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Democracy in Croatia:

From Stagnant 1990s to Rapid Change 2000–2011

Victoria Finn

VickiJFinn@gmail.com

Universidad Diego Portales

Leiden University

Abstract

This paper analyzes democracy in post-communist Croatia over 1990–1999 and 2000–2011. During the first decade, political stagnation occurred under a competitive authoritarian regime. This ended abruptly and opened a critical juncture, during which free and fair elections in 2000 mark the start of Croatian democracy. Proposing a causal chain, I suggest that the election revealed the population's existent underlying preference for democracy, as captured in political culture. Internally, this preference served as a positive feedback mechanism throughout Croatia's rapid increase in democracy up until a European Union (EU) Membership offer in 2011, acceding in 2013. Externally, the EU influenced democratic progress, particularly via conditionality policies. The main aim of this historical comparative analysis is to explain which factors allowed for a rapid increase in democratic quality.

Keywords: democratic quality, democratic preferences, critical juncture, political culture, Croatia, EU-Western Balkan relations

Introduction

Despite the decay of democracy around the western world—via low turnout, decreased representation, and electing political outsiders or extreme parties—when compared to authoritarianism, democracy is superior, even if it is the least worst form of government.[1] In this article, I juxtapose two periods within the post-communist country of Croatia during and after the democratic transition. The first, 1990–1999, followed the dissolution of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. Democratic stagnation occurred, although Croatia also managed to establish democratic roots. In the second, 2000–2011, democratic growth quickly occurred. Democracy, as a western European norm, is not the standard throughout the region since, even as of 2018, its Western Balkan neighbors have not entered the European Union.[2]

Which factors allowed for a rapid increase in democratic quality? Thereafter, how did growth ensue? The overall goal of this analysis is to understand how a country achieves a rapid democratic improvement, a 'breakthrough' in its democratic level. I undertake a historical comparative analysis of the political processes of two periods (1990–1999 and 2000–2011) in Croatia. As a qualitative study, it focuses on the causes-of-effects (rather than the effects-of-causes) (Goertz and Mahoney, 2006: 41–42). I answer the research questions by pinpointing the factors present in Croatia that allowed for a rapid increase in democratic quality and then briefly explain how growth ensued. The intention is to contribute primarily to literature on democratic quality and political culture.

The following section contains relevant literature, definitions, and the case selection justification. Section II explains the data sources and method of analysis. Section III is a historical account of Croatia's decade of political stagnation as a competitive authoritarian regime (1990–1999). The more extensive Section IV, in which I propose a causal chain and use it to answer the research questions, includes Croatian democracy until its European Union invitation (2000–2011). Section V puts Croatia in comparative perspective, suggesting its applicability for future research, followed by the Conclusion.

I. Democracy and Quality

At a minimum, democracy is a political regime with free and fair elections (Schumpeter, 1942). While democracy is an ideal, polyarchy is attainable; its dimensions are opposition (competitiveness) and participation (representation) (Dahl, 1971). At the core lies electoral representation: elections allow individuals to choose political actors to make decisions on their behalf—in other words, become the principles of their elected agents (Powell, 2004).

Considering the role of elections in democracy, centralized power in the hands of one or few in autocratic political systems lacks popular consensus (Svolik, 2012). As the present analysis will unravel, a lack of Croatian popular consensus was partly due to the competitive authoritarian regime concealing the population's true preferences, which democratic elections later revealed. Although partial, semi-, or hybrid democracies exist (e.g., Diamond, 2002; Levitsky and Way, 2002: 52; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, 2013: 94), I use Dahl's minimum definitions to dichotomously consider a regime democratic or not. With free and fair elections in the year 2000, Croatia became a democracy; this corresponds to when Čular

(2005) and Dolenec (2008: 25) consider Croatia a consolidated democracy and Maldini (2016: 24) recognizes a rejuvenated democratization process due to the election.

Once a political system is democratic, literature on consolidation and the quality of democracy are subsequently applicable, and I focus on the latter. Consolidation is beyond survival; it occurs when individuals view democracy as 'the only game in town'—and prefer it to any other political system—complete with institutions and rules (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Despite having the pre-conditions to be competitive, a lack of party competition postponed Croatian consolidation since there was a continuous single party rule (Dolenec, 2008: 34). Yet, even a consolidated democracy does not indicate a high-quality democracy (Linz and Stepan, 1996).

Democratic quality, in its simplest terms, generally involves evaluating dimensions beyond those of minimal definitions (Munck, 2016: 5). The present analysis focuses on democratic quality, which I define as *moving towards an ideal*, such as a perfect democracy or polyarchy (considering Lijphart, 1999: 276; Altman and Pérez-Liñán, 2002: 86; Munck, 2016: 3). Focusing on the minimal definitions of democracy, I examine the factors that formed during the first decade of analysis, 1990–1999, which allowed for a rapid increase in quality in the second period, 2000–2011. [3]

Defining democratic quality as moving towards an ideal requires a benchmark: hence the role of the European Union (EU).[4] The international community served as a model for Croatia and other post-communist countries to accede to Western organizations, such as the EU (Fisher, 2006: 5). Due to proximity, the EU has special rules—called the Stabilization and Association Process—for the Western Balkans, with the intention of stabilization (of democracy, peace, rule of law, and economy) through inclusion as EU Members (European

Commission, 2016; Maldini and Pauković, 2016). The EU's special interest in and privileged treatment of the region is for security reasons, regional trade, and to establish a global position for external trade negotiations (Maldini and Pauković, 2016). In addition, there are rules for all members, such as the European Neighbourhood Policy.

I consider the EU as an outside actor while discussing some of its influence via regional diffusion of democratic ideas, such as the possibility of neighbor emulation (Brinks and Coppedge 2006) (see Section IV.6). I also consider linkage and leverage, following Levitsky and Way (2006): linkage is the connection of a country and its government with the western world (in this case, the EU). Links include the quantity and intensity of connections (economic, political, diplomatic, social, and organizational), as well as cross-border flows (of trade, investment, people, and communication). Leverage indicates how vulnerable a government is to western external pressures to democratize. As will become evident, there was more linkage than leverage between the EU and Croatia, both pre- and post-democracy.

