

**More than Just the Final Straw:
Stolen Elections as Revolutionary Triggers**

by

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Abstract

Stolen elections are triggering events that overcome barriers to revolutionary action against electoral authoritarian regimes. They mobilize ordinary citizens, strengthen the opposition, and divide the regime. As neo-institutionalist theories of revolution suggest, the relative openness of electoral authoritarianism inhibits mass protest. But when elections are stolen, regimes undergo “closure,” increasing the probability of protest. The failure of other potential revolutionary precipitants underlines that stolen elections are not merely replaceable final straws. Stolen elections have not only been crucial for the emergence of revolutionary situations, they have shaped outcomes as well. Linking popular mobilization to fraudulent elections has become part of the repertoire of contention of democratic revolutionaries.

More than Just the Final Straw: Stolen Elections as Revolutionary Triggers

Disillusionment with post-Cold War democratization has grown steadily over the last decade. Initially, scholars analyzed the failings of post-transition countries in terms of illiberal or defective democracies.¹ More recently, however, *authoritarian* subtypes such as electoral or competitive authoritarianism have been added to the debate. This acknowledges the fact that many allegedly “hybrid” regimes fall short of even a narrowly defined democratic minimum. Although they have retained some formally democratic institutions (especially elections), these countries are no longer going through a rocky phase of democratic consolidation, but have become “electoral authoritarian.”²

While the reasons for such democratic decay are manifold and vary from country to country, one aspect is noteworthy from a cross-national perspective: widespread political apathy in the face of a drift towards electoral authoritarianism. This is all the more remarkable given that recent waves of democratization in Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa have been characterized by transitions “from below,” with popular protest-movements playing a decisive role.³ Many examples – among them Milošević’s Serbia, Shevardnaze’s Georgia, or Ukraine

¹ “Illiberal democracy” came into wide use after the publication of Fareed Zakaria’s article “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 6 (November/December 1997), pp. 22-43. The term defective democracy is applied chiefly by Wolfgang Merkel and his collaborators: see the special issue of *Democratization*, vol. 11, no. 5 (December 2004), particularly the articles by Wolfgang Merkel and Aurel Croissant.

² Andreas Schedler, *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamis of Unfree Competition* (Boulder/London: Lynne Rienner, 2006), Schedler, “Elections Without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulation,” *Journal of Democracy* vol. 13, no. 2 (April 2002), pp. 36-50 and Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* vol. 13, no. 2 (April 2002), pp. 51-65.

under Kuchma - reveal that people can remain passive even in the face of gross human rights violations and/or a thorough corruption of government. Observers have often judged this to be a major obstacle to democratization.

Yet only a short time after such pessimistic diagnoses, tens or even hundreds of thousands of citizens poured onto the streets of Belgrade (2000), Tbilisi (2003), and Kiev (2004), full of determination to get rid of their electoral authoritarian rulers. Vitali Silitski has nicely summarized why so many people were astonished by these revolutionary “eruptions” in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine: “The greatest story in all three revolutions is the emergence of a true democratic spirit in societies written off by many observers (often including insiders) as passive, indifferent, submissive, and inherently unfit for democracy.”⁴ Not only opposition activists, but also powerholders were caught by surprise. It was only a matter of weeks or even days before these regimes surrendered power. How can such a sudden and powerful mass mobilization be explained?

In this paper we will contend that the crucial turning point had occurred only *a short time* before people started demonstrating. Massive anti-regime protests broke out after “soft” authoritarian rulers engaged in blatant electoral fraud. More precisely, interference in the electoral process occurred at the last moment: “conventional,” i. e. more subtle and in-advance-means of keeping elections under control had failed. It became a common perception

³ See, for instance, Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Graeme Gill, *The Dynamics of Democratization: Elites, Civil Society, and the Transition Process* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000); Kurt Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); and Mark R. Thompson, *Democratic Revolutions: Asia and Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁴ Vitali Silitski, “Has the Age of Revolutions Ended?” *Transitions Online*, January 13, 2005 (<http://www.tol.cz/look/TOL/article.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=4&NrIssue=98&NrSection=4&NrArticle=13298&tpid=15>).

that the opposition had actually managed to defeat the regime. The last resort for cornered autocrats was to crudely falsify the final results or to annul the electoral contest altogether.

“Stolen elections” can be defined as polls in which the regime hinders an (actual or perceived) opposition victory at the ballot box through blatant manipulation of the vote count or by annulling the electoral result itself.⁵ The basis for stolen are “stunning” elections, in which the regime is surprised by the defeat it suffers at the hands of the opposition.⁶ While in a normative sense every act of manipulation amounts to an act of stealing, it is useful to reserve the term “stolen elections” for polls in which the regime is believed to have lost the voting despite attempts at manipulation.

Ordinary people can reach this conclusion in several different ways. Sometimes rulers are so surprised by electoral defeat that voting officials start publishing actual results before they receive orders to stop counting (or they go through with the count, only to have the election annulled altogether). In other cases, exit polls and parallel vote counts provide solid evidence for the actual outcome. International and pro-opposition media as well as movement activists can easily spread such information in a heightened post-electoral atmosphere. There is the possibility of hype in this process (what ultimately matters is the *perception* of an election being stolen), but usually the oppositions’ claims are based on some kind of credible evidence.

Understood this way, a stolen election is not just the final straw that breaks the autocrat’s back, merely adding enough additional “weight” to the burden already shouldered by the regime to prompt collapse. Rather, it constitutes a powerful transformatory event which fundamentally reshapes political contestation and thus deserves to be distinguished from other forms of electoral fraud. Opposition participation in an election held by the regime is initially

⁵ Mark R. Thompson and Philipp Kuntz, “Stolen Elections: the Case of the Serbian October,” *Journal of Democracy* vol. 15, no. 4 (October 2004), pp. 159-172.

⁶ S. P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991, pp. 174-178.

a test of its formal democratic credentials *within* existing political institutions. By denying the opposition its victory at the ballot box through outright manipulation, the regime transforms elections into a powerful trigger for a popular uprising *against* the political status quo.

The dynamic unleashed generates a revolutionary *situation* by removing major obstacles to a popular uprising, and because of the reshuffling of elite relationships contributes to a successful revolutionary *outcome* as well. This finding is not only of interest for students of contemporary democratization. Through an analysis of stolen elections as triggering events, a useful contribution can also be made to the study of revolutions. Attempts to emphasize revolutionary precipitants have encountered persistent academic resistance. By systematically demonstrating the impact of a short-term event like stolen elections this mainstream view can be challenged.

In the next section, an overview is provided of how students of revolutions have weighted the importance of precipitating events. The importance of triggers will then be demonstrated in three ways. First, using the example of stolen elections, a model will be introduced that reveals the potential for *theorizing* a triggering event among different groups of actors: citizens, activists, and regime members. Second, the importance of stolen elections in the structural context of electoral authoritarianism will be discussed. The final section supports the claim that stolen elections are indeed more than just a final straw by analyzing a number of empirical examples. In addition to the three aforementioned countries (Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine), we will look at the Philippines in 1986 and Madagascar in 2001/02. Obviously, stolen elections managed to turn weak revolutionary potential into mighty popular insurrections in quite diverse environments. At the same time, the cases shared important electoral authoritarian features, lending further evidence to the relationship between this broader political context and the events we term stolen elections.

