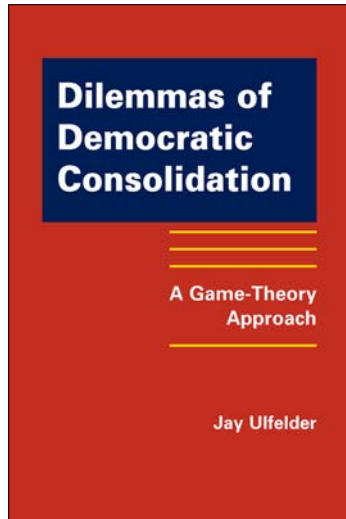


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**Dilemmas of  
Democratic Consolidation:  
A Game-Theory Approach**

Jay Ulfelder

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# 1

## Introduction

“The Silk Revolution,” one observer dubbed it. In September 2006, after months of political turmoil that saw citizens repeatedly throng the streets of Bangkok for dueling protests, Thailand’s military leaders carried off a bloodless coup d’etat against the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. While the prime minister attended a meeting of the UN General Assembly in New York, top officers declared martial law, announcing on television that they had suspended the constitution and dismissed the government, both houses of parliament, and the Constitutional Court. The officers said they were temporarily replacing those bodies with a Council of Administrative Reform on behalf of the country’s king, and military spokesman Gen. Prapas apologized to the Thai people for any “inconvenience.”<sup>1</sup> The coup punctuated a months-long political crisis during which a snap election was boycotted by the leading opposition party and then voided by the Constitutional Court and Prime Minister Thaksin had taken an unusual seven-week “break” from politics.

Democracy had been tried in Thailand before, and each previous episode has also ended with a military coup, so from a local perspective the turn of events in 2006 was not entirely exceptional. From a global perspective, however, the coup against the Thaksin government was noteworthy for several reasons. First, the 2006 coup terminated the longest episode of democratic government in Thailand’s history—fifteen years, an age at which some theories of democratization assert that democratic norms and habits ought to have taken hold in a way that would prevent usurpations of power. Second, the coup came after the country had experienced a peaceful transfer of power from one party to another via fair elections, another widely used marker of democratic consolidation. Third, the coup made Thailand one of the richest countries ever to suffer a breakdown of democracy in a world where economic development and democracy are often assumed to go hand in hand.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the coup came after several years of solid economic

growth under Thaksin's leadership, a performance that some theories would identify as a crucial source of legitimacy and thus inoculation against coups. In short, the usurpation of power that occurred in 2006 contradicted much of the conventional wisdom about the structural conditions under which democracy should survive or fail. Although rumors of an impending coup had circulated for weeks before the event finally happened and many citizens apparently welcomed the military's attempt to break the stalemate between rival political camps, prevailing theories of democratic consolidation would not have led us to anticipate this outcome.<sup>3</sup>

In December 2007, little more than a year after Thailand's coup, democracy also came undone in Kenya. In contrast to Thailand, however, the Kenyan military did not play a direct role in this seizure of power. Instead, soldiers only deployed to try to restore order after a flawed election sparked widespread violence between political rivals. In the Kenyan case, it was the elected government that dismantled democracy, apparently by rigging the vote to prevent opposition candidate Raila Odinga from unseating incumbent President Mwai Kibaki. The bloodshed triggered by that fraud claimed hundreds of lives and shut down economic activity in many parts of the country for days, but that violence was a symptom, not a cause, of democracy's destruction.

Kibaki's controversial re-election and the violence that ensued occurred in a country generally regarded as one of sub-Saharan Africa's most stable and most prosperous. Although democracy was still short-lived in Kenya at the time—Kibaki's election in 2000 had marked the end of a period of authoritarian rule that began in the 1960s and bent but did not break in the 1990s—the country's vigorous press, active and growing civil society, and vibrant economy were supposed to have guarded it against the troubles that have characterized many of the attempts at democratic government in African countries since independence. In simple terms, Kenya was thought by some prominent observers to have "too much to lose" to succumb to the temptations of power politics.

These breakdowns of democracy in Thailand and Kenya were notable because they contradicted conventional ideas about the circumstances under which democratic regimes become consolidated.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, those breakdowns are not isolated incidents. One piece of good news from global politics in the early part of the twenty-first century is that democratic regimes have become more prevalent than ever. The less happy corollary to that pattern is that many attempts at democracy continue to fail, even under conditions traditionally

considered auspicious for the establishment of elected government. In fact, most attempts at democratic government in the past half-century have ended with a return to authoritarian rule, often not so many years after their start.<sup>5</sup> These failures matter tremendously in their own right, because they sharply diminish the political rights of the citizens who suffer them. In a highly interconnected world, those failures can also have deleterious consequences for governments and citizens elsewhere, a fact that has led many of the world's most powerful countries to make the promotion of democratic government a pillar of their foreign policies.

Why do so many attempts at democracy fail? To provide novel answers to that question, this book pays less attention to the structural conditions that dominate prior theorizing on this subject and concentrates instead on the process of democratic breakdown. In the pages that follow, I develop and apply a game theoretic model of democratic politics to explore how and why the institutions of elected government might survive or fail under a variety of conditions. This model allows us to connect different forms of breakdown to specific actors and the strategic incentives they confront under different circumstances. Conventional accounts of democratization claim that democracy is likely to fail when structural conditions do not favor its survival. Although these arguments generally accord with robust patterns in cross-national data, they fail to explain exceptional cases and do not provide clear insights into the timing and mode of democracy's failure. Some scholars have previously used game theory to explore the strategic aspects of democratic breakdown, but those works have generally failed to consider the breadth of the ways in which democracy can break down and the full variety of incentives at work.

