The Wave Metaphor in Scholarly Democratization Discourse
An Argument for a More Diverse Set of Metaphors

Abstract

The study of political processes relies on metaphors to form and convey abstract ideas. Thus far, political metaphors have been studied mainly in the public realm, while academic discourse—often the source of ideas that later feature in public discourse—has been overlooked. I seek to fill this gap by applying critical discourse analysis, conceptual metaphor as well as blending theory to the scholarly literature on democratization. I will first provide a brief overview of the relevant literature on conceptual metaphors, blending theory, and critical discourse analysis. Drawing on articles from 100 issues of the Journal of Democracy (JoD) published between its inception in January 1990 and October 2014, I will trace the use of the wave metaphor over time. A detailed mapping of this metaphor and its symbolism within the western imagination will show that the wave metaphor reflects many teleological assumptions about democracy. I demonstrate that the wave metaphor portrays democratization as a natural, inevitable, and divinely ordained process. In addition, the wave metaphor diminishes the agency of local actors by omitting human actors in the metaphor’s applied event structure. Given these and other limitations of the wave metaphor, I encourage a more diverse use of figurative language to avoid the normalization of problematic assumptions.
The study of political processes relies on metaphors to form and convey abstract ideas. Metaphors allow us to conceptualize one thing in terms of another (Semino 2008). They are more than stylistic choices as they determine how a concept is understood through the lens of another. Figurative language plays a crucial role both in the conceptualization of political ideas and their communication. Thus far, the political metaphors that have been studied were drawn from the public realm (Lakoff 1996, Charteris-Black 2009, Deignan and Semino 2010, Oppermann and Spencer 2013), while the academic discourse—often the source of ideas that later feature in public discourse—has been overlooked.

The most widely used metaphor in the scholarly literature on democratization draws on the source domain of the wave. The wave metaphor describes simultaneous or successive democratization in numerous countries. The inevitable movement toward democracy entailed in the wave metaphor connects to two widely shared assumptions in the literature. First, democracy is seen as a universally desirable form of political organization at the state level, and second, every country is expected to eventually become democratic. Though the metaphor has contributed to prolific scholarly production, it has also perpetuated the western-centrist and teleological assumptions from which it arose. As this analysis seeks to show, the wave metaphor has facilitated and at the same time hindered the understanding of complex political change. There is an increasing need for more diverse metaphors to step beyond these limitations.

I will first provide a brief overview of the relevant literature on metaphor analysis. Drawing on articles from 100 issues of the Journal of Democracy (JoD) published between its inception in January 1990 and October 2014, I will trace the use of the wave metaphor. A detailed analysis of the conceptual mapping and an analysis of the symbolism of the wave within the western imagination will show that the wave reflects teleological assumptions about democracy.
Analytical Framework

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* created the foundation for conceptual metaphor analysis (1980). A *conceptual metaphor* is a conceptual mapping that presents one concept *(target domain)* in terms of another *(source domain)*. The standard annotation for this type of metaphor is **TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN**, whereby the source domain is more concrete than the often abstract target domain. Lakoff and Johnson’s key example of a conceptual metaphor is **ARGUMENT IS WAR** which captures the underlying understanding of expressions such as “You won the argument” or “You attacked their opinions” (1980).

Metaphorical expressions are more than “ways of talking […] but evidence that we also *think* about one thing in terms of another” (Semino 2008, 5). Most conceptual metaphors are **unidirectional**; while argument is often defined in terms of war, war is rarely understood in terms of argument. Several conceptual understandings connected to the source domain are transferred to the target domain when it is described in terms of the source domain. An analysis of conceptual parallels between the two domains is called a *mapping*. A mapping identifies potential links between the two domains, not all of which have to be used in the discourse studied. Which conceptual correspondences are employed, and which are omitted, is often a telling sign about how a target domain is perceived (Fairclough 1995, Semino 2008).

Conceptual metaphor theory can be situated within critical discourse analysis by asking why certain metaphors are used in a discourse. Critical discourse analysis, as defined by Charteris-Black, studies the “social relations that are forged, maintained and reinforced by language use in order to change them” (2004, 23). Black clarifies that the intentions of the speaker do not necessarily correspond with the ideological positions they communicate (7). Many metaphorical expressions are so naturalized that they “win acceptance […] as non-ideological common sense” (Fairclough 1995, 13). As Laurence Whitehead writes in one of his *JoD* articles, each metaphor “contains its own specific assumptions and built-in biases” (1999, 85). Nevertheless, Whitehead's
attempt to challenge “the flow of ocean waves” by drawing attention to the limitations of the metaphor went unnoticed in the field (84). It is therefore imperative to analyze the most dominant metaphors used in the JoD, a publication that situates itself “at the center of debate on major social, political, and cultural challenges” as “the world’s leading publication on the theory and practice of democracy” and that reaches out to “both activists and intellectuals” (JoD website 2014). This analysis highlights that the wave metaphor provides no space to challenge certain ideas about democracy since it presents a progress narrative that makes democratization appear natural, inevitable, and morally superior.

