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Abstract

Recent theories of political development have emphasized redistributive demands as the main drivers of democratic transitions and consolidation. The authors employ Cox duration models to evaluate a number of economic, institutionalist, and sociological theories of regime transition, using global data from 1970 to 1999. This study suggests that demands for redistribution are insufficient explanators of political transitions. The authors find that transitions to democracy depend primarily on a high level of oppositionist social mobilization and, secondarily, favorable patterns of economic distribution. On the other hand, a high level of socioeconomic development is by far the best guarantor of democratic resiliency, whereas mass political conflict endangers consolidation once democracy has been introduced. The study also reveals that institutionalist factors are less influential than socioeconomic characteristics in explaining regime transitions. This study highlights the contribution of social movement theory to the study of regime transitions.

Keywords

democratic transitions, authoritarian reversals, duration analysis, income redistribution, social movements and social mobilization

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Political science has witnessed renewed interest in theories of regime transitions and consolidation (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; Boix, 2003; Epstein, Bates, Goldstone, Kristensen, & O'Halloran, 2006; Gates, Hegre, Jones, & Strand, 2006). Explaining why some nondemocracies undergo democratic transitions and remain democratic whereas others revert back to authoritarianism has attracted considerable attention in recent years. Broadly speaking, these theories can be divided into two camps: those that emphasize the role of agency and focus on the interactive dynamics of transitions and those that privilege structural factors. Structuralist theories can be further differentiated between "statist" approaches that highlight the autonomy of the state and accounts that see political institutions as endogenous to broader socioeconomic conditions prevalent in society.

Accordingly, scholars taking the statist approach generally seek explanations for political change in regime characteristics such as institutional coherence (e.g., Gates et al., 2006) or the dynamics of political competition (e.g., Goldstone & Ulfelder, 2004); whereas scholars who see political institutions fundamentally as reflections of the broader social landscape generally focus on macro-socioeconomic characteristics. One such characteristic is the level of development, which has been the center of much scholarly attention for five decades (e.g., Epstein et al., 2006; Lipset, 1959; Londregan & Poole, 1990, 1996; Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, & Limongi, 2000). Another is the cost of collective action, which has received particular attention from scholars in the sociological tradition. Yet another is the distribution of incomes and assets in society, which is the focus of a pair of highly influential recent contributions from Carles Boix (2003) and Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2006). The models they construct explain a country's political regime (and regime transitions) as a function of three factors: the level of economic inequality, the specificity (mobility) of assets, and the repression costs for the elite (which is largely determined by the previous factor in the Acemoglu–Robinson model). Countries with high levels of inequality and asset specificity are most likely to be autocracies, whereas democracy prevails in societies with low inequality and mobile economic assets.

To date, however, the literature on regime transition lacks a comparative assessment of these rival approaches. Epstein et al. (2006) found that higher levels of development increase both the probability of democratic transitions and democratic consolidation. However, they did not account for institutional factors or even other economic variables such as inequality and capital mobility. In contrast, Gates et al. (2006) found that institutional characteristics are the best predictor of political instability, even after controlling for income levels. But their models also did not control for inequality and capital mobility, nor

did they distinguish between regimes changes in different directions. Boix (2003) models the probability of democratic transition and survival as a function of inequality and asset specificity. Although his empirical findings are consistent with his game theoretic predictions, he did not control for the institutional attributes of regimes, nor did he account for mass mobilization, the costs of repression, and other political variables explicitly included in his theoretical model.¹ In short, although all of these works make important contributions, each of them presents only a partial account.

In this article, we take an important first step toward addressing this gap. The foremost distinction of our study lies in the encompassing scope of our analysis, which provides a direct comparative assessment of some of the major institutionalist, economic, and sociological explanations put forth to date. Although we take no *a priori* position on whether all types of regime transitions can be understood within a single framework, we concur with Dankwart Rustow (1970) that the “burden of proof” rests with those who argue that the conditions that help create a new democracy are the same as those that sustain a mature one. Accordingly, we analyze democratic transitions and democratic breakdowns separately and find that the factors that explain transitions to and from democracy indeed differ systematically.

Another distinction of our analysis lies in the empirical strategy we employ. To model regime transitions, scholars have typically relied on the assumption that transitions can be modeled as discrete changes between distinct regime types. But the assumption is ahistorical, and models that rely on this assumption do not capture very well the incremental and often partial process that characterizes many regime transitions (Elkins, 2000). In contrast, we employ event history models that do not require us to define arbitrary boundaries between different regime types and model a country’s political regime in any given year as a function of that country’s prior history.²

Broadly speaking, our results support approaches that privilege socioeconomic conditions, although they also suggest a more nuanced account in which economic and social conditions interact to explain regime transitions. We find that the strongest predictor of liberalizing transitions is a high level of oppositionist social mobilization, often in the form of a protest movement. Although income inequality and asset specificity do affect the prospects for political liberalization, they do so only in the presence of oppositionist mobilization. But contrary to the accounts offered by Boix and Acemoglu and Robinson, we find that income inequality and capital mobility are not significantly related to the stability of democratic regimes. By far the strongest guarantor of democratic stability is a high level of socioeconomic development, whereas a high level of political turmoil, as well as the presence of a large security apparatus,

increases the likelihood of autocratic backsliding. Although various institutionalist factors also play a role, their impact tends to be more muted compared to other socioeconomic characteristics. In particular, the availability of legally sanctioned, formal channels of political participation does not appear crucial for the onset of liberalizing regime changes.

