Bringing Down Dictators: American Democracy Promotion and Electoral Revolutions in Postcommunist Eurasia

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Bringing Down Dictators: 
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by 
Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik 

Abstract 
The war in Iraq has led many to question whether the United States has the capacity to promote democracy abroad. In this paper, we analyze recent American efforts to support democratic change in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia—in this case, by supporting elections from 1996-2005 that led to the defeat of dictators and the empowerment of the liberal opposition. We argue that this approach to democracy promotion—the electoral model—can be quite successful, both in the sense of providing an important democratic opening and in the sense of diffusing easily from one semi-authoritarian political context to another. It is successful because it is both modular and modest, and because it invests not just in democratic results, but also democratic practices. 

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Introduction

The American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, coupled with the internal war that has engulfed that country since the Bush administration declared victory, has led many analysts to question both the commitment and the capacity of the United States to promote democracy abroad. Debates about this question have focused in particular on two issues. First, its rhetoric to the contrary: is democracy promotion in fact a high priority for American foreign policy? The decision to invade Iraq was premised on arguments about weapons of mass destruction and Saddam Hussein’s support of international terrorism—arguments that were replaced by a democracy promotion rationale, once the empirical support for the original justifications failed to materialize. Moreover, it would hardly seem coincidental that the fall of Saddam Hussein led to expanded American access to Iraqi oil. Finally, there is the well-known history of fickle American commitment to supporting democratic governments, particularly when those governments are coded by American public officials as unreliable allies—for example, American interventions to overthrow elected governments in Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, Brazil in the mid-1960s, and Chile in 1973 (Kinzer, 2003; Lowenthal, 1991; Pastor, 1999a, 1999b; Cooley, 2005). These actions, of course, grew out of the foreign policy priorities of the Cold War. However, there are reasons to see the new framing of the American international project—the war on terror—as providing some similar pressures on American foreign policy, with the familiar consequence that perceived tensions between democracy promotion and American security interests are resolved by preferring security over democracy. This is evident, for example, in the muted criticisms by the United States and the European Union of both Russian aggression in Chechnya and a recent pattern of flawed elections in that country; American support for the military dictatorship in Pakistan; and the ambivalent messages about support of democratic politics in such oil-rich and strategically-located states as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.

Even if we assume that a core goal in Iraq has at least become democracy promotion, then a second question presents itself. Is the U.S. capable of promoting democracy abroad? The invasion of Iraq has led to an escalating internal war, not democratic governance—the window-dressing of elections and a constitution notwithstanding. Moreover, just as the Bush administration seems to have seriously misread the Iraqi context when it went to war, so it has made a number of blunders since then that have made an environment already inhospitable in some ways to democracy far more so (Lawson, 2003; Diamond, 2004; Dobbins, 2005; Brown, 2005; Peceny, 2005; but see Dawisha and Dawisha, 2003; and, more generally, on democratization through military intervention, Watts, 2005). Finally, there is the more general question of whether democracy can be in fact promoted effectively by external actors. Most specialists on transitions to democracy concur that democratization is a largely domestic process (Hobsbawm, 2004). Moreover, external actors usually lack the knowledge, the stakes, the long-

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1 We are indebted to Vladimir Micic and Sara Rzyeva for the research assistance and to the Smith Richardson Foundation and the International Center for Nonviolent Conflict for their support of this project.

2 There is some irony in this outcome. As one source at the CIA personally communicated to the two authors, the discussion at the CIA prior to the war did not focus on whether military action was advisable—largely because key players at the CIA understood that the Bush administration was committed to invading Iraq. Instead, the debate centered on three possible rationales for the intervention—weapons of mass destruction, support of terrorists and democratization. The conclusion of this debate was that the first argument was the best; the second problematic (as Colin Powell, for example, also recognized when he dropped large parts of that argument from the first draft of his speech to the UN); and the third the weakest.
term commitment, and the control over the levers of change that are essential for transforming long-lived dictatorships into democratic polities. The post-World War II occupations of Japan and Germany, in short, were exceptional opportunities—as John Dower (2003) has observed. Finally, external interventions in support of democracy have often had effects that undermine democratic development, the intentions of international democracy promoters to the contrary. For example, such interventions can exacerbate local inequalities in access to money and power and thereby fuel internal resentments of both the beneficiaries of Western assistance and their foreign patrons; they can generate dependency relations that provide a fragile foundation for democratic politics; and they can distort domestic politics and policy-making by focusing domestic priorities on whatever happens to be the “in issue” at the moment for the international development community (see, for example, Grodeland, 2005; Krastev, 2004; Aksartova, 2005a, 2005b; Borzell and Risse, 2004; Carothers, 2004; Henderson, 2003; Mendelson and Glenn, 2002).

Electoral Revolutions as an Alternative

Before we conclude that the U.S. lacks both the commitment and the capacity to promote democracy abroad, however, we need to look beyond the Iraqi intervention—which was, after all, an unusual action, at least from an historical perspective, for the United States to take. In direct contrast to Iraq, most American efforts to promote democracy have involved one of four models: 1) using force to end political disorder and to restore democratic politics (as in Liberia and Haiti); 2) intervening in association with international organizations to end internal wars and build democratic polities (as in Bosnia); 3) building democracy after major wars through long-term occupation of aggressor states (Japan and Germany), or; 4) investing in the longer-term in such building blocks of a democratic order as rule of law, civil society and free and fair elections in polities perceived to be either new democracies or authoritarian regimes on the cusp of a democratic transition. Indeed, once we focus on these more common approaches and contexts for external engagement in democracy promotion, we find numerous examples where the international community, including the United States, seems to have had some positive effects on subsequent democratic development (Watts, 2005; Finkel, et.al., 2005; Mendelson, 2004; but see Bunce, 2005a, 2005d).

