



Review in Advance first posted online on December 23, 2013. (Changes may still occur before final publication online and in print.)

Democratic Authoritarianism: Origins and Effects

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Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci. 2014. 17:2.1–2.14

The *Annual Review of Political Science* is online at <http://polisci.annualreviews.org>

This article's doi:
10.1146/annurev-polisci-052013-115248

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Keywords

authoritarian states, democracy, elections, parties, media

Abstract

This article reviews the burgeoning literature on democratic authoritarianism, which examines two related but distinct questions: why authoritarian regimes adopt institutions conventionally associated with democracy, and how these institutions strengthen authoritarian regimes and forestall democratization. The literature suggests that authoritarian regimes adopt and utilize nominally democratic institutions to augment their strength through five main mechanisms: signaling, information acquisition, patronage distribution, monitoring, and credible commitment. After evaluating each of these mechanisms, I discuss the empirical challenges facing this research agenda and suggest how the field should proceed to overcome these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, the proportion of authoritarian states in the world has been on the decline. Today, authoritarian regimes comprise only one-fifth of all states in the world (Marshall & Cole 2011, p. 10).¹ Not only is the proportion of authoritarian states on the decline, but the proportion of authoritarian states that have institutions conventionally associated with democracy, such as parties and elections, is on the rise. In the past decade, about 70% of authoritarian states held legislative elections and 80% held elections for the chief executive. Furthermore, more than three-quarters of authoritarian states in this period permitted more than one party to participate in these elections.²

As a result, many have come to wonder if these institutions are a sign that these states are democratizing. A burgeoning literature on authoritarian states suggests otherwise. This literature looks at both why authoritarian regimes adopt nominally democratic institutions and what effect these institutions have on regime stability. It suggests that these institutions are not an indication that countries are democratizing, but that these institutions ironically help strengthen authoritarian regimes and forestall democratization.

In this review, I evaluate the principal mechanisms by which authoritarian states arguably use nominally democratic institutions in order to maintain power, as well as the distinctive empirical challenges that arise in attempting to understand the purpose and impact of these institutions in authoritarian regimes. Finally, I offer several suggestions for how the field should proceed in order to overcome these challenges in the future.

MECHANISMS

According to this literature, authoritarian regimes adopt nominally democratic institutions in order to protect themselves against potential threats from both within the regime and within society at large through five different mechanisms. These mechanisms are signaling, information acquisition, patronage distribution, monitoring, and credible commitment.

Signaling

Scholars argue that authoritarian regimes adopt and use nominally democratic institutions to reveal to their potential opponents the material and coercive strength of the regime, and thereby to deter these opponents from challenging the regime. In particular, they argue that authoritarian regimes hold elections and engineer the results of these elections in order to win large margins of victory, which signal to potential challengers that opposition to the regime is futile. Governments can win large margins of victory through electoral fraud (Simpser 2013) or by simply using government resources and institutions to mobilize voters (Geddes 2006, Magaloni 2008). Elections in which leaders win large margins of victory indicate to regime opponents that opposition to the regime is futile, not necessarily because the regime is popular or considered legitimate, but because the regime is able to buy off, intimidate, threaten, or force the populace to vote for it (Geddes 2006, p. 5; Weeden 2008; Magaloni 2008; Simpser 2013).

In support of this argument, Geddes (2006, p. 6) shows that, on average, authoritarian regimes that hold regular elections last longer than those that do not. Simpser (2013) also shows cross-nationally that excessive electoral manipulation is significantly associated with parties and leaders remaining in office longer and is associated with lower voter turnout. Simpser provides more direct

¹ Authoritarian states are defined as those scoring -6 or below on the Polity Index.

² Figures calculated by the author based on data from Svoboda (2012).



evidence of his argument in two qualitative case studies of Russia and Zimbabwe, which suggest that regimes manipulate elections in order to signal to their opponents their strength. Magaloni (2008) also offers more direct evidence of her argument regarding signaling in Mexico. She demonstrates that in Mexico the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) developed complex networks or organizations and activities to mobilize voters in its “golden years,” even though the opposition posed no threat to the regime at this time.