Our findings are based on a careful operationalization of model variables, drawing on a wide variety of data sources to maximize coverage as well as measurement validity. For example, although scholars have long postulated a link between inequality and democracy (Muller, 1988; Muller & Seligson, 1987; Reuveny & Li, 2003), most research on the question has focused on advanced industrialized democracies (Wright, 2008, p. 221).³ The widely used Deininger and Squire (1996) data set on income inequality, for example, contains only 229 data points for Asia, Africa, and South America combined for the 1970-2000 period. To broaden our coverage, we take advantage of a new data set on household income inequality from the University of Texas Inequality Project (hereafter UTIP). UTIP offers dramatically increased coverage of the developing world: for Asia, Africa, and South America (1970-2000), for instance, UTIP contains 1,302 observations, or about 5.7 times as many as Deininger and Squire (Galbraith & Kum, 2002, p. 3). UTIP thus makes it possible to examine the role of redistributive demands in many Third Wave transitions, a group that has played a major role in theories of regime changes.⁴ Indeed, for all the concepts examined in our models, we explore multiple indicators to identify those that maximize coverage while maintaining measurement validity. For complex theoretical constructs for which no ready indicators are available, we are careful to select proxies that tap into their various dimensions.

Recent studies such as the works of Boix and Acemoglu and Robinson have provided theoretically elegant accounts of the rise and consolidation of political regimes buttressed by plausible causal mechanisms. In so doing, they have dramatically raised the analytical bar. But the overzealous application of "Occam's razor" (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006, p. 16) may result in a picture that is too simplified to represent reality accurately while obscuring factors that are important to the Third Wave of democratization.⁵

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we lay out the theoretical context for our analyses of democratic transitions and authoritarian backslides. Next, we describe the data used in the analysis and illustrate its advantages over previous measures. We then discuss our empirical strategy for modeling regime transitions. The final section presents our findings and discusses their implications.

Theories of Regime Transitions and Consolidation

The study of regime transitions is generally divided between scholars attributing regime dynamics to structural variables such as economic development and those paying more attention to the interaction between various societal groups in the process of transition. Examples in the first camp include the modernization theorists and their intellectual heirs, who argue that economic development devolves authority, creates more social pluralism, and expands political awareness (Dahl, 1971). First formulated by Lipset (1959, pp. 83-83), the argument has been echoed by others (Vanhanen, 1997, 2003), who maintain that economic development gives rise to new social relations as well as new social groups seeking empowerment through democracy, variously identified as the bourgeoisie (e.g., Moore, 1966) or the urban working class (e.g., Rueschemeyer, Stephens, & Stephens, 1992). The effects of development are said to extend beyond material conditions. Scholars of public opinion highlight the creation of a trusting and tolerant political culture (e.g., Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Norris & Inglehart, 2004), as well as the growing acceptance of democratic norms as the “only game in town” (e.g., Diamond, 1999; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Putnam, 1993).

Theorists in the second camp maintain that although certain correlations between macro-structural forces and regime types do exist, they hardly justify any tight coupling between the two (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Przeworski, 1991). For those who focus on the dynamics of change, democratic transitions occur under conditions of relative parity between the authoritarian regime and the political opposition, regardless of whether the transition is peaceful or not (Swaminathan, 1999). According to Przeworski (1991), for an authoritarian regime to make concessions, the opposition must be able to mobilize popular pressure against the government. Or, to put it differently, authoritarian regimes liberalize only when they are forced to (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986, pp. 16-17). The trigger or immediate cause of these transitions may be an economic or political crisis (Gasiorowski, 1995; Haggard & Kaufman, 1995, 1997), but empirically all countries that have undergone a democratic transition have witnessed opposition mobilization (Swaminathan, 1999, p. 188).

Until recently, the explanatory powers of structuralist versus agency-based theories have not been effectively synthesized.⁶ The work of Boix (2003) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) aims to fill this gap by combining insights from both structuralist and agency-based theories (Boix, 2003, p. 1). Building

on Dahl (1971), Boix acknowledges the well-known positive correlation between democracy and economic development but claims that the literature does not systematize the mechanisms that account for this finding. Likewise, Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) criticize the literature for not being able to identify the conditions under which different political systems emerge and break down. These authors then proceed to construct models that explain political regimes, and transitions between regimes, as a function of the costs for the elite of exclusion and toleration of the citizen majority, which in turn are a function of the structure of the economy.

According to these models, “authoritarian solutions” predominate where inequality is high and economic assets are immobile. Since their wealth can be easily expropriated (Boix, 2003, p. 77), the rich have a strong incentive to repress the poor and oppose universal suffrage. But as the structure of the economy and income distribution become more balanced, two factors create an equilibrium that favors democracy: First are pressures for radical redistribution decline. Second, the rich find it easier to hide or move their wealth. In this situation, elites, the middle class, and/or the lower classes can negotiate an optimal level of taxation that is lower than the ideal preference of the masses but higher than what the elites would prefer. This makes social revolution less attractive for the majority and repression less attractive for the elites. Democracy thus arises as the solution to a commitment problem: In exchange for less redistribution today, the masses and the elite agree to institutions locking in reductions in elite power and consequently more redistribution in the long run (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006, p. 30).

Democracy as it emerges from these models then is a delicate political arrangement that comes into place under a very special set of circumstances. Have too much inequality and asset specificity and a country is almost certain to be perennially under dictatorship. If by chance democracy is introduced in a country whose levels of inequality and/or asset specificity exceed a certain threshold, the country is likely to experience political unrest and revert back to authoritarianism.

The models by Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) and Boix (2003) differ in at least one important respect, however: Acemoglu and Robinson (2006, p. 37) assert that the relationship between intergroup inequality and the likelihood of a transition to democracy is inverted U shaped. In other words, an egalitarian but nondemocratic polity (for which they cite Singapore as an example) may face little pressure for democratization, as citizens are presumed to be happy with their lot. Thus, democracy is most likely to emerge in societies with moderate levels of inequality, where the citizens are not satisfied yet the elites are not too averse to democracy. In contrast, Boix’s model implies that

the relationship between inequality and the emergence of democracy is negative and monotonic. Boix's empirical findings appear consistent with his theoretical predictions, although they are based on the Deininger and Squire data set with very limited coverage of the developing world.