Empirical observation of democratic breakdowns in the latter half of the twentieth century shows that these events comes in three basic forms: 1) the elected government rigs the electoral process in its favor or dismantles that process entirely; 2) the military steals power from that elected government; or 3) a popular rebellion topples the elected government. The game-theoretic model developed in this book connects these events to the incentives confronted by the organizations that perpetrate them. As is widely recognized, partisan rivals and military leaders may be tempted to try a coup or rebellion by the desire to control the spoils that come with state power, strategic considerations that might lead political actors in democracies to try to seize power illegally. What most theories of democratic consolidation fail to recognize, however, is that uncertainty about rivals' interests, capabilities, and intentions may also compel those organizations to attempt a coup or rebellion by

amplifying their fears of the exclusion and exploitation they could suffer if their political rivals take power—perhaps through the ballot, but also possibly through a coup of their own. Because of this strategic uncertainty, coups and rebellions can occur even in situations where all of the relevant actors most prefer that democracy survive. Taken together, these temptations and fears means that political parties and militaries in democratic regimes often have substantial incentives to try to usurp power. Those strong incentives, in turn, help to explain why democracy so often fails, even in conditions that structural theories might regard as auspicious.

### **Defining Democracy**

While democracy is surely one of the most familiar concepts in political science, scholars often disagree on its meaning. Most contemporary researchers follow Schumpeter (1945) by defining democracy with reference to processes rather than outcomes, but not all do, and even the procedural definitions used by many scholars vary significantly in their content.<sup>6</sup>

The persistence of a debate over definitions of democracy does not mean that there are no points of agreement. In 1830—thirty-three years before Abraham Lincoln would echo the line in his Gettysburg Address—Daniel Webster delivered a speech in which he spoke of a “people’s government, made for the people, made by the people, and answerable to the people” (Lijphart 1999: 1). This notion of a government of, by, and for the people it governs—of popular sovereignty—has emerged in many societies over the course of human history (Dahl 1998: 7–25). The notion of popular sovereignty also underpins most contemporary efforts to identify and measure democracy.

In this book, I rely on a definition of democracy that leans heavily on the work of Robert Dahl (1971, 1998), with additions or qualifications proposed by other scholars who have also struggled to measure democracy in real countries over time for purposes of comparative analysis. Specifically, I define democracy as a form of government in which *citizens freely and fairly choose and routinely hold accountable their rulers*. In practice, this form of government occurs when four conditions hold.

1. *Elected officials rule (representation)*. Representatives chosen by citizens make policy by law and in fact, and unelected entities

cannot unilaterally block those representatives' collective decisions or impose policy changes of their own.

2. *Elections are fair and competitive (contestation)*. The process by which citizens select their rulers provides voters with distinct choices and is generally free from deliberate fraud or abuse.
3. *Basic civil liberties are respected (freedom)*. Freedoms of speech, association, and assembly routinely afford citizens opportunities to deliberate on their interests, to organize in pursuit of those interests, and to monitor the performance of their elected representatives and the agencies and organizations on which those officials depend.
4. *Politics is inclusive (inclusion)*. Adult citizens have equal rights to vote and participate in government, and they enjoy fair opportunities to exercise those rights.

The fundamental procedural element of democracy defined this way is fair, competitive, and multiparty elections in which virtually all adult citizens may participate and vote for ruling officials. As to which kinds of officials to consider, I focus on the individuals who actually perform the state's legislative and executive functions at the national level: the head of government and the members of the legislature. For elections to these offices to fulfill the promise of participation and representation, however, democracies must routinely secure certain civil liberties, including freedoms of speech, association, and assembly. These freedoms are essential to citizens' opportunities to deliberate on their own interests, to make informed choices about candidates for office, to appeal for votes when running for office, to advocate for or against specific policies, and to monitor their government's actions.

For the principles of representation and accountability to be realized, democracies must also protect the policy-making process from interference by unelected entities (Dahl 1971; Karl 1995; Linz 1978). Drawing on Tsebelis' (2002) notion of a veto player, I consider unelected entities to wield undue power when they can unilaterally block or produce change in major issue areas such as national security, taxation, or property rights. The unelected entities in question can be any one of a variety of individuals or organizations, including monarchs, military leaders, religious or tribal elders, or even foreign governments. In bicameral systems, the upper house of the legislature sometimes holds veto power; these upper houses are considered unelected when a

substantial proportion of their members either inherit their seats or are chosen by unelected bodies or officials.<sup>7</sup>

Defined this way, democracy breaks down when routine opportunities for representation or accountability are substantially diminished or eliminated. This can happen abruptly, as it did in both Thailand and Fiji in 2006, when an unelected individual or group announces that they have replaced elected officials at the head of government and those elected officials actually step aside or are exiled, jailed, or killed. Usurpations of power by unelected officials are usually plain to see—military officers announce their coup on television or radio, antigovernment protesters swarm the legislature, and so on.

Democratic accountability can also erode more gradually, as the institutions and practices required to produce transparency, access, and competitiveness are incrementally subverted or dismantled, as they were in the 2000s in Russia and Venezuela. These “creeping coups” are more difficult to observe than the abrupt ones, partly because the incumbents undertaking them have motive and opportunity to conceal their actions. In fact, the repertoire of techniques for subverting democracy may be bounded only by the limits of incumbents’ creativity. As international election-monitoring has become more common and more sophisticated since the end of the Cold War (Hyde 2007), officials attempting this kind of subversion seem increasingly to be focusing their efforts on elements of the process that are further and further removed from the balloting itself, including obstructing challengers’ candidacies, manipulations of the media environment, tampering with voter-registration procedures, clever redistricting, and even the adoption of rules or movement of troops to distribute votes from rank-and-file soldiers in more favorable ways (Bratton 1998).

### **Prior Theory and Research**

Many of the democracies in existence as I write this book have not experienced attempts to usurp power from their elected governments for decades. During that same time, however, many other democratic regimes have come and gone, sometimes more than once in the same country. What explains this variation in outcomes? Why does democracy survive in some cases and break down in others? And, in the cases where democracy fails, what explains the form and timing of those events? In other words, why do those breakdowns happen when and how they do?

Theories of comparative democratization that might shed light on these questions fall into three broad groups. One set of explanations



emphasizes the influence of structural conditions—the political, economic, and social environment in which governments are situated. A second set emphasizes process—the dynamic ways in which democracy arises and sometimes fails. A third set uses game-theoretic models to explain the survival or failure of democracy as a consequence of strategic interactions among rational actors.

