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POWER POLITICS AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY: BALANCE, HEGEMONY, AND THE *REALPOLITIK* OF DOMESTIC POLITICS

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Abstract. *The rise of populism means that hybrid regimes, which combine elements of democracy and authoritarianism, are now emerging from deteriorating consolidated democracies as well as from former autocracies in transition. The increased salience of raw power, relative to norms and institutions, echoes the kind of politics that scholars of international relations have long sought to theorize. This paper shows how the distribution of power, long a key concept in the study of international politics, can be fruitfully applied to the study of comparative politics. Rather than institutions constraining power, power in many cases is deployed to reshape institutions in ways that empower rather than constraining rulers. Concepts from realist international theory such as balancing and bandwagoning help resolve important puzzles such as the rise of a hyper-presidential regime in Russia and the failure of Ukraine's post-Orange Revolution coalition. In examining the erosion of liberal democracy, we need to pay close attention to the distribution of political power as well as to the weakening of democratic norms and institutions.*

Key words: *democracy, populism, crisis, hegemony, power*

The new authoritarian regimes that are arising around world differ from previous generations in two important respects. First, many of them do not arise as ideological competitors to liberal democracy, but rather by perfecting the means of using democratic sources of legitimacy for non-democratic purposes. Second, and related, they arrive not suddenly through coups or revolutions, but rather by winning elections. The art of contemporary authoritarianism is to use elections, parliaments, and the rule of law to ensure the enduring dominance of a single leader or party.

"Democratic authoritarianism" is not a contradiction in terms. Political theorists from Plato onward assumed that pure democracy would lead inevitably to tyranny (Plato 2007: 290–298). Over two millennia later, the framers of the US Constitution shared the same fear. The danger, as James Madison explained it, is that a "majority faction" would come to control the government to the point that it could oppress a minority (Madison 1961: 80–81). The US constitution, and others that followed it, was intended not only to prohibit certain forms of illiberalism (the focus of the Bill of Rights), but to ensure that no force could garner a predominance of power.

At the core of the problem, therefore, is the concentration of power (defined for the purposes for this paper in narrow terms as the ability to induce or coerce with material resources). The essential phenomenon we see in a variety of populist, hybrid, and pseudo-democratic regimes around the world is that a single actor controls so much power that they are able overwhelm the "checks and balances," that are designed or assumed to maintain pluralism.

Electoral imbalance feeds institutional imbalance, as majorities rewrite rules to hinder competition and shift resources to themselves. Institutional imbalance leads to electoral imbalance, as the rules of the game are rewritten to favor dominant leaders or parties. Both kinds of imbalance feed economic imbalance, as control of government facilitates favored treatment to pro-government actors and punishment of opposition. Economic imbalance reinforces electoral imbalance as the resources needed to compete become unevenly distributed. The exact tactics by which these feedback loops operate are multiple and have been widely documented (D'Anieri 2007; Ledeneva 2013). Trying to figure out whether one of these imbalances is causing the others is something of a chicken-and-egg problem. The details vary case-by-case.

It is essential to understand the role of power in democracy and its demise. While existing literature has focused, rightly, on norms and institutions as the core sustainers of democratic politics (Sartori 1994; Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018), this analysis seeks to theorize power as a force shaping both norms and institutions. The argument is not that norms and institutions do not matter, but that to a large extent they are endogenous to more material sources of power.

The central question addressed in this article is how the distribution of power shapes the maintenance and demise of liberal democracy. In this respect,

the article reframes the discussion away from norms and institutions or democracy versus autocracy, and instead sees the problem as one of balance versus hegemony. To what extent are institutional, economic, and especially coercive powers spread among multiple actors or controlled by a single actor? How does balanced distribution become unbalanced, and vice versa?

The current wave of democratic backsliding is characterized by two phenomena that do not fit standard theories of comparative politics and democratization. First, physical violence is not "off the table," whether in the deployment of security services against regime opponents or in the use or threat of violent protest against governments. Second, institutions do not fully define what counts as power in the system, and are changed to reflect changes in the distribution of power.

Framed this way, the problem resembles those that are the subject of international relations theory, which is designed to deal with exactly such situations. In the international realm, force is always on the table, and while institutions may develop some autonomy over time, they emerge according to the prevailing distribution of power and are subject to revision as the distribution of power changes (Krasner 1983).

In sum, to understand the current wave of backsliding, we need an approach that treats institutions and norms as at least partly endogenous to the distribution of power. Realist international relations theory, and offshoots such as regime theory, provide a developed literature designed to meet these conditions. This article shows how we can deploy concepts derived from the international relations literature to understand the phenomena that we are now struggling with.

Realist international relations theory contains two strands (balance of power theory and hegemonic stability theory), the first of which sees pluralism as a stable equilibrium, and the second which sees hegemony as a stable equilibrium. I posit that both are potential equilibria, and the essential question that follows for domestic as well as international politics is when and how one will displace the other. The essential question for domestic politics is whether and when actors can achieve hegemony, or when a balance of power is maintained. Institutional design and norms can help sustain a balanced or pluralist distribution of power, but as the current wave of democratic backsliding shows, they are not sufficient.

The article proceeds as follows. First, relying largely on the classic democratic theory of Robert Dahl, I show that the question of hegemony vs. pluralism is not new to the literature on democracy. Dahl gave considerable attention to the distribution of power and to the problem of hegemony in his early writing, but over time, the notions that coercion was off the table and that institutions were exogenous to political competition took over. Then, a discussion of realist international relations theory shows how insights from that literature can be applied to today's hybrid and backsliding regimes.

The main empirical section of the article discusses politics in Russia and Ukraine since 1991. Both states began the post-Soviet era

with professed commitments to liberal democracy and a broad distribution of political and economic power. Ukraine has remained pluralist, though only through the use of street protest to foil aspiring dominant presidents. Russia has become the archetype of a pseudo-democracy dominated by a hegemonic president. In both cases, violence has never been off the table, and the ability either to triumph in violent conflict or to credibly threaten to be able to do so has been the defining force in reshaping institutions and norms. A conclusion then broadens the focus to the larger questions of democracy and democratic backsliding.

