

**National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy:  
Putting the “Competitive” into Competitive Authoritarianism<sup>1</sup>**

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Abstract: Electoral competition is an important conceptual dividing line among hybrid regimes, yet the line remains theoretically and empirically blurry. We argue that even minimal competition makes the outcome of elections uncertain, and propose a “competitive elections screen” to define the potential for electoral competition. Along with our theory, we present new data that measures electoral competition without relying on electoral outcomes or inferring the possibility of electoral competition from aggregate measures of regime type, as is currently common. Building on a recent study of competitive authoritarian elections, the consequences of this approach are illustrated by demonstrating that existing empirical findings are sensitive to alternative conceptualizations of competition. The article and data contribute to the growing body of research on hybrid regimes in comparative politics and international relations by providing a direct indicator of the potential electoral competition that should reduce measurement error and clarify the scope conditions of empirical claims.

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Elections are fundamental to democratic governance, yet it is well established that not all elections are democratic. In fact, elections for national office have spread to nearly all countries in the world, and vary considerably in the extent to which electoral contestation is permitted. Between 2000 and 2006, of the 172 existing independent states with a population greater than 500,000, only ten countries failed to hold some form of direct national election: Angola, Bhutan, China, Eritrea, Libya, Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Somalia. Of these, four held national elections or referenda in 2007 or 2008.<sup>2</sup> The spread of elections to countries that do not meet basic democratic standards has attracted a good deal of scholarly attention.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite this attention, several important conceptual and measurement issues remain. If some governments have the incentive to mimic democratic institutions without exposing themselves to the “institutionalized uncertainty” that comes with electoral accountability, how can one distinguish purely authoritarian (closed) regimes from regimes that face some level of threat from electoral competition? What observable characteristics separate sham elections from those that introduce at least some risk to an incumbent government’s hold on power?

The potential for electoral competition is arguably an essential distinction between purely autocratic regimes and “hybrid” regime types (Diamond 2002). Especially for scholars

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<sup>2</sup> Angola, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Nepal. List of independent states from Gleditsch and Ward (1999). China holds indirect national elections.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Beaulieu and Hyde 2009; Bjornlund 2004; Blaydes 2006a; Blaydes 2006b; Block, Ferree, and Singh 2003; Brownlee 2007; Bunce and Wolchik 2006; Cox 2008; Elklit and Svensson 1997; Lehoucq and Molina 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002; Lindberg 2006; Lust-Okar 2005; Magaloni 2006; Marinov 2006; Pepinsky 2007; Schedler 2002a; Schedler 2002b; Simpser 2005.

evaluating the conditions under which opposition parties can potentially gain representation through elections, defining the minimal necessary conditions for electoral competition is an important theoretical and empirical objective. Although scholars within international relations and comparative politics commonly cite the existence of electoral competition as a conceptual dividing line between the universe of countries that are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic, cross-national comparative data on electoral competition is incomplete and flawed. Existing sources do not even agree upon the relevant universe of election events, and widely used sources are incomplete, inaccurate, or employ inconsistent rules in determining which events are even considered national elections.<sup>4</sup> More importantly for the study of hybrid regimes, existing data do not accurately distinguish between purely authoritarian countries and regimes which allow electoral contestation. The most common approaches currently used to separate regimes that allow competitive elections from those that do not infer the existence of electoral competition from aggregate measures of regime type. Some scholars also exclude elections in which the winning party or candidate won “too much” of the vote.

As an alternative, this article outlines an election-based conceptualization of the minimal conditions necessary for electoral competition, and presents a new dataset of national elections throughout the developing world, 1960-2006. The dataset is referred to as National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy, or NELDA. The NELDA dataset is distinct in that it provides a baseline definition of the potential for electoral contestation that excludes elections in which competition is impossible, but otherwise makes few assumptions about the conditions under which opposition party victory or political liberalization is more or less likely. In part, the theory is motivated by cases in which opposition parties have managed to win elections despite

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<sup>4</sup> See the online appendix for more on this point.

extensive efforts by governments to commit election fraud. Given even a minimal opportunity for electoral contestation, opposition parties have used elections to successfully challenge regimes that would otherwise be considered authoritarian.

Although we are motivated in part by opposition victories that have occurred in spite of election fraud, manipulation, and political repression, the theory underlying the NELDA dataset explicitly avoids outcome-based definitions of electoral competition. There are many reasons an incumbent government can perform well or the opposition can perform poorly, including a successful opposition party election boycott, an extraordinarily popular government, or electoral rules that (legally but perhaps unfairly) amplify the vote share of the winning party (Schedler 2002b). Poor opposition party performance does not necessarily mean that the government did not, *ex ante*, face a real potential threat from electoral competition. Additionally, there is no reason why governments that otherwise prohibit electoral competition (but which want to appear more competitive than they are to internal or external audiences) could not engineer an electoral victory of 69%, or otherwise falsify a victory on the “competitive” side of any such arbitrary outcome-based threshold.

The central argument is conceptual. When elections occur but all opposition parties are prohibited from organizing, competing, or placing candidates on the ballot, they are substantively different from elections in which opposition parties are allowed to compete, even when competition is grossly manipulated or unfair. In contrast, when elections occur but opposition parties are legal, allowed to compete, and place candidates on the ballot for the office in question, even under conditions that are severely biased against opposition parties, electoral competition is possible – and the opposition has more than a theoretical chance of challenging the incumbent government.

To illustrate with a well-known case, in advance of the 1989 Chilean elections it was not clear whether the opposition would be allowed to compete, and many observers predicted that General Augusto Pinochet's long-running dictatorship would work to avoid transferring power at all costs. In a surprise outcome, Pinochet lost the presidential elections despite using high levels of political repression against opposition political parties. Counterfactually, if an outcome-based measure were applied to the Chilean case, and all else was held equal in Chilean politics except that the opposition candidate did not win against Pinochet, the election would now be considered an authoritarian election by many measures, even if there were no other substantive differences in the quality of the election apart from the winner.

As another example, in the 2000 elections in Côte d'Ivoire, the coup leader and incumbent President Robert Guei attempted to steal the election by severely limiting competition, but without entirely banning it. Among other tactics, Guei ensured that fourteen of the nineteen prospective presidential candidates, including those from the two largest political parties, were barred from running by the Supreme Court. These actions led the UN-coordinated election observer mission to withdrawal from the country and issue a strong condemnation of the elections. However, Guei's efforts were apparently not sufficient to guarantee electoral victory, and in a surprise outcome one of the four remaining opposition candidates won the presidency with 59% of the vote. Because minimal competition was allowed, the NELDA data considers this election competitive, but would also consider the election as competitive if the conditions were otherwise equal but the incumbent regime had won 70% of the vote or more.<sup>5</sup> Elections

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<sup>5</sup> Regime-type or aggregate measures reach different conclusions about this case. For example, the Polity dataset codes Côte d'Ivoire as transitional at the end of 1999 (and as -6 on variable *Polity2* for 1998) which gives little information on the electoral conditions. Freedom House

may be biased or unfair, but if competition is allowed, the outcome of elections will exhibit some randomness, thereby giving the opposition a chance of gaining representation through elections and the opportunity to challenge the incumbent government.