The weakness of structural theories as explanations for democratic breakdown is that they tell us little about the timing and course of that process. In other words, even if they offer a compelling general story about *why* democracies die, they usually say little about *who* kills them and even less about *how* and *when* they go. Meanwhile, theories of democratization emphasizing process deal explicitly with questions of who, how, and when, but they often do so descriptively in ways that do not readily accumulate into more general explanations and predictions. The best rational-choice theories combine aspects of structure and process in formal models that help to clarify existing issues and, sometimes, to illuminate new ones. Still, none of the existing rational-choice theories of democratic breakdown has managed to capture all of the crucial actors and pathways and then link those elements to observed structural patterns.

### *Structural Theories*

Structural theories of democratization identify elements of context that are thought to shape the chances for democracy's emergence and survival. For several decades, modernization theory has dominated discourse among political scientists in the United States about the process of democratization. Modernization theory understands democracy in teleological terms, as an outgrowth of certain social-structural changes that occur as societies experience certain kinds of economic growth and development. According to this view, economic development in the industrial age transforms societies through mutually reinforcing processes of urbanization, education, increased communication, and the accumulation of wealth by ordinary citizens. These processes change the way that society is organized and give rise to new values and interests that are conducive to democracy.

Modernization theory is perhaps most strongly identified with the work of Seymour Martin Lipset (1959), who saw the emergence of an educated middle class with “moderate” values as the crucial sociological foundation for democratic stability.<sup>8</sup> In a recent restatement of modernization theory, Ron Inglehart and Christian Welzel (2005: 134) locate the causal mechanism of this process in the emergence of what

they call self-expression values, which are said to arise in conjunction with the increases in education, knowledge-intensive work, and social complexity that generally accompany economic development:

Modernization tends to bring both cognitive mobilization and growing emphasis on self-expression values. This in turn motivates ever more people to demand democratic institutions and enables them to be effective in doing so as elites watch the costs of repression mount. Finally, with intergenerational replacement, the elites themselves may become less authoritarian and repressive if their younger cohorts are raised in societies that value self-expression. Social change is not deterministic, but modernization increases the probability that democratic institutions will emerge.

Occasionally, societies might sputter along under authoritarian rule in spite of modernization or might attempt democracy when these structural prerequisites are still lacking, but the basic trajectory is thought to be universal. Consequently, these aberrations are expected eventually to correct themselves, either by reverting to autocracy or restoring democracy.

While modernization theory has dominated the field of comparative democratization, scholars have tabled many other important ideas about the influence of structural forces on the prospects for democracy. Some scholars argue that enduring aspects of a society's "political culture"—"the beliefs and values concerning politics that prevail within both the elite and the mass" (Diamond, Linz, and Lipset 1990: 16)—have lasting effects on the prospects for democracy's success. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996) draw attention to the effects of prior regime type, positing a variety of ways in which structural features of the authoritarian regime that immediately precedes democratization can shape the processes of democratic transition and the prospects for consolidation. Other scholars have made claims about the impact of a democracy's institutional design on the odds that it will survive. The most prominent of these arguments comes from Juan Linz (1978, 1990a, 1990b), who initiated what might be regarded as a field within the field of comparative democratization with his assertion that presidential systems are more susceptible to deadlock and therefore breakdown than parliamentary ones.<sup>9</sup> Still other researchers have focused on the relationships between electoral systems and the dynamics of politics in democracies, with the conventional wisdom claiming that proportional representation (PR) is more conducive to democratic survival than majoritarian systems because of PR's greater inclusivity.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of this variety of ideas about relationships between structural forces and democratization, modernization theory remains the starting point for most contemporary explanations of democracy's establishment and survival. Probably the most powerful source of this theory's staying power is the widely acknowledged empirical fact that wealth and democracy hang together. In an attempt to confirm the causal pathway posited by modernization theory, Inglehart and Welzel (2005) have demonstrated a similar cross-national association between what they call self-expression values and levels of effective democracy. As Geddes (1999) surmises, this empirical regularity—or “stylized fact,” as she puts it—does seem to confirm modernization theory's fundamental assertions about affinities between certain forms of economic development, human values, and political institutions. This hypothesis has been confirmed again most forcefully by Przeworski et al. (2000: 101), who conclude on the basis of their rigorous statistical analysis that “Lipset was right in thinking that the richer the country, the more likely it is to sustain democracy.”<sup>11</sup>

And yet, in spite of this broad empirical regularity, modernization theory still leaves us scratching our heads about specific failures of democracy in specific countries. Although modernization theory tells a compelling story about how certain macro-structural processes are broadly conducive to certain kinds of political change, it is essentially silent on the question of how and when those changes occur. So, while it may provide important insights into long-term trends in the population of states, it offers little guidance on the proximate forces behind failures of democracy in specific real-world cases. Many of the other ideas about structural causes mentioned here were apparently intended to help fill in that blank, but they ultimately share the same fundamental weakness: any theory that relies primarily on structure will be hard pressed to explain change. Even when the structural element in question is a dynamic process rather than a static characteristic—as is the case with modernization theory—these theories do not generate clear hypotheses about how and when specific democracies might fail.<sup>12</sup>

### *Process-Centered Theories*

Sensibly enough, the major body of work that developed as a counterpoint to modernization theory shifted the focus from structure to process in an attempt to glean new ideas about the causes of democratic transition and breakdown. This literature generally traces its origins to work by Dankwart Rustow (1970), who sought to move the conversation from the search for preconditions to the dynamic process by which

democratic regimes come into existence—what he called a “genetic” theory of democracy. Ironically, Rustow’s critique of structural theory’s inflexibility led him to a model in which the genesis of stable democracy was said to depend not only on the presence of a few “indispensable” preconditions but also on the sequence in which those preconditions were assembled. Although this particular model has not withstood empirical scrutiny, Rustow’s call to consider process apart from precondition has.<sup>13</sup>

Much of the work in this vein examines problems with the establishment of democracy rather than its consolidation, which is the subject of this enquiry.<sup>14</sup> Not all of it does, though. In contrast to modernization theory’s emphasis on structural scaffolding, Linz (1978) sought to examine the process of democratic collapse in several prominent historical cases. In so doing, he sought to identify recurring themes and mechanisms that would hint at the underlying causal dynamics. Perhaps inevitably, the model that emerged from this project was primarily descriptive and emphasized the role of agency. According to Linz, democracies break down when elected leaders fail to respond effectively to crises. This failure of leadership makes the problems producing those crises appear unsolvable, and that sense of insolubility creates an opportunity for semi-loyal or disloyal oppositions to usurp power. Linz (1978: 50) writes:

In the last analysis, breakdown is a result of processes initiated by the government’s incapacity to solve problems for which disloyal oppositions offer themselves as a solution. That incapacity occurs when the parties supporting the regime cannot compromise on an issue and one or the other of them attempts a solution with the support of forces that the opposition within the system perceives as disloyal. This instigates polarization within the society that creates distrust among those who in other circumstances would have supported the regime.

