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Democratic Transition and Electoral Choice: The Legacy of One-Party Rule in Hungary and Poland*

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ABSTRACT

Why did reforming Eastern European countries adopt the electoral systems they did? Why, for example, did Poland adopt proportional representation while Hungary adopted a system of fairly strict majority rule? Often, the expectation is that new democracies will adopt electoral systems characterized by proportional representation rather than majority rule. This expectation is based on two (unwarranted) assumptions: (1) that proportional representation is better able to produce political stability and (2) that incumbent reformers care more about stability than about their own political power. Because it is reliant on these assumptions, the prevailing literature is unable to explain Hungary's adoption of majority rule; it is also unable to explain the *degree* of proportional representation agreed upon in the process of democratic transition.

In this paper, I present a formal model of regime transition that explains the electoral systems that emerged from democratic transition in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Aside from explaining Hungary's majoritarian outcome, the model holds *without reference* to the efficacy of proportional representation. It also makes simpler assumptions about the behavior of parties to constitutional negotiation.

KEY WORDS: Democratization; Electoral Systems; Authoritarian Regimes; Eastern Europe; Poland

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please. They do not make it under circumstances of their own choosing, but under circumstances that they stumble upon, inherited from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs down like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

—Karl Marx

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In any peaceful transition from authoritarian to democratic rule, the political institutions that emerge are likely to be the result of bargaining between reformers and authoritarian incumbents. In determining the likely outcome of this process, we must concern ourselves with two vital questions: (1) In what context does transition bargaining occur? (2) To what end?

Often, the expectation is that new democracies will adopt electoral systems characterized by proportional representation rather than majority rule (Lijphart 1992:209). This expectation is based on two unwarranted assumptions, one concerning the efficacy of proportional representation itself and the other, the interests of the negotiating parties. First, it is often claimed that proportional electoral systems are better than majoritarian ones at managing conflict and representing divergent interests in a fledgling democracy. (See Lijphart [1977, 1992]; Linz [1990a, 1990b].) Although many theorists may tacitly *assume* that this is the case, however, the issue is still a matter of contention (Horowitz 1990; Mainwaring 1993). Second, although proportional representation may (or may not) be better at managing such conflicts, the hypothesis holds only if competing parties *believe* in its ability to do so, and if they care.

Furthermore, the common analysis gives us no obvious way of determining the *degree* of proportional representation agreed upon in the bargaining process, and although it may (or may not) be true that no new democracy in Eastern Europe has an electoral system as *purely* majoritarian as that of Great Britain, the fact remains that the Hungarian system “belongs on the majoritarian side of the continuum” (Lijphart 1992:212) (Figure 1). Thus, even if we agree that new democracies will adopt proportional electoral institutions, the assumption gives us no way of determining the degree of proportionality that results.

Figure 1. Select Eastern European Countries on the Electoral System Continuum

Electoral System			
Proportional Representation			Majoritarianism
Poland	Czechoslovakia	Hungary	(UK)

Source: Lijphart (1992:210), from Rokkan.

Note: Hungary has single-member districts, a characteristic of majoritarian electoral systems.

In the analysis that follows, I present a model of regime transition that explains the electoral systems that emerged from the democratic transitions of Poland, Hungary, and countries around Eastern Europe.¹ I argue that the post-transition electoral systems that emerged in these countries resulted not so much from “altruistic” concerns about the national interest or societal well-being but from the self-interest of outgoing Communist

Party elites, who deliberately negotiated for post-transition electoral institutions that would maximize their influence in the new regime. Aside from explaining the more majoritarian nature of the Hungarian regime, this model holds *without reference* to the efficacy of proportional representation. It also makes simpler (and more realistic) assumptions about the behavior of parties to constitutional negotiation.

Explanations regarding the electoral system chosen in the democratic transitions of Eastern Europe generally fall into one of three broadly defined categories (Renwick 2006:37; Snyder and Mahoney 1999:104). Historical analyses explain the resulting electoral system in terms of the long- or short-term historical experience of the country in question. Socioeconomic analyses make reference, instead, to a regime's desire for social and economic stability. Finally, institutional analyses explain the electoral systems that emerge in terms of the institutional structure of the old regime, especially with reference to the (one-) party system and the nature of its opposition. After examining each of these analyses in turn, I will present a formal model of democratic transitions from one-party rule.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY IN REGIME CHANGE

Historical analyses explain electoral choice in terms of the long- and short-term historical experience of the country in question. For the purposes of this analysis, "cultural" and "sociological" explanations are subsumed into this broader category, which also includes reference to "more immediate" historical concerns such as the timing and onset of democratic transition. In this section, I investigate the claim that historical factors such as the legacy of one-party rule and timing determined the institutional outcomes of democratic transition.

