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Melis G. Laebens

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Please address comments and/or queries for information to:

V-Dem Institute
Department of Political Science
University of Gothenburg
Sprängkullsgatan 19, Box 711
SE 40530 Gothenburg
Sweden
E-mail: contact@v-dem.net

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Beyond Democratic Backsliding: Executive Aggrandizement and its Outcomes *

Melis G. Laebens

Central European University

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Abstract

Executive power grabs and resulting democratic backsliding have become a major concern for scholars and the public alike. Although a growing number of cases are studied under these headings, we do not have globally applicable measurement criteria for observing executive aggrandizement, i.e. attempts by democratically elected incumbents to concentrate power. Our conceptual net tends to be either too wide, lumping together all forms of democratic regression, or too narrow, limiting our attention to particular mechanisms through which incumbents subvert democratic institutions. This article conceptualizes executive aggrandizement as an attempt by a democratically elected executive leader to weaken both electoral (vertical) and horizontal accountability without altogether suspending democratic institutions. Using selected V-Dem indicators and secondary sources, I identify 26 cases of executive aggrandizement in democracies worldwide from 1989 to 2019. Descriptive analysis shows considerable variation in the consequences of executive aggrandizement for the democratic regime and for the incumbents who engaged in it. Only a minority of these cases resulted in democratic breakdown due to incumbent takeover, while a majority ended with the incumbent being forced out of office either via democratic institutional procedures or otherwise. This article lays the ground for explaining the causes and outcomes of executive aggrandizement.

Introduction

About a decade has passed since political scientists observed how democratically elected incumbents can use their mandates to cunningly dismantle institutional constraints on their power and defeat political opponents, even formidable ones (Bermeo 2016, Scheppele 2016, Corrales and Penfold-Becerra 2011). The apparent spread of this phenomenon from poorer or “troubled” democracies of the developing world to a number of rich and established democracies in the West has created a dynamic academic field focusing on the implications of such executive power abuses, for which Bermeo coined the term “executive aggrandizement” (Przeworski 2019, Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, Bermeo 2016). These works have tackled the puzzling phenomenon, whereby democracy is attacked by the victors of democratic competition, and have shown why democratic institutions can be vulnerable to such challenges. More recently, scholars have also focused on understanding the conditions under which democracy is resilient in the face of democratically elected incumbents’ efforts to undermine democratic institutions (Gamboa 2023, Tomini, Gibril and Bochev 2023, Cleary and Öztürk 2022).

Notwithstanding the fast expansion of this literature, efforts to understand the causes and implications of contemporary executive aggrandizement have been hampered by difficulties in systematically observing incumbents’ attacks against democratic institutions. A large part of the literature on the subject has focused on gradual regime change itself (called democratic backsliding, democratic regression or autocratization), rather than on a particular political process driving regime change, because the former is easier to observe.¹ The focus on regime outcomes in conceptualization and measurement has somewhat confused the debate, making it harder to conceptually and empirically distinguish democratic decline in general from executive aggrandizement, which is a particular process of regime contestation. While democratically elected incumbents’ efforts to govern unconstrained may account for a large share of the cases of democratic backsliding in the last decade, it would be a mistake to see this as the only contemporary threat to democracy. Not only can legislative and judiciary elites also be responsible for aggrandizement in some cases, but other threats to democracy, such as military coups and state capture by criminal interests or political and business elite alliances also remain an issue (Cianetti, Dawson and Hanley 2018, Bermeo 2016, Diamond 2015).

¹ See for example Haggard and Kaufman (2021) or Tomini, Gibril and Bochev (2023). There are also exceptions, such as the empirical analyzes by Gamboa (2023) and Scheppele (2016). See also Gerschewski (2021) which lays the ground for efforts to zoom in on different processes of democratic regression.

A second consequence of the literature's focus on regime change has been the difficulty of empirically distinguishing executive aggrandizement from its effect on the regime - that is democratic backsliding or breakdown. This conflation has led to a systematic bias in case selection. Studies have tended to focus on cases experiencing considerable democratic backsliding or breakdown (Kaufman and Haggard 2018, Tomini and Wagemann 2018) or on cases with high levels of polarization (Svolik 2019, McCoy, Rahman and Somer 2018). As a result, cases such as Venezuela under Chávez, Turkey under Erdoğan, Hungary under Orbán and, due to the importance of the United States, that of Trump, have attracted much of the attention. While some works in this field discuss a broader set of cases with diverse outcomes, such the study by Dimitrova's (2018) study of state capture efforts by political elites in Central and Eastern Europe, they often do so without a theoretical scope condition, relying rather on knowledge of cases or on regional frames.² In sum, cases of executive aggrandizement resulting in serious democratic backsliding or breakdown have received more attention in the literature than those which did not cause blatant regime change. The relative invisibility of cases where incumbents' ambitions failed to bring about far-reaching institutional changes may be affecting not only our descriptive conclusions about the severity of the threat to democracy from executive aggrandizement, but also our ability to understand the conditions under which democracy is more resilient.

Hoping to remedy some of these shortcomings of the existing literature, the present article focuses on a specific kind of regime instability: an executive power-grab, whereby a democratically elected incumbent attempts to disable checks on their powers *gradually* and largely through *institutional means*. I propose a new definition of executive aggrandizement and propose a measurement strategy that provides a close match between the concept and its operationalization, and allows us to more systematically identify cases around the world. I conceptualize executive aggrandizement as an attempt by a democratically elected leader to more or less simultaneously weaken both horizontal and vertical (electoral) accountability mechanisms. Because these two forms of accountability are central functional features of democracy, such executive aggrandizement by definition poses a threat to the democratic regime (but, as I show further below, does not always condemn it to death). Following this conceptualization, I identify 26 cases of executive aggrandizement worldwide since 1989 by using individual indicators from the Varieties of

² The comprehensive study of Latin American countries by Gamboa (2023) is a notable exception. Other exceptions which partly also speak to this problem are works on presidential term limit extensions, such as Baturo (2014) and Versteeg et al. (2020).

Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (Coppedge et al. 2020a), together with Freedom House *Freedom in the World* reports and journalistic sources where needed. Analyzing the consequences of takeover attempts reveals important variation both in regime outcomes and in the fate of incumbents, indicating that the existing literature has tended to overlook cases of aggrandizement that did not result in notable regime change away from democracy.

Overall, this article makes three contributions to scholarly debate on the subject. The first is conceptual. Thinking of executive aggrandizement in relation to accountability mechanisms allows us to place this phenomenon in a broader analytical space and relate it to other forms of regime instability. By connecting executive aggrandizement to particular aspects of democracy, I hope this conceptualization also facilitates debate on whether or not executive aggrandizement can, in some circumstances, advance aspects of democracy (Aria 2016), or be part of a cyclical regime movement between oligarchic and populist forms (Slater 2013) or between single-pyramid and multiple-pyramid patronal systems (Hale 2014). Second, by showing the full range of regime and political outcomes that follow executive aggrandizement, the article contributes to our descriptive knowledge of the phenomenon, which is more diversified than what existing accounts might imply. Like Gamboa (2023) in her study of “presidents with hegemonic aspirations” in Latin America, I find for this global universe of cases that executive aggrandizement did not always lead to democratic break-down or even cause significant backsliding. This variation is important, because it implies that selecting cases based on regime outcomes would be problematic for building explanatory theories of executive aggrandizement. Through systematic and analytical description of the short-term outcomes of executive aggrandizement for both the regime and the incumbent, the article hopes to facilitate future research about democratic resilience against executive aggrandizement. Finally, the work presented here also has implications, discussed in the concluding section, for the debate on democratic backsliding and how we should understand the “crisis of democracy” some observers have identified (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, Diamond 2015).

The first part of the article introduces the concept of executive aggrandizement as I use it, lays out the scope of the study, explains and justifies the measurement methodology, and presents the 26 cases of aggrandizement identified worldwide from 1989 to 2019. The latter part of the article discusses the evolution of democracy over the course of takeover attempts in these 26 cases and shows that there was considerable variation in outcomes. The final section concludes with a discussion of the findings.

Re-conceptualizing and measuring executive aggrandizement

One of the puzzling things about contemporary patterns of democratic regression is that in many cases institutional change is driven by democratically elected incumbents themselves. As Bermeo (2016) describes in her seminal article “On Democratic Backsliding”, incumbent governments or leaders sometimes use their democratic mandate to evade oversight by other democratic institutions, as well as legal constraints on their power. This not only expands the government’s ability to rule unilaterally, it also makes it more difficult for opposition parties and civil society to hold government accountable through elections or activism. Bermeo coined the term executive aggrandizement for this phenomenon, which she described as “a form of backsliding [that] occurs when elected executives weaken checks on executive power one by one, undertaking a series of institutional changes that hamper the power of opposition forces to challenge executive preferences” (2016, 10). Other scholars have used different terms, such as “elected autocrats” (Kaufman and Haggard 2018), “democrators” (Scheppelle 2016), “would-be authoritarians” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) or “presidents with hegemonic aspirations” (Gamboa 2023) to mean something very similar. In each case, scholars are interested in cases where the incumbents’ actions and the institutional changes they implement go beyond re-organizing democratic institutions and in some way threaten the democratic quality of the system itself.