Democratic Theory and the Balance of Power

The importance to democracy of the distribution of power shows up repeatedly in the writings of Robert Dahl. In *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, Dahl expresses skepticism that creating checks and balances within the government is sufficient to ensure democracy when there is not a balance of power in the broader society:

> Because we are taught to believe in the necessity of constitutional checks and balances, we place little faith in social checks and balances. (Dahl 1956: 83)

Similarly, he stresses the potential for a *de facto* imbalance of power to swamp the effects of the democratic process:

> In the prevoting stage many influences, including those of superior wealth and control over organizational resources, so greatly exaggerate the power of the few as compared with the many that the social processes leading up to the process of voting may properly be spoken of as highly inegalitarian and undemocratic, although less so than in a dictatorship. (Dahl 1956: 66)

Dahl continues this theme in *Polyarchy* (Dahl 1971), stating his basic question as:

> What conditions increase or decrease the chances of democratizing a hegemonic or nearly hegemonic regime? (Dahl 1971: 10)

Chapter 4 of that book ("The Socioeconomic Order: Concentration or Dispersion") is dedicated explicitly to the distribution of power, and his "Axiom 4" states that

> The likelihood that a government will tolerate an opposition increases as the resources available to the government for suppression decline relative to the resources of an opposition. (Dahl 1971: 48)

Dahl refers specifically to the distribution of the means of armed force, explaining the emergence of democracy in the US in terms of the absence of a standing army or national police force. A unified and powerful military, he argues, makes democracy impossible unless the military is depoliticized (Dahl 1971: 49–50). In other words, it must be practically impossible to prevail in competition through the use of force. The best chance for democracy, he contends, is when both access to violence and access to socioeconomic sanctions are widely distributed rather than concentrated (Dahl 1971: 52). This is, in its essence, an argument about the distribution of power and the use of force. It not dissimilar from that laid out in Kenneth Waltz's

Theory of International Politics. Nor does it seem out of place in a discussion of hybrid regimes and democratic backsliding.

The potential applicability of balance of power concepts domestically is also highlighted by the prominent realist international theorist, Kenneth Waltz, who goes further than most international theorists to assert the international/domestic distinction (Waltz 1979). Waltz stresses that the distinction between anarchical and hierarchical societies is not absolute or real, but rather is an abstraction that suits his theoretical purposes.

> All societies are mixed. Elements in them represent both of the ordering principles. (Waltz 1979: 115)

Therefore, the actually mix of anarchy and hierarchy in a particular (domestic or international) system is an empirical question.

The crucial distinction, in Waltz's view is that:

> A government has no monopoly on the use of force, as is all too evident. An effective government, however, has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and legitimate here means that public agents are organized to prevent and to counter the private use of force. (Waltz 1979 103-104)

This condition is not met in many cases, in particular where the use of state force against protests is considered illegitimate (as in Ukraine in 2013–2014 or in some US cities in 2020 and 2021), or where violence against the state is considered legitimate (as in Ukraine in 2013-2014 or among some citizens and elites of the US on January 6, 2021).

Finally, the literature on international relations is also relevant to the widely discussed phenomenon of informal institutions in hybrid regimes. The literature on international regimes stressed that much international cooperation is facilitated by "regimes," which are essentially defined as informal institutions. The term "regimes" was adopted in part to distinguish informal agreements and patterns of behavior from formal rules and organizations, which in many cases did not appear to have much effect. And while many theorists viewed regimes a providing order in an anarchic system, others cautioned that they in fact solidified the dominance of some groups over others (Strange 1982). This is directly analogous to the informal politics that much research has found dominate the formal rules in hybrid regimes (Ledeneva 2013; D'Anieri 2007).

Generating Insights about Hybrid Regimes

Realist international theory provides us with several arguments that can help us understand the choices of domestic actors in situations which are weakly institutionalized, and therefore partly anarchic. Actors must be concerned with power, including coercive power. Power is essential to who wins and who survives, and the best way to get power is to have power. Even actors that may not be inherently undemocratic are forced to try to reduce the ability of their opponents to compete.

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To the extent that institutions matter, actors have strong incentives to shape them to their benefit. When hegemony becomes a real possibility, actors face a choice whether to "balance" or "bandwagon," and bandwagoning can quickly tip balance toward hegemony.

Survival and Power

Realist international relations theory is based on the premise that security in an anarchic realm is not guaranteed, and then infers likely state behaviors from that premise. If security is not guaranteed by some external force, actors must look after their own security, and security must trump other concerns. Kenneth Waltz invokes natural selection, arguing that states that are not jealous about their security will likely cease to exist. Domestically, actors in hybrid regimes and backsliding democracies face much the same challenge.

Throughout the post-Soviet region are examples of parties that have ceased to exist, individual politicians that have been imprisoned, oligarchs who have been deprived of their fortunes, and peaceful demonstrators who have been repressed. These dynamics also now characterize politics in the United States, which has seen serious efforts to prosecute and imprison (or at least ban from office) leading politicians including Hilary Clinton to Donald Trump, as well as an effort to use force to overturn the result of an election.

The Distribution of Power: Hegemony versus Balance

Dahl (1956; 1971) stresses that some underlying diffusion of power in society is crucial to preventing hegemony from emerging, *regardless of institutional design*. For the purposes of studying hybrid regimes, three related questions arise repeatedly. The first is how the hegemony of a single individual or group emerges from a more balanced distribution of power (this is the problem Dahl feared that has characterized many hybrid and backsliding regimes in recent years). The second is how, in a hegemonic system, one dominant actor falls and is replaced with another. This problem is emblemized by disorder in 2022 stemming from the Nazarbayev succession in Kazakhstan, as well as the intense prognostication about how a Putin transition might shape Russian politics. The third is how a hegemonic system is transformed into a balanced one—how pluralism (and, one hopes, liberal democracy) emerges from hegemonic politics. In much of the literature on contemporary democracies, balance is assumed to be preserved by a combination of norms and institutions (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). In the domestic politics of hybrid regimes, however, balance is elusive and precarious.

The realist literature on international relations includes competing theories about whether balance or hegemony is more stable and about which predominates historically. Traditional balance of power theory (Morgenthau 1973; Waltz 1979) asserts that a balance of power—a distribution in which no single power can gain hegemony over the others—is both the norm (having prevailed in Europe since the fall of the Roman Empire) and is desirable, in terms of preserving the independence of most of the states. In contrast, hegemonic stability theory asserts that

stability results from the dominance of a single power and that instability and "hegemonic war" result from the erosion of the gap between the hegemon and the leading challenger (Kennedy 1987; Gilpin 1981).

Collectively, realist theory posits two possible stable worlds: one normally balanced, one normally hegemonic. Rather than debating which perspective is true, we can see balance and hegemony as two possible equilibria. We can then study these two equilibria and ask what underpins each of them, and what forces are likely to erode them, but only if we take power politics seriously.

What do we gain from doing so? By thinking of regimes in terms of the distribution of power, as well as regime type, we add an important dimension for categorizing and explaining regimes and their dynamics. For example, we can distinguish change in rulers from change in regimes, better understanding why the fall of an autocrat often does not lead to the building of democracy. In hegemonic stability theory, the fall of the reigning hegemon does not make the system balanced—it leads to the rise of a new hegemon. This state of affairs is represented domestically in what Levitsky and Way (2010) call "competitive authoritarianism," in which politics is dominated by a single actor, even though the actor in charge changes from time to time. The identity of the hegemon changes, but the dynamics of the system do not. In contrast, one can imagine the failure of a hegemon leading to the rise of multipolarity or pluralism, with no dominant actor. In that case, the fall of the hegemon creates a new system. Translated to domestic politics, this means that the fall of a dominant ruler can lead either to the rise of a new dominant ruler or to and establishment of a balance among multiple forces.

