Elections as Levers of Democracy: A Global Inquiry

Jan Teorell
Axel Hadenius

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Abstract

In this paper we purport to test the proposition that elections have a democratizing effect, drawing on cross-sectional time-series data at best covering a global sample of 193 countries from 1919 to 2004. Two versions of this proposition are tested: one with respect to current effects, another with respect to cumulative effects. The first maintains that the holding of an election would yield democratizing gains more or less immediately, either in the time period following shortly after the election or in the non-electoral spheres of society. The second version instead holds that the historical experience with a prolonged series of elections in the end would yield a democratizing effect. In our tests, we find support for both proposals—at least for certain ways of measuring the effects in question. Current effects manifest themselves primarily in the immediate aftermath of multiparty elections. We can also observe improvements in the no-electoral realm (with respect to civil liberties), but this effect is marred with uncertainty regarding the validity of the data at hand. As for the cumulative proposal, we conclude that the number of multiparty—or, even more strongly, free and fair—elections, which a country has experienced, has democratic influence, primarily on the non-electoral sphere of democracy. At the same time, the effect is not very strong and the relative influence of every new election is declining.

Jan Teorell
Department of Political Science,
Lund University
jan.teorell@svet.lu.se

Axel Hadenius
Department of Political Science
Lund University
axel.hadenius@svet.lu.se

Introduction

Do elections promote democracy? Paradoxical as it may seem, this is the question we are raising in this paper. To be sure political democracy, as we know it, is primarily institutionalized through the holding of repetitive and competitive elections. This is not a claim we are questioning. Rather, we are probing the proposition that the holding of elections in itself spurs a development toward more democracy, in other respects, in a country. There are actually two versions of this proposition. One focuses on distinct and separate elections, arguing that they work as events that trigger a process of democratization that goes beyond the quality of these elections in themselves. The other version holds that democracy evolves as a result of a long series of repetitive elections stretched over time. Whereas the first argument puts primacy on the current effects of single elections, the second stresses the cumulative experience of multiple elections.

To minimize the risk of an overlap between measures of elections and their effects in other democratic realms, we apply two strategies as to the measurement of current election effects. The first is to employ a *temporal lag*; accordingly, the democratic effects are measured at a point in time after the election. Here two different lags are utilized: (i) a one-year lag (which implies that we are looking at effects in the following year), and a monthly lag (i.e., effects in the election year, but measured at least one month after the election). The second strategy is to use a *non-electoral measure* of democracy, namely the Freedom House's Civil Liberty scores. To make this measure really waterproof, we control for Political Rights scores (also from Freedom House). However, as it could be argued that this control is too demanding, we also run analyses without it. We find the most noteworthy effects of multiparty elections (non-competetive elections thus have little import), when—along the first strategy—a monthly (within election year) lag is applied, and—along the second strategy—civil rights are accounted for without control for political rights.

As for the examination of the cumulative experience of elections, we start by reckoning the total historical *stock* of elections country by country (from 1919 onwards). As the democratic pay-off of elections may decrease, however—with respect to their quantity or distance in time—we also calculate the *square root* of the total number of elections, and an *annual depreciation rate*. We find that that there is indeed also a cumulative electoral effect. But not

all elections are equally important. It is only multiparty elections that count; and really democratic elections count the most. Furthermore, we find that the way elections are accounted for actually matters. We notice the most prominent effect when the square root variable is applied. This implies that the number of elections is important. But it implies, moreover, that the relative importance of every new election is declining.

Our analysis unfolds in the following steps. We first review the recent literature on the subject of elections as causes of democratization. We then present our data and estimation strategy, followed by the results for current and historical election experiences, respectively. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings.

The Democratizing Power of Elections Hypothesis

Up until recently the role played by political institutions has been surprisingly absent in theoretical approaches to explaining democratization (Snyder and Mahoney 1999). A small but growing body of literature interested in elections as institutions has however begun to change this picture. Of seminal importance in this regard is the work by Bratton and van de Walle (1997). Arguing in favor of a "politico-institutional" approach, they put premium on two institutional features in explaining democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa during the 1990s: the extent of political competition and the degree of political participation during the previous authoritarian regime. Most notably for present purposes, they found that the sheer number of elections held since independence—regardless of the freedom and fairness of these elections—helped explain transition outcomes to a significant degree. The explanation for this finding, according to the authors, would be that even rigged or non-competitive elections, by providing opportunities for political participation, make people better prepared for the experience with real democracy.

On a more theoretical note, Schedler (2002) portrays the logic of ambivalent elections in authoritarian regimes as unstable two-level games that tends to set countries on paths toward democratization. The uncertainty created by acceding voting rights to citizens with unknown preferences, the possible manipulation of elections results by incumbent autocrats, and the coordination problems faced by evolving opposition parties—all this tend to create a "self-subversive" spiral that either leads to the shutting down of the electoral arena, or—if the game is repeated—to a progressive movement away from authoritarianism: "even if democratic

progress is not inevitable, the inner logic of the game pulls it away from authoritarianism". Schedler (2002, 111) approvingly cites Barkan's (2000) analogy with "the mouse nibbling at the proverbial piece of cheese. After a period of time, the piece, in this case the authoritarian state, is no more."

A critical feature of Schedler's (2002) argument is that only *multiparty* elections generate the ambivalence that over time may hollow out an electoral autocracy. As opposed to Bratton and van de Walle, then, some room for opposition participation in the electoral contest must be provided in order for elections to have a potentially democratizing effect. This theme has recently been developed further by Lindberg (2006), who sketches an institutional learning theory of societal democratization, in which people's repetitive experience with *de jure* competitive and inclusive elections pay off for democracy in the non-electoral arena (even if these elections turn out to be *de facto* neither free nor fair). Both individuals and voluntary associations bring to other spheres of society the resources, skills and norms they have learnt in the electoral arena. Moreover, elections may develop a stronger sense for the rule of law within the judicial sphere, and an enlarged taste for informational freedom by the mass media (Lindberg 2006, 111–116). In sum, Lindberg's overall hypothesis may be summarized as that "the longer an uninterrupted series of elections a country has, the more its society will become imbued with democratic qualities" (2006, 99).

