

Pathways to Violence: A Reanalysis of The Relationship Between Elections and Civil Violence in Authoritarian Regimes

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Abstract

This review essay reexamines and synthesizes existing literature on the relationship between elections and violence in authoritarian regimes. Two decades and a half after Geddes's seminal article, political scientists and policymakers alike continue to grapple with the question of why some authoritarian regimes remain stable in the face of elections while others do not, and under what conditions do elections lead to violence and instability in some authoritarian regimes but maintain stability in others. This essay engages these questions by reviewing what we know about electoral authoritarianism after these years. Starting with early works on electoral authoritarian regimes and regime types, I observe that the variation in authoritarian regimes is a function of state capacity and institutional foundation. Furthermore, irrespective of these regime subtypes, elections themselves are not intrinsically violent. Still, they may lead to violence under certain conditions, such as weak institutional capacity, strong opposition coalitions, and evidence of past conflicts. These findings are consistent with the scholarship on post-conflict elections, which suggests that decisive victories, demobilization, peacekeeping, and strong political institutions can mitigate the risk of violence in post-conflict elections.

Keywords: Elections, Violence, Electoral Authoritarianism, Post-Conflict Elections

1. Introduction

Scholars have long viewed the relationship between elections and authoritarian regimes as an anomaly, characterizing it as a “monolithic, infrequent phenomenon somewhat incompatible with stable dictatorship.” However, as autocratic regimes increasingly adopt democratic facades, including elections, in the post-third wave of the democratization era, to legitimize their rule and maintain stability, the divergent electoral outcomes of these regimes have posed a puzzle for scholars and policymakers alike in recent years. Indeed, a significant body of literature has explored the unintended consequence of elections—civil violence—in electoral authoritarianism (see, for example, Bhasin, T., & Gandhi, J., 2013; Levitsky & Way, 2012; Snyder, 2000) [1-3]. Nevertheless, political scientists continue to grapple with fundamental questions: Why do elections lead to violence in some authoritarian regimes but not in others? And under what conditions do elections in authoritarian regimes result in civil violence?

This review essay synthesizes the vast literature on the relationship

between elections and civil violence under authoritarian regimes, examining the divergent arguments on whether elections consolidate regime stability or exacerbate violence in electoral authoritarianism. Through a comprehensive review of current literature and previous research on this topic, this study unpacks the mechanisms through which elections can both stabilize authoritarian regimes and, conversely, lead to violence and destabilization in others. I observed that the presence of strong political, administrative, and judicial institutions, combined with a relatively weak opposition coalition and stable economic performance, can contribute to regime stability in electoral authoritarianism. In contrast, weak institutional capacity, dense networks among political activists, and a strong mobilization capacity of the opposition coalition can lead to elections resulting in violence and destabilization in authoritarian regimes.

Furthermore, this study also examines the literature on the effects of post-conflict elections to investigate whether holding elections in the aftermath of civil war contributes to the consolidation of peace

and stability, or if it may have a destabilizing impact, increasing the likelihood of a return to conflict. Following Brancati and Snyder's (2012) quantitative analysis of all civil wars that ended between 1945 and 2008, I draw on their findings to conclude that holding elections early in the absence of genuine political parties, strong political institutions, demobilization of former combatants, and decisive victories can undermine stability and increase the likelihood of civil violence [4].

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a comprehensive review of the scholarship on regime types and classifications, with a particular focus on electoral authoritarianism. This section also examines the contending arguments on the role of elections in authoritarian regimes. The subsequent section explores the relationship between elections and civil violence in authoritarian regimes, examining the conditions under which elections lead to violence in some cases and peace and stability in others. This section also investigates the question of when elections prevent a return to conflict, and how they contribute to maintaining peace. The following section observes the debates surrounding post-conflict elections, explaining the conditions under which early post-conflict elections can have negative consequences. Finally, the concluding section summarizes some of the current literature on the relationship between elections, authoritarian regimes, and civil violence.

