



# Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy

*By Michael Albertus and  
Victor Menaldo*

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*Reviewed by Assoc. Prof. Şener Aktürk  
Department of International Relations, Koç University &  
Senior Fellow, TRT World Research Centre*

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**A**uthoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy is an eye-opening and thought-provoking contribution, one that unequivocally argues that democracy is almost always created by elites and for elites, and not by the people and for the people, as it is often believed. As its title already indicates, and as its authors boldly claim from the outset, "this book strongly challenges the conventional wisdom that democracy is created by and for the people... Democracy is often an enterprise undertaken by elites and for elites" (p.3). It provides a thorough disenchantment for those who think of democracy as a panacea since it turns out that most democracies are hardwired to preserve numerous political and socio-economic inequalities. "In short, in many ways this book suggests that democracy is a false promise" as the authors summarize in their conclusion, although they nonetheless qualify these statements by suggesting that "a flawed democracy riddled with elite biases is better than no democracy at all" (p.283).

Unlike most political science books in this genre, *Elite Origins of Democracy* does not seem to be motivated by a single puzzle stated at the outset; therefore, at first, this book struck me as a detailed description of a general condition, situation, or sequence (of democratisation) that they discovered, rather than an answer to a concrete puzzle. However, it is possible to posit that the main puzzle consists of the disappointing economic and social outcomes of democratic regimes. Contrary to what many (including political scientists) believe, "[t]here is evidence that democracies are no more likely than dictatorships to have better health and education outcomes" (p.6). Albertus and Menaldo criticize the extant "literature that grapples with the paradox of unequal democracy" (p.7) by arguing that most democracies are unequal by design: "we argue that democracy in many cases is not only not for the people; it is also not of or by the people" (p.7).

Why and how are most democracies "elite-biased" by design? The authors have a straightforward answer. Measurement of their dependent variable, elite-biased versus popular democracy, is based on the nature of the constitution. A constitution inherited from an authoritarian predecessor indicates an "elite-biased democracy." In contrast, a constitution made by the democratically elected leader(s) indicates a "popular democracy." This simple measurement yields the

following empirical observation that is at the heart of the book: "A total of 66 per cent of new democracies inherited a constitution that was designed under dictatorship and where outgoing elites dominated the transition process" and "Chile, Turkey, South Africa, Indonesia, and Thailand illustrate this more common scenario" (p.8). They consider any democracy that operates under a constitution designed by the authoritarian leadership preceding democratisation (e.g., military junta) as an elite-biased democracy because "constitutions lie at the heart of elite-biased transitions" (p.12). This approach seems to be an application of a key historical institutionalist insight, namely, that institutions reflect the interests of the actors that build them during critical junctures. In that sense, the emphasis on elites shaping new institutions according to their interests might not be original, but their emphasis on constitutions as the central element of elite privilege is. The book is also a well-rounded rebuttal of the arguments of Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson regarding democracy and dictatorship (1), which are critically cited and refuted throughout the book.

There are four possible regime types for Albertus and Menaldo: Consolidated dictatorship, volatile dictatorship, elite-biased democracy, and popular democracy. It is noteworthy that "[f]or the masses, volatile dictatorship can at times deliver more material benefits than even a popular democracy is likely to deliver—for instance, through the repartitioning of the assets of outsider economic elites" as in the aftermath of Bolivia's 1952 revolution that resulted in massive land reform/redistribution to landless peasants and the nationalisation of mines (p.38). This makes a lot of sense, and it reinforces the key findings of the first book of Albertus, *Autocracy and Redistribution* (2), where he argued that land reform, which is the most consequential form of economic redistribution in many parts of the world, is far more likely in a dictatorship than in a democracy. In fact, "volatile dictatorship" and "popular democracy" appear to be more beneficial to the masses than either "elite-biased democracy" or "consolidated dictatorship" because these latter two types mostly succeed in marginalising the masses in the game for political power.

For Albertus and Menaldo, elite politics, especially elite splits, are the primary determinants of regime transitions for better or worse, whereas masses only play a secondary role as each elite faction may (or may not) mobilise the masses for its particular political goals depending

on elite preferences. Thus, although the masses seem most marginalised in consolidated dictatorships and elite-biased democracies, they play a greater but still secondary role even in volatile dictatorships and popular democracies. In short, the book clearly urges scholars to primarily focus on elite politics and elite decisions in order to understand the origins of democracy and autocracy, which I also find convincing.

I should also note that throughout the book, Albertus and Menaldo consider "the adoption of proportional electoral rules" (e.g., p.145) as an elite-biased choice, meant to fragment the popular vote in order to prevent the emergence of an anti-elite majority, which again, is rather convincing. This should provoke some self-criticism among many democrats around the world, who see proportional representation (PR), especially with low or no thresholds, as the more democratic choice for an electoral system. On the contrary, a single-member district (SMD) electoral system, or a version of SMD that promotes a two-party system, would appear to be more supportive of popular democracy as opposed to elite-biased democracy.

