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Chapter 1

Introduction: Democracy, Non-democracy, and the Varieties of Political Competition

This is a book about ‘non-democracy’. Non-democratic politics takes many forms, and goes by many names. ‘Dictatorship’, ‘tyranny’, ‘authoritarianism’, ‘autocracy’, ‘totalitarianism’, and ‘despotism’ are only some of the many terms scholars and ordinary people use to distinguish non-democratic states from democracies. In order to make sense of this variety, we first need to know what characteristics typically distinguish democratic from non-democratic states.

Democracy is itself a contested concept, capable of taking on many meanings today (Coppedge et al., 2011). What the ‘rule of the people’ requires of our societies and institutions is controversial. Fortunately for our purposes in this book, however, we do not need perfect agreement on what democracy is, or on what it should be, before we can speak about non-democratic politics. As the economist Joseph Schumpeter (1950) observed in the first half of the twentieth century, the key distinction between states that can be called ‘democratic’ (even if grudgingly) and states that should *not* be so called (whatever else they might be called) has to do less with abstract notions such as popular sovereignty and the common good than with the forms of political competition for state power prevalent within them.

In particular, the countries we today call ‘democratic’ display a specific pattern of political competition for control of states (Schmitter and Karl, 1991). Roughly speaking, in democracies multiple organized groups compete for the support of large publics (in theory, all adults) in electoral contests in order to gain control of key offices of the state (for example, the presidency, a majority of seats in the legislature). One important feature of this form of political competition is that formal ‘barriers to entry’ (Mulligan and Tsui, 2006; Mulligan, Gil, and Sala-i-Martin, 2004) into the competition for power are relatively low: incumbents (the current group or groups controlling the state) have limited abilities to prevent groups with different views about the proper uses of state power from forming, organizing, appealing to the electorate, or assuming office if they win an election, much less physically harming the membership of these groups. In the pithy formulation of political scientist Adam Przeworski (1991, p. 10), democracies are political systems in which ‘parties lose elections’, precisely because they *cannot* systematically prevent their opponents from winning them.

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The definition of non-democracy follows directly from this: non-democracies today are political systems in which groups in control of the state ('incumbents') do *not* lose elections in the normal course of events, sometimes simply because political competition is carried out without the use of elections. There are many reasons why incumbents may *not* lose elections, and hence, as we shall see, there are many varieties of non-democracy. Incumbents may have the power to prevent opposition groups from forming (by banning them or imprisoning their members), from appealing to the electorate (by monopolizing the media or censoring opposition views), or from taking office if they win an election (by counting votes improperly, or refusing to yield office in case of an opposition win). They may also have the power to shape the norms of political competition so as to make elections either useless as a means of attaining power (as in single-party regimes where elections do not serve as a mechanism for the electorate to select among different parties) or to do without them completely (as in hereditary monarchies). In short, incumbents may use force, fraud, or legitimate but non-electoral means so that they remain in power 'by means other than competitive elections' (Gandhi, 2008, p. 7) – even if they originally *gained* power by such means.

Not all incumbents in non-democratic regimes will murder their political opponents, prevent protest activity, or ban opposition groups outright in their attempts to hold on to power. Some non-democratic regimes use such subtle means to ensure that they do not lose elections that they look almost democratic, while others are far more brutal. As we shall see in this book, the international environment, the availability of material resources, the degree of organization of opposition groups, and even the ruler's conscience all matter for the specific forms that non-democratic rule takes. But, however else they may differ, in all non-democratic political systems rulers and ruling elites systematically impose costs (sometimes quite substantial costs) on other groups in order to prevent them from achieving control or even influence over the direction of state policy.

These consciously imposed costs are different from the costs that the structure of political competition imposes on all groups attempting to control the state in a democracy. For example, in all modern democracies there are many costs involved in catching the attention of the public and persuading the masses of the merits of a political programme. Thus groups whose views are unpopular or not well known will necessarily be disadvantaged, even if incumbents do nothing to prevent them from competing for power. Minor parties in the United States find it difficult to appeal to the electorate, but this is mostly because the costs of persuading the public are large within the American institutional setting, and not due to legal disabilities or repressive activities by Republicans or Democrats. Indeed, in (well-functioning) democratic systems, the vast majority of barriers to competing for state power are what we might call 'structural' rather than

intentionally imposed by incumbents; even groups openly advocating for the overthrow of democracy are often capable of organizing and attempting to appeal to the electorate without great fear of repression.

