THEORIES OF DICTATORSHIPS: REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

Gustav Lidén
Senior Lecturer

Department of Social Sciences, Mid Sweden University
851 70 Sundsvall
Sweden

gustav.liden@miun.se

Abstract

Despite the third wave of democratization, dictatorships are still widespread global phenomena. However, in comparative research they are often treated merely as theoretical anomalies and empirical residual categories. By addressing this shortcoming, this research has three overall ambitions which are reached by reviewing, compiling and analyzing earlier research. First, different perspectives on how to define dictatorships are discussed. This makes it possible to approach the regimes in a more nuanced way compared with only classifying them as non-democratic. It is no understatement to claim that dictatorships are heterogeneous. Therefore, the second ambition of this research is to discuss different approaches to how to categorize these regimes more precisely. Theoretically valid categories are necessary when carrying out empirical inquiries. Third, and most absent in contemporary research, the ambition is to elaborate upon the factors that can explain dictatorships. In other words, what constitutes the explanans in an explanatory model of dictatorships and types of them? This includes both the existence of and transitions to dictatorship. To answer this question and to reach a theoretical framework for an explanation of dictatorship, contributions from a variety of research need to be put together. All in all, this paper will add greater theoretical understanding that is necessary for empirical examinations of dictatorships. Increased validity and increased confidence in explanations of dictatorships could be the result if the conclusions of this research are implemented in empirical studies.

Keywords: dictatorship, comparative politics, political regimes, regime transitions.
Introduction

Studying democracy is, in many ways, one of the main tasks of political scientists. This approach is motivated by the core issues of distribution of power, representation, and governance with which democracy is associated. Political scientists’ traditional lack of interest in what is not democracy, is however, unfounded. As an example and argued by many scholars in the comparative research regarding political regimes, the conventional approach is to lump together all non-democracies. This creates a category that is considered a theoretical anomaly, but there is no effort to specify any variation inside this heterogeneous group (Brooker 2000; Gandhi 2008; Karvonen 2008; Ezrow and Frantz 2011). As argued by Gandhi (2008), non-democracies are only defined through what they are not, meaning that they lack democratic traits. In a world where a considerable part of the population still finds itself living in such societies, a bias in favor of democracy is highly problematic since it makes it more difficult to understand and explain the existence of non-democracies as well as the transitions to such regimes.

The term dictatorship is selected for regimes that are non-democratic, and the overall purpose of this article is to discuss definitions of dictatorships and variants of them but also to develop a framework for empirical explanations of these regimes. To achieve this purpose, the starting point is a systematized review of relevant literature. Helpfully in recent years the discipline has seen the addition of several comprehensive studies of dictatorships. To achieve the aim of this study, three questions need to be answered. First, how does earlier research define and describe dictatorship and are these definitions satisfying or do they need to be developed? Second, are there several variants of these regimes, and if that is the case how can they be classified and related to each other? Finally, what theories explain the transitions to and the existence of dictatorships and different variants of them? Greater theoretical leverage will be reached if not only dictatorships but also sub-types of them can be explained. By taking the point of departure in both theoretical and empirical inquiries about these regimes, these questions will be addressed and with a comparative approach such studies provide knowledge of how and why these regimes arise and survive.

This article will not find the solution to all of the questions raised. However, it points out a desired direction for future research. In addition, it provides research with a valuable theoretical and analytical base that increases the potential for important empirical contributions.

Defining dictatorship

Getting away from a negative definition of dictatorship where emphasis is on democratic absences should be a trivial task. The history of political thoughts is namely full of research that implies that it has this very ambition, ranging from Aristotle’s (2000) founding discussions of political regimes to Moore’s (1966) explicitly approach of explaining both democracy and dictatorship. Yet defining dictatorship is by no means obvious as the review below will show.

Aristotle’s (2000) well-known classification of political regimes is presented in Figure 1. Two variables separate the different types of political regimes. As is indicated in the figure, Aristotle distinguished between good (true) and deviant (perverted) variants of regimes. The other dimension is about how many people are involved in the ruling, ranging between only one, a few, and many. When democracy developed during the enlightenment to become a system built upon representation, the fundamental idea of democracy did not change but its institutional mechanisms did (Dahl 1989; Dunn 2005). Modern typologies of political regimes have one major difference from historical ones. It is a difference that is of a normative character. The distinction between good and deviant has come to be analogous to the distinction between democracy and non-democracy. All desirable forms of political regimes are democratic, and those which are not democratic consist of some form of dictatorship. This dichotomization leads the process of the differentiation of regimes on to a second concern. In other words, when a regime has been classified as either democratic or non-democratic, the next question is to determine which type of democracy (Schmitter and Karl 1991; Lijphart 1999; Held 2006) or which type of non-democracy (Geddes 1999; Brooker 2000) it can be classified as. No typology in the social
sciences is undisputed and much of contemporary research has been occupied with regimes that cannot easily be categorized as either democratic or non-democratic. Different approaches are proposed (Diamond 2002; Møller and Skaaning 2010), resulting in several labels for hybrid regimes: competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010); illiberal democracies (Zakaria 1997); and semi-authoritarianism (Ottaway 2003). Having illustrated that political regimes that are democratic and non-democratic exist, and that there are some that have features of both forms, it is time to continue with the review of how contemporary research defines dictatorships.

