

Elections and Democratization in Authoritarian Regimes

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When do elections in authoritarian regimes lead to democracy? Building from the distinction between competitive and hegemonic authoritarian regimes, I argue that presence of relatively weaker incumbents renders competitive authoritarian elections more prone to democratization, but only when domestic and international actors choose to actively pressure the regime. The effects of two forms of pressure—opposition electoral coalitions and international conditionality—are theorized. Propositions are tested using a comprehensive dataset of elections in authoritarian regimes from 1990 to 2007. Results support two core claims: that the effect of electoral pressure is conditional on the type of authoritarianism and that this greater vulnerability to pressure is the reason why competitive authoritarian elections are more likely to lead to democracy. In contrast, several alternative explanations—that differences across regime type are explained by alternation in power, better electoral conduct, or ongoing processes of liberalization—are not supported by the evidence.

Since the end of the cold war, dictators around the globe have adapted to the changed international environment by adopting the form—though not necessarily the substance—of democracy. The result has been a proliferation of electoral authoritarian regimes in which political offices are filled through multiparty elections, but the electoral playing field is skewed in favor of the ruling party (Schedler 2006, 3). These “hybrid” regimes defy straightforward classification and challenge traditional, teleological theories of democratization (Diamond 2002). Their proliferation has therefore created a surge of scholarly interest in explaining when they democratize (Levitsky and Way 2010) and when dictators can be defeated at the ballot box (Bunce and Wolchik 2010a), as well as whether the repeated holding of elections produces democratization (Lindberg 2006, 2009). However, a central unresolved puzzle about electoral authoritarian regimes is why elections serve to bolster authoritarian rule at some times yet undermine it at others. When do elections lead to democracy?

The first step toward answering this question is to consider the differences in electoral context across electoral authoritarian (EA) regimes: in hegemonic authoritarian regimes (HARs), the incumbent or ruling party enjoys overwhelming electoral dominance (conventionally understood as winning more than 70 or 75% of the vote or seat share); whereas in competitive authoritarian regimes (CARs), opposition parties pose greater electoral challenges and garner a larger share of votes. Research has shown that CARs are more likely to transition to democracy than HARs (Brownlee 2009; Roessler and Howard 2009). Yet, the underlying reasons for this difference—and the role played by elections—remain unclear. While it is clear that stronger opposition challengers in CARs should translate to a higher probability of alternation in power, it is not obvious why these regimes should be more likely to *democratize*—an outcome which entails a systematic improvement in the quality of elections. That many EA regimes remain durably authoritarian even after power changes hands attests to the importance of

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treating turnover and democratization as distinct phenomena. Moreover, the presence of stronger opposition challengers in CARs only increases the incumbent's incentives to manipulate elections—an outcome antithetical to democratization.

While existing research has tended to study electoral politics in competitive and hegemonic authoritarian regimes separately, this article forwards a unified framework for understanding elections across EA regimes. It takes the key difference between CARs and HARs—the degree of incumbent or ruling party dominance—as the starting point for theorizing the conditions under which authoritarian elections lead to democratization. I argue that two key forms of electoral pressure are more effective in CARs than in HARs. First, the relative weakness of incumbents in competitive authoritarian elections affords opposition parties with greater opportunities to forge *electorally viable coalitions*, which, in turn, decrease the incumbent's ability to engage in electoral manipulation. Coalitions in HARs, in contrast, are unlikely to spur improved electoral conduct and democratization because they are not perceived as a threat. Second, incumbents' weaker electoral standing in CARs means that their need for external support is greater, increasing their sensitivity to *international pressure for democracy*. By comparison, hegemonic regimes are more insulated from external pressure. Thus, although opposition parties coalesce and international actors impose conditionality at *nearly identical rates* in hegemonic and competitive authoritarian elections, these forms of pressure are only effective in CARs.

To test these propositions, I analyze the full set of elections in EA regimes (both competitive and hegemonic) from 1990 to 2007. Information on opposition coalitions and international conditionality is originally coded. By focusing on the application of specific tools of international pressure for democracy, this study also differs from previous research on structural, diffuse forms of international influence, such as economic linkage or membership in international organizations.

The results of the analysis strongly support the claim that opposition coalitions and international conditionality are effective levers for democratization in CARs, but not in HARs. I then evaluate a number of alternative explanations for why competitive authoritarian elections are more likely to lead to democracy. I find, perhaps surprisingly, that CARs are no more likely than HARs to be on a liberalizing path to democracy, nor do they exhibit better electoral conduct. Moreover, CARs' greater propensity to democratize is not explained by their higher frequency of alternation in power. These facts, which belie conventional wisdom about electoral authoritarian regimes,

imply that competitive authoritarian elections are not inherently destabilizing. Rather, it is the application of specific forms of domestic or international pressure that can transform these contests into mechanisms for democratization. When applied in HARs, the same forms of pressure are ineffective.

Electoral Authoritarian Regimes

The distinction between electoral authoritarianism and democracy hinges on the quality of electoral competition (Diamond 2002; Schedler 2006, chap.1). EA regimes allow multiple parties to compete in elections, but they do so under patently unfair conditions. Incumbents may place barriers on opposition parties' ability to campaign; generate a progovernment media bias; stack electoral commissions and courts with their supporters; or resort to stuffing ballot boxes and manipulating vote tabulations. Among EA regimes, a further distinction can be made based on the degree to which the incumbent or ruling party is electorally dominant (Brownlee 2009, 518; Diamond 2002). In HARs, the ruling party wins elections by wide margins, while in CARs, elections serve as “arenas through which opposition forces may—and frequently do—pose significant challenges” (Levitsky and Way 2002, 54), despite many obstacles to their success. Election results matter because they signal the regime's level of control over the political arena (Brownlee 2007, 3), as well as (more noisily) its level of popular support (Gandhi 2008, 167; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009, 405). Overwhelming electoral victories therefore contribute to an aura of invincibility that discourages elite defections and deters voters from supporting the opposition (Simpser 2013). Thus, the use of incumbent vote shares to distinguish between HARs and CARs is not merely a convenient analytical shortcut; election results are a direct measure of authoritarian political dominance.