The recent electoral revolutions in Slovakia (1998), Croatia (2000), Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), and Ukraine (2004) are cases in point (see Reichardt, 2002; Pribecevic, 2004; Bieber, 2003; Silitski, 2005a, 2005b; Tucker, 2005; Wheatley, 2005; Karumidze and Wertsch, 2005; Miller, 2004; McFaul, 2005; Way, 2005a, 2005b; Kuzio, 2005; Kubicek, 2005). In all of these countries, there have been presidential or parliamentary elections since 1998 where liberal oppositions managed to defeat authoritarian incumbents or their anointed successors and where, as a result, elections, sometimes combined with mass protests, were instrumental in both ridding the polity of an authoritarian leader and moving these countries in a more democratic direction. The United States, moreover, provided support in all of these cases for regime transition through elections. Thus, while the electoral model shares the same overarching purpose as the intervention in Iraq (or bringing down a dictator), it diverges from the Iraqi dynamic in most other respects—for example, regime context (Iraq under Hussein had no democratic elements), democratic versus military approaches to regime change, and long-term external assistance versus short-term interventions. However, perhaps the most important contrast is between an
immediate and sustained shift in the direction of democratic politics versus a descent into disorder.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze these electoral revolutions in the postcommunist region and the role of the United States in promoting democracy through electoral transformation. We begin the analysis by providing a brief overview of American democracy promotion in general and in the specific case of postcommunist Eurasia. It is not accidental, for example, that electoral revolutions (or elections that produce regime change) have tended to cluster in this region in particular—though their origins were in fact elsewhere (in the Philippines and Chile) and though similar electoral confrontations, though with less positive results, have taken place over the past several decades, with the most recent examples in the Sub-Saharan African countries of Togo, Zimbabwe, the Ivory Coast, and Ethiopia. We then turn to an analysis of the electoral model of regime change—its development and core components, its diffusion within the postcommunist region, and the conditions that seem to contribute to its success (at least in the narrow sense of removing illiberal leaders or their allies from office). In this part of the analysis, we will focus not just on the pivotal elections since 1998 in Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, but also earlier failures in these cases to dislodge illiberal governments and recent failures in some other countries in the region, such as Armenia, Belarus and Azerbaijan. In the final section of the paper, we will confront a controversial question that is on the minds of not just democracy promoters and those who analyze them, but also leaders of regimes, such as in Azerbaijan, Belarus, China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Uzbekistan and Venezuela, who have recently expressed fears that the United States may be targeting them next for electoral interventions. Borrowing from the theme of their complaints: is it accurate to argue that the United States engineered these electoral revolutions?

American Democracy Promotion

There is a substantial literature on the history of American democracy promotion abroad. The first efforts in this direction appeared during the Presidency of Woodrow Wilson (Drake, 1991), but these priorities proved to be short-lived, given the return to isolationism in the interwar years and, after the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War, perceived tensions in many contexts between American security interests and American support of either democratization or democratic regimes (see, for example, Kinzer, 2003; Lowenthal, 1991; Carothers, 1999, 2004; Peceny, 1999). It was during the Carter and Reagan administrations, however, that democracy promotion once again emerged as an important goal in American foreign policy—a shift in priorities that deepened with the administrations that followed (see, for example, Carothers, 1999, 2004; Pevehouse, 2002; Watts, 2005; Peceny, 1999; Cox, Ikenberry, and Inoguchi, 2000; Santa Cruz, 2003; Talbott, 1996; Aksartova, 2005a, 2005b; Monten, 2005). As a result, by the 1990s, American foreign policy was premised on the goals of defending,

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3 We are concentrating on the American role in democracy promotion, largely because the U.S. dominates the field of democracy promoters in terms of the money it has invested, the complex networks it has supported, and the speed with which it responds to opportunities for democratic change in the international system. That recognized, however, the U.S. does share the stage with such important players as the Open Society, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Carter Center, the Open Society, the German party foundations, the Organization of American States, the European Union and the like (see, for example, Vachudova, 2005; Pevehouse, 2004; Sedelmeier, 2005; Fisher, 2005). However, most analysts close to developments on the ground concur that the United States leads the pack. See, however, Linden (2002) and Zielonka and Pravda (2001) for discussions of the impact of the EU on the institutions and policies of states seeking to become members.
supporting and even exporting democratic governance. This produced in practice a range of activities—for example, using economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation to pressure dictatorships to liberalize; investing in the development of civil society, rule of law and, more generally, democratic institutions, including elections, in emerging democracies; providing economic and political incentives to states that were perceived to be making progress in meeting democratic standards; monitoring elections; and using diplomacy and the military to end internal wars and promote democratic politics (see, for example, Pevehouse, 2002; Marinov, 2004).

Why has democracy promotion become such an important priority for the United States and for other international actors, such as the European Union and the Organization of American States (see Sedelmeier, 2005; Borzell and Risse, 2004; Vachudova, 2005; Pevehouse, 2002; Fisher, 2005; Santa Cruz, 2004)? A number of analysts have addressed this question, highlighting, for example, such factors as the global wave of democratization since the mid-1970s and its implicit lessons that democracy has become a global value, that democracy can be crafted, even in seemingly inhospitable circumstances, and that external support, especially in countries that already feature some democratic elements, can be extremely helpful; mounting empirical evidence that democracy (and its building blocks of civil society and social capital) carries with it other desirable benefits, such as more rapid and more equitable economic growth, a higher quality of human life, and a less aggressive foreign policy; the proliferation of domestic and international nongovernmental organizations, often supported by USAID, the EU and a variety of other organizations, such as the Soros Foundation and the German political foundations; and the rise of new international norms supporting both democratic governance and the right of powerful states and international organizations to violate state sovereignty in order to end internal wars and large-scale violations of human rights (see, for example, Monten, 2005; Santa Cruz, 2004; McFaul, 2004/2005; Aksartova, 2005a, 2005b; Bunce, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d; Pevehouse, 2002; Finnemore, 2003; Vachudova, 2005; Jacoby, 2004; Van Wersch and de Zeeuw, 2005; Brinks and Coppedge, 2005; Thomas, 2001; Finkel, et.al., 2005; Nadia and Zweifel, 2003; Eizenstat, Porter and Weinstein, 2005; Siegle, Weinstein and Halperin, 2004; Hermann, 2005). To this list of long-term developments can be added two more influences that were more short-term in nature. One was the end of the Cold War, which, among other things, helped the U.S. ease the tensions between its political values and its geopolitical interests, while at the same time having the more concrete consequence of enabling the Security Council to achieve the unanimity it required to intervene in support of ending internal wars, organizing elections, and building democratic polities (Anderson and Dodd, 2005). The other is 9/11 and the ways in which this attack on the United States linked an already developed American commitment to democracy promotion with a new line of argument that democratization held the key to undermining political environments that foster terrorism.

Democracy Promotion and Regional Specialization

The United States, however, has not promoted democracy in equitable fashion throughout the non-Western world. In fact, since the early 1990s, the focus of American efforts in this regard has concentrated on two regions in particular: Latin America and postcommunist Eurasia (Finkel, et.al., 2005). The interest in Latin America reflects four considerations: the long engagement of the U.S. in this area because of its geographical proximity and its economic importance, its long history of both political instability and regime shifts, the remarkable region-wide movement (with Cuba and the failed state of Haiti providing exceptions) towards
democratic politics since the mid-1980s, and, finally, the transformation of the Organization of American States by the late 1980s into an institution committed above all else to safeguarding democratic politics in the hemisphere. Indeed, it was in Latin America that the international norm of election-monitoring first developed—a key component of the electoral model (as will be discussed below) and a major mechanism by which the U.S., international institutions, such as the OAS, the UN and OSCE, and domestic actors could export their democratic project (see Santa Cruz, 2003; Pastor, 1999a, 1999b; Eisenstadt, 1999).

