Toward a New Transition Theory: Opposition Dilemmas and Countering Democratic Erosion[1]

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Abstract

The recent global wave of autocratization is characterized by the incremental subversion of democracy from within by elected governments (democratic erosion). This article explains why democratic erosion is hard to reverse for opposition actors, even though it develops incrementally and often by using formally legal and democratic means. Complex causal mechanisms triggered by what we call *regime uncertainty* create specific dilemmas dividing opposition actors at elite and mass levels into alarmists, strategic alarmists, and cautioners. The resolution of these dilemmas takes time, learning, and creativity and there is no one-size-fits-all formula: our case studies from Venezuela and Turkey show that opposition actors often experiment and oscillate between *normal* and *extraordinary* countering strategies and between *preservative* and *generative* political goals. We also offer a preliminary discussion of how opposition actors may manage to address the dilemmas and successfully counter democratic erosion.

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Introduction

Scholars largely agree that the current wave of autocratization is a product of a new form of democratic reversion: the incremental subversion of democracy from within by elected governments (henceforth democratic erosion, DE).[2] Democratic oppositions have a hard time arresting and reversing this gradual backsliding, even though arguably they should have more ability to do so because this form of autocratization relies less on repression and more on electoral legitimacy and incremental erosion, giving oppositions recurring chances to stop it. Instead, the number of autocracies continues to grow (Boese et al. 2022; Repucci and Slipowitz 2022). Why this puzzling result? We argue that the dilemmas created by this gradual erosion using largely democratic mechanisms has important implications that make fighting it different from the more precipitous democratic breakdowns common in the past (henceforth precipitous autocratization, PA). Perhaps because democratic oppositions have not yet fully understood these differences, they have not been able to take advantage of the many opportunities to recognize and challenge such erosion before it reaches the stage of autocratic regime change.

The article discusses and proposes the building blocks of a new theory of democratization under conditions of DE, by integrating and developing emergent scholarship on topics such as democratic resilience and opposition behavior, coordination and strategic dilemmas while countering DE (e.g., Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Cleary and Öztürk 2022; Gamboa 2017; Jiménez 2021; Lieberman, Mettler, and Roberts 2021; Selçuk and Hekimci, 2020; Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev 2022). New theorizing is required to answer a plethora of questions: Why is DE hard to reverse? What obstacles peculiar to DE are posed to opposition

[2] A plethora of terms other than DE exist in reference to similar processes (Cassani and Tomini 2020; Coppedge 2017): incremental autocratization or democratic decay (Gerschewski 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), recession, regression or backsliding (Boese, Lindberg, and Lührmann 2021; Bermeo 2016; Cleary and Öztürk 2022; Erdmann and Kneuer 2011; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Waldner and Lust 2018).

actors and how might they overcome them? To begin to answer these questions, the article examines common mechanisms of backsliding apparent in various cases in the post-Cold War era and draws on process tracing of opposition responses to democratic erosion in two of the earliest and long-lasting cases of DE in the 21st century – Turkey and Venezuela, as well as examples from other cases around the globe.

We focus on the dilemmas faced by those social, political and institutional actors who are opposed to the democracy-eroding incumbent and try to resist and reverse erosion. We call this set of actors broadly *opposition actors*. We argue that these specific dilemmas are a major reason why there are not yet clear examples of successful democratic recovery after a significant degree of DE, aside from partial success stories like South Korea, Slovenia or Ecuador which successfully removed eroding incumbents and which may be described as "near misses" (Ginsburg and Huq 2018).[3] Even in these cases, however, one might suspect that DE may come back if new and prodemocratic governments fail to successfully address the societal grievances and aspirations that fed the popularity of elected autocrats in the first place. In other words, we maintain that the opposition dilemmas and associated opposition failures and eroding incumbent successes we elaborate here should be part of how we explain the very process of DE itself.

Various scholars have argued that "moderate" responses to eroders at critical initial stages of DE offer the best chance of stopping DE while radical responses tend to "make things worse" (Gamboa, 2017; Cleary and Öztürk 2022, 218). While we sympathize with this diagnosis, it leaves open the question why so many opposition actors, including democratic institutions, advocate "radical" responses. Further, we need to explain intra-opposition

[3] Among the sixteen countries that Haggard and Kaufman (2021) identified as clear cases of DE between 1974 and 2017, as of 2021, only four can be argued to have reversed DE–Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador and Ukraine, none of which can yet be considered as decisive and sustainable reversals of DE.

disagreements that undermine a unified response to DE, and whether one can classify different responses as radical and moderate independently from their particular contexts, i.e., how severe an incumbent's potential of DE is in a specific country at a specific point in time.

Our key observation is that a peculiar uncertainty challenges opposition actors during DE, which we call *regime uncertainty*. This uncertainty confuses opposition actors about the nature of the threat to democracy and the role they play in the changing regime, and creates particular dilemmas of collective action, mass mobilization and electoral competition. It derives from the very question of what the regime is or is becoming: the difficulty of ascertaining whether incremental changes to democratic institutions, discourse and norms accumulate to a regime change to some form of authoritarian regime, or whether they simply reflect problems and tensions within an ailing democracy. Regime uncertainty, we argue, alters the problem and solution sets of opposition actors during DE, compared with contexts of stable democracies as well as contexts of PA.

For purposes of this article, DE is a process that can occur not only in established and liberal or developing and electoral democracies but also open autocracies with significant levels of competitive politics, such as competitive authoritarian regimes (Cassani and Tomini 2020; Levitsky and Way 2002; Waldner and Lust 2018). Deepening erosion will make regime boundaries between electoral democracies and open autocracies more uncertain. The scope of the argument, however, extends only to open, or electoral, autocracies that have eroded from some form of democracy; we are not addressing opposition challenges in long-standing authoritarian regimes.

The following sections elaborate the theoretical concept of regime uncertainty, its sources, and its consequences for opponents to DE. We then present two illustrative cases of contemporary DE with different degrees of severity–Turkey and Venezuela–to learn from

opposition failures as well as partial advances. We conclude with an analysis of the key choices for opposition actors to resolve their dilemmas and offer some ideas for concrete steps to overcome the dilemmas.

Regime Uncertainty

Uncertainty is a well-studied and debated concept in contexts of democracies, autocracies, electoral authoritarianism and transitions from autocracy to democracy (Przeworski 1988; Alexander 2002; Schedler 2013). As a first approximation, it is commonplace to say that in democracies, institutional rules of the game are certain, but outcomes are uncertain, while institutional rules are uncertain but outcomes are certain in autocracies. In fact, democracies can have significant institutional uncertainty and outcomes can be quite uncertain in autocracies. In electoral autocracies where elections are not merely a facade or legitimating mechanism (Brownlee 2007; Blaydes 2010), but a real, albeit unlevel "arena," the very institution of (manipulated) elections may increase the institutional and informational uncertainties for rulers (Svolik 2012; Schedler 2013). Analysts and opposition actors on the ground also face uncertainty about how strong an autocracy really is and when exactly a transition from autocracy to democracy begins, ends and culminates in democratic consolidation (Schedler 2001). Whenever known autocratic regimes soften, people can be uncertain whether this signals regime weakness and thus an eventual democratic transition or merely controlled liberalization. For example, in Poland under communism during the 1980s or Egypt under Mubarak during the 1990s, there was no uncertainty over these regimes being party and personal dictatorships respectively, but people could be unsure whether any regime openings–say tightly controlled elections or less media censorship–could lead to actual democratization (Ottaway and Choucair-Vizoso 2008; Brownlee 2007).

By comparison, we study a peculiar uncertainty that arises, we argue, during DE in countries that have some significant past experience of formal democracy: *regime uncertainty*. Regime uncertainty is related to the well-studied uncertainties of autocratic regimes and democratic transitions and involves the inherent uncertainties of all political reality as well as "strategic uncertainty" about incumbent behavior, intentions, and balance of power with the opposition (Cleary and Öztürk 2022). But it is more specific and contextual: it refers to the very questions of what the regime is or is becoming–not only how strong or stable it is–and, consequently, whether the main goal of the opposition should be to protect or to bring back/rebuild democracy.

Hence, regime uncertainty implies an inherent indecision among opposition actors (and others inside and outside the society) in regard to whether they are operating in a normal or extraordinary political context. *Normal (democratic) political context* refers to regular electoral competition in a fundamentally democratic regime, even if in democratic crisis, where the rule of law mostly prevails despite occasionally bitter legal disputes and political conflicts expected in any democracy, governments change in elections that mostly reflect the will of the voters and voters are choosing between one party or candidate and another. *Extraordinary political context*, in turn, denotes a context where the incumbent is eroding democracy to the extent of moving toward a regime change, political conflicts and the problems of electoral integrity and rule of law go beyond a democratic crisis and begin to threaten the survival of democracy itself, and the voters' choice becomes a regime choice between democracy and autocracy.

Which context more aptly identifies the political environment and explains the constitutive dynamics of politics during DE? Each one justifies quite different opposition strategies. This both splits opposition actors and complicates political communication between political parties and civil society and the voters.

