

# **Autocratic transitions and democratization\***

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## **Abstract**

Autocratic regimes that fall from power may be replaced by either new autocratic regimes or democratic regimes. Previous research on transitions has only looked at changes between democratic and non-democratic regimes. Non-democracy, however, is a residual category that lumps together both stable autocratic regimes and transitions between autocratic regimes. We develop a series of hypotheses on conditions affecting the likelihood of autocratic breakdown and transitions to either new autocratic or democratic regimes, and devise a new approach to identifying changes between non-democratic regimes. We find that although some factors make autocratic regimes more likely to break down and make both transitions to autocracy and democracy more likely, some types of regime transitions are relatively more likely under different circumstances. Whereas domestic economic factors have a strong influence on the stability of autocratic regimes, international factors and prior experiences with democracy are strongly associated with the likelihood of transitions to democracy in the wake of a dictatorship.

## Introduction

The so-called “Third Wave” of democracy has renewed interest in the prospects for democracy, and the question of what factors may account for transitions to democracy in autocratic states remains among the most central in Political Science. Many studies of democratization have stressed how transitions in autocracies often take the form of a two-stage process (see Gleditsch and Ward 2004, Przeworski and Limongi 1997). Transitions to democracy happen when an autocratic government is forced to surrender power and then subsequently replaced by a new government that initiates democratic reform or open elections. It is often argued that the factors that affect the first stage of the process, or lead an autocratic government to break down, may differ from factors that influence outcomes in the second stage of the transition process or make the introduction of democracy in the wake of dictatorships more likely. Although regime crises in autocracies may result in transitions to a democracy, new autocratic governments may also follow. As we will show later, most crises and irregular regime changes in non-democracies do indeed lead to new autocratic regimes.

Although much of the new work on democratization and transitions emphasizes how crises may spur the fall of an autocratic regime (see, for example, Gleditsch and Ward 2004, Przeworski 1988), virtually all existing empirical studies of transitions have looked only at the institutional characteristics that distinguish between democratic and non-democratic forms of governance. Although democracy is a relatively well-defined category and different definitions by and large lead to the same states being classified as democracies, non-democracy is a residual category, defined essentially in terms of what it is not. The non-democracy category includes a large number of very different types of political systems, and lumps together absolute hereditary monarchies such as contemporary Saudi Arabia, socialist autocracies such as the Soviet Union, fascist

regimes such as Nazi Germany, and kleptocracies such Mobutu's Zaire, which have little in common apart from not being democratic. More importantly, we argue that existing studies of regime change and transitions conflate stable non-democracies, where the same regime or coalition remains in power, with unstable non-democracies that experience abrupt changes in political leadership and institutions.

The possibility of regime changes leading to new autocracies is at least implicitly recognized by the common use of the term regime. Collier and Collier (1991: 789), for example, define regime as “the structure of state and governmental processes ... [including]... the method of selection of the government ... The regime is typically distinguished from the particular incumbents who occupy state and governmental roles, the political coalition that supports these incumbents, and the public policies they adopt.”<sup>1</sup> By this definition, we have changes between autocratic regimes if the process of leader selection fundamentally changes from prior arrangements. This can clearly happen without changes between democratic and non-democratic forms of governance. Consider the revolutions in Cuba and Iran, in 1959 and 1979 respectively. Both the Cuban and Iranian revolutions constitute examples of regime change by our definition. New leaders

<sup>1</sup> Collier and Collier (1991) provide one of the few explicit definitions of regime that we are aware of. Munck (2001), for example, reviews recent contributions on what he describes as “the regime question” without defining or discussing the concept. Most of the literature uses the term in ways resembling the Collier and Collier definition, since it is recognized that non-democratic regimes at least in principle may alternate. One prominent exception is Przeworski et al. (2000:18-9), who explicitly distinguish only between democratic and non-democratic leader selection. We suspect that this restriction is in part tailored to fit their data and empirical analysis.

come to power by defeating the old leadership and seizing political power. This contrasts markedly from a regular leadership turnover, where a ruler hands over power to a designated successor. These revolutions entailed fundamental changes in the character of the ruling political institutions and the methods by which leaders are selected. However, since the two states remain “non-democracies” before and after their revolutions, neither would be considered regime change by common measures based only on degree of democracy.<sup>2</sup>

The possibilities of fundamental political changes within autocracies that do not result in democracy are ignored by all empirical studies on crisis and regime change that we are aware of.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, we argue that understanding how factors influence the likelihood of crises in autocracies and when these may result in democratization requires that we distinguish stable non-democracies, where the same regime remains in power without significant challenges, from non-

<sup>2</sup> In the Polity data, for example, Iran is assigned a Polity score (institutionalized democracy – autocracy) of –10 before the 1979 revolution and a score of –6 after 1981. Likewise, Cuba’s Polity score increases from -9 to -7 after Castro replaces Batista.

<sup>3</sup> Researchers have debated whether democracy is best considered an inherently categorical phenomenon or something that may exist to a smaller or greater extent in political institutions (see Alvarez et al. 1996, Elkins 2000). Although some studies of regime change and transitions have included intermediate categories such as partial or semi-democracies (see Epstein et al. 2003, Gasiorowski 1995), graded measures of democracy still only distinguish between non-democracies in terms of the degree to which they have or lack democratic features. Hence, they do not overcome the problems of lumping together different regimes in a joint “non-democracy” category.

democracies where less stable autocratic regimes are challenged and fall, but the country remains a non-democracy after the regime change. Moreover, we must identify the specific conditions under which autocratic regimes that fall are likely to lead to democracies and when regime crises in non-democracies are more likely to yield new autocracies. We contend that the failure to distinguish between stable non-democracies where the same regime remains in power and unstable non-democracies where autocratic regimes change has left existing research unable to properly assess the conditions leading to regime crises in non-democracies and how these may influence the prospects for democracy. Moreover, we argue that quite different factors influence the likelihood that crises will yield new autocracies and the prospects for a democratic regime after the fall of a dictatorship. We follow Gleditsch and Ward (2004) in thinking about prospects for regime change and democratization in terms of factors affecting the strength of an autocratic regime in power relative to other social actors and factors that influence evaluations and the relative attractiveness of democratic and autocratic forms of governance to social actors. We develop a new data set that identifies regime changes within autocracies that allow us to analyze our hypotheses empirically. Our analysis suggest that the characteristics leading to regime crises in autocracies in general are quite different from the specific factors making transitions to democracy more likely.

## **Regime change and transitions in autocracies**

Before proceeding to our theoretical expectations about crises and transitions we will first illustrate the problems of ignoring regime change within autocracy in the study of transitions more formally. Although regime change in autocracies may be interesting in its own right, skeptics may ask why we need to worry about changes between autocratic regimes if one is exclusively interested in prospects for democracy.

