What Do We Know About Resistance to Democratic Subversion?

Andreas Schedler

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/andreas_schedler/47/
"WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CONTEMPORARY AUTOCRACIES AND AUTOCRATIZATION?"
“What Do We Know About Contemporary Autocracies and Autocratization?”

Dear members and friends,

So I begin my last year as Executive Editor of the Annals of Comparative Democratization. I am very grateful for the nine years. I first became a member of the editorial board from 2010 when Michael Bernhard took over and renamed it the APSA-Comparative Democratization Newsletter and expanded it to include substantive articles on democratization. The first of our issues featured scholars like James A. Robinson, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Thomas Carothers, Giovanni Capoccia, and Daniel Ziblatt with contributions under the theme “On The State and Prospects of Comparative Democratization Research. Basically, the idea was to take stock at where we had been, and where we should go. That has continued to be the underlying guiding leitmotif ever since, and stayed my focus when I and Benjamin Smith first acted as co-editors, and then I took over as Executive Editor in 2014. Last year we also renamed it to the Annals to reflect the academic quality of the contributions to the symposia.

This issue I believe fully lives up to expectations in both these two areas. I am very proud to present a set of distinguished scholars and their excellent contributions on a topic that really takes stock of where we have been, and where we should be going in the field for those who are now increasingly concerned with the fate of democracy in the world: What Do We Know About Contemporary Autocracies and Autocratization?

In the first piece, Andreas Schedler points to the lacuna in what we know about resistance to democratic subversion and decline. Allies, public officials, political and civil society, voters, and we as academics can potentially put up a defense for democracy, but what do we really know about conditions of success of various tactics? Like doctors of preventive medicine, have we done our job here? In the next piece, Ericka Frantz and Joseph Wright point to that personalism is resurging after decades where most authoritarian rule were led by collective bodies. We need, they say, much more research on the rise of personalist parties and leaders, to understand contemporary trends. In the third article, Barbara Geddes points to the increasing number of dictatorships that hold somewhat competitive elections. She provides us with her perspective on the reasons for this with the spread of the internet and communication possibilities as a driving force, and thus point to an increasing need for us to better understand these drivers.

Jennifer Gandhi points to another under-researched feature of these electoral authoritarian regimes in the fourth contribution to this issue’s symposium. She points to that the literature tends to assume that electoral tactics of both incumbent and opposition parties, and voting behavior in these regimes are largely irrelevant. But they are not, and...
this is another area where much more research is needed for us as a field to be relevant to the world. Finally, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way in their article discuss how we as a field have lost sight of the role of ideology. They show how the most durable authoritarian regimes have built their rule on ideology rather than just a strive for power or urge to enrich themselves, yet ideology rarely features anymore in our explanatory models.

This collection of submissions togethersems to lay out a rather comprehensive take on the research agenda laying before us when it comes to autocratization, authoritarian regimes, and endangered democracies. I am very grateful to this excellent cast of scholars who agreed to contribute to our community with their analyses. We really owe all of you our sincerest thanks for your generosity. I also believe that this issue fills a very important role in bringing us forward as a research community clarifying where we have been, and where we need to go.

Staffan I. Lindberg
Executive Editor
Donald Trump has done political science a great service. He has pushed the United States out of the parochialism of American politics into the realm of comparative politics. And vice versa, he has made comparative scholars veer towards the US. Since he won, first the Republican nomination and then the presidency, US democracy has faced a problem that was thought to be exclusive to democracies in developing countries: public concerns about its persistence. If democracies are consolidated when they can be expected “to last well into the future,” the ascent of Donald Trump to the US presidency has put an end to democratic consolidation. In US public debate, the stability of democracy is no longer taken for granted. All of a sudden, the country has entered the universe of fragile democracies and turned into a crucial case in the comparative study of democratic survival.

Over the past years, concerns about worldwide “democratic backsliding” have been spreading and deepening in academic, political, and diplomatic circles. Until Mr. Trump’s irruption into the US presidential election, however, they had been largely confined to new democracies. Despite decades of debate about “the crisis of democracy,” so-called advanced democracies appeared to be essentially immune to illiberal subversion. The US 2016 election changed this overnight inducing an instant radical shift of the democratic mood. Due to a surprising concatenation of contingent events, the unthinkable has become thinkable and the sense of democratic fragility has spread to established democracies. In a rare case of interdisciplinary convergence, politicians, journalists, historians, philosophers, psychologists, and political scientists alike have been warning that one of the world’s oldest democracies might be sliding into authoritarian rule. Gone are our old, comfortable certainties ... and they are unlikely to return within the next 20 years.

Ironically, though, comparative political science has little theoretical or practical guidance to offer on processes of democratic subversion. As a discipline, we have been caught ill-prepared by democracy’s renewed fragility and come almost empty-handed to our happy encounter with American politics. After the turn of the millennium, we shifted much of our attention to study authoritarian regimes. Taking the stability of established democracies for granted (even while surveying their defects), we all but abandoned the study of consolidation in new democracies. Somewhat painfully, we now discover that the theoretical tools and empirical findings which we have accumulated in the comparative study of political regimes over decades are of little use for understanding the stepwise subversion of democracy by illiberal governments.

Just like other citizens of the US or the world, we can articulate informed judgments about the causes, dynamics, and consequences of Donald Trump’s conquest of presidential power. But we do not possess a stock of reliable generalizations about the dynamics of democratic subversion. In this brief essay, I wish to point to the thinness of our comparative knowledge on possible counterstrategies to illiberal aggressions against democracy. In US political debate, both political actors and academic observers have been formulating a variety of strategic recommendations on paths of democratic “resistance” to Donald Trump. Many of these practical recommendations are grounded in enlightening historical analogies and sophisticated political judgment. They are not, however, grounded in systematic comparative evidence.

1) This essay contains a revised section from Andreas Schedler, “A Threat to Democracy? Donald Trump in Comparative Perspective,” 114th Annual Meeting, American Political Science Association (APSA), Boston, 30 August – 2 September 2018. I thank the Collegio Carlo Alberto in Turin, Italy, for supporting its elaboration. I am also grateful for critical comments by Veit Bader, André Banks, Philip Cook, Michael Copplestone, Mónica Ferrin, Maria Josua, Hans-Peter Kriesi, Staffan Lindberg, Mariana Llanos, Glyn Morgan, Fredric C. Schaffer, Sofia Vera, and Elizabeth Zechmeister.


Capacities of Democratic Subversion

Most of what we know about contemporary processes of democratic subversion derives from a handful of prominent cases of “democratic backsliding,” which has limited the scope of our knowledge through sample biases and truncated dependent variables. Our case knowledge is largely based on the analysis of “positive” cases of “authoritarian success” that have gone through (almost) full transitions to electoral authoritarianism (selection bias). And our tendency to study authoritarian practices of illiberal leaders like Putin, Chávez, and Erdoğan at the height of their power allows us to discern dynamics of electoral authoritarianism, but not preceding transitions from electoral democracy (truncation). Consequently, we know little about negative cases of “authoritarian failure” in which executive transgressions were stopped early on through societal opposition or institutional constraints; and we know little about early stages of democratic subversion, before illiberal campaigns spiral out of control.6

The good news is that Donald Trump has given us a case of early illiberal governance whose trajectory is still unfolding. The bad news is that we lack solid comparative findings that would allow us to tell where it is heading to. Whether a political actor represents a threat to democracy depends on her preferences as well as her capacities. In terms of regime preferences, Donald Trump may be described as a “semi-loyal” actor who does not pursue an openly anti-democratic program, but may well be willing to bring democracy down, or let it fall, in the simple pursuit of self-interest.7 In terms of institutional capacities, the picture is more complicated. The effects his actions bear or may bear on US democracy are an open question. He may be willing to wreak havoc on democracy, but is he capable of doing so? What do we know, in comparative perspective, about the subversive capacities of chief executives? Two things seem rather obvious.

First, illiberal governments do not act in isolation. The constraints and opportunities they face are not fixed and given. They are the contingent outcome of political conflict. The democratic net effect of their aggressions against democracy never depends on these aggressions alone, but on their interplay with opposing forces. In fact, if they ignite broad resistance, the ensuing “democratic backlash” may end up fortifying democracy, rather than debilitating it.

