Elections in Hybrid Regimes: Conceptual Stretching Revived

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This article challenges the use of diminished subtypes as a strategy for avoiding conceptual stretching in the conceptual construction of hybrid regimes. The popular adoption of this strategy is based on its perceived ability to increase analytical differentiation and, more relevantly, avoid conceptual stretching by making a more modest claim about the extent of authoritarianism and democracy. Using this strategy, regimes are classified according to any additional or missing properties they contain *vis-à-vis* these two root concepts. This is demonstrated by an influential body of scholarship using elections as the defining property (e.g., 'competitive authoritarianism' and 'pseudodemocracy'). The problem, however, is that the creation of these subtypes is premised on a 'true' democratic definition of elections: a method for selecting and empowering political representatives through a competition for people's votes (albeit without freedom and fairness). This article argues that in attempting to avoid stretching the meaning of authoritarianism and democracy, scholars have inadvertently displaced concept stretching by assuming that the meaning of democratic elections is applicable to hybrid regimes. Instead, it is proposed that elections in hybrid regimes can have at least three alternatives roles: legitimation, patronage and elite management. This article concludes by discussing the implications of this finding for the field of comparative studies and proposes three solutions to help guard against conceptual stretching in the future.

Keywords: authoritarianism; conceptual stretching; democracy; elections; hybrid regimes

The existence of political regimes that seemingly combine features of both democracy and authoritarianism has led to the use of 'hybrid regimes' as a method of conceptual classification. This approach aims to account for the diversity of regime types in existence while simultaneously avoiding conceptual stretching by making more modest claims about the prevalence of authoritarianism or democracy. The result has been a myriad of labels, including 'non-tyrannical autocracy' (Boix and Svolik, 2007), 'hegemonic authoritarianism' (Howard and Roessler, 2006), 'illiberal democracies' (Zakaria, 1997) and 'defective democracies' (Merkel, 2004), to name but a few. One issue often overlooked, however, is the subsequent meaning of political institutions within the regimes that now fall in this 'grey zone' between authoritarianism and democracy. Should courts, parliaments and political parties found in these regimes be understood as convenient window dressing for ongoing authoritarianism or as institutions capable of improving contestation and participation as would be their role in clear-cut democracies?

The extent of the problem is demonstrated by a small but influential body of scholarship which has thus far focused on the classification of regimes combining either authoritarianism or democracy and poor-quality elections (e.g., 'competitive authoritarianism' and 'controlled democracy'). Hybrid regimes of this kind are classified as such on the understanding that these elections are merely a substandard representation of an institution best practised by 'true' democracies. In other words, elections are defined in the traditional, minimal sense as a method for selecting and empowering political representatives through

a competition for people's votes, albeit without appropriate levels of freedom and fairness (Dahl, 1971; Huntington, 1991; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Schumpeter, 1947).[1] This is revealed by the very uniform criticism that elections in non-democratic regimes 'have no democratic significance and, above all, are not the expression of rights, freedom, and the genuine competition to be found in democratic regimes' (Morlino, 2009, p. 280; see also Armory and Schamis, 2005; Gilbert and Mohseni, 2011; Wigell, 2008). The problem, however, is that this implicitly assumes they are supposed to be such. This article addresses the consequence of this assumption and the conceptual construction of hybrid regimes based upon it.

In what follows, it is argued that the main consequence is conceptual stretching. This is an error that occurs when prior assumptions about the meaning of some components of a concept do not correspond to new contexts (Seawright and Collier, 2004). To date, scholars have attempted to avoid conceptual stretching by creating diminished subtypes, whereby regimes are classified according to any additional or missing properties they contain relative to authoritarianism or democracy. Overall, this strategy has been successful in demonstrating how some regimes are less than full instances of authoritarianism or democracy (when used as root concepts). However, the utilisation of elections as a defining property of hybrid regimes has subsequently allowed an incompatible understanding of their meaning to permeate the make-up of those same subtypes. In other words, the role of elections in 'true' democracies has been assumed to be the same for hybrid regimes. This is at odds with an entire body of research which finds that elections are not exclusively a method for selecting and empowering political representatives through a competition for people's votes. Instead, and depending on the regime in question, they can be used for legitimation, patronage and elite management.[2] These alternative roles – which are not mutually exclusive – typically come into effect depending on how power is distributed within a particular regime (Bueno de Mesquita *et al.*, 2003). Legitimation is important when the authority of a leader or party is thought to be dependent upon their 'popular' appeal among citizens. More obviously, patronage is prominent when the maintenance of power is based on the support of key groups within society, who are rewarded with goods and services in exchange for their votes. Finally, elite management occurs when power is based on the essential support of a small group of elites, making elections an effective tool that can be wielded to maintain regime cohesion. In sum, it is argued that conceptual stretching has been avoided in relation to authoritarianism and democracy only to be committed *vis-à-vis* elections.