Regime uncertainty divides not only fringe, but also mainstream opposition actors between those who view themselves as essentially *anti-systemic* (anti-autocracy) actors facing an emerging autocratic regime, operating in an extraordinary political context, and who design *extraordinary political strategies* accordingly, and those who see themselves as *anti-policy* actors functioning in a normal political context and facing problems that can be addressed by employing *normal political strategies*, i.e., the common tools and procedures of a democratic regime.

A major dilemma for opposition actors arises because there is no easily discernible correct answer to the above questions and each answer has its own downsides for the opposition actors. A systemic-actor identity and normal political strategies may end up legitimizing and strengthening an essentially autocratic or autocratizing regime. In turn, adopting an anti-systemic identity and extraordinary strategies may invigorate the regime by demobilizing disenchanted segments of the population, reinforcing polarization, and delegitimizing the democratic opposition. Disagreement among opposition actors over the regime question is also likely to generate problems of distrust and miscommunication with ordinary citizens, who may perceive formal opposition actors as confused, fragmented and vague.

Finally, these varying interpretations can influence an actor's political goals, whether preservative or generative (Somer, McCoy, and Luke 2021). Insofar as opposition actors can agree on a threat to democratic regime, should they aim to restore the pre-incumbent democratic regime, or try to build a better one? Political goals appeal to people's sense of interest, including socioeconomic and identity-related interests. *Preservative* goals refer to those aiming to protect or resurrect the institutions and the resulting scope of policies that the incumbent has been eroding, i.e., a return to the status quo ante. These include the main contours of the legal, political and economic system, such as the political party system and

constitutional civic and social rights, and the main structures of the state, which distributes power and goods among regions and social groups. Hence, preservative goals do not create new political cleavages based on new structures. In turn, *generative* goals aim to reform the political and economic system and the policies they produce. From Poland to Turkey and the United States, eroding autocrats typically rise on a wave of dissatisfaction with what the mainstream political and economic system can offer, whether or not they present a better alternative (Wigura and Kuisz 2020; McCoy and Somer 2019; Somer, McCoy, and Luke 2021). Insofar as they propose new structures, generative goals also create new cleavages by realigning politics alongside new coalitions and identities in support of their projected reforms. As we will discuss later, the preservative-generative goal distinction may be essential for opposition actors finding ways to overcome DE.

Regime uncertainty perplexes both experts and political actors, and it increased in the contemporary period marked by DE.[4] Table 1 shows that the level of agreement among eight democracy indices on regime categorization declined in the post-2006 period (when many argue a third wave of autocratization began), illustrating the uncertainty even among experts. The remainder of the article discusses regime uncertainty for domestic political actors.

Table 1. Growing Disagreement on Regime Categorizations

Data	**Years**	**RoW agreement (%) 1975-2005**	**RoW agreement (%) post-2006**
RoW	1900–2021	100 (5,164)	100 (2858)
Freedom House	1973–2020	91 (4,838)	85.2 (2,644) ↓
Polity IV	1901–2018	92.2 (4,740)	88.4 (2,164) ↓

[4] Somer (2021).

Boix et al. (2013)	1901–2015	91.8 (4,954)	90.7 (1,715) ↓
Cheibub et al. (2010)	1946–2008	90 (4,952)	85.5 (516) ↓
Wahman et al. (2013)	1972-2014	93.4 (4,937)	91.9 (1,534) ↓
Economist Intelligence Unit	2006-2020	NA	86.4 (2,196)
Bertelsmann	2004-2018	88.2 (119)	87.6 (905) ↓

Notes: Unit of analysis is country-year observation. Percentages show the level of agreement between country-year observations of each set with the Varieties of Democracy's (V-Dem) Regimes of the World (RoW) measure (Coppedge et al. 2022). A paired two-sided t-test showed that all the differences were statistically significant. Number of country-year observations are in parentheses. Measures not coded as binary are converted to a binary variable, either as democracy or autocracy. Closed and electoral autocracies are coded as autocracy, electoral and liberal democracies are coded as democracy in RoW measure. For Freedom House (then FH), partly free and not free countries are coded as autocracy. Country-year observations receiving six or above in Polity IV, Economist Intelligence Unit (2021), and Bertelsmann Stiftung's index (2022) are considered as democracy.

Sources of Regime Uncertainty During Democratic Erosion Compared with Precipitous Autocratization

Early theories of democratic breakdown drew on experiences of rapid democratic collapse–even though the conditions for the collapse might have been evolving for some time–with military coups, revolutionary or personalist projects in Southern Europe, Latin America and Asia in the first and second wave of autocratization. Accordingly, theories of how such regimes can become democracies focused on patterns from the third wave of democracy: elite defections, negotiations and pacted transitions (Among others, Linz and Stepan 1996; O'Donnell and Schmitter 2013; Przeworski 1988). In the third wave of autocratization, however, democracies erode by featuring peculiar patterns and tools, which give rise to regime uncertainty.

Speed of Breakdown

Autocratization during DE unfolds incrementally and democratic and authoritarian institutions coexist (Bermeo 2016; Cassani and Tamimi 2020; Diamond 2015; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Mechkova, Luhrmann, and Lindberg 2017). PA due to an autogolpe or military coup provides a clear marker of regime change obvious to all. Even in so-called "democratic coups" (Varol 2012), international democracy charters and scholarly rankings alike generally mark these as regime change. DE, however, decays democracies without a major event that undeniably represents the end of democracy (Bermeo 2016).

Source of Normative Legitimacy

Past collapses occurred under ruling actors with more clear intentions, such as those harboring totalitarian or revolutionary ideologies; deeply corrupt and personalist powers, as in the so-called sultanistic regimes (Chehabi and Linz 1998); or civilian or military coup-makers who claim to uphold some public interest (Hadenius and Teorell 2007). DE occurs through the policies of elected governments who lack totalitarian ideologies such as fascism or communism, even if they develop new discursive and ideological frames (Enyedi, 2020); and who do not denounce democracy and democratic legitimacy in toto, claiming instead to cherish and advance (some form of) democracy, at least until very advanced stages (Haggard and Kaufman 2016; Kneuer 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Significant portions of the public continue to believe in the electoral legitimacy of the incumbents as well as the regime, unlike hegemonic electoral or plebiscitary autocracies, where the majority of the public no longer believes that the elections are competitive and voluntary voter turnout falls drastically (Schedler 2006; Brownlee 2007).

Eroding incumbents often legitimize their authoritarian policies by framing them as corrections of preexisting political-institutional and socioeconomic systems and by copying

previous governments' transgressions. Finally, democratic institutions and oppositions, which unlike PA remain operational, directly or indirectly contribute to DE, e.g., by fueling polarization (Gamboa 2017; Jiménez 2021; Selçuk and Hekimci 2020; Somer and McCoy 2019; Somer, McCoy, and Luke 2021).

Use of Polarizing Politics

Polarization and polarizing politics are crucial causal mechanisms (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019; Svolik 2019). A society may be polarized before DE, but the conscious use of Us vs. Them pernicious polarizing politics as a strategy facilitates autocratization (Somer, McCoy, and Luke 2021). Perceptions of existential threat induce electorates to tolerate or even actively support democracy-eroding policies by their own partisans (Graham and Svolik 2020; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022). Incumbent and opposition supporters become subjectively polarized over the very question of democracy, with incumbent supporters claiming that the polity is actually democratizing, despite the objective decline of democratic indicators in the country, and opposition claiming that incumbents are threatening democracy. The repetition of lies, propaganda, and demonization of opponents creates confusion and uncertainty over truth itself. In this particular respect, DE has some parallels to totalitarianism, even though it may be much less repressive. In such an environment, polarization both fuels and becomes an outcome of regime uncertainty.

Contextuality of Erosive Acts

Eroding autocrats undermine authority through steps that in isolation may not necessarily be undemocratic, at least until later stages (Bermeo 2016). They only become democracy-eroding in combination with other similar acts, by creating a "Frankenstate" (Scheppele 2013), and objectionable by contextualizing them (Ahmed 2022). Eroding

autocrats conceal their steps behind a facade of "autocratic legalism" (Scheppele 2018), as in extreme gerrymandering. They also play one democratic principle against another, as in constitutionalism versus popular mandate (Slater 2013). In isolation these policies may challenge and cause careening while not always visibly eroding democracy, but their cumulative effect can lead to a slow death.

Tools of Democratic Erosion

First, eroding regimes incrementally eliminate free media checks on their power and actively use co-opted and manipulated media to sway, or at least divide, public opinion in their favor. Besides creating a partisan public media, they use tax harassment and licensing authority to pressure private media to sell to government clients. They weaponize social media to harass opponents, polarize society and shape preferences (Deibert 2019; Deibert et al. 2011; Laebens and Lührmann 2021). All this makes it difficult for citizens to access reliable information, and for opposition politicians to fight against post-truth politics, while propagating incumbent narratives of democratizing the regime (Gunitsky 2015).

