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ABSTRACT. In developing an analytical framework for the comparative study of processes of democratization by elections, this article first lays out the techniques of electoral manipulation authoritarian rulers employ to control electoral outcomes. It argues next that manipulated elections tend to trigger two-level games in which electoral competition is "nested" inside electoral reform, and outlines the causal interaction and strategic interdependence of the two levels. It describes the basic strategic choices and strategic dilemmas actors face in iterative cycles of conflict. It analyzes the uncertainties of results, relations of power, and strategic responses that characterize the game. Finally, it explains how actors may cope with its ambivalent and uncertain nature—they may devise "mixed" strategies or privilege one level of the game over the other.

Keywords: Democratization • Elections • Electoral reform • Legitimacy Nested games

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As political regimes move from authoritarianism to democracy, "founding elections" are supposed to mark the institutional break with the authoritarian past. In the first transitions within the "third wave" of democratization (Huntington, 1991) in southern Europe and South America, the convocation of elections signaled the inauguration of a new democratic era. Military rulers had banned political parties and suspended electoral politics, and when they allowed the electoral arena to open again they withdrew to the barracks rather than standing for election themselves.

Later transitions have often taken a different turn. Rather than quit the political scene, authoritarian rulers opted for entering the electoral arena themselves. But, turned into candidates, authoritarian incumbents contaminate electoral contests. Since they stand for election not to lose power but to legitimate their continuity in office, they commonly try to distort and control the electoral process in order to minimize the risk of defeat. By "borrowing cunningly some features of democracy in order to substantively avoid it" (Case, 1996: 438) the new electoral autocrats practice "democracy as deception" (Joseph, 1998b: 56, 59).[1]

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The elections they call for are therefore not foundational but transitional. They inaugurate no new democratic regime but a new phase in the struggle for democracy.

This article develops an analytical framework to guide our normative evaluations of transitional elections. More importantly, it proposes a heuristic model to advance our empirical understanding of the political logic of flawed elections. In a first step, it discusses the manifold instruments ruling parties may deploy to contain the democratic uncertainty of political elections. The "menu of electoral manipulation" it sketches, with loose empirical illustrations from new democracies, covers the whole sphere of electoral governance. It includes old themes: fraud, repression, and unfairness. But it also includes issues that to date have received little attention: the manipulation of actors, cleavages, and rules of competition.

Moving on from the comparative anatomy of manipulation to the comparative politics of manipulation, the article argues that the deployment of manipulative strategies rarely leads to a stable regime "equilibrium." Opposition parties usually do not accept flawed elections as the endpoint of democratization. Rather, they take them to be a mere way-station on the long road toward genuine electoral democracy. Manipulated elections accordingly tend to trigger cycles of conflict that revolve around issues of electoral governance. Rather than becoming institutionalized they set countries on paths of democratization by elections. In such transitions from authoritarian rule, electoral competition and the struggle for electoral reform unfold simultaneously and interact in "nested" two-level games.

The article outlines the causal and strategic interaction between the two game levels, discusses the structural ambivalence, the strategic choices, and the conflicting imperatives actors face, and delineates strategies actors may devise to manage the ambivalence and uncertainty associated with the multi-layered "nested game" (Tsebelis, 1990) of democratization.

The Menu of Manipulation

According to the standard script of transitions from military rule, authoritarian incumbents tend to do two things when confronted with pressures for regime change (short of simply repressing dissent). Initially, they may agree to liberalize. They do this under the illusion of keeping things under control, but normally things get out of control. Later, they may agree to hold elections under the condition of obtaining certain institutional safeguards. The "vital interests" they wish to protect commonly include property rights, military autonomy, and impunity from judicial prosecution. In later transitions, authoritarian rulers have been innovating. They have broadened their repertoire of "survival strategies" (Brumberg, 2000). Instead of liberalizing they have been democratizing to legitimate their continued monopoly of power. Instead of negotiating extra-electoral guarantees, they have been devising electoral safeguards to protect their vital interests. Once "exceptional" (Lamounier, 1989: 43), the Brazilian recipe of "distorting rather than disbanding the basic institutions of political democracy" (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986: 22) has found adept imitators all over the world. But how do rulers manage to "retain power while cultivating some semblance of electoral legitimacy" (Skidmore, 1989: 30)? Generally speaking, they have a broad array of safeguards at their disposal. By fine-tuning various complementary

strategies of electoral control, instead of trusting a single mechanism of electoral manipulation, they may minimize exposure to democratic uncertainty while limiting damages to legitimacy.[2]

Electoral Fraud

According to conventional understanding, electoral fraud involves the introduction of bias into the administration of elections. It distorts the voting process in its narrow sense, in any of its multiple steps from the registration of voters to the tally of the vote. Physically, vote rigging may involve such dissimilar activities as deleting names from the voter list, expelling voters from polling stations, and inflating the vote totals of certain parties and candidates. Whatever its concrete manifestation, though, electoral fraud by definition violates the fundamental principle of democratic equality. By unduly interfering with administrative processes, it weights citizen preferences, denying voting rights to some while amplifying the voice of others.

Clearly, over the past two decades, electoral fraud has been a widespread technique for containing the uncertainty of transitional elections. Governing parties from Haiti to Peru, from Yugoslavia to Azerbaijan, from Burkina Faso to Zimbabwe, have implemented electoral fraud to control electoral outcomes. To cite just one illustrative figure: on the basis of the regular election reports given by the *Journal of Democracy*, Robert Pastor (1999: Appendix) identifies eighty-one instances of protested elections worldwide during the 1990s. In many instances, the dataset does not allow one to identify the generic reasons that motivated protests. But in more than half of the cases (forty-three), allegations of electoral fraud appear as an explicit motive for opposition parties objecting to the electoral process. Yet ruling parties may allow the electoral process to be "administered passably well" (Barkan and Ng'ethe, 1998: 33), as in Kenya in 1992, just to deploy a whole panoply of alternative means of electoral containment. Sometimes, it appears, old dogs do learn new tricks.

