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When can External Actors Influence Democratization? Leverage, Linkages, and Gatekeeper Elites

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When can External Actors Influence Democratization?

Leverage, Linkages, and Gatekeeper Elites

Introduction

In this paper, I investigate the subject of *when external actors can influence democratization*. That is, I seek to put forward a theoretical explanation of *when* and *to what degree* external actors matter. The puzzle is a very basic one: why does, e.g., Western pressure for democracy sometimes lead to substantial changes like it did in transforming Meciar's Slovakia into a democratic state in the late 1990s (Pridham 2002; Vachudova 2005) or in pushing forward the democratic transition in a more remote country like the Philippines (Adesnik & McFaul 2006), while at other times it glances off and the authoritarian leader stay in power like in Mugabe's Zimbabwe or in Lukashenka's Belarus? And why has Russian influence, on the contrary, played such a, supposedly, big role in the consolidation of authoritarianism in that same Belarus (Ambrosio 2006, 2009; Tolstrup 2009), while its negative influence on the political development of the Baltic States (Tsygankov 2000, Jubulis 1996), Mongolia, and Turkmenistan, apparently, has been much smaller? Satisfactory answers to such big questions have, in my view, still not been found.

Nevertheless, scholars of Europeanization and democratization have produced some very interesting contributions that bring us a long way in explaining the influence of external actors. As often is the case in political science, these contributions can be grouped as to whether they mainly emphasize *structures* (e.g., Muller 1985; Whitehead 1999; Kopstein & Reilly 2000; Levitsky & Way 2005, 2006, 2007; Brinks & Coppedge 2006; Berg-Schlosser 2008) or *actors* (e.g., Putnam 1988; Milner 1997; Risse & Sikkink 1999; Yilmaz 2002; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2005; Vachudova 2005). While the former models emphasize how geographical proximity, the degree of interdependency, and power asymmetries between the external actor and the target state more or less determine the success-rate of the external influence attempt, the latter arguments

accentuate how domestic political elites, on the basis of their main values and calculations of both the internal and external costs and benefits of political change, decide whether or not to give into external demands. In general, the structural accounts do a good job explaining *interregional* differences in external influence, but they have difficulties coping with the cases that do not adhere to the overall structural pattern – that is, with *intraregional* differences. As an image reversed, the actor-centered explanations cannot produce the same compelling parsimonious explanations of clear-cut regional patterns, but definitely have some merits when it comes to explaining some of the intra-regional differences that puzzle the structuralists.

Of course the picture of two staunchly opposed approaches is painted too black and white – the macro-explanations are aware of the role that actors can play and the micro-explanations do not completely ignore the structural constraints that elites act within. Nevertheless, even though a theory that more explicitly synthesizes the insights of both groups definitely would bring our understanding of when external actors matter a great step further, it is, to my knowledge, currently not at hand. So, in the following I will attempt to construct a model that combines both the macro-logic and the micro-logic of when external influence matter, and, furthermore, I will follow the track laid out elsewhere (Tolstrup 2009) and make it applicable to both positive and negative external influence.

Trying to reach this goal, I take my departure in a short selective review of the main structurally grounded theories of the international dimension of democratization. Here the above-mentioned general critique of the static determinism of the structural accounts is elaborated upon. Then, I turn to a more critical assessment of the structural theory of leverage and linkage developed by Levitsky and Way (2005). This theory is widely cited and at the current state it is also the most acknowledged of the structural accounts of external influence on democratization, and as such it serves as an excellent starting point for developing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Even though this contribution is strong in itself, I will, nevertheless, cast light on some very critical flaws in the theory.

Most importantly, I argue that Levitsky's and Way's arguments for the primacy of structures are not entirely valid. The structural determinants (*linkages*) that constitute the basis of their explanation are not non-amenable as they claim (2005: 33), but can be influenced to a great degree by what I term the *gatekeeper elites* of the target country. That is, I claim that domestic elites should not only be perceived as mere objects of external influence, as they are in the structural accounts, but rather as gatekeepers that actively facilitate or constrain ties to external actors. By upgrading or downgrading these ties, the gatekeeper elites directly affect the capacity that determines the strength of the external actor. More precisely, I argue that to understand when external actors matter for democratization, we need to focus on how these ties come about in the first place. And here domestic elites become interesting, because they hold the key to turning the volume of an external actor's pressure up or down. In grounding the micro-part of this argument theoretically, I turn to the more actor-centered approaches in the literature and flesh out why we should expect the gatekeeper elites to deliberately try to facilitate or restrain linkages to an external actor. As such, I briefly touch upon the next question in the causal chain – what causes gatekeeper elites to act as they do? But it should be noted, that my main aim in this paper merely is to investigate the relationship between gatekeeper elites and linkages, not to thoroughly explore its scope conditions.

Ending the paper, I position myself more explicitly in the structure-actor debate. Domestic elites are, of course, not free to choose anything at will in all situations (Przeworski 1986) and the choices they make, obviously, have consequences. In general, neither structures, nor actors, can solely determine when external actors matter for democratization. Rather, I call for a synthetic approach. Leverage, the level of linkages, and the decisions of gatekeeper elites iteratively interact and, consequently, continuously influence each other. And this interaction between the three variables and between the micro- and the macro-level determines the degree to which external actors can influence democratization.