One study of domestic politics that uses a similar logic is Henry Hale's *Patronal Politics* (2014). Hale shows that while some patronal systems develop "single-pyramids," which essentially match the hegemony discussed by Dahl and by the international relations literature, others develop a "multiple pyramid" system, which even if not perfectly democratic, remains pluralist. Hale sees Russia as an example of a single pyramid system and Ukraine as an example of a multiple pyramid system. Crucially, however, for Hale the sources of the difference are in large part in exogenous institutions, in this case Russia's strong presidency versus the more limited presidency in the Ukrainian constitution after 2004. But as Hale acknowledges (2014: 66), that does not tell us where these different institutions come from. In this article, the causal arrows between power and institutions run in the opposite direction. Institutional differences define institutional power, but reflect coercive power. In Russia and Ukraine, the different constitutional models reflect the outcomes of battles fought in the streets of the two capitals. Institutions are *endogenous* to the distribution of power.

Balancing and Bandwagoning

This perspective allows us to address two broad questions. First, what causes change between a hegemonic system and one with multiple competing powers, or as Dahl puts it, "What conditions increase or decrease the chances of democratizing a hegemonic or nearly hegemonic regime?" (1971: 10).

Answering this question may help us understand democratic openings, though we should not equate balance or the absence of hegemony with democracy (balanced power is likely a necessary but insufficient condition for democracy).

When powers respond to potential hegemony by "balancing"—by aligning against the potential hegemon to thwart their rise—balance is likely to endure. However, when actors "bandwagon"—joining with the most powerful actor (Walt 1987), imbalance may tilt all the way to hegemony, or in Hale's domestic terms, a multiple-pyramid system can become a single-pyramid system. What factors shape incentives to balance versus bandwagon?

Second, we can better examine the internal workings of both kinds of systems. What are the internal dynamics of hegemonic regimes, and how do these influence other aspects of politics? The effects on democracy are only one possible area of inquiry. How does the competition among multiple actors differ when hegemony appears to be possible from when it does not? In hegemonic regimes, what determines the extent to which independent media and minority political parties are tolerated or suppressed? In balanced systems, what determines when actors will seek to strengthen the rule of law, to protect their future positions, and when they will seek short-term gains by undermining the rule of law? What kinds of constitutional arrangements are likely to be pursued by hegemonic regimes versus among parties competing for hegemony, versus among parties with little hope of hegemony? To the extent that many weakly institutionalized regimes are likely to persist for some time around the world, understanding their dynamics is essential.

Power Politics in the former Soviet Nations

How does balance of power theory apply to specific cases and specific questions? In this section, we apply the framework outlined above to explain important developments in two cases with similar beginnings but divergent outcomes (so far), Ukraine and Russia. While Vladimir Putin succeeded in building a somewhat stable authoritarian regime, attempts in Ukraine by Viktor Yanukovych failed twice, in 2004 and 2014. While Ukraine remains a pluralist system, Russia is hegemonic, and since February 2022 has become considerably more autocratic. The difference is rooted in the distribution of coercive power at crucial points in the process. Rather than explaining the difference in power configurations, the different institutional designs reflect different power configurations. Analyzing the two states' politics in terms of the distribution of power provides plausible explanations and leads to insights that otherwise would not be possible.

Power Creates Rules I: The Russian Crisis of 1993

Much analysis of Russian politics has pointed out that Russia has a "hyper-Presidential" constitution which gives extensive prerogatives to the President at the expense of the legislature (Skach 2021). From an institutionalist perspective, these extensive constitutional prerogatives explain why Vladimir Putin has been able to build autocracy in Russia. However, this does not tell us why

Russians would have chosen to give their president such extensive powers in the first place. Power politics does. A disagreement between the president and parliament was resolved by force in favor of the president. Having crushed the parliament with military force, Boris Yeltsin appointed a team of constitutional designers with the mission of writing a constitution that legitimated extensive presidential authority.

The background for the conflict was the process of dismantling communism in Russia, which left in place a President of Russia and a Supreme Soviet both of whom were popularly elected, but between whom the distribution of power and prerogatives was unclear (Huskey 1999; Chapter 2). President Yeltsin sought to implement a reform program along the lines of "shock therapy," but a majority in the Supreme Soviet, as well as its leadership, objected. Institutionally, the conflict concerned whether the government (cabinet of ministers) would be controlled by the President or by the Supreme Soviet. In other words, it was a conflict over whether Russia would have a presidential or a parliamentary system. There were related disputes over who could revise the constitution and how, as well as who could call a referendum, and who controlled the language of referendum questions.

On March 20, 1993, Yeltsin issued a decree "On the special regime of administration for overcoming the crisis of power," conferring upon himself extensive powers pending a referendum on a new constitution and on new legislative elections, as well as on confidence in the president and vice president. The head of the constitutional court, along with legislative leaders and the chief prosecutor, declared Yeltsin's decree unconstitutional. The parliament then convened and took up the question of impeaching the president, which narrowly failed.

The referendum, held in April 1993, yielded a narrow confidence vote in Yeltsin, but he still required parliamentary approval for much of his agenda. A constitutional convention went ahead, with contradictory drafts being proposed by Yeltsin and the Congress of People's Deputies. There was continuing disagreement about who had the right to determine the new constitution.

On September 21, 1993, Yeltsin announced the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet, in contradiction with the Constitution, which he declared null. He simultaneously announced a referendum on a new constitution and elections for a new legislature, to be held in December. The constitutional court ruled that Yeltsin's steps violated the constitution, while the Supreme Soviet declared Yeltsin's decree null and declared Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy to be president. Rutskoy dismissed Yeltsin and several ministers, including the Defense Minister, Pavel Grachev. The Congress of People's Deputies subsequently met and impeached Yeltsin, though without a quorum. Essentially, Russia at this point had two competing governments issuing competing decrees and claiming extensive powers. The members of the Supreme Soviet barricaded themselves inside the "White House." Interior Ministry forces supported the Supreme Soviet, but Yeltsin called on the army to intervene. After some indecision, the army swung behind Yeltsin. On October 4, armed forces surrounded the Supreme Soviet building and began shelling it, and the army cleared the building floor-by-floor.

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Yeltsin followed up with a series of decrees bolstering his power, and many officials who had opposed him, including the chair of the Constitutional Court, were forced to resign. Yeltsin then formed a constitutional assembly of his own supporters, which put forth the hyper-presidential constitution that has persisted. Officially, the new constitution was approved with 58 percent of the vote, but subsequent reports indicated widespread fraud (Sakwa 1995).

The resolution of the standoff between the president and parliament was resolved by raw military force. The design of the 1993 constitution was a result of this battle and enshrined the military victory of Yeltsin. Therefore, this is not a case of an institutional design that failed because democracy did not result. This is a case of successful institutional design, because the new constitution achieved exactly what its framers hoped, which was to create a strong presidency that could reliably and legally dominate the parliament. Such a constitution could only be enacted as a result of a particular distribution of power in which the military sided with Yeltsin. Had the armed forces sided with the parliament, Russia would have had a very different constitution—one serving the institutional interests of parliament. Whether it would have ended up more democratic is a matter of speculation.