The signaling mechanism presents a clever and nonobvious explanation for why authoritarian regimes hold elections and cheat blatantly in them. These elections can be an important sign of the strength of a regime. However, it is impossible to know whether the source of the regime’s strength is the signal of a large margin of victory or the actions that the government undertakes to produce this signal, namely the intimidation, threats, force, mobilization networks, etc. It seems likely that the actions regimes undertake to produce these signals are more effective in cowing the opposition than the signal itself. Magaloni (2008, p. 108) shows that historically the PRI experienced major splits within the party when government spending was lower and the party had fewer resources to distribute to elites in order to maintain their loyalty. This suggests that the PRI’s actions, not the signal that the actions produced, were key in building the strength of the PRI.

Authoritarian regimes, moreover, that hold elections may last longer, not because electoral outcomes serve as a signal of the regime’s strength, but because holding elections is indicative of the regime’s strength. That is, only popular regimes or regimes with the material capacity to win elections through strategic manipulation hold elections because the risk of their losing the elections is small (Geddes 2006, p. 7). Even governments in Western democracies are known to strategically hold parliamentary elections at times that are most advantageous for the government in power (Smith 2003). Nevertheless, authoritarian regimes do not always predict the outcomes of these elections accurately (Bunce & Wolchik 2010). In 1993, General Ibrahim Babangida held presidential elections in Nigeria ten years after coming to power in a coup d’etat. Babangida lost these elections to Moshood Abiola and immediately annulled them, triggering protests and riots throughout the country that eventually led to his resignation.

Information Acquisition

Scholars also argue that authoritarian regimes construct and utilize nominally democratic institutions, particularly legislatures and multiparty elections, in order to identify and manage sources of societal discontent. Legislatures help regimes identify discontent because they allow elected politicians to make demands on the government on behalf of their constituents (Gandhi 2008, Gandhi & Przeworski 2007). Autocrats are then able to use this information to stabilize their regimes by making policy concessions in response to these demands. In support of this argument, Gandhi (2008) shows that institutionalized regimes (i.e., multiparty legislatures) are more responsive to society, produce more public goods, and perform better economically than noninstitutionalized regimes. Gandhi does not find statistically, however, that authoritarian states with legislatures last significantly longer than those without legislatures.

To explore the use of legislatures to diffuse societal discontent, Malesky & Schuler (2010) capitalize on a unique feature of Vietnam’s political system—biannual, televised query sessions in which legislators question the country’s prime minister and cabinet members on pressing political issues. Although the authors are not able to show if legislators actually represent the interests of their constituencies in these query systems, or if the government ultimately adopts policies to address the legislators’ concerns, the authors do find that representatives openly criticize the government in these query sessions, suggesting that these sessions may be a forum for the government to identify and address societal discontent.

Multiparty elections, scholars argue, are another institution authoritarian regimes adopt in order to mitigate societal discontent. Multiparty elections help regimes identify discontent because votes for opposition candidates reveal the constituencies in which regimes have weak support (Brownlee 2007, Magaloni 2008). Magaloni (2008) claims that, to undermine the backing of the opposition, authoritarian regimes use this information to reward supporters with access to government funds and conversely, to punish defectors by withholding such funds. In support of this claim, Magaloni (2008) finds that in Mexico the PRI increased public spending to districts with the potential to vote for the opposition. Cox (2009) argues that knowledge of where the opposition has more electoral support also provides regimes with information about the military strength of the opposition—with the idea that the military potential of the opposition is based on the opposition's ability to mobilize the populace, as indicated by the number of votes that the opposition wins. Cox (2009), who does not explain how regimes use this information to strengthen themselves, finds statistically that authoritarian leaders of multiparty regimes leave office peacefully significantly more often than leaders of nonelectoral and one-party regimes.

Although legislatures and multiparty elections may serve these purposes, they are not the only, or necessarily the most effective, institutions for managing societal discontent. Authoritarian regimes can also achieve this through other formal and informal institutions, including civil society and the media (Milgrom et al. 1990). According to Berman (1997), the Nazis used civil society in their rise to power to gain insight into the fears and needs of particular groups within the German bourgeoisie, to tailor new appeals to them, and to disseminate Nazi ideology. The media and the Internet offer authoritarian regimes more modern ways to achieve these ends today. The Russian government uses the media in this way. President Vladimir Putin, for example, hosts annual live television call-in shows, much like the query sessions in Vietnam, in which he responds to questions from citizens in order to appear responsive to popular concerns.