To understand why some authoritarian regimes are hegemonic and others more competitive, one must look to a set of deep-rooted institutional and economic conditions.¹ Some regimes that secure political dominance are able to do so because of their resource advantages—stemming, for example, from a large, politicized public sector, or natural resource wealth—that are used to maintain patronage networks and buy mass support (Magaloni 2006, 15–24). These resource advantages, in turn, create an incentive structure that induces the

¹This is different from the question of regime survival. An autocracy may prove highly durable despite an inability to secure hegemony.

opposition to pursue self-defeating electoral tactics (Greene 2007). Other accounts focus on ruling parties as mechanisms for maintaining broad support coalitions (Brownlee 2007; Magaloni 2008), on the early repression of labor movements as a source of enduring opposition weakness (LeBas 2011, Chap. 2), or on the role of class-based communal conflict, which can spur elites to support the creation of an authoritarian “Leviathan” (Slater 2010). In short, a regime’s degree of electoral hegemony—which determines its status as a HAR or CAR—is shaped by path-dependent factors with deep institutional roots. The structure of the economy, colonial legacies, and elite choices made during the early years of the regime crucially shape its ability to consolidate power in the longer term.

Transitions to Democracy

For electoral authoritarian regimes—which hold multi-party elections but rig the playing field—democratization entails an improvement in the quality of elections such that parties compete on an equal footing, the casting and counting of ballots is conducted “in the absence of massive voter fraud,” and results “are representative of the public will” (Freedom House 2010). It is important to underscore that democratization involves a change in the quality and conduct—not necessarily the outcome—of elections. Many EA regimes experience changes in leadership, even an opposition victory, yet exhibit no subsequent improvement in the quality of electoral competition (Levitsky and Way 2010, 21).

Existing accounts of democratization in EA regimes leave several questions unanswered. In their study of competitive authoritarianism in the post-cold war era, Levitsky and Way (2010) argue that economic and social linkage with the West (which varies by region) is the primary cause of democratization. Yet, linkage is a diffuse, structural form of influence that fails to capture the effects of concrete tools of international pressure targeted to certain countries at certain times. Indeed, one of the limitations of Levitsky and Way’s theory is that there is no pathway through which active pressure—which they term international leverage—can lead to democracy (Slater 2011). Moreover, their claims about long-term regime trajectories are unable to explain the particular timing of democratic transitions—which is, in practice, almost always linked to elections.

Quantitative evidence clearly suggests the importance of electoral politics for democratization. Roessler and Howard (2009) and Brownlee (2009) both find that

the probability of a democratic transition is closely related to the regime’s prior electoral dominance. But this finding raises further questions about causal mechanisms. While it is straightforward to understand why electorally weaker incumbents in CARs should be more likely to lose power (cf. Roessler and Howard 2009, 103), we lack a satisfying explanation for why CARs should be more likely to democratize—which, to reiterate, entails a systematic improvement in the quality of elections. Brownlee suggests that the reasons stem from the “higher levels of contestation enjoyed by opposition parties” in CARs (2009, 521), yet he notes the need for “closer examination of the causal processes that propel these trends” (530). How exactly does the existence of greater electoral contestation in CARs translate to democratization? And how do electoral dynamics differ in HARs?

In a pathbreaking analysis of 50 competitive authoritarian elections, Howard and Roessler (2006) find that liberalizing electoral outcomes are most likely when opposition parties mobilize and forge coalitions.² But research on hegemonic regimes suggests a fundamentally different electoral dynamic. Rather than providing opportunities for genuine political competition, elections in HARs serve primarily as mechanisms to determine access to patronage (Lust-Okar 2009), to manage intra-elite competition (Blaydes 2011), or to signal the incumbent’s strength (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009, 407). Under these conditions, democratization is caused not by proximate electoral strategies but by changes in the underlying distribution of resources—for example, in response to an economic downturn or a shrinking state presence in the economy—which, over time, reduces the regime’s ability to maintain popular support and elite unity (Reuter and Gandhi 2011). Elections themselves rarely pose a threat, and when they do, they are likely reflecting these deeper structural changes.

In what follows, I build from these insights, explaining how two forms of pressure—opposition coalitions and international conditionality—help produce democratization in CARs but are unlikely to be effective in HARs.

Opposition Coalitions

To orchestrate electoral misconduct, incumbents require cooperation. Party operatives, election commission members, polling station workers, police, and the media are those most commonly complicit—either actively

²Bunce and Wolchik (2010a) similarly emphasize the importance of opposition strategies in ousting cheating incumbents (a different dependent variable) in postcommunist CARs.

or passively—in electoral manipulation. The choices of these actors depend crucially on perceptions about who is likely to win the election. When opposition parties are fragmented and weak—as in most EA regimes—there is little doubt about electoral outcomes, and orders to orchestrate or tolerate misconduct are likely to be followed with little hesitation. Domestic actors will simply calculate that their best option is to side with the regime (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; Van de Walle 2006).

If opposition parties unite, however, this can lead to a dramatic transformation in perceptions. For those who must choose whether to engage in, or tolerate, misconduct, the decision is no longer so clear-cut. As Hale notes in his analysis of post-Soviet presidential elections, if the incumbent is believed to be on his way out, regimes will “face defection from their very own machines,” including the “elites controlling mass media and even the very courts that are necessary for consummating electoral fraud” (2005, 141). Howard and Roessler further explain that in the presence of an opposition coalition, “. . . the police, army, and bureaucrats may be less inclined to employ illegal practices to benefit the incumbent” (2006, 371).