This view of events is fundamentally different from that predominant in the study of Russian institutions. Many studies analyze the effects of the 1993 constitution, while sidestepping its sources. Thus, Smith and Remington (2001: 8), in their explanation of the formation and evolution of the Duma, "consider the constitution as exogenous to the choices of parliamentary leaders" "because the constitution was imposed in short order and before the convening of the new parliament." Much commentary at the time viewed Yeltsin's shelling of the parliament as a step in the direction of democracy, because it quashed the power of a group that opposed economic liberalization and was generally seen as opposed to reform. Viewing these events through a realist lens emphasizes identifying the cause of change, not the relative merits of the antagonists. In this case the change, namely the establishment of a hyper-presidential constitution, was driven directly by the outcome of a military battle in Moscow. A more detailed historical analysis could examine why the Russian military sided with Yeltsin rather than the Supreme Soviet, but from a comparative perspective that is less important.

A further analysis of Russian politics after 1993 would make clear that the enormous presidential powers written into the constitution were insufficient to produce strong presidential authority. With little variation in the institutional design after 1993, Yeltsin's power waxed and waned considerably over the rest of his tenure. Similarly, Vladimir Putin's consolidation of power was not fuelled by a change in in institutions, but rather by the increased unity and resolve of the organs of force in coercing potential opponents. The endogeneity of institutions is clear in this case: force was on the table, and the formal rules followed directly form the outcome of a military battle. But those rules did not lead to authoritarian power until they were backed by overwhelming coercive force.

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Power Creates Rules II: Revising the Ukrainian Constitution, 2004

A second case that shows that power determines institutions, rather than the other way around, is the rearrangement of constitutional powers in Ukraine after 2004. The Orange Revolution has spurred a great deal of research. Here we focus on a central question: Why was there constitutional compromise in the aftermath of the street protests? Power politics explains both why the competing actors chose the sides they did, and why the result turned out as it did.

Amending the constitution to weaken the presidency and strengthen the parliament was already on the agenda in the spring of 2004, well before the election and subsequent protests. Moreover, the weakening of the presidency was actually supported by President Leonid Kuchma. Kuchma knew that he could not retain the office of the presidency, but he held significant power in the legislature, which was not up for reelection. By reducing the powers of the presidency, he could hope that he could retain *de facto* control over government, or at least that no one would have sufficient power to challenge his influence and wealth.

The main opponents to weakening the presidency were the supposed democrats—the elites supporting Viktor Yushchenko as a candidate in the election. Yushchenko's supporters saw the attempt to change the constitution for what it was—an attempt to limit the consequences of their impending victory. Assuming that they would win, they hoped to keep the presidency as strong as possible. When the measure was put to a vote in the Verkhovna Rada in the spring of 2004, it looked set to pass, but then narrowly failed, due to the last-minute defection of several deputies from the Party of Regions. Why did they defect? Because, although they were aligned with Kuchma, they assumed that their candidate, Viktor Yanukovych was going to win the election, and stood to gain power if Yanukovych won an unweakened presidency. That ended the debate for the time being. The key point is that positions on this issue were not driven by any institutional goal other than that of empowering those offices that one expected to control and disempowering the others.

By December, the situation had drastically changed in two related respects. First, the balance of power in the country had dramatically shifted. Viktor Yushchenko and Yuliya Tymoshenko had allied in order to prevent Yanukovych from coming to power. Numerous elites who had supported Kuchma were unwilling to support Yanukovych as a successor, so the elite divided. In other words, several powerful oligarchs decided to balance against Yanukovych, presumably in fear that their positions would be threatened if he took over the system. After the election, many in power facilitated the protests that emerged. Then Kuchma himself defected from Yanukovych by joining the call for rerunning the second round of the election. Second, it became increasingly unclear what would happen if force were used to resolve the matter. It was unclear which armed forces would support which side (and all of them clearly hoped to stay out of the conflict). In contrast to the Russian case, the Ukrainian army did not choose a side.

Two parts of a solution to the standoff then moved in tandem: the election would be re-run, and the presidency would be weakened. The institutional compromise was based on a relatively even and uncertain distribution of power. It was clear to most that re-running the election would lead to a Yushchenko victory. Those opposed to Yushchenko therefore supported a weakening of the presidency. Crucially, they were joined by one part of Yushchenko's coalition, the Socialist Party, which had consistently advocated a parliamentary model since 1991. In order to rerun the election, new legislation needed to be passed, and a majority of the legislature (Kuchma's supporters combined with Moroz's Socialists) insisted on weakening the presidency as part of the deal. Thus, while key elites had shifted positions to balance against Yanukovych, once he was defeated others took care to ensure that Yushchenko's team did not become too powerful.

Both Yanukovych and Yushchenko had to decide whether to agree by this deal or to pursue a decisive outcome in the streets. Yanukovych apparently sought to resolve the standoff with force, and implored Kuchma to order troops to repress the protests. Tymoshenko thought Yushchenko should push for total victory by having the protestors storm the presidential administration if need be.

It is clear that the revision of the constitution in 2004 was not driven by any notion that this was the "best" way to arrange institutions. Rather, it was the result of a bargaining process, which reflected the uncertain balance of forces on the streets of Kyiv. No one knew what would happen if the protestors (who that point had remained peaceful) tried to take power by force.

That this arrangement depended on the balance of power is shown by the fact that when the balance of power shifted, the arrangement was rewritten. After Viktor Yanukovych became president in 2010 and consolidated his power, he was able to appoint four new members to the constitutional court, and these new nominees were decisive in the ruling that the 2004 amendments had been enacted unconstitutionally. In this respect, the institutional arrangements followed changes in the distribution of power, rather than constraining them. The adoption of Ukraine's post-Soviet constitution in 1996 showed a similar pattern (D'Anieri 2007, Chapter 6).

From Bandwagoning to Balancing: The Run-up to the Orange Revolution

The preceding discussion explains why the Orange Revolution led to an institutional compromise, but it does not explain why the revolution happened in the first place. From the perspective of power politics, the key factor was the shift in strategy by many actors from bandwagoning with Kuchma to balancing against him (this discussion is based on D'Anieri 2007: 88–93). That shift was driven partly by a perception that Kuchma had weakened, and partly by a fear that his chosen successor, Viktor Yanukovych, would pursue authoritarianism more aggressively. While institutional rules (namely the two-term limit) played a role, exogenous factors (the Gongadze affair and Melnychenko tapes) also shaped actors' calculations. Absent those idiosyncratic factors, Kuchma may well have been able to maintain his grip on power.

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As Vladimir Putin later demonstrated, term-limits are not an insurmountable obstacle to maintaining power when one has sufficient power.

