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Authoritarian-Led  
Democratization

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**Abstract**

Authoritarian regimes become more likely to democratize when they face little choice or little risk. In some cases, the risk of democratization to authoritarian incumbents is so low that ending authoritarianism might not mean exiting power at all. This article develops a unified theory of authoritarian-led democratization under conditions of relatively low incumbent risk. We argue that the party strength of the authoritarian incumbent is the most pivotal factor in authoritarian-led democratization. When incumbent party strength has been substantial enough to give incumbent authoritarian politicians significant electoral victory confidence, nondemocratic regimes have pursued reversible democratic experiments that eventually culminated in stable, thriving democracies. Evidence from Europe's first wave of democratization and more recent democratic transitions in Taiwan and Ghana illustrate how party strength has underpinned authoritarian-led democratization across the world and across modern history.



## INTRODUCTION

There are currently two very different visions—in a sense, even diametrically opposed visions—of why authoritarian regimes become democracies when they do. The first and generally dominant perspective holds that dictatorships democratize at moments when they have little choice. The regime is splintering and crumbling from within (O'Donnell et al. 1986); rising popular protests threaten to topple the dictator and his inner circle violently (Geddes 1999, Acemoglu & Robinson 2006); an emergent bourgeoisie presents overwhelming demands for democratization to protect their burgeoning fortunes from autocratic expropriation (North & Weingast 1989, Ansell & Samuels 2014); and/or superpower patrons insist on democratization as a condition for continued, essential aid and support (Bratton & van de Walle 1997). In other words, democracy comes when an autocratic regime is in crisis, or even on the brink of collapse, and has little choice but to reluctantly usher in political reform. As Dahl (1971) so memorably put it, if the costs of repression come to exceed the costs of toleration, authoritarian regimes can be expected to step aside, grudgingly, allowing democracy to emerge.

From a second perspective, however, dictatorships democratize when they perceive little risk. Relative economic equality, asset mobility, and/or natural resource abundance mean democracy will not produce overwhelming pressures for downward redistribution (Boix 2003, Dunning 2008); regime insiders know the “skeletons in the closet” of their opponents and thus can step aside without fear of transitional justice (Nalepa 2010); dictators have a “usable past” that will allow them to pursue redemption and renovation in a competitive democracy (Grzymala-Busse 2002); military rulers know that they can retreat to their barracks and reassume their professional duties unmolested (Geddes 1999); and/or authoritarian leaders can define the terms and timing of their own exit, allowing them to “game democracy” in their own elitist favor (Albertus & Menaldo 2018). In this literature, the risks to incumbent authoritarians of democratization are synonymous with the risks of exiting power and handing it over to the opposition.

Our primary purpose in this article is to advance a unified theoretical framework for the second perspective just outlined. To do so, however, we must first distinguish the risks of ending authoritarianism from the risks of exiting power. Across disparate regions of the world and in differing time periods, authoritarian rulers may not simply expect to preserve many of their perquisites and privileges after leaving office—they may expect to remain in office through freer and fairer electoral means, or at worst to return to power after a brief spell in opposition. Authoritarian incumbents have strategically transitioned to democracy with confident expectations of democratic electoral success, in cases ranging from sub-Saharan Africa (Riedl 2014) to East and Southeast Asia (Slater & Wong 2013) to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western Europe (Ziblatt 2017).<sup>1</sup>

In this article, we draw our common lessons together into a unified theory of authoritarian-led democratization. First, we argue that the most important upstream source of this democratization trajectory is incumbent party strength. We operationalize this capacity both in terms of parties' internal characteristics and in terms of their coalitional linkages to elite actors in both the state apparatus and wider society, especially the countryside. Second, we argue that authoritarian-led democratization is consistently a process of an electoral authoritarian regime gradually transforming itself into an electoral democracy through reversible experimentation under conditions of rising pressures, rather than either grand strategic design or a series of miscalculations committed in desperation. This is why democratic transitions are often seen in retrospect to have been incremental in nature, traceable over a longer reform trajectory. Third, we argue it is leading incumbents' electoral victory confidence that motors authoritarian-led democratization, from the opening stage of

<sup>1</sup>Miller (2019) finds that formerly autocratic ruling parties win founding elections almost two-thirds of the time after conceding democracy: a total of 41 times between 1940 and 2010.



initial democratic concessions to the final stage of democratic completion, when the former ruling party “learns to lose” (Friedman & Wong 2008). This temporal process of episodic experimentations shifts how authoritarian incumbent parties assess the costs of losing, thus extending victory confidence into a new time horizon for future returns to power through electoral alternation.

We by no means deny that authoritarian regimes sometimes exit power in moments of desperation and resignation. We also take no issue with recent findings that, on average, dictatorships are more likely to give way to democracies through miscalculations and mistakes than by strategic design (Treisman 2018). Yet democratization is sometimes a strategic choice, much more than a forced move, on the part of the incumbent regime. Given that democratization unfolds according to a number of different pathways, we argue that authoritarian-led democratization is an identifiable and recurrent trajectory that can be witnessed across multiple continents as well as centuries.

After elaborating our theory of authoritarian-led democratization more fully in the following section, we illustrate it with historical comparisons. The first empirical section draws on Ziblatt (2017) to demonstrate that robust incumbent conservative parties were the linchpin of authoritarian-led democratization in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European cases such as Britain, Belgium, and Sweden, while historical cases lacking conservative party strength proved unable to democratize on their own terms and in their own time frame. This section thus captures essential variation on the dependent variable for purposes of causal inference. We then extend our theory beyond Europe with a most-different-systems comparison of positive cases to illustrate our theory’s causal mechanisms in parallel operation across radically different contexts (Teune & Przeworski 1970, pp. 32–34). The cases of Taiwan and Ghana exemplify how cases that are radically different, both from each other and from Europe’s historical democratization cases, can accomplish authoritarian-led democratization through gradual, reversible experimentation when a capable and deeply linked ruling party oversees the response to rising pressures for reform. The case of Ghana in particular suggests that neither high state capacity nor an incumbent party’s conservative, business-friendly ideology—features clearly evident in the foundational European cases and in Taiwan—is essential for authoritarian-led democratization to successfully unfold. What matters most consistently is neither the incumbent party’s ideology nor its connection to a highly capable state apparatus, but its electoral victory confidence arising from its own internal and coalitional strengths.

