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Emerging Trends in the Study of Electoral Authoritarianism

Importante

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De acuerdo con esta práctica internacional congruente con el trabajo académico contemporáneo, muchos de estos documentos buscan convertirse posteriormente en una publicación formal, como libro, capítulo de libro o artículo en revista especializada.

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Abstract

Electoral authoritarian regimes practice authoritarianism behind the institutional facades of representative democracy. They hold regular multiparty elections at the national level, yet violate liberal-democratic minimum standards in systematic and profound ways. Since the end of the Cold War, they have turned into the most common form of non-democratic rule in the world. Responding to the empirical expansion of non-democratic multiparty elections, the study of "electoral authoritarian" regimes has taken center stage in comparative political science. This essay reviews the conceptual and empirical foundations of this flourishing new field of comparative politics, summarizes cutting-edge research on regime trajectories and internal regime dynamics, and lays out substantive issues and methodological desiderata for future research.

Resumen

Este ensayo hace "un alto en el camino" en la joven literatura comparada sobre autocracias electorales. Ofrece una revisión de sus fundamentos conceptuales y empíricos, resume la investigación de punta sobre trayectorias y dinámicas internas de regímenes electorales autoritarios y esboza elementos sustantivos y metodológicos de la agenda de investigación futura.

Introduction

The modal dictator in the contemporary world holds multiparty elections. He sets up the institutional façade of democracy, yet undermines its spirit through authoritarian manipulation. He admits regular elections to highest national office and allows independent opposition parties to participate. At the same time, he subjects these elections to severe and systematic manipulation through strategies like media censorship, voter intimidation, the banning of parties or candidates, and electoral fraud. The contemporary dictator, that is, practices “electoral authoritarianism.”

The use of multiparty elections as instruments of authoritarian rule, rather than “instruments of democracy” (Powell 2000), is nothing new. During the 19th century, European monarchs and Latin American oligarchs exercised power by admitting competitive elections while containing them through exclusion, fraud, and coercion. Throughout the 20th century, numerous authoritarian regimes held regular multiparty elections. Mexico under the PRI, Paraguay under Stroessner, and Indonesia under Suharto were prominent examples. Yet, since the Cold War withered away in the late 1980s, the authoritarian use of multiparty elections has reached unprecedented global reach.

Today the grand categories of non-democratic regimes of the Cold War era - single-party systems, military regimes, and personal dictatorships - have almost disappeared. We must not underestimate their significance. The Chinese single-party regime alone rules over a fifth of humanity. Still, in rough proportion to the decline of “closed” regimes, we have seen the rise of new varieties of electoral authoritarianism. Many of them have been born in transitions from single-party rule (such as Gabon and Cameroon). Others have arisen from military coups (such as Algeria and Azerbaijan) and some have grown out of processes of democratic erosion (such as Venezuela and Russia). A small number are survivors from earlier periods, often rooted in struggles of national independence (such as Singapore and Zimbabwe). It has become commonplace to affirm that these new forms “pseudo-democracy” have turned into the most common type of non-democratic regimes in the contemporary world (see e.g. Hadenius and Teorell 2007, Roessler and Howard 2009).

Responding to the empirical expansion of non-democratic multiparty elections, the study of “electoral authoritarian” regimes has acquired a central place in comparative political science. In this essay, I review the conceptual and empirical foundations of this flourishing new field of inquiry, summarize cutting-edge research on electoral authoritarian regime trajectories and internal regime dynamics, and lay out substantive issues and methodological desiderata for future research.

I. Foundational Research

The foundational act that opened up the research agenda on electoral authoritarian regimes was conceptual. It was an act of *conceptual differentiation*. By introducing the notion of electoral authoritarianism scholars introduced a two-sided distinction. On the one side, they introduced a distinction among *multiparty regimes*: some are authoritarian; they are different from electoral democracies as we know them. On the other hand, they introduced a distinction among *authoritarian regimes*: some hold multiparty elections to highest office; they are different from non-electoral dictatorships as we know them. The presence of multiparty elections distinguishes electoral autocracies from closed autocracies. The authoritarian nature of these elections distinguishes them from electoral democracies.

In the social sciences, conceptual innovations often follow the trail of empirical transformations. New concepts strive to capture new realities. The invention of “electoral authoritarianism” is no exception. It has been a conceptual response to an empirical trend: the worldwide spread of “hybrid regimes” (Diamond 2002) after the end of the Cold War. The global spread of *multiparty elections* is an established fact in the comparative study of politics (see e.g. Hyde and Marinov 2012) and so is the global spread of *authoritarian multiparty elections* (see e.g. Gandhi 2008). The notion of electoral authoritarianism (as well as overlapping concepts like competitive authoritarianism and hybrid regimes) strove to capture these empirical trends.