A few observable implications flow from this argument. The first and most obvious is that it challenges the widespread use of creating diminished subtypes as an ideal strategy for both increasing analytical differentiation and avoiding conceptual stretching (Collier and Levitsky, 2009). While it is certainly possible to achieve analytical differentiation, conceptual stretching simply occurs at another stage of the conceptualisation process. Further afield, the findings here call into question the willingness of hybrid regime analysts, as well as many other comparative scholars, to overlook the risk of postulating false inferences when making cross-case generalisations. In this instance the pursuit of wider typological applicability has occurred without a parallel effort by scholars to acquire sufficient knowledge of their cases. Even though there is a wide body of research demonstrating how elections have different meanings under different regimes, this research – as will be shown – has not been reconciled

with the conceptual forms used to classify those same regimes. The larger contribution of this article, then, is that it goes beyond David Collier and Steven Levitsky's (1997) original advice that scholars need to be careful in their definition and use of concepts. In actual fact, it suggests that the operationalisation of imprecise concepts has undermined the most substantive arguments presented by researchers about these regimes. While scholars have generally been disciplined in their use of the comparative method, the line of least resistance has remained alluring.

This article begins by briefly analysing Giovanni Sartori's ladder of abstraction in order to demonstrate how conceptual stretching can occur in the process of comparative analysis. Due to the widely recognised limitations of the ladder, the second section considers the alternative strategy said to help avoid conceptual stretching: creating diminished subtypes. The aim is to show that, despite claims by hybrid regime analysts to the contrary, conceptual stretching is still possible under this strategy. The third section adds empirical weight to this argument by introducing and reviewing actual subtypes which stretch the meaning of elections in 'true' democracies to the roles they fulfil in hybrid regimes. This will lay the foundation for the next section, which posits that elections in hybrid regimes can instead be held for legitimation, patronage and elite management. As was earlier implied, the existence of these alternative roles contradicts the view that elections are solely a method for selecting and empowering political representatives, albeit in a system lacking the freedom and fairness inherent in liberal democracies. The article concludes by considering the implications of this finding for the wider effort within comparative studies to generalise across cases and classify different regimes. To help guard against conceptual stretching in the future, the conclusion also proposes that hybrid regime analysts should reconsider the meaning of elections; further qualify the definition of authoritarianism and democracy; and put a greater emphasis on context. The hope is that scholars can continue to account for the diversity of regime types while also recognising that the meaning of elections is not predetermined.

Situating the Error: Conceptual Stretching

In his seminal article, 'Conceptual Misinformation in Comparative Politics', Sartori (1970) lamented the lack of methodological awareness within the field. His primary criticism was that in attempting to achieve analytical differentiation and avoid conceptual stretching, scholars had obfuscated the meaning of various concepts until they produced imprecise, shapeless conceptualisations. The remedy he suggested was to use a ladder of abstraction in order to navigate better the inverse variation between the inclusiveness of cases and the specificity of concepts. Within this ladder he posited three alternative levels of abstraction – high, medium and low. According to this line of reasoning, each level provided the user with a different mix of extension (the class of cases to which the concept applies) and intension (the collection of properties that determine the cases to which the concept applies). So concepts with fewer properties commonly apply to more cases and are therefore higher on the ladder, while concepts with more defining properties apply to fewer cases and hence are lower on the ladder. A well-known drawback, however, is that one cannot simultaneously ascend and descend the ladder. By moving up the ladder the number of defining properties is reduced, leaving behind a broader concept that is less susceptible to

conceptual stretching. Alternatively, moving down the ladder increases the number of properties, thereby allowing for greater analytical differentiation. In light of their need to account for the maximum range of regimes in existence, the limitations of the ladder led to the adoption of another strategy by hybrid regime analysts.

The alternative strategy that is the focus of our attention here is to create diminished subtypes of authoritarianism and democracy. This involves identifying specific defining properties that are missing, thereby establishing the concept's diminished character, while also identifying other properties that are present (Collier and Levitsky, 1997). A key difference between the two strategies is that the ladder of abstraction draws upon a taxonomic hierarchy of categorisation whereas diminished subtypes employ radial categories. The first system assumes there are always clear boundaries and defining properties that distinguish specific, subordinate categories from general, superordinate ones. The risk accompanying its use is that important cases may be eliminated because not all of the defining properties are held by all the cases under consideration. By contrast, the radial system incorporates a prototypical central subcategory and multiple non-central subcategories. This means that each subcategory does not necessarily have to share defining properties with the others but only with the central subcategory. The major difference between the two systems, then, is that the differentiating properties of the subordinate categories occur *in addition* to those of the superordinate category while the differentiating properties of the non-central subcategories are *contained within* the central subcategory (Collier and Mahon, 1993, p. 849). Under the radial system, for example, a 'mother' is a central subcategory while 'genetic mother', 'birth mother', 'nurturing mother' and 'step-mother' are non-central subcategories (Gerring, 1999; Lakoff, 1987, p. 4, pp. 74–6). Despite obvious differences, the defining property they all share with the central subcategory is their being female. But they can still be labelled diminished because they are less than full instances of the concept being employed.