This proliferation of concepts in the literature possibly reflects the difficulty of precisely describing the actions that can pose a threat to democracy, and of pinning down the threshold beyond which executive power becomes dangerous. Even in a specific case of executive aggrandizement, two observers might reasonably disagree as to whether or not some actions taken by the incumbent constitute a democratizing corrective to institutions, or a subversive manipulation hostile to democracy (Przeworski 2019, 178-183). Democracies are complex political systems where particular institutions’ effects are determined in interaction with the political context and with other institutions (Scheppelle 2016, 35-37). As such, listing a set of actions and specific institutional changes that are potentially threatening always and everywhere is a difficult and potentially unfruitful endeavor. Indeed, Coppedge (2017) shows using V-Dem indicators to track the evolution of different democratic institutions and functions, that the particular institutional strategies incumbents have used to extend their powers have differed considerably. Yet, it would be important for both scholarly and policy purposes to have some diagnostic tools to identify potential cases of executive aggrandizement without having to acquire extensive expertise on individual countries’ political institutions and context, or waiting to see if the feared political outcome – democratic breakdown – will come to pass. Since we do not currently have

such a method, scholars of contemporary democratic backsliding largely rely on regime change indicators to identify cases of aggrandizement.

To address this shortcoming, I propose an alternative conceptualization of executive aggrandizement that will help us identify cases where democratically elected incumbents might be abusing their power at the expense of democratic institutions. I consider that the incumbent leader or government in a democracy is aggrandizing if they implement or visibly try to implement practices and legal changes that have the effect of weakening *both horizontal accountability* of the executive towards other branches of government (O'Donnell 1998) and *vertical accountability* of the government towards voters and the political opposition, without altogether suspending democratic institutions (Schmitter and Karl 1991). Such a two-pronged attack, I argue, has been a defining characteristic of contemporary executive aggrandizement. This is both a theoretical and an empirical claim. Theoretically, I argue that it is the joint attack on these two fundamental principles of democratic systems that distinguish executive aggrandizement from politics as usual.

³ While changes affecting only horizontal or only vertical accountability may reflect institutional experimentation within democratic bounds, when a government simultaneously targets these two types of constraints – those emerging from other parts of the state and those emerging from political competition – this is likely to indicate a desire to undermine the democratic system as such. Skewing the electoral playing field while removing institutional veto points opens the way for the incumbent to make unilateral political changes. This theoretical claim is backed by the evidence I present below. Even though the particular institutional reforms through which leaders sought to increase their power differed considerably across cases, the incumbents discussed in the literature on executive aggrandizement have always attacked both types of accountability more or less simultaneously.⁴

How exactly does this conceptualization differ from Bermeo's definition of aggrandizement reproduced above? In practice, undermining both horizontal and vertical accountability certainly has the effect that Bermeo describes – the opposition has a harder time “challenging executive

³ Executive aggrandizement differs from self-coups, i.e. the sudden suspension of democratic institutions by the incumbent with the backing of military power, in that it does not rely on coercion to immediately shut down or suspend democratic institutions.

⁴ Gerschewski (2021) suggests isolating different mechanisms of democratic regression. I define executive aggrandizement as a process, coordinated but not entirely controlled by the incumbent, which leverages many mechanisms for hampering political competition and accountability -the autocratic legalism mechanism along with others, such as the personalization of power and the capture of state resources for patronage and personal enrichment.

preferences” (Bermeo 2016, 10). But when we describe executive aggrandizement as an increase in executive power at the expense of horizontal and vertical accountability, it becomes easier to understand why and how opposition becomes less likely to succeed, and to see that these institutional changes affect more than the electoral arena. Less horizontal accountability also means that the all the rights of citizens, in particular those of minorities, are threatened, and that the government can systematically engage in corruption. The proposed conceptualization, therefore, explicitly links executive aggrandizement to a concept of democracy that goes beyond political competition and makes it clear that executive aggrandizement also threatens the kind of bureaucratic state capacity that is essential for democracy. In sum, I argue that this re-conceptualization adds analytical precision and greater theoretical grounding to the terminology proposed by Bermeo.

Measurement strategy

To identify the cases that fit my definition of executive aggrandizement, I use indicators from the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al. 2020a). The V-Dem dataset provides a vast number of indicators that allow us to track changes in the different practices and institutions that are required for democratic regimes to function (Coppedge et al. 2020b). I identify a small number of indicators to proxy relevant horizontal and vertical accountability mechanisms. Since the goal is to identify incumbent actions that undermine horizontal or vertical accountability, and not cases of democratic backsliding, I use first-level indicators that track those specific aspects of democratic institutions, rather than composite democracy indices. To capture the diverse strategies leaders may employ, I use multiple indicators to proxy each dimension.

I proxy the horizontal accountability dimension with five indicators: High court compliance (v2juhccomp), high court independence (v2juhcind), judicial purges (v2jupurge), legislature investigates in practice (v2lginvstp) and executive oversight (v2lgotovst).⁵ I pick these indicators because they capture executive actions that unambiguously relate to a change in the constraints - judicial, legislative or administrative - on the incumbent leader, and do so with enough specificity. It is enough for a democratic country to have experienced a significant decline in any one of these indicators to satisfy the condition of declining horizontal accountability put forth in the definition. I proxy changes in the vertical accountability dimension with seven indicators: Harassment of

⁵The executive oversight indicator measures control on the executive by bodies other than the legislature, “such as a comptroller general, general prosecutor, or ombudsman” (Coppedge et al. 2020b, 137)

journalists (v2meharjrn), government censorship effort - media (v2mecenefm), CSO repression (v2csreprss), election management body (EMB) capacity (v2elembcap), election management body (EMB) autonomy (v2elembaut), election voter registry (v2elrgstry) and government election intimidation (v2elintim).⁶ Again, significant decline in any of the seven is enough for a case to satisfy the criterion of declining vertical accountability.

I consider a country-year to be a potential case of executive aggrandizement, if at least one of the indicators in each dimension (horizontal accountability and vertical accountability) registered a decline that is significant at the 68% credibility level in the last 5 years.⁷ In addition to experiencing a decline in these vertical and horizontal accountability measures, to meet the definition of executive aggrandizement cases must be classified as democratic in the year the incumbent was first elected. While the cutoff point between democratic regimes and electoral autocracies may be difficult to defend in some cases, this cutoff problem is less worrisome than the comparability problems we would face if we were to include all regimes, both democratic and autocratic, in the analysis. I also exclude transition cases - those cases which have not yet had democratic turnover of the person in office. In the context of transition, expectations about democratic turnover and political resources to resist usurpation may not be as strong as in democracies, making aggrandizement different in the transition context. To eliminate clearly autocratic cases, I limit the sample to country-years where the Regimes of the World ambiguous classification was 4 or greater, that is those that are classified as democracy or as electoral autocracy upper bound (Lührmann, Tannenbergl and Lindberg 2018).⁸ Cases that were not democratic as well as transition cases are excluded manually from this set in the next stage.

⁶ I include the indicators measuring repression of civil society and media censorship as a measure of vertical accountability, despite the fact that several scholars involved in conceptualizing the V-Dem indices have placed those under a third form of accountability, called “social” (see Bernhard et al. 2020) or “diagonal” accountability (see Lührmann, Marquardt and Mechkova 2020). Because I use the media-related indicators to measure the existence of a pluralistic information environment that contributes to fair elections and enable vertical accountability, and am not interested in the media’s or civil society’s ability to hold the incumbent accountable, it makes little sense to distinguish a third form of accountability for my purposes.

⁷ The determination of a threshold for significant decline imposes a trade-off between the possibility of type 1 errors (false positives) and type 2 errors (false negatives). A low threshold may lead us to erroneously include cases where there was no executive aggrandizement, while too high a threshold may lead us to miss cases where there was, but it could not advance further. Because V-Dem provides the posterior distributions of the indicators coded by experts, it is possible to calculate 68% credible intervals for each indicator-year (see Pemstein et al. 2020). Year-on-year change that is significant at the 68% credibility level implies that the shortest interval (range of values) covering 68% of the posterior distribution (the highest density interval) of the indicator at time t does not overlap with the similarly constructed highest density 68% credible interval of the posterior distribution of the same indicator at time $t+1$.

⁸ Because the RoW classification’s cutoff points are partially arbitrary, it is best to evaluate on a case by case basis whether a case with a RoW score of 4 elected could in fact be considered democratic.

I use RoW to determine regime type because it provides full geographic and temporal coverage. This choice has consequences for the set of cases I obtain. For example, there are disagreements between the RoW classification and the Democracy-Dictatorship dataset (DD) (Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland 2010). While the latter provides a theoretically more grounded and more transparent decision rule for the classification of regimes than RoW, it is only available until the year 2009, and hence covers only a minority of the identified cases of executive aggrandizement. I use RoW to maintain the consistency of coding over time, but in Appendix II I present an alternative case universe which relies on the DD dataset and my application of the coding rules used in DD for the cases after the year 2009 (Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland 2010, 69).⁹

The analysis covers the years from 1989 to 2019. The scope of this study is limited to the years following the end of the Cold War both for theoretical and for empirical reasons. The extensive literature on regime transformations in the 1990s and 2000s has emphasized how the hegemonic status of liberal democracy in global politics, the United States' reduced tolerance for useful autocrats, as well as the EU's expansion and resulting international pressures for democratic reforms have influenced the incentives of governments around the world in this period (Carothers 1999, 3-8 and 45-46; Scheppele 2016). The theoretical assumption underlying the choice of the time span under study is that before the late 1980s autocratic regimes could enjoy greater international and domestic legitimacy and support. Because aspiring autocrats would not be as concerned with maintaining a democratic facade, and the military would likely be the critical actor in determining regime trajectory, executive aggrandizement was both less likely, and might have followed a different logic in this earlier period. As the subsequent analysis shows, most cases of executive aggrandizement happened after 2000. There is little reason to think that the extending the scope of the study further back in time would bring a significant increase in cases. For example, although Gamboa Guterrez's (2023, 60-62) study of presidents with hegemonic aspirations goes back to 1978, she finds no additional cases of presidents attempting constitutional amendments to extend their powers before 89. Limiting the scope to the post-Cold War period is theoretically consistent with the purpose of isolating a specific kind of regime instability, and also corresponds to empirical trends.

