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Downsizing Democracy: Why Ordinary People Acquiesce to Authoritarianism

A Funding Proposal

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Overview:

One of the most important intellectual challenges facing political science today is to understand when and why democratically elected incumbents succeed in subverting democracy. This project addresses this challenge by identifying a general mechanism that accounts for the vulnerability of democracies to executive takeovers: ordinary voters' willingness to trade-off democratic principles for policies that reflect their partisan interests and incumbents that can credibly deliver them. The project develops a theoretical framework that clarifies how voters' willingness to make such trade-offs at the micro-level results in the subversion of democracy by incumbents at the macro level. It identifies two structural conditions that make new democracies especially vulnerable: polity-wide political polarization and large performance gaps between the incumbent government and the opposition. These mechanisms are empirically evaluated using a combination of cross-country data and a series of survey experiments designed to test the proposed mechanisms in a number of critical cases: Hungary, Kenya, Northern Ireland, Russia, Tunisia, and Turkey.

Intellectual Merit:

This project addresses a fundamental question about the survival of democracy: When can we realistically expect the public to serve as a check on the authoritarian temptations of elected politicians? Extant research lacks both comprehensive empirical evidence and a rigorous theoretical framework to address this question. The present research explains why polarized societies are especially vulnerable to the subversion of democracy by incumbents, and why a mass of centrist voters provides precisely the kind of credible deterrent against manipulation that polarized societies lack. The formal framework proposed by this project thus develops microfoundations for one of the most prominent propositions in the study of democratization: that a strong middle class is essential for democratic stability.

The proposed project further advances survey-experimental research on democratization by incorporating several novel design elements: conducting structural identification from experimental data, emphasizing cross-country comparability in experimental design, and employing candidate-choice experiments as a form of an indirect questioning technique that avoids social desirability bias. Preliminary findings indicate a potential for the proposed approach to overturn established knowledge about the extent and robustness of public support for democracy.

Broader Impacts:

This project advances scientific knowledge and research on democratization, electoral authoritarianism, and public support for democracy. The broader societal impacts of this research include scientifically-grounded recommendations for foreign policy toward new democracies as well as democracy promotion around the world. Findings will be disseminated in the form of several scholarly articles, a book manuscript, and publicly accessible data. This project also provides academic training and research experience for a number of graduate student assistants who will be involved in the design, execution, analysis, and data management of nationally-representative survey-experiments in seven countries.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

A. Introduction

When democracies break down, they do so in two very different ways. The first and most extensively studied form of democratic breakdown is the military coup.¹ This is how the Chilean military brought down Salvador Allende’s government in 1973 and how the Egyptian military ousted president Mohamed Morsi in 2013. But as Table 1 shows, beginning in the 1990s, military coups have been surpassed as the modal form of democratic breakdown by executive takeovers. This second form of democratic breakdown typically entails the gradual subversion of democracy by an initially democratically elected incumbent, as illustrated by the recent rise of authoritarianism under Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey.²

Executive takeovers present a number of puzzles for our understanding of the breakdown of democracy. First, unlike military coups, executive takeovers are initiated by an elected incumbent and rarely involve the threat of force or overt violence. This suggests that incumbents are able to subvert democracy by exploiting vulnerabilities *within* the democratic process. Yet we know little about what these vulnerabilities are and why incumbents succeed in exploiting them in some democracies but not others. Second, executive takeovers tend to proceed gradually, often over several election cycles, and under vocal criticism by the opposition, the press, and foreign observers. Voters therefore have an opportunity to reject undemocratic incumbents without resorting to costly measures such as protest or violence – by simply voting them out of office. So why don’t they? Finally and even more perplexingly, many incumbents implicated in the subversion of democracy, including Chávez, Putin, and Erdoğan, enjoy significant and genuine popular support.³ Why do voters who routinely profess support for democracy simultaneously support incumbents intent on subverting it?

In this proposal, I outline a 3-year research project that addresses these questions. I am currently developing a theoretical framework that explains when and why incumbents succeed in subverting democracy and I propose to use this theoretical framework to design and execute a data collection along with a series of survey experiments that evaluate the key hypothesized mechanisms. Briefly, I propose that the following general mechanism accounts for the vulnerability of democracies to executive takeovers: voters, especially in new democracies, are willing to trade-off democratic principles for policies that reflect their partisan interests and incumbents that can credibly deliver order and economic growth. Incumbents with authoritarian ambitions, in turn, take advantage of voters’ susceptibility to make such trade-offs in order to perpetuate their hold on power. I identify two

¹See e.g. Cheibub (2007), Marinov and Goemans (2014), and Houle (2016).

²Most research on democratization ignores the difference between these two paths to democratic breakdown. For exceptions, see Bermeo (2016), Maeda (2010), Ulfelder (2010), and Svobik (2015). For a recent review of the research on democratic breakdowns and electoral authoritarianism, see Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009), Levitsky and Way (2010), Lust and Waldner (2015), and Schedler (2013).

³Best evidence on this phenomenon comes from research on Russia: Using list experiments, Frye et al. (2016) find that genuine support for Vladimir Putin in early 2015 was around 80%, which is consistent with similarly high public approval ratings reported throughout Putin’s tenure in office.

Table 1: Democratic breakdowns via military coups versus executive takeovers, 1973-2015

Period	Number of Democratic Breakdowns		Critical Values at 5% Significance Level ^a
	Military Coups	Executive Takeovers	
1973-1979	13	17	[10,20]
1980-1989	16	19	[12,23]
1990-1999	13***	29***	[15,27]
2000-2009	8***	25***	[11,22]
2010-2015	5*	13*	[5,13]

Note: Author’s coding of Freedom House’s *Freedom on the World* country ratings, 1973-2016. A democratic breakdown corresponds to a downward change from Freedom House’s “Free” or “Partly Free” rating.