As compelling as these models are, the privileging of economic factors leaves these authors open to criticisms from rival theoretical traditions. From an institutionalist perspective, one may question the relative importance assigned to economic conditions. Although scholars have long claimed that socioeconomic inequality is a major obstacle to the emergence of democracy, empirical studies on the topic often found no support for the presumed direct linkage between the two (e.g., Lichbach, 1989; Reenock, Bernhard, & Sobek, 2007). Instead, many theorists argue that what truly matters for democratization is the institutional separation of the political realm from overall patterns of inequality (e.g., Rueschemeyer et al., 1992, p. 41). As Charles Tilly (2007) argued, "[A]ny democratization process depends not necessarily on diminution of categorical inequality but on insulation of public politics from categorical inequality" (p. 75). One implication of these arguments is that given sufficient institutional channels for competition and participation in the political system, economic inequalities would not present major obstacles to democracy.

Although both Boix (2003) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) acknowledge the role of political institutions as mediating factors, they appear to regard such factors as secondary. Boix (2003, pp. 143-144) recognizes that institutional arrangements, especially in democratic regimes, have the ability to modify the balance of power among contending parties and thereby affect regime stability. He insists, however, that rules of preference aggregation have no influence on the stability of democracy. For this reason, he considers constitutional structures to be inconsequential, and issues such as "the choice of presidentialism or parliamentarism [do] not modify the chances of democratic survival." Boix's prediction thus directly contradicts the oft-repeated finding that presidential democracies face higher risks of authoritarian backslides regardless of the level of inequality (Cheibub, 2007, pp. 137-139), although it is not clear whether this is the result of some inherent feature of presidentialism or historical legacies of countries with presidential systems.⁷

Another institutionalist concern relates to the autonomy of the state and the assumption implicit in economic models of regime changes that politicians are autonomous from the broader social context only to the extent that they may extract economic resources through taxation, expropriation, or rents (Boix, 2003, p. 27). If politicians control their own resources and derive alternative sources of revenue from them, they may be able to operate independently

of social classes. They may even deploy state resources to create new elites beholden to themselves, thereby enhancing the stability of the regime (Geddes, 2007, pp. 330-331).

Finally, it may be argued that the economic models of regime changes privilege inequality-based grievances, while overlooking the voluminous literature on social movements that strongly suggests that there is little correlation between economic hardship and political upheaval (e.g., Jenkins & Perrow, 1977; Muller, 1985; Snyder & Tilly, 1972; Tilly, 1978). Implicit in the authors' models is the assumption that inequality-based discontent is mobilized at a monotonically increasing rate, so that greater inequality necessarily leads to greater pressure or at least desire for redistribution. But scholars of social movements argue that in the absence of political opportunities for collective mobilization, people with intense grievances may pose only negligible challenges to the existing regime. Given a conducive alignment of political opportunities and the broader social context, however, grievances and discontent may be amplified and manipulated by issue entrepreneurs, so that even moderate grievances may generate substantial challenges to the existing regime (Oberschall, 1978, p. 305; Suh, 2001).

We are thus faced with a robust theoretical debate that can be resolved only through empirical investigation. In this essay, we take a first step in this direction by assessing a number of competing explanations from alternative theoretical traditions. In the following section, we begin by describing the variables we selected for testing and provide a brief discussion of their theoretical relevance.

Data Sources

Since income distribution data before 1970 are extremely difficult to obtain on countries outside the OECD, our analysis is limited to the 1970-1999 period. We believe, however, that this period provides fertile ground for theory testing because of the worldwide shifts in regime forms that occurred during these decades. In 1950, the world was almost equally divided among autocracies, anocracies, and democracies. In 1977, the year in which the number of autocracies peaked, there were 89 autocracies, 16 anocracies, and 35 democracies in the world. By 2006, the number of democracies reached 77, whereas there were 49 anocracies and only 34 autocracies in the world (Hewitt, Wilkenfeld, & Gurr, 2007, p. 13).⁸ We test the following variables, beginning with some of the independent variables included in Boix's empirical analysis:

Inequality: The UTIP measure of inequality combines information on the dispersion of pay across industrial categories with survey-based estimates of household incomes (Galbraith & Kum, 2005).⁹ The measure provides Gini values (on a scale of 1 to 100) but pool income from all sources including wages and salaries, self-employment, and property income. The measures are adjusted by the share of manufacturing employment in total population. To fully capture the arguments presented, we include both a linear and a curvilinear specification in our liberalization models.

Size of primary sector: Asset specificity is measured as the percentage of the economy accounted for by agriculture and resource extraction. This measure is derived from the United Nations Statistics Division.¹⁰

Economic development: A long line of scholarship holds that a high level of socioeconomic development is the single best guarantor of democracy (Lipset, 1959; Przeworski et al., 2000). Development is said to help both existing democracies survive and new democracies emerge (Boix & Stokes, 2003), although recent research questions the democratizing effect of economic development (Acemoglu, Johnson, Robinson, & Yared, 2008). In particular, we are interested in testing the claim that the probability of democratic survival increases monotonically with per capita income (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, p. 169; Przeworski & Limongi, 1997, p. 171), controlling for other explanatory variables.

This variable is measured as per capita GDP in thousands of constant dollars, chain index, expressed in international prices. The data are taken from the Penn World Tables.

Real economic growth: The literature on the economic determinants of political stability has claimed that adverse economic conditions can affect the stability of political regimes. Some argue that economic crises trigger democratic breakdowns and coups (Collier, 2007; Londregan & Poole, 1996; Przeworski et al., 2000; Svoblik, 2008), whereas others point out that such crises can also catalyze transitions to democracy (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2001).

The inflation-adjusted rate of real economic growth, taken from the Penn World Tables, is expressed in annual percentage points.

Nontax revenue as a percentage of GDP: The dynamics of regime transition are likely to be substantially different where the state enjoys significant autonomy from social actors. One of the most important indicators of state autonomy is its ability to extract nontax revenues,

which allows the state to deflect redistributive pressures by creating new elites beholden to the regime.

This measure refers to all current nontax revenues such as entrepreneurial and property income, fees, charges, and nonindustrial and incidental sales, fines, and contributions to government employee pension and welfare funds.¹¹ Since revenues are expressed in current prices using local currencies, we divide them by the size of the nominal economy, also in local currency units. This variable is derived from the Government Finance Statistics database.