Political Repression

It seems obvious that for elections to qualify as democratic they have to take place in an open environment of civil and political liberties. Democracy must allow for more than the bare "freedom to shut up" that, according to Talbi (2000: 61), reigns in the electoral autocracies of the Arab world. Yet, the "strange combination of remarkably competitive elections and harsh repression" (Diamond and Plattner, 2000: 107) that characterizes contemporary Iran is by no means exclusive to the Islamic revolutionary state. For some time, Southeast Asia's "semi-democracies" have practiced "the containment of liberal participation more than electoral contestation," resulting in "a desultory mix of freedoms and controls" (Case, 1996: 459, 453). Most Arab regimes have held elections "amid conditions of pluralism and (relative) probity" (Sivan, 1997: 105) without guaranteeing the basic liberties that are constitutive of democracy. In many sub-Saharan countries, too, elections and repression have gone hand in hand. During much of Nigeria's tortuous transition from military rule, civil candidates entered the electoral game "under the constant threat of arrest or physical attack," with "brute force" remaining "the main currency of political control" (Joseph, 1998a.: 5). In the early 1990s, in Cameroon and Togo, "bogus elections" were accompanied by "pervasive

state violence" (ibid. 6). The 1996 presidential elections in Gambia took place within an oppressive "climate of fear" (Wiseman, 1998: 66), while "continual state harassment of the opposition" (Barkan and Ng'ethe, 1998: 33) marked the Kenyan 1992 and 1997 national elections.[3]

There are many gray areas, though. Democracy requires minimal degrees of freedom. But how much is just enough? Rather than organizing massive and continual repression, political regimes may subject their adversaries to selective and intermittent repression. Irregular episodes of harassment and intimidation make fewer international headlines than systematic human rights violations, and they may be equally effective in dissuading dissidence and imposing self-censorship. The 2000 presidential elections in Russia (McFaul, 2000: 30) and Peru (Youngers, 2000: 41–50, 65–67) apparently fell into such borderline categories of targeted "low-intensity" repression.

Manipulating the Actor Space

The capacity of authoritarian incumbents to go victoriously out of transitional elections is often not due to their own "cleverness but the ineptitude of [their] opponents" (McFaul, 2000: 23). Often, however, the failure of opposition parties is manufactured failure. In cases of political redemocratization as in Argentina and Uruguay, pre-authoritarian party systems have re-emerged in the course of regime change. But most transitional regimes do not count with anything resembling a consolidated party system. Authoritarian rulers have taken the opportunity of these fluid situations to manipulate the number and nature of nascent opposition actors. Their main strategies of manipulation read exclusion and fragmentation.

Exclusion. Authoritarian incumbents are always tempted to restrict the electoral arena by keeping out unfriendly competitors. The means of exclusion range from institutional violence to institutional design. The (attempted) physical elimination of salient opponents, as in Togo in 1991 (Monga, 1997: 159) and in Armenia in 1994 (Bremmer and Welt, 1997: 86), is only the most extreme form of candidate screening. Much "more common" is the "milder technique" (Monga, 1997: 159) of banning parties and disqualifying candidates. Expelling parties and candidates from the electoral game is sometimes a simple act of arbitrariness, as in Armenia in 1995 (Bremmer and Welt, 1997: 86–87). But often ruling parties hand-tailor legal instruments that permit them to exclude opponents from electoral competition. The electoral laws of post-revolutionary Mexico kept regional and religious parties as well as independent candidates out of the electoral arena (Molinar, 1991: 27–28). In Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, and Zambia incumbent presidents used custom-made "nationality clauses" to prevent their most serious competitors from running (Monga, 1997: 160). In Gambia, coup-monger Yahya Jammeh pushed through a new constitution that blocked the country's entire political elite out of the electoral game. All significant pre-coup parties were banned and any individual "who had ever been a member of any previous government" was not permitted to run (Wiseman, 1998: 69). In much of the Arab world, radical Islamic movements are either "legally banned (as in Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria) or are legal but restricted (as in Yemen and Jordan)" (Sivan, 2000: 77). In contemporary Iran, the Islamic revolutionary "legitimacy" of candidates is subject to tight layered evaluation by state agencies and religious authorities (Boroumand and Boroumand, 2000: 117–119).[4]

Fragmentation. In authoritarian Brazil (1964–85), military rulers banned previous parties but "their quasi-resurgence was tolerated under the all-embracing rubric of an official two-party system" (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986: 22). In the course of several electoral contests, however, the generals came to realize that "the compulsory two-party structure ensured opposition unity" (Skidmore, 1989: 35). In reaction, they abandoned their pretension of legislating the party system into a bipolar format, and turned their creative energies to a project most electoral autocrats pursue with determined enthusiasm: encouraging the fragmentation of the opposition camp (ibid.: 22).[5] To allow only unaffiliated individuals to contest elections by either outlawing opposition parties, as in Taiwan until 1989, or banning parties in general, as in contemporary Iran and Uganda, represents the most radical device for disorganizing electoral dissidence. But authoritarian incumbents have many other divisive means at hand, short of prohibiting the organization of electoral alternatives. They may weaken opposition parties by informal practice, as happened in Kenya with president Daniel arap Moi "harassing or bribing the leaders of any new parties until splits occurred or key members defected" (Barkan and Ng'ethe, 1998: 33). Rulers may also divide their opponents by institutional design. For instance, radical proportional representation in legislative elections has been instrumental since 1984 in splitting the anti-Sandinista camp in Nicaragua (Santiuste, 2000). It has served a similar function in Peru where, after 1990, it helped to produce and reproduce the prevailing "partyless" party system (Levitsky, 1999: 88).

Manipulating Rules of Representation

Beyond efforts to screen and split their competitors, authoritarian incumbents often institute self-serving electoral rules that give them a decisive edge at the moment of translating votes into seats. They design biased rules of representation to prevent an eventual loss of votes from translating into a loss of power. For instance, majoritarian electoral rules in post-revolutionary Mexico, post-independence Zimbabwe, and Croatia under Tudjman have been effective devices to minimize the parliamentary representation of opposition parties. In democratizing Mexico, the ruling party put into place a "governability clause" that guaranteed "artificial" legislative majorities to the major party. Other regimes have relied on gross malapportionment to keep winning despite defeat. In the 1997 Kenyan parliamentary elections, gross malapportionment led to a bare 51 percent governmental majority. The official party would have won less than 40 percent of seats, "had parliamentary districts been drawn to be roughly equal in numbers of registered voters" (Barkan and Ng'ethe, 1998: 44). On the eve of the 1997 legislative elections in Gambia, "the old constituency boundaries were redrawn in ways that blatantly violated" the constitutional requirement of a "reasonably practical" equitable apportionment (Wiseman, 1998: 69).