Regarding case justification, Croatia is the only Western Balkan country that has met the requirements to join the European Union, comprised of 28 countries as of 2018. Democracy has perhaps diffused differently into Croatia than in the rest of the region. The analysis begins at independence to analyze democratic stagnation in the 1990s. Since the 2000 election marked democracy, it starts the second period of study of increased democratic quality. The cut-off point is 2011 since this is when the EU invited Croatia to be a Member State; I interpret this invitation to indicate that, according to the EU, Croatia achieved an acceptable level of democratic quality. These unique features are why I have chosen to analyze these decades in this country.

II. Method of Analysis and Data

The dependent variable in this historical comparative analysis is a rapid increase in the level of democracy in Croatia from 2000 to 2011. In order to find the explanatory factors that allowed for a rapid increase in democratic quality, I define variables that led to the 2000 election outcome[5] through constructing a causal chain (following Goertz, 2017; see Figure 1). Since causal mechanisms are about regularities, they are about generalization, thus the causal chain is useful for research beyond the present analysis (Goertz, 2017: 30; see Section V). Once voters elected a pro-democracy party, I explore how democratic growth ensued; the contextual factors and causal mechanism again play a role in the explanation.

As evidence, I use a society's unwillingness to vocally demand democracy (such as through protesting) due to country-specific experiences with authoritarianism and its legacy. In post-communist regimes, a country's historical and cultural legacy and political learning from these events—coupled with democratic institutions—are the main predictors of democratic quality (Kitschelt et al. 1999).

As a causal mechanism, I use the population's preference for democracy. As this is unobservable (and for the most part unchanging), I use political culture as a way to 'observe' this mechanism. I take the aggregated preference for democracy as dichotomously present or absent. Political culture is from Inglehart and Welzel's (2010) cultural map, which graphs countries according to their traditional versus secular-rational values (on the y-axis), with survival values to self-expression values (x-axis) (see Figure 2). The publically available scores originate from answers to the World Values Survey (WVS, 2015) by combining indicators such as democratic aspirations, citizen empowerment, and life satisfaction. I justify

this proxy since more secular-rational and self-expression values parallel those in more democratic regimes.

I include national surveys from Čular (2000: 41–42) on election fairness perceptions 1990–2000, as well as democratic legitimacy perceptions 1995–2000. From Matić (2008: 13), I use the tables presenting views on and satisfaction with democracy from the European Values Survey (EVS). I also use Freedom House data, which incorporates the freedoms of association and expression, belief, and personal autonomy, as well as the rule of law. A civil liberties index is calculated using these variables, resulting in a score of 1 (the most free) to 7 (the least free) (see Figure 3), determining whether a state is free, partly free, or not free.

Voter turnout in presidential and parliamentary elections are from democracy and electoral assistance data, publically available from the International Institute for Democracy (International IDEA, 2016; see Appendix). Political structures and institutional or legal changes, specifically electoral rules, as well as the elected political actors who implemented these changes are also publically available (see, e.g., Croatia.eu, 2017). EU information on membership, accession, and requirements are from the European Commission (2016) and academic sources (e.g., Dolenec, 2008; Matić, 2008; Marinković, 2011; Maldini and Pauković, 2016).

III. Democratic Stagnation: Croatia 1990–1999

The Croatian democratic transition comprised two phases (Čular, 2000). The SKH (Croatian League of Communists, previously the Croatian Communist Party) led the first, very brief phase. The SKH changed into the Democratic Change Party, then in 1990 formed the SDP (Social Democratic Party of Croatia). The second period was led by HDZ (or CDU

in its English acronym for the Croatian Democratic Union), which started in 1989 and was the first noncommunist 'party'. HDZ won the first multiparty elections in 1990. Despite these elections, Croatia did not declare independence from Yugoslavia until 1991.

HDZ was a non-partisan populist movement, which attempted to institutionalize itself through a regime of government, instead of being a political party: Franjo Tuđman was the charismatic leader who used nationalism and the emotions of independence as the basis of Croatian sovereignty, with which HDZ gained popularity (Čular, 2000; Maldini, 2012). Nationalist rhetoric focused on nationalism and nation building in the new independent state as a tool to maintain power and win elections (Fisher, 2006: 4, 55). In the 1990 elections, voter turnout at about 85% was slightly lower than the established western European democracies, but was the highest recorded up to 2016 (International IDEA, 2016). Ethnic diversity greatly complicated voting dynamics. Strong connections with other territories, such as Serbia, affected about 12% of the population in Croatia in 1991 (Berglund et al., 1998). Therefore, the idea of 'Croatian nationalism' was not a desirable objective for the entire population, particularly ethnic minorities (Berglund et al., 1998; Maldini, 2012).

Given these aspects of their 'party' structure, nationalist goals, and a lack of consensus, the HDZ was unfit to lead a sustainable democratic transition. The Tuđman regime was authoritarian, marked by political intimidation, media control, and mobilization based on ethnic nationalism in order to secure power (Freedom House, 2000). Under HDZ rule, the country experienced the Croatian War until 1995. Throughout this first post-Yugoslavia era, Croatia displayed shortsighted ethnocentrism, which often relates to top-down populist political mobilization (Maldini, 2012). Similar to regional neighbors, Croatia also continued to reconfigure the historical memory in political discourse (Zakošek 2007).

During the two phases of transition, neither of the two parties (SKH nor HDZ) holding political power had been concerned with reaching consensus with the opposition or the Croatian population in decision-making or public policy. For instance, the definition of what type of electoral system the state would permanently constitutionalize remained an open question. Previous administrations had changed electoral laws before both local and national elections, seeking to align laws to party interests (Berglund et al., 1998; Čular, 2000: 33). Nonetheless, perceptions did not reflect this volatility. Sections of national surveys showed that Croatians did not significantly vary in perceptions of either election fairness in the 1990–2000 period or democratic legitimacy 1995–2000 (Čular, 2000: 41–42).

The absence of a defined electoral system not only reduced political representation, but also eliminated the option of classifying the regime as democratic. However, Čular (2000: 37) classifies Croatia as an authoritarian democracy from 1990 until 1999 whereas Dolenec (2008: 32) defines it as an illiberal democracy. These oxymoron-type terms distort what constitutes a democracy. Instead, Levitsky and Way's (2002) alternative classification considers a government that holds unfair elections not as democratic but as a competitive authoritarian regime. During its decade of stagnation 1990–1999 under president Tuđman, Croatia was a competitive authoritarianism.

