Dear CPW,

Thank you so much for reading this and sharing your feedback!

This is essentially a very short and rough first draft of the theory section of my dissertation. It’s not as far along as I’d like it to be, but I’m hoping the general idea is clear. I’m really struggling with exactly how to lay everything out and I’m particularly interested in hearing big-picture comments about how adjust my approach and pursue the project moving forward.

A few questions I’m struggling with:

- Does it make sense to include all potential challengers in “the opposition” (including coup plotters from within the regime) or should I limit my analysis to regime outsiders? I don’t want to assume that revolution always happens “from below” but that is the dynamic I’m primarily interested in. Should I focus in on that or try to explain regime change more broadly.

- I’m conflating regime failure with “liberalizing political change” with general regime change with democratization. Suggestions on how to limit my analysis?

Thanks!

Erin
Agents of Opposition and Democratization

In many theories of democratization, opposition groups play little to no role in bringing about political change. Instead, they are portrayed as reactive figures who respond in predictable, automatic ways to missteps in authoritarian strategy or changes in general structural conditions. In this paper, I argue that any challenge to an authoritarian leader is a strategic interaction in which both the leader and the challenger choose from a variety of possible actions under conditions of incomplete information. Opposition strength is not observationally equivalent to regime weakness or demand for democracy in society at large. Rather, it depends in great part on careful, purposeful choices regarding organization and strategy. Opposition leaders play a crucial role in articulating an encompassing group identity and coordinating and disciplining large-scale opposition activities. In the following sections, I discuss existing theories of democratization and make a case for further exploration of the strategic relationship between authoritarian leaders and pro-democracy dissidents.

Structural conditions

In one archetypal view of democratization, large-scale historical transformations push societies toward new forms of political organization. Opposition actors work to
accelerate the forces of history and authoritarian leaders work to forestall change, but the gradual and faceless evolution of social structures ultimately determines when long stretches of regime stability will be punctuated by moments of sharp institutional change (e.g., Marx and Engels 1848, Arendt 1963, Moore 1966, Skocpol 1979). In this view, revolution has “little, if anything, to do with the willful aims and purposes of men” (Arendt 1963, 44) and depends more on evolving class and social structures.

A second structural view focuses on “the acquisition by ordinary people of resources and values that enable them effectively to pressure elites” to democratize (Welzel and Inglehart 2008, 126). As societies become wealthier and more educated, people worry less about physical survival and place a higher priority on individual autonomy and political and civil rights. In addition, they develop a stock of “action resources” that enables them to gain increasing control over their lives. According to revised modernization theory, “modernization tends to bring both cognitive mobilization and growing emphasis on self-expression values. This in turn motivates ever more people to demand democratic institutions and enables them to be effective in doing so as elites watch the costs of repression mount” (2008, p. 134). Inglehart and Welzel show that self-expression values are highly correlated with democratization, and that such values have a tendency to build steadily in a country’s population in the years preceding full democratization (2008). Revised modernization theory is similar to the historical perspective in that it focuses on long-term structural changes that bring about a pro-democratic “ripening” of society.

If the process of regime change is likened to that of building a fire, the structural perspectives described above can be thought of as emphasizing the importance of having
lots of firewood. In these portrayals, regime change occurs much like a forest fire. Trees, low branches, needles, and woody debris build up on the forest floor until the scene becomes highly combustible and any good spark can set off a conflagration. In this view, dissidents can do very little to destabilize the regime or usher in democracy. Instead, they play a waiting game with nature. They sit on their hands and hope that the forces of history or modernization will produce serious change in their lifetimes. These theories are unsatisfying because they do not allow any serious role for individual agents.

Regime strategy

A second category of theories dealing with regime change focuses on the tools and strategies authoritarian leaders use to stay in power. Repression weakens opposition groups by preventing charismatic leaders and skilled organizers from participating in attempts by the opposition to challenge the regime [need more thorough discussion of repression here]. Cooptation is a tactic that achieves a similar end by essentially buying loyalty from would-be dissidents. A common assumption in the literature is that the strength of the opposition is fixed and somehow exogenously determined (Przeworski 1991). Authoritarian leaders observe the strength of the opposition and choose a mix of sticks and carrots that will maximize political control. In this view, the opposition reacts to regime strategies in predictable ways, and it is only when the leader makes serious miscalculations that dissidents have any chance of becoming agents of political change. In this view, when authoritative leaders fall, they have only themselves to blame. Democratization occurs when the regime fails to maintain effective authoritarian control;
opposition behavior is perfectly correlated with the types of opportunities the regime creates through its mistakes.