Structural Explanations of External Influence

Structural accounts, by and large, claim that the size and power of a state, its geographical location, and its ties to the outside world determine the strength of external influence on its political development. Structural accounts can be divided into those that analyze the active measures taken by specific external actors, like the US (e.g. Lowenthal 1991; Smith 1994; Whitehead 1996; Carothers 1999, 2009; Hook 2002; Adesnik & McFaul 2006; Magen, Risse & McFaul 2009; McFaul 2009) or the EU (e.g., Pridham 1991, 2002, 2005; Youngs 2001; Schimmelfennig, Engert & Knobel 2003; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier (eds.) 2005; Emerson (ed.) 2005; Vachudova 2005; Schimmelfennig 2007) and those that examine the more passive and sporadic pressure emanating from the external environment in general in the form of diffusion processes (Huntington 1991; Hale 2005; Brinks & Coppedge 2006; Bunce & Wolchik 2006; Beissinger 2007; Berg-Schlosser 2008; Kern 2010). The former stress how an external actor's influence is constrained by its relative power vis-à-vis the target state, its geographical proximity and its density of ties to the target state. The latter stress that diffusion processes travel best within geographical regions with fairly close cultural traits and that they are even stronger within closer and more secluded neighborhoods in particular.

As argued, both types of structural accounts are very good at explaining larger trends, such as overall regional patterns, but they have a hard time accounting for the countries that do not stick to the broader model. This is evident when the structural models analyzing external actors cannot explain why Western democracy promoters' success vary so much between much similar neighbor states like, e.g., Ukraine and Belarus, or when scholars of diffusion are still struggling with explaining why "*a sequence begins, why it ends, what it excludes, or even the order in which it is likely to advance*" (Whitehead 1996: 6). Clearly, there is something at play that is not incorporated in these structural models. A much-sited article concerning geographic diffusion by Kopstein and Reilly (2000) is illustrative of the problem at hand.

In trying to explain the divergent development of the post-communist states in Europe, Kopstein and Reilly present what they term a “*Western proximity model*” (2000: 12). In essence, their argument goes like this: the closer a country is to Vienna or Berlin (whichever is closest); the more exposed it will be to diffusion from the West of norms, resources, and institutions, and the better it will, thus, perform regarding democratization and market economy reforms. Being close to the Western neighborhood simply produces a structural pressure for democratic change. But what at first is presented as a more or less deterministic structural claim, is later toned down and the door is, in my view, left ajar to human action by introducing the so-called “*openness criterion*” (2000: 14). Basically, the criterion states that a country must be open and receptive to the external influence; otherwise the diffusion process will not work. Thus, Kopstein and Reilly are aware of the fact that some regimes are capable of “turning off” the external influence by isolating themselves from the inputs. Nevertheless, the authors stick to the general pattern of the spatial-dependent explanation and do not look further into the causal mechanisms that determine whether or not a country opens in the first place. Obviously, this leaves their model with some amount of unexplained variance.

Turning to the well-known theory of leverage and linkage, developed by Levitsky and Way in their *International Linkage and Democratization* (2005), does not offer us a solution to this problem. Levitsky and Way provide a much more detailed, elegant, and far-reaching explanation of Western democracy promotion. But as I will show, the stronger analytical bite of the model does not translate into solving the essential dilemma of the “*openness criterion*”. And therefore, it does not correct the basic problems, characteristic of the structural accounts. Let me explain.

Levitsky and Way (2005) propose that the degree, to which Western external actors succeed in promoting democracy in other countries, is conditioned by two factors: *leverage* (the vulnerability of the targeted states to the external pressure) and *linkages* (the density of ties between the

external actor and the targeted state)¹. In essence, external actors can exert strong influence only if an asymmetrical power-relationship and a high degree of interdependence are in place – that is, if leverage is high, and linkages are dense.

Following the two authors, leverage in itself is important for the strength and the credibility of the Western pressure. But it alone is not sufficient for bringing about change. If this was the case, the West should indeed have been equally successful across the globe, and we should simply not find the abovementioned differences in its impact on democratization in, e.g., Slovakia and Zimbabwe. Consequently, only differences in the density of linkages can explain why Western influence attempts has proven to be highly successful in some regions and less so in others (2005: 22-23). Linkage is seen as the decisive factor because it more intensely affects the motivations of the decision makers in both the external actor and in the target country; it raises the stakes so to speak. When ties to a state are dense, the salience of its political repression or economic mismanagement is higher in the West and the external actor is, therefore, more motivated to react. At the same time, linkage produces several pressure-points that enable the external actor to forcefully follow up on his words and, thereby, the cost of non-compliance rises significantly for the target state (2005: 23-25).

So where Kopstein and Reilly remain silent on the micro-mechanisms, Levitsky and Way elegantly explain how structural differences changes motivations of the relevant actors and, thus, increases the success-rate of Western influence. But just like Kopstein and Reilly do not do a good job explaining differences in *openness*, so do Levitsky and Way, in my view, not satisfactorily explain differences in degrees of the *density of linkages*. Basically, they argue that linkages come about as a product of, primarily, geography and history, and it is, therefore, considered to be “*less amenable to short-term foreign policy manipulation*” (Levitsky & Way 2005: 33). Taken to its extreme, this means that the density of linkages are more or less set in stone and consequently must look much alike in countries with approximately the same geographical and historical traits. In this

¹ See Table 1 later in this paper for the exact specification of the elements of the two variables.

perspective, some regions are simply much more prone to external influence from the West than others (like Kopstein and Reilly show in their Western proximity model), and countries that do not conform to the overall regional pattern must be considered as merely temporary outliers that, necessarily, will succumb to the structural model with time.