In the social sciences, though, conceptual innovation involves conceptual contestation. New concepts unsettle established fields of thought. They do not spread, and should not spread, without intense debate. Do the distinctions they draw point to “differences that make a difference” (Gregory Bateson)? How can we trace them on empirical grounds? How should we name them? The idea of “electoral authoritarianism” has found widespread acceptance within the comparative study of political regimes. However, as it could not be otherwise, its career has been accompanied by ongoing debates on meaning, boundary delimitation, and terminology.

Both outer boundaries of electoral authoritarianism (towards electoral democracies and closed autocracies) have been contested. With some variations in emphasis, the three major questions have been: Do we need these distinctions (meaning)? How should we draw them (operationalization)? And how should we name them (terminology)?

The Democratic Boundary

In the last decade of the Cold War, the so-called “third wave of global democratization” (Huntington 1991) led to the return of electoral democracy in most of Latin America. The region’s new democracies brought huge advances in political liberty over the military regimes they replaced. At the same time, when compared to “advanced” democracies, they appeared to be burdened by innumerable deficiencies, such as social inequality, corruption, clientelism, military tutelage, weak parties, weak parliaments, weak judiciaries, weak civil societies, overpowering presidents, and a long et cetera. These disappointing deficiencies of Latin America’s fledgling democracies sparked a broad literature on “diminished subtypes of democracy,” AKA “democracies with adjectives” (Collier and Levitsky 1997).

If observers had found the normative balance of the third wave of democratization disappointing, their disappointments deepened with the “fourth wave” of democratization after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Sure, most of Eastern Europe transited into the democratic camp (although in former Yugoslavia only after descents into the hell of ethnic violence and prolonged stopovers in the purgatories of electoral authoritarianism and international protection). Yet, in most of the former Soviet Union and Sub-Saharan Africa, the disintegration of single-party dictatorship did not give way to electoral democracy, but something else. It produced regimes that did establish the outward facades of liberal democracy. Above all, they introduced multiparty elections. At the same time, however, they violated democratic principles in severe and systematic ways. Describing these regimes as “democracies with adjectives” seemed to bend the notion of democracy beyond breaking point. Thus the conceptual shift towards “autocracies with adjectives.” Towards the analysis of “elections without democracy” (*Journal of Democracy* 2/2002).

A Contested Distinction

There is a broad normative consensus in the literature about what democratic elections entail: competition, freedom, integrity, and fairness. There is also broad consensus about the fact that autocrats have many tools at their disposal to undermine the democratic spirit of elections. Among other strategies, the open-ended “menu of electoral manipulation” (Schedler 2002b) includes vote rigging, exclusion, institutional discrimination, censorship, and repression (see also Birch 2012). Nevertheless, there is no firm consensus on how we should conceptualize manipulated multiparty elections. Some authors admit their deficiencies, yet still classify them as either “democratic” or “transitional.” Others describe them as defining elements of “intermediate” or “hybrid” regimes that occupy middle ground between democracy and authoritarianism. Still others hold the difference between democratic and authoritarian elections to be a difference in degree

only, not a difference in kind. The notion of “electoral authoritarianism,” by contrast, draws a qualitative dividing line between democratic and authoritarian elections. It involves the claim that severe and systematic acts of manipulation push elections across the democratic minimum into authoritarian territory.

A Contested Boundary

Even when we agree that we need to distinguish in principle between democratic and authoritarian elections, it is difficult to do so in practice. For normative, conceptual, informational, and political reasons, we should regard the front line between electoral democracies and electoral autocracies to be “essentially contested” (Gallie 1956).

- *Normatively*, we face the twin problem that no democracy fulfills all democratic principles perfectly while no electoral autocracy violates them all entirely. So where should we draw the line? What kind of imperfections should we tolerate? Electoral autocracies are defined by severe and systematic violations of democratic minimum standards. Yet what counts as such?
- *Conceptually*, we face the problem that electoral integrity is a complex concept. It is abstract and thus requires us to take many steps from definition to operationalization. It is multidimensional and thus requires us to weight and balance conflicting criteria. It is aggregate and thus requires us to summarize innumerable observations across time and space. Moreover, it is continuous thus poses intricate problems of threshold delimitation. Conceptual complexity defies mechanical application. It requires judgment and thus invites controversy.
- In *informational* terms, we face the problem of authoritarian opacity. Electoral manipulation tends to be an undercover activity. Even if we knew what we need to see to classify an election as authoritarian, we usually do not see what we need to. When assessing the magnitude and impact of electoral manipulation we need to make descriptive and causal inferences from uncertain information.
- *Politically*, rulers and opposition parties are bound to disagree over the authoritarian quality of flawed elections. Rulers will always declare them to be OK, albeit perfectible. Their opponents will invariably be more critical. The logic of adversarial politics precludes a consensual settlement of these conceptual boundary conflicts.