However, biased rules of representation may not be illegitimate. Opposition parties may pay little attention to them or even support them. In Brazil, Spain, and Argentina, for example, outgoing authoritarian governments devised rules of legislative seat assignment that were clearly privileging less populated, rural, and traditionally conservative regions. Nevertheless, today, the high level of malapportionment in these countries does not stir up any controversy. Political parties have come to perceive it as a legitimate fact of political life (Reynoso, 2000).

Manipulating the Issue Space

Democratic political parties are supposed to aggregate given societal interests but also to identify and define societal cleavages and translate them into political demands. They are not supposed, however, to literally create those cleavages; even less so, to manufacture them by violent means. But this is exactly what some incumbents have done in order to shore up popular support. They have constructed societal cleavages through the deployment of either external violence (international war) or internal violence (terrorism or civil war). Russian president Vladimir Putin is suspected of having traveled both of these violent avenues to popularity. According to Michael McFaul, the "simple explanation" of Putin's 2000 electoral victory—which, as the author notes despite his skepticism, has apparently "much truth" to it—runs as follows (McFaul, 2000: 20):

> Putin was chosen by Yeltsin and his band of oligarchs as a loyal successor . . . To boost [his] popularity in order to get him elected, they had to provoke a war with Chechnya. Some assert that this cabal was even responsible for blowing up apartment buildings in Moscow and elsewhere last fall—crimes that were attributed to Chechen terrorists—as a way to bolster support for the war and Putin.

In Kenya, the creation of ethnic conflict followed a less "dialectical" script. Death squads "acting on the orders of [governmental] hard-liners" took care of implementing president Moi's "self-fulfilling prophecy that multipartyism would lead to 'tribal conflict'" (Barkan and Ng'ethe, 1998: 33). Unfortunately, a substantial number of authoritarian elites in democratizing countries have been surviving and thriving by "persuading" citizens of the saliency of ethnic cleavages that had not been politicized before (Snyder, 2000).

Unfair Competition

When authoritarian incumbents go out to face voters and receive an electoral seal of approval for their continuity in power, they confront emerging opposition parties invariably under radically unfair conditions. The two main recurrent themes are money and media. Usually, ruling authoritarians transmuted into campaigning candidates enjoy generous access to public resources as well as public exposure. They have the whole state apparatus at their service, they control the state media, and they subject private media to harassment and intimidation to block out opposition candidates. In addition, they often control another crucial resource: time. In Ghana in 1992 (Gyimah-Boadi, 1999: 106–107) and Gambia in 1996 (Wiseman, 1998: 66) military rulers lifted the ban on political parties just a few months before election day, which deprived their opponents of the time necessary to put together something resembling a party organization.[6]

But the problem of electoral unfairness goes beyond unfair conditions of competition; it includes unfair practices of competition. Turned into electoral campaigners, authoritarian incumbents tend to treat their adversaries with contempt (Monga, 1997: 165). But often they go beyond gestures of dismissive arrogance and orchestrate aggressive campaigns destined to destroy the public reputation of opposition candidates. In addition to inundating state media with "undiluted praise" for themselves, they swamp them with "unadulterated attacks" on their contenders (Wiseman, 1998: 65). Such campaigns may go much further

than even the nasty forms of negative campaigning we have seen in some established democracies. It's not just that they violate minimal standards of civility and truthfulness, even more importantly, they proceed without brakes, without the countervailing force of "alternative sources of information" (Dahl, 1971: 3). In the Peruvian as well as in the Russian 2000 presidential campaigns, the systematic destruction of public reputation formed an integral part of sitting presidents' public relations offensives against their contenders (Youngers, 2000: 65–67; McFaul, 2000: 29).

Two-level Games

When authoritarian rulers convoke multiparty elections they open up a window of uncertainty, however small and fragile. The strategies of electoral manipulation serve the purpose of containing the emergent uncertainty of electoral outcomes. But even if incumbents try to steal elections, repress dissent, weaken opposition parties, create artificial cleavages, and establish unfair rules as well as unfair conditions of competition, citizens may still vote against them. Voters are never wholly predictable. In transitional situations, their preferences are either unknown or susceptible to changes of unknown magnitude and direction. As a consequence, manipulated elections tend to fall into the gray area of institutional ambivalence that lies between the poles of full authoritarian control and full democratic uncertainty. They are more than acclamatory rituals, but less than open competitive contests (see Figure 1).

The institutional ambivalence of flawed elections creates pressures for institutional change in both directions. On the one hand, authoritarian rulers wish to retain control over electoral outcomes. If semidemocratic elections get out of hand and start producing "unacceptable" results, incumbents will strive to rescind democratic concessions made in the past. On the other hand, democratic opposition parties struggle to institutionalize democratic uncertainty. They will refuse to bind themselves to electoral rules that fall below minimum thresholds of democratic quality. Even if they agree to enter the electoral game they will still entertain the hope of dismantling its authoritarian limitations in the future.

Accordingly, neither incumbents nor opponents will perceive manipulated elections as an "equilibrium" solution that corresponds to their long-term interests. Rather they will accept the rules of the electoral game as a temporary compromise, a provisional truce contingent on current correlations of force and open to revision in the uncertain future. To restate the argument in a more precise way: contending parties will refuse to accept ambivalent electoral institutions as binding if at least one of three assumptions holds. First, under the assumption that incumbents are authoritarian actors, rather than democratic reformers, their commitment to semidemocratic elections will be contingent on

FIGURE 1. *The Ambivalence of Manipulated Elections.*

their ability to hold the bastions of state power. Second, under the assumption that opposition parties are democratic actors, rather than players indifferent or even hostile to liberal democracy, their acceptance of semiauthoritarian elections will be contingent on their ability to besiege the bastions of power. Third, if neither incumbents nor opponents expect voter behavior to affect prevalent balances of power in the foreseeable future, if citizens thus do not represent a significant source of uncertainty, ruling parties may be able to institutionalize semidemocratic rule regardless of opposition parties' attitudes towards democracy.[7]