While I agree that some regions on average are simply more susceptible to Western influence due to their geographic proximity, I disagree with the determinism that follows from it. Below, I will in more detail argue how linkages are not only created by structural factors, but can actually be initiated, developed, and attempted reduced by, what I term, *gatekeeper elites*². As illustrated below in Figure 1, I argue that linkages are not determined by a country's geographical, historical, and cultural traits alone. Gatekeeper elites are, at least, just as important – they can both condition the relationship given by the structural factors and create linkages on their own, independently of structural preconditions. And because of this, the influence of an external actor can be expected to vary not only across regions but often also within them.

- Figure 1 about here -

The Theory of Leverage and Linkage Revisited

As Levitsky and Way show, the theory of leverage and linkage definitely has a lot to offer in explaining the degree to which Western external actors matter for democratization. But it also has its flaws. In the following I will point out these flaws and discuss the consequences they have for the conclusions Levitsky and Way draw.

In revisiting the theory of leverage and linkage, I, first, follow up on the track outlined in my earlier work (Tolstrup 2009). That is, I intend to create a theory that is applicable to both positive and negative external actors, and as Levitsky's and Way's original framework was

² The term, gatekeeper elites, is of course inspired by David Easton's seminal *A System Analysis of Political Life* (1965). Here, the notion of gatekeepers are used to describe those actors, who control which demands from the environment passes the threshold and enter the political system.

constructed to only account for *positive* Western democracy promoters, I have, as a first step, below in Table 1, broadened the framework so that it is applicable to external actors that not necessarily have a positive impact on democratization as well. In my view, there is nothing particular *Western* – neither in the logic of the theory, nor in the concepts of leverage and linkage – that forces us to only reserve them for such external influence. I will argue that leverage and linkage are equally important for determining the success rate of both positive and negative actors. Therefore, using the same framework to analyze all external influence makes very good sense. So, in the table below I slightly reformulate the definitions of Levitsky's and Way's original framework and add a few words and components to it³. This makes the theoretical concepts more general and, thus, more applicable to all of the various external actors that truly constitute the external dimension of democratization.

- Table 1 about here -

Now, let me return to my main claim, and flesh out why I think that Levitsky's and Way's arguments of the non-amenability of linkages are flawed. As mentioned, I will contend that linkages are not set in stone, but can be altered by, what I term, gatekeeper elites. If we take a closer look at each of the five dimensions of linkages pinned out in the table above, it is clear that the level of many of them potentially can be, if not controlled, then at least influenced substantially by the decisions of these elites. Whether the gatekeeper elites then make use of this possibility and actively try to change the level of linkages must be decided by investigating the empirical cases of the real world.

First, the *economic* linkages. As a rule, the overall economic policy of a country is run by the elites that hold political power. This group is in charge of concluding or abolishing trade agreements, applying for foreign credit and economic assistance, and approving of external

³ Most importantly, I have added patterns of export and import to the economic linkage, as they can be crucial for determining the economic influence of an external actor (e.g., Vachudova 2005).

assistance offered, and, therefore, it strongly affects the economic ties to external actors. Furthermore, if a substantial part of a country's economy is under direct control of the government, the ruling elites can also encourage or restrict investment flows from certain external actors and even to some degree influence patterns of import and export. The self-imposed isolation of the autarkic economy of the late years of Hoxha's rule in Albania, or the aggressive renationalization policy in Mugabe's Zimbabwe forcing out white farmers with ties to the West, are examples of how ruling elites cut economic linkages to the external environment and, thus, zeal off external economic influence.

In less state-controlled economies, the business elites heading the larger corporations of course also influence the level of economic linkages to external actors, both substantially and regularly. By actively seeking foreign direct investment, deciding wherefrom to import goods, and by choosing export markets, the economic elites create or cut economic linkages and, thus, contribute to facilitating or constraining this important channel of external influence. Obviously, the impact business elites have is of a different kind, than the one the political elites in power have. While the ruling political elites influence economic linkages in a coherent and concentrated manner, the influence of the economic elites is more a product of their actions aggregated. Only very large corporations can be expected to, on their own, make a substantial difference with regard to the density of linkages – as a rule, linkages are only influenced significantly by the concerted actions of several economic actors. Vachudova (2005) has, for instance, convincingly shown how the Central and East European countries' reorientation towards markets in the West increased the leverage of the European Union and led business elites to vigorously push for further integration.

However, not only the ruling political elites and the business elites play on the economic field – oppositional and civil society elites engage on the pitch as well. They can, for instance, establish economic links to an external actor by applying for financial assistance for running campaigns, strengthening their organizational structure, or for establishing independent media outlets. This

may not influence a country's economy as a whole, but, as the weight of the opposition or the civil society is boosted, changes to the existing political system become more likely.

Turning to *geopolitical* linkage, the political elites in power once again play the ultimate role in deciding whether or not to join new intergovernmental initiatives or to emphasize ties to some countries on behalf of others. Of course a country is often stuck with its memberships in various alliances and organizations, and it is often quite costly to leave such institutions. Nevertheless, it is the ruling elites that decide to upgrade or downgrade activity in the country's various international commitments, and as such they are the primary facilitators or constrainers of the geopolitical linkages to external actors. But again, the ruling elites do not hold a complete monopoly. Oppositional and civil society elites can also make their own connections to foreign governments and international organizations, and thus, facilitate external influence by circumscribing the official channels. Think of, for an example, how the Palestinian Hamas, during Arafat's time in power, strengthened high-level contacts with Syria and Iran, or take Aung San Suu Kyi's, the leader of the Burmese democratic opposition, well-established contacts with Western governments and organizations. Hence, also geopolitical linkages are indeed amenable and can, as such, be contingent on choices taken by gatekeeper elites.