Triggering events and theories of revolution

Triggers can be understood as short-term events that represent an abrupt breach of everyday practices, enabling barriers to collective action to be rapidly overcome.⁷ Disagreement over long-term vs. short-term causes has plagued the sociology of revolutions since its beginnings, with the importance accorded to triggers depending upon the emphasis given to the latter. Alexis de Tocqueville, for instance, writing about the events in Paris in February 1848, acknowledges that accidents of history (and the power of human agency) can be decisive for the occurrence or non-occurrence of revolutions. At the same time, he stresses the importance of long-term factors.⁸ But this still allows ample causal space for triggering events. Karl Marx, reflecting on the same event in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*, famously states: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”⁹ While short-term factors enter into his description of events, his systematic analysis centers around class structure and interests.

Scholars in the “natural history” of revolution tradition reserved a place for triggering events (although they favored typologizing revolutionary stages over the search for revolutionary causes).¹⁰ The same holds true for later theories or syntheses written in less metaphorical language and more explanatory in character. Examples are Johnson and Hagopian’s multi-causal models in which triggers play a role in the overall explanation.

⁷ This definition is inspired by William H. Sewell Jr., “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille,” *Theory and Society* vol. 25, no. 6 (1996), pp. 148-188.

⁸ Fred Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics: The Rise and the Fall of the Sixth Great Power* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 127.

⁹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (translation from www.marxists.org).

¹⁰ See e. g. Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965) and Lyford P. Edwards, *The Natural History of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

While the link between triggering events and revolutionary consequences remains under-theorized, at least triggering events retain causal significance.¹¹

Not surprisingly, proponents of the structuralist school have reached a quite different conclusion. The impact of structural preconditions - seen as the product of long- or at least medium-term developments - is assumed to be overriding. Events immediately preceding a revolution are by and large ignored. Well-known works by Barrington Moore, Jeffery Paige, Theda Skocpol, or Jack Goldstone are telling in this respect.¹² Skocpol, the most influential structuralist theorist of revolutions, is best known for her resolute rejection of voluntarism. At the same time, this leaves little room in her approach for the impact of short-term events. Jack Goldstone, on the other hand, does discuss the importance of precipitants in his historical narrative of revolutions, but not in his theoretical approach.¹³ Other influential texts, written in the functionalist tradition, share the position of the structuralists in rejecting the importance of short-term triggers (e.g., Huntington's modernization or Smelser's structural strain theory).¹⁴

¹¹ Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionary Change* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1966) and Mark N. Hagopian, *The Phenomenon of Revolution* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1975). Lawrence Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution 1529-1642* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 135-145, following Johnson, is an example of a historian who explicitly theorizes the role of triggering events.

¹² Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966); Jeffery M. Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export-Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World* (New York: Free Press, 1975); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

¹³ Edgar Kiser and Margaret Levi, "Using Counterfactuals in Historical Analysis: Theories of Revolution," in Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin (eds.), *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics. Logical, Methodological and Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 204.

¹⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press); Neil J. Smelser, *A Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York: Free Press, 1962). Chalmers Johnson, on the other hand, is writer in the functionalist tradition who has integrated triggering events in his work (see above).

Although structuralist accounts no longer dominate the study of revolutions today - Charles Kurzman speaks of a broad post-structuralist consensus – skepticism about the importance of short-term events persists.¹⁵ Only recently have some scholars identified short-term temporality as a neglected topic and started to build a new research agenda around it.¹⁶ But it is still in an early stage and existing studies are dominated by approaches stressing general “eventfulness.” Sometimes this involves a culturalist emphasis, in which the cultural transformation brought about by key events is stressed over resource distributional and political consequences.¹⁷ In other cases where such “eventfulness” is emphasized, a series of crucial events are considered as stepping stones to revolution.¹⁸ But this neglects singular events that lead to rapid political change (metaphorically forging a river directly to revolution).¹⁹

¹⁵ Charles Kurzman, “The Post-Structuralist Consensus in Social Movement Theory,” in Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper (eds.), *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), pp. 111-120.

¹⁶ Sewell, op. cit.; Doug McAdam and William R. Sewell, Jr. “It’s About Time: Temporality in the Study of Social Movements and Revolutions,” in Ronald R. Aminzade et al., *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 89-125; Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); James Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997); Andreas Suter and Manfred Hettling (eds.), *Struktur und Ereignis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2001) offer a general discussion about structure and events.

¹⁷ Sewell, op. cit., p. 862.

¹⁸ Jean-Pierre Reed, “Emotions in Context: Revolutionary Accelerators, Hope, Moral Outrage, and Other Emotions in the Making of Nicaragua’s Revolution,” *Theory and Society* vol. 33, (2004), pp.653-703.

Accordingly, he speaks of “accelerators” instead of “triggers.”

¹⁹ An exception is McAdams, Tarrow, and Tilly, op. cit., who provide at least cursory evidence for the power of triggering events in their new research agenda on contentious politics (considering, for example, the impact of the death of Hu Yaobang in China in 1989 or the murder of Aquino in the Philippines in 1983).

But strong objections persist against conceding triggers much causal importance. Michael Kimmel, for example, in his standard account of revolutions, acknowledges triggers as an indispensable prerequisite, but stresses the need to search for the “structural roots” of revolutions. He likens pre-revolutionary situations to a house that is “vulnerable to a stray spark from a match” because it consists of highly flammable materials. Kimmel adds that once the house has burnt down there is a danger of mistaking the immediate reason for the long-run causes: “A stray match does not cause a fire; it creates the missing – often accidental – ingredient in the fire-prone situation.”²⁰ Precipitating events in this picture are replaceable because it does not really matter what exactly starts the fire.

Timothy Wickham-Crowley is an even more outspoken critic. He ascribes only a “severely limited causal role” to triggering events.²¹ Explanations focusing on precipitants, he argues, resemble the (now widely despised) volcano model of revolutions.²² A common objection against this approach has been comparative, and Wickham-Crowley mounts a similar challenge to the analysis of triggering events: are there not numerous similar incidents which were *not* followed by a “volcanic social response?”²³ Why then should triggers be taken at all seriously in explaining revolutions? Edgar Kiser and Margart Levi offer the most scathing critique. They applaud the structuralist perspective for being aware “that the events most immediately preceding revolutions are ‘trigger events’ rather than causes.”²⁴ In this

²⁰ Michael S. Kimmel, *Revolution: A Sociological Interpretation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 9-10.

²¹ Timothy Wickham-Crowley, “Structural Theories of Revolution,” in John Foran (ed.), *Theorizing Revolutions* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 68, fn. 27. Wickham-Crowley explicitly sides with Neil Smelser (op. cit.) here.

²² Rod Aya has launched one of the staunchest critiques of aggregate social psychological models of revolution from a rational choice perspective. See his *Rethinking Revolutions and Collective Violence: Studies on Concept, Theory, and Method* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1990).

²³ Wickham-Crowley, op. cit. pp. 47-48.

²⁴ Kiser and Levi, op. cit., 204.

perspective, short-term precipitants have lost any relevance, even the status of causality is denied them!

However banal it may appear, it is worth stressing that triggering events have a causal logic of their own, even where their significance is minor. But not every potential precipitant is created equal: some triggers are more powerful than others or fit better into certain structural contexts. By affecting ordinary citizens, opposition activists, and the regime elites alike, causally significant triggers can overcome strong collective action barriers and create a revolutionary situation. Sometimes triggers are also related to revolutionary outcomes: they can help a movement prevail against the state's security forces and their nature can also influence *who* prevails if the old order collapses. In sum, it will be suggested here that the “final spark” can matter quite a lot and triggering events cannot be dismissed as just the last (and insignificant) link in a long revolutionary chain, perhaps determining the timing of an uprising, but otherwise being replaceable.