Second, rather than old-fashioned ballot box fraud, election manipulation uses apparently democratic or legal methods (Bermeo 2016; Corrales 2020; Waldner and Lust 2018). For example, governing party majorities pass new electoral legislation and selectively apply rules for voter registration (Mickey 2022), and unenforced campaign finance regulations make it difficult to assess the fairness of elections. These tools nurture regime uncertainty for voters as well as politicians and seasoned analysts alike.

Third, rather than closing down or jailing civil society leaders, eroders restrict civil society autonomy and access to foreign financing (Coppedge 2017; Gamboa 2017; Weyland 2013) or create parallel civil society organizations tied to the government (so-called

government-oriented nongovernmental organizations or GONGOs), fostering the appearance of an active civil society space (Walker 2016).

Fourth, eroders rely on partisan appointments or court-packing (Keck 2022) to emasculate checks and balances, to punish enemies and reward friends. Insofar as they draw on parliamentary majorities, it looks like the regime is following democratic principles. For instance, Hungary's constitutional change in 2012 helped Orban to pack the Court where the governing party increased the number of Court's members from 11 to 15, restricted the Court's jurisdiction over fiscal matters (Bánkuti, Halmai, and Scheppele 2012), removed the age limitation and increased the judicial term from nine to 12 years. Fifth, eroders practice executive aggrandizement to concentrate power in their own hands. They often use parliamentary super-majorities or plebiscitary referendums to legislate new constitutions creating hyper-presidential systems. Or they simply use existing legal executive power to write presidential decrees or executive orders.

Sixth, rather than violating formal laws and procedures, eroders undermine democratic conventions and norms, which are informal, vague, dependent on actors' voluntary compliance, and more known by political elites rather than the public. While essential for the functioning of democracy, it is hard for opposition actors to charge incumbents who violate them with changing the regime. The eroding incumbent may pass laws, for example, at express proceedings and "night deliberations." These undermine well-established implicit understandings, e.g. by not allowing "time, or the possibility" for parties to deliberate or change their minds (Horonziak 2022, 11).

Overall, these tools weaken and emasculate rather than eliminate vertical, horizontal and diagonal accountability of the executive. Table 2 summarizes the components and sources of uncertainty during DE in comparison to those during PA.

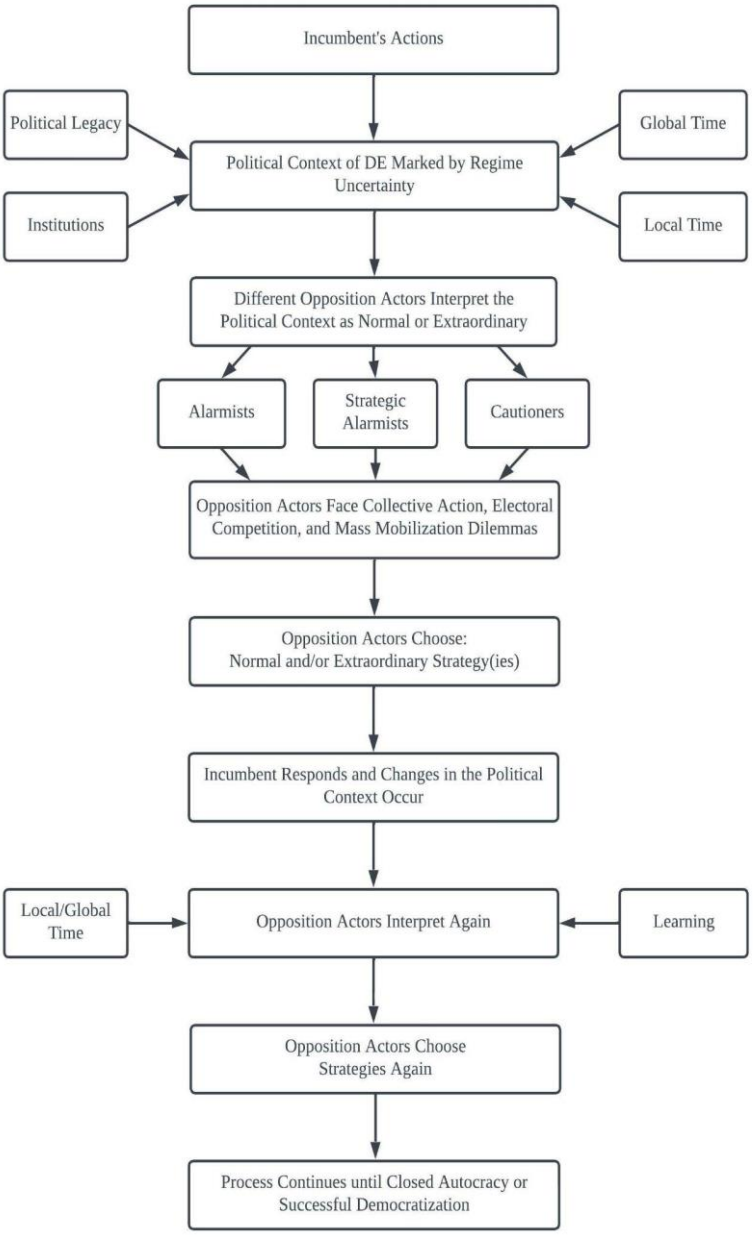
Table 2. Opposition Dilemmas in Two Types of Regime Change

	Precipitous Autocratization	Democratic Erosion
Uncertainty components	● No uncertainty of regime being autocratic ● Moment of regime change to autocracy clear ● Unknown strength of the ruling regime and opposition ● Uncertainty of how to amass power to resist ● Unforeseeable levels of regime repression ● Whether regime openings will lead to democratization or mere liberalization (softening) ● If and when a democratic transition begins, when, and how it may end	● Regime uncertainty: democratic crisis or evolving regime change to autocracy? ● Moment of regime change to autocracy unclear ● Normal democratic or extraordinary political context? ● Role of opposition actors unclear: systemic actor or anti-systemic (anti-autocracy) actor?
Sources of uncertainty	● Speed of breakdown fast ● Source of normative legitimacy: revolutionary ideology, performance, patronage ● Regime suppresses polarization/dissent ● Regime openly violates liberal protections and checks and balances ● Tools: control of information, repression, coopation, absence of elections or plebiscitary elections, closed political and civil space, control of institutions	● Speed of breakdown slow and incremental ● Source of normative legitimacy: electoral, claimed democratic deepening in selective areas ● Regime relies on polarizing politics ● Contextualize erosive acts: “Frankenstate” (whole more than sum of its parts) ● Tools: manipulation of information, election manipulation, restrict or divide/transform civil society, politicize institutions, executive aggrandizement, use flaws of existing democracy to legitimize regime change

Consequences of Regime Uncertainty for Opposition Behavior

DE creates peculiar difficulties in terms of formulating and agreeing upon opposition goals and strategies, and then organizing collective actions at elite and mass levels. Figure 1 summarizes our argument, which we then explain below.

Figure 1. A Dynamic Model of Opposition Dilemmas under Regime Uncertainty



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Alarmists vs. Cautioner Elites

At the elite level, opposition actors struggle to organize collective actions because they split into three types who assess and frame the threat to democracy and choose the strategies to guard or revive it in three conflicting ways.

Cautioners are opposed to the eroding incumbent and any actual or potential erosion but see tolerable and mostly issue-based, i.e., non-regime threatening, threats to democracy. They thus see themselves as still within a context of normal politics, as systemic actors. They focus on policy issues and uphold the familiar tools and procedures of democratic politics that tackle material and ideological differences within an essentially democratic regime. They propose cooperation with the incumbent to legislate institutional reforms such as changing the composition of electoral commissions, allowing more civil society access to policy, liberalizing conditions of democratic participation such as public protests, and addressing *longue durée* problems of democracy, such as economic development and cultural change, which are not specific to the incumbent and can only be addressed through policies of gradual transformation. They also normally advocate continuous participation even in tainted elections either as individual parties or in electoral alliances.

Alarmists, in turn, see greater and qualitatively different risks of DE. For them, issue-based and incremental steps of autocratization are not isolated (or isolatable) events but part of an integral process leading to regime change. To prevent this, from early on, alarmists view themselves as anti-systemic opposition actors working for rapid removal of the incumbent through unconventional strategies. They focus on the regime threat and advocate substantial-militant politics, i.e., emergency measures and tactics that aim to prevent democratic breakdown. These can range from constitutional but extraordinary acts such as mass protests demanding the government to step down, electoral boycotts aimed at attacking "incumbent legitimacy," and blocking all government reforms as in Polish opposition's occasional "total

opposition to total power" politics (Horonziak 2022), to extra-constitutional and unconstitutional actions such as politically motivated judicial plots to oust the incumbent. When alarmists advocate contesting tainted elections, they do so based on extraordinary alliances that come together to save democracy and draw on a democracy-autocracy cleavage.

Strategic alarmists acknowledge the regime threat like the alarmists but differ from them on political strategies. They think that the tools of normal politics are still better suited than extraordinary political measures to fight DE. They may think for example that extraordinary political strategies are too risky as they may create a backlash among incumbent supporters, backfire by delegitimizing the opposition or even reinforce DE by starting a downward spiral of incumbent and opposition authoritarianism. Simultaneously, they may evaluate the success prospects of normal political strategies more positively: they may think for example that such strategies *can* generate sufficient public awareness about the autocratic consequences of incumbent policies and enable the opposition to come to government. Thus, they often advocate participating in tainted elections, in cross-ideological or democracy-based alliances, and/or to bring attention to electoral manipulation.