Upon closer scrutiny, this democratizing power of elections hypothesis may be interpreted in (at least) two ways. The "mouse nibbling" metaphor suggests that each time an election is held, some more or less immediate real gains in the level of democracy are made. If there is any cumulative effect of repetitive elections over time, according to this view, then that is simply the sum of a series of smaller gains that each occur in the wake of a singular election. Another way to interpret the same theory, however, would be to say that what is gained at each successive election is an increased *potential* for democratization. As more people learn through election experiences, as new organizations form, as more democratic values are imbued in society and so on—the larger the probability for a democratic breakthrough. According to this later view the effect of elections on democratization is not captured by the metaphor of "mouse nibbling", but rather by that of a "pressure chamber". Cumulative experiences with elections imply that the pressure for democratization rises—even though no actual gains in the level of democracy are made at each successive election. The pressure may be rising although the chamber itself is not expanding. If the theory is right, however, one day

the chamber would explode—that is, one day the pressure for democratization results in a real democratic breakthrough.

The "pressure chamber" version of the theory comes closest to Eisenstadt's (2004) story of the protracted transition to democracy in Mexico. According to Eisenstadt, the groundwork for the 2000 watershed presidential election, where the opposition finally ousted the hegemonic Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI), had been laid in the series of postelection struggles throughout the 1990s. What eventually matters for democratization, Eisenstadt (2004, 2, 24), is a process that "transpires behind the curtain before democracy's opening act, and is thus not visible to observers focusing instead on democracy's debut". Although the metaphor is different, the idea is the same: elections matter, but not as a single-shot event but as a cumulative experience over time.

We will term the first interpretation of this theory ("mouse nibbling") the *current* effect of elections hypothesis, and the other interpretation ("pressure chambers") the *cumulative* effect of elections. Either one of the two interpretations may imply that elections of all sorts matter (as Bratton and van de Walle 1997 suggest), or that only nominally competitive elections have a democratizing effect (as Schedler 2002 and Lindberg 2006 would have it).

But perhaps even more is required from elections in order for them to have a democratizing effect? Perhaps in the end only free and fair elections are what matters? Interpreted in the current elections sense, this proposition would of course be purely tautological: surely the freedom and fairness of an election matter immediately for the state of democracy in a country. But in the historical sense this proposition becomes more interesting: that the more prolonged previous experience with *democratic* elections an authoritarian country has, the larger the probability for a democratic comeback, or for the upholding of democracy once installed.

As a matter of fact, quite a few arguments on the importance of democratic legacies for the prospect of democratization has been made in the literature, although none of them refers directly to the importance of elections in themselves. Huntington (1991, 44) points out that in the early phase of the third wave of democratization (from around 1974-1990), "an excellent predictor…of whether a country with an authoritarian government would become democratic was whether it had been democratic". Similarly, Skaaning finds that the best predictor of the

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state of civil liberties in Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1990s was the "liberal-bureaucratic legacy" of the country, that is, their "former experiences with liberal regimes and a vibrant civil society" as well as "the state's traditions for formal-rational bureaucratic rectitude" (2006, 14). Persson and Tabellini (2007) find in a large sample of countries covering 150 years that both transitions to democracy and democratic survival are promoted by a longer historical experiences with democracy. According to Hadenius (2001, 86), this effect could be attributed to political learning through prolonged exposure to pluralistic institutions. Over time people in more democratic contexts develop political abilities and resources (in a broad sense). Under authoritarianism these assets may be preserved to some degree, and could be vitalized again when the system opens up. From this perspective, accordingly, an early introduction of pluralist institutions is generally preferable. Even if the experiment fails, an investment has been made which could later pay-off. The longer the democratic practice has continued, and the less distant in time it is, one could thus presume, the more likely is such a delayed return.

This historical learning theory could be interpreted as another "pressure chamber" hypothesis, suggesting that authoritarian rule will in the end give way to democracy in the presence of too strong a country's democratic historical legacy. The slight difference concerns what kind of legacy matters: the holding of any kind of elections, of at east nominally competitive elections, or — as this last theoretical argument would have it — of fully free and fair elections.

Not all scholars agree on the democratizing power of elections. Carothers (2002), for one, dispels the notion—according to him held in wide circles of the U.S. foreign policy community—"that in attempted transitions to democracy, elections will not just be a foundation stone but a key generator over time of further democratic reforms". As against this view Carothers argued that even "reasonably regular, genuine elections" in many transitional countries have generated no political participation beyond voting, only shallow government accountability, and have done preciously little "to stimulate the renovation or development of political parties" (Carothers 2002, 8, 15). Along similar lines some case study comparativists have raised doubts about any democratizing results from holding elections. Brownlee (2007, 9-10), for example, holds that "authoriotarian elections tend to reveal political trends rather than propel them", that elections are "symtoms, not causes". Brownlee (2007) instead argues that what made authoritarian regimes crumble in Iran and the Philippines, as opposed to

Egypt and Malaysia, was the ruling party's coalition management. Lust-Okar (2006), in an intriguing case study of electoral politic in Jordan, argues that the primary role for elections in this country has been to organize the distribution of patronage and government spoils, not to act as an arena for struggles over regime change. Her conclusion is a direct challenge to supporters of the democratizing power of elections hypothesis: "Indeed, the logic of authoritarian elections should lead us to question the value of pressing for, and applauding, the introduction of elections in authoritarian regimes…Such elections are more likely to help sustain the authoritarian regime than they are to promote democracy" (Lust-Okar 2006, 468).

Data and Research Design

In order to take the proposition that elections spur democratization to data, we have put together a large cross-sectional time-series data set, covering just about every country of the world (193 nations in full) from 1919-2004. Although some data sources would have allowed an even longer time-series component, we estimated that the net gains from moving before 1919 did not outweigh the labor costs. Already in 1919 there were only some 60-70 independent nations in the world, and this figure would of course have fallen had we ventured even further back in time. In terms of country coverage, then, there is relatively little to gain from using information from the early 20th or the 19th century. Even more importantly, as a result of the First World War many old empires fell, many new nations saw the light of day for the first time in history, and many borders (particularly in Europe) were thus redrawn. As a consequence the pre-1919 historical experiences of the set of independent nations present in the world today are cumbersome to assemble and assess.