By adopting this strategy, it is claimed that scholars have been able to maximise analytical differentiation and minimise conceptual stretching when accounting for hybrid regimes (Collier and Levitsky, 1997, pp. 437–42). In what follows, this claim is challenged, first, by describing how conceptual stretching has nevertheless occurred and, second, by reviewing the actual subtypes in which it persists. Later, an alternative understanding of elections will be put forth demonstrating how elections need to be conceptualised not only as a defining property of democracy but as an institution in their own right, one that is therefore equally at home in authoritarian regimes. Indeed, in authoritarian regimes we will see that elections can be used in a variety of ways, including, I argue, as an instrument of legitimation, patrimonialism and/or elite management.

Conceptual 'Stretching' Revived

Where elections are the defining property, there are two different approaches to creating diminished subtypes. If authoritarianism is the root concept, then elections are said to exist within a regime predominately characterised by a 'political system with limited, not responsible, political pluralism ... without extensive or intensive political mobilization ... and in which a leader (or occasionally a small group) exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones' (Linz, 2000, p. 159). In such cases, elections are

subject to such widespread fraud and coercion that they cannot possibly be considered free and fair. Alternatively, if democracy is the root concept, elections are to some small degree flawed despite the fact that the regime fulfils other procedural minimum standards of democracy. Overall, then, the different subtypes produced using these two strategies can all be distinguished by the quality of elections.

On the contrary, it is argued here that conceptual stretching has nevertheless occurred because the difference between elections in liberal democracies and all other regimes has hitherto been conceptualised as one of quality only, rather than quality *and meaning*. As a consequence, prior assumptions about the meaning of elections – that they are only a method for selecting and empowering political representatives through a competition for people's votes – have been applied to contrary circumstances. To be sure, this error is more acute depending on the root concept used. Under authoritarianism, the role elections perform has been overlooked by hybrid regime analysts even as other substantive institutions, such as legislatures, political parties and courts, have come into focus (Gandhi, 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010). Less problematically, the role of elections under democracy (the root concept) is more in keeping with their traditional, normative meaning. However, the possibility that they perform additional roles has not been adequately reflected in the make-up of diminished subtypes. In order to demonstrate the real extent of conceptual stretching, the following section reviews the subtypes in which it persists. It begins with those employing authoritarianism as the root concept before moving on to the subtypes established under democracy.

Elections in Hybrid Regimes

One of the most established subtypes of the first kind is 'electoral authoritarianism'. In such regimes, incumbents 'play the game of multiparty elections by holding regular elections for the chief executive and a national assembly. Yet they violate the liberal-democratic principles of freedom and fairness so profoundly and systematically as to render elections instruments of authoritarian rule rather than instruments of democracy' (Schedler, 2006, p. 3; see also Diamond, 2002, p. 23). This definition makes two assumptions: first, that elections are intended to be, or should be, instruments of democracy wherein citizens vote on who should represent them in both the executive and legislature. Second, the fraud employed by the regime serves the single purpose of establishing elections as an instrument that can be periodically wielded to produce a predictable and favourable political outcome. Both assumptions lead to the foreseeable conclusion that elections in such regimes do not qualify as democratic. On the one hand, Andreas Schedler has rightfully abandoned the assumption that such regimes somehow still keep in touch with the liberal democratic tradition by situating his subtype under the root concept of authoritarianism. On the other hand, conceptual stretching has still occurred because the meaning of elections, the incongruous defining property identified, has not received similar treatment. As was stated, the difference between authoritarian and democratic elections has been interpreted as one of quality only, rather than quality and meaning.

In creating their subtype, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way adopt a similar approach to Schedler. They begin by justifiably critiquing the teleological bias within the democratisation literature which assumes that hybrid regimes are (or should be) moving towards

democracy. This is demonstrated by a description of Russia as undergoing a 'protracted' democratic transition; Cambodia as a 'nascent democracy'; Congo-Brazzaville and the Central African Republic as 'would be democratizers'; and Albania as a regime in 'permanent transition'. Instead, Levitsky and Way argue that these regimes should be categorised as distinct, non-democratic regime types that are not in transition. Towards that end they maintain that 'competitive authoritarianism' is a more empirically valid concept (Levitsky and Way, 2010, p. 4). These are civilian regimes in which:

> Formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents. Such regimes are competitive, in that opposition parties use democratic institutions to contest seriously for power, but they are not democratic because the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents. Competition is thus real but unfair (Levitsky and Way, 2010, p. 5; see also Howard and Roessler, 2006; Van De Walle, 2002).

