

A Theoretical and Methodological Proposal for Analysing the Effects of Political Change on Political Regimes

Introduction

Political change is one of the most important fields of study in Comparative Politics. In particular, the scholar interest has traditionally focused on democratisation processes and the breakdown of democratic regimes. Nevertheless, both processes do not cover all the possibilities of political change. Political transformations can occur, without affecting the democratic or authoritarian nature of the political regime, but increasing or decreasing the degree of authoritarianism or democracy. Therefore, it is essential to categorise the different pathways in which political change can take place and their consequences on the nature of the political regimes.

On the other hand, comparison requires a systematic approach. In this vein, a typology of political change and a methodological procedure to study political change processes can be useful for Comparative Area Studies (CAS), which focus on intra-, inter- and cross-area comparisons.¹ In particular, the aim of this chapter is to offer a theoretical and methodological framework for evaluating the consequences of political change in the nature of political regimes of the same or different regions.

Definition and typology of political change

The point of departure for our theoretical framework is that political change can and often does take different directions, not all of which necessarily have to lead to regime change.² As Morlino (2003) pointed out, political change is not a linear process and it does not produce the same results. Transitions may occur from authoritarianism toward democracy, but may also give rise to a reconfiguration of authoritarianism. Additionally, authoritarian rulers can undertake political reforms without democratic motivations.

¹ Bert Hoffmann, 'Latin America and Beyond: The Case for Comparative Area Studies', *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* no 100 (2015), 111–120.

² The theoretical framework of this chapter is based on the author's former publications: Inmaculada Szmolka, 'Theoretical Framework and Models of Political Change Processes in Arab Regimes', *Anuario IEMed del Mediterráneo*, 2014, 23–30; Inmaculada Szmolka, 'Los procesos de cambio político: conceptualización teórica, tipología y análisis', in *Análisis de la política. Enfoques y herramientas de la Ciencia Política*, ed. by Mikel Barreda and Leticia Ruiz (Barcelona: Huygens, 2016), 159–177; Inmaculada Szmolka, 'Analytical Framework for a Study of Change in Political Regimes', in *Political Change in the Middle East and North Africa. After the Arab Spring*, ed. by Inmaculada Szmolka (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 13–37.

On many occasions, the political changes carried out by authoritarian leaders may have the Lampedusian purpose of reforming aspects of the political systems without changing the main regime structures substantially in order to obtain legitimacy and wider social support. On the other hand, democratic countries can make progress or setbacks on democracy, increasing or decreasing the quality of democracy.

In this vein, a broad concept of ‘political change’ is used in this chapter not only in the sense of democratisation, but also as an element in reshaping authoritarian and democratic regimes. Thus, political change is defined here as the transformations in a political regime that can affect their rules, institutions, power relations, actor behaviours, power relationships and/or political processes.

We consider different pathways in which political change can take place. Firstly, two general processes of political change are identified which imply regime change: democratisation (from authoritarianism to democracy) and autocratisation (from democracy to authoritarianism). Secondly, five specific processes of political change are also distinguished: three affecting democracies (democratic regression, democratic deepening and democratic consolidation); and two characterising authoritarianisms (political liberalisation and authoritarian progression). Rather than involving a change of political regime, these five processes may lead to changes in subtypes within democratic and authoritarian regimes (see *Figure 1*).

General processes

Democratisation. This entails the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime and, therefore, the replacement of one political regime with another. In the academic literature, opinions vary as to when the democratisation of an authoritarian regime occurs. Linz and Stepan³ pointed out four requirements for democratisation: a sufficient agreement on procedures to produce an elected government; a government that comes to power as the direct result of a free and popular vote; the government’s *de facto* possession of the authority to generate new policies; and the fact that the executive, legislative and judicial power generated by the new democracy does not *de jure* share power with other bodies such as the military, or with religious leaders. Other political scientists have argued that democratisation implies the accomplishment of Dahl’s (1989) requirements for polyarchy: the existence of elected officials and control over governmental decisions; regular, free and fair elections; universal adult suffrage; the right to stand for office; freedom of expression; access to alternative sources of information; the right to form and join independent associations; and guarantees for minorities. However, it is argued here that Dahl’s conditions and Linz and Stepan’s list, are insufficient. For example, in

³ Juan J Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1.