An important caveat, however, is that opposition coalitions will only have such an effect when they are *electorally viable*, meaning they are perceived as having a real chance of victory. Opposition parties in CARs begin from a position of relative strength compared to those in hegemonic contexts; they have a better track record of electoral performance, which often translates to greater representation in the legislature. For these reasons, coalitions in CARs are far more likely to gain enough traction to be perceived as electorally viable. In contrast, opposition coalitions in HARs are typically composed of weak parties with poor organizational cohesion and low levels of popular support.

To illustrate this point, consider the different effects of coalition building in Serbia and Belarus. During the 1990s, Serbia was an archetypical CAR. Freedom was highly curtailed and elections unfair, but Slobodan Milošević was never able to consolidate electoral dominance. Although the ruling party’s vote share ranged from just 29–53% during the 1990s,³ a fragmented opposition consistently failed to mount a credible electoral challenge.⁴ The situation changed dramatically in the run-up to the 2000 presidential election when op-

position factions set aside their differences and formed a broad coalition—the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS)—with Vojislav Koštunica as their presidential candidate. The coalition had a profound impact on public perceptions, spurring unprecedented pre-election mobilization, campaign activity, and voter turnout (Bunce and Wolchik 2010b). While Milošević did everything in his power to manipulate the contest in his favor, ultimately, defections among key actors in the state (including the army, interior ministry, and police), media, and even his own party prevented him from consummating outcome-changing fraud.⁵

Similar coalition-building efforts by the opposition in Belarus fell flat. Different from Serbia—where opposition forces were always politically relevant despite their disadvantage—President Aleksander Lukashenka in Belarus enjoys near absolute power. Since his ascent in 1994, elections have been little more than a farce. Presidential contests in 2001 and 2006 were won by overwhelming margins, and by 2004, there was no opposition presence in the legislature. Under these conditions, the Belarusian opposition’s attempt to mimic the Serbian revolution by uniting behind a single presidential candidate in 2001 (and again in 2006) failed to gain any traction (Boris 2001; Shargorodsky 2001; Silitski 2010). Without a tipping point in perceptions about the opposition’s chances of victory, the regime’s grip over electoral management bodies, the media, and security forces remained firm, and the majority of citizens remained too afraid, or simply too passive, to defend their right to vote in free and fair elections.

HI: The effect of opposition coalitions on democratization is greater in competitive authoritarian elections than in hegemonic authoritarian elections.

International Conditionality

Since the end of the cold war, the international community has become increasingly active in democracy promotion. There are many tools in the democracy promotion “toolkit”—including election monitoring, democracy aid, and diplomatic pressure—but the most direct and immediate way to exert pressure for free and fair elections is through *conditionality*, understood as the linking of concrete punishments or rewards to improvements in the quality of elections. “Negative”

³These figures increase if one accounts for other parties allied with the government, but the total progovernment vote share never exceeded two-thirds of the vote.

⁴See Cohen (2002) on the opposition’s repeated electoral failures in the 1990s.

⁵See Pavlakovic (2005, 128), Graham (2000), Glenny (2000), and Sandford (2000).

conditionality threatens either material (e.g., economic sanctions) or political (e.g., suspension of membership in international organizations) costs on the government for electoral misconduct, while “positive” conditionality holds out the promise of rewards if conduct improves. International conditionality can also have indirect consequences for a regime, since democratic credentials are now an important factor influencing the allocation of foreign aid, international investment, and multilateral loans (Hyde 2011; Lebovic and Voeten 2009). Moreover, conditionality can impose symbolic costs, particularly if a government bases its claims to legitimacy on its international support and its electoral credentials. By activating these material and symbolic incentives, conditionality can induce governments to reduce their reliance on electoral misconduct or to tie their hands by introducing institutional reforms that make misconduct more difficult and risky (Donno 2013).

Different regimes exhibit different levels of sensitivity to international pressure, however. For incumbents in an already tenuous electoral position, a loss of international support can have serious consequences, particularly in the short term. Withdrawal of economic benefits in the months leading up to an election is likely to be particularly costly for CARs, for this is the time when resources are most needed to help them win, buy, or steal votes. In contrast, incumbents in HARs are better insulated from international pressure. Patronage networks sustained through domestic sources—natural resource wealth, a large public sector, or state-controlled economy (as in Belarus, or Mexico under the PRI)—are unaffected by international pressure for democracy. Even when external actors do wield leverage over a hegemonic regime, the leadership can typically find ways to introduce cosmetic reforms that do not threaten its power base.⁶ Equally important, the symbolic consequences of international criticism are likely to be less severe for HARs. Where elections are blatantly lopsided contests that serve primarily to determine access to state resources, citizens do not expect them to be free and fair or evaluate them on this basis (Lust-Okar 2009). If there is no illusion of democracy to begin with, international efforts to delegitimize the regime on these grounds are unlikely to be effective. Many hegemonic leaders can simply dismiss international criticism altogether, as did Lukashenka in Belarus when he urged supporters in 2001 to “take the election monitors by the scruff of the neck and send them packing so they can fly off with their heads spinning” (Boris 2001).

⁶See, for example, Blaydes’ (2011, chap. 10) account of Mubarak’s response to U.S. pressure for multicandidate presidential elections.

H2: The effect of international pressure for democracy is greater in competitive authoritarian elections than in hegemonic authoritarian elections.