In order to capture the potential for electoral competition and render it empirically useful to other researchers, NELDA introduces a “competitive elections screen” to distinguish between the two types of election events. This refinement should be of interest to scholars working on a diverse set of topics including election violence, protest, boycotts (Beaulieu 2006; Lindberg 2006), election fraud (Elklit and Svensson 1997; Lehoucq 2003; Tucker 2007; Simpser 2005), election monitors and international involvement in elections (Abbink and Hesselting 2000; Elklit and Reynolds 2005; Geisler 1993; Kelley 2008; McCoy 1998; Hyde 2006), electorally motivated revolutions (Beissinger 2008; Bunce and Wolchik 2006; Carothers 2006; Dimitrov 2008; Fairbanks 2008; Tucker 2007; Bunce and Wolchik 2008; Way 2008), endogenous election timing (Kayser 2005), post-conflict elections (Flores and Nooruddin 2009; Nooruddin 2008; Vreeland 2008), and the role of elections in democratization (Howard and Roessler 2006; Lindberg 2006; Lindberg 2009).

To be sure, many other variables may influence the success of opposition parties. In fact, NELDA variables include indicators like whether the opposition was harassed or the media was biased. Given some potential for electoral competition, other variables should be used to indicate the conditions under which the opposition is more or less likely to win. By starting with the

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would give the country a score of 6, or not free (1999). Finally, the Database of Political Institutions would code it as a 6, indicating multiple parties but with the largest party gaining more than 75% on the *LIEC* variable of legislative institutional competitiveness, and same on executive competitiveness variable (*EIEC*).

broadest set of potentially competitive elections, scholars can evaluate which variables correlate with opposition party success without basing such a question on whether the opposition party was successful. If the outcome of the election is used to infer the nature of the playing field, then errors will arise: poor conditions for competition will sometimes produce unexpected victories for the opposition and relatively good conditions will sometimes result in very one-sided wins. Excluding cases based on electoral outcomes may introduce bias into research about the causes of good or bad opposition performance within hybrid regimes.

This article also argues that existing options for measuring the potential for electoral competition are inaccurate, a point that illustrates the utility of NELDA for scholars studying the global spread of elections and electoral competition. By comparing NELDA to methods commonly used to identify regimes which are neither fully autocratic nor fully democratic, we show that such methods both exclude cases in which competition is possible and include elections in which it is not. The label(s) for regimes in this intermediate category are numerous, and include electoral autocracies, semi-democracies, competitive authoritarian regimes, and pseudo-democracies. Apart from our conceptual point about outcome based measures of competitiveness, the fact that aggregate regime-type indicators are inadequate proxies for electoral competition is a basic measurement problem for scholars working on many research agendas.

Aggregate regime type data, by design, were never meant to capture variation in electoral circumstances, and we demonstrate that the potential influence of such coding decisions is not trivial. Building on the results of an existing study of competitive authoritarian elections, published in the *American Journal of Political Science*, the NELDA election-specific measure of competitive authoritarian elections not only leads to a different universe of cases, but this

universe generates substantively different conclusions about the determinants of liberalization across competitive authoritarian regimes.

This article therefore makes two contributions. The first is conceptual: unlike much of the existing literature on hybrid regimes, we argue that actual opposition party performance is conceptually distinct from the potential for opposition party competition, and the former should therefore not be used to define the latter. The second point of this article is to highlight an important measurement issue: for scholars interested in the causes or consequences of electoral competition across regime types, aggregate measures of regime type do not accurately indicate whether the government allows elections in which electoral competition is possible.

#### **NELDA VS. ALTERNATIVES FOR DEFINING COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIAN ELECTIONS**

Many scholars have noted that the expansion of electoral institutions around the world has not necessarily resulted in the spread of democracy.<sup>6</sup> Instead, “hybrid” regime types have proliferated in which electoral competition is allowed but flawed in many ways. There are at least as many names for this phenomenon as there are debates about its causes and implications (Collier and Levitsky 1997). Nevertheless, the potential for electoral competition is at the core of many of the more widely cited conceptual definitions of the difference between purely authoritarian regimes and those that are not. Among other criteria, Andreas Schedler defines electoral authoritarian rule as including,

elections [that are] are broadly inclusive, (they are held under universal suffrage)

as well as minimally pluralistic (opposition parties are allowed to run), minimally

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<sup>6</sup> See Bunce and Wolchik 2006; Diamond 2002; Howard and Roessler 2006; Levitsky and Way 2002; Levitsky and Way 2005; Schedler 2002a; Schedler 2006; Collier and Levitsky 1997; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009.

competitive (opposition parties, while denied victory, are allowed to win votes and seats), and minimally open (opposition parties are not subject to massive repression, although they may experience repressive treatment in selective and intermittent ways)” (Schedler 2006, 3).

Similarly, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way situate competitive authoritarianism between regimes that meet the “basic standards of democracy” and fully authoritarian governments. According to their definition, competitive authoritarian regimes are set apart from democracies “in which democratic institutions offer an important channel through which the opposition may seek power [and] those regimes in which democratic rules simply serve to legitimize an existing autocratic leadership” (Levitsky and Way 2002, 54; Diamond 2002; Schedler 2006).

Following Levitsky and Way, we refer to regimes that allow electoral competition but that fail to meet basic democratic standards as *competitive authoritarian regimes*. Conceptually, scholars define these regimes (and the related but more general concepts of electoral authoritarian regimes, semi-democracies, and anocracies) with clear reference to whether elections are held and more importantly, whether electoral competition is allowed. As Diamond summarizes,

We can further divide electoral authoritarian regimes into the *competitive authoritarian* (following Levitsky and Way's formulation) and the uncompetitive or (following Schedler, and before him Giovanni Sartori) *hegemonic* (25, emphasis in original).

Therefore, whether competition is permitted in elections should arguably be used to separate competitive authoritarian regimes from regimes which hold elections but do not allow electoral competition. Thus far, however, a lack of data has prevented a clear election-based distinction.

The NELDA “competitive elections screen” is based on three questions: (1) Was opposition allowed? (2) Was more than one party legal? (3) Was there a choice of candidates on the ballot? Elections that meet all three conditions of the competitive elections screen are defined in the NELDA data as (minimally) competitive. This potential for competition does not mean that a close election or an alternation in power is likely, and even otherwise authoritarian regimes sometimes allow minimally competitive elections for some national offices. Crucially, we attempt to capture whether the opposition party has the opportunity to contest the election without basing this decision on whether it actually won. Our measure is intuitive, transparent, and conceptually unburdened by complex notions of political regime characteristics or expert coding that is difficult to replicate (Hadenius and Teorell 2007). Also distinct from other conceptualizations of competitive authoritarian regimes, the competitive elections screen does not rely on ex-post evaluation of the performance of political parties to judge the competitiveness of elections.<sup>7</sup> It allows competition to vary within country-years, which may be theoretically interesting for questions pertaining to electorally induced political transitions.

