Elections Under Authoritarianism

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Abstract

Current scholarship on elections in authoritarian regimes has focused on exploring the relationship between elections and democratization, and it has generally used analytical frameworks and methods imported from the study of genuinely democratic elections to do so. These tendencies have kept scholars from asking a wide range of questions about the micro-level dynamics of authoritarian elections and the systematic differences among them. With these issues in mind, this review examines literature that investigates the purpose of elections in dictatorships; the electoral behavior of voters, candidates, and incumbents in these elections; and the link between elections and democratization. The review ends with a call to redirect the study of authoritarian elections toward uncovering and explaining the important differences among them.

INTRODUCTION

Authoritarian elections are often understood as a monolithic, infrequent phenomenon somewhat incompatible with stable dictatorship, but a cursory examination of the practice of such elections around the world reveals a very different picture. Incumbents in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western Europe and Latin America held elections well before the advent of democracy (Zeldin 1958, Posada-Carbó 1996), and incumbents in the vast majority of regimes today call voters to the polls (Hyde 2006, Roessler & Howard 2008). That is, authoritarian elections are neither rare nor, as others have noted before, inevitably undermining to autocrats (Hyden & Ley 1972, Hermet et al. 1978).

Moreover, authoritarian elections—by which we mean simply those held in nondemocratic regimes—are enormously varied. They are held at different levels (for heads of state, national parliaments, and local councils) and for bodies with widely varying powers (from mere rubber stamps to legislatures with real policy and budgetary authority). They also differ in the degree to which incumbents allow candidates and parties to organize autonomously. The rules governing elections—aggregation systems, districting processes, candidate eligibility criteria—differ across countries and over time. So do the freedoms enjoyed by the media, civic associations, and political parties. As a result of these differences, authoritarian elections range from the relatively free and fair to those in which candidates' and citizens' choices are more constricted.

Scholars have recognized this, creating typologies that distinguish "hybrid," "competitive authoritarian," "electoral authoritarian," and other types of authoritarian regimes (e.g., Diamond 2002, Levitsky & Way 2002, Schedler 2006a). Yet such broad-stroke distinctions mask important differences in the structure of authoritarian elections. More importantly, the scholarship has focused on exploring the relationships between elections and democratization, and it has generally used analytical frameworks and methods imported from the study of genuinely democratic elections to do so. We argue that these tendencies have kept political scientists from asking a wide range of questions about the micro-level dynamics of authoritarian elections and the ways in which they differ systematically from each other. Until we explore these questions, we remain unable to understand fully the politics of authoritarianism and also, ironically, unable to determine the relationship between authoritarian elections and democratization.

This article reviews the scholarship on authoritarian elections with these issues in mind. We begin by examining works that explore the purpose of elections in dictatorships. Then, we turn to scholarship that considers the electoral behavior of voters, candidates, and incumbents in these elections. Finally, we investigate the link between elections and democratization. The review ends with a call to redirect the study of authoritarian elections toward uncovering and explaining the important differences among them.

THE ROLE OF ELECTIONS IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Puzzled by the seeming incompatibility of authoritarian regimes and elections, combined with the empirical reality that autocracies with elections are more durable than those without them (Geddes 1999), scholars increasingly are examining the role of elections in these regimes. They now generally view the establishment of elections as a means by which dictators hold onto power. Where they tend to differ is in their focus on the different kinds of threats to dictators' power: regime elites, opposition groups, and citizens. Less explicitly, they also differ in the types of elections they examine—local or national, legislative or executive—operating with very different rules and in different types of regimes. Such variation is seldom recognized, but it may be the source of some of the disagreement about the nature of authoritarian elections.

Explanations

Many scholars view authoritarian elections as an institutional tool that dictators can use to co-opt elites (Boix & Svolik 2008), party members (Magaloni 2006), or larger groups within society (Gandhi & Przeworski 2006, Gandhi 2008, Wright 2008a). For dictators, elections may be the most expedient way to spread the spoils of office broadly among members of the elite. Elites may perceive elections (as opposed to appointment) as a "fair" or "efficient" method of distribution: obtaining political office and its accompanying spoils depends on each member's own attempts to buy and persuade voters (Lust-Okar 2006, Blaydes 2008). In this way, the dictator can ensure that the most "popular" elites are associated with the regime and that they do not become complacent in serving the regime's goals. Finally, elections aid incumbents in maintaining their ties with elites by deterring defection among members of the ruling coalition. The regime can cajole, buy, and intimidate voters to make them turn out and cast ballots in its favor. Its consequently overwhelming electoral victories serve as a signal to members of the regime elite that opposition is futile (Geddes 2005, Simpser 2005, Magaloni 2006, Malesky & Schuler 2008). Alternatively, elections may "make effective the power-sharing deal obliging the ruler to promote the rank-and-file to power positions with certain regularity" (Magaloni 2008, p. 724).

Elections also serve to co-opt the opposition. By allowing non-regime-sponsored candidates and parties to compete in local and legislative elections, dictators provide some means of advancement into political offices that can confer spoils and limited decision-making capacity. In doing so, they use elections to divide opposition forces. Elections provide mixed incentives to opposition parties, who may oppose the current dictatorship but also want to benefit from the spoils of government. By holding elections and setting rules regarding the legal eligibility of candidates and parties, dictators create "divided structures of contestation" composed of outsiders who are not allowed to compete and insiders who become more invested in the regime (Lust-Okar 2005). Even among those candidates and parties who are allowed to contest authoritarian elections, there may be divisions over whether to participate in elections (Beaulieu 2006), whether to form electoral coalitions (Gandhi & Reuter 2008), and whether to accept the results. These divisions may be due to differences in ideological positions and in sizes of parties, but they also may result from the electoral rules that structure these contests (Diaz-Cayeros & Magaloni 2001).

