Is Party Pluralism Dangerous for Democracy?

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Área temática: Democracia, Democratización y Calidad de la Democracia

Abstract

Prominent theories of regime change argue that party pluralism in the legislature can help stabilize dictatorships and destabilize presidential democracies. We show the opposite to be true: party pluralism poses a danger for dictatorships but not for democracies. A formal representation of the problem suggests that dictators face a dilemma: while concessions allowing for party pluralism reduce the chances of an external (bottom-up) transition to democracy, they ultimately increase the probability of an internal (top-down) transition. We document this claim using a convenient estimator, a novel dataset on Latin American countries between 1945 and 2010, and two case studies. The results show that pluralism destabilizes dictatorships by inducing democratic transitions, not new forms of authoritarian rule. Our findings hold for multiple measures of regime instability and different regime classifications.
Can party pluralism be dangerous for democracy? Although counter-intuitive, this question lies at the core of several literatures on regime change. A minimal degree of party pluralism—defined by the existence of multiple political parties with legal recognition and legislative representation—is a necessary condition for the existence of modern democracy (Przeworski et al. 2000). However, the literature has qualified this argument in two ways. First, students of authoritarian regimes debate whether some degree of pluralism helps dictatorships survive (Gandhi 2008). Second, students of democracy—and in particular, presidentialism—have claimed that an excessive number of parties destabilizes the democratic regimes (Mainwaring 1993). These arguments indicate that the relationship between party pluralism, democracy, and dictatorship is fraught by conceptual tensions and deserves a systematic assessment.

We address this question by developing an integrated theory of the consequences of party pluralism for the survival of dictatorships and democracies. The theory builds on the distinction between internally-driven and externally-driven regime change. By internally-driven we mean that political transformations occur within the legal framework imposed by the regime. Internal change usually involves active participation by incumbent elites, although it may not reflect their preferences. Externally-driven change, by contrast, reflects the imposition of a new order by the regime’s opponents.

In authoritarian regimes, limited party pluralism reduces the chances of an external (bottom-up) transition to democracy, but high levels of pluralism open the way for an internal (top-down) transition. Thus, a sustained increase in the number of parties produces greater chances for democratization. In democratic regimes, by contrast, greater pluralism does not expand the risk of an external democratic breakdown, but reduces the risk of internal backsliding into authoritarianism. As a result, an increase in the number of parties does not destabilize democratic rule.

The first section of the paper revisits the debates about the impact of party pluralism in dictatorships and democracies. In the second section, we develop a formal model of dictatorships and democracies to reconcile the disparate views in the literature. The theory suggests that high levels of party pluralism should promote internal democratization of dictatorships, while legislatures with low levels of pluralism should prevent external democratization. However, party pluralism should have no consistent effect on the survival
of democracies. The next three sections introduce our dataset of Latin American countries between 1945 and 2010, the estimators, and the empirical findings. We propose an estimation strategy to overcome the problem of estimating the effects of party pluralism in a sample of dictatorships that includes regimes without legislatures. The results, including several robustness tests, strongly support our hypotheses. In the last part of the paper, we compare the experience of dictatorships in Mexico (1929-2000) and Brazil (1964-1985) to illustrate the causal mechanisms advanced by the theory.

**Party Pluralism and Regime Change**

**Authoritarian Stability**

Scholars agree that dictators create nominally democratic institutions to secure and extend their power (Pepinsky 2014). Authoritarian parties and legislatures help rulers contain internal splits, coopt opposition, and mobilize broader support for incumbents (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010). They reduce commitment and monitoring problems (Svolik 2012), provide credible mechanisms to solve disputes and leadership succession (Boix and Svolik 2013), and channel disenchantment to preempt regime crises (Brownlee 2007; Magaloni 2008). Wright (2008) distinguishes between binding legislatures that credibly constrain rulers and nonbinding legislatures that fail to do so, while Barros (2002) and Bonvecchi and Simison (2017) show that even non-elected bodies can constrain dictators.

This literature, however, displays less consensus on the consequences of party pluralism for dictatorships. Some scholars claim that multiparty elections stabilize authoritarian rule, either by providing greater legitimacy to the regime or by facilitating elite bargaining. Others, in contrast, argue that single-party regimes are more enduring and less likely to democratize than dominant-party regimes that tolerate an opposition.

Important studies claim that multiparty elections provide a democratic façade and strengthen autocratic legitimacy (Magaloni 2008). Gandhi and Przeworski (2007, 1291) argue that multi-party legislatures also “have an independent effect on the tenure of autocrats, stabilizing their rule.” Autocrats establish plural legislatures to incorporate opposition forces, solicit their cooperation, and give them a stake in the leader’s survival. Gandhi (2008, 80) notes that legislatures with multiple parties stabilize nondemocratic regimes because they
reduce uncertainty for outside groups, and because they facilitate the granting of concessions due to “the identification of reliable bargaining partners, the revelation of information, and the avoidance of popular mobilization.”

Other studies claim instead that party pluralism actually undermines dictatorships. Gates et al. (2006) argue that regimes combining institutional features of democracies and autocracies are more fragile than “pure” regimes. Full democracies or autocracies create a self-equilibrium that does not exist under hybrid regimes. Building on the distinction between competitive and hegemonic authoritarian regimes, Donno (2013) shows that domestic opposition coalitions and international actors can pressure competitive authoritarian regimes into democratization, but not hegemonic authoritarian regimes. Teorell and Wahman (2017) similarly pinpoint that multiparty regimes are more likely to democratize, particularly when confronting internal or external threats. Hence, while legislatures are conventionally seen as constraints (Boix 2003; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006), disparate views coexist in the literature regarding the effect of pluralism, which implies that legislatures and the number of parties are not functional equivalents and may produce different outcomes.