As before, the composite features of this definition demand closer scrutiny. The first problem is that elections are recognised as a formal democratic institution, thus arguably conflating the freedom and fairness inherent in democratic elections, both of which improve contestation and participation, with elections everywhere. The second problem is a companion of the first. This is the assumption that elections are exclusively a method for selecting and empowering political representatives through a competition for people's votes. As will be revealed shortly, the fault with this view is that it precludes any non-democratic meaning for elections in what are non-democratic regimes. Overall, Levitsky and Way successfully distinguish competitive authoritarianism from the democratisation bias they identify. However, they simultaneously apply their own democratic bias to the role of elections. In competitive or any other authoritarian regimes, elections are only a means of gaining power for the opposition – albeit an unlikely one. Assured of the political outcome, the incumbent uses elections to fulfil other roles. So to revise their conclusion, competition is thus real but ancillary.

In *Democracy Challenged*, Marina Ottaway (2003) argues that 'semi-authoritarianism' is the most appropriate label for regimes that cannot be classified as either authoritarian or democratic. This is because semi-authoritarian regimes have at least four unique characteristics: the way power is generated and transferred; a low degree of institutionalisation; a weak link between political and economic reform; and limits on civil society. Accordingly, the most important defining property is the 'existence and persistence of mechanisms that effectively prevent the transfer of power through elections from the hands of the incumbent leaders or party to a new political elite or organization' (Ottaway, 2003, p. 15; see also Sondrol, 2007). In terms of classification, holding elections implies that the regime is less than fully authoritarian, but manipulation of the process demonstrates that it is also less than fully democratic (see also Brooker, 2000; Dahl, 1971). Still, in this halfway house 'there is no way to challenge the power of the incumbents ... [because] even if elections are held, outsiders are not allowed to truly challenge the power of the incumbents' (Ottaway, 2003, p. 15). Once again, this assumes that elections in semi-authoritarian regimes should allow for the transfer of power and that competition should be real. Such an interpretation consequently understates the role of elections to authoritarian incumbents. As Philippe

Schmitter (1978, p. 149) stated long ago, 'Elections, even those with foregone conclusions ... must have some reason or motive; they must contribute in some way to sustaining (or undermining) the mode of political domination. They must have some functions – positive or negative, manifest or latent, intended or unintended – or they would not exist'. The truth is that authoritarian elections are more than simple window dressing. They are an institution with a formal role often prescribed by the incumbent.

Having demonstrated the understanding of elections under authoritarianism (as the root concept), the alternative strategy that will now be discussed creates diminished subtypes with democracy as the root concept. This involves using marginally flawed elections in supposedly democratic regimes as the primary defining property. The relative advantage of doing this is that it should reduce the risk of conceptual stretching by making it unnecessary to shift the meaning of elections to another root concept, whether consciously or subconsciously. Instead, this strategy takes the inexplicable absence of fully free and fair elections as a conceptual starting point.

This is reflected in the subtype used by Larry Diamond to categorise a wide range of regimes around the world as 'pseudodemocracies'. These regimes have 'multiple parties and many other constitutional features of electoral democracy but ... lack at least one key requirement: an arena of contestation sufficiently fair that the ruling party can be turned out of power' (Diamond, 1999, p. 15; see also Case, 2002). Implicit within this definition, then, is the assumption that an arena of contestation (i.e. elections) is an inherently democratic institution which represents a mechanism for removing the ruling party from power. At the risk of repetition, this conflates the democratic meaning of elections with elections in all other regimes. Stated in a different way, if elections were used to foster more extensive competition and more inclusive participation, then hybrid (or pseudodemocratic) regimes would not hold them. What is peculiar, then, is the subsequent claim that whatever democratic political institutions do exist in pseudodemocracies, such as multiparty electoral competition, are used in order to 'mask (often in part to legitimate) the reality of authoritarian domination' (Diamond, 1999, p. 8). Despite positing elections as a democratic institution this claim suggests that incumbents are capable of co-opting them for their own means. This realisation should warrant the use of authoritarianism as the root concept, rather than democracy, since elections are here being used to further legitimate and consolidate authoritarian rule.