Elections may serve an informational role as well. The results of multiparty elections help regime incumbents identify their bases of support and opposition strongholds (Ames 1970, Magaloni 2006, Brownlee 2007). Armed with this information, they may target the latter, punishing them with less government largesse after the election, buying their support, or intimidating them into switching allegiances before the next election or staying at home on election day. In addition, elections provide national-level rulers with information about the loyalty and competence of their own party cadres (Birney 2007, Blaydes 2008). Local elections in China, for example, ameliorate principal-agent problems between national and local officials: Low support at the polls for local incumbents signals to national leaders that their agents are incompetent and/or unpopular with citizens.

The use of elections to manage elite coalitions and the opposition may be motivated by autocrats' desire to reduce their risk of violent removal from office. Acemoglu & Robinson (2005) claim that elites allow elections in which the poor come to power to avert the threat of revolution. In the context of franchise expansion in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe and Latin America, their argument explains why authoritarian elites allowed truly democratic elections. Relatedly, Cox (2008) argues that nondemocratic elections are a means by which autocrats can avoid being violently overthrown, either by reducing asymmetries of information that would result in conflict or by

offering an alternative route to power to those who otherwise would launch a coup.

If elections help authoritarian incumbents, do they necessarily hurt citizens? In some contexts, authoritarian elections appear to promote some of the same virtues identified with their democratic counterparts: policy congruence between citizens and public officials and voter efficacy. Much of the evidence on this point comes from surveys done in Chinese local elections. Manion (1996), for example, argues that competitive village elections in China are associated with more agreement between voters and public officials on policies related to state involvement in the economy, since the electoral process promotes a dialogue between citizens and local officials. Turnover, and the belief in accountability that it generates, in local elections is important in increasing voter efficacy and the likelihood that citizens will continue to participate in such events (Shi 1999b; for a dissenting view, see Tsai 2007). So while elections may contribute to the survival of incumbents, they also may contribute to citizen welfare. But under what electoral structure and context this may be true is not clear; so far, the claim has been examined within a narrow empirical context. In addition, one must ask whether the benefits that accrue to citizens through elections are short-term, at the expense of long-term costs in the form of even stronger incumbents.

One way in which nondemocratic elections may part company with democratic ones is that the former may be used to mobilize voters coercively. Whether elections are to coerce or co-opt seems related to the degree of competition. At one extreme are single-candidate plebiscites, which clearly demonstrate the regime's coercive power: that it can compel people to participate in a ritual that everyone knows is "fake." This, at least, appears to have been the impression of communist voters in Eastern Europe, since to abstain or to spoil ballots was seen as an act of defiance. Accordingly, much research, usually on communist elections in Eastern Europe, focused on the issue of turnout (e.g., Karklins 1986; for a comparison to other forms of participation, see Bahry & Silver 1990). In China, variance in compliance with a 1987 law requiring that the number of candidates exceeds the number of seats in village elections has enabled scholars to explore whether competition induces voters to participate in elections for reasons other than avoiding punishment for nonparticipation (Shi 1999b, Chen & Zhong 2002). In this regard, how authoritarian elections are structured would seem to play an important role in determining their purpose.

Finally, some argue that elections help autocrats establish legitimacy at home or abroad. Elections may be manipulated, and of limited political influence, but they can nevertheless signal to domestic and international audiences that the regime is, or is in the process of becoming, based on popular will (Waterbury 1999). Schedler (2006a, p. 13) highlights this mechanism in "electoral authoritarian regimes," noting: "By opening the peaks of state power to multiparty elections, electoral authoritarian regimes establish the primacy of democratic legitimation... [electoral authoritarian] regimes institute the principle of popular consent, even as they subvert it in practice."

Limitations

All of these claims may have some validity. Yet a major difficulty in the literature on authoritarian elections is that scholars have tended to make universal claims based on a subset of cases. Research on Mexico, China, and Egypt, and to a lesser extent on Jordan, Taiwan, and Vietnam, drives our understanding of the politics of authoritarian elections. These cases are somewhat idiosyncratic, however. Executive elections occurred in Mexico under the PRI every six years because presidents abided by term limits. Also somewhat idiosyncratic is China, where elections occur at the local but not national level. The attention to such a limited number of examples demands some caution in the extent to which we generalize, and we must question whether we are missing some important sources of variation within these institutions.

Important sources of variation may be located in the types of elections, rules governing them, and social and political conditions surrounding them. For instance, the argument that elections are intended to distribute spoils to party elites may be primarily relevant to understanding legislative elections in dominant-party regimes. Incumbents may benefit from turnover in legislative elections, since this allows elites currently out of office to believe that they have a chance of winning a portion of the spoils in the future. In contrast, arguments that elections are aimed at signaling the incumbents' strength may be more relevant to national executive contests, wherein the incumbent can deter opponents by demonstrating his ability to mobilize voters. More attention to the differences in the level of authoritarian elections, and to how these contests are structured, may provide some leverage in disentangling claims about the role of elections.

Time may be another source of variation in elections. The factors that drive the emergence of elections do not necessarily explain their persistence, and indeed, the role that elections play may vary over time. Many authoritarian regimes today inherited elections and parliaments at the outset of independence, since colonial powers had created legislatures and councils to co-opt and manage their subjects. In other cases, state elites established elections in order to gain international legitimacy and admittance into the set of "democratizing" states in the post–Cold War era.

Yet, regardless of why the elections are instituted, they may come to operate quite similarly given the constraints of authoritarian rule. Indeed, as the cachet of elections as proof of democratization wears off, incumbents who instituted them in response to pressures for democratization generally neither abort them entirely nor allow them to result in regime change. Rather, elections become increasingly divorced from democratization (a fact which citizens and elites alike tend to recognize) and driven instead by incumbents' attempts to remain in power (Lust-Okar 2006, 2009a). In short, elections may evolve into very similar institutional constraints, producing similar political dynamics despite different initial stimuli. Given this, the search for a single, overarching explanation for the establishment of authoritarian elections may not only be unrealistic but, worse, approach functionalism.[1] It may be tempting to "read backward" from the roles that elections seem to play to understand the reasons for their existence, but to do so would be a mistake.

ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Scholars (and citizens) of authoritarian regimes recognize that at most electoral moments, the fundamental stability of the regime is not at stake. Generally, when incumbents hold elections, they have overwhelming advantages through their monopolies of state resources and the means of coercion. Moreover, although there is some important variation across countries, most national and local councils have little policy-making power. Rather, in regimes that are typically characterized by low transparency, weak rule of law, and ineffective parliaments, elected officials are expected to act as an intermediary between the state and the citizen.

In most cases, the emerging picture is that elections are not uncompetitive exercises simply returning preselected candidates, but rather exercises in "competitive clientelism," wherein candidates vie for the privilege of acting as intermediaries in patron-client relations (Lust-Okar 2006) and incumbents manipulate such a system to insure their prolonged rule. This view of elections has important consequences for the way in which we view voters, candidates, and regime incumbents in authoritarian elections. Here we review the recent literature that has focused on these three sets of actors, who are central to understanding elections. We highlight the view of authoritarian elections as conceptually similar to democratic ones and underscore important differences

[1]We thank Tarek Masoud for insightful discussions on this point.

that remain to be explored. There are some important similarities that allow for the use of the same conceptual toolkit in studying democratic and nondemocratic elections. Yet the behavior of voters, candidates, and incumbents in nondemocratic elections raises some unique questions worthy of exploration. Most notably, one can wonder why opposition parties run in elections they are unlikely to win, or what drives voters to go to the polls if fundamental policies and government positions are not at stake. In addition, there is reason to believe that behavior within elections may vary depending on the nature of the regime (e.g., dominant party, single party, or monarchy), the level at which the elections are held (i.e., national legislative, municipal council, or head of state), and the extent to which policies are at stake.

Voters

Most scholars view patronage distribution and control over resources as important in driving voter behavior in authoritarian regimes (Blaydes 2006b; Lust-Okar 2006, 2008a; Greene 2007; Pepinsky 2007; Masoud 2008). The playing field is so clearly skewed in favor of the incumbents—given their monopoly over patronage resources and the use of force—that citizens often vote in favor of incumbents despite their preferences. This results in what Magaloni (2006, p. 19) terms the "tragic brilliance" of the regime: "Citizens' choices are free, yet they are constrained by a series of strategic dilemmas that compel them to remain loyal to the regime."

We should note that in Chinese local elections, where access to central policy-making bodies is not even officially at stake, citizen engagement appears quite different. In this case, elections are seen as an opportunity for citizens to monitor local officials. Voters appear driven not only by patronage but also by a desire for the expressive benefits of voting. Those who vote are distinguished by their stronger ties to and interest in the village, and by their level of education, which perhaps motivates their choice to engage in elections (Wang 2008).

Patronage plays an important role in elections, but the extent to which this creates an incumbency advantage at the individual level is not clear. As Greene (2007, p. 5) notes, "Dramatic resource advantages allow the incumbent [party] to outspend on campaigns, deploy legions of canvassers, and, most importantly, to supplement policy appeals with patronage goods that bias voters in their favor." Yet although ties to the ruling elite may translate into an advantage for proregime candidates, they need not translate into support for incumbent officials. Indeed, voters seem willing to cast their votes for nonincumbents, as long as those candidates are seen as close to ruling elites (Lust-Okar 2006, 2008a), and as we discuss below, ruling elites may prefer a high degree of turnover in parliament.

Similarly, there is debate over how candidates and voters are linked. For scholars focusing on dominant-party regimes (particularly Mexico), political parties play a critical role. Strong party organizations may be required to manage the "punishment regime" through which incumbents' supporters receive payments and their enemies do not. Magaloni (2006, p. 20), for instance, views the party as key because it "can establish linkages with voters necessary to identify supporters and to monitor their behavior. Without effective targeting of government spoils, the autocrat will not be able to create a market for political loyalty and deter defections." The importance of parties also depends on the extent to which citizens perceive their choices within a system characterized by party competition and the degree to which they link partisanship to policy preferences. For instance, under the PRI, voters in Mexico placed parties on an identifiable left-right spectrum with regard to economic policies.

Yet, for others, the role of the party is much less pronounced. In China, candidates may run either as Communist Party members or as independents, and party labels do not appear to make a major difference in candidates' choices (Birney 2007, Shi 1999b, Wang 2008). In elections in Jordan and Egypt, voters also tend to cast their ballots for individuals on the basis

of their perceived links to regime elites rather than their partisan affiliations. More generally, in monarchies or even dominant-party states in which party discipline is weakened (as it currently is in Egypt), party labels may become much less important markers than personal ties and reputations. Voters who primarily seek to reap patronage benefits support candidates whom they view as sufficiently close to the regime to obtain resources, and whom they believe will deliver advantages to them because they are from the same family, clan, tribe, neighborhood, or village (Lust-Okar 2006, Masoud 2008, Shehata 2008).

Opposition parties usually cannot compete with the regime in offering material inducements or threatening violent consequences. Why, then, do voters sometimes support the opposition? Voters may make this choice not only on the basis of policy differences but also on the "regime dimension," which captures preferences over the fundamental nature of the political system. Those casting their ballots for the opposition, particularly in dominant-party states, appear to be more highly ideological. "[T]he only citizens willing to pay high costs and reap uncertain benefits are those who strongly disagree with the status quo policies offered by the incumbent" (Greene 2007, p. 5).