The ambivalent and thus (usually) contested nature of flawed elections implies that elections do not unfold as simple games but as two-level games. They unfold as "nested games" (Tsebelis, 1990) where "the game in the principal arena is nested inside a bigger game where the rules of the game themselves are variable" (ibid.: 8). At the same time as incumbents and opponents measure their forces in the electoral arena, they battle over the basic rules that shape the electoral arena. Their struggle over institutional rules is not extraneous to but an integral part of their struggle within prevalent institutional rules, as the game of electoral competition is embedded within the meta-game of electoral reform.[8]

The dynamics triggered by the organization of ambivalent elections contrast markedly with the political process opened up by the convocation of democratic elections. The early third-wave transitions from military rule that took place in southern Europe and South America were based on foundational pacts and foundational elections. After a conflictual period of institutional choice, founding elections were held within "reasonably fair rules" (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986: 58) either imposed or negotiated by the outgoing regime. Contending parties thus set up new electoral rules first and then moved on to play the game. Institutional design and electoral competition formed a temporal sequence of separate activities.

Processes of democratization by elections are different. When the curtain of the first electoral contest falls, the "drama of democratization" (Whitehead, 1999) is far from over. If held under the shadow of manipulation, first elections are not the final step of regime change but its mere point of departure. They do not have foundational, only transitional character. Rather than inaugurating a new regime, they represent focal points of a cyclical "test of forces and of legitimacy" (Lamounier, 1989: 69). Rarely do they allow regime opponents to conquer democracy at once. Rather, electoral routes to democracy tend to unfold as "protracted transitions" (Eisenstadt, 2000) in which opposition forces engage in "a continuous series of battles" (Barkan, 2000: 236) to peel off layers of authoritarian control step by step.

Conceptualizing processes of democratization by elections as two-level games involves the assumption that the game of electoral competition and the meta-game of electoral reform unfold in a simultaneous as well as interactive fashion. The links between the two levels are both causal and strategic. On the causal side, the outcomes of the meta-game level—the conditions of electoral competition and electoral governance—delimit the probability distribution as well as the outer limits of outcomes at the game level. Inversely, the results of electoral competition constitute important power resources at the moment of renegotiating the basic rules of the game. On the strategic side, actors know about the causal interplay between the two levels and adapt their strategic behavior accordingly. They know that they cannot achieve their goals at either level without taking into account the

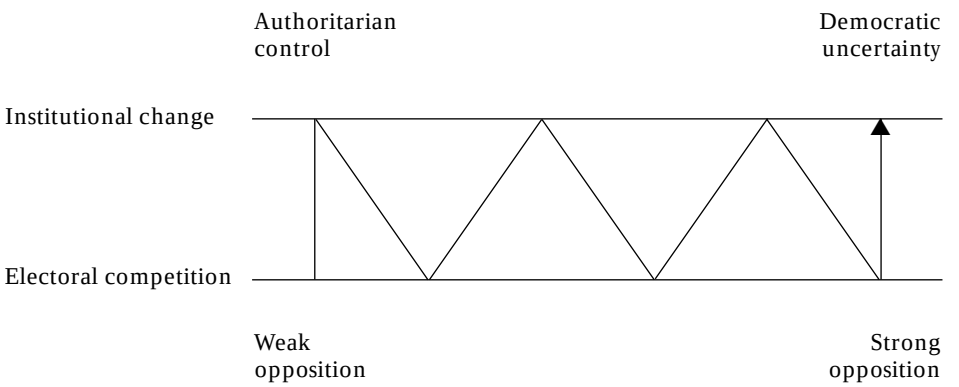

FIGURE 2. *The Self-reinforcing Dynamics of Democratization by Elections.*

repercussions of their decisions at the other level. Also, if we want to comprehend the strategic interaction between incumbents and opposition from an external observer perspective, it is only by being attentive to both levels of the democratizing game that we can decipher the rationale for actions that otherwise may look idiosyncratic, irrational or, at the very least, "suboptimal" (Tsebelis, 1990).

Of course, democratization is not the only possible outcome the nested conflict over votes and rules may lead to. Abortion and stagnation are alternative possibilities. If incumbents control the military (or think they control the military) they may try to shut down the electoral arena at any point. Also, for as long as a majority of citizens, the ultimate arbiters of the game, acquiesce to the ruling party and its practices of electoral manipulation, electoral authoritarianism may settle down as a stable solution (Case, 1996). Still, even if democratic progress is not inevitable, the inner logic of the game pulls it away from authoritarianism. As liberalization proceeds, processes of limited democratization have an intrinsic potential for getting out of hand. And, as in the case of extra-electoral guarantees, electoral controls may erode, rather than lock in unfair advantages for ever. To the extent that opposition parties succeed in accumulating strength in the electoral arena, they improve their chances to extract institutional reforms from the ruling party. And vice versa, to the extent that they succeed in improving the conditions of electoral competition and electoral governance at the meta-game level, they improve their chances of capturing votes and seats at the game level. Electoral success furthers electoral reform, which again furthers electoral success. Rather than establishing a "self-enforcing" equilibrium, ambivalent elections thus tend to trigger a "self-subversive" spiral that over time undermines both the institutional and the electoral bases of the authoritarian incumbent.[9] Figure 2 illustrates the self-reinforcing interaction between electoral competitiveness and electoral reform that defines "the power of elections" (Di Palma, 1990: 85) in democratizing contexts. It is the possibility of such a virtuous circle that leads Joel Barkan to the optimistic observation that "even flawed elections" are "not without significance." A compelling analogy, he writes, is "the mouse nibbling at the proverbial piece of cheese. After a period of time, the piece, in this case the authoritarian state, is no more" (Barkan 2000: 235–236).[10] The remainder of this

article, though, will focus less on the causal interaction between the two levels of the electoral game than on the strategic interaction of incumbents and opposition across these levels.