After his reelection in 1999, Kuchma moved quickly to consolidate his grip on power over a divided and fractious parliament. When the parliament failed to confirm his nominee for prime minister, he threatened to disband it. There was no constitutional provision for disbanding the parliament in such circumstances, but Kuchma proposed doing so via referendum, as Yeltsin had done in Russia in 1993. The threat was taken seriously, and centrist and rightist deputies began trying to form a pro-Kuchma majority in the parliament. Such a majority would not only avoid the disbanding of the parliament, but eject the leftist leadership of the parliament that had been in office since 1998 elections.

In January 2000, a pro-presidential majority formed under the leadership of former president Leonid Kravchuk, who pleaded with Kuchma that a referendum was no longer necessary, since there was now a pro-presidential majority. Kuchma, however, did not want to miss the opportunity, and he went ahead with scheduling the referendum for April 2001. The parliament split, with the leftists meeting in the parliament building and refusing to yield the leadership, while the pro-presidential coalition met in another Kyiv building and claimed jurisdiction. The standoff played into Kuchma's hands, because only he could resolve it. While he continued to make plans for a referendum, he also dispatched Security Service of Ukraine forces to the parliament to eject the leftists from the building. Force was very much "on the table."

Kuchma then proceeded with the referendum, despite widespread complaints that there was no constitutional basis for the president to call a constitutional referendum. The matter was appealed to the constitutional court which, in a bizarre and convoluted decision, ruled that the constitution could not be changed by referendum, but that the referendum was binding on the parliament, and would compel the parliament to amend the constitution. Kuchma got what he wanted. With widespread reports of fraud (Zakarpatska Oblast' in western Ukraine reported over 97 percent turnout, with 90 percent supporting the proposed changes) the four proposals made by the president were approved by voters. The road to constitutional change was wide open.

But before Kuchma could compel the parliament to pass the needed legislation, journalist Heorhiy Gongadze was found beheaded near Kyiv, and shortly after that, secret recordings made in the president's office implicated Kuchma in the crime, as well as revealing a slew of other misdeeds. These recordings led to a fundamental reordering of the balance of power in Ukraine, in two ways. First, by undermining Kuchma's popularity, they reduced his ability to circumvent the constitution by going to the public to overcome the parliament. Second, they prompted an alliance between two opposition groups that were previously unable to work together: the moderate left led by the Socialist Oleksandr Moroz, and the nationalist right.

As long as it appeared that Kuchma would dominate Ukraine, it was irrational for most actors to oppose him. As the Melnychenko tapes revealed, Kuchma had an extensive arsenal of tactics to punish those who did not support him. This contributed to his gradual accretion of power, including the success he had in getting people to vote, or to distort the vote, in the constitutional referendum. Once his opponents united and he appeared vulnerable, actors rationally changed their position. Those who thought they might do better with different leadership could now hope to actually bring that leadership about. And those who were purely opportunistic now had to hedge their bets against the possibility that someone else would run Ukraine.

Initially, Viktor Yushchenko was not among the defectors. When the Melnychenko revelations spurred formation of a "National Salvation Front" of forces opposing Kuchma's rule, Yushchenko declined to join it, even after being fired as prime minister. Instead, he co-signed a statement with Kuchma against the National Salvation Front. The protest movement subsequently was squelched (D'Anieri 2006).

By 2004, Kuchma was clearly weakened. In his own camp, the Party of Regions, led by Viktor Yanukovych was eager to displace him. At the same time, the opposition finally unified, with Tymoshenko and Moroz both supporting Yushchenko's presidential bid. Equally important, a large number of elites swung behind Yushchenko. Three aspects of the distribution of power changed these elites' calculus. First, with Kuchma apparently losing power, they had less reason to fear punishment from him in the future. Second, therefore, they could aspire to a better position in a new division of power (and spoils) than they had received under Kuchma. Third, they were afraid for what might happen under a Yanukovych/Party of Regions regime. All these factors made it both possible and necessary to shift from bandwagoning with Kuchma to balancing against him.

Thus, when the Orange Revolution broke out, many elites previously allied to Kuchma and Yanukovych supported Yushchenko. Most notable, in terms of the protests themselves, was Kyiv Mayor Omelchenko, who had helped repress the protests in 2001, but actively promoted them in 2004. Similarly, Interior Ministry forces who had helped obstruct the 2001 protests stood aside in 2004, and important media outlets, most notably Channel 5, publicized the election fraud and the protests. As noted above, however, many of these actors were careful not to let the balance tip too far in Yushchenko's favor (Moroz was most notable here) by ensuring that the presidency he won would be weakened.

From Balancing to Bandwagoning: Tripolarity and the Collapse of Orange Ukraine

The Orange coalition did not last. Viktor Yanukovych became president in 2010, actors scrambled to bandwagon to his side, and Ukraine appeared headed for lasting hegemonic rule until the 2014 "Revolution of Dignity." How did hegemony reappear so quickly? The predominant explanations focus on the personalities of Yushchenko and Tymoshenko, who are widely viewed as detesting one another.

Tymoshenko is seen as having been overly ambitious, and Yushchenko is seen has having been tactically inept and morally vacuous in his continued experiments with collaborating with the Party of Regions.

One major problem with such personalistic explanations is that they do not explain variation over time. Yushchenko's and Tymoshenko's personalities presumably did not change much between 1998 and 2007, yet in that period they went from being on the same side (in Kuchma's cabinet) to on opposite sides (Yushchenko in; Tymoshenko out) to being unified against Kuchma (2004) to being adversaries on the brink of civil war (2007).

Institutionally, the situation in post-2004 Ukraine should have been more conducive to democracy and stability. As Henry Hale (2011) and others have argued, parliamentary systems are more conducive to democracy than presidential ones, and Ukraine's 2004 revisions moved the system in a more parliamentary direction. However, politics in Ukraine continued to be driven by a competition for power, and the distribution of power in post-2004 Ukraine was tripolar, which realist theorists argue is inherently unstable and therefore rare (Waltz 1979, Schweller 1998).

After 2004, three large, powerful oligarchic networks, led by three dominant politicians, competed for power in Ukraine. The Party of Regions, led by Yanukovych, had been defeated in 2004, but it remained well organized, highly popular in the East, and backed by a network of wealthy and powerful industrialists. Tymoshenko's bloc was based on the wealth she had accrued in the 1990s, and on a different network of industrialists. Yushchenko may have had the weakest financial and economic network, but in theory he controlled the levers of government.

Yanukovych and Tymoshenko are generally regarded as ambitious power-hungry politicians, and this might explain the way they played the game in the months after the Orange Revolution. But Yushchenko, who is not generally regarded as so venal, played much the same way. This is explained by an important point from realist theory: it is not internal aggressiveness that makes actors contend for power, but rather the nature of the system. All three of Ukraine's leading actors may have wanted to rule alone, but equally, all three had to fear that each of the others wanted to rule alone. Once Yanukovych was defeated, conflict between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko began almost immediately, and on September 8, 2005, Yushchenko dismissed his entire government, including Tymoshenko.