Although the competitive elections screen is an overtly minimalist conception of electoral competition, scholars are welcome to add to or modify it based on other theories or additional assumptions. For example, distinguishing between regimes that allow minimal competition for legislative and executive elections versus regimes that only allow competition for one type of office may be relevant to some research. Because it defines a very minimal set of necessary conditions for electoral competition, the set of elections which pass the NELDA competitive elections screen should be the universe of cases in which electoral competition is possible, not

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<sup>7</sup> In this sense it is distinct and intentionally broader than the operationalization used by Larry Diamond to classify regimes (2002).

the set of elections in which opposition success is most likely. The determinants of opposition party success within hybrid regimes types are still not well established. Therefore, the broadest category of regimes in which competition is possible should be used to establish the determinants of opposition party success or regime liberalization.

How does this approach differ from that of scholars like Diamond (2002) and Howard and Roessler (2006) who argue for further subdivisions among regime types, or label regimes in which the opposition performs poorly as *hegemonic* electoral authoritarian regimes and reserve the label *competitive authoritarian* for only those regimes in which the opposition actually performs well? To be clear, we agree that regimes where the opposition is harassed and the media is biased offer less opportunity for opposition parties to compete. Yet we avoid the label *hegemonic* authoritarian elections because it is associated with outcome-based measures of opposition performance. In the extreme, we would argue that hegemonic elections in which the opposition is legal, permitted to compete, and place candidates on the ballot is a potentially competitive election, even when the outcome would be “hegemonic” by Diamond’s standards (2002). Diamond, however, also implicitly recognizes the inaccuracy of outcome based measures in discussing an example of hegemonic authoritarianism:

[T]he hegemonic character of rule by Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) was not apparent in the bare majority of parliamentary seats it won in 1998, but it became more blatant in early 2002 when the CPP won control of about 99 percent of the 1,621 local communes with about 70 percent of the vote (Diamond 2002, 32).

As mentioned above, scholars studying the causes or consequences of hybrid regimes in a large-*N* cross-national context typically rely on a range of either the Polity or Freedom House

rankings (or some combination) to identify the universe of cases (Diamond 2002; Howard and Roessler 2006; Hegre 2001; Mansfield and Snyder 2002). Countries are labeled as either authoritarian regimes or “hegemonic” authoritarian regimes if they hold elections but fall below some threshold on aggregate measures of regime type, or if the government’s vote-share in elections is judged to be too big. Countries above a given threshold in the Polity or Freedom House datasets, but below some threshold for democracy, are considered electoral authoritarian regimes, anocracies, competitive authoritarian regimes, semi-democracies, or one of the many other names applied to intermediate regime types.<sup>8</sup>

One of the more widely-used datasets in political science is the Polity scale, with its *Polity2* variable ranging from -10, or most autocratic, to 10, or most democratic (Marshall and Jaggers 2002). Yet we show that defining electoral competition based on Polity inaccurately categorizes many events. For example, from 1960-2006, there are 124 elections that receive a *Polity2* score below -5 yet which pass the “competitive elections screen” in the NELDA data. These elections are potentially competitive: of the 124 elections that would be dropped from a study using the -5 *Polity2* cutoff point, the incumbent was replaced in twenty-one of them.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, out of those countries that hold elections and receive a *Polity2* score greater than -5, 46 held elections that do not pass the competitive elections screen and overtly prohibit electoral competition, yet would be included in studies of competitive

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<sup>8</sup>We do not provide a comprehensive summary of all areas in which intermediate regimes types are an independent variable. For examples and critiques of such measures, see Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Greene 2008; Hegre 2001; Levitsky and Way 2002; Mansfield and Snyder 2005; Vreeland 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Source: the NELDA dataset.

authoritarianism. Potentially competitive elections fall on either side of any threshold on the Polity scale, meaning that this criticism does not depend on where the line is drawn. Similar comparisons also result from other indices used to classify regime types. For example, the Freedom House dataset, which defines countries as “partly free” when they have a score between three and five on their seven point scale, has also been used widely (Freedom House 2006). If the threshold between the “partly free” and “not free” categories on the Freedom House scale is used to infer the existence of electoral competition, 155 elections would fall below the “partly free” threshold but would pass the competitive elections screen in the NELDA data. On the other side of the Freedom House line between “not free” and “partly free,” 48 elections would pass the “partly free” threshold but do not pass the NELDA competitive elections screen.

Although such indices take electoral competition in to account in their coding, they were not designed to distinguish between countries based on whether electoral competition is allowed. For example, countries with similar *Polity2* scores hold elections that differ in competitiveness, and countries with different *Polity2* scores hold similarly competitive elections. Consider two cases: the 1980 elections in Communist Poland and the 1996 presidential elections in Armenia. Polity assigns to both countries a score of -6 on *Polity2* in the respective years. Yet, the Polish elections were solidly authoritarian by any measure: the Communist party did not brook any official opposition, literally making an opposition electoral win impossible. By comparison, the Armenian case was marked by fraud and other irregularities but the opposition was allowed to contest the poll, was able to run multiple candidates, and had a chance—in more than in theory—of overcoming the bias against them to win electoral representation.

This problem cannot be resolved by turning to Polity's subcomponent scores.<sup>10</sup> The subcomponent variables *XRCOMP*, *XROPEN*, and *PARCOMP* are the three *Polity2* component variables that appear to be the most theoretically relevant to electoral conditions. Yet they all have the same rankings for the Polish and Armenian cases: *XRCOMP* = 1 (chief executive determined through hereditary succession or rigged or unopposed elections); *XROPEN* = 4 (chief executive determined through elite designation or competitive election); *PARCOMP* = 2 (regime sharply limits political competition). Note that *XRCOMP* can be the same value across a number of theoretically distinct cases: the executive can be a king, or a popularly elected leader.

Also consider the cases of the 1996 elections in Mauritania and the 1995 elections in Kyrgyzstan. The NELDA dataset defines them both as competitive – opposition activity is allowed. The variable *Polity2* assigns -6 to the Mauritania case and -3 to the Kyrgyz case. The difference can be traced to two subcomponent variables: *XCONST* - the degree of limitation on executive authority; and *PARREG* - whether political competition is sectarian or more broad-based. Neither of these relates in any direct or transparent way to the elections per se. It follows that the difference in Polity scores is a questionable source for coding the Mauritanian regime as closed or authoritarian while coding the Kyrgyz case as a competitive authoritarian regime (which the standard cut-off point of -5 on *Polity2* would dictate).

The problem is not how underlying component variables are aggregated. Rather, Polity variables (as well as other measures of regime type), by design, conflate different types of electoral events. Whatever variation in the underlying political structure is captured by aggregate measures of regime type, it seems fair to conclude that their rankings are inadequate as proxies

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<sup>10</sup> See Vreeland (2008) on the potential advantages of considering subcomponent scores instead of the *Polity2* aggregate measure.

for whether electoral competition is possible, and therefore introduce systematic measurement error into categorizations of “hybrid” regimes.