Second, in the game of democratic subversion, nothing breeds success like success. The set of constraints and opportunities which illiberal governments face is endogenous to their own accomplishments. The further they advance in the destruction of democracy, the further they can go. *Wehret den Anfängen* (beware the beginnings). This battle cry of democratic resistance crystallizes one of the big lessons which democrats have taken from the rise of fascism in Interwar Europe: the defeat of democracy is a process of escalation that unfolds from seemingly innocuous beginnings to final catastrophes. The enemies of democracy accrue power in vicious spirals in which they grow stronger and bolder at each step. Vigilant democrats must confront and neutralize their attacks against democracy early on, while they are still able to halt their self-reinforcing logic.

The scary echoes from the early 20th century explain in part why Donald Trump has been triggering so many democratic alarm bells. We do not wish to repeat past mistakes and sleepwalk into another “age of catastrophe.”8 Unfortunately, though, the major lesson European democracies have drawn from the rise of fascism is of little practical use here. It says that we need to prevent the enemies of democracy from coming to power and that we can do so by shutting them out of the political arena through “defensive” or “intolerant” democracy.9 Yet, self-defense democratic repression has always been an alien idea to the US and anyway, the man whom his fiercest critics picture as a “fascist” occupies the presidential office already.

Resistance to Democratic Subversion

Existing research on contemporary processes of democratic subversion does not tell us either how democratic actors might be able to stop illiberal governments before it is too late. By focusing on cases of authoritarian success, findings are biased by cases in which opposition failed. Very often, democratic challengers did not fail for a lack of trying. In Venezuela, for example, the opposition succumbed only after a prolonged struggle in which

---


it chose its strategies from the whole repertoire of conventional participation, contentious action, and violent rebellion, from electoral competition to electoral boycott, from peaceful protest to a military coup, yet failed miserably.

Should we conclude that nothing works against aspiring autocrats in power? Well, no. The current debate about “the resistance” against Donald Trump identifies a broad range of actors and strategies that might serve to defend democratic practices and institutions. Estimating their defensive capacities is more a matter of political judgment, though, than of scientific certainties. It requires attention to actors which we often omit in our theories and to interactive sequences and interdependencies which we often omit in our methods.

Resistance by allies: To keep fascists out of power in interwar Europe, the “distancing capacity” of ideologically proximate actors from the political mainstream often proved decisive. Correspondingly, observers have placed certain hopes on the willingness of the Republican party, first to deny candidate Trump its support, and then to restrain the president’s behavior. They have been disappointed so far and are likely to remain so. The prevailing climate of partisan polarization has not only created the conditions for Donald Trump’s success, but for his survival, too. By folding all cleavages into one, it hardens loyalties and prevents defection.11

Resistance by public officials: To dissipate worries about Donald Trump’s authoritarian potential, numerous political commentators have declared their faith in the US system of constitutional checks and balances. In the comparative study of regimes, we often treat political institutions like some sort of perpetual machines that, once established, contain all the ingredients (incentives, values, beliefs) which are necessary to keep them running. The multi-layered political and governmental system of the US may indeed be too complex to be vulnerable to effective subversion from the summit of executive power.

Nevertheless, in the current debate, we have been discovering that political institutions are neither self-perpetuating nor self-defensive automatons. When observers have lauded public officials for withstanding pressures from the White House, they have made a valuable discovery (which may look obvious to the layperson): for their effective protection, institutions need actors – their professional integrity, their democratic spirit, their personal courage.12

Resistance by political and civil society: As economist Daron Acemoglu has argued, when everything else fails, when illiberal presidents manage to neutralize the separation of powers and subject the entire state apparatus to their control, this leaves us with “the last defense,” “the one true defense we have ... civil society’s vigilance and protest.”13 In the birthland of Alexis de Tocqueville’s “art of association,” this seems like a commonsensical proposition.

Yet, an active civil society does not form part of Acemoglu’s own theory of democracy, in which the creation and continuity of democracy derive from threats of popular rebellion. Surely, containing theories do grant a place of pride to enlightened citizens and civic organizations in the consolidation of democracy. However, the concrete actions civil society should take to defend democracy and the causal pathways that could make them successful are unclear. The individual, largely symbolic strategies recommended by historian Timothy Snyder may offer solace, but only faint prospects of systemic effectiveness. Campaigns for activating judicial restraints or pressuring elected officials presuppose the continuing effectiveness of courts and legislatures.14

Most democratic demolitions teams, like those headed by Chávez, Erdoğan, and


and Orbán, have faced massive street protests, to little avail. In the US, we have also been witnessing the irruption of a powerful omitted variable which has not been contemplated by comparative political science: resistance by social scientists (see e.g. note 5 above). We are contaminating our dataset, but are we saving our democracy?

**Rejection by voters:** If everybody else fail, what remains is hope in the ultimate arbiter of the democratic game (as long as the game itself remains minimally democratic): the voter. It has been quite puzzling, quite disturbing indeed, to see majorities (or at least pluralities) of voters supporting, once and again, illiberal governments who have been, step by step, dismantling their democratic rights and liberties. The set of logical explanations is limited. Either it is a problem of *values* and citizens care more about other things than democracy (such as social justice, religious piety, or the national soul). Or it is a problem of *perceptions* and predictions, but practical recipes. All over the globe, worried actors, observers, and citizens are asking: How should we confront these threats? What can be done to prevent, halt, or revert processes of illiberal subversion? We have been offering manifold advice on the contemporary black hole of our democratic fears, the disunited United States of America. We have been placing our democratic hopes on diverse groups of actors: state agents and civil society, presidential allies and adversaries, federal and subnational actors, non-elective powers and voters. I do not say these hopes are misplaced. I only note that they do not rest on anything close to scientific certainties. If we trust them, it is not comparative scholarship we trust, but political judgment.

**Conclusion**

In current debates about illiberal threats to democracy, comparative political scholars have been called upon to offer, not just explanations

---

This contribution to the symposium documents two critical changes in authoritarian politics from 1946 to the present. The first deals with how dictatorships seize control. Though some regimes still assume power through violence and force, we are increasingly seeing democratically-elected incumbents slowly chip away at democratic institutions to establish authoritarian rule. The second key change has to do with concentration of power in the hands of the leadership in dictatorships. In the past, many dictatorships featured collegial decision-making; today, however, we are witnessing a rise in levels of personalism, such that a single individual frequently wields disproportionate political power. We review the factors associated with greater personalism in dictatorships, before showing that these two trends are interrelated. We close by identifying a future avenue for research amid this new authoritarian landscape. We posit that democratically-elected incumbents with weak political parties -- which we term personalist parties -- should be more likely to engage in actions that erode democracy and, when successful, more likely to govern absent constraints on their rule.

**Trend 1: How today’s dictatorships seize power**

For much of the post-World War II period, new dictatorships formed in an abrupt and coercive way. The case of Chile exemplifies this. On September 11, 1973, Chilean troops staged a coup, toppling democratically-elected President Salvador Allende. Allende’s ouster happened quickly. Troops surrounded the presidential palace and attacked it, until eventually Allende took his own life. General Augusto Pinochet assumed control soon after, with the backing of a military junta, and a new dictatorship was born. The date of the transition to authoritarian rule is obvious.

Contrast this series of events with those that occurred in Venezuela. Hugo Chavez won free and fair presidential elections in 1998, and again in 2000 despite initiating a number of controversial policies. Over the course of the early 2000s, however, the quality of Venezuelan democracy deteriorated. In 2004, the Chavista-dominated parliament increased the size of the Supreme Court and made it possible to dismiss judges by a majority vote. By the end of the year, Chavez and his allies were in full control of the courts. Concurrently, Chavez pushed through new laws that muzzled media reporting critical of his rule and began naming his opponents “anti-revolutionaries.” The opposition boycotted the election held the following year in response to a government crackdown on its activities and because few had any hope the contest would be competitive. Chavistas won all the seats in parliament. Chavez continued to concentrate power in the years that followed, and Venezuela remains authoritarian today. Less clear, however, is the specific date Venezuelan democracy broke down. We label this form of seizure of power, in which incumbents slowly dismantle democracy, authoritarianization.

Table 1 shows that authoritarianizations have now displaced coups led by senior military officers as the most common way that dictatorships are formed. Prior to 1990, coups led by senior officers were at the top of the list. Combined with those led by junior officers, coups made up just under half of all authoritarian seizures of power. Since the end of the Cold War, however, as has been well documented elsewhere, coups have declined. From 1990 to 2015, only about a third of new dictatorships came to power via coup. In their place, rebel insurgencies, mass uprisings, and authoritarianizations became more common, with the latter now comprising roughly a quarter of all authoritarian seizures of power.