In our conclusion, we extend our purview to propose that our theory of authoritarian-led democratization may shed new light on three other commonly recognized pathways through which democracies are born: military exits to the barracks, decolonization in the “second wave” of democratization (Huntington 1991), and foreign-imposed regime change. Major cases that democratization theory has tended to explain away as exceptional, such as India, Japan, and West Germany, may very well fit the broader pattern and logic we outline here.

## AUTHORITARIAN-LED DEMOCRATIZATION

In contrast to the interests of the middle class or the role of the working class in demanding democracy (Moore 1966, Rueschemeyer et al. 1992, Collier 1999), we suggest that incumbent authoritarian regimes, whatever form they take in different places and times, frequently play a critical role in implementing and sustaining democracy. Why would politically risk-averse, authoritarian ruling parties put in place political reforms that raise the specter of their defeat, at worst immediately or at best eventually? Two key factors combine as permissive and productive conditions (Soifer 2012) for this democratization pathway.

The productive condition that potentially instigates political liberalization led by the authoritarian incumbent is the ruling party’s risk assessment of rising pressures for increased political



rights and competition in relation to the party's popular support, organizational strength, and dominant position to manage such a reform while staying in power. That is, a generative force for political liberalization is an increase in domestic and/or international pressure for liberalization in a context where the authoritarian incumbent has high confidence in its ability to win competitive elections and maintain itself throughout the process (Slater & Wong 2013, Riedl 2014, Ziblatt 2017). This balance of limited risk relative to the possible gains to be achieved by responding to the constituencies demanding reform spurs democratization where the authoritarian incumbent expects that its own capacity will endure after ending authoritarianism.

A related aspect of this logic implies that authoritarian incumbents could in fact realize benefits and gains from leading democratization. For example, they can increase their domestic support base among moderates and reformers when they act as catalysts of liberalizing reforms; they can shore up international support, development aid, and/or foreign direct investment; they can use institutional changes as an opportunity to address factions, hard-liner versus soft-liner splits, or junior challengers within their own party, releasing internal pressures through the creation of new splinter parties; and they can fragment a democratic opposition movement by denying them authoritarianism as a focal point and rallying cry to unify them. This list of benefits flowing from democratic reforms is likely not exhaustive but gives a sense of the variety of possible strategic advantages that authoritarian incumbents might gain from "leveling the playing field" (Levitsky & Way 2010) on their own terms and by their own timing.

The permissive condition that might compel authoritarian ruling parties to enact democratizing reforms is the institutional legacy of prior political party organization and strategies of social control and support (Slater 2010, Riedl 2014, Ziblatt 2017). These institutional strengths permit authoritarian incumbents to maintain their power in times of rising challenges, to adequately assess it, and to transfer their party strength to electoral victory.

This combination of productive and permissive conditions pushes authoritarian incumbents both to lead political liberalization and to abide by the democratic transition even when they eventually have to learn to lose (Friedman & Wong 2008). Enduring commitment to the democratic transition by the formerly authoritarian party is a fundamental element of democratic resilience and stability (Ziblatt 2017).

A key implication of this argument is that authoritarian incumbents need not lead democratization only when they have little choice; rather, they may strategically lead political reform when they still have the ability to resist it. The paradox is that the ruling party's incumbent capacity, which makes sustaining authoritarian rule possible, simultaneously makes it less imperative (Slater & Wong 2013, p. 719). Incumbent authoritarian parties accept the benefits and costs of initiating reforms because, at the time when they implement foundational liberalizing reforms, they perceive little risk in doing so, and the possible gains outweigh the potential costs. Our argument is thus consistent with Dahl's (1971) famous remark that democratization becomes more likely as the costs to dictators of suppressing opposition outstrip the costs of tolerating it. Yet the moving part in Dahl's theory that prompts reforms is generally seen to be rising costs of suppression. By contrast, we stress that the primary reason why the costs of tolerating democratic opposition might be low enough for democratization is the existence of an entrenched and electorally confident ruling party.

Of course, authoritarian incumbent parties will vary in the degree of actual risk they face, what the political game is about (and, thus, the costs of a potential loss), and how accurately they can assess their likelihood of losing control over the reform process or, ultimately, elections (Grzymala-Busse 2002). The critical point is that, along a spectrum of possible risks an incumbent regime faces, and relative to perceived costs and benefits of undertaking other options, the authoritarian incumbent has sufficient strength to manage reforms in order to maintain its power and privilege



(Albertus & Menaldo 2018). Therefore, the risks to liberalizing are limited, largely due to the incumbent party's historical and organizational strengths. Our purpose here is to demonstrate the importance of a strong ruling political party for the surprisingly well-traveled pathway of authoritarian-led democratization.<sup>2</sup>

### Risk Factors and Incumbent Assessment

How does an authoritarian regime recognize and perceive risks, and how does it assess its own abilities to manage such risks from democratizing reforms? The actual sources of risks to the regime may include a rising working and middle class (in historical Western Europe), or a narrower but equally powerful middle class making demands (as in much of developmental East Asia in the twentieth century). While this source of risk might seem to harken back to the neo-modernization school of bourgeois democracy, neither working-class nor middle-class growth is a necessary, let alone sufficient, condition to stimulate domestic demands. Nor does the growth of these groups necessarily coax democratic concessions. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the demands for democratization were articulated by international partners, opposition elites, and in many cases broad-based coalitions of urbanites and professionals, unions, civil society associations, and territorial enclaves against the incumbent party (Arriola 2013, Bleck & van de Walle 2019). These demands might be seen as risks to the regime, but they can also be seen by the incumbent as opportunities to expand its social base, to shore up its legitimacy in the population, and to potentially gain greater external resources to use in its domestic maintenance strategies. Therefore, the apparent risks also present strategic opportunities for gains to the incumbent party.