### **WHAT IS THE NELDA DATASET?**

Figures 1.1 and 1.2 illustrate the global spread of elections and minimal electoral competition, as documented in the NELDA data. The figures are included to demonstrate variation overtime, within countries, and between regions in the existence of elections and electoral competition. The figures also highlight a number of empirical puzzles, and underscore the future utility of the NELDA dataset. For example, why do countries like Cuba, Laos, Albania before 1990, Kuwait and Vietnam hold regular elections without allowing even minimal electoral competition? Why have competitive elections spread so consistently across Latin America, but not in the rest of the world until the end of the Cold War? Given the literature focusing on the potential for violence introduced by democratization (Mansfield and Snyder 2002), what does the recent trend toward nearly universal acceptance of electoral competition mean for the outbreak of democratization-induced violence? These questions are not addressed in this article, but outlining such questions emphasizes that existing data provide a poor resource for scholars interested these and related empirical puzzles. The next section summarizes the NELDA dataset and the competitive elections screen. A more extensive codebook and access to the dataset is available online at <http://hyde.research.yale.edu/nelda>.

[Figures 1.1 and 1.2 about here]

### **UNIVERSE OF CASES AND CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION**

Even the simple issue of merging election data collected by different scholars has, thus far, been difficult because no comprehensive list of election events has been agreed upon, definitions of “elections” tend to be imprecise and inconsistent (for example, many datasets

include some but not all indirect elections) and much of the data on elections is forced into a country-year format, resulting in the loss of potentially important variation. We code election dates and election types for the first and any subsequent rounds of multi-round events, and the data are structured such that each election event can be collapsed into theoretically appropriate units. Each observation in the NELDA dataset is an election event, which consists of a single round of an election for a single type of national office. To be included in the dataset, elections must be for a national executive figure (such as a president), or for a national legislative body (such as a parliament, legislature, or constituent assembly). Elections must also be direct, meaning that voters must elect the person or persons appearing on the ballot to the national post in question (including closed party-list electoral systems). The NELDA dataset does not include “indirect” elections in which mass voting takes place for a committee that then selects a president, for example.

The unit of observation is the election round, with presidential and legislative elections coded separately even when they take place on the same day (although simultaneous presidential and legislative elections can be combined easily). All rounds of an election are coded, regardless of the number of seats remaining to be filled. In some cases it is difficult to distinguish multi-round elections from new elections. In choosing whether to classify a new election rather than a subsequent round of an election already underway, we consider: (1) whether the government calls the election a new one; and (2) whether candidates are allowed and/or required to register again. A new election is implied by a positive answer to either variable. By this rule, the rerun of the second round of the Ukrainian presidential election of 2004 counts as a third round: the set of continuing candidates was based on rounds one and two. In contrast, when the results of the

November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2003 legislative election in Georgia were cancelled, the legislative election of March 2004 is coded as a new election: new registration lists and candidates were mandated.

Indirect elections are excluded, and represent a source of inconsistent coding rules in most existing data on election events. For example, in the 1983 presidential election in the Arab Republic of Yemen, the President was re-elected for a second 5-year term at a meeting of the Constituent People's Assembly, and is excluded from the NELDA data (although it is included as an election in several other sources, including Nohlen's *Elections in Asia*). NELDA does not include Chinese legislative elections because citizens do not vote directly on deputies. Exceptions to this rule are those elections in which an "electoral college" or similar body mechanically implements the outcome of the popular vote, and it is widely understood that voting by citizens determines who is elected, such as in the U.S. or South Korea.

Sometimes elections are cancelled immediately before, during or after election day, presenting an additional complication, and one in which different research questions could demand different data. We include elections if and only if voting on election day commenced, and exclude elections that are postponed or canceled before voting begins. This decision rule holds regardless of whether the balloting was completed or eventually cancelled, annulled, whether any results were ever announced, or whether the results of the election were eventually respected.

Excluding long-term democracies, all independent countries with a population above half a million are included from 1960 to 2006, and are detailed on the website. Updates of the data will extend coverage to all independent states.

Due to the lack of centralized information about election events, a number of primary and secondary sources were consulted in identifying elections and in coding data on whether

competition was possible. The most commonly used sources of information about elections are international and domestic journalistic accounts, most of which were accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspaper Databases, Lexis-Nexis Academic, and Keesing's Record of World Events. The data handbooks compiled by Dieter Nohlen and coeditors, the Polyarchy Dataset Manuscript, and the IFES Election Guide were valuable resources in compiling the initial lists of election dates, although none served as the only or primary resource. Many of the more unique or problematic cases are discussed in the codebook accompanying the data where a more complete list of sources is also provided. Inter-coder reliability was tested for all questions and for the appropriate identification of election events within country-years.

#### **MEASURING COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES**

The NELDA competitive elections screen distinguishes between potentially competitive elections and non-competitive elections. In order to measure competitive authoritarian elections it is necessary to define one additional threshold: the line between democratic and not democratic regimes, which is not provided by NELDA. Thus, defining competitive authoritarianism requires combining the NELDA data with a measure of democracy.

Most scholars would agree that a regime should not be considered a democracy unless contested elections occur at regular intervals. In practice, scholars demarcate the line that divides democratic regimes from other forms of government using a variety of criteria. Elections that fail to pass the NELDA screen take place in closed or uncompetitive authoritarian regimes. Regimes allowing elections that pass the minimal competitive elections screen provided by the NELDA data may range from fully democratic to authoritarian. Figure 2 builds on a similar effort to define competitive authoritarian elections by Howard and Roessler (2006), and illustrates how

our approach relates to existing research and definitions.<sup>11</sup> The NELDA competitive elections screen divides the 1,185 elections occurring between 1960-2006 into 842 elections in which competition was permitted, and 343 election in which it was not.<sup>12</sup> Depending on which measure of democracy is used, there are 400-450 democratic elections during the period, and 390-440 competitive authoritarian elections.

[Figure 2 about here]

Because we argue against outcome-based measures of competitive authoritarianism, and many other measures of democracy are implicitly or explicitly based on opposition party performance, we prefer the coding of democracy provided by Alvarez, Cheibub, Limongi and Przeworski (ACLP) (1996). Researchers may combine the NELDA competitive elections screen with other measures of democracy to define competitive authoritarian regimes. The ACLP data provide a procedural definition of democracy which can be used to eliminate the set of democratic elections from the larger set of competitive elections identified by NELDA, but the ACLP data not depend on outcome-based measures in defining which regimes qualify as democracies.

The ACLP dataset classifies each country in each year as a democracy or as an autocracy if it meets the following five procedural criteria: (a) the election is contested, (b) the office of the incumbent leader itself is decided by electoral competition, (c) there is ex-ante uncertainty on

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<sup>11</sup> To make our comparison analogous to this and other studies, we collapse the NELDA data into single election events (by collapsing multi-round elections into one event and by defining elections held on one day for multiple offices as one event).

<sup>12</sup> Note that the NELDA data does not currently include elections in long-term consolidated democracies.

who will win, (d) there is no doubt that the loser would yield power, (e) the elections will recur at regular intervals. If any one of these conditions fails, ACLP classify the country as a non-democracy (or authoritarian regime). These five criteria are not coded in disaggregated form in the ACLP data. If conditions (a) to (e) hold on December 31<sup>st</sup> of the coded year, the ACLP data consider the country a democracy. Note that the first of the ACLP conditions, contestation, should be conceptually identical to the competitiveness screen NELDA utilizes. As a check on the face validity of our measure, all elections that NELDA classifies as non-competitive occur in non-democracies, and all elections in ACLP democracies are competitive per NELDA, implying that the NELDA notion of competitiveness and the ACLP contestation condition are the same in practice.

