states were quickly overthrown by military coups. But established democracies did emerge after 1945 from the ashes of defeated dictatorships, not just in West Germany, but also in Austria, Japan and Italy. These postwar democracies were introduced by the victorious allies, led by the USA, supported by local partners. The second-wave democracies established firm roots, helped by an economic recovery which was itself nourished by American aid. During this second wave, democracy also consolidated in the new state of Israel and the former British dominion of India.

How did these second-wave democracies differ from those of the first phase? Their liberal traditions were somewhat weaker, as representation through parties proved to be the stronger suit. First-generation democracies had emerged when parties were seen as a source of faction, rather than progress. For example, parties had gone unmentioned in the American constitution and George Washington (1796) had declared in his farewell address that parties were ‘potent engines by which cunning ambitions, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people’.

But, by the second era of transition parties had emerged as the leading instrument of democracy in a mass electorate. As in many more recent constitutions, Germany’s Basic Law (1949) went so far as to codify their role: ‘the political parties shall take part in forming the democratic will of the people’. In that respect, second-wave constitutions were built in the Schumpeter mould.

In several cases, though, effective competition was reduced by the emergence of a single party which dominated national politics for a generation: Congress in India, the Christian Democrats in Italy, the LDP in Japan, Labour in Israel. Many second-wave democracies took a generation to mature into fully competitive party systems.

Third wave

The third wave of democratization was a product of the final quarter of the twentieth century. Its main and highly diverse elements were:

- the ending of right-wing dictatorships in Southern Europe (Greece, Portugal and Spain) in the 1970s;
- the retreat of the generals in much of Latin America in the 1980s;
- the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s.

The third wave transformed the global political landscape, providing an inhospitable environment for those non-democratic regimes that survive. Even in sub-Saharan Africa, presidents subjected themselves to re-election (though rarely to defeat). With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of any realistic alternative to democracy, the European Union and the United States also became more encouraging of democratic transitions – while still, of course, keeping a close eye on their own shorter-term interests. It is possible that such factors will have inspired a fourth wave by the time you read these words.

The third wave stimulated considerable research on the mechanics of transition. Our review in the next and final section provides a way of thinking about democracy-building focused directly on the