Given the events of 2004, it seems odd that Yushchenko and his supporters would hesitate to align with Tymoshenko against Yanukovych, but from a balance of power perspective, this made sense. Tymoshenko was more threatening to Yushchenko in two important ways. First, because she was prime minister, she controlled levers of power—including means of coercion, such as interior ministry forces—that Yanukovych did not. In 2008, a disagreement between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko over her efforts to replace the head of the State Property Fund led to a standoff after Yushchenko sent members of the Presidential Guard to take control of the building and physically prevent his ally's dismissal. Second, because Yanukovych's strength was limited to

the east of the country, he could not easily compete for the base of Yushchenko's power in the west. Tymoshenko could. Therefore, Yushchenko repeatedly became entangled in battles with Tymoshenko, while Yanukovych reorganized. Yushchenko's decision to battle Tymoshenko rather than Yanukovych left him so unpopular that he had no chance of winning the 2010 presidential elections. Even when it was clear that he would not make it to the second round, he refused to support Tymoshenko, and she lost narrowly. Ironically, the elections which saw the "Orange coalition" ejected from power were free and fair, but the coalition had actually ceased to have real meaning beginning in 2005.

Once Yanukovych was elected president, the game quickly shifted to bandwagoning, as everyone expected that Yanukovych would consolidate power, reward those who were on his side, punish his enemies, and seek control of the economic assets of any neutrals. Yanukovych's reputation for ruthlessness probably aided in his efforts to gather power; in contrast to Yushchenko, no one had any doubt that allies would be rewarded and enemies punished. Defections from both Tymoshenko's bloc and Yushchenko's bloc in the parliament facilitated formation of a pro-Yanukovych majority and selection of a pro-Yanukovych prime minister. Despite the formal division of executive authority, Yanukovych gained control quickly. He then was able to get the rules themselves changed, to reinstate the strong presidency. That several of the moves in this consolidation were unconstitutional was no more relevant than when Kuchma made similar moves in 2000. Few dared oppose someone who so clearly was going to win, and who had such a reputation for ruthlessness.

To summarize, balance of power theory allows us an account of post-orange politics in Ukraine that explains coalition politics without resort to speculation about the personalities of coalition leaders. The oscillation of the Yushchenko-Tymoshenko relations becomes understandable as a part of the politics of tripolarity: when they were clearly the two weakest parties, they aligned with each other against Kuchma and Yanukovych. But when Yanukovych was at his weakest, their alliance naturally fragmented. The collapse of Yushchenko's position in 2010 potentially heralded a return to a renewed alliance, but was in fact so severe that it appeared that even Yushchenko and Tymoshenko together could not resist Yanukovych, and bandwagoning ensued.

From Balancing to Bandwagoning: Putin's Consolidation of Power

Russia saw an even more drastic transition from balanced to hegemonic power. Unsurprisingly, the use of force was at the heart of the shift. The 1996 presidential election strengthened Boris Yeltsin at the expense of his main contenders, the Communist Party of Russia and the Liberal Democratic Party. But while his adversaries were weak, Yeltsin's government was not particularly strong. The state was weak, and regional governments as well as powerful oligarchs vied for control in various spheres. None of these was powerful enough to challenge Yeltsin's hold on the presidency or official politics, but neither was Yeltsin powerful enough to push back against their considerable influence and prerogatives. Power was diffused, and

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while Yeltsin was the most powerful, he was far from dominant. Indeed, many wondered whether the state could hold together. Looking forward to presidential elections scheduled for 2000, it was unclear who might replace Yeltsin, and it was unclear whether Yeltsin would be able to name his successor. The situation was primed, once a leading candidate emerged, for a rapid bandwagoning process.

The process by which Vladimir Putin was named as prime minister, prosecuted the war in Chechnya, was named interim president, and then was elected president, is well known. Here we highlight several important points. First, the use of force was essential in building power. The remilitarization of the conflict in Chechnya sent a sign to everyone in Russia that Putin was willing to deploy violence on a massive scale. Second, Putin's strong alliance with the security forces facilitated his use of coercion, and this too was widely known. Therefore, a small number of clear applications of force was sufficient to convince others to bandwagon with Putin rather than see their livelihoods threatened. Most notable among these was the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovskiy in October 2003, but the process began much earlier. In 2000, security forces arrested oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky and forced him to sell his Media-Most group, including the popular and critical NTV station, to the Kremlin-controlled Gazprom.

Putin enacted a wide range of institutional changes that enhanced his statutory powers, including giving himself the power to appoint regional governors, who previously had been elected. Had Yeltsin tried similar steps five years earlier, he likely would have been unable to enforce them, but Putin's control over the means of violence was much more secure. As a result, the two political forces that were most opposed to Yeltsin, the Communists and the Liberal Democrats, abandoned their opposition and bandwagoned with Putin. By 2008, Putin's de facto power so eclipsed Russia's institutional setup that he was able to swap positions with Dmitry Medvedev, while still wielding the same power he had as president, and then to reinstall himself four years later.

Norms, Institutions and the Balance of Power

Much of the debate in the international relations literature concerns whether hegemony or balance is a more stable distribution of power, but there is no reason to believe that a particular game has only one stable equilibrium. When hegemony is clearly established, it is irrational for actors to challenge it. Similarly it is irrational for an opposition politician to challenge the power of a well-entrenched leader. Unless some exogenous factor—such as the life expectancy of the dominant leader—causes actors to believe the leader is vulnerable, rational actors will bandwagon. A balance of power can also be an equilibrium, because once a balance exists, actors have an incentive to check the power of any one of them that appears poised to dominate. To the extent that they do so, the pursuit of hegemony will be futile.

The international relations literature also debates the extent to which norms a nd institutions constrain politics. This analysis shows that rather than assuming

the answer, we can make this an empirical question. In structural realist international relations theory, norms play a minor role, institutions are endogenous and the distribution of power is largely exogenous. In comparative politics the tendency is to assume the opposite. Norms are an important component of democracy. Institutions are exogenous and power is explained through them (especially through the processes by which elections allocate legislative and executive power). Thus, Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) influential study emphasizes the roles of institutions and especially norms in sustaining liberal democracy and in the way their erosion undermines democracy. Traditional realist international theory (in contrast to Waltz's neorealism) also allows more scope for belief in the legitimacy of the system to play a role in sustaining it (Bull 1977).

From the perspective of a balance of power approach, the key question is whether the normative belief in liberal democracy, in pluralism, or in maintaining a balance of power is strong enough to overcome the incentives that might exist to pursue hegemony, to bandwagon with a potentially hegemonic power, or simply to stand aside from the fray. In some cases, a normative commitment to balance might be expressed through voting practices, in which voters deliberately support different political forces in order to create balance. The practice of "ticket splitting" in the US, in which a voter supports one party for the presidency and another for Congressional offices represents such a norm (and the decline of the practice may signal the erosion of that norm).