At root, then, this theory posits that democracy fails because of poor leadership. According to Linz (1978: 51), “Oversimplifying somewhat, we can say that a regime’s unsolvable problems are often the work of its elites.” Linz argues that elected leaders often set themselves up for this problem when they adopt agendas more ambitious than their means allow, but he also claims they retain some ability to salvage or sabotage democracy right up until a regime’s final moments. The presence and growth of disloyal or semi-loyal opposition is a crucial element in this story, and it often has its origins in conditions and decisions that long precede the crisis, such as the mode of transition to democracy, the extent of power-sharing in the new democracy, the toleration of militia

groups, and the design of democratic institutions. This whole process is said to be mediated by the depth of legitimacy and the regime's efficacy and effectiveness prior to the crisis, and those conditions are shaped by structural characteristics, but none of these relationships is deterministic.

The heart of Linz's explanation is the shift from centripetal to centrifugal politics, but the unanswered question is why this dynamic tips one way or the other. His descriptive model identifies leadership, statesmanship, flexibility, and timing as key variables, but that seems like an incomplete answer at best. His comparative analysis begins to get at the why, but—perhaps because of his initial decision to restrict his sample to a fairly narrow set of cases—it ignores the possibility of breakdown outside of a prior political crisis. In other words, there is a substantial range of strategic possibilities that his model overlooks.

A newer but now substantial body of work frames the problem of democracy's survival as the result of a dynamic and uncertain process of regime consolidation. What exactly consolidation entails remains the subject of much discussion and debate (Schedler 1998). Some scholars understand consolidation in probabilistic terms, arguing that it refers simply to the expectation that a particular democracy is almost certain to survive indefinitely (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006, Przeworski et al. 2000, Svobik 2008). Others, however, seek to explain how that expectation emerges, usually by examining changes over time in attitudes and institutions.

One of the most elaborate statements of the latter view comes from Larry Diamond (1999), who defines consolidation (p. 65) as “the process of achieving broad and deep legitimation, such that all significant political actors, at both the elite and mass levels, believe that the democratic regime is the most right and appropriate for their society, better than any other realistic alternative they can imagine.” In his view, this process depends on developments in three areas: the regime's economic and political performance, the strengthening of political and civil institutions, and the deepening of democracy through expanded participation and accountability. Where these trends occur, democracy is likely to survive; where they fail to start or stall, democracy will remain tenuous.

While rich and provocative, Diamond's claims are illustrative of what I consider to be the chief shortcoming of work on consolidation: these theories are primarily descriptive or normative, not explanatory. They suggest one way to observe whether or not the prospects of democracy's survival are improving or deteriorating, but they generally say little about the forces driving those trends. To the extent that they do, they usually return to transitionology's emphasis on the “will and skill”

of political elites. For theories that see changes in norms and values as the outcome of interest, this explanation flirts with tautology. Even more problematic in my view, these explanations also fail to make explicit how those elites' choices are shaped by strategic considerations. Scholars associated with this school often acknowledge that elites do not simply pursue their own interests in a linear fashion, but they generally do not spell out what other issues those actors might consider and how those considerations might affect their behavior.

### *Game-Theoretic Approaches*

Another and generally newer literature uses game theory to explore in a more rigorous way the strategic interactions among key actors. This body of work tries to combine insights about the influence of structural forces with careful consideration of the kinds of choices that individuals and organizations must actually make, and then to link those individual choices to social outcomes. As Barry Weingast and Rui de Figueiredo (1999: 263) summarize, "The hallmark of rational choice theory for explaining macrosocial failure is its approach to social dilemmas of cooperation. In a variety of circumstances individually rational actions produce socially irrational outcomes." In one sense, democracy is an attempt to institutionalize macrosocial cooperation, and its failure can be studied by searching for ways in which the choices of specific individuals and organizations produce what are often socially irrational results.<sup>15</sup>

In his pathbreaking work on democracy, Adam Przeworski (1991) used the logic of game theory to turn our gaze away from the agent's skills onto the incentives to which those agents respond. His model focuses on the actions of election losers as the determinants of democracy's survival, and it implies that democracy will endure when the losers in any particular election have sufficient prospects for winning in future elections that it is better to concede defeat and wait to fight again at the ballot box instead than to rebel in response to the latest loss. In an important extension of that model, Przeworski (2006) incorporates the prospect that election winners may also "rebel," where rebellion by either party is understood as an attempt to impose a dictatorship in order to redistribute income to their supporters. In this version of the model, if either party chooses to rebel, a violent confrontation ensues, and the outcome of that confrontation is determined by the balance of military force. Nevertheless, the key insight from the earlier version is essentially unchanged: actors comply because they believe future elections afford them a better chance to advance their interests than subversion would.

Consistent with Przeworski's general logic but with a sharper focus on economic inequality as the main engine of politics, Carles Boix (2003) and Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2006) posit that we may usefully understand politics as a struggle between rich and poor over the distribution of wealth. Broadly speaking, Acemoglu and Robinson argue that democracy is established when the threat of rebellion by the poor against a dictatorship of the rich is credible and formidable, and democracy persists as long as the resulting redistribution is not costlier to the rich than the coercion and repression they would have to supply to mount a coup and sustain the ensuing dictatorship. In particular, these authors emphasize the way that democracy links policy outcomes to the preferences of the median voter and thereby offers a credible commitment by the rich to redistribute enough wealth to the poor to constrain the threat of a popular rebellion. Boix's theory follows a similar logic but associates the commitment problem with both of the actors, thus adding the possibility that democracy can fail by revolution as well as coup.