Normative, conceptual, observational, and political complexities create uncertainty and invite controversy. They mobilize our judgmental and deliberative faculties. Given the impossibility of drawing clear and consensual dividing lines between democratic and authoritarian elections, some scholars conclude that we should renounce the frustrating business of drawing and policing boundaries. Instead of classifying elections and regimes into discrete boxes we should strive to capture their quantitative distance from the

democratic ideal. With Giovanni Sartori, one might object, though, that a boundary can be fuzzy or controversial and nonetheless meaningful. “To say that a precise boundary cannot be drawn is not the same as saying that there is no boundary” (Sartori 1987: 86).

A Contested Terminology

The notion of “electoral authoritarianism” has proven fruitful in demarcating the conceptual territory of non-democratic multiparty regimes. It does not enjoy a terminological monopoly, though. Following relevant debates still requires a certain amount of translation among roughly homonymous categories. Highlighting authoritarian party pluralism, some authors talk of “multiparty autocracies” or authoritarian “multiparty regimes.” Others stress the contradictory institutional blend that characterizes electoral autocracies (as they combine institutions of domination with formal institutions of representation). They speak of “hybrid,” “mixed,” or “inconsistent” regimes. Still others locate these regimes in a position of equidistance from the poles of democracy and dictatorship. They refer to “pseudo-democracy,” “semi-democracy,” or “semi-authoritarianism.”

The Authoritarian Boundary

Despite occasional fears of “conceptual legislation,” conceptual shifts in the social sciences cannot be imposed. If they take place, they grow out of intense debate. Just like its “democratic boundary” towards electoral democracy, the “authoritarian boundary” of electoral authoritarianism towards closed dictatorship has been drawn among lively controversies. Its operational definition and its naming have been less controversial, though, than its empirical relevance.

The concept of electoral authoritarianism highlights both the authoritarian nature of certain elections and the electoral nature of certain autocracies. Whether it is important to distinguish authoritarian from democratic elections is a normative as well as an empirical question. The distinction is normatively relevant. If we care about democratic principles, we should care to avoid their semantic abuse. It is empirically relevant, too. Non-democratic elections are supposed to work differently from democratic elections. By contrast, whether it is important to distinguish electoral from closed authoritarianism is primarily an empirical matter. It only makes sense to distinguish these subtypes of authoritarianism if they work differently. If multiparty elections change the inner dynamic of dictatorship in a way that renders electoral regimes qualitatively distinct from non-electoral ones.

So, which is the causal role of elections in authoritarian regimes? Do authoritarian multiparty elections make a difference that makes a difference?

Much of the foundational empirical work on authoritarian elections has revolved around this causal question. The debate has been guided by three divergent theoretical perspectives:

- *Elections as adornments*: The so-called “new institutionalism” in the study of authoritarian regimes (see Schedler 2013) proceeds upon the assumption that formally democratic institutions matter, even under authoritarian governance. Not everybody shares this causal assumption. Some hold authoritarian elections are epiphenomenal, mere reflections of underlying power structures, without causal weight of their own (e.g. Brownlee 2007).
- *Elections as tools*: Others, objecting to the idea that authoritarian elections are purely decorative, conceive them as instruments authoritarian rulers deploy to strengthen their grip on power. Irrespective their concrete nature, their competitive or non-competitive character, or their local or national reach, elections work to prolong the political life expectancy of authoritarian rulers. They are utensils in the toolbox of dictators. They do not define authoritarian regimes, but authoritarian strategies across regimes (e.g. Gandhi 2008).
- *Elections as arenas*: A third perspective emphasizes the ambiguity of elections. It contends that multiparty elections are more than mere instruments of dictatorship. They change the inner logic of authoritarian politics. They open arenas of struggle that are asymmetric, as they grant huge advantages to the incumbent, and still ambiguous, as they endow opposition actors with opportunities of contestation and mobilization that do not exist in non-electoral regimes. Though unfree and unfair by design, authoritarian multiparty elections are contingent in their outcomes. They serve ruling parties to sustain authoritarian rule and opposition actors to subvert it (e.g. Schedler 2013).

If authoritarian multiparty elections were irrelevant, all talk about electoral authoritarianism would be delusory. If they were reliable tools of dictators, one instrument of domination among many others, they would make for valuable objects of study. But they would hardly appear as the defining institutional feature of a distinct category of regimes. The notion of electoral authoritarianism would be shallow, devoid of inner tensions. It would be of mechanical interest, but politically boring. It is a fruitful concept only if it captures the conflictive logic of authoritarian politics, rather than the solitary calculations of dictators. Unless authoritarian multiparty elections are autonomous arenas of conflict, whose dynamics and outcomes are not predetermined by contextual factors, we should hardly bother about them.