The preoccupation with democracy promotion in the postcommunist region dates from the end of the Cold War. Here, it is important to recognize that, for the past decade and a half, the U.S. has devoted more resources to democracy promotion in this region than in any other; whether one examines, for instance, patterns in general in USAID funding or such support on a per-capita or per-state basis (Finkel, et.al., 2005). Indeed, since the mid-1990s (when Shevardnadze returned to power in war-torn Georgia and stabilized its politics), Georgia has ranked second only to Israel with respect to U.S. aid, and Ukraine has not ranked very far behind (see Devdariani, 2003). In addition, on a per capita basis, Georgia has received more money than any other country from the Millennium Account.4

American involvement in democracy promotion in the postcommunist region has taken diverse forms. Thus, the United States has made long-term investments in civil society; offered outspoken (though inconsistent) criticisms of violations of civil liberties and political rights (most recently in Uzbekistan, but more grudgingly in Russia); and promoted the electoral/protest model of political change in a variety of hybrid regimes. In addition, the U.S. has engaged in more short-term and aggressive actions—for instance, ending the war in Bosnia in 1995 through the Dayton Peace Accords and, later, pressing NATO to carry out a bombing campaign in Serbia in 1999.

Why has postcommunist Eurasia loomed so large in the American international campaign for democracy? There are several reasons. First, there are geographical habits dating from the Cold War—habits that are hard to discard, given the considerable investment in expertise in this region in both the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department. For example, during the Cold War, fully one-half of the research wing of the CIA was devoted to analysis of the Soviet Union, with perhaps another fifteen percent analyzing Eastern Europe.

The end of the Cold War, however, did not lead to the re-thinking these habits, not simply because mental geographies resist change, but also because the postcommunist region features a cluster of characteristics that encourage continuing, if not expanding American engagement—in general and with respect to democracy promotion in particular. First, more and more countries in this region are in a position, despite their small populations and weak economies, to influence both Western Europe and the United States—for example, through their energy endowments and their pipelines (with oil and gas deposits in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Russia and key pipelines in Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus and Poland); the eastward expansion of both the European Union and NATO, which has had important consequences for both EU and American investments in democratic politics not just in the new postcommunist members of these institutions, but also in the neighbors of these new members (as evident, for example, in security partnerships through NATO, the Partnership and Cooperative Agreements concluded in the 1990s between the EU and the former Soviet successor states (minus the three Baltic countries), ongoing negotiations with the EU to meet the conditions of accession for candidate members (Bulgaria and Romania) or to move towards candidate status, and the European

4 Our thanks to Stephen Jones for providing this information.
Stability Initiative); and the strategic location of some of these states as a result of the war on terror (with Russia, the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan neighboring, for example, North Korea, China, Afghanistan and Iran). Yet another factor that draws in the United States is that there is one state in the postcommunist region—Russia—that has a formidable international profile. While an American ally in the war on terror, Russia also remains a nuclear power; it is extraordinarily rich in natural resources; and it exerts significant impact on many of its neighbors, including, for example, its close alliance with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and its continuing and destabilizing interventions in secessionist regions in both Georgia and Moldova.

The United States has also been drawn to the postcommunist region in particular, because of the significant opportunities it offers for American influence in general and democracy promotion in particular. During the first decade of postcommunism, the most common regime form in the region was a hybrid of democracy and dictatorship that featured continuing competition for power between communists, illiberal nationalists, or some combination of the two, on the one hand, and liberal opposition forces, on the other (Bunce, 1999, 2005c; Levitsky and Way, 2002; Ottaway, 2003). For many American-based democracy promoters, the understandable assumption—and one that has been supported by recent analyses of the diffusion of democracy—has been that hybrid regimes provided the best opportunity for international actors to make a political difference (Brinks and Coppedge, 2005; also see Bunce, 2005c). The logic is inescapable: while full-scale democracies need little assistance, full-scale dictatorships are hard to penetrate, lack democratic assets, and provide few local allies. In addition, the postcommunist region presented significant opportunities for democratic diffusion, given, for example, the presence of some democratic “success” stories and their similarities, as a result of communism, to other states in region with respect to the agenda of transition and obstacles to transition. Indeed, it is fair to say that this region is unusually “regional,” not just because of the homogenizing impact of communism, but also because of a history that predates communism of collaborations among dissident groups across state boundaries. This history also helps explain the willingness of at least some of the east-central European states that joined the European Union in 2004—most notably the Poles and the Slovaks—to apply for funds from the EU to spread the democratic and capitalist word to states east and south of them.

At the same time, it is important to recognize, in direct contrast to Latin America, that the United States is in fact quite popular throughout the postcommunist region, particularly among political elites. Specific US actions, ranging from the bombing of Serbia in connection with the conflict in Kosovo in 1999 and more recently the war in Iraq, are often reflected in temporary declines, sometimes quite sharp, in favorable sentiment toward the US and a drop in support for the US to play a leading role in world affairs, particularly among mass publics. But most political leaders in the region continue to value American engagement in world and European affairs. This perspective is not simply a matter of recognizing American hegemony. It is also grows out of comparisons between the U.S. and the EU and perceived differences in the foreign policies of the “old” Europe and the United States. Thus, for states that are not yet members of the EU, but where the EU has influence through various agreements, the U.S. is often seen as a more flexible, effective, generous and less hierarchical ally than the EU—which, to borrow from recent interviews conducted by the authors, is often characterized by opinion leaders in these countries as having the all-too-familiar deficiencies of a “socialist bureaucracy.” Moreover, for many of these states (which often border Russia, we must remember), the U.S. is seen as a far more effective constraint on Russian domination—with the EU seen at the same time as
altogether too willing to cave in to Russian concerns. At the same time, for the ten states that joined the EU in 2004 and for candidate members (Bulgaria and Romania), the U.S. is often perceived as an ally that can balance against EU domination. In this sense, both the power and the deficiencies of the EU, as well as the power of Russia, make many leaders in the postcommunist region—and many citizens as well—extremely interested in cultivating the support of the United States.

