On Democracy
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CHAPTER 8

What Political Institutions Does Large-Scale Democracy Require?

What does it mean to say that a country is governed democratically?

In this chapter we'll focus on the political institutions of democracy on a large scale, that is, the political institutions necessary for a democratic country. We're not concerned here, then, with what democracy in a very small group might require, as in a committee. We also need to keep our standard warning in mind: every actual democracy has always fallen short of the democratic criteria described in Part II and shown in figure 4 (p. 38). Finally, we should be aware in this chapter as elsewhere that in ordinary language we use the word democracy to refer both to a goal or ideal and to an actuality that is only a partial attainment of the goal. For the time being, therefore, I'll count on the reader to make the necessary distinctions when I use the words democracy, democratically, democratic government, democratic country, and so on.

If a country is to be governed democratically, what would be required? At a minimum, it would need to possess certain political arrangements, practices, or institutions that would go a long way, even if not all the way, toward meeting ideal democratic criteria.

Words About Words

Political arrangements sound as if they might be rather provisional, which they could well be in a country that has just moved away from nondemocratic rule. We tend to think of practices as
more habitual and therefore more durable. We usually think of institutions as having settled in for the long haul, passed on from one generation to the next. As a country moves from a non-democratic to a democratic government, the early democratic arrangements gradually become practices, which in due time turn into settled institutions. Helpful though these distinctions may be, however, for our purposes it will be more convenient if we put them aside and settle for institutions.

**HOW CAN WE KNOW?**

How can we reasonably determine what political institutions are necessary for large-scale democracy? We might examine the history of countries that have changed their political institutions in response, at least in part, to demands for broader popular inclusion and effective participation in government and political life. Although in earlier times those who sought to gain inclusion and participation were not necessarily inspired by democratic ideas, from about the eighteenth century onward they tended to justify their demands by appealing to democratic and republican ideas. What political institutions did they seek, and what were actually adopted in these countries?

Alternatively, we could examine countries where the government is generally referred to as democratic by most of the people in that country, by many persons in other countries, and by scholars, journalists, and the like. In other words, in ordinary speech and scholarly discussion the country is called a democracy.

Third, we could reflect on a specific country or group of countries, or perhaps even a hypothetical country, in order to imagine, as realistically as possible, what political institutions would be required in order to achieve democratic goals to a substantial degree. We would undertake a mental experiment, so to speak, in which we

**FIGURE 6. What political institutions does large-scale democracy require?**

- Elected officials
- Free, fair, and frequent elections
- Freedom of expression
- Alternative sources of information
- Associational autonomy
- Inclusive citizenship

would reflect carefully on human experiences, tendencies, possibilities, and limitations and design a set of political institutions that would be necessary for large-scale democracy to exist and yet feasible and attainable within the limits of human capacities.

Fortunately, all three methods converge on the same set of democratic political institutions. These, then, are minimal requirements for a democratic country (fig. 6).

**THE POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS OF MODERN REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY**

Briefly, the political institutions of modern representative democratic government are:

1. **Elected officials.** Control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in officials elected by citizens. Thus modern, large-scale democratic governments are representative.

2. **Free, fair, and frequent elections.** Elected officials are chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is comparatively uncommon.

3. **Freedom of expression.** Citizens have a right to express themselves without danger of severe punishment on political
matters broadly defined, including criticism of officials, the government, the regime, the socioeconomic order, and the prevailing ideology.

4. **Access to alternative sources of information.** Citizens have a right to seek out alternative and independent sources of information from other citizens, experts, newspapers, magazines, books, telecommunications, and the like. Moreover, alternative sources of information actually exist that are not under the control of the government or any other single political group attempting to influence public political beliefs and attitudes, and these alternative sources are effectively protected by law.

5. **Associational autonomy.** To achieve their various rights, including those required for the effective operation of democratic political institutions, citizens also have a right to form relatively independent associations or organizations, including independent political parties and interest groups.

6. **Inclusive citizenship.** No adult permanently residing in the country and subject to its laws can be denied the rights that are available to others and are necessary to the five political institutions just listed. These include the rights to vote in the election of officials in free and fair elections; to run for elective office; to free expression; to form and participate in independent political organizations; to have access to independent sources of information; and rights to other liberties and opportunities that may be necessary to the effective operation of the political institutions of large-scale democracy.

**THE POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN PERSPECTIVE**

Ordinarily these institutions do not arrive in a country all at once. As we saw in our brief history of democracy (Chapter 2), the last two are distinctly latecomers. Until the twentieth century universal suffrage was denied in both the theory and practice of democratic and republican government. More than any other single feature, universal suffrage distinguishes modern representative democracy from all earlier forms of democracy.

The time of arrival and the sequence in which the institutions have been introduced have varied tremendously. In countries where the full set of democratic institutions arrived earliest and have endured to the present day, the “older” democracies, elements of a common pattern emerge. Elections to a legislature arrived early on—in Britain as early as the thirteenth century, in the United States during its colonial period in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The practice of electing higher lawmaking officials was followed by a gradual expansion of the rights of citizens to express themselves on political matters and to seek out and exchange information. The right to form associations with explicit political goals tended to follow still later. Political “factions” and partisan organization were generally viewed as dangerous, divisive, subversive of political order and stability, and injurious to the public good. Yet because political associations could not be suppressed without a degree of coercion that an increasingly large and influential number of citizens regarded as intolerable, they were often able to exist as more or less clandestine associations until they emerged from the shadows into the full light of day. In the legislative bodies what once were “factions” became political parties. The “ins” who served in the government of the day were opposed by the “outs,” or what in Britain came to be officially styled His (or Her) Majesty’s Loyal Opposition. In eighteenth-century Britain, the faction supporting the monarch and the opposing faction supported by the much of the gentry in the “country” were gradually transformed into Tories and Whigs. During that same century in Sweden, partisan adversaries in parliament somewhat facetiously called themselves the Hats and the Caps.¹

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¹ *What Does Large-Scale Democracy Require?* [87]
During the final years of the eighteenth century in the newly formed republic of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, the vice president, and James Madison, leader of the House of Representatives, organized their followers in Congress to oppose the policies of the Federalist president, John Adams, and his secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton. To succeed in their opposition, they soon realized that they would have to do more than oppose the Federalists in the Congress and the cabinet: they would need to remove their opponents from office. To do that, they had to win national elections, and to win national elections they had to organize their followers throughout the country. In less than a decade, Jefferson, Madison, and others sympathetic with their views created a political party that was organized all the way down to the smallest voting precincts, districts, and municipalities, an organization that would reinforce the loyalty of their followers between and during election campaigns and make sure they came to the polls. Their Republican Party (soon renamed Democratic Republican and a generation later Democratic) became the first popularly based electoral party in the world. As a result, one of the most fundamental and distinctive political institutions of modern democracy, the political party, had burst beyond its confines in parliaments and legislatures in order to organize the citizens themselves and mobilize party supporters in national elections.

By the time the young French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, the first five democratic political institutions described above had already arrived in America. The institutions seemed to him so deeply planted and pervasive that he had no hesitation in referring to the United States as a democracy. In that country, he said, the people were sovereign, “society governs itself for itself,” and the power of the majority was unlimited. He was astounded by the multiplicity of associations into which Americans organized themselves, for every purpose, it seemed. And tow-

ering among these associations were the two major political parties. In the United States, it appeared to Tocqueville, democracy was about as complete as one could imagine it ever becoming.

During the century that followed all five of the basic democratic institutions Tocqueville observed during his visit to America were consolidated in more than a dozen other countries. Many observers in Europe and the United States concluded that any country that aspired to be civilized and progressive would necessarily have to adopt a democratic form of government.

Yet everywhere the sixth fundamental institution—inclusive citizenship—was missing. Although Tocqueville affirmed that “the state of Maryland, which had been founded by men of rank, was the first to proclaim universal suffrage,” like almost all other men (and many women) of his time he tacitly assumed that “universal” did not include women. Nor, indeed, some men. Maryland’s “universal suffrage,” it so happened, also excluded most African Americans. Elsewhere, in countries that were otherwise more or less democratic, as in America a full half of all adults were completely excluded from national political life simply because they were women; in addition large numbers of men were denied the suffrage because they could not meet literacy or property requirements, an exclusion supported by many people who considered themselves advocates of democratic or republican government. Although New Zealand extended suffrage to women in national elections in 1893 and Australia in 1902, in countries otherwise democratic women did not gain suffrage in national elections until about 1920; in Belgium, France, and Switzerland, countries that most people would have called highly democratic, women could not vote until after World War II.

Because it is difficult for many today to grasp what “democracy” meant to our predecessors, let me reemphasize the difference: in all democracies and republics throughout twenty-five centuries the rights to engage fully in political life were restricted to a minority of
adults. “Democratic” government was government by males only—and not all of them. It was not until the twentieth century that in both theory and practice democracy came to require that the rights to engage fully in political life must be extended, with very few if any exceptions, to the entire population of adults permanently residing in a country.

Taken in their entirety, then, these six political institutions constitute not only a new type of political system but a new kind of popular government, a type of “democracy” that had never existed throughout the twenty-five centuries of experience since the inauguration of “democracy” in Athens and a “republic” in Rome. Because the institutions of modern representative democratic government, taken in their entirety, are historically unique, it is convenient to give them their own name. This modern type of large-scale democratic government is sometimes called polyarchal democracy.

Words About Words

Polyarchy is derived from Greek words meaning “many” and “rule,” thus “rule by the many,” as distinguished from rule by the one, or monarchy, and rule by the few, oligarchy or aristocracy. Although the term had been rarely used, a colleague and I introduced it in 1953 as a handy way of referring to a modern representative democracy with universal suffrage. Hereafter I shall use it in that sense. More precisely, a polyarchal democracy is a political system with the six democratic institutions listed above. Polyarchal democracy, then, is different from representative democracy with restricted suffrage, as in the nineteenth century. It is also different from older democracies and republics that not only had a restricted suffrage but lacked many of the other crucial characteristics of polyarchal democracy, such as political parties, rights to form political organizations to influence or oppose the existing government, organized interest groups, and so on. It

is different, too, from the democratic practices in units so small that members can assemble directly and make (or recommend) policies or laws. (I return to this difference in a moment.)

Although other factors were often at work, the six political institutions of polyarchal democracy came about, in part at least, in response to demands for inclusion and participation in political life. In countries that are widely referred to as democracies today, all six exist. Yet you might well ask: Are some of these institutions no more than past products of historical struggles? Are they no longer necessary for democratic government? And if they are still necessary today, why?