Over the past years, at least two dozens of comparative studies have put the contrasting hypotheses about “the power of elections” to statistical testing. The preliminary balance sheet of these large-N studies is not evident at first sight. As in other substantive areas of cross-national statistical inquiry, results are mixed, sometimes contradictory, and not readily reconcilable, since studies differ in research purpose (the definition of independent and

dependent variables), data selection, model specification, and statistical procedures as well as in their geographical and temporal coverage. Overall, however, they appear to confirm the notion that authoritarian multiparty elections matter - not as reliable instruments of sovereign dictators, though, but as asymmetric arenas of struggle whose outcomes are contingent on the dynamics of conflict that unfold within its bounds (for an overview, see Schedler 2013: Chapter 5).

II. Cutting-Edge Research

Statistical research on the longevity of electoral autocracies in comparison to closed autocracies has been largely exhausted. Even if we keep refining our data and techniques of data analysis, we are unlikely to obtain dramatically new insights. Research on electoral authoritarian regimes has accordingly shifted its attention towards two new fields of inquiry: the divergent trajectories of electoral autocracies and the political dynamics within them.

Explaining Regime Trajectories

Electoral authoritarian regimes differ widely in their longevity. Some stumble and fall after a few rounds of elections, others cling to power for decades. What explains this wide variance in regime durability? Two contrasting explanatory perspectives have dominated the discussion: Generic, structural, and external explanations have been competing against regime-specific, actor-based, and internal explanations. Two important monographs nicely represent these contrasting perspectives: *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2010) represents the former, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* by Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik (2011) the latter perspective.

When we go about to explain patterns of stability and change within one subtype of political regime, we can either choose to mobilize *general* explanations that are valid for any type of political regime. Or we can craft more *specific* explanations that are grounded in the institutional and strategic dynamics that are particular to the regime type in question. In this regard, the two monographs take contrasting routes. While methodologically similar (both are qualitative case comparisons), the two books pursue contrasting explanatory strategies.

Levitsky and Way seek general explanations. They focus on two broad explanatory factors that are applicable to any type of authoritarian regime: the international embeddedness of regimes (linkage and leverage) and their organizational infrastructure (coercive capacity and party strength). As the authors posit, in situations of high linkage, when societies are densely

interwoven with the external environment, competitive autocracies are likely to democratize. When countries are more isolated, such regimes are likely to remain stable unless they are structurally vulnerable to democratizing pressures from Western powers. Their argument about the primacy of international factors is meant to be time-specific rather than regime-specific. It is applicable to the Post-Cold-War period in general, not limited to competitive regimes in particular (although competitive authoritarian regimes happened to flourish in the Post-Cold-War period).

Bunce and Wolchik, by contrast, focus their attention on domestic dynamics that are exclusive to electoral authoritarian regimes: the strategies opposition actors adopt towards multiparty elections. Asking about the electoral behavior of opposition actors only makes sense in contexts where multiparty elections actually take place. No elections, no electoral strategies, no electoral transitions. As the authors posit, if and only if opposition actors adopt the “electoral model” of transition, they can win against powerful incumbents. If they refrain from doing so, they will keep losing. The “electoral model” implies that opposition actors take the two faces of electoral authoritarianism seriously: the authoritarian nature of the electoral game as well as the electoral nature of the authoritarian game. They need to achieve democratizing reform. Otherwise, winning votes is of limited use in authoritarian elections. But they also need to wage effective election campaigns. Otherwise, achieving institutional change is of limited use in competitive elections.

While the two books differ in the regime-specificity of their explanations, they also differ in the type of explanatory theories they offer. Levitsky and Way privilege structural factors and discard the weight of actor dynamics. They seek to unearth the macro-foundations of regime change and stability. Bunce and Wolchik privilege the choices of actors and hold structural factors to be secondary. They strive to uncover the micro-foundations of electoral authoritarian regime dynamics. The former employ explanatory variables that are distant from regime outcomes, the latter ones that are more proximate. Levitsky and Way grant primacy to external factors, Bunce and Wolchik to domestic factors.

Structure-based approaches raise questions about the consequences of societal and institutional structures: how do they translate into actor dynamics? Actor-based approaches raise questions about the origins of actor dynamics: if strategic choices explain regime trajectories, what explains strategic choices? A emergent stream of empirical studies has been addressing the latter question: how can we explain actor dynamics that unfold within electoral autocracies?

Explaining Dynamics within Regimes

The concept of electoral authoritarianism is electiocentric. It comprehends pluralistic elections as the defining institution of one broad category of authoritarianism. Based by definition on elections, it assumes by implication that elections matter: It assumes that actor choices within the authoritarian electoral arena are *autonomous* - they are not predetermined by external structures. And it assumes them to be *consequential* - they carry causal weight of their own. To what extent do these assumptions hold empirically? The blossoming literature on actor dynamics within authoritarian elections has made significant advances in conceptualizing these dynamics, gathering systematic information about them, and explaining them across time and space.