Our dependent variable will be the "rate of democratization", measured as annual change in a set of graded measures of democracy, all converted to range from 0 (no democracy) to 10 (full democracy): the Revised Combined Polity Score (Marshall and Jaggers 2005), the Freedom House's (2006) Civil Liberties ratings, and the average Freedom House (combining both the Political Rights and Civil Liberties ratings) and Polity scores. All these measures have their respective strengths and drawbacks (Munck and Verkuilen 2002), and we have argued elsewhere that the best response to this situation is to average the Freedom House and Polity measures (Hadenius and Teorell 2005). This will thus be our favored dependent variable,[1] together with the Freedom House's Civil Liberties ratings, which we—following Lindberg (2006)—will employ in order to approximate a non-electoral measure of democracy (more on

that below). As a robustness check we will also make use of a unique feature of the Polity data: variables that for years of large changes in the Polity score record the month in which the prior regime ended, and the month in which the subsequent regime started.

Both the choice of the average FH/Polity measure and FH's Civil Liberties imply that we will concentrate on explaining democratization in the world from 1972 onward, that is, the so-called "third wave" of democratization (Huntington 1991). There is also another reason for this choice, namely that it is only for this latter period we have systematic data on determinants of democratization other than elections (to be used as controls). When constructing measures for the historical experience of elections and democracy, however, we will be able to draw on data all the way back to 1919.

The fact that we rely on graded measures of democracy, and hence of democratic change, is critical to our inquiry. We are not trying to predict the demise of autocracies (as a nominal category) and their replacement by a "democratic" alternative; nor will we explain the demise or survival of that alternative. What we purport to do is to test the extent to which elections may lead to *gradual* democratic reforms—be they small or large in nature. In other words, some of the regime changes we try to predict may be very limited, such as lifting a minor ban on newspapers or reluctantly increasing the regime's tolerance toward the organization of opposition groups. Other changes may however be of larger consequence, such as the opening of the executive for electoral contestation or the dismantlement of institutions that secured the rigging of elections. We believe this way of specifying our dependent variable is more in keeping with theoretical expectations. What the propositions on the democratizing power of elections developed above predict, as we understand them, are regime changes of various sorts, including minor shifts in the rules of the game, and *not only* the ways in which these regimes extricate themselves and hand over power to "qualitatively democratic" institutions.

Information on the holding of elections has primarily been extracted from two data sources: Banks (2002) and the 2004 version of Database on Political Institutions (Beck et al. 2001; Keefer 2005). Although they are, of course, overlapping to a great extent, these two sources each have their unique features. Banks' election data provide the longest time coverage—all the way back to our starting year 1919—but they only cover parliamentary elections (and elections to constituent assemblies). The DPI distinguish between executive and legislative elections and records the month of the election, a unique feature we will make us of, but only

covers the time period from 1975 onward. For the purpose of this paper, then, we will be using the DPI in order to test the current effects of elections, and Banks to test the historical effects.[2]

A key feature of these election variables is that they simply record the holding of an election in any country in any given year, regardless of the "quality" of that election. These election records thus include single party elections allowing no freedom of choice. In order to also assess whether an election held allowed multiparty competition or not, we have proceeded in two ways. For the "current effect" models, where the time period covered is from 1972 onward, a multiparty election is defined as one held under a "limited multiparty system" or "democracy", according to the data on types of authoritarian regimes reported in Hadenius and Teorell (2007). In "cumulative effect" models, when the cumulative experience of multiparty elections (going back to 1919) are to be measured, we have been forced to use a proxy, namely whether the winning party or candidate received less than 100 percent of the votes according to Vanhanen's (2005) indicator of the degree of competition. This is thus an ex post measure of multiparty competition, and must as such be deemed inferior to the first measure, which allows an election to be classified as multiparty "ex ante"—that is, even if the opposition in the end boycotted the elections or the winner received all the votes by rigging the ballot. For overlapping observations, however, these two indicators correlate very strongly (r=.94), which we interpret to mean that the historical proxy variable works as intended.

In order to assess the importance of historical experiences with elections, we will try several alternative measures. The most straightforward test just adds the number of elections held in a country since 1919 (or independence). This is thus simply a measure of the "stock" of elections accumulated throughout the history of a country. We produce one such stock variable for all elections held, and one for the number of multiparty elections held.[3] Since there might be a decreasing marginal effect from holding another election we also test this variable with a different functional form by taking the square root (implying that the number of elections needs to be quadrupled in order to achieve the same effect as a doubling of the simple additive stock variable). Accordingly, using this measure we assume that an additional election adds less democratic stimulus than the former. Moreover, we have applied weights in order to take into account the distance in time from the present to the historical experience of elections. Although various such time-weighted versions could be constructed, we have only tried one with a five percent annual depreciation rate. What this means is that, if an

election for example is held in country *X* at time *t*, the addition of that election to the accumulated stock of elections is only .95 at time *t*+1, .95² at *t*+2, 95³ at *t*+3 and so on. More generally, following Persson and Tabellini (2007, 21), the time-weighted cumulative number of elections at time *t* is computed according to the following formula:

$$(1-\delta)\sum_{\tau=0}^{t-t_0} elec_{t-\tau} \cdot \delta^{\tau}$$

,

where *elec* is a dichotomous indicator of whether an election was held (1) or not (0) for each year of observation, $\delta=0.95$ (the annual depreciation rate), and *t* is the year of independence or 1919, whichever comes last. What this time weighted cumulative stock variable does is essentially to discount the importance of the more distant path in favor of a country's more recent electoral history.