A second, older, example of using democracy as the root concept is the notion of 'facade democracies'. These are regimes where liberal democratic institutions, processes and safeguards are established by law but are in practice so manipulated or violated by an oligarchy as to stay in office (Finer, 1970). In facade democracies, elections are used by the oligarchy to retain power through a patron–client system whereby 'the governing clique grant favors to their provincial colleagues in return for the promise of their blocks of votes and these colleagues pass on a proportion of the favors to their middlemen, who return the service by "delivering the vote" for the candidate of the governing clique' (Finer, 1970, p. 445). The clear strength of this account is the recognition that elections in hybrid regimes can have a non-democratic meaning. The problem with it is that this regime is still considered to be democratic, despite elections no longer being a method for selecting and empowering political representatives. This is further reinforced by the admission that 'winning' the

popular vote entails preventing the opposition from contesting; restricting the right to vote; carrying out blandishment and intimidation; ballot-box stuffing; and falsifying the result. But this was obviously Finer's claim: the trappings of democracy exist in law, but in practice they are neglected or perverted. The problem though is that this interpretation assigns more importance to the decrees of regimes than their conduct, violating the principle that we should ask first how words are used rather than what they mean.

To summarise, the existing scholarship claims that, when accounting for hybrid regimes, creating diminished subtypes is a viable strategy for achieving analytical differentiation and avoiding conceptual stretching. The problem identified here, however, is that conceptual stretching is avoided at one stage of the conceptualisation process only to be inadvertently committed at another. In relation to hybrid regimes, elections have been conceptualised and defined as a method for selecting and empowering political representatives, albeit in a system lacking democratic guarantees (in varying degrees of severity). In the next section it will be shown how this understanding is at odds with an entire body of research.

Elections: Legitimation, Patronage and Elite Management

Elections in authoritarian regimes are by no means a localised or recent phenomenon. They have been held in countries as widespread as Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia during the 1960s and 1970s; East Germany, Hungary and Yugoslavia (among many socialist states) during the Cold War; Argentina, Bolivia and Peru in Latin America; and Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in Southeast Asia. Yet the reasons why they are held have always been different. In Cameroon, for instance, elections were held so elites could test their popular support and clientelist networks without compromising overall elite cohesion (Bayart, 1978). In Syria, the 1973 legislative election was primarily used by General Assad to legitimate his illegal seizure of power three years earlier (Picard, 1978). Under the regime of Antonio Salazar in Portugal, meanwhile, elections between 1932 and 1968 were sold to citizens as an avenue for public consultation but were really used by political elites to form dominant coalitions with corporate industrialists (Schmitter, 1978). Today, there are at least three alternative reasons (or meanings) for elections. First, they can be used in an attempt to gain legitimation domestically, internationally or both. Second, they help incumbents solidify their existing patronage networks and, subsequently, their hold on power. Finally, they present an opportunity to manage elite relations so that the autocrat himself, or the authoritarian regime as a whole, can be strengthened. The existence of these alternative roles implies that far from just being a method for selecting and empowering political authority, elections can be used for a range of authoritarian purposes. As further evidence, this section will outline each of the different meanings in more detail, beginning with the desire for legitimation.

In order to gain legitimation, authoritarian incumbents can appeal to a range of potential stimuli, including their ability to provide security or socio-economic development; their identification with a particular social cleavage or nationalist cause; their personal charisma; or, more relevantly, their willingness to hold elections. In ideal circumstances, the latter is capable of conferring legitimacy because voting represents evidence by a subordinate of consent to a particular power relation (Beetham, 1991). This is important in itself because in the contemporary era there is no better confirmation of the existence of popular sovereignty than the periodic expression of popular consent. Of course, the issue of what

constitutes 'ideal circumstances' is all important. In liberal democracies, legitimation is attainable because consent is expressed in a free and fair electoral system. As a result, 'people agree to the selection method – when they decide to use elections – but they also consent to each particular outcome – when they elect' (Manin, 1997, p. 85). In authoritarian regimes, the opposite is almost always the case since the circumscribed nature of elections means that consent is artificially restricted from above, thus preventing its full expression. In theory, the best-case scenario for such regimes would be when voters offer conditional consent, whereby they agree to subordination despite ongoing dissatisfaction (Held, 1989). This would give the incumbent the opportunity to gain something akin to semi- or incomplete legitimation. One outstanding factor, however, concerns the setting for legitimation.

