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Democratic Transitions and Democratic
Breakdowns: The Elite Variable

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ABSTRACT

Stable democratic regimes depend heavily on the "consensual
unity" of national elites. So long as elites remain disunified,
political regimes are unstable, a condition which makes
democratic transitions and democratic breakdowns merely temporary
oscillations in the forms unstable regimes take. Disunity
appears to be the generic condition of national elites, and
disunity strongly tends to persist regardless of socioeconomic
development and other changes in mass populations. The
consensually unified elites that are necessary to stable
democracies are created in only a few ways, two of the most
important of which involve distinctive _elite_ transformations.
After elaborating this argument, we examine the relationship
between elites and regimes in western nation-states since they
began to consolidate after 1500. We show that our approach makes
good sense of the western political record, that it does much to
clarify prospects for stable democracies in developing societies
today, and that it makes the increasingly elite-centered analysis
of democratic transitions and breakdowns more systematic.

DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS AND DEMOCRATIC BREAKDOWNS:
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The unexpected wave of democratic transitions during the last
decade, most notably in Latin America and Southern Europe, has
attracted much scholarly attention (see, _inter alia_, O'Donnell et
al. 1986; Malloy and Seligson 1987; Baloyra 1987; Needler 1987).
Although this new body of work has considerable value, it offers
no sound theoretical basis for judging the survival prospects of
newly democratic regimes. Scholars have focused primarily on the
antecedents and processes of democratic transitions, and have
avoided the task of prediction. Thus, comparative political
sociology today is not much closer to a workable theory of stable
democracy than it was in the 1960s and 1970s when many putatively
stable democracies fell to a wave of authoritarian regimes, which
was also unanticipated theoretically (see Linz and Stepan 1978;
Collier 1980).

In thinking about the determinants of stable democracies,
however, there has been a promising shift in causal focus away
from social structural and toward political determinants
conceptualized in terms of the behavior of powerful actors or
elites. This new emphasis has in turn introduced a large element
of indeterminacy. Some scholars now suggest that democratic
transitions and breakdowns are ultimately the products of
historically contingent elite _choices_ (e.g., O'Donnell and
Schmitter 1986; Lopez-Pintor 1987; Malloy 1987). Although this
shift in causal focus is a step forward, it may lead to a dead-
end if it is not substantially elaborated. The elite concept is

fraught with problems, and the contingent nature of elite choices may be a barrier to theoretical progress.

We suggest a route out of these and related difficulties. Briefly, we argue that democratic transitions and breakdowns can best be understood by studying basic continuities and changes in the internal relations of national elites. A <u>disunified</u> national elite, which is the most common type, produces a series of <u>unstable regimes</u> that tend to oscillate between authoritarian and democratic forms over varying intervals. A <u>consensually unified</u> national elite, which is historically much rarer, produces a <u>stable regime</u> that may evolve into a modern democracy, as in Sweden, or Britain, or the United States, if economic and other facilitative conditions permit. Unless regime changes are preceded or accompanied by <u>elite transformations</u>--from disunity to consensual unity, in cases of democratic transitions, or from consensual unity to disunity in cases of democratic breakdowns-- they should be regarded as strictly temporary. However, such elite transformations rarely occur. Once created, each national elite type strongly tends to persist, with the disunified type being nearly ubiquitous, both historically in Europe and Latin America and among Latin American and non-western countries today. Consequently, most regime changes that have been examined as democratic transitions or breakdowns are more fruitfully viewed as underpinned by continuing elite disunity and associated regime instability. Failure to see this has led many scholars to exaggerate the longer-term significance of such transitions and breakdowns, and left them unprepared to explain the reversals in regime form that typically follow.

The thrust of our argument is not new. Many scholars have shown that the unity of national elites is one of the most important determinants of regime forms (e.g., Pareto 1935; Mosca 1939; Aron 1950; Castles 1974; Putnam 1976; Huntington 1984). But this idea has not been developed systematically. Disunified and consensually unified national elites are not well defined, their origins and persistence are largely unexamined, and the

consequences of their internal organization for regime forms are poorly understood.

The following section outlines a theoretical perspective that begins to correct these problems. Then our theoretical claims about the connections between national elite unity and regime stability are examined in a review of major western political changes that have occurred since about 1500. We demonstrate that the connection between elite disunity and regime instability has been more widespread and persistent in historical and contemporary nation-states than is commonly recognized. We conclude by considering how our analysis informs current discussions about democratic transitions and breakdowns.

CONCEPTUALIZING ELITE VARIATIONS AND REGIME CONSEQUENCES

We first specify our frame of reference and organizing concepts. The unit of analysis is the independent, territorially-consolidated nation-state, a political entity that is at least moderately demarcated territorially and administratively centralized on basic matters like policing and taxing (see Giddens 1987, pp. 116-21). Our principal interest is to explain how domestic elite interrelations affect regime stability. Though we recognize that elite-regime relationships are sometimes changed fundamentally by wars, we do not intend to explain such events. And while the political importance of location in the world economy is undeniable, we think that international economic forces do not normally determine elite-regime relationships (see, Brenner 1977; Smith 1979; Linz and Stepan 1978; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Malloy 1987). Finally, we recognize that subnational, regionally-based ethnic, religious, linguistic, and other cultural conflicts sometimes override elite-regime relationships and require different but not necessarily contradictory concepts and models (e.g., Lijphart 1978).

Within this frame of reference, we conceive of national

<u>elites</u> as persons who are able, by virtue of their authoritative
positions in powerful organizations and movements of whatever
kind, to affect national political outcomes regularly and
substantially (Burton and Higley 1987a). Scholars generally
agree that national elites can be defined as top position-holders
in the largest or most resource-rich political, governmental,
economic, military, professional, communications, and cultural
organizations and movements in a society (see Putnam 1976; Higley
and Moore 1981; McDonough 1981; Dye 1983; Hoffmann-Lange 1987;
Moyser and Wagstaffe 1987). We think of <u>regimes</u> as basic
patterns in the organization, exercise, and transfer of
government decision-making power. Many distinctions among regime
types can be drawn (e.g., democratic, authoritarian, and
totalitarian), but we stress the value of distinguishing between
stable and unstable regimes.