On the surface, disagreement over the place triggers deserve in revolutionary theory stems from disagreement about their actual causal importance. There may well be a methodological fear involved as well: would not “bringing triggers back in” mean opening the door to ever more contingency in the explanation of revolutions, increasing the number of idiosyncratic case studies?²⁵ Without doubt, any inclusion of short-term events will result in less parsimonious explanations. But this does not mean that we cannot understand triggering events theoretically. Precipitants such as stolen elections can be linked to well-established theories, above all the rich literature on social movements. In addition, it is possible to contextualize triggering events, i.e., showing their relationship to longer-term structures.

²⁵ An earlier statement by Harry Eckstein on the study of “internal wars” reflects this position: “The greatest service that the distinction between precipitants and preconditions of internal war can render, however, is to shift attention from aspects of internal war which defy analysis to those which are amenable to systematic inquiry. Phenomena which precipitate internal war are almost always unique and ephemeral in character”: “On the Etiology of Internal Wars,” *History and Theory* vol. 4, no. 2 (1965), p. 140.

Stolen elections as triggering events

This is not the place to offer a general theory of triggering events. Instead, the general point can be exemplified by offering a model of stolen elections - an authoritarian regime trying to reverse the outcome of an election that has already been lost (de facto or at least in the perception of most people concerned). The dependent variable, “democratic revolutions,” should be mentioned here again as well. By this we mean popular uprisings - largely non-violent and urban-based - that take place with the goal of bringing about a democratic transition.²⁶ Analytically, the variable “democratic revolution” can be split up into a revolutionary situation (with the best indicator being mass mobilization) and a revolutionary outcome (the accomplishment of regime change).

Applying the label “regime change” to the events discussed here will not go uncontested. The very features of electoral authoritarianism - most of all the existence of formal democratic institutions - place this kind of regime relatively close to the category of procedural democracies. If a popular uprising does not result in a significant alteration of the constitutional order, some observers will downplay its impact as only having led to a change in intra-elite positions. This view, however, does not take into account the fact that informal institutions are essential for retaining control over the “democratic” arenas, which give competitive (or electoral) authoritarianism its name. A removal of the leadership crucially affects the informal structures that keep these regimes alive. And although democratic consolidation is by no means guaranteed, the successful defense of an opposition victory opens up this possibility in the first place. If we take the idea of authoritarian subtypes seriously, the regimes considered here had long left behind their phase of precarious consolidation and slipped into a state of authoritarianism. The consequences of uprisings sparked by stolen elections were thus more far reaching than it might seem at first glance.²⁷

²⁶ Thompson, *Democratic Revolutions*, op. cit., introduction.

These mass protests should also be considered momentous because of the lasting impression they left on all those who – voluntarily or involuntarily - participated. Just how many people can get affected by a stolen election becomes obvious when we turn the question why this event is such a powerful precipitant. In order to demonstrate the causal complexity of the exemplary trigger “stolen elections” it is necessary to distinguish between different groups of actors. The following analysis will focus on ordinary citizens, opposition activists, and regime elites. By showing that in an ideal-type situation the influence of stolen elections occurs at *several* levels, the causal significance of triggering events in overcoming collective action problems can be underlined. A separate focus on intra-regime dynamics helps clarify why the revolutionary precipitant may also shape the outcome of revolutionary struggles.

Stolen elections and ordinary citizens

A stolen election increases ordinary people’s willingness to participate in anti-regime protests for two main reasons. On the one hand, it conveys a strong message that a political opportunity for staging an uprising has emerged. This is important for individual calculations of the risks and chances of protesting before deciding to join in.²⁸ On the other hand, stolen

²⁷ Paul D’Anieri, for instance, who hesitates to speak of revolutionary changes in Ukraine, nonetheless concedes that Kuchma’s political machine has been disabled and that important foundations for a new democratization effort have been laid (cf. “What has changed in Ukrainian Politics? Assessing the Implications of the Orange Revolution,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 52, no.5 (September/October 2005), pp. 82-91). A comprehensive argument in favor of applying the term “revolution” to the events in Ukraine can be found in Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine’s Orange Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), chapter 10.

²⁸ Political opportunities are understood here as subjective, i. e. what matters is the *perception* of a political opportunity. The “political opportunity structure” concept remains contested, last but not least because its boundaries are notoriously hard to draw. Different positions in the debate can be found in Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper (eds.), *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

elections produce deeply felt and widely shared grievances. In this way they perform a mobilizing function, as well.

The perception of a “golden” opportunity for rebellion results partly from the impression that large numbers of people are prepared to join anti-regime protests. The fact that the regime has lost the election - often by an overwhelming majority of the vote - documents exactly how widespread dissatisfaction has become. Under less-than-democratic circumstances anger may be widespread, but it may also be hidden from view. When the opposition wins an election, private preferences become public and individuals in society learn they are not alone in their dislike of the regime.²⁹ Collective action seems likely to receive broad-based support within society, reducing the chances of sanctions and approaching the “critical mass” necessary for toppling the regime.

A sense that the moment of decision has arrived can also be inferred from more direct signs of regime weakness. For reasons considered below, a stolen election is likely to undermine regime cohesion and lead to open splits within the ruling elite. Such a development can spur popular protest because it indicates that the repressive capacities of the authorities have diminished. A stolen election also changes people’s impression of the top leadership, i.e., those hardliners who bear responsibility for stealing the vote. The loss of an election deals a serious blow to these rulers by shattering their nimbus of invincibility.

Electoral authoritarians are often skillful tacticians, who gain a reputation even among their

²⁹ James C. Scott introduced the idea of “hidden transcripts” developing within repressive contexts. See his

Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

Expressing a similar idea using the terminology of rational choice, Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies:*

The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) speaks of

“preference falsification” as a coping strategy in which people pretend to support a regime which they in fact

loathe. Vaclav Havel, *et al.*, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*

(London: Hutchinson, 1985) sees ordinary citizens as “living within a lie” to disguise their personal distaste for

the regime in order to avoid being disadvantaged by it. Havel illustrates this with his famous story of the green

grocer displaying a sign with a communist slogan in which he did not believe.

adversaries for knowing how to “play the game.”³⁰ For them suffering electoral defeat is especially devastating because it destroys their reputation as political masterminds. The image of vulnerability may be fostered if the regime is so wrong-footed by the opposition victory that its post-electoral maneuvers look visibly helpless (for example, when delaying the announcement of final results). At the same time, people’s sense of political efficacy has increased because it was they who inflicted the defeat upon the regime.

The subjective emergence of a political opportunity is by no means a purely cognitive affair. It also possesses a strong emotional dimension.³¹ Feelings of optimism and hope, enthusiasm and joy, empowerment and pride characterize the post-electoral mood. The psychological impact will be particularly strong in societies in which the regime had previously appeared unshakable. Having lost the electoral contest, rulers can be zestfully ridiculed like the emperor without clothes.