^a H_0 : “Military coups and executive takeovers are equally likely.” Critical values were computed using the binomial distribution. Significance levels *10%, **5%, ***1% refer to a two-sided hypothesis test.

structural conditions that allow incumbents to do so: the first is polity-wide political polarization, typically along economic, social, or ethnic lines; the second are large performance gaps between the incumbent government’s and the opposition’s tenure in office, typically in the form of economic growth and unemployment. I plan to evaluate these mechanisms using a combination of cross-country data and a series of survey experiments specifically designed to credibly elicit voters’ willingness to trade-off democratic principles for other, potentially competing goals.

Findings from this research will help us answer a fundamental question about the survival of democracy: *When can we realistically expect the public to serve as a check on the authoritarian temptations of elected politicians?* Over the 3-year time frame for this project, I plan to complete several research articles and a book manuscript, and I intend to make publicly available new cross-country survey-experimental data on support for democracy and democratic backsliding. In what follows, I briefly outline the key elements of the proposed research and clarify its potential to advance our understanding of democratic survival. Whenever available, I illustrate key concepts, mechanisms, and (potential) empirical results with preliminary theoretical and empirical research that I have conducted in preparation for this proposal.

B. Theoretical Framework

I propose to investigate how two broad, polity-level structural conditions facilitate the subversion of democracy by incumbents. The first is a high level of partisan polarization, typically along economic (left-right), social (liberal-conservative, secular-islamist), or ethnic lines. The second structural condition is characterized by sharp performance differences between the tenure of the incumbent government and that of the opposition that preceded it, usually in the form of economic performance. Both conditions allow incumbents to present voters with the following Faustian choice: they can vote for an incumbent whose policies or leadership they find appealing but who at the same time undermines democracy,

or for a pro-democratic but policy- or performance-wise unappealing opposition. In electorates that are sharply polarized and in those where large performance gaps favor the incumbent, a significant fraction ordinary voters will be willing to sacrifice fair, democratic competition in favor of an incumbent who represents their interests or simply delivers.

The above argument rests on a key, micro-level assumption: that voters are willing to trade-off democratic principles for other, potentially competing goals. Consider the first structural condition that I identify, a high level of polity-wide political polarization. In polarized societies, most voters have a strong preference for their favorite candidate or party, with only a few indifferent between those competing. Under these circumstances, an incumbent anticipates that electoral manipulation will present his supporters with a dilemma that may work to his advantage: even if most of the incumbent's supporters value democracy for its own sake, each understands that punishing the incumbent for manipulating the democratic process by not voting for him amounts to supporting a challenger that she detests. The more polarized a society is, the greater the number of the incumbent's supporters who resolve this dilemma by nonetheless voting for the incumbent – thus effectively tolerating his undemocratic behavior and allowing him to gain an unfair electoral advantage. Put differently, voters in polarized societies become pro- or anti-Chávez, Orbán, or Erdoğan first and democrats only second.

The microfoundations for the second structural condition that I emphasize – that large performance gaps between the incumbent and the opposition facilitate the incumbent's subversion of democracy – rest on voters' susceptibility to a related set of trade-offs: the willingness of ordinary people to forgo democratic principles in exchange for leadership that delivers economic growth and social order. In fact, this proposition amounts to a “folk theory” of the rise of authoritarianism in some of the most prominent cases of the subversion of democracy by incumbents. In Russia, observers often speak of a tacit contract behind Vladimir Putin's “managed democracy,” according to which Russians citizens have willingly subjected themselves to Putin's autocratic rule in exchange for economic growth, order, and national glory.⁴ Similarly, even the critics of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's increasing authoritarianism recognize the unprecedented levels of economic growth in Turkey during Erdoğan's decade as prime minister.⁵

What extant democratization research lacks is a rigorous theoretical framework that would delineate when ordinary citizens' willingness to make these two sets of trade-offs at the micro-level results in the equilibrium macro-level outcome that is the focus of this research: the subversion democracy by democratically elected incumbents.⁶ Equally importantly, we lack credible empirical evidence that ordinary people are indeed willing to

⁴See e.g. [McFaul and Stoner-Weiss \(2008\)](#). [Treisman \(2011\)](#) shows that, until 2014, Putin's popularity mirrored Russia's economic performance.

⁵See e.g. “Recep Tayyip Erdogan: Turkey's pugnacious president,” *BBC News*, 17 April 2017.

⁶Some of the key contributions to the emerging formal-theoretic research on electoral manipulation and fraud include [Fearon \(2011\)](#), [Egorov and Sonin \(2017\)](#), [Gehlbach and Sonin \(2014\)](#), [Gehlbach and Simpson \(2015\)](#), [Little \(2012, 2017\)](#), [Little, Tucker, and LaGatta \(2014\)](#), [Miller \(2013, Forthcoming\)](#), [Rozenas \(2016\)](#), [Chernykh and Svoboda \(2015\)](#), and [Rundlett and Svoboda \(2016\)](#); see [Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svoboda \(2015\)](#) for a review. None of these models examine voters' willingness to trade-off of democratic principles in exchange for other, potentially competing goals as a microfoundation for the subversion democracy by incumbents.

make trade-offs that entail the sacrifice of democratic principles for other, potentially competing goals. Below, I outline how I plan to translate the above intuitions into rigorous microfoundations for democratic backsliding; I turn to my empirical research design in the subsequent section.

B.1. Preliminary Results: When Polarization Trumps Civic Virtue

In order to illustrate how I plan to develop the theoretical framework for this project, I present a preliminary and simplified version of the formal analysis of the first of the two structural conditions that I argue facilitate the subversion of democracy by incumbents: polity-wide partisan polarization.