**Diving into the Wave of Democratization**

DEMOCRATIZATION IS A WAVE captures the phenomenon of simultaneous or successive transitions within a geographical region. Huntington defines a wave of democratization as “a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction” (1991a, 15). By portraying group democratization in terms of a wave, scholars are looking at this global political phenomenon as a seamless whole. The focus is not on the particular circumstances of political change, but on the spread of democracy across the globe.

The first mention of a “wave of democratization” in the corpus is in the first issue of the JoD in winter 1990. Carlos Waisman speaks of a “wave of democratization sweeping most of Latin America and much of Eastern Europe” (1990, 92). This instance of the wave metaphor precedes the publication of Samuel Huntington’s article “Democracy’s Third Wave” and his book The Third Wave by a year (1991).

Huntington’s third wave is based on an extensive study of regime change in the late twentieth century. Here are the opening lines of the preface of The Third Wave:

> This book is about an important—perhaps the most important—global political development of the late twentieth century: the transition of some thirty countries
from nondemocratic to democratic political systems. It is an effort to explain why, how, and with what immediate consequences this wave of democratization occurred between 1974 and 1990. (1991a, xiii)

Though the book is primarily an empirical study of so-called third wave transitions, Huntington also discusses the previous two waves of democratization that he identified.¹ These vastly different waves share several commonalities; most importantly, all waves are followed by ‘reverse waves,’ describing transitions of a democratic to an authoritarian state. In addition, given that there have already been three waves of democratization and since there are still numerous authoritarian regimes left in the world, there is also the general expectation that a fourth wave will follow. Hence, Huntington’s waves are more than observations; they have implicitly become a model of how political scientists think about democratization.

While Huntington did not introduce the understanding of democratization in terms of waves, his work convinced the discourse community of the metaphor’s presumed aptness. Bowdle and Gentner's (2005) ‘career of a metaphor’ fittingly applies to DEMOCRATIZATION IS A WAVE. They hypothesize that when a metaphor is introduced to a discourse community, it is rich in comparative language. As the metaphor becomes conventionalized, it turns into a category that does not require an elaborate exposition of the source domain choice. Huntington, as suggested by the hypothesis, uses strong visual comparisons in his book.

For a century and a half after Tocqueville observed the emergence of a modern democracy in America, successive waves of democratization washed up on the shore of dictatorship. Buoyed by a rising tide of economic progress, each wave advanced further and ebbed less than its predecessor. (Huntington 1991, 316)

Shortly after the publication of The Third Wave, references to the “third wave” or even the “Third Wave” are found in almost every JoD article on democratization between 1992 and 2014. However,

¹ The first wave started with the American and French revolutions, and the second wave followed World War II (Huntington 1991a).
most of these authors do not provide elaborate comparisons since the expression needed no further explanations at that point. The ‘third wave’ had established itself as noun and even as adjective within the discourse community.

[...] the political and economic conditions of ‘third wave’ democracies [...] (Maravall 1994, 29)

What is likely to be the fate of the “third wave” both in the near term [...] and in the twenty-first century? (JoD Editorial Board 1995, 6)

Is the Third Wave over? (Diamond 1996, 20)

During the first 25 years of the third wave, there were only three blatant reversals of democracy in countries with more than 20 million people. (Diamond 2000, 91)

The most striking aspect of the wave metaphor is the idea of progress. Table 3 mentions several variations of the PROGRESS IS MOTION FORWARD structure. In addition, the concepts of destination, blockage, force, space, forced movement, and time overlap.