Next in line are the *social* linkages, which, in general, are more difficult to substantially affect by a country's domestic elites. Only in totalitarian regimes like the former Soviet Union or today's North Korea are the ruling elites capable of controlling flows of tourism and migration by severely restricting the issuance of entry and exit permits. These extremes aside, such flows normally fluctuate independently as a product of an aggregation of the actions of the broader population, not of deliberate elite choices.

The diaspora communities, noted in the framework of Levitsky and Way, are another thing. They include both communities originating in the territory of the external actor, now residing inside the territory of a target country, and communities originating in the territory of the target country, now living on the territory of the external actor. While the latter resembles the more

sporadic flows characteristic of tourism and migration, the former can to, somewhat, higher degree be influenced by the political elites that hold power, because they can restrict the political rights of the diaspora by, for instance, disenfranchise them (like it happened with the Russian minority in the Baltics in the first part of the 1990s) or by forcing them out of the country (like Mugabe has recently done with the white farmers in Zimbabwe).

While the above elements of social linkages have proven less amenable, the elite education element of Levitsky's and Way's framework, on the contrary, is definitely contingent on the choices of gatekeeper elites. It is not history, nor geography, that solely determines whereto the children of a country's elites are sent for education. Rather, this is the choice of fathers and mothers, and these choices can easily change within shorter periods of time.

Turning to *communication* linkages, the ruling political elites are in the position to either pursue policies that aim at increasing internet access and encouraging foreign media expansion, or, like we have seen it in, e.g., China, to opt for restricting such cross-border information flow by controlling distribution licenses, or by introducing digital censorship (Schedler 2002). But even under such information blockade, oppositional elites and civil society can independently develop communication linkages to external actors by, for instance, importing and distributing banned media outlets. But just like social linkages, so are communication linkages more often deliberately cut to monopolize information flows than intentionally developed by gatekeeper elites. Yet, this does not change my central argument – these linkages are still a product of not only history and geography, but definitely also of the decisions taken by, in particular, the political elites in power.

Finally, both political elites and civil society elites can influence the *transnational civil society* dimension. Ruling political elites can opt for either encouraging such internationalization of the country's civil society, or they can, as we have seen it happen in Putin's Russia (e.g., Ambrosio 2009: 45-69), try to restrict the links by cracking down on the parts of civil society that are co-operating with unwanted external actors. But also oppositional elites and civil society elites can on their own tie or cut bonds to international NGOs, party organizations, and other networks.

Just think of the well-established contacts between youth movements from Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine that played a vital role for toppling the autocrats in power (e.g., Bunce & Wolchik 2006), or the strong role the Catholic Church had in bringing down the Communist regime in 1989.

Summing up, the discussion above clearly shows that linkages need not only be structurally determined. On the contrary, many of the elements of this variable are indeed amenable to policy choices, and such choices can potentially play an important role in facilitating and restraining the influence of external actors. Therefore, domestic elites should not only be perceived as mere objects of external influence but rather as gatekeepers that hold the capacity to facilitate or constrain ties to external actors. As depicted in Figure 1, they can both condition the level of linkages given by history and geography, and on their own develop linkages to the external actor. In this way, the concept of gatekeeper elites may prove helpful in explaining the discrepancy between the potential and the actual thickness of linkages that the structural accounts simply cannot explain.

But before I proceed with the question of why gatekeeper elites should be expected to care about linkages to external actors, a note of caution is in place. Three things need further clarification to avoid misunderstanding. First of all, I have *not* argued that all linkages are equally important for the influence of external actors. Which of the five elements are the most vital for facilitating external influence will most likely differ from case to case, and as such must be settled through empirical testing, rather than in theoretical debates.

Second, not all linkages are equally amenable, and not all linkages can be changed within the same time-horizon. While some linkages are extremely difficult to alter and can only be changed after a long period of time (take, for instance, the dependency on Russian energy of many of the post-Soviet states), others can be changed on a day-to-day basis at the whim of the ruling political elite (like the decision to ban externally sponsored, independent media outlets). That is, linkage encompasses a very wide range of ties, and one should be cautious treating them all alike.

Neither do I claim that all types of gatekeepers are equally important. In the discussion above, the ruling political elites clearly stand out as the most important group of gatekeeper elites. They are the only group that have the potential capacity to orchestrate a complete close-down of a country, and, thus, of disarming the other elite groups of their gatekeeper powers. So, politics matter – also for external influence on democratization. It simply makes a difference, whoever holds power. But again, even though the ruling political elites, at first sight, appear to be the most important gatekeepers, I propose to leave the question of which gatekeepers are most significant for facilitating or restraining linkages to an external actor to be decided by empirical analyses of specific cases. Summing up, determining the relative importance of different types of linkages and different types of gatekeeper elites is, fundamentally, an empirical question.

Returning to my main argument, the above clearly shows that Levitsky and Way are wrong in, *a priori*, outright downplaying the significance of domestic elites. And, if we accept the premise that linkages potentially are changeable, then we must, naturally, also consider important the question of what motivates gatekeeper elites – why would we expect them to deliberately try to facilitate or restrain the development of such ties in the first place?