There is, in addition, a larger consideration. For many political leaders and leaders of opposition parties in the postcommunist Eurasian region, there is a strong belief that the European realist tradition in international affairs translated in practice into supporting the continuation of authoritarian politics during the communist era. By contrast, many of these leaders and in more authoritarian contexts many leaders of more liberal groups consider the United States to be a more consistent champion of democratic values and practices than the EU and certainly Russia. One finds throughout the postcommunist region, as a result, a substantial reservoir of support for the United States and, by association, for American democracy promotion efforts. To provide one telling example: the road running from the airport to the center of Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, is named after George W. Bush.

Thus, for reasons of habit, the changing geography of the EU and NATO, the geopolitics of energy and the war on terror, and local opportunities for democracy promotion, the postcommunist region became by the 1990s the dominant site for American democracy promotion. This region, in short, was at the same time important; open to influence; and capable to producing positive results. That the region featured very high rates of literacy was also influential. This factor may not be as important for democratization as early theories had suggested, but it was for many democracy promoters an important political asset.

The Development of the Electoral Model

As with most innovative political “products,” the electoral model of regime change has complex origins that reflect the merger of developments that are both long-in-the-making and more short-term. There is no need to repeat the many factors, noted above, that contributed to the growing priority of democracy promotion in both American and European foreign policy. More specific to the rise of the electoral model were such developments as the growing role of international election monitoring, beginning in the 1980s; the growth of both domestic and international expertise with respect to public opinion polling, political campaigns, the conduct of free and fair elections, and the invention as well of techniques to ensure fair elections, such as parallel vote tabulation; the increasing focus of international organizations, such as the EU, the OAS, and the United Nations, on electoral processes as the core indicator and guarantor of democratic politics; and growing recognition by both political activists and scholars that a key contributor to successful democratization was not keeping publics at bay (as many transitologists argued earlier when favoring the Spanish model in particular of pacted transitions orchestrated through bargains struck between incumbent and opposition leaders), but, rather, mass mobilization—whether through elections, demonstrations or a combination of the two, as in Portugal, South Korea, the Philippines, much of the postcommunist region, and, indeed, upon closer look, in many of the Latin American cases as well (Garber and Cowan, 1993; Santa Cruz, 2003; Eklit and Reynolds, 2002; Bunce, 2003; Ackerman and Karatnycky, 2005). Central to this process, moreover, was the growing influence of approaches to political change in non-democratic settings that rested upon the use of planned and highly-strategic challenges by
citizens to the right and capacity of oppressive regimes to rule them—an approach that dates back to the early part of the Twentieth Century and that played a central and eventually successful role in defeating communist domination in Central and Eastern Europe (see Ackerman and Duvall, 2000; Schock, 2003).

A final piece of the puzzle was provided by a growing consensus among scholars, policymakers and political activists that elections were in fact the key indicator of democracy. A number of criticisms have been leveled at such reductionist lines of argument, since elections, for example, are often used by authoritarians to legitimate and thereby prolong their rule; since electoral outcomes can serve as a pretext for elites (and powerful international actors) to suspend the democratic rules of the game; and since accountable government, which is after all the overarching purpose of democracy, requires other elements to be in place, such as a rational bureaucracy under the control of elected officials, institutionalized competition for political office, laws that are applied consistently across time, space and circumstance, and, finally, elections that are free, fair and regular (Bunce, 2003, 2005c), as well as, in the eyes of many, a vibrant and well-developed civil society, a democratic political culture among elites and citizens, and a functioning market economy (see Linz and Stepan, 1996). These are compelling criticisms of the minimalist emphasis on elections as the indicator of democracy, but they ignore several key issues that influenced both domestic and international democracy promoters. First, while it is true that elections do not guarantee democracy, it is also true that they are a necessary condition. Second, one of the best predictors of both the subsequent quality and sustainability of democracy in the postcommunist region at least is the outcome of elections. Democracy is always enhanced when liberal oppositions win elections—whether that occurred immediately after the collapse of communist party hegemony or a decade later (Bunce, 2005c).

Finally, precisely because authoritarians often feel compelled to hold elections in order to legitimate themselves, they open themselves up to the possibility of more political change than they anticipated (Lust-Okar, 2004, 2005; Howard and Roessler, 2006; Schedler, 2002; Tucker, 2005). Thus, elections in these settings can often backfire—for example, when usually co-opted opposition groups become competitors in conditions where authoritarian rule seems to be weakening; when oppositions find ways to cooperate with one another; when elections shift in the public mind from a ritual to an opportunity to evaluate regime performance and register genuine political preferences; and when elections manage for a variety of reasons to both increase and focus the energies of both publics and opposition groups. Because they are scheduled, feature high stakes, and are widely understood by citizens as a right that comes with citizenship, elections, far more than other types of political activities, are optimal mechanisms for influencing authoritarian regimes. They have the potential of over-riding collective action problems—especially if publics and opposition groups come to believe that they can voice their true political preferences, that their votes will be aggregated in fair fashion, that the results of the election will conform to the distribution of public sentiments, and, thus, that their participation matters (Tucker, 2005).

Early Experiments

The electoral model of regime change made its first appearance in the Presidential election in the Philippines in 1986 and in the Presidential plebiscite held in Chile in 1988 (see, for example, Ackerman and Duvall, 2000; Garber and Cowan, 1999). In both cases, these elections, as with elections in the past, were presumed by incumbents to be “rigged rituals” that
would deliver to them an easy victory—especially since the elections in both cases were announced suddenly, with the assumption that the opposition would not have time to prepare (which was precisely the logic, and just as flawed, of the communists in Poland when they suddenly called for semi-competitive elections in June, 1989). However, local opponents of the Marcos and Pinochet dictatorships, respectively, in collaboration with the international democratization community, were able to capitalize on their earlier experiences with opposition organization, popular protests, and strategies of non-violent confrontations with the regime and combined these resources with large-scale campaigns to register voters and get out the vote (for example, through the Crusade for Citizen Participation in Chile); monitor the quality of the elections; and educate voters about regime abuses and the importance of seizing the political moment to reject the regime in the Chilean case (the plebiscite offered no alternative candidate) and to support the Acquino-Laurel ticket in the Philippines. Also critical in this process (as it was to be in others) was the willingness of the U.S., albeit rather late in the game in these cases, to take a quick stand rejecting fraudulent election results and, in the case of the Philippines, to go a step further in encouraging Marcos to leave office. While both Marcos and Pinochet lost, however, the transitions to democracy were neither immediate nor trouble-free. However, by most accounts, a corner was turned—a corner that was the result, it must be recognized, of hard work not just during the election, but also years before that. Another remarkable aspect of these two elections is the fact that publics were willing and able, like the opposition, to take the election seriously, rather than ignore or boycott it, and to register in large numbers their real political preferences.