This trend is consistent with findings from recent research on the “third wave of autocratization,” which reveal that democracies are increasingly deteriorating via power grabs that have a legal façade and in a process that is slow and incremental. The cumulation of evidence therefore suggests that would-be dictators are using new tactics to consolidate control.

**Trend 2: Power concentration in today’s dictatorships**

A large body of research shows that one critical dimension differentiating authoritarian regimes is the extent to which power is held in the hands of a single individual. Personalist dictatorships, which epitomize extreme power concentration in the leadership post, are associated with a wide array of bad behaviors, including more risky and aggressive foreign policy choices, greater propensity to invest in nuclear weapons, greater belligerence towards democracies, more corruption, and more squandering of foreign aid. Though observers historically tended to assume most dictatorships were strongmen, with examples of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Idi Amin of Uganda coming to mind, in recent years most are aware.

---


that the reality is far more complex. Regimes such as Mexico under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the Soviet Union after Stalin, and Brazil under its military junta illustrate this. In such places, the leadership is certainly powerful, but other elite actors are able to constrain and check the leader’s actions. These constraints are important because they minimize the chance of wild and erratic behaviors by providing some level of leadership accountability.  

For much of the post-World War II period, collegial forms of authoritarian rule made up the bulk of all authoritarian regimes (with dominant-party dictatorships comprising most of these). Since the end of the Cold War, however, personalist dictatorships have become far more common. Whereas in 1988, personalist dictatorships made up 23 percent of all dictatorships, this number nearly doubled (to 40 percent) by 2010.

Using new data measuring levels of personalism within dictatorships, we document a similar trend. This personalism index (ranging from 0 to 1) measures the extent to which power is concentrated within an authoritarian regime each year, such that higher values indicate more personalism and lower values the opposite. As Table 1 shows, average personalism in dictatorships is 0.27 from 1946 to 1989, but increased to 0.39 from 1990 to 2010. Moreover, levels of personalism are higher in the post-Cold War period than prior to it for each method of seizing power.

Personalization happens when a leader expands power at the expense of allies in the leader’s support group. Initial success consolidating power begets future successes. Eventually the dictator accumulates sufficient power that the support group is no longer able to push back against him. The strength and cohesion of the leader’s support group is therefore important for understanding when leaders will successfully grab power without resistance. Where members of the support group are well-organized and the leader must bargain with them as a unified actor and personalization can be deterred. Where they are instead fractured and weak, they can no longer bargain as a collective; leaders instead negotiate with separate individuals and can divide and conquer any threatening challengers. The ultimate tactic for containing ambitious leaders is to credibly threaten to oust them; cohesive and unified support groups are better able to do this, and the chances of personalization are lower.

This argument receives support in a new book with Barbara Geddes where we provide evidence that two factors increase the prospects of personalization in dictatorships: divided military and new parties. In both circumstances, organizational disunity and weakness make it more difficult for groups to challenge the leadership’s efforts to consolidate control, opening the door for one-man rule. In the past, leaders entering office through force had to bargain with members of the revolutionary movement or military. These organizations were typically both armed and well organized, enabling them to push back against leader efforts to concentrate power. Likewise, during the Cold War, many political parties that launched new dictatorships into power were strong and ideologically driven, making it easier for them to constrain personalization.

Since the end of the Cold War, however, we have seen a decline in organized support groups. Figure 1 shows this. Just as levels of personalism have increased in dictatorships over time, support groups are increasingly incapable of pushing back against aspiring strongmen. The share of new dictatorships with seizure groups made up of either a divided military or new political party increases from roughly a third of new dictatorships in the late 1970s to a peak of over one-half by 2010. In short, it appears that more and more new dictatorships come to power with seizure groups that have less bargaining power and are thus more susceptible to personalization.

**Authoritarianization as a springboard for personal rule**

Taken together these two trends reveal that today’s dictatorships are different from their Cold War predecessors. They are more likely to 1) come to power via democratically-elected incumbents incrementally dismantling democracy and 2) feature power concentrated in the hands of the leadership. Gone are the days of regimes such as the Soviet Union, where a revolutionary movement forces its way into power and evolves into a strong political organization with well-established rules and norms of behavior. Today’s dictatorships mirror that of Turkey, where democracy slowly erodes as the incumbent sidelines opponents and stacks the courts and security services with allies culminating in a system in which the regime and leadership become synonymous.

---


6) Note that uprisings in particular see a large jump in personalism, but because this regime seizure type occurs so infrequently, we should not put too much stock in this increase.


9) This shows levels of personalism during the first five years of rule or as long as the regime survives if less than five years.
Importantly, these two trends are reinforcing. From 1946 to 1999, just under half (44 percent) of authoritarianizations led to the formation of personalist rule. In the 2000 to 2010 period, this number increased to a whopping 75 percent. (As a comparison, coups led to personalist rule 32 percent of the time from 1946 to 1999 and only 43 percent of the time from 2000 to 2010.) Authoritarianization and personalism are on the rise, and the first is increasingly leading to the second.

Looking to future research: personalist parties in democracies

Future research is needed to better understand the relationships we highlight here. We close pointing to one potential pathway forward. There is good reason to believe that the same factors that make personalization possible after the seizure of power pave the way for authoritarianization in the period leading up to it. We focus our discussion here on political parties, though it is possible that divided militaries are also important in enabling incumbent takeovers in democracies.

Authoritarianizations typically involve aspiring dictators eroding democratic institutions until there is little democracy left. This is made possible by weak institutions that are unable to effectively push back against such behaviors. And, indeed, in many cases where authoritarianization has occurred, the political parties supporting incumbents have looked more like personal movements than real political organizations. Most are relatively new creations, often constructed by co-opting opponents and fusing pre-existing parties together. In Venezuela, for example, the Fifth Republic Movement -- Chavez’s own creation -- was established just prior to the election that propelled him to power and was comprised solely of his loyalists. The weakness of the party made it more difficult for any group of elites within it to effectively counter Chavez’s efforts to personalize the system.

It is possible, therefore, that weak incumbent political parties in democracies are paving the way for authoritarianization and subsequent personalist rule. Future research is needed to better understand whether and how the decay of democratic systems of governance is contributing to the two trends we identify. We suggest a few possibilities here.

In democracies, institutions such as elections and term limits should provide a regular and routinized mechanism to remove a leader and therefore offer a safeguard against incumbent takeovers. Members of the incumbent political party, the judiciary, and the security apparatus, however, must remain cohesive and/or influential enough to require the leader to abide by these rules. Once a leader slowly eviscerates constraints on executive power, it becomes possible to undermine the democratic process and concentrate control. Towards this end, we posit that personalist parties are less likely to resist leaders’ efforts to consolidate power. Thus, democracies with leaders backed by a personalist party should be more likely to fall via authoritarianization than those with leaders backed by an established party.

We suggest that the inability of political elites to constrain executive power in those cases where leaders create personalist parties stems from two related mechanisms. First, elites in personalist parties face higher collective action costs in organizing opposition to incumbent moves to consolidate individual power than those in established parties. Individual elites and senior office holders from established parties have a history of repeated interactions with each other that facilitates cooperation necessary to act collectively. Indeed, a stylized view of established parties states their raison d’être as a vehicle to solve elite collective action problems.

Further, the organizational resources of established parties, including financial resources, human capital, and organizing knowledge, are less likely to be directly controlled by the chief executive and his/her personal network of family and friends.

Second, leaders in personalist parties are more likely to eschew appointments from the political establishment and instead fill positions of high government office with individuals from personal networks, typically family members and other loyalists who often lack government experience. Such individuals, however, are less likely to constrain incumbent efforts to subvert democracy because their future positions in government are more closely tied to the fortunes of the incumbent leader, and they often have weaker normative preferences for democracy. In contrast to elites affiliated with an established party, those who are part of personalist parties are less likely to win power without the leader. This means that they have a stronger incentive to maintain the incumbent leader in power -- even at the cost of subverting democracy -- than do elites from established parties, who have

10) A stylized entrepreneurial leader unconstrained by a party would not seek votes or policy but rather maximize the chances of obtaining and remaining in office. (See Kaare Strom, “A Behavioral Theory of Competitive Political Parties,” American Journal of Political Science 34(1990):565-598.) While Samuels and Shugart examine how different electoral systems influence the trade-off between vote-seeking and policy, our theoretical ideas focus on the larger trade-off between office-seeking and the other two sources of party utility (votes and policy). A measurement of personalist parties would therefore utilize information on leader-party relations prior to the leader gaining national executive power in an election. This way, information used to code personalist parties would not reflect the strategic behavior of the leader once in power as the national executive. (David J. Samuels and Matthew S. Shugart, Presidents, Parties, and Prime Ministers: How the Separation of Powers Affects Party Organization and Behavior (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, Ch. 6).

greater potential to win power in the future with a different candidate from the established party. As a result, elites appointed to high office by leaders supported by personalist parties are less likely to constrain incumbent attempts to consolidate power and undermine democracy.