Figure 2 also illustrates how the NELDA data separate the universe of electoral contests into competitive and non-competitive ones, and how an ACLP-measure of democracy or a Polity measure of democracy (based on *Polity2* > 5) divide the universe of competitive elections into competitive authoritarian elections and democratic elections. Individual researchers will decide differently when it comes to the final branch on the figure, using their preferred criterion and dataset of democracy. This discretion is appropriate, and it does not undermine the utility of the NELDA dataset's conceptual criterion and empirical measure, as we demonstrate in the next section.

#### **ILLUSTRATING THE NELDA DIFFERENCE IN COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIAN ELECTIONS:**

##### **OPPOSITION COALITIONS AND LIBERALIZING OUTCOMES**

Thus far, this article has made two general points. First, outcome-based concepts of competitive authoritarianism run the risk of biasing research. Outcome-based measures disproportionately include cases in which the opposition actually performs well and exclude

cases in which the opposition could have performed well but did not for reasons that are unrelated to the concept of competitive authoritarianism, thereby generating systematic bias in studies relying on such outcome based measures. Second, we have highlighted an important measurement problem in the study of competitive authoritarianism and hybrid regimes more generally. Aggregate regime type measures do not accurately tap the existence of electoral competition. In this section we build on a recent study of competitive authoritarian elections to explore the consequences of the conceptual point and the measurement issue.

In their study of non-founding competitive authoritarian elections between 1990 and 2002, Marc Howard and Philip Roessler ask whether the existence of a broad opposition coalition makes what they call a “liberalizing electoral outcome” more likely in competitive authoritarian elections. A liberalizing outcome is, loosely, a significant episode of political liberalization such as the iconic loss of power by Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic to a united political opposition. They examine the set of competitive authoritarian elections between 1990 and 2002, and use a combination of Polity and Freedom House rankings to identify the relevant universe of elections that are included in their study. They find that opposition coalitions strongly increase the probability of a liberalizing electoral outcome.

The authors’ main theoretical insight is that unity among the opposition, all else equal, is more likely to bring down an authoritarian leader or secure a democratic breakthrough within competitive authoritarian regimes. This argument is supported with case-study evidence, which documents how a united opposition front is likely to score a dramatic upset against steep electoral odds. We do not dispute the authors’ findings for their specific universe of cases. Because the study relies on Polity and Freedom House to define the universe of competitive authoritarian elections, we use their research as a tool to evaluate the empirical consequences of

our alternative measure of competitive authoritarian regimes. We chose the Howard and Roessler study in part because they go much further than other scholars in transparently operationalizing competitive authoritarian elections, and in coding such events using systematic criteria.<sup>13</sup> They also acknowledge and cite recent criticism of Polity and Freedom House, and highlight known problems with “conceptualization, measurement, and aggregation” in these datasets, but justify this use of such indicators to measure competitive authoritarian elections because there “are as of yet not better alternatives that cover countries around the world annually” (368).

Howard and Roessler base their criteria for competitive authoritarian elections on Levitsky and Way’s conceptual work on the topic, which includes elections that: (a) are not hegemonic in that contestation is allowed; and (b) are not democratic in that competition is flawed in some way. This measure is also close to the conceptual definition of electoral authoritarianism outlined by Andreas Schedler, although Levitsky and Way (2002) and Diamond (2002) suggest that the category of electoral authoritarian elections contains both competitive authoritarian elections and hegemonic authoritarian elections. In both competitive and electoral authoritarian elections, electoral fraud or other unfair practices may prevent the opposition from claiming a victory that would be theirs if voter preferences were accurately translated into electoral outcomes.

We introduce the NELDA competitive elections screen as an alternative threshold for defining competitive authoritarian elections, and combine the NELDA competitive elections screen with two measures of democracy: using the measure of democracy preferred by Howard and Roessler and using the ACLP data. By using two separate measures of democracy, we show

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<sup>13</sup> Brownlee (2009) represents a very recent and similarly rigorous effort to distinguish between regimes using combinations of existing data.

that the empirical consequences of using the NELDA measure of electoral competition are not a function of using an alternative measure of democracy.

The universe of competitive authoritarian elections changes substantially when the NELDA competitive elections screen, rather than FH/Polity, are used to divide authoritarian elections from competitive elections. Table 1 combines NELDA with the ACLP definition of democracy to make the comparison clear. Using the Freedom House (FH)/Polity criteria (as both the bottom and top cutoff points, where bottom is uncompetitive elections and top is democratic elections), Howard and Roessler define a universe of 50 cases.<sup>14</sup> The NELDA/ACLP criteria for competitive authoritarian elections identify 60 cases, yet the two sets agree on only 22 elections.

[Table 1 about here]

In addition to employing different measurement of the presence of competition and democracy, Howard and Roessler use an outcome-based measure of performance to exclude elections in which the opposition performed poorly. Following Levitsky and Way, they define all elections in which the incumbent wins by more than 70% as hegemonic elections, and therefore exclude them from their study. Conceptually, we argue that such cases should be included in the competitive authoritarian category when the elections are contested, even if the government wins overwhelmingly. However, because this is a distinct point, we report separate models in order to highlight the consequences of variation in universe of cases (and therefore the variation in results) based on different measures of competitive authoritarianism.

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<sup>14</sup> The democracy threshold or upper bound is a FH political rights score of 2 or less or a Polity score of 6 or higher; the autocracy threshold or lower bound is a score of -8 or below on the Polity scale, or 7 on the Freedom House scale.

Much of the disagreement between the methods of measuring competitive authoritarian elections are cases that the NELDA data code as potentially competitive yet the FH/Polity criteria exclude as non-competitive or authoritarian elections. There are 22 such cases. Of these, the incumbent was replaced in seven elections which are excluded by measures derived from Freedom House and/or Polity scores. For example, the Kenyan 1997 presidential election is not counted as competitive authoritarian by Howard and Roessler because they disqualify cases where Freedom House political rights are at their “worst” value of 7. In this case, however, the NELDA data defines the election as minimally competitive and therefore assigns the case to the set of competitive authoritarian elections. As another example, in the 1995 elections in Algeria, the incumbent gained 61% of the vote yet the FH/Polity rule excludes it as a non-competitive regime. Of the cases excluded from Howard and Roessler’s study because the regimes scored too low on either Freedom House or Polity scales, Table 1 shows that the incumbent’s vote share was less than 70% in seven elections, providing further evidence that aggregate regime type measures are poor proxies for the potential for electoral competition, even if disagrees with our conceptual point that electoral outcomes should not be used to measure competitiveness.