Some historical analyses look to the *legacy of one-party rule* and Soviet domination to explain the resulting forms of government in Eastern Europe. In this view, the "past casts a long shadow on the present" and determines the social context in which transition negotiations take place (Crawford and Lijphart 1995:172). In explaining why some regimes *didn't* adopt proportional representation in their transitions to democracy, for example, Arend Lijphart argues that decades of Communist Party domination in Hungary led to a deep distrust of political parties in that country. This skepticism, in turn, led to a cultural preference for an electoral system that was more "personalistic" than party-based because individual candidates for political office in Hungary were trusted more than the political parties they (nominally) represented. In this context, political reformers preferred majority elections and single-member districts to proportional representation because these majoritarian institutions were more likely to reward prominent individuals whereas PR leads to systems in which political parties are more dominant. In "Democratization and Constitutional Choices in Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary and Poland," Lijphart (1992) argues that the prevailing skepticism in Hungarian political

culture gave politicians in that country a “strong incentive to emphasize personalities instead of parties.” Thus, he continues,

to the extent that parties believe that their individual candidates are considerably more attractive than the parties as collectivities, they have a strong reason to opt for majoritarian elections in single-member districts instead of PR elections. Both factors played a major role in Hungary’s decision not to adopt PR. (P. 216)

According to this historically oriented view of political transition, years of one-party rule and the resulting skepticism of Hungarian society led to the adoption of majoritarian electoral institutions because these institutions were seen as more likely to reward prominent politicians than the political parties they represented.

Although Polish constitutional engineers shared these same concerns, they dealt with them in a very different way. With an open-list electoral system, Poland ensured that the power of party organizations was considerably reduced *without* having to sacrifice proportional electoral rules (Lijphart 1992:216). Furthering this view, Barbara Geddes notes that “politicians with high name recognition” will prefer open- to closed-list proportional representation (1995:242). In this view, Polish political culture shared Hungary’s distrust of political parties but dealt with this distrust by adopting open-list PR rather than majoritarianism and single-member districts.

Although the foregoing analysis is helpful in illustrating how the historical context of transition can affect the political institutions adopted by a new regime, it simply brings the question “back” another step while doing little to resolve the deeper issue at hand. Yes, we may want to say, Hungary rejected PR because of its distrust of political parties. But with those very same factors at work in Poland, we are left to wonder why Poland would respond to this concern in one way (with open lists) and Hungary in another (via majoritarianism). If distrust of party politics was indeed common throughout the region, then this factor cannot be an adequate tool for predicting the differing institutional choices of Eastern Europe’s new democracies. Moreover, if Geddes is right and open-list PR is the system of choice for politicians with high name recognition, then we are left to wonder (1) if politicians in Poland really did have higher name recognition than those in Hungary (which would be contrary to what Lijphart [1992] argues, above) and (2) why Poland didn’t also adopt a majoritarian electoral system, which would seem at least equally suited for a society that emphasizes people over political parties. These questions leave us seeking a more fundamental explanation for the logic of democratic transition and electoral choice.

Another set of arguments contends that the *timing* of regime transition affects institutional outcomes. Acknowledging that Poland’s Solidarity Party had to consent to relatively conservative compromises because of a lingering fear of Soviet intervention, Lijphart argues that the “big difference” between Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia is that *Poland was the first* country to begin the democratization process. At this early

stage of the game, the argument goes, political incumbents such as the Polish Communist Party still had enough implicit Soviet backing to adopt a PR system that would “lock them in” as players—albeit weakened ones—in the new political dynamic. By the time the other countries entered into the same process, the “threat of Soviet disapproval had receded” (Lijphart 1992:214). This may have emboldened quickly consolidating anti-Communist majorities to push for majoritarian electoral systems that would effectively disenfranchise the forces of the old regime.

