Article

Strong states, weak elections? How state capacity in authoritarian regimes conditions the democratizing power of elections

Carolien van Ham
University of New South Wales, Australia

Brigitte Seim
University of North Carolina, USA

Abstract

State capacity may be a crucial factor conditioning the democratizing power of elections in authoritarian regimes. This paper develops a two-phase theory considers the different effects of state capacity on turnover in elections and democratic change after elections. In regimes with limited state capacity, manipulating elections and repressing opposition is more difficult than in regimes with extensive state capacity, rendering turnover in elections more likely in weak states. However, if the new incumbent has limited capacity to deliver public services and make policy changes after coming to power, sustainable democratic change is unlikely. Hence, state capacity is hypothesized to have a negative effect on turnover, but a positive effect on democratic change. These hypotheses are confirmed in a sample of 460 elections in 110 authoritarian regimes taking place in the period 1974 to 2012 using the Varieties of Democracy dataset. The findings suggest a need to revisit strong-state-first theories of democratization.

Keywords

Democratic change, democratization, elections, electoral authoritarianism, turnover

Introduction

Because many autocracies in the world today hold multiparty elections (Croissant and Hellmann, this issue), it is critical to understand the conditions under which elections lead to democratization or, conversely, sustain authoritarianism. On the one hand, research into democratization-by-elections argues that repeated elections, even when held in authoritarian contexts, eventually lead to democratization

Corresponding author:
Carolien van Ham, School of Social Sciences, University of New South Wales, 2052 NSW, Sydney, Australia.
Email: c.vanham@unsw.edu.au

(Edgell et al., 2015; Howard and Roessler, 2006; Lindberg, 2009). Indeed, in countries as varied as Tunisia, Ghana and Mongolia, the introduction of multi-party elections has generated increased civil liberties, deepened respect for the rule of law, and regular turnover of the national executive (Doorenspleet and Kopecky, 2008; Lindberg, 2006; Stepan, 2012). On the other hand, cases such as Malaysia, Russia and Cameroon demonstrate that elections in authoritarian regimes can be subverted to such an extent that they strengthen, rather than weaken, authoritarian rule (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Schedler, 2002, 2013). Clearly, elections can both sustain and undermine authoritarianism, raising the question: what factors mediate the relationship between elections and democratization?

We argue that state capacity is one of the factors affecting the democratizing power of elections in authoritarian regimes. Scholars have argued that developing strong state institutions is an important pre-condition for successful democratization, acting both to prevent instability and conflict in transitional regimes and to enable newly democratic governments to gain legitimacy by providing public services (Fortin, 2012; Fukuyama, 2014; Mansfield and Snyder, 2007; Mazzuca and Munck, 2014). However, state capacity may serve those same functions in authoritarian regimes and, in addition, strengthen autocrats' capacity to manipulate support and oppress dissent (Seeberg, 2014; Slater, 2012; Way, 2005), suggesting state capacity might be equally important for either democratic or autocratic stability (Andersen et al., 2014b; Slater and Fenner, 2011).

We build on insights from research on state capacity, democratization and electoral authoritarianism to develop a theory of how state capacity conditions the effectiveness of elections in bringing about democratic change in authoritarian regimes. We argue that, ultimately, whether state capacity undermines or reinforces democratization depends on who is exercising the capacity of the state and to what end. We therefore propose a two-phase theory that considers the differential effects of state capacity on turnover in elections and democratic change after elections. We hypothesize that state capacity has a *negative* effect on the likelihood of turnover in authoritarian elections, but a *positive* effect on democratic change after turnover has occurred. In authoritarian regimes with weak state capacity, manipulating elections, repressing opposition and co-opting elites may be more difficult than in authoritarian regimes with strong state capacity. Hence, we expect elections in regimes with weak state capacity to be more likely to lead to incumbent turnover. However, after turnover, if the new incumbent has limited capacity to deliver public services and make policy changes after coming to power, democratic change is unlikely to be sustainable.[1] Thus, state capacity in authoritarian regimes can either reinforce or undermine the democratizing power of elections, depending on the stage at which state capacity is being applied.

In the next section, we develop our theoretical argument and hypotheses about the relationship between state capacity, elections and democratization. We then present our data and methods, followed by the results of our empirical analyses using new data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (version 6.1) and Hanson and Sigman (2013). By drawing on the V-Dem dataset and the Hanson and Sigman state capacity index, we are able to test our theoretical expectations robustly, cross-nationally, and over time, examining 460 elections in 110 electoral authoritarian regimes over a 35+ year period, from 1974 to 2012. In the final section we conclude with a discussion of the results and suggestions for future research. Our findings highlight the need to revisit strong-state-first theories of democratization.

State capacity, elections and democratic change in electoral authoritarian regimes

A rich and extensive literature considers whether or not elections in authoritarian regimes lead to democratization. Some conclude that elections in authoritarian regimes sustain authoritarianism. Historical research on elections in fledgling democracies in Europe, the United States and Latin

America demonstrates that elections were subverted in a variety of ways, from co-optation of ruling elites to exclusion of opposition parties and voters, and to electoral manipulation (Evans, 1989; Key, 1949; Lehoucq, 2003; Mickey, 2015).[2] Likewise, during the Cold War authoritarian regimes often restricted competition in elections (when held at all) to such an extent that elections were single-party elections or plebiscites (Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010). More recently, the spike in electoral authoritarian regimes after the end of the Cold War that use a variety of strategies to manipulate elections (Lehoucq, 2003; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Schedler, 2002, 2013), suggests that elections can indeed be useful instruments to promote authoritarian stability (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010).

Conversely, another thread of research concludes that elections can offer opportunities for democratization. The struggles for electoral reform in countries such as the USA and Mexico illustrate this pathway (Magaloni, 2006; Mickey, 2015). Similarly, many of the authoritarian regimes that started holding multiparty elections after the end of the Cold War did democratize, albeit sometimes through protracted periods of transition (Barkan, 2000; Lindberg, 2006, 2009).[3] Regime change by elections has become increasingly frequent in authoritarian regimes (Croissant and Hellmann, this issue).[4] Hence, a better understanding of the conditions under which elections contribute to the democratization of authoritarian regimes is critical.[5]

To resolve these opposing conclusions of the literature on elections and democratization, we examine the mediating variable of state capacity. Although scholars have considered a range of intervening variables that may affect whether or not elections lead to democratization, state capacity has been largely overlooked as such a factor, especially in empirical work.[6] In order to understand the role of state capacity in strengthening or weakening the democratizing power of elections, we map the causal connections between state capacity, elections, and democratic change.[7] We first discuss the direct effects of elections and state capacity on democratic change, and then proceed to outline our key hypotheses on the role of state capacity as a mediating variable in the relationship between elections and democratization in electoral authoritarian regimes.