In sum, the first noncommunist party was founded in 1989, Croatia had non-free elections in 1990, declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, and then experienced competitive authoritarianism under Tuđman. Despite some democratic advances—such as increasing minority representation in the 1995 electoral reforms—the 1995 parliamentary elections showed irregularities, while the 1997 presidential elections were undemocratic because they lacked impartiality (Freedom House, 1998). Tuđman held state control until his

death in 1999. A year later, 'the electoral law for the 2000 parliamentary elections was actually the first electoral system adopted by the consent of all the relevant players' (Čular, 2000: 34; Freedom House, 2001). Holding free and fair elections was the outcome of previous political change (see Section IV.3), but what is relevant for the present analysis is that Croatia's 2000 election signaled its start as a democracy.

IV. Democratic Quality: Croatia 2000–2011

Despite democracy beginning in 2000, it took 11 years to meet the EU's benchmark to become a Member State (ratified in 2013). This delay is unsurprising due to being a post-communist country with an authoritarian legacy, non-consensus, low social capital, tendencies of state paternalism, and a lack of national identity (Matić, 2008: 2–5). Instead of having a common identity, I suggest that the population in Croatia had a common preference for democracy. A 'popular commitment to democratic values' is a necessary condition for long-term democratic stability (Matić, 2008: 7) since individuals must believe in the system and continually approve state movements toward improving democracy. Moreover, being a post-communist country with an authoritarian legacy affected views of Europe and of democracy.

One of the first EU requirements is stable institutions guaranteeing democracy (European Commission, 2016). Institutions are critical because they 'take on a life of their own and become genuinely independent causal forces in shaping further institutional development' (Pierson, 2004: 131). Stable free and fair elections assist in guaranteeing democracy since consistency sets expectations of continuance. Croatia has had presidential

elections in 1992, 1997, 2000, 2005, 2009–10 and 2014–15, but which occurred under various regime classifications (see Table 1).

Table 1 Democracy in Croatia, 1990–2018

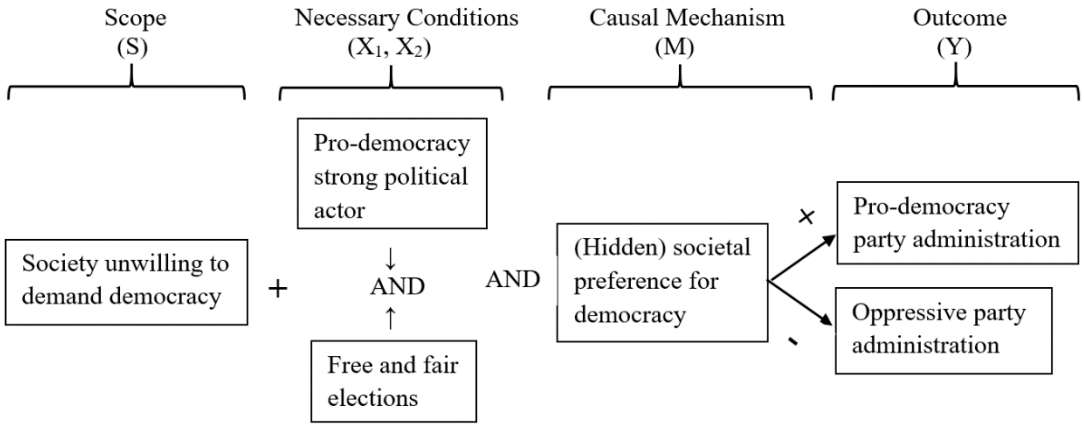
President (surname)	Prime Ministers (surname)	Period	Political Party	Regime Type	Democratic Status
Tuđman	Manolić, Gregurić, Šarinić, Valentić, Mateša	1990–1999	HDZ	Competitive Authoritarianism	Stagnation
Mesić	Račan, Sanader, Kosor	2000–2010	HNS	Democracy	Rise in quality
Josipović	Kosor, Milanović	2010–2015	SDP	Democracy	Rise in quality
Grabar-Kitarović	Milanović, Orešković, Plenković	2015–present	HDZ	Democracy	Rise in quality*

Source: Author's compilation.

Notes: HDZ is the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*), right and center right; HNS is the Croatian People's Party - Liberal Democrats (*Hrvatska narodna stranka - liberalni demokrati*), liberal; SDP is the Social Democratic Party, left or center-left, (formed in 1990 by the previous SKH, the League of Communists of Croatia). The presidential term is five years, with one re-election allowed. *I include up to 2018 for a longer overview of nonlinear democratization in Croatia since Prime Minister Orešković received a no-confidence vote in 2016. Lacking confidence indicates a loss of governmental legitimacy, but also that democratic institutions or processes are functioning.

On the path of addressing the research question, quality—again defined as moving towards the ideal as defined by EU standards—was not suddenly realized with democratic elections. Whilst the 2000 election marked the start of democracy, the scope and necessary conditions present in Croatia explain the election results, which replaced the continuous one-party rule with a more pro-democracy and pro-EU administration. This change was the springboard for rapid democratic growth. Thus I take a (temporal) step back in order to unravel a causal chain interpretation of what occurred in Croatia, visualized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Causal Chain Explaining Croatia's 2000 Democratic Election Results



Source: Author's elaboration, based on the causal logic in Goertz (2017: Chapter 2).

Notes: The positive sign (+) generates the pro-democracy selection whereas the negative sign (-) constrains the oppressive party selection. This causal chain is not the only way to the same outcome: equifinality exists for electing a pro-democracy party.

Unpacking each part of Figure 1, I elaborate on the factors that hushed the society's preferences, Mesić and Račan as strong political actors, the critical juncture (that began with Tuđman's death) with the 2000 election marking democracy, and political culture as hidden

democratic preferences. These four subsections answer the question of what allowed for a rapid increase in democracy. Following, post-election democratic quality and the EU as an international factor comprise subsection 5 and 6, which answer how democratic growth ensued in the second decade of analysis, 2000–2011.

1. Authoritarian Legacy

The scope condition in Figure 1 is that the Croatian society was unwilling to demand democracy: individuals in the population did not take to the streets to vocalize their preference for democratic change. This lies in stark contrast to the sweeping protests witnessed, for example, during the Arab Spring. However, revolutions are not the common road to democratization (Huntington, 1991). The differences in countries involved in the Arab Spring could highlight which societal differences formed a willingness to protest to demand a change in the political system—although analyzing transitions differs from electing a pro-democracy party.