Scholars who focus on the variability of national elites
generally distinguish three basic types: (1) the "pluralistic"
or "consensually unified" type that exists in most western
societies today and that existed in a few of them in earlier
times; (2) the "totalitarian" or "ideologically unified" type in
nation-states organized along communist, fascist, or theocratic
lines; (3) and the "divided" or "disunified" elite of many past
and contemporary nation-states (Aron 1950; Dahrendorf 1967;
Putnam 1976; Welsh 1979; Burton and Higley 1987a). We focus here
only on consensually unified and disunified national elites
because understanding their differences and their strong tendency
to persist clarifies the analysis of democratic transitions and
breakdowns.

A national elite is <u>consensually unified</u> when its members
(1) share a largely tacit consensus about rules and codes of
political conduct amounting to a "restrained partisanship"
(Prewitt and Stone 1973; Di Palma 1973), and (2) participate in a
more or less comprehensively integrated structure of interaction
which provides them with relatively reliable and effective access
to each other and to the most central decision-makers (Kadushin

1979; Higley and Moore 1981). This combination of tacit consensus on rules of the game and comprehensive integration disposes elite members to view decisional outcomes as a positive-sum or "politics-as-bargaining" game, rather than a zero-sum or "politics-as-war" game (Sartori 1987, p. 224). With agreement on the rules of the political game and with decision-making access assured, the diverse and heterogeneous members accept various decisions they do not especially like because they expect to get their way on other issues they consider vital. Over time, most elites achieve their most basic aims, and are therefore inclined to view the totality of decisional outcomes as positive-sum (Sartori 1987, p. 229).

This explains why elite persons and factions who regularly take opposing ideological and policy positions in public consistently refrain from pushing their differences to the point of violent conflict. Typical elite members therefore enjoy considerable personal security, in the sense that they do not expect to be killed, imprisoned, or similarly penalized for ending up on the losing side of a policy dispute. It follows that, once this type of national elite is created, and so long as it persists, forcible seizures of government power by one or another discontented faction will not occur. Moreover, to accommodate and process the diverse, frequently opposing interests of the factions in such a national elite, political institutions will be structured along representative, at least proto-democratic lines, though the actual extent of representative democracy may depend on other, facilitative conditions.

By contrast, a national elite is <u>disunified</u> when its members (1) share few or no understandings about the proprieties of political conduct, and (2) engage in only limited and sporadic interactions across factional or sectoral boundaries. The basic situation of persons comprising this elite type is one of deep insecurity--the fear, usually rooted in experience, that all is lost if some other person or faction gets the upper hand.

Accordingly, members of a disunified elite routinely take extreme measures to protect themselves and their interests: killing, imprisoning, or banishing opponents, fomenting rebellions against ascendant factions, expropriating opponents' resources, and so on. In the context of elite disunity, these actions are often the most rational ones available. Recent experiences of having punitive measures taken against them or their close associates, and the strong belief that such measures will be implemented in the future, solidifies the fears and insecurities of disunified national elite members. So entrenched are these fears and insecurities that elite disunity can be transcended only in extraordinary circumstances.

We have few direct and comprehensive empirical studies of disunified national elites. Members seldom cooperate in such research because they fear it will be used against them. Researchers who persist in studying a disunified elite do so at considerable personal peril. One direct and relatively extensive study is McDonough's (1981) 1972-73 survey of the Brazilian national elite, minus the governmentally dominant military elite which refused to cooperate. McDonough's research portrays an elite divided into military-governmental, economic, church, and urban labor factions which were polarized over rules of the political game (e.g., freedom of political opposition and the extent of executive power), and were isolated from each other. Brown's (1969, p. 441) more limited survey of French elite groups in the mid-1960s--just a few years after their conflicts toppled the Fourth Republic and the Algerian imbroglio spawned considerable intra-elite violence--concluded that the outstanding feature of the French national elite was "the lack of agreement concerning the basic political institutions of the nation" and an absence of extensive personal contacts among the main elite factions (p. 441). In related fashion, Shonfeld's (1981) study of French elites in the early 1970s found extensive personal ties among elite members in the main factions but lack of ties across factional lines. Importantly, each faction was

ignorant of and disregarded the other. In the same vein, in
Czudnowski's (1987) limited survey of the Taiwanese national
elite, the fact that he had to devise complex research stratagems
to circumvent the respondents' mutual fears and hostilities
points to basic elite disunity.

The origin of national elite disunity apparently lies in the
process of nation-state formation. Constructing nation-states
out of previously disparate and partially autonomous territories
is typically such a violent and conflict-ridden process,
involving the repression of some elite groups by others, that
deep and unremitting elite disunity is almost inevitable (Coleman
1971, pp. 89-93). Bendix's (1978) treatise on nation-state
formation in the west and Japan amply demonstrates that nation-
state consolidation everywhere resulted in disunified elites.
The formation of nation-states in Latin America after
emancipation from Spanish rule in the early nineteenth century
required repeated efforts to suppress local elites by force
(Oszlak 1981). Johnson (1983) provides a graphic account of the
altogether similar result of postcolonial nation-state
consolidations in Black Africa and many other newly emerging
nations in the 1960s and 1970s.

Thus, the historical record strongly suggests that elite
disunity originates in the formation of nation-states. Disunity
is, in other words, the generic condition of national elites.
But there are two kinds of exceptions. First, the experience of
operating "home rule" regimes over longer periods under
relatively benign colonial tutelage and/or of orchestrating large
and politically complex national independence movements sometimes
results in a consensually unified national elite from the date of
postcolonial independence. The United States, Canada, New
Zealand, Australia, India, and a few other offshoots of the
British Empire are the principal examples. Second, defeat and
occupation of societies after wars sometimes results in
consensually unified elites from the date of postwar independence
because the previously most opposing elite factions have been

liquidated (e.g., Austria during and after World War II). But
with these exceptions, the historical record strongly supports
the proposition that nation-state formation almost always results
in a disunified national elite.