Elections and democratic change

Elections can lead to democratic change in two ways. First, elections can spur democratic change by generating incremental changes in other components of democracy that subsequently lead to improvements in overall democratic quality. Repeated experiences with elections can encourage learning and socialization of elites and citizens into the practices of democracy, and expand media freedom and civil liberties, changes that might be difficult to turn back after the elections are over (Lindberg, 2006, 2009). Second, elections can lead to democratization by generating incumbent turnover in elections, creating a possibility for citizens to 'throw the rascals out' if they are dissatisfied with the incumbent government (Huntington, 1991: 174). Of course, in electoral authoritarian regimes this possibility may be very small, but even autocrats sometimes lose elections, creating a window of opportunity for political change (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013). Evaluating whether elections have democratizing effects therefore requires a two-phase operationalization of democratization-by-elections: one that examines the determinants of incumbent turnover separately from the determinants of democratic change after elections.

State capacity and democratic change

The state and state capacity have been conceptualized in many different ways (Andersen et al., 2014a; Hanson, this issue). Following the Weberian tradition, we define the state as 'an entity that successfully claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a specified territory' (Weber,

1918). State capacity is defined as 'the ability of state institutions to effectively implement official goals' (Sikkink, 1991). Following Hanson (this issue), we distinguish between three types of state capacity: three types of state capacity: coercive; administrative; and extractive. While coercive capacity relates to states' capacity to maintain their monopoly of power and deliver a minimum level of security for citizens (Fukuyama, 2004; Mansfield and Snyder, 2007), administrative capacity refers to states' capacity to implement policies and deliver basic public services (Andersen et al., 2014a).[8] Extractive capacity refers to states' capacity to collect resources, which is important for sustaining both coercive and administrative capacity. In practice, authoritarian regimes vary in terms of their capacity on these three dimensions, and this variation determines what strategies for ensuring regime stability are available to incumbents (Andersen et al., 2014b; Slater and Fenner, 2011).[9]

We argue that authoritarian rulers can channel state capacity to strengthen their power base in three ways: first, by generating genuine support; second, by fabricating support; and, third, by suppressing dissent. State capacity enables incumbents to generate genuine support by providing security and other public services, such as education or health services (Slater, 2012; Slater and Fenner, 2011). State capacity also allows incumbents to fabricate support by manipulating elections, distorting information provided by the media, and co-opting ruling elites, opposition and citizens (Seeberg, 2014). Lastly, state capacity can be used to suppress dissent by legal prosecution, intimidation, or even jailing and eradicating opposition actors, journalists and critical citizens (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Schedler, 2013; Seeberg, 2014).

All three types of state capacity can be used by authoritarian incumbents to generate genuine support, fabricate support, or suppress dissent. For example, coercive state capacity can be used to guarantee security for citizens (generating genuine support) as well as to limit opposition to the incumbent (suppressing dissent). Likewise, administrative state capacity can be used to deliver public services to citizens (generating genuine support) as well as to manipulate elections (fabricating support). Finally, extractive state capacity can be used to fund public services (generating genuine support) as well as for co-opting elites and citizens that may otherwise oppose the incumbent (fabricating support).

In various combinations therefore, electoral authoritarian regimes can use the three types of state capacity through these three different channels to strengthen their power.[10] This can affect prospects for democratic change directly, regardless of whether elections are held or not. For example, co-optation of ruling elites and citizens can ensure loyalty and support for incumbents in the period between elections and can lower the risk of coups, protests and even revolutions or civil war. Coercion of the opposition serves the same purpose, maintaining stability of the regime regardless of whether elections are being held.[11] Hence, we would expect state capacity in authoritarian regimes to lower the prospects of democratic change even in the absence of elections.

How state capacity mediates the relationship between elections and democratization

When it comes to understanding how state capacity affects the democratizing power of elections, it is important to consider two phases, modeling incumbent turnover in elections separately from democratic change after elections. Here, we define 'incumbent turnover' to be the election of a different ruling party, and we define 'democratic change' as a net shift towards democracy in the years following the election. We advocate this two-phase approach because whether state capacity undermines or reinforces democratization depends on who is exercising the capacity of the state, and to what end (Slater and Fenner, 2011). In considering what leads to incumbent turnover in electoral authoritarian regimes, state capacity is in the hands of an authoritarian incumbent. In this phase, we anticipate state capacity being used to retain power using the strategies outlined above,

making turnover and democratic change less likely. However, if turnover nevertheless does occur, state capacity is then in the hands of a newly elected incumbent, who – if democratic – can use state capacity to generate democratic change. We therefore theorize that state capacity has opposing effects in these two phases and thus it is critically important to separate both phases when investigating the effects of state capacity empirically.

Starting with turnover, in elections in authoritarian regimes, strong state capacity can enable incumbents to engage in generating genuine support, fabricating support and suppressing dissent. For example, strong state capacity allows incumbents to ramp up delivery of public services and goods in the months leading up to the elections, to target clientelism, to co-opt elites by promises of access to and redistribution of state resources after the elections, to intimidate opposition and voters and oppress independent sources of information, and to manipulate electoral institutions such as electoral management bodies to deliver results in favor of the incumbent (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Hellmann, this issue; Schedler, 2013; Seeberg, 2014). Strong state capacity thus allows authoritarian incumbents to limit the presence of viable opposition parties, limit the freedom of the media, engage in electoral fraud, and use many other strategies that maximize their chances of winning the elections. Hence, we would expect strong state capacity to significant lower the chances of turnover in authoritarian elections. Elections held in electoral authoritarian regimes with strong states, such as Malaysia, Singapore and Russia, provide illustrative examples of this logic. Conversely, we would expect weak state capacity to increase the likelihood of turnover in authoritarian elections, as illustrated by elections in regimes with weaker state capacity such as those in Haiti, Bangladesh and Comoros.

However, while weak state capacity may increase the probability that elections trigger incumbent turnover, subsequent democratic change may be *less* likely in regimes with limited state capacity. Conversely, if elections in authoritarian regimes with strong state capacity bring a 'democrat' to power, however unlikely such an outcome might be, state capacity would be important in supporting the new incumbent's attempts at implementing further democratic change. A democratic leader attempting to generate genuine support would need strong extractive capacity to fund large-scale public goods, strong administrative capacity to follow through on a programmatic agenda, and strong coercive capacity to enforce the rule of law and depart from the previous autocratic status quo. Thus, what may be needed for democratic change after elections is the (unlikely) combination of incumbent turnover and a strong state.[12] The cases of South Korea (Hellmann, this issue) and Indonesia (Mietzner, this issue) provide examples of this logic.