Consider the following interaction between an incumbent, a challenger, and a large number of voters. I distinguish between *uninformed* voters, who make up an α fraction of the electorate, and *informed* voters, who make up the remaining $1 - \alpha$ fraction; $0 < \alpha < 1$. Informed voters base their voting decisions on the candidate’s policy platform and the fairness of electoral competition. Specifically, each voter i evaluates the two candidates’ policy platforms according to the negative absolute distance function $-|x_i - x_j|$, where x_i denotes i ’s ideal policy and $x_j \in \{x_A, x_B\}$ denotes the incumbent’s and the challenger’s policy platform, respectively.

While informed voters may differ in their preferred policies, they all agree that electoral competition should be democratic and therefore prefer candidates that compete fairly. Specifically, each informed voter suffers the disutility $-\gamma\mu^2$ if the incumbent manipulates electoral competition in his favor and wins.⁷ The term μ reflects the amount of the incumbent’s *manipulation*, while $\gamma \geq 0$ is a *civic virtue* parameter that captures informed voters’ sensitivity to manipulation. Thus in an electorate with civic virtue γ , an informed voter with the ideal point x_i obtains the payoff

$$u_i(x_j, \mu) = \begin{cases} -|x_i - x_A| - \gamma\mu^2 & \text{if the incumbent wins;} \\ -|x_i - x_B| & \text{if the challenger wins.} \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

In contrast to informed voters, uninformed voters’ electoral decisions are driven entirely by the incumbent’s degree of manipulation μ .⁸ I do not directly model the mechanism by which manipulation sways uninformed voters directly due to the large number of distinct forms that pre-election manipulation can take. Instead, I simplify the analysis that follows by assuming that when the incumbent does manipulate, he gains an electoral advantage among a subset of the electorate – the uninformed voters – and I capture the effectiveness of the various “technologies” of manipulation via the parameter M . Specifically, I assume that the incumbent obtains a $\frac{1+\mu M+\epsilon}{2}$ share of uninformed voters’ votes, while the challenger

⁷The assumption that only the incumbent can engage in manipulation captures the most frequent real-world scenarios: Incumbents have disproportionately greater access to the tools of manipulation by virtue of controlling the state apparatus. A model in which both the incumbent and the challenger can manipulate is a straightforward extension of the current setting.

⁸This distinction between informed and uninformed voters is inspired by the models of special interest politics pioneered by Baron (1994) and Grossman and Helpman (1996). See Gehlbach (2013, Chapter 3) for a review of these and related models.

obtains the remaining $\frac{1-\mu M-\epsilon}{2}$ share. I interpret ϵ as a small, exogenous perturbation to uninformed voters' vote choices that may occur between the time when candidates announce their platforms and the incumbent chooses μ , and when the election takes place. Specifically, ϵ is commonly believed to be uniformly distributed on the interval $(-\sigma, \sigma)$, where $0 < \sigma < \frac{1}{2}$. Thus in the absence of manipulation, $\mu = 0$, uninformed voters split evenly between the two candidates. I let $0 \leq \mu \leq 1$ and $0 \leq M \leq 1$ so that in the extreme case when $\mu = 1$, the incumbent obtains the vote of at most all α uninformed voters.

In order to examine the implications of the electorate's polarization for manipulation, I let $1 - \pi$ fraction of voters' ideal points x_i be distributed uniformly along the unit interval $(-\frac{1}{2}, \frac{1}{2})$, with the remaining π fraction of voters' ideal points forming two equally sized mass points at the limits of the interval; $0 \leq \pi < 1$. The parameter π thus reflects the electorate's *polarization*: in an electorate with π close to 1, most voters' ideal points are located at ideologically opposed poles.

Before moving further, note that the payoff structure in (1) implies that voters are willing to trade off the fairness of electoral competition for ideologically proximate policies: if the candidates propose different platforms, informed voters who are ideologically closer to the incumbent than the challenger will be willing to tolerate a positive amount of manipulation in exchange for the incumbent's more favorable policy. To see this, suppose that $x_A > x_B$ and observe that for $\mu > 0$ informed voter i is indifferent between the incumbent and the challenger if

$$-|x_i - x_A| - \gamma\mu^2 = -|x_i - x_B|,$$

or equivalently if i 's ideal policy is

$$x_i = \frac{x_A + x_B}{2} + \frac{\gamma\mu^2}{2}.$$

Denote this *swing voter*'s ideal policy by $x_S(\mu)$. We see that informed voters to the right of the midpoint between the incumbent's and the challenger's platforms $\frac{x_A+x_B}{2}$ but to the left of the swing voter $x_S(\mu)$ favor the incumbent based on their policy preferences, yet are sufficiently put off by manipulation to vote for the challenger instead. The loss of informed voters put off by manipulation is intentionally the only cost of manipulation to the incumbent in this setting. By contrast, informed voters whose ideal points are to the right of $x_S(\mu)$ tolerate the incumbent's manipulation because their distaste for it is outweighed by the ideological proximity of the incumbent's policies.

In order to show how political polarization facilitates the subversion of democracy by incumbents in the most transparent manner, I simplify the analysis in this proposal by assuming that the candidates' platforms are exogenously fixed to be symmetric around the electorate's median. In this setting, the only strategic decision is the incumbent's choice of the amount of manipulation μ . After that, voters vote, the exogenous shock ϵ is realized, and the candidate that obtains the most votes wins.