Opposition divisions among these elite and mass groups become endogenous to DE. The alarmists and cautioners view each other as bearish and naive respectively. They may turn critical and suspicious of each other even more than they are of the incumbent.

Mass Mobilization Dilemmas

At the mass level, the alarmist frame may not be convincing early on in DE as creeping authoritarianism is less visible. It may become more cogent later in the process, but then it may discourage mass mobilization by feeding the fear of repression. It may motivate people to exit from politics, or, often, from the country itself. In contrast, cautionary frames highlighting policy issues may fail to inspire the mass mobilization necessary to stop an eroding autocrat. Both framings will face mobilization problems when repeated failures occur.

All these opposition challenges are deepened the more successfully the autocratizing incumbent governs, delivers socioeconomic benefits, and enjoys performance legitimacy. Clientelistic opposition parties, in particular, struggle to gain supporters as they are not in control of government resources to distribute to them and the prospects of coming to power diminish. Thus, many would-be supporters of the opposition may vote for the incumbent as they prioritize well-being and safety over abstract democracy principles, or simply because they see the opposition as incompetent after repeated electoral defeats.

In addition to the emotional responses produced, DE also alters the calculus of rational incentives for participation in opposition collective actions. Repression, and, hence, the risks (cost) of joining pro-democracy collective actions are usually lower in DE than in PA, especially in early stages, which on the surface seems to be an advantage for democratization. However, since DE results from the cumulative effects of relatively small autocratic steps that span years, the expected benefit of reversing any particular eroding action (e.g., appointment of a loyalist judge to the constitutional court), may not suffice to make collective actions worth the cost for a critical mass of participants. The ensuing small-scale collective actions may at best mobilize sufficient public pressure to postpone these incremental policies. Thus, issue-based opposition (Jiménez, 2021) may not always fare better than mass opposition in stopping an eroding incumbent. Over time, these struggles of resistance that generate few tangible and sustained benefits may lead to fatigue among participants who begin to normalize regular defeat.

Eroding incumbents promote the public image that oppositions lose elections primarily because of their own incompetence. Many voters indeed attribute opposition defeats to opposition actors' own mistakes rather than the unlevel playing field that the incumbent built over time. Opposition actors are caught between a rock and a hard place trying to dispel this notion by highlighting election manipulation by the incumbent without incentivizing the

electorate to give up on elections and view democracy as an unwinnable proposition, Alarmists sounding the alarm bell about regime change try to mobilize people based on an outcome that accrues over time rather than "radical autocratization" now (Cassani and Tomini 2020). Thus, they may feel a need to exaggerate the extent of current autocratization and the incumbent's authoritarian intentions, thereby also undermining opposition actors' credibility.

Electoral Competition Dilemmas

Many less engaged citizens may not necessarily notice or appreciate the gravity of specific problems that a manipulated field of electoral competition creates for opposition actors. These include the challenges of reaching voters when the government dominates the media through oligarchs formally not part of the government, unequal access to financing, and electoral formulas aimed to benefit the largest party (e.g., compensation of winners, or high thresholds for parliamentary entry).

It is not evident whether and how political oppositions should compete in this very unlevel playing field, which leads to intra-opposition disputes and weakens their public image. Hence, they may fight bitterly over strategies of boycott to discredit an illegitimate regime versus contesting elections with such aims as negotiating to marginally improve voting conditions over repeated election cycles, educating and informing the populace and international allies about the presence of autocratization, and building the organizational potential to eventually win elections. Similarly, they may debate whether they have a better chance of defeating the incumbent by forming electoral alliances on an anti-autocracy platform or by contesting elections separately with promises to cooperate once the victor is clear.

Extant research indicates that electoral boycotts are not effective during DE (Frankel 2009), while recommending that oppositions unite forces to defeat electoral autocrats (Bunce

and Wolchik 2011). However, electoral participation and opposition unification also face the dilemmas we discussed above, besides more familiar problems such as personal and ideological differences, free rider problems, and private ambitions/interests of parties. Further, when former allies or members of the democracy-eroding incumbent join the opposition, this expands the opposition ranks but also generates credibility problems and resentment for some opposition supporters, due to these actors' former complicity with DE. Alternatively, attempting to form unified opposition electoral alliances across the ideological sphere can generate voter alienation as voters of one ideological extreme distrust the parties on the other.

Polarizing politics is yet another challenge. Democracy-eroders come to power riding on popular grievances, and often use a polarizing, Us vs Them rhetoric to blame the former political establishment for the problems. If current opposition leaders represent the traditional parties of past governments, they face a challenge of demonstrating that they have learned from their mistakes and are ready to provide an alternative vision. In turn, if opposition leaders are new, incumbents attack them for lack of inexperience or being puppets of outsiders.

Time as a Causal Factor Affecting Opposition Opportunities

As the above discussion indicates, *time* (Grzymala-Busse 2011; Casal Bertoa and Enyedi, 2021) is a major factor shaping opposition dilemmas and opposition capacity during DE.[5] Opposition dilemmas are constantly transformed as DE deepens over time and poses constraints on the availability of some solution recipes, while opening up access to and increasing the urgency of others.

[5]Numerous factors influence opposition capacity to overcome regime uncertainty and successfully counter DE, including historical-institutional and sociological factors such as political culture, level of democratic experience, memory of past authoritarian episodes and democratic transitions, party systems and organizational strength, electoral systems, the vigor of civil society, and how divided a society and its political elites are. A good deal of contingency and, as we highlight here, human agency, especially political elite choices, play crucial roles, too.

Reversing DE basically implies the reversal of a moving process. Depending on how prolonged DE has been in an initially liberal-democratic country, it may mean a transition from electoral (or damaged liberal) to liberal democracy, or from open autocracy to some form of democracy. Hence, the passing of time, by changing the stage of erosion also alters which causal mechanisms drive erosion, which opposition strategies can be effective for reversing it, and the type and timing of successful opposition mobilization.

Accordingly, time becomes a variable adjacent to the regime uncertainty factor: different opposition actors inevitably have different assessments of time, especially how long DE has been progressing. At initial stages of DE and non-pernicious levels of political polarization, for example, issue-based judicial interventions may have more potential because institutions are less politicized and society is less polarized. Institutions may also have more power to launch regime-guarding interventions such as impeachment or criminal investigations against democracy-eroding incumbents. However, neither the public nor political actors may support such interventions *en bloc* because they don't perceive themselves to be in an extraordinary political context. The same goes for forming a unified, anti-incumbent opposition coalition based on a democracy vs. autocracy platform.

Yet, early stages are exactly the times when such strategies may be more feasible because the incumbent has less built up capacity to manipulate the political field. As more opposition actors recognize the expediency of extraordinary and coordinated political action over time, they may face more obstacles from an incumbent who has become more powerful.

But time does not only work *against* the opposition. As time passes, significant learning may occur, and oppositions may develop more shared awareness of the urgency to fight DE through coordinated action; they can further develop new political strategies. We highlight that reversing DE, a new type of autocratization, requires political innovation, which takes time. It may take developing novel strategies and generative political goals such as new

communication strategies discussed below or reform proposals to address socioeconomic and sociocultural grievances. If the opposition gains a foothold in municipal or regional governments and has some resource capacity, they can begin to implement, popularize and refine these proposals even before they control the national government.

The time factor also has international and transnational dimensions – captured by global time in figure 1 above. Once we see more successful contemporary examples of overcoming DE in the world, the strategies of doing so may diffuse internationally and transnationally. Hence, it may become easier and faster for opposition actors to learn how to defeat DE.

Finally, democratic standards and aspirations also develop with time and democracy can better be understood as a collection of processes that can constantly expand and deepen (Tilly 2007). This may generate collective action problems for opposition actors whose democracy aspirations have not kept pace with each other. Further, different aspects of democracy do not always expand or contract simultaneously. As in a bubble that grows in some directions and collapses in others, and with some smooth surfaces and other parts bulging out, democracy can expand and contract in its different elements. This will lead to different priorities among opposition actors, say women and labor. Finally, DE may not regress all aspects of democracy simultaneously and to the same degree. This also reinforces the regime uncertainty as opposition actors with different priorities will differently assess the combined regime threat.