⁹ There are two differences between the two sets of cases. First, because DD considers a wider set of multi-party electoral regimes to be democratic, it leads to the inclusion of cases like Armenia under Robert Kocharyan, Sri Lanka under Mahinda Rajapaksa or Comoros under Azali Assoumani. Second, because DD requires at least one *party* turnover in government, it considers some Sub-Saharan African cases as undemocratic until proven otherwise (potential "false negatives" or Type II errors).

Applying all of these scope conditions returns a set of 119 country-years worldwide from 1989 to 2019 where executive aggrandizement was potentially happening. Grouping together consecutive years for the same country, I obtain 46 episodes where there was aggrandizement.¹⁰ Of these, I exclude 13 episodes, either because they happened in autocratic countries or because the incumbent was the first to be democratically elected since the last period of authoritarianism.¹¹

Among the remaining 33 episodes, some are familiar cases of executive aggrandizement that can easily be confirmed, as they appear prominently in the recent comparative literature on the subject. For remaining episodes, I consult the evolution of the V-Dem indicators used for the analysis as well as secondary sources, starting with Freedom House Freedom in the World country reports where these are available, to decide whether each episode was in fact part of an executive aggrandizement process.¹² Table 4 in Appendix I shows 23 episodes classified as executive aggrandizement, as well as the 10 episodes that were not classified as such, either because the cause of the decline in the indicators could not be identified or because the cause was not the incumbent's attempts to increase their powers.

Selection bias

The flexibility offered by V-Dem's disaggregated structure is extremely useful for identifying cases of executive aggrandizement, but using V-Dem indicators for this purpose leads to some issues. The most important one is that V-Dem indicators are more likely to capture incumbents' attempts to undermine accountability when these attempts have been at least somewhat successful in transforming the political regime. Because the indicators are based on coders' evaluation of

¹⁰ I group North Macedonia 2009-2012, 2014 and 2016 in a single episode as these are all during the governments of Gruevski.

¹¹ Excluded episodes are: Albania 2013, Bangladesh 2009-2010, Belarus 1994-1996, Comoros 2017-2018, Honduras 2012, Haiti 2007, Iraq 2013, Sri Lanka 2013, Maldives 2013, Mali 2014-2016 and 2018, Niger 2000-2001, Nigeria 2016-2019 and Pakistan 2015-2016.

¹² For there to be executive aggrandizement, the events that plausibly led the expert to downgrade the country must involve power abuse by the executive, threats to breach constraints on executive power, or executive initiatives to change some aspect of the regime in favor of increasing executive power or tenure. If the reports point to a controversial constitutional, judicial or electoral reform proposed by the incumbent leader, I consider that to be an indicator of executive aggrandizement. Persecution of media or opposition members by the incumbent suggests aggrandizement, although by itself it is not enough, as these may be routine occurrences in some regimes. If the reports in the period where there is a drop in the V-Dem indicators focus on institutional or government instability due to economic or political crises, massive corruption scandals implicating prominent members of the political elite, systemic impunity of state officials or judicial overreach, I exclude the case. If reports do not provide clear evidence of executive aggrandizement but do not suggest any other potential cause for the falling V-Dem scores in that particular case, I turn to the country-specific academic literature for the period in question.

institutions, *threats* to change the functioning of institutions would likely not be reflected in these evaluations unless they were at least partially realized, at least through informal mechanisms. This implies that operationalizing the concept of executive aggrandizement through V-Dem data has an intrinsic limitation: the method may oversee cases where the executive tried to aggrandize but could not implement desired changes because they were somehow constrained. Thus, even though the concept refers to actions incumbents take to undermine accountability and not to regime change, in practice the cases I identify through V-Dem would have experienced some decline in some aspects of democratic quality.

To partially address this bias of the measurement method towards cases which resulted in at least some institutional change, I consult two relevant studies whose case selection methods are entirely independent of regime outcomes: Gamboa's study of presidents with hegemonic aspirations in Latin America, and Baturo's study of presidential term limit extensions worldwide. Gamboa (2023, 55) defines presidents as having hegemonic aspirations if they are "democratically elected presidents who show no preference for democracy", and identifies seven such presidents in Latin America in the relevant period. She considers a president to not have a preference for democracy if, once in power, they try to introduce a constitutional amendment to increase executive power, and try to extend their tenure beyond a *second* term (*Ibid.*, 62). Of the presidents she identifies, four – Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Rafael Correa and Daniel Ortega – are among the cases identified using the V-Dem indicators. Of the three remaining cases one is Alberto Fujimori of Peru, who is excluded here because he staged a self-coup, suddenly shutting down congress and courts with the help of the military. The two remaining presidents are Alvaro Uribe of Colombia and Carlos Menem of Argentina. Should the actions of these presidents lead us to qualify them as cases of executive aggrandizement by the definition provided in this article? If so, why could the measurement not identify them?

Both presidents (successfully) extended their term limits and even attempted (unsuccessfully) to extend it a second time. To varying degrees they also expanded their influence on the judicial branch. Both, therefore, undermined horizontal accountability. Under Uribe, media freedom also worsened, making Uribe's a clear case of executive aggrandizement, one narrowly excluded by the significance cutoff used.¹³ In the case of Menem, it is less clear whether there really was an attempt

¹³ During Uribe's tenure, V-Dem's government censorship indicator registered significant decline at the 68% credibility level in 2003. On the horizontal accountability side, the judicial purge indicator also registered a sharp fall in 2003, but this does not reach significance.

to undermine electoral (vertical) accountability.¹⁴ I exclude Menem's case due to a lack of evidence that he would be willing to attack vertical accountability, though inevitably this coding decision remains somewhat uncertain. It is after all possible that Menem would have been bolder in attacking the press had he not faced so many domestic and international constraints.¹⁵

Baturo's (2014) study of what he calls "continuismo" focuses on presidents who extend their term limits. The study has global coverage and includes democratic as well as authoritarian regimes, but reviewing democratic cases is enough for our purposes. His study suggest four potential additional cases: Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, Didier Ratsiraka of Madagascar, Hipólito Mejía of the Dominican Republic and Fernando Cardoso of Brazil. Of these, I find that only Mejía, who successfully extended the term limit and tried to politicize electoral administration, fits the scope conditions.¹⁶ In sum, these two studies help me to identify two additional incumbent takeover attempts: Alvaro Uribe of Colombia (2002-2010) and Hipólito Mejía of the Dominican Republic (2000-2004).

While the studies reviewed above are comprehensive and systematic in their case selection, they focus exclusively on presidential regimes. There are also some parliamentary countries that have appeared prominently in discussions on executive aggrandizement, and yet are not present among the cases I find using V-Dem indicators: Czechia under Andrej Babiš and Slovenia under Janez Janša (Delić 2020, Hanley and Vachudova 2018, Cabada and Tomšič 2016). The latter is excluded only because the present study ends in 2019, and Janša came to office in 2020. In Babiš' case, V-Dem indicators for judicial compliance, legislative oversight, censorship and EMB autonomy register notable declines in the period included (up to 2019, two years before Babiš

¹⁴ Two horizontal accountability indicators register significant decline under Menem - judicial purges and high court independence. On the vertical accountability side, the harassment against journalists indicator registers sustained decline for Menem's first years, but this decline is not significant at the 68% credibility level. The government censorship indicator also registers a sharp decline initially (not statistically significant), though it recovers quickly.

¹⁵ When he was faced with widespread protests in 1997, Menem evoked Benjamin Franklin's words that the freedom of expression should be compensated with the "freedom of the stick". Due to domestic and international criticism (including in a New York Times editorial), he subsequently apologized to the press. *La Nación*. 1997. "Menem pidió disculpas al periodismo", September 20. Accessible at: <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/menem-pidio-disculpas-al-periodismo-nid77150/>

¹⁶ Ratsiraka and Wade, although they did engage in executive aggrandizement, are excluded from the study because they were the first elected presidents after the transition to democracy. Cardoso, while he extended the term limit, did not otherwise attempt to increase executive powers. Mejía also fails to meet Gamboa's criteria (2023, 62), as he extended the term limit only to allow for a second term (which he could not obtain). I include Mejía even though V-Dem does not register any decline in horizontal accountability indicators because of the extension of the term limit combined with his intervention in the conduct of elections.

stepped down), though all of these fall short of significance. Freedom House reports do not explain the decline in all of these indicators, but they provide enough of a basis to argue that Babiš did engage in executive aggrandizement.¹⁷ I therefore add the Czech Republic under Babiš as one of my cases.

In sum, a targeted review of the relevant literature results in the identification of three more cases that fit the scope conditions of this study: Uribe (Colombia), Mejía (Dominican Republic), and Babiš (Czechia). The inclusion of these cases is not based on a systematic screening process with global coverage, and there may still be “false negatives” - cases of executive aggrandizement that I fail to identify because they had limited impact on the regime. Even so, including these three leaders, who all lost power before their actions could cause much damage to institutions of accountability, improves the measurement by offsetting some of the selection bias caused by the nature of V-Dem data.