The second way in which stolen elections contribute to societal mobilization is by creating a set of powerful grievances. Depriving people of their victory at the ballot box leads to the disappointment of expectations built up during the opposition’s election campaign. However naïve it may appear to outsiders, it is striking how enthusiastically voters participate

³⁰ This refers to Marina Ottaway’s phrase of the “games semi-authoritarian regimes” play. See her *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), chapter 6.

³¹ Calls for an (explicit) integration of emotions into social movement research have proliferated over the last few years. See, for instance, James Jasper, op. cit.; Jeff Goodwin; James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta (eds.), *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001); Ron Aminzade and Doug McAdam, “Emotions and Contentious Politics,” in Ronald R. Aminzade et al., *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 14-50; Reed, op.cit. For an earlier acknowledgement of the role of emotions in collective action see Helena Flam “Emotional ‘Man’: I. The Emotional ‘Man’ and the Problem of Collective Action,” *International Sociology* vol. 5, no. 1 (1990), pp. 39-56.

in such elections although there appears little chance that the regime would accept defeat.³² Casting one's ballot is nonetheless seen as a promising way for bringing about political change. Such hopes appear particularly well founded under the conditions of electoral authoritarianism, where manipulation is less comprehensive or at least less visible to the voters. Outrage when the election is stolen is correspondingly great. Frustrated hopes set stolen elections apart from many other incidents of authoritarian injustice which are not preceded by increasing expectations.³³

That said it should already be clear that post-electoral dissatisfaction is deeply moral in nature. Using James Jasper's phrase, we can speak of "moral shocks" caused by stolen elections.³⁴ Moreover, blatant fraud works like a magnifying glass in that it focuses in on the unjust character of the regime. Even if the regime had little popular legitimacy before the election, the actual stealing of the result creates a clear moral front between the people's will and an evil regime bent on thwarting it.

Again, this is of particular importance in an electoral authoritarian setting. Such regimes are not completely devoid of formal legitimacy or at least people do not see them as outright dictatorships. As the participation before stolen elections indicates, institutional channels are still regarded as holding the potential for change. A flagrant stealing of the vote, however, rips away the last remnants of regime legitimacy and removes whatever doubts there may have remained about the rightfulness of revolutionary action. Disrespecting the

³² On voter enthusiasm in the Philippines during the presidential campaign in 1986 see Mark R. Thompson, *The Anti-Marcos Struggle: Personalistic Rule and Democratic Transition in the Philippines* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 138-9. On the Ukraine see Paul D'Anieri, "The Last Hurrah: The 2004 Ukrainian Presidential Elections and the Limits of Machine Politics" *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 38 (2005), pp. 231-49.

³³ The logic behind this argument is derived from James Davies, "Toward a Theory of Revolution," *American Sociological Review* vol. 27, no. 6 (1962), pp. 5-18 and Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Man Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

³⁴ James Jasper, op. cit.

choice of the electorate deeply hurts people's dignity as citizens. This engenders a strong sense of moral obligation to join protests. Such a feeling of duty can outweigh the perceived costs of participation or overcome a possible free rider dilemma.

It is not only the quality of grievances (fundamentally heightened and morally grounded) that matters after a stolen election, but also the extent to which these sentiments are shared among the population. While authoritarian regimes constantly violate citizens' rights, few incidents can be imagined that personally affect most of the populace at the same time. Stolen elections do: stealing the results creates an "imagined community" of millions of robbed voters.

Advantages for opposition activists

All of the mechanisms elaborated so far can also be applied to the more narrow group of opposition activists. Yet, it makes sense to deal with them separately because of their specific task of mobilizing the population.³⁵ Stolen elections facilitate this effort in two respects: first, it becomes easier to create resonant collective action frames.³⁶ Second, in terms of the resource mobilization paradigm, it can be said that at the moment an election is stolen opposition activists already have an effective organizational apparatus at their disposal.³⁷

³⁵ To be sure, some democratic uprisings have occurred almost spontaneously, with only a minimum of formal coordination. This does not, however, exclude the possibility that organizational capabilities where available can be extremely helpful.

³⁶ For an overview of frame analysis see Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements. An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* vol. 26 (2000), pp.611-639.

³⁷ More explicitly than the classic resource mobilization paradigm as formulated by John D. McCarty and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 82, no. 6 (1977), pp. 1212-1241) does, we will pay attention to revolutionary coalitions here, the importance of which has been recognized by numerous scholars of revolution.

Revolutionary activists offer their own interpretation of the political situation in order to draw people into anti-regime protests. The resonance of social movement frames partly depends upon their credibility.³⁸ A well-defined and strongly emotionalizing event like a stolen election helps in constructing the right frames. Diagnostic framing, with its attribution of blame to the regime, now coincides with people's first-hand experience of electoral manipulation. The same holds for the opposition's "rhetoric of change."³⁹ Quick reaction is required before the window of opportunity, temporarily opened by the election, closes again. Thus, the opposition's shopworn talk about the need for urgent action suddenly sounds very convincing.

Electoral campaigning improves the opposition's organizational capabilities. It is rarely enough to just have a convincing message against an adversary who enjoys vast structural advantages. The opposition also needs to form a broad coalition, choose a common candidate, redouble its efforts to reach out to voters, and engage in poll-watching activities. Building a broad electoral coalition can be extremely difficult for opposition parties, and divide-and-rule strategies are common tools of electoral authoritarians. But it may be even harder to forge a united front seeking revolutionary change. As long as the system is not entirely closed, factions of the opposition may opt for more moderate (institutionalized) means of challenging the regime (not to mention the possibility of them being co-opted). Once an election is called, pressure for opposition unity rises and those who do not join a coalition may be marginalized during the electoral campaign. But even if divisions persist, a broad-based coalition is likely to emerge after the elections as the regime becomes the object of popular protest that has entered a revolutionary phase.

³⁸ Snow and Benford, *op.cit.*, p. 619.

³⁹ See William A. Gamson and David S. Meyer, "Framing Political Opportunity," in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 285-286.

Opposition unity often finds its expression in the selection of a single candidate who runs for president or prime minister. Campaigning creates strong ties between him/her and the voters, particularly through personal campaign appearances given that opposition presence in the media is often severely limited. By the time of the election, a clear leader-figure has emerged. Door-to-door canvassing efforts by volunteers and a push to “get out the vote” on election day further contribute to opposition organizational capabilities. Perhaps most importantly, the opposition often tries to create a network of independent election observers to come up with a vote count independent of the government’s. Not only is this crucial in showing that the elections have in fact been stolen, but it also generates a network of activists that can be mobilized for further collective action after the balloting. In short, efforts to achieve victory at the ballot box enhance capacities for post-electoral mobilization as well.

A similar point can be made regarding international assistance. Foreign support is often crucial in overcoming the tremendous hurdles set up by an electoral-authoritarian regime. By aiding the construction of campaign and poll-watching infrastructures, external actors simultaneously prepare the ground for ensuing protest movements. Under normal circumstances it is extremely difficult for outsiders to promote political participation among an apathetic citizenry (let alone to encourage the emergence of a powerful popular movement). Yet when foreign assistance is targeted at electoral contests it can contribute to the outbreak of massive protest movements. It is no coincidence that international actors, who want to stem the current tide of electoral authoritarianism, have increasingly been drawn to elections as focal points.

