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**Democratic Transitions and Democratic
Breakdowns: The Elite Variable**

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DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS AND DEMOCRATIC BREAKDOWNS:
THE ELITE VARIABLE

ABSTRACT

Stable democratic regimes depend heavily on the "consensual unity" of national elites. So long as elites remain disunified, political regimes are unstable, a condition which makes democratic transitions and democratic breakdowns merely temporary oscillations in the forms unstable regimes take. Disunity appears to be the generic condition of national elites, and disunity strongly tends to persist regardless of socioeconomic development and other changes in mass populations. The consensually unified elites that are necessary to stable democracies are created in only a few ways, two of the most important of which involve distinctive elite transformations. After elaborating this argument, we examine the relationship between elites and regimes in western nation-states since they began to consolidate after 1500. We show that our approach makes good sense of the western political record, that it does much to clarify prospects for stable democracies in developing societies today, and that it makes the increasingly elite-centered analysis of democratic transitions and breakdowns more systematic.

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The unexpected wave of democratic transitions during the last decade, most notably in Latin America and Southern Europe, has attracted much scholarly attention (see, inter alia, O'Donnell et al. 1986; Malloy and Seligson 1987; Baloyra 1987; Needler 1987). Although this new body of work has considerable value, it offers no sound theoretical basis for judging the survival prospects of newly democratic regimes. Scholars have focused primarily on the antecedents and processes of democratic transitions, and have avoided the task of prediction. Thus, comparative political sociology today is not much closer to a workable theory of stable democracy than it was in the 1960s and 1970s when many putatively stable democracies fell to a wave of authoritarian regimes, which was also unanticipated theoretically (see Linz and Stepan 1978; Collier 1980).

In thinking about the determinants of stable democracies, however, there has been a promising shift in causal focus away from social structural and toward political determinants conceptualized in terms of the behavior of powerful actors or elites. This new emphasis has in turn introduced a large element of indeterminacy. Some scholars now suggest that democratic transitions and breakdowns are ultimately the products of historically contingent elite choices (e.g., O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Lopez-Pintor 1987; Malloy 1987). Although this shift in causal focus is a step forward, it may lead to a dead-end if it is not substantially elaborated. The elite concept is

fraught with problems, and the contingent nature of elite choices may be a barrier to theoretical progress.

We suggest a route out of these and related difficulties. Briefly, we argue that democratic transitions and breakdowns can best be understood by studying basic continuities and changes in the internal relations of national elites. A disunified national elite, which is the most common type, produces a series of unstable regimes that tend to oscillate between authoritarian and democratic forms over varying intervals. A consensually unified national elite, which is historically much rarer, produces a stable regime that may evolve into a modern democracy, as in Sweden, or Britain, or the United States, if economic and other facilitative conditions permit. Unless regime changes are preceded or accompanied by elite transformations--from disunity to consensual unity, in cases of democratic transitions, or from consensual unity to disunity in cases of democratic breakdowns--they should be regarded as strictly temporary. However, such elite transformations rarely occur. Once created, each national elite type strongly tends to persist, with the disunified type being nearly ubiquitous, both historically in Europe and Latin America and among Latin American and non-western countries today. Consequently, most regime changes that have been examined as democratic transitions or breakdowns are more fruitfully viewed as underpinned by continuing elite disunity and associated regime instability. Failure to see this has led many scholars to exaggerate the longer-term significance of such transitions and breakdowns, and left them unprepared to explain the reversals in regime form that typically follow.

The thrust of our argument is not new. Many scholars have shown that the unity of national elites is one of the most important determinants of regime forms (e.g., Pareto 1935; Mosca 1939; Aron 1950; Castles 1974; Putnam 1976; Huntington 1984). But this idea has not been developed systematically. Disunified and consensually unified national elites are not well defined, their origins and persistence are largely unexamined, and the

consequences of their internal organization for regime forms are poorly understood.

The following section outlines a theoretical perspective that begins to correct these problems. Then our theoretical claims about the connections between national elite unity and regime stability are examined in a review of major western political changes that have occurred since about 1500. We demonstrate that the connection between elite disunity and regime instability has been more widespread and persistent in historical and contemporary nation-states than is commonly recognized. We conclude by considering how our analysis informs current discussions about democratic transitions and breakdowns.