We therefore expect state capacity to be positively associated with democratic change after elections, but *only* if the elections resulted in incumbent turnover. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the expected relationships between state capacity, incumbent turnover and democratic change after elections.

Figure 1. Theoretical conditional effect of state capacity on democratization-by-elections.
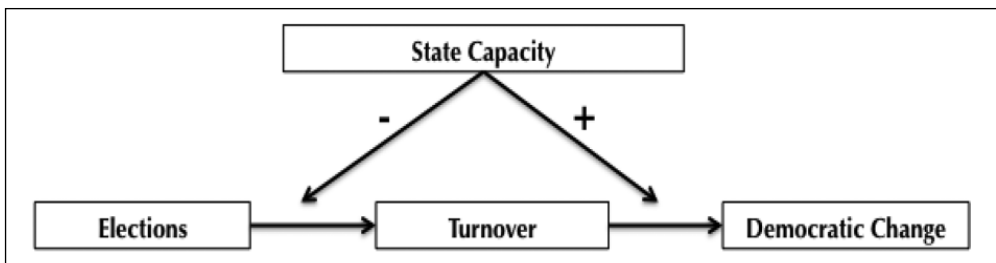
Summarizing our hypotheses, our hypothesis for the *direct* effect of state capacity on democratic change in electoral authoritarian regimes is:

> *H1 – Greater state capacity is associated with a lower likelihood of democratic change.*

Our hypotheses for the *conditional* effects of state capacity on the democratizing power of elections in electoral authoritarian regimes are:

> *H2 – Greater state capacity is associated with a lower likelihood of turnover in elections; and*

> *H3 – Greater state capacity is associated with a higher likelihood of democratic change after elections that resulted in turnover.*

Data and methods[13]

The hypotheses outlined in the previous section are tested with new data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset, version 6.1 (Coppedge et al., 2016a, 2016b, 2016c) and the Quality of Government dataset (Teorell et al., 2015), as well as data on state capacity from Hanson and Sigman (2013).[14]

Sample selection

Because our theoretical argument focuses on authoritarian elections, we limit our sample to electoral authoritarian regimes. We use the V-Dem liberal democracy index which classifies regimes along a continuum from 'very authoritarian' (0) to 'very democratic' (1).[15] We consider all regimes that hold elections and score lower than 0.5 on the liberal democracy index to be electoral authoritarian regimes and include them in our analysis.[16] This cutoff means some ambiguous cases on the border between electoral authoritarianism and electoral democracy might be included, but assures inclusion of all electoral authoritarian regimes.[17,18] We exclude closed autocracies that do not hold multiparty elections for the national executive, and exclude countries that are not fully independent.[19] We further restrict the sample to national-level elections for the executive. Hence, in presidential regimes we include presidential elections and in parliamentary regimes we include parliamentary elections.[20] These choices result in a sample of 460 executive elections that took place between 1974 and 2012 in 110 countries around the world, a total of 3116 country–year observations.[21]

Dependent variables

Tables A and B in the online Appendix show summary statistics for all variables. The analyses include two dependent variables: incumbent turnover in elections, and democratic change after elections.

Turnover is measured using the V-Dem variables capturing turnover in the head of government and turnover in the head of state. We code elections as having resulted in turnover when the head of state or head of government lose their position(s) as a result of the outcome of the election. In presidential systems, this code applies when the new president is both a different person and from a different party (or independent) than was in power before the election. In parliamentary systems, this code applies when the ruling party or coalition of parties loses and the new head of government

is from a different party or from a new coalition (Coppedge et al., 2016b).[22] In our sample, 34% of elections resulted in turnover.[23]

We measure democratic change by calculating the change in the regime's democracy score in the two years after the elections.[24] The democracy score we use is the V-Dem liberal democracy index described above, which classifies regimes along a continuum from very authoritarian (0) to very democratic (1).[25] In the models with democratic change as the dependent variable, we include lagged democracy level ($t - 1$) as an independent variable to mitigate possible ceiling effects.[26]

Independent variables

Our main independent variable of interest is state capacity. We use the measure of state capacity developed by Hanson and Sigman (2013) for three reasons. First, it combines the three dimensions of state capacity discussed – extractive capacity, coercive capacity, and administrative capacity – into a single measure of state capacity.[27] Second, it offers the greatest coverage in years and countries, because it incorporates measures of state capacity from multiple sources. Third, missing data are imputed rather than list-wise deleted.[28] In the models explaining turnover, state capacity is lagged; hence it is measured in the year before the election; in the models explaining democratic change after the election, we measure state capacity in the year of the election.

Controls

In models explaining turnover, we include several control variables associated with turnover in elections. Because turnover is more likely if economic performance is unsatisfactory (Anderson, 2007), we include GDP per capita (in current US dollars) and economic growth per capita (% annual GDP growth per capita).[29] Clarity of responsibility, required for voters to hold incumbents accountable for bad performance, is considered to be greater in presidential (versus parliamentary) systems (Anderson, 2007), and so presidentialism is included as a control variable as well.[30]

In models explaining democratic change, we include control variables that have commonly been found to be associated with democratization in previous research (Lindberg, 2006; Przeworski et al., 2000; Teorell, 2010). We include control variables for the level of economic development (measured as GDP per capita in current US dollars) and economic growth (measured as % annual GDP growth per capita), because previous research has found that greater economic development but lower growth rates are conducive to democratization (Przeworski et al., 2000). We include control variables indicating whether a coup d'état or civil war occurred in the year before the elections because previous research has found both such events to have a negative effect on democratization (Lindberg, 2006). We include controls for ethnic and religious fractionalization, whether the country has a presidential or parliamentary form of government, and whether the country is a former British colony because previous research has found that ethnic and religious fractionalization undermines democratization (Teorell, 2010), presidentialism negatively affects prospects for democratization (Przeworski et al., 2000), and former British colonies tend to have better prospects for democratization (Teorell, 2010). Data on the level of economic development and growth are derived from the World Development Indicators, data on coup d'états and civil war from the V-Dem dataset, and data on the other control variables from the Quality of Government dataset (Teorell et al., 2015).[31]

We do not include the level of foreign aid and the level of natural resources as controls when predicting democratic change because we anticipate these to be intervening variables in the relationship between state capacity and democratic change. Similarly, we do not include intervening variables that are associated with elections and democratic change, such as co-optation of elites

Table 1. The direct effect of state capacity and elections on democratic change.