Table 3: Conceptual Mapping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democratization (target domain)</th>
<th>Wave (source domain)</th>
<th>Primary Metaphor, and/or Image-Schemata</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>Shore</td>
<td>Purposes are Destinations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reforms</td>
<td>Movement of wave</td>
<td>Progress is Motion Forward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuccessful transition</td>
<td>Reverse wave</td>
<td>Regression is Motion Backward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time period</td>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political resistance</td>
<td>Undertow</td>
<td>Impediments are Difficulties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regime types</td>
<td>Ocean</td>
<td>Bounded space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External pressure</td>
<td>Wave sweeps over</td>
<td>Causation is Forced Movement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The wave metaphor is particularly apt as it provides an event structure that vaguely mirrors the consecutive trends of regime change from authoritarianism to democracy, and vice versa. The wave first offers an image of powerful forward motion, followed by a less spectacular undertow, or ‘reverse wave.’ The frame of the wave metaphor relies strongly on the image-schemata of force and counter-force, up and down, as well as front and back.

[...] the recent wave of democratization crested in the 1990s [...] (Haggard and Kaufman 1994, 6)

[...] undertow in the third wave [...] (Diamond 1996, 29)

[... the wave] has begun to recede [...] (Ray 1997, 61)
The cyclical structure of the wave shows that Huntington provided more than an observation of democratization trends over the past century; he created a model of how to study such phenomena. Scholars refer to this organization of the wave when they ask any “at what stage are we within the third wave?” or whether “the third wave [is] still rising [...] or has it reached a crest” (Huntington 1991a, 12; Editorial Board of *JoD* 1995, 5).

The wave metaphor presents progress as a result of forced movement instead of self-propelled motion. A wave that has been set in motion can hardly be redirected. Instances where recently democratized regimes shift back to authoritarianism are understood as a ‘reverse wave’ which is considered to be smaller and separate from the democratization wave. In addition, since waves are forces of nature, progress presented in terms of a wave appears natural. Scholars are, however, particularly resistant to the argument that they see democratization as a natural process. When Carothers accused his colleagues of the view that “democratization was in some important sense a natural process [...] no matter how much its adherents have denied it” (2002, 7), there was major backlash. In the same issue of the *JoD*, Kenneth Wollack responded:

> In fact, if democracy promoters truly considered the transition toward, and the consolidation of, democracy as a “natural process,” as Carothers asserts, we should have viewed our own program work—in fact, our very existence—as superfluous.

(2002, 23)

However, the extent to which the view that democratization is natural has shaped the field is too great to be denied. For example, in *The Third Wave*, Huntington cites James Bryce as saying that the “trend toward democracy now widely visible, is a natural trend, due to a general law of progress” (quoted in Huntington 1991, 17). Though this statement dates back to 1920, Huntington echoes this position in his book without critically responding to or evaluating this claim. The wave metaphor portrays progress toward democratization as natural and inevitable; one wave follows another, and though reverse waves occasionally interrupt, the overall direction is clear.
The democratization wave conveys size in terms of spread as well as height. These ideas of growth and size connect to the primary metaphor IMPORTANT IS BIG. Expressions such as “the great wave of democratization” and “the vast third wave” underscore the significance of this global political phenomenon (O’Donell 1994, 62; Huntington 1996, 2). The imagery of the wave spreading reflects the teleological assumption that every country will eventually join the rising tide of democracy. Examples of this view are Soares’ assertion that “the ‘third wave’ of democratization [...] spread to every corner of the globe” (1999, 104), and Huntington’s question whether the wave is a “continuing and ever-expanding ‘global democratic revolution’ that will reach virtually every country in the world” (1991b, 12). Huntington responds to his question in the closing lines of The Third Wave: “Democracy will spread to the extent that those who exercise power in the world and in individual countries want it to spread” (1991a, 316).

It is telling that Huntington lists “those who exercise power in the world” before powerful figures “in individual countries.” This points to another feature that the wave metaphor emphasizes: CAUSATION IS FORCED MOVEMENT. External pressures to democratize flow from many sources: other countries (mainly the United States), the Bretton Woods institutions, intergovernmental organizations, and the media. The wave aggrandizes these pressures by personifying the external force.

Democratization as a forceful, personified actor (wave):

[...] democratization began its sweep through Africa [...] (Diamond 1996, 30)

[...] sweep away many of the world’s remaining nondemocratic regimes [...] (Plattner 2011, 6)

[...] successive waves of democratization have washed over the shore of dictatorship [...] (Huntington 1991b, 34)

[...] a wave of change swept on to Eastern Europe and then culminated in the dissolution of the Soviet Union [...] (Nathan 1993, 30)

The ease with which the grandeur of the sweeping wave can be visualized arguably contributes to its persuasiveness within the field. By emphasizing the external factors, the wave metaphor
diminishes the agency of actors within a particular country. Hence, the popularity of the wave metaphor in the 1990s brings with it a shift in agency from internal to external actors and systems. Furthermore, the personification of the wave suggests that not even external actors can control the wave once its internal dynamic has developed; democratization becomes a phenomenon beyond control.