Strategic Choices

What are actors' fundamental choices in the nested game of ambivalent elections? Figure 3 shows the cycle of conflictual interaction that revolves around electoral processes. The starting-point is a government calling an election the opposition denounces as flawed. In continuation, (1) the incumbent decides whether to respond to the criticism voiced by its adversaries by either attending to or neglecting their complaints; (2) the opposition evaluates the response it gets from the government and decides whether to participate or boycott the election; (3) the incumbent chooses whether to run a relatively clean election or to commit fraud on election day; (4) if the ruling party is declared victorious, the opposition decides whether to accept or protest the result; and (5) the cycle comes to full circle with incumbents deciding to repress eventual opposition protests or respond by opening up to reform.

Of course, the decision scheme is highly simplified. Choices are often not binary but allow for more complex and subtle moves. Also, as the two-headed arrows in the figure indicate, the simple chronological sequence often gets messed up in an interactive dynamic of moves and countermoves. In addition, a more complete model of electoral routes to democracy would have to take into account that within the nested game of national elections, multiple nested games of local elections may be taking place.[11] Still, the figure indicates the fundamental decisions each side has to take in iterative cycles of conflict.

Of course, the story may take a different turn if the opposition wins, or thinks it has won. The ruling party must then decide whether to acknowledge or reverse its defeat. If it accepts an opposition victory at presidential elections (in presidential systems) or at elections to the national parliament (in parliamentary systems), the transition has come to an end and the two-level game of democratization by

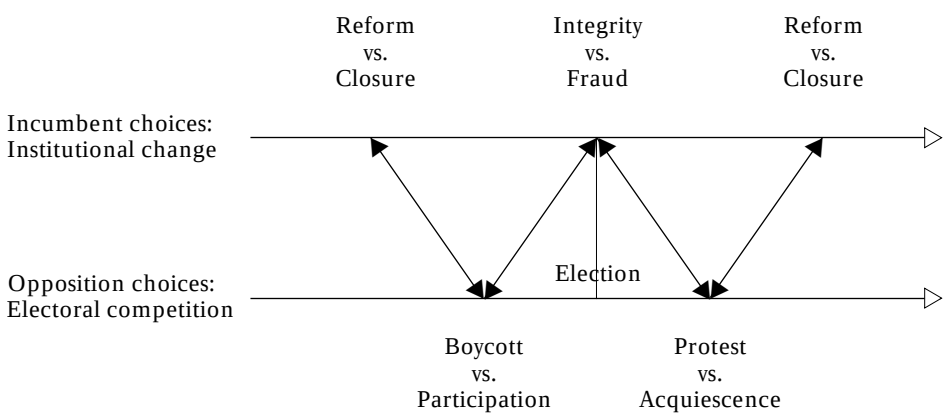

FIGURE 3. *The Cycle of Strategic Choices.*

elections is over. The game is over as well if incumbents respond to defeat by closing the electoral arena—for example, by staging a military coup. But incumbents may also perpetuate the two-level dynamic by introducing "corrective" postelectoral safeguards. They may adjust official election results, as in the 2000 parliamentary elections in Iran (Boroumand and Boroumand, 2000: 117–120). They may jail the elected president, as in Nigeria in 1993. They may strip legislators of their mandates, be it through the "whitewash" courts (Eisenstadt, this issue) or by executive decree, as in Brazil in the 1970s. Or they may rely on intimidation and material seduction to "persuade" opposition actors to join their ranks, as reported in Kenya in the 1990s and Peru in the year 2000.

Strategic Interdependence

Figure 3 situates actors' sequential choices at different levels of the game. As it indicates, the major choices for incumbents lie at the meta-game level of electoral reform, while the major choices for opposition actors lie at the game level of electoral competition. This asymmetry of choices arises from the asymmetry of resources actors control. On the one hand, incumbents control electoral rules and conditions. Given their control over the meta-game of constitution-making, incumbents commonly enjoy at least veto powers over the basic rules and conditions of electoral competition and electoral governance. Between elections they have to decide whether they reform given institutions or not. During electoral periods, they have to decide how to act within the given framework, whether to respect or subvert it.

On the other hand, while incumbents control the terms of electoral competition, opposition parties control the terms of electoral legitimacy. As soon as ruling parties convoke elections with at least some measure of genuine plurality and competition, they provoke a fundamental shift of power. Even if they continue to control the structural conditions of the game, they surrender control over its conditions of acceptability to opposition parties. While incumbents may be able to establish rules by decree, they cannot establish legitimacy by decree. If they wish to embellish their hold on power with at least "a semblance of electoral legitimacy" (Skidmore, 1989: 30) they need the cooperation of their adversaries. They need opposition parties to participate in the electoral game they open up. Neither one-party shows nor one-man shows do the job. To the dismay of ruling parties, international election monitors tend to recognize the privileged role opposition parties play in defining the terms of legitimacy. Even if it "infuriates ruling parties" (Pastor, 1998: 160), they tend to define a "flawed" election as one "in which some or all of the major political parties refuse to participate" or to accept the results (ibid., 1999: 15). With the denial of legitimacy as their major bargaining chip, opposition parties face two major entry–exit decisions at the level of electoral competition. In the pre-electoral phase they have to decide whether to boycott or participate under given conditions; in the post-electoral phase they have to decide whether to accept or protest official results.

To the extent that opposition parties care about conditions of electoral competition and electoral governance and to the extent that incumbents care about electoral legitimacy, each side thus controls resources valuable to the other. To obtain their objectives in this situation of strategic interdependence, they have to induce their adversaries to make cooperative moves across game levels. Incumbents try to get what they want at the game level (opposition participation)

by deploying the resources they command at the meta-level. Their opponents try to get what they want at the meta-level (democratizing reform) by using the leverage they have at the game level. While incumbents try to keep opposition parties in the game of elections by manipulating electoral conditions, opposition parties try to keep incumbents in the game of electoral reform by playing, or refusing to play, the electoral game.