Ultimately, however, it depends on *domestic* circumstances whether a strategy of promoting “electoral revolutions” from abroad succeeds or not. Moreover, the impression of massive external interference in recent “colorful revolutions” (often exaggerated to the point that foreign forces are depicted as pulling the strings) may provoke drastic authoritarian

counter-measures. As a consequence, electoral playing fields have become less competitive and international democracy promotion a more difficult endeavor.⁴⁰

The impact on the regime elite

Stolen elections are not only “triggers” in society, they can also lead to open rifts among regime elites.⁴¹ Elite defections are important for several reasons. Citizens perceive them as an indicator of regime weakness, which in turn will spur their willingness to engage in acts of protest. Mobilization will also be facilitated once the state-controlled media machinery crumbles from within and critical voices suddenly speak out within this previously pro-government bastion. Last but not least, elite divisions undermine the regime’s ability to repress mass mobilization. Even when its legitimacy is low, a regime can hold onto power by retaining the loyalty of key civilian officials and military elites. But a stolen election is likely to undercut this loyal behavior sufficiently to severely weaken the regime. As a consequence, not only the probability for a revolutionary situation increases, but also the likelihood of a revolutionary *outcome*.

Why do stolen elections put the loyalty of the regime staff to the test? One reason is that the unjust character of the regime has become obvious. Here the issue of elite legitimacy

⁴⁰ Thomas Carothers, “Ousting Foreign Strongmen: Lessons from Serbia,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Policy Brief* vol. 1, no. 5 (May 2001) and “The Backlash Against Democracy Promotion,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 85, no. 2 (March/April 2006), pp. 55-69; Mark R. Beissinger, “Promoting Democracy: is Exporting Revolution a Constructive Strategy?” *Dissent* (Winter 2006), pp. 18-24.

⁴¹ In democratization studies, “transitologists” have long acknowledged the importance of singular events for strategic elite behavior. See Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) and Mattei Dogan and John Higley “Elites, Crises, and Regimes in Comparative Perspective,” in Mattei Dogan and John Higley (eds.). *Elites, Crisis, and the Origins of Regimes* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), pp. 3-27.

comes into play. The belief in the righteousness of one's rule matters. The loss of this belief was, for example, a crucial factor in the breakdown of communism in Eastern Europe.⁴² Formal ideology is less important in electoral authoritarian regimes, but nonetheless upholding certain democratic standards is of genuine concern for at least some members of the elite. Having long cooperated within a pseudo-democratic framework they now become disgusted by the blatant disregard of the people's will. Popular mobilization helps create a split in the regime due to genuine shame at the regime's stealing of the popular vote.

More frequently, however, defections from the ruling circle occur out of strategic calculation. The election showed that the current regime lacks legitimacy and that an alternative center of power has emerged, backed by a large part of the population. This situation has, on the one hand, consequences for those who had been beneficiaries of the current system. Now that the regime has been openly questioned and is under great pressure, they have to take a stance: either to stick with a discredited leadership or abandon it. Many prefer to change sides before it is too late. On the other hand, parts of the elite may have been plotting ways of ousting the leadership for some time already. They may have never had an opportunity to translate their plans into action, however. The weakening of the regime internationally and domestically after a stolen election signals that the time to take action has come. Simultaneously it becomes harder for these groups or individuals to assume power by themselves. It is difficult to replace the current leadership in order to install another dictatorship since a new opposition center of power has surfaced, which is backed by an

⁴² See, for instance, Guiseppe Di Palma "Legitimation from the Top to Civil Society," *World Politics*, vol. 44, no. 1 (October 1991), pp. 49-79; Daniel V. Friedheim, *Democratic Transition Through Regime Collapse*, Ph.D.-Dissertation Yale University, 1997; Steven Saxonberg, *The Fall: A Comparative Study of the End of Communism in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Poland* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 2001); and Jan Pakulski "East European Revolutions and 'Legitimacy Crisis,'" in Janina Frentzel-Zagórska (ed.), *From a One-Party State to Democracy: Transition in Eastern Europe* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), pp. 67-87.

unambiguous popular mandate. In sum, it may be said that a stolen election has an enabling and constraining effect on regime defections.

The main arguments presented here are summarized in the following figure:

- FIGURE "STOLEN ELECTIONS AS REVOLUTIONARY TRIGGERS" ABOUT HERE -

The structural context of stolen elections as triggers

The discussion thus far has shown that a multitude of causal mechanisms affecting different actors can be specified when applying social-scientific approaches to the triggering effect of a stolen election. In addition, theory building is possible by locating triggering events in their structural environment. This can mean two things: that some triggers function better in specific contexts, but also that some situations require specific triggers. Theoretical examples of this event-structure relationship have already been given above in the context of electoral authoritarianism. In the following, the focus shifts more specifically to the question why stolen elections ripen such regimes for revolution.

A strong finding in many recent studies of revolution is that popular uprisings occur only in highly exclusionary political contexts and/or regimes that resort to violent, arbitrary repression. People are forced to rebel because rulers show no willingness to reform, offer no channels for political participation and/or indiscriminately repress political opponents. Therefore, sultanistic dictatorships (like Nicaragua under Somoza) or post-totalitarian communist rulers defying reform (such as Honecker in East Germany) had to be brought down through popular uprisings, while in neighboring countries insurrections were not encompassing enough to achieve a revolutionary breakthrough or regimes were transformed via negotiation between soft-liners who dominated the government and a moderate

opposition.⁴³ More open or institutionalized systems are likely to divert revolutionary pressure or avoid its emergence in the first place. Paraphrasing Leon Trotsky, people resort to revolutionary action only if there is “no other way out.”⁴⁴ Correspondingly, democracy can be seen as the regime type most hostile to revolution. Goodwin claims that “[e]ven imperfect and poorly consolidated democracies tend to diffuse revolutionary pressures.”⁴⁵

Following this argument, it can be contended that electoral authoritarian regimes are rather resistant to revolutions since they belong to a category of rule that allows relatively extensive political pluralism and outright acts of repression are not very common. Opposition parties find it hard to form a revolutionary coalition and draw broader support from society for toppling the regime under such circumstances. But electoral autocrats change the character of their rule abruptly by stealing an election. The uncertainty produced by the political competition still ongoing in these kinds of regimes is replaced by the certainty that change through institutionalized channels alone will be impossible. Political closure through a stolen election leads to the realization that there is “no other way out” than revolutionary action.

⁴³ See Jeff Goodwin, *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) for insightful comparisons among South East Asian, Central American, and Eastern Europe countries. Michael Krennerich, *Wahlen und Antiregimekriege in Zentralamerika* (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 1996) offers a strikingly similar argument with regard to Central America. See Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), Saxonberg, op.cit., and Thompson, *Democratic Revolutions* for comparisons within the context of East European communism. Mohammed M. Hafez applies the same general line of reasoning to Islamic countries: *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Boulder/London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).

⁴⁴ Goodwin, op.cit., cites Trotsky on p. 26 and uses this quote as his book’s title.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

More than the final straw

The theoretical discussion in the previous section demonstrated how stolen elections can trigger sudden and significant behavioral changes in three groups of actors: citizens, activists, and members of the regime. It was also argued that relatively open regime environments tend to inhibit opposition mobilization, but the circumstances alter dramatically when incumbents are forced to deprive the opposition of victory.

Nonetheless, a skeptic might still ask whether stolen elections as triggering events have really been necessary for democratic revolutions to take place or whether they were only the “final straw.” Mass mobilization was already well underway in the Philippines in 1986, Serbia in 2000, and the Ukraine in 2004 *before* elections were stolen. Furthermore, many of these electoral authoritarian regimes were quite fragmented. With civil society strong and the regime weak, any trigger will do. Finally, the value of the theory proposed here can be questioned by pointing to cases where stolen elections were not followed by mass uprisings.