Gandhi (2008) contends, however, that legislatures are the best venue for authoritarian states to make policy compromises to citizens. Legislatures and parties, she claims, allow groups to convey their demands to the government without these demands appearing as acts of public resistance, and allow dictators to consent to these demands while appearing to be magnanimous rather than weak (p. 137). Blaydes (2011) concurs, arguing that elections are a way for opposition candidates, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, to establish themselves as the most viable opposition group in the country without posing a direct challenge to the regime (p. 12).

Elections are salient events, however, and a strong performance by an opposition candidate is likely to threaten the regime. Dictators, moreover, are likely to see demands expressed by the opposition as threatening even if they are expressed through legislatures. Outside of legislatures this process can also be controlled. Putin, for example, during his televised call-in shows, receives the questions in advance and chooses which ones he wants to respond to. Similarly, China allows criticism of the government on social media sites so long as it does not represent, reinforce, or encourage social mobilization (King et al. 2013).

Institutions, moreover, cannot effectively provide information about potential sources of opposition to the regime and mitigate this threat if they are not fully democratic. Election results do not provide an authoritarian regime with much information about where opposition lies because these results do not represent the will of the people, and because those sympathetic to the opposition may abstain from voting in high numbers. Cox (2009) recognizes this but argues that autocrats can evaluate the strength of the opposition during electoral campaigns based on attendance at the autocrat's rallies and illegal protests, as well as turnout at elections. However, electoral campaigns can also be extremely circumscribed in autocratic states, and, thus, not very informative as well. Moreover, according to Cox, decisions about whether to hold an election are based on information that the autocrats already have about the military strength of the opposition,



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with the leader only holding elections when his rival is weak and likely to accept electoral defeat. Therefore, it is not clear what additional information elections provide autocrats. Elections do not, moreover, provide much information about the opposition's ability to launch a civil war, as Cox argues, because civil wars are often conducted by rebel groups whose existence is not based on societal grievances (Collier & Hoeffler 2002, Fearon & Laitin 2003) and whose capabilities are derived not from public support but from foreign patronage (Regan 2002, Salehyan & Gleditsch 2006), natural resources (Ross 2004), and other sources.

Furthermore, legislatures cannot serve as a valve to reduce societal discontent before it explodes if legislators are not elected in open and competitive elections, if legislatures do not have real decision-making authority, and if governments do not ultimately adopt policies to address issues of concern raised by the legislators. Because politicians are not chosen in open and competitive elections in authoritarian regimes, they are less likely to question and challenge the government. Consistent with this point, Malesky & Schuler (2010) find that in Vietnam the candidates most likely to criticize the government are those that are full-time professionals and nominated locally from competitive electoral districts. Malesky et al. (2012) also find that the more knowledgeable citizens are of the proceedings of query sessions, the less likely legislators are to participate actively in them, and that citizens are not more likely to reward at the polls legislators who actively participate in these sessions, suggesting that authoritarian legislatures are not responsive to citizens. Likewise, because authoritarian legislatures exist at the discretion of the dictator, they do not have real decision-making power and only rubberstamp government-proposed legislation. Query sessions, like those in Vietnam, are also limited in where they occur, how often they occur, whether they are public, and what issues they can encompass. Moreover, query sessions, as well as the legislatures themselves, are suspended when the legislators become too critical and too demanding of governments.

Patronage Distribution

Scholars argue that authoritarian regimes create and use nominally democratic institutions, including parties and elections, to buy support from political elites and citizens through patronage (Geddes 2006, Lust-Okar 2008, Magaloni 2008, Blaydes 2011, Svobik 2012). Geddes (2006, p. 4) argues that political parties provide members with benefits, including jobs, connections, and other economic opportunities. These give party members a stake in the system, and, in turn, make them more likely to oppose coups d'état. Parties, Geddes claims, are able to effectively organize mass opposition to attempted coups d'état, because they are able to capitalize on the pre-existing networks and relationships of their members to organize protests, demonstrations, strikes, and other actions against coups. Consistent with her argument, Geddes finds that dictators who formed parties survived an average of 14.3 years, while those allied with pre-existing parties survived 10.8 years and those without parties lasted only 6.9 years (pp. 8–9).