**Figure 1 Aristotle’s classification of political regimes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Monarchy</th>
<th>Aristocracy</th>
<th>Constitutional democracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deviant</td>
<td>Tyranny</td>
<td>Oligarchy</td>
<td>Extreme democracy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One standpoint on dictatorships that theoretically must be regarded as a minimal one is present in the literature. Although it was originally argued that it was only an empirical residual category of democracy (Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, and Limongi 2000), the actual theoretical meaning of regarding dictatorship in this way has been elaborated upon by Gandhi (2008:7), who argues that this form of political regime reflects a situation in which rulers acquire power by means other than competitive elections. This standpoint, which intellectually inverts the ideas of Schumpeter (1943), can be questioned on the same grounds as its corresponding minimal definition of democracy, and the subsequent discussion of the actual validity of such an approach has been vast (e.g. Collier and Adcock 1999; Munck and Verkuilen 2002; Snyder 2006).

An alternative and expanded conception of dictatorships is given in Linz’s (2000) groundbreaking work on non-democratic states. Linz’s ambition was to nuance the earlier distinction between democracy and the concept of non-democracies as totalitarian states that prevailed at the time. The latter were said to have three characteristics: all major powers are based on a monistic center, an exclusive and autonomous ideology influences the policies, and civic mobilization is requested, encouraged, and rewarded by the ruling single party. Pioneer works focused on these dogmatic regimes (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956; Arendt 1968). By using the term authoritarian and filling it with a theoretical body, Linz (2000:159) brought understanding to a more empirically frequent form of non-democratic regimes, defined as:

> political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, expect at some point in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones.

Other scholars have emphasized different dimensions to these. Although Karvonen (2008) discusses the lack of pluralism in such regimes, he also stresses the absence of civil rights and that civil society in dictatorships is permeated by the close scrutiny of citizens’ movements. Thereby he complements, corresponding to how Dahl (1989) expanded the electoral definition of democracy, the understanding of how a dictatorship is also characterized by the violation of rights and basic individual freedom. In addition, for democracy a “Rechtsstat” is necessary, since it acts predictably, in accordance with laws and the constitution and has state capacity to implement its politics. This means that a democracy is a constitutional political system that is restricted to violating laws or the constitution. However, in dictatorships, institutions are in line with the interests of the regime and work as a method for exercising its power without regard to laws or a constitution (Diamond 1999).

Although a “thicker” description of dictatorship can add details to the concept, it is not without its problems. Rather, it raises additional questions, such as: are all the factors above necessary for
depicting a country as a dictatorship; can these factors be hierarchically ordered; are these dimensions internally consistent and if so how are they related to each other; and what is the travel capacity for this type of definition? The literature does not provide any clear answers to any of these questions.

To navigate between Scylla and Charybdis and handle the flaws of both too much minimalism and too much detail, a middle way between these two alternatives is proposed: in dictatorships are methods other than competitive elections used for distributing political power, and in such societies are individuals’ political and civil rights frequently violated. This construction makes two properties, or qualities, necessary for classifying a country as a dictatorship and at the same time leads to a conceptualization that is highly universal and situated at the top of the ladder of abstraction (cf. Sartori 1970). Moreover, this approach takes a balanced standpoint on the distinction between democracy, dictatorship and hybrid regimes that to a large extent has already been established in earlier research (Karvonen 2008; Levitsky and Way 2010).

However, also this approach can also be criticized. One form of criticism concerns the regimes that are normally placed somewhere between democracy and dictatorship. Although they are not the focus of the article, this study notes that regimes combining characteristics from both democracies and dictatorships should, theoretically, be regarded as hybrid regimes. As noted earlier, the identification of these types of regimes is another important research field (e.g. Zakaria 1997; Diamond 2002; Ottaway 2003; Levitsky and Way 2010). Another criticism is put forward by Snyder (2006), who underlines how disparate this group of closed regimes is, ranging from totalitarian and post-totalitarian cases, theocracies, sultanates, personalistic regimes, and monarchies, to ethnocracies. This objection is of course reasonable and empirically correct and corresponds to the second research question of this article. To be more specific, after reaching an analytically valid conceptualization of dictatorship, the next step is to nuance this form of regime into subgroups with the help of earlier research and thereby climb down the ladder of abstraction (cf. Sartori 1987).