Consider the stylized representation of the two-stage process of regime change and transitions in autocracies from an initial time  $t$  to a subsequent point  $t+1$  in Figure 1. The existing autocratic regime may survive in power from time  $t$  to  $t+1$ , in which case we end up at the far left node labeled  $\sim T$  without a change of regime. By contrast, the right branch of the tree in Figure 1 indicates cases where an autocratic regime breaks down or is unseated in a crisis. The fall of an autocratic regime in turn brings us to one of two possible outcomes. The previous regime may be replaced by a new autocratic regime, which we for simplicity will refer to as outcome  $Ta$ . Alternatively, the autocratic regime could be followed by a new democracy, which will denote by  $Td$ .

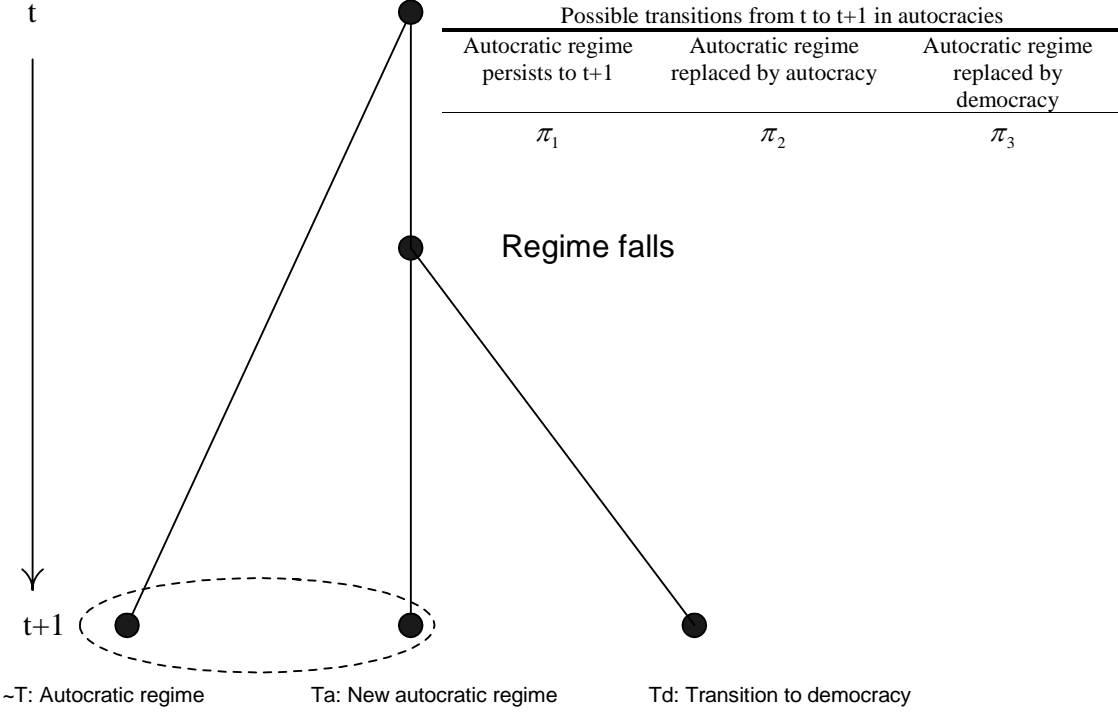


Figure 1: Crises in autocracies, regime change, and transitions

Figure 1 reveals how existing research, by limiting itself to institutional characteristics to define regimes, has considered transition probabilities that do not reflect the particular events and outcomes that we are interested in. Going from left to right among the outcomes at time  $t+1$

shown in Figure 1, we denote the probabilities of ending up on nodes  $\sim T$ ,  $Ta$ , and  $Td$  respectively by  $\pi_1$ ,  $\pi_2$ , and  $\pi_3$ . By dichotomizing democracies and non-democracies, existing research on transitions to democracy has examined the probability that a non-democracy will be replaced by a democracy  $\pi_3$  versus the probability that a state will remain a non-democracy  $(1-\pi_3)$  conditional on various right hand side covariates  $\mathbf{X}$  (e.g., Gleditsch 2002a, Gleditsch and Ward 2004, Przeworski and Limongi 1997). However, as shown by the dashed circle around the two nodes to the left in Figure 1, the probability that a non-democracy at time  $t$  will remain a non-democracy  $(1-\pi_3)$  at time  $t+1$  pertains to a compound event of either  $\sim T$  or  $Ta$ . This is given by the sum of the probability of two quite different outcomes, namely the probability that a *particular* autocratic regime remains stable from  $t$  to  $t+1$  ( $\pi_1$ ) and the probability that one autocratic regime is replaced by another autocratic regime ( $\pi_2$ ). Since  $(1-\pi_3)$  contains the sum of  $\pi_1$  and  $\pi_2$ , statements and claims about conditions under which countries are more likely to remain non-democracies may reflect a rather misleading average of trends or how factors affect two quite different outcomes. For example, we may find that something does not appear to influence the likelihood of continued “non-democracy”  $(1-\pi_3)$  because it has effects in opposing directions on  $\pi_1$  (duration of the same regime) and  $\pi_2$  (transition to a new autocracy) that wash out in the aggregate. To understand what makes autocracies more or less stable we need to study directly how factors affect the likelihood that regimes will fall or lose power  $(1-\pi_1)$ . Factors that make autocratic regimes less likely to survive may in turn increase the likelihood of one or two outcomes (or possibly both): replacement by a democracy  $\pi_3$  or replacement by a new autocratic regime  $\pi_2$ .



The distinction between stable non-democracies where the same regime remains in power and unstable non-democracies with autocratic regime change is also relevant for assessing whether certain historical trajectories or “paths” are more conducive to democracy. Suppose that certain stable non-democratic regimes under some conditions may be better candidates for becoming democracies than less stable autocratic institutions. Some researchers have suggested that the “first wave” of democracy in Europe was easier, as the incremental expansion of democracy and individual rights allowed countries to overcome one problem in the transition processes at a time without having to address all problems simultaneously (e.g., Huntington 1991). Similarly, it could be argued that non-democracies having some independent institutions such as a judiciary can facilitate a gradual establishment of democratic institutions in the contemporary world. By contrast, unstable autocracies are susceptible to new coups and violence. In this setting, crises conditions that tend to undermine non-democratic regimes may actually decrease the long-term prospects of a transition to a democracy by making regime change to less stable autocratic regimes more likely. Londregan and Poole (1990) present evidence suggesting a coup trap, where states that have had an irregular regime change have a higher likelihood of experiencing new violent regime changes. Hence, if we wish to estimate the effects of factors making democracy relatively more or less likely in the wake of autocracies we need to consider the probability of transitions to different autocratic regime changes  $\pi_2$  separately from the survival rates of stable autocracies  $\pi_1$ .