Nevertheless, since the costs that incumbents impose on challengers are often a matter of interpretation and degree, it is sometimes difficult to draw clear lines between democratic and non-democratic systems. Elections in Venezuela over the past 15 years, for example, have often been assailed by opposition parties as being unfair due to the government's ability to use state resources for electoral purposes, while the government has brushed off these criticisms by pointing to the genuine popularity of the late president Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian revolution, the fact that elections have been pronounced free of fraud by international organizations, and the many avenues for political action available to the opposition. (We shall have occasion to revisit Venezuelan politics several times in this book; see also the Venezuela case study included among the online resources for a more detailed discussion.) Political action never takes place in a perfectly even playing field, and political actors are constantly trying to gain advantages over their challengers. As Daniel Arap Moi, a former president of Kenya, once noted, 'politics is not like football, deserving a level playing field. Here, you try that, and you will be roasted' (quoted in Levitsky and Way, 2010, p. 5).

Moreover, as we shall see in Chapter 2, contemporary non-democratic rule has tended to take on the trappings of democracy without the substance, making judgments that some states are 'authoritarian' or 'dictatorships' even more controversial today than in the past. Due to very wide-ranging ideological and geopolitical changes over the last two centuries, most non-democratic rulers today do not dissolve parliament, shoot their opponents, and declare themselves 'presidents for life'; indeed, the vast majority of them argue for their democratic credentials. Yet we can still make rough judgments about how much incumbent advantage is 'too much' for a state to be considered democratic. In particular, throughout this book, we shall make extensive use of a variety of measures created by political scientists to distinguish between democracy and non-democracy on the basis of whether or not political competition proceeds on the basis of free and fair competitive elections (for example Magaloni, Chu, and Min, 2013; Svobik, 2012; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2014; Boix, Miller, and Rosato, 2012; Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton, 2010).

The Importance of Electoral Competition

When we say that the key distinction between democracy and non-democracy hinges on the kind of (electoral) political competition they allow, we are *not* saying that this is all that matters to democracy, or

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even that the ideal of democracy necessarily *requires* electoral methods of leadership selection. (This is sometimes called the ‘electoralist’ fallacy.) Ancient Greeks, for example, thought elections were characteristic of ‘oligarchic’ regimes (where the wealthy ruled), for reasons having to do with the *structural* barriers to entry into political competition they presuppose (when offices are open to election, the poor have difficulty competing for such positions). In their view, sortition (selection by lottery), not election, was more appropriate to the ideals of citizen equality implicit in the notion of *demokratia* (‘the power of the *demos*’) and *isonomia* (‘citizen equality before the law’) as they understood it (see Guerrero (2014) for a modern version of this argument). And today, many people think that various forms of participative or direct democracy are viable alternatives to the representative system. Indeed, in some countries, such as Switzerland, much politics happens through referenda, though in such cases we still find parties, and these parties can lose – that is, they cannot systematically prevent their opponents from appealing to the voters and having their preferences enacted as policy if they count on the support of the requisite majorities.

More generally, electoral competition by itself need not enable popular sovereignty, government ‘for the people, by the people, and of the people’, liberty and equality, or any of the other ideals associated with the notion of democracy (Dahl, 1989). In any case, the democratic ideal has many dimensions, and thus a proper conception of democracy should be multidimensional and not merely electoral (Coppedge et al., 2011). But in modern states sufficient electoral competition is a *minimal* requisite for democracy, and its lack is thus a useful dividing line between ‘democratic’ and ‘non-democratic’ politics. And we are less interested here in conceptualizing and measuring democracy and its degrees than in tracing the differences between the forms political competition takes in typical modern-day systems where parties lose elections (‘democracies’) and the forms it takes in other, non-democratic, regimes where parties do not lose elections, sometimes because elections do not exist.