In order for democratizing demand to be a greater possible benefit than cost to the incumbent, the ruling party must be able to rely on particular sources of strength: a legacy of development and public goods provision; a popular national base built through direct citizen linkages or through indirect ties to powerful social brokers at the local level, be they religious, ethnic, or other; and/or incumbent elites who have established organizational coherence and can rely on a social glue that keeps them aligned. These sources of incumbent strength help to keep the assessed risk of democratization reforms low.<sup>3</sup>

Analysts typically conflate the strength of a regime with the intensity of the challenges it faces. In other words, if the challengers are becoming strong, the regime has by definition become weak. In our argument, we distinguish a regime's historical strengths from the challenges that emerge at any particular moment in time. Further, we recognize that because of a ruling party's historical strengths, challenges can actually present opportunities to bolster legitimacy, public support, or internal coherence. Additionally, authoritarian-led democratization might make a previously rising opposition more vulnerable to fragmentation.

<sup>2</sup>The riskiness of democratic reform is shaped by more than just the ruling party's prospects for victory, of course. Slater & Wong (2018) argue that state strength shapes "stability confidence," i.e., a ruling party's confidence that its opposition is moderate enough to avoid becoming punitive should it win democratic elections, and hence what the political game is about. Riedl (2014) argues that, particularly in weak state contexts, the political game itself is shaped in part by the nature of the outgoing ruling party through institutional isomorphism, such that the opposition party mirrors the incumbent in form and function to a large extent. Here, we focus on the role of political parties for a particular democratization pathway, given that the authoritarian-led pathway has been previously underexplored as a global phenomenon across historical time.

<sup>3</sup>State capacity constitutes another key source of incumbent capacity (Levitsky & Way 2010, Slater 2010), and conservative ruling parties with access to a strong state will surely have extra reason for confidence that democratization will go smoothly. But our case study of Ghana below suggests that party strength can induce authoritarian-led democratization even in the absence of a strong state.



**Table 1** Incumbent party strength, pressure for democratization, and regime trajectories

	Pressure: low	Pressure: high
Party strength: high	Democratization unlikely (party domination is durable)	Democratization through strength (democracy with little risk)
Party strength: low	Democratization unlikely (non-party authoritarianism endures)	Democratization through weakness (democracy with little choice)

**Table 1** summarizes how the strength of authoritarian parties and the strength of democratization pressures combine to shape reform prospects and trajectories. Where the incumbent party is strong and pressures for change are weak, we expect the regime to stand pat and authoritarian party domination to endure. Democratization is also unlikely when both the ruling party and liberalization pressures are weak, although authoritarian regimes that lack strong parties enjoy fewer tools for governing in stable fashion.

It is on the right side of **Table 1** where our theoretical intervention lies. When an authoritarian regime lacking a strong party confronts strong liberalization pressures, it can only democratize from a position of weakness (and is thus highly likely to try to crack down rather than democratizing at all). The upper right cell captures the less-explored trajectory that is our focus here. Even when pressures against an authoritarian regime with a strong ruling party get stronger, that does not make the incumbent party weaker. Authoritarian-led democratization is most likely to unfold and culminate in a stable democracy when autocrats with a strong party calculate that democratizing in their own time and on their own terms is the best strategic response to pressures that are rising but do not yet constitute an imminent threat of regime overthrow.

### Incumbent Party Strengths

How do we measure the strength of incumbent authoritarian parties? For starters, we distinguish party strength from party type, especially in terms of party ideology. In the case studies that follow, we locate common strengths across incumbent parties of very different ideological types and social profiles. In Western Europe, as we will see, the protagonists of authoritarian-led democratization were conservative bastions of the old regime and, in many cases, of the aristocratic rural order. In East Asia, parties that presided over rapid statist development in the wake of equalizing land reforms managed to concede democracy without conceding defeat. In sub-Saharan Africa, parties with a more radical mobilizing bent at times gained sufficient strength to pursue authoritarian-led democratization with remarkable success, even in the absence of the strong state apparatuses that undergirded democratization through strength in Western Europe before and in East Asia after World War II.

What sources of party strength matter as permissive conditions, which facilitate the incumbent navigating the risks of democratic demands and successfully implementing meaningful reforms? A robust authoritarian political party's strength is aggregated from five key factors (Ziblatt 2017, p. 49). First, the party has nationwide capacity to mobilize supporters. This is critical to incumbent calculations surrounding victory confidence. Second, the party can stimulate but subordinate outside groups (such as unions, economic organizations, religious groups, ethnic associations, civil society, etc.). This parallels a type of embedded autonomy (Evans 1995), in which the ruling party can learn from and respond to social groups but not be beholden to them. Rather, the party can act strategically in its own interests to maintain itself, using the organizational resources of subordinate groups. Third, the party can call upon loyal professionals who deploy campaign resources effectively. In this respect, electoral experience, even in flawed and authoritarian elections, is an asset for the ruling party. Fourth, the party has the capacity to mobilize around issues



such as nationalism, religion, and patriotism, which can cut across existing divisions and diminish the impact of social class or ethnicity as an electoral cleavage. Fifth, the party has organizational boundaries or “firewalls” (Ziblatt 2017) to prevent extremist groups from penetrating the party’s decision-making structure or forming alliances with internal party insurgents.

These organizational strengths and national rootedness make the authoritarian party capable of conceding democracy without conceding defeat (Slater & Wong 2013) and, in so doing, defending its interests. Furthermore, a party’s elites, because of their professional investments in skills, supporters, and “sticky” organizational resources, may find it in their best interest to compete in elections. The party thus makes strategic reforms to gain public support in those contests (Ziblatt 2017). When these reforms are liberalizing, the party may see short-run electoral gains, but the incumbent politicians themselves may also be implementing the institutions that sow the seeds of their own defeat in later rounds. Authoritarian incumbents do not necessarily intend for their liberalizing reforms to lead to full democratization and certainly not their own electoral downfall. But in large part because of the authoritarian party’s leadership role in transition as well as their historical strengths, they are uniquely well-positioned to become a capable opposition as authoritarian successor parties that indirectly support democratic maintenance by using electoral channels to gain power in the future (Loxton & Mainwaring 2018). The willingness to lose is premised to a large degree on the calculation of being able to win again in the future, and through this strategic outlook, democratization proceeds. The party can avoid permanent obsolescence, and party elites can minimize personal costs of permanent exclusion, such as exile or criminal persecution. We see this in both Taiwan and Ghana, discussed in later sections.