Quality of the data: Potential problems of expert assessment

A second source of selection bias related to the use of V-Dem could be due to experts’ sensitivity to political changes varying over time and space. V-Dem data is based on the ordinal answers that expert coders give to questions concerning the functioning of a wide range of institutions that are considered essential for democracy. Although estimates are based on multiple experts’ answers for each country-year, and although the V-Dem model tries to correct for the variability of the standards and thresholds across experts (and provides uncertainty estimates together with point estimates of the indicator values), we cannot claim that experts’ aggregated judgement for sure reflects an accurate picture of reality always and everywhere. Expert bias might be causing an overall or selective decline in democracy scores in recent years.¹⁸ It could be that experts have more knowledge about the present than they do about the past, and therefore assume that there were less violations in the past. This is a kind of presentist bias, that could account for the clustering of cases closer to the present.¹⁹ A second possible source of bias would be that experts’

¹⁷ Based on Freedom House reports, it is possible to identify an increase in harassment of journalists and an increase in the manipulation of media, where Babiš and allies have holdings, as well as an attempt to influence public media. On the horizontal accountability side, reports mention an attempt by the Prime Minister and the President to stall investigations into a high-profile subsidy-fraud scandal involving Babiš’ agricultural company.

¹⁸ Recently, Little and Meng (2023) have claimed that V-Dem data might be over-estimating the extent of democratic backsliding around the world. According to their view, ubiquitous public discourse about democratic backsliding may be leading experts to evaluate countries’ performance more negatively, thereby causing an artificial fall in democracy scores.

¹⁹ These potential differences in the coding process for years that are further back in the past is

expectations of how democratic things *should* be have increased. While the world hasn't changed, ambition has grown and hence we are more critical of the state of things.

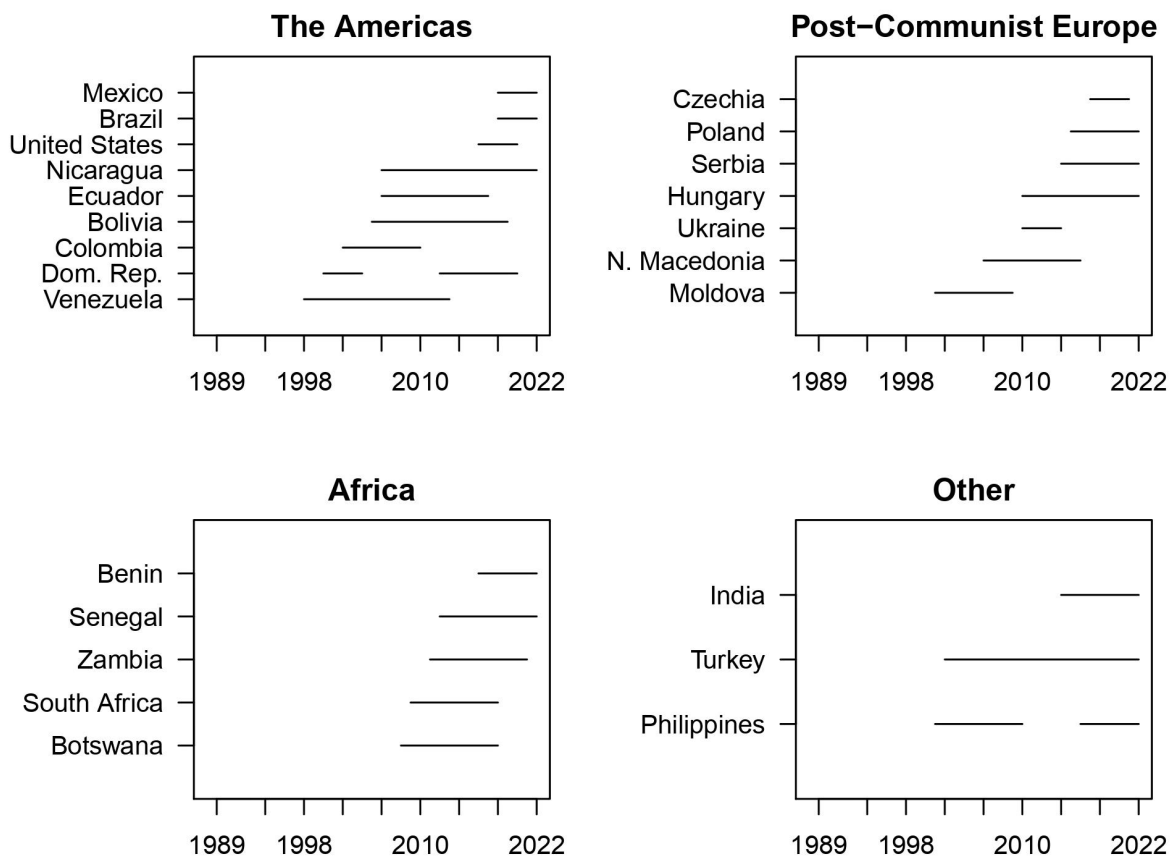
How certain can we be that the cases identified really did have an incumbent trying to amass more power, and that our perception of a rise in incumbent attacks against democratic institutions is not an artifact of changing expert perceptions, expectations or sensitivity? There are two factors that increase our confidence. First, for every case that fulfills the criteria of decline in at least one indicator in each of the horizontal and vertical accountability categories, I attempt to identify in the Freedom House Freedom in the World country reports the specific phenomena (e.g. judicial purge, reform proposal, crackdown etc.) underlying the decline in scores. Where these reports were inconclusive or unavailable, I look for press reports and other academic sources. If I cannot identify a specific political conflict, or if the instability is caused by an altogether different political dynamic where the incumbent executive leaders' ambition is not the main moving force, I exclude the case. Furthermore, for the majority of these cases - most of the Latin American and virtually all the European cases - executive aggrandizement is documented in the literature by country and regional experts in case studies.

There remain, however, two potential problems. The first is that paradigmatic cases in different regions, such as Venezuela, Turkey and Hungary have created schemata through which experts read developments elsewhere, including in their own country of expertise. It is possible, even likely, that the developments in these paradigmatic cases make them more sensitive to certain aspects of the political system they study, leading them to downgrade scores in the absence of clear "objective" changes. This indeed might be a form of bias, but there is also another way of looking at this possibility. Since leaders themselves learn from and are inspired by what happens in their regions and in the broader world, incumbents may also be realizing, because of those same paradigmatic cases, that they can manipulate some aspects of the political system more effectively to their advantage. In short, if experts downgrade scores because of the the increased salience of certain defects of the existing democratic institutions, this may also reflect a process by which a pre-existing systemic weakness becomes an actual political threat because prominent political actors are increasingly willing or able to use it to their advantage. In such ambiguous circumstances, it may be difficult to judge definitively whether or not any decline in scores is a result of expert bias or of a growing threat to the functioning of democratic institutions. The second problem concerns the match between the conceptualization of the phenomenon, itself deeply shaped by

another reason not to extend the scope of the study historically.

the earlier, paradigmatic cases, and the measurement strategy. It is possible that some of the cases of executive aggrandizement I find, notably the Sub-Saharan African dominant party democracies, might be qualitatively different by virtue of their context, yet look the same. Yet, even if that is true, comparing those cases to cases of executive aggrandizement identified elsewhere I hope will open a fruitful discussion whereby country and regional experts provide nuance and correct any mistakes in interpretation. All in all, even though the proposed measurement strategy is not fool-proof, it holds promise for advancing the debate on executive aggrandizement, why it happens and the conditions under which it leads to democratic regression and breakdown.

Figure 1: The temporal and geographic distribution of the 26 cases of executive aggrandizement in democracies (excluding immediate periods of transition), 1989-2019.



The cases

The 26 cases of executive aggrandizement identified above are from all over the world. Figure 1 visualizes the timing and duration of the cases by region and rough chronological sequence (See Table 1 below for a detailed list of the cases).

Of the 26 cases, eight had parliamentary regimes (or a regime more similar to the parliamentary regime, including parliamentary regimes with elected presidents) when the incumbent came to power.²⁰ The remaining countries largely had classic presidential regimes.²¹ A striking aspect of Figure 1 is that cases start emerging only around the turn of the century. This pattern should be approached with caution, however, as it is in part an artifact of the exclusion of transitional democracies – those regimes that have not yet had a second executive leader elected democratically. If we were to include cases of aggrandizement in transitioning regimes, then the possible addition of a set of leaders such as Lukashenko in Belarus, Mečiar in Slovakia, Wade in Senegal or Ratsiraka in Madagascar would lead to the 1990s being somewhat more populated. The temporal pattern, therefore, is partly a result of truncation, since many of the world’s democracies emerged in the early 1990s. A second pattern that the figure reveals is that cases have been concentrated in South America and post-communist Europe and Eurasia, and that they sometimes display sub-regional geographic clustering. It is notable that so far, no Western European cases are present. Finally, the figure shows that while a few leaders who aggrandized were rewarded with very long tenures, many were in power for just one term, or stepped down after two terms. In the next section, I analyze the outcomes of aggrandizement for democracy and for the incumbents.

Executive aggrandizement and regime outcomes

Identifying regime outcomes in cases of aggrandizement is somewhat challenging because when the incumbent remains in power for more than two terms, an electoral regime of an ambiguous nature tends to emerge (Przeworski 2019, 25-26). Are these regimes still democratic? On the one hand, the opposition competes in elections and often does win some offices in such cases. On the other hand,

²⁰ These cases are South Africa, India, Turkey, North Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic.

²¹ The exceptions are Bolivia before the 2009 constitution, where congress would elect the president in a run-off if no candidate achieved an absolute majority at the polls, and Moldova, where from 2000 to 2016 (including during Voronin’s tenure) the president was elected indirectly by parliament.

it is unclear that normal turnover in power would happen if the opposition actually had a chance of winning, or would win, national elections. Furthermore, a country that is undergoing executive aggrandizement by definition does not have a stable regime but is rather in a dynamic political “situation” (Collier and Levitsky 1997, 446), where the incumbent tries to mold political institutions to their advantage, to the extent allowed by their political power and abilities. The regime features we observe at some point may be deceiving, because they may depend on the (changeable) balance of political forces more than on any stable institutional pillar. Due to these ambiguities, I propose a categorization of outcomes that is theoretically more directly linked to the phenomenon of executive aggrandizement than a typical regime categorization would be.