**Different types of dictatorships**

As already noted, a major research field is concerned with the identification of different types of dictatorships. Deriving from Linz’s noteworthy distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes an extensive field has followed. Later on this distinction was refined and two additional categories were added: post-totalitarian and sultanic regimes (Linz and Stepan 1996). However, this expansion did not anticipate the criticism from contemporary research that has since abandoned this typology and described it as obsolete (Snyder and Mahoney 1999; Hadenius and Teorell 2007). The criticism is about the lack of generality but also points out the mismatch between these forms and the empirical reality.

Contemporary research in this field has been occupied with creating more valid models and the biggest step forward during more recent years has been the identification of different sub-types. Compared to earlier research (Sartori 1993; Linz 2000) the updated approach is not only about theoretically important categories but is also based on an empirical point of view. Groundbreaking is Geddes (1999) typology of three variants of dictatorships. The many examples of empirical research that have relied on her categories indicate this. Geddes’ article has also given rise to additional contributions that discuss similar issues (Brooker 2000; Hadenius and Teorell 2007; Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010).

Stating that dictatorships differ from each other as much as they differ from democracy, Geddes (1999:121) builds up her argument of why variants of them need to be found. The categories that are found are separated from each other on the basis of which has control over access to power, and this results in three types of dictatorships: personalist, military, and single-party. Personalist rules are made up of regimes where the power and distribution of power is in the hands of a certain individual. In the dictatorships that are classified as military the influence on policy is carried out by a group of officers where the military hierarchy is respected. Finally, in single-party regimes the political power is derived from a dominating party.
However, even this straightforward approach is not without classification problems. One example, as discussed by Geddes (1999) herself, is the uncertain distinction between the personalist and the military rules. The leader can have a background in the military and even wear uniform but still be an individual leader, which legitimizes the classification as a personalist rule although, since borderline cases do exist, Geddes also admits that combinations of these three forms are necessary. In the wake of this article several others have focused on how to improve this typology. That research can be separated into those contributions that see the need for modifying Geddes’ typology and those that suggest different perspectives.

Hadenius and Teorell (2007) represent the first approach. Arguing that Geddes has omitted two important types of dictatorships, they launch monarchies and electoral dictatorships. Monarchies differ from other categories since the succession of political power is inherited inside the royal family. One could argue that there are great similarities to the personalist type of rule, but there are also crucial differences (Brooker 2000:47). Regarding the electoral forms of dictatorships, Hadenius and Teorell (2007) increase the accuracy in Geddes third category by letting it be constituted of three sub-groups: no-party, one-party, and multi-party regimes. For these sub-types to be embedded in the definition of dictatorship it must be stated that even if elections exist in such regimes they are neither competitive nor crucial in distributing political power. Many dictatorships allow some sorts of, normally manipulated, elections, but the effect of these is disputed. They are often described as a method for regimes to legitimize their government, but can also imply a step towards democratization (e.g. Gandhi and Lust-Oak 2009; Bunce and Wolchik 2010). Empirical examinations show that the latter actually could be realized (Gandhi 2008; Teorell & Hadenius 2009) and other scholars even indicate the presence of parties in dictatorships, as a crucial feature of elections, increase prospects of democratization (Wright and Escribà-Folch 2012). In relation to Geddes’ description of personalist rule, Hadenius and ‘Teorell (2007) dismiss it and argue instead that it is better to treat personalism as a trait that can vary in extent among regimes. In doing so, they neglect Geddes’ implied distinction about how many are sharing the main source of political power and its historical background in Aristotle’s (2000) typology. A better alternative is perhaps suggested by Brooker (2000), who distinguishes between the traditional monarchies and presidential monarchies as a way to identify personal rulers. In many ways the latter category reflects the stereotypical idea of a dictator. This form better describes the ruling by despots such as Hitler or Stalin than the alternative of single-party regimes. The reason is quite obvious where the dominating center of power was not the ruling parties, the National Socialist German Workers’ Party or the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, but where it was possessed and distributed by the dictators themselves. Classifying them as monarchies has its background in their many similarities to traditional monarchies. Examples are the use of rituals and symbols and the fact that the dictator regards the country as his to rule for life. One even closer likeness is when presidential monarchies develop a hereditary succession as has previously has been the case in Haiti, for example, or that which still exists in North Korea (Brooker 2000).