The incumbent's optimal choice of μ maximizes his probability of victory. The vote

share that the incumbent obtains when he manipulates at μ is

$$V_A = (1 - \alpha) \left[(1 - \pi) \left(\frac{1}{2} - x_S(\mu) \right) + \frac{\pi}{2} \right] + \alpha \left(\frac{1 + \mu M + \epsilon}{2} \right),$$

with the challenger obtaining the remaining $V_B = 1 - V_A$ vote share. Given our assumptions about the distribution of ϵ , the incumbent's probability of victory $\Pr(V_A - V_B \geq 0)$ is

$$\Pr \left(\epsilon \geq \frac{2(1 - \alpha)(1 - \pi)x_S(\mu)}{\alpha} - \mu M \right) = \frac{\sigma - \left[\frac{2(1 - \alpha)(1 - \pi)x_S(\mu)}{\alpha} \right] - \mu M}{2\sigma}.$$

Maximizing the above with respect to μ , we obtain

$$\mu^* = \frac{\alpha}{1 - \alpha} \times \frac{M}{2\gamma(1 - \pi)}. \quad (2)$$

The expression for μ^* summarizes the equilibrium consequences of polarization for the incumbent's ability to manipulate electoral competition in his favor: the equilibrium amount of manipulation μ^* as well as the resulting probability of the incumbent's victory are increasing in the level of polarization π . This is because the more polarized an electorate is, the greater is the fraction of the incumbent's "core" supporters for whom it would take extreme amounts of manipulation to abandon the incumbent in favor of the challenger. Figure 1 illustrates these comparative statics. The left panel plots the equilibrium amount of manipulation μ^* and the corresponding probability of the incumbent's victory as a function of polarization π . The right panel plots the resulting equilibrium share of informed, uninformed, and all votes for the incumbent as a function of polarization π . The flat discontinuities result from my assumption that $\mu \leq 1$ and the fact that the probability of the incumbent's victory can be at most one. That is, there are levels of polarization π so large that the incumbent will optimally manipulate to the fullest extent, which may in turn assure his certain victory.⁹

B.2. Plans for Further Theoretical Research

The above is an intentionally simplified and preliminary illustration of the conceptual microfoundations that are an integral part of this project. The more general theoretical framework that I am developing extends the above analysis in a number of directions. First, it considers the implications of the mirror image of a polarized society – one with a mass of centrist voters – and shows that a large enough mass of centrists provides precisely the kind of credible deterrent against manipulation that polarized societies lack. This extension provides microfoundations for one of the most prominent propositions in the study of democratization: that a strong middle class is essential for democratic stability

⁹The remaining comparative statics are also intuitive. A greater share of uninformed voters α and a more effective technology of manipulation M both result in higher equilibrium amounts of manipulation. Civic virtue γ , meanwhile, has the opposite effect on μ^* because it raises voters' sensitivity to manipulation.

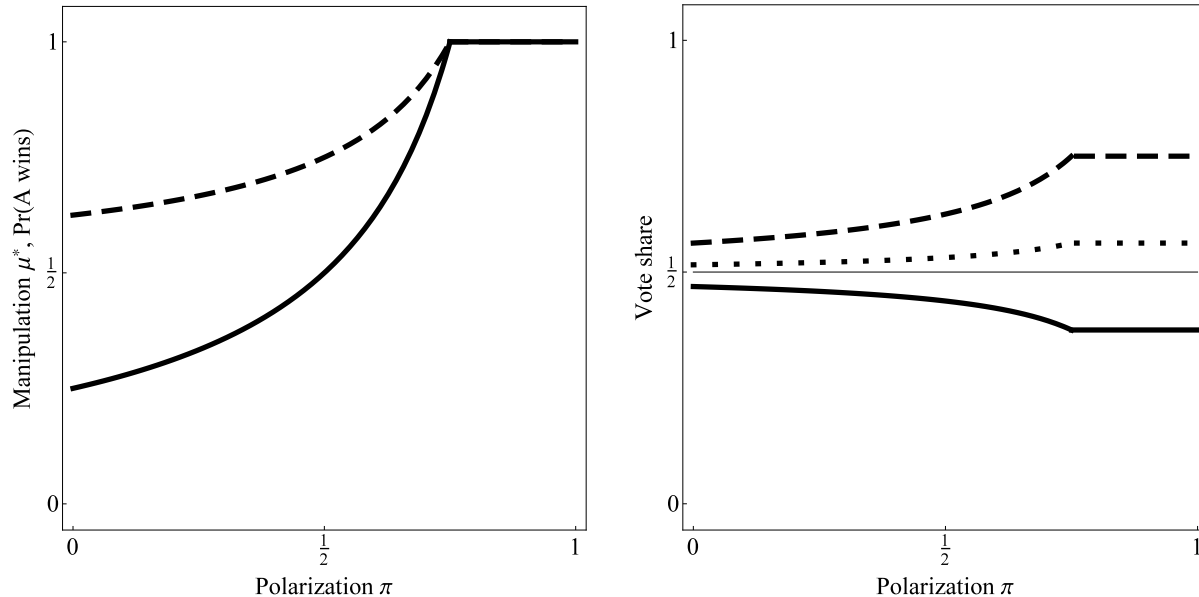


Figure 1: Equilibrium amount of manipulation μ^* (solid) and the probability of the incumbent’s victory (dashed) as a function of polarization π (left panel); the incumbent’s vote share among informed (solid), uninformed (dashed), and all (dotted) voters as a function of polarization π (right panel)

(Lipset 1959; Moore 1966).¹⁰ Second, I am developing an extension of this model that captures distinct features of ethnic polarization, as opposed to polarization along economic or social lines. The purpose of this extension is to explain the persistence of suboptimal government performance that characterizes many ethnically-divided societies as the consequence of ordinary people’s willingness to prioritize ethnic and sectarian loyalties at the expense of other candidate attributes, especially competence and pro-democratic orientation.¹¹ Finally, I plan to employ a separate, accountability-based formal framework to explain how voters’ willingness to forgo democratic principles in exchange for leadership that delivers economic growth accounts for the turn to authoritarianism in Russia and related cases.¹² A special case of this framework will focus on explaining electoral support for former authoritarian elites in new democracies by emphasizing how post-transition economic performance shapes voters’ beliefs about the competence of new democratic versus former authoritarian political elites.¹³

More broadly, a key role for the above theoretical framework is to guide the design and analysis of the candidate-choice survey experiments that are at the core of my empirical research design; I turn this aspect now.