As we shall see later, the dominance of the existing party organization and the structure of the party system will indeed affect the type of electoral system adopted during democratic transition. As Lijphart suggests, the timing of democratic transition may very well influence the dominance of existing party organizations, but timing itself is such an imprecise variable that it constitutes a weak foundation for a theory of democratic transition.² After all, how are we to measure exactly when democratic transition actually begins? Although it is true that the Hungarian opposition “capitalized on the Polish experience” (which would be Lijphart’s implication), Ludwikowski (1996) argues that the *Hungarian reforms* of the late 1980s *were the “first thorough constitutional transformations within the Soviet bloc”* (p.152, 180, emphasis added). In other words, whereas some would argue that Poland adopted PR because its democratization started earlier than Hungary’s, others argue that *Hungary* was actually the first country in the Soviet Bloc to undergo this type of transformation. Of course, I’m not suggesting that either Lijphart or Ludwikowski got his assessment of history wrong. The point is that democratic transformations do not take place overnight; what begins as a minor reform in one place is carried a little further in another, and it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to determine precisely where and when the transformation had its genesis. To say that the choice of electoral system results from the timing of democratic transformation is to base a theory of institutional choice on a factor that can never be measured with adequate precision. Although this doesn’t suggest that timing had *no* role in the determination of institutional outcomes, it does suggest that evidence of a causal link might be too subject to competing interpretations to be objectively reliable. We can’t base a theory of institutional choice on the timing of democratization if we are unsure about when democratization actually began.

Another writer, Stanislaw Gebethner, also pays careful attention to the timing of a regime’s first free elections and the type of electoral system that results. He argues that the “major difference” between Poland and Hungary is that the first free elections in Hungary took place once the new multiparty system was “already fairly well formed.” In Poland, in contrast, the first free elections took place when the new multiparty system was still “in its infancy” (Gebethner 1996:63–4). Gebethner observes a correlation between Hungary’s relatively mature party system at the time of its first free elections and Hungary’s choice of majoritarian electoral institutions. Although the correlation is interesting and worthy of further investigation, it is not entirely clear why this factor would matter in the way the author suggests. Why should time *reduce* rather than *enhance* the degree of political fragmentation in a system? Besides, even if later elections really did contribute to a less fragmented party system (as they allegedly did in Hungary),

why would less fragmentation itself account for majoritarianism? Without a formal model of the dynamics of regime transition, Gebethner's fascinating analysis tells us why a particular party system might be more or less fragmentary, but it does not help us predict why the chosen electoral rules would be majoritarian or proportional.

As the analyses considered in this section suggest, historical factors such as the legacy of one-party rule and the timing of democratic transition play a crucial role in determining important characteristics of the new regime, but these important factors have not as yet been specified with the precision or predictive accuracy necessary for a rigorous model of democratic transition. The model I present below acknowledges and in fact relies upon an understanding that history, culture, and timing constitute the foundational context of any regime transition, but it also illustrates the particular way that these factors help determine whether a new democracy's electoral institutions will be majoritarian or proportional.

THE SEARCH FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STABILITY

In the previous section, we examined a number of arguments that maintain that historical factors such as the legacy of one-party rule and the timing of democratic transition affect a new democracy's choice of electoral institution. Now we turn our attention to a related set of arguments that see electoral system choice as part of a quest by incumbent elites to secure socioeconomic or political stability. While these arguments also help us to conceptualize democratic transition and electoral choice in a systematic way, they are similarly unsatisfying because they rely upon debatable assumptions about the efficacy of consociational institutions and because they're too generous in their assumptions about the motives of incumbent political elites. In short, these arguments contend that authoritarian incumbents adopt proportional representation because they believe these institutions offer a new democracy its best chance of maintaining socioeconomic or political stability. The problem with these arguments, however, is that we can't be sure that PR institutions really are the most likely to promote these ends, and we certainly can't be sure that authoritarian incumbents would care about these ends in the first place, especially if they came at the expense of political power itself.

A number of scholars argue that a country's choice of electoral system is dependent upon its leaders' expectations about which system will best serve the interests of economic and social stability. Following in this tradition, Stein Rokkan predicted that PR and presidentialism should have been the "prevalent new constitutional structures" in Eastern Europe because these consociational institutions were most likely to secure socioeconomic stability. (See Lijphart [1992]:209.)

If we assume for a moment that political elites have only sincere intentions regarding the socioeconomic stability of their countries, the notion that proportional representation increases stability gives us reason to consider claims that countries facing higher degrees of instability might also opt for proportional electoral institutions. Thus, in *Constitution-Making in the Region of Former Soviet Dominance*, Rett Ludwikowski

(1996) argues that Hungary could afford to adopt majoritarian electoral institutions because it was one of the “[m]ore economically advanced” countries in East-Central Europe (p. 191). By contrast, Poland adopted proportional representation because its dire socioeconomic circumstances gave it no choice to do otherwise. The argument is that regimes will select proportional representation unless positive economic circumstances enable them to “afford” the alternative.