Motivations Guiding Gatekeeper Elites

To answer the question of what motivates gatekeeper elites to restrain or facilitate external influence, I first need to make a clear distinction between the various elite *types* that I, in the discussion above, claim to be potentially important. Three types stand out – the political elites, the economic elites, and the civil society elites. Of course the delimitation of these groups are not always clear-cut. Economic elites are often very close to governments, and civil society groups often turn into political parties. So, to keep the three types apart, I follow the division of the political elites that I already hinted at above and make a distinction between the *ruling political elites* and the *oppositional elites*. The *ruling elites* are similar to those that Linz and Stepan refer to as “*the*

core group that is in day-by-day control of the state apparatus” (1996: 66)⁴, while the *oppositional elites* are defined as *those groups that openly struggle for winning office*. Consequently, as soon as economic elites or civil society elites start interfering directly in the political game by either participating in the day-by-day control of the state apparatus or by trying to win office, I will treat them as the political elites, not as economic or civil society elites.

So far so good. But how then, can we expect these three different groups to act regarding external actors? Why should we expect them to try to build or cut linkages? The economic elites probably pose the least challenge, as they can, in accordance with economic theory, be assumed to follow a profit-maximizing logic. That is, they constantly opt for the solutions that bring them the largest possible profits for the lowest possible risk. Consequently, they will cut linkages to one external actor and build linkages to another one, only if this deems economically profitable. If they, e.g., can make a larger profit by exporting to country A than to country B, they will try to do this, regardless of the fact that this increases their country’s vulnerability to country A.

Turning to civil society elites, a somewhat similar logic is expected to dominate. Just like economic elites struggle to advance the position of their economic corporations (by maximizing profits), so do civil society elites try to advance the interests of the organizations they represent. No matter whether we are speaking of leaders of trade unions, ethnic movements, or religious groups they all strive to improve the position of their organization, and as such they will seek to build linkages to external actors that will strengthen their cause, and cut linkages to external actors that weaken their cause. If, for instance, a repressed minority group thinks that an external actor will try to push the leaders of the country towards implementing a more liberal policy concerning their basic rights, the leaders of this group will be expected to try to expand linkages to this external actor.

With political elites, it is somewhat more complicated. Because, they are not tied to only one organization or cooperation, but take decisions that have consequences for society and their

⁴ Though they term it *state elites*

country's political regime as such. But fortunately, a rich literature on the subject does exist, and this allows me to dig further into the details of the motivations of the political elites – the ones that I hypothesize to be the most important gatekeepers.

Motivations of the Political Elites

Ever since the early transitologists (Rustow 1970; Dahl 1971; Linz 1978; O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986) started emphasizing the importance of *human action, decisions, and choices* in explaining transition to democracy, political elites have played a fairly strong role in the literature on democratization (e.g., Higley & Burton 1989, 2006; Huntington 1991; Linz and Stepan 1996; Easter 1997; Higley, Pakulski & Wesolowski (ed) 1998; Diamond 1999, 2008; McFaul 2002; Boix 2006; Gandy & Przeworski 2006; North, Wallis & Weingast 2009). Among the transitologists, Rustow was the first to warn that structural explanations “*can easily explain away the very facts of political life*” (1970: 344). Instead he argued that “*it [democracy] is a genuine choice*”, and “*a small circle of leaders is likely to play a disproportionate role*” (1974: 356). The message was clear; political elites are tremendously important for understanding political development and if we leave them out, we miss out on much of the dynamics of politics.

Dahl quickly followed suit with his influential *Polyarchy* where he introduced a simple, but powerful, model of democratic transition, emphasizing the rational, strategic calculations of the ruling elites. The model parsimoniously states that democratization of an authoritarian regime will take place, only if the ruling authoritarian elites expect the *costs of suppression* to exceed the *costs of toleration* (1971: 15-16) – that is, if they calculate that holding on to authoritarianism is simply too costly.

15 years later O'Donnell and Schmitter, in their seminal *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, introduced the distinction between *hard-liners* and *soft-liners* in authoritarian regimes (1986: 15-17). In this way, they underlined the very simple fact that elites are far from uniform – not even authoritarian ones. Some elites value the authoritarian order as a virtue in itself (the hard-liners),

while others are more pragmatic and are ready to sacrifice that order in trying to hold on to at least some of their privileges (the soft-liners). Some ruling elites simply have comparatively higher costs of toleration due to the configuration of their basic values and, therefore, some of them hold on to power more staunchly than others, even if the objective costs of doing so are the same.

Obviously, the transitologists had only the national level in mind when they aired their actor-centered frameworks. But, these contributions provide important insights that have served as a stepping stone for later contributions that more explicitly incorporate the external dimension as well. So, when it comes to deducting the motives of political elites, the literature basically offers two different possibilities – a rational, strategic one, and a more value-driven one. Below each of these logics will be elaborated upon.

Rational and Strategic Motives

A good example of a rational-choice inspired actor-explanation explicitly building on the works of the early transitologists is Yilmaz' (2002) attempts to include the external dimension of democratization in the calculations the political elites make. Basically, he opens Dahl's closed model by supplementing the *internal* costs of suppression and toleration with the expected *external* costs of suppression and toleration. In essence, Yilmaz argues that a solution to the dilemma, faced by ruling elites when deciding whether to repress or liberalize, is not influenced only by strategic calculations of consequences at the national level but also include calculations about how external actors will react. That is, external actors supportive of democratization in a country will lower the external costs of tolerance and raise external costs of suppression, while external actors opposed to the democratization of that country, on the contrary, will raise the external costs of tolerance and lower the external costs of suppression.