¹⁰For alternative models of the role of the middle class in democratization, see Acemoglu and Robinson (2005), Ansell and Samuels (2014), Boix (2003), and Debs and Morrison (2015).

¹¹For an alternative model of the role of ethnicity in accountability, see Padró i Miguel (2007).

¹²In my formal analysis, I plan to build on the models in Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland (Forthcoming), Klasnja, Little, and Tucker (Forthcoming), Svoboda (2013), and Meirowitz and Tucker (2013).

¹³On the success of former authoritarian elites and parties after a transition to democracy, see especially Grzymala-Busse (2002, 2007), Miller (Forthcoming), Nalepa (2010), Pop-Eleches (2008), and Tucker (2006).

C. Empirical Research Design

The empirical research design for this project builds directly on the theoretical framework that I outline above. My dependent variable – the subversion of democracy by incumbents – is at the national, macro level. Meanwhile, the key theoretical mechanisms in my framework operate at the individual voter, micro level. Accordingly, I plan a two-level empirical strategy: i) to conceptualize, collect, and analyze cross-national country-level data on the subversion of democracy by incumbents; and ii) to design and execute a series of nationally representative survey experiments to evaluate the key mechanisms in my framework at the level at which they are hypothesized to occur – that of the individual voter. Since the funding that I am requesting in this proposal goes toward the execution of these nationally representative survey experiments, I will restrict attention to outlining this set of activities.¹⁴

In order to empirically assess theoretical predictions about the relationship between voters' willingness to tolerate undemocratic behavior by elected politicians and the subversion of democracy by incumbents, I propose to conduct a series of candidate-choice experiments to be embedded in nationally representative surveys in six countries: Hungary, Kenya, Northern Ireland, Russia, Tunisia, and Turkey. Each experiment will ask respondents to vote for one of two candidates described by platforms that are randomized and deliberately designed to allow me to estimate the respondents' willingness to trade off democratic principles for other, possibly competing ends. When evaluating my propositions about the pernicious effects of polarization, candidate platforms will entail policy proposals about economic and social issues, and in the case of ethnic polarization, the candidate's ethnicity and an ethnically-contingent policy position (e.g. a Catholic candidate in Northern Ireland may endorse an armed struggle for a united Ireland.) When evaluating my propositions about how performance gaps between the incumbent and the opposition facilitate the subversion of democracy, candidate attributes will include statements of accomplishments and experiences (e.g. presiding over a 10% decline in crime while serving as a mayor), and when the focus is on support for former authoritarian elites, the candidate characteristics will contain each individual's political affiliation prior to the transition to democracy (e.g. a high-ranking member of the ruling party.) Across all cases, candidates' platforms will include proposals about political reforms that are either unambiguously democratic (e.g. to establish an independent electoral commission) or undemocratic (e.g. to prosecute journalists that criticize the government) as well as several politically irrelevant attributes (e.g. the candidates' favorite hobby). The purpose of the latter will be to conceal that my primary interest is to infer from respondents' voting decisions how

¹⁴Briefly, as a part of this project, I am completing the collection of original data on electoral competitiveness around the world since 1815. A distinguishing feature of this data is that, rather than measuring the procedural fairness of any single election directly – which is not feasible in a sample of this size and historical scope – I record a range of reliably measurable and comparable indicators of electoral competitiveness, such as margins of victory, the presence of and compliance with term limits, and the frequency of alternation in power for legislative and executive posts. I plan to use this data in conjunction with other datasets with similar focus, especially [Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland \(2010\)](#), [Coppedge et al. \(2011\)](#), [Elkins, Ginsburg, and Melton \(2014\)](#), [Geddes, Wright, and Frantz \(2014\)](#), [Hyde and Marinov \(2012\)](#), and [Przeworski \(2013\)](#).

willing they are to trade-off democratic principles for the other, substantive policy goals.

Three aspects of these candidate-choice experiments distinguish them from existing survey-experimental research. The first is a design aimed at *structural identification*: the candidate-choice experiments will be designed (in terms of the nature of candidate attributes, number of choices per respondent, and the accompanying pre-treatment questions) to allow for the estimation of not only causal effects of the relevant treatments but also of key theoretical quantities in the framework outlined in Section B.¹⁵ At the individual level, such key quantities include each respondent’s ideal points with respect to substantive policy platforms and, crucially, each respondent’s civic virtue parameter (x_i and γ in the model in Section B.1). The latter will estimate real-world respondents’ (un)willingness to vote for a candidate who espouses an undemocratic political platform, even if that candidate’s substantive policy proposals were to be closer to the respondent’s preferences than those of a competing candidate. At the macro level, estimates of the electorate-wide distribution of respondent’s ideal points and civic virtue parameters will allow me to compute a new measure of an electorate’s democratic resilience that I call the *elasticity of support for democracy*. The latter is a polity-level quantity defined as the fraction of the electorate willing to defect from a candidate they prefer on policy grounds to a competing candidate, when the latter espouses a more democratic platform. I plan to use this quantity to compare across cases the public’s susceptibility to subversion of democracy by incumbents and to construct experimentally-based polity-level counterfactuals.¹⁶ This focus on experimentally-based structural identification of polity-level quantities explains why I need to embed the candidate-choice experiments in nationally-representative surveys: only then can the advantages of experimental methods for causal identification be deployed toward estimating polity-level quantities – such as the elasticity of support for democracy – with meaningful external validity.¹⁷

The second, distinct aspect of my research design is an emphasis on *cross-country comparability*. This entails two design principles: First, the choice of candidate policy platforms must be identical – whenever realistic – across the six countries so that estimates from the candidate-choice experiments can be directly compared. Second, I plan to ask a set of standard direct questions on political identification and support for democracy that will allow me to contrast my findings to traditional (non-experimental) cross-national survey evidence (from the World Values Surveys, the AmericasBarometer, and others.) This departs from most existing survey experimental research, which is overwhelmingly

¹⁵The candidate-choice experiments that I propose to conduct belong to a broader category of survey-experimental techniques known as conjoint experiments (Hensher, Rose, and Greene 2015). While their use along with methodological research on the prerequisites for proper causal identification has recently grown (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2015a,b), their applications have been predominantly atheoretical.