The main political consequence of elite disunity is <u>regime
instability</u>. As a property of regimes, instability has several
meanings. Sanders (1981) identifies three meanings: (1) a high
incidence of political violence in the form of revolts, riots,
strikes, mass demonstrations, and individual actions; (2)
frequent changes in the makeup of governing coalitions and
cabinets; (3) the occurrence of coups d'etat or other government
overthrows. In our view, the first two meanings are not
sufficiently discriminating because nearly all regimes at various
times would qualify as unstable in one or both respects. Only
the third meaning, suitably elaborated, distinguishes unstable
regimes in a clear-cut and theoretically useful fashion. Thus, a
political regime may be said to be unstable <u>whenever government
executive power is subject to irregular seizures, attempted
seizures, or widely expected seizures by force</u>. Concrete
indicators of regime instability are revolutions, uprisings, or
coups d'etat aimed at changing the control of government
executive offices and not primarily orchestrated by another
nation-state. A regime may be classified as unstable during
periods when such seizures occur, are attempted, or are regarded
by informed persons as likely possibilities. So long as any of
these indicators of instability obtain, a regime's current mode
of functioning, whether "democratic" or "authoritarian" or
something else, is likely to be temporary.

Irregular, forcible power seizures are sufficiently frequent
and visible, or the expectation of them is so palpable, that
observers usually have little difficulty recognizing a regime as
unstable. Thus, Malloy (1985, p. 367) calculated that some 186
irregular seizures of government occurred in Bolivia since
independence in 1825. Veliz (1967, p. 278) counted 80
successful military coups in 18 Latin American countries between

1920 and 1966. Grundy (1968) found 64 irregular seizures of power in Black African nations between 1963 and 1968, and Macridis (1986, p. 225) listed 26 coups in 16 countries of Tropical Africa between 1970-1984. Similarly, it is usually not hard to discern expectations of irregular power seizures among informed observers of a regime. For example, a journalist (Bonner 1988) who recently spent several months talking with leaders and opponents of the democratic regime led by Alan Garcia in Peru concluded: "The soldiers still exercise a de facto veto over the actions of civilians, and many observers in Peru, both Peruvian and foreign, think that the question is not whether the military will stage a coup but when. Between two and five years is the general estimate" (p. 58).

Occasionally, however, there are regimes in which no irregular power seizure or attempted seizure has recently occurred and where it is debatable whether informed observers regard such seizures as likely possibilities. Uruguay after its civil war in 1904 to the years immediately preceding the military coup in 1973 is an example. Chile, after the overthrow of the Ibanez dictatorship in 1932 and down to the first year of the Allende government in 1970-71, is another example. France during the long-lasting Third Republic, 1875-1940, might be another. In such ambiguous cases, many scholars and policymakers have mistakenly regarded regimes as stable.

The primary reason for these inaccurate assessments has been a failure to comprehend the underlying condition of elite disunity. Though elites and regimes seem inextricably entwined, analytically distinguishing between the basic structure of a national elite and the characteristics of its political regime allows one to postulate a causal relationship between elites and regimes, in which elite structure is viewed as logically and factually prior to regime stability. This leads to the proposition that, for a lasting democratic transition to occur, the national elite must first be transformed from disunity to consensual unity. When analyzing regime changes, in short,

researchers should concentrate on the underlying elite structure, seeking recent or historical evidence of an elite transformation. If no such evidence is found, the analyst should presume that the elite remains disunified and the regime remains unstable.

This conclusion presumes that we know both what elite transformations from disunity to consensual unity look like and the circumstances in which they may occur. Unfortunately, political sociologists have not explored these matters in depth. We (Burton and Higley 1987b) recently analyzed one kind of elite transformation: the "elite settlement" in which warring elite factions suddenly and deliberately reorganized their relations by negotiating compromises on their most basic disagreements, thereby achieving consensual unity and laying the basis for a stable democratic regime. The elite settlement process is exemplified by political events in England in 1688-89, Sweden in 1808-09, and Colombia and Venezuela in the late 1950s. We suspect that a second kind of transformation from disunity to consensual unity occurs in two distinct steps. In step one, some of the warring factions enter into sustained, peaceful collaboration in electoral politics in order to mobilize a reliable electoral majority, win elections repeatedly, and thereby protect their interests by dominating government executive power. In step two, the major hostile factions opposing this coalition eventually tire of losing elections, and, seeing no other way to gain government power (for example, through a coup), gradually abandon their distinct ideological and policy stances and adopt essentially those of the winning coalition. With this development, a consensually unified national elite is created and a stable democratic regime rapidly emerges. Examples include France and Italy during the past quarter century: center-right elite coalitions formed, the French Gaullists and the Italian Christian Democrats plus smaller elite factions in each country. These coalitions then dominated electoral politics in ways that eventually forced radical leftist factions, principally the French Socialists and

the Italian Communists, to moderate their ideologies and programs in order to compete effectively for executive office (Field and Higley 1978).

So far as we can determine, elite settlements and these "two-step" elite transformations are, to date in modern history, the only routes from a disunified to a consensually unified national elite. They thus constitute the only indigenous bases for changes from unstable to stable democratic (or proto-democratic) regimes. But, as noted, such transformations rarely occur. Conversely, elite transformations from consensual unity to disunity are even rarer. Down to the present period at least, consensually unified national elites, once formed, have everywhere perpetuated themselves.

The rarity of elite transformations from consensual unity to disunity has implications for the analysis of democratic breakdowns. The much-discussed breakdowns of interwar Europe (see Linz and Stepan 1978) all occurred in nation-states whose elites had been patently disunified since the time of nation-state formation (e.g., German elites after 1871, see Baum 1981; Hamilton 1982). What broke down in interwar Europe were democratic interludes in wider patterns of elite disunity and regime instability. Possibly, an elite transformation from consensual unity to disunity, and thus a regime change from stability to instability, has recently occurred in the Philippines, a nation-state which gave many indications of having a consensually unified national elite and a stable democratic regime from the end of American colonial tutelage in 1946 until the spread of intraelite violence, culminating in several military rebellions, during the 1980s.