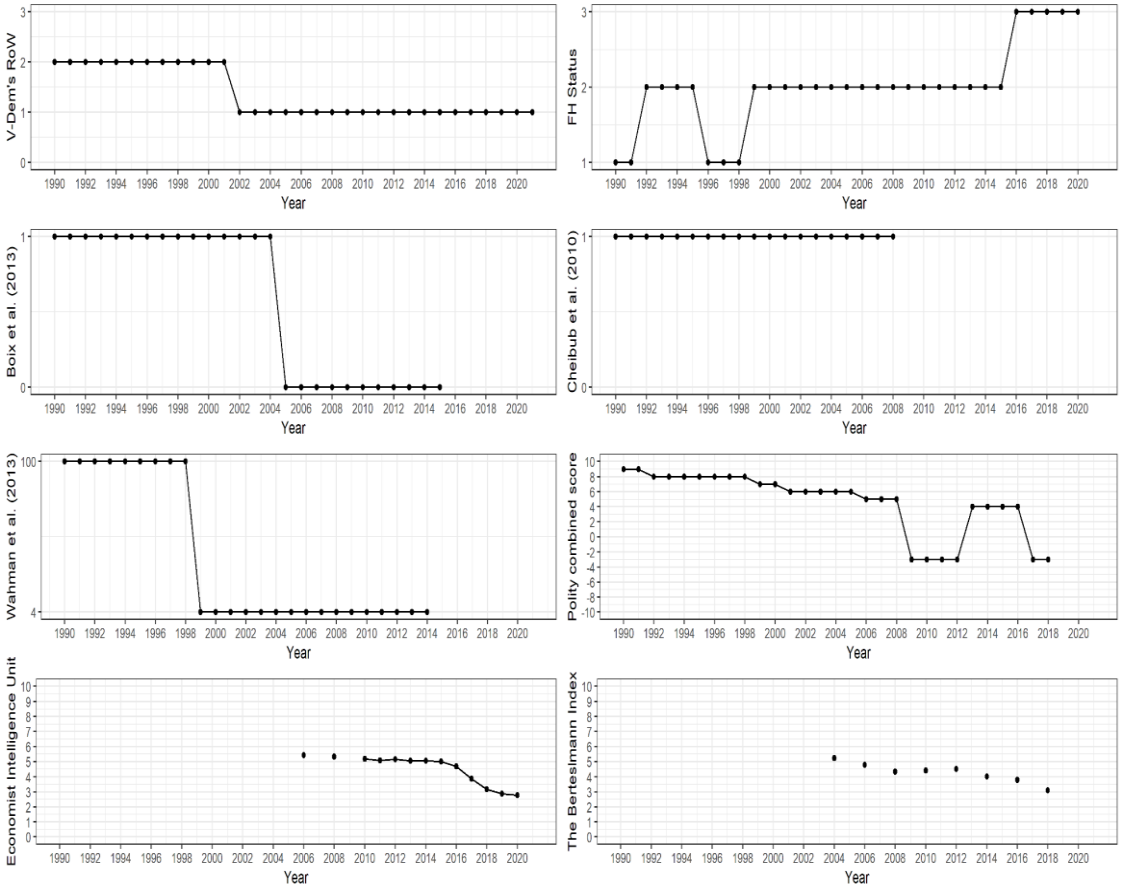
Illustrative Case Studies

Venezuela

Venezuela's 40-year electoral democracy began to erode soon after populist Hugo Chavez was elected president in 1998. Yet interpreting the speed and scope of its erosion was not a simple task. As figure 2 shows, international expert rankings varied tremendously in the

degree and timing of downgrading the regime, with some observing erosion since the beginning of Chavez' government and others not until well into his mandate. Nevertheless, by 2017, all agreed it had reached some form of authoritarianism.

Figure 2. Venezuela's Democracy Score in Different Regime Measurements



Chavez attempted a coup in 1992 and his Bolivarian ideology and discourse prescribed radical transformations in Venezuela's domestic and international politics; hence, mainstream political actors and many voters had good reasons to suspect his autocratic and revolutionary potential, even while many others supported his call for change, redistribution of oil revenues and democratic deepening.

During his first two years, Chavez enjoyed widespread public support, with an approval rating of 80% (Carlin et al. 2019). Obtaining Supreme Court approval to hold

constituent assembly elections to write a new constitution, Chavez began his effort to remake Venezuelan politics and economy, though as yet with an unclear end goal. Strategically organizing his own coalition to present single candidates in each district, Chavez's coalition won two-thirds of the seats while all other parties competed against each other. The political opposition was still interpreting the context as one of normal politics, and they pursued their normal intra-opposition competitive electoral strategies.

Rapidly pushing through a new constitution in six months time, Chavez held new national elections in 2000 for all levels of government and this time gained a legislative majority. Using this new institutional leverage, Chavez used decree power to enact economic and social changes that confirmed the fears of many elites that he aimed for radical change. While some progressive sectors still believed they could work with his government to accomplish generative goals of more inclusionary political and social reforms, Chavez' polarizing strategy provoked a counter-polarizing backlash among political and socioeconomic elite groups: an alarmist group of business, religious and military elites perceived Chavez as a regime threat and threat to their own interests. They used extraordinary political strategies to remove Chavez from power in 2002: a general strike and a mass protest against a specific government policy (politicizing the board of the national petroleum company) ended in a military coup. The civilian regime they put in his place, however, was even less democratic, and the horrified domestic and international reaction led to the reversal of the coup within two days. Subsequently, a loosely-coordinated opposition coalition of civil society organizations from unions, business and media, along with political parties in a more junior position, continued to pursue a maximal strategy of mass protests and a long general strike to try to force Chavez' resignation, while another group of societal intellectual and cultural figures sought to become bridge-builders (McCoy and Diez 2011).

Failing to remove Chavez with extra-institutional measures (Gamboa 2017), opposition political party leaders stepped back in and negotiated the use of the new constitutional provision to conduct a presidential recall referendum halfway into Chavez's political term. This use of more normal political means was the first real attempt by the political opposition to unite to challenge Chavez, but they were afflicted by problems of collective action under regime uncertainty and overestimated their own support. At the same time, Chavez benefitted from his own efforts to delay the recall referendum to August 2004, while oil prices were rising. Many voters were not convinced the opposition had changed for the better and were not yet convinced that Chavez was the greater threat to democracy or well-being.

The effects of regime uncertainty became glaring in the aftermath of the failed recall attempt, when the opposition declared fraud, yet also asked voters to come out just two months later to vote in state and municipal elections. Confused voters did not know whether to trust the electoral system, and again Chavez's candidates won handsomely. The following year, the opposition parties boycotted legislative elections, handing Chavez's party total legislative control and Chavez the ability to declare his subsequent remaking of all institutions as legitimately democratic, approved by an elected legislature.

The second phase of dominant-party regime consolidation (2006-2013) was thus initiated with Chavez's ability to politicize all institutions by appointing loyal civil and military partisans, and to begin implementing his twenty-first century socialist revolution. The political opposition maintained a goal of removing Chavez from power, but now without any institutional power bases, and so they abandoned the extraordinary strategies pushed by the alarmists and instead entered more formal coordinated electoral politics (Jiménez 2021). Although still competitive, elections became increasingly tilted over the next decade to advantage the governing party. The opposition experimented with various cooperation

strategies and had some success in the 2010 legislative elections, but at the executive level could not compete against the charismatic Chavez, who also enjoyed abundant oil revenues and won two more presidential elections before his death in 2013. Voters remained polarized over the democratic nature of the regime, with Chavez supporters viewing his redistributive policies and new communal forms of participation as truly democratic, while opponents viewed with alarm the eroding liberal protections.

The third phase of DE (2013-2018) moved rather quickly through an autocratization phase, to become fully authoritarian by 2016. The opposition oscillated between normal and extraordinary strategies, with alarmist and strategic alarmists alternating in influencing policies, while more or less working together. Following Chavez's death, special elections brought a united and well-coordinated opposition within 1.5% of winning the presidential election in 2013. Protests over suspected voter fraud morphed into social protests in 2014 as oil prices fell, and the opposition split on the strategy to follow to reach their common goal of removing Nicolás Maduro from power. Alarmists called for his immediate ouster through extraordinary politics of mass protests, while strategic alarmists called for the strategies of more normal politics, electoral mobilization and a recall referendum halfway through his six-year term. In addition, various international mediation efforts were attempted, with divisions within the opposition over whether it was worthwhile to negotiate for piecemeal, issue-specific improvements (the strategic alarmists), or whether negotiations were simply a stalling tactic by the government to gain legitimacy in order to consolidate its own power (the alarmists).

Opposition formal unity continued and a unified slate for the 2015 legislative elections produced a two-thirds supermajority in the National Assembly. The Maduro regime reacted by turning to increasingly visible autocratizing and repressive policies in 2016 and 2017, in turn provoking massive opposition protests. The Supreme Court declared the Assembly in

contempt and this usurpation of power in 2016, along with other power-grabbing behavior, clearly marked the degradation of the Venezuelan political regime to an authoritarian one. Pressured to join a new international mediation effort to lead to competitive presidential elections in 2018, the opposition again divided when negotiations failed, and Maduro called a snap election. A small opposition faction chose to participate, while a larger faction boycotted. Maduro won handily.

After this fiasco, the alarmists again predominated in an extraordinary new strategy: they declared a presidential vacuum in the wake of the illegitimate 2018 election and appointed an interim president in early 2019. With the closing of the political space, the opposition also began to turn to international actors for help, proposing both economic sanctions and U.S. military intervention, another use of extraordinary politics. Military intervention was not forthcoming, and sanctions failed to motivate defections from the government. Popular approval of both the opposition and the government fell as neither could address the deteriorating social and humanitarian conditions in 2019-2021, nor could the opposition achieve their professed goal of immediate regime change.