The emerging debate about the effects of party pluralism on authoritarian stability opens three important questions. First, are legislatures intended to prevent democratic transitions or authoritarian conspiracies? Geddes (1999) notes that 40% of autocracies ending between 1974 and 1998 were followed by new forms of authoritarianism. Second, are single-party legislatures functional to the survival of dictatorships while plural legislatures represent a source of instability? Third, if dangerous levels of party pluralism favor democratization, why would dictators ever allow for such levels of pluralism to emerge?

**Democratic Stability**

Unlike authoritarian regimes, all democracies have popularly elected legislatures open to competing parties. However, scholars disagree on whether multiparty systems have a negative impact on democratic stability. Classic studies that relied heavily on the experience of parliamentary democracies expressed inconsistent views. Sartori (1976) claimed that fragmented party systems promote polarization and instability, while Lijphart (1984) argued that multipartyism is a trademark of consensus democracies.
A more extensive debate ensued for presidential democracies. Qualifying Linz’s (1984) early claim that presidentialism is inherently weak, Mainwaring (1993) argued that democracies are fragile under the “difficult combination” of presidentialism and multipartyism. Multiparty systems tend to produce minority presidents devoid of “partisan powers” in congress, and thus become prone to deadlock and policy paralysis (Mainwaring and Shugart 1997). The absence of parliamentary mechanisms compounds executive-legislative conflict and facilitates regime breakdown.

In response to this concern, a later wave of scholarship has documented that presidents usually overcome paralysis by building legislative coalitions (Amorim Neto 2002; Chasquetti 2008; Lanzaro 2001; Mejía Acosta 2009). Moreover, Cheibub (2002, 2007) provides empirical evidence that minority governments do not augment the likelihood of deadlock or democratic breakdown. Other studies show that minority presidents, a frequent consequence of multiparty legislatures, are more likely to confront turmoil and threats of impeachment, but not military coups (Negretto 2006; Pérez-Liñán and Polga-Hecimovich 2017).

The debate about presidential democracies preceded the exchange about authoritarian legislatures and paralleled its concerns. Scholars of autocracy and democracy invoke similar causal mechanisms: party pluralism undermines executive control and emboldens enemies against the regime, yet pluralism also allows for the formation of coalitions that remove incentives to revolt. The next section provides a thorough account that links the relationship between party pluralism and regime breakdown under both types of regimes.

**Party Pluralism, Transitions, and Backsliding**

To reconcile the disparate arguments outlined in previous sections, our theory relies on the distinction between internal and external regime change. “Internal” political transformations occur within the existing legal framework, while “external” change is driven by regime opponents acting outside the law.¹

¹ Note that regime insiders (e.g., the minister of defense) may concoct an “external” overthrow of the regime. We use the term “internal” in reference to the legal system, not to membership in the elite, and distinguish this idea from the concept of “endogenous” democratization as employed by other authors (Boix and Stokes 2003).
British political reforms in the nineteenth century, Argentina’s democratization in 1912-16, the Spanish transition in 1976-81, and South Africa’s end to apartheid in 1989-94 represent different examples of internal change towards democracy. The literature has often described internal change as democratization from above, transitions through reform, or “pacted” transitions. In contrast, the literature has described externally-driven processes of democratization as democratization from below, rupture, or even revolution (Karl 1990; Munck and Leff 1997). A similar distinction applies to the establishment of authoritarian rule. Studies of coups and “breakdown” focus on external assaults by anti-system actors. Yet, an emerging literature on democratic “backsliding” shows that incumbents can establish authoritarian rule as a result of internal processes of democratic erosion—often with the acquiescence of voters (Haggard and Kaufman 2016). Venezuela since 1999 or Turkey since 2003 represent examples of internal backsliding into authoritarian rule.

To pinpoint the micro-foundations of our argument, we outline a formal model representing the interaction between authoritarian forces and democratic parties under democracies and dictatorships. The model indicates that, under dictatorships, concessions allowing for party pluralism reduce the chances of an external (bottom-up) transition to democracy, but ultimately increase the probability of an internal (top-down) transition. Under a democracy, in contrast, pluralism does not expand the risk of an external democratic breakdown (as assumed by the literature), but instead reduces the risk of internal backsliding into authoritarianism.

Consider a society in which multiple parties compete for power. One party—call it A—seeks to establish authoritarian rule, and its ascent to power implies the establishment of dictatorship. Other parties, D₁,…, Dₜ, are willing to abide by the rules of democracy (where N ≥ 2). Let s be the share of seats captured by the democratic bloc and 1 – s the share of seats captured by the authoritarian party. Authoritarians gain power via elections when popular support for democrats falls below a minimal threshold s*, such that s < s*. The effective number of parties in the legislature can range from 1 (if s = 0) to N + 1 (if voters distribute support evenly across all parties).² Assuming, for simplicity, that democratic parties are of

² Laakso and Taagepera (1979) define the effective number of parties as $1/\sum p_i^2$, where $p_i$ is the proportion of seats for each party $i$. 
similar size, the effective number of parties would be $1/[N(s/N)^2 + (1 - s)^2]$. It follows that party pluralism is increasing on $s$, the share of seats allocated to democrats.

Figure 1 below introduces two games in strategic form, representing the interaction between the authoritarian party and the democratic leaders. In the first game, the authoritarian party controls the regime and grants democrats limited concessions, represented by $s_A$. In the second game, democrats control the regime and the electorate freely decides on the allocation of seats, $s_E$. In both games, the incumbent can repress or tolerate opposition to the regime, while the challenger can accept the rules of the regime or revolt against them. Incumbents pay a cost for repressing their opponents, $r > 0$, while rebel challengers bear the cost of mobilization, $m > 0$.