Lust-Okar (2008) similarly argues that in countries, like Jordan, where states have a monopoly on financial resources as well as force, legislative elections strengthen authoritarian regimes because regimes distribute patronage to elites and to citizens through these elections. Lust-Okar's survey data indicate that in Jordan people vote for candidates who they think can act effectively on their behalf and with whom they have personal connections, and that candidates run because of ties with the state and emphasize personalist ties in their campaigns, not unlike in many democracies.

Other scholars have built on the seminal work of Geddes and Lust-Okar, noting that patronage can be delivered without parties (Blaydes 2011, Svobik 2012) and that elections are the key to explaining how patronage enhances regime stability. Blaydes (2011), for example, claims that elections are needed because they make elites and citizens perceive the distribution of patronage



as fair, preventing resentment from arising among elites, because patronage is based on the ability of party members to garner votes for the party during elections. Although patronage can provide elites with resources to challenge the regime, elites will not challenge the regime, Blaydes argues, because the next regime will likely punish them for their participation in the previous regime (p. 10). Similarly, Svulik (2012, p. 164) argues that elections are needed because they make receiving benefits contingent on prior costly service. According to Blaydes, parties also distribute patronage to citizens through elections by paying voters to cast their ballots for particular candidates and by persuading people to vote for the regime in exchange for goods and services. Noting that only some states use elections for this purpose, Blaydes hypothesizes that certain states do not need to distribute rents in order to buy support from society because they have large natural resource endowments and because they have established avenues for the distribution of rents, including ethnicity, owing to the size and cohesion of the ruling regime (pp. 232–36).

Blaydes' evidence is indirect. She hypothesizes that if elections are used to either reward or punish party members, there should be turnover in office so that members are able to move up through the ranks of the party. Turnover is also indicative of governments demoting party members who are not loyal and competent. Consistent with her claim, Blaydes finds that in Egypt under President Hosni Mubarak, there was turnover in office, and that high-quality candidates (i.e., those that defeated Muslim Brotherhood candidates) were rewarded with appointed posts. Svulik (2012, p. 195) argues that parties are necessary because dictatorships, whose support base is limited to traditional elites—landed aristocracy or owners of capital—are not willing to relinquish the resources necessary for the party to effectively co-opt citizens. Consistent with his argument, Svulik (2012) finds that dictatorships in which parties control a supramajority of seats in the legislature survive on average about as long as ruling coalitions with single parties.

Patronage can be a useful means of building support, as studies have shown (Wantchekon 2003, Calvo & Murillo 2004, Stokes et al. 2013). However, the literature on democratic authoritarianism tends to underplay the instability present in patronage-based systems and sometimes makes ad hoc claims that the benefits of patronage must outweigh the dangers because regimes with legislatures ultimately last longer (Blaydes 2011, p. 2; Geddes 2006, p. 6). Patronage carries certain risks. When the money undergirding this system dries up, instability can result, as was the case during crisis periods in post-Cold War Kenya, Malawi, Senegal, and Zambia (Levitsky & Way 2010, p. 26). Moreover, elites can also use the patronage gained through political office to challenge authoritarian regimes in the future. Dictators often face challengers from former party members; Morgan Tsvangirai was a high-ranking member of President Robert Mugabe's ruling party before he founded Zimbabwe's largest opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, and was elected prime minister. Recognizing these dangers, some authoritarian regimes have rotated bureaucrats in and out of office to prevent them from acquiring institutional resources and building support networks that they may use to challenge autocrats in the future.

The extent to which elections reduce resentment over the distribution of patronage is also overstated because those outside the patronage system will continue to be disaffected. In Mexico, elites who failed to win the party's nomination for the presidency have historically presented a serious threat to the unity of the PRI (Magaloni 2008, p. 53). In 1987, for example, when Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas failed to earn the PRI's nomination, he split from the party and eventually formed the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), today one of Mexico's three largest parties. Term limits and forced retirements, which some authoritarian regimes impose on politicians to enable other elites to compete for office, may also create resentment among those who are forced to vacate their seats (Svulik 2012, p. 174).