The unwillingness to demand democracy is rooted in learning from experiences during authoritarianism and conflict. Croatia's previous communist regime left a historical-cultural authoritarian legacy, experienced nationalism afterwards, and had a war of independence (Maldini, 2012; Maldini and Pauković, 2016). The Yugoslav wars have resulted in competing interpretations of the past, distorting historical memory and consciousness, which elites have manipulated to mobilize support (Zakošek, 2007).

Authoritarianism and conflict have been present across the region, thus is not unique to Croatia. Nonetheless, the historical and cultural legacy in post-communist regimes and political learning from these events are a main predictor of (future) democratic quality

(Kitschelt et al., 1999). The legacy left in post-communist countries affect participating in civil society and voicing concerns, such as through protest (Bernhard and Karakoç, 2007: 545).

This does not mean certain groups would not protest for other motives. The Croatian population was willing to protest to protect media freedom, which was under tight control in Tuđman's regime (Freedom House, 2000). In 1996, there was a protest against Tuđman's non-renewal of a radio station's broadcasting license (Marinković, 2011: 34). Veterans and right-wing parties also rallied various times against Croatia's cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, although this was already during democracy, and in 2011, spiraled into anti-EU sentiments (Marinković, 2011: 16, 40, 67). Interpreting that political learning from authoritarian experiences serves to understand why the society was unwilling to demand a major change in the political system—the scope condition (S) in Figure 1.

2. Political Actors' Preferences

The first necessary condition (X_1) is a pro-democracy political actor. Democracy requires political actors who are accustomed "to shaping their actions in accordance with democratic rules and procedures" (Matić, 2008: 7). Moreover, given that the region has had varying levels of democratic progress, it highlights the importance of domestic political actors (Haughton, 2007: 243). Mesić and Račan fulfill this role. Mesić's candidacy signaled a chance that, if elected, Croatia would strengthen its democracy. Since the administration was also pro-EU, the direction of democratic progress would be shaped by its policies since

Croatia would aim toward EU membership. He was a key political actor who desired this change and voters elected him.

If there was no pro-democracy candidate, then a pro-democracy political party could not have won the elections. If free and fair elections were absent, Mesić could not have been democratically elected. Moreover, there would have been no guarantee he would have won if voters had not shared a desire for change. These brief counterfactuals demonstrate why X_1 and X_2 are necessary conditions for Y, since an absence of X_1 or absence of X_2 would result in an absence of Y. In between, M explains how the combined X_1 and X_2 cause Y. The outcome Y is the election results, which is prior to explaining the main dependent variable of the rapid increase in the level of Croatian democracy.

3. The Critical Juncture and Elections

Within Croatian political history, Tuđman's death marks a critical juncture.[6] A critical juncture is a relatively short period of time when: uncertainty is high, significant change is possible, there are higher chances that agents' choices will affect the outcome, and the result differs depending on when and where it occurs (Collier and Collier, 1991; Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007). It is like the moment when a ball is soaring through the air, with players scrambling around below attempting to strategize how to reach it first at just the right time before it falls. This is because, once it falls, the players' alternative strategies lose relevance since the moment to seize is over. The impact of choices made during critical junctures endures since they eliminate alternative options and lead to establishing institutions that generate self-reinforcing path-dependent processes (Pierson, 2004; Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007: 341).

During the critical juncture, democratic elections occurred; the result put Croatia on a path towards strengthening institutions guaranteeing democracy, nearing EU membership. Given the long-standing authoritarian competitive regime headed by the HDZ party, one could ask why this party would have allowed free and fair elections. In other words, how this political process unfolded between relevant actors during the critical juncture is an intriguing research question, one begging its own analysis; a key agent is Mesić, given his previous role as an HDZ elite, then leaving the party in 1994.[7] The analysis would need to investigate the HDZ internal party structure, including individual actor strategies and political bargaining—especially because the result was not another Tuđman-type political actor seizing power during the period of high uncertainty. There are many reasons why the HDZ did not (or could not) continue the competitive authoritarian regime. What is relevant for this analysis is that democratic elections indeed occurred.

The election per se did not increase democratic quality. In free and fair elections, participation is an indicator of democratic quality (Levine and Molina, 2007: 7–9). Between 1990 and 2000, voter turnout for parliament fluctuated between 15 percentage points but perceptions of the (parliament and presidential) election fairness was similar: when asked if upcoming elections would be fair in 1990, 1992, 1995, and 2000, about 50% of respondents in each round answered either ‘yes fully’ or ‘yes mainly’ (Čular, 2000: 41). Turnout in presidential elections in the year 2000 was almost the same as it was in 2015 (61% versus 59%), while previously dropping to its lowest at 50%, immediately following the worst part of the economic crisis (see Figure A1 in the Appendix). Parliamentary elections show a steadier decrease in voter turnout, from about 77% in 2000 to 53% in 2016 (see Figure A2 in

the Appendix). Thus, neither the election nor voter turnout data confirms increased democratic quality.

Since elections allow individuals to become the principles of their elected agents (Powell, 2004), societal preference aligned with elected President Mesić and the complementary Prime Ministers: first Račan, followed by Sanader, then Kosor. The administration quickly began institutional reform. Applying the logic of Pierson (2004), it was not enough that these political actors were pro-EU or pro-democracy; it was the *timing* of external democratic growth while gaining domestic legitimacy during a critical juncture that these actors were able to exercise agency to implement legal change to strengthen democracy. In the causal chain, the elections, combined with a pro-democracy strong political actor, allowed for a change in power to a more democratic party.