In sum, pressure for clean elections occurs across regime types. Indeed, as the next section shows, opposition parties coalesce and international actors impose conditionality at nearly identical rates in hegemonic and competitive authoritarian regimes. But it should be more effective in CARs. This is so not because competitive authoritarian leaders are closet democrats who willingly forswear electoral fraud. Rather, the application of pressure in CARs alters incentives and beliefs, triggers defections, and prompts institutional reforms that limit the government’s ability to manipulate elections.

H3: Elections in CARs are more likely to lead to democracy than elections in HARs because CARs are more vulnerable to domestic and international pressure.

Data

To uncover the factors associated with democratization through elections, I constructed a dataset of elections in EA regimes from 1990 to 2007. The units of analysis are national elections, both presidential and legislative. Creation of the dataset proceeded in several steps. First, Geddes, Wright, and Franz’s (2012; GWF hereafter) data were used to identify the set of autocratic regime-years. These data, which cover all countries in the world from 1946 to 2010, expand and improve upon Geddes’ (1999) earlier coding.⁷ Within this set, I define the sample of electoral authoritarian regimes as those in which multiple parties are allowed to contest elections. If the ruling party or candidate won less than 75% of the votes (presidential contests, first round) or seats (legislative elections) in the last election, the regime is classified as a CAR; otherwise, it is classified as a HAR.⁸ This coding reflects the country’s status as of January 1 of the year in question,

⁷Data and codebook are available at <<http://dictators.la.psu.edu/>>. The GWF data are highly correlated with Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland’s (2010) coding of regime type, but GWF has the advantage, for my purposes, of explicitly considering electoral quality in its coding of autocracy.

⁸Following Brownlee (2009), using the World Bank’s Database of Political Institutions (DPI) indexes of executive and legislative electoral competitiveness (Keefer 2010), a country is coded as CAR if it received a “7” on either index and as HAR if its highest score on either index was a “5” or a “6.” These scores capture the presence of multiple parties in an election and whether the winner exceeded 75% of the votes (presidential elections) or seats (legislative

thus equivalent to a one-year lag.⁹ Last, I employed the dataset on *National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy* (NELDA) to identify the elections held in these regimes (Hyde and Marinov 2012). This yields a sample of 177 elections (104 in CARs and 73 in HARs). A list of included elections and regime type is in the supplemental appendix.

The dependent variable of the analysis is a *transition to electoral democracy*. I employ a dummy variable indicating whether a country moved from a “0” to a “1” on Freedom House’s list of electoral democracies in the year of the election in question. Inclusion on this list requires that a country meet four criteria:

- 1) a competitive, multiparty political system;
- 2) universal adult suffrage for all citizens (with exceptions for restrictions that states may legitimately place on citizens as sanctions for criminal offenses);
- 3) regularly contested elections conducted in conditions of ballot secrecy, reasonable ballot security, and in the absence of massive voter fraud, and that yield results that are representative of the public will; and
- 4) significant public access of major political parties to the electorate through the media and through generally open political campaigning.

The advantages of this measure are twofold. First, unlike the Polity index, which incorporates nonelectoral dimensions in its coding, inclusion on the electoral democracy list is driven by electoral quality alone (with criteria 3 and 4 representing the main differences between an electoral authoritarian regime and a democracy). Second, unlike other dichotomous measures of regime type, inclusion on the list is independent of electoral outcomes.¹⁰ Of the 177 elections in the data, 25 marked a transition

elections). Remaining regimes (scoring a 4 or lower on both indexes) are coded as *closed authoritarian*.

⁹If a country is coded as *closed authoritarian* as of January 1, that country-year is excluded from the dataset. This coding scheme therefore excludes founding elections in which a country made a rapid transition from a closed to a multiparty system and then held an election in the same year. Appendix F in the supplementary materials presents the results of robustness checks that alter this coding scheme by (1) including all founding multiparty elections following single-party rule and then (2) excluding all founding multiparty elections in which the regime is coded as a HAR or CAR as of January 1. The results hold in both cases.

¹⁰Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010) and Geddes, Wright, and Franz (2012) both require that a country experience alternation in power in order to move from dictatorship to democracy.

to electoral democracy; 18 of these occurred in CARs and seven in HARs.¹¹

The first key independent variable is an indicator for *opposition coalition*. Following Howard and Roessler (2006), this measure is coded as “1” if all major opposition parties forged a unified platform, coordinated their campaigns, or united behind a single presidential candidate.¹²

The second key independent variable, which captures the application of international pressure, is an indicator for pre-election *conditionality*, defined as the issuance of threats or promises that link punishments or rewards to the country’s electoral conduct (Donno 2013).¹³ Incentives can be economic (e.g., sanctions, aid, trade agreements) or political (e.g., suspension of diplomatic ties, suspension or granting of membership in an international organization). While previous research on international influences on democracy has focused largely on passive forces, such as international linkage (Levitsky and Way 2010) or membership in democratic regional organizations (Pevehouse 2005), these data represent a systematic collection of information on active pressure for democracy. The conditionality variable is coded as “1” if one or more of the following actors employed conditionality during the four months prior to the election: the United States, United Nations, European Union (EU), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Council of Europe, Organization of American States (OAS), Caribbean Community (CARICOM), Southern African Development Community (SADC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and African Union.¹⁴

An initial look at the data reveals that the rates of coalitions and conditionality across regime types are nearly equal: coalitions occurred in 15% of elections in both HARs and CARs, while international conditionality

¹¹See Appendix B in the supplementary materials for a list.

¹²Howard and Roessler’s data were used when available. See Appendix C in the supplementary materials for details on how the remaining elections were coded.

¹³Conditionality is only coded if clearly targeted toward the country and election in question; regional or ongoing conditionality policies not related to that election are not coded.