Extending this logic to integration-dynamics with external actors, the EU-scholars Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005: 16-17) pose, in what they term a rational *external incentives model*, that ruling elites carefully weigh the size and distribution of costs incurred at the national level before engaging in EU-integration. If the costs are unfavorably distributed or simply too high compared to the benefits, integration will not be pursued. On the contrary, if the expected costs are deemed insignificant, integration will be considered a free lunch. This echoes Putnam's famous *two-level game* logic (1988) that stresses how engaging in international cooperation almost always leads to distributional and electoral consequences at the national level. Aware of this fact, both ruling and oppositional elites will of course avoid integration with external actors if it has negative consequences for their main supporters (Milner 1997: 16).

Common for all these perspectives is the assumption that elite affairs are *competitive* and *confrontational* (McFaul 2002). Regardless of whom the political elites are their most important goal will be to outperform their opponents in order to hold office (Downs 1957). So, just like Easter (1997) has argued that elites choose institutions like presidentialism or parliamentarism based on their perception of how such bodies will affect their chances for retaining power, so does the rational perspective tell us that both ruling and oppositional elites choose to initiate, develop, or restrain linkages to external actors based on how they think that such choices will influence their chances of winning political power. That is, if ruling elites want to, e.g., maintain tight control over the economy and the distribution of rents and, at the same time, preserve the freedom to suppress, they will try to diminish the external costs of suppression by cutting linkages to external actors that are generally favorable disposed to a market economy and democratization. In such a scenario, the oppositional elites will seek to build ties to external actors that can help increase their chances of winning office by strengthening their power vis-à-vis the ruling elites. That is, leveling the playing field by, e.g., providing financial and political support and thereby raising the internal and external costs of suppression.

Value-driven Motives

As O'Donnell and Schmitter accentuated, political elites are not only driven by strategic calculations but also by basic values and ideologies. Even the rationalist explanation put forward by Yilmaz leaves the door open for more value-driven behaviour. He notes that “*no set of external incentives would convince an authoritarian government to undertake democratic reforms if it estimated that democratization would unleash an insurmountable potential danger to the basic institutions and values of the state*” (Yilmaz 2002: 82). That is, political elites will to some degree be guided by what they think is right or wrong, and such evaluations, of course, hinge on how they *perceive* realities, i.e., their intrinsic worldview (Bermeo 1997: 315).

Also the EU-scholars Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005: 18-20) focus on the values of political elites by differentiating between the *logic of consequences* and the *logic of appropriateness*⁵. While the former represents the rational perspective outlined above, the latter echoes social constructivism and stresses how elites act according to basic norms, values, and ideologies. In this perspective, integration with the EU will only take place if the domestic elites in, e.g., candidate countries consider the Union to represent values and ideals fairly similar to their own personal values and those they perceive to be the state values.

Transferring this logic to my terminology, the political gatekeeper elites are expected to build linkages to external actors they perceive as legitimate and just, representing an identity that they feel they share, and, on the contrary, cut linkages to an external actor that is regarded as an illegitimate player, representing a non-desirable value-system. Phrasing it in a simple dichotomy, convinced authoritarians will prefer to build linkages to authoritarian external actors and cut linkages to democratic external actors, while convinced democrats will try to weaken ties to authoritarian external actors and strengthen ties to external actors that are considered more democratic.

⁵ Inspired, of course, by the seminal work of March & Olsen (1989)

Scope Conditions and Problems of Falsification

Summing up, I argue that political elites have very good reasons to restrain or facilitate influence of external actors by either cutting or building linkages. Furthermore, I have proposed that they do so on the basis of their main values and/or a strategic calculation of both the internal and external costs and benefits of political change. Which of the hypothesized motivations – the value-driven or the strategically driven – dominates is, obviously, not something that can be decided in theoretical debates. Rather, it must be settled by scrutinizing empirical facts. Unfortunately, this is not always an easy task. Discriminating between actors' motives often requires insider knowledge of considerations behind decision-making, and, seldom, such data is readily available. Furthermore, often the two types of motivations go hand in hand, and deciding which one is the strongest will prove extremely difficult. Only in cases where the two logics lead us to expect that the gatekeepers are confronted with a dilemma, and they have to choose to follow one logic at the expense of the other, will we be able to more accurately assess their relative importance. But, as stated, the main aim of this paper is not to evaluate the relative strength of these two logics, but rather first to show that the gatekeeper elites really do play a role in facilitating or restraining the external influence. What I have done in the sections above is to show why we should expect political elites to care about linkages to external actors – only once this relationship is established can we start investigating the conditions under which it takes place.

Following the same line of thought, it will, of course, also prove extremely difficult for the researcher to exactly calculate the costs and benefits that political gatekeepers expect to reap from a given situation. And as such, we will often be tempted to reach for ad hoc explanations and only *ex post*, on the basis of actions taken, assess their relative magnitude. Again, there is no easy solution to this challenge.