Ethnic fractionalization: Ethnic fractionalization is said to narrow the regime's support coalition in autocratic societies (Collier, 2007, pp. 49-50) while also undermining democratic stability if it reinforces class-based cleavages (Rueschemeyer et al., 1992, p. 49). On the other hand, others argue that ethnically diverse societies facilitate democratic consolidation since they generate less pressure for redistribution.¹² Boix (2003, pp. 79-80) included ethnic fractionalization as a control variable in his analysis and found that it has no significant effect on democratic transitions but does undermine consolidation.

Ethnic fractionalization is measured as a Hirsch–Herfindhal index ranging from 0 to 1, based on data from La Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer, and Vishny (1999) for years prior to 1981 and from Alesina, Devleeschauwer, Easterly, Kurlat, and Wacziarg (2003) thereafter.

Presidentialism: Although most scholars recognize the role of political institutions as a mediating factor in the stability of political regimes, they differ with respect to its relative importance as well as the specific effects of particular institutions. One of the most vigorously debated issues relates to the choice between presidentialism and parliamentarism, with some scholars positing a linkage between presidentialism and democratic fragility (Linz, 1994) and others maintaining that no such relationship exists (Power & Gasiorowski, 1997).

We created an indicator coded 1 for presidential democracies (excluding mixed systems) and 0 otherwise. We derived our coding from Cheibub (2007).

Military dictatorships: Similarly, Geddes (1999) has argued that types of dictatorship have direct implications for the resiliency of such regimes. Dictatorships are supposed to be vulnerable to different challenges and to respond to them in different ways depending on their institutional basis of support. Military juntas in particular are said to be the least resistant to liberalization since they are typically more concerned with the integrity of the military as an institution.

We created an indicator coded 1 for military dictatorships (excluding mixed types) and 0 otherwise. We derived our coding using Geddes's (1999) classification of dictatorships as adopted from Ulfelder (2005).

Political competition: Another key institutionalist variable concerns the extent of formal channels for competition and participation. The availability of such channels can insulate the political system against hegemonic domination by the elite, thereby facilitating democratization. They can also modify the balance of power in favor of challengers, which has been identified as a key factor in democratic consolidation (Boix, 2003, p. 144).

As an indicator of the extent of legal political competition we selected the POLCOMP authority concept from the Polity IV data set, which combines information on the extent to which alternative political preferences can be pursued with the regulation of participation (Marshall & Jaggers, 2007, p. 28). The variable ranges from 1 to 10, with 1 indicating the complete absence of legal participatory channels outside of the hegemonic regime and 10 indicating free and stable competitive politics with no significant exclusions. Note, however, that this variable does not capture informal, "underground" participation.

An alternative interpretation of the dynamics of regime changes emphasizes a conducive political opportunity structure. Defined as "the political environment that affects incentives for people to undertake collective action" (Tarrow, 1994, p. 85), the concept is best approached as the sort of "theoretical term . . . basically defined by the part that it plays in the whole theory" (Sartori, 1970, p. 1040). As such, it is a construct manifested in multiple empirical dimensions. These may include opportunities for legal political participation, the coercive capacity of the state (McAdam, 1996; pp. 26-29), and an overall environment of heightened collective actions (e.g., Snyder & Tilly, 1972). Although we recognize that intervening variables can mediate the effect of these factors on collective action (Koopmans, 1999, p. 105), in this study we are less concerned with uncovering specific casual mechanisms than with the identification of general correlational patterns.

Accordingly, we select the following variables as indicators of opportunities for collective social action: the coercive capacity of the state, the presence of various forms of dissent, and the rate of urbanization. The extent of political competition mentioned above also provides an indication of opportunities within the formal political system for regime opponents to seek out disaffected members of the public.

We are careful to distinguish between mobilization generated from below and mobilization of the state-controlled variety common in totalitarian systems. For this reason, we exclude education and mass media access because of the possibility that these may be promoted by a hegemonic regime as instruments of social control.

Coercive capacity: State coercive power is expected to depress mobilization and collective action (e.g., Davenport, 2007; Oberschall, 1978; Snyder & Tilly, 1972; Tilly, 1978). Although the actual level of repression is also determined by the state's willingness to resort to violence, the mere concentration of coercive power can raise the expected costs of collective action. In the literature, the size of the military is frequently used as an indicator of coercive capacity since a large and influential military generally also implies high capacity for domestic coercion. We operationalize this variable as military personnel as a percentage of the country's total population, based on figures from the Correlates of War project. We select this measure over military spending figures since personnel figures are considered more reliable (e.g., Bowman, 1996, p. 293).

Peaceful and violent dissent: The level and the success of contentious collective action appear highly correlated with the overall level of social mobilization (Goldstone, 1980; Snyder & Tilly, 1972). A heightened level of overall mobilization significantly reduces the individual costs of collective action, while raising the costs of repression for the elites. At such moments the established interests are also more ready to compromise as the need for integration and support of the existing order is particularly strong (Goldstone, 1980, p. 1037).

Following Ulfelder (2005), we rely on the Cross-National Time-Series Data Archive (CNTSDA; Banks, 2007) indicators of political conflict. We select three measures of political dissent: antigovernment demonstrations (which involve more than 100 participants), general strikes (involving more than 1,000 workers in coordinated action), and "guerrilla warfare" episodes. Guerrilla warfare refers to any armed activity, sabotage, or bombings carried out by independent bands of citizens or irregular forces and aimed at the overthrow of the present regime.

For our purposes, we would like to capture the presence of significant popular mobilization against the government. Since CNTSDA data are based on press reports, bias in coverage leads us to distrust reported counts of contentious events. Instead, we created dummy variables that indicate whether any of the three contentious events has occurred in a given country year.¹³

Urbanization: Finally, political opportunities for social mobilization are said to be directly related to the rate of urbanization. Large urban concentrations of population are said to provide greater opportunities for social mobilization to political entrepreneurs, thereby facilitating the formation of opposition movements (Tilly, 1978, p. 82). This variable is measured as the percentage of population in cities of 100,000 or more people, derived from the Banks's (2007) CNTSDA.