In an interesting article, Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010) launch a systematized alternative to Geddes’ typology. At first sight the resemblance seems obvious, but on detailed examination an important form of development is shown. Not satisfied with looking at which institution in society possesses the major political power, Cheibub and colleagues places the focus on the inner sanctum that is related to this ruling and the actual ruler. This leads to three variants of dictatorships: monarchy, military and civilian. As discussed earlier, monarchies are characterized by the order of succession and how political power is inherited and concentrated in a royal family. Hence, Cheibub et al. neglect the distinction between the two types of monarchies that are suggested by Brooker (2000). Also, in defining military dictators, Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010) have a slightly different approach than Geddes. They focus not on the presence of a collective military ruling but on the fact that major political power is in the hands of a current or past member of the armed forces. This does not mean that they exclude the existence of a junta. Quite the contrary, they note that this is the typical form but not the defining characteristic. In relation to other typologies, the last category, civilian, must rightly be described as vague. Based on the dichotomy of democracies and dictatorships, Cheibub et al.
classify all dictatorships that are not found to be monarchies or military as civilian. Arguing that the rulers in these regimes do not have a family, or kin networks, or the military to rely on, the authors describe them as a separate category but adds that the political power often is concentrated to a political party. The consequences of this approach is a definition that it based on the same logic as the negative definition of dictatorships and thereby is constituted of disparate regimes whose only common denominator is that they are neither monarchies nor ruled by the military. However, the main advantage of the suggested typology by Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010) is its strong empirical connection. The authors have formed clear rules for how to classify dictatorships which create good possibilities for analyzing these regimes.

Having reviewed some of the more important contemporary literature on this topic it is time to strengthen the analytical clarity further. However, the model mania (Sartori 1993) that has previously been an appropriate way to describe all the approaches that distinguish totalitarian and authoritarian regimes from each other has now struck up against the updated version of variants of dictatorships. The discussion has already been carried out on three different levels and will continue so with a particular focus on sub-types of variants of dictatorships (see Table 1). Deriving from the now established distinction between democracy and dictatorships, four types of variants of the latter are found (Geddes 1999; Brooker 2000; Hadenius and Teorell 2007). The personal and monarchial forms of dictatorships especially imbricate each other but this inclusive view is an advantage when reviewing earlier research. In his important work Linz (2000) has distinguished between three forms of personal rule: sultanism, caudillismo and caciquismo. The modern form of sultanism described by Linz is often a brutal form of ruling where neither rules nor ideology restraint the power in the hands of the dictator. According to Linz (2000) these regimes are rare but are found in small agricultural economies. To underscore the total domination of one political actor, Linz and Stepan (1996:52) have stressed: “The sultanistic polity becomes the personal domain of the sultan.” Caudillismo is one form of personal rule where the ruling elite has its background in the military. Building on the situation with patron-client relationships, it is an unstable form of dictatorship where competition for political power exists. Caciquismo does not have any military connection but is instead based on a traditional hierarchy where local leaders interlock with each other to create the ruling elite (Linz 2000). The last two types of these personal dictatorships came out from the situation in Latin American during the nineteenth century and therefore have a weak empirical connection to the present situation (Brooker 2000). The two different forms of monarchial dictatorships have already been discussed and are an adequate way to differ between various types of individual rule. Potentially they can be described as alternatives to the personal form. Turning to military rule, the established way to distinguish these is based on the typology suggested by Finer (1962). Five types are discussed. Indirect military rule is distinguished into two types, limited and complete. The first variant is found in regimes where institutions are strong enough to restrain military influence to a minor but still significant level. In the complete variant of the indirect version, the ruling is carried out by civilian governments which are installed and controlled by the military. Dual regimes are dependent on two pillars, civilian and military, which are both regarded as necessary. These two centers of power often create an alliance which is led by the ruling elite. Finer also describes two forms of direct forms of military rule. In the traditional direct rule the military governs society, often through a junta, but examples exist where the military creates a more “civilized” form of marionette rule. The other form of direct rule points in the same direction and is referred to as quasi-civilianized. This implies methods for legitimizing the military rule through civilian trappings (Finer 1962). Finer makes an interesting point when relating the hierarchy of these military dictatorships to their order of political culture. Expressing ideas that are closely related to the three forms of political culture proposed by Almond and Verba (1965), Finer describes how societies characterized by direct forms of military dictatorships have a minimal form of political culture, while this is more developed in the two indirect types.