To describe different outcomes, I distinguish between three stages of executive aggrandizement. The first stage is the *democratic* stage, where, despite aggrandizement, the government is still operating in a political system where electoral and horizontal accountability remain functional because the executive does not have overwhelming influence over other branches of government, media and civil society. Incumbents may be defeated electorally during this democratic phase, may receive a vote of no confidence where relevant, may decide not to seek re-election, or may reach the end of their term limit and step down. Trump and Bolsonaro would be examples of electoral defeat in this democratic phase, while Danilo Medina of the Dominican Republic is an example of a leader who stepped down at the end of their term limit. In such cases, where incumbents are turned out of power and do not get to put in office a successor they can control, I consider that there was minimal change to the regime. To describe this outcome, whereby the incumbent exits via institutional mechanisms in the democratic phase, I use the term “institutionally enforced exit”.

If the incumbent remains in office and aggrandizement progresses, leading to a growing concentration of power, the regime becomes less democratic while the incumbent becomes more hegemonic: it becomes harder for opponents (other political parties, civil society actors, or control organs) to hold them accountable. I posit that it would take at least two terms to establish hegemony, especially in more institutionalized democracies with rooted political parties.²² If a government that is increasing its powers via aggrandizement stays in power for *more* than two consecutive terms, they have accumulated both formal and informal influence over state institutions and civil society, such that even though elections, the legislature and courts continue to function, the regime is in fact less democratic because a large power asymmetry between the government and the opposition hampers democratic accountability. While it is not always possible to classify this *hegemonic* government situation as a

²² In already fragile democracies where institutions pose little resistance, this transition can happen within a single term, although it may still be premature to describe the government as hegemonic - civil society may still have motives and resources to oppose an overreaching government in this early period.

competitive authoritarian regime at this stage, it might also be difficult to classify it as democratic – still, there would be reason to think that the political institutions are less democratic than they were at the beginning of the incumbent’s tenure.

Once the government attains hegemonic status, incumbent takeover becomes a likely outcome, but is still not certain. Exit due to democratic institutional constraints becomes unlikely in the hegemonic phase, because institutional rules tend to no longer be binding for the incumbent. An example where electoral defeat failed to create turnover in the hegemonic phase is Turkey, where the ruling AKP [Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - Justice and Development Party] lost its majority in 2015 after three terms in power, but was able to co-opt nationalists into an alliance that would help them to repeat elections, all the while re-kindling the civil war with the Kurdish insurgency in a successful strategy to increase their votes. Thus, the June 2015 electoral defeat did not lead to alternation, but to repeated elections, where the AKP recovered its majority.

Yet, incumbents who have established hegemonic control over institutional politics may still face formidable *political* opposition and end up losing power. I observe two ways in which a hegemonic incumbent loses power: because they decide to step down, or because they are overthrown. One irregular exit scenario was politically-enforced resignation. Widespread protests against Gruevski led to international negotiation and political pressure finally securing his resignation. A second irregular exit scenario was popular and/or military upheaval of opposition forces. I name this outcome opposition takeover, as the new government is not immediately subject to democratic accountability. This is what happened to Morales in Bolivia and also to Yanukovich in Ukraine. Finally, it is also possible that the incumbent decides to step down and install a successor even though they do not face any institutional constraint. If the incumbent can keep the successor in line from behind the scenes and eventually come back to power, or otherwise secure a stable continuation of the regime, then the regime outcome might be incumbent takeover even though the person in executive office changes. But if this successor subsequently turns against the incumbent, like Correa’s successor Morales did, then the outcome is not incumbent takeover.²³

Among the nine aggrandizing leaders that were in power for more than two terms, five eventually achieved takeover according to my classification, consolidating a form of electoral authoritarian regime

²³ The distinction between leaders stepping down for institutional reasons and stepping down without institutional obligation is admittedly a fragile one in electoral regimes. Had he faced no electoral constraint, Correa would have chosen a much more loyal successor who would have likely secured Correa’s continued influence over political institutions.

under their leadership. While takeover will be personal in most cases -meaning that power will be vested in the individual leader, who remains in office - it is not unimaginable that there could be takeover by a party, in which case the head of government might change but power will remain vested in the same political group. In sum, while the nature of the emerging authoritarian regime may differ, I consider the outcome to be incumbent takeover whenever the incumbent is not ousted from office and successfully establishes a political system that removes the expectation and possibility of institutionally exercised accountability.

Table 1 reports the outcomes for the cases of executive aggrandizement according to these categories in two columns: “Hegemon” and “Outcome”. I also report the decline in V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index over the incumbent’s tenure (or to the year 2022 if the incumbent remains in power).²⁴ Table 2 provides a summary of the outcomes in all the cases. Of the 26 cases of aggrandizement I identify above, four cases - Poland, India, Mexico and Senegal – do not yet have a clear regime outcome. I categorize these cases as ongoing. India’s political complexity and diversity make it difficult to claim that Modi has achieved takeover and is no longer susceptible to institutional accountability. In Senegal, Macky Sall is in his second seven-year term, and the development of the regime may become clear only towards the end of that term. Mexico’s Lopez Obrador is still in his first term and unlikely to breach Mexico’s long-lasting one-term limit. Finally, Poland under Kaczynski’s party PiS - Law and Justice – is at a critical turning point at the end of its second term.

²⁴ While the rest of the article uses V-Dem version 10 (ending in 2019), calculations shown Table 1 and in Figure 2 are based on version 13 of the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al. 2023), which extends to 2022 and reflects the extent of regime change in most up-to-date fashion. Due to V-Dem’s methodology, the score of a country on a given year for any variable can vary from version to version.

Table 1: Cases of executive aggrandizement worldwide and their outcomes, 1989-2019.

Country	Leader	In office	End	Δ LDI	Hegemon	Outcome
Venezuela	Hugo Chávez	1998	2013	-0.479	Yes	Incumbent takeover
Hungary	Viktor Orbán	2010	-	-0.411	Yes	Incumbent takeover
Poland	PiS / Jarosław Kaczyński	2015	-	-0.400	-	-
Turkey	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	2002	-	-0.376	Yes	Incumbent takeover
Nicaragua	Daniel Ortega	2006	-	-0.302	Yes	Incumbent takeover
Benin	Patrice Talon	2016	-	-0.268	Yes ¹	Incumbent takeover
Bolivia	Evo Morales	2005	2019	-0.231	Yes	Opposition takeover
India	Narendra Modi	2014	-	-0.210	Yes	-
Ukraine	Viktor Yanukovich	2010	2014	-0.198	No	Opposition takeover
Macedonia	Nikola Gruevski	2006	2016	-0.185	Yes	Resigned (no successor)
Serbia	Aleksandar Vučić	2014	-	-0.167	Yes	Incumbent takeover
Philippines	Rodrigo Duterte	2016	2022	-0.153	No	Term limit (successor)
Zambia	Michael Sata, Edgar Lungu	2011	2021	-0.151	No	Electoral defeat

Table 1: Cases of executive aggrandizement worldwide and their outcomes, 1989-2019.

Country	Leader	In office	End	Δ LDI	Hegemon	Outcome
Ecuador	Rafael Correa	2007	2017	-0.122	Yes	Stepped down (successor rebelled)
USA	Donald Trump	2017	2020	-0.112	No	Electoral defeat
Brazil	Jair Bolsonaro	2019		-0.105	No	Electoral defeat
Moldova	Vladimir Voronin	2001	2009	-0.074	No	Electoral defeat
Czechia	Andrej Babiš	2017	2021	-0.064	No	Electoral defeat
Dominican Republic	Danilo Medina	2012	2020	-0.049	No	Term limit (no successor)
Mexico	AMLO	2018	-	-0.043	-	-
Philippines	Gloria Macapagal Arroyo	2001	2010	-0.038	No	Term limit (no successor)
South Africa	Jacob Zuma	2009	2018	-0.038	No	Term limit (no successor)
Botswana	Ian Khama	2008	2018	-0.032	No	Term limit (successor rebelled)
Dominican Republic	Hipólito Mejía	2000	2004	-0.01	No	Electoral defeat
Senegal	Macky Sall	2012	-	0.020	-	-
Colombia	Alvaro Uribe	2002	2010	0.075	No	Term limit (successor rebelled)

[†]Talon is categorized as hegemonic (despite being in his second term and despite still facing a two-term limit) because of the comprehensive way in which he has shut down political competition by banning or co-opting rivals.

Of the 22 concluded cases, I consider six to have already experienced incumbent takeover: Venezuela, Turkey, Hungary, Nicaragua, Serbia and Benin. These countries, still governed by the aggrandizing executive with the exception of Venezuela, can no longer be considered democratic even though the extent to which their different regimes rely on violent repression versus co-optation of opposition forces vary considerably. While this group includes some of the most emblematic examples of executive aggrandizement, I find that, in fact, 11 out of 22 cases of aggrandizement - half - resulted in institutionally enforced exit by the incumbent. While the democratic regime may have experienced some changes and regression under these leaders (see also Figure 2), these changes did not amount to an elimination of accountability mechanisms - the regime remained democratic throughout and beyond the incumbent's tenure. Finally, the remaining five of the 22 concluded cases experienced other kinds of incumbent exit. These are North Macedonia, South Africa and Ecuador, where the incumbent ended up stepping down, and Ukraine and Bolivia, which experienced opposition takeover.