Conceptualization

In an early contribution to the literature, Schedler (2002a) conceived authoritarian elections as two-level games in which the struggle for voters at the game level goes hand in hand with the struggle over rules at the meta-game level. Electoral competition is nested within institutional battles. At the *meta-game of institutional struggle*, governments decide among strategies of electoral manipulation or reform. Opposition parties resolve whether to boycott or participate, and whether to acquiesce or contest electoral processes and results. State agents choose their level of regime loyalty. At the *game-level of electoral competition*, both governments and opposition parties choose their strategies of electoral mobilization. Citizens choose their level of regime loyalty. They decide whether to turn out or not, and whether to support the rulers or opposition actors. In this two-level contest, actors compete over electoral uncertainty under conditions of informational uncertainty. Authoritarian election results are the combined product of voter choices and state manipulation. Yet no-one knows for sure to what extent (see also Schedler 2013: Chapter 4).

Data Development

About a decade ago, systematic information about the inner dynamics of authoritarian elections was almost non-existent. Today, thanks to the personal initiative of numerous individual researchers, a considerable number of public datasets exist on relevant attributes of authoritarian elections, such as institutional rules, levels of electoral competitiveness, alternation in power, strategies of manipulation, violence, opposition boycott, and protest.

Some major data initiatives offer global coverage, long time series, and large sets of variables, like the DPI World Bank Dataset on Political Institutions (<http://econ.worldbank.org>), the nelda dataset on National Elections across

Democracy and Autocracy (<http://hyde.research.yale.edu/nelda/>), and the iaep Institutions and Elections Project (<http://www2.binghamton.edu/political-science/institutions-and-elections-project.html>). Many other datasets are more limited in purpose and coverage. Most are cross-national, but high-quality single-country datasets have emerged as well, offering either subnational or individual-level data (for an overview on cross-national datasets, see Schedler 2013: Appendix c).

In terms of data availability, we are much richer now than we were a decade ago. Nevertheless, as in other fields of comparative politics, data collection on authoritarian elections has evolved in a an uncoordinated fashion. More often than not, scholars have been collecting similar data without mutual coordination or even knowledge. Even when their data intend to measure similar concepts, it is often difficult to compare them or even fuse them into integrative datasets. They tend to differ in their spatial and temporal coverage. More importantly, they usually differ in their methodological micro-choices: their formal definitions, their measurement techniques, their choice of primary sources, their units of analysis, their operational rules, their measurement scales, their coding procedures, and their publication formats. The downside of entrepreneurial creativity has been a somewhat wasteful multiplication of measurement efforts (see Schedler 2012).

Explanation

If electoral democracies are complex systems, electoral autocracies are even more complex, as the “normal” democratic game of electoral competition interacts with the “deviant” authoritarian meta-game of electoral manipulation. In modern social sciences, our usual way of coping with complex realities is to slice them into manageable component parts. Rather than looking at everything interacting with everything else, we isolate “independent variables” (x) we expect to have an impact on “dependent variables” (y). In the comparative study of electoral authoritarianism, we have followed this logic of scientific fragmentation by isolating and examining specific causal relationships - both within the two-level game of authoritarian elections and between the game and its social, political, and international environments. Some studies have been x -centered, inquiring into the effects of certain variables. Others have been y -centered, asking about the causes of certain phenomena.

Most scholarly attention has focused on the analysis of meta-game strategies by government and opposition: the causes and consequences of levels and types of manipulation and the causes and consequences of levels and types of opposition protest (e.g. Birch 2011, Lindberg 2006, Robertson 2010, Schedler 2013, Simpser 2013, Wilson 2005). To a much lesser, yet increasing, extent, comparative scholars have been paying systematic

attention to game-level dynamics: party building, candidate selection, electoral campaigning, and voter behavior (e.g. Magaloni 2006, Greene 2007, Rose and Munro 2002). Too, they have started to conduct systematic research into the relations between authoritarian election arenas and their “external environments,” such as state structures (e.g. Snyder 2006, Way 2006), the military (e.g. Clark 2006), civil society (e.g. Aspinall 2005, Weiss 2006), and the international community (e.g. Hyde 2011, Kelley 2012).

Most of these studies frame their analyses in term of regime struggles, where the overarching goal of governments is to maintain the institutional status quo (the containment of threats) and the overarching goal of opposition actors to change it (the creation of threats). Within this common focus on competitive struggles over institutional uncertainties (Schedler 2013), some study the *material* deployment of power resources like money, violence, law, and organization. Other analyze the *communicative* use of power (“signaling”) through which actors strive to overcome the opacities of authoritarian governance.