Demographic factors appear to affect both the basis of voting and turnout. Citizens in rural areas are more likely than those in urban areas to appear at the polls and to vote for proregime candidates. The smaller size of constituencies may mean that incumbent elites have more information, through which they can insure voter compliance (Magaloni 2006). Kinship ties also are stronger in rural areas, making voters confident that their candidates, if elected, would channel selective benefits to them (Lust-Okar 2006). In addition, the poor are more likely to turn out to vote and to be loyal to the regime, since their votes are more easily bought and their reliance on state patronage is higher (Blaydes 2006b, Tezcur 2008). In contrast, urban, middle-class voters, who exhibit less demand for patronage, are less likely to go to the polls and, when they do, more likely to cast their ballots for regime opponents (Magaloni 2006, Masoud 2008, Malesky & Schuler 2008). Similarly, a village-level survey in China found that individuals with greater senses of efficacy and more support for democracy were less likely to vote (Zhong & Chen 2002).

Citizens' expectations about others' voting behavior also affect both choice and turnout. Van de Walle (2006) has likened voting for the opposition to a "tipping game," arguing that citizens will do so if they believe that others will. Several factors can influence the likelihood of such events: the defection of key regime supporters, institutional mechanisms that increase the likelihood of opposition gains (e.g., two-round majority and parliamentary systems), past experience with democracy, less ethnic diversity, socioeconomic development, and international pressure for democratization. Voters may also be more likely to support opposition candidates when they believe that there is one single party that can effect a transition. An opposition party that is clearly stronger than others may serve as a focal point for citizens who want to see an end to the regime. As Simpser (2005, pp. 51–67) has noted, in the absence of such coordination, "even a 'materially weak' ruler can win an election."

Candidates

There are two sets of questions regarding candidates in authoritarian elections. The first set centers on the nature of candidates: Who chooses to run, why do they do so, and how do they conduct their campaigns? The second focuses on opposition candidates: Why do individuals choose to run as opposition candidates, where presumably they are most likely to lose?

Most candidates apparently enter elections to vie for a portion of the spoils, since their control over policy outcomes is limited (Lust-Okar 2006, Magaloni et al. 2007, Blaydes 2008, Masoud 2008, Shehata 2008). Studies of local elections in China do not emphasize such selective incentives because local officials have limited access to state patronage. But in general, elected officials are well-placed to help

distribute state resources and to benefit from these resources themselves. Elected officials have direct access to government ministries and bureaucrats, and therefore they are more likely to obtain permits and licenses expediently, to bid successfully on public contracts, and to circumvent government restrictions. In short, they can benefit directly from the types of intermediation with the state that their constituencies demand. They extract gifts and social status from providing their constituents with services. Finally, in many cases, they enjoy parliamentary immunity, which allows them to "engage in all sorts of extra and sometimes illegal practices and business ventures, making significant sums of money in the process" (Shehata 2008, pp. 100–1). With these perks and privileges come even more opportunities to move to higher governmental positions. Because the privileges of office are so significant, elections attract candidates who often direct significant personal funds into campaigns. In Egypt, for instance, candidates often invest millions of pounds to campaign, far exceeding the legal campaign limit of 70,000 LE (approximately $12,300 U.S.) in a country where the average gross national product per capita is <9,000 LE per year (~$1500 U.S.).

In addition, candidates are encouraged to run by friends, family, and acquaintances who stand to benefit from having an elected official in their circle. Indeed, a survey of Jordanian candidates found that the vast majority decided to run based on the support of family and friends rather than that of political parties or government officials (Lust-Okar 2008c). This in part depends on important differences in the vetting of candidates. In some countries, such as Jordan and Egypt, where the nomination process is relatively open, independent candidates can enter quite easily. (Indeed, even members of the Egyptian ruling party often run as independents after failing to get their party's nod.) In others, such as Syria and Mexico, party discipline remained stronger and candidacies based only on personal supporters are rarer.

High turnover at the national and local levels also may encourage candidates to enter elections. In the six multiparty legislative elections held in Egypt since the mid-1980s, only 19%–40% of all parliamentarians have kept their seats (Blaydes 2008). In Jordan during the 1990s, fewer than 20% of deputies were returned to parliament (Hourani et al. 2004). In Village Committee elections in China in the mid-1990s, turnover in seven provinces ranged from 2% to 31% (Pastor & Tan 2000, p. 504). In some cases, perhaps most notably Mexico's PRI, institutional features foster high turnover. Term limits foster a legislator's dependence on the ruling party for his or her next job, strengthening ties between candidates and the party at the expense of constituents, maintaining party dominance, and keeping ambitious politicians in check as they await their turn in power (Magaloni 2006). In other cases, where ruling parties are weaker or, in the case of monarchies, nonexistent, the very weakness of parliament may foster high turnover rates. When elected bodies fail to affect policy significantly, voters pay little attention to candidates' party labels. The result is weak parties, little party discipline, and a large number of candidates per seat contesting elections. Consequently, there are high percentages of wasted votes and a small margin of votes between the last winner and the first loser (Lust-Okar 2008a). In subsequent elections, potential candidates often believe they have a realistic chance of winning a seat and thus are willing to invest in the chance of election. Whether high turnover results from institutional structures or the logic of elections for weak parliaments, it strengthens authoritarian leaders' hold on power.

An important puzzle is why elites choose to enter elections as opposition candidates, and why such parties even form when they seem to have such minimal chances of winning. Candidates who otherwise would have sided with the ruling party may become willing to run as opposition elites when the relative benefits of remaining within the regime coalition decline. Cost-benefit analyses may be influenced by exogenous shocks, such as poor economic performance (Gandhi & Reuter 2007) or the state's inability or unwillingness to punish

defectors (Lawson 2002, Magaloni 2006). As the ruling party weakens, elites who formerly would have aligned with the ruling party choose instead to join the opposition, further weakening the ruling party and stimulating more defections. Indeed, Langston's (2006) analysis of the PRI in Mexico and the Kuomintang (KMT) in Taiwan suggests that this dynamic accounts for the simultaneous unraveling of the regime party and the emergence of increasing electoral opposition.