Figure 2 depicts the evolution of V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) over the course of the incumbent's tenure and in the years that followed their exit, up to the year 2022 for the 26 cases of aggrandizement identified. Each line in the plots represents one of the incumbents in the table, except for the cases from the same country (Philippines and Dominican Republic), which are represented in a single line per country. The x-axis shows the number of years since the incumbent assumed office. Lines are solid for the years the incumbent was in power and dashed for the years after they leave office. The regime trends depicted here give us some information about the state of political freedoms and elections in these countries during and after executive aggrandizement (in the short- or medium-term depending on the years in which executive aggrandizement happened).

Table 2: Summary of the outcomes of executive aggrandizement

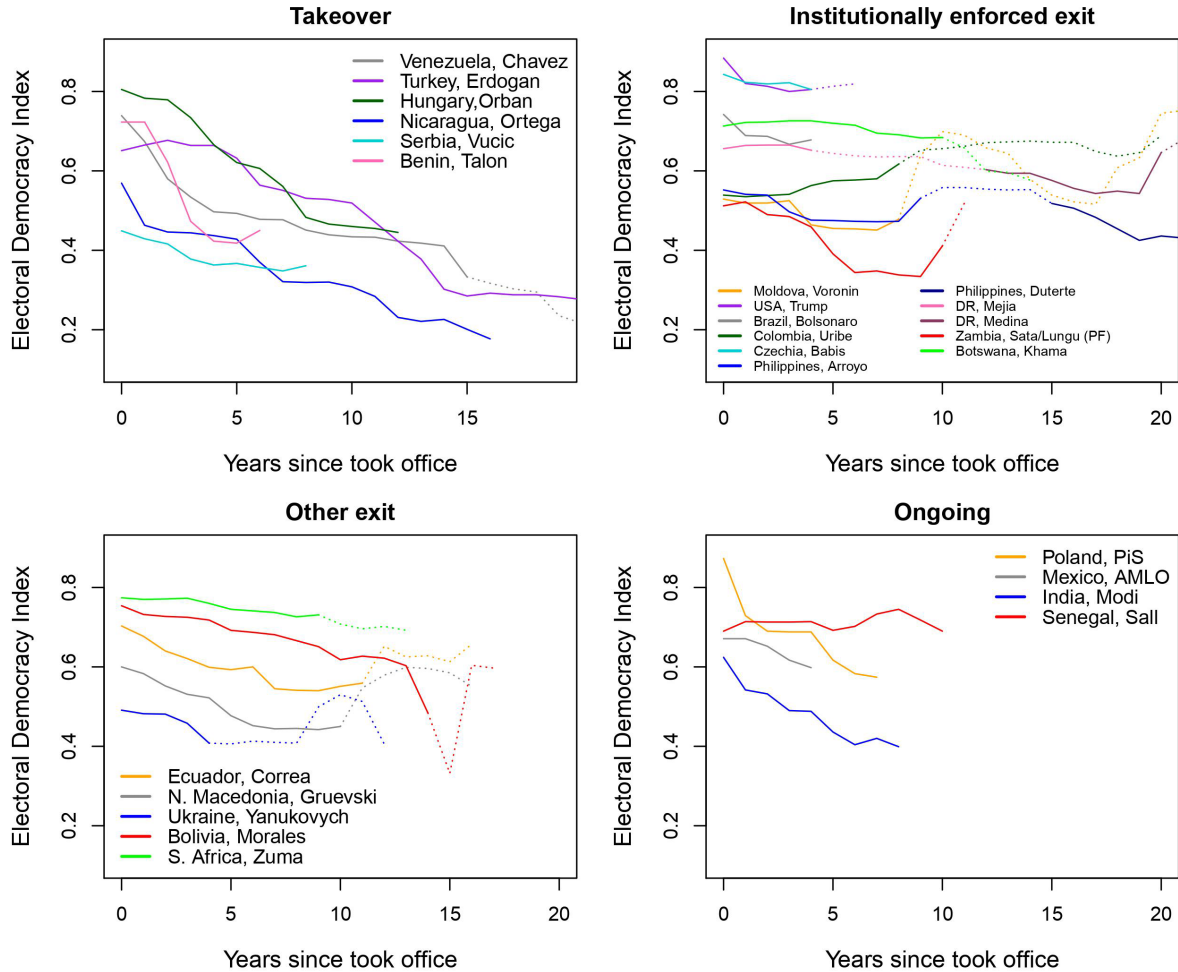
Takeover	Institutionally enforced exit			Other exit		Ongoing
	<i>Electoral defeat</i>	<i>Term limit</i>	<i>Successor</i>	<i>No successor</i>	<i>Oppos. takeover</i>	
Chavez	Voronin	Uribe	Correa*	Gruevski**	Yanukovych	AMLO
Erdoğan	Trump	Arroyo		Zuma***	Morales	Modi
Orbán	Bolsonaro	Duterte				Kaczyński
Ortega	Mejía	Khama				Sall
Vučić	Lungu	Medina				
Talon	Babiš					

* Correa removed term limits but then stepped down and supported the election of a successor, who later broke away.

** Gruevski, faced with social protest, accepted to step down and left the country following internationally brokered negotiations.

*** Zuma failed to get his preferred successor elected as head of ANC and, facing the imminent prospect of a vote of no confidence in congress, he resigned towards the end of his second term.

Figure 2: The V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) over incumbents' tenure and after (to the year 2022) for 26 cases of aggrandizement, by outcome category.



Note: Each line depicts the EDI in one country over time, from the year the aggrandizing incumbent first came to power to the year 2022. The x-axis shows the number of years since the incumbent assumed office. Lines are solid for the years the incumbent was in power and dashed for the years after they leave office. For the DR and the Philippines, which had two aggrandizing leaders in the period, I use a single line, where the first solid stretch represents the first aggrandizing leader's term, and the second solid stretch the second aggrandizing leader's term.

The cases are organized by outcome category into four panels. On the upper left side, the panel with the cases of incumbent takeover shows a collapse of democracy scores in all cases (with the exception perhaps of Serbia, which already had low scores). The four cases of executive aggrandizement that are not yet concluded are grouped in the lower right panel (“Ongoing”). While Poland and India exhibit stark drops in the EDI, they remain democratic and it is not clear yet how the episodes will end. The panel on the upper right side groups cases where incumbents had to step down because of an election defeat or a term limit. For the Dominican Republic and the Philippines, which had two aggrandizing leaders in the period studied, I use a single line where the first solid stretch represents the first aggrandizing leader’s term, and the second solid stretch the second aggrandizing leader’s term. The lines here are relatively flat compared to the takeover panel on the left: Although the cases in this plot experience some fluctuation of the EDI score during and after the executive aggrandizement episode, democracy largely survived. Nevertheless, the fact that executive aggrandizement was followed by yet other periods of aggrandizement in the DR, the Philippines and possibly also Botswana (presently), suggests a need to conduct more research on the political implications of executive aggrandizement beyond an immediate collapse of democracy. Finally, the lower left panel groups cases where the incumbent left office and lost influence in unusual ways. In the case of Bolivia, which experienced an opposition takeover supported by the military, democracy scores worsened after Morales was ousted, until elections were finally resumed. Ecuador and Macedonia’s democracies were deemed to recover quickly after the aggrandizing incumbent stepped down. In sum, I consider that the democratic regime broke down in seven out of 22 concluded cases (adding the case of Bolivia, where democracy swiftly recovered, to the cases of takeover). Democracy survived, if in battered state, in the remaining 15 cases.

The typology of political outcomes I present above says nothing of the fate of the incumbent when they do not achieve takeover of the political system. Do these leaders then go back to participating in “politics as usual”? For the majority, this was not an option. Of the 16 aggrandizing incumbents who have left office, no less than ten faced legal charges after leaving office. For Babiš and Zuma there were corruption charges already preceding their rise to executive office, while for Uribe, Macapagal Arroyo, Yanukovych, Gruevski, Correa, Trump, Morales and Bolsonaro the charges mainly had to do with abuses of power while in office. Gruevski, Morales, Yanukovych and Correa went into exile and remain there, while Macapagal Arroyo was briefly jailed before resuming her political activity. This brief account of the consequences of executive aggrandizement for the incumbents themselves shows that aggrandizement is hardly a safe endeavor for politicians, and should not be a very attractive option even

in more fragile democracies, unless the incumbent is confident of victory or is already in trouble to begin with and has little to lose.

In sum, executive aggrandizement, even when it progresses enough to transform institutions, can lead to different regime outcomes and to different consequences for incumbents who venture down this path. Gradual autocratic takeover of the political system by the incumbent happened in about a quarter of the cases. In about half of the cases incumbents left office in regular ways - either because they lost elections (six cases) or because they stepped down after completing their constitutionally allowed terms (five cases). Incumbents were ultimately defeated in an additional five cases, where turnover happened in a less predictable or irregular way. All the five incumbents in this latter group, as well as five of the incumbents who left office due to electoral defeat or due to term limits, subsequently faced legal trouble for corruption or abuse of power. Executive aggrandizement sometimes does cause the demise of democracy, but it is equally likely to result in the demise of the incumbent.

Conclusions

By systematically identifying cases of executive aggrandizement around the world in the last 30 years, this article has shown, first, that aggrandizement has happened in very different kinds of democracies - old or new; liberal, patronal or oligarchic; parliamentary or presidential. Second, I show that although aggrandizement destabilizes the democratic regime by definition, it need not break democracy. Based on the cases analyzed in this article, we can say that an aggrandizing incumbent was roughly as likely to end up in exile as they were to become an autocrat.