1 The civilian category proposed by Cheibub et al. (2010) is left out here since it appears to be a residual category.
The last form of dictatorial regime also has sub-types. As discussed earlier, Hadenius and Teorell (2007) propose a threefold separation of electoral dictatorships which have common features in elections for parliament or executive office. In line with the given conceptualization of dictatorships, these elections are in some way constructed or manipulated to restrict the influence of the people. In no-party regimes, elections are held but no parties are allowed. In one-party regimes, only one party is allowed. The typical example is from Communist states where, at most, a choice of different candidates, all representing the Communist party, is the only electoral feature. Earlier research has even tried to increase the accuracy further by discussing variants of one-party regimes (Huntington and Moore 1970). Finally, in limited multiparty regimes some competition is allowed but the elections are still controlled in ways that favor the prevailing regime.

Table 1 A compilation of political regimes on three levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regime</th>
<th>Dictatorial form</th>
<th>Sub-type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Dictatorship | 1. Personal | a. Sultanism  
b. Caudillismo  
c. Caciquismo |
|  | 2. Monarchial | a. Traditional monarchies  
b. Presidential monarchies |
|  | 3. Military | a. Indirect-limited  
b. Indirect-complete  
c. Dual  
d. Direct  
e. Direct: quasi-civilianized |
|  | 4. Electoral | a. No-party regime  
b. One-party regime  
c. Limited multiparty regime |

As the table shows, the traditional distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes are today replaced by approaches that focus on who rules. As several scholars have emphasized (Geddes 1999; Brooker 2000), it is not always possible to fit regimes into theoretically based typologies. Therefore, mixed versions of the stereotypes presented in the table are sometimes required. There could also be cases where especially the sub-types risk overlapping each other.

Explaining dictatorships

When both definitions of dictatorships and different types of them have been discussed the following and logical question from a comparative perspective will be: what explains these regimes? Throughout the modern history of research of political regimes, mainly democracy, there has surprisingly often been confusion regarding, on the one hand, the existence of and, on the other hand, the transition to the type of regime in focus. Hence, Dankwart Rustow’s (1970:339) important remark about a bias that neglects the focus on cause should be repeated:

The question is not how a democratic system comes into existence. Rather it is how a democracy, assumed to be already in existence, can best preserve or enhance its health and stability.

It did, though, take thirty years until research that seriously considered this distinction was carried out. Przeworski et al. (2000) not only noted the difference between these two dimensions but also gave empirical proof to questions of both the existence or survival of democracy and the transition to it. An undertaking to examine these questions considers the explanations of both stability and transition. When it comes to explaining dictatorships the same logic should be applied, and adding the dynamic
from the typology of political regimes, a battery of questions appears to be legitimate (see Table 2). The table describes different potential research strategies. An implicit function is that the analytical precision increases when shifting to approaches that are concerned with the right hand column of the table.

Table 2 A framework for explaining dictatorships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dictatorships</th>
<th>Sub-types of dictatorships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Existence</strong></td>
<td>1. What factors explain the existence of dictatorships?</td>
<td>2. What factors explain the existence of sub-types of dictatorships?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transition</strong></td>
<td>3. What factors explain the regime change to dictatorships?</td>
<td>4. What factors explain the regime change to sub-types of dictatorships?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before continuing with a review of answers given by contemporary research to these questions, one important note should be made. This statement has its theoretical background in the dichotomization that separates democracy from dictatorship and can be formulated in the following terms: *if dictatorship is the opposite of democracy should not the explanations of dictatorship be the opposite of the ones explaining democracy?* There are two reasons why this kind of argument could be a fallacy. First of all some methodological objections can be discussed. Since not all the explanations are made up of factors that can easily be expressed as continuous measures, opposites of variables can be hard to sort out. Max Weber’s (2003) classic suggestion of how Protestantism and capitalism are interrelated give no information about which religions work in the opposite way and hinder the development of capitalism. Even when factors are operationalized into continuous variables, negative coefficients for democracy cannot automatically be interpreted as factors promoting dictatorships. One important reason has to do with the overall lack of concern for discussing linearity in explanations of political regimes (Ezrow and Frantz 2011). Previously this was an important research field in studies of democratization (Neubauer 1967; Jackman 1973; Lipset, Seong, and Torres 1993). The other main objection has a theoretical background. Theories explaining democracy constitute, at most, an idea of why the explanatory factor is correlated to democracy. That these theories include information about why the lack of an explanatory factor would create or stabilize dictatorships are rare. This creates unsatisfactory research that cannot connect causal effects with causal mechanisms, which is a feature of successful comparative research (Gerring 2010; Hedström and Ylikoski 2010; Lidén 2011b).