All of these authors model democracy as a strategic interaction among actors seeking to advance their own interests, often at the expense of others. Where Przeworski's model emphasizes those actors' future electoral prospects as an incentive to, or constraint against, the subversion of democracy, Boix and Acemoglu and Robinson emphasize the policies that democracy is expected to produce, and thus the relative costs to the wealthy of accepting some amount of redistribution or renegeing on that commitment and sustaining or re-imposing dictatorship. What Przeworski's model seems to lack is a way to address the kinds of commitment problems Acemoglu and Robinson and Boix spotlight. The contestants in democratic politics have to worry not just about how the next election might turn out, but whether it will occur at all, and if it might not, what they ought to do about it. Meanwhile, Acemoglu and Robinson's model seems to obscure the point that democracy produces not just policies but also electoral winners and losers, and both of these groups may find reason to prefer a change in the political order. This can happen, in part, because in an immediate sense those electoral winners and losers are not social groups or economic classes but political parties—in other words, a specific kind of organization that does not always act neatly on behalf of the citizens it claims to represent. At the same time, none of these models deals directly with the potentially autonomous role of the military in this process.

## Democracy's Dilemmas

To develop a theory of democratic breakdown and consolidation, I start from the observation that different actors can usurp power in different ways, depending on where they sit (figuratively, in political space) and what skills they possess. As Przeworski (1991: 12) argues, "Democratic societies are populated not by freely acting individuals but by collective organizations." These organizations are composed of aggregations of citizens, and they typically make claims on behalf of even larger groups defined by some commonality of interest. The fact that they make collective claims, however, does not mean that these organizations simply channel their constituents' interests. Instead, organizations bring specific skill sets, structures, and even interests of their own to their interactions with other actors, and these attributes shape their behavior, just as external incentives do (Milgrom and Roberts 1992, Simon 1976). What's more, organizations often develop interests that diverge from the interests of the collections of individuals on whose behalf they are supposed to act. As a result, those constituents often find it difficult or costly to monitor the organization's behavior and to punish it for wrongdoing. Economists refer to this as the principal-agent problem, and it pervades collective action (Milgrom and Roberts 1992; Niskanen 1971).

Organizations also tend to persist. Because coordination problems must be overcome to get them off the ground, the costs of starting them often exceed the costs of maintaining them, and once they exist they usually fight for their own survival. As a result, organizations usually take on lives of their own, even as they serve to facilitate exchanges among the individuals they purportedly represent. Organizations do emerge, change, and die, and whole fields of study in economics and sociology are devoted to understanding these dynamics.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the tendency for organizations to develop interests of their own and to outlive the impulses that led to their creation makes it reasonable to treat them as political actors in their own right at particular moments in time.

Following this reasoning, the first of the simplifying assumptions I make in trying to understand the process of democratic breakdown is to focus on specific types of organizations, not competing social classes or specific individuals, as the most relevant actors. Observation of the ways that democracies fail in the real world identifies three organizations as the crucial ones: 1) election winners, a.k.a. the *incumbents*; 2) election losers, a.k.a. the *opposition*; and 3) state security forces, a.k.a. the *military*. The differences in these organizations' roles and capabilities



mean that they respond to different sets of incentives and usurp power in different ways.

As a second simplification, I assume that the organizations most relevant to democracy's survival seek to maximize their material welfare. Importantly, this assumption implies that those organizations do not automatically seek to gain or retain political office for its own sake (Geddes 1999). State authority is understood here as an instrument used to pursue other ends, not an end in and of itself, and the value associated with controlling that instrument varies according to the outcomes it can help produce. If this were not true, democracy would never survive for long, because incumbents would routinely engage in extreme behavior to retain their positions no matter how long the democracy had existed.

In this framework, the incumbent and opposition are political parties or coalitions of parties, meaning that they are organizations composed of citizens with political skills. These organizations exist for the purpose of mobilizing voters and producing policy. Those functions can be performed in many ways by many different kinds of individuals, from village elders to precinct captains, from thugs to marketing professionals. The skill and success of those organizations at mobilizing voters on their behalf determines whether or not they win elections, and the winning or losing of elections determines whether or not their preferred policies are pursued. Generally speaking, there are no functional differences between the incumbent and opposition parties; the distinction between the two is strictly the result of the preceding election, and those roles are interchangeable.

The military is a very different kind of organization. It is composed of "specialists in violence" (Bates 2001) who have explicitly or implicitly entered into a contract with the state to act as its agents of legitimate coercion—that is, its "muscle." What is essential to this book's theory is that, in a democracy, this organization is subordinated only to the state, not to a particular political party, which means it really isn't subordinated to anyone at all, because in this relationship the state is just an abstraction.<sup>17</sup> The individuals who exercise the associated authority are interchangeable, and the idea of what constitutes the state is subject to interpretation.<sup>18</sup> Put another way, Weber's legitimacy is an idea, but the guns are real.

The military's coercive skills and capacity give it an inherent capability for independent political action. In other words, the state-sanctioned military is not just an element in the calculus determining the balance of coercive power among political parties. Instead, it is a distinct organization with an inherent potential for autonomous action, and it may choose at any time whether or not to ally itself with any particular

party or to act on its own behalf in a manner that might not reflect other actors' ideas about loyalty to the state. As much as those of us who live in countries that have not recently suffered coups would like not to think about it, this description applies to militaries in rich countries with long democratic traditions just as well as it does to militaries in poorer countries with a recent history of praetorian rule. As Rapoport (1968: 552) argues, "As long as we can distinguish between a government on the one hand, and the armed and unarmed portions of its public on the other, military usurpation is always conceivable; and, in fact, history gives little support to the supposition that an unmistakable movement from military insubordination to subordination exists."