¹⁴These actors, which were identified through extensive research of a larger set of international organizations, represent the universe of regional organizations with a track record of at least once employing conditionality for election-related purposes. The primary sources of information used were stories in international newspapers and newswires. To ensure reliability, all elections were coded twice by different individuals working independently. Intercoder disagreement was found in less than 10% of observations and was resolved by the author. See Appendix C in the supplementary materials for more information.

was applied in 8% of hegemonic elections and 13% of competitive authoritarian elections (this difference was not statistically significant). There appears to be little ground for concern, then, that opposition parties and international actors are systematically choosing to focus their efforts in the ostensibly easier, more competitive, cases.

Seven control variables capture country- and election-specific factors that may influence the probability of a democratic transition. First, it is likely that democratization occurs primarily in elections that determine who will hold executive power. Because the stakes are higher in these contests, they are more likely to elicit higher levels of domestic mobilization for democracy. I include a dichotomous variable, *main election*, coded as a “1” for presidential elections in presidential (or mixed) systems and legislative elections in parliamentary systems (Simpser and Donno 2012). Second, I include a variable indicating whether the *incumbent was running* in the election, which is expected to decrease the chances of democratization (Cheeseman 2010; Maltz 2007).¹⁵ It is also important to account for the country’s previous experience with elections. Lindberg (2006, 2009) argues that holding elections fosters institutional change and greater respect for civil liberties and that these changes cumulate over time. Relatedly, Bratton and Van de Walle (1997) argue that the more elections held under authoritarianism, the greater the chances for democratization. I thus include a variable that sums the *number of previous elections* held under a continuous authoritarian spell.¹⁶

Two variables control for economic conditions: first a variable for *GDP per capita*, lagged one year.¹⁷ High income is reliably associated with democracy, though its effect on democratic transitions is less clear. Przeworski et al. (2000, chap. 2), for example, find that dictatorships at high (but not the highest) levels of income are more likely to democratize. Second, I include a variable for *GDP growth*, measured as the percent change in a country’s GDP from year $t-2$ to $t-1$. If it is true that good economic performance bolsters authoritarian regimes, the coefficient on this variable should be negative.

¹⁵Data come from the NELDA dataset (Hyde and Marinov 2012), which defines the incumbent leader according to the individual identified in *Archigos* (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009).

¹⁶This count begins in 1946 or at the date of independence. The count restarts each time a country transitions to autocracy from democracy. Data on authoritarian spells are from Geddes, Wright, and Franz (2012) and data on elections are from NELDA (Hyde and Marinov 2012).

¹⁷Data on GDP and GDP growth are taken from the World Bank (2010).

Finally, Levitsky and Way (2010) demonstrate that democratization is more likely in regions of the world with high economic and social linkage with the West—namely, *Latin America* and *Central/Eastern Europe*. Accordingly, I include dummy variables for both these regions in the models.

Findings

To recap, two core implications flow from the argument. First, opposition coalitions and international conditionality should be more effective at producing democratization through elections in CARs than in HARs. Thus, interaction terms between competitive authoritarianism and these two forms of pressure are expected to be positive and statistically significant. Second, this greater vulnerability to pressure explains why CARs are more likely to democratize than HARs. Thus, any significant difference in the probability of democratization across regime types should disappear once the conditional effects of opposition coalitions and international conditionality are modeled. To put these predictions to the test, I estimate probit models with democratic transition as the dependent variable. The sample includes all elections in EA regimes, excepting only those countries already classified as electoral democracies by Freedom House,¹⁸ as well as countries under a provisional government installed after the resignation of an authoritarian leader. All models are run with robust clustered standard errors to adjust for dependence across observations within countries.¹⁹

The first column of Table 1 presents a baseline model that sheds first light on the conditions under which authoritarian elections lead to democracy. The results reveal that democratization is, as expected, more likely in main elections that determine who holds executive power, but less likely when the incumbent is running for reelection, lending support to the idea that open-seat elections represent particularly opportune moments for democratic change (cf. Cheeseman 2010). The results also suggest that strong economic performance bolsters authoritarian regimes, since high income and economic growth are

¹⁸These ambiguous cases in which GWF and Freedom House disagree on status as an autocracy include, for example, elections in Botswana (all years), Haiti (2000), and Russia (1995–2004). I omit these cases from the main analysis, but when they are included, the results for competitive authoritarianism, opposition coalitions, and international conditionality remain robust.

¹⁹Because the data form an unbalanced panel, panel-corrected standard errors are infeasible. In a likelihood ratio test, country random effects were not significantly different from zero, indicating that a pooled model is preferred. Fixed effects lead to too many observations dropping from the analysis.

TABLE 1 The Determinants of Democratization through Elections

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Competitive Authoritarian Regime (CAR)	0.64+	0.58+	0.18	0.70*	0.21
	(0.05)	(0.08)	(0.62)	(0.03)	(0.57)
Opposition Coalition		0.69+	-4.21**		-4.12**
		(0.09)	(0.00)		(0.00)
International Conditionality		0.18	-4.88**		-4.62**
		(0.73)	(0.00)		(0.00)
CAR x Opp. Coalition			5.15**		5.45**
			(0.00)		(0.00)
CAR x Conditionality			5.23**		5.34**
			(0.00)		(0.00)
Main Election	1.60**	1.59**	1.65**	1.61**	1.77**
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Incumbent Running	-0.79*	-0.80*	-0.88*	-0.84*	-0.87*
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)
# Previous Elections	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.05	-0.07+
	(0.82)	(0.77)	(0.74)	(0.22)	(0.09)
GDP per capita (lagged 1 year)	-0.42*	-0.46*	-0.42+	-0.37+	-0.37+
	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.07)
GDP growth (lagged 1 year)	-0.04+	-0.04+	-0.04	-0.03	-0.02
	(0.07)	(0.09)	(0.12)	(0.14)	(0.54)
Central and Eastern Europe	0.32	0.18	0.13	0.56	0.44
	(0.49)	(0.72)	(0.80)	(0.36)	(0.47)
Americas	1.45**	1.63**	1.58**	1.40**	1.63**
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.00)
Alternation, Previous Elec.				0.46	1.05+
				(0.38)	(0.09)
Misconduct Intensity				-0.34+	-0.54*
				(0.06)	(0.02)
Regime Openness				0.03	0.06
				(0.90)	(0.78)
Prior Liberalization				0.31*	0.37+
				(0.03)	(0.05)
Constant	0.28	0.42	0.49	0.49	0.58
	(0.83)	(0.77)	(0.75)	(0.73)	(0.72)
Pseudo R ²	0.28	0.31	0.35	0.34	0.43
Observations	177	177	177	176	176

