Inequality and Democratization: An elite Competition Approach

by

Ben Ansell

Nuffield College, University of Oxford

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Research on the economic origins of democracy and dictatorship has shifted away from the impact of growth and turned toward the question of how different patterns of growth - equal or unequal - shape regime change. Ansell and Samuels offer a new theory of the historical relationship between economic modernization and the emergence of democracy on a global scale, focusing on the effects of land and income inequality. Contrary to most mainstream arguments, Ansell and Samuels suggest that democracy is more likely to emerge when rising, yet politically disenfranchised, groups demand more influence because they have more to lose, rather than when threats of redistribution to elite interests are low. We show that democratization is historically more likely under conditions of high income inequality, that the conjunction of inequality and democratization produces less redistribution rather than more, and that the chief proponents of democracy in authoritarian regimes are individuals with high income and anti-redistributive preferences.

Ben Ansell is Professor of Comparative Democratic Institutions in the Department of Politics and International Relations. He received his PhD in Government from Harvard University in 2006 and conducts research in a wide area of comparative politics and political economy. Before joining Nuffield College he was an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota. His initial research focus was the politics of education, with his book From the Ballot to the Blackboard: The Redistributive Politics of Education, published by Cambridge University Press in 2010 and winning the William H. Riker prize for best book in political economy. He is currently working on the interplay between inequality and democratization and on the effects of housing price booms and busts on political preferences. His work has been published in International Organization, World Politics, Comparative Political Studies, and the American Political Science Review. From September 2013, together with David Samuels at the University of Minnesota, he is co-editor of Comparative Political Studies.

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