Chile and Sweden are the two most detailed chapter-long case studies in the book. We learn that Sweden was economically more unequal than the United Kingdom or the United States in the early 20th century, and the "1866 rules gave the franchise to 5.5 per cent of the Swedish population, or roughly 21 per cent of all legally competent men" (p.187) and by their measure, "Sweden's popular democratic experience began in 1974" (p.191). Finally, in the last chapter, they demonstrate "how specific elements of institutional design, and especially constitutional design, benefited colonizers and their local allies" (p.252), with case studies of Canada and the Philippines as examples. Canada and the Philippines were "established at their founding as democracies but were saddled with institutional legacies that favored elites who were powerful under colonial rule, as well as the interests of their colonizers" (p.253). These case studies are also eye-opening in demonstrating that even Canada and Sweden, often thought of as bastions of liberal and/or social democracy, can hardly even be considered democratic until recently.

The book also has some theoretical, empirical, and methodological shortcomings. Theoretically, non-economic factors that shape preferences, such as

ideology, religion, and nationalism, are missing in this book in general. This problem is also linked to their choices of empirical case studies: Their two most detailed case studies are exceptionally homogenous polities in terms of their religious sectarian demography; the overwhelmingly Lutheran Christian Sweden and the overwhelmingly Catholic Christian Chile. From a comparative historical perspective, these countries are particularly homogenous. This homogenous demographic background removes the risk of religious sectarian strife, a major if not the primary source of conflict in most European and non-European polities historically, as I argued elsewhere (3). As such, the case selection almost naturally prioritises economic conflicts among otherwise similarly Christian-heritage ethnocultural groups. This is a particularly unusual, atypical political setting in comparative perspective, which then very much limits the generalisability of this pattern of political conflict, competition, and the subsequent democratic transition.

Some of the most significant theoretical and methodological contradictions of the book become apparent in the conclusion, where the subjectivity of the key dependent variable, political regime type, is exposed. The book as a whole critically analyses the negative consequences and intricate design of elite-biased democracy in meticulous detail. Throughout the book, Turkey is presented as "an excellent, and egregious, example of how elites can use a constitution to limit punishment after democratization" (p.94), an extreme form of elite-biased democracy designed as such by the military dictatorship of 1980-83. This constitutionally embedded elite-biased political structure has been routinely decried, especially by conservatives in Turkey, as the "tutelary regime" (*vesayet rejimi* in Turkish). However, in addition to the referendum in 1987 that the book mentions (p.154), Turkey undertook three more recent momentous constitutional changes, each approved in popular referenda in 2007, 2010, and 2017, respectively, and which removed "elite-biased" checks against popular control of the chief executive and the judiciary in particular. Based on the operationalisation and measurement of Albertus and Menaldo, Turkey's constitutional transformation between 2007 and 2017 should count as a transition from elite-biased democracy to popular democracy, and yet in the conclusion Turkey is suddenly denounced as a "quintessential example" of "populism," where "Erdoğan has used strongman bluster and constitutional reform to gut the checks and balances

and military vetoes that previously hemmed in civilian politicians" (p.274). If Turkey was indeed "an excellent, and egregious, example" of elite-biased democracy earlier, then why and how can one normatively denounce the removal of these military vetoes and elite-biased checks on popular rule? More generally, based on the book's strictly constitutional criteria of elite-biased versus popular democracy, what distinguishes "populism" from "popular democracy" other than a subjective assessment? Equally perplexing is the mention of Turkey's robustly competitive multiparty system alongside the unambiguously unipolar, stable authoritarian Russia under Putin (p.275) as similar political regimes. In a previous research article, I went through all the presidential, parliamentary, and local elections and national referenda in Russia and Turkey since 2000, demonstrating how vigorously competitive and contested every election in Turkey has been in stark contrast to Russia (4).

Problems of measurement also occur in one of the two major case studies they focus on, namely Chile, where the authors recognise the problems with their "formal coding rules" for what counts as a popular democracy as opposed to an elite-biased democracy (pp.220-221). Apart from the two chapter-long case studies of Chile and Sweden, South Africa is probably the most prominent example of a democratic transition used in numerous chapters starting with the very first pages of the book, and yet the authors note in a footnote that "on technical grounds, it [South Africa] does not yet qualify as a democracy" because "there has been no alteration in the executive branch between different political parties" (p.91, footnote 4).

In conclusion, *Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy* makes critical contributions to the study of political regimes through its careful exposition of elite-biased democracy as the most common type of democratic regime worldwide, which perpetuates and even deepens multifaceted political and socioeconomic inequalities. It is the story of "how holdover elites from the previous autocratic regime can use tailor-made democracy as a Trojan horse to perpetuate their political and economic hegemony at the expense of other elites and regular citizens" (p.100), which, in turn, is the most likely cause of the "populist backlash" that we have been observing across electoral democracies. This book should provoke critical rethinking about the causes and consequences of "actually existing democracy" (to

paraphrase the famous depiction of the Soviet Union as "actually existing socialism") as opposed to idealised depictions of democracy.

1- Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Economic Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship* (Cambridge University Press, 2006)

2- Michael Albertus, *Autocracy and Redistribution: The Politics of Land Reform* (Cambridge University Press, 2015)

3- Şener Aktürk, "Comparative Politics of Exclusion in Europe and the Americas: Religious, Sectarian, and Racial Boundary Making since the Reformation," *Comparative Politics* 52, no. 4 (2020): 695-719.

4- Şener Aktürk, "Unipolar vs. multipolar: Russland und die Türkei im Vergleich," *Osteuropa* 68, no.10-12 (2018): 119-129. <https://www.zeitschrift-osteuropa.de/hefte/2018/10-12/unipolar-vs-multipolar/>