An “ethnic” variation of this argument maintains that authoritarian incumbents in ethnically diverse societies will adopt proportional electoral institutions because these institutions are more likely to promote power sharing and to mitigate ethnic conflict (Lijphart 1977, 1992; Linz 1990a, 1990b). Explaining why the imperative to adopt PR was higher in some places than in others, for example, Arend Lijphart (1992) notes that the presence of “ethnic and religious minorities . . . provides a strong reason to adopt PR, because PR guarantees minority representation and can counter-act potential threats to national unity and political stability” (p. 216). Clearly, this was the decisive factor at work in Czechoslovakia, where PR was just one element of a “thoroughly consociational” system that also included federalism, power-sharing guarantees, and a mutual veto power for both ethnic groups (Lijphart 1992:216). Lijphart extends this analysis to the case of Poland, where ethnic pluralism was also a factor in the decision to adopt PR (p. 217). The explanation gains “further plausibility” when we recognize that “Hungary, the one country that opted against PR, is also the most ethnically homogeneous of the three—and, in fact, one of the least ethnically divided countries in all of Eastern Europe” (p. 217). This ethnic variant of the social-stability argument suggests that authoritarian incumbents in heterogeneous societies will adopt PR because of its superior ability to enhance minority representation and to accommodate ethnic difference. As with the economic variant of the argument, the implication is that outgoing elites will adopt PR unless ethnic homogeneity allows them to do otherwise.

As the relative virtues and vices of proportional representation are still a matter of debate among political scientists, I find the aforementioned arguments to be problematic. In the very least, the lack of consensus about the efficacy of PR makes these arguments a poor basis for a generalizable theory of democratization. Consider for a moment the argument of György Szoboszlai, who, like Lijphart and Rokkan, *also* assumes that there is a relationship between proportional representation and regime stability, only for Szoboszlai (following from Mainwaring), the assumption is that the relationship is negative. In “Parliamentarism in the Making: Crisis and Political Transformation in Hungary,” Szoboszlai concedes that Hungary’s more majoritarian³ character “makes [its] political system *less* consensual by excluding minor parties from parliamentary representation.” But the exclusion of minor parties, Szoboszlai continues, also “*helps* coalition formation and *increases* the degree of governability” (Szoboszlai 1996:125, emphasis added). In other words, while some theorists (like Lijphart) argue that PR contributes to socioeconomic and political stability, others (like Szoboszlai) maintain that majoritarian institutions are superior for achieving these ends.⁴ As long as political *theorists* still debate the relative merits of PR and majoritarianism, it hardly makes sense to imagine that political actors have come to a consensus on the issue. In explaining why

democratizing countries adopted PR, we should seek explanations that do not rely on contentious assumptions about the efficacy of PR itself.

Besides, it doesn't make *sense* to assume that political elites would adopt electoral systems that are conducive to stability, even *if* they knew or agreed upon just which systems those were. The dominant forces in transition negotiations may not want to accommodate minority ethnic groups or even to promote economic prosperity if those ends come at the expense of political power itself. Indeed, even if it were agreed that proportional institutions enhanced the representation of ethnic minorities, that recognition itself might incentivize ethnic majorities to push for majoritarianism as a way of ensuring their continued domination in the political process. This dynamic seems to have been at work in Croatia, where "electoral laws favored the dominance of the Croatian majority" against the Serbian minority (Crawford and Lijphart 1995:189). A dominant ethnic group that *voluntarily* cedes power to a minority population is a selfless one indeed.⁵ The aforementioned arguments contend that political incumbents and constitutional engineers may have preferred PR to majoritarianism because they believed it would be better at maintaining stability in their economically vulnerable and deeply divided societies. Unfortunately, the post-Cold War history of the Balkans shows us that dominant ethnic groups often tailor electoral institutions so as to gain and maintain political power, even when this endeavor comes at the *expense* of socioeconomic stability (Crawford and Lijphart 1995:189; Gagnon 1995: *passim*). Given the choice between sharing political power or manipulating electoral institutions so as to maintain power, self-interested ethnic elites may be more likely to choose the latter. So long as decision makers are *self-interested*, they may opt for a solution that maximizes *their own* political power at the *expense* of the regime's stability or economic well-being.