By labelling some regimes ‘democracies’ and others ‘non-democracies’ on the basis of whether there are free and fair elections with multiple parties in them, we are thus not suggesting that democracies are always ‘better’ than non-democracies. It is true that the idea that electoral forms of accountability should force the groups who control the state to track the interests of the majority of the population is a major argument for democracy; indeed, it is a key argument for saying that the people are somehow sovereign in modern democratic states, despite their lack of direct influence on policy or of control over major decisions. In theory, politicians that depend on popular majorities for their continued control of the state should act in ways that benefit these majorities more often than politicians that do not depend on popular majorities. But the truth of this argument

depends ultimately on empirical considerations, not on pure logic. And it is possible that political leaders or groups that are not so constrained may (under some conditions) produce outcomes that better serve the welfare of large majorities. We will consider the possibility that alternative, non-democratic forms of political competition may produce better outcomes than standard democratic institutions in Chapter 9.

Political Regimes and State Capacity

The democracy–non-democracy dichotomy is also not always the most important distinction for thinking about the outcomes of state policies or the quality of government. These may vary systematically for reasons having less to do with the forms of political competition for control of states (democratic or non-democratic) and more to do with the *capacity* of the state itself to govern. Modern states are peculiar organizations; as Max Weber argued in the early twentieth century, they monopolize or attempt to monopolize the ability to use normatively regulated (‘legitimate’) force within a territory (Weber, 1978, sec. I.i). These organizations use this monopoly to extract resources from sometimes unwilling populations (‘taxes’) and use these to, among other things, impose binding rules on these same populations (‘laws and regulations’), wage war against competing states or dissatisfied groups within the territory, stage rituals and other public spectacles, or even simply use these resources for the private consumption of state elites (‘corruption’). Control of (or even influence on) states thus gives organized groups power and many other benefits, which justifies our focus on the ways in which such control is maintained against other groups.

But states did not always exist – even today many spaces around the world can hardly be said to have them – a fact that limits the temporal scope of our project in this book. And they also vary considerably in their ability to maintain order and enforce laws, or more generally in what we might call their capacity to govern. Indeed, wherever there is no centralized organization worth struggling over – no enduring institutions whose action can be harnessed to regulate social life in a given territory by successfully occupying a limited number of social positions, such as an office named ‘the presidency’ – patterns of political competition for control of states may not be the most important thing to understand when thinking about the politics of particular countries.

Differences in state capacity – or, in Michael Mann’s (1984) terms, high levels of ‘infrastructural power’, in contrast to mere ‘despotic power’ or the ability to extract resources by the threat of violence – are typically manifested in the presence or absence of relatively high-quality impersonal bureaucracies with low levels of what we ordinarily call ‘corruption’. These

Table 1.1 *Political regimes and state capacity*

	Democratic regimes	Non-democratic regimes
High infra-structural power	<p>Incumbent office holders can use their power to effectively regulate the activities of the population, imposing binding rules (laws and regulations) for a variety of purposes, ranging from taxation to infrastructure provision to education. But they cannot in general impose substantial costs on other groups to prevent them from organizing to compete for state office.</p> <p>These are typically ‘consolidated’ or ‘advanced’ democracies, such as the contemporary United States, South Korea, Denmark, and Japan.</p>	<p>Incumbent office holders can use their power to effectively regulate the activities of the population, imposing binding rules (laws and regulations) for a variety of purposes, ranging from taxation to infrastructure provision to education. In addition, however, they can also place effective barriers to political competition for central state power and office.</p> <p>Examples include the Soviet Union from the mid 1920s until its breakdown in 1989, the Egyptian regime since 1952, the Chilean military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, and many others.</p>

bureaucratic structures have very deep historical roots; for that reason, a state’s level of infrastructural power (‘state capacity’) appears to change only very slowly (Pritchett, Woolcock, and Andrews, 2012), and is to some extent *independent* of the pattern of political competition for their control, whether democratic or non-democratic (Fukuyama, 2013). Though ‘consolidated’ democracies tend to display high levels of infrastructural power, some states with democratic patterns of political competition show low levels of state capacity (for example, Jamaica, Malawi, and Guatemala today), while some states with non-democratic patterns of political competition have very high levels of infrastructural power (for example, Singapore, whose successes we will explore in more detail in Chapter 9). Thus, although some research suggests that differences in state capacity may be affected (in the long run) by the practices, norms, and institutions that regulate the struggle for power (Carbone, 2015; Carbone and Memoli, 2015), the degree of state capacity is *not* identical with the degree of democracy.

