



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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**“Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War”**  
*National Endowment for Democracy*  
**1025 F Street NW, Suite 800**  
**September 24, 2010, 12:30-2:30 PM**

**Steven Levitsky** and **Lucan Way** presented their new book, “Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War,” Friday at an event hosted by the National Endowment for Democracy. **Thomas Carothers**, vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace gave a response and **Marc Plattner**, the president for research and studies at the National Endowment for Democracy moderated the event.

**Levitsky** began by explaining how the authors define competitive authoritarian countries. These are countries in which democratic institutions exist and competitive elections occur regularly, but the systemic electoral fraud and abuse weight the system heavily in favor of the incumbents, Levitsky said. **Elections under these regimes are not just “window dressing;” opposition candidates can and do win, but such victories are rare.**

**Competitive authoritarian regimes are “very much a post-Cold War thing,”** said Levitsky. Western democracy promotion efforts established principle of democratic governance as the international norm in the early 1990s. Elections became the single most important symbol of progress. But many countries failed to move beyond this stage, Levitsky explained. Researchers initially described these countries as “democracies in transition” but as time wore on, it became clear that the transition paradigm was flawed and a new grouping was necessary to categorize these regimes.

In 1995 there were 35 countries that fit Levitsky and Way’s definition of a competitive authoritarian regime. Of these 35 regimes, 14 became democracies during the 15-year period the researchers evaluated. The rest became either stable or unstable authoritarian regimes. **The goal of the book was to examine why some countries succeeded and others failed, Levitsky said.**

The researchers found that there were two determining factors. **First the level of linkage a country had with the West. Levitsky and Way defined linkage as the economic, diplomatic, political and civil connections between the country in question and the West.** Linkage works in three ways to increase the likelihood a country will be become a functioning democracy: First, the more links a country has to the West, the more likely fraud, corruption and abuse will come to the attention of the international media; second, a high level of linkage creates domestic constituencies with personal and business ties to the West that have a vested interest preventing international isolation; and third, it reshapes the power distribution to protect opposition groups that would otherwise have to stand alone against government oppression.

The second factor was the organizational strength of the incumbent government. Research is often unnecessarily opposition-centered, Levitsky said. **Levitsky and Way’s research found that what the ruling government does is actually more important.** Two factors affect the strength of regimes in

Levitsky and Way's model: First extent of the government's control and second the degree of authority the government has over its constituent parts.

**Of the countries they evaluated, Levitsky said, not a single government with a high level of linkage failed to democratize.** When linkage was weak, domestic factors weighed much heavier on the outcomes. If a ruling government was strong, the country was much more likely to transition to a stable authoritarian system. The final factor was the level of outside influence. Weak governments can survive if they have a patron state, for example Russia.

Way then presented the implications of their research for policy makers. **First, democracy promoters must pay more attention to what Way called the “uneven playing field.”** Often the shift that fixes the system in favor of the incumbent government is not particularly noticeable and occurs between elections when the international community is not watching. **Second, the U.S. government should work to increase linkage.** This means expanding exchange programs, increasing trade, and fostering diplomatic interaction. And third, policy maker need to pay more attention to “rotten door transitions” in which a corrupt, ineffective regime is disbanded only to have a similar government appear in its place. These transitions are very easy but are unlikely to result in full democratization. On the other hand “hard door” transitions where a consolidated regime loses power, while harder, are much more likely result in a successful democracy.

In his response, **Carothers** raised four issues with the book that “puzzled” him. **First, Carothers questioned how Levitsky and Way established boundaries for their definition of competitive authoritarianism.** From his perspective, any model that lumps Zimbabwe and Botswana together, for example, is flawed. Carothers also noted the Levitsky and Way's definition seemed to focus too much on elections and not enough on freedom. Second, Carothers criticized Levitsky and Way's concept of linkage for being far too limited and opaque. **The authors failed to disambiguate between the effects of the measures they combined to create their single measure of linkage and failed to include important variables like foreign aid, military ties, and host of other potential links in their concept.** Third, Carothers questioned the overtly positive role the U.S. always seems to play in Levitsky and Way's narrative. Carothers cited multiple examples where high levels of linkage—as defined by Levitsky and Way—have actually helped to keep competitive authoritarian regimes in power. Fourth, Carothers expressed concern that policy makers would draw the conclusions from Levitsky and Way's research that could be detrimental to effort to increase American assistance for democratization. **On Egypt for example, policy makers could use the research to justify building long term economic links while ignoring glaring issues like the upcoming parliamentary election and fraud and oppression that will likely accompany it, Carothers said.**

Levitsky responded to Carothers' question about the boundaries of competitive authoritarianism by saying it is important to look at how these countries compare internationally. While Zimbabwe and Botswana may seem very different at the regional level, it is still possible to group them together when you look at them in the global context. In response to Carothers' criticism of the concept of linkage, Levitsky said that it is very hard to disambiguate the constituent parts and added they used the best available measures they could find.

Plattner then opened the question and answer session by asking if the unique time period Levitsky and Way evaluated in their study made their findings less applicable today. **In response Way acknowledge that the period they studied was a time of “liberal hegemony” and it is possible the world has moved beyond this today.**

Many audience members asked why Levitsky and Way didn't include certain countries in their research (i.e. Venezuela, Poland, the Baltic States, Uganda, Ethiopia and Rwanda). The researchers responded that many of these countries had already become democracies by the mid-1990s and other did not meet the criteria to be labeled a competitive authoritarian regime.