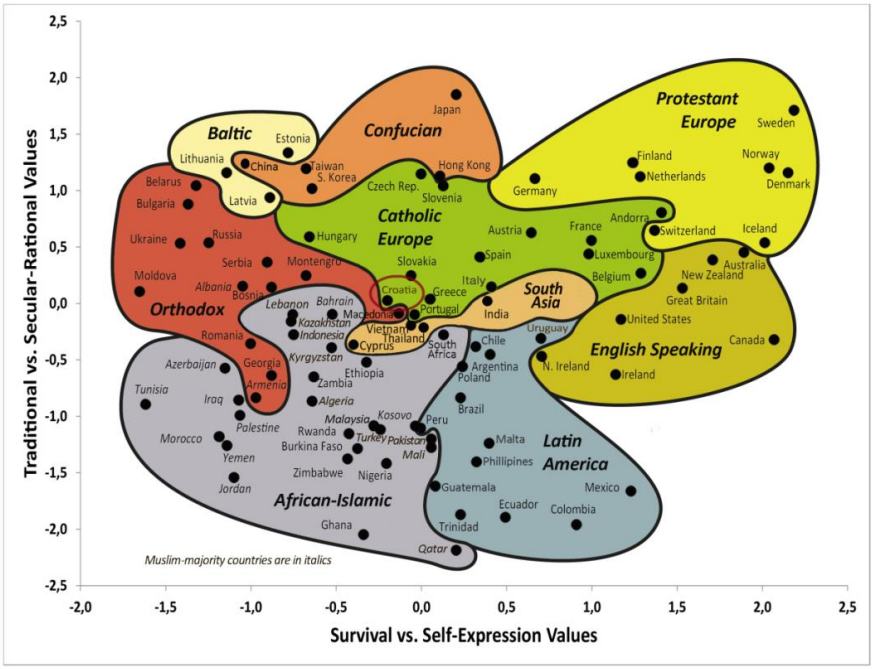
This entire process acted as a springboard for then quickly increasing democracy quality: internally, the roots and desire for democracy had already formed. Externally, there was a continued presence of the nearby EU, which aimed for political changes in order to integrate the Western Balkans. Therefore, once the electoral situation changed in Croatia, democracy could progress quickly, following EU guidelines and policies.

Similar to the scope condition, the underlying preference for democracy was also already present. However, the critical juncture allowed the necessary conditions (X_1 and X_2) to *activate* it; the combined explanatory variables acted as a trigger, 'setting the causal mechanism in motion' (Goertz, 2017: 38). The underlying preference had already existed, but the trigger was absent. Hence, if democratic elections had occurred earlier, for instance between 1991 and 1999, the decade of stagnation would have ended sooner.

4. Political Culture: Hidden Democratic Preferences

Aggregated individual democratic views represent the society's political culture, which is the causal mechanism (M) in Figure 1. Croatia is unique from its neighbors not only in EU membership but is also a regional exception in terms of political culture, as seen on Inglehart and Welzel's (2010) cultural map (WVS, 2015; see Figure 2). Between 1981 and 2015, Croatia is always located away from other countries in the region and within the Catholic Europe grouping (WVS, 2015).

Figure 2. Cultural Discrepancies amongst Western Balkan States, 2010–2014



Source: Inglehart–Welzel Cultural Map, World Values Survey Wave 6, 2010–2014 (WVS, 2015).

Notes: Croatia is circled to highlight its position. The rest of the Western Balkans are to the left of Croatia in the Orthodox grouping, with the exception of Kosovo, located vertically below Croatia.

On the cultural map, Croatia has been moving from traditional towards more secular-rational values. Comparatively to its neighbors being closer to survival values, Croatia saw higher self-expression values as its democracy developed, being located closer to Spain (WVS, 1996–2015). In 2008, Croatia was near Spain and Italy on the cultural map—summarized as Croatia having "a largely Western religious and cultural tradition" (Fisher, 2006: 7). Immediately prior to the EU invitation until right after accession, 2010–2014, Croatia was located close to Portugal, Greece, and Slovakia, which are all fellow EU Members. While regional neighbors Macedonia and Kosovo had similar self-expression values as Croatia 2010–2014, only the former is overall located closer to Croatia on the WVS map. The reduced distance is due to a shift in Macedonian values moving away from survival towards self-expression, particularly since 2010.

I use political culture to represent an underlying democratic preference as the causal mechanism. The fact that political culture does not vary much is a non-issue since causal mechanisms can be 'invariant' (Waldner, 2012, cited in Goertz, 2017: 41). Since democratic values are also secular and support self-expression, I interpret this as Croatians' true preference for democracy. Many factors would have contributed to the origin and development of this preference, particularly the experience of gaining independence from Yugoslavia, as well as anticommunism. These processes affected citizens' views toward the European Union and democracy, although in different ways, as compared to its neighbors.

One can observe democratic roots already in 1995 and continuing until 1999, about 94% of the Croatian population viewed democracy, despite its faults, as better than any other political system; however, about 60% were 'not very satisfied' with how democracy was functioning (Matić, 2008: 13)—which is unsurprising given the competitive authoritarianism. Nonetheless, despite low trust of political elites, including incumbent Tuđman, democracy was already the 'only game in town' because of 'citizens' belief in the intrinsic worth of [democracy's] political attributes' (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Matić, 2008: 14–15).

The causal mechanism answers the question why a pro-democracy strong political actor combined with democratic elections result in electing a pro-democracy party. The 'why' is because *individuals had already wanted democracy*. Prior to elections, this preference existed yet remained hidden. Although political culture was constant, the critical juncture changed the context since both a pro-EU candidate and a democratic election emerged. The result was electing an administration that represented their democratic preferences. The revealed preferences then acted as a positive feedback mechanism, seen through the population's consensus and approval of the changes the Mesić administration made to strengthen democracy towards the benchmark of EU Membership.

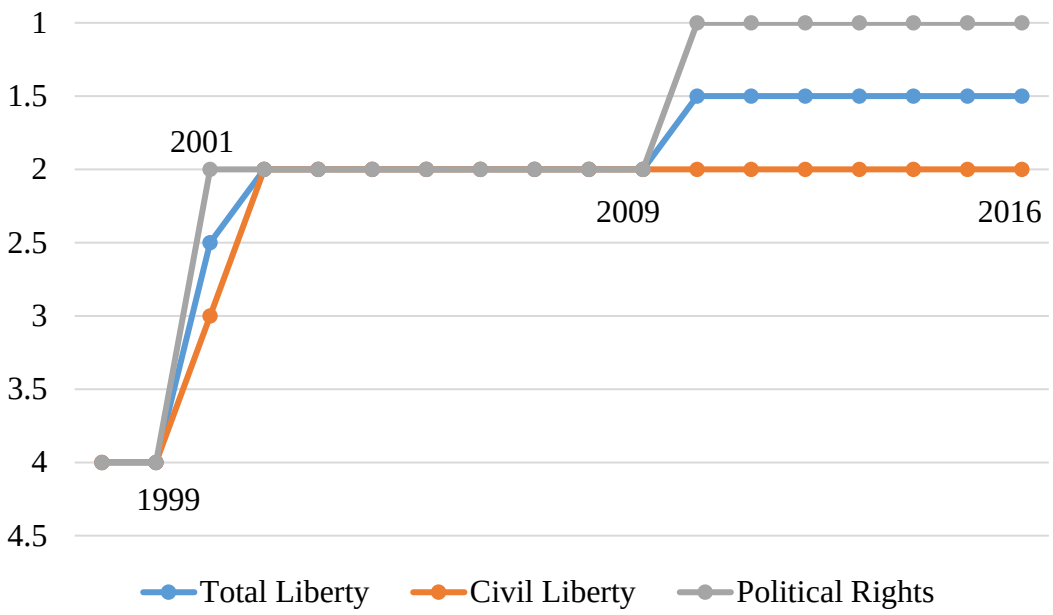
5. Post-Election Rising Democratic Quality