Strategic Dilemmas

For both sides, achieving the cooperation of their adversaries is not a simple matter of goal maximization under conditions of strategic interdependence. The ambivalence and the nested character of the game confront actors with severe normative and strategic dilemmas. On the one hand, incumbents face the trade-off between electoral control and electoral credibility. They want to bring opposition parties into the game but they also wish to keep them under control. After all, they are not interested in institutionalizing democracy but in legitimizing their continuity in power. Manipulating elections thus turns into a difficult balancing act. Rational governments will not wish to distort the electoral process as much as *possible* but only "as much as *necessary* to assure a win" (Monga, 1997: 159, emphasis added). But gauging the "optimal level of opening" (Eisenstadt, 2000: 14) is hardly a trivial assignment. The search for democratic "legitimacy via controlled elections" (Joseph, 1998a: 9) under the logic of minimal concessions may well be self-defeating. What looks like a minimal institutional self-restraint today may be too much to prevent defeat or too little to earn recognition tomorrow. Floating in a sea of uncertainty, authoritarian rulers have to steer through the Scylla of losing an excessively open contest and the Charybdis of winning an exceedingly controlled electoral farce nobody believes in.

On the other hand, opposition parties face the dilemma that democratizing the pre-democratic electoral game often goes hand in hand with legitimizing it. Where elections are hollow triple-nine rituals[12] from which "all competitiveness" has been "squeezed" (Case, 1996: 460), regime opponents will seldom feel torn apart by Faustian inner conflicts when considering whether to stay out of the electoral show business. By contrast, if announced elections "seem likely to occur under reasonably fair rules" (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986: 58), emergent opposition parties usually do not hesitate to take up the challenge and enter the electoral arena. But how should opposition parties deal with the ambiguities of patently manipulated, but still potentially meaningful, elections? Authoritarians wish to have electoral legitimacy conferred without making further concessions. Democrats struggle to achieve the opposite: they wish to extract democratic concessions without legitimizing the authoritarian manipulation of elections. But often they cannot have one without the other. They "find themselves caught between the need to run and garner votes and the feeling that they are taking part in a charade" (Monga, 1997: 158). If they enter the game they legitimate it. If they stay outside, they miss an opportunity for accumulating strength and opening up spaces of liberty and plurality. Contesting manipulated elections may perpetuate their ambivalent nature, but it may well be the only way of subverting them.

Uncertainties of Competition

The strategic dilemmas actors face are heightened by the profound uncertainties

that accompany processes of democratization by elections. Uncertainty is an inherent feature of institutional change. When institutions change, "all that is solid melts into air" (Berman, 1982). All the parameters that endow games with coherence and predictability turn into variables: rules, preferences, expectations, resources, and payoffs.[13] Situations of regime change are prey to the same fundamental uncertainty.

According to Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter's classical formulation, transitions from authoritarian rule are times of "extraordinary uncertainty" and "indeterminacy" (1986: 3, 5). Processes of democratization by elections make for no exception. Their "protracted" nature may flatten out the uncertainties of transition, since actors are able to learn about the dynamics of regime change in iterated cycles of conflict, yet electoral routes to democracy are specifically affected by a triple uncertainty that derives from their nested nature. In the two-level game of democratization by elections, actors face the uncertainty of rules as defined at the meta-game level; the uncertainty of payoffs and correlations of power as defined at the game level; and the uncertainty of how the two levels interact. While the uncertainty of future rules (and their consequences) is inherent to processes of institutional change, the diagnostic as well as causal uncertainty of power relations needs some explication.

Votes and seats represent the basic payoffs of the electoral game. But they also constitute a fundamental measure of power between incumbents and opposition parties. Power, the "royal variable" of political science, lies at the very heart of contemporary transition studies. The literature has analyzed processes of regime change primarily as a function of (changing) correlations of power. Most classification schemes of democratic transitions relate to prevailing realities of power. They stress either power relations between elite and mass actors (transitions "from above" versus transitions "from below") or between regime and opposition ("reform" versus "rupture").[14] Of course, electoral strength is not the only measure of correlations of force between rulers and opposition. Other currencies of power, such as money and violence, may trump the weight of votes. But electoral competitiveness represents an indicator of power that is specific and specifically relevant to electoral routes to democracy. In addition, it serves as a proxy for a couple of interrelated variables that actors are likely to factor into their nested strategies. For instance, the intensity of electoral competition is closely related to the perceived need for regime legitimation; to the costs of repressing opposition actors; and to the organizational capacity of opposition parties, including their ability to monitor voting and defend their victories. Unfortunately, however, in the ongoing game of democratization by elections, both levels and consequences of electoral competitiveness are hard to estimate.

Uncertainty about parties' correlation of strength in the electoral arena is particularly acute before first elections, when actors have few cues to predict the decisions voters will take on election day. But, in fact, during the whole process of democratization, "measuring" actors' relative competitiveness is very much a matter of informed guesses. After the transition, once the fog of uncertainty dissipates under the sun of credible results, correlations of power are easy to ascertain. But during the process, perceived, expected, revealed, and actual, electoral competitiveness often diverges.

Much has been written on the miscalculation of authoritarian rulers who convoke elections under the firm expectation of winning, but who end up losing. Much less attention has been given to the electoral miscalculation of opposition

parties. Regime opponents sometimes overestimate their own popularity and have a hard time learning that citizens may confirm authoritarian rulers in office by their own free will. At times, their well-founded institutional distrust amplifies their margin of error. Suspicious of official election results as well as of public opinion polls, they often have to gauge their own popularity on the basis of episodic evidence of doubtful reliability. As Vesna Pusić comments, for example, Croatian opposition leaders had to overcome "the megalomania that counted on landslide victories without electoral strategies" (Pusić, 1998: 120). Yet, whether false or accurate, whether overoptimistic or overpessimistic, what counts for the strategic interaction between government and opposition is not the "real" but the perceived level of competition. But how do actors react to different levels of (perceived) competitiveness?

It is intuitively plausible that correlations of forces determine actor strategies on both levels of the game. Available research seems to support this intuition. For example, Fabrice Lehoucq and Iván Molina (forthcoming) find in their path-breaking study on electoral fraud in pre-reform Costa Rica that "the large-scale denunciation of fraud" signaled "the end of noncompetitive party politics." With the rise of inter-party competition, parties faced increasing "incentives to commit and to denounce acts of fraud." As the struggle for elective positions intensified, "efforts to stuff the ballot box became more blatant".[15] Not only the mechanisms, but the intensity, and the exposure of manipulation changed in response to rising electoral competition.

Evidence from new democracies suggests, however, that levels of electoral competition do not have linear consequences. Rather, electoral competitiveness seems to be similarly indeterminate in its effects as those "social mechanisms" that trigger any of several "mutually incompatible" causal chains (Elster, 1998: 46).[16] Seemingly, any level of competitiveness may constitute a plausible reason for any kind of strategic response. It may motivate reform as well as closure on behalf of incumbents and protest as well as acquiescence on behalf of opposition parties.