We shall call the combination of norms and institutions that govern *both* state capacity *and* the political competition for control of the state the ‘political regime’; but we will focus in this book mostly on the norms and institutions that regulate the struggle for power, since changes in state

<p>Low infra-structural power</p>	<p>While in power, incumbent office holders cannot fully regulate the state's territory and population for many purposes, because, for example other groups retain independent authority and can impose binding rules on particular groups, or the population can effectively evade state regulation. Moreover, they also cannot impose substantial costs to prevent groups from contesting and winning elections.</p> <p>These are often seen as 'lower quality democracies'. Examples include modern Jamaica, Colombia, and India.</p>	<p>Incumbent office holders can place many barriers to political competition for central state power and office, ranging from rigging elections to physically restraining potential competitors. Nevertheless, while in power, they cannot fully regulate the state's territory and population for many purposes, because, for example other groups retain independent authority and can impose binding rules on particular groups, or the population can effectively evade state regulation.</p> <p>Examples include most pre-modern monarchies, Russia between 1917 and 1920, Zaire (modern Democratic Republic of Congo) under Mobutu Sese Seko, and perhaps contemporary Venezuela.</p>
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capacity take place mostly over the *longue durée*. Political regimes thus vary along two dimensions: the democracy–non-democracy dimension and the state capacity dimension (see Table 1.1; see also Tilly (2007)). Both aspects of a regime – state capacity and democracy – may matter for a population's welfare, but we should also keep in mind that, to the extent that states have low capacity to govern, the forms taken by the competition for their control (democratic or non-democratic) may not make much difference to the outcomes that matter to people.

The Dimensions of Non-Democratic Politics

Saying that non-democracies have one thing in common – relatively large barriers to entry into political competition by groups who do not control the state – does not mean that they are all the same. The world of non-democratic regimes is very diverse, ranging from regimes that look almost like democracies and work almost like them to regimes that have almost nothing in common with them and work in completely different ways. To organize this variety, we shall focus on four dimensions of non-democratic politics:

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1. **Legitimizing norms and institutions.** Some non-democracies are ‘republics’, claiming to accept some form of popular sovereignty; others are ‘monarchies’, claiming that sovereignty resides in a particular family. Accordingly, non-democracies also differ in the extent to which they use electoral and plebiscitary means (however rigged) to regulate selection to executive office and legitimate state action. In Chapter 2 we examine the evolution of these norms and institutions over the past two centuries, and show how it came to be that most modern non-democracies, like modern democracies, claim to accept popular sovereignty and make extensive use of electoral institutions.
2. **The degree of social ‘pluralism’ permitted by the regime,** or more specifically the extent to which ruling groups attempt to control society in pursuit of an ideological project (Linz, 2000 [1975]). Some non-democracies are ‘authoritarian’ regimes that are content with preventing particular groups from gaining power but do not have a well-defined ideology that demands extensive control over society (or cannot achieve such control); others are ‘totalitarian’ or ‘ideocratic’ regimes that attempt to exercise far more ideological control over society. In Chapter 3 we explore the factors that made it possible for some important non-democratic regimes in the twentieth century to exercise a large degree of ideological control over society, as well as the reasons why most modern non-democracies are today merely authoritarian regimes.
3. **The degree of ‘personalism’ within a ruling elite,** or more specifically the extent to which rulers are forced to share power with an elite that can impose binding normative constraints on their actions (Svolik, 2012). Some non-democratic regimes are ‘personal dictatorships’, where a single figure concentrates power and the rest of the elite cannot substantially or consistently constrain his actions; while others are ‘institutionalized’ regimes, where an elite can impose consistent constraints on the ruler’s actions, and reasonably clear norms regulate political competition within the regime. We shall explore how power has been concentrated, or shared, in non-democratic regimes over the past century in Chapter 4.
4. **The key organizations through which power is exercised.** In some non-democratic regimes, political parties are the primary institutions organizing political competition, ensuring elite cohesion, channelling information about society, and in general retaining control over the state. In others, military organizations are more important for these roles, while political parties, if they exist, are subject to military control. And in yet others dynastic families control parties (or dispense with parties) and military organizations. We shall explore these differences, and their consequences for non-democratic politics, in Chapters 5 to 7.