Rapoport's reference to the military as the armed portion of the public hints at an important point about the origins of the military's political interests. Many theories of political rule do not treat the military as an independent actor, but ones that do often see its interests arising from the nature of the military as an organization. As an actor, the military is often assumed to be interested primarily in maximizing its budget and benefits, minimizing its costs, and protecting its reputation. While these issues will often be important, we should also keep in mind that the military is composed of armed citizens who, presumably, also have interests as citizens. When citizens in a democracy suffer, soldiers and their families often suffer, too, and this suffering can impel those soldiers to react in their capacity as soldiers. In other words, the forces shaping the incentives for soldiers to act politically in a democracy are not limited to the ones that directly concern the military as an organization.<sup>19</sup>

The reference above to affirmation of democratic government hints at the point that, in order to persist, democracy must constantly be produced through the behavior of individuals and groups engaged in it. This is true of any set of political institutions, and democracy is no exception. There is no magical set of conditions under which democracy becomes permanent and the risk of failure is therefore zero. As other scholars have observed (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Boix 2003; Przeworski 1991, 2006), there do appear to be conditions under which the persistence of democracy becomes an equilibrium from which actors are highly unlikely to deviate. That persistence should not be confused with permanence, however, and even in the world's oldest democracies, there exists at least the possibility that unexpected shocks to the system or an accumulation of other processes could lead to authoritarian rule.<sup>20</sup>

Because it controls state authority, the party in power—the incumbent—uniquely possesses the opportunity to abrogate democracy from the inside. In other words, the incumbent can usurp power without

directly employing coercion, by simply changing the formal rules or impinging upon the requisite supporting practices in ways that favor its continuation in office. In some instances, these alterations take the form of direct electoral fraud, declared annulments of constitutional procedures, or unilateral and extra-constitutional dismissals of other elected officials. In others, the party in power infringes more gradually and perhaps more subtly on important enabling conditions for representation and transparency, such as rights of free speech, procedures for voter registration, or rules governing the formation and operation of political parties. In all cases, however, the essential dynamic is the same: incumbent officials use their authority and influence to alter electoral procedures or to diminish civil liberties in ways that ensure their continuation in office. For analytical purposes, we can treat all of these actions as a single mode of democratic failure, the *executive coup*.

A critical aspect of executive coups is that they can be carried out without acquiring new skills or mobilizing new supporters. The incumbent party simply uses its *de jure* power to rewrite rules, alter institutions, or influence key officials—exactly the kinds of tasks it was organized and elected to do. This is important to the prospects for democracy’s survival because it means that executive coups are relatively cheap, at least in their execution. They certainly require collective action, but the number of individuals who must act collectively and the immediate costs of their actions are usually small, and those individuals are already bound together by organizational ties which at least partially align their interests and help them to overcome the kinds of coordination problems that generally inhibit more spontaneous forms of collective action.

Many of the tactical maneuvers involved in carrying out an executive coup are also inherently ambiguous in their intent. Political parties are expected to seek an edge wherever they can find one, and elected governments sometimes have legitimate reasons for imposing restrictions on civil liberties or political action. For the opposition and the military, this ambiguity of intention translates into uncertainty about the strategy the incumbent party is pursuing. As events unfold, it will often seem unclear whether the incumbent is seeking partisan advantage within the “normal” parameters of democratic politics or is instead building incrementally toward a decisive break with democracy. As revealed by the formal model developed later in this book, under the right (or wrong) circumstances, that uncertainty can significantly affect the prospects that democracy will live or die.

Opposition parties see two paths to power. They can try to win the next election (assuming that it occurs), or they can try to overthrow the party in power by extralegal means—in a word, through *rebellion*. In contrast to executive coups, rebellions require a type of organization and skills that differ significantly from the ones a political party uses to contest elections. Rebellions are also illegal, which means that organizations preparing for them must take measures to hide their actions or risk punishment or defeat if they do not. Finally, because rebel movements usually lack a dominance of force, the formal trappings of state authority, or both, rebellions are just plain hard to finish. These aspects of rebellions make them a costly and difficult undertaking compared with executive coups.<sup>21</sup>

Even when opposition groups manage to mobilize a large and imposing force, the “end game” of actually seizing power usually affords other actors, domestic and foreign, numerous opportunities to redirect the outcome in their favor. Events in Ecuador in February 1997 provide a case in point. Amidst a deepening economic crisis, opponents of President Abdalá Bucaram managed to bring literally millions of people into the streets as part of a general strike aimed at compelling Bucaram to resign. The National Assembly responded to the show of popular force by voting to remove the eccentric president on grounds of “mental incapacity” and then installed its leader, Fabián Alarcón, as interim president. Thus, in spite of their demonstration of tremendous de facto power, the citizens who effectively forced Bucaram’s ouster played no direct role in determining what happened next.

It is also important to clarify that rebellions need not involve the direct use of violence in order to pose a threat to democracy. Nonviolent uprisings that aim to topple elected governments also represent a form of rebellion that can lead to a break from democratic governance. Philosophically, the democratic credentials of these nonviolent popular uprisings is sometimes ambiguous. Democracy is supposed to entail government of, by, and for the people, and in cases where an elected government has become broadly unpopular, mass uprisings that lead to the installation of a new set of rulers can seem like an expression of the “will of the people” every bit as legitimate as an election. The key point, though, is that democracy as a system of government depends fundamentally on adherence to rules and procedures—constitutionalism, as Diamond (2008) puts it—and the procedures at the core of this arrangement are the ones that describe who votes, when, and how those votes are translated into seats in office. Thus, efforts to circumvent those procedures can pose an inherent threat to democracy as a system of government, whether or not they directly use violence.<sup>22</sup>

All national governments, whether democratic or authoritarian, depend constantly on the support of an armed force, an organized agent of coercion, to promote or protect their claim to a monopoly on state authority within their territory. For democracy to exist, however, this unelected force must limit itself to that negative role of protection; it must not engage in positive political action. Soldiers are citizens too, but those roles must be separated, and their actions as soldiers must come at the discretion of their elected rulers. When military officers abrogate democracy by claiming control over central state authority, it is a *military coup*.<sup>23</sup> This mode of democratic failure involves military leaders acting as representatives of the military as a state-sanctioned organization. When soldiers act against their government as participants in opposition parties or armed insurrections, any resulting abrogation of democracy is not considered a military coup.