¹⁶These counterfactuals will allow me to address a range of policy-relevant questions like “If the mass of ideological centrists in Turkey doubled, how much more resistance would an incumbent proposing undemocratic constitutional reforms face from the public?”; “How effective would the technology of manipulation have to be for manipulation to be politically beneficial, given the current level of polarization in Venezuela?”; “How much would the support for an undemocratic incumbent in Russia decline if perceptions of the difference in competence between the incumbent and the opposition were reduced by a half?”

¹⁷On the external-validity advantages gained by embedding survey experiments within nationally-representative samples, see especially Mutz (2011).

characterized by ad-hoc designs that limit our ability to draw implications beyond the cases immediately studied.

The third, final aspect of my research design that distinguishes it from existing survey-experimental research concerns the use of candidate-choice experiments as a form of an *indirect questioning technique* that avoids social desirability bias.¹⁸ The primary purpose of the candidate-choice experiments is to help me estimate voters’ willingness to trade-off democratic principles for other ends, as anticipated by my theory. This is, by design, precluded under the prevailing approach to the study of support for democracy, which takes the form of direct questions – as in “Democracy may not be perfect but it is the best form of government; do you agree?” – which fail to capture the propensity of respondents to make such trade-offs. Equally concerning is the vulnerability of the prevailing approach to social desirability bias: citizens in most democracies have been taught that the only appropriate answer to the above question is “I strongly agree.” The proposed candidate-choice experiments allow for a more credible approach: instead of answers to direct questions, respondents will reveal their commitment to democratic principles by their choices. Crucially, because candidate characteristics will differ along a number of attributes other than democratic platforms, respondents will not be aware that my main purpose is to infer their willingness to sacrifice a candidate who espouses democratic principles for one who does not but whose platform may be appealing on other grounds. My preliminary results, which I briefly discuss at the end of the next section, suggest that prevailing research may severely underestimate the susceptibility of voters in new democracies to such trade-offs.

C.1. Preliminary Results: The Curse of Venezuela’s Polarization

In order to illustrate the value and feasibility of the proposed empirical research design, I briefly present the findings from a set of candidate-choice experiments that I designed to assess my propositions about how political polarization facilitates the subversion of democracy by incumbents. These candidate-choice experiments were embedded in a nationally representative survey of Venezuelan voters in the fall of 2016.¹⁹ The candidate choice experiment presented each respondent with a choice between two candidates with five randomized attributes each: age, number and gender of children, economic policy, proposed reforms to the political system, and favorite sport.²⁰ After seeing these

¹⁸On indirect questioning techniques, see e.g. [Rosenfeld, Imai, and Shapiro \(2016\)](#).

¹⁹The survey took place in October (the pilot) and December (the main round) 2016. Key aspects of Venezuela’s political (d)evolution since Hugo Chávez’s ascent to the presidency in 1999 correspond closely to my theoretical framework. While Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro have taken advantage of a wide “menu of manipulation” (see e.g. [Corrales and Penfold 2015](#)), virtually all such manipulation takes place before elections – paralleling my theoretical focus on incumbent-driven pre-election manipulation. Additionally, electoral competition in Venezuela takes place between two opposing blocks consisting of the incumbent government led by Maduro and the opposition alliance MUD represented by Henrique Capriles. Consistently with my theoretical framework, the two blocks reflect a single, economic left-right axis of conflict within a highly polarized electorate.

²⁰The three politically irrelevant attributes – the candidates’ age, children, and favorite sport – were introduced to add realism to candidates’ profiles and – primarily – to generate artificial differences between

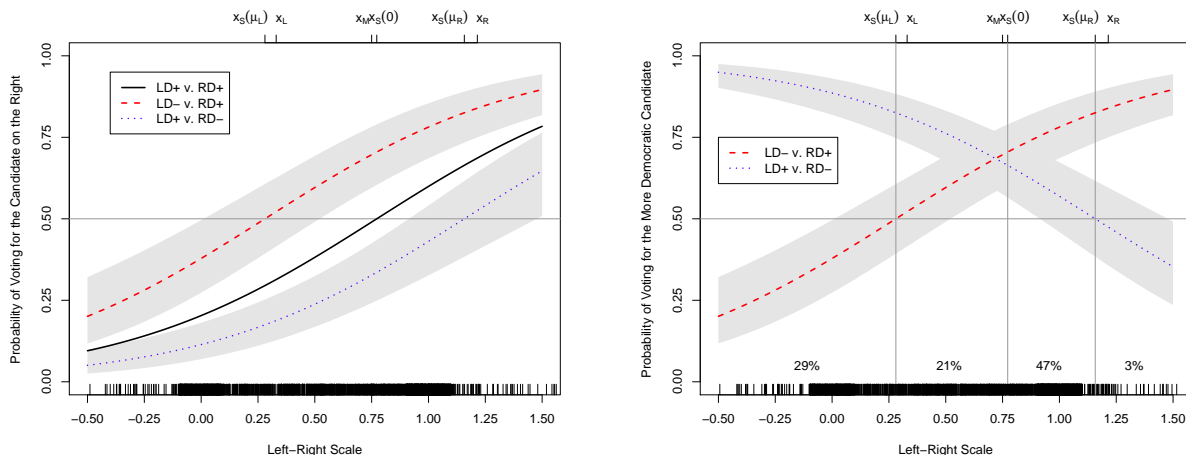


Figure 2: The probability of voting for the candidate on the right (left panel) and the probability of voting for the more democratic candidate (right panel) as a function of voters’ left-right position in the candidate choice experiment

attributes, respondents were first asked to choose the candidate for whom they would vote and then to give an approval rating of each candidate on a scale from 1 to 10. My main interest was to infer from respondents’ voting choices their willingness to trade off democratic values – via the nature of the candidate’s proposed reform to the electoral system – for policies that appeal to their economic interests.