Variables	Models testing H1			
	1	2	3	4
	Democratic change	Democratic change	Democratic change	Democratic change
State capacity	−0.011**	−0.012**	−0.011**	−0.012**
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Level of democracy (*t*–1)	−0.162***	−0.208***	−0.147***	−0.190***
	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.015)
Executive election held?			0.043***	0.039***
			(0.008)	(0.008)
Election × democracy			−0.118***	−0.115***
			(0.027)	(0.028)
Turnover in election?			0.012	0.012**+**
			(0.007)	(0.007)
Election × state capacity			0.014**	0.011*
			(0.005)	(0.005)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
Number of country–years	2676	2435	2676	2435
Number of countries	99	97	99	97

Standard errors in parentheses. *p*-values: *0.05; **0.01' ***0.001.

and citizens, oppression of the opposition, and electoral manipulation. These variables are part of the causal mechanisms we are positing, meaning that we expect state capacity to shape turnover in elections and democratic change *through* these variables, and that the multicollinearity between these variables and state capacity would render the effect of state capacity insignificant in regression analysis.

We lag all included control variables by one year, so they are measured the year before the elections took place.

Empirical strategy

Our empirical strategy has two sections. First, in order to test whether there is a direct negative effect of state capacity on democratic change (H1), the first section of our analysis predicts democratic change in all country–years, regardless of the incidence of an election. These analyses are carried out using time-series cross-sectional ordinary least squares regression with country fixed effects: the results are presented in Table 1. Because we are testing for a direct effect of state capacity on democratic change, in these analyses we consider all country–years in our sample, regardless of whether elections were held or not.

To determine whether there is a negative effect of state capacity on turnover in elections (H2), we first test the effect of state capacity on turnover, using time-series cross-sectional logistic regression with regional fixed effects for turnover models.[32] Then, in order to test whether there is a positive effect of state capacity on democratic change after elections with turnover (H3), we model turnover and democratic change simultaneously as part of a two-step equation. We use a treatment effects model to test, first, how state capacity affects turnover (selection model) and,

Table 2. The effect of state capacity on turnover and democratic change.

Variables	Models testing H2		Models testing H3	
	1	2	3	4
	Incumbent turnover	Incumbent turnover	Democratic change	Democratic change
State capacity			0.022** (0.008)	0.020* (0.009)
Turnover in election?			0.123*** (0.016) Incumbent Turnover	0.128*** (0.016) Incumbent Turnover
State capacity (t–1)	−0.677** (0.256)	−0.862** (0.327)	−0.357** (0.127)	−0.331* (0.135)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
Number of elections	397	383	367	365
Number of countries	98	94	98	94

Models 1 and 2 are based on time-series-cross-sectional logistic regression with regional fixed effects. Models 3 and 4 are based on treatment effects ordinary least squares regression (i.e. linear regression with endogenous treatment effects, with maximum likelihood estimates). Standard errors in parentheses. p-values: *0.05, **0.01, ***0.001.

subsequently, how state capacity affects democratic change once turnover has taken place (regression equation).[33] A treatment model is an appropriate test for our hypothesis about the two-stage nature of democratization-by-elections, where elections first need to lead to incumbent turnover in order to open possibilities for wider post-election democratic change. Since these analyses focus on the consequences of elections, the sample is limited to election years. Results for these analyses are presented in Table 2.

Robustness checks of the analyses are discussed in the endnotes and reported in the online Appendix.

Results

Table 1 shows the results of the analyses testing the direct effect of state capacity on democratic change (H1).

As Model 1 shows, in our sample of electoral authoritarian regimes, state capacity negatively affects democratic change, supporting H1. This effect is robust to the inclusion of controls (Models 2 and 4) and the election variables commonly included in the democratization-by-elections literature (Models 3 and 4). To summarize these findings, state capacity has a negative direct effect on democratic change, while elections have a positive direct effect on democratic change. The democratizing power of elections is strongest when elections resulted in turnover and when elections occurred in high state capacity states.

Table 2 models the impact of state capacity on democratization-by-elections as a two-phase process. We first predict the effect of state capacity on turnover in Models 1 and 2. Models 3 and 4 report the results when turnover and democratic change are modeled simultaneously in a treatment effects model, where turnover is the dependent variable of the selection equation and democratic change is the dependent variable of the regression equation.

Figure 2. Marginal effects of state capacity on turnover Vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals; estimates based on Model 2, Table 2.
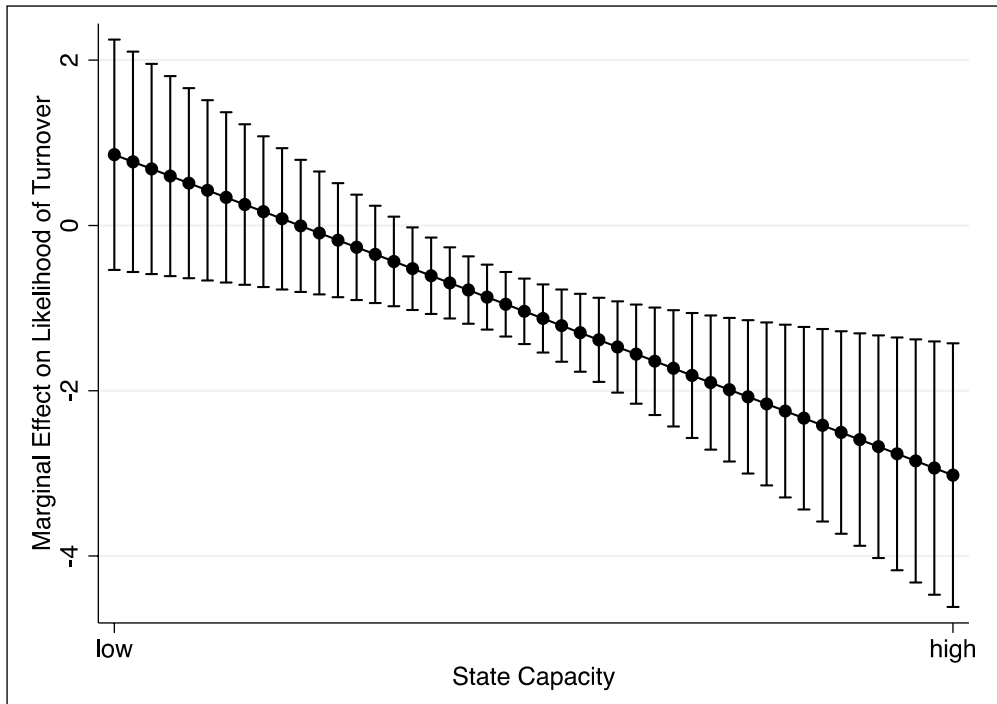

As Model 1 shows, lagged state capacity has a strong negative effect on incumbent turnover. This effect is robust to the inclusion of control variables in Model 2. A plot of the marginal effects of state capacity on turnover shows that at higher levels of state capacity, turnover is much less likely to occur (Figure 2). These results suggest that state capacity is an important factor shaping whether authoritarian elections result in turnover, and that greater state capacity may be detrimental for turnover, supporting H2.