Though elite transformations are fundamentally "elite events," obviously mass variables are important. Elites always need mass support. Mass conditions and orientations thus establish fields of opportunity and constraint to which elites must respond (see Field and Higley 1980, pp. 18-47). For example, two-step elite transformations appear possible only

where a majority of voters are disposed, by virtue of their
socioeconomic and other conditions, to support elite electoral
appeals that essentially defend the status quo. Yet, as we
suggest below, no discernible mass configuration leads inexorably
to elite transformations. <u>Despite dramatic changes in mass
conditions and orientations during the modern historical period,
the modal pattern of western politics was one of persistent elite
disunity and resulting regime instability</u>. We now briefly
describe this modal pattern.

THE MODAL PATTERN OF WESTERN POLITICS

For most of the period between 1500 and the Napoleonic Wars, only
eight western societies approached the political independence and
integration of modern nation-states: Denmark, England, France,
Portugal, Russia, Scotland, Spain, and Sweden (see Table 1).
During the first half of this period probably only England fully
met the nation-state standard in terms of territorial political
consolidation. Denmark was embroiled in an effort to retain
control of Sweden, France was periodically broken up in civil
wars over religious and social questions until late in the
seventeenth century, Portugal was subjugated by Spain between
1580 and 1640, Russia did not achieve national consolidation
until the seventeenth century under the Romanovs, Scotland was
not fully independent from England after 1652 and it disappeared
as a nation-state after merging with England in 1707, while Spain
was initially several distinct countries joined by a dynastic
union which only eventually led to territorial demarcation and
administrative centralization. A ninth political entity, the
United Provinces of the Netherlands, threw off Spanish domination
in the 1580s, but the seven provinces, which separately appeared
to have consensually unified elites from the time of independence
(see Grever 1982), did not achieve nation-state consolidation
until the Napoleonic Wars. Throughout the eighteenth century,
Brandenburg-Prussia emerged as an important European power, but

it consisted of various semi-autonomous and non-contiguous
territories. Finally, the United States, did not emerge as a
consolidated nation-state until the very end of the period.

Disunity as the Generic Condition of National Elites

By about 1600 all eight original societies-cum-nation-states had
reached levels of urbanization and commercialization
sufficiently complex that many elite positions required more or
less full-time attention by their incumbents. Though small
leisured classes of influential aristocrats and gentry continued
to exist, in showdown situations the decisive power-wielders
tended to be the persons and factions commanding the most
important bureaucratic organizations: monarchs and high state
officials, senior military officers, high-ranking ecclesiastics,
merchants and entrepreneurs heading important commercial
enterprises, and leaders of regional political bodies.

As national aggregations, these elites were clearly
disunified in the sense that wide and deep struggles for
political ascendancy typified their relationships. Elite
factions associated with monarchs and contenders for the throne
tended to back royal absolutism, while factions benefitting from
local autonomy resisted. The use of military force for purposes
of aggrandizement and pacification bulked large (Finer 1975; Mann
1986), and religious divisions made struggles between state-
building and state-resisting elites more bitter and complex
(Bendix 1978; see also Tilly 1975).

Political regimes in all these nation-states were
traditional monarchies in which government executive power was
transferred among successive rulers by principles of
inheritance. But since there seldom was any widespread agreement
on the concrete application of these principles, transfers of
executive power were subject to intrigues, challenges, and
usurpations. In Denmark, for example, struggle over the royal

succession exploded in civil war during the 1530s, and in
England succession to the throne was precarious throughout the
second half of the sixteenth century. Even where transfers of
executive power among successive monarchs occurred peacefully—as
during Spain's "golden" sixteenth century—the mutual fear and
distrust of elite factions guaranteed incessant rivalries, plots,
and other frequently violent maneuvers aimed at dominating the
monarch.

In reality, these traditional monarchies simply embodied
elite disunity. The attempt to centralize political power in one
person and clique—the monarch and his or her retinue—reflected
the absence of mutually agreed power-sharing arrangements. In
Bendix's (1978, pp.218-43) view, traditional monarchies
confronted insoluble dilemmas—irreconcilable needs to both
concentrate and delegate royal authority, large and irreducible
elements of arbitrariness in monarchical actions, eminently
disputable processes of inheritance and succession, pervasive
uncertainty about the extent and limits of royal authority—the
only consequence of which could be regime instability. In these
fundamental respects, the persistence of traditional monarchies
everywhere epitomized the existence of disunified national
elites.

The First Elite Settlements

Down to the Napoleonic Wars, the relationship between elite
disunity and regime instability was broken only in England and
Sweden (see Table 1). In England's "Glorious Revolution" of
1688-89, and in substantively similar events surrounding Sweden's
creation of a constitutional monarchy in 1808-09, elite
settlements occurred in which previously warring factions
suddenly and deliberately transformed their relations from
disunity to consensual unity. As we have argued (Burton and
Higley 1987b), these settlements originated in the recent
experience of costly but inconclusive elite conflict—the

English civil wars and their Cromwellian aftermath plus thirty years of bitter infighting between Tory and Whig factions during the Restoration period, and in Sweden the struggle between Hat and Cap factions throughout the eighteenth century. Immediate precipitants were dramatic political crises: the birth of James II's son in 1688 making probable a Catholic succession to the throne of a Protestant country; the grave defeat Sweden suffered at the hands of Russia in 1808, coupled with economic disarray. The settlements depended for their success upon the unprecedented forbearance and secret collusions of a handful of skilled and experienced leaders, representing the major elite factions, who rapidly negotiated compromises on the most dangerous issues. And the predominantly unmobilized character of nonelite populations apparently facilitated the settlements by allowing elites sufficient autonomy to negotiate compromises.