Although these three versions of the cumulative stock variables (three each for the count of all elections and the count of all multiparty elections) are highly interrelated (correlations lie in the range of .90 and above), there are important but nuanced differences among them. The most important difference between the square root and the untransformed version is of course to depreciate the importance of very long series of elections. In 1973, for example, the United States had held 24 congressional elections since 1919, which is four times more than the stock of 6 parliamentary elections in Spain for that same year. In terms of differences in the square root of these numbers, however, the US had only a stock of elections twice as large as that of Spain (around 4.90 vs. 2.45). The most important implication of the time-weighted version, moreover, is that the stock of cumulative elections is depreciated in non-election years. This difference most importantly plays out under long spells of the absence of elections. Thus, all the 6 elections that entered Spain's stock in 1973 had been held in the 1920s and 1930s, before the advent of the Franco regime. By contrast, Bangladesh too had an experience from 6 parliamentary elections in the year of 1973 (taking into account all elections held during the period in which Bangladesh belonged to Pakistan), but these had been held more recently (in the period since 1955). In terms of the (square root of the) time-weighted stock of elections, this implies a much larger number for Bangladesh (2.09) as compared to Spain (0.77).

To be able to test the importance of having a long experience with relatively "democratic" elections, we must also somehow take the "quality" of an election into account. In order to accomplish this for the long time series of elections going back to 1919, and in order to maximize country coverage, we rely on the Vanhanen (2005) measure of democracy. We then assume that the level of democracy awarded to a country in an election year is a suitable proxy for the "quality" of that election. This assumption might of course prove wrong in certain cases, where for example other events unraveling in the wake of an election take precedence in the final democracy assessment for that country. Lacking any superior alternatives, however, this proxy is the best we can accomplish. We thus construct a measure of the "effective" number of cumulative "democratic" elections in a country at time t by applying the following formula:

$$\sum_{\tau=t_0}^{t} \frac{elec_\tau \cdot dem_\tau}{10},$$

where dem_τ is the Vanhanen measure of democracy (scored from 0–10) for time τ.[4] In other words this procedure weighs the importance of each election held according to the level of democracy of the country for that year. (For example, if an election is held in a country with a Vanhanen score of 8, according to this measure only .8 "effective democratic elections" have been held this year.) As with the simple stock variable taking no regard of the "quality" of an election, this cumulative stock measure will also be tested using a different functional form (the square root) and with a time weight applied (again using a 5 percent annual depreciation rate).

A potentially serious missing data problem with all these historical "stock" variables concerns countries that only gained independence after 1919. Since most data sources start coding a country in or around the year of independence, we usually lack information about the holding of elections, or the level of democracy, in the years under external rule. For certain types of external rule, what might be called "contiguous empires", this problem could be ameliorated by assuming that data for the "empire" also applies to all constituent contiguous "countries" (Gerring et al. 2005, 15). Data for Estonia, for example, which is missing from the Soviet occupation of around 1941 until regained independence in 1991, could be rather safely filled in with data from the USSR.[5] A larger problem arises with former non-contiguous overseas

colonies, since they cannot, as a rule, be assumed to have been governed in the same way as their colonizing country. With data for former colonies more or less entirely missing, we instead have to assume that their colonial period generated no electoral or democratic legacy at all. Although we are aware of the fact that this assumption is probably wrong in some cases, such as in colonial India and Algeria, we simply see no way in which this problem may be solved systematically for all relevant cases.

Having continuous dependent variables, our estimation strategy will be to use OLS regression with lagged dependent variables in order to correct for temporal autocorrelation. Although the general methodological advice with cross-sectional time-series data is to also correct for panel heteroskedasticity and spatial autocorrelation through panel-corrected standard errors (Beck and Katz 1995, 1996), preliminary testing shows that when we concentrate on the estimates for the *current* election variables, taking these additional error sources into account makes no or very little difference to the estimates of error variances. The simple explanation for this is that there is not much cross-country variability in the holding of elections, nor is there much correlation in the holding of elections across countries for any single year. Elections is a common phenomenon in all countries, regardless of regime type, whereas the election cycle is very country specific. Hence, to save estimation time we simply report ordinary OLS standard errors for the tests of the current effects hypothesis. In particular due to the varying years of independence for overseas colonies, however, the *cumulative* number of elections varies to a great extent across countries. This of course applies even more strongly if the competitiveness or democratic quality of these elections is also taken into account. Hence, for the cumulative effects analyses we must take the spatial part of the error structure into account.

Although the lagged dependent variable(s), apart from mopping up the autocorrelation, also takes a certain form of reversed causation into account, there is another serious threat to any sensible estimate of the democratization power of elections that need to be accounted for: the threat of tautology. We argued above that it seems reasonable to assume that the measure of democracy for a given country at election years to some extent measures the democratic quality of that election. This of course most strongly applies for the more "electoral" measures of democracy—those that rely on indicators most closely related to the electoral process— such as Polity and Freedom House's Political Rights ratings. This is a property of these measures we are able to take advantage of in our construction of historical variables tapping into the experience of democratic elections. When we use any of these measures as our

dependent variable in regressions with elections as the independent variable, however, this feature is turned into a direct disadvantage. We would then be trying to estimate the "effect" of the very elections that already have been incorporated into the process of measuring the dependent variable—a close to tautological exercise.

To avoid tautology, we will employ two strategies in the assessment of current election effects. The first is to create a temporal lag between the election and democracy variables. What we then are able to estimate is any consequences for democratization that *in time* go beyond the holding of an election itself. We will first apply the simplest lag that still maximizes the chances of observing an election effect, namely the *one-year lag*, but since even the one-year lag could be argued to be too long, we will also make use of the monthly dating of elections in the DPI and of regime changes in the Polity data. By excluding elections held in the same month or after the beginning of a "new regime" (i.e., when a shift of 1.5 or more in the Polity score on a 0–10 scale occurs), or elections held in the same month as the end of the "old regime", we approximate a monthly lag applied *within* the election year.

The second strategy is based on Lindberg (2006), who primarily looks at current elections (without applying a lag) but instead endeavors to avoid the tautology problem by using a non-electoral measure of democracy: the Freedom House's Civil Liberties ratings. Since this particular measure of democracy at least on paper does not take the quality of elections as such into account, there should be less risk of tautology. It is however still the case that the Civil Liberties rankings mostly change together with the Political Rights scores (Coppedge et al., forthcoming). The correlation between annual changes in the two rankings is .51 in election years. In order to ascertain that only changes in the Civil Liberties are picked up, we will therefore control for the changes in Political Rights. Since this control might appear too rigorous, however, we will also present results without it.