CONCEPTUALIZING ELITE VARIATIONS AND REGIME CONSEQUENCES

We first specify our frame of reference and organizing concepts. The unit of analysis is the independent, territorially-consolidated nation-state, a political entity that is at least moderately demarcated territorially and administratively centralized on basic matters like policing and taxing (see Giddens 1987, pp. 116-21). Our principal interest is to explain how domestic elite interrelations affect regime stability. Though we recognize that elite-regime relationships are sometimes changed fundamentally by wars, we do not intend to explain such events. And while the political importance of location in the world economy is undeniable, we think that international economic forces do not normally determine elite-regime relationships (see, Brenner 1977; Smith 1979; Linz and Stepan 1978; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Malloy 1987). Finally, we recognize that subnational, regionally-based ethnic, religious, linguistic, and other cultural conflicts sometimes override elite-regime relationships and require different but not necessarily contradictory concepts and models (e.g., Lijphart 1978).

Within this frame of reference, we conceive of national

elites as persons who are able, by virtue of their authoritative positions in powerful organizations and movements of whatever kind, to affect national political outcomes regularly and substantially (Burton and Higley 1987a). Scholars generally agree that national elites can be defined as top position-holders in the largest or most resource-rich political, governmental, economic, military, professional, communications, and cultural organizations and movements in a society (see Putnam 1976; Higley and Moore 1981; McDonough 1981; Dye 1983; Hoffmann-Lange 1987; Moyser and Wagstaffe 1987). We think of regimes as basic patterns in the organization, exercise, and transfer of government decision-making power. Many distinctions among regime types can be drawn (e.g., democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian), but we stress the value of distinguishing between stable and unstable regimes.

Scholars who focus on the variability of national elites generally distinguish three basic types: (1) the "pluralistic" or "consensually unified" type that exists in most western societies today and that existed in a few of them in earlier times; (2) the "totalitarian" or "ideologically unified" type in nation-states organized along communist, fascist, or theocratic lines; (3) and the "divided" or "disunified" elite of many past and contemporary nation-states (Aron 1950; Dahrendorf 1967; Putnam 1976; Welsh 1979; Burton and Higley 1987a). We focus here only on consensually unified and disunified national elites because understanding their differences and their strong tendency to persist clarifies the analysis of democratic transitions and breakdowns.

A national elite is consensually unified when its members (1) share a largely tacit consensus about rules and codes of political conduct amounting to a "restrained partisanship" (Prewitt and Stone 1973; Di Palma 1973), and (2) participate in a more or less comprehensively integrated structure of interaction which provides them with relatively reliable and effective access to each other and to the most central decision-makers (Kadushin

1979; Higley and Moore 1981). This combination of tacit consensus on rules of the game and comprehensive integration disposes elite members to view decisional outcomes as a positive-sum or "politics-as-bargaining" game, rather than a zero-sum or "politics-as-war" game (Sartori 1987, p. 224). With agreement on the rules of the political game and with decision-making access assured, the diverse and heterogeneous members accept various decisions they do not especially like because they expect to get their way on other issues they consider vital. Over time, most elites achieve their most basic aims, and are therefore inclined to view the totality of decisional outcomes as positive-sum (Sartori 1987, p. 229).

This explains why elite persons and factions who regularly take opposing ideological and policy positions in public consistently refrain from pushing their differences to the point of violent conflict. Typical elite members therefore enjoy considerable personal security, in the sense that they do not expect to be killed, imprisoned, or similarly penalized for ending up on the losing side of a policy dispute. It follows that, once this type of national elite is created, and so long as it persists, forcible seizures of government power by one or another discontented faction will not occur. Moreover, to accommodate and process the diverse, frequently opposing interests of the factions in such a national elite, political institutions will be structured along representative, at least proto-democratic lines, though the actual extent of representative democracy may depend on other, facilitative conditions.

By contrast, a national elite is disunified when its members (1) share few or no understandings about the proprieties of political conduct, and (2) engage in only limited and sporadic interactions across factional or sectoral boundaries. The basic situation of persons comprising this elite type is one of deep insecurity--the fear, usually rooted in experience, that all is lost if some other person or faction gets the upper hand.

Accordingly, members of a disunified elite routinely take extreme measures to protect themselves and their interests: killing, imprisoning, or banishing opponents, fomenting rebellions against ascendant factions, expropriating opponents' resources, and so on. In the context of elite disunity, these actions are often the most rational ones available. Recent experiences of having punitive measures taken against them or their close associates, and the strong belief that such measures will be implemented in the future, solidifies the fears and insecurities of disunified national elite members. So entrenched are these fears and insecurities that elite disunity can be transcended only in extraordinary circumstances.