**Figure 1. Two Games of Regime Change**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game 1: Dictatorship</th>
<th>Game 2: Democracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challenger:</strong> D</td>
<td><strong>Challenger:</strong> A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incumbent:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accept</strong></td>
<td><strong>Accept</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A</em> Repress</td>
<td><em>D</em> Repress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1 - s_A - r$</td>
<td>$s_E - r$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$s_A$</td>
<td>$s_E - m$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tolerate</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A</em> Tolerate (a)</td>
<td><em>D</em> Tolerate (c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1 - s_E$</td>
<td>$s_E$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$s_E$</td>
<td>$1 - s_A - m$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: Colored cell is the status-quo; $s$ is the share of seats allocated to democratic parties; $s_A$ is the share of seats granted under authoritarian rule, while $s_E$ is the share granted by a free election; $r$ is the cost of repression for the incumbent; $m$ is the cost of revolt by the challenger.

Notes: (a) Toleration of a free election produces top-down democratization; (b) Democratic revolt produces bottom-up democratization; (c) Tolerance of authoritarian opponents opens the possibility of an external coup; internal backsliding into authoritarian rule occurs if $s_E < s^*$; (d) Authoritarian revolt produces external breakdown, unless prevented by repression.

**Authoritarian Stability.** In the first game, authoritarian rulers can repress democrats, granting them an arbitrary share of seats $s_A$ as a unilateral concession, or they can tolerate a free electorate, allowing for a top-down transition to democracy. Democrats, in turn, can accept the conditions offered by the regime or revolt and impose bottom-up democratization.

In this game, D never revolts if A is willing to concede top-down democratization. Otherwise, D revolts when $s_E - m > s_A$. In turn, A is willing to tolerate a controlled process
democratization if the alternative is bottom-up revolt. However, A can prevent bottom-up revolt by granting concessions such that \( s_A = s_E - m \). Given this condition, A must assess whether the cost of toleration is ultimately lower than the cost of sustaining the regime, i.e., \( s_E < (s_E - m) + r \). If so, toleration of free elections becomes the dominant strategy for the incumbent. It follows that authoritarian rulers democratize internally when \( r > m \).

Figure 2 illustrates the two equilibrium outcomes of the first game. When the cost of repression is high or the cost of democratic mobilization is low (\( r > m \)) the concessions required to appease the democratic opposition are so large that authoritarian rulers are better off allowing a transition from above (Panel 2.1). By contrast, when \( r \leq m \), authoritarian rulers can offer limited concessions to de-activate democratic conspiracies (Panel 2.2).

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**Figure 2. Effects of Party Pluralism on Authoritarian Regimes (Game 1)**

2.1. Large Concessions Trigger Internal Democratization

- (Tolerate, Accept)
- Top-down democratization

![Diagram showing the equilibrium outcomes](image)

- Level of pluralism required to prevent revolt (off-path).

2.2. Limited Concessions Prevent External Democratization

- (Repress, Accept)
- Stability

- Top-down democratization (not needed)

![Diagram showing the equilibrium outcomes](image)

- Level of pluralism required to prevent revolt (equilibrium).
Together, the two panels of Figure 2 outline an important empirical implication: moderate levels of pluralism—feasible when the costs of democratic mobilization are high—will deflect the risk of bottom-up democratization. By contrast, high levels of party pluralism—necessary when the costs of mobilization are low, or when the costs of repression are too high—will justify an internal process of democratization. Thus, in equilibrium:

H1 (Dictatorships with legislatures): *Under dictatorship, greater levels of party pluralism will increase the risk of regime change (a transition to democracy).*

Figure 2.2 also hints at another corollary. With full information, authoritarian leaders will offer concessions \( s_A = s_E - m \) to prevent an uprising. However, authoritarian regimes without parties or legislatures will lack the institutional ability to adjust levels of pluralism and thus become intrinsically fragile. Therefore,

H2 (Dictatorships without legislatures): *The absence of a legislature will increase the risk of regime change (a transition to democracy).*

**Democratic Stability.** In the second game depicted in Figure 1, democratic rulers can repress authoritarian groups, preventing a possible coup, or they can tolerate their conspiracies. Authoritarian opponents, in turn, may accept the share of power obtained in free elections, or they may—if tolerated by the government—revolt and overthrow the regime. In Game 2, by contrast to Game 1, the incumbent has no control over \( s \), which is determined by the electorate. Democracy can therefore backslide into authoritarian rule if voters voluntarily support A such that \( s_E < s^* \), or break down if A overthrows the regime by force. In equilibrium, A never revolts against democracy if D is able to repress. However, if D tolerates autocratic conspiracies, A overthrows the regime whenever \( s_E > s_A + m \). In turn, D is always willing to tolerate authoritarian groups when they accept the regime. If they do not, D will tolerate A only when \( s_E < s_A + r \).

Figure 3 summarizes the range of equilibrium outcomes for democracies at different levels of party pluralism. In Panel 3.1, the cost of repression for democrats is relatively high \( (r > m) \) and they are willing to tolerate authoritarian conspiracies. As a result, external democratic breakdown—a coup—is possible in the range \( s_E \in (s_A + m, s_A + r) \). In panel 3.2, the cost of repression is lower \( (r \leq m) \) and democrats prevent authoritarian conspiracies. However, as in the previous case, backsliding into authoritarian rule is still possible if voters decide to support A, such that \( s_E < s^* \).
Figure 3. Effects of Party Pluralism on Democratic Regimes (Game 2)