Finally, elections constrain the ability of regimes to reward particular elites with patronage in order to build support because elections give citizens the authority to select representatives. This



is consistent with Svobik's (2012) claim that party-based co-optation is more effective if political control over appointments is selective, according to which governments co-opt those that are ideologically most similar to the regime and repress those that are most distant, since the former is less costly than the latter (p. 182).

Credible Commitment

Scholars argue that authoritarian regimes adopt nominally democratic institutions because these institutions allow regimes to credibly commit not to expropriate domestic investment (Boix 2003, Wright 2008, Gehlbach & Keefer 2012). Such regimes are more stable because they can maintain the support of key sectors of the political and economic elite by not expropriating their assets (Boix 2003, Wright & Abel Escriba-Folch 2012). Authoritarian regimes are also less likely to be challenged by people demanding democracy in the streets if they preside over strong economies (Brancati 2013).

Boix (2003) argues, for example, that authoritarian legislatures limit expropriation by dictators by increasing the number of veto players in the political system (pp. 210–13). Credible commitment not to expropriate enables authoritarian regimes to maintain the loyalty of the elite and business classes. Consistent with his argument, Boix shows that corruption and the risk of expropriation are statistically significantly higher for regimes without legislatures than for those with legislatures.

Wright (2008), meanwhile, argues that legislatures indicate to potential investors that regimes will not expropriate investments by tying the hands of dictators, thereby increasing economic growth and investment. Wright further argues that military and single-party authoritarian regimes adopt legislatures in order to increase domestic investment because they lack natural resources. He finds that military and single-party regimes that have legislatures tend to have less oil revenue, more productive economies, and longer time horizons, while personalist regimes and monarchies that have legislatures tend to have the opposite. Legislatures in military and single-party regimes are associated with higher growth and investment, whereas legislatures in personalist regimes and monarchies decrease growth (Wright 2008). Wright & Abel Escriba-Folch (2012) extend this argument to address the issue of democratization. Authoritarian legislatures, they argue, reduce the likelihood of democratization by increasing the credibility of authoritarian regimes not to renege on promises to forgo predation, and permit policy concessions or redistribution in future.

Finally, Gehlbach & Keefer (2012) argue that ruling-party institutionalization increases domestic private investment by granting a group of individuals the right to invest and by discouraging investment outside of that group. Ruling-party institutionalization facilitates collective action by this group, they further argue, because it provides this group with complete information about who has suffered expropriation and, thus, allows authoritarian regimes to credibly commit not to expropriate investment by this group. Gehlbach & Keefer (2012) show that party institutionalization, proxied as the age of the ruling party, as well as the regularity of leader entry and the competitiveness of legislative elections, is associated with higher levels of domestic private investment.

Although strong property rights increase investment (Lee & Mansfield 1996), they are unlikely to result from authoritarian legislatures serving as a credible commitment against expropriation. Legislatures cannot bind the hands of leaders if they are not democratic (Milgrom et al. 1990, Root 1989, Jensen et al. 2013). That is, authoritarian legislatures cannot punish dictators if they expropriate investment, and they cannot adopt strong property-rights legislation independent of the regime because they do not have autonomous decision-making authority and can be disbanded

by the head of the regime if they attempt to do this. Jensen et al. (2013) suggest an alternative explanation for the effect of authoritarian regimes on investment. They argue that authoritarian legislatures attract more domestic investment because they provide a forum for the types of bargains that result in corporate-governance legislation, which protects citizens from expropriation by private actors, not the government. Statistically, Jensen et al. find that international investors do not perceive property rights to be stronger in authoritarian regimes with legislatures than in those without them, but that the strength of authoritarian legislatures is associated with corporate-governance rules.