INSTITUTIONS AND THE EVOLUTION OF PARTY SYSTEMS IN NEW DEMOCRACIES

In his study of the Hungarian transition from authoritarianism, Patrick H. O'Neil explains that the political order that emerges from democratic reform largely depends upon the (authoritarian) political institutions that preceded it. O'Neil explains that

how authoritarian rule was first institutionalized in a given case is a key to a better understanding of variations in authoritarian transitions. Institutional orders determine the context that shapes not only the transition event itself but also the subsequent political order, that is, how authoritarianism dies and what replaces it. (1996:579)

In this paper, I present a preliminary model for how the evolution of these new political orders might be better understood. The model is generalizable, meaning that it might be of value in understanding the nature of democratic transitions in regions outside of Eastern Europe, and it is exhaustive, in that it can explain the development of any new electoral system (majoritarian, consociational, or a hybrid of the two) based on

differences in the initial conditions of the new democracy in question. Most importantly, perhaps, the model is based on simpler (and, arguably, more realistic) assumptions about the motives of political incumbents forced to undergo democratic reform. In my view, Communist Party officials in Eastern Europe were not necessarily concerned with the social, political, or economic stability of their countries in the post-transition period; rather, they engineered constitutional reform in such a way as to maximize the power they would still have in the new regime. In other words, this model requires only the relatively limited assumption that political incumbents want to hold on to what little power they can still hope to have in the new political order.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the Soviet Union in decline and with Communist parties throughout the region under intense pressure to reform, incumbent party officials faced a daunting and unappealing choice: They could give in to opposition pressure and introduce moderate reform or they could refuse to do so and wait to see where the winds of change would take them. Of course, reform was not inevitable. Romania's dictator, Nicolai Ceacescu, dug in his heels, offered no realistic options, and wound up dead at the hands of a military firing squad. Across the world, near Tienanmen Square, Chinese political leaders *also* refused to give in to opposition demands and, in their case, successfully quelled the opposition and managed to remain in place. In most of Communist Europe, however, political elites voluntarily (if begrudgingly) gave in to what they saw as the inevitable and organized the first free and fair elections their countries had seen in decades.

This is where the crucial choice examined in this paper first appeared to authoritarian incumbents. Having decided that some type of reform was the most prudent choice for their regimes, sitting governments across the region still had a great deal of influence over the type of elections they would hold. (See Dryzek and Holmes [2002]:*passim*.) My argument is that they tailored their choice of electoral institutions so as to maximize their representation in the new post-reform regime. Having resigned themselves to the notion that they would have to give up *some* power, outgoing authoritarians opted for new institutions that allowed them to give up whatever dominance they *had to* relinquish while preserving whatever power they could.

In practice, this dynamic led Communist parties with only narrow support to adopt proportional representation, whereas incumbent parties with a wider base of support (such as Hungary's) adopted majoritarian electoral institutions. The logic is that where Communist parties were weak, they would opt for electoral institutions that were proportional in nature and could therefore be expected to generate results where they would at least maintain a seat at the political table. (Indeed, the fact that incumbents usually found themselves in this situation explains why proportional representation was the more common choice!) In some cases (and Hungary seems to be one of these), however, Communist parties entered into negotiations having already co-opted portions of the opposition. In these cases, they enjoyed a wider (if not necessarily wide) base of support. By doing what they could to ensure that the reformed electoral system would be a majoritarian one, such parties expected to consolidate their grip on a larger portion of the political pie than their less popular counterparts in other countries. In short, if political

incumbents could expect to still be players in a majoritarian political system, they made arrangements for that to be the system they would have, but where they were marginalized and knew that majoritarianism would lead to their complete exclusion from the political system, Communist reformers opted for PR electoral systems that would at least lock in the minimal support they had.

Let us consider how this dynamic unfolded in three East European Communist countries that experienced peaceful reform during the period in question (1989–1990). Following the brutal crackdown of the Prague Spring in 1968, the Communist party in Czechoslovakia enjoyed free reign (and Soviet backing!) to purge its ranks of intellectuals, freethinkers, and anyone who didn't condemn the uprising loud or early enough to satisfy the Party's Old Guard. This house-cleaning operation left a Communist Party in Czechoslovakia where the "institutionally loyal [were] in clear control" (O'Neil 1996:586). The unforeseen consequence of the purge, however, was that the Czechoslovak Communist Party was small, marginalized, and in power only by the grace (and guns) of its Soviet backers. This model suggests that, with such a narrow base of support, the Czechoslovak Communist Party would lobby for electoral institutions that would allow it to preserve whatever power it could reasonably hope to maintain.