These settlements established new arrangements for sharing power, thereby greatly reducing elite insecurities. Henceforth, most elite persons had reliable access to decision-making on issues salient to them, and defeats on policy questions no longer carried drastic penalties. Almost immediately after the English and Swedish elite settlements, a prudent and restrained politics came into being, with contested elections taking place at short intervals and eventually becoming democratized through universal suffrage, and with executive power shifting from monarchs to cabinets responsible to elected bodies. Thereafter, even serious political challenges, such as England's Chartist Movement during the 1830s and radical labor movements in both countries at the end of the nineteenth century, did not prevent the peaceful transfer of executive power among different elite factions according to the outcomes of regular, popular elections.

We sketch the elite settlements in England and Sweden because they represent, within the frame of reference specified, the only route in preindustrial societies from elite disunity and regime instability to consensual elite unity and a stable, proto-democratic political regime. Without a settlement,

the elite disunity that originates during nation-state formation simply persists, guaranteeing that political regimes remain unstable. This contention is borne out by the politics of the other original western nation-states down to the Napoleonic Wars: in none did anything resembling the English and Swedish elite settlements occur, and all of their political regimes evidenced instability throughout the period.

Persistence of Elite Disunity Elsewhere

In Denmark, struggles among aristocratic and bourgeois elite factions culminated in royal absolutism after 1665. A century of rule by a few hundred landowners in league with the monarchy followed, but was upset in the 1770s and 1780s by palace intrigues and power grabs, amounting to successive coups d'etat. In France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, elites in the court, the church, the military, and the major towns became polarized over traditional versus rationalist views of rank and privilege and over other conceptions of the good society. The chasm between the elite camps persisted, and in 1788-89 revolution broke out. In Portugal, independence from Spain in 1640 was soon followed by court intrigues, the overthrow of Afonso VI in 1668, and the assertion of royal absolutism; which, as elsewhere, involved constant infighting among elite factions bent on dominating the monarchical power.

Elite disunity was also evident in Russia and Spain. In Russia during the seventeenth century, absolutist rule was punctuated by sporadic uprisings which the Tsars ruthlessly suppressed. After thirty-five years of "enlightened despotism" under Peter The Great (1689-1725), court intrigues and military interventions perpetuated regime instability. As Bendix (1978, p. 597) notes, only two of the eight monarchs following Peter during the eighteenth century attained the throne without military intervention, and both were murdered. Seventeenth century Spanish politics were dominated first by revolts against

Castilian hegemony and then by attempts by noble elite factions
to dominate the incompetent Charles II (1665-1700). Early in the
eighteenth century, Spain broke up in civil war and regional
revolts. It was patched together in 1716, then its politics
paralleled French politics--a protracted struggle pitting
reactionary aristocrats and church officials against modernizing
elite factions spearheaded by state officials and leaders of the
small bourgeoisie. At century's end, under another incompetent
king, Charles IV, court intrigues swept Spain into its disastrous
French alliance, which produced an uprising against the king, his
forced abdication in 1808, and Napoleon's imposition of his
brother Joseph on the Spanish throne.

In short, the uniform political pattern in all the earliest
western nation-states was elite disunity and regime instability,
a pattern originating in the process of nation-state formation.
Except in England and Sweden, where extraordinary circumstances
facilitated sudden and deliberate settlements, elite disunity and
regime instability persisted over several hundred years, despite
the ebb and flow of national fortunes and despite fairly steady
socioeconomic development. This pattern was not simply a
consequence of imperfect nation-state consolidation, traditional
monarchies, or preindustrialization. It persisted after these
nation-states fully consolidated, after their monarchies were
mostly replaced by republican governments, real or de facto, and
after substantial industrialization.

Elite Disunity In the Nineteenth Century

Conquests by French revolutionary and Napoleonic armies turned
many small and precariously independent German and Italian
principalities into large territorial units. In 1815, the
Congress of Vienna ratified these changes, thus reorganizing the
European political map (see Table 1). Prussia emerged as a major
nation-state, while the loosely consolidated Habsburg Empire
(after 1867 the Austro-Hungarian Empire) tried to control

territories in Italy, Eastern Europe, and the Balkans. Through
war in the 1860s, Prussia excluded the Habsburg Empire from
German-speaking territories outside Austria proper, and in 1871
Prussia established the German Reich. With French and Prussian
help, the Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont expanded, also reducing
the Habsburg Empire, and emerged in 1870 as the Italian nation-
state. Along with France, Spain, and Russia, these countries
dominated continental Europe, though smaller nation-states also
emerged--the Netherlands from 1813, Belgium from 1830,
Switzerland from 1848, Norway from 1884.

At various points during the nineteenth century, most of
these countries, plus Britain, Sweden, and Denmark, reached
industrial levels of socioeconomic development, and their
populations came to include large categories of manual industrial
and bureaucratic and service workers. This spread of an
industrial occupational configuration created new elites
commanding labor unions, mass political parties, new commercial
enterprises, professional associations, mass media organizations,
educational institutions, and public sector agencies and
organizations stemming from state expansion. But
industrialization was not accompanied by any basic change in
elite structures or in the character of political regimes.
Elites in the original European nation-states, other than England
and Sweden, remained disunified. If anything, elite disunity was
exacerbated by the French Revolution's aftershocks, by new elites
entering the political arena, and by conflicts between population
segments resulting from industrialization. Moreover, the
process of forging new nation-states during the nineteenth
century nearly everywhere produced disunified national elites.
Thus, in Prussia, Belgium, Germany after 1871, and Italy after
1870, elites disagreed fundamentally about the constitutions and
institutions on which their new nations rested, and they defended
or subverted governments according to their narrow interests.