Given the increasing specialization of research, taking stock of our knowledge on electoral authoritarianism demands taking stock of our knowledge within emerging subfields of specialized research on the moving parts of authoritarian elections: manipulation, protest, institutions, parties, campaigns, competitiveness, electoral choice. One generic conclusion, however, seems compelling. Overall, the increasingly specialized stream of research on electoral autocracies has provided manifold empirical confirmations for the theoretical intuition that motivated it in the first place: the *relative autonomy* of authoritarian elections. Authoritarian multiparty elections are neither epiphenomenal nor inconsequential, but follow causal logics of their own and carry causal weights of their own.

III. Key Issues for Future Research

Where is the study of electoral authoritarianism going? Where should it be going? I will outline some substantive issues of research that in my view deserve more scholarly attention. I will also outline two methodological imperatives: the need for more and better cross-national data and the need for more and better qualitative case comparisons. I will conclude by speculating about the future of electoral authoritarianism: a continuing trend or a fading one?

Neglected Areas

The blossoming literature on electoral authoritarianism has privileged some aspects of authoritarian elections and neglected others.

Internal Heterogeneity

The extended family of electoral authoritarian regimes is numerous and internally heterogeneous. The most common internal distinction runs between competitive and hegemonic regimes. The precise meaning of this distinction is somewhat contested, but in essence it points to contrasting degrees in regime consolidation. Hegemonic regimes are consolidated. The political dominance of the ruling party is firmly institutionalized. It controls the constitutional rules of the game, wins all elections it cares about by wide margins, and everybody expects it to continue doing so well into the future. Competitive regimes, by contrast, are non-consolidated. The incumbent party's grip on state power is more contested and insecure. It wins elections by variable margins and looks vulnerable to electoral defeat.

The operational definition of hegemonic regimes is subject to dispute, too. Setting a threshold (between 50 and 80 percent) of votes or seats won by the incumbent is the most common solution for identifying hegemonic regimes. It ignores the core of hegemony, though: the institutionalized nature of domination. The terminology is somewhat unsettled as well. In the literature, hegemonic parties are also referred to as “dominant,” “dominant multi-party” or “single” parties. Even in the absence of perfect conceptual agreement, though, scholars tend to agree that the distinction between weakly and strongly institutionalized regimes carries strong theoretical and empirical implications. We should expect competitive and hegemonic regimes to work in fundamentally different ways. Most empirical studies have not compared electoral authoritarian dynamics across these regime subtypes. Those that did have found systematic differences (see Schedler 2013). Yet much remains to be done if we wish to understand the contrasting dynamics of fragile versus consolidated electoral autocracies.

Regime Origins

A growing number of cross-national studies have documented the comparative advantages electoral autocracies possess. On average, they live longer and die more peacefully than non-electoral dictatorships. Just like the structural functionalism of earlier decades, the rational functionalism of the contemporary literature has led authors to take the effects of elections for their causes. The benefits of elections are presumed to explain their adoption by rational, utility-maximizing dictators.

The assumption of omniscient sovereign rulers who pick the most useful utensils from the toolset of political institutions possesses theoretical elegance. However, it certainly provides an under-complex account of the manifold origins of electoral authoritarian rule. How do closed regimes transform into hegemonic ones? And how do competitive regimes build electoral hegemonies? How do hegemonic regimes give way to competitive ones? And how do electoral democracies turn into competitive autocracies?

Since the literature has been focusing on transitions *from* electoral authoritarianism, our present knowledge on transition *to* electoral authoritarian rule is fragile and fragmentary.

Electoral Competition

To date, most of the empirical literature on authoritarian elections has focused on the meta-level of institutional conflict. The void of comparative research is evident: it is very little we know about the game level of authoritarian electoral competition. It is little we know about party organizations, candidate selection, electoral alliances, election campaigns, public discourse, media content, media consumption, and voter behavior. Once we know more about these game-level structures and processes, we will be in a position to trace their interactions with meta-game structures and processes.

To study authoritarian electoral competition, we need the analytical tools of comparative authoritarianism as well as those of democratic studies. Modern political science has been born as the “science of democracy.” Over the past years, with the flourishing of comparative research on authoritarian rule, it has increasingly become a “science of dictatorship” as well. Research on authoritarian elections is a fertile meeting ground between the two. The study of hybrid political regimes is giving birth to a hybrid political science.

Embedded Elections

The nested game of authoritarian elections is nested in other games. Elections are nested in national societies. Regime actors are nested in the state, opposition actors in civil society. Local elections are nested within national elections. National politics is nested in international politics. Studying the internal interaction between the two levels of authoritarian elections may seem complex enough. Yet, if we wish to better comprehend the dynamics of authoritarian elections, we need to study their external linkages as well. Comparative research about them is barely commencing.