Taken together, these two mechanisms suggest that incumbent leaders backed by personalist parties should be less likely to be checked by elites and thus more likely to succeed in their efforts to concentrate control.

These dynamics should be compounded by the fact that incumbents backed by personalist parties are more likely to attempt power-grabs to begin with. Leaders affiliated with an established party typically rise to power by working through the party’s lower ranks. They often have experience in local government and/or serve party elites in appointed government positions (e.g. cabinet posts). This means they typically have more exposure to how democratic politics works, learning skills such as negotiation with the opposition, compromising on policy, and building diverse coalitions. Sustained experience in democratic politics while rising through the ranks of an established party also shapes leaders’ normative preferences for democracy. Together, democratic experience and a normative preference for democracy should make leaders less likely to attempt to consolidate individual power at the expense of democratic institutions.

We leave it to future research to empirically evaluate these possibilities.

Table 1. How dictatorships seize power and levels of personalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Type of regime seizure event</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Average personalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1946-1989</td>
<td>Family takeover or foreign power</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior officer coup</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Junior officer coup</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insurgency</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uprising</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authoritarianization</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Type of regime seizure event</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Average personalism*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990-2015</td>
<td>Family takeover or foreign power</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior officer coup</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Junior officer coup</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insurgency</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uprising</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authoritarianization</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data only available for 1990-2010.

Source: Updates to Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018).
Frantz and Wright

New dictatorships, 1974-2015

Average **personalism** in new dictatorships

New dictatorships with **divided militaries**

New dictatorships with **new parties**

Percent

Year

Before the early 1990s, most dictatorships either held no elections or staged election rituals that offered voters no choice of candidates or parties. Many dictatorships exercised effective censorship over mass media. Especially during the first years after seizures of power, dictatorships often jailed, tortured, and murdered large numbers of citizens.

Post-1990, most dictatorships hold regular, semi-competitive elections. Ruling parties and incumbent dictators rarely lose such elections, but lower-level officials and legislators can and do sometimes lose. Dictatorships can no longer monopolize the flow of information among citizens, and intervention in the media has taken radical new forms. Rather than aiming for absolute control over the flow of information as some earlier dictatorships did, ruling elites now distort and reshape the information reaching citizens through targeted censorship of some internet content, the generation of fake news, the use of trolls to manipulate social media communication, and intimidation, exile, and murder of opposition journalists. Despite these strategies, dictatorships can no longer block the spread of information about opposition opinions and activities as they once could. Finally, in most contemporary dictatorships, repression is more targeted than it once was; jails and gulags hold fewer political prisoners.

Why have dictatorial elites changed the ways they deal with citizens in these ways? Some observers credit the post-Cold War policies of rich democracies with these changes. The policies of rich democracies are a part of the story, especially with regard to elections,1 but in my view this explanation overstates both the commitment of rich-country leaders to democratization and their ability to influence the rest of the world.

I suggest that a bigger reason for these changes is that the extension of internet access to much of the world and the ubiquity of social media have rendered old dictatorial methods of controlling popular opposition unworkable, while presenting dictators with new methods that in some respects work better. Most directly, the inability to cut off popular access to information about opposition has incentivized the development of more sophisticated and specialized strategies for shaping opinions, diverting attention from criticisms of the dictatorship, and spreading misinformation. Dictatorial security services can also eavesdrop on the information flowing among citizens using social media in order to assess the risk posed by individuals. This allows them to target repression more accurately than used to be possible, reducing the temptation to murder or jail large numbers of potential opponents.

Despite these new strategies for manipulating information, however, social media have increased the capacity of irate but unorganized citizens to join together in demonstrations and uprisings that can overthrow dictators. As the likelihood of popular ouster has risen, more dictatorships have agreed to hold semi-competitive elections as a means of reducing popular grievances. Though semi-competitive elections rarely end dictatorships, they can end the careers of individual officials and thus give them elected officials reasons to pursue welfare improvements for the people who vote for them.

Dictators and Popular Opposition

Dictators know that citizens could overthrow them. From 1946 to 1989, mobilized citizens overthrew about 20 percent of the dictatorships that ended, either by popular uprising or by revolution. Since 1990, popular uprisings have become more common means of overthrowing dictatorships. Together with revolution, they now account for 33 percent of the dictatorships that ended.2 This history gives dictators strong incentives to worry about popular opposition.

Three things can increase the likelihood of popular mobilization against dictatorship:

1) Widespread discontent with the government, at least in the cities. In order to limit discontent, dictatorial media strategies try to block or manipulate the flow of information to citizens. Media under government control flood screens with smiling images of the dictator and positive information about their accomplishments. They foster identification between the regime and the nation. They try to hinder the transmission of bad news about the economy, corruption, crime, and even disasters such as refinery explosions and the collapse of buildings. These efforts pay off much of the time because elites can shape public opinion about subjects with which people lack direct experience.3 This basic feature of human attitude formation explains why propaganda and campaign advertising work – in democracies as well as dictatorships.

Before about 1990, dictatorial elites relied on state ownership of media and prior censorship of privately owned newspapers, television, and radio to prevent their citizens from finding out about bad news and being exposed to opposition ideas.

1) Before 1990, dictatorships that held uncontested election rituals received more aid per capita than those held no elections or those with semi-competitive ones. Post-Cold War, however, those that hold semi-competitive elections receive more aid than other dictatorships (Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, 2018, How

2) Figures calculated from data in the Authoritarian Regimes Data Set, http://sites.psu.edu/dictators/. Popular uprising is defined as mostly unarmed opposition demonstrations and strikes. Revolution or insurgency is defined as armed popular action against a government.

This kind of censorship could only work if dictatorial elites could control the flow of information and people across borders, which many dictatorships tried to do. In East Germany and North Korea, where borders would otherwise have been most permeable, dictatorships went to extraordinary lengths to guard their borders. People who attempted to cross the borders could be shot and can be still in North Korea. In East Germany, the security service employed 4,400 people just to open and censor mail to and from the country. Agents in every post office opened every letter and package to and from anyone outside the communist bloc. Thousands more agents guarded the border. In North Korea, radios were fixed at factories to prevent the reception of any channels other than the state-owned one. Apartment house monitors were required to check radios in individual apartments to make sure they had not been tampered with. The claim that North Koreans were better off than their South Korean cousins remained a staple of North Korean government messaging until the early 1990s, when famine led to the flight of desperate people out of the country and cross-border smuggling increased the amount of information making its way into the north.4

Despite dictatorial efforts at media and border control some citizens always oppose dictatorships, and in some circumstances, very large numbers of citizens do so. Although elite discourse can shape citizens’ opinions about many things, it cannot persuade hungry people that they have enough to eat or unemployed people that they have jobs.

(2) Citizens can communicate with each other in order to find out how many others oppose the government and to coordinate opposition activities.

Before 1990, the control of information also prevented citizens from learning how many others opposed the dictatorship. Without knowledge about the beliefs of others, citizens could not assess the risk of overt opposition, which reduced the likelihood of popular movements to dislodge dictators. The sudden public exposure of widespread dissatisfaction, as during the Monday marches against the East German communist regime or the demonstrations against the Ceausescu dictatorship in Romania, show how dangerous such knowledge can be. In these and other instances, the sudden revelation of widespread popular outrage led to more massive demonstrations, defection by the dictator’s armed defenders, and the sudden collapse of dictatorships that had seemed invincible only months before.5

(3) Discontented citizens have been organized by opposition leaders.

Where information control prevents citizens from finding out how many others oppose the dictatorship, effective opposition depends heavily on leadership. Opposition leaders figure out ways to create alternative information networks and shoulder the costs of coordinating opposition activities. Consequently, old methods of opposition control focused on opposition leaders in order to prevent discontent, even if widespread, from leading to overt political action. To prevent mass opposition, dictatorships jailed, killed, or exiled potential opposition leaders. Dictatorial elites lacked good information about citizens’ real opinions and also about leadership potential and individual risk tolerance, however, so they could not pinpoint the individuals to lock up. Consequently, repression tended to blast the lives of many people.