2 What Is Electoral Authoritarianism?

Early works on regime types have extensively investigated the proliferation of elections in authoritarian regimes (see, for example, Morse, 2012; Schedler, 2006; Magaloni, 2006; Lindberg, 2006, 2009; Snyder, 2000; Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; Levitsky and Way, 2002) [3,5-9]. The “electoral tsunami” towards the end of the third wave of democratization prompted scholars to reevaluate the role of elections in these regimes, given their varied outcomes. As Collier and Levitsky (1997) observed, “The recent global wave of democratization has presented scholars with the challenge of

dealing conceptually with a great diversity of postauthoritarian regimes” (p. 430) [10]. To explain and classify these subtypes of authoritarian regimes that have adopted elections, scholars have employed various concepts while avoiding conceptual stretching.

For instance, a large body of literature has employed concepts such as “hybrid regimes”, “competitive authoritarianism,” “hegemonic authoritarianism,” “semi-democracies,” “electoral authoritarianism,” “pseudo-democracy,” and “semi-authoritarianism” to describe political regimes that combine democratic procedures with autocratic practices. Schedler (2002) argues that these electoral autocratic regimes deviate from our contemporary understanding of authoritarian regimes, such as “one-party, military, or personal dictatorship” [11]. While these regimes are undoubtedly authoritarian in nature, they nonetheless “hold elections and tolerate some forms of pluralism and interparty competition” (Schedler, 2002; 36) [11]. Unlike closed authoritarian regimes, electoral authoritarian regimes hold regular elections even though they are usually held on an unequal playing field.

Since electoral authoritarianism (EA) employs repression and manipulates the electoral process, Howard and Roessler (2006) argue that these regimes are “neither completely authoritarian nor democratic” and are “mostly likely not ‘in transition’ from one to the other [12].” These regimes can be further divided into competitive authoritarianism and uncompetitive or hegemonic authoritarianism, as Levitsky and Way (2002) and Schedler (2002) noted [9,11]. This distinction sheds more light on the variation among electoral authoritarian regimes. In competitive authoritarian regimes, Levitsky and Way (2002) contend that the frequent violation of political and civil rights of the opposition candidates and their supporters creates an unequal playing field between the government and the opposition [9]. Figure 1 provides a clear illustration of the various types of authoritarian regimes, including the subtypes of electoral authoritarianism.

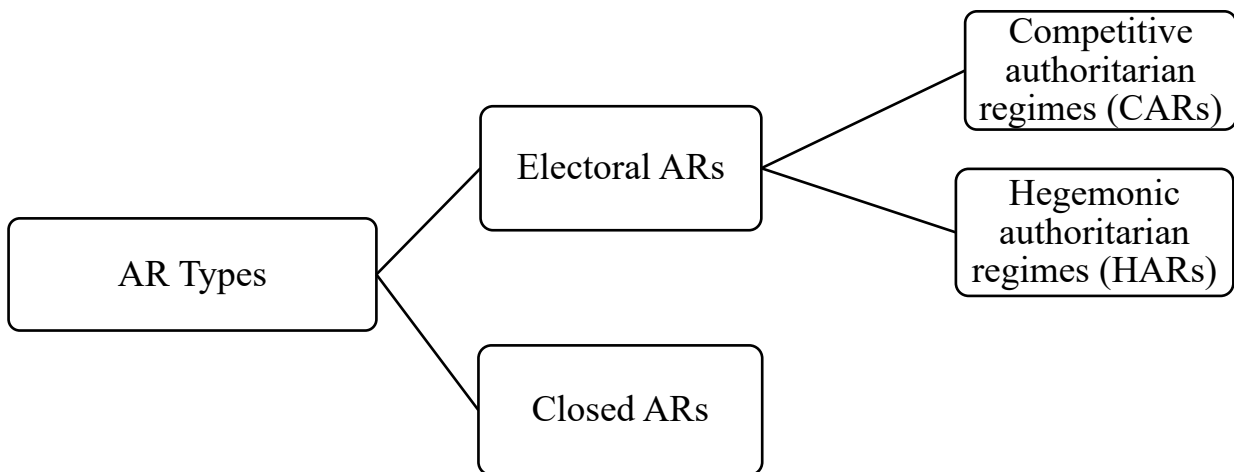


Figure 1: Authoritarian Regime (AR) Types and Subtypes

Note: Figure 1 illustrates the diagram of the different authoritarian regime types and subtypes presented in this work.