As any other causal proposition, the democratizing power of elections must of course be tested *ceteris paribus* to the greatest extent possible. In other words, we must be able to assess whether the holding of an election (or an extended experience with elections) is merely correlated with changes in the level of democracy, or if that association also holds when other characteristics of the case in question are taken into account. We will therefore expose the electoral proposition to a host of substantial control variables that also vary within countries and/or over time. The controls comprise a wide range of hypothesized determinants of

democratization, including colonial background, religious composition, societal fractionalization, country size, modernization, resource wealth, international dependence, diffusion effects, regional organizations, and popular mobilization (for details, see Teorell and Hadenius 2007).

Hence, it is a matter of a demanding test. What we are probing is the extent to which the holding of elections has a democratizing import—on top of a number of other factors which have proved to play a significant role. It should be noted that this is the most rigorous examination so far of the electoral proposition, as it is based on global data, including a long historical record, and is accomplished, moreover, under control for a broad set of competing explanatory factors.

Democratization and Current Experiences of Elections

We start our exploration by looking at the democratizing effects of current elections. Tables 1-2 employ the first testing strategy outlined above, that is, by using lags in the election variable, whereas tables 3-4 employs the second strategy, instead using a non-electoral measure of democracy.

In Table 1 we use our preferred measure of democracy, the average Freedom House and Polity scores, and a combined indicator of both legislative and executive elections. As indicated in both model (1), with no controls, and model (2) with controls added, there is a significant and positive change in the degree of democracy occurring in election years. After the year they are being held, however, these elections in general appear to have no democratizing effect.[6] This picture changes slightly when non-competitive elections are excluded in models (3) and (4). The lagged election effect is now stronger, but is rendered marginally significant under controls. Moreover, it turns out that both the magnitude and the (marginal) significance of the lagged multiparty election effects now relies on only two cases: the elections held in Uruguay in 1984 and Paraguay in 1988. If these two extremely influential outliers are excluded, the estimated effect is almost halved and rendered completely insignificant (coef=.041, se=.036, p=.257).

Neither of these countries serves well as a paradigmatic case for the power of elections hypothesis. The elections of November 1984 in Uruguay had been agreed upon by the Naval Club Pact of August that same year and did not produce any stunning results or other

departures from the road toward democracy paved in that same agreement (Gillespie 1986, 192-3). In 1988, in Paraguay, the Colorado Party under President Stroessner managed to win yet another rigged election, which on the face of it appears distantly related to the coup that overthrew Stroessner the following year and led (after another election) to substantial liberalization of the political regime under Rodríguez (Powers 1992). Whatever the exact interpretation of these two cases, the fact remains that the already weakly significant effect of multiparty elections under controls is not robust since it hinges on these two particular observations. With the combined Freedom House and Polity measure of democracy, there thus seems to be no democratizing effect of elections over the one-year time horizon.

[Table 1 about here]

But perhaps the one-year lag is too long? In table 2 we decrease the lag length by taking advantage of the possibility to date both election months in the DPI data and the month of substantial (≥ 1.5) changes in the scores of the Polity data. As shown in models (1) and (2), the effects are strengthened by applying this shorter time lag, since even the measure which counts all elections (including non-competitive ones) has a marginally significant impact on democratization.[7] The strongest showing for the power of elections hypothesis however again appears when we restrict our attention to competitive elections. Even after controls (in model 4), a multiparty election on average appears to increase the Polity score of .161 in the year it is held. This effect is both statistically significant and robust to the exclusion of some relatively extremely influential outliers.[8]

[Table 2 about here]

We may then conclude that by deploying the first testing strategy for current elections, the one where lags are used, we find support for the power of elections hypothesis when multiparty elections are considered over a time span shorter than a year. With a one-year lag, or if non-competitive elections are also included, however, the support is fragile at best.

In table 3 we turn to the second testing strategy, by instead employing a non-electoral measure of democracy. As argued above, the best available such measure for our purposes appears to be the Civil Rights ratings issued by Freedom House (scaled from 0–10, where 0 means no respect for civil liberties, 10 the opposite). In order to restrict our attention even

more exclusively to the non-electoral changes in this measure, we also throughout table 3 include a control for the yearly change in Freedom House's political rights ratings. We again make use of the DPI measure of elections, both at time t and at time t–1. Since there is now less risk of tautology, both may be interpreted as support for the electoral proposition.

In models (1) and (2) we start by including all kinds of elections, again generating non-significant results (although, notably, these results also apply for election years). When we restrict attention to nominally multiparty elections in model (3), however, there is a small but significant effect of the lagged election variable (although not for the unlagged version). This effect is however rendered only marginally significant under controls in model (4). Moreover, it now hinges on the inclusion (or not) of two extremely influential outliers.[9] Accordingly, the result lacks a desirable degree of robustness.

[Table 3 about here]

However, it could be argued that we eliminate too much of the substantial over-time variation in civil liberties by controlling for the simultaneous change in political rights. As the two variables are strongly correlated, the one obviously has a propensity of washing out the other. For this reason, we repeat in table 4 the setup from table 3, except we exclude this particular control. This lowering of the security provisions has two implications. The first is a slight increase in the lagged effect of holding elections, particularly of the multiparty type. In model (4), this lagged effect even stands the presence of controls, but it is again completely dependent on two influential cases: Paraguay in 1989 and Panama in 1990. We have already commented upon the negligible effect of the 1988 election in Paraguay, but Panama is a more complicated case. Whereas the elections which Noriega lost were held in May, the newly installed democratic regime came about as the result of US invasion in December, and most bans on civil being raised only in 1990 (Pérez 1995, 132-135). Although the direct downfall of the authoritarian regime did not occur through elections, then, elections might still be argued to have had an indirect effect: since the elections were "stolen" (Thompson and Kuntz 2006), they may have precipitated later event that led to the downfall of the Noriega regime. If we accept to include Panama, the remaining effect is only marginally significant (coef=.077; se=.040; p=.053) and thus hinges on the interpretation of one single influential outlier.[10]

The second and more important change resulting from our more permissive test in Table 4 is therefore a considerable improvement in the within-election-year effect. As can be seen in models (1) and (2), this simultaneous effect of elections holds even when non-competitive elections are counted, and including control variables. The most pertinent effect again is for multiparty elections, which stands the inclusion of controls (model 4). As compared to the lagged effect, moreover, the effect on civil liberties in election years does not hinge on any particular influential outliers. Even when a few relatively extreme outliers are deleted (India in 1977, Grenada in 1984 and Paraguay in 1989), the effect is positive and statistically significant.

