Cooperate or Defect?
Strategic Opposition in the Shadow of Repression

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May 10, 2025

Extended Abstract

In Turkey's 2019 local elections, opposition parties made significant gains by adopting a cooperative approach: major factions refrained from running against one another in key races, focused their campaigns on criticizing the ruling party, and avoided public infighting. This informal but sustained cooperation enabled the opposition to win control of major cities, including Istanbul and Ankara. In Venezuela's 2015 parliamentary elections, opposition parties with diverse platforms maintained a disciplined focus on the incumbent regime, suppressing intra-bloc defection and reinforcing a shared anti-government narrative across successive election cycles. A similar pattern emerged in Kenya in the lead-up to the 2002 general election. After earlier failures marked by opposition fragmentation, party leaders gradually shifted toward a more cohesive strategy that prioritized regime change over factional defection, ultimately leading to a decisive electoral victory.

By contrast, in South Korea's 1987 presidential election, rival opposition candidates split the anti-regime vote, enabling the ruling party to retain power with only a plurality. In Kenya's 1992 and 1997 elections, deep divisions among leading opposition figures undermined their credibility and prevented a unified challenge to Daniel arap Moi. In Russia, during the early 2000s—before repression fully closed the political space—opposition parties frequently defected from broader cooperation and publicly discredited rival factions, weakening their challenge to Vladimir Putin and facilitating the entrenchment of his regime. In each of these cases, the absence of cooperative opposition behavior played a central role in the incumbent's ability to maintain power.

These are just a few of many examples that reveal a striking variation in opposition outcomes under electoral autocracy. In some contexts, opposition forces manage to overcome internal divisions and successfully challenge entrenched incumbents through sustained cooperation. In others, fragmentation persists, cooperation fails to materialize, and regimes remain firmly in power. These divergent outcomes underscore the strategic dilemmas faced by opposition actors. While much attention has been paid to the ways incumbents manipulate institutions to maintain control, the internal dynamics of opposition forces—particularly the conditions under which they choose to cooperate or defect—have received comparatively less focus. Yet in many cases, it is precisely these dynamics that determine whether political change becomes possible. In liberal democracies, where elections are generally free and fair, challenges of opposition cooperation are often managed through institutionalized mechanisms such as coalition-building and structured party systems. By contrast, these patterns are far less typical in electoral autocracies—systems where formal democratic institutions coexist with authoritarian practices such as repression, media control, and electoral manipulation. Although elections in electoral autocracies may still allow for some degree of political competition and even change, opposition actors frequently confront significant barriers, including harassment, censorship, and legal restrictions. Electoral autocracies differ from outright authoritarian systems like military juntas, one-party states, or absolute monarchies, yet they still maintain a high degree of political control. Despite these constraints, the limited contestation they allow makes the study of opposition behavior under electoral autocracy both challenging and essential.

This paper develops a formal framework to analyze opposition behavior under repressive incumbents, focusing on contexts in which opposition forces have a realistic—albeit constrained—opportunity to unseat the regime through contestation. While such contests most commonly take the form of elections in electoral autocracies, we acknowledge that as regimes move closer to full autocracy, alternative forms of contestation—such as mass protests, riots, or even civil conflict—may become more relevant. For analytical clarity, this study centers on electoral contests as the primary arena of opposition-incumbent interaction.

The model captures the strategic choices faced by opposition factions: whether to challenge the incumbent, whether to cooperate with other opposition groups, and generally how to position themselves for influence in a potential post-incumbent political order. A defining feature of the model, in line with the nature of electoral autocracies, is the use of state-led repression to tilt the electoral playing field in favor of the incumbent. Importantly, the model incorporates forward-looking incentives: opposition factions not only seek to end repression by displacing the incumbent, but also to shape the distribution of power in the aftermath. This dual objective introduces tensions between cooperation and defection within the opposition, shaping their strategic calculus.