The first setting relates to those regimes holding elections in an effort to gain internal (or domestic) legitimation. In the view of Jennifer McCoy and Jonathan Hartlyn (2009, p. 47), 'incumbents take part in scheduled multiparty elections, which they seek to distort sufficiently to their advantage to win while simultaneously projecting the appearance of permitting enough competition to gain legitimacy from the exercise' (for agreement, see Anderson, 1997; Case, 2009; Crespo, 2004; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Luhiste, 2008; Schedler, 2002). The most obvious strategy they employ is to feign popular elections and then claim legitimation on the grounds that they have fulfilled the same social obligation that all liberal democracies do. In effect, they use this strategy to exploit the infused value of elections to voters. Some of the factors that determine its failure (i.e., coup, protest, revolution) or success include whether the elections involve new leadership; are perceived to be cleaner than those previously; are held during a crisis; or are monitored by international observers. To put this strategy in context, Dmitry Medvedev was able to gain some degree of legitimation from Russia's disputed 2008 presidential election since he offered new leadership, a continuation of his predecessor's popular policies and because the elections were being observed by a variety of international organisations.

An alternative strategy is to use the political mobilisation produced by elections as a source of legitimation itself. In such cases, legitimation is based on the regimes' capacity to generate mass participation (Beetham, 1991). This strategy is most often used by single or dominant party regimes, such as those in Equatorial Guinea, Tajikistan and Tunisia, in order to point to high voter turnout as a barometer for their public support. For example, in Kazakhstan's 2011 presidential election, the incumbent, Nursultan Nazarbayev, ran virtually unopposed and did not even bother to campaign, yet voter turnout was an unprecedented 90 per cent (Barry, 2011). One foreseeable consequence of this strategy is that it consigns elections to a purely symbolic role within authoritarian regimes. Moreover, it raises the question of whether it would be more accurate to describe the holding of elections as modern methods for self-legitimation than as strategies for legitimation (Markus, 1982; Palma, 1991). In the former, 'the ruler is seen as the repository and source of authority, and instead of needing confirmation of his rights from another social agent, he enjoys the unique capacity of confirming by his will the rights of all other agents to demand and to command' (Bauman, 1976, p. 81). Since they consider themselves to be the sole source of political authority, it is conceivable that incumbent regimes simply use elections to self-validate their own rule.

The second setting is external (or international). Here, authoritarian regimes hold elections in an attempt to gain legitimation from the international community or an actor within it (see Friedman *et al.*, 2005; Norris, 2009; Schwedler and Chomiak, 2006). This is based on the belief that democracy is the most acceptable form of governance (Fukuyama, 1992; Plattner, 1996; Sen, 1999) and therefore any regime appearing to be democratic has a better chance of having legitimation bestowed on it than one that does not. This suggests that authoritarian regimes' desire for external legitimation is essentially norm driven because they are modifying their internal behaviour in order to comply with the expectations that exist within international society on an intersubjective level (see Etzioni, 2004). This is evidenced by the astronomic increase in the number of elections monitored by outsiders since the 1980s (Hyde, 2011). In such cases, authoritarian incumbents agree to have observers on the ground in exchange for a range of potential benefits, including increased foreign direct investment or foreign aid, membership in international organisations or international legitimation. In Kenya, for instance, the Moi regime received both legitimation and hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid from international donors just for holding elections – no matter how flawed – and maintaining political stability (Brown, 2001). Obviously, this outcome is not universally achievable. Some authoritarian regimes, including those in Syria, Turkmenistan and Zimbabwe, rarely receive external legitimation for holding elections. As always, there must be an overarching strategic incentive which compels either the international community or a great power to take a genuine interest in the conduct and outcome of the election. Beyond legitimation, however, another alternative meaning for elections which is analysed below is patronage.

The patronage rationale for elections occurs when an incumbent regime, acting as a unified actor, promises goods and services – such as construction projects or health services – to citizens in return for their votes. The implication is that elections are held to strengthen a patron–client network and, beyond that, the incumbent's hold on power (see Blaydes, 2006; Brownlee, 2011; Chehabi and Linz, 1998; Lust-Okar, 2006; Thompson, 1998; Un, 2005). In such regimes, which are usually an amalgamation of both personal dictatorship and single-party dominance, elections have often been superimposed on to a traditional patrimonial system, which until then was characterised by low social mobilisation, limited state penetration and minimal distributive capacity. Over time this increased politicisation had the effect of not only broadening the distributive demands of clients but also increasing the incumbents' reliance upon state resources. It also led to the widespread recognition that the ruler's authority was not based on their qualifications, but was instead inextricably linked to their continuing ability to distribute material incentives and rewards. The basic pattern of distribution in these regimes (e.g., Cambodia, Jordan, Venezuela and Zimbabwe) is characterised by a patron–client pyramid, whereby patronage is distributed downward and outward from the leader to successive clients, from the national to local level. This demands the widespread use of intermediaries – social brokers, hinge groups or middlemen – to bridge the gaps between persons, group structures and even cultures (Lemarchand and Legg, 1972). The significance of these actors is that they allow the incumbent to use elections to improve the vertical integration of their patronage network by creating new groups of clients and solidifying existing ones. In Egypt, for example, Mubarak used elections to 'periodically renew channels of clientelist inclusion, drawing both voters and

deputies into networks of patronage culminating at the top of the political system' (Koehler, 2008, p. 974). The eventual consequence of using elections to enhance a patronage network, however, is that they make both elites and citizens further dependent on the ruler. The flipside is that when the spoils of office are not adequately distributed there is a propensity for dependence to give way to violence (Snyder, 1992), as both the Philippines (1986) and Egypt (2011) dramatically demonstrated.