This interlocking system for limiting popular opposition apparently worked reasonably well since only 20 percent of dictatorships that ended between 1946 and 1989 were ousted by popular mobilization. Members and former members of the dictatorial elite overthrow most dictators and dictatorships.

Disruption by the Internet

The spread of internet access and social media made old forms of censorship ineffective, however, beginning in the early 1990s. Browser and web server software first became available in 1991. The 1991 Soviet coup was broadcast in real time via the internet. The years between 1994 and 2000 saw exponential growth in use of the internet by ordinary people. Google launched its search engine in 1998. These innovations multiplied the sources of information about all subjects available to people all over the world. They also made it possible for like-minded people to find each other without physical proximity or organized intermediation by leaders.

Once these developments had occurred, dictatorial governments could no longer monopolize the flow of information to citizens. Simply closing down access to the internet has tremendously high economic costs and so has rarely been done. Blocking the spread of information across borders has become impossible. Currently the only country besides North Korea that attempts to prevent most citizens from crossing the border is Eritrea. In Eritrea, all adults except married women with children and the seriously ill can be conscripted indefinitely. Those subject to the draft cannot cross the border, and border guards have orders to shoot. There is no mobile internet in Eritrea and mobile phones are scarce.6 Eritrea is one of the ten poorest countries in the world. Even in these conditions, however, dictatorial elites cannot completely prevent the transmission of information from abroad.


In other parts of the world, after mobile phones reached large numbers of people, citizens living in dictatorships could find out how people lived across the border. They could also find out how many in their own country shared their hostility toward the dictatorship. They could organize opposition demonstrations even without leaders, though they might not be able to maintain them for more than a few weeks.

Citizens’ increased ability to inform themselves and coordinate anti-government activities put pressure on dictatorships to develop new skills in order to respond. These new skills can include a complicated and nuanced internet intervention strategy. Internet security personnel monitor web traffic in order to remove the posts thought most damaging or challenging. In some countries, government employees post content supportive of political leaders and their policy choices, or trolls participate in chat rooms to divert political conversations into harmless controversies about sports or celebrities. Fake news generated by government security personnel runs the gamut from ludicrous rumors to the plausible reshaping of real events, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in order to put dictators in a positive light.\(^7\)

Some dictatorships were quicker and more effective in building new skills than others. In some places, citizens’ ability to use new technology outpaced the dictatorship’s, at least for awhile, and popular mobilization facilitated by social media ousted dictators. Observers have given Facebook credit for making possible the demonstrations that ousted Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak in 2011, for example.

Naturally, dictatorships in richer countries have been quicker to develop the skills needed to undermine popular opposition coordination. During the Arab Spring, the Mubarak and Ben Ali governments lacked effective cyber technicians in their security services, but the Gulf States were already hiring foreign experts, beginning to develop mass surveillance techniques, and copying manipulation strategies from China and Russia.\(^8\)

The social media and surveillance strategies used by dictatorships not only interfere with the dissemination of accurate information and coordination of opposition activity. They have also made possible much more targeted repression than in the past. Dictatorships still jail, murder, and exile opposition activists and journalists, but in most countries, many fewer citizens are locked up. Mass repression is very costly. The cost of spies, jailers, and institutions to house the incarcerated is high, and the cost to the economy of imprisoning substantial numbers of educated people – as those suspected of dissidence tend to be – is also high.

All else equal, dictatorships prefer targeted repression if they can identify who to target.\(^9\)

---


\(^9\) Why, then, has the Erdogan government in Turkey locked up more than 50,000 political prisoners since 2016? The current dictatorship follows more than 40 years of vibrant democracy in which the Gülen movement spread unhindered to large numbers of people attracted by his religious teaching and advocacy of universal access to quality education. Meanwhile, the security services focused their attention on the Kurdish ethnic minority rather than developing a capacity to monitor ethnic Turks. Erdogan believes that Gülen and his followers organized the attempted coup of 2016. He has tried to prevent future attempted ousters by locking them up, but security services cannot distinguish which Gülenists are dangerous, if any are, from the many people in the movement or friends with someone in it.

---

How Semi-Competitive Elections Reduce Popular Opposition

Despite the sophisticated cyber strategies being developed by the richest dictatorships, contemporary autocrats cannot block information about opposition opinions and activism as fully as they once could. In this context, semi-competitive elections have become more worth their cost and risk to dictatorial elites because they help reduce popular discontent.

I define semi-competitive elections as elections in which candidates from the dictatorial ruling group run against opposition, but a tilted playing field makes election outcomes predictable. Rather than outlawing opposition, the ruling cabal maintains its dominance through media control, internet manipulation, intimidation and repression of opposition activists, and the use of state resources to dominate campaign advertising, pay for exciting campaign events, and buy votes.

Most contemporary dictatorships hold semi-competitive local and legislative elections because they help dictators to monitor and constrain the self-serving behavior of local and regional officials. All dictatorships have trouble monitoring and controlling their agents in outlying areas. Such officials are supposed to pursue central regime policies, distribute the benefits allocated to local citizens, and provide adequate governance. They need to be monitored because authoritarian rule (which provides citizens with no low-cost means of sanctioning officials) inevitably creates temptations for officials to abuse their offices, exploit those over whom they have power, and steal. Bad behavior by local officials creates risks for dictators. It alienates citizens, and in extreme cases, can lead to popular mobilization to overthrow the dictator. When all is said and done, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, former dictator of Tunisia, lost power because a local official abused one too many street vendors. Semi-competitive elections help central leaders overcome their difficulties.
with monitoring and controlling these officials. In this way, they address condition (1) above: they seek to reduce popular anger about mistreatment and abuse by making it possible for citizens to vote the worst local abusers out of office.

Steps toward Democracy?

Semi-competitive elections and some other features of the post-1990 recipe for opposition control appear more democratic than did the institutions used for opposition restraint in past dictatorships. Superficial observation might confuse semi-competitive elections with democratic elections, which in the real world also often involve vote buying and efforts by incumbents to influence media coverage. The reduction in the number and severity of human rights abuses may also contribute to a more democratic image. Some dictatorships exercise less old-fashioned censorship than they used to. These changes have probably led to incremental improvements in the quality of life for people ruled by dictators. For example, dictatorships that hold semi-competitive elections have lower infant mortality rates than those that hold no elections. More targeted repression obviously makes those who have not been jailed or killed better off.

These changes should not be seen as steps toward democracy, however. They are simply revised strategies for keeping dictators in power in a changed information environment.

10) Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018.
The Opposition and Electoral Strategy in Competitive Autocracies and Democracies at Risk
Jennifer Gandhi, Emory University

Introduction
Among dictatorships, electoral autocracies represent the modal category, arrived at either by liberalizing a closed regime or by backsliding from a democratic one. We know a great deal about incumbents in these regimes: how they use and rig elections to maintain themselves in power. Equally important is how opposition actors respond. Whether they are able to coordinate to protest electoral theft can make the difference between a democratic transition and maintenance of the status quo.

But also important is what opposition parties, candidates, and voters do within the election itself: the decisions over candidate selection, campaigning, fundraising, messaging, and mobilization that influence the success of parties and candidates in obtaining voter support. In electoral autocracies, the incumbent party controls the executive and a legislative majority. For this reason, it may be tempting to dismiss the possibility that electoral strategy can make a difference. But there are circumstances in which it can matter. So understanding the electoral behavior of voters and parties is just as critical in these regimes as it is in democracies.

Electoral strategies to end autocracy: the case of Malaysia
Malaysia’s historic May 2018 election illustrates this point. For the first time in the country’s history, the opposition defeated the incumbent Barisan Nasional coalition of parties. Four opposition parties – the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the People’s Justice Party (PKR), the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (BERSATU), and the Islamist National Trust Party (AMANAH) – formed an electoral coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), to contest the election. One critical goal of the alliance was to coordinate candidate selection to avoid multi-cornered fights in Malaysia’s single-member constituencies. The PH was able to do so, winning 113 seats in Malaysia’s 222-seat parliament. Forming a post-electoral coalition with the Sabah Heritage Party (WARISAN), the opposition was able to command a more solid legislative majority to form the new government.

