

Drawing on material from this section of the course, and the previous section if you like, develop an argument as to what might explain why countries with competitive authoritarian regimes would follow different regime change paths. What explains why some of them have become more democratic while others have either continued to have competitive authoritarian regimes or became more authoritarian?

Competitive authoritarian regimes are characterised by ‘the coexistence of meaningful democratic institutions and serious incumbent abuse’, yielding electoral competition that is ‘real but unfair.’ (Levitsky and Way 2020, 51). Such regimes may move towards democracy—marked by peaceful electoral turnover—slide into authoritarianism, or remain hybrid. While such changes involve multiple elements, this essay focuses on two key aspects: electoral support and electoral institutions. I argue that these are often dependent on citizens' perception of their socioeconomic status and the costs of repression vis-a-vis toleration respectively. Although such factors hold some predictive value for regime change paths, a regime's trajectory is ultimately shaped by its unique context.

Shifts in electoral support

Firstly, I posit that electoral support is deeply intertwined with citizens' perception of changes to their socioeconomic status resulting from government policy. Citizens content with their socioeconomic status are more likely to support the status quo, enabling a competitive authoritarian regime to maintain or further entrench its authoritarianism. For instance, Ross (2019) found that nearly 70% of both state sector and private sector workers in Russia's middle class supported ‘strengthening the state's power over the economy and politics’ as they preferred stability over the ‘uncertainties brought about by democratic reforms’. While workers' economic dependence on the state for their livelihoods contributed to this support, Ross argues that this

effect was not significant: ‘members of [private and public] sectors ... both [expressed] high levels of trust in the Putin regime’. Consequently, continued electoral support for Putin enabled Russia to slide into full-scale authoritarianism over the last two decades.

Crucially, a country’s historical context can also shape public opinion and consequently, electoral support. Fish (2005) suggests that Russia’s period of political opening (*glasnost*) in the 1980s to early 1990s exposed high-level corruption, causing many Russians to ‘naturally associate more corruption with greater political openness’ and therefore ‘seriously eroded public demand for open politics’ (132). Economic restructuring during that time also led to massive social and economic upheaval. This recent history may still be alive in Russian memory, further facilitating Russia’s shift towards authoritarianism.

Conversely, when citizens perceive a decline in socioeconomic status, possibly due to government mismanagement, electoral support may shift against the incumbent. This is supported by Tertychnaya’s (2019) findings in Russia, where ‘... the relative risk of disengaging from politics and defecting to the opposition is greater for respondents who report greater dissatisfaction with their pocketbook’ (1942). While in Russia the rising middle class in support of autocracy outweighs voters seeking change, economic grievances do have the power to shift competitive authoritarian regimes. Mexico’s 1994 Peso crisis caused industrial wages to decline by over 30% in two years, leading to a drastic fall in the ruling party PRI’s¹ electoral support (Magaloni 2005). This enabled an opposition candidate to become president in 2000 and solidified Mexico’s democratic transition.

¹ Mexican Partido Revolucionario Institucional

Electoral reform

Shifts in electoral support must also be supported by institutional change for regime change to take root. Competitive authoritarian regimes can democratise when electoral institutions allow greater political contestation and accountability. This was demonstrated in Mexico, where the PRI lost the presidency in 2000 following seven decades of dominance, achieved in part through fraud and disproportionate government funding for political campaigns (Root 1995, 156). Magaloni (2005) argues that the PRI's establishment of an independent Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) in 1994 was an 'irreversible' reform which played a crucial role in democratisation (146).

Why might those in power allow reform? Dahl's (1972) axioms on political competition offer a helpful framework. He argues that 'the more the costs of repression exceed the costs of toleration [of political opponents], the greater the chance for a competitive regime' (16).

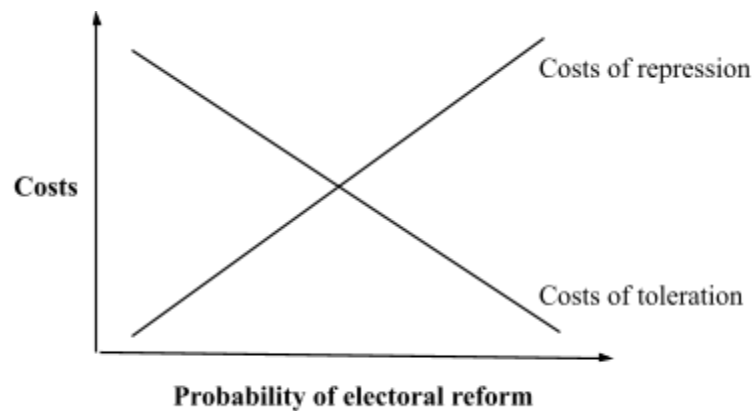


Figure 1. Adapted from Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale, 1971), 16.

In Mexico, a violent uprising in January 1994 greatly increased the costs of repression as there was a risk of main opposition party PRD² joining the movement. The PRI also perceived low costs of toleration as they had recently implemented significant economic reforms including

² Partido de la Revolución Democrática

PRONASOL, a national programme to improve living standards. Moreover, President Salinas had strong approval ratings of nearly 80% at the beginning of 1994. However, by relinquishing control of the IFE, the PRI restricted itself from committing fraud in subsequent elections and hence opened the door for electoral turnover.

International factors may also influence electoral reform. As Bates (2001) writes, costs of repression in the post-Cold War era were high; autocratic governments thus ‘gingerly set into motion political reforms, designed to retain support in the Western democracies for further international lending’ (94). In Taiwan, democratic electoral changes were made throughout the 1980s to boost state legitimacy following a decline in international stature, including losing its United Nations seat in 1971 (Solinger 2001, 35).

However, when the costs of toleration exceed that of repression, electoral reform may slide towards authoritarianism or stagnate. Levitsky and Way (2020) suggest that international pressure to democratise has now diminished due to the ‘waning of Western liberal hegemony’ (52), driven in large part by China and Russia’s rise in global influence. Hence, there is far less external pressure for competitive authoritarian leaders to tolerate contestation. This partly explains why nearly half of competitive authoritarian regimes identified by Levitsky and Way in the 1990–1995 period, such as Hungary, remained so as of 2019. Therefore, the global context also matters significantly.

To conclude, changes to competitive authoritarian regimes may occur via shifts in electoral support and electoral reform. These are in turn often influenced by citizens’ perception of changes to their socioeconomic status and the costs of repression vis-a-vis toleration respectively. It is important to highlight that these factors are not exclusive; other events such as elite defection within a ruling party can also catalyse democratisation in a competitive

authoritarian regime. Moreover, since such factors are often dynamic, regime change is rarely linear. The establishment of democratic electoral institutions, for instance, may be later undermined, just as Putin consolidated power in Russia following the *glasnost* period. Therefore, while broad factors do hold some predictive value, we must ultimately investigate a country's regime change through specific contexts, accounting for both domestic and international factors.

Word Count: 1000

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