Theories focusing on regime agency emphasize the importance of active intervention to prevent the outbreak of serious opposition activity. In the fire analogy, the regime has to be sure to rain on opposition activity whenever possible so that even in the presence of rich fuel, a fire will not burn. The intuition here is that if the regime allows “drought conditions” to prevail, fires can erupt without any help from the opposition. While opposition actors do depend on the regime to occasionally open up cracks in the system for them to exploit, there are many ways of widening the cracks (or not) and activating disparate individuals to assist in that work (or not). In addition, dissidents can make the first move in some cases and push the regime to respond in ways that might harm the long-term stability of the regime.

*Regime change and tipping models*

Kuran (1991) argues that political life in an authoritarian regime is a type of assurance game. Often a majority of citizens would prefer to have a new leader and liberalized political institutions, but they are unwilling to engage in open opposition against the regime unless they feel confident that opposition activity is unlikely to be severely punished and somewhat likely to succeed in producing political change. Citizens weigh the likely costs and benefits of opposition activity as a function of the proportion of people in society who can already be observed acting against the regime. If a sufficient number of people have revealed their anti-regime preferences, the individual’s revolutionary threshold is met, and he too will reveal his preference for regime change.
Otherwise he will continue to give the regime his tacit support, fearing that opposition activity will be ineffective and costly. Political opposition succeeds when society “tips” and undergoes a cascade of revolutionary activity that overwhelms support for the existing regime.

In Kuran’s model, what matters is the proportion of people in society who oppose the regime. Individuals are special in that they have different revolutionary thresholds, but they are essentially interchangeable when they are classified and counted by other members of society; individuals care about the size of the opposition, but they are indifferent about who exactly comprises the membership of the opposition. In this relatively simple model, a pensioner observing a mass protest of a given size will have the same reaction whether the protesters are students, workers, or fellow pensioners. The strategic interaction that generates mass opposition activity occurs in a simple, homogeneous society.

Karklins and Petersen (1993) propose a modification of Kuran’s model in which citizens differentiate between members of various social groups and weigh information about the size of public opposition accordingly. In this model, citizens play an assurance game with the general population as in Kuran’s model, but they also play a smaller version of the game within their own social groups, using other social groups as reference points:

When one social group has realized its tipping point and achieved a satisfactory protection level [against repression], other groups use this as a reference in predicting the effectiveness or willingness of the regime to use repression against their own group (595).
Karklins and Petersen expect determined dissidents to initiate opposition activity, followed by students, then workers, then finally party supporters. While this particular social ordering may or may not be an empirical regularity, the intuition that some citizens provide richer, more pertinent information than others has great appeal.

Returning to the fire analogy, Kuran essentially tells us that we need some tinder, some kindling, and some smaller and larger pieces of firewood to get the fire started (people whose level of support for the regime is distributed in a particular way such that a revolutionary cascade can be initiated). Karklins and Petersen take us a step further and tell us that we will fail to build a successful fire if we simply scatter the various types of fuel uniformly over the fire pit and throw a match on top. The heterogeneous tipping model suggests that a successful fire begins with a pile of tinder and grows in size only when the flame encounters a uniform source of fuel that is fairly similar in size to what is currently burning (a cohesive group that sees the current opposition group as a useful reference point).

The logic of these tipping models explains the mechanism by which “tiny oppositions mushroom into crushing majorities” (Kuran 1993, 13) and seemingly stable autocracies suddenly fail. However, the “cause” of regime failure in these models is an exogenously determined array of preferences. When we ask not how but why revolutions

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1 The logic for this social ordering is as follows: “...Those who have been engaged in dissent before and have already been sanctioned have less to lose than others [and will be] willing to demonstrate more quickly. Students will usually have more to lose—they may jeopardize their future careers by participating. Thus, their tipping point will be somewhat higher. Workers’ tipping point will be higher hey since they can be fired from their jobs. Party supporters will not begin demonstrating until they believe that they will have to deal with a new order” (594).
occur, these theories point in large part to structural explanations: prevailing circumstances cause members of society to have more or less happy relationships with their political masters.