The formation of an electoral alliance among opposition parties happens infrequently: around 15 percent in post-World War II executive and legislative elections in autocracies. As difficult as formation is, it provides little guarantee of victory, as opposition parties in Malaysia knew. The Barisan Alternatif was a four-party coalition that won over 40 percent of the vote in the 1999 election, but ended up with only 22 percent of seats in parliament. In the previous election of 2013, another four-party coalition, the Pakatan Rakyat, came the closest anyone has ever come to ending 43 years of BN rule. It won the popular vote, but received fewer seats than the BN due to malapportionment. For the 2018 election, the BN was vulnerable due to the 1MDB scandal and then-Prime Minister Najib Razak’s general unpopularity. But most commentary on the election predicted that the BN would eke out victory since they controlled so many levers of power – redrawing district lines, resources to buy votes, legal strategies to intimidate opposition leaders – to insure it.

So how did the PH win? What was different this time? Arguably, the parties paid closer attention to electoral strategy. The coalition (like past ones) was composed of parties with very different positions on two of the critical dimensions that define Malaysia politics: ethnicity and religion. Aware of these policy differences, party leaders took action. They strove to determine how these policy differences within the coalition would reverberate among voters. Because each constituency would have only one candidate from the PH running, the coalition, in order to win, would need voters who supported one party within the coalition to vote for a different party from the coalition. If the four parties within the PH were ideologically similar, then there would little tension for supporters of any of the parties. But because the parties represented such different views, party leaders worried about whether their constituents would engage in sufficient cross-party voting. Internal polling by the parties sought to determine the extent of the problem, asking voters explicitly about their willingness to engage in cross-party voting. The biggest rivalry and policy differences were between the Chinese-dominated DAP and the Malay-dominated BERSATU. Results from a survey experiment run before the election show that BERSATU voters were 30 percent more likely to defect from supporting the coalition after learning that the DAP might form the next government, than voters from other alliance parties.

1) e.g., Sarah Birch, Electoral Malpractice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).


3) The incumbent coalition formerly was named the Alliance.


Having identified cross-party voting as a potential issue, PH leaders took actions to mitigate the problem. First, six months before the election, they issued a draft budget that served as the equivalent of a common policy platform. The budget, in essence, showed voters how the coalition would govern no matter the distribution of power among the parties after the voting. Second, the parties were strategic in candidate selection within constituencies. The coalition chose, for example, a DAP candidate to run in more Chinese-majority districts in 2018 than it had in 2013. Strategic candidate selection was a way of minimizing the amount of cross-party voting the coalition would have to ask from its supporters. Finally, all the parties recognized the high importance of retaining the support of BERSATU voters who came from the majority population (Malay) and who could credibly threaten to defect to either the incumbent or spoiler opposition parties (e.g., PAS). Therefore an effort was made to accommodate them and insures their commitment to the coalition. In January 2018, four months before the election, the coalition announced its post-electoral government, headed by BERSATU’s leader, Mahathir Mohamad, should it win the election. This was the first time that any opposition coalition in Malaysia’s history had formally announced its post-electoral cabinet ahead of impending elections. The announcement of an executive branch headed by a Malay-Muslim leader served to resolve the uncertainty over who would control the government and to reassure BERSATU supporters that their interests would be protected under an opposition government. These electoral strategies were critical for the opposition’s success. Forty constituencies that BN won in 2013 switched to one of the parties within the coalition in 2018. If BERSATU voters constituted on average 24 percent of coalition voters in each constituency (as in our sample) and 30 percent of them had defected (as in our results), the coalition would have lost 5 to 12 of these seats, for example. Given that the coalition won a majority by just one seat, defection by opposition voters in these constituencies would have resulted in defeat.

**Electoral strategies to defend democracy**

In their recent annual report, the Varieties of Democracy project finds that for the first time since the third wave transitions, the number of countries experiencing advances in democratization is matched by an equal number of states undergoing democratic backsliding. Hugo Chavez, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Jarosław Kaczyński, and their kind could not have led their countries down the path of backsliding without the complicity of others, and these enablers usually are tied to the leader through a political party. Once the leader’s political party controls the executive and a legislative majority, democratic backsliding is not guaranteed or even likely. But it is possible. An executive working with a legislative majority can disguise their attacks on the institutional strongholds of the opposition, within courts or the media, as institutional reforms that follow established procedures for modifying laws and institutions. In Poland, for example, the government carried out politically-motivated attacks on the judiciary by passing laws through the PiS-controlled legislature. In Turkey, Erdoğan and the AKP gained control over the media by using libel, terrorism, and tax evasion charges to silence critical journalists and media outlets. The critical question is whether the leader’s co-partisans are willing to defend the prerogatives of institutions designed to check executive power. If not, following the letter of the law to accrue power means democratic backsliding can occur through stealth. There is no “bright line” around which citizens can coordinate protests to express their opposition to these kinds of behaviors.

Recent cases illustrate the difficulty of organizing and sustaining protests in response to actions that further executive takeovers. They also highlight the impotence of institutions, such as courts and the media, to counter an executive and legislature that is united and determined to engage in backsliding. Consequently, one of the early lines of defense rests with voters at the ballot box, and this is where electoral strategy of the opposition matters. Party leaders in democracies are aware that strategy matters, as reflected in their debates: what should be the relative importance of economic and identity politics in the Democratic Party’s message in the U.S.? How should mainstream parties in Germany position themselves to stem the defection of voters to the AfD? How can parties in Spain prevent Vox, a regional right-wing party, from obtaining a national following? To realize what is at stake, one need only look at the cases in which the incumbent’s intent on takeovers from above capitalized on the opposition’s mistakes. Turkey’s opposition parties have lost to the AKP 14 times in the last 16 years – the result of AKP mafiasence, but also the opposition’s “hapless”

---


8) Gandhi and Ong, “Committed or Conditional Democrats?”


strategies. Similarly, one commentary notes: “One of the striking things about Poland’s political trajectory in the last three years has been the inability of the opposition to mount a credible challenge to PiS, despite periodic mass protests against the government, various scandals that tarnished the party’s reputation, and a handful of international embarrassments.”

The failure of the opposition in places such as Poland and Turkey, shows the urgency with which opposition actors must learn and be willing to act strategically. Multiple failed attempts at winning elections only allow the incumbent to grow in strength, enabling an incumbent party with control of both branches to change the rules governing elections so that it becomes even more difficult for the opposition to succeed. The accumulation of power brings increasing returns so that incumbents can make elections an institutional shell – in which case, decisions over candidate selection, campaigning, fundraising, messaging, and voter mobilization will mean very little.

This is in contrast to electoral autocracies where opposition parties can learn valuable lessons about electoral strategy through repeated contestation. In Malaysia, for example, the past failures to form a coalition and to win as a coalition, arguably helped inform opposition parties so that they were able to bring about the historic transition in 2018. Time seemed to be on the opposition’s side. This is not the case for opposition actors in democracies at risk, illustrating how urgently we need to understand the behavior of voters, candidates, and parties in these regimes – both for accumulating knowledge and for upholding democracy.


13) Ong, “Opposing Power.”
Over the last two decades, studies of authoritarianism have overwhelmingly treated autocrats as rational actors whose behavior is dictated less by ideology and more by a short-term desire to remain in power. The focus has been on how the demands of survival lead autocrats to choose particular institutions and economic policies. In the words of Bueno de Mesquita et al., “political leaders need to hold office in order to accomplish any goal.”1

Yet ideology has been central to the durability of one of the most robust types of authoritarian regimes in the modern era: revolutionary regimes that emerge out of violent social transformation.2 Since 1900, revolutionary regimes have on average survived more than twice as long (37 years) as non-revolutionary regimes (16 years). The Soviet Union lasted 74 years, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico persisted 83 years. Revolutionary regimes in China, Cuba, and Vietnam have remained in power for more than six decades.