This section attempts to answer such objections by arguing that mass mobilization was as likely to decline as to continue, much less accelerate in these countries and that a reconsolidation of the regime was as much a possibility as was a breakdown. Moreover, it can be shown that there were enough other potential triggering events which likewise should have led to revolutionary explosion if the “just-the-final-straw” perspective on stolen elections were correct. A counterfactual thought-experiment also suggests that without stolen elections authoritarian survival was possible in these countries. “Negative cases,” where stolen elections did not trigger revolutions, reinforce the importance of the electoral authoritarian context.

Mass mobilization and regime fragmentation

Major mass mobilization had indeed been underway for several years in the Philippines, Serbia, and the Ukraine before stolen elections occurred. In the Philippines, there were over 250 major demonstrations held from August 1983 (when opposition leader Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. was assassinated) and February 1984 alone. One demonstration (the funeral of Aquino) drew an estimated two million participants. Weekly demonstrations that drew tens of thousands of participants continued until late 1985.⁴⁶ Impressive manifestations of popular dissatisfaction had also occurred on several occasions in Serbia and Ukraine.⁴⁷ Already in 1998, one observer of the Milošević regime noted that “[t]he history of opposition activity in Serbia since 1990 had in some senses been a chronicle of street demonstrations.”⁴⁸ Yet in Madagascar and Georgia stolen elections had occurred without being preceded by serious protest movements. Since Didier Ratsiraka had become president in 1997 and during Eduard Shevardnadze’s decade in power demonstrations fell well short of mass mobilization or lacked the necessary dynamic.⁴⁹ Empirically, therefore, the claim of pre-existing mass mobilization must be carefully examined case by case.

However, the fact that stolen elections can trigger collective action on a revolutionary scale without a previous history of mass mobilization does not exclude the possibility that earlier protests *were* of crucial importance in other cases. One assumption in particular must

⁴⁶ These figures combine government and opposition estimates. Thompson, *The Anti-Marcos Struggle*, op. cit., pp. 115-116.

⁴⁷ For some examples from Serbia see below. For Ukraine also see below and Taras Kuzio, “The Opposition’s Road to Success,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 16, no. 2 (April 2005), pp. 118-130.

⁴⁸ Robert Tomas, *The Politics of Serbia in the 1990s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 288.

⁴⁹ Examples are mentioned in Solofo Randrianja “‘Be Not Afraid, Only Believe’: Madagascar 2002,” *African Affairs*, vol. 102 (2003), pp. 313-314 and Gigi Tevzadze “Key Civil and Public Institutions and Values of Modern Georgia,” in *Building Democracy in Georgia: Attempts to Establish Democracy in Georgia* (Stockholm: IDEA, May 2003), pp. 18 and 22.

be looked at more closely: that protest movements had a cumulative effect on the chances of regime change. In the case of Ukraine, for example, Taras Kuzio argues that civil society had been gradually gaining strength in the course of protests against the Kuchma regime, especially since the “Kuchmagate” scandal in late 2000. In his words: “[t]he experience of popular protests during those four years prepared and equipped Ukraine’s opposition members to lead the Orange Revolution.”⁵⁰ It is hard to deny that strategic learning had occurred, especially among students. But this does not mean that the breakthrough in protests was only a matter of time. The case of Serbia suggests another possibility. There renewed cycles of opposition protest were becoming smaller and smaller as citizens grew disillusioned by previous failures (which they often blamed on opposition leaders). A case in point are the massive demonstrations which broke out when Milošević’s deprived the opposition of its victories in the November 1996 communal elections. After months of protests, Milošević finally gave in.⁵¹ The opposition alliance returned to internal squabbling and gambled away much of what had been achieved. As a result, many citizens who had invested enormous energy in protesting became even more apathetic than before. Longer-term mobilization periods can lead to growing discouragement and pessimism instead of increasing determination and optimism.

⁵⁰ Kuzio, *op.cit.*, p. 129.

⁵¹ These events are not considered further here because the demand which unified the protesters - the recognition of the opposition victories in several towns and cities – did not focus on the country’s most important *national* political institutions. Apart from that, however, the 1996/1997 protests strongly support the argument about the dynamic unleashed by the sudden reversal of an opposition victory. The massive outburst of popular outrage came as a huge surprise, especially since in the months before the elections other potential triggering events had failed to incite a similar response (cf. Dušan Pavlović, *Akteri i modeli: ogledi o politici u Srbiji pod Miloševićom* (Belgrade: Samizdat B92, 2001), p. 87, and Florian Bieber, “The Serbian Opposition and Civil Society: Roots of the Delayed Transition in Serbia,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2003), p. 84).

Turning to the regime fragmentation argument: in terms of the degree of unity in the regime, it has, for example, been said that the Ukrainian regime was already fragmented before elections were held in 2004. With the loyalty of the oligarchs to the regime in doubt, several former regime officials now leading oppositionists, and members of the state apparatus supporting the opposition, the regime seemed unstable even before the vote was stolen.⁵² (A similar argument could be made about Georgia, where the opposition was headed by former members of Shevardnaze's Citizens' Union of Georgia). But many rifts in the regime appeared only during the electoral crisis.⁵³ In Serbia there were few defections at all from the regime before the September 2000 vote and while there were certainly tensions within the inner circle of power, most observers did not forecast its breakup in the immediate future. Finally, regime fragmentation does not tell us very much about *how* rulers are going to lose power - a massive popular uprising, an internal coup or something else. This mode of transition, in turn, may strongly influence future political developments.

The failure of other triggers

Another way to highlight the importance of stolen elections is to point out that other potentially "explosive" events did not have the same powerful impact. In what follows the assassination of regime critics, a lost war, and attacks on the anti-regime media will be briefly considered. The purpose is to show that such events might have become mobilizational "dead ends" had stolen elections not taken place

⁵² Lucan A. Way, "Kuchma's Failed Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 16, no. 2 (April 2005), pp. 131-145.

⁵³ See *ibid.*; D'Anieri, *op.cit.*, 244-246; Kuzio, *op. cit.*, p. 126; Taras Kuzio "From Kuchma to Yushchenko: Ukraine's Presidential Elections and the Orange Revolution," *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 52, no. 2 (March/April 2005), pp. 13-14.

The above mentioned assassination of Aquino created a mass protest movement in the Philippines. But by the end of 1983 it was becoming obvious that Marcos was neither planning to resign as opposition demonstrators had demanded. While protests continued, moderate oppositionists began to lose hope in a peaceful uprising and the initiative shifted to more radical, communist-influenced organizers. In addition, communist-linked groups had organizational capacities lacking in the moderate camp. Without stolen elections, the demobilization of the *moderate* opposition seemed a likely outcome (even if radical-led protests had continued).

A similar observation can be made about Ukraine. An anti-regime movement was sparked by the leaking of audiotapes in fall 2000 that linked President Kuchma to the killing of journalist Georgi Gongadze. Yet the protest eventually “petered out.” The movement re-emerged in the following years, but again the demonstrators did not succeed in getting rid of Kuchma. Paul D’Anieri has provided an interesting explanation for this failure:

Ironically, protesters in tents in central Kyiv were able to force the resignation of the Ukrainian prime minister in 1990, when the country was still ruled by the Soviets, but the same tactics (by many of the same protesters) failed in 2002, in large part because Kuchma, unlike the Soviet government, has a strong electoral basis for his legitimacy.⁵⁴

In other words, the electoral authoritarian system that had been established in Ukraine was open enough to absorb popular pressure before stolen elections in 2004.