Note: Robust p-values in parentheses. +significant at 10%; *significant at 5%; **significant at 1%.

negatively associated with democratization. However, the idea that the repeated holding of elections helps produce democracy is not supported.²⁰

²⁰Lindberg (2006) shows that the holding of elections is associated with democratic change in Africa, but this relationship does not appear to hold in Latin America (McCoy and Hartlyn 2009) or the Middle East (Lust-Okar 2009); moreover, the effect of repeated elections is strongest when held in more democratic contexts (Teorell and Hadenius 2009, 96–98).

In line with previous research, Model 1 shows that democratization is more likely in competitive authoritarian elections than in hegemonic elections. Even after controlling for a host of country- and election-specific factors, there is something different about elections in CARs—some attribute associated with democratization—that remains unexplained. Models 2 and 3 resolve this puzzle. The variables for opposition coalition and international conditionality are positively signed (Model 2) but are only statistically significant when interacted with the indicator

TABLE 2 Predicted Probability of Democratization

	Probability of Democratic Transition
Competitive Authoritarian Regimes	
<i>No Coalition, No Conditionality</i>	.26 [.09, .50]
<i>Coalition</i>	.59 [.21, .92]
<i>Conditionality</i>	.39 [.05, .84]
<i>Coalition + Conditionality</i>	.69 [.22, .97]
Hegemonic Authoritarian Regimes	
<i>No Coalition, No Conditionality</i>	.21 [.07, .43]
<i>Coalition</i>	.00 [.00, .00]
<i>Conditionality</i>	.00 [.00, .00]
<i>Coalition + Conditionality</i>	.00 [.00, .00]

Note: The 95% confidence intervals appear in brackets. Other variables held at modal (for dummy variables) or median values.

for competitive authoritarianism. Thus, opposition coalitions and international conditionality greatly increase the likelihood of democratization, but only in CARs, where governments are more vulnerable to electoral pressure.²¹ This resonates with Wright's (2009) finding that foreign aid conditionality is more effective in regimes with larger winning coalitions (measured in part by the competitiveness of executive selection). Notably, once the interaction terms are included in the models, the constituent term for CARs becomes statistically insignificant, lending support to the claim that vulnerability to pressure is the reason why elections in CARs are more likely to lead to democracy (Hypothesis 3). Absent an opposition coalition or international conditionality, democratization in a competitive authoritarian context is no more likely than democratization in a hegemonic context.

To illustrate the core findings, Table 2 presents the predicted probability of democratization through elections in CARs and HARs, all other factors held equal.²² In

²¹Results are robust when the conditionality variable is recoded to include U.S. and EU conditionality only.

²²Table 2 is based on simulations performed using *Clarify* (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2001). Unless otherwise specified, all variables are held at their median values.

an average hegemonic authoritarian election with no opposition coalition and no international conditionality, the probability of democratization is 0.21. This probability is only slightly higher—at 0.26—in an identical competitive authoritarian election. The fates of CARs and HARs diverge, however, with the application of domestic and international pressure. When opposition parties coalesce or international actors impose pre-election conditionality in CARs, the chances of democratization increase to 60 and 40%, respectively; and in elections with both coalitions and conditionality, the probability of democratization climbs to 0.69.

The results also reveal that in hegemonic regimes, coalitions and conditionality are negatively associated with democratization (denoted by the coefficients on the constituent terms in Model 3). This is consistent with the argument forwarded here, that these forms of pressure should not have a positive effect in HARs. Yet it suggests the intriguing possibility that they are actually counterproductive when applied in hegemonic contexts, perhaps because leaders respond by further tightening their grip on power. In Cambodia's hegemonic regime, for example, sustained international involvement has arguably only spurred Hun Sen to further centralize power and manipulate electoral rules so that outright vote rigging is unnecessary.²³ The negative findings for coalitions and conditionality in hegemonic regimes should be interpreted with caution, however, since there are relatively few cases of democratization in HARs in the data. Future qualitative research will need to probe whether these effects hold in particular cases over time.

Alternative Explanations

This article's core hypothesis, that CARs are more vulnerable to opposition and international electoral pressure than HARs, is not the only possible explanation for why competitive authoritarian elections are more likely to lead to democracy. Elections in CARs and HARs may differ in other ways that are causally relevant for democratization. First, as previous research has noted, CARs are more likely than HARs or closed regimes to experience transfers of executive power to the opposition (Roessler and Howard 2009). Because alternation in power is an electoral *outcome* that temporally follows (rather than precedes) any improvement in electoral conduct, it cannot be said to exert a causal effect on democratization in the current

²³Brinkley (2011) gives an in-depth account of the international community's role in Cambodia.

election; but it may increase the chances of democratization in the next election if the new government exhibits greater respect for democratic norms. To explore this possibility, I employ a dummy variable for *alternation in executive power* in the previous election. In presidential systems, alternation is coded if the pro-government candidate (including, if applicable, the incumbent himself) lost a presidential election; in parliamentary systems, if the ruling party lost a legislative election.²⁴