Monitoring

Scholars argue that authoritarian regimes adopt and utilize nominally democratic institutions so that upper-level regime elites can monitor dictators (Gehlbach & Keefer 2012, Svolik 2012), and so that dictators can monitor lower-level regime elites (Lorentzen 2009, Blaydes 2011). Scholars focus on two types of institutions in this regard: legislatures and the media. Svolik (2012) argues that deliberative and decision-making institutions (e.g., committees, politburos, and ruling councils) allow upper-level regime elites to monitor the behavior of dictators because they entail regular interaction between dictators and upper-level regime elites over major policy changes and periodic reviews of government revenue and spending. In turn, greater transparency, Svolik argues, reassures elites that actual attempts by the dictator to usurp power will be caught before it is too late. Transparency also prevents misperceptions about the dictator's actions from escalating into regime-destabilizing confrontations.

Some scholars contend, meanwhile, that a free media allows upper-level regime elites to identify corrupt and incompetent lower-level elites and remove them from office (Blaydes 2011, pp. 141–45; Lorentzen 2009). Public discontent with corrupt politicians can destabilize regimes if unaddressed. Using the case of China as an example, Lorentzen (2009) argues that authoritarian regimes are more likely to use the media as a check on local politicians when corruption significantly reduces the rents collected by regimes, and when other mechanisms, such as internal party discipline and police investigations, are not as available. Egorov et al. (2006) suggest that authoritarian regimes are less likely to use the media to constrain bureaucrats in countries abundant in natural resources because they can buy the support of bureaucrats with these resources instead.

Monitoring may serve an important role in stabilizing regimes, but unlike some of the other mechanisms by which institutions are thought to strengthen regimes, monitoring does not require these institutions to be democratic in order to be effective. Thus, it does not fall squarely within the research agenda of democratic authoritarianism. Deliberative institutions, as Svolik (2012) has conceived them, can monitor dictators' behaviors without being democratic by increasing interactions among dictators and upper-level regime elites. Svolik also points out that deliberative and legislative institutions will not stabilize regimes unless there is a credible mechanism to punish transgression by the dictators (Shepsle 1986). This mechanism is not democratic, but demographic, according to Svolik. That is, it depends on the balance of power between the dictators and the ruling coalition as well as the repressive capacity of the state (Svolik 2012, ch. 4).

Nor does the media have to be free for upper-level elites to monitor lower-level elites. In China, the media often prepares confidential reports for the government on sensitive political matters (Stockmann 2013, p. 11). Allowing the media to be free in order to monitor lower-level elites is also dangerous because exposing the government's flaws could reduce public support for the regime. Given this risk, one has to question why authoritarian regimes would liberalize the media when they also have alternative means at their disposal to monitor lower-level elites, including the secret police, which do not have the same destabilizing potential.



THE WAY FORWARD

Empirically, the literature on democratic authoritarianism faces a number of challenges in terms of functionalism, overidentification, and generalizability, which it must address in order to provide stronger evidence of its claims.

Distinguish Motivation from Effect

Since it is not possible to identify the intentions of dictators directly, research within this agenda tends to infer leaders' motivation for adopting nominally democratic institutions from the outcomes they produce (with a few notable exceptions, i.e., Gandhi 2008, Wright 2008; Ginsburg & Simpser, forthcoming). One can make a strong case that the motivation for adopting these institutions does not matter, and that only their effect does. However, the democratic authoritarianism literature often claims to explain both. For at least three reasons, though, one cannot accurately infer the intention of dictators from the outcomes associated with certain institutions.³

First, an institution might have a particular outcome but the leader might not have adopted the institution for this purpose. In multiparty elections, for example, votes for opposition candidates may help competitive regimes identify discontent within the electorate (Magaloni 2008, Brownlee 2007). However, it is doubtful that governments allowed other parties to compete in elections for this purpose because this is a very costly and risky strategy. Countries may have adopted these institutions for other reasons, such as pressure from the international community or strong opposition pressure (Brancati & Snyder 2011), and these institutions may have taken on new roles.⁴ Also, as Geddes (2006) points out, dictators in creating institutions such as political parties may have "multiple somewhat unrealistic goals in mind" and may not "necessarily understand their deterrence value" when they adopt them (p. 12).