### Avoiding Democratic Backsliding

An unresolved paradox emerges from this framework: Why don’t authoritarian successor parties become spoilers in these later stages of democratization, when they face greater risk of losing? This question is key, given the logic of the argument that the incumbent party maximizes its gains and minimizes the threats to conceding power through reform, when these initial reforms create later opportunities for the incumbent to be defeated. Why wouldn’t the incumbent ruling party become a democratic spoiler, a potential threat to democratic consolidation?

We might expect this vulnerability to backsliding for three reasons. First, the incumbent ruling party, having won founding elections, may revert to authoritarian means of consolidating its power. Authoritarian creep is common in many cases where the authoritarian-turned-democratic ruling party continues to dominate after an initial democratic breakthrough is achieved. Incumbents would generally have the capacity and experience of managing the authoritarian toolkit. Second, the continued dominance of the former authoritarian party can exacerbate, rather than mitigate, the prevailing antiregime cleavage that had mobilized the opposition in the first place. Democracies are more likely to be consolidated when the basis of electoral competition between the ruling and opposition parties shifts from questions that strike at the heart of the regime’s legitimacy to other political and economic cleavages. Third, incumbent ruling parties will eventually be defeated if democracy is to be tested and institutionalized. Former authoritarian parties can become democratic spoilers if they are unwilling to accept their electoral defeat. Put another way, democracy is threatened if the incumbent ruling parties do not learn to lose.

We propose four mechanisms through which incumbents avoid falling prey to the temptations of democratic backsliding. Through the initial reforms implemented by the authoritarian incumbents, the institutional context and competitive playing field can shift in significant ways that sufficiently reposition the authoritarian incumbent’s capacity and its interest away from becoming a democratic spoiler.



First, the presence of stronger mechanisms of horizontal accountability in a new democracy create new constraints and can prompt the formerly authoritarian incumbent party elite to evaluate their future well-being not only in light of winning elections. Most significant in this regard is the existence of an autonomous and capable judiciary. Former authoritarian elements may begin to be concerned about judicial repercussions of reviving authoritarian strategies of maintaining power, particularly in an era of increasing press freedoms and civil society organizations that can share information and mobilize around political rights and civil liberties.

International or regional commissions may also play a role in increasing pressures on domestic players to abide by the new democratic institutions. Increasingly independent electoral commissions can be formed to buy the authoritarian incumbent increasing legitimacy to conduct elections for domestic and international audiences, but the commissions' capacity to contest elections can well exceed the incumbent's expectations, as in Nigeria's 2016 elections. These autonomous institutions can limit the incumbent's tested means of electoral maintenance practices and leave the incumbent underequipped. In general, horizontal accountability can create cross-pressures for authoritarian ruling parties, and the possibility of corruption inquiries and other forms of judicial oversight may encourage authoritarian incumbents to accept democracy as the only game in town for their individual and organizational strategic interests.

Second, the process of liberalizing can stimulate or exacerbate divisions within the authoritarian incumbent party about the intrinsic value of liberalization and democratic practice, making it difficult to sustain party consensus over deploying strategies of authoritarian creep. Many incumbent party members may have extensive Western ties through their education and private sector experiences, and these kinds of low-level linkage may create divisions inside the party over the value of pursuing and maintaining democratic reforms for their own sake. In particular, outgoing presidents may see their own legacy as buoyed in the international realm when they are associated with shepherding and consolidating democratic reforms. Conceding democratic reform endows the old regime with an important source of political legitimacy, which can be translated into political capital in future electoral contests. Diplomatic golden parachutes and international accolades—such as the Mo Ibrahim award—await retiring authoritarians who have catalyzed democracy. Democratic spoiling may threaten individual legacies.

Third, democratization reforms create a new political landscape for contested offices at the local, regional, and national levels. Authoritarian incumbent parties may see losses at the national level as temporarily balanced by victories in parliament and at the state or local level that provide the party ongoing opportunities for office-holding (Riedl & Dickovick 2014). Subnational footholds can provide a livelihood and focus for some elements of the authoritarian incumbent party, and this may create enough momentum for the party as a whole to avoid spoiling national-level elections.

Finally, authoritarian incumbents may learn to lose through the process of implementing democratic reforms themselves. Authoritarian incumbent parties may calculate that complying in the near term, by stepping down from executive control, will provide the best pathway to regain national power in the future. Rather than facing a military take-over or popular uprising if they do not comply, authoritarian incumbents may assess their future possibilities as best served by democratic compliance in an electoral defeat, especially if the scale of defeat is modest enough that they imagine winning again in the future (Slater & Wong 2018). A central ingredient in this recalibration of interests is that over time, politicians can develop the political skills of negotiation, patience, and compromise to thrive in democracies. Dahl (1971) termed this process learning the arts of contestation. This only comes through practice. Several authoritarian successor parties have successfully returned to power, such as the National Democratic Congress (NDC) in Ghana, demonstrating the wisdom of this logic over the longer term.





In the case studies that follow, we examine these logics to demonstrate the applicability of the general theory and the mechanisms of democratic consolidation. We include nineteenth-century Western Europe as a key rebuttal to a prevailing explanation of first-wave democratization as one that occurred with little choice. We also examine contemporary cases in sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia to demonstrate variations in state capacity and sources of authoritarian incumbent victory confidence, as well as the nature of rising pressures for reform. In these diverse contexts and cases, the overarching commonality is the authoritarian incumbent's ability and willingness to catalyze democratic reforms, and their continued practice even in the face of defeat.