3.1. Equilibrium Outcomes when $r > m$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authoritarian majorities</th>
<th>Backsliding</th>
<th>Stability</th>
<th>Coup</th>
<th>Stability</th>
<th>Pluralism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$s^*$</td>
<td>$s_A + m$</td>
<td>$s_A + r$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2. Equilibrium Outcomes when $r < m$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authoritarian majorities</th>
<th>Backsliding</th>
<th>Stability</th>
<th>Stability</th>
<th>Pluralism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$s^*$</td>
<td>$s_A + r$</td>
<td>$s_A + m$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Combined, Panels 3.1 and 3.2 suggest that, in a democracy, low levels of pluralism potentially hint a process of backsliding into authoritarianism. However, the highest levels of pluralism will not facilitate external breakdown in the form of a coup. Against the traditional literature, Figure 3 indicates no monotone relationship between pluralism and democratic demise. The theory at best suggests a null hypothesis:

H3 (Democracies): Under democracy, greater levels of party pluralism will not increase the risk of regime change (democratic breakdown).
Data

To test these hypotheses, we take advantage of a novel dataset on 20 Latin American countries, which allows us to measure the effective number of parties (our indicator for party pluralism) in presidential democracies and dictatorships between 1945 and 2010. Our unit of analysis is the country-year (N = 1273). The dataset includes alternative measures of regime change, plus institutional and economic indicators as control variables.

Regime change. The dependent variables in our models capture whether regime change takes place in any given year. In order to test H1 and H2, we analyze a sub-sample of authoritarian regimes and employ two alternative measures of the outcome. The first measure is dichotomous and captures the end of an authoritarian regime. The second one is trichotomous and captures whether the regime survives through the end of the year (0), whether a new authoritarian regime overthrows the existing dictatorship (1), or whether the authoritarian regime experiences a transition to democracy (2). The trichotomous measure allows for a “placebo” test, because H1 implies that party pluralism should induce democratization, not simply the demise of the authoritarian elite.

In order to assess H3, we analyze a sub-sample of democratic regimes. The dependent variable is coded as 1 when breakdown into authoritarian rule occurs, and 0 otherwise. To verify the robustness of our findings, we code alternative versions of the three dependent variables using three different data sources (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2009; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014; Svolik 2012).

Pluralism. Our main independent variable is the level of party pluralism, measured through the effective number of parties in the lower (or only) house of congress (Laakso and Taagepera 1979). Data for this variable originates in multiple historical sources compiled for this project. We address the treatment of dictatorships without any legislatures in the next section.

Alternative Explanations. Following the literature, we include institutional and economic factors as for control variables. The analysis of dictatorships controls for the presence of a personalist regime in which elites are compelled to cooperate with the leader (Geddes 1999). Because incumbents may benefit from a fragmented opposition, all models

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3 Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.
include a dichotomous indicator coded as 1 when the effective number of parties in the opposition bloc is greater than 2.0.\textsuperscript{4}

The models also control for \textbf{per capita GDP} (in thousands of 2000 US dollars) and annual \textbf{growth} in per capita GDP. Data for both variables originates in the World Bank’s World Development Indicators, and relies on rates of change from other sources (mainly the Penn World Tables) for years prior to 1961. To control for the impact of resource rents on regime survival (Gervasoni 2010; Jensen and Wantchekon 2012; Ross 2001), we incorporate a dichotomous variable that takes a value of 1 when \textbf{oil and mineral exports} represent more than 10% of the gross national income. The models also control for the size of the country’s \textbf{population} (in millions), and levels of \textbf{ethnic} and \textbf{religious fractionalization} (Fearon 2003).

\textbf{Estimation: Dealing with the Absence of Legislatures}

To model regime survival, we employ discrete-time survival models with a logistic link (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004, chapter 8). The models account for duration-dependence using a quadratic transformation of the age of the regime (Carter and Signorino 2010). For competitive regimes, \textit{age} reflects the number of years elapsed since the last democratic transition (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2014). For nondemocratic regimes, it indicates the age of the specific form of authoritarianism, as coded by the specific dataset (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2009; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014; Svolik 2012).

Our test of H1 and H2 confronts a crucial problem: we need to estimate the simultaneous effect of a legislative body, which presumably stabilizes the authoritarian regime (H2), and of the number of parties in the legislature, which presumably facilitates a transition to democracy (H1). This poses a specification dilemma. Any model including a dichotomous indicator for legislatures must exclude party pluralism, because dictatorships without legislatures will present missing values for the number of parties, while any model including the effective number of parties must necessarily exclude authoritarian regimes without legislatures. Prior studies (e.g., Gandhi 2008) have solved this problem by recoding the two variables into a categorical measure (e.g., no legislature, one party, many parties), but this solution truncates the variance of our main predictor.

\textsuperscript{4} The dichotomous indicator is coded 0 if no legislature is in operation.
This estimation issue represents a broader family of problems in which analysts need to estimate the effects of a treatment $T$ as well as its dosing $X$, yet the possibility of observing the dose $X$ is conditional on the presence of treatment $T$. We propose a simple solution for this problem using a reliable estimator. To clarify this strategy, let $T$ be a dichotomous indicator coded $T = 1$ when the authoritarian regime has a legislature in place, 0 otherwise. Also, let $X$ be the effective number of parties, such that $X \geq 1$ for all $T = 1$, and missing otherwise. Estimating the effect of legislatures requires (assuming no controls for simplicity) a model for all dictatorships, such that $Y = b_0 + b_1T$, where $Y$ is the risk of regime change, $b_0$ is the baseline estimate of risk for dictatorships without legislatures, and $b_1$ is the effect (presumably negative) of adding a legislative body. In contrast, estimating the effects of party pluralism requires a model for dictatorships with legislatures ($T = 1$), such that $Y = (b_0 + b_1) + b_2X$, where the intercept $(b_0 + b_1)$ reflects the presence of a legislature, and $b_2$ is the marginal effect (presumably positive) of allowing an additional party in the legislature.