THE FACTOR OF SIZE

Before answering these questions, I need to call attention to an important qualification. As I warned at the beginning of this chapter, we are considering institutions necessary for the government of a democratic country. Why “country”? Because all the institutions necessary for a democratic country would not always be required for a unit much smaller than a country.

Consider a democratically governed committee, or a club, or a very small town. Although equality in voting would seem to be necessary, small units like these might manage without many elected officials: perhaps a moderator to preside over meetings, a secretary-treasurer to keep minutes and accounts. The participants themselves could decide just about everything directly during their meetings, leaving details to the secretary-treasurer. Governments of small organizations would not have to be full-fledged representative governments in which citizens elect representatives charged with enacting laws and policies. Yet these governments could be democratic, perhaps highly democratic. So, too, even though they lacked

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FIGURE 7. Why the institutions are necessary

In a unit as large as a country, these political institutions of polyarchal democracy…

1. Elected representatives…

2. Free, fair, and frequent elections…

3. Freedom of expression…

4. Alternative information…

5. Associational autonomy…

6. Inclusive citizenship…

are necessary to satisfy the following democratic criteria:

- Effective participation
- Control of the agenda
- Voting equality
- Control of the agenda
- Effective participation
- Enlightened understanding
- Effective participation
- Enlightened understanding
- Effective participation
- Enlightened understanding
- Full inclusion

political parties or other independent political associations, they might be highly democratic. In fact, we might concur with the classical democratic and republican view that in small associations organized “factions” are not only unnecessary but downright harmful. Instead of conflicts exacerbated by factionalism, caucuses, political parties, and so on, we might prefer unity, consensus, agreement achieved by discussion and mutual respect.

The political institutions strictly required for democratic government depend, then, on the size of the unit. The six institutions listed above developed because they are necessary for governing counties, not smaller units. Polyarchal democracy is democratic government on the large scale of the nation-state or country.

To return to our questions: Are the political institutions of polyarchal democracy actually necessary for democracy on the large scale of a country? If so, why? To answer these twin questions, let us recall what a democratic process requires (fig. 7).

WHY (AND WHEN) DOES DEMOCRACY REQUIRE ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES?

As the focus of democratic government shifted to large-scale units like nations or countries, the question arose: How can citizens participate effectively when the number of citizens becomes too numerous or too widely dispersed geographically (or both, as in the case of a country) for them to participate conveniently in making laws by assembling in one place? And how can they make sure that matters with which they are most concerned are adequately considered by officials—that is, how can citizens control the agenda of government decisions?

How best to meet these democratic requirements in a political unit as large as a country, of course, enormously difficult, indeed to some extent unachievable. Yet just as with the other highly demanding democratic criteria, this, too, can serve as a standard for evaluating alternative possibilities and solutions. Clearly the requirements could not be met if the top officials of the government could set the agenda and adopt policies independently of the wishes of citizens. The only feasible solution, though it is highly imperfect, is for citizens to elect their top officials and hold them more or less accountable through elections by dismissing them, so to speak, in subsequent elections.

To us that solution seems obvious. But what may appear self-evident to us was not at all obvious to our predecessors.

As we saw in Chapter 2, until fairly recently the possibility that citizens could, by means of elections, choose and reject representatives with the authority to make laws remained largely foreign to both the...
theory and practice of democracy. As we saw, too, the election of representatives mainly developed during the Middle Ages, when monarchs realized that in order to impose taxes, raise armies, and make laws they needed to win the consent of the nobility, the higher clergy, and a few not-so-common commoners in the larger town and cities.

Until the eighteenth century, then, the standard view was that democratic or republican government meant rule by the people, and if the people were to rule they had to assemble in one place and vote on decrees, laws, or policies. Democracy would have to be town meeting democracy; representative democracy was a contradiction in terms. By implication, whether explicit or implicit, a republic or a democracy could actually exist only in a small unit, like a town or city. Writers who held this view, such as Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, were perfectly aware of the disadvantages of a small state, particularly when it confronted the military superiority of a much larger state and were therefore extremely pessimistic about the future prospects for genuine democracy.

Yet the standard view was swiftly overpowered and swept aside by the unshakable force of the national state. Rousseau himself clearly understood that for a government of a country as large as Poland (for which he proposed a constitution), representation would be necessary. And shortly thereafter the standard view was driven off the stage of history by the arrival of democracy in America.

As late as 1787, when the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia to design a constitution appropriate for a large country with an ever-increasing population, the delegates were acutely aware of the historical tradition. Could a republic possibly exist on the huge scale the United States had already attained, not to mention the even grander scale the delegates foresaw? Yet no one ques-

*A few delegates daringly forecast that the United States might ultimately have as many as one hundred million inhabitants. This number was reached in 1805.

tioned that if a republic were to exist in America it would have to take the form of a representative republic. Because of the lengthy experience with representation in colonial and state legislatures and in the Continental Congress, the feasibility of representative government was practically beyond debate.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the traditional view was ignored, forgotten, or, if remembered at all, treated as irrelevant. "It is evident," John Stuart Mill wrote in 1861,

that the only government which can fully satisfy all the exigencies of the social state is one in which the whole people participate; that any participation, even in the smallest public function, is useful; that the participation should everywhere be as great as the general degree of improvement of the community will allow; and that nothing less can be ultimately desirable than the admission of all to a share in the sovereign power of the state. But since all cannot, in a community exceeding a single small town, participate personally in any but some very minor portions of the public business, it follows that the ideal type of a perfect government must be representative.4

WHY DOES DEMOCRACY REQUIRE FREE, FAIR, AND FREQUENT ELECTIONS?

As we have seen, if we accept the desirability of political equality, then every citizen must have an equal and effective opportunity to vote, and all votes must be counted as equal. If equality in voting is to be implemented, then clearly elections must be free and fair. To be free means that citizens can go to the polls without fear of reprisal; and if they are to be fair, then all votes must be counted as equal. Yet free and fair elections are not enough. Imagine electing representatives for a term of, say, twenty years! If citizens are to retain final control over the agenda, then elections must also be frequent.

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How best to implement free and fair elections is not obvious. In the late nineteenth century the secret ballot began to replace a public show of hands. Although open voting still has a few defenders, secrecy has become the general standard; a country in which it is widely violated would be judged as lacking free and fair elections. But debate continues as to the kind of voting system that best meets standards of fairness. Is a system of proportional representation (PR), like that employed in most democratic countries, fairer than the First-Past-the-Post system used in Great Britain and the United States? Reasonable arguments can be made for both, as we’ll see when we return to this question in Chapter 10. In discussions about different voting systems, however, the need for a fair system is assumed; how best to achieve fairness and other reasonable objectives is simply a technical question.

How frequent should elections be? Judging from twentieth-century practices in democratic countries, a rough answer might be that annual elections for legislative representatives would be a bit too frequent and anything more than about five years would be too long. Obviously, however, democrats can reasonably disagree about the specific interval and how it might vary with different offices and different traditional practices. The point is that without frequent elections citizens would lose a substantial degree of control over their elected officials.

WHY DOES DEMOCRACY REQUIRE FREE EXPRESSION?

To begin with, freedom of expression is required in order for citizens to participate effectively in political life. How can citizens make their views known and persuade their fellow citizens and representatives to adopt them unless they can express themselves freely about all matters bearing on the conduct of the government? And if they are to take the views of others into account, they must be able to hear what others have to say. Free expression means not just that you have a right to be heard. It also means that you have a right to hear what others have to say.

To acquire an enlightened understanding of possible government actions and policies also requires freedom of expression. To acquire civic competence, citizens need opportunities to express their own views; learn from one another; engage in discussion and deliberation; read, hear, and question experts, political candidates, and persons whose judgments they trust; and learn in other ways that depend on freedom of expression.

Finally, without freedom of expression citizens would soon lose their capacity to influence the agenda of government decisions. Silent citizens may be perfect subjects for an authoritarian ruler; they would be a disaster for a democracy.

WHY DOES DEMOCRACY REQUIRE THE AVAILABILITY OF ALTERNATIVE AND INDEPENDENT SOURCES OF INFORMATION?

Like freedom of expression, the availability of alternative and relatively independent sources of information is required by several of the basic democratic criteria. Consider the need for enlightened understanding. How can citizens acquire the information they need in order to understand the issues if the government controls all the important sources of information? Or, for that matter, if any single group enjoys a monopoly in providing information? Citizens must have access, then, to alternative sources of information that are not under the control of the government or dominated by any other group or point of view.

Or think about effective participation and influencing the public agenda. How could citizens participate effectively in political life if all the information they could acquire was provided by a single...
source, say the government, or, for that matter, a single party, faction, or interest?

WHY DOES DEMOCRACY REQUIRE INDEPENDENT ASSOCIATIONS?

As we saw earlier, it took a radical turnabout in ways of thinking to accept the need for political associations—interest groups, lobbying organizations, political parties. Yet if a large republic requires that representatives be elected, then how are elections to be contested? Forming an organization, such as a political party, gives a group an obvious electoral advantage. And if one group seeks to gain that advantage, will not others who disagree with their policies? And why should political activity cease between elections? Legislators can be influenced; causes can be advanced, policies promoted, appointments sought. So, unlike a small city or town, the large scale of democracy in a country makes political associations both necessary and desirable. In any case, how can they be prevented without impairing the fundamental right of citizens to participate effectively in governing? In a large republic, then, they are not only necessary and desirable but inevitable. Independent associations are also a source of civic education and enlightenment. They provide citizens not only with information but also with opportunities for discussion, deliberation, and the acquisition of political skills.

WHY DOES DEMOCRACY REQUIRE INCLUSIVE CITIZENSHIP?

The answer is to be found, of course, in the reasons that brought us to the conclusion of the last chapter. We hardly need to repeat them here.

We can view the political institutions described in this chapter and summarized in figure 6 in several ways. For a country that lacks one or more of the institutions, and is to that extent not yet sufficiently democratized, knowledge of the basic political institutions can help us to design a strategy for making a full transition to modern representative democracy. For a country that has only recently made the transition, that knowledge can help inform us about the crucial institutions that need to be strengthened, deepened, and consolidated. Because they are all necessary for modern representative democracy (polyarchal democracy), we can also view them as establishing a minimum level for democratization.

Those of us who live in the older democracies, where the transition to democracy occurred some generations ago and the political institutions listed in figure 6 are by now solidly established, face a different and equally difficult challenge. For even if the institutions are necessary to democratization, they are definitely not sufficient for achieving fully the democratic criteria listed in figure 6 and described in Chapter 4. Are we not then at liberty, and indeed obligated, to appraise our democratic institutions against these criteria? It seems obvious to me, and to many others, that judged against democratic criteria our existing political institutions display many shortcomings.