Revolutionary regimes emerge out of social revolutions, which we define as the violent overthrow of an existing regime from below, accompanied by mass mobilization and at least a partial collapse of the state, which triggers a rapid and radical transformation of the state and the existing social order. Such regimes differ from other types of autocracies in four critical ways. First, they are grounded in social revolutions from below that are led by mass-based movements from outside the state and regime. We exclude regimes that came to power via military coup. Second, revolutionary autocracies emerge out of the violent overthrow of the old regime. Third, social revolutions produce a fundamental transformation of the state. State transformation initially entails the collapse or severe crippling of the existing coercive apparatus as well as the construction of new coercive institutions by revolutionary forces. Fourth, social revolutions involve the imposition of radical social change. Revolutionary governments violently attack the core interests of large groups in society or powerful domestic and international actors. Such attacks include the large-scale seizure and redistribution of property, campaigns to destroy pre-existing cultures and cultural institutions, and attempts to impose new rules governing social behavior (i.e., create a “new man”).3

Using these criteria, we identify 19 revolutionary regimes since 1900 (Table 1). Overall, revolutionary regimes have been more durable than most other types of autocracies. According to an analysis conducted with Jean Lachapelle, revolutionary regimes have over 70 percent chance of surviving 40 years – an estimated less than 20 percent of nonrevolutionary regimes survive that long. Controlling for a range of factors thought to affect authoritarian survival including growth and resource rents, revolutionary origins are associated with a 69 percent reduction in risk of regime breakdown. Outside of Persian Gulf monarchies, the world’s most successful dictatorships are products of violent, revolutionary conflict.4

Table 1: Revolutionary Regimes 1900-present

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>1996-2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albania</td>
<td>1944-1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>1962-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>1975-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>1952-1964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>1975-1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1949-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>1959-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eritrea</td>
<td>1991-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinea-Bissau</td>
<td>1974-1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>March 21-July 29, 1919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>1979-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>1915-2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>1975-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>1979-1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>1917-1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>1994-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>1954-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yugoslavia</td>
<td>1945-1990</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


4) See Lachapelle, Jean, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way. “The Durability of Revolutionary Regimes since 1900.” Presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Conference, 2017. To identify revolutionary regimes, we used data from Colgan on revolutionary leaders to narrow the range to those leaders who came to power in an irregular manner and engaged in “radical policies” upon taking power. We then excluded cases that do not match our other criteria— including leaders who emerge from within the old regime rather than from below; leaders who did not come to power with violence; and leaders who did not radically transform the state. See Jeff Colgan, “Measuring Revolution.” Conflict
We argue that such durability has been the result of a *revolutionary reactive sequence*, in which revolutionary governments’ efforts to radically transform the existing social order triggers intense domestic and international opposition, resulting in a combination of domestic counter-revolutionary and external military conflict. These conflicts pose an existential threat to new revolutionary regimes, which (1) fosters a high level of elite cohesion, (2) encourages the development of a powerful and loyal coercive apparatus and (3) leads to the destruction of rival organizations and alternative centers of power in society. These legacies help to inoculate revolutionary regimes against elite defection, military coups, and mass protest—three principal sources of authoritarian breakdown.

Radical attacks by new revolutionary governments on powerful domestic interests and the geopolitical order have triggered intense—and often violent—reactions, both at home and abroad. In many cases (Angola, Cuba, China, Mexico, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Russia, Vietnam), such efforts triggered civil wars that involved significant foreign intervention. The Bolsheviks, for example, were plunged into a civil war against White armies backed by British, French, Japanese and American forces. In other cases (Afghanistan, Cambodia, China, Eritrea, Hungary, Iran), they sparked external wars, usually with neighboring states whose governments either felt threatened by the revolutionary regime or perceived a window of opportunity in the wake of state collapse. Thus, the radicalism of Iran’s revolutionary government plunged it into conflict with the West and contributed to a bloody war with Iraq. Overall, two-thirds (13 of 19) of the revolutions triggered a civil or external war.

In some cases, post-revolutionary conflicts prove fatal. In 1919, Béla Kun, the head of the stillborn Hungarian Soviet Republic, lost power after just five months at the hands of invading Allied-backed Romanian troops – partly in response to his efforts to foment revolution in Vienna and Slovakia and seize land from a hostile peasantry. Likewise, revolutionary dictatorships in Cambodia under Pol Pot and Afghanistan under the Taliban were destroyed by foreign powers responding to these regimes’ belligerent actions.

In most cases, however, revolutionary actions ultimately strengthened rather than weakened revolutionary regimes. First of all, revolutionary conflict has enhanced elite cohesion. Revolutions polarize societies, often for decades. Intense polarization sharpens “us-them” distinctions, strengthening within-group ties and fostering perceptions of a “linked fate” among cadres. Revolutionary polarization, moreover, is often accompanied by an enduring perception of existential threat. Revolutionary challenges to the existing order create powerful domestic and international enemies. As a result, most revolutionary regimes face enduring threats to their survival from both domestic opponents and external powers. The result is often a two front siege mentality. This creates powerful incentives to close ranks. In a context of existential threat, elite defection—or even open dissent—is often viewed as treason. As a result, the costs of defection are enormously high.

To be clear, the cohesion generated by revolutionary conflict does not eliminate the factionalism and internal power struggles that are endemic to virtually every large political organization. However, revolutionary origins and post-revolutionary conflict create powerful obstacles to defection from the ruling party, even during periods of intense crisis when the regime’s survival is under threat.

Second, existential military threats have compelled revolutionary governments to build vast and loyal security apparatuses. Conflict induces revolutionary regimes to invest heavily in expanding their armies and internal security forces, creating, in effect, a revolutionary garrison state. In Cuba, the threat of a U.S.-backed invasion led the Castro government to transform its “ragtag army” of 5000 soldiers into a 300,000-strong military force that was “sufficiently large to contemplate real deterrence of a Superpower.” In Nicaragua, the Sandinista government responded to the threat of a U.S. invasion and the U.S.-backed contra war by dramatically expanding the size of both the military and the internal security apparatus. In Vietnam, decades of war gave rise to “one of the world’s largest and most effective military establishments.” By the 1980s, the Vietnamese army had become the fifth largest army in the world.

Revolutionary states are not only

---


strengthened by war. Radical social transformation also contributes to state building by destroying the power bases of local elites that had inhibited the construction of a modern centralized state. For example, partisan conflict in Albania and Yugoslavia during World War II was aimed not just at German forces but also at village chiefs who dominated much of the country.

Simultaneously, the crippling or collapse of the state that accompanies social revolution compels revolutionary leaders to build new coercive agencies from scratch. As a result, there is almost always heavy overlap between military and party leaders. Party-army fusion enhances the authority of political leaders, many of whom led the armed struggle and thus gained substantial military experience. In Angola, China, Cuba, Mexico, Mozambique, Nicaragua, and elsewhere, party leaders commanded the military struggle. Such fusion diminishes the corporate identity of the military. In China and Vietnam, fusion eliminated any clear distinction between the military and the party.

Partly as a result, coups are extremely rare among revolutionary regimes. In an analysis conducted with Jean Lachapelle, we find that revolutionary regimes were less likely to suffer coups than non-revolutionary regimes.\(^8\) Revolution is associated with a 58 percent reduction in the annual hazard rate of a regime experiencing a military coup. Revolutionary militaries have remained loyal even in situations normally thought to provoke intervention. Thus, the Chinese military did not carry out a coup against Mao Zedong amid the intra-party conflicts generated by Cultural Revolution, despite the fact that Mao openly encouraged violent factional conflict that brought the country to the brink of civil war. Regimes in Cuba, Mozambique, and Nicaragua did not suffer coups despite severe economic crises.

Finally, revolutionary conflict and radical social transformation allow revolutionary elites to wipe out rivals and alternative centers of power: institutions or social classes whose power, resources, or legitimacy can serve as a basis for mobilizing opposition to the regime. Wars permit governments to do things that ordinary dictatorships often cannot do, including the weakening or destruction of alternative centers of societal power: institutions or social classes whose power, resources, or legitimacy can serve as a basis for mobilizing opposition to the regime. These include pre-existing armies, landowning classes, and traditional monarchic and religious authorities whose “symbolic power” could be used to mobilize opposition to the regime.\(^8\) In Mexico, for example, the bloody revolutionary war of 1913-15 led to the dismantling of the old Federal Army and weakened once-dominant landowners. In Cuba, the Castro government used the threat of a U.S.-sponsored invasion in 1960 and 1961 to justify an assault on the Catholic Church.

Revolutionary conflict also provides revolutionary elites with both a justification and the means to destroy rival political organizations. For example, during their struggle against the French (1946-54), the Vietnamese Communists carried out a “campaign of demolition” against rival organizations, including nationalists, Trotskyites, and Catholic and Buddhist groups. By the time the Communists had returned to power in 1954, challenges to its authority had been destroyed. In Yugoslavia, revolutionary war brought the destruction of traditional local notables, as well as the nationalist Chetniks, who competed with the Partisans for control of much of the country. The destruction of independent power centers contributes to authoritarian durability by eliminating not only contemporary rivals but also the structural bases of future opposition. In the absence of independent sources of finance, infrastructure, or legitimacy, the organizational bases of opposition effectively disappear.

These three revolutionary legacies -- a cohesive elite, a strong and loyal coercive apparatus, and the destruction of alternative power centers – have contributed to the creation of extremely durable authoritarian regimes that in most cases have endured for decades. These regimes remained cohesive even in the face of crisis and possessed the capacity to preempt or put down any serious mobilization from below.