In Models 3 and 4, we model turnover and democratic change as a two-stage process using a treatment model. The results of the selection model indicate the expected strong negative effect of state capacity on turnover, although the strength of the effect is somewhat diminished in comparison to Models 1 and 2. The results of the regression model indicate that turnover has a significant positive effect on democratic change in years after elections. Moreover, if elections result in turnover, state capacity has a substantively small yet statistically significant positive effect on democratic change in electoral authoritarian regimes. Thus the results in Table 2 appear to confirm H2 and H3. State capacity decreases the likelihood of turnover in authoritarian elections but increases post-election democratic change once turnover occurs. Figure 3 illustrates the marginal effects of state capacity on democratic change with and without turnover.

We ran a series of robustness checks using different criteria for sample selection, using different measures for the dependent variables, and using a different measure for state capacity. The results of these tests are reported in the online Appendix to this paper. In brief, H1 appears to be robust with regard to alternative model specifications: state capacity significantly lowers the likelihood of democratic change, regardless of whether elections were held or not. Only in models using the Polity IV < 0 score as a sample selection criterion and in models with the alternative measure of

Figure 3. Marginal effects of state capacity on democratic change, with and without turnover. Vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals; estimates based on Model 4, Table 2.
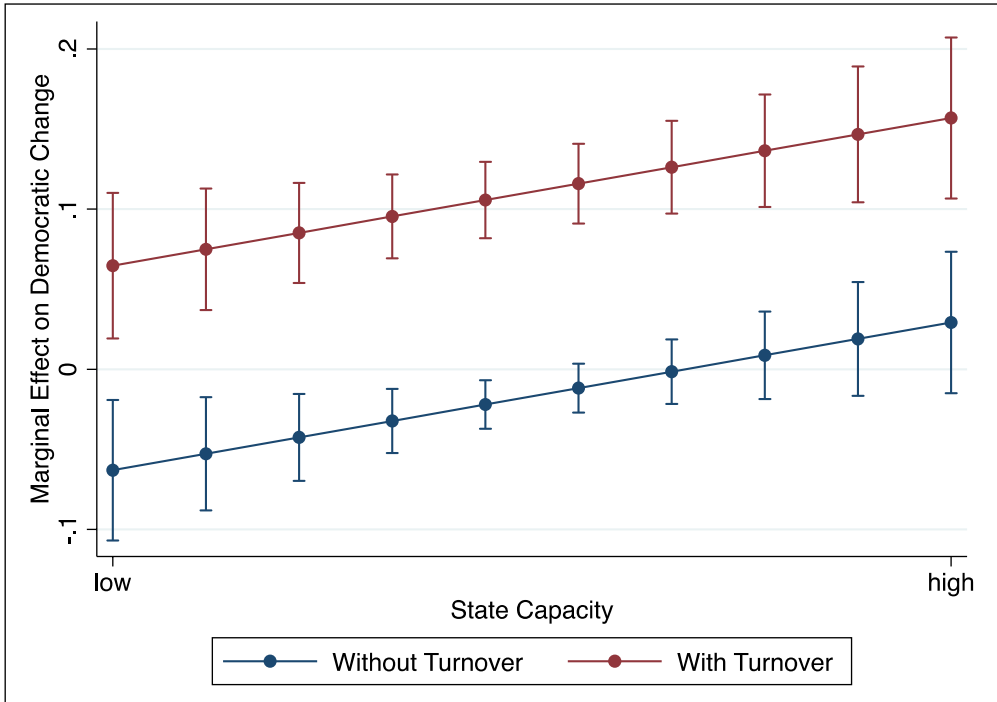
state capacity was the effect of state capacity insignificant, though still negative. H2 and H3, concerning the conditional effect of state capacity on the democratizing power of elections, appear to be partially confirmed in the robustness checks. The clear negative effect of state capacity on turnover in elections (H2) is robust with regards to alternative model specifications. However, the positive effect of state capacity on democratic change after turnover has occurred (H3) does not always hold in robustness checks and the effects are substantively small.

Conclusions

Under what conditions do elections lead to democratization or, conversely, sustain authoritarianism? In this article, we propose that state capacity is a key intervening variable in the relationship between elections and democratization in authoritarian regimes. We develop two main hypotheses regarding this relationship: that state capacity *prevents* turnover in authoritarian elections but that, conditional on turnover having occurred, state capacity *catalyzes* democratic change after elections. We use the Varieties of Democracy dataset and the Hanson and Sigman state capacity index to test these expectations robustly, cross-nationally and over time, examining 460 elections in 110 electoral authoritarian regimes over a 35+ year period.

The results suggest that state capacity significantly lowers the likelihood that elections will result in turnover. However, if elections do result in turnover, the effect of state capacity on democratic change is positive. Whilst turnover in elections is less likely in authoritarian regimes with strong state capacity, if elections *do* result in turnover in these regimes then state capacity enables new incumbents to consolidate democratic change. These results demonstrate the mixed effects of

state capacity under authoritarian regime conditions: electoral authoritarian incumbents that benefit from stronger state capacity face greater chances of surviving elections, but if turnover *does* occur – against the odds or for other reasons – state capacity can help newly democratic incumbents to stabilize and sustain the new regime.

The fact that state capacity has opposing effects on turnover in elections and democratic change after elections demonstrates that the role of state capacity in conditioning the democratizing power of elections is more complex than previous research has demonstrated. This suggests that 'strong state first' theories of democratization may need to be qualified. While state capacity is clearly important with regard to consolidation of democratic change once democratic incumbents come to power, it is only if and when such incumbents come to power that state capacity helps to promote democratic change. In the hands of authoritarian incumbents, state capacity both limits the likelihood of democratic change directly and undermines the capacity of elections to generate turnover, thereby hindering the prospects for democratic change overall. Our findings reinforce the idea that policy efforts to build state capacity should be executed carefully, mindful of this precarious tipping point between building state capacity that might reinforce authoritarian control and building state capacity that can enhance democratization.