Consequently, just as we need strategies for bringing about a transition to democracy in nondemocratic countries and for consolidating democratic institutions in newly democratized countries, so in the older democratic countries we need to consider whether and how to move beyond our existing level of democracy.

Let me put it this way. In many countries the task is to achieve democratization up to the level of polyarchal democracy. But the challenge to citizens in the older democracies is to discover how they might achieve a level of democratization beyond polyarchal democracy.

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It is necessary to begin by saying a few words about three minimal conditions that must obtain before there can be any possibility of speaking of democratic consolidation. First, in a modern polity, free and authoritative elections cannot be held, winners cannot exercise the monopoly of legitimate force, and citizens cannot effectively have their rights protected by a rule of law unless a state exists. In some parts of the world, conflicts about the authority and domain of the polis and the identities and loyalties of the demos are so intense that no state exists. No state, no democracy.

Second, democracy cannot be thought of as consolidated until a democratic transition has been brought to completion. A necessary but by no means sufficient condition for the completion of a democratic transition is the holding of free and contested elections (on the basis of broadly inclusive voter eligibility) that meet the seven institutional requirements for elections in a polyarchy that Robert A. Dahl has set forth. Such elections are not sufficient, however, to complete a democratic transition. In many cases (e.g., Chile as of 1996) in which free and contested elections have been held, the government resulting from elections like these lacks the de jure as well as de facto power to determine policy in many significant areas because the executive, legislative, and judicial powers are still decisively constrained by an interlocking set of "reserve domains," military "prerogatives," or "authoritarian enclaves." 2

Third, no regime should be called a democracy unless its rulers govern democratically. If freely elected executives (no matter what the magnitude of their majority) infringe the constitution, violate the rights of individuals and minorities, impinge upon the legitimate functions of the legislature, and thus fail to rule within the bounds of a state of law, their regimes are not democracies.

In sum, when we talk about the consolidation of democracy, we are not dealing with liberalized nondemocratic regimes, or with pseudo-democracies, or with hybrid democracies where some democratic institutions coexist with nondemocratic institutions outside the control of the democratic state. Only democracies can become consolidated democracies.

Let us now turn to examining how, and when, new political systems that meet the three minimal conditions of "stateness," a completed democratic transition, and a government that rules democratically can be considered consolidated democracies. 3

In most cases after a democratic transition is completed, there are still many tasks that need to be accomplished, conditions that must be established, and attitudes and habits that must be cultivated before democracy can be regarded as consolidated. What, then, are the characteristics of a consolidated democracy? Many scholars, in advancing definitions of consolidated democracy, enumerate all the regime characteristics that would improve the overall quality of democracy. We favor, instead, a narrower definition of democratic consolidation, but one that nonetheless combines behavioral, attitudinal, and constitutional dimensions. Essentially, by a "consolidated democracy" we mean a political regime in which democracy as a complex system of institutions, rules, and patterned incentives and disincentives has become, in a phrase,
"the only game in town." 4

Behaviorally, democracy becomes the only game in town when no significant political group seriously attempts to overthrow the democratic regime or to promote domestic or international violence in order to secede from the state. When this situation obtains, the behavior of the newly elected government that has emerged from the democratic transition is no longer dominated by the problem of how to avoid democratic breakdown. (Exceptionally, the democratic process can be used to achieve secession, creating separate states that can be democracies.) Attitudinally, democracy becomes the only game in town when, even in the face of severe political and economic crises, the overwhelming majority of the people believe that any further political change must emerge from within the parameters of democratic procedures. Constitutionally, democracy becomes the only game in town when all of the actors in the polity become habituated to the fact that political conflict within the state will be resolved according to established norms, and that violations of these norms are likely to be both ineffective and costly. In short, with consolidation, democracy becomes routinized and deeply internalized in social, institutional, and even psychological life, as well as in political calculations for achieving success.

Our working definition of a consolidated democracy is then as follows: Behaviorally, a democratic regime in a territory is consolidated when no significant national, social, economic, political, or institutional actors spend significant resources attempting to achieve their objectives by creating a nondemocratic regime or by seceding from the state. Attitudinally, a democratic regime is consolidated when a strong majority of public opinion, even in the midst of major economic problems and deep dissatisfaction with incumbents, holds the belief that democratic procedures and institutions are the most appropriate way to govern collective life, and when support for antisystem alternatives is quite small or more-or-less isolated from prodemocratic forces. Constitutionally, a democratic regime is consolidated when governmental and nongovernmental forces alike become subject to, and habituated to, the resolution of conflict within the bounds of the specific laws, procedures, and institutions sanctioned by the new democratic process.

We must add two important caveats. First, when we say a regime is a consolidated democracy, we do not preclude the possibility that at some future time it could break down. Such a breakdown, however, would be related not to weaknesses or problems specific to the historic process of democratic consolidation, but to a new dynamic in which the democratic regime cannot solve a set of problems, a nondemocratic alternative gains significant supporters, and former democratic regime loyalists begin to behave in a constitutionally disloyal or semiloyal manner. 5

Our second caveat is that we do not want to imply that there is only one type of consolidated democracy. An exciting new area of research is concerned with precisely this issue--the varieties of consolidated democracies. We also do not want to imply that consolidated democracies could not continue to improve their quality by raising the minimal economic plateau upon which all citizens stand, and by deepening popular participation in the political and social life of the country. Within the category of consolidated democracies there is a continuum from low-quality to high-quality democracies. Improving the quality of consolidated democracies is an urgent political and intellectual task, but our goal in this essay, though related, is a different one. As we are living in a period in which an unprecedented number of countries have completed democratic transitions and are attempting to consolidate democracies, it is politically and conceptually important that we understand the specific tasks of "crafting" democratic consolidation. [End Page 16] Unfortunately, too much of the discussion of the current "wave" of democratization focuses almost solely on elections or on the presumed democratizing potential of market mechanisms. Democratic consolidation, however, requires much more than elections and markets.

Crafting and Conditions

In addition to a functioning state, five other interconnected and mutually reinforcing conditions must be present, or be crafted, in order for a democracy to be consolidated. First, the conditions must exist for the development of a free and lively civil society. Second, there must be a relatively autonomous political society. Third, throughout the territory of the state all major political actors, especially the government and the state apparatus, must be effectively subjected to a rule of law that protects individual freedoms and associational life. Fourth, there must be a state bureaucracy that is usable by the new democratic government. Fifth, there must be an institutionalized economic society. Let us explain what is involved in crafting this interrelated set of conditions.
By "civil society," we refer to that arena of the polity where self-organizing and relatively autonomous groups, movements, and individuals attempt to articulate values, to create associations and solidarities, and to advance their interests. Civil society can include manifold social movements (e.g., women's groups, neighborhood associations, religious groupings, and intellectual organizations), as well as associations from all social strata (such as trade unions, entrepreneurial groups, and professional associations).

By "political society," we mean that arena in which political actors compete for the legitimate right to exercise control over public power and the state apparatus. Civil society by itself can destroy a nondemocratic regime, but democratic consolidation (or even a full democratic transition) must involve political society. Democratic consolidation requires that citizens develop an appreciation for the core institutions of a democratic political society--political parties, legislatures, elections, electoral rules, political leadership, and interparty alliances.

It is important to stress not only the difference between civil society and political society, but also their complementarity, which is not always recognized. One of these two arenas is frequently neglected in favor of the other. Worse, within the democratic community, champions of either civil society or political society all too often adopt a discourse and a set of practices that are implicitly inimical to the normal development of the other.

In the recent struggles against the nondemocratic regimes of Eastern Europe and Latin America, a discourse was constructed that emphasized "civil society versus the state"--a dichotomy that has a long philosophical genealogy. More importantly for our purposes, it was also politically useful to those democratic movements emerging in states where explicitly political organizations were forbidden or extremely weak. In many countries, civil society was rightly considered to be the hero of democratic resistance and transition.

The problem arises at the moment of democratic transition. Democratic leaders of political society quite often argue that civil society, having played its historic role, should be demobilized so as to allow for the development of normal democratic politics. Such an argument is not only bad democratic theory, it is also bad democratic politics. A robust civil society, with the capacity to generate political alternatives and to monitor government and state, can help start transitions, help resist reversals, help push transitions to their completion, and help consolidate and deepen democracy. At all stages of the democratization process, therefore, a lively and independent civil society is invaluable.

But we should also consider how to recognize (and thus help overcome) the false opposition sometimes drawn between civil society and political society. The danger posed for the development of political society by civil society is that normative preferences and styles of organization perfectly appropriate to civil society might be taken to be the desirable--or indeed the only legitimate--style of organization for political society. For example, many civil society leaders view "internal conflict" and "division" within the democratic forces with moral antipathy. "Institutional routinization," "intermediaries," and "compromise" within politics are often spoken of pejoratively. But each of the above terms refers to an indispensable practice of political society in a consolidated democracy. Democratic consolidation requires political parties, one of whose primary tasks is precisely to aggregate and represent differences between democrats. Consolidation requires that habituation to the norms and procedures of democratic conflict-regulation be developed. A high degree of institutional routinization is a key part of such a process. Intermediation between the state and civil society, and the structuring of compromise, are likewise legitimate and necessary tasks of political society. In short, political society--informed, pressured, and periodically renewed by civil society--must somehow achieve a workable agreement on the myriad ways in which democratic power will be crafted and exercised.

**The Need for a Rechtsstaat**

To achieve a consolidated democracy, the necessary degree of autonomy of civil and political society must be embedded in, and supported by, our third arena, the rule of law. All significant actors--especially the democratic government and the state apparatus--must be held accountable to, and become habituated to, the rule of law. For the types of civil society and political society we have just described, a rule of law animated by a spirit of constitutionalism is an indispensable condition. Constitutionalism, which should not be confused with majoritarianism, entails a relatively strong consensus regarding the constitution, and especially a commitment to "self-binding" procedures of governance that can be altered only by
exceptional majorities. It also requires a clear hierarchy of laws, interpreted by an independent judicial system and supported by a strong legal culture in civil society.

The emergence of a Rechtsstaat—a state of law, or perhaps more accurately a state subject to law—was one of the major accomplishments of nineteenth-century liberalism (long before full democratization) in continental Europe and to some extent in Japan. A Rechtsstaat meant that the government and the state apparatus would be subject to the law, that areas of discretionary power would be defined and increasingly limited, and that citizens could turn to courts to defend themselves against the state and its officials. The modern Rechtsstaat is fundamental in making democratization possible, since without it citizens would not be able to exercise their political rights with full freedom and independence.