However, competitive authoritarian regimes (CARs) should not be confused with hegemonic authoritarian regimes (HARs), as the incumbent in HARs “enjoys overwhelmingly electoral dominance (conventionally understood as winning 70 or 75% of the vote or seat share)” (Donno, 2013: 703) [13]. Therefore, hegemonic authoritarianism differs from competitive authoritarianism in terms of its electoral competitiveness and party system.

According to Schedler (2002), “How can we recognize an electoral authoritarian (EA) regime?” [11]. Scholarship on authoritarian regimes suggests that electoral authoritarianism “is a system in which opposition parties lose elections” (Schedler, 2002: 47) [11]. Although Schedler’s definition does not encompass all forms of electoral authoritarianism, he further notes that the “relative strength of opposition forces varies substantially among electoral autocracies.” While authoritarian leaders in competitive EA regimes are characterized as “insecure,” leaders of hegemonic

EA regimes are regarded as “invincible” (Schedler, 2002) [11]. In other words, these regimes' power dynamics and institutional characteristics largely dictate their EA subtype.

Elections in an electoral authoritarian regime could be either competitive or uncompetitive, and the factors responsible for this variation reside in the overall nature of the EA regime. Geddes (1999) opined that while most authoritarian regimes are easily classifiable, some defy categorization [14]. So conceiving EA regimes as either competitive or hegemonic, according to their resilience and degree of power consolidation, helps us differentiate between the different forms of electoral authoritarianism. Similarly, Donno noted that “a regime’s degree of electoral hegemony — which determines its status as a HAR or CAR — is shaped by path-dependent factors with deep institutional roots” (Donno, 2013: 705) [13].

Proponents	Regime Types
Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) 2024	Closed autocracy, Electoral autocracy, grey zone, Electoral democracy, Liberal democracy.
Howard and Roessler (2006)	Closed authoritarian, Hegemonic authoritarian, competitive authoritarian, electoral democracy, and liberal democracy.
Diamond (2002)	Liberal democracy, Electoral democracy, Ambiguous regimes, Competitive authoritarian, Hegemonic electoral authoritarian, and Politically closed authoritarian.
Levitsky and Way (2002)	Closed Regimes and Electoral or “hybrid” regimes—Competitive and Hegemonic authoritarianism
Geddes (1999)	Military regimes, Personalist regimes, Single-party regimes, or amalgams of the pure types

Notes: This classification cut across several scholarships on the different types of authoritarian regimes

Table 1: Classification of Regimes according to the Existing Literature

2.1 Electoral Outcomes in Electoral Authoritarianism

Scholars have argued that the variation in electoral outcomes in electoral authoritarian (EA) regimes can be attributed to the differences in their institutional legacies. One strand of literature investigates the democratizing power of elections in authoritarian regimes and argues that concurrent elections in authoritarian regimes, even if imperfect, can serve as a “mode of transition” to democratic government (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997; Joseph, 1999; Lindberg, 2006, 2009; Howard and Roessler, 2006; Hadenius and Teorell, 2007; Donno, 2013) [7,8,12,13,15]. This scholarship suggests that: “The more elections, the more democratic the regime and society in general” (Lindberg, 2009: 9) [7]. Conversely, pessimists contend that elections allow authoritarian regimes to pursue legitimacy, manage political elites, co-opt opposition, and maintain stability.

2.1.1 Demo-optimists

For the “optimists,” elections in competitive authoritarianism have a liberalizing outcome, and repeated competitive elections

could create a pathway for democratization. Howard and Roessler (2006) argue that the liberalizing effects of elections on electoral authoritarian regimes do not “necessarily mean that a country will turn into a liberal democracy overnight, though in most cases the country does become classified as an electoral democracy following the liberalizing election” (Howard and Roessler, 2006: 369) [12]. However, for these scholars, the contention is not that elections in all authoritarian regimes—either competitive or hegemonic—possess the same effect, but rather that elections in competitive authoritarian regimes, under certain conditions, could potentially drive the regime toward liberalization. For instance, Ghana in 1996, Yugoslavia in 2000, Croatia in 2000, Indonesia in 1999, Senegal in 2000, and Thailand in 1992, all appear as universal cases of “non-founding” competitive authoritarian elections with liberalizing electoral outcomes according to Howard and Roessler (2006) [12].