We replicate Howard and Roessler’s universe of cases and results on Model 1 in Table 1, and use this model as a baseline to evaluate how different concepts and measures provided by NELDA influence the results reported in Model 1. To make the comparison clear, we followed Howard and Roessler’s coding rules and estimation procedures in performing the analysis unless otherwise stated.<sup>15</sup> Beginning with the unconstrained NELDA list of election events, we

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<sup>15</sup> In the interest of space, we refer readers to Howard and Roessler’s article for variable definitions and sources. Most of their variables are from widely available datasets, and we used these original sources and followed Howard and Roessler’s coding rules. Two variables, *Broad*

excluded events that do not allow minimal opposition competition, selected presidential elections in presidential systems and parliamentary elections in parliamentary systems, and excluded “founding” elections. In order to replicate the coding of founding elections, we used two other variables from the NELDA data. Elections are considered founding if they are the country’s first multiparty elections or if regular elections were suspended before the current election, as defined in the online codebook.

Models 2-5 report our findings. Across all four models, the NELDA competitive elections screen is used instead of the FH/Polity rankings to distinguish between contested elections and non-competitive authoritarian elections. Models 2-5 differ from each other in the measure used to exclude democratic elections, whether elections are excluded based on poor opposition party performance, and the precise list of founding elections.

Model 2 uses FH/Polity to exclude democratic elections, and therefore uses the same criteria for competitive authoritarian elections as in Howard and Roessler (Model 1), except that the NELDA data is used to exclude the non-competitive (or closed) elections rather than FH/Polity. Like Howard and Roessler, Model 2 excludes overwhelming victories. Based on 74 observations, the results show a positive coefficient for the *Opposition Coalition* variable, but the

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*Opposition Coalition* (the main independent variable) and *Incumbent Turnover*, were coded by Howard and Roessler for the 50 elections in their study. We were able to use NELDA to derive a measure of *Incumbent Turnover* but we had no suitable variables in NELDA to help with *Opposition Coalition*. To address this issue, we followed the coding rules outlined in their codebook, and trained research assistants to use their rules. We then assigned research assistants to all cases included in Models 1-5, including those already coded. The recoded cases were used to test inter-coder reliability between the two sets of data, a test that matched our expectations.

variable does not achieve conventional levels of statistical significance. Its size is substantially different from the coefficient reported in the original study, suggesting that opposition coalitions make less of a difference for the odds of a breakthrough when NELDA data are used. Model 2 does, however, support their finding that opposition mobilization is significantly related to liberalizing electoral outcomes.

In Model 3, we adjust the set of founding elections to reflect nine cases that Howard and Roessler code as founding elections but the NELDA criteria do not code as such because they are not the country's first multiparty elections nor elections that followed the suspension of regular elections.<sup>16</sup> Model 3 replicates Model 2 without these nine cases, and shows that when the set of founding elections is adjusted to conform to the list favored by Howard and Roessler, the magnitude of *Opposition Coalition variable* increases, and is still shy of statistical significance at the 95% confidence level. More importantly, the size of the effect is substantively different from the original study. Although Model 1 estimates that the presence of opposition coalitions increase the probability of an upset to .8, Model 3 estimates an expected increase of .35 (the

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<sup>16</sup> Private correspondence with the authors established that these cases are: Algeria 1995, Cambodia 1998, Central African Republic 1992, Congo 1992, Ethiopia 1995, Fiji 2001, Guinea-Bissau 1999, Niger 1999, Nigeria 1999. An important part of the divergent coding stems from how elections that occur in the immediate aftermath of a coup against an elected leader are treated: NELDA does not count those as founding, whereas Howard and Roessler would do. We do not believe that this issue is straightforward or settled.

baseline when *Opposition Coalition* = 0 is comparable in both models).<sup>17</sup> Most of the change between Model 1 and Models 2 and 3 results from using NELDA to identify the set of election events more accurately (see Table 1), and moving away from reliance on FH/Polity to infer potential electoral competition. In every other respect, Model 3 includes cases based on the criteria favored by Howard and Roessler: a definition of democracy based on FH/Polity, a set of non-founding elections per their preferred list, and excluding cases where the opposition performed badly. Thus, Model 3's results are the closest to Howard and Roessler's study, but do not confirm a strong link between opposition coalitions and liberalizing electoral outcomes, and underscore the point that there are substantive consequences to how competitive authoritarian elections are defined.

Model 4 moves away from relying on Polity/Freedom House entirely, instead using ACLP to exclude democratic elections from the set of competitive elections. Opposition coalitions are no longer positively associated with democratic breakthroughs. One should note that ACLP data are sometimes accused of "backwards" coding – observing a liberalizing outcome at time  $t$  and then using that information to code the political regime at time  $t-1$  as democratic on the basis of the outcome at time  $t$ . If the charge of backward coding of ACLP data has any merit, it might make for an unfair test of the Howard and Roessler study - precisely those elections that result in liberalizing outcomes may be at higher risk of being backward coded as taking place in democracies, leading to attrition in the number of cases with liberalizing outcomes and possible bias in the estimated coefficients. In fairness to ALCP, the project's

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<sup>17</sup> In Model 1, holding all else equal at median values and changing the *Opposition Coalition* variable from zero to one increases the probability of a liberalizing electoral outcome from .14 to .86. In Model 2, the same simulated change is from .15 to .35.

authors defend their coding rules by arguing that they only code cases retroactively when the formal rules of the game did not change between time  $t$  and  $t-1$ . By this logic, the ACLP coding convention should not be an issue in this study. We have examined the data carefully and find only two or three cases where backwards coding is plausible, leading us to conclude that ACLP is still a preferable alternative to the conceptual and measurement problems in FH/Polity.

Model 5 moves further away from outcome-based measures of electoral competition, and closer to our proposed conceptual definition. Model 5 includes elections even when the government won an overwhelming victory (those elections where the government won by more than 70% of the vote but allowed opposition parties to compete in the election). The results change somewhat in this model relative to Model 4, although they continue to show a statistically insignificant relationship between opposition coalitions and liberalizing electoral outcomes, and the sign on *Opposition Coalition* continues to be in the opposite direction. Model 5 confirms two auxiliary findings reported by Howard and Roessler: incumbent turnover and opposition mobilization are associated with increased likelihood of a liberalizing electoral outcome. Model 5 also suggests the additional finding that liberalizing outcomes are less likely in elections in parliamentary systems (possibly due to greater incentives for programmatic rather than personalist parties).

At the very least, these results suggest that determining whether opposition coalitions are a key factor in bringing about liberalizing electoral outcomes is sensitive to the criteria for defining competitive authoritarian elections. The significance and magnitude of the effect of opposition coalitions is not robust to alternative election-based measurement of competitive authoritarian elections. It is sufficient to drop reliance on Polity and Freedom House as measures

of non-competitive elections for the estimated effect of *Opposition Coalition* to decrease substantially in size and significance.