The study of transitions and regime change is complicated by the many possible ways in which one regime may disappear and be replaced by another (see Gleditsch and Ward 2004 for a more extended discussion). Although the fall of an old regime and the emergence of a new regime may take the form of two clearly separate events – as in the case of the fall of the Junta and the eventual restoration of democracy in Argentina in 1982-3 – in other transitions, the fall of one

regime and the emergence of another may be more difficult to separate into two distinct stages or events. Transitions may for example come about through a coup where an incumbent regime defeats the old regime. Moreover, an existing autocratic regime may, under varying degrees of pressure from others, initiate democratic reforms, which would constitute a fall of an autocratic regime and a transition to democracy by our definition of regime change. Our stylized Figure 1 highlights the possibility of alternation between different autocratic regimes, but does not purport to provide a full representation of types of transitions. Clearly, a transition to democracy or a new autocracy can come about in many different ways, which are aggregated in the branches of our figure. However, whereas the specific mechanisms underlying transitions are largely unobservable and may be interpreted differently by observers, we can observe the final outcomes and consider how various factors make each of the outcomes more or less likely.

## **Defining regime change**

We suspect that most people will agree with our claim that Iran during the Shah and the Islamic republic constitute radically different political regimes, and that studies seeking to understand what undermines an autocratic regime must consider both the possibility of new democracies in the wake of dictatorship as well as the prospects for a new dictatorship. However, although a distinction contrasting only democracies and non-democracies clearly is insufficient to capture changes between different autocratic regimes, it is far from obvious how autocratic regimes changes could be conceptualized or measured empirically. We clarify what we mean by a regime and regime change operationally in the following section. We first outline some of the alternatives that have been suggested in previous research and why we find these unsatisfactory. We

then detail a new approach to identifying autocratic regimes based on leader transfers and the manner in which these occur.

There is tendency in political science to treat the concept of regime change in a Justice Potter Stewart fashion, or as something that people recognize upon seeing it and hence does not need an explicit definition.<sup>4</sup> However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the term regime is actually used in a variety of different ways by researchers. We have already mentioned some of the reasons why we find a definition of regime type limited to the democracy and non-democracy distinction unsatisfactory.

Many researchers have recognized the heterogeneity of non-democratic regimes, and suggested ways to find more fine-grained indicators of types of non-democratic regimes. Some researchers have attempted to develop measures based on the structure of government or the dominant institution (whether a party, an individual, or the military), or policy orientation to distinguish between different types of non-democracies (see, for example, Geddes 1999, Peceny, Beer and Sanchez-Terry 2002). Focusing on the dominant institution of a country is in our view not sufficient to identify changes between non-democratic regimes, as one military regime may defeat another and seize power, and a given autocratic regime could transform itself from being dominated by a single leader to reliance on an organized party. Likewise, classifying regime change based on policy orientation overlooks how many leaders have few public policy goals objectives, and primarily seek the inherent private benefits of holding office. Although political out-

<sup>4</sup> Justice Potter Stewart in 1964 tried to define “hard-core” pornography (legally synonymous with obscenity) with the memorable phrase: “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced ...[b]ut I know it when I see it”.

comes or “policies” may not change much when one warlord defeats another, such changes clearly pertain to the stability of an autocratic regime. Likewise, this approach overlooks how policy orientation reflects strategic decisions given both preferences and external constraints. Policies can change dramatically in autocracies even when leaders or what we think of as “regimes” do not change.<sup>5</sup> In Somalia, for example, Siad Barre switched from “scientific socialism” to some type of “IMF’ism” when he found this opportune to maintain power. Many leaders who at some point have favored central planning and extensive government involvement in economic affairs have recently enacted market-oriented reforms.<sup>6</sup> Hence, measures of regimes based on policy orientation do not in our view provide an appropriate way to differentiate between autocratic regimes and identify changes between regimes.

Some researchers have tried to capture differences within autocratic regimes by looking at individual leaders and the likelihood that they will lose power or be replaced by other individuals (see Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, Goemans 2000). However, clearly not all changes in individual leadership constitute what we think of as regime change. In democracies, changes between cabinets would not be considered regime change, as the key political institutions and selection mechanisms for leaders remain the same. Likewise, in autocracies, a leader succession in a he-

<sup>5</sup> Likewise, executive changes within democracies can have dramatic policy consequences without altering the “regime”. Sometimes a cabinet reshuffle may require a major compromise on previous policies, even if many of the same individuals remain in power.

<sup>6</sup> Torolf Elster, an important ideologue in the Norwegian Labor Party, in the early 1950s allegedly defined socialism as “whatever policy the central committee of the Labor party follows at any given time”.

editary system or a situation where an outgoing leader is replaced by handpicked protégé such as Baby Doc Chevalier taking over from Papa Doc in Haiti clearly does not amount to regime change. Irregular changes in the ways leaders are selected that constitute a clear break with previous rules and practices in a system such as coups, however, should clearly be considered regime change.

In this paper, we identify regime change in non-democratic regimes by looking at whether leaders are selected into and leave political office in a manner prescribed by either explicit rules or established conventions. We consider transfers of powers that occur in a prescribed manner as “regular” changes within the same regime. In a democracy, for example, a leader may come to power through direct election or establishing a sufficient coalition of representatives in the legislature. Although leaders may not be elected or selected in particularly competitive processes, many autocracies have similar implicit or explicit rules for transfers of executive power. Leader changes that occur through designation by an outgoing leader, hereditary succession in a monarchy, and appointment by the central committee of a ruling party would all be considered regular transfers of power from one leader to another in an autocratic regime. The identity of the leader of the state may change, but the regime in power or institutions governing the mass public would remain the same by our meaning of the term regime. We distinguish regular transfers of power from irregular leadership transfers. We consider transfers irregular or regime changes if one leader is unseated or forced from power in an irregular fashion and the new leader acquires power in a manner not prescribed by formal rules or conventions, such as a coup d’etat or a popular revolt where a leader flees. We do not consider transfers irregular as long as a previous leader vol-

untarily withdraws, even if the decision is made under some degree of duress, as in the resignation of a leader facing widespread discontent and protest.<sup>7</sup>

We identify irregular leader transfers by a new data set Archigos (Goemans et al. 2004), which contains data on the manner of entry and exit for all heads of states over the period 1875-2002. In some cases, leaders may be forced out of power in an irregular fashion (for example through an assassination), but be succeeded by a new leader in a regular fashion, for example if a Vice President takes over or a temporary head of state is appointed by the original legislature, thereby potentially restoring the old regime. Our operational criteria for regime change are based on what we define as *total* regime change. We consider both exit and entry in a particular transfer of leadership, and code transfers as irregular changes or regime change whenever we find both that a leader is forced from power in an irregular manner *and* that a new leader assumes power in an irregular fashion within the subsequent six months.