Limitations and future research opportunities

A number of caveats to these findings are in order. First, in the analyses presented here we have considered the relationship between state capacity, turnover and democratic change with a relatively short-term perspective. Our analysis focuses on short-term causal effects such as the relationship between state capacity and election turnover one year later, and then the subsequent democratic change in the years immediately following elections. There are valid causal inference reasons for doing so, because examining democratic shifts over a longer time period would result in the inclusion of multiple elections, potentially confounding cause and effect. However, it is possible that state capacity affects democratization-by-elections through more long-term causal mechanisms, such as processes of 'creeping democratization' whereby successive elections generate slow, protracted change in other components of democracy that eventually pave the way for broader democratic change. A better understanding of the role of state capacity in promoting or hampering such long-term processes would be an interesting venue for future research.

This leads to the second caveat, which is that we have considered democratic change here as shifts of regimes in the direction of democracy, conceiving regimes to be located along a continuum from authoritarian to democratic, and allowing positive democratic change to serve as an indication that democratization-by-elections is succeeding. However, some would argue that successful democratic change is only achieved when democratic change is substantial enough to shift regimes from being classified as 'electoral authoritarian' to being classified as 'electoral democracies'. Future research exploring how elections and state capacity interact in generating full regime change across different regime types could give a more complete picture of the role of elections and state capacity in cultivating democratization.

Finally, an interesting venue for future research would be to investigate the specific causal mechanisms by which state capacity affects the democratizing power of elections; for example, by disaggregating state capacity into its three components of administrative, coercive and extractive capacity. Currently, cross-national data on state capacity are scarce, and data on its specific components even more so, limiting analyses to a small (and non-random) sub-set of electoral authoritarian regimes for which such data are available. The new Hanson and Sigman (2013) data ameliorates this situation by using multiple data sources and Bayesian latent variable analysis to generate high quality comparative data on state capacity, but more detailed data on the

disaggregated components of state capacity are still lacking. Future research collecting large-*N* cross-national data on these dimensions would be highly valuable, and could shed more light on the causal mechanisms connecting state capacity, elections, and democratic change.

Policy implications

Recognizing these caveats, the findings presented in this article nonetheless suggest several policy implications. Our findings provide evidence that the positive effects of state capacity for democratization may only occur under specific – and comparatively rare – circumstances, i.e. after authoritarian incumbents have lost elections and a democratic incumbent has come to power, suggesting that strengthening state capacity in authoritarian regimes is not necessarily good for democratization. Of course, strengthening state capacity might be beneficial for achieving other goals such as security and efficient public service delivery, but the empirical evidence presented here suggests that in electoral authoritarian regimes it is likely that investments in state capacity with the goal of democratization will need to be complemented by other interventions aimed at promoting turnover in elections, such as increasing the integrity of elections and supporting opposition.

Acknowledgements

Funding

Notes

1. Incumbent turnover in elections does not guarantee broader democratic change (because elections may bring new autocrats to power), but it does at least create a possibility for democratic change if the new incumbent(s) is/are democratic.
2. The widespread vote-buying and (formal) voter disenfranchisement in the UK before the Great Reform Act (Evans, 1989); the use of single-party elections, (de facto) voter disenfranchisement, and elite co-optation in the Southern states in the US before WWII (Key, 1949; Mickey, 2015); and hegemonic party rule in Mexico (Magaloni, 2006) are illustrative examples of how elections can be used to respectively limit democracy, disguise authoritarian practices, and strengthen authoritarianism. For an excellent overview of historical cases of electoral manipulation in Latin America and Europe, see Lehoucq (2003).
3. The empirical evidence on democratization-by-elections is mixed. A recent study on a global sample of elections suggests that democratization-by-elections occurred mainly in the third wave, and mainly in Africa and post-communist Europe, finding weaker or no effects in other regions and time periods (Edgell et al., 2015).
4. In electoral authoritarian regimes, regime change can be triggered by elections, but also by other factors, such as coup d'états, civil conflict, revolutions, or transitions 'from above' initiated by incumbent regime elites. Because regime change by elections has become increasingly frequent (Croissant and Hellmann, this issue), we focus on the role of elections in this paper. We include coup d'états and civil wars in our empirical analyses as control variables.

5. There is a vibrant literature regarding why authoritarian regimes hold elections demonstrating that elections can provide information to the regime, enable the incumbent to co-opt the opposition and manage elite coalitions, provide domestic and international legitimacy, etc. (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010). For the purpose of focusing our research, we set aside understanding why the regimes in our sample have opted to hold elections and take this as given. In our analysis, having elections is a scope condition for inclusion in our sample.

6. But see Flores and Nooruddin (2016) for an analysis on how state fiscal space affects the democratizing power of elections. For a review of other factors that may condition the relationship between elections and democratization, see Lindberg (2009) and Flores and Nooruddin (2016).

7. The primary outcome variable under consideration in this paper is 'democratic change' rather than 'democratization'. Conceptualizing our outcome variable as democratic change allows us to consider authoritarian regimes that shift towards democracy (i.e. if we conceive of regimes as varying on a continuum from authoritarian to democratic) without necessarily fully democratizing (i.e. without passing a threshold on the regime continuum that justifies classification as an electoral democracy instead of an electoral authoritarian regime). This approach therefore also allows us to record smaller shifts towards democracy. We argue that this outcome variable is more in line with the democratization-by-elections literature, which posits that elections can move towards democracy through small, incremental changes.

8. 'Administrative capacity' refers purely to the ability of states to 'plan and execute policies' (Fukuyama, 2004), not to whether those policies were executed in an impartial manner. Thus administrative capacity, according to this definition, excludes notions of impartiality and the rule of law, which would generate conceptual overlap between state capacity and democracy (Mazzuca and Munck, 2014).

9. State capacity is also likely to vary within countries, because some regions may have stronger state capacity than others, which may sustain 'authoritarian enclaves' within regimes (Gibson, 2013; Mickey, 2015). However, lacking comparative data on sub-national variation in state capacity, this paper focuses on national-level state capacity.

10. The range of options available to incumbents is determined not only by the capacity of state institutions as defined here, but also by 'the extent to which these institutions can be controlled by the dictator' (Hanson, this issue). Variation in regime control over the state is covered in other articles in this special issue (see Hellmann this issue, White this issue).

11. See also Hellmann, this issue.

12. See note 1.

13. Replication data and code are available on the authors' websites: [https://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu. au/about-us/people/carolien-van-ham/ and http://bseim.web.unc.edu/].