Empirical Strategy

The goal of our empirical analysis is to conduct a comparative assessment of some of the major theories of regime transitions and durability put forth to date. Broadly speaking, the literature on the topic has relied on three empirical strategies: correlational analysis, survival models, and Markov transition models. Although Markov transition models have been prominent of late, these models rely on previously defined regime categories and assess the probability of a subject experiencing a change in categories (Boix, 2003; Epstein et al., 2006; Przeworski et al., 2000). Przeworski et al. (2000), for example, divide regime year observations into autocracies and democracies and use Markov transition models to study the probability of transition between regimes. They find that the level of economic development affects the stability of democracies but not the transition from dictatorship to democracy. However, their findings have been disputed by Epstein et al. (2006), who similarly apply Markov techniques but employ a threefold typology in which countries with Polity scores from -10 to 0 are coded as autocracies, those from $+1$ to $+7$ as anocracies, and those from $+8$ to $+10$ as democracies.¹⁴ They show that under this finer-grained categorization, high per capita income increases the likelihood of transitions to democracy as well as decreases the likelihood of democratic breakdowns.

In models of this type, there is generally no clear theoretical justification for one categorization scheme over another. Because the choice of regime categorization clearly has a large impact on one's results, however, we wish to avoid as much as possible having to make these choices. As a result, we eschew Markov models and rely instead on duration analysis to identify the factors that affect the probability (or "hazard" in technical terms) of regime changes. Specifically, we employ Cox proportional hazards models with shared frailties. The Cox model assumes that for a given subject, covariates raise or lower the probability of experiencing a particular event in a cumulative way. It is parametric in that it performs individual binary-outcome analysis at each occurrence of the event and pools the results. However, the model does not make any assumptions about the rate at which the hazard changes, which may

be constant, increasing, or decreasing. Since the functional form of the survival function is not parameterized, the Cox model is said to be semiparametric. Furthermore, to capture country-specific effects not accounted for in the general model, we cluster the observations by country and estimate models with “shared frailties,” where a “frailty” is a latent random effect that enters multiplicatively on the hazard function. The data are organized into $i = 1, \dots, n$ groups with $j = 1, \dots, n_i$ subjects in group i . For the j th subject in the i th group, the hazard is,

$$h_{ij}(t) = h_0(t)\alpha_i \exp(x_{ij}B_x),$$

where α_i is the group-level frailty.

As discussed previously, we employ separate models of democratic transitions and authoritarian backslides, in which duration is recorded as the number of days and regime failures are respectively defined as a liberalizing regime change and a backsliding regime change. We adopted the Polity IV definition of a regime transition as a change in the polity score of 3 points or more in either direction over a period of 3 years or less.¹⁵ Accordingly, increases of 3 points or more are classified as liberalizing events, whereas decreases of 3 points or more are considered backsliding events. Since observations not “at risk” of undergoing the event of interest should not be included in the analysis (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones, 2004), we exclude regimes with scores of +8 or higher from our liberalization models and regimes with scores of -8 or lower from our backslide models. Regimes that ended because of civil wars or foreign interventions are included in the analysis but considered right censored, as such failures are neither liberalizations nor backslides. For those polities that underwent multiyear transitions, regime failure is considered to have occurred at the beginning of the transition period. The transition period itself is excluded from analysis as the outcomes of such periods are largely determined by short-term contingent factors beyond the scope of our analysis.

A problem arises because Polity scores are assigned once a year for each country based on the characteristics of its political institutions at the end of that year. This becomes an issue in years of regime changes because the Polity score for that year applies to the new regime that emerged, not the regime that failed. For example, with a Polity score of +6, Chile in 1972 is considered a democracy. But on September 11th, 1973, the military overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende and the country’s Polity score dropped to -7 for 1973. In our analysis we are interested in characterizing the Allende regime that was overthrown, not the Pinochet regime that replaced it. To remedy this problem, we follow Gates et al. (2006) and lag all of the variables relating to regime characteristics (viz., presidentialism, military

dictatorship, and political competition) by 1 year. In addition, we lag the rate of economic growth by a year to minimize endogeneity problems.

Because of the lack of relevant data, we have to exclude the bulk of communist regimes from analysis. Our findings therefore pertain mainly to the noncommunist world. The complete list of countries included in the analysis is given in the appendix.

Results

In general, results from pooled time-series, cross-sectional analyses can be highly sensitive to alternative model specifications. To enhance the robustness of our findings, we experimented with various model specifications and alternative indicators of the concepts under investigation to identify patterns which emerge consistently across the range of specifications. To check for multicollinearity, we conducted pairwise correlation tests among our explanatory variables.¹⁶ We also verified that our models are consistent with the proportional hazards assumption fundamental to the Cox model and conducted residual tests to ensure that the results are not biased by the presence of significant outliers. (For space considerations, these diagnostic tests are not reported.)

The key findings from our analyses are presented in Tables 1 and 2. We select the following models as representative of the range of specifications we explored: an “economic” model (Model 1) that examines the effects of various economic factors but that does not account for political institutions and opportunities for social mobilization,¹⁷ a “full” model (Model 2) that includes all of the variables previously introduced, a “restricted” model (Model 3) that iteratively eliminates a number of variables that do not serve as controls and turn out to be insignificant, and a couple of models that explore various interaction effects using the restricted model as a baseline. For comparability, we keep the sample constant across models. To facilitate direct comparison of the magnitude of the coefficients, we standardize the independent variables except for those that are binary indicators. Significance values are calculated using robust standard errors to account for possible intracountry correlation.