Nevertheless, what we must strive at is, at least, to credibly point out what the most important sources of power for the political gatekeepers in question are. Do they, primarily, base their

power on securing support and loyalty from a loose coalition or a more well-defined ruling party (Wintrobe 1990: 851; Bueno de Mesquita et al 2003: 7-8, 10; Magaloni 2008: 715-716; Way 2010: 230), on exercising discretionary control over the distribution of rents (Geddes 1999: 138; Vachudova 2005: 64; Gandi & Przeworski 2006; North, Wallis & Weingast 2009: 30), on controlling a well-functioning coercive apparatus (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986: 21; Tullock 1987: 10; Wintrobe 1990: 851; Geddes 1999: 138; Diamond 2008: 89; Way 2010: 230), on harassing the opposition and airing propaganda through a strictly controlled media (Schedler 2002: 43-44; Way 2005: 234), or, as in more liberal regimes, mainly on trying to expose the inadequacy and illegitimacy of their opponents and to convince the population that they are best at delivering welfare, stability, and security?

Only by knowing what constitutes the power-base of the political gatekeepers do we know where it hurt the most, and, consequently, where they place the highest cost on changes. But to reiterate, my main goal is to establish whether or not the connection between gatekeepers and linkages is valid. In the above, I have, primarily, sought to render this connection probable by proposing reasons for the various types of gatekeeper elites to actively try to affect linkages to external actors. Here, I have only hinted at some of the factors that possibly may condition that effect – yet, the question of fully assessing the scope conditions for this relationship must be left for future research. But, before ending, let me round off by briefly returning to the question of the amenability of linkages and more explicitly position myself in the structure-actor debate.

Finding Common Ground between Leverage, Linkage and Gatekeeper

Elites

As stated in the introduction to this paper, I seek to strike a balance between the structural and the actor-centred explanations of external influence of democratization. Yet, so far, I have mainly been arguing that *structures* are not everything. But, equally important is it to underline that

neither do I claim that *actors* are everything. Bringing elites back in “*is not to deny that the macrostructural factors are still ‘there’*” (O’Donnell & Schmitter 1986: 5). Actors are, of course, not free to choose anything at will in all situations (Przeworski 1986) and the choices they make, obviously, have consequences in the longer term. So, to make it crystal clear, that what I propose is a synthesis of the two explanation-types, let me spell out how structures (leverage and linkage) and actors (gatekeeper elites) continuously interact in iterative sequences.

First of all, leverage always sets the stage. The stronger the external actor is vis-à-vis the target state, the more influence it will have and the more difficult it will, *ceteris paribus*, be for gatekeeper elites to avert developing linkages (if the external actor wants to do so) or to cut linkages (if the external actor wants to preserve them). Is the leverage relaxed through either competing issues on the external actor’s agenda or the existence of alternative external actors ready to engage with the target state (cf. Table 1, the last two elements of leverage), the maneuverability of the gatekeeper elites are of course also relaxed. Yet, all things equal, the basic claim remains – the greater the power-asymmetry, the greater the external influence on democratization will be.

But, as Levitsky and Way propose, all things are not equal. Raw power definitely has a lot to say in these matters. But, the asymmetrical power-relationship cannot be exploited to its full potential without the “glue” of linkages. Linkages simply work as multiplicator-effects for external influence. The denser the ties, the more intense the external pressure will be. Furthermore, while leverage is fairly constant over time, I have argued that elites can facilitate and constrain linkages and, therefore, such ties do indeed change.

Nonetheless, the level of linkages between an external actor and a state is not a *tabula rasa* that gatekeeper elites can fill out, as they please. Levitsky’s and Way’s emphasis on a state’s geographical, historical, and cultural traits definitely are important for the density of linkages. Not only do they produce the linkages that are more difficult to alter than others, but these traits also determine the *possible scope* of the density of ties. What makes gatekeeper elites interesting then, is that they, by actively downgrading or upgrading integration measures, are capable of

influencing the *actual* level of ties – sometimes by closing the gates and lowering the density of linkages below the potential level given by the structural environment, and sometimes even by raising the level beyond what we should expect (evident in, e.g., Cuban-Russian or US-Taiwanese relations). So, gatekeeper elites produce differences in linkages that again produce differences in the chances that external actors can influence democratization.

However, as more and more linkages are developed, the power of the external actor is increased, and the more difficult it will be for the gatekeeper elites to effectively cut the ties again. The logic proposed by Levitsky and Way tells us that the more a state becomes entangled in linkages with one external actor, the more vested interests will consolidate on both sides. And the holders of these vested interests will naturally try to preserve such ties. At the same time, the external actor itself will not just stand by and watch as the influence it has accumulated over a longer period is being torn down. In most cases, it will, on the contrary, fight to keep its privileges. So, the determinacy of the external actor in combination with the consolidation of vested interests on both sides will seriously circumscribe the free choice and maneuverability of the gatekeeper elites. Following the logic proposed by historical institutionalists (see Thelen 1999 for an overview), opening the gates too widely simply produces a path-dependency that constrain the elites for many years.

Nevertheless, even in such a situation, I will argue that the gatekeeper elites are not determined to simply succumb – vested interests can be overcome and external actors can be challenged by strong and unified gatekeeper elites. But, for such punctuated equilibrium to happen (to stay in the terminology of historical institutionalism), the gatekeepers need *momentum*. One clear-cut example is how the breakdown of the Eastern Bloc resulted in the process, whereby the Central and East European states (along with the Baltic States) within a decade practically freed themselves from a tightly woven network of economic, political, and cultural linkages with Russia and the post-Soviet space and established almost as tight a network with the EU. Or consider how quickly the Iranian revolutionists in the years after 1979 cut the strong ties that the

Shah had developed with the American superpower. Thus, successfully turning away from even deep integration with an external actor is indeed possible, and history is fairly rich with examples of gatekeeper elites really doing this. Hence, opening the gates widely does lead to strong constraints on the gatekeepers' maneuverability. But are the gatekeepers committed and ready to face the consequences, the gates need not stay forever open.

