

Elections and Democratization



Woman voting at a polling station in Cape Coast Central Constituency, Ghana, 2008. Photo by Staffan I. Lindberg.

KEY FINDINGS

- Repeated elections can enhance democratization as they strengthen oppositions and build expectations of and support for democracy.
- The timing of state capacity building is critical: If state capacity is bolstered before there has been an electoral turnover of power, such capacity can be used to subvert elections and prevent full democratization.
- If state capacity is strengthened after there has been an electoral turnover, then it may enhance the chances of democratization by reducing the likelihood of instability.

Elections are the trademark of democracy, but are also often held in autocracies. Elections in autocracies lack freedom and fairness, for example because dictators oppress the opposition or distort the media. Nevertheless, holding repeated elections can increase civil liberties, the respect for rule of law, and lead to turnover of the national executive (Lindberg, 2006). In a new study based on V-Dem data, Edgell et al. (2017) argue that even elections lacking freedom and fairness can facilitate democratization because reiterated elections over time can strengthen demands for, and expectations of, democracy. In a related study, van Ham and Seim (2017) argue that state capacity can be used to either reinforce or undermine democratization. High state capacity in an authoritarian regime helps incumbents to prevent electoral turnovers, but after turnovers, state capacity is needed for democratic change.

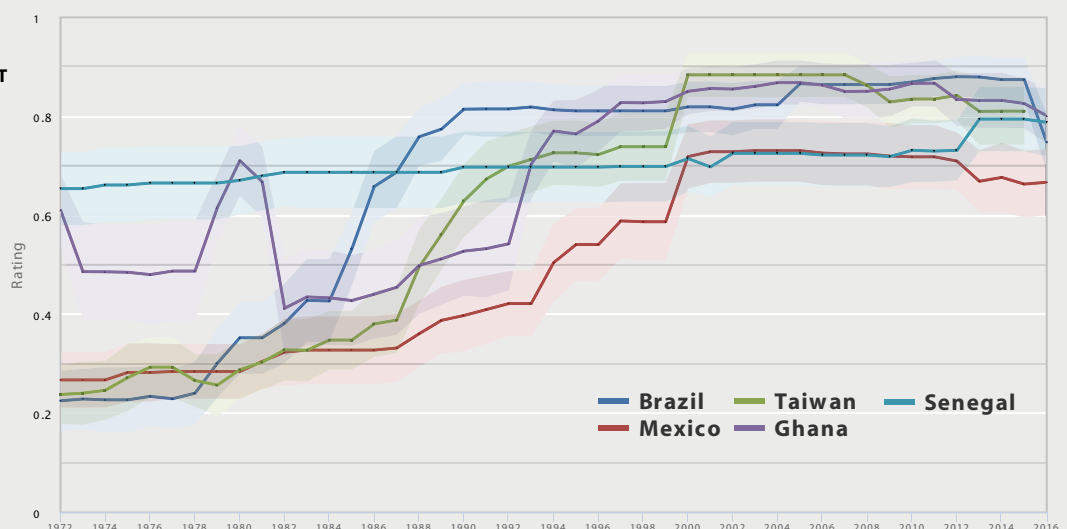
This policy brief summarizes the key findings of these new studies – which build on V-Dem Working Papers 51 and 37 - and discusses policy implications.

Reiterated Elections

The holding of repeated elections can improve democratic qualities (Edgell et al. 2017). Lindberg (2006) has linked successive multiparty elections in Sub-Saharan Africa to incremental democratization (Lindberg 2006). In other regions, however, this link was not as noticeable until the 1970s (Edgell et al. 2017: 2). Today, many authoritarian regimes hold elections. While these elections take place on “uneven playing fields”, they may enhance democratization for three reasons: 1) the opposition improves its organizational and campaign capacity; 2) citizens come to ex-

FIGURE 1. CHANGE IN THE V-DEM LIBERAL COMPONENT INDEX OVER TIME IN SELECTED COUNTRIES

Note: Higher values indicate more democratic development. Source: V-dem.net



pect regular opportunities to be involved in the political arena, and 3) civil society organizations learn how to better advocate and to promote vertical accountability (Edgell et al. 2017: 2). Thus, even in autocracies elections may create expectations for democratic behavior, which stimulates the liberal and deliberative components of democracy (Edgell et al. 2017).

The authors illustrate the plausibility of their theory with the cases of Brazil, Mexico, Taiwan, Ghana and Senegal. Figure 1 shows V-Dem data on the liberal component of democracy since 1972 in these five cases. The liberal component of democracy “emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority”, including aspects such as civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances (Coppedge et al., 2017: 51). In all five countries – following repeated elections - improvements in the liberal component are noticeable.

In country fixed-effects and random effect models based on V-Dem data from 1900 to 2010, Edgell and her co-authors find that countries that have held at least two multiparty elections are predicted to score 42% higher on the liberal component index and 69% higher on the deliberative component index compared to countries that held one or no multiparty election (Edgell et al. 2017: 10). Results hold in separate models for all regions, but findings for the MENA region are relatively weak.

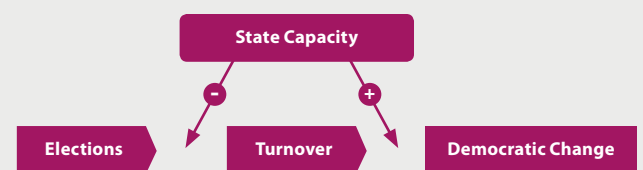
State Capacity and Elections

Van Ham and Seim (2017) focus on the interaction between state capacity and democratization. According to them, state capacity – namely coercive, administrative and extractive capacity - is a critical factor conditioning the democratizing power of elections.

Van Ham and Seim argue that state capacity has opposing effects on democratic change, depending on when it is strengthened (Figure 2).

If an authoritarian regime has high state capacity, the likelihood of turnover is lower. However, if electoral turnovers occur, democratization is more likely in strong states. Turnovers are more likely in authoritarian regime with low state capacities, yet these will not necessarily result in democratic change. The authors used V-Dem data from 1974 to 2012 in 110 countries and an ordinary least squares and logistic regression with country fixed effects. The findings suggest that state capacity enhanced prior to turnover in an election has a negative direct effect on democratization, while high state capacity after an electoral turnover has a positive direct effect on democratization. Russia, Singapore, and Malaysia are examples of countries in which state capacity has been used by incumbents to prevent turnover, and subsequent democratic change.

FIGURE 2. THEORETICAL EFFECT OF STATE CAPACITY ON DEMOCRATIZATION (VAN HAM AND SEIM 2017: 5)



POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Programmes aimed at enhancing state capacity for democratization should avoid the risk of sustaining autocratic regimes
- Holding repeated multiparty elections may improve the liberal and deliberative components of democracy incrementally
- Supporting elections in countries with a high level of state capacity may undermine the aim of democratization if the opposition is not yet strong enough

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ABOUT V-DEM INSTITUTE

V-Dem is a new approach to conceptualizing and measuring democracy. The project’s multidimensional, nuanced and disaggregated approach acknowledges the complexity of the concept of democracy. With four Principal Investigators, two Project Coordinators, fifteen Project Managers, more than thirty Regional Managers, almost 200 Country Coordinators, several Assistant Researchers, and approximately 2,600 Country Experts, the V-Dem project is one of the largest-ever social science data collection projects with a database of over 15 million data points.



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