Two exceptions, Switzerland and Norway, require brief
mention. Before entering the new Swiss federation in 1848,

several, perhaps all, previously self-governing, geographically-isolated Swiss cantons had consensually unified elites as outgrowths of late medieval "citizen communities." The Swiss constitutional settlement of 1848 formed these cantonal elites into a consensually unified national elite which has operated a stable representative regime ever since. Somewhat by contrast, Norway was controlled by Sweden between 1814 and 1884, with Norwegian elites operating a "home rule" regime along representative political lines. When Sweden relinquished control in 1884, Norway emerged with a national elite that was halfway through a two-step transformation. Between them, conservative and liberal factions mobilized an electoral majority and consistently excluded ostensibly revolutionary socialist factions from government executive power until the latter abandoned radicalism during the 1930s, allowing full consensual unification (see Higley et al. 1976).

But elsewhere in nineteenth century Europe, elite disunity persisted and produced frequent, often violent oscillations in regime forms. Thus, in France a traditional monarchy was restored in 1814-15, a "bourgeois monarchy" was installed in an upheaval in 1830, a republican regime was instituted by revolt in 1848, an autocratic regime was established by coup d'etat in 1851, and another republican regime was instituted following the suppression of the Paris Commune uprising of 1870. Elite disunity and regime instability were equally conspicuous in Spain: restoration of the monarchy in 1814; enforced liberalization of the monarchy, involving a military coup, between 1820-23; the military-backed "succession" of three-year-old Queen Isabel III in 1833 and withdrawal of the former heir presumptive to lead a "Carlist" revolt in the north; military interventions which shifted power between liberal and conservative factions in 1835, 1843, 1854, and 1856; Isabel's dethronement in 1868 and an interregnum of military rule and civil war followed by her son's acceptance of a constitutional monarchy with nominally representative institutions in 1875.

Portugal experienced a similar pattern of upheavals--
displacement of the monarchy in 1820, a failed insurrection in
1824, civil war in 1832-34, coups in 1836 and 1851, and an
attempted uprising in 1890.

In most other European nation-states, however, there were no
similar sequences of government overthrows. In Russia, Prussia
and Germany, conservative elite factions used repression to
sustain monarchies that were reviled by elites leading bourgeois
and working-class organizations and movements. In these
countries, and in Denmark, Belgium and Italy, elite disunity was
suggested by deep ideological divisions between elites, and
regime instability was reflected in intrigues surrounding the
monarchical regimes and in numerous riots, strikes, and other
confrontations engineered by dissident elites.

Disunified Elites and Unstable Democracies

When the nineteenth century ended, all western nation-states
except Russia had representative political institutions involving
significant practice of electoral politics. The material wealth
produced by industrialization enabled dominant elites temporarily
to placate dissident elites and their followings, and the
suffrage was still largely restricted to those with a stake in
the existing socioeconomic order. Thus, elections did not
immediately become merely another way for warring factions to
undermine and destroy each other. For a while, a number of
European nation-states appeared to have stable democratic
regimes, even though no basic elite transformation had occurred.

We must examine this situation further because it bears
directly on our argument that democracy is stable only when
elites are consensually unified. The long-lasting French Third
Republic may seem to constitute a particularly clear exception.
For sixty-five years it suffered no forcible seizure of
government executive power, and it was regarded as one of the
major democracies of the modern age. If space allowed, other

seeming exceptions to our argument would bear examination:
Italy's constitutional monarchy from 1870 until Mussolini's
takeover in 1922-25; and, further afield, the Argentine regime
between 1912 and 1930, the Uruguayan regime between 1905 and the
late 1960s, and the Chilean regime between 1933 and Allende's
assumption of the presidency in 1970. In our view such
governments were interludes, if rather long-lasting ones, in a
continuing pattern of elite disunity and regime instability.
Here we can only illustrate this interpretation by looking at the
French Third Republic.

Despite certain conditions favoring an elite transformation,
the creation of the Third Republic was not preceded, accompanied,
or followed by unification of the disunified elites so evident in
France's earlier history. Among the monarchist factions who
held a majority of National Assembly seats in the early 1870s,
many people favored a British-style constitutional monarchy
(Anderson 1977, p. 6). Republicans within the Assembly were
predominantly moderate, as exemplified by their leader, Adolphe
Thiers. Monarchists and republicans were thus potentially
capable of compromising. And radical factions in the Assembly
were in disarray after the Paris Commune debacle. In these
circumstances, an elite settlement was conceivable. A step in
this direction was the "fusionist" effort by leaders of the two
monarchist factions to have the Legitimist pretender, the
childless Comte de Chambord, then in his fifties, take the throne
and be succeeded by the much younger Orleanist pretender, the
Comte de Paris (Thomson 1969, pp. 80-83). The plan foundered on
Chambord's refusal of the limited monarchy being offered, a
refusal he couched in a dispute over the national flag. Had
Chambord accepted the fusionist plan, it might have become a key
element in a comprehensive elite settlement.

Thus, the Third Republic was born, not in an elite
settlement but in an elite stalemate (Hoffman 1963). Established
by a one vote margin in the National Assembly in 1875, it was
never viewed by monarchist, Bonapartist, or left-wing elite

factions as more than a temporary expedient (Thomson 1969).
These several factions mobilized major segments of the business
class, the church hierarchy, the military, the civil service, and
the working class. Predictably, expectations of forcible
seizures of government power became a regular feature of French
politics. During the 1880s there was considerable support for a
coup by ex-General Boulanger, but he balked at the last minute.
The Ligue des Patriotes attempted a coup in 1889. In 1898 and
1899, during the divisive Dreyfus affair, two serious coup plots
were uncovered. In 1933, Action Francaise and other proto-
fascist groups conspired to overthrow the Daladier government.
The last years of the Republic, before, during and after the
Popular Front government of 1936-1938, involved severe elite
disunity, as evidenced by the alacrity with which a major portion
of the elite seized the opportunity created by military defeat in
1940 to dismantle the Republic and to establish the corporatist,
semi-fascist Vichy regime (Paxton 1972).

