

Electoral Authoritarianism

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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 nondemocratic rule in the world. Responding to the empirical expansion of nondemocratic 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.

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 such as media censorship, voter intimidation, the banning of parties or candidates, and electoral fraud. The contemporary dictator practices “electoral authoritarianism.”

Today, the grand categories of nondemocratic 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, electoral authoritarian “pseudo-democracies” have turned into the most common type of nondemocratic regimes in the contemporary world (see e.g., Hadenius & Teorell, 2007; Roessler & Howard, 2009).

In accordance with the empirical expansion of nondemocratic 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.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

The foundational act that opened up the research agenda on electoral authoritarian regimes 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 nonelectoral 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. New concepts, however, unsettle established fields of thought. They do not spread, and should not spread, without intense debate. Do the distinctions they draw capture relevant differences in the real world? 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. As it could not be otherwise, though, its career has been accompanied by ongoing debates on meaning, boundary delimitation, and 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 civil and political liberties. At the same time, when compared to “advanced” democracies, they appeared to be burdened by innumerable deficiencies, such as corruption, military tutelage, weak parties, and weak judiciaries. Their disappointing defects sparked a broad literature on

“diminished subtypes of democracy,” also known as “democracies with adjectives” (Collier & 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. 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 established the electoral facades of liberal democracy, yet violated democratic principles in severe and systematic ways. Describing them as “democracies with adjectives” seemed to bend the notion of democracy beyond breaking point. Thus, the conceptual shift toward “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 possibility that autocrats can undermine the democratic spirit of elections by choosing from an open-ended “menu of electoral manipulation” (Schedler, 2002b) that includes vote rigging, exclusion, institutional discrimination, censorship, and repression (see also Birch, 2011). No firm consensus exists, however, on whether we should conceptualize manipulated multiparty elections as deficiently democratic, plainly authoritarian, or something in between (“hybrid”).

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. Given its normative, conceptual, informational, and political complexities, the dividing line between electoral democracies and electoral autocracies has been uncertain and contested (see Schedler, 2013, Chapter 3).

A Contested Terminology. The notion of “electoral authoritarianism” has proven fruitful in demarcating the conceptual territory of nondemocratic multiparty regimes. It does not enjoy a terminological monopoly, though. Following relevant debates still requires a certain amount of translation between vaguely homonymous categories. Highlighting authoritarian party pluralism, some authors talk of “multiparty autocracies.” Others stress the contradictory institutional blend that characterizes electoral autocracies. They speak of “hybrid,” “mixed,” or “inconsistent” regimes. Still others locate these regimes in an equidistant position between democracy and

dictatorship. They refer to “pseudo-democracy,” “semi-democracy,” or “semi-authoritarianism.”

THE AUTHORITARIAN BOUNDARY

While the distinction between democratic and authoritarian elections is primarily normative, the distinction between electoral and closed authoritarianism is primarily empirical. It only makes sense to distinguish these subtypes of authoritarianism if they work differently. Yet, which is the causal role of multiparty elections in authoritarian regimes? Do they 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 (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, by contrast, conceive authoritarian elections as instruments authoritarian rulers deploy 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 novel opportunities of contestation and mobilization. Though unfree and unfair by design, authoritarian multiparty elections are contingent in their outcomes (e.g., Schedler, 2013).

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. Overall, however, they appear to confirm the idea 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).

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 toward 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. Alternatively, 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. As the authors posit, in situations of high international linkage, when societies are densely interwoven with the external environment, competitive autocracies are likely to democratize. When regimes are more isolated, they 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. Bunce and Wolchik, by contrast, focus their attention on domestic dynamics that are exclusive to electoral authoritarian regimes: the strategies opposition actors adopt toward multiparty elections. As they argue, 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.

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 macrofoundations 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 microfoundations 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? An 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 election-centric. 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. In addition, 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. In this two-level contest, actors compete over electoral uncertainty under conditions of informational uncertainty. Final election results are the combined product of voter choices and state manipulation (see also Schedler, 2013, Chapter 4).