Turning to the review of explanations of dictatorships, Karvonen’s (2008) statement about an absence of a comprehensive theoretical model creates a necessary point of departure. The lack of holistic theoretical contributions about why and how dictatorships come into being and survive is striking (for a recent exception see Ezrow and Frantz 2011). Regarding the research that does exist on this topic, it varies between theoretical results and empirical results. One suitable way to present it is to distinguish between where different approaches have their analytical background. Deriving from Lidén (2011a), three levels are found from where factors may originate. These three are of spatial character. The first level refers to characteristics from the political system. By contrast, the second approach is based on factors external to the given society’s political system but still found inside the society in question. Collectively, these two alternatives are considered endogenous in relation to the study object because the determinants are extracted from within. The third level refers to explanations that are found outside the concerned society and thereby are exogenous in relation to the society.

---

2 Barro (1999) argues that even this feature is lacking in democratic theory.
The first level includes political institutions. They are clearly one important part of a political system and influence political processes by having relevance for both shaping and creating policies. However, one of the aims for this article is to sort out which role these institutions play in dictatorships. Several scholars have performed examinations that increase such an understanding. The main argument for an explanation of a positive outcome of institutionalization in dictatorships has to do with the fact that approval of at least some allowed political engagement can be expected to result in demand for increased civil rights (Gandhi 2008:138). The opposite idea, that the level of institutionalization endures dictatorships, is based on the notion of the stability and efficiency that these institutions bring (Huntington 1968). Gandhi (2008:chap. 4) measures institutions by the number of political parties in the legislature and finds that institutionalized dictatorships are more tolerant of civil liberties, meaning that more brutal dictatorships are in general without these institutions. Wright and Escribá-Folch (2012) add specification to the argument by showing how the presence of parties increases the chances for democratization in military and dominant-party regimes, while the effect on parties for personalist dictatorships is actually a transition towards another form of dictatorship. Considering specifically elections in dictatorships, as one form of institutionalizing, arguments show how these can be used to co-opt elites, party members or the opposition and thereby lower risk for violent removals of the steering elite (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). Through a massive test of different sets of explanations, Bunch and Wolchik (2010) expose the mechanisms and stress how an opposition in collaboration with civil society groups and with the support of external democracy activists, could result in a transition to democracy through the functioning of elections. Intensive and strategic ambitions via political campaigns that encourage voter registration and the establishment of electoral monitoring procedures can result in an effective opposition that appears to be a serious alternative to the dominating regime and thereby it is much harder to attack the regime with undemocratic methods. The combination of the traits of the national institutions and external influence is in accordance with the conclusion of Levitsky and Way (2010). Additional empirical evidence is though quite unclear. Teorell and Hadenius (2009) prove that elections can promote democratization, while Brownlee (2007) finds that regime type and not elections influences transitions. In sum, institutions can clearly affect the existence and outcome of regime transitions. But even though the theoretical underpinnings are strong the empirical outcome is inconsistent. In particular, the existence of parties implies importance, even if there are several uncertain results. Another characteristic of a political system is how the political regime can be classified. The different types of dictatorships have here been used both as explanans and explanandum. Brownlee (2007:30) points out that military regimes are unstable and risk falling, while the opposite is true for single-party regimes. According to Brownlee the existence of elections are without importance. To elaborate upon this, descriptive data show that military regimes have the largest population among Geddes’ types of dictatorships, while there are no traits that stand out when it comes to single-party regimes (Wright 2008).