A state of law is particularly crucial for the consolidation of democracy. It is the most important continuous and routine way in which the elected government and the state administration are subjected to a network of laws, courts, semiautonomous review and control agencies, and civil-society norms that not only check the state's illegal tendencies but also embed it in an interconnecting web of mechanisms requiring transparency and accountability. Freely elected governments can, but do not necessarily, create such a state of law. The consolidation of democracy, however, requires such a law-bound, constraint-embedded state. Indeed, the more that all the institutions of the state function according to the principle of the state of law, the higher the quality of democracy and the better the society.

Constitutionalism and the rule of law must determine the offices to be filled by election, the procedures to elect those officeholders, and the definition of and limits to their power in order for people to be willing to participate in, and to accept the outcomes of, the democratic game. This may pose a problem if the rules, even if enacted by a majority, are so unfair or poorly crafted and so difficult to change democratically that they are unacceptable to a large number of citizens. For example, an electoral law that gives 80 percent of the seats in parliament to a party that wins less than 50 percent of the vote, or an ideologically loaded constitution that is extremely difficult to amend, is not likely to be conducive to democratic consolidation.

Finally, a democracy in which a single leader enjoys, or thinks he or she enjoys, a "democratic" legitimacy that allows him or her to ignore, dismiss, or alter other institutions—the legislature, the courts, the constitutional limits of power—does not fit our conception of rule of law in a democratic regime. The formal or informal institutionalization of such a system is not likely to result in a consolidated democracy unless such discretion is checked.

Some presidential democracies—with their tendency toward populist, plebiscitarian, "delegative" characteristics, together with a fixed term of office and a "no-reelection" rule that excludes accountability before the electorate—encourage nonconstitutional or anticonstitutional behavior that threatens the rule of law, often democracy itself, and certainly democratic consolidation. A prime minister who develops similar tendencies toward abuse of power is more likely than a president to be checked by other institutions: votes of no confidence by the opposition, or the loss of support by members of his own party. Early elections are a legal vehicle available in parliamentarianism—but unavailable in presidentialism—to help solve crises generated by such abusive leadership.

A Usable Bureaucracy

These three conditions—a lively and independent civil society; a political society with sufficient autonomy and a working consensus about procedures of governance; and constitutionalism and a rule of law—are virtually definitional prerequisites of a consolidated democracy. However, these conditions are much more likely to be satisfied where there are also found a bureaucracy usable by democratic leaders and an institutionalized economic society.

Democracy is a form of governance in which the rights of citizens are guaranteed and protected. To protect the rights of its citizens and to deliver other basic services that citizens demand, a democratic government needs to be able to exercise effectively its claim to a monopoly of the legitimate use of force in its territory. Even if the state had no other functions than these, it would have to tax compulsorily in order to pay for police officers, judges, and basic services. A modern democracy, therefore, needs the effective capacity to command, to regulate, and to extract tax revenues. For this, it needs a functioning state with a bureaucracy considered usable by the new democratic government.
In many territories of the world today—especially in parts of the former Soviet Union—no adequately functioning state exists. Insufficient taxing capacity on the part of the state or a weak normative and bureaucratic “presence” in much of its territory, such that citizens cannot effectively demand that their rights be respected or receive any basic entitlements, is also a great problem in many countries in Latin America, including Brazil. The question of the usability of the state bureaucracy by the new democratic regime also emerges in countries such as Chile, where the outgoing nondemocratic regime was able to give tenure to many key members of the state bureaucracy in politically sensitive areas such as justice and education. Important questions about the usability of the state bureaucracy by new democrats inevitably emerge in cases where the distinction between the communist party and the state had been virtually obliterated (as in much of postcommunist Europe), and the party is now out of power.

Economic Society

The final supportive condition for a consolidated democracy concerns the economy, an arena that we believe should be called “economic society.” We use this phrase to call attention to two claims that we believe are theoretically and empirically sound. First, there has never been, and there cannot be, a consolidated democracy that has a command economy (except perhaps in wartime). Second, there has never been, and almost certainly will never be, a modern consolidated democracy with a pure market economy. Modern consolidated democracies require a set of sociopolitically crafted and accepted norms, institutions, and regulations—what we call “economic society”—that mediate between the state and the market.

No empirical evidence has ever been adduced to indicate that a polity meeting our definition of a consolidated democracy has ever existed with a command economy. Is there a theoretical reason to explain such a universal empirical outcome? We think so. On theoretical grounds, our assumption is that at least a nontrivial degree of market autonomy and of ownership diversity in the economy is necessary to produce the independence and liveliness of civil society that allow it to make its contribution to a democracy. Similarly, if all property is in the hands of the state, along with all decisions about pricing, labor, supply, and distribution, the relative autonomy of political society required for a consolidated democracy could not exist.

But why are completely free markets unable to coexist with modern consolidated democracies? Empirically, serious studies of modern polities repeatedly verify the existence of significant degrees of market intervention and state ownership in all consolidated democracies. Theoretically, there are at least three reasons why this should be so. First, notwithstanding certain ideologically extreme but surprisingly prevalent neoliberal claims about the self-sufficiency of the market, pure market economies could neither come into being nor be maintained without a degree of state regulation. Markets require legally enforced contracts, the issuance of money, regulated standards for weights and measures, and the protection of property, both public and private. These requirements dictate a role for the state in the economy. Second, even the best of markets experience “market failures” that must be corrected if the market is to function well. No less an advocate of the “invisible hand” of the market than Adam Smith acknowledged that the state is necessary to perform certain functions. In a crucial but neglected passage in the Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith identified three important tasks of the state:

First, the duty of protecting the society from the violence and invasion of other independent societies; secondly, the duty of protecting, as far as possible, every member of the society from the injustice or oppression of every other member of it, or the duty of establishing an exact administration of justice; and, thirdly, the duty of erecting and maintaining certain public works and certain public institutions which it can never be for the interest of any individual, or small number of individuals, to erect and maintain; because the profit could never repay the expense to any individual or small number of individuals, though it may frequently do much more than repay it to a great society.

Finally, and most importantly, democracy entails free public contestation concerning governmental priorities and policies. If a democracy never produced policies that generated government-mandated public goods in the areas of education, health, and transportation, and never provided some economic safety net for its citizens and some alleviation of gross economic inequality, democracy would not be sustainable. Theoretically, of course, it would be antidemocratic to take such public policies off the agenda of legitimate public contestation. Thus, even in the extreme hypothetical case of a democracy that began with a pure
market economy, the very working of a modern democracy (and a modern advanced capitalist economy)
would lead to the transformation of that pure market economy into a mixed economy, or that set of norms,
regulations, policies, and institutions which we call "economic society." 11

Any way we analyze the problem, democratic consolidation requires the institutionalization of a politically
regulated market. This requires an economic society, which in turn requires an effective state. Even a goal
such as narrowing the scope of public ownership (i.e., privatization) in an orderly and legal way is almost
certainly carried out more effectively by a stronger state than by a weaker one. Economic deterioration due
to the state's inability to carry out needed regulatory functions greatly compounds the problems of economic
reform and democratization. 12

In summary, a modern consolidated democracy can be conceived of as comprising five major interrelated
arenas, each of which, to function properly, must have its own primary organizing principle. Rightly
understood, democracy is more than a regime; it is an interacting system. No single arena in such a system
can function properly without some support from another arena, or often from all of the remaining arenas.
For example, civil society in a democracy needs the support of a rule of law that guarantees to people their
right of association, and needs the support of a state apparatus that will effectively impose legal sanctions on those who would illegally attempt to deny others that right. Furthermore, each arena in the
democratic system has an impact on other arenas. For example, political society manages the governmental
bureaucracy and produces the overall regulatory framework that guides and contains economic society. In a
consolidated democracy, therefore, there are constant mediations among the five principal arenas, each of
which is influenced by the others.

Two Surmountable Obstacles

Two of the most widely cited obstacles to democratic consolidation are the dangers posed by ethnic conflict
in multinational states and by disappointed popular hopes for economic improvement in states undergoing
simultaneous political and economic reform. These are real problems. Democratic theorists and crafters
alike must recognize that there is often more than one "awakened nation" present in the state, and that there
can be prolonged economic reversals after democratic transition begins. Nonetheless, we are convinced, on
both theoretical and empirical grounds, that democracy can still make significant strides toward consolidation
under such conditions. We are furthermore convinced that if democratic theorists conceptualize what such
obstacles mean and do not mean, this may lessen the dangers of democratic disenchantment and help to
identify obstacle-reducing paths. That is our task in the rest of this essay.

Under what empirical conditions do "nation-states" and "democratization" form complementary logics? Under
what conditions do they form conflicting logics? If they form conflicting logics, what types of practices and
institutions will make democratic consolidation most, or least, likely?

Many political thinkers and activists assume that Weberian states, nation-states, and democracy cohere as
part of the very grammar of modern polities. In a world where France, Germany, Portugal, Greece, and
Japan are all Weberian states, nation-states, and democracies, such an assumption may seem justified. Yet
in many countries that are not yet consolidated democracies, a nation-state policy often has a different logic
than a democratic policy. By a nation-state policy we mean one in which the leaders of the state pursue
what Rogers Brubaker calls "nationalizing state policies" aimed at increasing cultural homogeneity.
Consciously or unconsciously, the leaders send messages that the state should be "of and for" the nation. 13
In the constitutions they write and in the politics they practice, the dominant nation's language becomes the
only official language and occasionally the only acceptable language for state business and for education;
the religion of the nation is privileged (even if it is not necessarily made the official religion); and the culture of
the dominant nation is privileged in state symbols (such as the flag, national anthem, and even eligibility for some types of military service) and in state-controlled means of socialization (such as
radio, television, and textbooks). By contrast, democratic policies in the state-making process are those that
emphasize a broad and inclusive citizenship that accords equal individual rights to all.

Under what empirical conditions are the logics of state policies aimed at nation-building congruent with those
aimed at crafting democracy? Empirically, conflicts between these different policies are reduced when
almost all of the residents of a state identify with one subjective idea of the nation, and when that nation is
virtually coextensive with the state. These conditions are met only if there is no significant irredenta outside
the state’s boundaries, if there is only one nation existing (or awakened) in the state, and if there is little cultural diversity within the state. In these circumstances (and, we will argue, virtually only in these circumstances) leaders of the government can simultaneously pursue democratization policies and nation-state policies. This congruence between the polis and the demos facilitates the creation of a democratic nation-state; it also virtually eliminates all problems of “stateness” and should thus be considered a supportive condition for democratic consolidation. Under modern circumstances, however, very few states will begin a possible democratic transition with a high degree of national homogeneity. This lack of homogeneity tends to exacerbate problems of “stateness.”