Furthermore, Hadenius and Teorell (2007) in their assessment of the “pathways from authoritarianism” concluded that the institutional

attribute, that is, the overall nature of the authoritarian regime, should be considered in any discussion of democracy's precondition [15]. This strand of scholarship put forth a more compelling argument for the transition process from authoritarian regimes to democracy. According to them, authoritarian regimes without a single dominant party are a "stepping-stone to democratization." Donno's (2013) empirical evidence clearly suggests that "opposition coalitions and international conditionality greatly increase the likelihood of democratization, but only in CARs, where governments are more vulnerable to electoral pressure" (Donno 2013: 711) [13]. Thus, the democratizing power of elections in authoritarian regimes is far more effective in CAR than HARs.

2.1.2 Demo-Pessimists

In contrast, skeptics have argued that, rather than facilitating a transition to democracy, elections in authoritarian regimes are used to co-opt opposition, manage elites, and pursue legitimacy and stability (Schedler, 2006; Riedl, 2014; Reuter et al., 2016; Morgenbesser, 2016) [16,17]. Moreover, they suggest that authoritarian regimes employ elections to signal incumbents' strength and capacity, thereby consolidating their power. This scholarship examines the impacts of state power and regime capacity on the outcome of elections in authoritarian regimes, providing insight into how elections can strengthen rather than weaken autocratic rule.

In their large-n comparative analysis of elections in post-communist Eurasia, Kaya and Michael (2013) found little evidence to suggest that holding elections serves as a catalyst for democracy [18]. Similarly, Lust-Okar's (2009) observation of elections in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region failed to uncover significant evidence of elections as a mechanism for democratization [19]. Indeed, the proponents of the pessimistic view on the democratizing power of elections argue that elections have weaker effects in "hegemonic authoritarian" regimes than in "competitive authoritarian" regimes. Their arguments hinge on the fact that competitive authoritarianism exhibits some degree of political uncertainty and instability, which increases the possibility of elections yielding the unintended outcomes of civil violence or democratization.

The infographic in Figure 2 illustrates that a significant number of countries have maintained their authoritarian status over the past years while holding elections. According to the Freedom House 2024 report, the "manipulation of election was among the leading causes of global erosion in freedom." Countries like Poland, Zimbabwe, and Cambodia, among others, restrict opposition parties from competing on a level playing field. Slater and Fenner (2011) posit that state power is the most important institutional foundation for authoritarian regimes' longevity (Slater and Fenner, 2011: 16) [20].