Similarly, the question concerning institutions is when do institutions check aspiring hegemons and when do they empower them. Around the world, a key task for the aspiring autocrat is to subject institutions to their control, and the autonomy of institutions, along with their integrity, is seen as a powerful bulwark against authoritarianism. With the exception of the organs of force, however, even institutions that are seen as powerful rely on others for their ability to constrain. When leaders try to subvert institutions, one of three groups has to stop them: either the voters punish the offending politicians, or protestors use the threat of violence to coerce the authorities, or the organized coercive forces (the military and its relatives) step up. The first is what happens in well-functioning liberal democracies; the second has been the norm in the post-Soviet hybrid regimes, although as was shown in the US in January 2021 and in Germany in 1933, protestors are not necessarily forces in favor of democracy. The third case is what some hoped was happening in Moscow in 1993, in which the military was stepping in to defend democracy. More likely the role of military intervention in defending democracy is to refuse to support those who would put an end to democracy and pluralism, making it impossible for an aspiring autocrat to succeed. Implicitly, this was the role played by the Ukrainian military in 2004 and 2014, and the Soviet military in August 1991.

A central task of the aspiring autocrat or populist is to undermine the norms that lead people to balance power and to defend the autonomy and authority of institutions. An essential tactic of the populist is to gain the assent, or even the insistence, from voters to trample institutions that are seen as obstructing the achievement of an important goal, which might be implementation of

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a particular reform or challenging some perceived enemy such as migrants, a minority group, or an ideology seen as dangerous. The goal is to get people angry or threatened enough for them to want to overturn or violate norms of institutional autonomy, rule of law, and balance of power.

With or alongside such an effort, the aspiring autocrat can seek to subvert institutions directly. Rather than populism, such efforts rely on more direct power applied to the institutions. Assuming those in the bureaucracies are not predisposed to aiding the rise of the authoritarian, they can be persuaded by positive incentives (for example, empowering them to use their positions for material gain beyond their salaries) or by negative means (threatening to fire those who do not do the will of the leader). Leonid Kuchma railed against officials who were not doing enough to skew votes in his favor, and Donald Trump fumed at his inability to get bureaucrats to follow his orders, leading him to repeatedly change senior leaders until he found people willing to do his bidding, even if doing so was illegal. While norms and institutions are distinct, they are closely related, as institutions have norms embedded in them. The strength of democratic norms is directly related to the difficulty of subverting institutions.

How does the quality of norms and institutions interact with the distribution of power? If democracy is correlated both with a balanced distribution of power and with rules that constrain the exercise of power, then the relationship between power and rules is likely to have a significant impact on democracy. We might tentatively hypothesize something like Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Power and Role of Power vs. Institutions

		Power vs. Norms and Institutions	
		Power Dominates Institutions and Norms	*Norms and Institutions Constrain Power*
Distribution of Power	*Balanced*	Pluralism by default	Liberal democracy
	Hegemonic	Personalized Autocracy	One-party rule

In the upper right-hand quadrant, power is evenly balanced and is constrained by strong institutions, by which we mean that actors tend to defer to the authority of institutions and respect their autonomy, rather than ignoring their authority or trying to subvert the institutions. In such a situation the even balance of power and the institutions reinforce one another: because power is balanced, it is difficult for any actor to revise the institutions in a way that undermines competition, and the institutions make it more difficult for power to become imbalanced. This is the classic case of liberal democracy as envisioned by democratic theorists.

In the lower right-hand quadrant, institutions are strong, but a single group dominates. As long as the institutions do not create serious difficulties for the dominant power, this system should also be stable. Presumably, the dominant party has been able to create institutions that serve its interest to an extent that it does not have an interest in changing them. In the international relations literature,

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this is the scenario envisioned by hegemonic stability theory, in which a hegemon such as Great Britain or the US creates a world order that suits its vision, works to maintain the order, and is willing to follow the rules because it benefits from the overall order. Liberal versions of hegemonic stability theory consider international hegemony to be beneficial in allowing for the resolution of collective action problems (Kindleberger 1973; Keohane 1984). Domestically, the analogue might be to one-party democracies, such as Japan under the LDP. However, these conditions might also be consistent with a strongly institutionalized one-party autocracy like China before Xi Jinping began eroding institutional constraints on his power. While rule of law is not strong in such cases, powerful informal institutions govern many aspects of political life, including succession.

In the lower left quadrant, power is unevenly distributed and there is little constraint on the exercise of it. In such a situation, the hegemonic group or individual can write rules to suit its purpose and rewrite them. But the rules themselves have weak normative support and do not powerfully shape expectations or constrain behavior. What separates these polities from those in the lower right quadrant is that with weak institutions, power tends to be personalized. This reduces stability in two important ways. First, if the popularity of the leader erodes, his or her position can be undermined very quickly, as was the case in Ukraine in 2013-2014. In contrast to the more institutionalized variant, other members of the leader's group may have much more ability, and much more incentive, to defect if the ship appears to be sinking. Henry Hale (2011) has captured this dynamic effectively. Second, in a personalized system, every change of leader is potentially a change of the system. And since leaders must eventually die even if they are never ejected, succession politics are a constant source of instability.

In the upper left quadrant, power is relatively evenly distributed, such that no actor is able to take control of the system, but the competition for power is relatively unconstrained by rules. As the power between different actors ebbs and flows, rules are likely to be changed as well. This looks very much like what we have seen in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia. Where power dominates institutions, shifts in power can occur quickly and unpredictably, but that does not make the system itself unstable. Thus Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan have seen instability as power has changed hands, but the nature of these polities has not fundamentally changed. In contrast, Putin's eventual departure in Russia may lead to a change in the system, or it may lead simply to Putin being replaced by another powerful personality, much as happened after the death of Saparmurat Niyazov in Turkmenistan. This situation is aptly captured by Way's term "pluralism by default" (Way 2016).

Paths from Balance to Imbalance and from Imbalance to Balance

If liberal democracy and authoritarianism can both be "consolidated" but can also be eroded, a central question is what paths exist from one to the other. Vast amounts have been written historically about paths from authoritarianism to democracy, and more recently about democratic breakdown. Having framed

the question around balance, not around liberal democracy per se, we sketch some of the implications for paths from balance to hegemony and back.

The path from balance to imbalance begins with one aspect of the system becoming imbalanced, and that imbalance being leveraged to create imbalance elsewhere. The archetypal mechanism has been through the military using its means of physical coercion to seize power directly. In recent cases of democratic backsliding, two distinct processes have taken place, one beginning with institutions and one with elections.

A first path begins with institutions. If a leader can populate institutions with loyalists willing to use selective law enforcement and biased election administration, they can erode the economic resources of their opponents, capture or close media outlets, gain the patronage resources that come from government budgets, and control the administration of elections. Control of institutions and the "administrative resources" that goes with them can lead to control of legislatures, as legislators can be rewarded or punished depending on their behavior. This was the path pursued by Kuchma in Ukraine and Putin in Russia.