## EUROPEAN HISTORICAL CASES AND DEMOCRACY'S FIRST WAVE: TWO PATTERNS

In democracy's first wave (1830s–1930s) in Western Europe, an underappreciated collective political actor shaping democracy's stability was the class of parties on the traditional right, or conservative parties, that represented social and political groups at the center of Europe's predemocratic political order. In Britain this party was the Tory Party, and in Germany the *Deutsche Konservative Partei* filled this role. In Portugal the *Partido Regenerador* was on the conservative right, and in Spain it was the *Partido Conservador*. Meanwhile traditional forces were represented in Denmark by the *Højre* and in Sweden by the *Allmänna valmansförbundet*. While representing different groupings of Europe's old regime in each country—a mix of state officials, economic elites, and high church clergy—these parties were precursors to contemporary authoritarian successor parties, often defending the prerogatives of monarchy as pressures for democratization mounted, but effectively coping with the rise of democracy by actively shaping it.

Broadly speaking, there were two clusters of democratization experiences in Western Europe between the 1830s and 1930s. Ziblatt (2017, 2018) finds that in one group of countries—Sweden, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands, for example—democracy proceeded in a settled fashion. In a second cluster of countries, including Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and France, democratization occurred in a much less settled manner with frequent breakdowns and stalled transitions.

Many of our usual variables of analysis fail to explain why some countries experienced basically uninterrupted though protracted democratic expansion while others underwent constitutional breakdowns over the century-long process of democratization. However, in the former class of cases, conservative parties developed core attributes of mass party organization early, before universal male suffrage and the rise of socialist parties (Ziblatt 2017). This counterintuitive finding challenges classic models of party development that often assume parties of the right develop only in the face of “socialist contagion” from the left (Duverger 1959). The sources of “precocious development” were anchored in a configuration of confessional conflicts and lack of access to the state (Ziblatt 2017). But in any case, in these countries, parties of the right, representing traditional groups at their core, reached into new constituencies, found effective issues and cleavages to win support, and often initiated and supported major democratic transitions. A powerful illustration of this dynamic is seen in Sweden, where it was ultimately not the left, but Sweden's Conservative Party Prime Minister, Arvid Lindman, who, with the aid of his party, passed universal male suffrage in the first decade of the twentieth century, secure in the confidence that his party could thrive facing democratic challengers and expanded electoral competition.

By contrast, in the second group of countries, exemplified by Germany from the nineteenth century onward as well as much of southern Europe, democratic transitions were harder to achieve and less enduring once achieved. Also, religious conflicts and access to the state split the right earlier on. These two facts—the unsettled nature of the political regime and the fragmentation of the



old regime parties—were inextricably interlinked: Weak parties of the right were more resistant to democratic reforms and more likely to subvert them once achieved. To be sure, the stiff resistance to democratic reform in these countries paradoxically came from weak parties, in Germany, Spain, and Portugal, for example, where their survival and the interests of the groups they represented were perceived as more profoundly threatened by even modest democratic reform. A contrasting case to Sweden's experience in the first decade of the twentieth century was Prussia, where a weak Prussian Conservative Party refused to support even the slightest reforms of suffrage rules that would have introduced modest egalitarianism into the Prussian political system in the century's first decade.

Europe's conservative parties, facing the first wave of democratization, were also the globe's first authoritarian successor parties. Their impact was decisive here; and, as we see below, there were echoes of this experience around the world.

### STRENGTH AND SUCCESS IN AUTHORITARIAN-LED DEMOCRATIZATION: TAIWAN AND GHANA

In this section, we explore parallels in authoritarian-led democratization in cross-regional analyses of African and Asian cases, gauging two paradigmatic exemplars of democracy through strength in Taiwan and Ghana.

#### Taiwan

In the fall of 1986, Taiwan's democratic movement—called the *Tangwai* (literally meaning “outside the ruling party”) movement—announced the formation of an opposition political party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Under martial law, this was illegal. Most observers of Taiwan affairs expected the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) to clamp down and crush the opposition, as it had done throughout the postwar era. And yet, President Chiang Ching-Kuo allowed the DPP to form. A year later, the KMT regime lifted martial law, paving the way for interparty competition and Taiwan's eventual democratization (Cheng 1989). Supplementary elections were held in 1989, allowing opposition party candidates to contest seats in the legislature for the first time. These were followed by full legislative Yuan elections in 1992. Taiwan's first presidential election took place in 1996, and the KMT candidate Lee Teng-Hui won handily. In fact, the KMT continued to politically dominate after the democratic transition was under way in Taiwan (Wong 2008).

The KMT's decision to concede democratic reform during the late 1980s and into the early 1990s—a classic case of authoritarian-led democratization—was unexpected. When the opposition DPP was formed, the KMT was popular and strong. It continued to dominate local elections. The ruling regime did not face mass protests as we saw in other democratizing Asian countries such as South Korea. The economy was robust and growing. The regime, even as late as the early 1980s, did not shy away from using repressive tactics to stamp out any burgeoning opposition. Simply put, Chiang's concession represented an abrupt turn in the KMT's political strategy (Dickson 1997).

The fact of the matter, however, was that though the KMT remained firmly in political control, its grip on power was slowly, if not irreversibly, loosening by the late 1980s. As President Chiang himself noted, “the times are changing, the environment is changing, the tide is also changing” (quoted in Moody 1992, p. 92). There were at the time several indicators that suggested the ruling party had passed its apex of power (Slater & Wong 2013). Limited elections throughout the 1970s and 1980s, in which independent non-KMT candidates were permitted to run, but in which formal opposition parties were forbidden, provided the ruling party continual feedback about its popularity. By the time the DPP formed in 1986, The KMT's popularity had already begun to wane, as



its vote share slowly declined in successive electoral contests (Chao & Myers 1998, Rigger 1999). At the same time, the *Tangwai* movement mounted a growing opposition, specifically exploiting the antiauthoritarian regime cleavage as well as a simmering ethnic cleavage in Taiwan, mobilizing ethnic Taiwanese against the “outsider” and Chinese “mainlander” KMT (Wachman 1994). Just as significant, the KMT regime, at one time the darling of the postwar West, had begun to lose the support of its American patron. The Cold War thawed and the United States normalized relations with the People’s Republic of China in the 1970s, recognizing the Chinese Communist Party government in Beijing over the KMT. The international derecognition of the KMT government undermined the regime’s *raison d’être* on the island, a point that was not lost upon the KMT’s opponents.