Moreover, whereas the outgoing Communist Party in Czechoslovakia was small and marginalized, the party system that replaced it was fractured and unstable. According to Petr Kopecký, strong personalities and shifting coalitions contributed to a party system in the early 1990s that defied institutionalization (Kopecký 2007:142; see also Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998:114–117). The fractionalization of Czechoslovak society and of its newly emergent party system can be seen as both cause and consequence of the strategy of its outgoing authoritarian incumbents. Working in the context of a political society that was increasingly divided and beset by cross-cutting cleavages, these outgoing leaders had a strong incentive to develop the electoral institutions necessary to survive in a new, fractured, and unstable party system.

In Poland, the last decade of leadership by the Polish United Workers' Party (the PZPR) was characterized by similar repression of dissidents and of the growing Solidarity Movement. During this period, the party experienced numerous "reorganizations" of its internal political leadership. The chronic repression of independent voices, argues Patrick O'Neil, had "disastrous" results that "eroded domestic institutional linkages and paved the way for . . . the party's desperate recourse to martial law" (1996:586). After a decade of brutal repression, the remains of the PZPR, like their Czechoslovak counterparts, might also have hoped for a proportional electoral outcome that would help them maintain whatever political power they could.

As in Czechoslovakia, the party system that was to emerge in Poland was fractured, unstable, and unpredictable. Before a new law raised registration thresholds in 1997, the Polish political system saw a proliferation of new political parties, with 370 new parties officially registered in the years that followed democratic transition (Jasiewicz 2007:85). In fact, Polish political parties even eschewed the title of "party" itself, preferring instead to adopt party names with identifiers such as "union," "alliance,"

or “movement” (Jaseiwicz 2007:86). Expecting what was indeed to become an “alphabet soup” of political parties and coalitions (Jaseiwicz 2007:86), Poland’s outgoing authoritarian incumbents also opted for the PR electoral institutions that, at least in their expectations, would allow them to preserve a modicum of political power.

By contrast, in the aftermath of the 1956 revolution in Hungary, Communist Party officials in that country adopted a more liberal policy of co-opting their political opponents. “While this had the intended effect of blocking the formation of social opposition,” O’Neil argues, “it also moved an important segment of intellectual dissent into the ranks of the party itself” (1996:587). Moreover, when János Kádár took over as the new general secretary of the Communist Party in 1962, he pursued a policy of “reconciliation rather than continued force” (1996:587). Thus, where other regimes in Eastern Europe drove potential opponents “out of the party and sow[ed] the seeds of later opposition movements,” Hungary’s Communist Party was characterized by internal opposition and individuals who entered the party ‘*so that*’ they could transform it (1996:588; emphasis in original). Of course, this is not to say that Hungary’s Communist Party ever actually attained the type of popularity it hoped to achieve.⁶ Still, the nature of its support and its internal composition were quite different than that of its Czechoslovak and especially Polish counterparts. This unique internal composition, I argue, led Hungary’s Communist reformers to expect that they would have more to gain from an electoral system that had significant majoritarian elements.

Indeed, in the Round Table Negotiations that accompanied democratic transition in Hungary, the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party (HSWP) favored a one-vote, single-member district formula—institutions of classic, electoral majoritarianism. “The reason,” argue Elster, Offe, and Preuss, “was to maintain the existing constituencies in which the communists had better-known representatives and dominated the whole infrastructure” (1998:118). In so doing, Elster, Offe, and Preuss continue, the HSWP created an electoral system in which it seemed likely that it would achieve “a governing majority under a majoritarian system *with only a minority of the votes*” (1998:118; emphasis added). In direct contrast to the Polish and Czechoslovak cases, outgoing authoritarian leaders in Hungary saw majoritarian electoral institutions as a way to *enhance* their influence in the new regime. Thus, in the negotiations where they ultimately surrendered complete control over the political system, they created the very conditions by which they hoped to maintain the largest share of political power they thought possible.