Politically motivated murders badly weakened regimes in the Philippines and Ukraine. But in the following years it became apparent that the demonstrations triggered by these killings were not sufficient to bring the regime down. The same can be said about another potential trigger - a lost war. In Serbia, the NATO air campaign ended in June 1999 with Belgrade’s de facto loss of control over Serbia’s “sacred places” in Kosovo, the “cradle of the Serb nation.” Milošević’s image as a savior of Serbia was irrevocably shattered. The

⁵⁴ “Leonid Kuchma and the Personalization of the Ukrainian Presidency,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, no. 5 (September/October 2003), p. 60.

economic outlook was bleak as well. The regime's own behavior revealed the tenseness of the situation. Increasingly, it resorted to blatant oppression, abandoning the more subtle modes of domination it had favored earlier. Yet, for over a year the opposition waged an increasingly desperate struggle to unseat the regime. Under the guidance of Zoran Đinđić from the Democratic Party, the Alliance for Change tried to wring concessions from the regime by organizing daily marches and rallies starting in September. But the number of demonstrators declined and the movement ultimately fizzled out in mid-December 1999. The pattern repeated itself when the opposition started another round of protests in spring 2000. As had been the case in the first half of the 1990s, most citizens responded with resignation rather of political activism to the catastrophic results of Milošević's foreign policy.

The Serbian case also demonstrates that attacks on the independent media may not be enough to spark popular rebellion. In May 2000 - when the number of participants in the spring protest round was already declining - police raided an opposition broadcasting center in Belgrade. Yet this blatant crackdown on the media did not reverse the trend of declining participation in the anti-Milošević movement.⁵⁵ Unlike during a stolen election, not many people are directly affected by such a raid. Moreover, there were no rising expectations which could have been disappointed.

In Georgia, a raid of the independent Rustavi 2 television company at the end of 2001 attracted several thousand people to anti-regime demonstrations.⁵⁶ This is not a negligible number if we take into account that the revolutionary movement in Tbilisi in 2003 was much smaller than the movements in Belgrade or Kiev.⁵⁷ Yet, the 2001 protests - unleashed by this attack on the media - did not develop the dynamic necessary to topple the regime. One reason

⁵⁵ Matthew Collin, *This is Serbia Calling: Rock'n'Roll Radio and Belgrade's Underground Resistance* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2001), pp. 199-200.

⁵⁶ Tevzadze, op. cit.

⁵⁷ In the words of Lincoln Mitchell, the movement in Georgia was "undersized" ("Georgia's Rose Revolution," *Current History*, October 2004, p. 345).

is that Shevardnaze made substantial concessions to the demonstrators. This tactic could not be used after stolen elections, however, because they raised fundamental questions about the distribution of power.

All these examples indicate that the stolen election trigger was much better suited to overcome collective action barriers under electoral authoritarianism. But the nature of the “final spark” not only matters for mass mobilization. As the Philippine case demonstrates, it can also influence *who* takes over after the dictatorship has been toppled. The “Reform the Armed Forces Movement” (RAM) army officers who rebelled after Marcos’ had stolen the presidential poll were unable to establish a military regime as they had hoped. They were too dependent on the powerful position which Corazon C. Aquino had acquired by *de facto* winning the election. Moreover, if Marcos had not announced elections at all, there might have never been a democratic revolution and a communist insurrection might have succeeded in removing Marcos from power instead. In this sense, too, a seemingly small triggering event had a major influence on the political future of a country.

Counterfactual considerations

Highly contingent events, it is easy to imagine a situation in which electoral authoritarians are not forced to steal elections in order to remain in power, thereby avoiding the revolutionary mobilization that could cut short their tenure in office. One can use such “what if”-questions to answer those still skeptical about the importance of stolen elections.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ One reason is that as contingent events stolen elections do not violate the “minimal-rewrite rule” for counterfactual thought experiments. See Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, “Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives,” in Tetlock, Philip E. and Aaron Belkin (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 23-25.

The occurrence of stolen elections depends on a number of key decisions, both by the ruling elite and opposition leaders.⁵⁹ Sometimes rulers are so confident about winning an electoral contest that they announce elections earlier than scheduled or they do not take “necessary precautions” of manipulating the vote long before election day. Or, if manipulation is attempted, it can badly backfire: the poisoning of opposition candidate Victor Yushchenko in Ukraine is such an example. In conjunction with other mistakes (like the selection of Victor Yanukovich as regime candidate) this strengthened the opposition and the regime had to resort to more blatant fraud on election day in order to “win.”

Often the regime’s blunders result from insufficient knowledge about the actions its opponents will take, who also decide about the emergence or non-emergence of a “stunning election”. It is easy to think of a counterfactual situation in which a stolen election would not have occurred in these countries. Resort to stealing might not be necessary if the opposition had failed to form a coalition or had not chosen a suitable candidate who had gained the status of a “moral leader.”⁶⁰ In Serbia, it was opposition leader Zoran Đinđić who paved the way for Vojislav Koštunica’s candidacy in the critical presidential election in September 2000. Despite a long history of disagreements and animosity between the two, Đinđić had realized that Koštunica had an impeccable reputation of being a nationalist and a man with integrity and thus was in a much better position to defeat Milošević. Similarly, an opposition split could have occurred in the Philippines had squabbling factions not united on the candidacy of Cory Aquino, who was dubbed the “Filipina Maria” in her “moral crusade” against Marcos in presidential elections.⁶¹

⁵⁹ On the difficulty of making the right strategic choices in electoral autocracies see Andreas Schedler “The Nested Game of Democratization by Elections,” *International Political Science Review*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2002), pp. 103-122.

⁶⁰ John Kane terms this “moral capital” which he defines as the “specifically political value of virtue.” *The Politics of Moral Capital* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁶¹ Thompson, *Anti-Marcos Struggle*, chp. 8.

A regime also does not have to steal the election if opposition politicians decide to boycott the electoral contest. In electoral authoritarian regimes opposition parties are constantly confronted with a boycott-participation dilemma. What would have happened if the major opposition parties in Ukraine, for example, had decided to boycott the presidential contest in 2004? Imagine the opposition parties and civil society organizations calling for people to take to the streets because “it is impossible to participate in elections under the present conditions.” Would these calls have even remotely as much impact as was the case during the “Orange Revolution” after a stolen election? Would it not be more plausible to assume a demobilizing effect, because seeing the regime candidate winning easily would have discouraged ordinary people, lowering their expectations and creating a bleak outlook for political change for years to come?

Stolen elections not followed by democratic revolutions

In some cases stolen elections have not triggered democratic revolutions.⁶² Since the late 1980s, the most prominent cases have occurred in Panama (1989), in Burma (1990), in Algeria (1991/92), and in Nigeria (1993).⁶³ In all these countries stolen elections had a

⁶² The universe of cases in which the dependent variable is “negative” is smaller than it might look like at first glance, however. It is important to recall that the argument advanced in this paper is founded on a narrow definition of stolen elections (see p. 3). For example, the fact that electoral manipulation in Azerbaijan and Armenia was not followed by a democratic revolution does not challenge the role of large-scale fraud in the making of the “Rose Revolution” in neighboring Georgia, because only in the latter case does our definition of stolen elections apply. It could even be argued that the difference between stolen elections and fraudulent elections that fall short of this category forms part of an explanation for the varying outcomes in this and other cases.