In spite of the military's preponderance of coercive strength, military coups are still difficult to execute. The degree of difficulty depends, in part, on the internal organization of the armed forces. In cases where officers and soldiers are loyal to its perpetrators, a coup may be bloodless and relatively cheap; in cases where the military is internally divided, the execution of a coup may exact a much higher price, or it may fail as a result of the ensuing infighting. Even when the military acts coherently, however, the process of converting the coercive power of guns into the persuasive power required to sustain political authority is not a straightforward one. Thus, military coups can founder in spite of initial tactical successes as long as enough of the rest of the relevant actors—including ordinary citizens—refuse to play along. The need to inspire quasi-voluntary compliance in order to obtain their strategic objective poses an additional obstacle to political aspirations of military leaders, and this need helps explain why coups are relatively rare in spite of the military's inherent combination of coercive power and political interests.

In deciding whether or not to abide by the democratic rules of the game, the ruling party and its political rivals both must consider more than their prospects for victory or defeat in the upcoming election and their expected welfare in an authoritarian regime of its own making. Likewise, the military cannot focus myopically on its own preferences. Instead, each of these actors must take into account the risk of a usurpation of democracy by the others. The multiplicity of threats and simultaneity of action in a context of incomplete and imperfect information raises the possibility that any of these actors might act strategically by staging what amounts to a preemptive strike, attempting to establish an authoritarian regime that it controls before another actor

does the same. In other words, this representation of the problem suggests that the establishment of an autocracy does not have to be any of the actors' most preferred outcome in order for a coup to occur. Any one of them might also attempt to abrogate democracy as a means to reduce the risk of ending up with a least-preferred outcome in which another party usurps power and shuts them out of the ensuing authoritarian regime.

## **Methodology**

My aim in this book is to develop a new, mid-range theory of democratic breakdown. If this theory is to prove useful, it must focus our attention on certain actors, their interests and beliefs, and, ultimately, the strategic choices they make in ways that are both logically coherent and accord with observed outcomes in the real world. In other words, the situations and processes the theory describes in a stylized way must really occur, and viewing those occurrences through the lens of this theory should shed some light on why they happened in ways that prior theory does not.

A formal model, developed in Chapter 2, serves as the theory's foundation. Game theory is a powerful tool for theory building because it forces us to clarify our logic. At the same time, as Bates et al. (1998) argue, game theoretic models are most useful when they are based on assumptions that accord with real-world patterns. The conventions of formal modeling—the symbols, equations, diagrams, and such—are not the theory. They are only a language and grammar used to help tease out insights from a set of prior ideas about the nature of politics in democracies. The assumptions made here about the actors involved, their interests, and their decision-making processes are, of course, gross simplifications. Still, they are not chosen solely on the basis of their ability to produce novel hypotheses and accurate predictions. They are also chosen because they are thought to reflect important elements of observed human behavior.

To explore the theory's relevance to the real world, I use “analytic narratives”—retellings of historical events that trace the actors and concerns spotlighted by the theoretical model to see if they offer fresh insight into real-world cases. These narratives are not sufficiently precise or detailed to falsify the theory, a goal that would probably be inappropriate at this stage anyway.<sup>24</sup> Instead, these sketches are meant to serve the more modest goals of illustrating the elements of the theory in action and, in so doing, of providing some validation for the choices made in its construction. As Bates et al. (1998: 234) argue,

Rational choice theory (and in particular the theory of games) offers a theory of structure: it suggests a way in which structures create incentives that shape individual choices and thereby collective outcomes. Insofar as a game yields multiple equilibria, it may be difficult to test its explanatory power. But the ‘force’ of a game may lie in the properties of structure that it highlights and in the strategic problems to which it gives rise.

The formal model developed in this book is dynamic and complex, so it is not surprising that it yields what game theorists call “multiple equilibria”—in other words, that it does not produce unique predictions about choices and outcomes in all situations. Given this complexity, my chief aspirations for the theory are that it identifies significant strategic dilemmas common to all democracies and helps to clarify how certain structural conditions and external shocks or interventions can exacerbate or diminish those dilemmas. If it does those things, it should also guide us toward more insightful descriptions of real-world cases and, perhaps, to more accurate predictions about their future survival or failure.

The theory I develop is meant to be mid-range; in other words, it is meant to produce general insights, but only across a narrow class of cases. My game-theoretic model only applies to situations where the formal and informal institutions required to produce democracy, understood here as a system of government in which rulers are routinely held accountable to citizens (Schmitter and Karl 1991), have already come together, even if only briefly. My hope is that the theory sheds light on the behavior of certain sets of individuals in democracies across history and well into the future. That said, the model is most certainly not intended to be a general theory of politics. It is not designed to help us understand politics in authoritarian regimes or how democracy arose in the first place. If it is useful, the theory will shed light on elements of the interplay among actors and between actors and structure in democracies that help explain outcomes in specific cases in new ways, that accord with general trends in empirical data, and that offer specific and testable predictions about outcomes in cases that occur in the future.

### **Organization of the Book**

The book proceeds as follows: Chapter 2 takes the assumptions and intuitions about politics in democracies discussed in the Introduction and translates them into a formal game-theoretic model. Comparative statics are used to see what the model can tell us about the prospects for democratic breakdown or consolidation in a few archetypal scenarios,

and anecdotes are used to illustrate some of those scenarios in action. Chapter 3 applies descriptive event-history techniques to cross-national data, summarizing broad patterns in the survival of democracy over the past half-century and discussing what my model suggests about those patterns' origins. Chapters 4 and 5 use process-tracing narratives to demonstrate that this book's game-theoretic model sheds new light on how the democracies represented in those cross-national data actually survived or failed. The first of those two chapters explores four episodes of democracy, one selected at random from each of four sets according to their outcomes: breakdown by executive coup (Ukraine in the 1990s), breakdown by military coup (Fiji in the 2000s), breakdown by rebellion (Cyprus in the 1960s), and consolidation (Spain after Franco). The second of those chapters turns to a pair of recent breakdowns that most theories of democratic consolidation would have failed to anticipate—Venezuela and Thailand—to show that this book's theory can help to explain those surprises in ways that conventional theories cannot. Chapter 6 spells out some implications of the model for international democracy-promotion efforts; broadly speaking, it shows how the technical view that motivates most current work in the field of democratic development overlooks the political implications of specific interventions and may therefore produce unintended and undesirable consequences, and it uses the model to generate a few concrete recommendations for future efforts at democracy promotion. The book concludes by revisiting the theory's major implications, identifying areas for further research, and speculating about future trends in the global spread and consolidation of democracy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "With Premier at U.N., Thai Military Stages Coup," *The New York Times* (September 20, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> According to the World Bank's *World Development Indicators*, in Thailand in 2004, per capita income measured in constant 2000 \$US was \$2,356, on par at the time with Peru and Russia.