Opposition candidates and parties also may be highly committed opponents of the regime, rather than strategic defectors. Greene (2007, p. 5) argues that elites who "value policy and partisan expression as a way of transforming voters' hearts and minds" and "strongly disagree with the status quo policies offered by the incumbent" are willing to pay the high costs of forming and attempting to run within an opposition party. This view builds on Magaloni's (2006, p. 22) insight that middle- and upper-class voters, with independent resources, are more capable of making "ideological investments" and defecting to opposition parties. The result, in these cases, is the development of niche parties that appeal to minority electoral constituencies.

However, the collective findings of case studies in the Middle East—where the most important opposition forces are anything but narrow, niche parties—demonstrate that other dynamics also may be at work. Strategic considerations that cross the boundaries of the electoral arena may account for opposition candidates and parties contesting authoritarian elections. Indeed, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the Muslim Brotherhood–related Islamic Action Front (IAF) in Jordan are all political parties that emerged from broad-based movements. Masoud (2008) finds the explanation in the decision to use political parties as a basis for mobilizing support for these movements. Given the level of repression that the incumbent regime entails, opposition leaders weigh the costs of political party formation and entry into elections against other protest options. Where social movements are unable to challenge the incumbents through other means, even rigged elections and ineffectual parliaments become attractive avenues of political participation.

Of course, contesting elections may be a double-edged sword. Opposition candidates may enter elections for the opportunity to gain visibility, express policy positions, and mobilize supporters, but their entry may tend to legitimize the authoritarian system. As Schedler (2006a, p. 14) summarizes: "To the extent that they [elections] serve to legitimate the system and demonstrate the power and popularity of the ruling party as well as the weakness of its opponents, elections tend to demoralize and demobilize opposition forces. To the extent that they allow opposition forces to get stronger and to demonstrate that the emperor is naked, that his grip on power is based on manipulation rather than popular consent, elections tend to reinvigorate opposition parties."

Consequently, opposition parties have to decide how to use authoritarian elections to their advantage, which might mean deciding whether to participate or not. The decision to boycott elections is a strategic one, driven in part by how "unlevel" is the playing field created by incumbents. Scholars have found that opposition parties are more likely to withdraw from elections viewed as not free and fair, those marred by violence, and—in majoritarian systems—those in which the incumbent wins a disproportionate number of seats (Lindberg 2006b). It is difficult to discern whether parties' decision to boycott leads to the perception of the elections as "poor quality," or whether parties are more likely to boycott poor-quality elections. It is important to recognize, however, that opposition parties' fear that international observers may accord these elections some legitimacy may further drive the opposition to boycott (Beaulieu & Hyde 2009). In addition, though further study is needed, the decision by opposition elites to compete in elections may also be influenced by internal party struggles. The choice over participation is made within the context of a two-level game: one between incumbents and their

opponents and another within the opposition party itself. Facing decreasing power and conflict between ideologues and pragmatists within the party—both of which are associated with the same conditions stated above, i.e., unfair elections, violence, and majoritarian systems—opposition party elites may also be able to stave off internal challenges by foregoing candidacy.

Indeed, both within and across opposition parties, the coordination problem is one of the most significant challenges. Opposition candidates and their parties are weakened by their inability to form stable coalitions and overcome collective action problems. Their divisions result from real differences in their policy preferences, their expected benefits from regime change (Greene 2007, Gandhi & Reuter 2008), and institutional rules that make coordination unlikely (Diaz-Cayeros & Magaloni 2001) or reward some opposition elites while punishing others (Lust-Okar 2005). They are also divided on their willingness to engage in violence or to see violence arise from opposition actions. Different attitudes toward violence, combined with incomplete information, may limit opposition candidates' ability to claim electoral fraud (Magaloni 2007).

Incumbents

Autocrats have a variety of tools to "stage manage" elections and achieve their desired results. The common perception is that autocrats use widespread violence and repression, ballot-box stuffing, and other extralegal measures to stay in power. They do so, sometimes to a degree that gains international attention, but these are not the only, or even the primary, ways in which incumbents hold onto power.

Ruling elites exploit their control over state resources to stay in power. Particularly when the state controls a vast public-sector and state-dependent private economy, citizens from all economic strata remain dependent on the state. As discussed above, because elections are generally about access to state resources, rather than a competition over the rules of the game, voters tend to support candidates who have close relations to incumbent elites, and the majority of elites who choose to run in (and win) elections are those who are relatively close to the regime. The logic of authoritarian elections creates a system that generally (barring exogenous shocks) helps keep incumbents in power. In addition, ruling elites can also keep a portion of the citizenry (generally, rural constituents) dependent on the regime's largesse for their livelihood. Magaloni (2006, p. 72), for example, argues that the PRI regime in Mexico "simultaneously put in place a series of policies and institutions that prevented peasants from rising out of poverty and made them systematically dependent on state patronage for their survival." Finally, incumbents also distribute state resources at election time, offering more widespread benefits and inducing political business cycles similar to those found in democratic regimes (Blaydes 2006a, Magaloni 2006, Pepinsky 2007).

Ruling elites also can manipulate the rules that shape voter and candidate behavior in elections. From the study of democracies, we know that electoral rules matter and, consequently, incumbents have an interest in manipulating them. As a result, there is a large literature that examines the effect of electoral rules on candidate and voter behavior, starting with Duverger (1951), and a smaller one that examines the choice of electoral rules (e.g., Bawn 1993; Remington & Smith 1996; Boix 1999; Benoit 2004, 2007; McElwain 2008). The same is true for electoral rules in dictatorships. The type of electoral system (proportional representation versus winner-take-all, and concurrent versus sequential elections) influences the ability of the opposition to coordinate and also affects the number of candidates and parties more generally (Lust-Okar & Jamal 2002, Pripstein Posusney 2002, Magaloni 2006). For this reason, ruling elites engage in gerrymandering and malapportionment, which shifts parliamentary seats toward supporters and weakens opposition parties (Lust-Okar 2005, 2006; Patel 2006; Malesky 2005). The cases of autocrats miscalculating in their choice of electoral rules are particularly interesting (e.g., Siavelis &

Valenzuela 1996, Kamiński 1999, Navia 2003), but they appear to be relatively infrequent.