The wave metaphor, as it is used in democratization literature, does not provide space for human agency. While democratization scholars have creatively and collectively expanded the wave metaphor, there is a curious absence of metaphoric uses that relate to objects or people on top of the wave. Of more than 400 JoD articles mentioning the ‘third wave,’ one article on democratization speaks of someone “surfing the wave” (Darmanovic 2007, 153), and three articles mention that someone is riding the wave (Bratton 1992; Schmitter 1996; Yom 2009). There were no references to swimmers, boats, or ships on top of the democratization wave. This is particularly significant in light of the understanding that control means top-down exercise of power, as displayed by the primary metaphor Control is Up. While surfers, boats, and swimmers would not be able to control the wave, their general absence indicates that humans can also not maintain control over their own situation by ‘staying on top of it.’

The absence of human actors as part of the democratization wave is peculiar since waves as source domain do not inherently resist human control or agency. Indeed, Dancygier and Sweetser discuss John F. Kennedy’s use of the wave as source domain in his speech at Rice University.

Kennedy spoke of those that “made certain that this country rode the first waves of the industrial revolutions, the first waves of modern invention, and the first wave of nuclear power, and this generation does not intend to founder in the backwash of the coming age of space.” (Quoted in Dancygier and Sweetser 2014, 94)

By using the extension of ‘riding a wave,’ Kennedy inserts actors into the source domain of waves. Given that the concept of the wave within democratization literature has so far excluded actors in
its imagery, a hypothesis that merits further study is whether the wave metaphor has favored structural as opposed to actor-based studies of democratization.

At the same time, the wave arguably creates space for actors aiming for democracy by removing obstacles in their way. This taps into the understanding that DIFFICULTIES ARE IMPEDIMENTS TO MOTION and the image-schemata of blockage and removal of restraint. The powerful movements of water cannot be stopped by “[authoritarian leaders] ‘trying to block the tide’ of democratization” (Emmerson 1999, 50), and the “channels that democratization is creating” (Palma 1991, 27) open opportunities for political change. Nevertheless, there appears to be a tacit consensus within the discourse community not to integrate actors into the language of the wave.

Beyond the fitting event structure of the cycle of forceful motion forward followed by a calmer undertow, the nature imagery, and its size, the wave metaphor is appealing, because it represents democratization processes in many separate countries as a unified whole. The JoD’s mission to “unify what is becoming a worldwide democratic movement,” as stated in its first issue, captures this desire for unity within democratization literature (Diamond and Plattner 1990, 4). The wave also provides the opportunity to extend the metaphor to the ocean as source domain. Scholars frequently refer to the “slowly rising tide of democracy” or “the tide underneath the third wave” (Rowen 1995, 52). While democratization within one country can be part of the wave of democratization, successive waves form a rising tide. This image connects to the primary metaphors of MORE IS UP and GOOD IS UP.

A Point of View

While vast waves cresting and tides rising appear as majestic natural spectacles from afar, they signal danger and destruction in close proximity. Therefore, a closer analysis of the point of view implied in the scholarly use of the wave metaphor is imperative. Scholars situate themselves as distant scientific observers that are not in any way threatened by the phenomenon that they are
studying. Indeed, the earliest use of the wave metaphor in the JoD (before Huntington published *The Third Wave*), presented the wave as a ‘laboratory’:

> The wave of democratization sweeping most of Latin America and much of Eastern Europe provides students of democratic legitimation with a unique laboratory.

(Waisman 1990, 92)

A similarly distant and scientific view is expressed in phrasings such as “the democratic experiment in Iraq” (McFail and Wittes 2014, 19). While this distance may be helpful and possibly even necessary to draw larger inferences, it can also be harmful since these texts on democratization, written by distant observers, influence political decision makers around the world. In the literature, the wave is only presented as a threat to authoritarian leaders and their supporters through the language of *survival*.