From the perspective of authoritarian incumbents, competition is the mother of electoral fraud. As emerging opposition parties threaten to disrupt monopolies of power, ruling parties are tempted to contain the democratic uncertainty of elections by manipulative maneuvers. But the opposite may be true as well. Competition may be also the mother of electoral reform. As ruling parties come under the pressure of rising opposition forces, they may accede to democratizing concessions in order to defuse political protest and legitimate their continuing hold on power. In the Mexican transition, the non-linear impact of increasing inter-party competition has been quite evident. In the 1980s, the regime responded to the incipient competitiveness of the conservative National Action Party (PAN) by stepping on the brakes of electoral fraud. Later, during the 1990s, the electoral strength of opposition parties was crucial in getting far-reaching clean election reforms accepted. But it is not just that high levels of inter-party competition may lead to either electoral manipulation or electoral integrity. The same is true for low levels of competition. When opposition parties are weak, incumbents may distort the electoral process with impunity, but they may also open up the process without risking the loss of anything in the foreseeable future. While high competition may lead to either defensive fraud or defensive reform, low competition may give rise to either preventive fraud or preventive reform. Over the past decade, surviving bastions of one-party hegemony in Mexican federal states produced both kinds of responses to weak opposition. Some

governors used their secure positions to promote reform, others to harass opposition parties, colonize electoral institutions, and exploit state resources for partisan purposes.

From the perspective of democratic opposition parties, different levels of electoral competitiveness involve no less "agonizing choices" (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986: 3). If opposition parties are weak, they have little to lose by boycotting an election. But they have little to lose by participating, either. Whether they boycott or enter the game, they may end up with nothing in their hands at either of its levels. By contrast, if opposition parties are strong they have much to win by participating, but much to lose as well if robbed of their victory by electoral fraud. If they boycott they may or may not achieve democratic reform at the meta-level; if they participate they may or may not make progress at the game level.

The reason for the causal indeterminacy of electoral competitiveness is simple. The level of competition works like a control knob that increases *simultaneously* both the expected utility and the expected cost of electoral manipulation. For incumbents, the potential benefits as well as the potential costs of manipulation rise as competition rises, with the same being true for democratic reform. In a similar way, for opposition parties both the potential benefits and the potential costs of exiting the game rise as competition rises, with the same being true for participating in the game.

Managing Ambivalence

Contending parties may try to reduce the ambivalence and uncertainty associated with electoral routes to democracy either by devising "mixed" strategies or by privileging one level of the game over the other. To begin with, both sides have ample opportunities for combining strategies. In fact, opposition parties dispose of an easy exit route out of their dilemma—that their participation in the electoral game may either legitimize or democratize it. They may resolve their dilemma if they accept to compete in the electoral arena, while retaining the right to protest against electoral results. Through participation they improve their electoral competitiveness; through protest they improve the conditions of electoral competition. In Mexico, between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s, it was precisely opposition parties' persistent combination of electoral participation and postelectoral protest that kept the country's protracted transition from electoral authoritarianism on the move.

Authoritarian rulers, too, may combine apparently contradictory strategic choices. From the "menu of manipulation" laid out above it is clear that the choice between electoral manipulation and electoral integrity is not a binary choice. Rulers do not have to choose either one or the other but may take an intermediate route. They may try to fine-tune manipulation by picking just certain items from the menu. They may try to reap the fruits of legitimacy by selective reform while containing its risks by selective bias. They may make partial concessions to build credibility while putting in place (or leaving in place) certain "auxiliary precautions" that contain democratic uncertainty.

In Malaysia, for instance, the relative "propriety" of electoral administration "masks" (Case, 1996: 448) severe restrictions on civil and political liberties. In pre-reform Costa Rica, the introduction of the secret ballot cancelled traditional mechanisms of control, which led parties to rely on more severe violations of democratic norms (Lehoucq and Molina, forthcoming). In democratizing Mexico,

measures to clean up the electoral apparatus were accompanied by the introduction of electoral rules that discriminated in favor of the ruling PRI. Later, as local PRI party bosses could no longer resort to electoral fraud, they shifted their strategy of electoral control from vote rigging to vote buying (Schedler, 2000: 13–14).[17]

Combining strategies is one technique for reducing the complexity of the game. Alternatively, contending parties may privilege one game level over the other. Opposition parties may either bet on improving competitiveness by electoral gains or on improving structural conditions by electoral reform. The deep strategic differences that separated the right-wing National Action Party (PAN) from the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) during much of the Mexican transition may be interpreted in this way. While the PAN centered its efforts on accumulating strength in the electoral game (which then would eventually translate into the party's improved capacity for changing formal rules as well as informal practices), the PRD focused on achieving institutional advances through electoral reform (which then would eventually translate into the party's improved ability to win elections).[18] Note that privileging one game level over the other is not the same as decoupling the levels. It is only by cutting off one level from the other that—following a distinction proposed by Todd Eisenstadt (2000: 8)—opposition parties divide into "patronage-seekers," who pursue electoral gains with indifference towards electoral reform, and "anti-regime" actors, who pursue electoral reform with disdain for electoral competition itself.

Incumbents, on their side, often try to contain emerging opposition parties by disconnecting electoral competition from electoral reform. They routinely discredit criticism of prevailing conditions of electoral competition and electoral governance by alleging that opposition parties boycott or protest elections only because they are unpopular as well as undemocratic. By attributing opposition grievances to undemocratic attitudes rather than undemocratic conditions, they try to strip the game of its nested nature, converting it into a simple one-level game.