The question that remains to be answered is whether steps can be taken to lower revolutionary thresholds and change the ways groups interact with one another to make a society-wide revolutionary cascade more likely. In many places and at many times in history, conditions have seemed ripe for democratization, but the status quo has been maintained. It hasn’t rained in ages and the woods are filled with firewood, yet there is no fire. Opposition strategy may help to explain the outcomes of both successful and failed revolutions, as well as situations in which no opposition activity occurs at all.

*Key variable: opposition strategy*

Regime change is ultimately impossible if no actor steps up to challenge the prevailing system. Most theories of democratization are spark-and-tinder models, in which various things happen to make the situation just right and then some unimportant spark sets the process of democratization in motion. But there’s an easier, more deliberate way to start a fire. Sure, you can wait for lightning to strike a tree in a forest, but you can also walk around and gather firewood and *build* a fire in a short period of time. However, as anyone who has tried to start a campfire knows, some attempts at building a fire work out better than others and there is a certain art to the process. Skilled revolutionaries are artists who know how to arrange the firewood in just the right way and to blow on the embers at just the right time to feed the flames and start a healthy blaze.
I do not mean to suggest that structural conditions and regime strategy don’t matter in fostering democratization. On the contrary, the theories I have discussed so far have both intuitive appeal and some level of empirical support. Rather, I argue that these theories alone miss a critical component in the process of democratization. They often seem to explain examples of successful revolution, but have limited predictive power in terms of distinguishing between “ripe” and “unripe” cases. Denardo suggests that we should “begin to appreciate what revolutionaries have known all along—that spark-and-tinder models vastly underestimate the difficulty of mobilizing a revolutionary insurrection, however miserable, or oppressed, or ambitions, or frustrated the population might be” (1985, 17).

My working hypothesis at this time is that several features of opposition groups are particularly important in predicting opposition strength and effectiveness. First, the membership structure of the group matters. Who meets the criteria for participation and what proportion of people who are “eligible” actually choose to participate? How does the group strike a balance between group cohesion and sheer power in numbers? A key aim for opposition leaders should be to succeed in articulating an encompassing identity for the group that encourages high membership numbers and still preserves a sense of ideological purity and unified purpose. Opposition leaders who wish to challenge the regime with a formidable group must by necessity “build a chain of equivalences among democratic struggles” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, xix) to create a coalition of previously disparate dissident groups that can act as a single pro-democratic force. Membership structure determines the strength of the opposition in terms of the
sheer number of bodies that can be employed in a confrontations with the regime. It is thus very important in determining the likelihood of a successful opposition challenge.

A second important feature of opposition groups is the *internal power structure*. How are decisions reached and implemented? Who shapes group strategies and to what extent do their interests correspond with those of the group as a whole? Is the group coordinated, disciplined, and capable of acting as a unified force? The answers to these questions shed light on the strength of the opposition in terms of whether representatives of the group can really be said to represent the group as a whole. Opposition groups are less powerful when the leadership of the group is contested and there is no clear way for any representative to make credible threats and promises on behalf of the group.

[I am currently working on building a large-N dataset with opposition groups as the unit of analysis. I am envisioning creating several game theoretic models, one to explain within-opposition-group dynamics and another to explain the opposition-regime relationship. I also intend to estimate some regressions that control for existing explanations and test key predictions from the formal models].

[This is the end of this theory section for now, although I definitely want to expand quite a bit on the identity politics discussion].

[I’m also working on a separate section about international leverage and linkage. This will address the claim by Levitsky and Way that linkage with the democratic West is essentially sufficient condition for democratization. Levitsy and Way have an interesting theory, but the empirics are unsatisfying. The “linkage” measure has to do with the]
extent to which authoritarian populations are linked to the US and/or the EU through trade, immigration, and communication. They look at country averages over the course of the decade following the end of the cold war (one data point for each country in the data set). They argue that democratization occurred in all instances of high linkage. However, they don’t explain the timing very well, since high linkage can exist for many years before democratization finally occurs. I’m working on replicating their findings and expanding the dataset to include country-year data over a longer period of time. I expect to find that linkage is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for democratization.]
WORKS CITED


Skocpol, Theda (1979). States and social revolutions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.