This model of regime change—that is, transforming elections in authoritarian settings into genuinely competitive and fair processes with substantial popular involvement-- then moved to other parts of the world, such as Nicaragua, Indonesia, and eventually Mexico, as well as the postcommunist region. One of the most interesting cases was the Nicaraguan elections of 1990, when the Sandanistas, fearing fraud, but supremely confident of their public support, welcomed international election monitors—who then ended up certifying the victory of the opposition. Just as interesting is the fact that the Sandanistas accepted this judgment, as did, for example, the losers many years later in pivotal elections in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Croatia from 1997-2000. However, in Serbia in 2000 (as in the Philippines and Indonesia before it), the election was immediately followed by popular protests to support an electoral-mandated transfer of political power in the fact of attempts by the incumbents to falsify the election results—a dynamic that also materialized in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004.

Core Components

On the face of it, the electoral model seems relatively simple. However, it rests in practice on optimism, hard work, and considerable planning. First, it is important to recognize that while elections are a moment, they are preceded by a number of developments—for example, long-term development of civil society, aided in part by the international community, and prior rounds of popular protests. Moreover, there are some medium-term elements that influence the effectiveness of the electoral model, such as exploiting media openings (which was particularly important in Georgia, but only during the campaign in Ukraine); building cooperative ties among what is invariably a dispirited and divided opposition; developing public opinion polling where political conditions permit; expanding both the generational and geographical reach of opposition development; and, as already noted, using local elections...
(which should be a wake-up call for the regime, but which often are not) to challenge the regime, bring oppositions together, “practice” campaigns, voter registration, and electoral monitoring; and provide publics with a belief that the regime is vulnerable and the opposition can in fact win elections. To provide some examples: in the cases of Croatia, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, the opposition succeeded in winning some key local elections prior to the “big” election which ended the rule of the Croatian Democratic Union, Milosevic, Shevardnadze and his allies, and the Kuchma/Yanukovitch group, respectively. Moreover, in Slovakia, Georgia, Ukraine and most importantly, Serbia, younger people were organized into popular movements prior to the key election or played key roles in getting out the vote. Otpor in Serbia, for example, originated in 1999 when students organized in opposition to educational reforms that threatened to end the autonomy of Serbian universities. Otpor played a pivotal role—not just in exposing the weakness of the regime (in part through street theatre and other formats) and in reaching out to very young people throughout the country, but also in pressing the opposition to work together and to focus on a leader who could win. It was also Otpor that brought in substantial new supporters to the cause of ending the Milosevic era, such as the Serbian Orthodox Church, which had been a clear supporter of the Milosevic regime since it formed in the second half of the 1980s (though the Georgian Orthodox Church did not make the same switch prior to the electoral revolution in 2003). In Slovakia, young people played a key role in the march across Slovakia which the opposition used to get their message to voters in light of media manipulation by Meciar. They also worked with the Rock the Vote campaign that, together with other actions of the OK98 Campaign, resulted in an 80 percent turnout rate of first time voters, a key element of the oppositions support.

The elections, themselves, also involve considerable efforts. Common to all the electoral revolutions in the postcommunist region were a series of targeted actions. These included significant voter registration and mobilization drives; pressures on regimes to improve the quality of voter lists; pressures on central election commissions to be more representative in their membership, to tighten up their procedures, and to carry out their tasks in a more transparent fashion; wider distribution of campaign materials that advertised the cost of the incumbent regime and encouraged voters that their ballots were critical; far more ambitious campaigns conducted by opposition groups than in the past or in comparison with incumbent politicians and parties (with the Georgian and Ukrainian cases especially notable with respect to the commitment of both Saakashvili and Yushchenko to campaign in every nook and cranny of their countries); sophisticated get-out-the-vote campaigns on election day, in combination with rapid tabulation of votes, often advertised repeatedly during election day through, for example, press conferences (a factor which was critical in Serbia in particular); both internal and external election-monitoring (with only the former in Serbia); and extensive use of both parallel vote tabulation and exit polls, both of which provided a comparative standard against which “official” results could be contrasted.

Finally, the opposition prepared for public protests in the event that the regime lost, but refused to vacate office. This preparation built upon on popular mobilization and protest techniques used in the past, and it capitalized on linkages already made outside the capital and large cities—through the campaign and through the work of civil society organizations which were very numerous and had a long history of cooperation and self-organization in Slovakia, Otpor in Serbia and the “older” Serbian opposition, and the youth organizations in Georgia and Ukraine which had developed in closer relationship to the electoral campaign. However, the success of such protests also depended upon another development: conversations during the
campaign between opposition groupings and security forces that reminded the latter that they had also paid dearly for the costs of the regime. What is striking about the protests that followed elections in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine is the fact that the security forces, even when pressed by the regime to act against protesters, stood by while thousands of people took to the streets—indeed, hundreds of thousands in the cases of Serbia and Ukraine in particular. Critical to this dynamic, however, aside from preparations for peaceful protest and the sheer number of protesters (which makes it harder for security forces to act) are the particular advantages of election-centered protest activity. It is easy for citizens to see fraudulent elections as a denial of fundamental liberties; elections provide a well-defined moment for both hard political choices and significant political change; and the very process of voting has already engaged and mobilized publics.

In all of these aspects of the electoral model, it is important to recognize, the United States provided assistance. While the importance of this assistance will be addressed later, it is important to recognize at the least the irony of this situation. Two examples will suffice. First, there is the example of the 2000 Presidential elections in the U.S., which were so flawed that, by most accounts, they would not have been certified by external election monitors. Indeed, the Russian Duma, presented with an opportunity to challenge the quality of American democracy, voted to send election monitors to the United States. The second example comes from Georgia. The Bush administration sent James Baker to Georgia in the summer, 2003, to persuade his old friend, Eduard Shevardnadze, to tighten up electoral procedures and to allow for both external election monitors and parallel vote tabulation in the coming parliamentary elections. It was the same James Baker who had supervised the re-counting of the Florida election in 2000 and who succeeded, in collaboration with the President’s brother, who was governor, in delivering that state to Bush and thereby determining, together with a five-to-four vote in the Supreme Court, the outcome of the 2000 Presidential election.