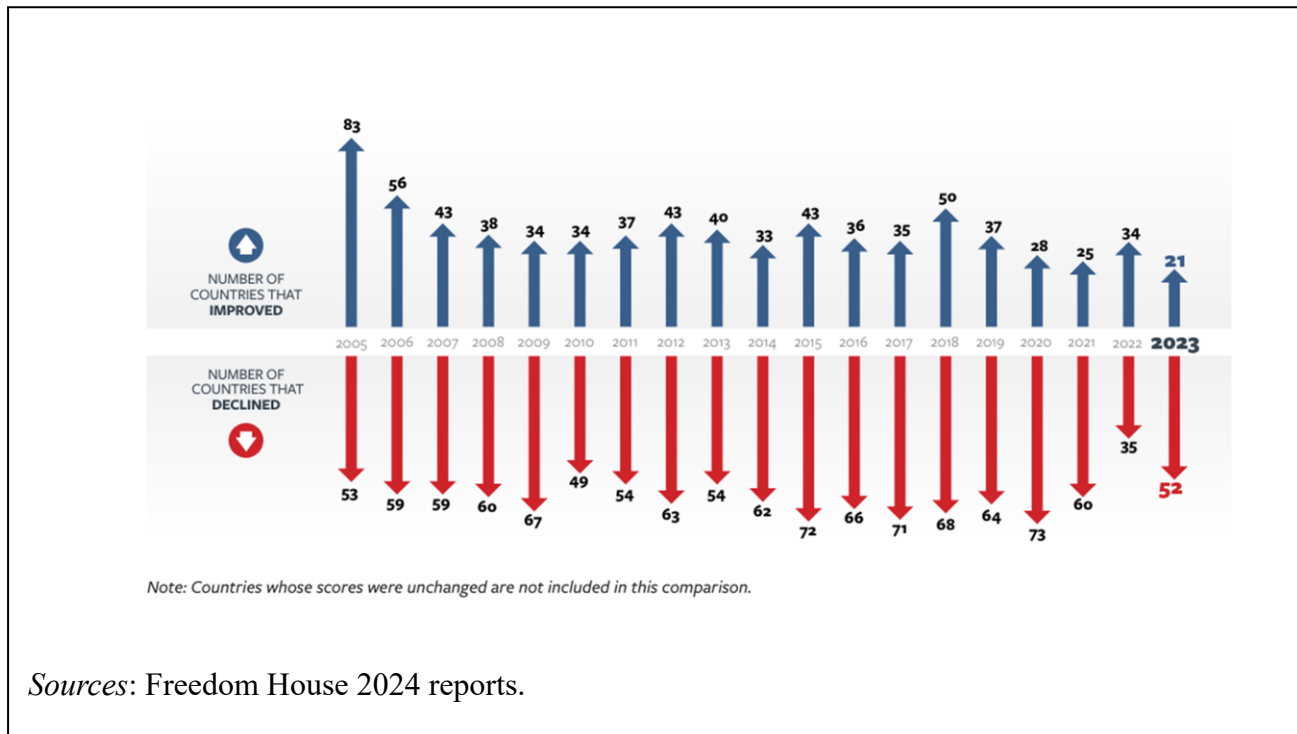


Figure 2.

Clearly, elections can both sustain and undermine authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, van Ham and Seim (2018) suggest that state capacity is equally crucial for either democratic or autocratic stability [21]. While strong state capacity sustains

electoral authoritarianism, weak state capacity undermines it. This argument confirms that variations in electoral outcomes in electoral authoritarian regimes can be attributed to the state capacity and institutional context.

3. Elections and Civil Violence in ARs

Similar to the arguments above regarding the role of elections in strengthening or weakening authoritarian regimes' stability, a burgeoning body of literature explores why elections in authoritarian regimes turn violent in some countries but not others. This scholarship offers a more nuanced understanding of the condition under which elections in authoritarian regimes can lead to civil violence. This section unpacks the complex relationship between elections and civil violence in authoritarian regimes (ARs). By examining the factors that contribute to elections exacerbating civil violence in some authoritarian regimes and the conditions that enable elections to maintain peace and stability in others, this essay opens the “black box” of the intricate dynamics at play, shedding light on when and where we can expect elections to yield divergent outcomes of either civil violence or peace and stability.

3.1 When Do Elections Lead to Civil Violence in EA?

Perhaps, Jack Snyder's seminal book, “From Voting to Violence” (2000), gets us ahead by comprehensively analyzing the relationship between elections and violent conflicts. Snyder argues that elections can exacerbate existing social and political tensions, particularly in states with weak institutions and fragmented societies. Similarly, Goldsmith (2015) notes that elections held under “an unresponsive, low-capacity regime would be apt to revive disputes” (p.605), leading to instability [22]. Indeed, both scholars submitted that elections could trigger the transformation of pre-existing disputes into civil violence in the context of weak institutions and low-capacity regimes.

Relatedly, other Scholars examine the endogenous effect of elections, positing that elections do not inherently lead to violence, but rather are often held in contexts where the risk of civil violence is already high (Donno et al., 2022; Cheibub and Hays, 2015; Cederman et al., 2012) [23-25]. This body of research suggests that elections trigger instability when other factors that contribute to civil violence are present. Donno et al. (2022) conducted a study examining the onset of civil conflict in 134 developing countries from 1950 to 2012 [23]. Through a time-series cross-national empirical analysis, they investigate the relationship between electoral integrity and the outbreak of civil conflict. Their findings revealed that elections with low integrity, held in the context of weak political institutions and a history of civil conflict, can serve as potential triggers for civil violence.

According to these scholars, elections should not be associated with conflict onset when their “integrity is sound” (Donno et al., 2022: 135) [23]. They defined electoral integrity as “the extent to which a contest is free, fair, and procedurally sound.” Arguing further that flawed elections or low-integrity elections create an environment conducive to opposition grievances and facilitate mobilization among political elites, thereby inciting violence.