Tunisia, these conditions were met following the founding elections, which were held in 2011; however, it was not possible to use the term ‘democratisation’ until 2014, as a result of the approval of a new and consensual constitution. Thus, another prerequisite for democratisation is that a large majority of parties and of citizens accept the new common framework of social and political life.

On the other hand, it should be noted that democratisation can occur in countries in which democratic institutions have never existed or in others that have had democratic experiences in the past. These cases of ‘redemocratisation’ are, for example, those that occurred in some European countries after the Second World War (Germany, Italy) or in the 1970s (Spain), or in Latin America in the 1980s (Uruguay, Argentina, Chile).

Autocratisation. This is the opposite concept to democratisation; specifically, the evolution from a democratic to an authoritarian regime. The breakdown of democratic regimes can occur gradually by legal means because of an abusive exercise of power, a significant restriction of political competition and/or the limitation of political rights and civil liberties. Autocratisation can also be produced as a consequence of acts of violence, such as a *coup d’état* or war. Examples of breakdown of democratic regimes are those countries that Huntington⁴ placed in the ‘counter-waves’ of democracy. On the other hand, according to Linz and Stepan,⁵ the stability of democracies depends on three factors: legitimacy, efficiency and effectiveness. Lührmann and Lindberg⁶ provide an effective methodological tool to operationalise and empirically analyse the concept of autocratisation.

Particular processes of political change

Regarding the specific processes of political change, they affect democratic regimes as well as authoritarian regimes. These processes do not entail a change in the political regime but rather an alteration in the norms, structures or functioning of the political system that do not affect the consideration of the political regime as ‘democratic’ or ‘authoritarian’, although it may involve a change in the subcategories of democratic regimes (full democracies and defective democracies) and authoritarian (closed authoritarianisms and pluralist authoritarianisms).

⁴ Samuel P Huntington, *The Third Wave. Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press – Norman, 1991).

⁵ Juan J Linz and Alfred Stepan (eds), *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes. Crisis, Breakdown and Reequilibration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁶ Anna Lührmann and Staffan I Lindberg, ‘A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?’, *Democratization* 26, no 7 (2019), 1095–1113.

Particular processes of political change affecting democracies

In democratic regimes, political regimes can experience:

Democratic regression. The concept of democratic regression⁷ – also named ‘democratic backsliding’⁸ – is applied to full democracies that regress to become defective democracies, without the loss of the substantive democratic core (competitive elections, effective political opposition, a legitimate government that is accountable for its actions, and guaranteed rights and freedoms for the majority). This situation may occur, for example, because of the debilitation of the democratic institutions from within the political system, the interference in political decision-making by non-accountable actors or through the limited impairment of citizens’ rights (whether political, ethnic or religious). Nevertheless, gradual democratic declines can provoke autocratisation if the situation persists and the political regime finally loses some of the requirements for ‘polyarchy’.

Democratic deepening. It refers to an improvement in the quality of a democratic regime.⁹ Democratic deepening leads the transition from a defective democracy towards full democracy in which principles such as equality, representation and participation are guaranteed. This process is characteristic of countries that have recently installed a democratic regime and have improved their democratic practices, leading to full democracy first and then, if pursued, to the consolidation of democracy.

Democratic consolidation. This concept involves the anchoring of democratic values, institutions and practices, and therefore of the legitimacy of a democratic regime.¹⁰ Therefore, it is a process that is developed over time, in the context of full democracies. Nevertheless, democratic consolidation is only one of the possible results after democratic installation. It is not easy to limit the moment when democratic consolidation takes place. For Huntington,¹¹ democratic consolidation occurs when there is alternation in the government after elections. Diamond¹² identifies the conditions that foster democratic consolidation. These include strong political institutions, appropriate institutional designs, decentralisation of power, a vibrant civil society, and improved economic and political performance.