What does this descriptive analysis imply for the debate on the state of democracy around the world? First, the data presented here suggest that while executive aggrandizement is an important threat to democracy, it is not usually lethal. Second, systematic reflection on the outcomes of executive aggrandizement reminds us that a certain temporal distance is needed to draw conclusions about what is happening to democracy around the world. Executive aggrandizement has happened in different circumstances, and we have yet to learn to what extent it is caused by universally comparable domestic factors, to what extent international structural conditions have encouraged aggrandizement, and to what extent cases have proliferated due to diffusion dynamics of different kinds. The fact that in many cases the aggrandizing incumbent lost power and had to face prosecution or exile means that incumbents' anti-democratic actions are not in themselves proof that democratic institutions are too weak.

Furthermore, the fact that aggrandizement backfired in some cases needs to be accounted for in our explanations of democratic instability. Did these incumbents miscalculate their probability of success and if so, why? Perhaps cases of aggrandizement have proliferated as a result of a diffusion mechanisms similar to the one theorized by Weyland (2019), whereby elected elites, upon observing “successful” executive aggrandizement in neighboring countries or around the world, *mistakenly* judge that they can also achieve an autocratic takeover in this way. If that is the case, then the different cases of aggrandizement might not be comparable in terms of the mechanisms driving them, and we might expect the “success rate” of executive aggrandizement to fall from its level in earlier cases. If, however, aggrandizement proliferated because incumbents believe (sometimes mistakenly) that the international system now provides cover for autocratic leaders, as has been argued by Diamond (2015, 9), the world might indeed end up with a smaller number of democracies overall. Alternatively, it is also possible that the years of commodity boom and flush global liquidity pushed up incumbency advantage and provided incumbents with a window of opportunity to escape accountability in some countries. In the current economic environment of slow growth and inflation such an advantage is unlikely to persist, unless the global economic orthodoxy and globalization that constrain economic policy do not survive the present political pressures. By delineating a universe of cases, this study hopes to open the way for future research that might help us test these and other hypotheses about the causes of executive aggrandizement, and better understand its varied political consequences.

Naturally, the analysis presented here has important limitations. Case specialists might contest whether executive aggrandizement is the most appropriate frame to understand the specific process of regime instability in each of these cases. Furthermore, the proposed method for identifying executive aggrandizement may miss cases where it largely failed. To identify the weaker forms of executive aggrandizement, I am forced to move away from systematic measurement and turn to a case-based evaluation that relies on the literature. Finally, the temporal limitation of the analysis, as well as the exclusion of transitional democracies means that I give up on a more comprehensive descriptive analysis of the phenomenon to preserve greater theoretical and empirical consistency. Notwithstanding its weaknesses, I hope this global-scale comparative exercise may help advance our understanding of the challenges against democracy in our age.

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Appendix

Appendix I: Case Selection with V-Dem

Table 3 shows the full list of democratic countries that have experienced a significant decline (at the 68% credibility level) within a five-year period in at least one of the selected V-Dem horizontal accountability indicators - high court compliance (v2juhccomp), high court independence (v2juhcind), judicial purges (v2jupurge), legislature investigates in practice (v2lginvstp) and executive oversight (v2lgotovst) - and at least one of the vertical accountability indicators, namely harassment of journalists (v2meharjrn), government censorship effort-media (v2mecenefm), CSO repression (v2csreprss), election management body (EMB) capacity (v2elembcap), election management body (EMB) autonomy (v2elembaut), election voter registry (v2elrgstry) and government election intimidation (v2elintim). Cases on the left-hand side were identified as cases of executive aggrandizement, while those on the right-hand side were found to correspond to other forms of political instability and are excluded from the study.

Table 4 provides more detailed information about the case selection by showing, for all potential cases of incumbent takeover attempts identified using V-Dem, which indicators registered a statistically significant decline (at the 68% credibility level) over the five-year period up to the year pre-selected for inclusion in the study (in the “year” column). Indicators marked with an X registered significant decline. The case selection is based on Version 10 of the V-Dem dataset.

Table 3: Potential cases of executive aggrandizement, based on V-Dem data (v10).

Executive aggrandizement		Other political crises	
Country-Period	Leader	Country-Period	Explanation
Benin; 2018-19	Talon	Argentina; 2003-04	Protests, instability (pre-Kirchner)
Bolivia; 2006-09, 2019	Morales	Bosnia; 2009	Institutional instability (consociationalism)
Brazil; 2019	Bolsonaro	Brasil; 2016-18	Corruption, impeachment
Botswana; 2017	Khama	Ghana; 2015-16	Judicial corruption, electoral irregularity
Dominican Rep.; 2016-17	Medina	Moldova; 2015-18	Judicial overreach, state capture
Ecuador; 2013-16	Correa	Namibia; 2019	Corruption, instability of dominant party rule
Hungary; 2010-19	Orbán	Paraguay; 2013-15	Re-affirming dominant party rule
India; 2017-19	Modi	Romania; 2018	Instability, impunity, state-capture
North Macedonia; 2009-12, 2014, 2016	Gruevski	Slovenia; 2013	Corruption, instability
Mexico; 2019	Lopez Obrador	Timor-Leste; 2015-16	Impunity and co-optation of opposition
Moldova; 2001-03	Voronin		
Nicaragua; 2006-10	Ortega		
Philippines; 2004	Arroyo		
Philippines; 2016-19	Duterte		
Poland; 2016-19	PiS (Kaczyński)		
Senegal; 2018	Sall		
Serbia; 2013-16	Vučić		
South Africa; 2013	Zuma		
Turkey; 2010-11, 2013	Erdoğan		
Ukraine; 2010-12	Yanukovich		
USA; 2017	Trump		
Venezuela; 1999-2006	Chavez		
Zambia; 2013-15	Sata/Lungu		

Table 4: Declining indicators in all potential cases of gradual incumbent takeover attempts, based on V-Dem data (v10).

	Country	Year	H. Court Indep.	H. Court Compl.	Jud. Pur.	Leg. Inv.	Ex. Over.	Har. Journ.	Gov. Cens.	CSO Rep.	EMB Cap.	EMB Aut.	Voter Reg.	Gov. El. Intim.
1	Argentina	2003			X				X					
2	Argentina	2004			X				X					
3	Benin	2018				X			X					
4	Benin	2019				X		X	X			X		
5	Bosnia and Herzegov- ina	2009			X									X
6	Bolivia	2006			X	X	X							X
7	Bolivia	2007			X	X	X							X
8	Bolivia	2008			X	X	X							X
9	Bolivia	2009			X	X	X					X		
10	Bolivia	2012	X									X		
11	Bolivia	2019			X			X			X	X	X	
12	Brazil	2016					X	X	X	X				
13	Brazil	2017				X	X	X	X	X		X		
14	Brazil	2018				X	X	X	X	X		X		
15	Brazil	2019					X	X	X	X		X		
16	Botswana	2016			X			X						
17	Botswana	2017			X					X				

Table 4: Declining indicators in all potential cases of gradual incumbent takeover attempts, based on V-Dem data (v10).

	Country	Year	H. Court Indep.	H. Court Compl.	Jud. Pur.	Leg. Inv.	Ex. Over.	Har. Journ.	Gov. Cens.	CSO Rep.	EMB Cap.	EMB Aut.	Voter Reg.	Gov. El. Intim.
18	Dominican Republic	2016			X								X	
19	Dominican Republic	2017			X								X	
20	Ecuador	2008	X			X								X
21	Ecuador	2009	X			X				X				X
22	Ecuador	2010	X			X	X			X				X
23	Ghana	2015			X							X		
24	Ghana	2016			X							X		
25	Honduras	2012			X			X						X
26	Haiti	2007	X										X	
27	Hungary	2010				X			X					
28	Hungary	2011			X	X			X	X				
29	Hungary	2012	X		X	X			X	X				
30	Hungary	2013	X			X	X		X	X		X		
31	Hungary	2014	X				X					X		
32	India	2017			X		X	X	X	X		X		
33	India	2018					X	X	X	X		X		
34	India	2019			X		X		X	X				
35	Moldova	2001			X	X				X		X		

Table 4: Declining indicators in all potential cases of gradual incumbent takeover attempts, based on V-Dem data (v10).

Country	Year	H. Court Indep.	H. Court Compl.	Jud. Pur.	Leg. Inv.	Ex. Over.	Har. Journ.	Gov. Cens.	CSO Rep.	EMB Cap.	EMB Aut.	Voter Reg.	Gov. El. Intim.
36	Moldova			X	X						X		
37	Moldova			X	X						X		
38	Moldova			X			X			X			
39	Moldova	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X		
40	Moldova			X	X	X			X		X		
41	Moldova	X		X	X	X					X		
42	Mexico					X		X					
43	North Macedonia		X	X				X	X				
44	North Macedonia		X	X				X					
45	North Macedonia		X	X			X	X					
46	North Macedonia	X		X			X	X					
47	North Macedonia	X	X				X						
48	North Macedonia	X	X	X					X				
49	Namibia	X	X								X		

Table 4: Declining indicators in all potential cases of gradual incumbent takeover attempts, based on V-Dem data (v10).