We have few direct and comprehensive empirical studies of disunified national elites. Members seldom cooperate in such research because they fear it will be used against them. Researchers who persist in studying a disunified elite do so at considerable personal peril. One direct and relatively extensive study is McDonough's (1981) 1972-73 survey of the Brazilian national elite, minus the governmentally dominant military elite which refused to cooperate. McDonough's research portrays an elite divided into military-governmental, economic, church, and urban labor factions which were polarized over rules of the political game (e.g., freedom of political opposition and the extent of executive power), and were isolated from each other. Brown's (1969, p. 441) more limited survey of French elite groups in the mid-1960s--just a few years after their conflicts toppled the Fourth Republic and the Algerian imbroglio spawned considerable intra-elite violence--concluded that the outstanding feature of the French national elite was "the lack of agreement concerning the basic political institutions of the nation" and an absence of extensive personal contacts among the main elite factions (p. 441). In related fashion, Shonfeld's (1981) study of French elites in the early 1970s found extensive personal ties among elite members in the main factions but lack of ties across factional lines. Importantly, each faction was

ignorant of and disregarded the other. In the same vein, in Czudnowski's (1987) limited survey of the Taiwanese national elite, the fact that he had to devise complex research stratagems to circumvent the respondents' mutual fears and hostilities points to basic elite disunity.

The origin of national elite disunity apparently lies in the process of nation-state formation. Constructing nation-states out of previously disparate and partially autonomous territories is typically such a violent and conflict-ridden process, involving the repression of some elite groups by others, that deep and unremitting elite disunity is almost inevitable (Coleman 1971, pp. 89-93). Bendix's (1978) treatise on nation-state formation in the west and Japan amply demonstrates that nation-state consolidation everywhere resulted in disunified elites. The formation of nation-states in Latin America after emancipation from Spanish rule in the early nineteenth century required repeated efforts to suppress local elites by force (Oszlak 1981). Johnson (1983) provides a graphic account of the altogether similar result of postcolonial nation-state consolidations in Black Africa and many other newly emerging nations in the 1960s and 1970s.

Thus, the historical record strongly suggests that elite disunity originates in the formation of nation-states. Disunity is, in other words, the generic condition of national elites. But there are two kinds of exceptions. First, the experience of operating "home rule" regimes over longer periods under relatively benign colonial tutelage and/or of orchestrating large and politically complex national independence movements sometimes results in a consensually unified national elite from the date of postcolonial independence. The United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, India, and a few other offshoots of the British Empire are the principal examples. Second, defeat and occupation of societies after wars sometimes results in consensually unified elites from the date of postwar independence because the previously most opposing elite factions have been

liquidated (e.g., Austria during and after World War II). But with these exceptions, the historical record strongly supports the proposition that nation-state formation almost always results in a disunified national elite.

The main political consequence of elite disunity is regime instability. As a property of regimes, instability has several meanings. Sanders (1981) identifies three meanings: (1) a high incidence of political violence in the form of revolts, riots, strikes, mass demonstrations, and individual actions; (2) frequent changes in the makeup of governing coalitions and cabinets; (3) the occurrence of coups d'etat or other government overthrows. In our view, the first two meanings are not sufficiently discriminating because nearly all regimes at various times would qualify as unstable in one or both respects. Only the third meaning, suitably elaborated, distinguishes unstable regimes in a clear-cut and theoretically useful fashion. Thus, a political regime may be said to be unstable whenever government executive power is subject to irregular seizures, attempted seizures, or widely expected seizures by force. Concrete indicators of regime instability are revolutions, uprisings, or coups d'etat aimed at changing the control of government executive offices and not primarily orchestrated by another nation-state. A regime may be classified as unstable during periods when such seizures occur, are attempted, or are regarded by informed persons as likely possibilities. So long as any of these indicators of instability obtain, a regime's current mode of functioning, whether "democratic" or "authoritarian" or something else, is likely to be temporary.

Irregular, forcible power seizures are sufficiently frequent and visible, or the expectation of them is so palpable, that observers usually have little difficulty recognizing a regime as unstable. Thus, Malloy (1985, p. 367) calculated that some 186 irregular seizures of government occurred in Bolivia since independence in 1825. Veliz (1967, p. 278) counted 80 successful military coups in 18 Latin American countries between