Our definition of regime change is based on both irregular transfers within autocracies as well as changes between democratic and non-democratic political institutions. We consider transitions to democracy as having taken place if a state acquires the institutional characteristics that we associate with democracy. Operationally, we classify countries as democracies if they achieve a value of 6 or more on the 21-point Polity scale, ranging from -10 for the least democratic and 10 for the most democratic polities. Although democracy may arise after an autocratic regime has

<sup>7</sup> Although we recognize that it may be difficult to determine whether leaders leave voluntarily or involuntarily, the resulting coding of irregular regime changes generated from our list has high face validity. The supplementary documentation for Archigos provides comments on coding decisions and outlines how potentially controversial cases have been handled.

been defeated, democratic regimes may also come about through opening from above or reforms initiated by the leaders of a non-democratic state. In Paraguay, for example, General Andrés Rodríguez first came to power in a military coup in February 1989, then quickly surprised observers by announcing open elections in May of that same year, which he won with a relatively large margin. The coup by itself would constitute an irregular change within an autocracy or a transition to a new autocratic regime. The opening to competitive elections later that year implies a transition to democracy or democratic regime change under the same leader.

Since most of our data are measured annually, in this study we will look at the likelihood of regime change within a one-year period. We compare the characteristics in place at the end of the year to classify whether a regime change to democracy has taken place. We code states as having an irregular or autocratic regime change if one or more irregular regime changes have taken place between time  $t-1$  and  $t$ . In the present study, we consider only transitions within regimes that are non-democracies at time  $t-1$ . We disregard transitions from democracy to non-democracy as well as the question of what makes democracies more likely to endure.<sup>8</sup> Table 1 illustrates the relationship between irregular transfers and transitions to democracy for annual ob-

<sup>8</sup> By our criteria, regime change in democracies can only be to a non-democratic regime. Since we only have two outcomes (democracies break down or endure), the aggregation problem we have noted for studies of transitions in non-democracies does not arise. As in the case of transitions from autocracy to democracy, the fall of democracy may or may not involve leader change. Democracies may break down under an irregular leader transfer, such as coup or external invasions, or under a democratically elected leader that subsequently limits democratic institutions, as Peruvian President Fujimori's *autogolpe* in 1992.

servations where a country was a non-democracy at  $t-1$ . Table 1 reveals that the annual probability of regime change in an autocracy to a new autocratic regime is more than two times the size of the probability of a transition from an autocratic to a democratic regime. Although there are 11 cases where an irregular transfer to a new autocracy earlier in that year preceded a transition to democracy, most transitions to democratic regime were not preceded by an irregular transfer in an autocracy.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1: Irregular transitions by democratic transitions

Irregular autocratic transfer from t-1 to t	Democratic transition from t-1 to t	
	No	Yes
No	7644	99
Yes	232	11

## Crisis and transitions

We follow Gleditsch and Ward (2004) in thinking about transitions and regime change in terms of a) factors that affect the relative balance of power at the domestic scene and the likelihood that

<sup>9</sup> The 11 transitions to democracy preceded by an irregular autocratic transfer are Haiti (1990 & 1994), the Dominican Republic (1963), Colombia (1957), Venezuela (1958), Spain (1931), Czechoslovakia (1945), Greece (1926), Ghana (1979), South Korea (1960), and Syria (1954). Many of the democratic regimes preceded by an irregular autocratic transfer were relatively short-lived. Looking at irregular autocratic transfers from t-2 to t-1 yields eight additional cases prior to democratic transitions from t-1 to t, still a relatively small share of the total number of transitions to democracy.



an incumbent regime will remain in power, and b) factors that alter preferences or evaluations of democracy, thereby making it more or less likely that democracies will emerge in the wake of the fall of a dictatorship. Whereas Gleditsch and Ward (2004) only were able to observe transitions between non-democracy and non-democracy, our new data on regime change within autocracies allow us to consider separate hypotheses about how conditions shape the likelihood of the fall of an autocratic regime, a transition to democracy, and a transition to a new autocracy. Whereas many studies have assumed that transitions are determined entirely by domestic attributes and process (see, for example, O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead 1986), we will consider the role of both domestic and international factors.

The traditional literature on democratization and transitions has emphasized domestic attributes and processes, in particular economic performance, wealth, and crises (see Gasiorowski 1995, Przeworski and Limongi 1997). We expect that economic factors will strongly influence the likelihood that autocratic regimes will remain in power and the risk of irregular regime change in autocracies. Autocratic regimes with faltering economic performance are more likely to face challengers, as they are less likely to be able to enact compliance from both the population in general and lukewarm supporters who may be willing to defect if other alternative leaders become plausible challengers. We expect this to be reflected in a negative relationship between economic growth rates and regime crises in general. However, we also expect a low growth rate to be less conducive to transitions to democracy, and above all promote the replacement of one autocratic regime with another. Likewise, a low level of income is likely to make for weak and unstable autocracies, and thereby make transitions to new autocracies more likely.

Modernization theory and the literature on the social requisites of democracy suggest that higher income should make it more likely that a democracy surfaces in the wake of autocracies, as the popular preferences and value attached to democracy should be expected to influence the

choice of new institutions during transition processes (see, for example, Boix and Stokes 2003, Lerner 1958, Lipset 1960, Vanhanen 1992). However, everything else being equal, a higher income should also make autocratic regimes less likely to fail. Although a regime may fail for reasons unrelated to economic performance and wealthier states may be more likely to turn democracies in the wake of crises, we are skeptical of whether transitions to democracy will be substantially more likely by virtue of high income and other associated social requisites alone. To summarize, we postulate the following hypotheses:

*H1: Poor economic performance increases the likelihood that an autocratic regime will face challenges and break down*

*H2: Low income increases the likelihood that an autocratic regime will be replaced by a new autocracy*

Economic factors are only one class of domestic characteristics that may influence the prospects for democracy. Many researchers have argued that certain cultural traditions are more or less conducive to democracy. Some have argued that the Catholic Church historically has tended to support existing governments and resisted demands for greater political openness and reform, making Catholic societies less likely to be democratic than protestant countries (see, for example, Bollen and Jackman 1985). More recently, Fish (2002) has argued that Muslim countries are consistently less likely to be democratic, which he attributes to the denial of rights to women. We are somewhat skeptical of arguments that link cultural traits and prospects for democracy and autocracy in a static fashion, since they tend to have a *post hoc* flavor and to be developed around known empirical regularities. Most religious traditions are sufficiently diverse to encompass several interpretations, of which many may be perfectly compatible with democracy.

We will return to this issue in our discussion of international conditions and their impact on transitions. The conventional wisdom suggests the following two hypotheses:

*H3: Transitions to democracy are less likely in Catholic societies*

*H4: Transitions to democracy are less likely in Muslim societies*

Outside economic conditions and cultural traits, historical factors may influence the stability of regimes and the prospects for transition to democracy. In particular, a previous democratic tradition might make it easier to restore democracy or set up new democratic institutions in a country after the fall of a dictatorship. The restoration of democracy in Germany after World War II, for example, was facilitated by the ability to draw upon the population's prior experiences with democratic institutions and respected former politicians such as Konrad Adenauer who were not tainted by associations with the previous autocratic regime. Accordingly, we believe that autocratic regimes should be substantially more likely to be replaced by democracies when a state has previously had a democratic political system.