A key innovation in 2021 was the insertion of an independent civil society role to negotiate partial accords with the government (Penfold 2021), and the strategic alarmist view came to the fore convincing the opposition to return to elections in late 2021. They won important mayoral and governor races in the few cases where they were able to unite. By 2022, the opposition had abandoned the strategy of immediate removal of the president and begun to focus on addressing the humanitarian needs and improving electoral conditions for the 2024 presidential elections.

Figure 3. Use of Normal and Extraordinary Strategies by Venezuelan Opposition Over Time (1999-2022)

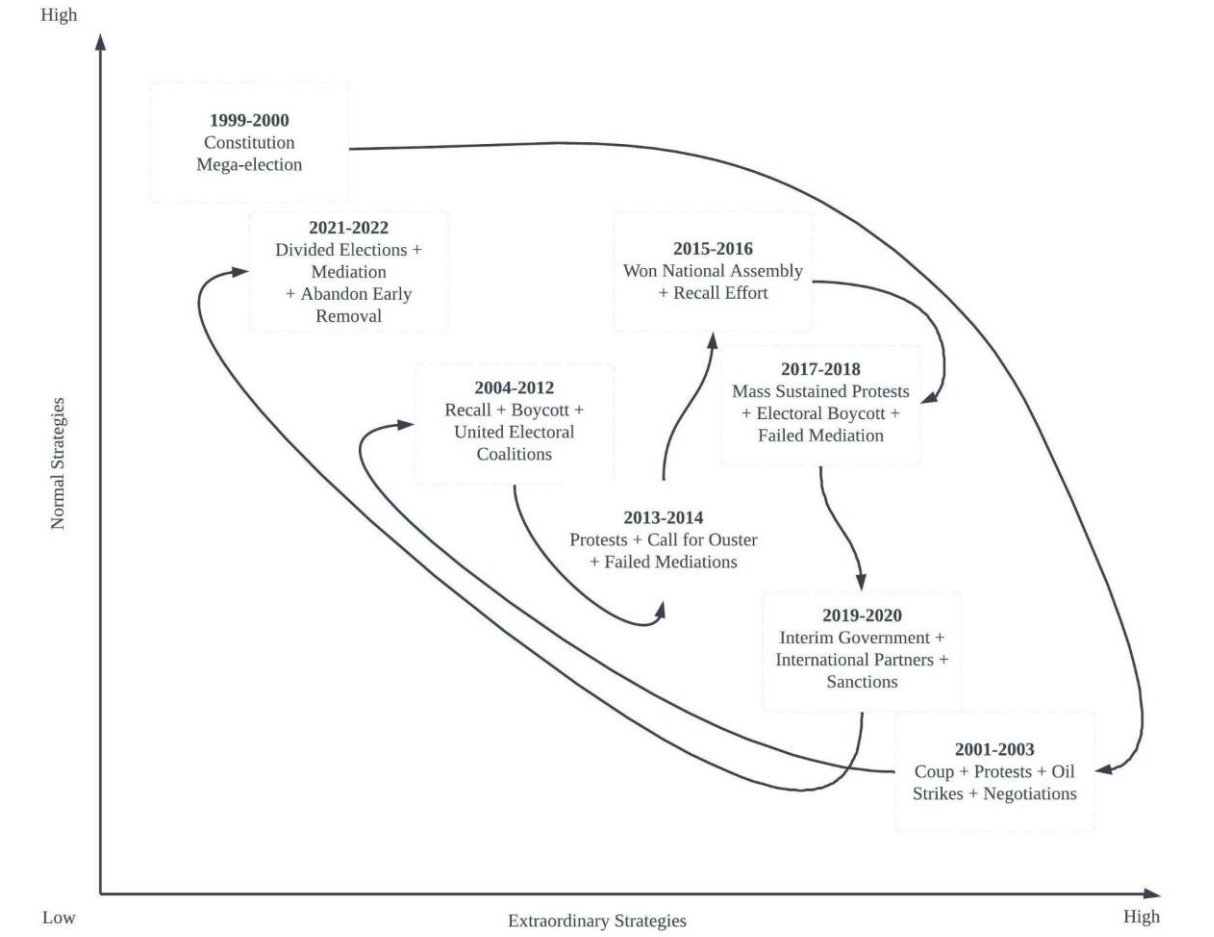


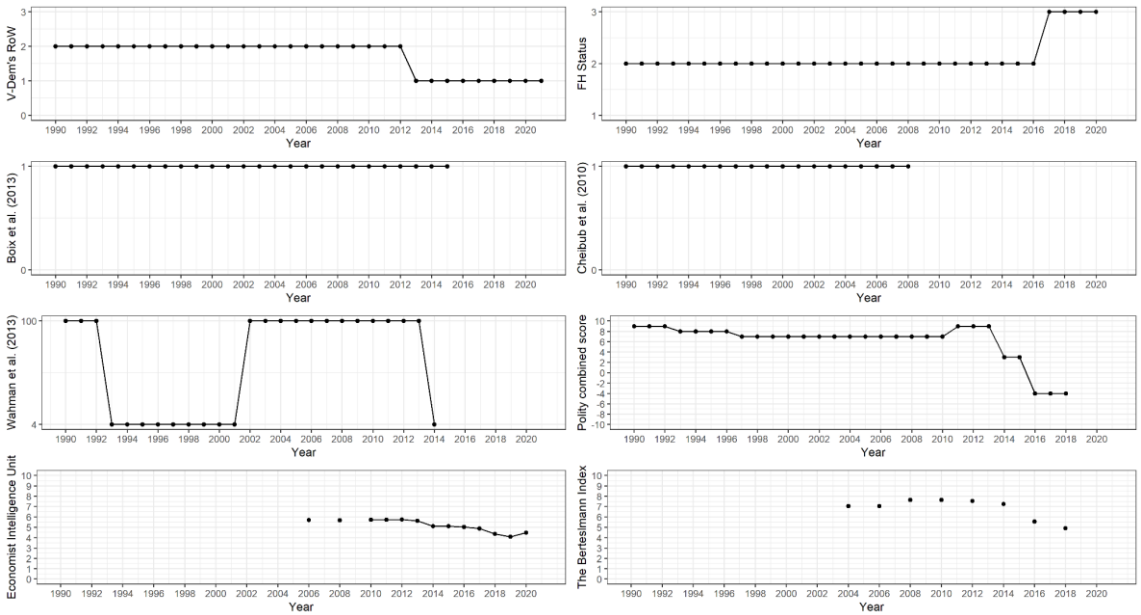
Figure 3 summarizes the oscillating opposition strategies combining normal and extraordinary strategies as various sectors of the opposition interpreted the changing context differently over time. It shows that oppositions do not operate in a linear fashion, they divide and may compete with each other, and they often experiment with different strategies and learn over time. Uncertainty, time, and interaction with the incumbent alter the equilibrium for these actors and redefine their bundle of options against the eroding incumbent. In this case, we observe that the alarmist view dominated and the opposition opted for very high levels of extraordinary strategies early in the DE process (i.e., coup, general strike, mass protests). After two decades of progressive DE, multiple defeats and partial successes, most of

the opposition tacitly accepted the reality that the Maduro government holds the levers of power, and that reversion of DE would be a slow, sequential process. Recognizing the value of partial accords to achieve relief from the severe health and economic crises and welcoming international mediation, in 2022 the opposition was pursuing a normal politics strategy where electoral mobilization and negotiation play a greater role, but within an extraordinary context.

Turkey

Since AKP came to power in 2002, regime uncertainty and related opposition dilemmas have played major causal roles in enabling and even driving DE. Opposition actors became divided into alarmists, strategic alarmists, and cautioners. This undermined their unity and effectiveness despite their remarkable vibrancy and level of mobilization and many efforts to bridge intra-opposition rifts. Meanwhile, as figure 4 shows, while all ratings showed significant declines in Turkey's democracy, different measurements varied widely in rate, time, and quality of regime change or decline, manifesting regime uncertainty.

Figure 4. Turkey's Democracy Score in Different Regime Measurements



In 2002 elections, Turkish voters punished mainstream parties for a severe financial crisis and the resulting belt-tightening policies in 2001-2002, which also unleashed all the built-up public dissatisfaction with the country's deficient democracy and governance. The newly founded AKP skillfully rose to the occasion and came to represent the public longing for something new and better.

Despite its refashioning itself as a center-right party, the AKP's Islamist background led to an immediate divide among political, cultural and state elites. The alarmists rang the warning bell that a slippery slope of Islamization and autocratization would begin unless AKP was removed from power as soon as possible, and tightly checked, by using the measures of "militant democracy" (Capoccia 2013), a concept developed to defend democracy against totalitarian ideologies in the interwar era, if not a military intervention. Strategic alarmists agreed on the threat but believed that normal politics such as cooperation with AKP in parliament coupled with selective and issue-based resistance would provide the best shield against it.