⁷ Gero Erdmann and Marianne Kneuer (eds.), *Regression of Democracy?* (VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011); Larry Diamond, ‘Democratic regression in comparative perspective: scope, methods, and causes’, *Democratization* 28, no 1 (2021), 22–42.

⁸ Nancy Bermeo, ‘On Democratic Backsliding’, *Journal of Democracy* 27, no 1 (2016), 5–19.

⁹ Andreas Schedler, ‘What Is Democratic Consolidation?’, *Journal of Democracy* 9, no 2 (1998), 91–107.

¹⁰ Leonardo Morlino, *Democrazie e democratizzazioni* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003); Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*.

¹¹ Huntington, *The Third Wave*.

¹² Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy. Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

Particular processes of political change affecting authoritarianisms

Political liberalisation. This process takes place in authoritarian contexts and is led by rulers in order to preserve the legitimacy of the regime. It implies an easing of repression and an extension of political rights and civil liberties, and thus, an increase in political competition and participation.¹³ It may also involve a rotation of power. In a context of political liberalisation, the regime maintains its autocratic nature. Political liberalisation does not necessarily lead to the beginning of a transition towards democracy, and therefore does not necessarily trigger a change in political regime from authoritarian to democratic.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it may involve a shift from a hegemonic authoritarian regime towards a quasi-competitive one, extending the degree of political competence and rights. If liberalisation is very limited or only normative, it will maintain the previous form of political authority (a quasi-competitive or hegemonic authoritarian regime).

Authoritarian progression. This means a deepening of the authoritarian nature of a regime. The authoritarian regime places even more limits on political competition and the exercise of political rights and civil liberties. It can occur in any category of authoritarian regime.

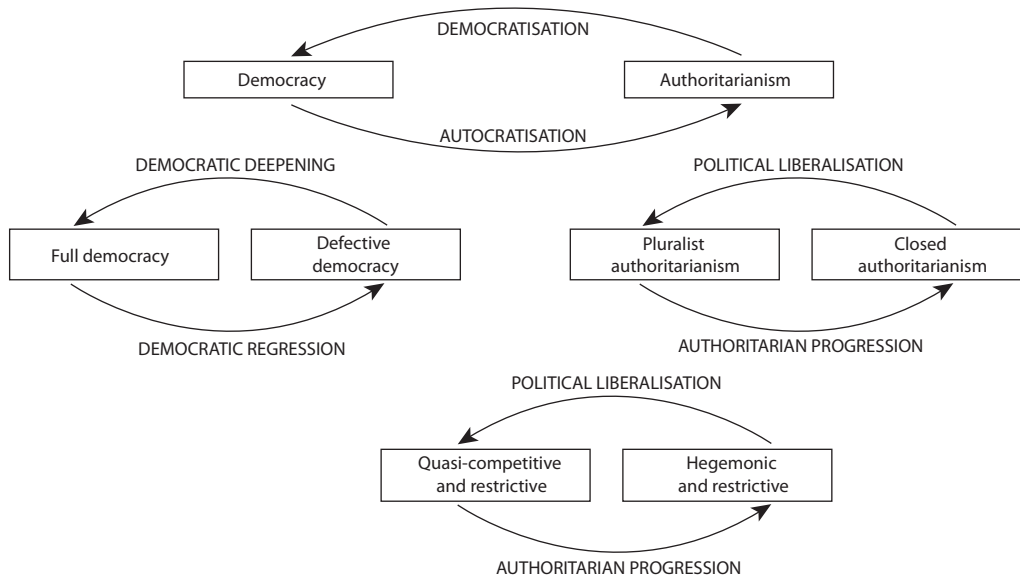


Figure 1: Political change processes between political regimes

Source: compiled by the author

¹³ Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (Baltimore–London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Scott Mainwaring, 'Transitions to Democracy and Democratic Consolidation: Theoretical and Comparative Issues', in *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*, ed. by Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell and J Samuel Valenzuela (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Leonardo Morlino, *Cómo cambian los regímenes políticos* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, 1985).