Our estimator allows us to capture both effects simultaneously. For this purpose, we recode missing values of $X$ resulting from the absence of a legislature into an arbitrary value (say $X = 0$). The conditional estimator then incorporates the recoded term $\hat{X}$, such that

$$Y = b_0 + b_1T + b_2\hat{X}$$  \[1\]

The model is estimated for the full sample of authoritarian regimes. For regimes without legislatures, the estimator reduces to the baseline risk $b_0$, because

$$Y = b_0 + b_1(0) + b_2(0) \quad \text{if } T = 0. \quad \[2\]$$

For regimes with legislatures, in contrast, the estimator expands to:

$$Y = b_0 + b_1(1) + b_2\hat{X} \quad \text{if } T = 1. \quad \[3\]$$

It follows from Equations 2 and 3 that $\hat{X}$ is invariant when $T = 0$, and thus a fixed effect $b_0$ is sufficient to account for levels of $Y$ under the first condition.\(^5\) In contrast, $\hat{X}$ presents deviations from the conditional mean when $T = 1$, and informs the estimation of $b_2$ only under the second condition. The model thus yields proper estimates of $b_0$ (the baseline risk with no legislature), $b_1$ (the effect of adding a legislature), and $b_2$ (the effect of adding an additional party conditional on the existence of a legislature).

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\(^5\) Strictly, the fixed-effect estimate of $Y$ under the first condition is $b_0 + b_2(m)$, where $m$ is the indicator for the absence of the treatment. Estimates of $b_0$ are thus conditional on $m$. 

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To illustrate this approach, Table 1 presents a simple bi-variate model (1.1) using the effective number of parties as predictor of regime change for the subsample of dictatorships with legislatures. The coefficient for the number of parties is positive ($b_2 = 0.74$) and significant (s.e. = 0.13, p < .01), indicating that greater pluralism tends to destabilize the regime. The second column (1.2) presents the results of an equivalent model using our conditional estimator for the full sample of dictatorships. The estimates for the main variable are the same in both models ($b_2 = 0.74$, s.e. = 0.13, p < .01), but the intercept in Model 1.1 (-3.72) is decomposed in Model 1.2 into an estimate of risk for dictatorships with no legislatures (-1.85) and an estimate for the effect of legislatures (-1.87). The latter, negative coefficient indicates that legislatures stabilize authoritarian regimes. Notice however that their overall impact is conditional on the effective number of parties. Because no legislature may contain zero parties, the overall effect of a legislature is -1.13 (-1.87 + 0.74) under one-party rule, and 1.09 (-1.87 + 2.96) if congress contains four parties of the same size.

Table 1. Conditional Estimator of the Effect of Pluralism (no controls)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1.1) Dictatorships (with a legislature)</th>
<th>(1.2) Dictatorships (All cases)</th>
<th>(1.3) Democracies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ENP (House)</td>
<td>0.74** (0.13)</td>
<td>0.74** (0.13)</td>
<td>-0.08 (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislature</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1.87** (0.42)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-3.72** (0.36)</td>
<td>-1.85** (0.22)</td>
<td>-2.80** (0.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>736</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log-L</td>
<td>-114.338</td>
<td>-187.458</td>
<td>-131.373</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Entries are logistic estimates (standard errors). Dependent variable is the End of regime according to Geddes, Wright & Frantz. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01.

For reference, Table 1 also presents the same bi-variate model for the sub-sample of democracies (which, of course, include legislatures in all cases). In line with theoretical expectations, the number of parties has no significant effect for the survival of democracies.
Empirical Findings

Presented for illustration purposes, Table 1 does not control for alternative explanations, or assesses whether authoritarian rulers are ousted by other autocratic elites. Table 2 presents fully specified models, using the coding of regimes according to Geddes, Wright & Frantz (2014) to measure regime change. Model 2.1 predicts regime change for the sub-sample of authoritarian regimes, Model 2.2 estimates the competing risks of an autocracy becoming a democracy or a new autocracy, and Model 2.3 estimates the risk of breakdown for the sub-sample of democratic regimes.

**Hypothesis 1.** The results in Table 2 align with our theoretical expectations. Model 2.1 indicates that, as the number of effective parties increases, authoritarian regimes are more likely to collapse. This result is both statistically significant and substantively relevant. Contrary to the literature that argues that multipartism reflects the fragmentation of the democratic opposition (and thus its weakness), greater pluralism instead reflects the weakness of authoritarian rulers. Indeed, our indicator of opposition fragmentation is not statistically significant, and removing this dummy from the models does not alter the substantive results for party pluralism.

Model 2.2 qualifies the interpretation of this finding by estimating the probability of a dictatorship being replaced by a subsequent autocracy or by a competitive regime. The number of parties is irrelevant to explain an authoritarian coup, but a sustained increase in the number of parties is associated with a net expansion in the probability of democratization. Greater levels of pluralism—as the case studies presented below illustrate—increase the chances of an internal transition.
### Table 2. Regime Termination (Geddes, Wright & Frantz)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(2.1) Dictatorships</th>
<th>(2.2) Dictatorships</th>
<th>(2.3) Democracies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>End of regime</td>
<td>A-to-A</td>
<td>A-to-D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENP (House)</td>
<td>0.75** (0.19)</td>
<td>0.44 (0.27)</td>
<td>1.20** (0.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislature</td>
<td>-1.72** (0.56)</td>
<td>-1.42 (0.75)</td>
<td>-2.75** (0.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalist</td>
<td>0.47 (0.38)</td>
<td>0.73 (0.49)</td>
<td>0.25 (0.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragmented opposition</td>
<td>-0.07 (0.50)</td>
<td>0.45 (0.70)</td>
<td>-0.19 (0.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita GDP</td>
<td>-0.16 (0.12)</td>
<td>-0.41 (0.25)</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic growth</td>
<td>-0.06* (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.07 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mineral exports</td>
<td>0.00 (0.44)</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.60)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population (millions)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Fractionalization</td>
<td>-0.67 (0.80)</td>
<td>0.38 (1.12)</td>
<td>-1.77 (1.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Fract.</td>
<td>-3.65* (1.49)</td>
<td>-2.72 (2.11)</td>
<td>-7.54** (2.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of the regime</td>
<td>0.03 (0.08)</td>
<td>0.04 (0.11)</td>
<td>0.16 (0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of regime(^2)</td>
<td>-0.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>-0.00 (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of regime(^3)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.15 (0.71)</td>
<td>-0.91 (0.97)</td>
<td>-0.53 (1.10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                  |                      |                      |                   |
| N                | 561                  | 561                  | 712               |
| Log-L            | -174.437             | -203.331             | -125.551          |

Entries are logistic estimates (standard errors). Dependent variable is the End of regime according to Geddes, Wright & Frantz. Model 2.2 estimates competing risks using regime survival as the baseline category.