Cautioners downplayed the long-term consequences of creeping authoritarianism and dismissed any threat of DE. They thought that institutions and elections would stop DE if and when it became evident. Many saw in the AKP government an opportunity for turning Turkey into full, liberal democracy by taming the military's secularist tutelage over civilian politics, as the party framed its policies as democratic reforms aimed at joining the EU. Many also prioritized economic stability and growth and wanted AKP to further "moderate" its Islamism through inclusion in the system (Somer 2014). Some cautioners further found the authoritarian undertones of the alarmists more threatening than AKP.

The main opposition party, Republican People's Party (CHP), initially embraced the cautious position. This modus vivendi came to a grinding halt in 2007 when AKP unilaterally

nominated its number two leader Abdullah Gül for the presidency, a position many saw as a major check on AKP hegemony and a guardian of secularism. Hence, following a major hike in extraordinary opposition strategies in 2007, the four years between 2008-2012 witnessed a mixture of extraordinary strategies such as a Constitutional Court case to ban AKP and alarmist media campaigns against the party, and normal strategies such as electoral mobilization and constant issue-based protests.

Regime uncertainty prevailed because eroding policies comprised either creeping policies framed in a democratizing discourse or attacks against selective groups, such as the military and big media vilified by populist propaganda. AKP's alliance with the globalist-Islamist Gülen movement, which it promoted as a civil society actor, played crucial roles in dominating state institutions and civil society and demonizing opponents. Democratic norms such as tolerance of political satire and dissent were gradually eroded through discursive and parliamentary practices.

A critical 2010 referendum on constitutional amendments was an example of opposition dilemmas. The proposed changes were an omnibus bill of 26 changes. Most of these were widely supported and democratizing reforms, such as collective bargaining rights for civil servants. Only a few, such as those expanding the size of the Constitutional Court and changing their selection rules were controversial. These cracked the door open for government control of the judiciary, but only over time and conditional upon the government's ill will, i.e., intent to erode democracy. Hence, the bickering of cautioners and alarmists often were over government intentions rather than evident policies.

Cautioners and some strategic alarmists defended the "insufficient but Yes" position and alarmists accused them, who included for example Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk, of being "useful idiots." The changes passed by a large margin. In the end, a contingent development sped up the Turkish judiciary's loss of independence. CHP appealed to the

Constitutional Court, which annulled one change – the election of high judiciary members based on open list elections. The party miscalculated that partisan candidates the AKP-Gülenist alliance was promoting would have less success with closed lists. In fact, the opposite happened.

In a more recent example, in 2016, AKP proposed to lift the immunity of parliamentarians for already existing subpoenas, claiming that some parliamentarians were linked with a Kurdish insurgency movement. Such a decision required a constitutional amendment. CHP abstained from taking a party decision. Many party members and civil society actors wanted a united party vote against the bill to resist further DE. However, others shied away from openly fighting the change lest the AKP-controlled media associate the party with Kurdish insurgents; such a move would contradict its own party program at any rate because the party had long argued against parliamentary immunity to fight corruption. Some CHP members also wanted to avoid a divisive and ethnically charged referendum or believed AKP was bluffing, while others supported the bill for ideological reasons. In a normal political context, these justifications and letting MPs vote individually could be understandable. In the extraordinary context of an incumbent bent on eroding democracy and erasing real democratic opposition, however, this was very shortsighted. AKP was given a free hand to fast forward DE and pass the change without a referendum. This allowed the arrest and jailing of several pro-Kurdish MPs, crucially the then co-chair of the pro-Kurdish opposition party, and an MP from CHP, protesting which the CHP leader organized an extraordinary protest: a twenty-five days long "justice walk" from Ankara to Istanbul. In the end, this episode helped eradicate parliamentary conventions protecting MPs' freedoms. Thereafter, AKP used hundreds of other subpoenas as a sword of Damocles over opposition MPs, while blackmailing CHP to stand by and feeding intra-opposition fighting (Deutsche

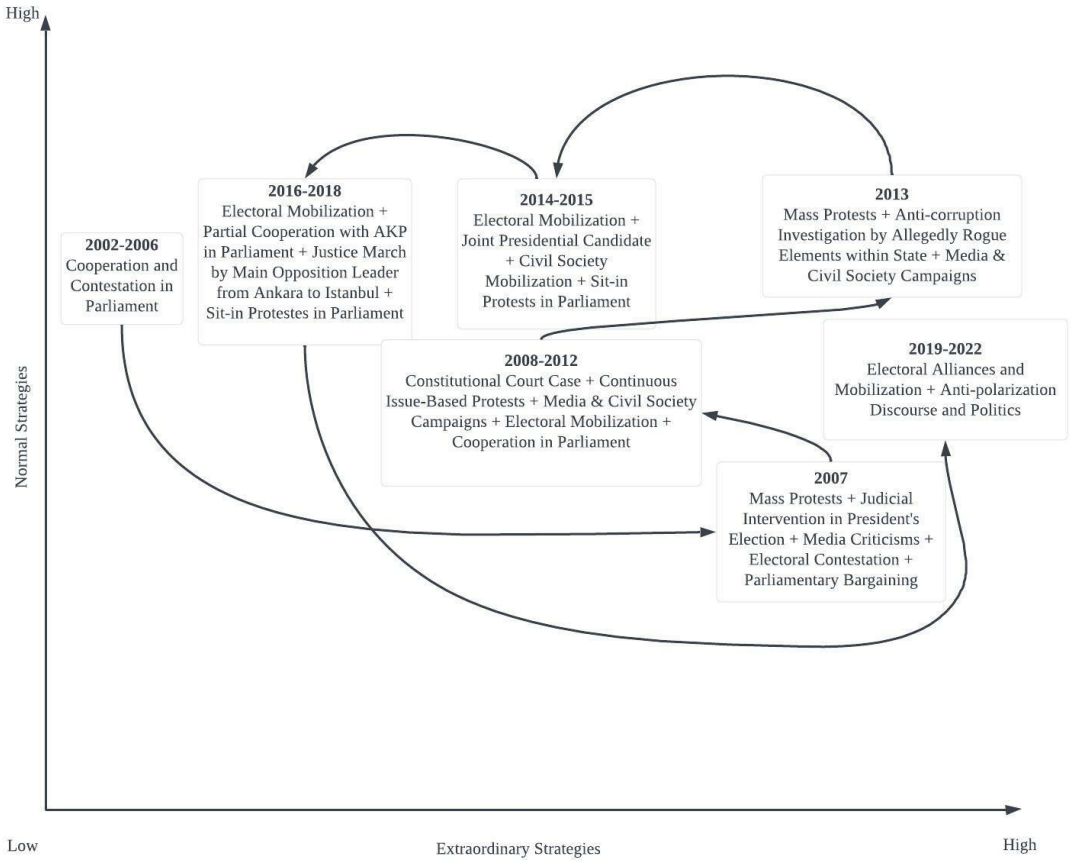
Welle 2021). Many citizens charged CHP with naivete at best and sameness with the AKP at worst.

DE under AKP capitalized on the flaws of the pre-existing Turkish democracy. For example, while some methods of the Gülen-AKP alliance, such as mass cheating in public exams, were unprecedented, others, such as media smear campaigns, blackmailing and clientelism were new only in degree and intent. While pre-AKP examples were mainly corrupt political practices exploiting the deficits of Turkey's "normal" democratic politics, AKP seemed to employ these policies in such a way as to engineer a gradual regime change.

Hence, preservative political goals aiming to restore the pre-AKP political and economic system could not succeed in mobilizing a winning majority of citizens to reverse DE. Given widespread public dissatisfaction with the pre-AKP system, opposition actors needed a generative agenda of reforming the system. Oscillating between normal and extraordinary political strategies similar to the Venezuelan case, as figure 5 indicates, and competing both with AKP and among themselves, however, opposition actors could not formulate such an agenda for a long time.

Learning and experimentation in civil society and political parties involved creative discursive and mobilizational strategies. For example, they employed a depolarizing "radical love" strategy to win the 2019 Istanbul mayoral elections (Wuthrich and Ingleby 2020), which the Hungarian opposition then borrowed to take the mayorship of Budapest.

Figure 5. Use of Normal and Extraordinary Strategies by Turkish Opposition Over Time (2002-2022)



Significantly, innovation in the Turkish case involved redefining normal politics. For example, anti-polarization discourse–which has been used since 2019 according to figure 4–would have been a feature of normal politics in the early 2000s. However, opposition actors reframed it as a trait of extraordinary politics in late 2010s, a strategy necessary to overcome autocracy as a united front and win over incumbent supporters.

Opposition actors began to achieve considerable unity and coordination only in recent years. Since 2018, CHP has formed an electoral alliance with a newly established nationalist party, Good Party (IYIP). They then created with four other parties a “six-party alliance” who agreed to field a joint presidential candidate and on revamping the system based on a

"Strengthened Parliamentary System" model. This alliance is also in talks with a separate opposition alliance of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and other leftist parties.