Once Croatia was a democracy, democratic growth could ensue. The change in power allowed political actors to formalize democratic values into the legal framework, following EU guidelines. Under the new administration, Croatia was moving towards an ideal since it was going towards a 'stable institutional ordering that, through institutions and mechanisms

that work correctly, achieves freedom and equality for citizens' (Morlino 2007: 5). Democratic quality increased due to reduced executive power, an improved process of securing free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections, regaining media independence, and attempts to resolve corruption issues—which all contributed to changing Croatia's status from 'partially free' to 'free' (Freedom House, 1999–2002; Dolenec 2008: 34). The new balance between legislative and executive powers established inter-institutional accountability. Lowering executive power allowed more room for political voice (representation), creating more opportunities for responsiveness.

Increased democratic quality also comprised maintenance of and increases in civil liberties and political rights. Within representation, freedom of association, expression and voting form the basis of the necessary (but not sufficient) requirements for democracy (Dahl 1971)—of course, along with continued competitive elections. Freedom House data includes the freedoms of expression, association, belief, and personal autonomy, as well as the rule of law. The freedom of expression as a political conditionality strategy, which Croatia accepted, was key in the EU's expansion policy as a successful tool for the country's democratic consolidation (Marinković, 2011: 14, 18). Although civil liberties are requirements for democracy, their extension can show increases in democratic quality (Morlino, 2007). Figure 3 shows changing Croatian freedoms.

Figure 3. Liberty in Croatia, 1998–2016



Source: Graphed based on the annual reports of Croatia, 1998–2016, in Freedom in the World, published by Freedom House.

Notes: In the Freedom House index, 1 represents the most free, while 7 is the least free. The axis ends before 7 since Croatia did not receive a rating lower than 4 during this period. Each point represents one year. Data is missing for the year 2000.

Institutions play an important political role by creating results and increasing political stability (Linz and Stepan, 1996). The European Council agrees since the 1993 Copenhagen criteria lists 'stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities' as EU eligibility requirements (European Commission, 2016). There was a deliberate decision to change Croatia's institutional structure, effectively re-aligning it to support democracy.

The most intriguing aspect is the *speed* of democratic change. As depicted in Figure 3, the first large change occurred between 1999 and 2001, reflective of the critical juncture and a change in political power. Democratization in 2000 overlapped with forming civil

liberties that served as a base for stabilization and then growth after 2009. The option to improve existent democratic institutions was available under Tuđman, but the competitive authoritarian regime had not acted upon it. Pre-established democratic institutions had the opportunity to improve only post-2000 (Čular, 2000: 44). Since Croatia already had the necessary structures, these democratic roots help explain the rapidity in increasing quality.

Under President Mesić and Prime Minister Sanader, Croatia opened the EU accession discussion in 2005. The reasons for delayed discussion were contextual (Matić, 2008, see the beginning of this section) and involved issues surrounding war crimes since the EU requires respecting human rights and protecting minorities (European Commission, 2016). Thus outstanding war crime suspects starkly contrasts EU democratic values. Croatia also faced other international pressures, mainly from the European Council, to cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (Fisher, 2006: 195). In 2005 a leading suspect, Ante Gotovina, was arrested and transferred for trial at The Hague for war crimes. This serves as an example of this administration's cooperation in adhering to international norms externally established. In 2006, the Croatian criminal code officially defined hate crimes, further advancing the country's legal steps towards improving democratic quality.

Whether one conceptualizes democratic improvement through levels, consolidation, or quality (Linz and Stepan, 1996; O'Donnell, 1996; Čular, 2000; Levine and Molina, 2007; Morlino, 2007; Munck, 2016), the population supported executive powers that aimed to strengthen Croatian democracy. Movement in quality headed towards EU standards, starting by focusing on democratic institutions, with the assistance of EU resources (Maldini and Pauković, 2016: 3).

6. International Factors: The European Union

EU membership serves as an incentive for a country to democratize, following EU rules (European Commission, 2016). Outside actors—in this case, the EU—have played a large role in Third Wave Democracies (Huntington, 1991). The EU was able to play this key role in Croatia in terms of democratic and market reforms via the existence of internal political actors, such as Mesić and Račan, who can be classified as "Europeanist" leaders (Fisher, 2006: 186). The parameters of democratic standards are a guide, or set of ex-ante requirements (such as adapting markets and implementing institutional and normative structures), for the quality of democracy needed to join (European Commission, 2016). The EU has the power to define international and economic political standards in western Europe and offers admission to the 'club' if a state is able to accept, implement, and follow these membership conditionality rules (Levitsky and Way, 2006; Maldini, 2016).

"Political conditionality is a strategy of reinforcement used by international organizations and other international actors to bring about and stabilize political change at the state level" (Schimmelfennig, 2007: 127). This is effective for adopting liberal democratic norms when concrete benefits are present and credible, such as the EU offering membership to Croatia, but only when the international rewards outweigh the domestic implementation costs (Schimmelfennig, 2007: 126–128; Marinković, 2011: 15). The EU's willing to open negotiations with some countries before the 2004 enlargement signaled that the membership offer was credible for states that have made progress toward EU norms and practices (Haughton, 2007: 238).