Ideology has been central to such durability. Early revolutionary leaders such as Lenin, Kun, Mao, Pol Pot, Ho Chi Minh, Khomeini, and Samora Machel were unusually ideological, in that they put strong emphasis on utopian or eschatological visions of a new world order. While Skocpol is certainly correct that ideologies are not “blueprints for revolutionary outcomes,”\(^10\) ideology has motivated revolutionaries to undertake extremely risky and aggressive behavior that triggered the revolutionary reactive sequence described above. Revolutionary policies – large-scale expropriation of land, introduction of Sharia law, military

---

\(^8\) Lachapelle et al. op cit. Non-revolutionary regimes have a 3.14% chance of experiencing at least one military coup during a given year, compared to 0.93% for revolutionary regimes (one-tailed p-value <0.05), using the Archigos dataset.


\(^10\) Skocpol op cite, pp. 170-171
assaults on neighboring countries – are extremely difficult to understand in terms of a short-term desire to remain in power. For example, despite their extreme weakness and vulnerability in 1917, Bolsheviks assaulted the Russian business class – calling on workers to “loot the looters” – and alienated the Western powers by repudiating international debts. In the short run, such measures created severe threats to the Bolsheviks’ hold on power. The exigencies of survival also did not require Albania’s Enver Hoxha, who had gained power with British support, to bomb British warships. Nor was it seemingly rational for Fidel Castro to try to export revolution in the face of Soviet and American opposition. Finally, short-term considerations about staying in power did not require that Mao Zedong to send three million Chinese troops into war with the United States in Korea in 1950-1951.

Ideology helps to account for why revolutionaries were so risk acceptant and possessed such extensive time horizons at moments in which their regimes were so vulnerable. As Stephen Hanson argues, ideological commitment lengthens time horizons. “Secure in the ‘knowledge’ of long-term success,” ideologically committed activists “rationally forgo the benefits of short term egoistic behavior in order to advance the cause of the ideological collective.” 11

The impact of ideology is evident in a comparison of Chiang Kai-shek and Mao in China. Both leaders were forced to build new states in the face of extreme external pressures -- Chiang Kai-shek in 1925-1945 and Mao in 1927-1949. A critical difference was that Chiang Kai-shek was far more pragmatic than Mao. First, during the 1926-27 Northern Expedition launched by the KMT to consolidate territorial control over China, Chiang Kai-shek frequently opted to coopt powerful warlords rather than defeat them militarily, which would have been more costly. In the short run, this gave the KMT an enormous military advantage over the Communists, which nearly resulted in their annihilation. In the longer-run, however, this decision led to a weak and corrupt army over which Chiang had limited control. By contrast, Mao’s risky decision to foment peasant revolution and challenge local power structures in the countryside was costly in the short run but ultimately contributed to the construction of a powerful authoritarian state. The Chinese Communist Party’s ideology—viewed rural politics in terms of class conflict and international politics as defined by an irreconcilable conflict between communist and imperialist forces—encouraged the party to take risks that would likely not have been undertaken had the leadership simply focused on gaining and maintaining power. As a result, the People’s Republic of China, like other revolutionary regimes, emerged as one of the most durable authoritarian regimes in the modern era.

At the same time, social revolutions face few internal or external challengers. However, in the absence of revolutionary or other ideologies, such regimes are arguably more vulnerable to crisis— including economic downturns, or protest movements that threaten incumbents’ hold on power. 12 When such crises cast doubt upon incumbents’ ability to deliver the goods in the future, patronage-based regimes may be prone to defection. Indeed, if a crisis convinces ruling elites that continued loyalty threatens their future access to power and patronage, it may trigger a bandwagoning effect in which politicians defect en masse to the opposition. Thus, while the decline of revolutionary leaders may have enlarged the number of risk-averse autocrats, it ironically may also have increased the number of autocracies vulnerable to breakdown.


**SECTION NEWS**


**David, Roman and Ian Holliday** published a book *Liberalism and Democracy in Myanmar* (Oxford University Press, 2018), which examines the prospect for democracy in the South East Asian country and proposes the concept of limited liberalism to characterize the political culture of hybrid regimes.


**Kuo, Didi** , research scholar at the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law at Stanford University, published *Clientelism, Capitalism, and Democracy: the rise of programmatic politics in the United States and Britain*, with Cambridge University Press.

**LeVan, Carl** from American University published two books on Nigeria. In *Contemporary Nigerian Politics: Competition in a Time of Transition and Terror* (Cambridge), he traces the decline of Nigeria’s ruling party to elite pacts crafted during the 1999 transition. Empirical tests then show how the opposition party ran a successful campaign that recalibrated voter priorities. In *The Oxford Handbook of Nigerian Politics* (Oxford), co-edited with Patrick Ukata, 44 original essays explore Nigeria’s history, politics, policy and society.


**Morse, Yonatan L.**, Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Connecticut. *How Autocrats Compete: Parties, Patrons, and Unfair Elections in Africa* (Cambridge University Press) is available in print and eBook.


**You, Jong-sung**, formerly Senior Lecturer at ANU, has relocated to Korea, taking a new position as Professor at the Graudate School of Social Policy, Gachon University, since July 2018. He has been awarded a research grant of 1.4 million USD (1.5 billion KRW) for a five-year lab project on the political economy of inequality in Korea from the Korean Studies Promotion Service at the Academy of Korean Studies. The lab plans to publish ten monographs on measurements, causes, consequences of inequality and social policy in Korea, in comparative perspective. He has recently published the following articles:


Executive Editor

Staffan I. Lindberg is professor of political science and director of the V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg; one of four PIs for Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem); Wallenberg Academy Fellow; member of the Young Academy of Sweden and the Board of U of Gothenburg; and a Research Fellow in the QoG Institute. He is author of Democracy and Elections in Africa and editor of Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition, and has also worked on women’s representation, clientelism, voting behavior, party and electoral systems, democratization, popular attitudes, and the Ghanaian legislature and executive-legislative relationships.

Ruth Carlitz is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow with the Program on Governance and Local Development at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. Her research looks at government responsiveness from the ‘top down’ (how governments distribute public goods) and the ‘bottom up’ (what citizens and non-governmental organizations can do to promote transparency and accountability). She focuses primarily on East Africa, inspired by my experience living and working in Tanzania from 2006-2008. In addition to her academic research, she has worked on commissioned research for organizations including the World Bank, the International Budget Partnership, the UK’s Department for International Development, and the Open Government Partnership.

Anna Lührmann is a Research Fellow at the V-Dem Institute since 2015. She received her PhD in 2015 from Humboldt University (Berlin) with a doctoral thesis on the United Nation’s electoral assistance. Prior to turning to academia, Anna was an MP in the German National Parliament (Bundestag, 2002-2009). She currently runs several research projects in the realm of autocratization, autocracy, democracy aid, and elections. Her research has been published or is forthcoming in Electoral Studies, International Political Science Review and the Journal of Democracy.

Kristen Kao is a Research Fellow with the Program on Governance and Local Development (GLD) at the University of Gothenburg and a PhD Candidate in Political Science at UCLA. In 2014, she ran a nationwide survey in Jordan in collaboration with Ellen Lust and Lind say Benstead funded by the GLD program at Yale. She has served as a program consultant and election monitor for a variety of international organizations, including The Carter Center and the National Democratic Institute.

Marcus Tannenberg is a PhD Candidate at the V-Dem Institute at the Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg. His research looks at self-censorship and the issues that it poses for measuring legitimacy and popular support in autocratic countries, as well as at the effects of autocratic developmental aid. Additional research concerns the classification of political regimes, which has been published in Politics and Governance. He has also worked on commissioned research for the Swedish Government’s Expert Group for Aid Studies, and is currently running survey experiments on behalf of the UNDP Oslo Governance Center in order to develop robust measures of a number of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Ellen Lust is the Founding Director of the Programs on Governance and Local Development at Yale University and at the University of Gothenburg, and Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg. She has authored Structuring Conflict in the Arab World as well as articles in Perspectives on Politics, edited The Middle East and several volumes. The Moulay Hicham Foundation, NSF, the Swedish Research Council and other foundations have supported her research on authoritarianism, political transitions, and local governance.

Kyle L. Marquardt is a post-doctoral fellow at the V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg. He studies identity politics and the politics of authoritarianism. His current project uses data from extensive field and survey research from Eurasia to examine the relationship between language and separatism. Other projects involve the use of list experiments to analyze support for authoritarian leaders and Bayesian latent variable analysis of the components of social identities.