In a similar vein, Goldsmith (2015) conducted a study examining whether civil violence in Africa is more frequent during the

election cycle compared to other times [22]. His findings reveal that “Africa is far from homogenous with regard to election-related civil violence” (Goldsmith 2015: 618) [22]. Goldsmith's analysis identifies three distinct patterns: (a) some countries in the region hold elections that are uncorrelated with civil violence events, (b) a few countries have a high risk of violent events regardless of the election cycle, and (c) countries with a lower risk of civil violence during an election are “somewhat atypical in Africa.” While Goldsmith (2015) urges caution in interpreting these findings, it is also crucial to note that elections in competitive authoritarian regimes can lead to violence when conducted in environments susceptible to other forms of political unrest [22].

Following Huntington's (1972) definitions of civil violence, Goldsmith (2015) excludes interstate conflict while encompassing state-incited repression of dissidents, protest and rebellion against the state, and ethnic fighting among rival groups (Goldsmith 2015) [22,26]. The existence of any of these grievances before the election cycle could trigger violence during and after elections. In other words, elections themselves are not inherently violent, but they can exacerbate past conflicts, transforming them into bigger conflicts. Goldsmith (2015) argues that when political actors feel they cannot trust the outcome of elections in authoritarian regimes, it can lead to assaults, potentially sparking violence [22].

Moreover, by altering how citizens perceive their relationship with the government and fostering a denser network among political opponents and activists, elections can inadvertently lead to civil violence in authoritarian regimes with weak institutional capacity. In essence, all things being equal, competitive authoritarian regimes with weak institutional capacity, robust opposition coalition, and a history of conflicts are more likely to experience elections-related civil violence compared to regimes with strong institutional capacity, fragmented opposition, and demobilized citizens.

3.2 When Do Elections Contribute to Stability in EA?

A substantial and impressive body of research exists on the stabilizing effect of elections in authoritarian regimes. Several scholars have argued that authoritarian regimes use elections to co-opt opposition, gain legitimacy, signal incumbents' strength, and maintain stability (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Magaloni 2006; Schedler, 2006; Riedl, 2014; Reuter et al., 2016; Morgenbesser, 2016) [6,16,17]. According to these scholars, the co-optation of opposition enables autocratic leaders to identify and neutralize potential threats, thereby consolidating their power and maintaining stability.

Similar to the “demo-pessimists” arguments, proponents of the stabilizing power of elections in EAs argue these regimes employ elections to “prolong their stay in power and, by extension, resist democratisation” (Morgenbesser 2017: 206), and prevent civil violence [27]. Building on Gerschewski's (2013) theory of autocratic stability, Morgenbesser (2017) posits that, even flawed elections can be used by regimes to gain legitimacy and maintain

authoritarian rule [27,28]. According to Gerschewski (2013), there are three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation, each contributing to the stabilization process of authoritarian regimes. While Gerschewski (2013) failed to provide evidence on the significance of legitimation, Morgenbesser (2017) examined the case of Singapore’s authoritarian regime to illustrate how elections can be employed to gain legitimacy [27,18].

Through the pathway of co-optation and repression, Morgenbesser (2017) demonstrates how authoritarian regimes utilize elections to gain legitimacy and maintain stability [27]. The strategy of co-optation is intrinsic to authoritarian regimes and the level of its repression is subjected to the institutional capacity of the regime. As Morgenbesser further argues, “a common form of co-optation is patronage” (p.207). Therefore, authoritarian regimes with extensive patronage networks and robust economic institutions offer political elites the opportunities to benefit from the dividends of autocratic rules, thereby reducing the incentives for rebellion.

Furthermore, Morgenbesser (2017) asked the question of whether flawed elections provide legitimacy for authoritarian regimes in the context of Singapore [27]. It was observed that in the 2012

Asian Barometer survey, Singaporean citizens had a high level of trust in the election and their government. Absent these electoral institutions, the regime would have lacked “the moral authority to govern” (Morgenbesser, 2017: 216) [27]. This demonstrates the extent to which authoritarian regimes can utilize elections to gain legitimacy.

Bernhard et al. (2019) also investigate the role of electoral institutionalization in determining whether electoral authoritarianism promotes stability or vulnerability [29]. Their argument is based on the logic that “the ability of authoritarian regimes to effectively institutionalize electoral uncertainty will determine their impacts on survival.” According to them, institutionalization emerges from the ability of authoritarian regimes to repeatedly conduct multiparty elections while reducing the uncertainty of the electoral outcomes. They test their “double-edged” hypothesis and “competition” hypothesis using empirical data from 262 authoritarian regimes between 1946 and 2010. Their findings suggest that the institutionalization of elections enhances the survival of authoritarian regimes. In general, their results support earlier claims that single-party regimes are more stable.