Turning to the second level, there is existing research that focuses on explanations of dictatorships that are found in the surrounding society. Such examples are the outcome of society’s internal balance of power (Moore 1966) which can be connected with how modernization can create an unholy alliance between political and economical elites (O’Donnell 1973). More recent studies (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992) partly revise Moore’s famous standpoint on the role of the bourgeoisie as a trigger of democratization, adding that their role in the process of democratization varied from case to case and time period to time period. Among the more quantitatively oriented research, Wright’s (2008) is a good example, in which Geddes variants of dictatorships are not used as independent variables but as dependent ones. The analysis is carried out with one-party regimes as the reference category. The results show that personal dictatorships have a positive correlation with oil reserves and revenues and a negative one with national investments and population. The same relationships apply for monarchies, but in addition these societies are more ethnically fragmented and dominated by Islam to a greater extent. For military dictatorships the picture is the opposite, meaning that they are not dependent on oil nor are they ethnically fragmented. However, they are more populated than one-party regimes. Wright’s article has an explicit approach on dictatorships but has
deficiencies in the lack of non-dictatorships as reference. Without the possibility of a comparison with
democracy, plausible hypotheses are hard to deduct. With the groundbreaking research of Przeworski
and colleagues (2000), results that challenged earlier ideas of regime explanations hit the field. By
using a measurement that derives from a theoretical dichotomization of democracy and dictatorship,
explanations of the latter category were introduced. By summarizing their findings regarding both
survival and transitions of regimes, two points can be made. As regards earlier research, the result of
showing the existence of dictatorships irrespective of economic conditions is, of course, surprising.
Moreover, regime transitions to dictatorship are proven to be accompanied by economic crisis. Hence,
economic factors affect the transition but not the existence or survival of a dictatorship (Przeworski et
al. 2000:109–111). These highly discussed results have, however, been questioned. By extending the
time-series, adding control for extraneous variation and using additional techniques of estimation
several authors add clarity (Boix and Stokes 2003; Epstein, Bates, Goldstone, Kristensen, and
O’Halloran 2006; Boix 2011). Epstein and his colleagues even argue that the outcome has been
misinterpreted and shows that economic development is significant when it comes to regime changes
in both directions. More concrete, high levels of GDP covary with transitions to democracy, while low
values are significant in transitions to dictatorships. Why this is the case is sketched out by Boix (2003)
who shows how not the income per se but the distribution of income is the crucial factor. Dictators
prevail in highly unequal societies where the transition to democracy would pose demands on the
wealthy of redistribution and heavy taxation. The ruling elite and its wealthy associates therefore have
strong incentives to block democracy. Empirically, Boix shows how, among poorer countries, equal
income distribution positively affects the probability that dictatorships will transition to democracy.
Among other important results in the comparative literature the possession of valuable natural
resources can cement dictatorships. Rentier effects, where the wealth from oil or minerals can be used
to keep the population loyal or where the income can be invested in police or military forces to more
efficiently control opposition to the regime, is listed by Ross (2001), who has noticed that these
resources prevent democracy. These results are followed up in more recent research, in which Ross
(2012) emphasizes how a country’s income of oil is robust in explaining the survival of dictatorships
as well as explaining the transition to dictatorship. The oil effect is limited, though, in time and has
been of greatest importance since 1980. Using other forms of estimations reported results are
ambiguous, either supporting the findings of Ross (Aslaksen 2010) or questioning them (Haber and
Menaldo 2011). Among other characteristics in societies, scholars have pleaded for addressing the
importance of religion (Fox 2001; Anderson 2004; Minkenberg 2007) in relation to political regimes.
Stepan (2005) has underscored that the two dimensions of religion and politics must be kept separated
to avoid the risk that religious institutions might have influence on the decision-making process.
Anckar’s empirical study (2012) shows how authoritarian features in Islam and Buddhism create
intolerance toward democratic values. One could argue that societies dominated by these religions
have a greater chance to survive as dictatorships.

The third level of explanation is exogenous in relation to the studied objects and states that
phenomena outside countries affect their political orientation. These types of explanations do,
however, need to conform to domestic forces (Linz and Stepan 1996:73). Theoretically known as
Galton’s problem, the spreading of ideas has been studied both with geographical and more
traditional comparative approaches. Previously under-theorized scholars have tried to examine how
such processes can affect established dictatorships or influence the transition to such regimes
(Ambrosio 2010; Elkink 2011). Ambrosio argues that both the appropriateness of global attitudes to
democracy or dictatorship and the effectivness of policymakers in benchmarking other countries’
experiences can be mechanisms that explain the outcome of regimes. Turning to the empirical
examples, O’Loughlin et al. (1998) prove that dictatorships, as well as democracies, are geographically
clustered. Regarding transitions to dictatorships, authors (Starr 1991; Starr and Lindborg 2003) argue
that these are more likely to arise if neighboring countries also are dictatorships. The importance of
exogenous factors has also been emphasized by research that simultaneously examines these
explanations with control for domestic ones. Of definite interest is Teorell’s (2010) study that examines
democracy and dictatorship from perspectives of both transition and survival. Among the exogenous factors, results show that economic interventions from foreign powers actually could trigger transitions toward dictatorship. Thus, there is a risk that quite the opposite to the desired outcome happens. Moreover, Brinks and Coppedge (2006) find empirical evidence that neighboring countries are similar when it comes to political regime, even when other, earlier discussed factors, are controlled for. With similar control for country-specific factors, Gleditsch and Ward (2006) find that a high proportion of democratic neighbors lowers the chance that a dictatorship will survive. However, as stated by other scholars (Ambrosio 2010), not only geographical distance but other forms of linkages, such as economic and political ones, and others, can affect regime outcome. Operating with the opposite causal direction, scholars (Gleditsch 2002; Wejnert 2005) emphasize that diffusion factors on both a regional and global level have importance for democratization.