To understand some of the EU influence, I regress to the concepts of linkage, leverage, and diffusion. First, linkage is the connection of a country and its government with the western world (Levitsky and Way, 2006). On one side, Croatia is the only Western Balkan country to become an EU Member. On the other (literal) side, Croatia shares a border with Hungary and Slovenia, both EU Members; but they acceded only in 2004; this would not have affected the Croatian 2000 election nor the first years of democratic change under the newly elected administration. Although democratization and marketization prior to EU accession would have likely occurred in the counterfactual situation in which the European Commission and the European Union was absent (Haughton, 2007: 243), contrarily the EU influenced the democracy-strengthening process and thus the result of Croatian democracy.

Evidence of linkages exist, as seen throughout this Section: first, Croatia was already culturally closer to EU Member States. Second, the possibility of EU membership and its benefits was a credible offer that was within sight post-Tuđman, thus had the potential to influence Croatia to adopt liberal democratic norms (Schimmelfennig, 2007). Third, the population had elected a pro-EU administration with the intention of heading toward EU standards, particularly strengthening democracy and the economy.

Second, leverage indicates how vulnerable a government is to western external pressures to democratize (Levitsky and Way, 2006). Leverage fails to explain the different (non-)democratic paths. The EU has offered the same Stabilization and Association Process to all Western Balkan states, yet Croatian citizens visualized the country as part of Central Europe, rather than being grouped with the Balkans (Marinković, 2011: 25). Moreover, electoral abstention in Croatia's 2000 election reflected economic dissatisfaction, meaning domestic issues took the forefront (Zakošek, 2001, cited in Dolenec 2008: 39). A 'democratic

turn' occurred since 'political parties became dominantly liberal-oriented and pro-EU', but EU influences did not directly form or support the winning administration (Dolenec 2008: 39, 42). The population in Croatia had had a desire and ability to move away from previous experiences that occurred with Tuđman, as seen in the 2005 election shifting focus from past legacies to economic and social issues (Fisher, 2006: 185, 204). Croatian voters reacted to domestic issues rather than showing 'vulnerability' to international pressures. This finding does not diminish the importance or influence of the EU. Rather, it shows that external actors influenced Croatia, but in a non-coercive way.

Third, neighbor emulation is a tendency for neighboring countries to converge toward a shared level of democracy or non-democracy (Brinks and Coppedge, 2006: 464). The EU role comprised both its expansion policy to promote democratic change and its available financial and institutional resources (Marinković, 2011; Maldini and Pauković, 2016). An influence of international factors and resources can partially explain a rise in the quality of democracy (Morlino, 2007). Croatia's convergence was not to its own region, but rather to a shared level of democracy, per EU guidelines. As seen through political culture, the population's preferences could have already aligned with—rather than have been influenced by—EU democratic ideals.

In sum, the EU influence and resources were not the direct reason for a pro-democracy and pro-EU candidate to run or win the 2000 election, but increased afterwards due to the election outcome. Croatia began the reciprocal relationship with the EU in order to access resources and assistance to strengthen democracy. Indeed, Europeanization started to occur only once Croatian democratized (Dolenec, 2008). Rather than coercively convincing Croatia to join the EU via leverage, the evidence points to the EU's role as an

opportunity to increase linkage, once voters were able to express their preference for democracy. The pro-EU perspective of both government and citizens served as a factor to begin its progress towards accession (Dolenec, 2008; Maldini and Pauković, 2016). The origin of Croatia's location on Inglehart and Welzel's (2010) cultural map remains unclear: the EU ideal of democracy had perhaps diffused into Croatia early on, or the population could have more independently held these values. Regardless, a pro-EU perspective was present and approval from both Parliament and the population was required to accede, which occurred in 2013. Democratic preferences again reflect the conditions in Figure 1 that not only explain the 2000 election outcome, but once revealed, served as a feedback mechanism reinforcing Croatia's path toward strengthening democracy.

V. Past and Future: Croatia in Comparative Perspective

Within the region, Croatia's non-EU neighbors are in various phases of democratization and in different stages of EU membership (Maldini, 2012; see Footnote 2). In future research, scholars could use the same causal chain to analyze if the scope condition, the necessary conditions, and the causal mechanism function similarly in other contexts.

First would be to understand to what extent the scope variable (S) holds since it 'acts as a limit to the generalizability of the causal mechanism' (Goertz, 2017: 81). Since post-communist neighbors share overlapping legacies, I would expect the scope condition of being unwilling to demand democracy to be present. Second, I argue that if a country has the necessary conditions of a pro-democracy political actor (X_1) combined with free and fair elections (X_2) and the voter population has democratic preferences (M), voters will elect a democratic political party (Y). A preference for democracy also constrains a comparatively

more oppressive party; the motivation behind the negative constraint (Goertz, 2017: 49) is that the ruling HDZ party had incentive to remain in power. Future analyses need to test the necessity of these conditions in other settings.

Third would be to explore if the causal mechanism regularly functions in other settings. Besides political culture, a population's underlying preferences may be measured in other ways, such as within public opinion surveys, past voting trends, or political engagement in civil society or organizations. Instead of the democratic preference being dichotomously present or absent, it could be a continuous measure using fuzzy logic (see Goertz, 2017: 93)—for example, ranking low to high democratic preference to analyze its effect on election outcomes, especially in post-communist regimes.

Future research could also investigate how EU accession has influenced Croatia's development or culture (Maldini and Pauković, 2016)—particularly in differing ways, as compared to its Western Balkan neighbor states. It could also focus on the specific ways Croatia has improved democratic quality, or how it has accomplished this. These two questions use democratic quality as the dependent variable, with the first seeking explanatory variables whilst the second aims to uncover causal mechanisms. Scholars would aim to measure democratic quality through electoral decision, participation, responsiveness, accountability, and sovereignty (Levine and Molina 2007: 7), as well as the rule of law, freedom, and equality (Morlino 2007: 10). For a more parsimonious version, Munck's (2016) reconceptualization suggests using political freedom and political equality to gauge democratic quality.

Conclusion

In this article, I have conducted a historical comparative analysis of two decades in Croatia: the competitive authoritarian regime 1990–1999 and democracy 2000–2011. To assist in answering the research questions of which factors allowed for this rapid change and explain how democratic growth ensued, I have proposed a causal chain (Figure 1).