Far from being a method for selecting and empowering political representatives, a third alternative meaning of elections is elite management. This is an ideal type that incorporates a range of different elite-centred actions, all of which are designed and used to increase internal support and decrease external animosity. Inside the regime, elections (and their flattering results) can be used by the incumbent to demonstrate his or her strength, settle disputes, demote potential rivals and promote loyalists (see Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2011; Cox, 2009; Geddes, 2005; and, more broadly, Frantz and Ezrow, 2011; Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956). Outside, elections can be used to co-opt any existing opposition by encouraging them to join the regime (see Brownlee, 2007; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2006; Slater, 2010). In addition to adding some legitimacy to the regime and the elections, this action diffuses a real source of opposition without the use of physical violence. Once again, though, the exact role elections perform depends on the regime in question. In Mexico, two recurring roles included perpetuating the rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party by rotating elite positions, including the Presidency, and trapping the opposition so that they invested credibility in existing autocratic institutions (Magaloni, 2006). In a similar way, Kyrgyzstan's 2007 parliamentary election was memorable for how afterwards several opposition candidates took government jobs after being nominated by the incumbent, Kurmanbek Bakiyev (Matveeva, 2009).

Whether by design or coincidence, then, these examples illustrate that elections can be used to manage elites. One outstanding issue though is whether they are actually necessary to do so. In some cases, like Singapore, elections are heavily relied upon because they allow for both the removal of older or problematic elites as well as the promotion of new talent under the mantra of meritocracy and self-renewal. In Myanmar (Burma), by contrast, there are countless examples of small and large purges of the elite occurring independently of elections since the military came to power in 1962. Ultimately, in order to determine when and how elite management occurs, it is necessary to consider: (1) the nature of the power-sharing agreement among elites; and (2) the degree of party pluralism within the electoral system. Obviously, if power is contested between elites, the autocrat's need for a recurring institution to manage them effectively becomes paramount (Svolik, 2009). Alternatively, if power is well established among elites, authoritarian incumbents are free to use elections to satisfy other roles, such as legitimation and patronage.

Conclusion

Since some political regimes seemingly occupy a 'grey zone' between authoritarianism and democracy, scholars have turned to creating diminished subtypes in order to classify them better. This involves labelling a regime in line with any existing, additional or missing properties it contains. The reputed benefit of this strategy is that it both increases analytical differentiation and, more relevantly, avoids conceptual stretching by qualifying the extent to

which authoritarianism or democracy endures. The problem identified in this article was that conceptual stretching had been avoided at one stage of the conceptualisation process only to be committed at another. This was demonstrated in the context of elections, whereby prior assumptions of their meaning had been applied to conflicting circumstances. At most, elections in hybrid regimes were conceptualised as a method for selecting and empowering political representatives through a competition for the people's votes, albeit without the freedom and fairness characteristic of liberal democratic elections. The resulting subtypes were therefore distinguished from other political regimes by the quality, if any, of their elections. The problem here was that in categorising hybrid regimes only by this criterion at least three alternative meanings for elections were neglected: legitimation, patronage and elite management. These different meanings only come into view when elections are conceptualised as independent, substantive institutions of authoritarianism, rather than just liberal democracy. The most significant consequence of this error is that it undermines the widespread use of diminished subtypes as a strategy for successfully avoiding conceptual stretching. Furthermore, it reduces the empirical validity of the subtypes on the basis that the key defining property is misidentified as an imperfect democratic institution, rather than as something else entirely. Admittedly, how different the meanings of elections are depends on whether authoritarianism or democracy is employed as the root concept.