	Competitive Authoritarian Regimes	Hegemonic Authoritarian Regimes
Civil Violence	More Likely	Less Likely
Regime Stability	Likely	Most Definitely
Democratization	More Likely	Less Likely

Note: Due to the pathway of high levels of repression and co-optation, hegemonic authoritarian regimes maintain more regime stability compared to competitive authoritarian regimes. We should expect closed authoritarian regimes to be more stable compared to both HARs and CARs.

Table 2: The Electoral Outcome in Competitive and Hegemonic Authoritarian Regimes

In addition, Bernhard et al.’s (2029) finding also suggests that “incumbents who are able to successfully institutionalise hegemonic multiparty elections may reap similar benefits as single-party environments” (Bernhard et al.,2019: 476) [29]. However, for competitive authoritarian regimes, the first two competitive electoral cycles yield “decreasing odds of survival” for these regimes. But Bernhard et al (2019) observed that these odds begin to decrease after the third or fourth competitive election [29]. Overall, consistent with Howard and Roessler's (2006) argument, elections themselves do not lead to civil violence or democratization more in competitive authoritarian regimes than in hegemonic authoritarian regimes, unless other factors such as opposition coalition, opposition mobilization, and international and global factors are present [12].

Having considered the conditions under which elections can lead to civil violence under some authoritarian regimes and foster stability in others, Table 2 showcases this relationship. In competitive authoritarian regimes (CARs), civil violence is more likely to occur as a result of weak political institutions. Also, CARs holding repeated multiparty elections in the presence of a strong opposition

coalition are more likely to democratize compared to Hegemonic authoritarian regimes (HARs). Due to strong political institutions and weak opposition coalition in HARs, we should expect to see more instances of regime stability in these contexts.

4. Post-Conflict Elections

To examine the effects of post-conflict elections on authoritarian regime stability and the reoccurrence of civil violence, Brancati and Snyder (2013) investigate the impacts of election timing on post-conflict stability [4]. In their quantitative study, they argue that “holding elections too soon after a civil war raises substantially the risk of war occurring again” (Brancati and Snyder, 2013: 823) [4]. Brancati and Snyder (2013) posit those decisive victories, demobilization, and the presence of peacekeeping operations diminish the probability of former combatants returning to war in the face of unfavorable election results [4]. These scholars outline how these mechanisms work to deter the reoccurrence of violence in the aftermath of post-conflict elections.

Brancati and Snyder (2013) test their argument using an original dataset of all the post-civil war elections that occurred between

1945 and 2008 [4]. They demonstrate that while early elections proponents stress the need for early elections to consolidate the legitimacy of post-conflict government, skeptics argue that elections held soon after wars or civil violence can derail the country back to the path of violence. Only when certain conditions are met that early elections are less likely to reignite conflict.

Under conditions that mitigate early election risks, Brancati and Snyder (2013) argue that elections held in the aftermath of civil violence are less risky when “one side has won a decisive military victory” (Brancati and Snyder, 2013: 828) [4]. They contend that when past conflicts are not resolved or there is no decisive victor, contending groups can easily return to conflict at the slightest provocation. Unfavorable election results can reignite conflict due to past grievances. Similarly, successful demobilization can mitigate the risk of early elections. By demobilizing former combatants and requiring rebels to surrender their weapons, the risk of conflict reoccurrence after post-conflict elections can be significantly reduced.

Lastly, Brancati and Snyder suggest that strong bureaucratic institutions, supported by peacekeeping operations, can reduce the likelihood of early elections resulting in new or renewed conflict. They cite the example of Angola in 1992 and 2008. They observed that the 1992 election in Angola resulted in renewed violence because the rebel opposition, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) remained militarily mobilized. In contrast, the 2008 elections had a different turnout. Since the UNITA had been demobilized, the opposition did not resort to violence but rather challenged the result in the established country’s courts. Also, Brancati and Snyder noted that Liberia’s experience in 1997 “illustrates the danger of holding elections when institutions remain weak” (p.830). Similarly, Liberia’s 2005 election showcased how elections, when held in the context of a more developed institution, can mitigate the risk of returning to civil violence.