Political learning from events relating to historical and cultural legacy affect (future) democratic quality (Kitschelt et al., 1999), seen through the authoritarian legacy hiding Croatian society's democratic preferences. The unwillingness to demand changing the political system is a scope condition. The necessary conditions are free and fair elections as well as a pro-democracy strong political actor. Tuđman's death opened a critical juncture, during which free and fair elections occurred in 2000, marking democracy in Croatia. Mesić ran on a pro-European Union (EU) platform and won the election. The election results acted as a springboard for the following decade of rapid democratic growth.

Applying Pierson (2004), it was the timing of these conditions during a critical juncture that allowed for the election results and then the administration's ability to implement legal and institutional changes. Pro-democracy political actors and the democratic election triggered the population's hidden preference for democracy, as measured through political culture. The revealed preferences approved of these changes to strengthen democracy, thus served as a positive feedback mechanism that increased the rapidity of increasing democratic quality.

Despite claiming a decade of rising democratic quality in Croatia, the present article does not imply that the Croatian (or EU) level of democracy is polyarchy. Croatia can improve civil liberties, political participation, and state capacity in terms of effective control, accountability, and responsiveness (Maldini, 2016). Corruption and bribery continue in

Croatian political and economic spheres, although there has been a specific aim to reduce them and proceedings are unfolding as of 2017 (Freedom House, 2017; Transparency International, 2018).

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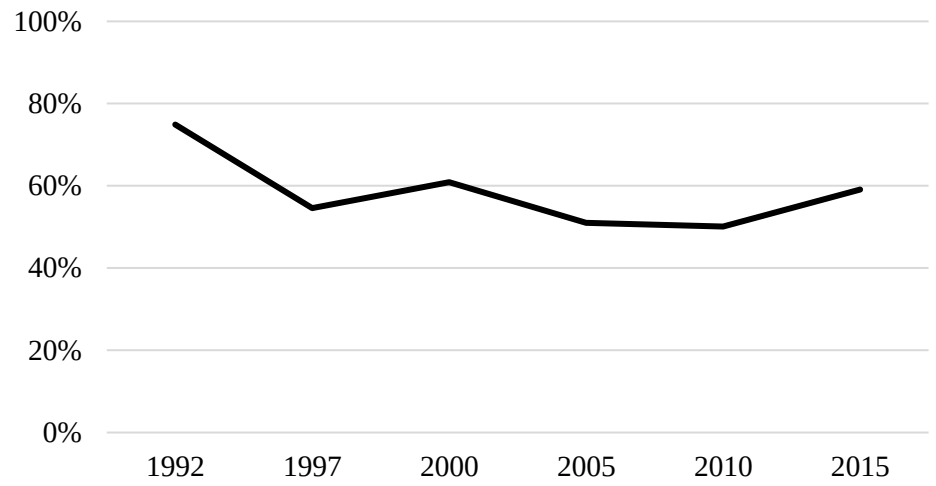
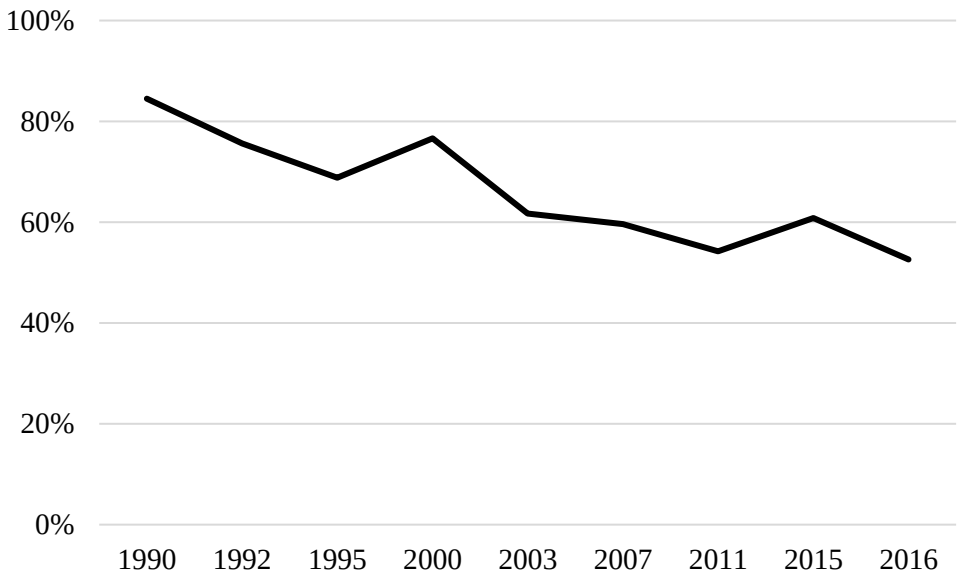
Appendix

Figure A1. Voter Turnout in Croatia: Presidential Elections 1992–2015



Source: Graphed International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance data (International IDEA, 2016).

Figure A2. Voter Turnout in Croatia: Parliamentary Elections 1992–2015



Source: Graphed International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance data (International IDEA, 2016).

[1] As Winston Churchill said in 1947, although the original source is unknown.

[2] The countries composing the former Yugoslavia are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. In contrast, the countries considered as the Western Balkans are Albania and all those aforementioned, except Slovenia (an EU Member since 2004). Montenegro and Serbia are in accession negotiations whereas the remaining countries are official or potential candidates (De Munter, 2016; European Commission, 2016). Bulgaria and Romania, in the Eastern Balkans, have been EU Members since 2007.

[3] While reviewing Croatian accession to the EU, Maldini (2015: 27) proposes a *slowdown* of democratization in Croatia between 2006 and 2010. However, I juxtapose 1990–1999 to 2000–2011, thus rapid change in democratic quality occurred in the second period.

[4] Without indicating EU Member States lack room for democratic improvement, I position the EU democratic standards as benchmarks for potential Member States; in sum, I recognize my assumption of considering that moving in this direction of strengthening the institutional and legal framework, as defined by the EU, reflects democratic quality.

[5] Note that the outcome in Figure 1 is election results rather than the main dependent variable.

[6] Dolenec (2008: 40) also recognizes a critical juncture in the year 2000, but explains its origin as the 'democratic turn' elections, which opened Croatia's route to join the EU.

[7] I extend my gratitude to one of the journal Reviewers for highlighting this fact. Before leaving HDZ, Mesić had publicly criticized Tuđman's "approach in certain sensitive areas, such as the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina", which was another indication that the Croatian population was prepared to move past the previous regime (Fisher, 2006: 174).