Methodology for the study of political change processes

The analysis of political change processes in Comparative Area Studies demands a systematic approach that enables comparison among countries (intra-, inter- and cross-area comparisons). In this section a methodological framework for the study of political change is proposed. The aim is to provide a tool that may be useful in analysing and evaluating the scope of political transformations.

Bearing in mind that each process of change is configured in a different way, according to combinations of different variables (institutional, historical, economic cultural, social, and so on), we take into account the context in which the political process takes place together with the consequences of political change in the nature of political regimes, in particular, on pluralism and political competition, government and public rights and civil liberties.

Context of political change processes

Contextual and structural factors are important for a study of political change, not because they constitute prerequisites for democratisation but as elements that can facilitate or hinder democratic or authoritarian change.¹⁵ Among these factors we can point out the following:

Historical legacies: democratic/authoritarian past; colonial past.

Socioeconomic factors: economic and social development.

Demographic factors: demographic structure, fragmentation and polarisation (religious and ethnic).

Institutional-political factors: characteristics of the regime (internal and external support, degree of institutionalisation and ideologisation), and of opposition to the authoritarian regime (opposition groups, organisation of the opposition in coalitions, unity of opposition and capacity for social mobilisation).

Political culture: citizen and elite values and attitudes towards democracy.

International factors: relation of dependence or interdependence on international markets and other countries, integration in regional or supranational organisations, international pressure for or against democratisation, degree of cultural globalisation.

¹⁵ Thomas Carothers, 'The End of the Transition Paradigm', *Journal of Democracy* 13, no 1 (2002), 5–21; Jan Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization. Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Table 1: Context of political change processes

Dimension	Variables	Sub-variables	Suggested indicators/categorisation
Historical	Democratic/authoritarian legacy		Former experiences of democracy or authoritarianism
	Colonial legacy		Colonial power/colony
Socioeconomic	Economic growth		GDP per capita growth (World Bank)
	Social development	Equality/inequality	GINI index (World Bank)
		Unemployment	Unemployment rate (total) (World Bank)
			Youth unemployment rate (World Bank)
		Education	Literacy rate (World Bank)
			Secondary completion rate (World Bank)
			Tertiary graduation rate (OECD)
Demographic	Demographic structure	Adult population	Population ages 15–64 (World Bank)
	Fragmentation	Ethnic fragmentation	Ethnic fractionalization index
		Religious fragmentation	Religious fractionalisation index
	Polarization	Ethnic	Ethnic polarisation index
		Religious	Religious fractionalisation index
Institutional-political	Political regime	Support	Endogenous support (political, economic and social support) Exogenous support (international)
		State institutionalisation	Strong/weak
		Ideologisation	Strong/weak
	Opposition	Opposition groups	Main organisations and types
		Organisation	Platforms and coalitions
		Unity	Fragmentation
			Polarisation
		Capacity of social mobilisation	Call for social and political protests
Cultural	Political culture	Democratic/authoritarian values and attitudes	In political elites In citizenship (World Values Survey/area barometers)
International	Relationship of dependence or interdependence		Ratio of international trade flows to national income
			Membership
			Democratisation as prerequisite of membership
	International pressure for democratisation		Yes/no
	Cultural globalisation	Internet penetration	Individual using the Internet (World Bank)
		Internet control by State	Yes/no

Source: compiled by the author

Consequences of political change on the nature of the political regimes

Political change is proposed here to be analysed with reference to the three key dimensions of the political regimes: pluralism, government, and public rights and liberties.

Pluralism and political competition. With regard to parties and party systems, political parties' legal frameworks can be studied with the aim of identifying whether there has been an increase or decrease in political pluralism and whether the main societal cleavages are represented in the creation of parties. We can also observe political competitiveness in order to determine the existence of a hegemonic actor or rotation in power. Likewise, inter-party relations in the processes of change can be examined, bearing in mind the coalition structures and the shared or adversarial interests and strategies between parties. In relation to electoral integrity, researchers can assess achievements in the presidential and/or parliamentary elections through variables such as consensus in the electoral system and fairness, the degree to which elections allow *de facto* participation, competition and the expression of political preferences, the supervision and conduct of electoral processes, and the acceptance of the electoral results by political actors.