Democracy is characterized not by subjects but by citizens; thus a democratic transition often puts the question of the relation between polis and demos at the center of politics. From all that has been said thus far, three assertions can be made. First, the greater the extent to which the population of a state is composed of a plurality of national, linguistic, religious, or cultural societies, the more complex politics becomes, since an agreement on the fundamentals of a democracy will be more difficult. Second, while this does not mean that consolidating democracy in multinational or multicultural states is impossible, it does mean that especially careful political crafting of democratic norms, practices, and institutions is required. Third, some methods of dealing with the problems of “stateness” are inherently incompatible with democracy.

Clear thinking on this subject demands that we call into question some facile assumptions. One of the most dangerous ideas for democracy is that “every state should strive to become a nation-state and every nation should become a state.” In fact, it is probably impossible for half of the territories in the world that are not now democratic ever to become both “nation-states” and “consolidated democracies,” as we have defined these terms. One of the reasons for this is that many existing nondemocratic states are multinational, multilingual, and multicultural. To make them “nation-states” by democratic means would be extremely difficult. In structurally embedded multicultural settings, virtually the only democratic way to create a homogeneous nation-state is through voluntary cultural assimilation, voluntary exit, or peaceful creation and voluntary acceptance of new territorial boundaries. These are empirically and democratically difficult measures, and hence are exceedingly rare.

The other possibilities for creating a homogeneous nation-state in such settings involve subtle (or not-so-subtle) sanctions against those not speaking the language, wearing the attire, or practicing the religion of the titular nation. Under modern circumstances—where all significant groups have writers and intellectuals who disseminate national cultures, where communication systems have greatly increased the possibility for migrants to remain continuously connected to their home cultures, and where modern democratic norms accept a degree of multiculturalism—such sanctions, even if not formally antidemocratic, would probably not be conducive to democratic crafting. If the titular nation actually wants a truly homogeneous nation-state, a variant of “ethnic cleansing” is too often a temptation.

Another difficulty in the way of building nation-states that are also democracies derives from the manner in which humanity is spatially distributed across the globe. One building block for nations is language. But as Ernest Gellner observed, there are possibly as many as eight thousand languages (not counting important dialects) currently spoken in the world. Even if we assume that only one out of every ten languages is a base for a “reasonably effective” nationalism, there could be as many as eight hundred viable national communities. But cultural, linguistic, and religious groups are not neatly segmented into eight thousand or eight hundred nationalities, each occupying reasonably well-defined territories. On the contrary, these groups are profoundly intermixed and overlapping.

We are not arguing against democratically crafted “velvet divorces.” We should note, however, that relatively clear cultural boundaries facilitate such territorial separations. Latvia would like to be a nation-state, but in none of its seven most-populous cities is Latvian spoken by a majority of the residents. In Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, barely half the people of this aspiring nation-state speak Estonian. For these and many other countries, no simple territorial division or “velvet divorce” is available.

**Democracy and Multinational States**

Some analysts were happy when the separate nationalities of the USSR became 15 republics, all based on “titular nationalities,” on the assumption that democratic nation-states might emerge. In fact, many political
leaders in these republics sounded extreme nationalist (rather than democratic) themes in the first elections. One possible formula for diminishing conflict between titular nationalities and "migrants" is what David Laitin calls the "competitive-assimilation game." That is, it becomes in the best interests of some working-class migrants to assimilate in order to enhance the life chances of their children in the new environment. This may happen to Spanish working-class migrants in culturally and economically vibrant Catalonia, but is it likely to occur among Russians in Central Asia? In 1989 in Almaaty, the capital of Kazakhstan, Russians constituted 59 percent of the population, and the Kazakhs, the titular nationality, only 22.5 percent. Less than 1 percent of the Russians spoke the titular language. In Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, the comparable percentages were virtually identical. In such contexts, shaped by settler colonialism, it is utterly implausible that a nation-state would emerge voluntarily through a process of competitive assimilation. 18

So how can democracy possibly be achieved in multinational states? We have a strong hypothesis about how not to consolidate democracy in multinational settings. The greater the percentage of people in a given state who either were born there or arrived without perceiving themselves as foreign citizens, and who are subsequently denied citizenship in the state (when their life chances would be hurt by such denial), the more unlikely it is that this state will consolidate democracy. Phrased more positively, our hypothesis is that in a multinational, multicultural setting, the chances of consolidating democracy are increased by state policies that grant inclusive and equal citizenship and give all citizens a common "roof" of state-mandated and state-enforced individual rights.

Such multinational states also have an even greater need than other polities to explore a variety of nonmajoritarian, nonplebiscitarian formulas. For example, if there are strong geographic concentrations of different groups within the state, federalism might be an option worth exploring. The state and the society might also allow a variety of publicly supported communal institutions—such as media and schools in different languages, symbolic recognition of cultural diversity, a variety of legally accepted marriage codes, legal and political tolerance for parties representing different communities, and a whole array of political procedures and devices that Arend Lijphart has described as "consociational democracy." 19 Typically, proportional representation, rather than large single-member districts with first-past-the-post elections, can facilitate representation of geographically dispersed minorities. Some strict adherents to the tradition of political liberalism, with its focus on universalism and individual rights, oppose any form of collective rights. But we believe that in a multinational, multicultural society and state, combining collective rights for nationalities or minorities with individual rights fully protected by the state is the least-confictual solution. 20

Where transitions occur in the context of a nondemocratic, multinational federal system, the crafting of democratic federalism should probably begin with elections at the federal level, so as to generate a legitimate framework for later deliberations on how to decentralize the polity democratically. If the first competitive elections are regional, the elections will tend to favor regional nationalists, and ethnocrazies rather than democracies may well emerge. 21 However, the specific ways of structuring political life in multinational settings need to be contextual-ized in each country. Along these lines, we believe that it is time to reevaluate some past experiments with nonterritorial autonomy such as the kinds of partially self-governing ethnic or religious communities exemplified by the Jewish Kabal of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the millets of the Ottoman Empire, or the "national curias" of the late Hapsburg Empire. These mechanisms will not eliminate conflict in multinational states, but they may moderate conflict and help make both the state and democracy more viable.

We also believe that some conceptual, political, and normative attention should be given to the possibility of "state-nations." We call "state-nations" those multicultural or even multinational states that nonetheless still manage to engender strong identification and loyalty from their diverse citizens. The United States is such a multicultural and increasingly multilingual country; Switzerland is another. Neither is strictly speaking a "nation-state," but we believe both could now be called "state-nations." Under Jawaharlal Nehru, India made significant gains in managing multinational tensions by the skillful and consensual use of numerous consociational practices. Through this process India became, in the 1950s and early 1960s, a democratic "state-nation"; but if Hindu nationalists win power in the 1990s and attempt to turn India (with its 115 million Muslims) into a Hindu nation-state, communal violence would almost certainly increase and Indian democracy would be gravely threatened.

Multiple Identities
Let us conclude with a word about "political identities." Many writings on nationalism have focused on "primordial" identities and the need for people to choose between mutually exclusive identities. Our research into political identities, however, has shown two things. First, political identities are not fixed or "primordial" in the Oxford English Dictionary's sense of "existing at (or from) the very beginning." Rather, they are highly changeable and socially constructed. Second, if nationalist politicians (or social scientists and census-takers with crude dichotomous categories) do not force polarization, many people may prefer to define themselves as having multiple and complementary identities. In fact, along with a common political "roof" of state-protected rights for inclusive and equal citizenship, the human capacity for multiple and complementary identities is one of the key factors that makes democracy in multinational states possible. Because political identities are not fixed and permanent, the quality of democratic leadership is particularly important. Multiple and complementary political identities can be nurtured by political leadership, as can polarized and conflictual political identities. Before the conscious use of "ethnic cleansing" as a strategy to construct nation-states in the former Yugoslavia, Sarajevo was a multinational city whose citizens had multiple identities and one of the world's highest interfaith-marriage rates.

Our central proposition is that, if successful democratic consolidation is the goal, would-be crafters of democracy must take into careful consideration the particular mix of nations, cultures, and awakened political identities present in the territory. Some kinds of democracy are possible with one type of polis, but virtually impossible if political elites attempt to build another type of polis. Political elites in a multinational territory could initiate "nationalizing policies" that might not violate human rights or the Council of Europe's norms for democracy, but would have the effect, in each of the five arenas of the polity, of greatly diminishing the chances of democratic consolidation.

An example of such "nationalizing policies" in each of five arenas would be the following: In the arena of civil society, schooling and mass media could be restricted to the official language. In the arena of political society, nationalizing citizenship laws could lead to a significant overrepresentation of the dominant nationality in elected offices. In the arena of the rule of law, the legal system could subtly privilege a whole range of nationalizing customs, practices, and institutions. In the arena of the state bureaucracy, a rapid changeover to one official language could decrease other nationalities' participation in, and access to, state services. Finally, in the arena of economic society, the titular nationality, as the presumed "owners" of the nation-state, could be given special or even exclusive rights to land redistribution (or voucher distribution, if there was privatization). In contrast, if the real goal is democratic consolidation, a democratizing strategy would require less majoritarian and more consensual policies in each of the above arenas.

A final point to stress concerns timing. Potentially difficult democratic outcomes may be achievable only if some preemptive policies and decisions are argued for, negotiated, and implemented by political leaders. If the opportunity for such ameliorative policies is lost, the range of available space for maneuver will be narrowed, and a dynamic of societal conflict will likely intensify until democratic consolidation becomes increasingly difficult, and eventually impossible.

**Problems of Simultaneous Reform**

The widely held view that market reform and privatization can legitimate new democracies is based on the dubious assumption that economic improvement can be achieved simultaneously with the installation and legitimation of democratic institutions. We believe that, in countries with imploded command economies, democratic polities can and must be installed and legitimized by a variety of other appeals before the possible benefits of a market economy fully materialize. Many analysts and political advisors dismiss the case for giving priority to state restructuring because they assume that, due to people's demands for material improvements, economic and political gains must not only be pursued but occur simultaneously. Some even argue that simultaneous economic and political reforms are necessary, but that such simultaneity is impossible.