Due to space constraints, I only summarize the results based on scenarios in which the candidates’ economic proposals concerned either the expansion or the closing of social welfare programs known as “Bolivarian missions” (I label these policies L and R for left and right, respectively), and where proposed reforms of the political system included the nomination of new, impartial members to the Supreme Court and the Electoral Commission or no reforms to these institutions (I label these proposals D^+ and D^- for more or less democratic, respectively.) Each respondent was first presented with the LD^+ v. RD^+ scenario, which I treat as a control, and was then, at random, asked to consider either the LD^- v. RD^+ or the LD^+ v. RD^- scenario.²¹ In order not to prime or frame these platforms as democratic/undemocratic, left/right, or pro-government/pro-opposition, I intentionally avoided using any such labels.

The outcome that I focus on here is the respondents’ voting decisions as summarized in the left panel in Figure 2.²² The horizontal axis plots the left-right distribution of voters’ ideal points along an anchored and normalized economic left-right scale on which 0 corresponds to each voters’ placement of Hugo Chávez and 1 of Henrique Capriles. The vertical axis plots the probability of voting for the candidate on the right based on a logit

candidates that would allow respondents to conceal a potentially sensitive reason for their choices (e.g. voting for a candidate who proposes an undemocratic electoral reform only because he offers a favorable economic policy.)

²¹The candidate choice experiment included both within-subject assignment of candidate pairs (as in this case) and across-subject assignments (not presented here.)

²²The experimental design also allows for an analysis that accounts for abstentions and voters’ ratings of candidates (rather than votes.)

estimate of the model

$$\Pr(i \text{ votes for } R | x_i, \tau_1, \tau_2) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \beta_1\tau_1 + \beta_2\tau_2 + \beta_3x_i),$$

where dummies τ_1 and τ_2 correspond to the LD^- v. RD^+ and the LD^+ v. RD^- treatment scenarios, respectively, and x_i is each respondent’s ideal policy on the left-right scale.

We see that when the only difference in the candidates’ platforms concerns their left-right economic policies (this is the control scenario LD^+ v. RD^+ plotted as a solid line), the swing voter – the voter indifferent between the two candidates – is located at $x_S(0) = 0.776$. The adoption of an undemocratic platform by either candidate shifts the swing voter in the direction predicted by the model in Section B.1. When the leftist candidate’s platform becomes less democratic, LD^- v. RD^+ , the swing voter shifts left to $x_S(\mu_L) = 0.277$, implying the defection from the leftist candidate of all voters with ideal points between $x_S(0)$ and $x_S(\mu_L)$. Analogously, when it is the rightist candidate who becomes less democratic, LD^+ v. RD^- , the swing voter shifts rightward to $x_S(\mu_R) = 1.168$. In both cases, these shifts are not only statistically but also politically significant: the adoption of an undemocratic platform by either candidate amounts to a shift in the swing voter corresponding to about a half of the ideological distance between Hugo Chávez (0 on the left-right scale) and Henrique Capriles (1 on the left-right scale)!

But as the theoretical analysis in Section B.1 emphasized, a commitment to democracy alone does not guarantee that each voter is going to vote for the candidate with the more democratic platform. The more extreme voters’ partisan positions are, the more likely it is that their policy preferences will override their concern about democracy. The right panel in Figure 2 highlights this dynamic. The vertical axis now plots the estimated probability of voting for the more democratic candidate for the two treatment conditions LD^- v. RD^+ and LD^+ v. RD^- . The swing voter shifts associated with the two treatment conditions allow me to separate those voters whose policy preferences trump their commitment to democracy from those for whom the opposite holds. Specifically, we see that when the leftist candidate adopts the less democratic platform, voters to the left of $x_S(\mu_L)$ stick with him in spite of that. In effect, these voters are leftists first and democrats only second. By contrast, voters between $x_S(\mu_L)$ and $x_S(0)$ are sufficiently put off by the undemocratic platform proposed by their policy-wise preferred candidate to defect from him and vote for the more democratic – albeit policy-wise more distant – candidate. These voters are democrats first and leftists only second. As suggested by my theoretical discussion, most such defectors are ideological moderates. Unlike strong partisans, these voters can “afford” to put their concerns about the fairness of electoral competition ahead of their economic interests or political ideology. Strong partisans, meanwhile, stick with their preferred candidate even if he adopts an undemocratic platform and are effectively trading-off democratic principles for their partisan interests. Crucially, the latter outnumber the former due to the extreme polarization of the Venezuelan electorate.

These results as well as further analysis that I omit here due to space constraints corroborate my discussion in Section B of the pernicious effects of polarization and the crucial, pro-democratic role played by ideological moderates. Consistently, I found that i)

Venezuelans indeed value democracy for its own sake, but that ii) they are willing to accept undemocratic political reforms when these are proposed by a candidate whose economic policies appeal to their interests, and iii) that voters' willingness to accept such a trade-off is increasing in the intensity of their partisanship.

I conclude my preliminary analysis of the Venezuelan case by highlighting the promise of my research design for experimentally-based structural identification and credible measurement of support for democracy – two distinctive aspects of my research design that I emphasized at the beginning of this section. The decision problem faced by voters in the model in Section B.1 naturally translates into the random utility model of discrete choice.²³ This both provides a microfoundational justification for using a logit regression to analyze the candidate choice experiments, and it allows me to empirically estimate all theoretical parameters in the model in Section B.1. Crucial among these are the swing voter locations for each experimental condition and the civic virtue parameter γ . In turn, I can conclude that if an election were to present Venezuelan voters with the LD^- v. RD^+ scenario from our candidate choice experiment, the leftist candidate could adopt the undemocratic platform and nonetheless win – as long as a his control over the Electoral Commission and the Supreme Court would be effective enough to make up for the 21% of voters who would defect to the rightist candidate. Such a defection would serve as a much stronger check on undemocratic behavior by the rightist candidate, whose manipulation technology would have to make up for the defection of as many as 47% of voters. Because the survey in Venezuela was representative, these findings imply that the Venezuelan electorate is particularly vulnerable to the subversion by a leftist – which is consistent with Venezuelan political development since Hugo Chávez's election to the presidency in 1998.