[Table 4 about here]

Whether we choose to believe in this effect as causal or not is then a judgment call that depends on how we interpret Freedom House's measurement process. If we accept the assumption that the civil liberties ratings are arrived at without taking the quality of the electoral process into account for any given election year, we may interpret this as a truly democratizing effect of elections. If, however, we are more inclined to believe that the upholding of civil liberties for an election year cannot be assessed without at least in part evaluating the electoral process itself (this would most likely be the case for associational and organizational rights), then the more conservative result from Table 3 should be our preferred conclusion—in other words, that there is a small and non-robust effect on civil liberties occurring in the year following elections. Taking also into consideration the positive result from table 2, where multiparty elections were found to have an effect on the within-year horizon, we would argue in favor of the first interpretation. Current elections appear to have some democratizing potential, but this potential is marred with uncertainty and only applies in the brief wake of an election or in the non-electoral arena of democracy.

Democratization and Cumulative Experience of Elections

We now turn to our tests of the "pressure chamber" version of the power of elections hypothesis. To begin with, there are a series of negative results which we for space conserving reasons have decided not to show. The first concerns the cumulative measure that takes all elections, competitive or not, into account. In no instance have we found any significant impact of this variable, regardless of functional form and time weights. The second, slightly more positive result, concerns the mean FH/Polity score. With this as our dependent variable,

we find a positive and statistically significant effect of both the cumulative number of multiparty elections, and the effective number of cumulative democratic elections. This effect is however not robust to the exclusion of influential outliers.

Let us instead turn to table 5, where Freedom House's civil liberties ratings are again used as our dependent variable. As indicated in model (1), the number of parliamentary multiparty elections held in a country since 1919 exerts a positive and significant effect on the prospects for democratization, even when the current election year effect is taken into account. Although model (2) shows this effect is not robust to the inclusion of substantial control variables, it turns out that functional form is of critical importance. By taking the square root of the cumulative stock in model (3), which decreases the marginal impact of each additional election, the effect is strengthened and again statistically significant—despite the presence of controls, including the change in the political rights rating. The average marginal effect of .061 implies that it would take roughly 269 multiparty elections to raise the civil liberties rating by 1 point (on the 0-10 scale), indicating that we should not expect any dramatic improvements as a result of electoral legacies. The effect is however statistically significant, and not an artifact of any extremely influential outliers. When we both make use of the square root functional form and the time weights in model (4), the effect is still positive and significant, but somewhat weaker. Interestingly, this implies that elections held in the distant past are as important as a country's more recent electoral history.

[Table 5 about here]

By turning to the "effective" number of cumulative "democratic" elections measure in table 6, the pattern is similar but stronger. The mean marginal effect of the square root measure in model (3) is now .153, indicating that it would take an historical stock of 43 fully democratic elections to notch up the civil liberties ratings one point. This is again not a very strong effect in substantial terms, but it is significant at conventional levels, and robust to the exclusion of a number of extremely influential outliers.[11] As was the case for the cumulative number of multiparty elections, the time-weighted version fares somewhat worse. What matters is thus the full stock of historical experience with democratic elections, regardless of the time passed.

[Table 6 about here]

In sum, then, we find support for the notion that democratization is furthered by a historical legacy of elections. Not just any elections matter, however, and some dimensions of democratization are more easily affected than others. The elections must be of the multiparty or, even stronger, more democratic kind. Moreover, we only find a robust impact on the extent of civil liberties protection. When the more electoral aspects of democracy themselves are taken into consideration, the cumulative experience of elections has a weak and non-robust impact. Finally, it should be noted that the effect on civil liberties of an electoral legacy is not strong in substantial terms. This implies that electoral pressure may eventually make the democratic chamber expand, but hardly explode. More precisely, upon closer scrutiny we find that the primary cumulative effect of elections is to hinder downturns in already relatively democratic countries, not to spur upturns in authoritarian ones. In other words, what electoral pressure does is to help the democratic chamber refrain from contracting.[12] Hence, more than being a step-stone, elections serve as a backbone of democracy.

Conclusion

In this paper we have scrutinized the proposition that elections have a democratizing effect. Two version of this proposition have been tested. The one maintains that the holding of an election tends to yield democratizing gains more or less immediately, either in the time period following shortly after the election or in the non-electoral spheres of society. The second version instead holds that the historical experience with a prolonged series of elections in the end tends to yield a democratizing effect. In our empirical testing, where a broad set of demanding control variables was applied, we have found significant support for both propositions—at least for certain ways of measuring the effects in question.

As for the short-run (current) effects of elections, we can establish that such effects are indeed at play. Using a composed, but mainly electoral, measure of democracy provided by Polity, we find weak but still notable democratizing effects during the same year, in the immediate aftermath of elections. Such effects stem most plainly from plural (multiparty) elections. However, later in tame, i.e., in following years, no such effects of a robust nature could be observed. Hence, the democratizing effect of elections tends to kick in soon, and then fade away.

Using another measure, namely the Freedom House Civil Liberty score, we could also register significant and robust effects, again mostly from multiparty elections—but only when

Political Rights were not simultaneously controlled for. The substantial implication of this finding could certainly be disputed. It could be argued that relying only on Civil Liberty measures is to easy an approach, as these are correlated with Political Rights scores that contain the electoral components, the effects of which we aim to inquire. On the other hand it could be said that because of this correlation, including a control for Political Rights, would in all probability wash out any effect on the part of Civil Liberties. As we see it, there is no obvious way out of this dilemma. Basically, it has to do with the degree of independence—in the way codings are actually made—between the two Freedom House measures.