14. The exact question wording and answer categories of all V-Dem variables can be found in the V-Dem codebook (Coppedge et al., 2016b).

15. The V-Dem liberal democracy index is a new index of democracy developed by the Varieties of Democracy project. The index is based on a combination of indicators for electoral and liberal democracy from the Varieties of Democracy dataset, including: 'political and civil society organizations can operate freely; elections are clean and not marred by fraud or systematic irregularities; elections affect the composition of the chief executive; in between elections, there is freedom of expression and an independent media; and there are constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks on the exercise of executive power' (Coppedge et al., 2016b). The resulting index scores political regimes on a continuum varying from 0 ('very autocratic') to 1 ('very democratic'). For the exact indicators used in constructing the liberal democracy index, see Coppedge et al., 2016b.

16. We choose 0.5 as the cut-off point because it corresponds to the median of the V-Dem liberal democracy index. In addition, because the boundaries between electoral authoritarian regimes and electoral democracies are somewhat fuzzy, and many different regime classifications exist (Howard and Roessler, 2006; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Schedler, 2002, 2013), we prefer to err on the inclusive side and include in our analysis all regimes that fall on the authoritarian side of the V-Dem liberal democracy index.

17. We test the robustness of our findings on a sample following Schedler's (2002) operationalization of electoral authoritarian regimes, which defines regimes as electoral authoritarian when their average

Freedom House political rights and civil liberties score is between 4 and 7. Freedom House data are derived from the Freedom in the World reports, an annual comparative assessment of political rights and civil liberties that covers over 190 countries worldwide. Countries are assigned two ratings – one for political rights and one for civil liberties – based on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating 'most free' and 7 indicating 'least free'. See: https://freedomhouse.org/ for more information. Results are substantively similar.

18. We also check the robustness of our results when using a sample of regimes with Polity IV scores below 0. The Polity IV dataset covers all independent states over the period 1800–2015 and scores these states along a continuum from 'fully institutionalized autocracies' (–10) to 'fully institutionalized democracies' (+10). We take the mid-point of the scale as our cut-off point, including regimes that score 0 or lower on the Polity IV scale as electoral authoritarian regimes. See: http://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html for more information. Results are substantively similar.

19. We also exclude autocracies that held single party elections, because such regimes cannot experience incumbent turnover.

20. Robustness checks using a sample including all national-level parliamentary and presidential elections (i.e. also including parliamentary elections in presidential regimes) resulted in substantively similar findings.

21. We include elections as of 1974, because this is when the third wave of democratization started and multiparty elections in authoritarian regimes became more common (Huntington, 1991; Schedler, 2002).

22. Robustness checks were carried out using only turnover of the head of government, and the results are substantively the same.

23. This is 28% if we restrict turnover to include turnover of the head of government only.

24. We test the robustness of results using democratic change in the three years after the elections, but did not investigate longer time periods, because this might lead to the inclusion of the next election in the measure of democratic change, thus confounding cause and effect in the estimates.

25. We test the robustness of our models using V-Dem's more narrowly defined electoral democracy index as well. Results are substantively similar.

26. We made this measurement choice because the scope for democratic change may be smaller in regimes that are more democratic already. In fact, the correlation between positive democratic change after elections and the level of democracy in the year before elections is –0.23, providing evidence of a possible 'ceiling effect'.

27. Ideally, we would have preferred to have data on state capacity that measure each of these dimensions separately. However, specific data on coercive, administrative and extractive capacity tend to cover only a limited set of countries and years (see Andersen et al., 2014b), and would therefore severely limit the sample of electoral authoritarian regimes that we would be able to analyze. Moreover, Hanson and Sigman (2013) found, in their latent variable analyses of multiple indicators of state capacity, that the three dimensions are highly correlated and proposed the use of a single index of state capacity.

28. We test the robustness of our results with an alternative measure of state capacity from the V-Dem dataset. In this analysis, we use the V-Dem variable 'State Authority Over Territory', defined as 'Over what percentage (%) of the territory does the state have effective control?' as a proxy for state capacity. Results are substantively similar.

29. Downloaded 22 February 2016. See: http://databank.worldbank.org/data/

30. Turnover in elections is also likely to be affected by the availability of viable opposition candidates (Anderson, 2007). Also, the level of electoral fraud can affect the likelihood of turnover. However, we did not ultimately control for the availability of viable opposition and the level of electoral fraud, because it is likely that both of these variables lie on the causal pathway from state capacity to turnover as intervening variables, and their inclusion would result in multicollinearity in our models. In other words, as discussed in our theoretical section, it is *through* election fraud and suppressing opposition, among other mechanisms, that authoritarian regimes might use state capacity to reduce the likelihood of turnover.

31. Ethnic and religious fractionalization and colonial history are time invariant, and therefore models with fixed effects already control for these potential confounders.

32. A Hausman test indicated random effects are appropriate for the turnover models and fixed effects are needed for the democratic change models.
33. We use a treatment effect model rather than a Hausman selection model because we have outcome data for both treated and non-treated groups (i.e. elections with and without turnover).

References

Andersen, David, Jørgen Møller and Svend-Erik Skaaning (2014a) The State-Democracy Nexus: Conceptual Distinctions, Theoretical Perspectives, and Comparative Approaches. _Democratization_ 21(7): 1203–1220.

Andersen, David, Jørgen Møller, Lasse Lykke Rørbæk and Svend-Erik Skaaning (2014b) State Capacity and Political Regime Stability. _Democratization_ 21(7): 1305–1325.

Anderson, Christopher J (2007) The End of Economic Voting? Contingency Dilemmas and the Limits of Democratic Accountability. _Annual Review of Political Science_ 10: 271–296.

Barkan, Joel D (2000) Protracted Transitions among Africa's New Democracies. _Democratization_ 7(3): 227–243.

Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Staffan I Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, M Steven Fish, Adam Glynn, Allen Hicken, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Kyle Marquardt, Kelly McMann, Farhad Miri, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Jeffrey Staton, Eitan Tzelgov, Yi-ting Wang and Brigitte Zimmerman (2016a) _V-Dem [Country–Year/Country–Date] Dataset v6_. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Staffan I Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, with David Altman, Michael Bernhard, M Steven Fish, Adam Glynn, Allen Hicken, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Kelly McMann, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Jeffrey Staton, Brigitte Zimmerman, Frida Andersson, Valeriya Mechkova, and Farhad Miri (2016b) _V-Dem Codebook v6_. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Staffan I. Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, Frida Andersson, Kyle Marquardt, Valeriya Mechkova, Farhad Miri, Daniel Pemstein, Josefine Pernes, Natalia Stepanova, Eitan Tzelgov, and Yi-ting Wang. (2016c) _V-Dem Methodology v6_. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

Croissant, Aurel and Olli Hellmann. Introduction: State Capacity and Elections in the Study of Authoritarian Regimes. In: "State Capacity and the Survival of Electoral Authoritarianism", Special Issue _International Political Science Review_. DOI: 10.1177/0192512117700066.