Government. Political change can influence the constitutional framework, government and state powers, and governance. Thus, firstly, it is convenient to analyse the procedures, the degree of consensus (or lack of it) in the constitutional processes, and the democratic or autocratic content of the new constitutions or constitutional reforms. Secondly, political change can have consequences on elections and the accountability of government; the concentration or distribution of power between institutions; the effectiveness with which the elected rulers are able to exercise power; and the state's capacity to meet the needs of its citizens (responsiveness).¹⁶ Thirdly, the effects of political change can be studied in relation to good governance: inclusiveness (equal treatment and equal access to public services), accountability (publication of budgets and public expenditure) and transparency (fighting corruption in the public sector).

Public rights and civil liberties. The changes introduced by the new legal frameworks for rights of citizenship, the degree of success achieved in their implementation, and the extent to which they represent a forward or a backward step for public rights and civil liberties can be examined. Secondly, the strengthening of the rule of law through observation of the independence of the judiciary, the implementation of transactional justice and respect for human rights can be considered. Finally, the evolution of civil society and the appearance of new social movements, the autonomy of civil society *vis-à-vis* the state, and the role of civil society in the process of political change – the ability to mount protest action and to participate in processes of political change – can be taken into account.

¹⁶ Morlino, *Democrazie*.

Table 2: Consequences of political change on the key dimensions of the political regimes

Dimension	Variables	Sub-Variables	Indicators
Pluralism and political competition	Political pluralism and representation	Legal framework	Increase/decrease in party supply
		Social cleavages	Possibility of parties of all tendencies to participate in politics
	Political competitiveness	Pluralism vs hegemony	Dominance/no dominance of an hegemonic party or coalition in politics
		Political alternance	Rotation in power
	Inter-party relations	Coalition structures	Unified opposition platforms
		Democratic consensus	Democratic shared interests and strategies. Agreements between political forces
	Electoral integrity	Freedom for voting	Universal right to vote
		Electoral competence	Similar opportunities to run for office
		Electoral system	Acceptation of electoral system by the majority of political forces
		Fairness of election process	Mechanisms to guarantee fairness of elections (independent commissions for organising elections, international and/or national monitoring). No significant irregularities (vote-buying, intimidation, violence)
		Social and political acceptance of electoral results	Significant turnout. Absence of political contestation of electoral results
	New constitutions and constitutional reforms	Procedure	Participation of majority political groups. Participation of citizenship (constitutional referendum)
		Consensus/lack of consensus	Agreed or non-agreed constitutions
		Content	Democratic/autocratic scope
Government	Government and state powers	Government legitimacy	Democratic election
			Accountable government
		Separation of powers	System of check and balances between institutions
		Effective power of government	Non-existence of veto players or reserved domains
			Control of the territory and legitimate use of violence
		Responsiveness	Correspondence of state to citizen needs and civil society in general
	Governance	Inclusiveness	Equal treatment and access to public services
		Accountability	Publication of budgets and public expenditure
		Transparency	Measures against corruption

Dimension	Variables	Sub-Variables	Indicators
Public Rights and Civil Liberties	Rule of law	Independence of the judiciary	Increase in the autonomy of the judiciary
		Transactional justice	Implementation and consensus on transactional justice
		Human rights	Improvement in the situation of human rights
	Public rights	Right of association	New legal measures and improvements or setbacks
		Union rights	New legal measures and improvements or setbacks
		Right of assembly and demonstration	New legal measures and improvements or setbacks
	Civil liberties	Freedom of religious beliefs	New legal measures and improvements or setbacks
		Freedom of speech and opinion	New legal measures and improvements or setbacks
		Freedom of the press	New legal measures and improvements or setbacks
	Civil society	Relation <i>vis-à-vis</i> the state	Dependence/independence of the state
		Social mobilisation	Participation of social groups and citizens in processes of change