Our analysis suggests that the factors that facilitate transitions to democracy do differ systematically from those that sustain it. In particular, we found that although inequality—and to a lesser extent asset specificity—affects the probability of democratic transitions, the strongest predictor of liberalizing regime changes is the presence of open political protests. On the other hand, by far the best guarantor of democratic stability is a high level of economic development, consistent with the findings of Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, and Limongi (1996, 2000). The presence of armed insurgency, mass political

Table 1. Random-Effects Cox Models of Liberalizing Transitions

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Inequality	-0.253 (0.335)	-1.183** (0.595)	-1.048* (0.56)	-0.813 (0.780)	-1.217 (0.816)
Inequality ²	0.265 (0.226)	1.596** (0.785)	1.439** (0.634)	0.879^ (0.666)	1.574** (0.769)
Primary sector size	-0.841** (0.38)	-2.402** (1.017)	-2.983* (1.565)	-3.239** (1.461)	-3.931^^ (2.502)
Development level	-0.299 (0.456)	-0.491 (1.088)	-0.694 (1.698)	-1.557 (1.793)	-1.167 (2.37)
GDP growth (lagged)	-0.483 (0.299)	-0.159 (0.746)	0.092 (0.462)	0.215 (0.501)	0.189 (0.507)
Nontax revenues	-1.663* (0.943)	-1.889 (1.377)			
Ethnic fractionalization		1.734** (0.881)	1.963* (1.028)	1.878** (0.914)	2.022* (1.11)
Military regime (lagged)		3.399* (1.838)	4.064** (1.744)	3.977** (1.834)	4.129** (1.779)
Coercive capacity		-1.535 (1.281)	-0.954 (0.608)	-0.566 (0.623)	-1.03* (0.556)
Political competition (lagged)		-4.461 (3.0)	-3.653* (1.922)	-3.430* (1.968)	-3.704* (1.951)
Antigovernment demonstrations		5.97** (2.408)	5.459*** (1.893)	4.453** (1.805)	6.079*** (2.291)
Armed insurrections		4.59 (2.911)	3.539** (1.678)	3.898** (1.754)	3.785** (1.79)
General strikes		-1.063 (1.237)			
Urbanization level		0.558 (0.7)			
Inequality × Demonstrations				-0.008 (0.835)	
Inequality ² × Demonstrations				1.429**^ (0.697)	
Primary Sector × Demonstrations					0.872^^ (1.397)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Observations	410	410	410	410	410
	35	35	35	35	35
R ²	.10	.60	.58	.59	.59

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$, **** $p < .001$. For joint tests of interactive terms and indicated components:
^ $p < .10$, ^^ $p < .05$, ^^^ $p < .01$.

protest, and a high level of state coercive capacity also increases the probability of autocratizing regime changes, but income inequality and asset specificity appear to have no significant effects.

According to our results, the single most powerful catalyst of liberalizing regime changes is oppositionist social mobilization. The presence of open antigovernment demonstrations is particularly salient, being consistently the largest in magnitude across all models and the most significant statistically ($p < .01$ in most of the models we examined).¹⁸ Some institutional characteristics are also important: On one hand, consistent with Geddes’s observation, military dictatorships are significantly more likely to give way to liberalizing regimes; but on the other, formal institutions of participation appear surprisingly unimportant to the likelihood of liberalization—their effect is marginal and, indeed, negative, suggesting that the most autocratic political systems may be even more vulnerable to liberalizing regime changes than their more open counterparts.¹⁹

Although factors emphasized in economic models of regime changes such as income inequality and (to a lesser extent) asset specificity also play a role, their impact is moderate and mediated by other sociopolitical factors. As Models 4 and 5 in Table 1 reveal, neither inequality nor the size of the primary sector alone is significant in the absence of open political dissent (i.e., when the antigovernment demonstrations indicator is equal to 0 and the interactive terms are canceled out).²⁰ In the presence of open dissent, however, the joint significance of these variables with their respective interactive terms increases substantially, suggesting that the mechanism identified by Boix and by Acemoglu and Robinson is in fact predicated on the presence of political mobilization. In addition, there is some evidence that a high degree of ethnic fractionalization increases the likelihood of liberalizing transitions, although the significance of this factor is variable across models (its p value is around .05 in most cases). Notably, income level has no significant effect in any of our liberalization models.²¹

At the same time, a high level of development is by far the best guarantor of democratic durability. The negative effect of income level in our backslide

Table 2. Random-Effects Cox Models of Autocratizing Transitions

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Inequality	-0.385 (0.635)	-0.640 (0.525)	-0.691 (0.502)	-0.689 (0.512)	-0.685 (0.475)
Primary sector size	-0.987* (0.532)	-0.939 (1.027)	-0.847 (0.772)	-0.911 (0.779)	-0.857 (0.771)
Development level	-4.625*** (1.342)	-6.656*** (2.360)	-6.781*** (2.231)	-6.10*** ^{^^} (2.570)	-6.88*** ^{^^^} (2.474)
GDP growth (lagged)	0.246 (0.524)	0.067 (0.648)	0.026 (0.649)	-0.012 (0.592)	0.025 (0.648)
Nontax revenues	-0.417 (0.764)	-0.553 (2.590)			
Ethnic fractionalization		0.026 (0.550)	0.052 (0.488)	0.039 (0.483)	0.050 (0.485)
Presidentialism (lagged)		-2.690* (1.523)	-2.510* (1.341)	-2.455* (1.298)	-2.519* (1.333)
Coercive capacity		1.465*** (0.495)	1.416*** (0.424)	1.419*** (0.438)	1.421*** (0.439)
Political competition (lagged)		0.930 (0.656)	0.935 (0.592)	0.857 (0.577)	0.936 (0.592)
Antigovernment demonstrations		1.535* (0.904)	1.849* (0.767)	1.276 (1.243)	1.842** (0.755)
Armed insurrections		2.171*** (0.747)	2.140*** (0.636)	2.165*** (0.620)	2.223** (1.025)
General strikes		0.718 (1.117)			
Urbanization		-0.082 (0.498)			
Development × Demonstrations				-1.330 ^{^^} (2.039)	
Development × Insurrections					0.210 ^{^^^} (1.755)
Observations	1,102 77	1,102 77	1,102 77	1,102 77	1,102 77
R ²	.19	.52	.51	.51	.51

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$, **** $p < .001$. For joint tests of interactive terms and indicated components:

[^] $p < .10$, ^{^^} $p < .05$, ^{^^^} $p < .01$.

models (i.e., a high level of income decreases the probability of an autocratizing transition) is consistently both highly significant and large in magnitude, being 2 to 3 times as large as the next largest significant factor across the range of models we examined. Conversely, a high level of political conflict, especially in the form of armed violence, appears to be a great threat to democratic stability, especially when combined with the presence of a large military (Auvinen, 1997, p. 187). In this respect our findings complement the work of Christian Davenport (2007), who argues that violent dissent creates divisions within the regime over the use of state repression. Davenport's arguments imply that in moments of intraregime division over the use of state violence, democracy itself would come under threat since democratic participation is the main restraint against state repression. It is also plausible that the greater the state's coercive capacity, the greater the temptation to resort to repression.