Recapitulating, neither structures nor actors can be given absolute primacy in explaining external influence on democratization. As both structures and actors, obviously, are important, a symbiotic understanding of when external actors matter for democratization is simply the only way forward. What I have proposed is that the theory of leverage and linkages is indeed right in highlighting the importance of the structural basis for external influence. But, this is simply not enough. We are not told the full story, and not always do real cases fit the pattern inferred by the structural models. But by incorporating the notion of gatekeeper elites we breathe dynamism into an otherwise fairly static account of the external dimension of democratization. This enables us to light up the dark spots in the structural accounts by explicating the mechanisms behind, what Kopstein and Reilly termed, the *openness criterion*, and thereby, explaining that residual variance in the density of linkages that neither history nor geography can account for.

So, trying to answer the question of this paper in the most simple way possible, I argue that an external actor matter the most for democratization when it is relatively more powerful than the state it tries to affect, when a tight network of linkages exists between the external actor and that state, and when the gatekeeper elites try to strengthen these ties and thus ease the transmission of the external actor's pressure into political system of the target state. On the contrary, an external actor that is not very powerful vis-à-vis the target state, that does not have a dense set of linkages with that state, and that is repeatedly confronted with gatekeepers that staunchly try to constrain its influence will simply be much less capable of influencing democratization in that country. Basically, even strong external actors need partners inside the countries they are trying to affect – without such partners, the influence capacity they possess will be strongly reduced,

and they risk ending up looking more like spectators than causers of the decisive processes that mold political development.

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Figure 1. Model of when external actors can influence democratization

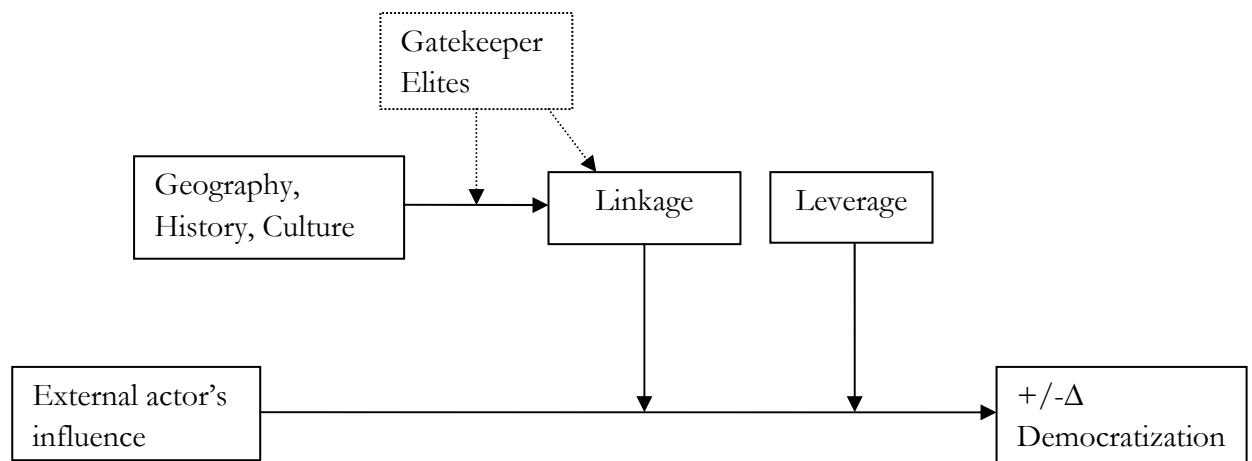


Table 1. Original and revisited version of the framework of Leverage and Linkage

	Levitsky & Way	Amended version
Leverage		
Concept	<i>Western</i> leverage	Leverage
Definition	<i>Authoritarian</i> governments' vulnerability to external pressure	Governments' vulnerability to external pressure
Elements	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A State's raw size and military and economic strength 2. The existence of competing issues on the external actor's policy agendas. 3. The existence of alternative regional powers that can support the country politically, economically, and militarily. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A states' raw size and military and economic strength. 2. The existence of competing issues on the external actor's policy agendas. 3. The existence of alternative regional powers that can support the country politically, economically, and militarily.
Linkage		
Concept	Linkage <i>to the West</i>	Linkage
Definition	The density of ties to <i>the United States, the EU, and Western-dominated multilateral institutions</i>	The density of ties to <i>the external actor and multilateral institutions dominated by it</i>
Elements	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Economic linkage – credit, investment, and assistance 2. Geopolitical linkage – ties to <i>Western</i> governments and <i>Western-led</i> alliances and organizations 3. Social linkage – tourism, migration, diaspora communities, and elite education <i>in the West</i> 4. Communication linkage – cross-border telecommunications, Internet connections, and <i>Western</i> media penetration. 5. Transnational civil society linkage – ties to international NGOs, churches, party organizations, and other networks. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Economic linkage – credit, investment, and assistance, <i>patterns of export and import</i> 2. Geopolitical linkage – ties to governments and alliances and organizations 3. Social linkage – tourism, migration, diaspora communities, and elite education <i>abroad</i> 4. Communication linkage – cross-border telecommunications, Internet connections, and <i>foreign</i> media penetration 5. Transnational civil society linkage – ties to international NGOs, churches, party organizations, and other networks

Note: the words in italics are either those that I have removed from (left column) or those that I have added to (right column) Levitsky's and Way's original framework.

Source: Levitsky and Way 2005: 21-23