[Table 2 about here]

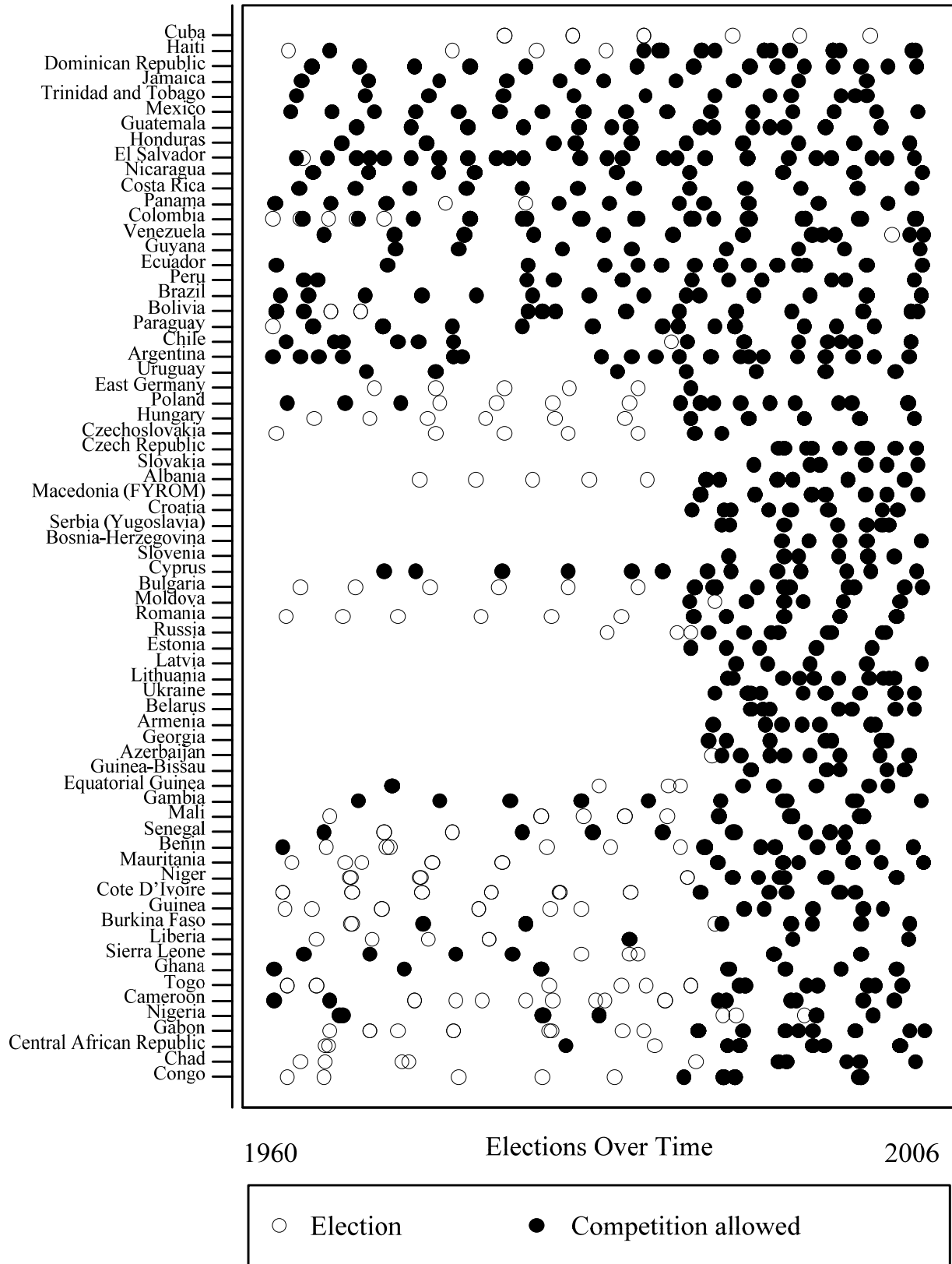
Our results do not disprove Howard and Roessler's argument that opposition coalitions play an important role in democratizing breakthroughs in competitive authoritarian regimes. Much can prevent precise estimations of such an effect, including the un-modeled existence of conditional relationships, the non-randomness of the strategic decision to form a coalition, and the strategic decision of the incumbent government to allow such a coalition to form. Our intuition is that the relationship is conditional on other election-level characteristics, although we maintain that outcome-based measures of electoral competition and reliance on Freedom House and Polity to exclude non-competitive or hegemonic elections introduce unnecessary complications and potential bias into research on hybrid regimes.

### CONCLUSION

The contribution of this article is best illustrated by five related observations: First, for scholars evaluating the causes and consequences of electoral competition, outcome-based measures of electoral competition, by excluding elections in which the opposition can compete but did not perform sufficiently well, introduce a serious form of bias into research on a wide-ranging set of questions. Second, existing regime type measures do not accurately define the universe of cases in which electoral competition is possible, and lead to the unintended inclusion of noncompetitive elections as well as the unintended exclusion of competitive elections. Third, no existing public dataset has comparable scope of coverage of elections as unique and identifiable events. Fourth, relative to existing datasets on elections, the data are more flexible outside of the country-year format and can be easily transformed into the structure that is most

appropriate to a specific research question. Finally, the list of election events makes adding additional election-specific variables relatively straightforward, a feature that we hope will facilitate further research and collaboration. This final point is simple, but is arguably the most lasting contribution of the project. Overall, we hope that this study will facilitate further debate in international relations and comparative politics on the implications of the rapid increase in competitive but undemocratic forms of electoral processes throughout the world.