A second set of alternative explanations stems from the idea that CARs may be closer to democracy to begin with. Elections in CARs, though flawed, may be marked by relatively better conduct than HARs. If so, the changes required to cross the threshold to democratic elections would be smaller and, possibly, easier to achieve. To evaluate this, I construct a measure for the *intensity of electoral misconduct*. Ranging from 1 to 3, this variable sums the number of areas in which misconduct is present. For each election, one point is given for pre-election restrictions on the opposition's freedom of movement, association, or expression; one point for pre-election bias in the media or institutions that govern elections; and one point for ballot fraud. These forms of misconduct are identified using a variety of sources, including more than 400 election observation reports, news articles and the NELDA dataset.²⁵ Additionally, elections in CARs may simply represent the culmination of an ongoing process of liberalization. While competitive authoritarianism is a stable equilibrium for some countries, for others, it may represent a transitional point on the road from a closed or hegemonic regime to democracy. Following Howard and Roessler (2006), the extant level of *regime openness* is captured using the country's Freedom House civil liberties score (measured as the running average in the two years prior to the election).²⁶ *Prior liberalization* is measured as the difference in the Freedom House political rights score during the four-year period preceding the election.

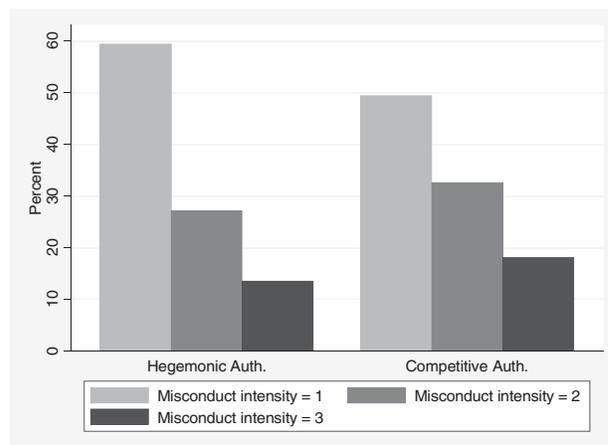
An initial look at the data provides only limited support for these arguments, calling into question some conventional assumptions about differences across hybrid regimes. Alternation in power is indeed more likely in CARs: 18% of executive elections in CARs led to alternation, compared to 13% in HARs. And alternation is associated with a higher chance of democratization in the

²⁴This variable is taken from NELDA (question 24; Hyde and Marinov 2012). Missing data were filled in using Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza's (2009) coding of regular alternation in power.

²⁵See Appendix C in the supplementary materials for a more detailed description of this variable.

²⁶Scores are inverted so that higher values represent greater freedom.

FIGURE 1 Intensity of Electoral Misconduct, by Authoritarian Type



next election (33% versus 10% in contests not following alternation), but this difference is not statistically significant.²⁷ Elections in CARs are more likely to occur in a more open context, with an average civil liberties score in the two years prior to an election of 3.28 in CARs, compared to 2.94 in HARs.²⁸ However, elections in CARs are not more likely to occur during periods of ongoing political liberalization. The average change in Freedom House's political rights index in the four years prior to elections is negative in both regime types (-0.06 in HARs and -0.20 in CARs), and this difference is not significant.

Turning to the quality of elections, Figure 1 shows the percent of elections in each regime type marked by different levels of misconduct intensity. It reveals, strikingly, that elections in CARs are actually marked by more widespread misconduct—in terms of the scope and range of tools employed—than elections in HARs. This lends support to the idea that CARs rely to a greater extent on outright electoral manipulation, while HARs are typically able to sustain themselves without resorting to these tactics (Lust-Okar 2009; Magaloni 2006). Elections in HARs are, however, more likely to exhibit problems in their legal framework, such as barriers on who can run for office, high thresholds for party registration, and flaws in procedures for lodging electoral complaints (Kelley 2009, 2010).²⁹ In sum, elections in CARs are, by

²⁷A χ^2 test yields a p-value of .44; the null hypothesis of independence cannot be rejected.

²⁸A difference of means test was significant at $p = .00$.

²⁹In Kelley's (2010) quality of elections (QED) data, 66% of elections in HARs are marked by moderate or major problems in their structural/legal environment, compared to 51% in CARs.

definition, more competitive in terms of their *outcome* and tend to be governed by relatively better legal frameworks, but they are not more free and fair in terms of their *conduct*.

Models 4 and 5 (Table 1) explore the effect of these variables in the multivariate analysis. The results show that elections marked by more intense misconduct are, as expected, less likely to democratize, while prior liberalization is positively associated with democratization. Alternation in power exhibits the expected positive effect only in Model 5, and it is only marginally significant. Most importantly, the coefficient on CARs remains at nearly identical levels of statistical significance after the inclusion of these variables (Model 4 versus Model 1), which means that the four alternative explanations account for a very small amount of the variance across CARs and HARs. The interactive effects of coalitions and conditionality are also unaffected.

Robustness

The robustness of this article's core findings is probed in several ways. I first investigate whether the results hold under an entirely different coding scheme for regime type and democratization. Roessler and Howard (2009) code EA regimes as those that hold multiparty elections and that receive a Freedom House political rights score of 3 or higher *and* a Polity score of 5 or lower. (Democratization occurs if the country moves to an FH score of 2 or better or a Polity score of 6 or higher.) Within EA regimes, they employ an electoral threshold of 70% (rather than 75%) of votes/seats to the winner for classifying a country as a CAR or HAR. When this alternative coding scheme is employed, the key results remain nearly unchanged (supplementary Appendix D), the only difference being that the effect of opposition coalitions in CARs reduces to marginal levels of statistical significance. Upon closer examination, this appears to be driven by a subset of cases where executive elections are won by large margins, but legislative elections are more competitive (coded as hegemonic by Roessler/Howard but coded as competitive in the main analyses). This suggests that opposition coalitions are particularly effective in settings where the executive is electorally dominant but the opposition gains a greater foothold in the legislature.

