholar (Bollen, 1998). Her data comes from the mid-1990s.

She summarises her findings as showing that “**the relationship between social capital and democracy is reciprocal.** In the panel analyses, social capital was found to promote democracy

while a return effect from democracy to social capital was also established. The analysis also confirmed that **certain types of associations do better in promoting democracy**. When associations were broken into two types using the WVS, **connected associations had a strong positive influence on democracy, while isolated associations had a strong negative influence on democracy**. Overall, these findings demonstrate that to fully understand how democracy and social capital are related, both their reciprocal nature and the possibility of negative effects must be recognized” (p.272).

She concludes that her analysis provides some justification for donor funding to NGOs, but that it also “provides some cautionary evidence: (1) Some types of social capital may be detrimental to democracy, and (2) social capital can in turn be affected by democracy. Funding agencies should consider these issues in funding NGOs to foster democracy” (p.273).

Research finds that the presence of democratic CSOs prior to independence is important for later democratic consolidation.

In a working paper, Grahn and Lührmann (2020) ask: **To what extent does the strength and the nature of civil society organisations (CSOs) prior to independence have an impact on the consolidation of democracy?**

The authors use the V-Dem data described above to empirically test the argument that the existence of democratic CSOs prior to democratic transition strengthens post-independence democracy, whereas non-democratic CSOs have a detrimental effect. They use data on 92 cases of independence since 1905.

Explaining in detail how they define their variables, the authors use OLS (Ordinary Least Squares) regressions for their statistical analysis.

Some of their findings include:

- The **presence of democratic CSOs prior to independence is positively related to levels of democracy after independence** at a statistically significant level.
- Correspondingly, the **presence of non-democratic CSOs prior to independence is negatively related to post-independence democracy levels** at a statistically significant level.
- This relationship still holds when the variable of GDP is added.

The authors conclude that “**the nature of active CSOs is pivotal** for the new state following independence, as it is affecting post-independence democracy levels **even when accounting for other influential factors such as politico-geographical neighbourhood, previous levels of democracy-related variables, and modernization factors**” (p.19).

Referring to Putnam’s famous study cited earlier in this rapid review, the authors say that “bowling together may be important for consolidating and strengthening already independent democracies, but **in processes of forming new states, we instead need to pay more attention to the potential detrimental impact of non-democratic CSOs**” (p.19).

4. Some alternative viewpoints – applicability to non-Western contexts

Some alternative viewpoints about the applicability of the terms and their hypothesised relationship include:

The term ‘civil society’ has only limited relevance to non-Western contexts.

As noted at the beginning of this rapid review, the idea of civil society, as well as its relationship to liberal democracy, originated from early modern European thinkers. Some contemporary authors **question whether “a concept which emerged at a distinctive moment in European history can have meaning within such different cultural and political settings...or at least assert that it takes on local, different meanings and should not therefore be applied too rigidly”** (Lewis, 2002, p.574).

A book on civil society in Bangladesh (Quadir and Tsujinaka, 2015) gives several possible implications of being blinded to non-Western forms of civil society. For example, the Islamic concept of *Ummah* (meaning “community”) often blurs the distinction between state and civil society in a way that is not recognised in the Western concept of civil society. Or the puzzle of Bangladesh’s very active civil society (over 250,000 CSOs registered) that contributes to social development, but not liberal politics.

Both civil society and liberal democracy are themselves products of prior material and sociological conditions.

Drawing on others’ research, Sardamov (2005) argues that **“the correlation between ‘civil society’ and democracy may be spurious, both phenomena being shaped by deeper social processes related to modernization and individualization”** (p.380).

He argues that modernisation in Western societies has created masses of pragmatic yet self-disciplined individuals who habitually obey abstract rules and cooperate within formal associations and impersonal institutions. But within non-Western societies, most individuals have remained embedded within face-to-face and quasi-kinship networks and have tended to pursue social goals through informal associations based on personal or factional loyalties (p.401).

A ‘non-liberal’ practice like clientelism could contain some ‘democratic moments.’

Anciano (2017) extrapolates some insights on civil society and democracy from qualitative fieldwork, including interviews, focus groups and informal observation in a South African village.

She argues that **“clientelism as civil society may fulfil democratic tasks such as holding the (local) state accountable, strengthening civil and political liberties and providing channels of access for previously marginalised groups”** (p.593). She also recognises that clientelism, as with civil society, may indeed weaken democratic norms.

In the context of this rapid review, the point is that a feature of civil society (clientelism) that could lead researchers to dismiss it as non-democratic could potentially achieve some 'liberal' results, such as providing access to powerholders.

These alternative viewpoints highlight a necessary distinction between civil society as an ideal, and in reality:

'Civil Society': Both an analytical tool and an ideal

"One should take care to distinguish between 'civil society' as an ideal-type concept that embodies the qualities of separation, autonomy and civil association in its pure form, and the factual world of 'civil societies' composed of associations that embody these principles to varying degrees.

At the same time, one should avoid a kind of triumphalism about civil society as a necessary source of democratic energy with homogenous goals and principles; in a word, one should avoid a theory of civil society that privileges civil society."

Fioramonti (2005, p.65).

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