Success and Failure

The discussion thus far leaves the misleading impression that the electoral model has been regularly used in semi-authoritarian settings in the postcommunist world, and that attempts to carry out electoral revolutions have usually been successful. In fact, the full application of the electoral model, as specified above, is the exception for most elections most of the time in this region, and the outcome of oppositions winning elections and taking office in semi-authoritarian settings is exceptional as well. Moreover, there are many cases in the region, including elections that preceded the breakthroughs in Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, where attempts by the opposition to use elections to oust authoritarian leaders or to challenge regime claims of victory failed. The uneven success of the electoral model (as seen most recently in Azerbaijan, but also relatively recently in Armenia and Belarus) leads to an obvious question: under what conditions do electoral revolutions succeed in bringing democratic oppositions to power?

We can begin to answer this question by offering some preliminary observations. First, as we saw in 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe when communism fell, a region-wide process of significant political change usually begins in locations that are optimally-configured for change. Just as Poland and Hungary had more developed oppositions and less oppressive economic and political regimes than their neighbors and were thus well-situated to take advantage of not just the Gorbachev reforms, but also, more generally, political disarray in the colonial core, so the...
breaks with communism that followed in other states “borrowed” the precedents set by these two states, but combined them with less domestic raw material supporting political change. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the order of political protests in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 predicts relatively well the ease and thoroughness of subsequent transitions to democracy and capitalism. Demonstration effects, in short, begin with the “strongest cases” and move to the weaker ones (Tarrow, 2005; Beissinger, 2002). In the cases of interest in this paper, the electoral revolutions from 1998 to 2004, there was a similar dynamic—which also spoke in part to the development of the opposition prior to the breakthrough. Thus, the electoral revolutions began in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia, the countries with the “strongest” cases for regime change, and then moved to contexts where the conditions for regime transformation were more mixed. If one indicator of this dynamic is the greater impact of electoral revolutions on producing a shift to the fully free rating in Freedom House (which is what happened with Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Croatia and, most recently, Serbia), then another is the reliance, beginning with Serbia in 2000, on public protests after the elections to force authoritarian leaders to give up power.

Second, while the components of the electoral model are relatively constant across our successful cases, we should not assume that there is an unchanging formula for such revolutions to succeed. There are in fact many differences among the Slovak, Croatian, Serbia, Georgian and Ukrainian dynamics—though all five, again, featured full-fledged electoral models, as detailed earlier. For example, some of the elections involved merely selecting parliaments (and sometimes with that either important or less important governments, depending upon the design of the polity), and some were presidential elections; some of the revolutions depended in key ways on vigorous and large youth movements, whereas in other cases such movements were far less important (with Serbia the exemplar of the first example and Georgia the second); some of the elections were for new leaders (though incumbents selected successors, such as with Kuchma and Yanukovitch in Ukraine) and others were direct verdicts on long-serving leaders; and some opposition leaders were charismatic and conducted remarkably sophisticated campaigns (which describes, for example, both Saakashvili of Georgia and Yushchenko of Ukraine), while others were deficient in both regards (with Kostunica of Serbia a prime example). The regime context also varied. For example, the media were relatively open in Georgia. Indeed, the independent television station, Rustavi2, played a movie, “Bringing Down a Dictator,” that chronicled the fall of Milosevic in Serbia through popular protests, not once, but twice before the November, 2004 parliamentary elections! To provide another example: there were seventeen thousand external monitors for the November, 2004 elections in Ukraine. By contrast, the media were quite closed in Serbia in 2000, and there were no external monitors. Similarly, in Slovakia, where the NGO sector and the political opposition were harassed under Meciar but had more freedom of action than oppositions in most of our other cases, the government nonetheless controlled most television outlets. Finally, extraordinary resources in one arena can compensate for limitations in other areas. The remarkable work of Otpor and the long history of Serbian protests (including three months of protests from 1996-1997), for example, went very far in compensating for the constraints on political change in Serbia as a result of a regime that had in fact become more repressive from 1997 to the 2000 elections.

With these considerations in mind and taking failed electoral revolutions into account, let us now highlight some factors that seem to be helpful for success. Let us turn, first, to some longer-term considerations. First, one contrast is in the development of civil society. To take the Caucasus as one example: there is no question that Georgia had far more numerous and experienced civil society organizations than the other two states in the region, or Armenia and
Azerbaijan (see, for example, the estimates by USAID, 2005; but note the overall weakness of civil society in the region as a whole—Howard, 2003, 2002). A similarly sharp contrast appears when we compare Slovakia, Serbia, Ukraine, and Croatia with, say, Belarus—the most dictatorial regime of the entire group (Silitski, 2005a, 2005b). Second, in all of the successful cases, illiberal leaders were closely associated with financial scandals, escalating levels of corruption, and in many instances violence against political opponents (this was particularly the case for Milosevic and Kuchma/Yanukovitch). While this phenomenon is far from unusual in this region, what makes these cases stand out is that these scandals were widely discussed, and they had served as the focus in all of the successful cases of earlier rounds of public protests. However, another common indicator of regime failure, or economic decline and growing socio-economic inequalities, is not a good predictor, given the sharp contrast, for example, between these economic factors in Ukraine, Croatia and especially Slovakia versus the economic disasters of both Serbia and Georgia (though Georgia in fact features remarkably few people under the poverty line, and Ukraine’s recent economic upturn still left that country as one of the slowest growing economies in the region over the past fifteen years—a dubious distinction—see Bunce, 2005c; also see Kuzio, 2005).

A third and distinguishing commonality is the accumulation of highly visible indicators that the power of the leader has shifted in important ways, with the leader appearing to lose allies, to be more nervous about his control, or to become more careless and more extreme in his exercise of power. Examples here include defections from the ruling circle (as occurred in Serbia, Ukraine and Georgia) and evidence that the ruling coalition was disintegrating (which was particularly evident with CUG in Georgia), popular protests aimed at the leader (as in Serbia regularly, but also in both Ukraine and Georgia several years before the key election), losses in earlier local elections and even parliamentary elections, and actions that violated widely-held norms for political conduct (for example, the involvement of forces close to Meciar in the kidnapping of President Kovac’s son and the firebombing of the car of an officer investigating this event in Slovakia, and the involvement of both Milosevic and Kuchma in political murders). In the Slovak case, it was also clear that the reelection of Meciar would have dramatically decreased Slovakia’s chances of becoming a member of the EU and NATO. Just as striking is another common pattern that distinguishes the successful cases from recent elections in, say, Azerbaijan and Belarus. While both Aliyev and Lukashenko ran energetic campaigns, the same could not be said for Yanukovitch, Milosevic, and Shevardnadze’s allies in particular. Indeed, a theme that emerged in the interviews in both Georgia and Serbia was the seeming lack of engagement, (by Shevardnadze in particular), in the electoral process.