Though the KMT’s hold on political power during the mid- to late 1980s remained formidable and the economy continued to be strong, the ruling party was weakening. Consistent with our theory of authoritarian-led democratization, the decision by President Chiang in 1986 to allow the formation of the DPP and the introduction of party competition was a preemptive strategy for the ruling party to maintain its power in democracy. Chiang never intended the KMT to lose in democratic elections. An autocratic incumbent conceding democracy is not necessarily conceding defeat, especially when the incumbent party remains strong. The KMT had plenty of strengths to draw from. It was a confident party.

Part of the KMT’s strength was rooted in the party’s history in Taiwan. Arriving in 1947, Chiang Kai-Shek immediately set out to reorganize the party. Early on, Chiang eliminated his rivals among the party elite, stamping out corruption and breaking remaining patronage ties linking the party to mainland China. The 1950 Party Re-Organization Campaign featured a mass membership drive and the formation of Leninist-style party cells that reached every government agency and local community. Through these cells, the KMT institutionalized a dense network of local ties in Taiwan, which not only allowed the ruling party to closely monitor and surveil but also provided it with an important feedback mechanism to gauge its popular standing. Though the government implemented limited local elections as early as the 1960s, the KMT’s control of political power was unassailable, due in part to its enormous organizational strength (Dickson 1996; Rigger 1999).

The KMT enjoyed tremendous legitimacy for having presided over Taiwan’s postwar economic miracle. With the support of the United States in the early 1950s, the KMT regime implemented a series of land reforms that both stamped out feudal remnants of the Japanese colonial period and unleashed newfound economic productivity. From there, the KMT-led developmental state implemented public policies and allocated government resources to facilitate Taiwan’s entry into the global market and to continually upgrade Taiwan’s industrial output. Taiwan’s economy grew nearly 10% per year from the 1960s onward, with only one pronounced dip during the 1970s OPEC crisis. Taiwan’s developmental state also ensured that the distributive outcomes of economic growth were equitable. Government efforts to grow Taiwan’s small and medium-sized enterprises, combined with large investments in universal education, full employment, and targeted social programs, promoted social mobility and the growth of the middle class. From an economic point of view, this proved to be efficient. Politically, growth with equity in Taiwan prevented the concentration of economic wealth, which the KMT feared could translate into political opposition (Cheng 1990, Haggard 1992).

During its authoritarian reign in Taiwan, the KMT continually adapted. Most notably, as a Taiwanese ethnic identity emerged as an important political cleavage, the KMT responded by recruiting ethnic Taiwanese into the party’s rank-and-file and its leadership. The “Taiwanization” of the KMT regime also extended to the government bureaucracy, as leading Taiwanese technocrats were recruited into the developmental state apparatus beginning in the 1970s. Though



the KMT was perceived by its opponents to be an *émigré* Chinese mainlander regime, the fact that the KMT consistently won the support of overwhelming majorities—even though so-called mainlanders made up less than 20% of voters in Taiwan—demonstrates that the ruling party quite successfully repositioned itself as a local political party (Tien 1989). The ethnic cleavage, which emerged as a more central political issue in the 1990s and 2000s, was relatively benign at the time for the ruling party due to the KMT's localization strategy.

The KMT's inherited strengths—its organizational structure, its “usable past” (Grzymala-Busse 2002) in directing Taiwan's postwar economic development, and its strategic adaptation, specifically its efforts to localize the party—contributed to the regime's considerable confidence of victory as it initiated democratic reforms in the late 1980s. The KMT, we stress, conceded democracy without intending to cede power. There are several reasons why the KMT enjoyed such confidence. In an absolute sense, the party's inherited strengths endowed it with tremendous power and important political-economic assets. The incumbent KMT was much stronger than its opposition, the newly formed DPP. The DPP was rife with factional battles and it had few assets. The opposition party, as an organization, was still in its infancy at the time, and it did not have a record of developmental achievement, a “usable past,” unlike the KMT. In addition, the DPP was formed primarily as an antiauthoritarian party and thus relied on an antiregime cleavage to mobilize its supporters; the KMT effectively neutralized that cleavage by introducing democratic reforms (Rigger 2001, Fell 2005). That the KMT preemptively conceded democratic reform, and effectively led the transition process, allowed it to shape Taiwan's new democracy in ways that benefited the KMT. For instance, the KMT adhered to the multi-member (single nontransferable vote) district electoral system that greatly advantaged the ruling party because of its ability to strategically field many candidates in large districts and because of its massive seat bonus in rural districts where the KMT's clientelistic ties ran deepest (Huang 1996). Though the KMT understood the risks of democratic reform, the party was nonetheless confident that it would not only politically survive a democratic transition but that it would very likely thrive in democracy. The KMT won both the legislative Yuan and the presidency in Taiwan's founding elections in 1992 and 1996.

The party did lose the presidency in 2000, when DPP candidate Chen Shui-bian won a tightly contested three-cornered race. The KMT did not stay in the wilderness for long, however, as it maintained a dominant legislative majority through the first decade of the 2000s and regained executive office in 2008 under President Ma Ying-Jeou. The KMT resisted becoming democratic spoilers because, though it lost some elections, it was in a position to compete (Slater & Wong 2018). Earlier on, soon after the democratic transition began, the KMT initiated a series of internal party reforms led by Lee Teng-Hui, the party leader and then president. In an effort to sideline party hardliners and those resistant to democratic reform in the early 1990s, President Lee convened the National Affairs Conference. Lee reached out to his supporters within the KMT and to opposition politicians and leaders to redefine the democratic rules of the game. Constitutional changes were made in order to strengthen Taiwan's nascent democracy, and Lee's hardline opponents from within the party splintered off from the KMT when they formed the New Party in 1993 (Chao & Myers 1998). The KMT, in relatively short order, had renovated itself into a legitimate democratic reformer and a party that was invested in the democratic game. The KMT, facing defeat soon after, was the quintessential student learning to lose in order to win again.