> [...] many authoritarian regimes have survived the ‘third wave’ of democratization

(Levitsky and Way 2002, 63)

> [...] his [Chiang’s, a former Chinese political leader] regime’s ability to deal with threats to its international survival and internal stability [...] (Nathan 1990, 54)

However, often the political struggle for democratization is violent at a larger scale. In 1994, Philippe Schmitter observes that "[t]he celebrations that have accompanied shifts from autocracy to democracy [...] obscure some serious dangers and dilemmas" (57). Assuming that only authoritarian supporters are in danger, as suggested by the scholarly use of the wave metaphor, distorts the political reality of people in countries undergoing regime change. Despite the recurring portrayals of the wave as ‘great’ and ‘vast,’ there is only one reference to a “tsunami” throughout twenty-five years of the JoD (Ozel 2003). In stark contrast to the “fear from democratization” (Schmitter 2010, 20), is the “enthusiasm by the U.S. government and the broader U.S. foreign policy community” (Carothers 2002, 5). The importance of this difference in point of view becomes apparent in light of the previously discussed closing lines of *The Third Wave*, where Huntington chooses to list foreign actors before actors within democratizing countries.
The Purposes and Effects of the Wave Metaphor in the Discourse

The wave metaphor serves numerous purposes in democratization literature beyond facilitating communication. Metaphors have a bonding effect within a discourse community as members collectively contribute to an inter-textual act of meaning making when they refer to the metaphor or extend it (Charteris-Black 2004, 12). Seyla Benhabib, drawing on Derrida, describes such acts of collective meaning creation when she argues that “every iteration transforms meaning, adds to it, enriches it in ever-so-subtle ways” (2010, 466). Figurative language as an indicator of belonging to a certain community even goes as far as that novices who wish to join the discourse community feel compelled to adopt these expressions to gain acceptance (Deignan, Littlemore and Semino 2013, 60-61). After The Third Wave greatly extended the wave metaphor within democratization literature, multiple scholars have creatively, and some even critically, expanded Huntington’s use of the metaphor; Ozel’s “tsunami” is one example thereof (2003). Even those that do not seek to extend the metaphor, signal their membership to the discourse community simply by referring to the wave. Indeed, many scholars only refer to the third wave in their introductory or closing paragraphs in an effort to situate their findings within this shared, overarching idea of the discourse community.

The wave metaphor also fulfills a pivotal ideological function. Especially in political discourse, metaphors tap into existing ideologies or myths to legitimize ideas (Charteris-Black 2009, 113). Similarly, Semino argues that metaphors reflect and perpetuate value systems and ideological beliefs (2008). In the case of the wave, the underlying ideas are PROGRESS IS MOTION FORWARD and the view of democracy as the ideal destination of this motion. Expressions like the “wave advanced further—and receded less” are more than a creative way to communicate abstract ideas (Huntington 1991b, 34); the word ‘advance’ connects the wave to widely accepted enlightenment beliefs about progress.
Metaphors also legitimize an idea by evoking emotions (Charteris-Black 2009, 113). The wave metaphor, as applied in democratization literature, emphasizes forward motion and assigns only limited importance to the reverse wave. This implies that the wave metaphor is connected to a strong sense of democratic optimism, so much so that Nodia coined the term "third wave optimism" (2002, 14). The euphoria within the discourse community turned the third wave into "democracy's hour" or the "era of democratization" (Munoz 1993, 39; Phillips 2006, 65). The wave even appeals to moral teleology, as the good side (democracy) is presented as superior to the bad side (authoritarianism). This dualism is reflected in the event structure of the metaphor. While the wave (transitions to democracy) is high, corresponding to GOOD IS UP, the undertow (transitions to authoritarianism) is close to the ground, consistent with BAD IS DOWN.

The moral dimension of the wave metaphor crystallizes when considered in the context of the collective imagination in Judeo-Christian culture. As Charteris-Black observes, "a literal value system statement would seem like an imposition" (2004, 12). Such imposing statements can be circumvented by alluding to existing frames, such as religious references. Two of the most famous Christian associations with waves and water respectively—the Great Flood (Genesis 7) and the tradition of baptism—combine to a powerful blend that elucidates democratization. Fauconnier and Turner's blending theory argues that several cognitive elements can combine to form complex cognitive concepts, or blends (2002). Table 5 demonstrates that the religious blend aptly captures the two central stages of democratization, the removal of authoritarianism and the establishment of democracy.

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2 While wave and water symbolism also appear in other cultures, most authors who published in the JoD have been exposed to Judeo-Christian value systems.
While the destruction caused by the Great Flood signals the end of authoritarian institutions, baptism describes the emergence of democracy. With the exception of those on the ark, the Great Flood destroys all life on earth to facilitate a new start for humanity. The democratization wave metaphor follows a similar logic; it removes authoritarian structures to create space for “democracy [to] emerge” (Diamond and Plattner 1990, 3). The language of the emergence of democracy as the waters of the wave recede corresponds with baptism by immersion. Slight allusions to the more common baptism by affusion also reoccur via the language of ‘touching.’