Similar analyses of continuing elite disunity and its
destabilizing effects on democratic regimes apply to most other
European and all Latin American nation-states during the latter
part of the nineteenth century and much of this century. Weimar
Germany and the Austrian Republic during the interwar period
before Hitler took over provide two especially clear-cut and
consequential examples (see Hamilton 1982), but so do Italy,
Spain, and Portugal in the same period.

Did this modal pattern of western politics persist after
World War II? Following our argument, one must examine each
country for clear evidence of an elite transformation from
disunity to consensual unity, either through a sudden and
deliberate settlement or a two-step transformation. Apart from
Russia and its East European satellites, and possibly Portugal,
all the unstable European countries discussed above appear to
have experienced an elite transformation (see Table 1). In
Austria, the proporz system and other power-sharing arrangements
that elites secretly negotiated in the late 1940s probably

constituted an elite settlement, thus laying the basis for the
first stable democratic regime in Austria's history (see Steiner
1972; Stiefbold 1974). Similarly, the intensive elite
negotiations carried on in Spain after Franco's death in 1975
produced a settlement terminating more than four centuries of
regime instability (see Gunther et al. 1986; Share 1987).
Elsewhere--in West Germany and Belgium during the 1950s and early
1960s, and in France and Italy during the 1960s and 1970s--two-
step elite transformations occurred as the electoral dominance of
center-right elite coalitions gradually forced left-wing factions
to abandon socialist orthodoxies and join their "bourgeois"
opponents in defending and operating liberal democratic regimes
presiding over capitalist economies.

Summary

Table 1 summarizes the patterns underlying our contention that,
barring special colonial legacies like those in the United States
or the Netherlands, and barring exceptional historical and
geographical circumstances like those of Switzerland, elite
disunity and regime instability have been so widespread and
persistent as to constitute the modal pattern of western
politics. Locating the origins of elite disunity in the
formations of western nation-states, the table illustrates our
contention that the relationship between elite disunity and
regime instability simply persists, regardless of changes in
regime forms or in the configurations of mass publics, until one
of three elite transformations occurs: (1) a sudden and
deliberate elite settlement, (2) a more gradual two-step elite
transformation, or (3) a "revolutionary elite transformation" to
the condition of ideological unity (which because of our focus we
have not examined). Finally, Table 1 suggests that only after an
elite settlement or a two-step transformation do previously
unstable regimes become stable along representative lines that
are conducive to the rapid or gradual spread of democratic

politics. In short, within the frame of reference specified,
special colonial legacies, elite settlements, and two-step elite
transformations have constituted the only routes to stable
democratic political regimes in modern western history. We now
suggest some implications of this analysis for the current
discussion of democratic transitions and democratic breakdowns.

DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS AND BREAKDOWNS RECONSIDERED

The distinction between democratic, totalitarian, and
authoritarian regimes has been a mainstay of comparative
political sociology, but success in developing a general theory
of political continuity and change centering on this distinction
has been slight. A serious impediment is the fuzziness in
distinguishing between democratic and authoritarian regimes.
While Linz (1964; 1975) and others have offered sound
distinctions between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, so
long as the former retained something like their pristine
Stalinist and Hitlerite forms, the analytical boundary between
authoritarian and democratic regimes has been much less
convincingly drawn. This is reflected by the numerous concepts
that seemingly combine authoritarian and democratic elements:
authoritarian-populist, single-party, revolutionary,
mobilizational, tutelary, and even post-authoritarian regimes.
Moreover, political changes have made the analytical dichotomy
into a sieve, as numerous countries have oscillated between
various authoritarian and democratic regime forms.

Reacting to these regime oscillations, comparative political
sociology has developed an oscillatory pattern. Thus, during the
1950s and early 1960s, when many newly independent developing
countries seemed to be consolidating democratic regimes, and when
most Latin American countries seemed to be moving toward
democracy, comparativists were preoccupied with theories about
the socioeconomic requisites of democratic regimes (e.g., Lipset
1959; Cutright 1963), the political cultures in which they are

ostensibly rooted (Lipset 1963; Almond and Verba 1963), and other aspects of political development or evolution toward democracy (see Huntington 1968; Huntington and Dominguez 1975). Beginning in the mid-1960s, however, the fledgling democratic regimes of many developing countries were overthrown and replaced by authoritarian regimes. During the 1970s, comparativists thus became preoccupied with "democratic breakdowns" (Linz and Stepan 1978), the role of the military in politics (Nordlinger 1977; Perlmutter 1977), and the nature of "bureaucratic-authoritarian" as well as other non-democratic but also non-totalitarian regimes (O'Donnell 1973; Collier 1980). Beginning in the late 1970s, a number of authoritarian regimes, particularly in Latin America and Southern Europe, again gave way to more democratic ones. Accordingly, scholars are now preoccupied with "democratic transitions" or "transitions from authoritarian rule" (O'Donnell et al. 1986; Malloy and Seligson 1987; Needler 1987; Baloyra 1987).

We have outlined an approach to the study of regime creation, persistence, and change that avoids this oscillatory, reactive pattern. Thus, any tendency to accord watershed importance to the latest regime changes in countries with long records of instability should be resisted unless compelling evidence demonstrates that the necessary elite transformations have occurred. Studies of "democratic breakdowns," such as those collected by Linz and Stepan (1978), provide much evidence of long-standing regime instability rooted in continuing elite disunity. But such studies fail to observe that, without some fundamental transformation to consensual unity, any outcome other than breakdown was and is unlikely. Similarly, discussions of recent transitions from authoritarian to democratic regimes in Latin America and Southern Europe generally fail to ask whether the regime changes were preceded or accompanied by shifts from elite disunity to unity. Again, without such elite transformations, these democratic transitions are likely to be short-lived swings in regime instability.