## Ghana

The authoritarian ruling party in Ghana, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), successfully led the transition to multiparty competition in 1992, won the founding elections in 1992, won



again in 1996, conceded defeat in 2000, regained executive power in 2008, and won again in 2012. The main reason for its long-term success was that it enjoyed the stable support of local brokers. This support had been crafted throughout the national territory during the authoritarian period, beginning in the single-party period that had started in 1981 (Owusu 1996). Given the continuing importance of chieftaincy in Ghana, the NDC decided to incorporate local elites into the party and mobilize their followers as supporters of the party at an early stage. The party built a broad support base that endured even after the introduction of multiparty competition, similar to the KMT's strategy of building up its networks in rural constituencies in Taiwan (Pryce & Oidtmann 2014).

Strong social linkages were the key to mobilizing support for the NDC, as the party sought grassroots incorporation to provide a social base as a foundation for their rule (Gyimah-Boadi 1993). The NDC further appointed chiefs to high-ranking ministerial positions and created a vast number of new local-level administrators in pursuit of a new decentralization agenda (Ninsin & Drah 1987, Ayee 2004). Expanding the cadre of loyal party professionals was conducive to the incumbent's ability to successfully implement democratic reforms while minimizing the possibility of electoral defeat. Rather than a developmental state, these social linkages were the basis of the authoritarian incumbent's strength, which allowed it to face multiparty elections with relatively little risk, despite the competitive capacity of the opposition (Riedl 2014, 2018).

The authoritarian incumbent party in Ghana used its control over the state apparatus and rooted social support to determine the extent of democratic reform and limit threats to its rule from political liberalization. The ruling party was firmly in control of the democratization process: It could not fully ignore demands for political reform, but it could reject opposition demands to negotiate and create its own path toward constitutional rule.

The members of the party's inner circle, at this reform stage, saw the move to multipartyism as a strategic decision to respond to internal and external pressures and preempt opposition in order to maintain the party's position. Like the KMT in Taiwan, the NDC took strategic steps to continue its dominance and maximize its gains from leading democratization. It used the institutional change to establish local district agents loyal to the regime, and it leveraged the party national infrastructure and the state resources it controlled to build electoral support through the multiparty campaigns (Ninsin & Drah 1987). The party's foot soldiers in the field provided continued opportunities for co-optation as well as constant fear-inducing reminders of the local-level institutionalization of the previously authoritarian regime. From the electoral rules regarding political party formation to the maintenance of elements of the coercive state during the founding multiparty elections, the party's politically liberalizing reforms were meant to satisfy the social demands for pluralism while the incumbent party won power anyway.

The NDC controlled the transition from one-party rule to multipartyism with great success, transforming itself and remaining in power during the 1992–2000 period of dominance through multiparty competition. During this period, the NDC further entrenched itself at the local level through targeted public service projects (Briggs 2012) and local governance reforms designed to incorporate local brokers into the machinery of state administration.

Given the precise strategic calculations accompanying political liberalization throughout the early 1990s, why did the NDC accept defeat in the 2000 elections? On one hand, the NDC had much less to lose in 2000 than it would have under an earlier authoritarian system. The party's local brokers remained loyal to the party and supported it by carrying out activities and maintaining offices in each constituency, and therefore the party continued to enjoy the support of just under 50% of the electorate. The NDC personnel (the local brokers who were integrated into the party base) tending to the party's headquarters maintained the party in the eyes of their followers. Because these local leaders had been integrated into the party as officials in prior decades,



they continued to animate the party's activities and represent the party to the public. Not unlike Taiwan's KMT, the DNC after losing the presidency in 2000 retained control of nearly half of the parliamentary seats, and it was intimately connected with the national bureaucracy and civil service at the local level (and in particular connected with the nonpartisan district agents installed in years prior through the decentralization reforms). Therefore, the party did not lose access to the state, nor all of its voice in future legislative debates. The legislature had already proved itself a vigorous source of opposition debate, and the NDC was able to use its position as parliamentary opposition to maintain a national profile among constituents. And the continued access to state resources through administrative and elected positions allowed the party to maintain clientelistic relationships with loyalists to an important degree, even while in the opposition.

The NDC accepted defeat while managing internal divisions over the nature and extent of democratic reform and the future of the party itself. One wing supported the party's former military leader, John Jerry Rawlings, who had led the creation of the party and the transition of the regime from a military to a civilian single-party system, then to a competitive authoritarian multiparty system, and finally to a thriving democracy. This pro-Rawlings faction was associated with fervent support of the 1981 military coup, which was seen as crucial in ridding the nation of corrupt, elitist, big men politicians. The alternative wing advocated greater inner-party reform and freeing the party from the former dictator's personal leadership. This reformist wing also sought to focus the party's electoral campaign more on social democratic ideological lines and less on the charisma of Rawlings. The NDC's 2000 defeat was part and parcel of President Rawlings and his party accepting the term limits implemented in 1992 and passing the candidacy to a successor within the party. Therefore, the NDC's defeat and acceptance of its defeat was related to internal party succession and organizational changes. The two factions' differing views of the future direction of the party played out in differing conceptions of what opportunities the democratic electoral contest provided. Many of the reformists saw opportunities to compete and win in the future through their faithful adherence to the rules of the game. For Rawlings himself, the local diplomatic community was highly influential in encouraging the President to accept the term limits and pursue a new stage as a venerated international statesman (Gyimah-Boadi 2001). The NDC's continued ties to the military, even after losing power, further assured them of their security to lose temporarily and compete again in the future. They also perceived the past dictator's populism as essential in securing future electoral success (Elscher 2008, p. 189). These factors combined to reassure the NDC that as an authoritarian successor party, it would not lose too much, and it would be in a position to win again in the future.