We can call the two opposing perspectives about the relationship between economics and democratization the "tightly coupled" hypothesis and the "loosely coupled" hypothesis. By "loosely coupled," we do not mean that there is no relationship between economic and political perceptions, only that the relationship is not necessarily one-to-one. For at least a medium-range time horizon, people can make independent, and even opposite, assessments about political and economic trends. We further believe that when people's
assessments about politics are positive, they can provide a valuable cushion for painful economic restructuring. Let us look at the evidence concerning the relationship between economic growth and democratization in the first five years of postcommunist Europe. Certainly, if we look only at relatively hard economic data, none of the 27 countries in postcommunist Europe except Poland experienced positive growth in 1992. Indeed, in 1993 all postcommunist countries were still well below their 1989 industrial-output levels.

If we look at subjective impressions of economic well-being in six East Central European countries, the mean positive rating (on a +100 to a -100 scale) among those polled between November 1993 and March 1994 was 60.2 for the communist economic system, but was only 37.3 for the postcommunist economic system—a drop of almost 23 points. The tightly coupled hypothesis would predict that attitudes toward the political system would also drop steeply, even if not by the full 23 points. What does the evidence show? The mean positive ranking of the communist political system was 45.7. Thus a one-to-one correlation between the political and economic evaluations would have yielded a positive evaluation of the political system of 22.6. Yet the mean positive ranking for the postcommunist political system, far from falling, rose to 61.5—or 38.9 points higher than a "perfectly coupled" hypothesis would have predicted.

How can we explain such incongruence? First of all, human beings are capable of making separate and correct judgements about a basket of economic goods (which may be deteriorating) and a basket of political goods (which may be improving). In fact, in the same survey the respondents judged that, in important areas directly affected by the democratic political system, their life experiences and chances had overwhelmingly improved, even though they also asserted that their own personal household economic situations had worsened.

We do not believe such incongruence can last forever; it does indicate, however, that in a radical transformation like that occurring in East Central Europe, the deterioration of the economy does not necessarily translate into rapid erosion of support for the political system. The perceived legitimacy of the political system has given democratic institutions in East Central Europe an important degree of insulation from the perceived inefficacy of the new economic system. Indeed, most people in East Central Europe in 1994 had a fairly long time horizon and expressed optimism that by 1999 the performance of both the new democracy and the new economic system would improve significantly.

Thus the evidence in East Central Europe is strongly in favor of the argument that deferred gratification and confidence in the future are possible even when there is an acknowledged lag in economic improvement. Simultaneity of rapid political and economic results is indeed extremely difficult, but fortunately the citizens of East Central Europe did not perceive it as necessary.

### Democracy and the Quality of Life

While we believe that it is a good thing for democracies to be consolidated, we should make it clear that consolidation does not necessarily entail either a high-quality democracy or a high-quality society. Democratic institutions—however important—are only one set of public institutions affecting citizens' lives. The courts, the central bank, the police, the armed forces, certain independent regulatory agencies, public-service agencies, and public hospitals are not governed democratically, and their officials are not elected by the citizens. Even in established democracies, not all of these institutions are controlled by elected officials, although many are overseen by them. These institutions operate, however, in a legal framework created by elected bodies and thereby derive their authority from them.

In view of all this, the quality of public life is in great measure a reflection not simply of the democratic or nondemocratic character of the regime, but of the quality of those other institutions.

Policy decisions by democratic governments and legislators certainly affect the quality of life, particularly in the long run, but no democracy can assure the presence of reputable bankers, entrepreneurs with initiative, physicians devoted to their patients, competent professors, creative scholars and artists, or even honest judges. The overall quality of a society is only in small part a function of democracy (or, for that matter, a function of nondemocratic regimes). Yet all of those dimensions of society affect the satisfaction of its citizens, including their satisfaction with the government and even with democracy itself. The feeling that democracy is to blame for all sorts of other problems is likely to be particularly acute in
societies in which the distinctive contributions of democracy to the quality of life are not well understood and perhaps not highly valued. The more that democrats suggest that the achievement of democratic politics will bring the attainment of all those other goods, the greater will be the eventual disenchantment.

There are problems specific to the functioning of the state, and particularly to democratic institutions and political processes, that allow us to speak of the quality of democracy separately from the quality of society. Our assumption is that the quality of democracy can contribute positively or negatively to the quality of society, but that the two should not be confused. We as scholars should, in our research, explore both dimensions of the overall quality of life.

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Notes

This essay is largely drawn from excerpts from our forthcoming book, Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-communist Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press). Interested readers can find more detailed documentation, analysis, and references there. We thank the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York for help in our research.


2. We document the incomplete status of the Chilean democratic transition in chapter 13 of our book. For military prerogatives, see Alfred Stepan, Rethinking Military Politics: Brazil and the Southern Cone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 68-127. For the electoralist fallacy in Central America, see Terry Lynn Karl, "The Hybrid Regimes of Central America," Journal of Democracy 6 (July 1995): 72-86. Dahl in his Polyarchy has an eighth institutional guarantee, which does not address elections as such, but rather the requirement that "[institutions] for making government policies [should] depend on votes and other expressions of preference," (p. 3). This addresses our concern about reserve domains.

3. Some readers have accused our work--and other studies of democratic transition and consolidation--of being teleological. If this means advocating a single end-state democracy, we decidedly do not share such a view. If, however, teleological means (as the Oxford English Dictionary says) "a view that developments are due to the purpose or design that is served by them," our analysis is in part teleological, for we do not believe that structural factors per se lead to democracy and its consolidation. Social actors (and in some measure particular leaders) must also act purposefully to achieve a change of regime leading to some form of governing that can be considered democratic. The design of democracy that these actors pursue may be different from the one resulting from their actions, but without action whose intent is to create "a" democracy (rather than the particular institutionalized form that results), a transition to and consolidation of democracy are difficult to conceive. The processes that we are studying do, therefore, involve a "teleological" element that does not exclude important structural factors (or many unpredictable events). In addition, there is not a single motive but a variety of motives for pursuing democracy (as we define it) as a goal.


5. In essence, this means that the literature on democratic breakdown, such as that found in Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, eds., The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University...
Press, 1978), would be much more directly relevant to analyzing such a phenomenon than this essay or related books on democratic transition and consolidation. This is not a criticism of the transition literature; rather, our point is that the democratic-transition and democratic-breakdown literatures need to be integrated into the overall literature on modern democratic theory. From the perspective of such an integrated theory, the "breakdown of a consolidated democracy" is not an oxymoron.


12. In postcommunist Europe, the Czech Republic and Hungary are well on the way to becoming institutionalized economic societies. In sharp contrast, in Ukraine and Russia the writ of the state does not extend far enough for us to speak of an economic society. The consequences of the lack of an economic society are manifest everywhere. For example, Russia, with a population 15 times larger than Hungary's and with vastly more raw materials, only received 3.6 billion dollars of direct foreign investment in 1992-93, whereas Hungary received 9 billion dollars of direct foreign investment in the same two years.


14. See, for example, the outstanding monograph by Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), which analyzes in extensive detail the wide repertoire of nation-state mandated policies in the schools, the civil service, and the military that were systematically designed to repress and eliminate multilingualism and multiculturalism and to create a nation-state. From today's perspective, similar endeavors of modern states appear far from admirable and represent a cost that many of us would not like to pay. However, it is not just a question of how we evaluate such efforts of state-based nation-building, but of how feasible these efforts are in the contemporary context.


16. This conjecture is developed by Gellner in *Nations*, 44-45.


21. We develop this point in greater detail in our "Political Identities and Electoral Sequences: Spain, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia," *Daedalus* 121 (Spring 1992): 123-39; and in our *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* in the chapters on Spain, on "stateness" in the USSR, and on Russian speakers’ changing identities in Estonia and Latvia.

22. In our *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, we show how in Catalonia in 1982, when respondents were given the opportunity to self-locate their identities on a questionnaire offering the following five possibilities--"Spanish," "more Spanish than Catalan," "equally Spanish and Catalan," "more Catalan than Spanish," or "Catalan"--the most-chosen category, among respondents with both parents born in Catalonia, as well as among respondents with neither parent born in Catalonia, was the multiple and complementary category "equally Spanish and Catalan." We also show how identities in Catalonia were becoming more polarized and conflict-ridden before democratic devolution.


24. The voters might, due to negative economic performance, vote incumbents out of office, but the overall economic policies of their successors might well continue to be roughly the same. Poland in 1993-95, and Hungary in 1994-95 come to mind.

25. See our *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*.


27. Rose and Haerfer, "New Democracies," questions 26, 35, 36, 39, 40, and 42.

Why Democracy Needs a Level Playing Field

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Multiparty elections proliferated in the late twentieth century but often did not bring democratization. In many countries, autocrats have repeatedly thwarted opposition electoral challenges through a variety of nondemocratic measures. Among the most effective, but least analyzed, means of autocratic survival is an uneven playing field. In countries like Botswana, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal, Singapore, Tanzania, and Venezuela, democratic competition is undermined less by electoral fraud or repression than by unequal access to state institutions, resources, and the media.

An uneven playing field is less evident to outside observers than is electoral fraud or repression, but it can have a devastating impact on democratic competition. When the opposition is systematically denied access to finance and major media outlets, competing in elections—even clean ones—is an uphill battle. Although opposition candidates occasionally win such contests, they usually lose them. And when elections are over, resource-starved oppositions are often decimated by defection, sometimes to the point of collapse. A skewed playing field may thus enable autocratic incumbents to retain power without resorting to the kinds of blatant abuse that can threaten their international standing.

We define an uneven playing field as one in which incumbent abuse of the state generates such disparities in access to resources, media, or state institutions that opposition parties’ ability to organize and compete for national office is seriously impaired. These disparities rarely emerge naturally; rather, they are usually rooted in illicit or autocratic behavior, including partisan appropriation of state resources, systematic
packing of state institutions and state-run media, and politicized distribution of state resources, concessions, and licenses.

Obviously, incumbent advantage exists everywhere. Incumbents in advanced democracies distribute patronage, engage in pork-barrel spending, and enjoy privileged access to media and finance. Clientelism, corruption, and other forms of particularism are pervasive in new democracies in Southeastern Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere. Yet there is a key difference between routine incumbent advantage and an uneven playing field (or what Kenneth Greene calls “hyper-incumbent advantage”). Whereas patronage and corruption may affect the quality of democracy in Brazil, Italy, or Poland, skewed access to resources and the media in countries such as Botswana, Malaysia, and Tanzania undermines democracy itself.

To distinguish an uneven playing field from routine incumbent advantage, we set a high threshold. We consider a playing field uneven where: 1) state institutions are widely abused for partisan ends; 2) the incumbent party is systematically favored at the expense of the opposition; and 3) the opposition’s ability to organize and compete in elections is seriously handicapped. The scope, partisan nature, and especially the impact of incumbent abuse are thus critical. Incumbents may abuse state resources in Greece, Latvia, and other democracies, but such abuse does not seriously affect the opposition’s capacity to organize and compete for power.