Another factor distinguishing among successful and failed electoral revolutions is a pronounced increase in the engagement of the United States—as indicated, for example, by providing significant electoral assistance, signaling dissatisfaction when elections appear to be fraudulent, and providing support to liberal oppositions who succeed in winning power. The United States, of course, always supports free and fair elections, but in the cases of Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, the U.S. devoted more resources to the electoral project; expressed concerns about whether the regime in power would run fair elections; sometimes signaled its desire to see incumbents lose (especially in Serbia, where the goal was getting rid of the “butcher of the Balkans,” as Madeleine Albright put it, but coming close to the same position for that other “butcher of the Balkans,” Franjo Tudjman, whose death in 1999 opened up the possibility of defeat for the long-governing HDZ and also in Slovakia, where US officials made it clear that Slovakia would not get into NATO if Meciar were in power); supported protesters in
the streets (and quickly, as in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine); and promised considerable support to the new government. The American messages in all of these cases were clear, but they were far more muddled in the recent election, for example, in Azerbaijan, where protesters (prevented from coming to the center of Baku) complained that the United States failed to back them.

Finally, there are the details of electoral dynamics. What we see in all of the successful cases is a detailed, though imperfectly-coordinated development of a very large network of local, regional and international players in support of three key developments: the prolonged, frustrating, but ultimately successful (if all-too-often temporary) construction of a large and unified opposition (composed, for example, of no less than eighteen parties in Serbia); identification of a single opposition leader who was most likely to win widespread public support (a process that was most important for presidential races, with Serbia being the most “iffy” in this regard until Djindjic agreed to defer to Kostunica); and implementation of what has already been identified as the electoral model. It is fair to say that these processes were much more developed in all three respects in the successful cases than in the failures. One example is the sheer size of the popular protests in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine contrasted with the smaller and far more chaotic demonstrations in, say, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Belarus and Azerbaijan. This contrast, moreover, holds up, even if we control for the repressiveness of the regime. While such predictions are always hazardous, it can be argued that there were good reasons to assume that the Milosevic regime, for example, was more likely to use violence to stay in power than the regimes in, say, Armenia or Kyrgyzstan (St. Protic, 2005; but see Pavlovic, 2005 on the “softer” side of Serbian authoritarianism).

How Important was the United States?

The “colored revolutions” have produced a rather exotic and cross-regional alliance, consisting, for example, of Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, various writers for the Guardian, Vladimir Putin of Russia, the current leaders of China, Uzbekistan, and Zimbabwe, as well as the recently deposed leader of Kyrgyzstan (see, for example, Herd, 2005; Nygren, 2005a, 2005b). These leaders have argued in concert that the United States carried out coups d’etat in Georgia and Ukraine in particular. The Slovak, Croatian, and Serbian cases figure less prominently in these arguments, because they are not members of the former Soviet space, but supporters of the ousted leaders made similar charges in these cases as well. Indeed, this charge, plus reassurances that such revolutions could never happen in Kyrgyzstan, even became the focus of a small book written by President Akar Akayev and published a month and half before he was deposed in the Kyrgyz parliamentary elections! While politics often makes some strange bedfellows, it is important, nonetheless, to transform their allegations into a question: did American assistance, or, less charitably, American interventions, play a decisive role in fomenting the electoral revolutions in Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine?

There are some reasons to argue that U.S. involvement was, in fact, critical. As noted above, there were in fact some significant differences among the successful cases, yet one clear commonality was the strong commitment of the United States to free, fair and competitive elections in these countries, with such elections understood to perform two related tasks: defeating illiberal incumbents and successors and investing in the quality and sustainability of democracy. Moreover, in all of our cases, success followed on failure. A simple comparison brings this point home. While the massive public protests in Serbia in 1996-1997 (which lasted 88 days) failed in bringing down Milosevic, large protests three and one-half years later
succeeded, and did so relatively quickly. One difference between the two rounds was that the United States was a bystander in 1996-1997 (because of the Dayton Peace Accords), whereas the United States was deeply committed to defeating Milosevic in 2000 (though there were some other important differences that should not be overlooked, such as the facts that the 2000 protests were much more broadly based in generational, social and spatial terms than the earlier protests and that the 2000 election was in fact the first time Milosevic had faced the verdict of the voters in over a decade). Finally, there is clear evidence that there was substantial U.S. involvement in all the successful cases, both in the longer-term, such as investments in civil society, and in the short-term, such as pressing incumbents to reform the electoral process and election commissions and providing economic support and advice for the development of a cohesive opposition and for improvements in the quality of campaigns, voter registration and voter lists, and the actual conduct of the elections. While they varied across cases, the primary players in these processes were USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and the International Foundation for Electoral Support (IFES)—though other players, such as American ambassadors and the Open Society, also played critical roles.

To reduce the electoral revolutions to the machinations of the U.S., however, is a serious mistake. First, as already noted, the electoral model was never a purely American invention—even in the Philippines or Chile, let alone in the postcommunist region. It was co-authored by a diverse group of international and local players; it was fashioned in different ways, depending upon local interests, needs and capacities; and it played out differently in different contexts. Moreover, in every case, the electoral model was developed not just by American democracy promoters and local activists, but also by activists from neighboring countries. Thus, the OK98 campaign in Slovakia drew ideas from Romanians and Bulgarians who had participated in protests and elections in their countries; the Slovaks played a vital role in Croatia and Serbia; the Serbs assisted the Georgians; and the Slovaks, Georgians and Serbs assisted the Ukrainians. For many of the individuals who played key roles in these electoral revolutions, it was in fact the precedents of electoral revolutions elsewhere in the region and the insights these neighboring activists provided—rather than, say, American financial assistance and advice—that were repeatedly defined by our respondents in Slovakia, Georgia, Serbia and Ukraine as the key American contribution to defeating illiberal leaders and political coalitions (Kandelaki, 2005; also see Melakadze, 2005).

Third, as a number of studies have shown, American support of civil society in the postcommunist region can have perverse consequences. Such interventions, for example, can divide and demobilize societies, rather than empower them (see, for example, Aksartova, 2005a, 2005b; Henderson, 2003; Mendelson and Glenn, 2002; Grodeland, 2005). To return to a point in the introduction: because the United States is the primary democracy promoter in the world in terms, for example, of levels of funding, does not mean that American investments in democracy abroad necessarily produce the desire results. Indeed, these electoral revolutions did not necessarily play out in ways that the United States wanted. For example, the U.S. was uncomfortable with Vojislav Kostunica as the candidate of the eighteen party coalition that formed to challenge Milosevic in the fall, 2000 Presidential election, and American support for Saakashvili was tepid, especially when he used fraudulent parliamentary elections in November, 2003 as a pretext for ousting the Georgian president, Eduard Shevardnadze.