The general failure to account for the fact that there are alternative conceptual meanings for elections underlines the pitfalls associated with generalising across cases when undertaking comparative analysis. In fact, it raises questions about the very building blocks we use to test and refine theories about causal relationships. The primary error, I submit, is careless conceptualisation. It appears that the more familiar a concept (e.g., democracy, economic development, revolution, elections), the more willing comparativists are to use an explicit definition of it. The first risk in doing so is that the concept can be misclassified from the beginning as what we consider to be the signs of a revolution or the hallmarks of democracy are rarely translucent. A safer approach would be to classify a concept not only according to its presence within a specific context, but also via an initial, thorough analysis of its latent or manifest purpose in that same setting. An accompanying risk is that the use of an explicitly defined concept across multiple cases does not allow comparativists to control for differences within individual cases. This is best expressed by Sidney Verba's oft-cited observation that:

> To be comparative, we are told, we must look for generalizations or covering laws that apply to all cases of a particular type ... We must do analytical rather than configurative studies ... But where are the general laws? Generalizations fade when we look at the particular cases. We add intervening variable after intervening variable. Since the cases are few in number, we end with an explanation tailored to each case. The result begins to sound quite idiographic or configurative (Verba, 1967, p. 113).

The simplest remedy for this problem was to find a balance between the extension and the intension of a concept. On the whole most comparativists have proceeded according to this solution. However, a similar level of diligence has been missing when it comes to understanding the meaning of the different properties (e.g., elections) excluded or included in a concept.

In relation to the more specific problem identified in this article, the following suggestions are put forward to help guard against conceptual stretching in the future. The most obvious course of action would be to reconsider the meaning of elections around the world. To date, the hybrid regime scholarship has affixed an exclusively democratic understanding of their role to all political regimes. This mirrors the 'fallacy of electoralism' that once persisted within democratisation studies, whereby it was believed that if a regime held what looked like multiparty elections, it must be democratic (Carothers, 1997; Karl, 1986). Today, there is a similar belief that if a regime holds elections then it must be using (and abusing) a democratic institution. The problem is that this ignores past instances of elections being held in regimes not at all resembling liberal democracy. In the Soviet Union, for example, elections under the Stalin constitution (1936–77) allegedly enshrined the principles of universal, direct and equal suffrage by secret ballot. Likewise, it ignores the fact that beliefs about the nature of elections have changed over time. This can be observed in relation to elections for the House of Commons in the eighteenth century, which were labelled as such despite the fact that they were seldom contested and the votes rarely counted (Kishlansky, 1986). A more reasonable claim to espouse would be that contemporary liberal democracies have come closer to realising the institution of elections *for democratic purposes*. This is because having a free and fair electoral system cultivates the element of choice, thus adding genuine meaning to the selection and empowerment of political representatives. Critically, though, just because elections are synonymous with liberal democratic regimes does not then imply that they can have only this democratic meaning.

Another option is to be more precise in the definition of authoritarianism or democracy. This would involve adding defining properties to each root concept in order to establish more explicit criteria for their application. Such a strategy not only increases analytical differentiation by modifying the boundaries of authoritarianism and democracy, but also avoids conceptual stretching by not applying either label to cases that, in light of this added property, no longer match. In relation to democracy, for example, the procedural minimum definition has been previously modified to specify that an elected government (e.g., Chile, Indonesia) must to a reasonable degree have the effective power to rule. In relation to authoritarianism, adopting this approach would involve specifying elections as an institution that forms part of the limited, but not responsible, political pluralism characteristic of authoritarian regimes (Linz, 2000). In other words, elections could be included in a minimum procedural definition of authoritarianism on the grounds that their different roles help resolve a variety of problems common to most such regimes. Elections, therefore, would be an existing defining property of authoritarianism, rather than an additional property. As a result, they could be classified according to both their quality *and* meaning, thus significantly reducing the risk of conceptual stretching.

The final suggestion is to put a greater emphasis on context. In this instance, subtypes have been developed to account for sometimes upwards of 30 regimes around the world. By returning to context it will not only be easier to identify the presence or absence of a defining property, but help determine whether elections in a particular setting are being used in a democratic sense or for the alternative reasons outlined here. In truth, given the conceptually contested nature of elections, hybrid regime analysts should have hitherto

been more mindful of the risks associated with applying their own (democratic) interpretation so widely. As W. B. Gallie (1956, p. 172) famously observed, 'to use an essentially contested concept means to use it against other uses and to recognize that one's own use of it has to be maintained against these other uses'. Since this has by and large not been the case, this article takes the opportunity to reiterate the importance of context in comparative analysis. Ultimately, attempts to categorise hybrid regimes cannot occur at a level of abstraction so far removed from the properties that actually define and distinguish those very regimes.

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Notes

1 Admittedly, there is no definition of elections that everybody will agree upon. The one employed here is therefore a minimalist definition derived from the key (cited) scholarship on democracy.
2 There are a range of other, less established reasons for authoritarian elections not included here. These include the incumbent regime's need for information about voters (see Kricheli, 2011; Malesky and Schuler, 2011; Miller, 2011), as well as their need to mobilise or socialise the population (see Brumner, 1990; Friedgut, 1979; Pravda, 1978).

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