\* p<0.05, ** p<0.01.

**Hypothesis 2.** Model 2.1 shows that the presence of a legislature stabilizes authoritarianisms and makes it possible for rulers to lengthen their tenure. The size of this effect, as mentioned, is conditional on the number of parties. The expected risk of collapse in a typical year, which is .12 for dictatorships without a legislature, declines to .05 for authoritarian legislatures with one party, but it increases to .19 for authoritarian legislatures with one party.
with three parties. Model 2.2 confirms that the adoption of a legislative body reduces the risk of democratization, but legislatures have no significant effects on the emergence of a new autocracy. Nominal democratic institutions do not avoid or encourage transitions among nondemocratic regimes.

**Hypothesis 3.** Model 2.3 allows us to consider the effect of party pluralism on the likelihood of democratic breakdown. By contrast to authoritarian regimes, pluralism does not increase the risk of regime change under democracy. In line with our theory, an increase in the number of parties does not destabilize democratic rule.

**Alternative Explanations.** Consistent with a vast prior literature, Model 2.1 suggests that economic growth strengthens authoritarian leaders, diminishing the likelihood of regime change. The results in Model 2.2 suggest that growth prevents an authoritarian coup more than democratic change, although the coefficients are insignificant. Moreover, the existence of religious fractionalization reduces the probability of democratization.

No control variable included in Model 2.3 achieves statistical significance at the .05 level. This suggest that some factors regarded as crucial for democratic survival by the previous literature, such as levels of development and economic performance, do not shape the survival of competitive regimes in Latin America. This null finding is consistent with the work of Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2014), who instead emphasize regional political forces, domestic actors’ normative preferences, and their policy radicalism as alternative explanations.

**Robustness Tests**

**Non-Linear Effects.** Party pluralism may have non-monotonic effects on regime survival. At least two reasons could explain a non-linear link between the number of parties and the log-odds of regime change. First, a unit-change in the effective number of parties has different substantive meanings at different levels of the variable. For example, increasing the number of parties from 1 to 2 implies moving from a hegemonic party system to party pluralism; from 2 to 3 implies changing from a two-party system to multipartism; and from 5 to 6, sliding from moderate into fragmented pluralism. Second, arguments about the perils of presidentialism suggest that democracies may be unstable at very low levels of party pluralism (because they confront internal backsliding into authoritarianism) and at very high
levels of pluralism (because they confront deadlock and the risk of external breakdown).\(^6\)

To account for possible non-linearities in the effects of party pluralism, we re-estimated all models in Table 2 using a quadratic specification for the Effective Number of Parties. Table 3 summarizes the results of this exercise.

| Table 3. Effect of Pluralism in Models with Quadratic Specification (Geddes et al.) |
|-----------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|
|                                        | (A1.1) | (A1.2) | (A1.3) |
|                                        | Dictatorships | Dictatorships | Democracies |
|                                        | End of regime | A-to-A | A-to-D | End of regime |
| ENP (House)                             | 0.41 | -0.32 | 1.39 | -0.63 |
|                                         | (0.63) | (0.88) | (0.98) | (0.60) |
| ENP (House)\(^2\)                      | 0.06 | 0.12 | -0.02 | 0.07 |
|                                         | (0.10) | (0.14) | (0.15) | (0.07) |
| N                                      | 561 | 561 | 712 |
| Log-L                                  | -174.273 | -200.445 | -125.087 |

Entries are logistic estimates (standard errors). Dependent variable is the End of regime according to Geddes, Wright & Frantz. Control variables omitted to save space (Table available upon request).

\(* p<0.05, ** p<0.01.\)

Although the individual estimates for the linear and quadratic terms are statistically insignificant, the overall marginal effect of the effective number of parties in authoritarian regimes is statistically significant and similar to the effects estimated in Table 2. The marginal effect is defined as \(b_{21} + 2b_{22}(\text{ENP})\), where \(b_{21}\) is the coefficient for the linear term and \(b_{22}\) is the coefficient for the quadratic term. For example, in Model 3.1, the marginal effect of adding an extra party when the system already has two parties is \(0.41 + 2(0.06)2.0 = 0.64\) (\(p < .05\)).

In contrast, the effect of party pluralism remains insignificant for democratic regimes in Model 2.3. The marginal effect when the democratic system has two parties is \(-0.12\) (\(p = .27\)). More generally, Figures 1 and 2 below show that the overall effects of party pluralism are consistently similar in all models, whether we assume a monotonic or a non-monotonic effect.

**Alternative Outcome Measures.** Tables 2 and 3 presented estimates using information from Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2014) to code regime change. Table 4 shows

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\(^6\) However, Cheibub (2002) argues that situations of limited pluralism—e.g., three parties of similar size—may be riskier for presidential regimes than those in which the effective number of parties exceeds five.
that the same results hold when we use Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland’s (2009) and Svolik’s (2012) classifications of political regimes. Even though the three datasets differ in coding rules that alter the timing of several events in our dataset, our main conclusions remain unaltered. Increasing levels of party pluralism posit great danger for authoritarian regimes, not because they are likely to be displaced by another autocracy, but because they confront greater chances of democratization. In contrast, party pluralism does not increase the risk of democratic collapse.