Regimes may consolidate over time, in the sense that the likelihood that a regime will be replaced declines with the length of time that it has been in power. Gleditsch and Ward (2004) find that whereas democracy appears to be self-sustaining so that transitions to autocracy become less likely the longer a state has been a democracy, "non-democracies" do not appear to consolidate in the sense that the likelihood of transitions to democracy does not decrease the longer a state has been a non-democracy. This, however, may be an artifact of the aggregation of stable autocratic regimes and unstable autocratic regimes. In particular, we expect regime instability to become self-perpetuating, and that irregular autocratic regime changes should be much more

likely in countries that have recently experienced an irregular regime change. To summarize, we hypothesize:

*H5: A prior history of democratic rule increases the chances that an autocratic regime will be replaced by a democracy*

*H6: The risk of an irregular autocratic regime change is higher for countries that have recently experienced irregular regime change, and declines the longer a particular autocratic regime has remained in power*

Although most of the traditional work on democratization and regime change has focused on domestic attributes and processes, researchers have increasingly come to recognize that international factors may influence the prospects for democracy and the stability of autocracies (e.g., Gleditsch 2002a, Huntington 1991, Pevehouse 2002a, 2002b, Whitehead 1996). Gleditsch and Ward (2004) suggest various ways in which international factors can affect both the domestic balance of power and preferences or the relative costs and benefits of democracy. First, the domestic balance of power can be fundamentally influenced by the regimes that hold power in other states a country is connected to. External events and process can shift the distribution of power among social actors, thereby undermining existing regimes or increasing the power of specific groups that influence the nature of subsequent regimes. Notably, outside actors can promote democratization by providing assistance to actors seeking democratic reform or withdrawing their support from an autocratic regime. Gleditsch and Ward (2004) argue that states generally will support opposition movements and government reforms that promise to bring about regimes more similar to their preferences. Since states care more about and have more resources to influ-

ence proximate states, we would expect transitions to be more likely for non-democracies with democratic neighboring states. Likewise, opposition groups in autocracies connected to open, democratic societies are more likely to receive support from transnational actors. External support may have a particularly dramatic impact on struggles for political power when there are shifts in the coalitions that hold power in neighboring entities. As a result, we would expect to see a clustering of transitions and that transition in one state increase the likelihood of subsequent transitions in connected states. Second, actors' perception of democracy may change as a result of international events. Fears of the consequences of unmitigated popular rule have often impeded political liberalization (see Mueller 1999, Pevehouse 2002b). However, leaders or elites that have been skeptical of democratic rule may be more willing to initiate difficult reforms if neighboring states that have experimented with democracy have fared relatively well or they observe that democracy may not be as bad as they had feared. Finally, the likelihood of experiments with democracy depends not only on the perceived benefits from democracy, but also the expected costs of not being a democracy relative to other nations. Whereas the costs of being a non-democracy were relatively low during the Cold War when most countries were not democracies, many long-standing autocratic rulers that had enjoyed international support have found themselves increasingly isolated after their strategic importance declined. Hence, autocratic leaders may seek to initiate democratic reforms in efforts keep on good terms with the rest of the world or not to look bad relative to other states they may be compared to. To summarize, we expect that

*H7: Transitions to democracy are more likely the greater the proportion of neighboring states that are democracies, and regime changes following crises are likely to yield new autocracies when states are located among predominantly autocratic states*

*H8: Transitions are contagious: Transitions to democracy in neighboring states increase the chances that a country will see a transition to democracy*

Conflict and peace may also influence the stability of autocracies and the prospects for transitions to democracy. First, civil wars may undermine the power of existing governments and increase the likelihood that they succumb to challenges. We therefore expect autocratic regimes to be much less stable and more likely to collapse if they experience civil wars on their territory. However, war provides an inhospitable soil for democratic institutions, and we expect cases where an autocratic regime falls under a civil war to be particularly likely to give rise to new autocracies. Second, many researchers have argued that regional peace historically helped facilitate the growth of democracy in Europe. Wars have tended to lead to centralization of power, and limit the opportunities for contracting between rulers and the ruled that eventually give rise to institutions of representation (see Barzel and Kiser 1997, Gleditsch 2002a, Thompson 1996). Finally, poor performance in international affairs such as losses in wars can undermine support for governments and their ability to remain in power (Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995, Goe-mans 2000). The disastrous performance in the Falklands war is often seen as a triggering event for the fall of the military dictatorship in Argentina. We believe that losses in war may discredit an autocratic regime. Such cases may lead to both new autocracies and democracies, with the latter more plausible when conditions for transitions to democracy are otherwise favorable. To summarize, we consider the following hypotheses on conflict involvement:

*H9: Civil wars are likely to undermine the stability of an autocratic regime, but more likely to yield autocratic regime changes*

*H10: More stable regional peace increases the prospects for transitions to democracy*

*H11: A recent loss in war increases the prospects for regime change, and can promote both transitions to new autocracies and transitions to democracy depending on other circumstances*

Influences from international non-governmental organizations or global society on domestic processes provide another form of international factors that may increase the likelihood of democratization. For example, international events and processes may modify the implications of cultural factors. Although many hypotheses linking cultural traits to democracy assume stable functional relationships, cultural traits may predispose societies to particular types of regimes in different ways over times. Whereas Catholic countries seemed less likely to be democratic in the 1950s and the 1960s, states with large Catholic populations do not seem to be notably less democratic in the contemporary world. One possible interpretation is the absence of stable structural relationships is that culture essentially is irrelevant for democracy. Another interesting possibility, however, is that the changing relationship may reflect shifts in the position of the Catholic Church on democracy. Whereas Pope Pius IX in the 19<sup>th</sup> century denounced democracy, following the II Vatican Council (1962-65) the Catholic Church has come to emphasize the value of democracy and human rights. The changes in doctrine have led the Catholic Church to play an active role in supporting organizations that seek to promote democracy. As a result of the changing position of the Church hierarchy, we hypothesize that Catholicism will have different effects before and after the II Vatican council.

*H12: Catholic societies will be more likely to have transitions to democracies after the II Vatican Council and more likely to have transitions to new autocracies prior to the II Vatican Council*

## **Research design and data**

Our data for estimating the likelihood of transitions to new autocracies and democracies are based on annual observations where a country was a non-democracy at time  $t-1$  for 1875 to 2002. An autocratic regime at  $t-1$  may take on one of three possible values at the subsequent time  $t$ .<sup>10</sup> A regime may be replaced in an irregular fashion by another autocratic regime, in which case our dependent variable is scored -1. An autocratic regime may be replaced by a democratic regime, in which case our dependent variable is scored 1.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the same autocratic regime may remain

<sup>10</sup> It could be argued that the structure of Figure 1 suggests that we should estimate a two-stage model, with the fall of an autocratic regime as the outcome in the first stage and the type of regime (whether autocratic or democratic) as the outcome in the second stage. We are hesitant to impose this structure since transitions can occur in so many different ways that the “fall of an autocracy” becomes a rather heterogeneous event and it is difficult to distinguish between whether something drives the emergence of a new regime rather than the demise the old regime from observed data. However, we have also estimated a sequential logit, and our main results are not sensitive to the choice of estimation technique.