In authoritarian regimes, the manipulation of rules goes beyond the standard ones governing the translation of votes to seats. Incumbents can manipulate rules governing the media, thereby limiting information and making coordination among opposition elites more difficult (Simpser 2005, Magaloni 2006). Incumbents also can engage in direct pre-electoral interventions to limit the entry of and support for opposition candidates, vetting candidates and limiting their abilities to campaign. Finally, incumbents establish the composition and independence of electoral commissions that play a large role in the counting and certifying of final results.

Ruling elites also engage in electoral fraud and manipulation. Fraud, by its nature, is difficult to detect (Lehoucq 2003), but scholars have developed clever ways to analyze the phenomenon (e.g., Cox & Kousser 1981, Lehoucq & Molina 2002, Donno & Roussias 2006). At the same time, many case studies and cross-national analyses find that corruption is neither always covert nor essential in insuring ruling parties' victories (Simpser 2005, Esfandiari 2003). In fact, according to Molinar (1991), not only is corruption unnecessary to achieve the ruling elites' victories, but it is frequently employed in rural areas, where the opposition is already weak, and sometimes even in areas where no opposition candidate is running. At the local level, corruption seems to be intended not so much to win elections as to show the ruling elites that the local officials can get out the vote. In some cases, as Simpser (2003) argues, ruling elites may use corruption to create supermajorities, which signal to potential opponents that a contest is hopeless. Such mechanisms may be particularly useful in dominant-party systems, where the strength of the party label is much more important and fragmentation of legislatures much less desirable (Lust-Okar & Jamal 2002).

More systematic study is required, but there appear to be important differences in the ways that ruling elites view elections for the head of state, national parliaments, and local offices, as well as differences in the ways that monarchs and presidents view elections. Anecdotal evidence and voting patterns suggest that ruling elites exert more effort mobilizing for elections and referendums returning the head of state than they do for national parliamentary or municipal elections. For presidents, high turnout and a preponderance of votes for the ruling party may limit potential opposition members' interest in defecting from the party (Geddes 2005, Simpser 2005, Magaloni 2006). Presidents place a much lower premium on high turnout in legislative elections, where the autocrats' ability to mobilize is more loosely linked to voter turnout. They also appear to be much less concerned about returning sitting legislators to parliament; indeed, presidents' tenures remain more stable if individual parliamentarians are unable to use parliament to secure independent bases of power and if, given the rotation of parliament, more elites view themselves as potentially able to gain from such positions. In contrast, in monarchies, there is little linkage between the support for political parties and the legitimacy of the monarch. Monarchs appear to prefer that interest in elected parliaments does not disappear, but it need not be extraordinarily high. Moreover, monarchs legitimize their rule by emphasizing the need for an arbitrator sitting above a divided populace, while they are threatened by strong, competing powers. Consequently, they benefit from votes split across competing parties, rather than votes consolidated in support of the ruling party (Lust-Okar & Jamal 2002). In short, then, we expect that rulers in dominant-party states are particularly likely to use all means possible to encourage high turnout and support for the ruling party, whereas monarchs are less determined to manufacture high turnout and prefer to see fragmentation across parties.

Preliminary Conclusions

Recent scholarship yields some preliminary insights into electoral behavior in authoritarian regimes. However, it is important to recognize

that they are drawn primarily from a relatively small, highly studied, and somewhat idiosyncratic set of cases—with more recent elections, and particularly those in Mexico, China, and Egypt, receiving far more attention than others. Moreover, scholarship has focused on the aspects of elections that are significant in democracies—turnout, voter choice, and elite interference—providing some important points of comparison between authoritarian and democratic elections.

What is striking about the literature to date is that electoral behavior in authoritarian regimes is similar in many ways to that in democracies. Based on the assumption that dictatorships do not respond to the policy preferences of citizens, scholars have focused on the roles of clientelism and patronage, and the relationships among these factors, party institutionalization, and regime stability. In addition, they have asked why, under conditions of such large incumbent advantage, voters would turn out and/or support opposition candidates. But these topics are well-known to students of voters and parties in democracies, and as a result, the theoretical apparatus used to study these types of electoral behavior under both regimes is similar. Incumbents in democracies, both new and old, also manipulate electoral rules (e.g., Cox & Katz 2002), buy votes (e.g., Stokes 2005), and resort to fraud in order to win elections (e.g., Cox & Kousser 1981).

The literature on electoral behavior in nondemocracies stakes out more distinctive ground in its discussion of candidate and incumbent behavior. Questions of when and why electoral losers accept their loss is not common in the study of democratic elections, which are in fact characterized by the willingness of losers to accept such losses in the hopes of playing again (Przeworski 1991, Anderson et al. 2007). Yet the questions emerge in nondemocracies: When does the opposition accept losses in elections it claims are fraudulent? When do authoritarian incumbents accept electoral defeat and step down from power? Similarly, in democracies, the question of why opposition candidates emerge is not common, yet it is an underlying concern in authoritarian elections. Finally, authoritarian elections raise questions about how incumbents manage elections—and manage to maintain power—that democratic elections do not. Democratic incumbents are not free to incarcerate key opposition leaders and their supporters, ban their parties, and clamp down on the media as are their autocratic counterparts. Yet, although authoritarian leaders have this option, they do not always avail themselves of it. This may be because fraud will ultimately fail to fool opposition elites who believe they can undermine incumbents (Magaloni 2006), because the distribution of patronage through competitive means serves a valuable purpose in itself (Lust-Okar 2008a), or because they believe they risk adverse effects if outrage over fraud becomes a catalyst for opposition mobilization (van de Walle 2002, Lindberg 2006a, Beissinger 2007, Donno 2007, Tucker 2007, Bunce & Wolchik 2009). The sheer variety of instruments on an autocrat's "menu of manipulation" (Schedler 2002) raises interesting questions concerning the optimal use of fraud for incumbents, and how this affects the use of other tools.