Still, Turkish opposition has not yet overcome the dilemmas of regime uncertainty. Ideology-based inter-party competition, a feature of normal politics, continues beneath significant cross-ideological coalition-building to defeat autocracy, a feature of extraordinary politics. This makes it difficult for them to give a clear message to the public regarding their main goal: rebuilding democracy or simply defeating AKP and restoring the parliamentary system. Further, parties that split from AKP tend to trace the start of the "regime problem" to the hyper-presidential system in 2017 (Esen and Gumuscu, 2018), while others trace it back to the 2000s, leading to important intra-opposition discursive and emotive differences and distrust.

Resolving the Dilemmas

Implications of Our Theory

Our theoretical inquiry and case studies suggest that opposition actors' critical decisions go beyond and crosscut the choices that extant research highlights, such as those between radical and moderate goals, and between institutional and extra-institutional, or violent and nonviolent strategies of struggle (Cleary and Öztürk 2022; Gamboa, 2017; Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev 2022). Instead, they seem to involve finding the right balance between preservative and generative political goals, and between normal and extraordinary strategies, so that they can mobilize a winning majority or plurality of the electorate.

Since the incumbent is elected, even if with a minority or plurality of votes under skewed electoral rules, the people that opposition actors need to win over to win elections and then to govern stably most likely include some supporters of the incumbent. To do so, they need to bring together these disenchanted citizens with constituencies of their own, based on

generative political goals, i.e., reformist platforms of *political remaking*. Such platforms would aim, for example, to reform democratic institutions and rewrite the social contract, which is likely to require intersectoral coalitions across society (Putnam 2020; Kleinfeld 2022). Simultaneously, opposition actors need to promise to preserve the policies and institutions that their own constituencies value the most.

Similarly, a fluid mix of normal and extraordinary strategies seem necessary. Extraordinary methods such as disruptive mobilizations in the workplace, the consumer sphere, the streets, or social media may be needed simply because eroding autocrats are hard to remove, in combination with normal strategies to sustain the public's hope in the possibility of unseating the incumbent through elections. The right combination of these goals and strategies may change across polities, as well as through time. Depending on the historical-institutional context, needed political remaking may include reforms in such areas as accountability (checks and balances), equitable access to justice, ethnic-regional autonomy, and minimum living standards, and to draw on shared historical values associated with democracy in that country, such as freedoms, personal autonomy, equal opportunity, voting as right or responsibility, or collective well-being.

Since DE is gradual, democratization may also have to be gradual and involve trials, errors, and learning. Oppositions will have to learn over time to adapt to regime uncertainty and opportunities as they arise.

Practical Solutions Illustrated

A scholarly consensus is emerging that identifies common early warning signs of DE. Even with disparities in the expert assessments regarding the timing of regime changes, recognition of these early signs can help overcome the collective action problems associated

with regime uncertainty and the problem of polarization around the assessment of whether a regime is democratizing or autocratizing.

Whenever opposition actors feel the need to implement extraordinary strategies to counter DE, they should explain the need for such strategies to the public and develop extraordinary methods that are not violent or extra-constitutional, as such measures can create a backlash from regime supporters, reinforce an incumbent's narrative that oppositions are anti-democratic, add fuel to polarization and cause oppositions to lose the moral upper hand domestically and internationally (Cleary and Öztürk 2022; Gamboa 2017; Jiménez, 2021; McCoy and Somer 2019). Our case studies show that well organized and coordinated election campaigns with forward-looking messages, positive emotional undertones and programmatic content could be successful even in the wake of election systems severely tilted toward the incumbent party, as in the 2015 Venezuelan National Assembly elections and the 2019 Istanbul and Budapest mayoral elections.

We propose that a combination of electoral mobilization and political remaking may have the greatest potential for opposition-led democratization under DE. In both Turkey and Venezuela, for instance, a challenge of opposition actors has been to agree on a platform that did not aim to restore but to reform the political and economic systems in place before the AKP and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), which disadvantaged pro-AKP and pro-PSUV segments of the population in the distribution of status and resources. For electoral mobilization, successful political strategies require clear and consistent messaging to voters over time, where opposition actors clarify private and public benefits for citizens, highlight material well-being and safety over abstract democracy principles and tie democracy to specific outcomes and concrete benefits. When voters are anxious about their own safety and well-being, it is difficult to effectively campaign solely on a campaign of abstract democratic principles, or even anti-corruption promises, as the broad opposition coalition in Hungary

learned in the 2022 election when Orban won handily on his promises of keeping Hungarians safe from the Ukrainian war and protected from rising energy prices due to his agreements with Vladimir Putin.

Connecting parties to voters is a long-term project and often requires rebuilding party organizational strength. The start and stop messages of the Venezuelan opposition over twenty years, along with their resistance to investing in ground level organization-building, impeded their ability to generate mobilizational capacity even when they eschewed a boycott strategy.

To overcome the problems of voter apathy or demobilization, opposition parties and movements alike can devise creative mobilization strategies using humor, positive emotions, and social media to build group identity and bonding. Examples include Turkish opposition's ingenious and humorous use of social media during the 2018 election (Jacinto 2018). Opposition actors can emphasize the value of participating even in unfair elections to shed light on the autocratic nature of regime/elections for domestic and international audiences, impinge on the legitimacy of the regime, and gather allies to reverse DE.

Lessons from civil resistance movements can be combined with bridge-building NGOs to reach ordinary citizens, refocus on the values that unite rather than divide, and build broad social movements to demand change. Artists can play important roles, e.g. Otpor's humor campaign against Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic (Nikolayenko 2013) during 1998-2000, and the Senegalese rappers who successfully thwarted a president's attempt to remove term limits and shared their strategy with other African countries (Yarwood 2016)

To counter incumbent control and manipulation of information, innovation in media business models, reporting methods, and communication techniques are critical. For example, the opposition-run Istanbul mayorship made headways in overcoming its informational

disadvantages and exposing the eroding tactics of the AKP by broadcasting live every meeting of the city council, where the AKP and its ally party held the majority. New online forms of investigative citizen journalism, and collaborative news reporting have been developed in Turkey (Medyascope or 140Journos) and Venezuela (Efecto Cucuyo or Armando.Info) where traditional media spaces have closed to alternative voices (Human Rights Watch 2021). These alternative media also use citizen journalism, video activism, and visual arts while notable journalists, documentary makers and cartoonists also use social media tools like YouTube, Twitch, Periscope, or Instagram to showcase their work.

New business models for both traditional and social media could stimulate a shift from the polarizing click baiting and attention-grabbing through outrage appeals and algorithms common in current for-profit business models, to new nonprofit, community-owned, and cooperative models of social media (Collins 2022) and reinforcing nonpartisan publicly-owned models of traditional media where possible.

Conclusions

In a nutshell, we have argued in this article that regime uncertainty and the dilemmas it creates for opposition actors help to explain why DE appears to be so hard to overcome in many countries and why the resolution of these dilemmas is necessary for arresting and reverting DE. Our argument also sheds light on some common features of DE such as the fragmentation and weakening public image of oppositions. Further, we have maintained that opposition actors facing DE as a new type of autocratization may still be in the process of finding ways to resolve these dilemmas, and that this may take innovation and time. It follows from our arguments that the regime uncertainty and the associated opposition dilemmas should be part of our theories of DE and new theories of transition in contexts of DE. [6] While

[6] (Somer, 2021).

we do not claim to have put forward such a full-fledged theory by any means, we have tried to identify some building blocks of such a theory.

Beyond opposition coordination and cooperation dilemmas highlighted in the literature, we add the fundamental problem of competing perceptions of the threat to democracy posed by democracy-eroding incumbents in regime uncertainty. This leads to divisions among opposition actors between what we have called alarmist, strategic alarmist and cautioner perspectives, and consequently to divisions over goals (preservative and generative), identities (systemic or anti-systemic actors), and strategies (normal and extraordinary). Once recognized, these competing views can be discussed and perhaps more easily negotiated to arrive at coordinated strategies among political actors and with support from civil society actors.

We have illustrated with two of the longest-running cases of democratic erosion the variation in opposition reactions as they initially interpret the political context as normal or extraordinary and react. As they try one strategy, learn from mistakes, reinterpret the changing context and the meanings of particular strategies, and debate among themselves, the balance of normal and extraordinary strategies can evolve in a very non-linear way over time. Another shorter experience such as Hungary shows yet a different pattern, a predominance of cautioner views interpreting the scene for some time as normal politics and only after several years moving toward extraordinary strategies of electoral unification, yet never resorting to the higher risk extra-constitutional strategies seen in Venezuela, and to a lesser degree in Turkey. Thus, each context must be interpreted for its dynamics, legacies, and political culture when devising opposition strategies to resist DE.

When may such opposition efforts bear fruit? Along with regime uncertainty, comes unpredictability. Recent research suggests that two-thirds of cases of democratic transitions happen because of mistakes of the autocrat rather than a deliberate choice or being imposed

by class revolts (Treisman 2020). Both internal and external stressors may eventually make democracy-eroding autocrats vulnerable, and oppositions should be prepared for such a window of opportunity. This requires recognizing the dilemmas of regime uncertainty, preparing convincing and democratic alternatives to the incumbent, developing creative and innovative strategies to respond to the changing context , and learning from their own experiences and those from other democratic groups abroad.

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