<sup>11</sup> A transition to democracy in place at the end of the year takes precedence over a prior irregular transition to a new autocratic regime in the coding of our dependent variable.



in power at  $t$ , in which case our dependent variable is scored 0. Table 1 shows the distribution of our dependent variable, and reflects the unconditional transition probabilities for the different types of regime changes in autocracies. As can be seen, the unconditional probabilities of a transition in any one year are low, only 0.013 for a transition to a democracy and 0.029 for a transition to an autocratic regime.

Since our dependent variable has three discrete categories without an inherent ordering we use multinomial logit to estimate conditional transition probabilities given covariates. Multinomial logistic derives probabilities for each alternative  $j$  among  $J$  unordered alternatives by looking at  $J-1$  equations for the odds of each particular alternative relative to a baseline. We examine the transition probabilities for autocratic and democratic regime change relative to no change.

We use two indicators of economic conditions. First, we create a series of GDP per capita figures based on data from Gleditsch (2002b), Maddison (1995), and the energy consumption per capita data from the Correlates of War National Material Capabilities data. More specifically, we use purchasing power parity GDP per capita data in 1996 US dollars from Gleditsch (2002b) as our base, but supplement these with data predicted from Maddison's data whenever available, and predictions based on energy consumption per capita as a third alternative.<sup>12</sup> This yields a reasonably comprehensive data set covering 1875 to 2002. We measure economic growth rates by the annual change in the series for each country. Although we would have liked to consider other measures of variables pertaining to crises, the plausible indicators are available only after 1960.

<sup>12</sup> The predicted values are linear predictions of one source based on the other, using logged levels and a time trend.

Previous studies have found little evidence of these crises measures having an impact on regime change using the post 1960 data.<sup>13</sup>

The percentage Catholic and Muslim are taken from the *CIA World Factbook*, and correspond to approximately 1980 population figures. For historical polities and countries that experience border changes we tried to obtain historical estimates.<sup>14</sup> We interact the percentage Catholic population variable with a dummy variable for post II Vatican Council to test for the argument that changes in Church doctrine altered the effect of Catholicism.

A prior history of democracy is a binary indicator that takes a 1 if a country has ever had a polity score above 6. Time dependence is addressed by two measures. We consider the number of years that a country has remained an non-democracy, and the number of years that a particular autocratic regime has been in power, measured by the number of years since last irregular regime change.

Our main indicator of international context is the proportion of neighboring states that are considered democracies in the Polity data. We identify states as neighbors of state  $i$  if they are within a 500 km distance band around  $i$ 's outer boundaries, as measured by the Gleditsch and

<sup>13</sup> For example, Gasiorowski (1995) finds no evidence of inflation having an impact on transitions, and Gleditsch and Ward (2004) find no effect of adverse changes to a country's terms of trade.

<sup>14</sup> We assume that these shares remain fixed over time. This is of course unlikely to be fully accurate, but since we would not expect to see dramatic changes over time we believe it is probably approximately valid.

Ward (2001) minimum distance data. We also consider an indicator of whether neighboring countries experience transitions to democracy or irregular transitions in any given year.

We include three indicators pertaining to war and conflict. The first variable, war on territory, is a binary indicator whether a country experiences a war with more than 1000 casualties on its territory. Our data are based on the expanded list of war within and between states in Gleditsch (2004). We do not consider it plausible that participation in distant wars far from a state's core territory should affect regime stability, and include only wars waged on or close to a state's territory. To account for the possible role of losses in war, we include an indicator for whether a state has suffered a war loss in the last two years. Colonial wars and extra-regional conflict can also indicate policy failures, and the war loss variable is not limited to conflict on a state's territory. Finally, we measure the stability of peace by the time since independence or last outbreak of war on a state's territory.

## Results

The empirical results from estimating the model are shown in Table 2. Each of the separate logit coefficients indicates how the likelihood of a particular alternative changes with right hand side variables relative to the baseline category, i.e., a case where a non-democratic regime stays in place from  $t-1$  to  $t$ . A significant coefficient for an individual covariate indicates that a variable significantly influences the log odds of that particular outcome over the baseline category.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Multinomial logit relies on the Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives (IIA) assumption, i.e. the ratio of the probabilities for two choices being independent of the choice set of other alterna-

Looking at the coefficients for the two logit equations in Table 2 reveals that many features influence the likelihood of transitions over the same autocratic regime remaining in place. Before proceeding to comment on the implications for our hypotheses we first consider an initial joint test of whether the covariates have a consistent effect on transitions to autocracy or the same autocratic regime remaining in power. This provides an evaluation of whether lumping all observations where regimes remain non-democracies together mask differing effects on regime stability and autocratic transitions. We find that a likelihood ratio for a joint test of all the coefficients in the transitions to autocracy equation (i.e.,  $\beta_{1, \text{Ta}| \sim T} = \dots = \beta_{k, \text{Ta}| \sim T} = 0$ ) yields a LR- $\chi^2 = 138.38$  (df = 15), which is well above the threshold for statistical significance. This provides strong evidence that the covariates have very different effects on the two outcomes, and that aggregating all non-democracies leads to somewhat meaningless averages. The compound non-democracy category used in previous studies clearly includes very different outcomes, and the conditions associated with stable autocratic regimes seem quite different from those associated with autocratic regime changes.

tives. We used the Hausman-McFadden (1984) test to evaluate whether the IIA assumption appeared to be violated, but found no evidence that this posed a problem for our analysis.

Table 2: Multinomial logit estimates of transitions and regime change

	<b>Transitions to new autocracies</b>		<b>Transitions to democracy</b>	
Ln(GDP per capita)	-0.295 (0.137)	-2.16	0.163 (0.199)	0.82
Economic growth (%)	-0.014 (0.007)	-1.95	-0.001 (0.009)	-0.10
Previous democracy	0.406 (0.243)	1.67	1.505 (0.324)	4.64
Share of democratic neighbors	-1.606 (0.506)	-3.17	2.521 (0.470)	5.37
Time as non-democracy	0.008 (0.003)	2.77	0.007 (0.005)	1.45
Time at regime	-0.028 (0.005)	-5.48	-0.007 (0.005)	-1.28
Catholic population (%)	0.010 (0.003)	3.51	-0.007 (0.005)	-1.53
Muslim population (%)	0.005 (0.003)	1.87	0.002 (0.004)	0.37
Catholic population (%) X post Vatican II	-0.000 (0.004)	-0.06	0.012 (0.006)	2.05
Post Vatican II	-0.081 (0.246)	-0.33	-0.622 (0.358)	-1.74
War on territory	0.707 (0.258)	2.74	0.366 (0.466)	0.78
Recent loss in war	1.706 (0.296)	5.76	1.064 (0.556)	1.91
Time at peace	0.007 (0.004)	1.87	0.012 (0.005)	2.67
Neighboring transition to democracy	0.067 (0.343)	0.20	1.781 (0.262)	6.81
Neighboring irregular transition	-0.201 (0.204)	-0.99	0.487 (0.289)	1.68
Intercept	-1.614 (0.979)	-1.65	-7.133 (1.495)	-4.77

N=6,409      LR-Chi2(30) = 310.87

Note: Entries in left columns are coefficient estimates, with standard errors in parentheses, and entries in right columns are z-scores.