Intelligence, law enforcement, and military institutions are especially potent. In Russia, the military was essential in dismissing the parliament in 1993, and then internal security organs played the key role in ending the independence of the oligarchs. In Ukraine, in contrast, those with the ability to deploy coercion have either "stood aside" or have checked each other to the extent that none can dominate. The period in which the armed forces reported to President Yushchenko while the Interior Ministry reported to Prime Minister Tymoshenko was especially relevant. When Viktor Yanukovych took over in 2010, he immediately began trying to subject the security forces to his dominance (Kuzio 2012), but the Euromaidan broke out before the task was completed. Only a relatively small force, the "Berkut" special interior troops, were unquestionably controlled by him.

A second path begins with voters. In several important cases, including Hungary, Israel, India, the Philippines, Brazil and the United States, the path to imbalance began with voters, who elected and in some cases re-elected leaders who made clear their intentions to pursue political hegemony. In the United States in 2020, voters narrowly chose against re-electing a populist potential autocrat, though 70 million people voted for him and many predict that he or a similar candidate will win in the future. This case and those like it stress a key point that has been underemphasized: it is hard to undermine liberal democracy without the support of a significant number of voters. Even in Russia, before Vladimir Putin was able to rig elections, he needed to win elections that were flawed but not rigged. This required voters to ignore clear signs of authoritarian inclinations. While the tactics that populists use to win support deserve more analysis, so do the choices that voters make, as indicated by the long line of political theorists, who worried that democracy would eventually endanger liberty. In countries around the world, we see voters, as well as populist leaders, chafing under the rules and norms that ensure that democracy remains liberal.

The path beginning with institutions has dominated the post-Soviet cases, while the path beginning with voters has predominated in previously consolidated liberal democracies. Interestingly, concentration of wealth does not emerge as a starting point for unbalancing politics. While there are other reasons to oppose the emergence of a small number of ultra-wealthy oligarchs in a country, oligarchy is not hegemony, and we would expect a small number of oligarchs to compete for power in a way that likely results in balance, not hegemony. In Ukraine, for example, a small number of oligarchs controls a vastly disproportionate share of the country's economy, but their competition with one another has prevented any of them from becoming dominant, and in key situations, like the 2004 Orange revolution and the 2014 Euromaidan, elites appear to have engaged in balancing behavior. In Russia, in contrast, it took the application of force, in the form of politicized law enforcement, to bring the oligarchs under Putin's thumb. Only a situation where a single actor controlled a dominant share of a country's economy might lead to political dominance, such a but situation would almost certainly have to result from pre-existing political imbalance.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the politics of hybrid regimes in terms of realist international relations theory. It does so based on the observation that there are relatively few limits on the exercise of power in these countries, and that one of the essential goals of aspiring autocrats and populists is to loosen the institutional checks on power and to create permanent imbalances in their favor. Not only are legal constraints on misuse of power difficult to enforce, but violence remains a viable option for at least some of the actors. This includes both state leaders who control security forces and protest leaders who can, by putting people in the streets, defy state leaders and sometime eject them from power. With the use of force a real possibility, actors experience not only the temptation to use force to pursue their goals, but the fear that others will use force on them. This "politics of insecurity" resembles the idealized version of international politics on which realist theory is based.

The main finding empirical finding of this paper is that institutional design in new democracies is as much of a dependent variable as an independent variable, and in existing democracies institutions are more shaped by power than we generally acknowledge. In both Russia and Ukraine, changes in institutions tend to follow changes in the distribution of power, rather than constraining power. Within relatively static institutional arrangements, the distribution of power sometimes varies considerably. A second important finding is that actor strategies vary between balancing and bandwagoning, depending on expectations of the outcome.

Examining the problem this way yields several insights. First, the politics of insecurity creates a "security dilemma" for those competing for power (for a domestic application of the concept of security dilemma, see Posen 1993). Second, institutional design follows the distribution of power, and reinforces a given distribution of power rather than undermining it or creating liberal democracy.

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Third, actors in this situation cannot afford to be motivated solely, or even primarily, by the goal of constructing liberal democracy. Even if we assume that this is their desire, actors are driven by insecurity to augment their own power and to reduce that of potential adversaries.

One implication for democracy is that the normative desire to build democracy is not sufficient to create it. Balance of power, realist theory stresses, does not result because actors desire it, but because each actor's efforts to dominate result in a balance that is everyone's second-best outcome. Normative commitment to balance can reinforce this tendency to balance, but is not sufficient by itself. The Treaty of Westphalia was not necessary to create a plurality of sovereign states in Europe; rather it codified a situation that the actors confronted toward the end of a war that each of them had hoped to win.

Another conclusion that emerges from this analysis is that balance and imbalance can both be stable equilibria. If both balanced and hegemonic distributions of power can be stable, the question is what forces are sufficient to disrupt such an equilibrium? What are the forces capable of undermining a hegemonic leader or party? What are the forces capable of allowing or empowering a single party to unbalance a system and become dominant? Clearly, the strength of institutions helps answer this question, in that institutions almost by definition strengthen certain equilibria. Thus, the relationship between institutions and power merits further investigation—just as it has in the study of international politics.

One question that needs further investigation is the extent to which hegemony reshapes norms. In the international politics literature, immense attention has been given to the way in which the United States shaped the "Liberal International Order" built after World War II (Lake, Martin and Risse 2021). Authoritarian leaders and aspiring authoritarians, in places as diverse as Russia, China, Hungary and the US, have sought both to challenge prevailing norms both about the importance of democracy and about the meaning of democracy. A key assertion for some of these leaders is that de-institutionalized populist democracy is a purer form of democracy than one that allows unelected institutions to check the power of elected politicians. To what extent does holding power, controlling major economic resources and dominating the media help rewrite these fundamental norms? Put differently, how resilient are these norms to sustained challenges? This is an important question because of democracy's enduring power as a legitimating force. Without democracy, legitimacy must come from economic performance, which can ebb and flow, or from foreign policy success, the pursuit of which can be dangerous.

Equally important, from this perspective, is the extent to which protests and anti-government activity become legitimate in the eyes of the population. In countries like Ukraine, the perception that elections were rigged led to protests, and violent suppression of the protests was seen as illegitimate not only by the population but by much of the security apparatus. This prompted an increased effort in Russia to suppress protests and the people inclined to lead them. It points to a larger problem that the new populist regimes will increasingly face: it is one thing to unbalance

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a system and to undermine the mechanisms intended to ensure competitive politics; it is another to exert coercive power when large-scale protest is seen by much of the populace as legitimate.

The hybrid regimes of the post-Soviet world have tended to be unstable. With few exceptions, the post-communist regimes have either become relatively stable authoritarian states, as in Russia, or stable democracies, as in much of Eastern Europe. A few, including Ukraine, Moldova, and perhaps Armenia and Georgia, have remained as hybrids, while a few of the successful democratizers have slid into less liberal populist forms of democracy (Hungary and Poland). Even in the states that seem to be consolidated autocracies, openings occur, as they have in Kazakhstan and Belarus. And many of the consolidated democracies, most importantly the United States, appear poised to slide in the direction of Hungary and Poland. As the norms that support liberal democracy come under increasing challenge, the maintenance of democracy, or at least the prevention of consolidated authoritarianism, will depend more in the future than in the past on the distribution of power.

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