Both the authoritarian successor party and the newly victorious opposition party in Ghana employed clientelistic appeals to win electoral support, as in many emergent democracies in Africa (van de Walle 2003). But similar to the KMT–DPP competition in Taiwan, the primary initial cleavage was based on an antiregime mobilization, allowing citizens to express their claims for democratic reform, to which both parties endeavored to respond through institutional reforms and electoral strategy. This regime cleavage also evolved into a contemporary debate between a more neoliberal and a more statist approach, with linkages to early-independence political groupings (Morrison 2004). While clientelism remains an electoral strategy, it exists within a context of a highly competitive, multiparty democracy with high levels of civil rights and political liberties.

## CONCLUSION

We propose a unified theory of authoritarian-led democratization, built from cross-regional patterns in new and old democracies alike. We suggest this insight in a critical global historical moment when democracies are under threat from populist/nativist challenger movement parties. But



our theory of how democratization occurs and why it is maintained can also suggest important implications for the types of threats the regimes might face in the future. Strong authoritarian successor parties may lose electorally to populist challenger parties, but they are less likely to enact democratic backsliding than we might have expected given their authoritarian origins.

Authoritarian successor parties frequently do not backslide because they perceive that by losing in the short term they will not lose too much, and that limited loss may best preserve their ability to return to power and secure their political and material interests. Institutions of horizontal accountability may constrain the authoritarian incumbents and new winning parties alike. Strong opposition movements may emerge as credible constraints as well. The authoritarian successor party may be able to maintain subnational or other offices despite losing national elections, which may diminish the quality of democracy. Yet, most critically, the outgoing authoritarian leaders may learn the skill of democratic politics and have strategic incentives to accept losing when they are offered golden parachutes of various types to cede power. The broader lesson is that learning to lose is a prerequisite for democratization, and when losses are limited, the potential for future victories is advanced. We suggest that these mechanisms of authoritarian-led democratization initiation and maintenance broach new frontiers in understanding democratic spoiling and consolidation.

Three new applications of the theory leap to mind. First, our theory of authoritarian-led democratization offers a new way of thinking about military exits from power. According to Geddes (1999), military regimes are more likely to concede democratic reforms than either single-party or personalist regimes because militaries always have barracks to which they can retreat. We do not disagree, but we see this theory as limited in explaining why some military regimes stay in power so much longer than others. Our argument suggests that a military regime might be more willing to exit when it is confident that an electorally viable conservative party will be able to rule in its stead and in its interest. Intriguingly, this implies that military regimes might stay in power longer *without* strong backing from a civilian party: the opposite of what Geddes' theory suggests.

Consider the cases of Indonesia, Egypt, and Thailand. In Indonesia, the dominant military accepted the return of free and fair electoral competition in the late 1990s after the fall of President Suharto, and then surprisingly yielded its key safeguards, such as its guaranteed seats in parliament, over the course of the early 2000s (Slater & Wong 2013, 2018). This military retreat was smoothed by the continuing viability of a conservative authoritarian successor party, Golkar, which managed through power-sharing arrangements to maintain a leading position in the executive even as its vote share precipitously declined from its hegemonic authoritarian heyday (Slater 2018). This case contrasts dramatically with Egypt, where the ruling National Democratic Party collapsed along with President Mubarak's regime, leaving no viable conservative party to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood's electoral landslide. Bereft of a party capable of unseating the Brotherhood through the ballot box, Egypt's military returned to power in a coup and shows no sign of relinquishing it—despite the eternal availability of a barracks to return to. A similar story has unfolded in Thailand. There, the military has both returned to power and shown an unusually dogged commitment to remaining there since 2006, when it became clear that the country's main conservative and royalist party, the Democrats, was simply incapable of defeating the upstart Thai Rak Thai Party of Thaksin Shinawatra in a fair electoral fight. If either Thailand or Egypt possessed a strong conservative party along the lines of Indonesia (or Ghana or Taiwan, for that matter), we would expect the likelihood of a military exit from power through our authoritarian-led democratization logic to rise accordingly.

Authoritarian-led democratization also sheds new light on democratization's "second wave" (Huntington 1991), which began with widespread decolonization in the wake of World War II. Until now, this wave has been seen as either a natural consequence of European imperial retreat



or a largely exogenous product of Allied victory and resultant American hegemony and prestige (Gunitsky 2018). Yet there is no obvious reason why second-wave democracies should have gained solid footing at all, and indeed most did not. The greatest puzzle of this wave is the world's largest democracy, India. It has recently been argued that India's democracy, unlike Pakistan's, persevered after independence because the ruling Congress Party featured both an ideological commitment to democracy and the organizational capacity to ensure it was coherently and consistently pursued (Tudor 2013). Our argument resonates, while placing more attention squarely on the point that Congress had ample reason to believe it could keep winning elections, and thus had no reason to discard democratic practices as most new democracies in postcolonial settings did. A similar lesson could easily be drawn from Malaysia: The conservative dominant party UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) lacked the deep ideological commitment to democracy of India's Congress, yet it still upheld democracy from 1957 until 1969, when its first major electoral setback prompted it to install electoral authoritarian rule for the next half century.

Third and finally, authoritarian-led democratization offers a new perspective on the mode of democratization that has proven least amenable to systematic theorizing and comparison: democracy by imposition, or foreign-imposed regime change. Most significantly, the postwar democratization of Japan and West Germany is treated as simply a byproduct of American imposition as one of the spoils of war victory. The glaring problem with this account is that the United States was perfectly content to watch democracies collapse around the world during the Cold War, so long as the authoritarian regime that resulted was anti-Soviet in character. Perhaps democracy endured in Japan and West Germany because strong conservative parties such as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) were rightly confident that they could keep winning elections, either on their own in the Japanese case or in tandem and in alternation with other moderate parties in Germany, and that the risks of communist or radical socialist electoral victory were minimal to nonexistent. If conservative party strength was key to successful authoritarian-led democratization in the massively important historical cases of postwar Japan and West Germany—even if the authoritarian regime that originally pushed for democratization was an American occupier working through conservative local allies, rather than local conservative authoritarian incumbent parties acting alone as in Britain, Ghana, and Taiwan—then the potential impact of our theory should expand accordingly.

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