However, some factors predicting to changes to new autocracies, such as losses in war, also seem associated with a higher likelihood of transitions to democracy. A second important test is whether the transition probabilities simply reflect factors that make autocracies less likely to endure and that the covariates do not discriminate between transitions to democracy or transitions to autocracy. This would imply that the coefficient estimates for the logit equation for transitions to autocracy over no change should be indistinguishable from the coefficient estimates in the equation for transitions to democracy over no change, i.e.,  $(\beta_{1, \text{Ta}| \sim T} - \beta_{1, \text{Td}| \sim T}) = \dots = (\beta_{k, \text{Ta}| \sim T} - \beta_{k, \text{Td}| \sim T}) = 0$ . The test of these restrictions similarly yield a high LR-  $\chi^2 = 135.93$  (df = 15). This provides strong evidence against the null hypotheses that the coefficients are equal. Although some features increase the prospects for both types of transitions, the covariates examined on the risk of transitions have very different estimated effects on the likelihood of transitions to new autocracies and transitions to democracies.

In general, the estimated individual coefficients are largely consistent with our hypotheses. First, consistent with H1 and H2, we find that low income and poor economic performance influence the chances that autocracies will fail, but do not increase the prospects for transitions to democracy. Consistent with H5, we find that a prior experience with democracy notably increases the odds of transition to democracy over the odds of transitions to autocracy. Furthermore, we find strong evidence of consolidation among stable autocratic regimes, as suggested by H6. The time that a particular regime has been in power or time since last irregular regime change is strongly negatively associated with the risk of autocratic regime change. Clearly, there is a sub-

stantial difference between stable and unstable autocracies.<sup>16</sup> The coefficient estimate for transition to democracy is also negative, but not statistically significant. Although it is possible that there may be a coup trap where democracy eventually becomes less likely through the effects of unstable autocratic regimes on other features, autocratic instability in and of itself does not have a strong negative impact on the odds of transitions to democracy.

The net impact of the Catholic population share depends on a large number of parameters, and the results are somewhat ambiguous with respect to H3 and H12. We find evidence of Catholicism being associated with a higher rate of autocratic regime changes, and the absolute probability of transitions to autocratic regimes remains higher than the probability of a transition to democracy also after the II Vatican Council. However, the ratio of the two predicted probabilities at the median decline by about half in the period after the II Vatican Council, indicating that transitions to democracy indeed do appear to become relatively more common when autocratic regimes break down in Catholic societies after changes in the Church's doctrine. For H4, we find that a larger share of Muslims appears to increase the risk of autocratic regime changes (although the coefficient estimate is small and of borderline significance), but do not exert any systematic influence on the risk of transitions to democracy.

<sup>16</sup> Table 2 suggests that time as non-democracy significantly increases the risk of irregular autocratic regime change. As such, irregular regime changes seem more common in countries lacking experience with democracy, after controlling for the stabilizing impact of regime duration. Taking out time at a particular autocratic regime, however, we again find that time as non-democracy by itself does not influence the risk of irregular transitions.

We find strong evidence suggesting that international factors influence the prospects for transitions to democracies. Consistent with H7, states located in relatively democratic neighborhoods are much more likely to become democracies than autocracies when an autocratic regime falls. Moreover, we find support for H8 in that democratic transitions appear to cluster regionally, and the estimated odds of a transition increase notably when neighboring states undergo a transition to democracy. However, irregular regime changes do not appear to be contagious or cluster spatially.

We also find support for our hypotheses on the relationship between conflict and transitions (H9, H10, and H11). Wars have a significant positive influence on the odds of an autocratic regime change, but do not make transitions to democracy more likely and above promote crises that yield transitions to new autocracies. More stable regional peace appears to be associated with a greater likelihood of transitions to democracy. Losses in war can undermine autocratic regimes and promote both transitions to democracy as well as autocratic regime changes.

Since the coefficients in the multinomial logit model refer to the effect on the log odds of events relative to the baseline (here, no change) rather than  $1 - \Pr(event)$  as in a binary logit, looking at the coefficients alone can be somewhat misleading for inferences about effects of covariates on the overall likelihood of outcomes. Since changes in right hand side variable affect not only the likelihood of a given outcome  $j$  over the baseline category but the likelihood of all other outcomes as well, there is no necessary relationship between the size or even the sign of an estimated coefficient and a variable's substantive impact on changes in total likelihood of an outcome (see Greene 1997: 916). To supplement the table of the estimated coefficients, we illustrate the substantive implications of individual covariates by plotting the marginal effects on changes in predicted probabilities of particular types of regime changes, holding other independent vari-



ables at their median values. Figure 2 illustrates how the predicted probabilities for different types of transitions change under different scenarios and values on the right-hand side variables.