Fourth, many of the factors differentiating successful from unsuccessful cases, whether over time or across country, remind us of the importance of local conditions and local actors.
Here, we refer, for example, to variations in the willingness of opposition forces to cooperate with one another (which is perhaps the most important development, but one which is very hard to explain by reference to specific variables); the ability of the opposition and various civil society groups to neutralize security forces (which only they can do—and at considerable risk); the tendency of over-confident authoritarian leaders to make major mistakes that alienate allies and the public (for example, calling sudden elections); the remarkable effectiveness of local organizations, such as the many NGOs organized in the Gremium of the Third Sector and active in Campaign OK98 in Slovakia, the Liberty Institute and the Georgian Young Lawyers Association in Georgia, Otpor in Serbia, and Pora in Ukraine, which were largely (though not entirely) products of local struggles; the extraordinary planning that went into these electoral revolutions and that was informed by the rich protest experiences of the past; and the key role of regional actors in showing their neighbors that change could happen and in sharing with them their experiences and their strategies. This is a very long list. It also reminds us of a familiar generalization in studies of democracy promotion. International democracy promotion can only be effective when it is joined with local democracy promotion.

There is a final observation that reinforces the interpretation that the American role in these events is best characterized as one of facilitating and assisting electoral change, rather than the more powerful claim, implying a unilateral process, that the U.S. created, forced, dominated and/or controlled what happened. When critics speak of the United States “engineering” political change through electoral revolutions, they give the impression that: 1) there were high levels of coordination among external actors, and; 2) local actors were mere bystanders to the American drive for democratization through electoral change. If there is one theme that appeared repeatedly in the one hundred or so interviews we conducted with American democracy promoters and local activists in Washington, D.C. and in Georgia, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine, it is that the democracy promotion enterprise is a chaotic affair—not just because local players have their own ideas and resources (as one respondent put it—“moving off the reservation”), but also because international players move around from country to country and job to job with striking frequency, change their minds, pursue pet projects, and connect in different ways with different parts of both the society and the government. Indeed, as one Georgian respondent noted: the chaotic character of the democracy promotion “community” is probably a good thing, because it gives local players extensive room for maneuver, enriches their choices among competing ideas, strategies and political alliances, and, in the process, has the positive consequence of undercutting the validity of conspiracy theories and their implication of coordinated and goal-oriented behavior taking place behind the scenes.

At the same time, the allegation of an American plot involving orchestration of electoral change carries the implication that the “natives” lack the ability to carry out a successful campaign to end the rule of illiberal leaders. As Giorgi Melakadze, a member of the Liberty Institute in Georgia, has argued: the charge of an American plot implies that citizens in Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine do not want either democracy or fair elections and that, if they do support these two goals, are limited in their ability to make these changes happen. By exaggerating the power (and the consistency and cohesion) of the U.S., then, critics of American electoral “exports” also exaggerate the impotence, the divisions, the disinterest, the incompetence, and perhaps even the timidity of citizens in these countries.

The arrogance of these implications returns us to an earlier line of argument in the literature on democratization. Transitologists once argued in concert that democracy was too difficult and too important to be left to publics, and that democratization, as a result, should be
left to elites and the deals they cut. By the same token, critics of democracy promotion through elections seem to imply the same, once we replace domestic elites with international power-brokers. In both cases, the role of citizens is belittled, despite the fact that it is they who did the planning, took on the risks, went to the polls and, if necessary, took to the streets. It was citizens, many of whom had long been understandably passive, and activists, many of whom had long been discouraged, who together defended their right to choose who governs them.

Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been to analyze the origins and components of the electoral model of regime change; the factors that seem to be critical for its success; and the impact of the United States in promoting democracy through electoral revolutions. Our focus has been on the post-communist region, largely because it is there where the electoral model has enjoyed its greatest success.

Let us close the discussion with two final questions. First, is it correct to term the pivotal elections in Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine from 1998-2004 cases of successful democratization? As argued earlier, elections are only one component of democratization, and too much emphasis on their conduct and consequences can blind us to the complexities and the fragility of the democratic project. However, it is also important to realize that elections are necessary components of democracy, and that subsequent democratic performance improved significantly in all the cases where there were electoral revolutions. Indeed, in the postcommunist region only two states have made the leap in Freedom House rankings from not free to fully free: Croatia and Serbia after their electoral revolutions in 2000. Just as important is another comparative insight. It has only been through the decisive victories of the liberal opposition that countries in the postcommunist region have made a full transition to democratic politics. Once made, moreover, this transition is sticky. There is only one case of backsliding from that point--Slovakia when Meciar was in power—and that was temporary. The victory of the democratic opposition in 1998 restored democratic practices, and Slovakia has remained on this path since that time. Electoral outcomes, in short, are in fact extremely important, because they seem to predict not just the quality, but also the sustainability of democracy in the postcommunist region.

Does this mean that democracy is fully-elaborated and firmly-ensconced in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine? The answer is no. One key test, which Croatia has passed, is whether elections following the democratic breakthrough produce a turnover in governing parties—which is critical for institutionalizing competition, limiting corruption, correcting policy mistakes, and incorporating the losers in the democratic game (Bunce, 2002; Orenstein, 2001; Grzymala-Busse, 2003). In Slovakia, the center right parties at the core of the coalition that won in 1998 also won the 2002 elections, but, as in Croatia, the election held after the ouster of Meciar went smoothly and was free and fair.

The second question also looks to the future. We know that the electoral model is conducive to diffusion through precedent, the movement of ideas, and the sharing of strategies among activists who have succeeded in defeating dictators and activists in other countries who want to accomplish the same objective. The electoral model, therefore, is a collaborative project, supported by the United States and other international actors, but shaped by local activists and regional mentors. What are the chances that such collaborations can develop elsewhere? There are reasons to be optimistic and reasons to be skeptical. Optimism follows from the very nature
of the model: it exploits opportunities that the authoritarians themselves have provided, and it is a model that combines technical detail, simple goals, circumscribed periods of activity, resonance with democratic practices, and considerable potential, as a result, for bringing society at large and diverse opposition groups together in common cause. However, thus far the electoral revolutions have depended for their success on developed civil societies, opposition groupings that are willing to collaborate, and many dress rehearsals. Successful electoral revolutions have also depended on both significant public mobilization and security forces who are willing to watch, if not collude. These are in fact highly unusual circumstances.
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