IMPLICATIONS OF ELECTIONS: A LINK TO DEMOCRATIZATION?

Many scholars examine authoritarian elections primarily to determine the likelihood of democratization. They seek the conditions under which elections fail to serve the interests of incumbents and instead allow challengers to bring about alternation in power or policy changes, as the colored revolutions most recently and dramatically illustrated. Some scholars have focused on the politics of authoritarian elections, seeking to understand when elections become moments of real contestation over the rules of the game (Magaloni 2006, Greene 2007, Lust-Okar 2008a). Others work within Schedler's (2002) framework, viewing authoritarian elections as a constant, dual-natured contestation—one competition occurring over

the positions under contention and the second competition over the rules of the game (Huntington 1993; Bratton & van de Walle 1997; Schedler 2002, 2009; Lindberg 2006a, 2009b). The challenge is to elucidate how elections would contribute to democratization in two ways: first, by promoting regime breakdown generally, and second, by increasing the likelihood that democracy emerges in its place.

There are a wide variety of possibilities for a link between elections and regime breakdown. One is related to the internal politics of the regime: that a succession crisis, when the incumbent does not stand for election, generates splits within the ruling elite that opponents can exploit, leading to the downfall of authoritarian regimes (Baturo 2007). Economic crises and liberalization also may weaken an authoritarian regime, changing electoral politics and weakening the incumbent's grip on power as the public sector shrinks and the regime's monopoly on economic welfare shatters (Magaloni 2006, Greene 2007).

It is more difficult to demonstrate that authoritarian elections promote democratization—not just regime breakdown and transition. Yet there is some evidence that elections may contribute to democratization from the ground up. The literature on local elections in China advances the claim that elections promote "creeping democratization" (Pei 1995). Village-level elections can empower citizens or enhance their engagement in politics depending on township characteristics. In particular, "better elections increase participatory attitudes and rights protection, values that are likely to be difficult to dislodge" (Birney 2007, p. 153; see also Shi 1999a, Li 2003). Elections thus may influence citizens' relationship with the state and their expectations about it, eventually leading to higher levels of democratic engagement.

In addition, elections may promote democratization if they result in victory for a democratic opposition. "Liberalizing electoral outcomes" are possible when opposition parties form pre-electoral coalitions (Howard & Roessler 2006). These coalitions not only make an opposition victory more likely but also expand the political space just short of alternation in power. Or possibly democratization is more likely over the course of repeated elections, particularly where opposition candidates are afforded some degree of freedom (Lindberg 2006c, Roessler & Howard 2009). In Mexico, as opposition parties made greater inroads into the PRI's majority in the assembly, the PRI sought to form legislative coalitions with one opposition party (i.e., PAN) in an attempt to marginalize another (i.e., PRD). The price, however, was increasing concessions regarding the independence of electoral institutions, eventually leading to elections that an opposition party could and did win (Eisenstadt 2004).

Finally, elections may make regime breakdown—and the possibility of democratization—more likely through actions outside of the electoral arena, if opposition parties successfully mobilize voters to protest "stolen elections" (Bunce & Wolchik 2006, Beissinger 2007). Stolen elections can lead to revolutionary outcomes as "an 'imagined community' of robbed voters" experiences a shared moral outrage that enables it to overcome its collective action problem (Thompson & Kuntz 2004, p. 162). Similarly, Tucker (2007) argues that postelectoral fraud changes the calculus of protest for individuals, lowering the perceived costs of mobilizing against the regime and increasing the perceived benefits to voters who believe that their actions will determine whether the incumbents are allowed to remain in power. These explanations of how individuals overcome their collective action problem to engage in postelectoral mobilization against authoritarian regimes—most notably in the colored revolutions—highlight another pathway by which elections may result in a democratic transition.

External actors also may play an important role, as implied by the numerous empirical studies on the diffusion of democracy (e.g., Brinks & Coppedge 2006, Gleditsch & Ward

2006). States and international organizations can exert pressure on certain regimes, making foreign aid conditional on the holding of multiparty elections (Wright 2008b). They may serve as arbiters, revealing information about whether the opposition's claims of fraud or the regime's claims of fairness have merit (Hyde & Marinov 2008). Observer missions, however, must have strong capabilities to detect irregularities and be able to make credible statements regarding the degree of fraud. In this regard, international monitors may be most effective when they coordinate with domestic counterparts (Hyde 2006, Bjornlund 2004). Monitoring impacts both opposition and incumbent behavior: Opponents become more likely to boycott when elections monitors are present (Hyde 2006), and incumbents are likely to turn to other ways of manipulating outcomes—including undermining the rule of law, freedom of the media, and civil liberties—in advance of the election in order to gain the electoral edge (Simpser 2008, Simpser & Donno 2008).

The claim that authoritarian elections facilitate democratization, however, has its skeptics. Finding little evidence for it in Latin America, McCoy & Hartlyn (2007, 2009) question whether the findings within sub-Saharan Africa (Bratton & van de Walle 1997; Lindberg 2006a,b) are more general. The results of more global inquiries seem questionable as well. For instance, Hadenius & Teorell (2007) find that multiparty elections appear to be a "prime stepping stone" for democratization, and yet they code as "multiparty regimes" those regimes that have chosen to open elections, possibly as part of the process of democratization. Multiparty elections may characterize democratization without necessarily causing it. Indeed, Brownlee (2007) finds no evidence that elections affect regime survival in a large-*n* analysis of authoritarian regimes, although he does find that holding elections under an authoritarian regime increases the likelihood that a subsequent regime will be democratic (Brownlee 2009). Moreover, given that autocrats are so successful at using elections to perpetuate their rule, the theoretical links between authoritarian elections and democratization would appear to be tenuous (Lust-Okar 2006).