Electoral History

The remarkable rise of electoral autocracies since the end of the Cold War often lets us overlook the fact that authoritarian multiparty elections have a long history, in particular in Europe and the Americas of the 19th century. In addition to the “historical turn” in democratization studies (Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010), we need a historical turn in the comparative study of electoral authoritarianism. Historians have produced a rich stream of research on authoritarian elections. Outstanding examples are Anderson (2000), Key (1949), Kousser (1974), and Lehoucq and Molina (2002). Nevertheless, there has been little dialogue between political scientists and historians. Through

research alliances between the disciplines we might be able to extend the comparative study of authoritarian elections deep into the past.

Data Requirements

Over the past decades, we have seen an impressive growth of cross-national quantitative data in comparative politics. In the study of electoral authoritarianism, too, numerous scholars have engaged in the development of cross-national dataset, above all, on electoral manipulation and electoral competitiveness. To push quantitative comparative research on authoritarian elections on its next stage, we need both to revise, integrate, complement, and consolidate the data we have collected so far. And we need to construct new and better data on almost all aspects of authoritarian elections:

- *Election results*: Incredible, but true. Despite countless private initiatives of data collection, access to historical and contemporary national election data, not to speak of subnational data, is still precarious. We still need to institutionalize the systematic collection of data on elections and parties across the world (see Schedler 2012: 256-7 and 259).
- *Electoral governance*: We possess certain cross-national data on rules of electoral competition (see Teorell and Lindstedt 2010), but very few on institutions of electoral governance, such as suffrage rights, rules of voter and party registration, and the structure of election management and electoral dispute settlement.
- *Voter preferences*: If we wish to apply the analytical tools of electoral studies to authoritarian contexts, we need to collect individual-level data on voter attitudes. Electoral autocracies tend to inhabit middle grounds between full liberty, where pollsters can work freely and publics respond freely, and full repression, where public opinion polls make little sense. As a matter of fact, some electoral autocracies like Russia under Putin permit the development of a professional community of public opinion polling. Still, though we possess rich data on individual countries, we possess few cross-national data on voters under authoritarian conditions. We still need to incorporate electoral authoritarian regimes into cross-national political surveys like the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (www.cses.org).
- *Election campaigns*: Collecting comparative data on authoritarian regimes is difficult. Collecting them on processes of electoral competition is difficult even in democratic contexts. Still, data projects like the Comparative Manifesto Project (MAPOR) that codes the content of election platforms should in principle be adaptable to authoritarian settings (<https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu>).
- *Electoral protest*: The only available worldwide source of cross-national longitudinal data on contentious action, the political conflict data in the Arthur Banks Cross-National Time Series (CNTS), captures no more than a minuscule fraction of the contentious events that actually take place in any country in any year (see Schedler 2012: 247-248). In a joint venture with scholars of contentious action,

students of electoral politics might set out to develop more accurate data on electoral protest, and on extra-electoral protest as well.

As a matter of course, even within a quantitative framework, we need not study everything in cross-national perspective. We also need systematic observations on subnational elections and electoral histories in single countries. Almost half of all quantitative comparative research (published in top journals between 1989 and 2007) covers single countries (Schedler and Mudde 2010: 421). The quantitative study of electoral autocracies lies within the trend.

Qualitative Research

While there is still much insight to be gained from careful and innovative quantitative research, I tend to agree with Yonatan Morse: “the next stage of research on electoral authoritarianism needs to be case driven” (2012: 189). Statistical research on electoral authoritarianism tends to keep us far away from actors. There is much we lose in meaning and precision if we survey the two-level game of authoritarian elections from the bird’s perspective of cross-national quantification.

In comparative politics, it has become fashionable to complement statistical research with qualitative case comparisons. Frequently, though, the qualitative side of such “mixed-method” designs is little more than methodological adornment. Instead of the longwinded “thick” case stories of earlier times, which we now use to discard as atheoretical area studies, we often get “thin” short stories that bear little systematic connection to their underlying or overlaying theory.

In the study of authoritarian elections, we need qualitative analytical arguments (not just narratives) that embrace and exploit the comparative advantages of qualitative case research - such as the closeness to actors; more valid and precise conceptualization and observation of institutions and actors; attention to history, sequence, and process; access to empirical evidence unavailable to external observers, like public discourse, the communicative strategies of elites and citizens, or the internal dynamics of collective actors; and attention to decision dilemmas, possible worlds, critical junctures. We need to find methodological balances. Unless we complement the quantitative study of electoral authoritarianism with strong qualitative research, our empirical insights risk turning misty and simplistic.