 [...] one world region has been practically untouched by the third wave of democratization [...] (Howard and Hussain 2011, 35)

The ‘third wave’ of global democratization has left untouched several East Asian autocracies. (Pei 1995, 65)

One of the most striking features of the Third Wave of democratization has been its failure to touch the Arab world. (Plattner and Diamond 2002, 3)

At first, the counter-intuitively gentle language of touching appears to diminish the power of the wave as suggested by earlier descriptions where it sweeps and washes over regions. In these instances, the wave is no longer the powerful force akin to the biblical Flood; it resembles more

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3 Baptism by affusion describes the process where water is poured onto the head of a person.
closely the small amount of water need to convert an autocratic country to democracy. Both types of baptism closely link water with rebirth. Plattner even describes the third wave as “the birth of new democracies in well over fifty countries that has made democracy the most common form of regime in the world today” (Diamond et al 2014, 86).

This religious frame is not only reflected in the wave metaphor but also in phrases such as the “mission of democratization” (Ake 1991, 33). Huntington even dubbed the third wave an “overwhelmingly a Catholic wave” because many of the countries that transitioned during that time period were predominantly Catholic (Huntington 1991b, 13). This religious context further glorifies the wave as a good moral force, and makes it challenging for thinkers who wish to question whether the type of democracy that third wave transitions have created are indeed universally desirable, since raising that doubt would implicitly align them with ‘the bad side.’

**The Limits of the Wave**

While I do not argue that the wave metaphor should no longer be used, I highlight its limitations in the hope that scholars draw more on alternative source domains.

First, the destination, democracy, can hardly be questioned within the frame of the wave metaphor. The idea of progress presumes that forward motion will lead to an improved state; democracy must hence be better than previous regime types. The wave metaphor presents democratization as a natural process, rendering those opposed ‘unnatural’ and prone to fail. This democratic superiority is furthered by the wave's implicit references to the Judeo-Christian collective imagination, likening democratization to a divine force. Within the discourse community, it is hence believed that the “democratic idea has gained legitimacy worldwide” (Munoz 1993, 29), and anyone seeking to challenge this position is likely to drown in the “slowly rising tide of democracy” (Rowen 1995, 52).

Second, the progressively cyclical model of the wave metaphor creates distorted expectations. As soon as more than one authoritarian regime dwindles, democracy enthusiasts
proclaim the start of the next wave democratization. As early as 1996, Diamond prophetically wrote that “the world will then be poised for a ‘fourth wave’” (1996, 35). His expectation that a fourth wave would follow, does not mark an outlier case. It is therefore not surprising that many prematurely spoke of the Arab Spring as the “fourth wave” (Plattner 2011, 6).

Third, the wave metaphor absorbs even those cases that do not fit the transition paradigm, and which would otherwise have the potential to disprove the model. Carothers, in particular, critiques that transitology scholars tend to explain situations that contradict their predictions in terms of the faulty transition paradigm, instead of raising the question whether the paradigm is indeed applicable (2002). The “reverse wave” and the “undertow” are both examples of this tendency.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The wave metaphor is so ubiquitous in democratization literature that its impact has been overlooked. In Fairclough’s terms, this essay sought to ‘denaturalize’ the wave and draw attention to the underlying values and assumptions that it communicates (1995). The wave metaphor has profoundly shaped the field of democratization since the publication of *The Third Wave* (Huntington 1991a). It presents democratization as a natural and morally superior phenomenon beyond human control. While the use of the wave metaphor decreased after Carothers’ apt critique of its foundation, the transition paradigm, many of the ideas have returned. Even as the references to the third wave become less common, the use of the wave metaphor to describe events closely associated with democratization, such as protest, has increased steadily. Articles on the Arab Spring, for example, speak of “a wave of protest,” or even a “global protest wave,” “waves of unrest [that] soon touched virtually every Arab country” and “some went so far as to speak of the beginning of a new ‘fourth wave’ of democratization” (Plattner 2011, 6).

As Chilton noted, an expression may be conventionalized only in specific discourses and not in others (2009, 45). Hence, to understand the impact of **DEMOCRATIZATION IS A WAVE** at large, further
research is required to determine to what extent the wave metaphor moved beyond scholarly discourse and entered the language of policy makers and popular media.
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**Corpus References**


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