The model begins by treating the level of repression as exogenous. In the first stage, each political faction decides whether to become active in opposing the incumbent, weighing the anticipated costs of repression. Conditional on this choice, a second strategic dilemma arises: active factions must decide whether to cooperate with one another in the effort to unseat the incumbent. Cooperation is broadly defined. It encompasses a political landscape characterized by jointly targeting the incumbent, promoting common opposition narratives, and refraining from undermining fellow opposition groups. One can even imagine a more developed form of this behavior—where formal alliances, joint campaigning, and shared electoral lists emerge. While such outcomes can be described within the structure of our model, the purpose here is not to analyze coalition formation or to explain which faction ultimately prevails as the joint candidate of a coalition. Instead, the model adopts the broader and more flexible conception of cooperation introduced above, which aligns more directly with the motivating cases discussed earlier. Defection, by contrast, involves advancing the faction's own agenda at the expense of the collective opposition. This may include promoting faction-specific ideas, discrediting other opposition actors, and refusing to endorse joint platforms or candidates. While cooperation enhances the opposition's unity and legitimacy, defection can yield a strategic electoral advantage for individual factions by allowing them to differentiate themselves and appeal more directly to voters. These dynamics generate a key tension: when all factions cooperate, the opposition presents a credible front capable of mounting an effective challenge. When all defect, fragmentation weakens the collective effort. Particularly important is the asymmetric case in which a single faction defects while others cooperate. In such scenarios, the defector may benefit disproportionately—gaining electoral visibility and independence while free-riding on the cohesion of others. Thus, the model captures a fundamental strategic trade-off between collective strength and individual gain.

To capture the strategic behavior of opposition factions, the model identifies four distinct equilibrium types, each reflecting a different combination of mobilization and cooperation. First, we establish a benchmark equilibrium in which factions behave myopically, treating the interaction as a one-shot game. In this setting, the absence of forward-looking incentives leads to minimal cooperation and results in the most fragmented, defect-prone outcome. Second, we examine a repeated interaction equilibrium, where cooperation is sustained through grim trigger strategies: factions agree to cooperate indefinitely, but any defection triggers a permanent reversion to non-cooperative behavior. The threat of future punishment supports cooperation that would not be viable in a static context. Third, we analyze a non-cooperative mobilization equilibrium, in which factions choose to defect but nevertheless achieve higher levels of opposition activity than in the benchmark. This outcome illustrates that increased mobilization does not necessarily depend on cooperation, and that electoral incentives alone can drive political engagement. Finally, we identify a fully cooperative equilibrium, characterized by both widespread mobilization and sustained inter-factional cooperation. This scenario represents the most unified and electorally effective opposition configuration, in which factions succeed in overcoming both repression and the temptation to defect.

Repression plays a dual role in the model, exerting complex and sometimes counterintuitive effects on opposition behavior. On one hand, repression has a deterrent effect on the initial decision to become politically active: higher levels of repression discourage factions from opposing the incumbent in the first place, reducing overall mobilization. On the other hand, conditional on activation, repression can increase the incentives for cooperation among factions. When the risks and costs of opposition are high, cooperation offers a mechanism to improve collective efficacy and share the burden of resistance, making cooperation a relatively more attractive strategy. This trade-off underscores how repression can simultaneously weaken and consolidate opposition forces, depending on the strategic stage. In the later stages of the analysis, we aim to endogenize repression by modeling it as a strategic choice of the incumbent. We consider two approaches. In the first, repression is treated as a fixed institutional parameter: the incumbent selects an optimal level of repression at the outset, which remains constant across repeated interactions until the regime is unseated.

In the second, more dynamic approach, repression becomes a period-by-period choice. When the discount factor is less than one, the incumbent optimally adjusts repression at the start of each period in response to the evolving behavior of opposition factions. This formulation captures a more flexible and adaptive strategic environment, mirroring real-world patterns in which regimes recalibrate their repressive tactics over time.

This paper contributes to the growing literature on autocratic politics by developing a formal framework that examines opposition dynamics under repressive electoral regimes. While the model engages with the question of regime change—specifically, how opposition factions might unseat incumbents in electoral autocracies—it does not make claims about democratization per se. Regime change in such contexts does not necessarily imply a transition to democracy, which is often a protracted and uncertain process. Instead, the focus is on understanding the conditions under which opposition cooperation emerges and whether such coordination can successfully challenge incumbents operating within repressive, yet electorally competitive, environments. Opposition actors are central to any potential political transition, yet theoretical work on the strategic mechanisms that facilitate or hinder their cooperation in autocratic settings exists but remains limited. The existing research has explored a range of conditions that influence the cooperation of opposition, including ideological convergence or divergence, institutional structures that facilitate or hinder cooperation, credible commitment problems among opposition actors, and the incumbent's ability to retain power through various strategic tools. Our model builds particularly on the latter two dimensions—the challenges of credible cooperation and the strategic influence of incumbents—and examines how repression, electoral incentives, and forward-looking considerations shape opposition behavior. By focusing on these factors, we offer a novel perspective on the internal dynamics of political change in electoral autocracies.