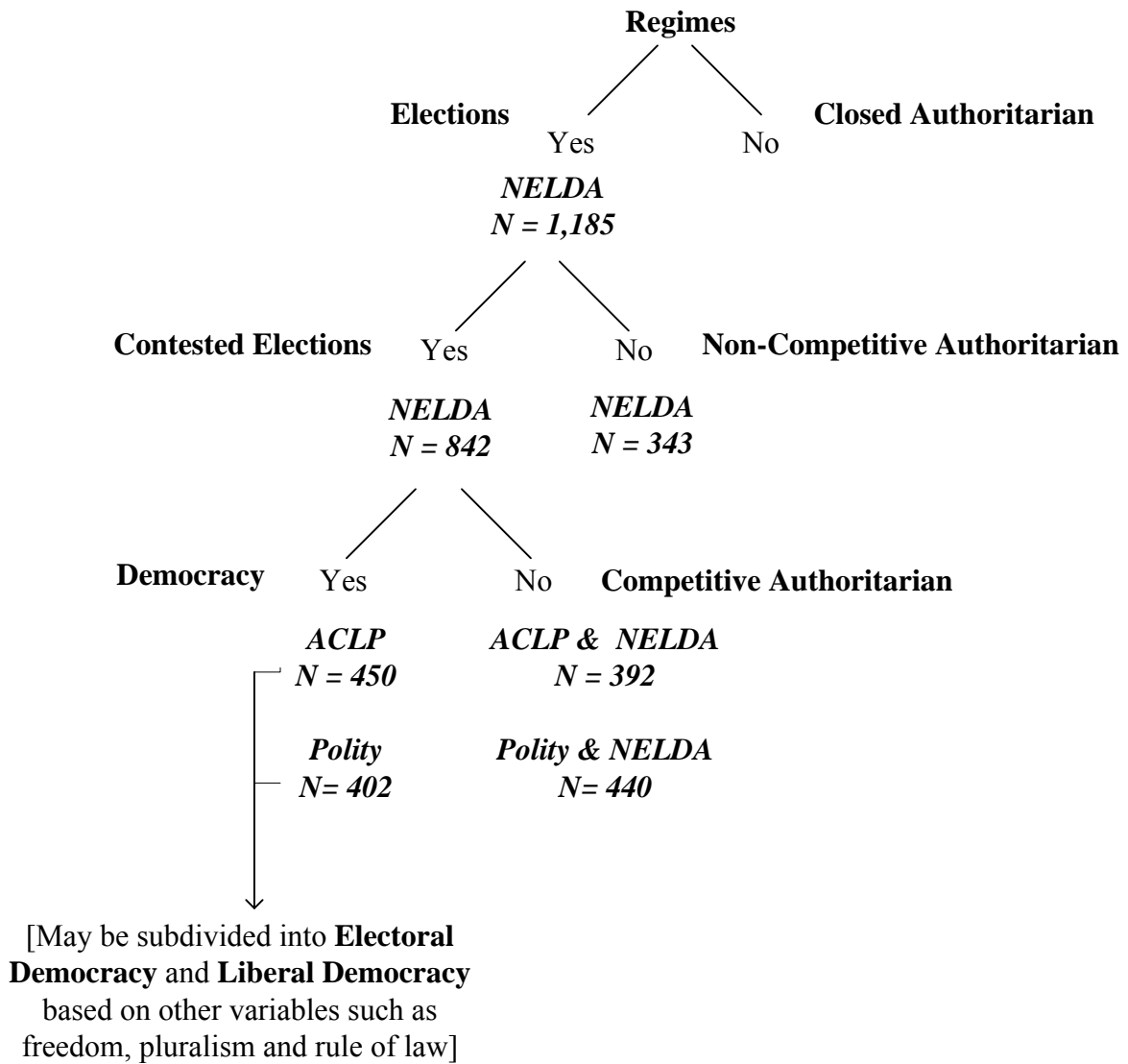
**Figure 1.1 The Global Spread of Elections and Competition over Time, 1960-2006**



**Figure 1.2 The Global Spread of Elections and Competition over Time, 1960-2006 (cont.)**



**Figure 2. Defining Competitive Authoritarian Regimes, 1960-2006**



Note: Figure modeled after Howard and Roessler (2006, 367)


**Table 1: Comparing Criteria for Competitive Authoritarian Elections, 1990-2002**

		Freedom House / Polity Criteria <sup>1</sup> (Howard and Roessler 2006)		
		Non-Competitive Elections per FH/Polity	Competitive Authoritarian Elections per FH/Polity	Democratic Elections per FH/Polity
<b>NELDA / ACLP Criteria</b>	Democratic Elections per ACLP	N = 0	N = 24 Examples: Albania 1996, Croatia 2000, Dominican Republic 1996, Kenya 2002, Romania 1996, Thailand 1992	N = 0
	Competitive Authoritarian Elections per NELDA	N = 22 (incl. 2 wins > 70%) Examples: Algeria 1995 (7, -7), Cambodia 1998 (7, -7), Cameroon 1997 (7, -4),* Fiji 2001 (6, -88), Kenya 1997 (7, -5), Lebanon 1996 (6, -66), Sudan 2000 (7, -7)*	N = 32 (incl. 10 wins > 70%) Examples: Chad 2001, Guinea 1998, Indonesia 1992, Kyrgyzstan 2000, * Malaysia 1995, Peru 2001, Senegal 1993, Singapore 2001,* Zimbabwe 2002.  N = 20 (incl. 10 wins > 70%) Examples: Burkina Faso 1998 (5, -4),* Djibouti 1999 (5, -6),* Equatorial Guinea 2002 (6, -5), Fiji 1994 (5, 4), Georgia 1995 (5, 4), Kazakhstan 1999 (6, -4),* Yemen 1999 (5, -2)*	N = 11 Examples: Mexico 2000 (3, 6), Moldova 1994 (5, 7), Mozambique 1999 (3, 6), Niger 1993 (5, 8), Yugoslavia 2002 (3, 7)
	Non-Competitive Elections per NELDA	N = 0	N = 3 Iran 1993, Iran 1997, Uganda 2001	N = 0

Note: When parenthesis follow the country year, they include the Freedom House score and the Polity score.

<sup>1</sup>In Howard and Roessler (2006), elections are considered competitive authoritarian elections if they occur in a country with a Polity score that is  $\geq -8$  and  $\leq 6$  (where -10 is autocratic and 10 is democratic) and which have a Freedom House score that is  $\geq 2$  and  $\leq 6$  (where 1 is democratic and 7 is autocratic). “Founding” elections and elections in which the government wins 70% of the vote or more are excluded.

\*Denotes elections in which the government won with 70% of the vote or more, which are excluded in Models 1-4.

 Denotes elections that meet the Polity/Freedom House criteria but that were not identified in their study for unspecified reasons.

**Table 2: Binary Logit of Liberalizing Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Elections, 1990-2002. Comparing Results with Samples Drawn from Freedom House, Polity, ACLP, and NELDA**

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>	<b>Model 4</b>	<b>Model 5</b>
Competitive Election Data Source	FH/Polity	NELDA	NELDA	NELDA	NELDA
Democracy Data Source	FH/Polity	FH/Polity	FH/Polity	ACLP	ACLP
Founding Elections Data Source		NELDA		NELDA	NELDA
Including elections when vote share of winner > 70%	No	No	No	No	Yes
<i>Opposition Coalition</i>	7.72* (3.03)	0.90 (0.64)	1.56 (0.81)	-0.53 (0.95)	-0.13 (0.87)
<i>Opposition Mobilization</i>	0.91* (0.4)	0.34* (0.15)	0.50** (0.18)	0.49* (0.21)	0.57** (0.21)
<i>Incumbent Turnover</i>	3.15* (1.51)	0.43 (0.73)	-0.05 (0.95)	1.18 (1.09)	2.16* (1.01)
<i>Economic Growth</i>	0.33 (0.24)	0.05 (0.06)	0.05 (0.07)	0.05 (0.06)	0.02 (0.05)
<i>Foreign Direct Investment</i>	-0.1 (0.31)	-0.03 (0.07)	0.01 (0.10)	-0.06 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.08)
<i>Foreign Aid</i>	0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
<i>Parliamentarism</i>	-3.07 (2.18)	-1.96* (0.91)	-1.98 (1.20)	-2.35 (1.29)	-2.74* (1.23)
<i>Regime Openness</i>	-1.04 (0.99)	0.02 (0.35)	-0.76 (0.46)	0.83 (0.48)	0.83 (0.43)
<i>Prior Liberalizing Change</i>	-1.38 (1.73)	0.06 (0.66)	-0.45 (0.82)	-0.27 (0.93)	-0.16 (0.87)
<i>Constant</i>	-1.33 (5.24)	-1.40 (1.75)	1.37 (2.14)	-5.83* (2.64)	-7.09** (2.48)
<i>N</i>	50	74	65	60	82

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01. Note: Table entries are regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is whether or not a country experienced a liberalizing electoral outcome (LEO).

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