However, we find little evidence in support of the view that forms of repression explain the large impact of income level on democratic stability (Posner, 1997, p. 354). According to that line of reasoning, democracy is more durable in wealthy societies primarily because these societies can afford to employ more "civilized" but more costly coercive measures that democracy does not constrain. But if that were the case, we would expect the effect of income level to be especially pronounced in societies facing armed insurgency or mass protests. However, we find the effect of income level to be highly pronounced regardless of the presence of armed insurgency or mass protests (i.e., development level remains highly significant and large in magnitude even when the antigovernment demonstrations and armed insurgency variables are equal to 0, setting the interactive terms to 0 as well). Conversely, the presence of armed insurgency and mass protests does little to magnify the effects of income level (i.e., the interactive terms themselves are statistically insignificant and small in magnitude).

We find no support for the frequently made assertion that presidential democracies are more prone to authoritarian backslides, although presidential systems are characterized by higher levels of inequality than their nonpresidential counterparts. The coefficient on the presidentialism indicator is only marginally significant and has the wrong sign, lending support to the argument that presidential democracies are not inherently more unstable than other systems of selecting the chief executive (e.g., Cheibub, 2007; Power & Gasiorowski, 1997). Likewise, we also find no evidence that the competitiveness of the formal institutions of participation affects the prospects of consolidation.

Our analysis thus highlights the deficiencies of models that seek to explain regime transitions solely or primarily as a function of economic factors. Although income level emerges as highly significant across the full range of

backslide models ($p < .01$ in all of the models where income level is not part of an interactive term), economic factors by themselves do not offer robust explanations for the onset of liberalizing transitions, being highly sensitive to model specification (as in the case of “primary sector size” in Model 2 in Table 1). Indeed, using a data set with more extensive coverage of the developing world, our “economic” model finds no evidence that inequality affects the likelihood of liberalizing transitions. The full picture emerges only once other political factors are taken into account. We find that although inequality does affect the probability of democratic transitions, it does so only in the presence of opportunities for political mobilization. But because such opportunities are relatively rare (antigovernment demonstrations are present in only about one fifth of the observations), the effect does not attain significance unless the presence of political mobilization is explicitly controlled for. Nor is there any evidence that economic grievances on their own generate political mobilization—the correlation between inequality and the incidence of anti-government demonstrations is .0024 for the period 1970-2000.

We would like to stress that our findings do not completely depart from, but rather complement, the extant literature. Consistent with Boix’s (2003, p. 82) empirical findings, we find that inequality has no independent effect in our models of autocratizing transitions. But unlike Boix, who regards the effect of inequality to be essentially linear, we find the relationship to be curvilinear. Although Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) similarly expect a curvilinear relationship, our analysis reveals that the relationship is U shaped, rather than inverted U shaped as in Acemoglu and Robinson’s theoretical model. Acemoglu and Robinson understand the demand for democracy as essentially driven by economic grievances. Thus, they expect the probability of democratization to decrease at low levels of inequality, as citizens are presumed satisfied with the regime. In contrast, our findings suggest that at very low levels of inequality, the probability of liberalization in fact increases with declines in inequality, a finding all the more remarkable considering that the bulk of state-socialist regimes have been excluded from the analysis.

Our findings also shed light on a number of ongoing theoretical debates in the literature and suggest new venues for future research. One example is the relationship between ethnic fractionalization and democracy. Scholars such as Acemoglu and Robinson (2006, p. 43) have argued that ethnically diverse societies generate less pressure for redistribution. Since they consider redistributive pressures to be a major challenge in the consolidation of new democracies, they predict that ethnic heterogeneity would in fact enhance democratic stability. However, we find that ethnic fractionalization is not statistically significant in the backslide models we examined, suggesting that the relationship between ethnic pluralism and democratic stability is likely conditioned by other variables.

On the other hand, it has a moderately significant positive effect in most of our liberalization models, suggesting that a high level of ethnic fractionalization may reduce an autocratic regime's basis of support.

Another topic of interest is the connection among democratic consolidation, military influence, and coups. The contributory effect of a large military on autocratizing regime transitions emerges at a high level of significance across the models we examined. Although a thorough investigation of the topic is beyond the scope of this study, our findings do provide promising leads for future research. One possible mechanism linking military size and democratic stability, for instance, may be an increased probability of coups. As some have pointed out (e.g., Auvinen, 1997; Jenkins & Kposowa, 1992), the prominence and power of the military are strong predictors of coups in developing societies. Considering that coups in democratic regimes almost invariably result in authoritarian backslides, this may explain the significance of military size in our backslide model.

Conclusion

In this article, we present an analysis of the determinants of regime transitions and stability. Our study features an encompassing analytic framework that allows us to comparatively assess some of the major economic, institutionalist, and sociological theories of regime changes. In addition, we employ a modeling strategy designed to capture the incremental and sometimes partial processes that characterize many regime transitions. We find some support for the role of redistributive demands as highlighted in some influential recent works. But overall, the evidence suggests that such demands are neither necessary nor sufficient for the emergence of democracy. On the other hand, we provide strong evidence that the key explanators of transitions to democracy are a high level of oppositionist social mobilization, along with the institutional characteristics that make this possible. Indeed, our findings suggest that transition mechanisms based on redistributive demands are predicated on the existence of opportunities for oppositionist mobilization.