In sum, scholarship on the effects of post-conflict elections in authoritarian regimes underscores the risk associated with early elections when certain conditions such as strong political, administrative, and judicial institutions, decisive victories, demobilized combatants, and peacekeeping operations are not in place. When these conditions are absent, elections in post-conflict settings can trigger the renewal of civil violence.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Decades after the renaissance in studies of electoral authoritarianism, what have we learned? Geddes's (1999) seminal work introduces us back to the study of regime transition and the different kinds of authoritarianism [14]. Since then, scholars have employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the role of elections in authoritarian regimes. While several studies suggest that repeated elections under authoritarian regimes can serve as a pathway to democratization, others argue that authoritarian regimes utilize elections to co-opt opposition, gain legitimacy, and

subsequently maintain stability. This review essay synthesizes some of the existing literature on the relationship between elections and civil violence in electoral authoritarian regimes.

Scholars such as Donno (2013), Howard and Roessler (2006), and Levitsky and Way (2002) among others have explicitly examined the role of election in competitive authoritarian regimes [2,12,13]. They observed that all things being equal, elections should have liberalizing effects in competitive authoritarian regimes compared to hegemonic authoritarian regimes. According to Donno (2013), strong opposition coalitions and international conditionality make competitive authoritarian regimes susceptible to democratization compared to hegemonic authoritarian regimes [13]. Through cross-national and case-study analyses, scholars demonstrate that weak political institutions, opposition mobilization, opposition coalition, and international and global factors, competitive authoritarian regimes are less stable compared to their counterparts, hegemonic authoritarian regimes.

Empirical works on elections and civil violence in authoritarian regimes are rich and substantial. In this review, I have examined and synthesized this literature together to understand the conditions under which elections lead to the unintended outcome of civil violence in authoritarian regimes. By highlighting the pathways through which elections can lead to violence in authoritarian regimes, this review work provides a more nuanced perspective on the complex relationship between elections and violence under authoritarian regimes. Additionally, this essay examines the effects of elections in post-conflict settings. Following Brancati and Snyder (2012), I explored the mechanisms through which post-conflict elections can go wrong [4]. Absence of demobilization, decisive victories, peacekeeping operations, and strong political institutions, elections when held soon after civil violence can trigger past grievances, leading to new conflict.

Overall, scholarship on authoritarianism and civil violence notes that elections themselves do not exacerbate violence; they only turn violent when the necessary conditions are not met. This review suggests to political scientists and policymakers that elections can help maintain authoritarian regimes' survival rather than resulting in civil violence. Future research should focus more on how elections are used by authoritarian regimes to deter the rise of civil violence.

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Footnotes

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2. Existing cross-national literature focuses on the role of elections in democratizing as well as stabilizing authoritarian regimes (e.g., Morse 2012; Schedler 2006; Magaloni 2006; Lindberg 2006; Synder 2000; Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; Levitsky and Way 2002). Also, extensive literature acknowledges the destabilizing role of elections in authoritarian regimes, see Howard & Roessler, 2006; Bunce and Wolchik, 2010; Hadenius & Teorell, 2007; Shirah, 2016.
3. Early elections proponents such as Diamond (2006) and Lindberg (2003) posit that elections held immediately after conflicts can improve a country's chances of consolidating peace and stability by strengthening the legitimacy of post-conflict governments. See Brancati, D., & Snyder, J. L. (2013). Time to Kill: The Impact of Election Timing on Post-conflict Stability. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 57(5), 822–853. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002712449328>, for the debates on post-conflict elections by early election proponents versus early election opponents.
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9. This distinction aligns with Schedler's (2002) argument that “the distinction between competitive and uncompetitive regimes highlights a crucial source of variation among EA regimes: the competitiveness of their party systems” (Schedler, 2002: 46-47).
10. Schedler, 2006; Riedl, 2014; Reuter et al., 2016; Morgenbesser, 2016; Magaloni, B. (2006); Gandhi, J., & Lust-Okar, E. (2009).
11. Lindberg (2006) used ‘demo-optimism’ to refer to the wave of political liberation enjoyed around the world in the early 1990s.
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