Table 4. Effects of Pluralism in Models with Linear Specification (Alternative Outcomes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regime classification</th>
<th>Dictatorships</th>
<th>Dictatorships</th>
<th>Democracies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>End of regime</td>
<td>A-to-A</td>
<td>A-to-D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geddes, Wright &amp; Frantz</td>
<td>0.75**</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>1.20**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[2.1]</td>
<td>[2.2]</td>
<td>[2.2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheibub, Gandhi &amp; Vreeland</td>
<td>0.71**</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>1.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[A2.1]</td>
<td>[A2.2]</td>
<td>[A2.2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Svolik</td>
<td>0.62**</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>1.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[A3.1]</td>
<td>[A3.2]</td>
<td>[A3.2]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are logistic coefficients for the Effective Number of Parties in discrete-time duration models replicating Table 2. Coefficients for all other variables are omitted to save space. Brackets indicate the model’s number. Prefix “A” indicates that full model is available upon request.

Figure 4 compares the predicted probability of regime change among dictatorships at different levels of party pluralism, according to the results presented in Models 1.1 (Table 1), 2.1 (Table 2), A1.1 (Table 3), A2.1 and A3.1 (Table 4). (All control variables included in the models remain at their observed values for the purpose of the simulation, except for the presence of a legislature). The effect of party pluralism among dictatorships is consistently strong, irrespective of the specification of the model or the coding of the dependent variable.
**Understanding Causal Mechanisms**

We illustrate the operation of causal mechanisms assumed by H1 and H2 with a comparison of democratic transitions in Mexico and Brazil. The two countries experienced different types of dictatorships—party rule in Mexico (1929-2000) and military rule in Brazil (1964-1985)—yet both regimes were unusually enduring for their type. The presence of legislatures, which accommodated different factions of the ruling party and limited opposition forces, combined with rules for the alternation of the executive, contributed to the survival of the dictatorships for a long time. In response to social pressures, however, the two regimes allowed for greater party pluralism in the late 1970s. The opposition fragmented into multiple parties, but as those forces gained influence over the national legislature and state governments, top-down liberalization evolved in both cases into a process of democratization.

**Mexico: Internal Termination of Party Hegemony**

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) ruled a hegemonic regime between 1929 and 2000, longer than any other noncommunist party in modern history. In 2000, after more than 70 years, the PRI peacefully relinquished power to the presidential candidate of the
National Action Party (PAN). Can party pluralism help explain this internal transfer of power?

Specialists have argued that the Mexican legislature gave the hegemonic regime ability to survive, as our second hypothesis claims. Albeit weak compared to the executive, Congress served as a power-sharing mechanism that forced presidents to compromise on important policy issues and avoided concentration of power. Jointly with cabinet positions and other state resources, legislative seats helped incumbents reward opponent’s “silence,” coopting them by offering a place in the Congress (Magaloni 2010, 764). The assembly also played an important role since it facilitated the contention of the PRI’s different factions by granting the committee leadership posts where they could block or amend executive bills (Langston 2017). Hence, while presidents had an exceptional amount of control over appointments, they had to take into account the interests of the party bureaucracy, the governing class and its social allies—labor and agrarian unions—in the legislature and governorships (Smith 2005).

Although they were allowed to compete for all levels of elective office, opposition parties could only expand in the 1980s and 1990s after the PRI became more tolerant of party competition. In 1978, the ruling party adopted an electoral reform that doubled the size of the Chamber of Deputies and allocated a quarter of the seats to minority parties through proportional representation. The goal was threefold: to reward itself disproportionately, to divide their opponents, and to coopt smaller parties, incorporating them into institutional channels instead of defying them through violent means (Magaloni 2006, 25). While the electoral system hindered coordination among opposition parties, it reduced the costs of entry to the Chamber of Deputies and fostered party pluralism.

As resource asymmetries diminished since the 1982 economic crisis, the costs of mobilization for the rightist PAN and the leftist PRD declined. Opposition parties expanded by taking advantage of voters’ dissatisfaction, and exploited the new opportunities offered by the electoral authoritarian regime. The regime was no longer able to create an image of invincibility by winning by ample margins at the polls, to distribute spoils and government jobs to members of the ruling coalition, and to raise the costs of entry to potential challengers by manipulating the electoral rules (Magaloni 2006). As Greene (2007) points out, opposition party behavior and its increasing electoral capacity account for transforming Mexico from a
dominant party system into a competitive democratic regime. After the 1978 electoral reform, the PAN and PRD gradually extended their presence in the legislature. The effective number of parties rose from 1.5 in 1978 to 3.2 in 2000. Before the electoral reform was implemented, the ruling party had controlled at least 82% of the seats in the House; by the time the transition to democracy was completed in 2000, the regime barely controlled 48% of the seats.

Mexico’s history thus illustrates how nominally democratic institutions, such as Congress, stabilized its single-party regime, but at the same time depicts that greater party pluralism facilitates democratization. Despite facing coordination problems due to ideological disagreement, the two parties challenging the PRI were able to offer moderate alternatives to voters and facilitated a transition to democracy. Its multiparty nature has not posed a threat to Mexico’s democratic survival.

**Brazil: The Internal Demise of Military Rule**

The Brazilian dictatorship of 1964-1985 represented one of the most stable bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes in the Latin American twentieth-century. Portrayed as “the most protracted and controlled case on record of the liberalization of an authoritarian regime from above” (von Mettenheim 1995, 99), party pluralism contributes to explain this lengthy process. Moreover, as civil-military relations deteriorated, the Congress became a space of voiced opposition to the rulers.