Since actors may differ in their tolerance as well as in their strategic management of electoral ambivalence, each of the critical decision points in the electoral cycle may introduce tensions that lead to splits and provoke the emergence of "the classic four-player game of transition" (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 265). The successive dilemmas both groups of actors face may lead authoritarian incumbents to split into hardliners and softliners, while democrats may split into radicals and moderates. Both subgroups entertain different degrees of aversion towards electoral ambivalence. Hardliners are highly averse to electoral uncertainty, softliners less so; radicals are highly averse to electoral ambivalence, moderates less so; the "purists" on both sides are reluctant to play the two-level game of ambivalent elections, the moderates less so.[19]

Conclusion

When authoritarian rulers convoke flawed elections, they inaugurate "nested games" in which the competition for votes and the struggle for electoral reform go hand in hand. After laying out the techniques of electoral manipulation the new electoral autocrats may deploy, the article analyzed the political logic of such two-level games of democratization by elections. It sketched the causal and strategic interaction between electoral competition and electoral reform and outlined the structural ambivalence, the dynamic uncertainty, the strategic choices, the strategic

interdependence, and the strategic dilemmas the game involves. The article introduced the idea of a "nested" two-level game as a heuristic tool for the comparative study of electoral routes to democracy. In the "third wave" of global democratization, numerous countries have been going through processes of democratization by elections. All over the globe, from Brazil to Mexico, from Poland to Armenia, from Senegal to Kenya, from Malaysia to Taiwan, political actors have been playing the ambivalent game of competing for votes and seats and simultaneously struggling to change the basic rules and conditions of electoral competition. To date, country and area specialists have tended to treat those dispersed experiences as exceptional. The concept of a two-level game provides an analytical tool that may guide the systematic comparison between these seemingly dissimilar cases. In fact, the model may even serve as a fruitful guide to studying the reverse movement: the erosion of democracy through vicious circles of electoral manipulation that give rise to the electoral dominance of the ruling party and vice versa.

Notes

1. In allusion to post-revolutionary Mexico's hegemonic party, Przeworski and collaborators declare themselves "impressed that the dream of many political elites is to rule perpetually and to rule with consent: Politicians are just PRIstas [sic] by nature" (2000: 26).
2. Note that the focus is on centralized interference in national elections. This leaves out a whole range of practices and institutions that may distort electoral processes in a decentralized manner. Still, local practices of manipulation often count on at least tacit toleration by the central government.
3. Fareed Zakaria, in his widely discussed "rise of illiberal democracy" (1997), adverts that a growing number of leaders who came to power through "open and fair" elections (p. 25) are "routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving citizens of basic rights and freedoms" (p. 22). While deeply sympathetic with concerns about spreading illiberal practices, I am skeptical about the democratic nature of "illiberal democracies." I think it is more accurate to classify such regimes as instances of "electoral authoritarianism" (Schedler, 2000: 6).
4. One story is the illegitimate exclusion of opposition candidates; another is the illegitimate inclusion of incumbents. For instance, most independent observers believed that Alberto Fujimori's bid for a third presidential term was unconstitutional (Levitsky, 1999: 80; Youngers, 2000: 9, 30).
5. "Once long-dominant ruling parties are forced to accept the inevitability of multipartism, they often try to ensure their control over the transition [by] encouraging the creation of 'friendly' opposition parties, and infiltrating others with a view to keeping them as weak and unstable as possible" (Sithole, 1997: 136).
6. On the strategic manipulation of electoral timetables by interim governments, see Shain and Linz (1995: 76–83).
7. What do different techniques and degrees of electoral manipulation imply for the authoritarian or democratic status of a political regime? Where should we draw the boundary line between electoral authoritarianism and electoral democracy? By relying on actor perceptions and expectations I circumvent the complex issue of regime classification. Implicitly, though, I side with those who conceive democracy as a continuous phenomenon. For a discussion of graded versus dichotomous approaches to democracy, see Collier and Adcock (1999).
8. According to Tsebelis, "nested" games are either games in multiple arenas or games of institutional choice. Although the latter may be conceived as a subtype of the former, as the author himself suggests at a point (1990: 8), he tends to treat games of institutional

change as a specific type of game in which "the choice of rules [is] opposed to the choice of strategies inside existing rules" (1990: 248).

9. I owe the term "self-subversion" to Albert O. Hirschman (1995).
10. Note that the same self-reinforcing two-level dynamic may drive the inverse process of democratic erosion. Incumbents in a democratic regime may start subverting the electoral process to cement their hold on power. They may set in motion a regressive spiral of decreasing electoral integrity and increasing electoral dominance of the ruling party (see Lehoucq, this issue).
11. Analyzing regime change in Senegal, Mozaffar and Vengroff (forthcoming) propose such a "whole-system" approach that takes into account the interaction between elections at various levels (national, regional, and local, as well as executive and legislative). On the interaction between subnational electoral dynamics and national politics in Mexico, see Mizrahi (1995: 186–191) and Prud'homme (1999).
12. On contemporary "triple-nine" elections in the Arab world, in which "deliberately absurd and intentionally ridiculous" official results declare incumbent parties victorious with 99.9 percent of the popular vote, see Talbi (2000: 60).
13. "[I]nstitutional change by definition involves political innovation, and it is difficult (if not impossible) to know its rules, much less to have a complete theory about them. . . . Whether the laws of institutional design are unknowable or simply unknown, the issue of institutional design is too important to be left out [although] the current state of knowledge on institutions justifies the absence of theoretic rigor" (Tsebelis, 1990: 11).
14. For a summary of several coinciding conceptual proposals, see Huntington (1991: 114).
15. Quotes are from pp. 333, 144, and 133 in the manuscript version of 12 April 2000.
16. Elster contrasts such "type A" mechanisms with "type B" mechanisms that generate contradictory effects in a simultaneous, rather than alternative fashion. Such mechanisms "affect an independent variable in opposite directions, leaving the net effect indeterminate" (Elster, 1998: 46). Electoral competitiveness, though, is not a mechanism but a variable. As we outline below, the "causal mechanism" that turns it into a contradictory variable reads strategic calculation.
17. Taking up Jon Elster's distinction of causal mechanisms introduced above (see note 16), when incumbents mix strategies in response to growing opposition pressures, electoral competition transforms from a "type A mechanism" that produces alternatively either reform or closure into a "type B mechanism" that involves simultaneously both democratizing and authoritarian moves.
18. Complementary explanations emphasize, for instance, the two parties' different social constituencies (Eisenstadt, 1999) and their different degrees of risk aversion (Loaeza, 2000).
19. For the original formulation of this 2–2 scheme of transition actors in the context of "classical" transitions, see O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 15–17, 24, 63, 71).

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