The most daunting problem in answering this question is that of establishing causality and its direction. Consider one illustration of the problem: the idea that opposition coalitions lead to democratization (Howard & Roessler 2006). It may be that electoral coalitions among opposition parties lead to their victory and control over the chief executive office, but it is equally plausible that already-weakened incumbents both allow opposition coalitions and desist from using fraud and manipulation as part of a predetermined "step out" of power. Elections, in that case, have little causal force.

In addition, in searching for the effects of elections on democratization, we must consider how much the behavior of opposition parties or individual voters is determined by the likelihood of a democratic transition. It is possible that opposition parties do not form electoral coalitions, for example, unless they perceive that a regime change is likely (van de Walle 2006, Gandhi & Reuter 2008). Similarly, authoritarian leaders may choose to institute elections when they find themselves losing power, preferring the possibility of peaceful transition through elections to a more violent overthrow (Cox 2008). In either case, addressing the problem of endogeneity is central to empirically isolating the effect of elections on the likelihood of transitions. Similarly, if citizens make strategic decisions regarding whether to protest a stolen election, their cost-benefit analysis may be influenced by their perception of the likelihood of regime change.

Although determining the effect of authoritarian elections on autocratic survival and democratic transition is perhaps one of the most compelling motives for examining these institutions, it is not necessarily the only one. When we study electoral behavior and institutions under authoritarianism, does the answer to the "so what?" question always need to reference the topic of regime survival? Or do we have reasons to study voting behavior, candidate entry, and partisan strategies in authoritarian

elections irrespective of their effects on regime survival?

CONCLUSION

Recent scholarship on authoritarian elections has yielded important insights. There is an increased understanding that elections in authoritarian regimes are very different phenomena than their democratic counterparts. The issues at stake, the incentives for participation, and the resulting electoral behavior are strikingly different. Moreover, we recognize a great deal of variation in authoritarian elections. National elections differ from local ones; executive races differ from legislative contests; elections held immediately after the resumption of electoral politics differ from those held in subsequent years. Whether driven by differences in regime type, institutional constraints, or socioeconomic conditions, we also know that there is a great deal of variation in electoral behavior and outcomes. Finally, although elections sometimes may foster democratization, it is no longer easy to assume that elections necessarily undermine authoritarian regimes; in fact, the opposite generally appears to be true.

A great deal of work remains to be done before the behavior within, and impact of, elections under authoritarianism are fully understood. As we have seen, elections vary remarkably—from local elections in communist China to the relatively competitive national elections of the PRI-dominated Mexico. The extent to which varying conditions affect behavior and outcomes remains largely unexplored. Indeed, the studies that exist—based primarily on a handful of cases—do more to raise questions and hypotheses than to set forth determinative findings.

One set of questions focuses on how variation in the structure of authoritarian elections affects the behavior of participants. The degree to which incumbents engage in political business cycles, for example, appears to depend on whether elections are single- or multiparty (Block et al. 2003). In addition, we understand that electoral rules affect elections (Lust-Okar & Jamal 2002, Pripstein Posusney 2002, Magaloni 2006, Masoud 2008), but what is the impact of more nuanced rules? Does allowing candidates to contest elections as independents, for example, affect candidate entry and the formation of electoral coalitions? Do staggered elections affect voters' and incumbents' behavior? Studies of Mexican and Egyptian elections (Magaloni 2006 and Masoud 2008, respectively) claim yes, but these findings call for further, systematic study. In general, few broadly comparative studies examine how differences in the level and structure of elections affect the behavior of citizens, candidates, and incumbents.

A second set of questions centers on the effect of elections on policy outcomes that fall far short of regime transition. Recent scholarship has shown, for instance, that multiparty parliaments in authoritarian regimes can influence domestic and foreign policy (Gandhi 2008, Vreeland 2008). But we do not yet fully understand the impact of authoritarian elections on outcomes such as economic growth and war, and how these effects may vary across regime types. In addition, electoral politics may provide catalysts for change in other political institutions. Zhenglin & Bernstein (2004), for example, suggest that village-level elections in China have led to new competition between Village Committee (VC) chairs and local party secretaries, changing the structure of party-VC relations. Wang & Yao (2007) explore how VC elections have affected village-township relations, arguing that the elections increase accountability but also weaken fiscal sharing. How, then, can we understand how institutions adjust to the introduction of elections or to changes in electoral institutions?

Finally, the effect of elections on social environments needs to be explored. Elections not only should be shaped by the societal organization but also should affect conflicts among elites and social forces (e.g., Keshavarzian 2005, Tezcur 2008). They influence the strategies of social movements (Masoud 2008) and tribal organizations (Lust-Okar 2009b), and likely affect gender relations and representation, which can

have spillover effects on social organization as well. Research needs to focus on the effects of elections on other social and political forces.

These questions require an enormous amount of work: the careful elaboration of theories and explanations, studies of a more varied set of cases, and the collection of systematic data to identify the empirical patterns, assess the scope conditions of current findings, and verify whether our theories have explanatory power. These studies promise to be rewarding. Unlike in democracies, where by definition elections entail specific political conditions (e.g., partisan competition, free press), the variety in conditions surrounding elections under authoritarianism allows us to theorize and empirically examine how basic, yet specific, features of elections are related to particular outcomes. Moreover, a deeper understanding of elections will shed useful light on the politics of authoritarianism and help us explore more fully the relationship between authoritarian elections and democratization. Only then can we tackle the theoretically interesting and substantively important questions facing us today.

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