To further probe the sensitivity of the results to different electoral thresholds, I run a set of analyses that dispense with the dichotomous classification of CARs and HARs altogether and instead employ a continuous measure of vote/seat shares, which I label *authori-*

tarian electoral dominance.³⁰ This variable captures the vote/seat share of the winning candidate/party in the last election. While this measure contains some missing data, and measurement error is more problematic than with the dichotomous classification of CARs and HARs, the results again prove robust (Table E and Figure E in the supplementary materials). As dominance increases, the odds of democratization decline. Most notably, coalitions and conditionality exhibit significant interactive effects: at low to mid-levels of electoral dominance—analogueous to competitive authoritarian regimes—coalitions and conditionality are statistically significant, but their positive effect on democratization disappears in systems with highly skewed electoral results.

As a last check for sensitivity to different electoral thresholds, I ensured that the findings are not driven by differences in electoral system. The vote and seat shares of winning parties are typically smaller in proportional representation (PR) systems (in which larger numbers of parties compete and gain representation) than in majoritarian systems. However, inclusion of an indicator for PR does not alter the results: competitive authoritarianism retains a positive, significant coefficient in the baseline model, and the conditional effects of coalitions and conditionality remain.

Finally, I explored the possibility of selection bias. As discussed, a large body of research has identified the sources of authoritarian hegemony as being rooted in domestic institutional legacies, economic endowments, and the structure of the economy. Nevertheless, to investigate statistically whether status as a CAR is driven by an underlying, unobserved propensity for democratization, I employ a Heckman selection model that predicts both (a) selection into competitive authoritarianism and (b) democratization. The method, model specification, and results are discussed in the supplementary appendix. In short, the findings lend no support to the idea that selection bias is driving the results, further supporting the conclusion that opposition coalitions and international conditionality indeed exert a causal effect in CARs.

Conclusion

Democratization through elections has become an increasingly prominent mode of regime change (Lindberg 2009). Yet, puzzlingly, the study of democratization in hybrid regimes has remained largely disconnected from

³⁰This measure is taken from electoral results reported in Keefer (2010).

the growing literature on electoral conduct and quality. The few studies that have focused squarely on electoral politics have been limited in scope, analyzing a subset of elections in competitive authoritarian regimes (cf. Bunce and Wolchik 2010a; Howard and Roessler 2006). This study has helped bridge this divide by examining a comprehensive sample of elections in EA regimes since the end of the cold war. In the process, it has challenged some commonly held ideas about hybrid regimes. Contra those who tout the intrinsic tensions and fragility of competitive authoritarianism, the findings here underscore that there is nothing inherently unstable about this type of hybrid regime. Instead, CARs are more accurately characterized as *potentially* unstable in that democratization is contingent on whether domestic and international actors choose to pressure the regime. Absent pressure, elections in CARs are no more likely to lead to democracy than elections in hegemonic regimes. Nor are elections in CARs manifestly closer to democracy to begin with, at least in terms of their conduct. While hegemonic authoritarian elections tend to be held under an inferior legal framework, active electoral misconduct is more widespread in CARs, likely because leaders in these regimes have a greater need for manipulation to ensure victory. Yet, in CARs, the government's ability to manipulate can be offset if opposition parties forge a unified front and international actors threaten to punish the regime for violations of electoral norms. Thus, in contrast to the conclusion that international leverage produces, at best, unstable authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010), this article has demonstrated that there is a link between conditionality and democratization. Further, the finding that the effect of international pressure is conditional on regime context also helps explain why external actors have previously been noted as having only a "variable impact" on electoral politics (Bunce and Wolchik 2010a).

This study also challenges analysts to think carefully about the relationship between democratization—which is related to the electoral process—and alternation in power—which relates to electoral outcomes. While these two phenomena often coincide—for example, the democratizing elections in Indonesia (1999), Croatia (2000), and Peru (2001)—they should not be conflated. Indeed, the finding that alternation is not a significant predictor of democratization in the next election suggests that alternation may best be understood as a by-product, rather than a direct cause, of democracy. This point has implications for domestic and international groups interested in democracy promotion, for it underscores that a focus on ousting dictators should be accompanied in equal measure by close attention to the democratic pro-

cess, particularly the quality of elections. The electoral revolution in Kyrgyzstan is a stark example of alternation in power unaccompanied by any real improvement in democratic performance, but the revolutions in Georgia (2004) and Ukraine (2005) exhibit a similar dynamic. Eight years on, both countries continue to struggle with electoral irregularities, declining media freedom, and, in Ukraine, a troubling upswing in opposition intimidation. In contrast, alternation in power in Slovakia (1998) was accompanied by rapid institutional reform, facilitated by conditionality and assistance from the European Union.

Variation across these postcommunist cases may prove instructive for the recent revolutions in the Arab world, where euphoria over regime change must now give way to more practical consideration of the challenges associated with ensuring free and fair elections and, in the longer term, achieving wholesale political transformation. Elections will surely play an integral role in these countries' transitions, but the findings presented here underscore the importance of the political context in which these contests are held. In long-standing hegemonic regimes, where citizens have lived through decades of lopsided electoral charades, the creation of a competitive political system with a robust opposition will be essential for altering public perceptions about the purpose, authenticity, and legitimacy of elections.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Supplementary Appendix A. Elections in HARs and CARs, 1990–2007

Supplementary Appendix B. Transitions to Electoral Democracy in HARs and CARs, 1990–2007

Supplementary Appendix C. Coding Rules and Sources

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