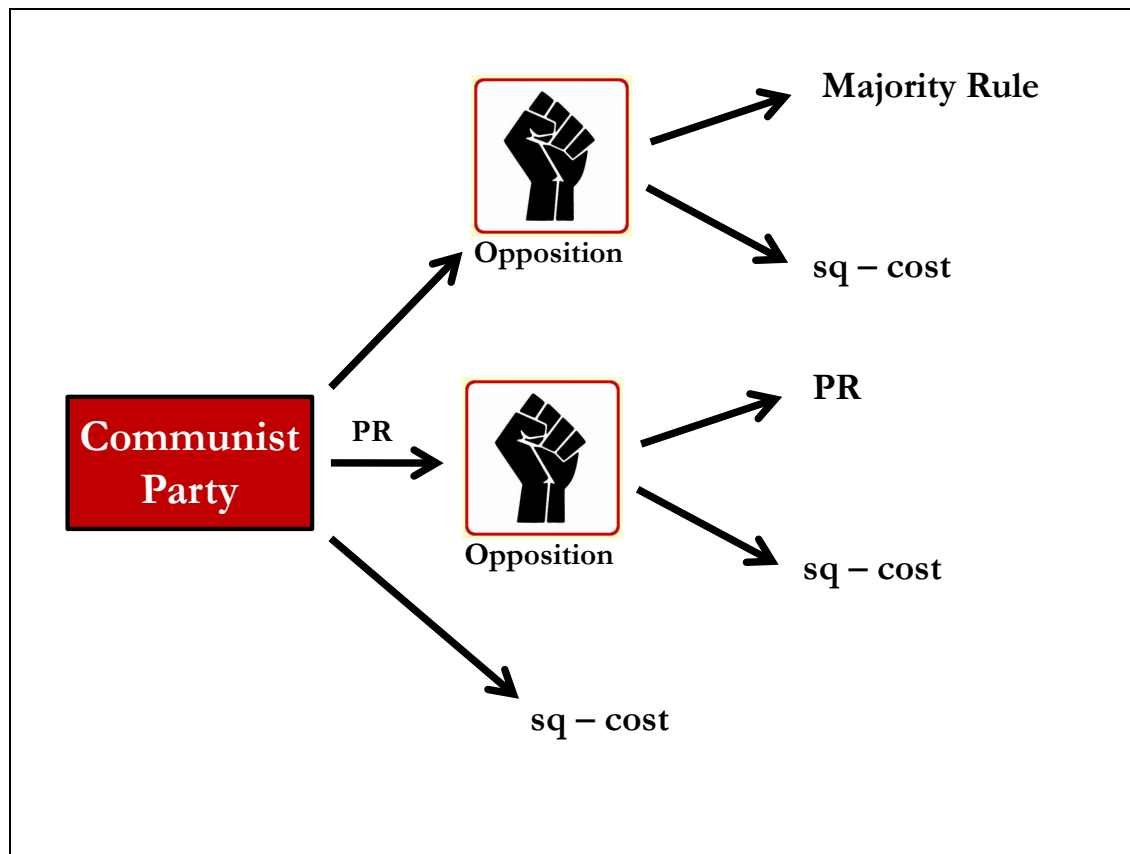
In sum, authoritarian political elites in Poland, who enjoyed support among only a narrow segment of the population, opted for a system of proportional representation because such an electoral system guaranteed their party at least a say in the political order that followed. It seems as though Poland’s authoritarian party could do no better, given the situation it was in. In Hungary, in comparison, the Communist Party enjoyed a wider base of support. By doing what it could to ensure that the reformed electoral system would have majoritarian elements, it locked in its seat at the table in the new regime.

MODELING DEMOCRATIC REFORM AND ELECTORAL CHOICE

Although the negotiations that led to free and fair elections in Eastern Europe were undoubtedly complicated, extensive, and messy, a game-theoretic model of the situation illustrates the key players and their choices. In this simplified, parsimonious form, the dynamic of incumbent-opposition negotiation and the electoral regimes that result is clear, general, and applicable to situations of democratic reform in other regions and historical epochs.

As I have modeled it (Figure 1), the situation begins when the incumbent Communist Party first faces demands by the opposition for democratic reform. Because it is already established and because the onus of genuine transformation is technically its own, the Communist Party moves first, offering the opposition free and fair elections characterized by electoral institutions of the Party's own choosing. The key suggestion of my argument is that authoritarian incumbents will choose the electoral system that they believe will maximize their representation in the new post-Communist regime.

Figure 1. Incumbent-Opposition Negotiation and Resulting Electoral Regimes



Of course, formally speaking, authoritarian incumbents have the option to do nothing at all, but if the incumbents choose not to decide, they still have made a choice—a choice that in the short run preserves the status quo but in the long run leaves the old regime exposed to the risk of continuing political dissent or even violent overthrow. Even in the “best” of circumstances, failing to find an acceptable compromise can be costly for all involved. Thus, there was a very real incentive—and, empirically speaking, a very real tendency—for regimes in Eastern Europe to avoid this situation. Indeed, of all the authoritarian regimes in the region, only Romania’s embattled regime failed to find a compromise that its opponents would find acceptable.