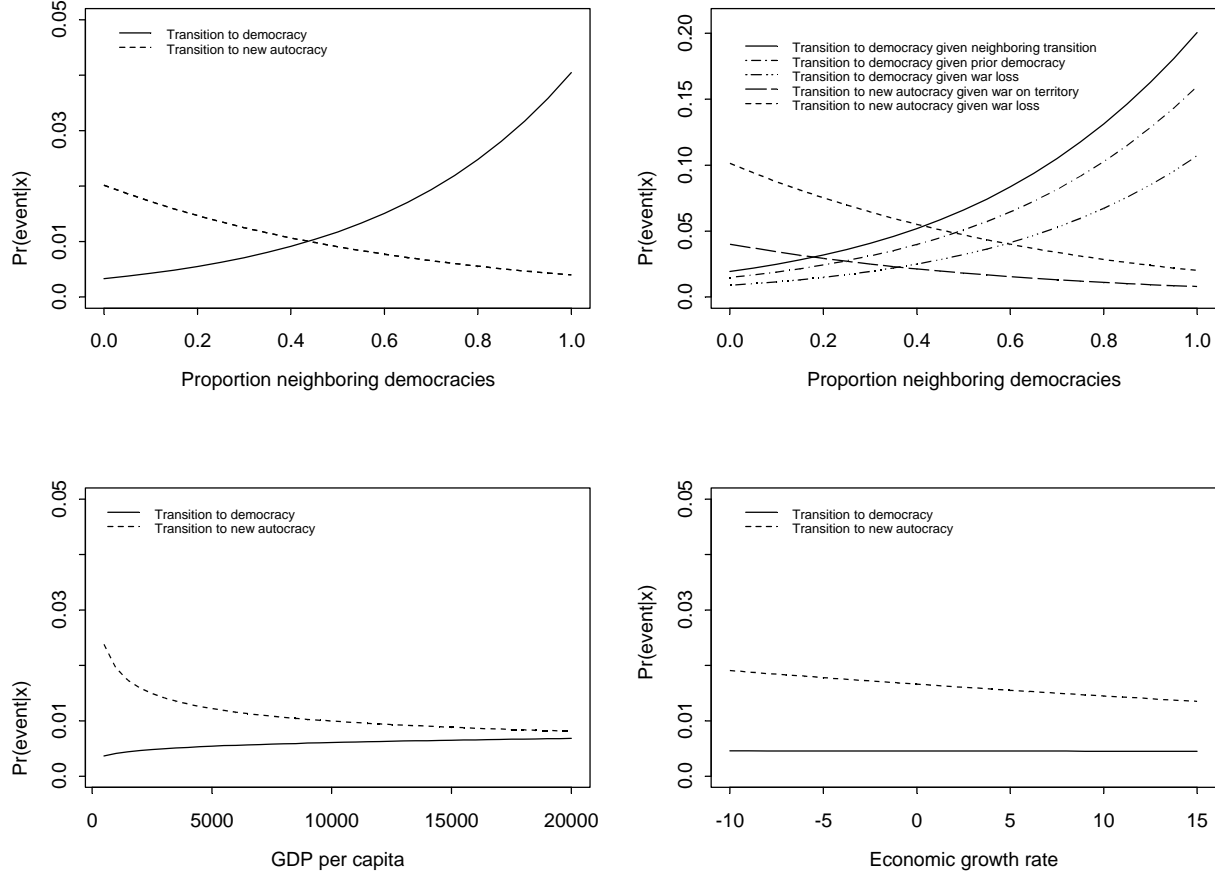


Figure 1: Marginal predicted effects of covariates on transition probabilities

The traditional literature on democratization has argued that economic development should make democratization more likely. As can be seen from the plot in the lower left quadrant of Figure 2, regime change with transitions to new autocracies (indicated by the dashed line) are particularly likely when countries have low income or GDP per capita. However, although transitions to democracy (shown by the solid line) become more likely the higher a country’s GDP per capita, there is very little curvature in the transition probabilities over the level of GDP per capita.

Summing the two lines for the two transition probabilities indicates the probabilities of any transition or the likelihood of a breakdown of an autocratic regime. Since the increase in the probability of transitions to democracy with higher income does not offset the fall in the probability of transitions to a new autocracy, it is evident that autocratic regimes become much less likely to fall the higher their GDP per capita. The lower right quadrant in Figure 2 illustrates the limited impact of economic growth on regime survival and transition probabilities. Although low growth rates make transitions to new autocracies somewhat more likely (shown by the dashed line), the flat shape of the solid line demonstrates that the growth rate exerts essentially no systematic influence on the likelihood of transitions to democracy. We see these results as corroborating our claim that economic factors influence the stability of autocracies and the likelihood of crises in general, but do not make transitions to democracy more likely. Poor economic performance and low income are particularly likely to lead to new autocracies, but higher income tends to lead to more stable autocratic regimes.

Although economic factors by themselves have somewhat limited effects as measured by the absolute size of the transition probabilities, the marginal estimated effect of international factors in our model are more substantial. The upper left quadrant of Figure 2 shows how the probabilities of transitions to new autocracy or democracy vary as a function of the proportion of neighboring states that have democratic institutions. Whereas the chances of a transition for a country with characteristics corresponding to the median values of the covariates is less than 0.0033 in a highly autocratic neighborhood, far below the probability of a transition to a new autocracy (about 0.02), the likelihood of a transition from autocracy to democracy becomes substantially larger once a majority of the neighboring countries are democracies, even if all other features in the model remain fixed at their median values. When all neighbors are democracies, the likelihood of transitions to democracy reaches about 0.04.

However, in practice all else may not be equal or remain fixed at the median values. The right quadrant of Figure 2 shows how the estimated probabilities over differences in neighboring context change depending on other events or background condition. If a country has previously experienced democratic rule we see much higher probabilities of a transition to a democracy following autocratic rule. Moreover, our estimated results suggest that external events and regional shocks can have a large impact on the prospects for regime change. Comparing the line for the likelihood of autocratic regime change among states that experience conflict on their territory (large dashed line) in the upper right quadrant of Figure 2 with the corresponding line in the upper left quadrant reveals that wars make autocratic regime changes about twice as likely. Even more markedly, the solid line in the upper right quadrant of Figure 2 illustrates how our estimated model indicates much larger predicted probabilities of a transition to democracy in the presence of a transition to democracy in a neighboring country. This corroborates our claim that regime transitions in non-democracies are not merely a function of the stability of autocratic regimes, where the institutional type of the subsequent regime is entirely random. We are much more likely to democracies emerging after the fall of a dictatorship in countries with some prior experience with democracy, and there is a tendency for transitions to democracy to cluster regionally.

Even when a particular condition can make autocratic regimes more likely fall to in general without having a systematic effect on the likelihood of transitions to democracy or autocracy, as appears to be the case for recent losses in war, the relatively most likely type of transition in the aftermath of a dictatorship will still differ notably depending on the other characteristic of a country. This is clearly illustrated by comparing the lines in the upper right quadrant of Figure 2 for the impact of loss in war on the likelihood of an autocratic regime change (line with short dashes) and the likelihood of transitions to democracy (dashed line with three periods) over differences in the proportion of neighboring states that are democracies. In this case, keeping other

covariates fixed at their median values, we can see that transitions to democracy become more likely than transitions to autocracy when more than 60% of the neighboring states are democratic, keeping all other right hand side variables at their median values.

## **Discussion**

In this paper we have examined how a series of factors affect the chances that autocratic regimes will break down and be replaced by either new autocratic regimes or democratic regimes. We argue that lumping together states without democratic institutions as “non-democracies” leaves a very heterogeneous set of countries, combining stable autocratic regimes and alternating autocratic regimes. We find that the factors influencing the probability that the same autocratic regime will survive are clearly not unrelated to the risk of irregular regime changes in autocracies. As such, an average over how factors affect these two tendencies will be highly misleading. We also find strong evidence that although some factors may be more likely to make autocratic regimes break down in general and make both transitions to autocracy and democracy more likely, many factors influence the two types of transitions in quite different ways and some types of transitions are clearly more likely under different circumstances. Transitions to democracy are definitely not random and simply due to factors making autocratic regimes less stable. Whereas domestic economic factors have a strong influence on the stability of autocratic regimes, international factors and prior experiences with democracy are strongly associated with the likelihood of transitions to democracy in the wake of the fall of a dictatorship.

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