These aspects of non-democratic politics can be used to roughly classify non-democratic political regimes in two different ways. First, we can focus on the *outcomes* of struggles over legitimating norms, social control, and power-sharing. Such a classification distinguishes primarily among more or less authoritarian, and more or less personalized regimes. Second, we can focus on the *institutions* that are used to regulate and channel these conflicts over social control or power-sharing. Such a classification distinguishes regimes primarily on the basis of the primary organization a ruling elite uses to control the state, which over the last century has typically been a political party, a military organization, or (in a few cases) a dynastic clan. Each of these classifications represents a distinct (though complementary) view of *political power* in non-democratic regimes: the first emphasizing the forms of power that rulers and ruling elites can actually exercise, and the second emphasizing the *vehicles* through which that power is exercised.

Social Control and Personal Power in Non-Democratic Regimes

On the first view, we can place non-democratic regimes in a two-dimensional matrix of ideal types according to the degree to which ruling elites succeed both in controlling and directing social pluralism according to a singular vision, and in sharing power with a ruler (Table 1.2). (We omit complications derived from struggles over basic legitimating norms, as most regimes today, with some small exceptions, share a basic republican orientation, as we shall see in Chapter 2.) It is important to stress that though struggles over social control and power-sharing are often related, they are distinct: the degree to which power becomes personalized in a struggle within the ruling elite is not always tightly connected with the degree through which that same elite can exercise control over society in pursuit of an ideological project.

The different non-democratic regimes combine three basic kinds of social control – competitive authoritarian, authoritarian, and totalitarian – with two basic forms of ‘personalization’ – dictatorships and non-personalized or institutionalized regimes. These are all ideal types, but real life is messy, and no regime fits exactly any given category for all time. Struggles over social control and power-sharing are rarely settled clearly and definitively. We might thus be better off imagining a continuous space through which states move over time rather than a 3-by-2 table. Consider Figures 1.1 and 1.2. Figure 1.1 shows an illustrative trajectory through the two-dimensional space of social control and personalism for Russia and Venezuela, two countries which we will be discussing in more detail at various points in this book, plus the trajectory of New Zealand – a

Table 1.2 *A typology of non-democratic political regimes*

	Competitive authoritarian	Authoritarian	Totalitarian or ideocratic
Personal rule (dictatorships)	Executives are elected, and there is genuine electoral competition for power, but opposition groups labour at a significant disadvantage, and other institutions have little control over the executive. Examples in this book include the Chávez regime in Venezuela from 2006 to 2013.	Executives may or may not be elected, but political competition for power is tightly restricted, and independent organization for political purposes is very difficult. Examples in this book include the Franco regime in Spain and the Pinochet military regime in Chile.	Executives may or may not be elected (though without opposition), but the elite cannot constrain the ruler, and society is tightly controlled in pursuit of an elite-endorsed ideological project. Examples in this book include the Soviet Union under Stalin and Germany under Hitler.
Institutional control	Executives are elected but are significantly constrained in their actions by elites and other institutions. There is electoral competition for power, but opposition groups labour at a significant disadvantage. Examples in this book include Mexico until 2000.	Executives may or may not be elected but are significantly constrained in their actions by elites and other institutions. Independent political organization is difficult or impossible, yet some space for autonomous social (but non-political) organization exists. Examples in this book include the current Saudi regime.	Executives may or may not be elected (though without opposition) but are significantly constrained in their actions by elites and other institutions. Society is tightly controlled in pursuit of an elite-endorsed ideological project. Examples in this book include the Soviet Union after Stalin's death.