Country	Year	H. Court Indep.	H. Court Compl.	Jud. Pur.	Leg. Inv.	Ex. Over.	Har. Journ.	Gov. Cens.	CSO Rep.	EMB Cap.	EMB Aut.	Voter Reg.	Gov. El. Intim.
50	Nicaragua	2006	X	X	X				X			X	
51	Nicaragua	2007		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
52	Nicaragua	2008	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
53	Nicaragua	2009	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
54	Nicaragua	2010				X	X	X	X				
55	Philippines	2004				X					X		
56	Philippines	2016	X			X		X	X				
57	Philippines	2017				X		X	X				
58	Philippines	2018	X		X	X	X	X	X				
59	Philippines	2019		X		X		X	X				
60	Poland	2016		X	X	X	X	X	X				
61	Poland	2017	X	X		X	X	X	X		X		
62	Poland	2018	X	X	X		X	X	X		X		
63	Poland	2019	X	X			X	X	X		X		
64	Paraguay	2013	X			X	X		X				
65	Paraguay	2014				X	X		X				
66	Paraguay	2015				X			X				
67	Romania	2017	X		X	X	X	X	X				
68	Romania	2018	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				
69	Romania	2019	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				

Table 4: Declining indicators in all potential cases of gradual incumbent takeover attempts, based on V-Dem data (v10).

Country	Year	H. Court Indep.	H. Court Compl.	Jud. Pur.	Leg. Inv.	Ex. Over.	Har. Journ.	Gov. Cens.	CSO Rep.	EMB Cap.	EMB Aut.	Voter Reg.	Gov. El. Intim.
70	Senegal	2018	X									X	
71	Serbia	2013			X	X		X	X				
72	Serbia	2014			X	X	X	X					X
73	Serbia	2015			X	X	X	X					X
74	Serbia	2016			X	X	X	X			X		X
75	Slovenia	2013	X				X						
76	Timor- Leste	2015	X						X				
77	Timor- Leste	2016	X						X				
78	Turkey	2010		X			X	X					
79	Turkey	2011		X			X	X					
80	Turkey	2013		X			X		X				
81	Ukraine	2010	X			X		X			X		
82	Ukraine	2011	X		X	X		X			X		
83	Ukraine	2012	X			X					X		X
84	United States of America	2017			X								X
85	Venezuela	1999	X		X	X		X					

Table 4: Declining indicators in all potential cases of gradual incumbent takeover attempts, based on V-Dem data (v10).

Country	Year	H. Court Indep.	H. Court Compl.	Jud. Pur.	Leg. Inv.	Ex. Over.	Har. Journ.	Gov. Cens.	CSO Rep.	EMB Cap.	EMB Aut.	Voter Reg.	Gov. El. Intim.
86	Venezuela	2000	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
87	Venezuela	2001	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
88	Venezuela	2002	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
89	Venezuela	2003		X	X	X	X				X	X	
90	Venezuela	2004	X								X		
91	Venezuela	2005	X	X		X	X						X
92	Venezuela	2006	X	X		X	X						X
93	South Africa	2013		X					X				
94	Zambia	2013				X	X						
95	Zambia	2014				X	X						
96	Zambia	2015				X	X	X					

Appendix II: Case Selection with V-Dem, using Democracy-Dictatorship criteria for regime type

Tables 5 and 6 reproduce the measurement strategy with V-Dem indicators, this time using the criteria developed by Cheibub et al. (2010) in the Democracy-Dictatorship (DD) dataset, rather than the Regimes of the World (Row) classification (Lührmann Marquardt and Mechkova 2018), to identify democracies. Because DD criteria for democracy are simpler and less onerous (or more minimalist) than RoW criteria, a greater number of electoral regimes are likely to be considered democratic by the former. The exception to this is dominant party regimes, which RoW classifies as democratic if they fulfill certain conditions regarding political rights, whereas DD only classifies them as democratic after they have at least one *party alternation* in office.

Unfortunately, the DD dataset only extends to the year 2009. For the years 2010-2019 the coding is done by the author, based on the criteria laid out in Cheibub et al. (2010, p. 69) and relying on basic information concerning elections and any other regime events, as well as Freedom House Freedom in the World Country reports where available. For the period before 2009 as well as after, I apply DD's requirement of at least one party alternation in power slightly differently: while DD *retrospectively* codes countries as democratic if they end up experiencing party alternation, I exclude cases that correspond to the countries' first democratic government after an autocratic period, whether or not these countries continue to have democratic alternation in office later on.

To apply the DD criteria, I start from the sample of all country years that experienced significant decline in at least one V-Dem indicator in both the vertical accountability and horizontal accountability categories over a five-year period (see Appendix 1). For the years up to 2009, I first eliminate country-years coded as non-democratic in DD. For democratic country-years, I apply the same criteria used in the article: I try to identify, on the basis of Freedom House reports and news articles or other secondary sources where necessary, the events presumably causing the decline in the relevant V-Dem indicators. When I find no evidence that the decline in indicators is due to executive aggrandizement, or if the case corresponds to the first democratic government after an autocratic episode, I exclude the case.

For the years after 2009, I revise all country years coded as "electoral autocracy" or "electoral autocracy upper bound" in RoW's ambiguous regime classification. There are 62 such country-years. Of those, 19 are clearly autocratic also based on DD criteria. Grouping the remaining country years into episodes, I find ten episodes of executive aggrandizement, and eight that are not cases of aggrandizement. Finally, reviewing the cases categorized as democratic by RoW, I exclude the cases that would not be categorized as democratic by DD criteria, namely the two cases of dominant party democracies which did not have any alternation of the party in power (Botswana and South Africa).

Tables 5 and 6 show my classification of the cases. This alternative way of applying the scope conditions concerning regime type leads me to identify 26 cases of executive aggrandizement (instead of the 23 identified in the article). For the period up to 2009, the DD classification includes two more cases - those of Kocharyan in Armenia and Kuchma in Ukraine - into the scope conditions, whereas these cases were classified as electoral autocracy by RoW. For the period after 2009, where the coding is done by the author, four cases of aggrandizement were coded as democratic by DD criteria, even though they were coded as autocratic by RoW. Among these four, the coding method is inconclusive for the case of Imran Khan in Pakistan - it may or may not be a case of executive aggrandizement, but I include it as one in the table. 14 Cases of aggrandizement happened in democratic countries according to both RoW and DD (Table 6), whereas two cases considered democratic according to RoW are excluded from the scope by DD criteria (dominant party regimes).

The universe of cases we obtain when we use DD rather than RoW to identify regime type is bigger, but it does not substantially alter the conclusions of the descriptive analysis. In fact, only one of the six new cases identified can be said to have resulted in severe democratic backsliding or breakdown, the case of Armenia under Kocharyan, who stepped down after two terms but installed his successor in power. A second one, Comoros under Assoumani, remains inconcluded. The remaining four episodes resulted in the leader exiting office without democratic breakdown - via regular electoral turnover for Bouhari and Kuchma, and less regular political processes for Rajapaksa and Khan.

Table 5: Potential cases of executive aggrandizement, based on V-Dem data (v10) and Democracy-Dictatorship (Cheibub et al., 2010) criteria for democracy.

Before 2009 (Democracies coded in the Democracy-Dictatorship dataset)			
Executive aggrandizement		Outside of scope	
Country-Period	Leader	Country-Period	Explanation
Armenia; 2004-08	Kocharyan	Albania; 1993	Protests, instability (pre-Kirchner)
Bolivia; 2006-09, 2019	Morales	Argentina; 2003-04	Transition
Moldova; 2001-03	Voronin	Burundi; 2006-08	Aggrandizement by Nkurunziza, first pres. after transition
Ecuador; 2008, 2013-16	Correa	Niger; 2000-01	Aggrandizement by Tandja, first pres. after transition
Nicaragua; 2006-08; 2012-15	Ortega	Pakistan; 2008	Instability after coup
Philippines; 2004	Arroyo		
Ukraine; 2001, 2003	Kuchma		
Venezuela; 1999-2009	Chavez		
After 2009: RoW electoral autocracies coded as democracy by author using DD criteria)			
Executive aggrandizement		Outside of scope	
Country-Period	Leader	Country-Period	Explanation
Comoros; 2016-19	Assoumani	Albania; 2013	Protests?
Pakistan; 2019	Khan (?)	Bangladesh; 2009-10	Instability after coup
Sri Lanka; 2013	Rajapaksa	Egypt; 2014, 2016-17	Coup
Nigeria; 2016-19	Bouhari	Honduras; 2012	Instability
		Maldives; 2013-16	Infighting
		Niger; 2019	Aggrandizement by Isoufou, but first president after coup
		Thailand; 2010	Instability, repression
		Ukraine; 2015-17	State capture, infighting, invasion
		Pakistan; 2015-16	Infighting

Table 6: Potential cases of executive aggrandizement, based on V-Dem data (v10) and Democracy-Dictatorship (Cheibub et al., 2010) criteria for democracy - continued.

After 2009: Cases coded democratic *both* by RoW and by author according to DD criteria

Executive aggrandizement		Outside of scope	
Country-Period	Leader	Country-Period	Explanation
Brazil; 2019	Bolsonaro	Bosnia; 2009	Institutional instability (consociationalism)
Dominican Rep.; 2016-17	Medina	Brasil; 2016-18	Corruption, impeachment
Hungary; 2010-19	Orbán	Ghana; 2015-16	Judicial corruption, electoral irregularity
India; 2017-19	Modi	Moldova; 2015-18	Judicial overreach, state capture
North Macedonia; 2009-13, 2014, 2016	Gruevski	Namibia; 2019	Corruption, instability of dominant party rule
Mexico; 2019	Lopez Obrador	Paraguay; 2013-15	Re-affirming dominant party rule
Philippines; 2016-19	Duterte	Romania; 2018	Instability, impunity, state-capture
Senegal; 2018	Sall	Slovenia; 2013	Corruption, instability
Serbia; 2013-16	Vučić	Timor-Leste; 2015-16	Impunity and co-optation of opposition
Poland; 2016-19	PiS (Kaczyński)		
Turkey; 2010-11,2013	Erdoğan		
Ukraine; 2010-12	Yanukovich		
USA; 2017	Trump		
Zambia; 2013-15	Sata/Lungu		