The political playing field may be uneven in a variety of ways, but three are of particular importance: resource disparities; unequal access to the media; and unequal access to the law.

**Access to Resources.** Extreme resource disparities may be created in several ways. For one, incumbents may directly appropriate state resources. In Mexico in the early 1990s, the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) reportedly drew upon as much as US$1 billion in illicit state finance; in Russia, tens of millions of dollars in government bonds were diverted to Boris Yeltsin’s 1996 re-election campaign; and in Cameroon, the state treasury covers most of the ruling party’s operating expenses. Incumbents may also make widespread partisan use of public buildings, vehicles, communications equipment, and employees—from low-level bureaucrats to security forces to teachers, doctors, and other professionals. Although such abuse is of little significance in wealthy democracies, it can have a major impact where the state apparatus is particularly large, as in Belarus, or where private-sector and other societal resources are limited, as in Malawi and Mozambique.

Incumbents may also use the state to skew access to private-sector finance. For example, they may use public credit, concessions, licensing, privatization, and other policy instruments to enrich party- or proxy-owned enterprises, as in Malaysia and Taiwan, or to corner the market on private-sector finance, as in Mexico under the PRI and in Rus-
sia under Yeltsin. They may also use state policy to punish businesses that finance the opposition. In Ghana, for example, entrepreneurs who backed opposition parties in 1992 “were blacklisted, denied government contracts and [had] their businesses openly sabotaged.” In Cambodia, the opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) was “starved for funds by a business community told by [the government] that financing SRP was committing economic suicide.”

The resource disparities in these cases exceed anything seen in democratic regimes. Ruling parties in Malaysia and Taiwan built multibillion-dollar business empires. The estimated $3 billion in assets belonging to Taiwan’s Kuomintang (KMT) made it the “richest party in the non-communist world”; in the mid-1990s, its $450 million annual budget exceeded that of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) by at least 50-to-1. In Mexico, the PRI reportedly spent up to twenty times more than its two major opponents combined in the 1994 legislative elections, and in Russia in 1996, the Yeltsin campaign spent at least thirty times the amount permitted the opposition. In some cases, including Belarus, Gabon, Malawi, Russia in the 2000s, and Senegal, opposition parties were so starved of resources that many either collapsed or were coopted by the government. As Russian opposition leader Grigory Yavlinsky complained, “How can we compete if one of the goals on a football pitch is one meter long while the other is ten meters long?”

**Media Access.** Media access also may be skewed in several ways. In many cases, including those of Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal, and Zambia, the state either monopolizes broadcast media or operates the only television and radio stations with a national audience. Although independent newspapers often circulate freely, in many low-income countries they reach only a small urban elite. This leaves the state-run media—almost always biased toward the ruling party—as the dominant (and in many rural areas, the only) source of news. Thus, even after Malawi’s 1994 transition from dictator Hastings Kamuzu Banda to elected president Bakili Muluzi, government control of the media was such that one journalist complained, “Before it was Banda, Banda, Banda—every day. Now it is Muluzi, Muluzi, Muluzi.”

In other cases, private media exist but are closely linked to the governing party, via proxy ownership, bribery, or other corrupt means. In Ukraine, President Leonid Kuchma controlled television coverage through an informal network of private media entities. The head of the Presidential Administration, who also owned the popular 1+1 television station, issued orders to all major stations dictating how events should be covered. In Peru in the late 1990s, television owners signed “contracts” with state officials in which the former received up to $1.5 million a month in exchange for limiting coverage of opposition parties. In Malaysia, all major newspapers and television stations were controlled by allies of the governing Barisan Nasional coalition.
In such cases, elections are marked by extraordinarily unequal media access. A study of television coverage during Peru’s 2000 election found that President Alberto Fujimori’s share of coverage hovered close to 90 percent, and that nearly all opposition coverage was negative.11 Similarly, in Russia’s 1996 election, the head of NTV (the main private television station) served as Yeltsin’s media director, major broadcasters refused to sell advertising time to the Communist opposition, and the media covered up Yeltsin’s heart attack just before the second round.

**Uneven Access to the Law.** In many competitive authoritarian regimes, incumbents not only control the judiciary, the electoral authorities, and other nominally independent arbiters (via packing, bribery, and intimidation), they also deploy them systematically as partisan tools against opponents. Politicized control of the legal system allows incumbents to violate democratic procedure with impunity. It also ensures that major electoral, legal, and other disputes will be resolved in the ruling party’s favor. In Malaysia in 1988, a packed judiciary ensured that a schism in the ruling United Malays National Organization was resolved in favor of Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad, and a decade later it allowed Mahathir to imprison his main rival, Anwar Ibrahim, on dubious charges. In Belarus in 1996, the constitutional court terminated an impeachment process launched by parliamentary opponents of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, facilitating his consolidation of autocratic rule. In Venezuela in 2003, electoral authorities invalidated signatures collected for a recall referendum against Hugo Chavez, thereby delaying the vote long enough for Chavez to rebuild public support and survive the recall election.

**Why the Playing Field Matters**

A skewed playing field allows incumbents to thwart opposition challenges without resorting to significant fraud or repression. This is an enormous advantage in the post–Cold War era, for it enables autocrats to retain power without sacrificing international legitimacy—effectively to have their cake and eat it too. A clear example is Botswana, which has long been considered a model democratic regime. Freedom House has classified it as Free since 1973, and its political-rights and civil-liberties scores in the 2000s were equal to or better than those of such Latin American democracies as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. Indeed, Botswana’s elections have generally been free of fraud and intimidation, and civil liberties—though violated more frequently than often thought—have been relatively well protected.12 Nevertheless, the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has resoundingly won every election since independence in 1966, and it has always controlled at least 75 percent of the legislature.

This outcome is not simply a product of Botswana’s robust economic
growth. Rather, it is rooted in the ruling party’s virtual monopoly over access to state institutions, finance, and mass media. The BDP “towers over the political scene.” Whereas its privileged ties to business yield “generous donations” from the private sector, opposition parties “attract virtually no donations.”13 And whereas the BDP has routinely used state agencies and resources for partisan ends,14 no public financing exists for opposition parties. Media access is likewise skewed. Through the late 1990s, the state owned all electronic media and the country’s only daily newspaper. Although some private media emerged in the 2000s, the state-owned radio and television stations remain the dominant news source, and favor the ruling party.15 The BDP’s financial and media advantages deny opposition parties anything close to an even footing. As one newspaper editorialized before the 2004 elections, “only the [BDP] enters the race with resources to reach every voter.”16

A similar dynamic exists in Tanzania. Outside of Zanzibar, electoral fraud and major civil-liberties violations have been relatively rare since Tanzania’s 1992 transition to multiparty rule. Yet the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) has overwhelmingly won every national election. In 2005, the CCM won more than 80 percent of the presidential vote and captured over 85 percent of parliament. This dominance is rooted in extreme resource and media disparities. The CCM “overwhelms the playing field.”17 The 1992 transition failed to break the ruling party’s ties to the state. Consequently, the CCM either owns or makes regular partisan use of numerous public properties (including businesses, buildings, and vehicles), giving it an incalculable resource advantage. As one opposition leader put it, “In many areas, every open space is owned by the CCM. There are simply no places that we can hold meetings other than on the road side.”18 The CCM also uses its business holdings and close private-sector ties to dominate access to finance. Finally, although private radio and television stations exist, their reach is largely limited to the capital. State-owned media predominate in the rest of the country, giving the CMM “far more media exposure than opposition parties.”19 With these advantages, CCM leaders have boasted that they do not “need to cheat” in elections. 20

Although a skewed playing field may be less visible than fraud or repression, it can be equally, if not more, damaging to democratic competition. Where oppositions lack reasonable access to resources and the media, even clean elections are markedly unfair. For example, although Mexico’s 1994 presidential election was free of fraud, the PRI’s resource and media advantages were so vast that Jorge Castañeda compared the race to “a soccer match where the goalposts were of different heights and breadths and where one team included 11 players plus the umpire and the other a mere six or seven players.”21 Taiwan’s 1996 presidential election—though widely viewed as democratic—was marked by such extreme resource disparities that the DPP “found it nearly impossible to compete.”22 Although opposition candidates occasionally win unfair
elections—Nicaragua in 1990; Zambia in 1991; Belarus, Malawi, and Ukraine in 1994; Senegal and Serbia in 2000; Kenya in 2002—the mere possibility of opposition victory is not sufficient for democracy. Regimes in which opposition victories are heroic exceptions rather than the norm should not be labeled democratic.

An uneven playing field also undermines the opposition’s ability to organize between elections. Deprived of resources or access to mass media, opposition parties are often unable to maintain national organizations. Without patronage or other material inducements to offer followers, they are frequently plagued by defection, as leaders and activists jump to the ruling party in search of patronage, “pork,” or a more secure political future. Indeed, unless opposition parties have unusually strong organizations, identities, or core constituencies (Albania, Malaysia), their very survival may be threatened. Many prominent (or promising) opposition parties have thus withered away: Russia’s Yabloko, Malaysia’s Semangat ’46, Cameroon’s Social Democratic Front (SDF), and Zambia’s United National Independence Party. Facing the specter of collapse, opposition parties may view joining the governing coalition as their only viable alternative. Major opposition parties in Cambodia, Cameroon, Gabon, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Russia, Senegal, and Ukraine have succumbed to cooptation, largely in order to secure the resources necessary for political survival.

As “pragmatic” parties join the government and “principled” ones weaken, the opposition ranks may be effectively depopulated. In Cambodia, for example, the ruling party’s cooptation of Funcinpec and marginalization of the more militant Sam Rainsy Party effectively eliminated serious opposition in the 2000s. In Gabon, opposition parties seriously challenged President Omar Bongo in the early 1990s, but in the decade that followed, Bongo used the state’s considerable oil rents to coopt nearly all of them. By 2005, 29 of 35 registered parties had joined the governing coalition, and parties that remained in opposition did so “at the cost of losing money, and therefore supporters.”23 In Cameroon in the late 1990s, most opposition parties opted to “cooperate” with President Paul Biya’s government, leaving the SDF alone in opposition, where, starved of resources, it wilted and lost prominence. In post-2002 Mali, President Amadou Touré’s “consensus” strategy brought most major parties into the Presidential Bloc, leaving the country virtually without opposition. In Tanzania, no significant national opposition party has emerged in seventeen years of multiparty rule.