The model presented in this paper, then, doesn’t deal with situations such as the Romanian one, in which the regime failed to offer a negotiated settlement that was acceptable to the opposition. Rather, it deals only with the empirically more common situation, in which outgoing political elites tried to manage political transformations that they saw as inevitable. The model predicts that an incumbent’s initial offer of majoritarian versus proportional electoral institutions was largely determined by the incumbent’s own assessment of which institutions would best allow it to maintain influence after democratic transition. By this logic, outgoing authoritarian elites simply choose (and offer) the electoral institutions that they believe maximize their power—or minimize their loss—in the new regime.

Of course, for the opposition, this is a Hobson’s choice, because failure to accept an incumbent’s offer leaves the opposition even worse off than it would have been if the offer had never been made. Opponents who fail to accept reasonable offers, like incumbents who fail to make them, can expect everything from protracted negotiations and continued unrest to strikes, riots, massacres, and even civil war. Unless both sides vastly overestimate their chances of prevailing in the maelstrom, they both have considerable incentive to find a reasonable compromise. The potential for failure is painful for both sides, and this propels incumbents to propose, and opponents to accept, reasonable compromises. The fact that most democratic transitions in the region were peaceful can be seen as affirmation that mutually agreeable compromises were usually found.

My argument recognizes that incumbents have an incentive to play an active role in this process and to use their privileged position as agenda-setters to make offers that their opponents can’t refuse. The extensive form presented here demonstrates exactly why this is the case.

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing analysis, I have conceptualized democratic transition and constitutional design as a negotiated process between authoritarian incumbents, on the one hand, and political reformers, on the other. This analysis assumes that the Communist Party itself would be a player in the negotiations that set the terms of its exit from absolute power. It also models, in abstract and general terms, how the dynamics of such a

transition may take place. It thereby sets the agenda for future research that might seek to determine (1) how, and to what extent, outgoing authoritarians really were parties to negotiations about new electoral systems and (2) how, and to what extent, parties' expectations about electoral outcomes actually shaped their preferences for certain electoral systems over others.

The primary advantage of this model over the alternatives is that it relies on more realistic assumptions about human behavior, and especially about the behavior of Communist Party incumbents who, in some cases, had spent decades doing whatever they could to maintain political power. I have no doubt that, all else being equal, these dictators desired for their countries stable and prosperous futures. All else *wasn't* equal, however, and so when the choice was between a stable, prosperous future and a future in which they could maximize their power in the new regime, I argue, authoritarian elites had every incentive to choose the latter.

Today, as we ponder the tumultuous changes going on in the Middle East, it behooves us to learn what we can from the democratic transitions of decades past. The dynamic discussed in this paper reminds us that democratic reform is seldom as clear or as complete as it may first appear. Dictators don't always fight to a fiery end, but neither must they go gentle into that good night. They can, instead, manipulate the constitutional foundations of the new regime so as to ensure that their actions weigh heavily on the next generation. Democratic revolutions are seldom as complete or as lasting as democratic reformers hope they will be. As we near their 25th anniversary, the European transformations of 1989 appear to be stable. The European revolutions of 1848, of course, were not, and so, as we witness yet another Springtime of Peoples, this one in the Middle East, we would do well to remember this lesson and to temper our optimism accordingly, for as Karl Marx remarked after observing the failure of 1848, all great historical events happen, as it were, twice. The problem is that they happen "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."

ENDNOTES

1. Although I draw primarily from Poland and Hungary (and secondarily from Czechoslovakia) for examples, the model presented in this paper has similar applicability throughout the region and, I suspect, even to democratization processes more generally.
2. The problem is not so much that timing-based theories of transition are wrong but that we have no good way of knowing if they are right.
3. Strictly speaking, the Hungarian electoral system is not purely majoritarian but "mixed *majoritarian*-PR" (Szoboszlai 1996, p.125, emphasis added). Still, we are speaking in *relative* terms and comparing the Hungarian system to that of Poland, which is more-strictly proportional.
4. To be fair, Szoboszlai's analysis is not so much normative as it is positive. His primary concern was to *explain* the instability and lack of consensus that existed in Hungary in the 1990s rather than to explain how elites addressed it. Still, insofar as

we might assume that political elites value things such as consensus and governability, and insofar as these factors are especially crucial in societies undergoing transformation, we can glean from his description an expected correlation between majoritarianism and regime stability.

5. Of course, one could argue that even a selfish dominant group would value stability because stability is in the interest of all parties, but this still leaves us asking why one dominant population (such as the one in Poland) would have a longer time horizon than another (in Croatia).
6. Communist parties throughout the region were woefully misinformed about their prospects for survival in truly competitive electoral environments. (See Timur Kuran [1995].)

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