Data Development. About a decade ago, systematic information about the inner dynamics of authoritarian elections was almost nonexistent. 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 offer global coverage, long time series, and large sets of variables. Examples are 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 (for an overview on cross-national data sets, see Schedler, 2013, Appendix C). Though the availability of data on authoritarian elections has increased enormously over the past decade, their collection has evolved in uncoordinated manner. Even when scholars intend to measure similar concepts, it is often difficult to compare their data or even fuse them into integrative datasets (Schedler, 2012).

Explanation. If electoral democracies are complex systems, electoral autocracies are even more complex, as the democratic game of electoral competition interacts with the 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 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.

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

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.

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 nonconsolidated. 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. We should expect competitive and hegemonic regimes to work in fundamentally different ways. Yet only few empirical studies have compared electoral authoritarian dynamics across these regime subtypes. Those that did have found systematic differences (e.g., Schedler, 2013).

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 nonelectoral 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 long-term benefits of elections are presumed to explain why rational, utility-maximizing dictators adopt them in the first place. The assumption of omniscient sovereign rulers who pick the most useful devices from the toolset of political institutions possesses theoretical elegance. However, it provides an undercomplex account of the manifold origins of electoral authoritarian rule. Our empirical knowledge on transitions to electoral authoritarianism, be it from closed regimes or electoral democracies, 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.

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 the use of multiparty elections as instruments of authoritarian rule, rather than “instruments of democracy” (Powell, 2000), is nothing new. Authoritarian multiparty elections have a long history, in particular in Europe and the Americas of the nineteenth century. In addition to the “historical turn” in democratization studies (Capoccia & Ziblatt, 2010), we need a historical turn in the comparative study of electoral authoritarianism.

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. In addition, 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 (Schedler, 2012: pp. 256–257 and 259).
- *Electoral governance:* We possess certain cross-national data on rules of electoral competition (Teorell & 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. Though we possess rich data on individual countries, we possess few cross-national data on voters under authoritarian conditions.

- *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 such as 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 (Schedler, 2012: pp. 247–248).

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 & Mudde, 2010: p. 421). The quantitative study of electoral autocracies should embrace this trend.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

While there is much insight to be gained from careful and innovative quantitative research, statistical research on electoral authoritarianism has kept us far away from actors. There is much we lose in explanatory accuracy if we survey the two-level game of authoritarian elections exclusively from the bird's perspective of cross-national quantification. To achieve methodological balances, we need more case studies that embrace and exploit the comparative advantages of qualitative research—such as the closeness to actors, attention to history, sequence, and process, and access to empirical evidence on public discourse or the internal dynamics of collective actors.

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. With the exception of Singapore, all hegemonic party regimes that predated the fall of the Berlin Wall have disappeared, while competitive authoritarian regimes have emerged as “the typical stepping stone to democratization” (Hadenius & Teorell, 2007: p. 152). Should we conclude that “the era of electoral authoritarianism” (Morse 2012) is bound to end soon? Well, not quite, no yet. A fair number of electoral autocracies have defied the laws of political mortality. In

addition, a continuous stream of new members continues to repopulate both subtypes of electoral authoritarianism.

The Regeneration of Hegemonic Regimes. Hegemonic regimes are long-lived by definition and inherently stable. They are not immortal, though. The disappearance of almost all of the long-lasting hegemonies of the twentieth century does not imply 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 competitive autocrats 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 challenges of authoritarian electoral competition. 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. Their battles are asymmetric, between contenders of unequal standing, yet not predetermined in their outcomes. Representing "the most volatile regime type" (Roessler & Howard, 2009: p. 103), many have democratized, such as Peru, Serbia, and Ghana. Others have been cut short by military coups and political disorder, such as Côte d'Ivoire and Togo. Still, a fair number of regimes, such as Russia, Algeria, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe, are hanging on, muddling through. The family of competitive autocracies has also been admitting new members from closed autocracies, such as Afghanistan and Myanmar. However, more importantly, it has been admitting new members from Latin American democracies. In Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, anti-political establishment actors (Schedler, 1996) have taken

power through democratic means, concentrated power through dubious means, and subverted the competition for power through authoritarian means (Levitsky & 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.

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 reached 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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