My finding that a significant fraction of Venezuelans are willing to trade off democratic principles for their partisan interests stands in stark contrast to conventional research on public support for democracy. In my survey, the vast majority of respondents – almost 90% – profess strong respect for democratic norms when asked directly.²⁴ This is comparable to conventional survey findings from Venezuela and other democracies. Yet when the same respondents are faced with the candidate-choice experiments outlined above, one-third overall, and a majority of those on the left, are willing stick with a candidate they prefer on policy grounds even if he proposes an undemocratic political reform. This is much closer to the real-world choices made by Venezuelans over the past 15 years, suggesting that my research design provides an estimate of support for democracy that is much more behaviorally relevant than conventional practice.

C.2. Plans for Further Empirical Research

The six countries in which I plan execute the above research design – Hungary, Kenya, Northern Ireland, Russia, Tunisia, and Turkey – were chosen for their suitability in

²³See e.g. Cameron and Trivedi (2005, 476-478, 486-487).

²⁴This is the proportion of respondents that either “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” with the statement “Democracy may not be perfect but it is the best form of government.” Similar answers were given to other standard direct questions that measure support for democracy or authoritarian alternatives.

evaluating distinct aspects of my theoretical framework. With the exception of Northern Ireland, each country represents a case in which – to a varying degree – practices commonly employed by incumbents attempting to subvert democracy have occurred. This is key for the realism of the (un)democratic political proposals that may be part of a candidate’s profile within the candidate-choice experiments that I propose. At the same time, each of these cases remains free enough so that a nationally representative political survey can be conducted there. I plan to focus on the role of social polarization along the secular-islamist divide in Turkey and on the role of ethnic polarization in Kenya and Northern Ireland. These cases complement the preliminary analysis of left-right economic polarization that I conducted in Venezuela. The cases of Hungary, Russia, and Tunisia will help me evaluate the proposition that voters are willing to trade-off democratic principles in exchange for a leadership that delivers economic growth and order. My research design in Tunisia shares this focus but pays special attention to the public’s willingness to accept former authoritarian elites.

In each case, I plan to employ survey-based items to assess a major competing hypothesis: that rather than making a conscious trade-off between democratic principles and policy or partisan ends, voters are instead engaged in “motivated reasoning.” In the present context, voters may be – possibly unconsciously – ignoring or refuting undemocratic platforms by candidates who share their party or ethnic identity (Adida et al. 2017; Ahlquist et al. Forthcoming).

D. Project Timeline and Anticipated Products

I plan to publish the findings from this project in the form of several research articles and a book manuscript, *Downsizing Democracy: Why Ordinary People Acquiesce to Authoritarianism*. Currently ongoing work on this project consists of an analysis of a survey conducted in Venezuela in the fall of 2016 for the article “When Polarization Trumps Civic Virtue” and the execution of pilot surveys in Northern Ireland and Turkey.

Contingent on being awarded funding, I plan to execute the Northern Ireland and Turkey surveys in the spring of 2019; to design and pilot the Kenya, Russia, and Tunisia surveys in the summer of 2019; to review the pilots and execute the Kenya, Russia and Tunisia surveys, use the data from Russia to work on the article “Putin’s Leviathan”, and use the data from Kenya and Northern Ireland to work on the article “The Trap of Ethnic Politics” in the fall of 2019; and to design and pilot the Hungary survey in the spring of 2020. I intend to complete the research outlined in this proposal during the 2020-2021 academic year when I plan to continue with the publication of the above articles, to execute the Hungary survey, and to work on the book manuscript (including hosting a book workshop.)

F. Broader Impacts

One of the most important intellectual challenges facing political science today is to understand when and why democratically elected incumbents succeed in subverting

democracy. This project addresses this challenge by identifying a general mechanism that accounts for the vulnerability of democracies to executive takeovers: ordinary voters' willingness to trade-off democratic principles for policies that reflect their partisan interests and incumbents that can credibly deliver them. I develop a theoretical framework that clarifies how voters' willingness to make such trade-offs at the micro-level results in the subversion of democracy by incumbents at the macro level, and I identify two structural conditions that make new democracies especially vulnerable to this: polity-wide political polarization and large performance gaps between the incumbent government and the opposition. I plan to evaluate these mechanisms using a combination of cross-country data and a series of survey experiments specifically designed to credibly evaluate the proposed mechanisms.

As a result, this project advances scientific knowledge and research on democratization, electoral authoritarianism, and public support for democracy. I plan to disseminate the findings from this project in the form of several articles, a book manuscript, and publicly accessible data. The latter will consist of cross-national country-level data on the subversion of democracy by incumbents and survey-experimental data on public support for democracy. The data on public support for democracy will be based on a new methodology for the measurement of support for democracy via choice-based survey experiments; my preliminary findings indicate a potential for this methodology to overturn established knowledge about the robustness of public support for democracy. The broader impacts of this research thus include scientifically-grounded recommendations for foreign policy toward new democracies as well as democracy promotion around the world.

This project will provide academic training and research experience for a number of graduate student assistants who will be involved in the design, execution, analysis, and data management of nationally-representative survey-experiments in six countries. I expect most of them to become co-authors on articles resulting from this project.

G. Results from Prior NSF Support

I have not received NSF support in the past five years.

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