An important step toward recognizing the significance of elite transformations is the recent attention paid to "elite pacts." O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986, p. 37), define an elite pact as "an explicit, but not always publicly explicated or justified, agreement among a select set of actors which seeks to define (or better, to redefine) rules governing the exercise of power on the basis of mutual guarantees for the 'vital interests' of those entering into it." Such an elite pact roughly approximates our concept of an elite settlement, though the latter is more comprehensive and multifaceted. The importance of elite pacts has been noted in the democratic transitions of Colombia in 1957-58 (Wilde 1978; Hartlyn 1984), Venezuela in 1958 (Karl 1986), and Spain in 1977-79 (Gunther et al. 1986). O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986, pp. 37-9) doubt that such pacts are necessary preconditions for transition to stable democracy, but they think pacts enhance its probability. They observe, for example, that two of the three countries that escaped the post-1964 wave of democratic breakdowns in Latin America--Colombia and Venezuela--were "pacted democracies." In our view, the third country, Costa Rica, escaped breakdown because in 1948 its elites entered into a settlement, though not a formal pact (see Peeler 1985). Moreover, O'Donnell and Schmitter notice that even the long-lasting, but "unpacted," democratic regimes in Chile after 1933 and Uruguay after 1904 oscillated to authoritarian forms in 1973. As we have suggested, those regimes--like the French Third Republic and several other long-lasting, more or less democratic western regimes--were unstable because they did not originate in fundamental elite transformations from disunity to consensual unity. They rested instead on fragile coalitions and stalemates among basically disunified elites, and their comparatively long durations probably depended on a good measure of luck. Sooner or later they were likely to break down in the face of a political crisis.

Although the focus on elite pacts and other recent elite-centered analyses are steps forward, they introduce a potentially

troublesome amount of indeterminacy. Thus, O'Donnell and
Schmitter (1986, p. 5) stress "the high degree of indeterminacy
embedded in situations where unexpected events (_fortuna_),
insufficient information, hurried and audacious choices,
confusion about motives and interests, plasticity, and even
indefinition of political identities, as well as the talents of
specific individuals (_virtu_), are frequently decisive in
determining the outcomes." Like Hamilton's (1982) penetrating
study of the breakdown of democracy in Weimar Germany, O'Donnell
and Schmitter (1986, p. 19) adopt a position of "structural
indeterminacy" when analyzing recent transitions from
authoritarian rule. Similarly, Malloy's (1987, p. 237) analysis
of recent regime changes in Latin America notes that "...there is
a key voluntary dimension to the process that...precludes neat
deterministic theories based on general laws."

Our effort to specify the basic forms of national elites,
their origins, and their consequences provides a way around what
may otherwise be a theoretical dead-end. While more systematic
and explicit in its concepts and claims than much current work,
our approach nevertheless respects the messiness of politics and
political history. Our concepts steer a middle course between
grand theory and a retreat to local history. We urge those who
study democratic breakdowns and democratic transitions to look
first at elites, and to investigate basic patterns and
transformations of elite relationships. This approach is
decidedly not monocausal, however. We recognize that religion,
class, ethnicity, technology, demography, geography, economic
development, and the "demonstration effects" of other countries'
politics (Bendix 1978) may affect elite relationships and the
forms of political regimes. But we deny that such forces lead
inexorably to democratic transitions or breakdowns. Instead, we
see national elites as filtering these forces, with each type of
elite giving a broadly predictable thrust to the functioning of
political regimes.

Finally, our approach implies much caution about the

prospects for stable democracy in contemporary developing
nations. The strong tendency for disunified elites to persist,
evident in the west almost up to the present, and evident today
in most Third World countries, calls for a shift in thinking
about the mechanisms through which stable democracies are
established. Stable democracies do not emerge simply by writing
constitutions, holding elections, expanding human rights,
accelerating economic growth, or exterminating leftist
insurgencies. The vital step is the consensual unification of
previously disunified elites. Except in a few instances growing
out of international warfare, such elite transformations have
resulted primarily from internal situations and contingencies.
This strongly suggests that western countries can do little to
promote stable democracies where they do not now exist. Indeed,
it may be that western policies--in particular those of the
United States--have done more harm than good, often exacerbating
elite disunity and thus actually weakening prospects for the
elite transformations that alone appear to provide the basis for
stable democracy.

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Table 1. Types and Origins of National Elites in Selected

Western Nation-States: A Schematic View

Nation-State Formation	Elite Type(s)	Origin of CU Elite
England (late medieval)	DU to 1689	Elite settlement
	CU 1688-1988	1688-1689
Denmark (late medieval)	DU to 1901	2-Step transformation
	CU 1935-88	1901-35
Scotland (late medieval)	DU to 1707	None; merged w/England 1707
Portugal (late medieval)	DU to 1980s	None clearly indicated
Spain (from 16th cent)	DU to 1977	Elite settlement
	CU 1979-88	1977-79
Sweden (from 16th cent.)	DU to 1809	Elite settlement
	CU 1809-1988	1808-09
Russia (from 17th cent.)	DU to 1917	None; revolutionary trans-
	IU 1921-88	formation, 1917-21
France (late 17th cent)	DU to 1960	2-Step transformation
	CU 1981-88	1960-81
U.S.A. (from 1789)	CU 1789-1988	Colonial "home rule" and
		independence struggle
Netherlands (from 1813)	CU 1813-1988	Fusion of provincial elites
Prussia (from 1815 or earlier)	DU to 1871	None; merged w/Germany 1871

Table 1. Continued

Nation-State Formation	Elite Type(s)	Origin of CU Elite
Belgium (from 1830)	DU to 1890s	2-Step transformation
	CU 1961-1988	1900-61
Switzerland (from 1848)	CU 1848-1988	Fusion of cantonal elites
Italy (from 1870)	DU to 1948	2-Step transformation 1948-80
	CU 1980-88	
Germany (from 1871)	DU to 1933	Revolutionary trans. 1933
	IU 1933-45	2-Step transformation 1948-66
	CU 1966-88	
Norway (from 1884)	CU 1935-88	2-Step trans. 1884-1935
Austria (from 1919 or	DU to 1938	Elite settlement 1945-48
earlier)	CU 1948-88	

Abbreviations: CU = Consensually Unified; DU = Disunified; IU = Ideologically Unified.