Doorenspleet, Renske and Petr Kopecky (2008) Against the Odds: Deviant Cases of Democratization. _Democratization_ 15(4): 697–713.

Edgell, Amanda, Valeriya Mechkova, David Altman, Michael Bernhard and Staffan I Lindberg (2015) End of the Debate on the Democratizing Effects of Elections? New Empirical Evidence 1900–2014. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 3–6 September 2015, San Francisco.

Evans, Eric J (1989) _Britain before the Reform Act: Politics and Society 1815–1832_. London: Longman.

Flores, Thomas E and Irfan Nooruddin (2016) Elections in Hard Times. _Building Stronger Democracies in the 21st Century_. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fortin, Jessica (2012) Is There a Necessary Condition for Democracy? The Role of State Capacity in Postcommunist Countries. _Comparative Political Studies_ 45(7): 903–930.

Fukuyama, Francis (2004) _State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century_. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Fukuyama, Francis (2014) States and Democracy. _Democratization_ 21(7): 1326–1340.

Gandhi, Jennifer and Ellen Lust-Okar (2009) Elections under Authoritarianism. _Annual Review of Political Science_ 12: 403–422.

Gibson, Edward L (2013) _Boundary Control: Subnational Authoritarianism in Federal Democracies_. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hanson, Jonathan K and Rachel Sigman (2013) _Leviathan's Latent Dimensions: Measuring State Capacity for Comparative Political Research_. Unpublished Manuscript.

Hanson, Jonathan K. State Capacity and Authoritarian Resilience: Conceptualizing and Measuring the Institutional Underpinnings of Autocratic Power. In: State Capacity and the Survival of Electoral Authoritarianism, Special Issue *International Political Science Review*. DOI: 10.1177/0192512117702523.

Hellmann, Olli. High Capacity, Low Resilience: The 'Developmental' state and Military-Bureaucratic Authoritarianism in South Korea. In: State Capacity and the Survival of Electoral Authoritarianism, Special Issue *International Political Science Review*. DOI: 10.1177/0192512117692643.

Howard, Marc M and Philip G Roessler (2006) Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes. *American Journal of Political Science* 50(2): 365–381.

Huntington, Samuel P (1991) *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

Key, Valdimer O (1949) *Southern Politics in State and Nation*. New York: Vintage Books.

Lehoucq, Fabrice (2003) Electoral Fraud: Causes, Types, and Consequences. *Annual Review of Political Science* 6: 233–256.

Levitsky, Steve and Lucan Way (2010) *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lindberg, Staffan (2006) *Democracy and Elections in Africa*. Baltimore, OH: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lindberg, Staffan (ed.) (2009) *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition*. Baltimore, OH: John Hopkins University Press.

Magaloni, Beatriz and Ruth Kricheli (2010) Political Order and One-Party Rule. *Annual Review of Political Science* 13: 123–143.

Magaloni, Beatriz (2006) *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mansfield, Edward D and Jack L Snyder (2007) The Sequencing 'Fallacy'. *Journal of Democracy* 18(3): 5–10.

Mazzuca, Sebastián L and Gerardo L Munck (2014) State or Democracy First? Alternative Perspectives on the State-Democracy Nexus. *Democratization* 21(7): 1221–1243.

Mickey, Robert (2015) *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944–1972*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mietzner, M. Authoritarian elections, state capacity, and performance legitimacy: Phases of regime consolidation and decline in Suharto's Indonesia, Special Issue *International Political Science Review*. DOI: 10.1177/0192512116687139.

Przeworski, Adam, Michael Alvarez, Jose Antonio Cheibub and Fernando Limongi (2000) *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schedler, Andreas (2002) The Menu of Manipulation. *Journal of Democracy* 13(2): 36–50.

Schedler, Andreas (2013) *The Politics of Uncertainty. Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Seeberg, Merete B (2014) State Capacity and the Paradox of Authoritarian Elections. *Democratization* 21(7): 1265–1285.

Sikkink, Kathryn (1991) *Ideas and Institutions: Developmentalism in Brazil and Argentina*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Slater, Dan (2012) Strong-State Democratization in Malaysia and Singapore. *Journal of Democracy* 23(2): 19–33.

Slater, Dan and Sofia Fenner (2011) State Power and Staying Power: Infrastructural Mechanisms and Authoritarian Durability. *Journal of International Affairs* 65(1): 15–29.

Stepan, Alfred (2012) Tunisia's Transition and the Twin Tolerations. *Journal of Democracy* 23(2): 89–103.

Teorell, Jan (2010) *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Teorell, Jan, Stefan Dahlberg, Sören Holmberg, Bo Rothstein, Felix Hartmann and Richard Svensson (2015) *The Quality of Government Standard Dataset, version Jan 15*. University of Gothenburg: The Quality of Government Institute. Available at: http://www.qog.pol.gu.se

Way, Lucan (2005) Authoritarian State Building and the Sources of Regime Competitiveness in the Fourth Wave: The cases of Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine. *World Politics* 57(2): 231–261.

Weber, Max (1918) Politics as a Vocation. In Hans H Gerth and C Wright Mills 1946 [1919] (eds) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 77–128.

White, David. State Capacity and Regime Resilience in Putin's Russia. In: "State Capacity and the Survival of Electoral Authoritarianism", Special Issue *International Political Science Review*. DOI: 10.1177/0192512117694481

Author biographies

Carolien van Ham is a Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the University of New South Wales, Australia, and an ARC Discovery Early Career Research Award recipient (2015–2017). Her research focuses on democratization and authoritarianism, election integrity, and legitimacy and political representation. She has published in the European Journal of Political Research, Government and Opposition, Democratization, West European Politics and Electoral Studies.

Brigitte Seim (née Zimmerman) is a scholar of comparative politics, focusing on the political economy of development. Her research agenda covers the relationship between citizens and political officials, with a particular emphasis on accountability in sub-Saharan Africa. She obtained her PhD in Political Science from the University of California, San Diego, in 2014. She was a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow with the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project for 2014–2015. She joined the faculty of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Public Policy and Peter Thacher Grauer Fellow in 2015.