Hence, despite the presence of a large number of control variables we find that in election years there is a positive democratizing effect. In the following years, however, this effect is not upheld at a corresponding level. Accordingly, the holding of elections seems to spur democratic improvements in a stairs-like manner. The effects manifest themselves in close temporal connection with the election. These improvements are generally maintained in the coming years, until a new election is held, at which new improvements are likely to take place. Besides, there is incidence of a significant and robust effect in the realm of Civil Liberties. But this finding hinges on the condition that we believe that these ratings could be used as "clean" non-electoral measures of democracy.

Turning to the other proposition, which has to do with long-run (cumulative) effects, we register support when we postulate a decreasing marginal utility of elections. Thus, the total number of elections counts, but to a vanishing degree. Furthermore, we conclude that it is mainly multiparty, and especially fairly democratic, elections that have this positive impact, and that the impact mostly concerns the non-electoral sphere of democracy (i.e., the civil liberties). In a separate test, moreover, we have tried to find out more precisely the nature of this effect. Does it spur democratic upturns as well hinder democratic downturns? The answer is that the latter effect predominates. Countries that can rely on a substantial record of elections have a democratic advantage (however, as we saw, to a gradually diminishing degree), as they are more immune against democracy-challenging forces. It is interesting to note that in respect of its causal implication—serving as a backbone rather than a step-stone of democracy—the cumulative effect of elections resembles another prominent promoting factor, namely socio-economic modernization (Teorell and Hadenius 2007).

Thus, overall we find substantial support for the view taken by "optimists", Huntington and others, who claim that the holding of elections, and fairly democratic elections in particular, have positive democratic side effects. Instead of being just a token, by themselves, of some kind of democratic achievement, as "pessimists such as Carothers have claimed, the holding of elections has a cumulative consequence for democracy's future. And there is even, according to our findings, evidence of a short-term effect. Current elections have a democratizing potential, but it applies only in the brief wake of an election or, marred by uncertainty, in the non-electoral arena of democracy.

Joining the "optimist" party, we would maintain, accordingly, that support for the holding of elections, and preferably really plural and democratic elections, is indeed a desirable activity on the part of both domestic and international actors. As it seems, elections set the stage for a process of democratic learning in the countries in case. Therefore, it is advantageous to introduce elections as soon as possible, and to make them going and eventually more plural in character. The project may derail, but nevertheless it will pay off, both in the short and the long run. Having said this, the effects we may register are not very large in substantial terms. No democratizing miracles should thus be expected from electoral experience.

Notes

[1] We have imputed missing values for 749 country year observations by regressing the average FH/Polity index on the FH scores, which have better country coverage than Polity.

[2] Golder's (2005) data, recording the holding of both presidential and parliamentary elections in 1946-2000, was used for robustness tests in preliminary data analysis, without leading to any substantially different conclusions than the ones reported below.

[3] Lindberg (2006) stresses the importance of a *consecutive* series of nominally competitive elections. To capture this concept, we also computed a version of the cumulative stock variable which was set to zero if a period of noncompetitive (or the absence of) elections followed a period of competitive elections (that is, if Vanhanen's indicator of competitiveness

turned zero after a period of positive values). This version however performed less well in our tests than the historical stock variable that disregards breaks in a consecutive series.

[4] As a robustness test, we also computed the effective number of cumulative democratic elections using the Polity data as our measure of democracy in election years. Results obtained were no different (although from a more limited sample of countries).

[5] More precisely, we have followed this procedure for the following countries: all the former member states of the USSR and the People's Republic of Yugoslavia (until 1991), the Czech and Slovak Republics (until 1992), Timor-Leste (a part of Indonesia until 2002), Bangladesh (a part of Pakistan until 1971), Eritrea (a part of Ethiopia until 1993), Iceland (a part of Denmark until 1944), Ireland (a part of the UK until 1921), Yemen (a continuation of North and South Yemen from 1991), South Yemen (a part of Yemen until 1966), and East Germany (a part of Germany until 1948). We treat West Germany as a continuation of inter-war Germany, reunified Germany as a continuation of West Germany, Vietnam as a continuation of North Vietnam, and Ethiopia after the secession of Eritrea, Pakistan after the secession of Bangladesh and North Yemen after the secession of South Yemen, as a continuation of themselves, which means that no data needs to be filled in for these countries.

[6] We include the election variables both at time t and at time $t-1$ in order to take into account the fact that elections are unlikely to occur on two consecutive years (only 10 % of all elections are held the year after another election), which makes the election variable negatively autocorrelated temporally ($r=-.15$). As a result of this, the one-year lagged effect of holding an election is negative (albeit not significant) if entered alone into the model.

[7] However, this impact again hinges on two relatively extreme outliers: Panama in 1989 and Zambia in 1991. With these two cases excluded, the election effect is rendered completely insignificant (coef=.049; se=.042, p=.244).

[8] These outliers are again Panama in 1989 and Zambia 1991, but now in addition Bangladesh in 1991. With these three cases excluded, the election effect remains significant at the 5 % level (coef=.114; se=.045, p=.011).

[9] These outliers are Panama in 1990 and Uruguay in 1989. With them excluded, the election effect is completely insignificant (coef=.048; se=.036; p=.183).

[10] If Panama is also excluded, the remaining effect is insignificant (coef=.064; se=.039; p=.103).

[11] These outliers are Kuwait in 1990, Angola in 1991, Thailand in 1976 and the Slovak Republic in 1998. Without them, the cumulative election effect remains significant at the 5 % level (coef=.124; se=.052; p=.018).

[12] In order to arrive at this conclusion, we have followed the approach developed in Teorell and Hadenius (2007), where separate models are run for all observations with positive change in the democracy variable (upturns) and those with negative change (downturns). It then turns out that most of the effects reported in table 5 and 6 appear in the latter case.

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Table 1. Democratizing Effects of Parliamentary/Executive Elections (FH/Polity)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Any election at time t	.311***	.287***		
	(.034)	(.033)		
Any election at time t–1	.035	.032		
	(.034)	(.034)		
Multiparty election at time t			.407***	.375***
			(.036)	(.036)
Multiparty election at time t–1			.077**	.063*
			(.037)	(.037)
Control variables	NO	YES	NO	YES
Adjusted R^2	.056	.095	.070	.107

* significant at the .10-level, ** significant at the .05-level, *** significant at the .01-level.