The Future of Electoral Authoritarianism

Even while recognizing the limits of prediction in the social sciences, it is tempting to ponder the future of electoral authoritarianism. After the end of

the Cold War, electoral autocracies experienced impressive growth. Within a few years, they turned into the most common form of dictatorship around the globe. Does their global expansion represent a lasting trend or no more than a passing fad? With the exception of Singapore, all hegemonic party regimes that predated the fall of the Berlin Wall have disappeared. They have given way either to democracy or to competitive authoritarianism. Overall, competitive authoritarian regimes have emerged as “the typical stepping stone to democratization” (Hadenius and Teorell 2007: 152).

Should we conclude that “the era of electoral authoritarianism” (Morse 2012) is bound to end soon, giving way to renewed advances of electoral democracy? Well, not quite, no yet. The reasons are simple: A fair number of electoral autocracies defy the laws of political mortality and continue to hang on. More importantly, a continuous stream of new cases continues to repopulate both subtypes of electoral authoritarianism. Both hegemonic and competitive autocracies continue to gain new members from their neighboring regime categories.

The Regeneration of Hegemonic Regimes

Hegemonic regimes are long-lived by definition and inherently stable. They are not immortal, though. Except for Singapore, Gabon, and Tanzania, all hegemonic regimes that had existed in the early 1990s have withered away. Their disappearance does not imply, however, that electoral hegemonies are a matter of the past. Both competitive regimes and closed autocracies may transform themselves into hegemonic regimes. They have done so in the past and they are likely to do so in the future.

- *Transitions from competitive authoritarianism:* Many authoritarian rulers who preside the strenuous tug of war of a competitive regime strive to transform their precarious incumbency advantages into solid hegemonic domination. Some have failed, at least for now. Russia’s Vladimir Putin is a prominent example. Others, however, have succeeded. In the post-soviet space, **Nursultan Nazarbayev** of Kazakhstan, **Alyaksandr Lukashenka** of Belarus, and **Ilham Aliyev** of Azerbaijan have conducted successful transitions from competitive authoritarianism to personalist breeds of hegemonic rule.
- *Transitions from closed authoritarianism:* When closed autocracies introduce multiparty elections they can hope to establish instantaneous hegemonic domination. They possess huge initial advantages over their competitors. They have the organizational infrastructure, the administrative capacity, the appearance of popular support, and the military power they need to face the emergent winds of electoral competition without so much as disheveling their hairdo. No doubt, the most important case of a possible future transition from closed to hegemonic authoritarianism is China.

The Regeneration of Competitive Authoritarianism

Unlike hegemonic regimes, competitive authoritarian regimes are not in equilibrium. They are battle grounds, congealing systems of domination, not yet solidified. Their battles are asymmetric, between contenders of unequal standing, yet not predetermined in their outcomes. They represent “the most volatile regime type” (Roessler and Howard 2009: 103). Many have democratized, such as Peru, Serbia, and Ghana. Others have been cut short by military coups and political disorder, like Côte d’Ivoire and Togo. Nevertheless, the species of competitive authoritarianism is not in danger of extinction.

A fair number of regimes, like Russia, Algeria, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe, are hanging on, muddling through. Some, like Kenya and Ukraine, have installed themselves along the contentious borderline of “ambiguous regimes” (Diamond 2002) experts disagree in how to classify. Others, like Chad and Cambodia, have been drifting towards the opposite end, moving closer and closer to the category of closed regimes. Still others, like Côte d’Ivoire, Madagascar and Kyrgyzstan, have been oscillating in and out of states of disorder, military intervention, and competitive authoritarianism. While struggling to keep its quarrelsome pack together, the family of competitive autocracies has been admitting new members from closed autocracies, like Afghanistan and (as it appears at the time of writing) Myanmar. But more importantly, it has been admitting new members from electoral democracies.

The transformation of electoral democracies into competitive autocracies has been most notable in Latin America. At the beginning of the 21st century, Latin America was a region of democracy. One decade later, the regional picture looks different. New challenges to democracy have emerged from organized societal violence. And old challenges to democracy from overpowering executives have reappeared with renewed vigor. In Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, anti-political establishment actors (Schedler 1996) have taken power through democratic means, concentrated power through dubious means, and then subverted the competition for power through authoritarian means (see Levitsky and Loxton 2013). Today, all three arguably belong to the category of competitive electoral autocracies. The same applies to Nicaragua after the return of Daniel Ortega and Honduras after the 2009 military coup. Argentina’s “delegative democracy” (O’Donnell 1994) is creeping towards the borderline.

All in all, electoral authoritarianism seems more than a fleeting fad. Since the invention of modern mass elections, their authoritarian use has been an inherent possibility. After the end of the Cold War, this strategic possibility adopted pandemic dimensions. Today, the pathology has slowed down its contagious spread. Yet the global virus of electoral authoritarianism has come to stay with us for the foreseeable future.

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