A brief comparison of eight so-called new democracies in southern Africa (Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia) and Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua) illustrates the impact of an uneven playing field on political competition. Freedom House classifies all eight regimes as “electoral democracies” and has given them roughly similar political-rights and civil-liberties scores since the mid-
1990s. Yet in terms of the playing field, the two sets of cases differ markedly. Whereas the Central American playing fields were reasonably level, in that private media and financing were accessible to two or more competing parties, those in southern Africa were severely tilted: State-owned media were the dominant news sources, and incumbents’ abuse of state resources and massive advantage in private-sector funding generated vast resource disparities.24

The consequences of these disparities are striking. With the exception of transitional elections in Zambia in 1991 and Malawi in 1994, incumbents in the southern African cases have never lost. Ruling parties have been re-elected four consecutive times in Mozambique, Namibia, and Zambia and three times in Malawi. Overall, incumbents have won 15 of 17 elections and have not lost since 1994. In Central America, by contrast, incumbents usually lose. In El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, opposition candidates have won more than two-thirds (13 of 18) of the presidential elections held since 1989. These contrasting patterns suggest real differences in the level of democratic competition that standard measures fail to capture.

The Need for Conceptual Precision

The above discussion suggests a need to take the slope of the playing field more seriously in conceptualizing and measuring democracy. The proliferation of hybrid regimes, in particular, poses a conceptual challenge. Because most hybrid regimes hold multiparty elections, scholars seeking to differentiate them from democracies have sought to “precise” the concept of democracy by making explicit criteria that had been implicitly understood as part of its overall meaning.25 In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars precised the Schumpeterian definition to include—or make explicit—two additional criteria: civil liberties and civilian control over the military. In our view, the concept needs to be honed further to include a reasonably level playing field. In other words, a level playing field should be treated as a defining feature of democracy.

Although a level playing field is implicit in most conceptualizations of democracy, standard measures of civil liberties and free elections often fail to capture key aspects of unfair competition. Abuses that tilt the playing field often are not, strictly speaking, breaches of civil liberties. Whereas closing newspapers and arresting government critics are clear violations of civil liberties, gaining de facto control of the private media via informal proxy or patronage arrangements and using state powers to secure a monopoly over private-sector finance are not. Similarly, many of the effects of a skewed playing field are felt between elections and are thus often missed in election evaluations. Yet when vast resource disparities weaken opposition parties, lure erstwhile opponents into the government, or deter potential challengers from entering the political
arena, democratic competition is undermined in ways that do not necessarily manifest themselves on election day. Rather, incumbents effectively secure victory before the campaign ever begins.

Attention to the slope of the playing field thus highlights how regimes may be nondemocratic even in the absence of significant fraud or civil-liberties violations. Precising the definition of democracy to include a level playing field thus allows scholars more accurately to score cases such as Mexico and Taiwan in the mid-1990s and contemporary Botswana, Georgia, Mozambique, and Senegal, where the façade of Schumpeterian democracy belies a far less competitive reality.

**Origins of an Uneven Playing Field**

Uneven playing fields tend to emerge under conditions that facilitate incumbent control over key state and societal resources. Such conditions often exist in cases of incomplete transition from single-party rule. Single-party regimes tend to fuse the state and ruling party, creating a highly politicized state in which bureaucrats are also party cadres, state properties (businesses, media outlets) are also party properties, and resources from various state agencies are systematically deployed for partisan use. Transitions to multiparty rule—often accomplished via a simple constitutional change or the calling of elections—do not necessarily alter these patterns. In countries like Cambodia, Cameroon, Gabon, Kenya, Mozambique, Serbia, Taiwan, and Tanzania in the early 1990s, the end of single-party rule did not bring an effective de-linking of state and party, and this helped incumbents to retain power in a multiparty context.

In the postcommunist world, a skewed playing field may be a legacy of incomplete transitions. Incumbents often retained dominant control over societal resources after the collapse of state socialism in 1989–91. In states that did not undergo large-scale privatization (such as Belarus and Uzbekistan), or where governments used insider privatization to establish extensive patronage ties to a new business elite (as in Russia and Serbia), incumbents often established a virtual monopoly over access to finance and the media, thereby impeding the ability of nonstate actors to emerge and challenge the government.

Another source of an uneven playing field is mineral wealth. Where petroleum or other natural-resource exports are a primary source of national revenue, and the bulk of this revenue flows through the state, governments have almost total control over societal resources. In such a context—for example, in Botswana, Gabon, and, to some extent, Venezuela—it is a huge challenge to build or sustain opposition.

Finally, an uneven playing field is often rooted in underdevelopment. In a context of widespread poverty and a weak private sector, the financial, organizational, and human resources available to opposition parties are usually quite limited. Small, economically vulnerable private sectors
cannot be relied upon to finance opposition. Moreover, in the absence of a vibrant private economy, public-sector jobs, contracts, and other resources take on disproportionate importance and help governments to coopt politicians, businessmen, and activists away from the opposition. Opposition impoverishment magnifies the impact of incumbency. Even petty incumbent abuses that have no real impact in rich countries, such as the ruling party’s use of public employees, buildings, or vehicles, can seriously hinder the opposition’s ability to compete. In countries like Cambodia, Madagascar, Mali, and Tanzania, for example, access to 4x4 vehicles allows incumbents to penetrate rural areas that are largely inaccessible to opposition parties.

Underdevelopment also skews media access. In poor societies newspaper circulation is usually low, leaving television and radio as the only sources of news for much of the population. Yet weak private sectors may have difficulty sustaining national broadcasting networks. In Mali, Moldova, Mozambique, Senegal, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and other low-income countries, only state-owned television broadcasted nationally in the 1990s and into the 2000s. Even where private media exist, they are often highly dependent on the state. Government advertising is almost invariably their major source of revenue, leaving them vulnerable to cooptation.

In a context of extreme resource scarcity and media underdevelopment, then, simply being in government can generate a significant incumbent advantage. This has an important implication: The same type of incumbent abuse can have different effects across cases, depending on the level of development. For example, incumbents use public employees and state resources for election campaigns in Malawi and Brazil, but whereas in Malawi this abuse seriously affects the opposition’s ability to compete, in Brazil it does not. Likewise, government threats to withdraw advertising from private media powerfully shape media behavior in Botswana, but not in Italy or Mexico. And whereas biased public television or radio have little impact in Central Europe and South America, where private media predominate, they have a powerful impact in much of southern Africa, where they are often the only available news sources.

**Overcoming an Uneven Playing Field**

How can an uneven playing field be overcome? The surest way is to grow out of it. Capitalist development expands the resources available to opposition parties, creates markets capable of sustaining a pluralist media structure, and diminishes the impact of incumbent abuse. In Mexico and Taiwan, for example, economic development expanded the media market and gave rise to a more independent private sector that would become a major source of opposition finance. Thus, although the PRI and KMT continued to abuse state power during the 1990s, the impact of abuse diminished relative to earlier decades.
Short of such long-term structural developments, hyper-incumbent advantage may be overcome in several other ways. The most common is a split within the ruling elite. Where the playing field is skewed, the most viable challengers often come from within. Unlike opposition politicians, top government officials do have access to the state and media. When those officials defect to the opposition, their access to such resources may effectively mitigate incumbent advantage. Incumbent coalitions are especially prone to disintegration where ruling parties are weak, as in much of the former Soviet Union and Africa. In Ukraine, for example, Viktor Yushchenko, who had served as prime minister under Kuchma, was able to mount a successful presidential campaign (despite considerable incumbent abuse) with the support of leading politicians and oligarchs who, along with Yushchenko, had recently abandoned the Kuchma regime. Likewise, in Kenya in 2002, the defection of leading government officials was critical to the opposition’s victory. Indeed, many of the most dramatic David-versus-Goliath–style opposition victories in recent decades (Zambia in 1991, Malawi in 1994, Senegal in 2000, Georgia in 2003) were products of massive defections of regime insiders.

Oppositions may also seek to overcome the disadvantages created by an uneven playing field by allowing themselves to be coopted and (temporarily) joining the government. Lacking access to media and finance, opposition parties and politicians have adopted this strategy in Armenia, Cambodia, Cameroon, Gabon, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Senegal, and Serbia. Such behavior is often dismissed as opportunistic and corrupt, and opposition parties that pursue it risk being discredited. Where the playing field is skewed, however, joining the government may be their only viable means of organizational survival. By allowing themselves to be coopted today, opposition parties may gain the resources needed to survive and compete tomorrow.


Although these scenarios highlight how incumbents may be defeated despite an uneven playing field, neither entails an actual leveling of the playing field. As a result, turnover in such cases rarely brings democracy. In Belarus, Malawi, Ukraine, and Zambia in the 1990s, and in Georgia, Kenya, Madagascar, and Senegal in the 2000s, an uneven playing field persisted after transitions, and successor governments were not democratic. Democratization in such cases often requires active mea-
sures to widen access to resources and media, such as guaranteed public finance for political parties and regulations to strengthen independent media. In Mexico, for example, campaign finance and media reforms succeeded in leveling the playing field after 1996. Incumbents rarely accede to such measures, however, and equitable arrangements on paper are often not enforced in practice.

In such a context, international actors can make a difference. External assistance has at times helped opposition forces to overcome the effects of an uneven playing field. In Nicaragua in 1990, for example, U.S. assistance enabled an enfeebled opposition coalition to hire staff, buy campaign vehicles, open offices across the country, and run a national campaign—all of which was critical to its stunning victory over the Sandinistas. In Serbia in 2000, Western assistance was critical to the anti-Milošević opposition’s successful campaign and postelection protest movement. External assistance may also strengthen civil society organizations—such as domestic election-observer groups (OK-98 in Slovakia, Committee of Voters in Ukraine)—and support independent media outlets (Nicaragua in 1990, Cambodia in 1993, Serbia and Croatia in 2000, Ukraine in 2004). In poor countries, where a few 4x4 vehicles or rural radio stations can make a big difference, external efforts to level the playing field do not require large sums of money. By simply enabling opposition groups to reach voters across the country, even modest assistance can put those groups in a position to win.

An uneven playing field is an increasingly important means of sustaining authoritarian rule. Even where fraud or civil-liberties violations are widespread—as in Belarus, Cambodia, Gabon, Malaysia, Russia, and Singapore—unequal access to resources, media, and the law may be the most potent force undermining political competition. Indeed, in the contemporary era, such mechanisms may be a more effective way to “disappear” opponents than the kind of violent repression used by regimes in the past.

NOTES

1. For an excellent analysis of the causes and consequences of an uneven playing field, see Kenneth F. Greene, *Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico’s Democratization in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).