No. of observations = 2771; No. of countries = 145; Time period covered = 1976-2002

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, with OLS standard errors within parentheses. Either parliamentary or executive are counted (the source is DPI), with multiparty elections defined by the limited multiparty/democratic regimes of Hadenius & Teorell. The dependent variable is yearly change in the mean FH/Polity measure of democracy (scored 0–10). In all models, two one-year lags of the dependent variable are entered in order to purge the standard errors from serial autocorrelation. In models with control variables the following factors, lagged one year (where appropriate), are included: British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Belgian/Italian/Dutch colonial background; the proportion of Protestants, Orthodox Christians, Christians of other denomination, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Nonreligious and of Other denomination; ethno-linguistic and religious fractionalization; the log of the country area; a composite index of socio-economic modernization; oil and minerals; trade and capital flows; democratic diffusion at the level of neighboring states, within regions, and globally; membership in democratic regional organizations; growth and inflation; demonstrations, strikes and riots.

Table 2. Democratizing Effects of Parliamentary/Executive Elections (Polity)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Any election, within-year lagged at time t	.091** (.043)	.078* (.043)		
Multiparty election, within-year lagged at time t			.187*** (.047)	.161*** (.046)
Control variables	NO	YES	NO	YES
Adjusted R^2	.030	.070	.035	.073

* significant at the .10-level, ** significant at the .05-level, *** significant at the .01-level.

No. of observations = 2618; No. of countries = 135; Time period covered = 1975-2002.

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, with OLS standard errors within parentheses. The dependent variable is yearly change in the mean Polity measure of democracy (scored 0–10). The within-year lag is approximated by excluding elections held in the same month or after the beginning of a "new regime" (i.e., when a shift of 1.5 or more in the Polity score occurs), or elections held in the same month as the end of the "old regime" occurs. For other details, see table note of Table 1.

Table 3. Democratizing Effects of Parliamentary/Executive Elections (FH's CL):
   Controlling for Political Rights

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Any election at time *t*	−.012	−.028		
	(.034)	(.034)		
Any election at time *t*–1	.045	.036		
	(.034)	(.033)		
Multiparty election at time *t*			.041	.022
			(.037)	(.036)
Multiparty election at time *t*–1			.077**	.065*
			(.036)	(.036)
Change in FH's Political Rights	.354***	.343***	.350***	.339***
	(.014)	(.014)	(.014)	(.014)
Control variables	NO	YES	NO	YES
Adjusted R^2	.208	.243	.209	.244

* significant at the .10-level, ** significant at the .05-level, *** significant at the .01-level.

No. of observations = 2772; No. of countries = 145; Time period covered = 1976-2002.

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, with OLS standard errors within parentheses. The dependent variable is yearly change in Freedom House's Civil Liberties rating (scored 0–10). In all models, a one-year lags of the dependent variable are entered in order to purge the standard errors from serial autocorrelation. For other details, see table note of Table 1.

Table 4. Democratizing Effects of Parliamentary/Executive Elections (FH's CL):
NOT Controlling for Political Rights

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Any election at time t	.133***	.109***		
	(.037)	(.037)		
Any election at time $t–1$	.058	.047		
	(.037)	(.037)		
Multiparty election at time t			.211***	.184***
			(.040)	(.039)
Multiparty election at time $t–1$			.102**	.088**
			(.040)	(.040)
Control variables	NO	YES	NO	YES
Adjusted R^2	.026	.073	.031	.078

* significant at the .10-level, ** significant at the .05-level, *** significant at the .01-level.

No. of observations = 2772; No. of countries = 145; Time period covered = 1976-2002.

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, with OLS standard errors within parentheses. For other details, see table note of Table 3.

Table 5. Democratizing Effects of the Cumulative Number of Multiparty Elections (FH's CL)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Cumulative Number of Multiparty	.015***	.006	.061***	.054**
Elections at time *t*–1	(.004)	(.004)	(.022)	(.023)
Parliamentary election at time *t*	–.040	–.052	–.050	–.053
	(.033)	(.033)	(.033)	(.033)
Change in FH's Political Rights	.342***	.333***	.333***	.333***
	(.018)	(.018)	(.018)	(.018)
Control variables	NO	YES	YES	YES
Square root of elections	NO	NO	YES	YES
Time-weighted elections	NO	NO	NO	YES
Adjusted R^2	.208	.234	.235	.234

* significant at the .10-level, ** significant at the .05-level, *** significant at the .01-level.

No. of observations = 2939; No. of countries = 151; Time period covered = 1974-2002.

Note: All multiparty parliamentary elections since 1919 are counted (the source is Banks, using Vanhanen's indicator of competition>0 as the criterion for multiparty elections). The dependent variable is yearly change in the Freedom House Civil Liberties rating (scored 0–10). In all models, a one-year lag of the dependent variable is entered in order to purge the standard errors from serial autocorrelation. For other details, see table note of Table 1.

Table 6. Democratizing Effects of the Cumulative Number of Democratic Elections (FH CL's)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Effective Number of Cumulative Democratic Elections at time t–1	.056*** (.013)	.022 (.016)	.153*** (.055)	.127** (.058)
Parliamentary election at time t	–.035 (.033)	–.051 (.033)	–.048 (.033)	–.052 (.033)
Change in FH's Political Rights	.343*** (.018)	.333*** (.018)	.334*** (.018)	.333*** (.018)
Control variables	NO	YES	YES	YES
Square root of elections	NO	NO	YES	YES
Time-weighted elections	NO	NO	NO	YES
Adjusted R^2	.208	.234	.236	.235

* significant at the .10-level, ** significant at the .05-level, *** significant at the .01-level.

No. of observations = 2939; No. of countries = 151; Time period covered = 1974-2002.

Note: All parliamentary elections since 1919 are counted (the source is Banks), weighted by the level of democracy at election year (according to the Vanhanen's index of democracy, scored 0–1). The dependent variable is yearly change in the Freedom House Civil Liberties rating (scored 0–10). In all models, a one-year lag of the dependent variable is entered in order to purge the standard errors from serial autocorrelation. For other details, see table note of Table 1.