⁶³ For the following discussion see Brittmarie Janson Pérez, *The Process of Political Protest in Panama: 1968-1989*, Ph.D.-Dissertation University of Texas at Austin, 1993; Christine Fink, *Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule* (London and New York: Zed Books); Michael Willis, *The Islamist Challenge in Algeria: A Political History* (New York: New York University Press); Rotimi T. Suberu, “Crisis and Collapse: June-

decisive impact. They led to the reshuffling of regime élites in Algeria and Nigeria, hastened the U.S. invasion of Panama, and forced the Burmese military to keep tight control over election winner Aung San Suu Kyi. But it would be far-fetched to speak of revolutionary consequences. Peaceful mass protests staged in Panama and especially Nigeria turned out to be either short-lived or of limited geographical reach. The brutal civil war unleashed by the refusal to allow an Islamist victory in Algeria also cannot be likened to the sort of popular mobilization considered in this paper. In Burma no post-electoral protests worth mentioning took place.

With the partial exception of Panama, these countries had an important factor in common: their political orders fell far short of the electoral authoritarian regime type present in the other cases which had allowed for a relatively contested political environment to persist over a prolonged period of time. Rather, the elections that spun out of control in Burma, Algeria, and Nigeria were preceded by only a brief phase of political liberalization. These countries (at least for a decade) lacked an electoral tradition that would have produced expectations of electoral minimum standards incumbents must adhere to. Outrage in electoral authoritarian regimes, it can be argued, was far greater after stolen elections because such standards existed there. Polls (despite repeated manipulation) were seen as a vested right that simply could not be taken away.

A more important point, though, is that intimidation was much more prevalent in these military dictatorships than in civilian regimes. In Panama, Noriega's *Dignity Battalions* moved with brute force against protesting opposition politicians. Repression in Algeria was far greater. But sometimes the direct use of force was unnecessary. Fear of reprisal, based on the experience of past repression, can preempt popular protest. The Burmese example is the most notable in this respect: in 1990 people remained intimidated by the horrendous massacre November 1993," in Larry Diamond, Anthony Kirk-Greene, and Oyeleye Oyediran (eds.) *Transition Without End. Nigerian Politics and Civil Society Under Babangida* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), pp. 281-299.

carried out by the armed forces against protesters two years earlier. These “negative examples” thus underline the importance of an electoral authoritarian and civilian context for the operation of stolen elections as triggers.

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been argued that “triggers matter” in revolutionary uprisings. In the context of electoral authoritarianism, stolen elections assume a particularly significant role. They mobilize ordinary citizens, strengthen the opposition, and divide the regime, thus helping overcome significant barriers to collective revolutionary action. As neo-institutionalist theories of revolution suggest, the relative openness of electoral authoritarian regimes inhibits mass protest. But when such leaders steal elections their rule undergoes “closure,” increasing the probability of successful mass protest. Stolen elections are triggering events that suddenly transform the structural setting in favor of revolutionary efforts.

Considering several cases of electoral theft, it was then argued that mass mobilization and regime fragmentation (when it actually occurred) is not necessarily cumulative. The relevance of stolen elections was also underscored when other potential precipitants (such as political assassination, a lost war, or media raids) failed to bring about a revolutionary endgame, showing that stolen elections are more than replaceable final straws. While these other “potential triggers” were not insignificant, they were not sufficient to bring about a popular uprising, which was sparked off only later by stolen elections.

Stolen elections have not only been crucial for the emergence of a revolutionary situation, they have shaped the revolutionary outcome as well: those opposition forces denied victory at the ballot box are best positioned to lead the mass uprising and to take power after the collapse of the *ancien régime*. By imagining a counterfactual situation in which elections were not stolen, it was argued that the result would have more likely been opposition

demobilization rather than a successful democratic revolution. Lastly, it was observed that where stolen elections produced no triggering effect regimes were “fully” authoritarian military dictatorships with little previous electoralism. Thus these cases do not diminish the claim that stolen elections help overcome severe obstacles to collective action in electoral authoritarian, civilian settings.

Another way to show that such short-term events as stolen elections are within the reach of useful generalizations is to think of them as collective action templates. Linking the task of popular mobilization to fraudulent elections has become part of the repertoire of contention of democratic revolutionaries. While the revolutionary potential might not have been obvious before the first stolen election, it developed into a calculated means of societal mobilization once the potential has been discovered (in this sense, social movement activists themselves theorize stolen elections!). Once there had been several cases of successful revolution after electoral fraud, a demonstration effect kicked in, lowering the revolutionary threshold. In other words, less manipulation is required to trigger protest because people are already aware of the possibility of staging a post-electoral uprising.

Since Milošević’s ouster in October 2000, many anti-regime activists and rulers in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, but also Western democracy promoters have begun to think about this link. Belarusian activists were among the first to see the revolutionary potential of a stolen election, treating it as a template for the presidential poll in 2001. On the other hand, President Lukashenka threatened that in such a scenario he was not going “sit things out in a bunker like Milosevic.”⁶⁴ However, the opposition in Belarus failed at the ballot box and could not seriously claim to have won the presidential contest.⁶⁵ By contrast, the lessons of stolen elections were successfully applied in the more “liberal” autocracies Georgia and Ukraine, where credible evidence was available that the challengers had indeed been deprived

⁶⁴“Belarus leader accuses OSCE”, *BBC News Online*, August 1, 2001.

⁶⁵ See Rodger Potocki, “Dark Days in Belarus” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no. 4 (October 2002), pp. 142-156.

of victory. As is well documented, the Georgian opposition received important advice from Serbian activists, aided by George Soros' Open Society Institute.⁶⁶ Moreover, just before the "Rose Revolution" a pro-opposition television channel twice aired a documentary about Serbia's "Bulldozer Revolution."⁶⁷ Similar transnational networks and a general diffusion effect contributed to the making of the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine, although the Kuchma-regime was well aware of the scenario of an election-related uprising. By now, the idea has captured the attention of people all over the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the impressive precedents set by Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine may even have lowered the amount of fraud necessary to make people rebel. In Kyrgyzstan it was not a stolen election that led to the overthrow of Akaev in 2005. There was no opposition group which could have claimed to have been deprived of a national-level victory.⁶⁸ But the power of diffusion was such that mobilization around electoral fraud had become an established pattern. Electorally-sparked democratic revolutions have become part of the international repertoire of contention and a grave cause of concern for electoral-authoritarian rulers. As triggering events, stolen elections can no longer be ignored by students of revolution.

⁶⁶ Mitchell, op. cit., p. 346; Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution: Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 189-190.

⁶⁷ Peter Baker, "Tbilisi's 'Revolution of Roses' Mentored by Serbian Activists: Foes of Milosevic trained Georgians," *The Washington Post*, November 25, 2003.

⁶⁸ This lack of a clearly documented stolen election in part explains the chaos in which Kyrgyzstan was plunged during the "Tulip Revolution." No electorally legitimated opposition leadership existed that was capable of keeping the protests under control.

Figure

Stolen Elections as Revolutionary Triggers