We live in an era of democracy; for the first time in history, most people in the world live under tolerably democratic rule. This fact reflects the dramatic transformation of the world’s political landscape in the final quarter of the twentieth century. Over this short period, the number of democracies grew from fewer than 40 to about 80 (Figure 3.1). Democracy expanded beyond its core of Western Europe and former settler colonies to embrace Southern Europe (e.g. Spain), Eastern Europe (e.g. Poland), Latin America (e.g. Brazil), more of Asia (e.g. Taiwan) and parts of Africa (e.g. South Africa). Mandelbaum (2007, p. xi) goes so far as to claim that ‘this global democratic surge in the last quarter of the twentieth century has a strong claim to being the single most important development in a century hardly lacking in momentous events and trends’.

Once the Cold War had passed, and the principle of unconditional state sovereignty came into question, so the promotion of democracy became a more explicit ideological objective for the West. While remaining pragmatic in its choice of allies, the United States was periodically willing to talk the talk: ‘it is the policy of the United States to seek and support democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world’ (White House, 2006). International law, which previously had little to say on political organization within states, also began to address the topic of democracy. Democracy promotion even became a field of academic study (Carothers, 2004).

**Figure 3.1 The number of democratic countries in the world, 1800–2011**

The number of democracies in the world increased dramatically after 1945. This expansion began before, but was accelerated by, the collapse of communism.