<sup>3</sup> See Ismael Wolff, "The Silk Revolution," *The New York Times* (September 26, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this book, the term "consolidation" is used to refer narrowly to expectations about regime survival. Following Schedler (1998), a democracy is considered consolidated when most observers, including the key actors themselves, expect it to survive indefinitely. Of course, these expectations do not guarantee that democracy will survive, and one of the points of this book is to illuminate strategic concerns that can affect those beliefs and the behavior of the actors to whom they adhere.



<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of the numbers, see Chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the definitions of democracy that have most powerfully influenced contemporary research on democratization are found in Schumpeter (1945), who identified the process of election as the sine qua non of democratic government; Dahl (1971), who proposed to measure regimes by their inclusiveness and contestation for office and emphasized the supporting role of civil liberties; Schmitter and Karl (1991), who linked democracy to the concepts of citizenship and accountability; and Przeworski et al. (2000), who assert that democracy is inherently a yes/no concept and understood it as a system in which governments lose elections.

<sup>7</sup> I do not consider judicial review by a supreme or constitutional court whose members are appointed by elected officials to be veto power by an unelected entity. Likewise, I do not consider routine consultation or advisement of elected officials by unelected entities to be inherently undemocratic, either.

<sup>8</sup> For an insightful intellectual history of modernization theory, see Gilman (2003).

<sup>9</sup> Cheibub (2007) offers the most thorough and compelling rebuttal of this argument, showing on both theoretical and empirical grounds why this claim is flawed.

<sup>10</sup> See Norris (2004: 3–22) for a careful review of arguments in this vein and counterarguments concerning the enduring effects of culture and values.

<sup>11</sup> See also Epstein et al. (2005) and Ulfelder and Lustik (2007).

<sup>12</sup> See Doorenspleet (2005) for a thoughtful effort to integrate and test ideas from several structural theories of democratization.

<sup>13</sup> Also worth noting, the idea that a special sequence of changes holds the key to the establishment of stable democracy has also lingered in spite of various attempts to declare it dead.

<sup>14</sup> The most influential expression of this “transitology” school comes from O’Donnell and Schmitter’s (1986) comparative analysis of democratization in Latin America and Southern Europe. From those cases, these authors concluded that the “will and skill” of political elites—along with significant doses of luck and chance—represent the driving forces behind the outcome of transitions from authoritarian rule.

<sup>15</sup> Some scholars have used game theoretic models to examine other aspects of the democratization process. Colomer (1991) and Przeworski (1991), for example, develop models of transitions from autocracy to democracy, while Geddes (1999) sketches games that help explain how different forms of authoritarian rule are sustained. To the best of my knowledge, however, little of the prior work in this vein applies directly to the subject of this book, namely, the survival and breakdown of democratic regimes.

<sup>16</sup> In sociology, see especially Hannan and Freeman (1989).

<sup>17</sup> As Hobbes writes in *Behemoth*, “For if men know not their duty, what is there that can force them to obey the laws: An army, you will say. But what shall force the army?”

<sup>18</sup> I do not say that it is loyal to the constitution because the notion that the constitution embodies the state is just one (particularly American) version of the kind of idea I’m talking about. In Turkey, the military has long considered itself loyal to an ideology, Ataturkism, which is only partially expressed in that country’s constitution. In Thailand, the military appears to emphasize loyalty to

the king over the constitution. The common thread here is some idea about the proper foundation of state authority, which, ironically, cannot exist without some coercive means of enforcement.

<sup>19</sup> Coup attempts in Venezuela in 1992 and Ecuador in 2000 illustrate this idea. In both situations, economic crisis led to widespread popular frustration with elected governments. That frustration produced popular unrest that culminated in attempted coups involving middle-ranking officers and rank-and-file soldiers from the communities that were suffering. Thus, although they both involved segments of the armed forces, these grabs for power do not seem to have had much to do with the interests of the military as an organization.

<sup>20</sup> For a thoughtful discussion of this point, see Armony and Schamis (2005). The notion that the risk of failure is never zero also has important implications for qualitative and quantitative analysis, because it implies that all democracies can be compared to one another in the search for correlates of survival and termination.

<sup>21</sup> In his study of democratic breakdown, Linz (1978: 15) observes that, “The twentieth century has seen fewer revolutions started by the populace than the nineteenth, and their fate in modern states has generally been defeat. The Communists and Nazis learned that lesson. Mussolini’s combination of illegal action and legal takeover became the new model for overthrow of democracies. Only the direct intervention of the military seems to be able to topple regimes in modern stabilized states.”

<sup>22</sup> That said, it is also worth noting that subversions of an existing elected government may sometimes be required to establish a democracy that will be more durable in the long run. The principle here is the one described by Thoreau in his essay on civil disobedience: “Those who, while they disapprove of the character and measures of a government, yield to it their allegiance and support are undoubtedly its most conscientious supporters, and so frequently the most serious obstacles to reform” (Bode 1947: 118).

<sup>23</sup> When the military routinely makes policy decisions, we don’t call it a democracy in the first place. Coups also differ from situations in which the military is called on by the elected government to provide internal security, perhaps during a period of emergency rule.

<sup>24</sup> On the futility of seeking absolutely to falsify social-science theory, see Bates et al. (1998: 14–18).