Before summing up, an explanation that cannot be categorized as spatial needs to be brought up. Svolik (2008) has shown that it is important to identify regimes that are consolidated. Regimes that have been democracies for a long time only have a negligible risk that they will turn into a dictatorship. This means that one central determinant of consolidation is the time as democratic; therefore, the temporal dimension should not be forgotten.

Table 3 A summary of explanations of dictatorships.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanations are derived from:</th>
<th>Type of explanation</th>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Key references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inside the political system</td>
<td>3 &amp; 4.</td>
<td>H₁: Dictatorships that are institutionalized (parties) are less brutal and will lead to democracy.</td>
<td>Gandhi (2008); Wright &amp; Escribà-Folch (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 &amp; 4.</td>
<td>H₂: Dictatorships that are institutionalized (elections) can transform to democracies.</td>
<td>Teorell &amp; Hadenius (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>H₃: Institutionalization explains the existence of dictatorships.</td>
<td>Huntington (1968)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>H₄: Military institutionalizations have the greatest risk of falling to democracy while single-party regimes have the lowest.</td>
<td>Brownlee (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>H₇: The possession of valuable natural resources explains the existence of and transition to dictatorships.</td>
<td>Ross (2001); Ross (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>H₈: The existence of Islam and Buddhism explain the existence of dictatorships.</td>
<td>Anckar (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>H₁₀: The more democracies there are as neighbors, in the region or in the world, the lower is the chance that a dictatorship will survive.</td>
<td>Gleditsch &amp; Ward (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>H₁₁: Close linkage with other dictatorships will increase possibilities for survival of a dictatorship.</td>
<td>Ambrosio (2010)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All in all, explanations of dictatorships are possibly found on three spatial levels and one temporal dimension (see Table 3). Deriving from the research that presents both convincing theoretical and empirical results, a number of hypotheses are found that reflect these four sources of explanations. In addition, these hypotheses display three types of explanations as they have previously been classified. The review of literature does, however, show that the dominating part of the deducted hypotheses reflects the survival of or transitions to dictatorships and where only two hypothesis gives
information about sub-types of these dictatorships. In summary, this review implies that there are no coherent theoretical models for explaining dictatorship as is common in the literature of democracy and democratization (e.g. Sørensen 2008). Thereby, the anticipated future research needs to examine these hypotheses in a systematized way but also need to work quite inductively.

Conclusions

This article has reviewed the literature on three related areas. In analogy with this, the contribution is threefold. First, this article has noted research gaps in the definition of dictatorships. By compiling earlier contributions on how to properly define dictatorships, validity can potentially be strengthened. A definition of the regime type of dictatorships has been provided, which states that dictatorships use methods other than competitive elections for distributing political power and that they also violate individuals’ political and civil rights. This conceptualization is consistent with how liberal democracies are defined (Dahl 1989; Diamond 1999) and thus creates consistent way of separating the two main forms of regime types from each other without describing dictatorship merely as the opposite of democracy. In addition, it leaves room for further differentiation of hybrid regimes (e.g. Diamond 2002; Brownlee 2007; Levitsky and Way 2010). Second, the discussion of different types of dictatorships represents one of the most stimulating debates in the field of comparative politics. It has the potential to increase analytical clarity and, when implemented in empirical research, to result in groundbreaking results. However, there are also risks with too much theorizing without connection to the reality being explained. The motive of reviewing the systematized models in the research so far is therefore hard to question. This article has provided such a contribution and has increased the nuance on how to look upon dictatorship by, in a unified way, introducing two levels of underlying categories. Third, when explaining the existence of and transitions to dictatorships and variants of them, earlier research should be used as guidance. As this article has been able to show, hypotheses are seldom presented or examined in a systematized way. Even more worrying is that empirical studies normally neglect the theoretical improvements that have occurred in finding different types of dictatorships. This groundless constrain, limits the potential of political science and hinders valuable feedback to decision-makers on how dictatorships can be understood and explained.

Literature


Additional hypotheses regarding transitions to and survival of sub-types of dictatorships can be found in the literature (e.g. (Linz and Stepan 1996; Ezrow and Frantz 2011) but they either appear to be speculative or based upon ideas of variants of dictatorships that are found to be obsolete today.


LIDÉN, GUSTAV. (2011b) What About Theory? The Consequences on a Widened Perspective of Social Theory. Quality & Quantity Accepted for publication 4 May 2011.