By contrast to other Latin American dictators, the Brazilian military planned for a long-term intervention and tolerated a legal opposition (Stepan 1971). While in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay military rulers closed the legislature, in Brazil congressional elections were held every four years. Brazilian rulers closed the legislature only twice and for short intervals. Political parties were permitted, although with strong legal restrictions. Until 1978, government regulations imposed a two-party system in which the pro-regime ARENA competed against a single opposition force, the MDB.

Despite the opposition’s weakness, the dictatorship did not enjoy enough popular support to govern without repression and recurrent manipulation of electoral laws. Social pressures led the military to believe that some liberalization of the system was necessary. Scholars agree that the “slow road to democratization” began with General Geisel’s triumph over hard-liners in 1973 (Skidmore 1989). Confident in controlling the political situation,
soft-liners embarked in an opening designed to split the opposition and coopt social and labor movements into institutionalized arenas rather than to accomplish competitive elections and full democracy (Lamounier 1974).

Although the decision to liberalize had its roots within the regime, it unleashed a dynamic that boosted the role of the opposition by changing the rules of the game. Anticipating a triumph under the effects of the “economic miracle”, the regime allowed the MDB to run a relatively free campaign in 1974 as part of its decision to tolerate greater political freedom (Breneman 1995). Confident that economic growth in the late 1960s and early 1970s was outstanding and that ARENA would repeat the 1970 landslide, the regime overestimated its own strength. Yet the opposition claimed key victories, winning 16 of 22 contested seats in the Senate. While military triumph in the 1970 elections was achieved under extremely controlled conditions, the success of the MDB in the 1974 elections under less censorship and greater turnout undermined support for liberalization because it cast doubts on the regime’s ability to control the electoral process (von Mettenheim 1995).

In 1979, the military took advantage of a long-overdue party reform to liberalize the artificial two-party system, with the goal of dividing the opposition. The effective number of parties in the opposition indeed increased from 1.0 in 1978 to 2.6 in 1980, but the size of the government’s party in the lower house progressively shrank. Emboldened, the opposition challenged autocracy at both the institutional and popular levels, demanding the reestablishment of basic civil liberties. The government responded reducing the episodes of torture and abolishing the Institutional Act No. 5, which had eliminated important civil liberties.

The liberalization process provided new opportunities for the opposition (Mainwaring 1986). New parties were created. Before the abertura began, the government controlled 72% of the Chamber of Deputies and 86% of the Senate. The 1982 elections yielded a far different outcome: the regime lost its majority in the lower house and maintained 67% in the upper chamber. Having obtained considerable institutional resources, the opposition thrusted the regime towards democracy by pushing the government into making new concessions. Social movements also surged back and challenged the dictatorship (Moisés 1982).
The PMDB’s presidential candidate prevailed in the 1985 indirect election. By then, more than five parties had representation in the Chamber of Deputies, and the party system would soon become one of the most fragmented in the world. Multipartyism posed coordination problems, yet opposition parties served as means to channel the population demands, taking advantage of the top-down decided liberalization process and pushing Brazil towards democracy. The opposition played an essential role in the institutional arena—the legislature and the state governorships—as well as through social movements. Consistent with our third hypothesis, Brazil’s democracy has not been challenged by its extremely fragmented party system.

Conclusions

This paper has made three contributions. First, it advances a theory of party pluralism and regime stability that integrates vast literatures and lasting debates in the study of authoritarian regimes, party systems, and presidentialism. The theory helps explain why some dictators tolerate party pluralism even though one-party regimes appear to be more durable. Pluralism helps prevent bottom-up revolt, even though it facilitates internal democratization.

Second, our study shows the effectiveness of a straightforward estimator to assess simultaneously the effects of a treatment and its dose, overcoming the fact that part of the population does not receive the treatment (and thus is missing any information on dosing). This estimator allows us to assess the impact of authoritarian legislatures and of the number of parties allowed in such legislatures, without losing information for our main predictor, the effective number of parties.

Third, and most important, our study shows that a large number of parties does not undermine the survival of presidential democracies, but instead undermines the survival of dictatorships. The results, observed for a sample of 20 Latin American countries, are resilient under different specifications and measures of the dependent variable. Our results reinforce Teorell and Wahman’s (2017) findings for a worldwide sample, who argue that multiparty elections create an institutional space for opposition parties and allow them to promote further positive democratic change.
The mechanisms implied by the theory are supported by the experience of the Mexican (1929-2000) and the Brazilian (1964-1985) dictatorships, two examples of long-lasting party and military dictatorships, respectively. The presence of authoritarian legislatures, combined with mechanisms for executive turnover, facilitated the survival of both regimes. Although institutions served as a democratic façade to coopt civilian support and deter international pressures, the persistence of elections, parties, and a constitution proved important for democratization. In the 1970s, both regimes allowed for greater pluralism to reduce the need for repression. Emboldened by the liberalization process, opposition parties gained institutional room for maneuvering and negotiating with the autocratic government. The same institutions that allowed a stable authoritarian regime, preventing bottom-up revolt, ultimately facilitated an internal transition to democracy by giving the opposition the means to channel discontent with authoritarian rulers.

The distinction between internal regime change, a progressive transformation that takes place following the rules of the incumbent regime, and external regime change, which involves an overthrow of the existing legality by the regime’s opponents, is of crucial relevance to understand contemporary political processes. Scholars of democratization have long distinguished between top-down and bottom-up transitions to democracy, but contemporary events in Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Venezuela, and other troubled democracies suggest that theories of regime change must always accommodate the possibility internal processes of backsliding into authoritarian rule.

References


Make a Difference?


Moisés, José et al. 1982. *Alternativas Populares Da Democracia*. Petrópolis: Vozes/CEDEC.