Consistent with earlier work on the topic, we find that the best guarantor of democratic consolidation is a high level of socioeconomic development, and conversely the greatest threat to democratic survival is a low level of income. The effect of income level is so decisive that it dominates all other variables in our backslide models, although factors such as a high level of political strife along with a powerful security apparatus can also precipitate authoritarian backslides. It is worth noting that once the aforementioned variables are taken into account, factors such as the level of inequality, asset specificity, and the state's access to autonomous sources of revenue have no significant

effect on the prospects of consolidation. Likewise, short-term economic performance has no independent effect on regime transitions in either direction.

Our results therefore mirror some key findings from the social movement literature, which similarly suggest that a conducive environment for collective political action outweighs economic grievances as the main determinant of the emergence of contentious politics. The parallels should not be surprising. If, as most theorists of regime transitions explicitly or implicitly concur, democracy is the achievement of the bottom-up struggle for inclusion rather than a privilege granted from above, then the transition to democracy should be studied first and foremost as a phenomenon of collective political action. In this endeavor, we shall be well rewarded to draw on the rich store of insights in the social movement literature.

Appendix

List of Countries Included in the Analysis

Albania	Honduras	Norway
Argentina	Hungary	Pakistan
Australia	India	Panama
Austria	Indonesia	Paraguay
Belgium	Iran	Peru
Benin	Ireland	Poland
Bolivia	Israel	Russia
Brazil	Ivory Coast	Rwanda
Bulgaria	Jamaica	Senegal
Burundi	Japan	Singapore
Cameroon	South Korea	Slovakia
Canada	Kuwait	Slovenia
Central African Republic	Latvia	South Africa
Chile	Lesotho	Sri Lanka
Colombia	Liberia	Sweden
Congo	Lithuania	Thailand
Costa Rica	Madagascar	Togo
Croatia	Malaysia	Trinidad
Cyprus	Mauritius	Tunisia
Denmark	Mexico	United Kingdom
Dominican Republic	Moldova	United States
Egypt	Mongolia	Uruguay
Finland	Morocco	Venezuela
France	Nepal	Zambia
Germany	Netherlands	Zimbabwe
West Germany	Nicaragua	

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Notes

1. Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) do not provide statistical tests of their arguments.
2. The study by Przeworski and others is based on the assumption that the probabilities of (transitions to) democracy are constant over time and similar for each year. See Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, and Limongi (2000, p. 90).
3. Some examples of these studies include Przeworski et al. (2000), Boix and Stokes (2003) and Epstein, Bates, Goldstone, Kristensen, and O'Halloran (2006).
4. Although the survival models presented in Epstein et al. (2006, Table 3) covered most of the post-World War II period (1960-2000), they did not account for income inequality. Przeworski et al. (2000) did not include data from the 1990s in their analyses. Boix (2003) also limited his analysis to the pre-1990 period since the inequality measures he used did not extend beyond the 1990s.
5. Boix's arguments fit well with the stylized facts of Western European democratization (Geddes, 2007, p. 324).
6. A special issue of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* was devoted to this subject. See Kugler and Feng (1999, pp. 139-146).
7. The latter has been the case in Latin America.
8. Huntington (1991) and Walton and Seddon (1994, pp. 333-334), among others, document a global trend toward the democratization of authoritarian and one-party regimes in the 1980s and 1990s. This includes 19 one-party states in Africa and four continental powers (Brazil and Mexico in Latin America and Nigeria and Algeria in Africa).
9. Problems with Deininger and Squire (1996) include fragmented information across countries and time, use of expenditure-based and income-based measures of inequality, use of household per capita surveys, and unbalanced regional coverage.
10. See <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/selectionbasicFast.asp>.
11. See the annex to codes, descriptions, and definitions of government finance statistics in the Live Database (LDB), <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/DATASTATISTICS/EXTDECSTAMAN/0,,contentMDK:20877696~isCURL:Y~menuPK:2648180~pagePK:64168445~piPK:64168309~theSitePK:2077967,00.html>.

12. Acemoglu and Robinson (2006, p. 43) make this argument citing the lack of strong socialist parties in such societies.
13. We thank Jay Ulfelder for bringing this point to us.
14. By our reckoning, however, Epstein et al. (2006) would not consider democratic certain countries deemed democratic by many scholars such as Venezuela in 1958, Chile in 1972, South Korea in 1988, Mexico in 1997, Nicaragua in 1990, and Russia in 1992. These countries all have polity scores of +6.
15. For details, see the Polity IV User's Manual available at <http://www.nd.edu/~mcoppedg/crd/PolityIVUsersManualv2002.pdf>.
16. Among the models presented, the highest correlation is that between urbanization and development, at .75. Urbanization is subsequently excluded from our streamlined models. The next highest correlation is -.66.
17. This is the model most analogous to Boix's (2003) models of regime transitions. We also experimented with the inclusion of measures of ethnic and religious fractionalization and found that these do not alter the results of the model substantively.
18. Notably, general strikes do not have a significant effect. We believe this is the result of the high threshold employed by the data set since strikes meeting those criteria are typically launched by autonomous trade unions. This is in many cases not possible until after the transition to democracy (e.g., South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines). In particular, we find that although 26% of the liberalizing transitions in our sample were accompanied by antigovernment demonstrations, only 6.6% were accompanied by general strikes as defined.
19. Indeed, we found that between 1970 and 2000 roughly 60% of those regimes with a mean Polity score below -5 underwent liberalizing transitions, whereas only 30% of those with a Polity score between -5 and +5 liberalized. Fewer than 5% of those regimes with scores between +5 and +7 liberalized further.
20. In the presence of an interaction between inequality and antigovernment demonstrations, the coefficient on inequality reflects the effect of this variable on liberalizations in the absence of demonstrations.
21. Our findings are therefore in agreement with Acemoglu, Johnson, Robinson, and Yared (2008), who also found that once country-specific effects are accounted for, income level has no effect on liberalizing regime changes.

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