Source: compiled by the author

Conclusions

This chapter has offered a theoretical framework for evaluating the consequences of the processes of political change on the nature of political regimes from a comparative perspective. Even with similar starting points, whether in authoritarian or democratic regimes, political change can and often does take different directions, not all of which necessarily have to lead to a regime change. A regime might move from authoritarianism towards democracy, but the transition can also lead to a new form of authoritarianism. Therefore, with a typology of political regimes in mind, two general processes of political change have been identified: democratisation (from authoritarianism to democracy) and autocratisation (from democracy to authoritarianism). Furthermore, five specific processes of political change affecting democracies (democratic regression, democratic deepening and consolidation of democracy) or authoritarianisms (political liberalisation and authoritarian progression) have been identified.

This chapter has also offered an analytical framework for evaluating the effects of the processes of political change on the nature of political regimes. First, we consider convenient to study the context and structural factors in which political change takes place, not because they constitute prerequisites for democratisation but as elements that can facilitate or hinder democratic or authoritarian change. Second, political change can be analysed with reference to three key dimensions of political regimes: pluralism and political competition (parties and party systems and electoral integrity; government (constitutions and constitutional reforms, government and state, and good governance; and public rights and liberties (political rights, civil rights, the rule of law and civil society).

Literature

- Bermeo, Nancy, 'On Democratic Backsliding'. *Journal of Democracy* 27, no 1 (2016), 5–19. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>
- Carothers, Thomas, 'The End of the Transition Paradigm'. *Journal of Democracy* 13, no 1 (2002), 5–21. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0003>
- Dahl, Robert A, *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Diamond, Larry, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Diamond, Larry, 'Democratic regression in comparative perspective: scope, methods, and causes'. *Democratization* 28, no 1 (2021), 22–42. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1807517>
- Erdmann, Gero and Marianne Kneuer (eds), *Regression of Democracy?* VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011. Online: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-93302-3_1
- Hoffmann, Bert, 'Latin America and Beyond: The Case for Comparative Area Studies'. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* no 100 (2015), 111–120. Online: <https://doi.org/10.18352/erlacs.10125>
- Huntington, Samuel P, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma Press – Norman, 1991.
- Linz, Juan J and Alfred Stepan (eds), *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes. Crisis, Breakdown and Reequilibration*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- Linz, Juan J and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Lührmann, Anna and Staffan I Lindberg, 'A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?' *Democratization* 26, no 7 (2019), 1095–1113. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029>
- Mainwaring, Scott, 'Transitions to Democracy and Democratic Consolidation: Theoretical and Comparative Issues', in *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*, ed. by Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell and J Samuel Valenzuela. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.
- Morlino, Leonardo, *Cómo cambian los regímenes políticos*. Madrid: Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, 1985.
- Morlino, Leonardo, *Democrazie e democratizzazioni*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003.
- O'Donnell, Guillermo, Philippe C Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead (eds), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*. Baltimore–London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
- Schedler, Andreas, 'What Is Democratic Consolidation?' *Journal of Democracy* 9, no 2 (1998), 91–107. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1998.0030>
- Szmolka, Inmaculada, 'Theoretical Framework and Models of Political Change Processes in Arab Regimes'. *Anuario IEMed del Mediterráneo*, 2014, 23–30. Online: www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/anuari-2014/Szmolka_Arab_Regimes_Types_of_Process__IEMed_yearbook_2014_EN.pdf/view
- Szmolka, Inmaculada, 'Los procesos de cambio político: conceptualización teórica, tipología y análisis', in *Análisis de la política. Enfoques y herramientas de la Ciencia Política*, ed. by Mikel Barreda and Leticia Ruiz. Barcelona: Huygens, 2016, 159–177.

- Szmolka, Inmaculada, 'Analytical Framework for a Study of Change in Political Regimes', in *Political Change in the Middle East and North Africa. After the Arab Spring*, ed. by Inmaculada Szmolka. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 13–37. Online: <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474415286.001.0001>
- Teorell, Jan, *Determinants of Democratization. Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511762727>

Further literature

- Przeworski, Adam, *Democracy and the Market*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.