Second, an institution might not have the outcome that the leader intended. Politicians may hold elections to signal their strength to opposition candidates. However, elections might backfire and undermine the regime because elections help mobilize the opposition or because the practices that the dictator employs to win the elections provoke a reaction from the opposition. Fraudulent elections are an important trigger behind democracy protests, as the cases of Serbia (2000), Ukraine (2003), and Russia (2011/2012) demonstrate (Tucker 2007, Brancati 2013). Similarly, elections might not be an effective means of distributing patronage among supporters because those unable to participate in the elections are disaffected. Even Geddes, who recognizes the risks involved when dictators use parties and elections to solidify their regime, makes a functional argument in assessing the value of these risks. "Elections always involve some risk, and the mobilization of support that goes along with them is quite costly, so we can infer from their prevalence that they must also provide authoritarian leaders with some benefit that can outweigh these costs" (Geddes 2006, p. 6).

Conversely, if authoritarian regimes adopt nominally democratic institutions because they are weak and need to co-opt the opposition as some scholars suggest, and if they are effective in co-opting the opposition, then authoritarian regimes with legislatures should not last significantly longer than those without legislatures. Provided that authoritarian regimes can accurately predict threats to the regime and adopt legislatures accordingly, this may help explain why Gandhi (2008, p. 177) does not find a statistically significant relationship between institutionalized legislatures and the tenure of dictators.

Third, the relationship between the institutions and the outcome they are purported to produce may be spurious. Authoritarian regimes, for example, may hold nominally democratic elections

³ See Bates (1988) on the problems of functionalism and institutions.

⁴ For a contrary view on "institutional stickiness", see North (1990) and Pierson (2004).

because the international community extends foreign aid to these regimes as an incentive to democratize. Foreign aid, in turn, may stabilize authoritarian regimes because it reduces the need for taxes (Rajan & Subramanian 2007) and leads politicians in power to engage in rent-seeking activities (Djankov et al. 2008).

Going forward, the democratic authoritarianism literature will be well served if it differentiates between the reason why regimes adopt nominally democratic institutions and the effect those institutions produce, and analyzes motivation and effect separately.

Differentiate Competing Effects

Within this literature, there are many different theories why the same institutions might strengthen authoritarian regimes. Many authors themselves also recognize multiple ways in which the same institution might enhance the stability of regimes, although they generally focus on one or two of them (Geddes 2006, Magaloni 2008, Blaydes 2011). This is particularly problematic because many of the measures scholars use to evaluate the relationship between certain institutions and regime stability are blunt and consistent with multiple explanations.

Gandhi (2008), for example, uses regime type to proxy for the need for cooperation. She reasons that civilian regimes need more cooperation than monarchies and militaries do because they cannot rely on kin networks or force to stay in power, and are more likely to adopt legislatures as a result. Wright (2008) uses regime type to proxy for the need to constrain dictators in order to generate the revenue necessary to sustain their rule. He argues, in contrast to Gandhi, that military regimes, like single-party (civilian) regimes, have more incentives to establish so-called binding legislatures than monarchies and personalist (civilian) regimes have because they tend to rely on natural resources for wealth. Gandhi (2008) also uses natural resources to proxy for the need for cooperation. She argues that leaders of countries with a lot of natural resources need less cooperation than those in resource-poor countries because they use rents to assure people's acquiescence to their rule, and are less likely, therefore, to have legislatures.

Many of the institutions examined are collinear, so it is difficult to determine which institution, if any, contributes to regime stability. For example, it is difficult to determine if parties alone or parties in combination with elections strengthen regimes because most authoritarian regimes that hold elections also have parties. Between 1945 and 2008, about 95% of legislative elections in authoritarian regimes involved at least one political party. Similarly, it is difficult to distinguish the effect of elections from the effect of legislatures because most authoritarian legislatures are elected. Between 1945 and 2008, only 13% of authoritarian legislatures were not elected.⁵ The collinearity problem is even more challenging in single-country studies because there is often little or no variation among these institutions over time.

To distinguish among competing effects, scholars have to use more specific measures that test the observable implications of their arguments compared to others. For example, to test Geddes' argument that parties coup-proof regimes, empirical tests are needed to determine if protests occur against coups d'état more often in authoritarian regimes with political parties than in those without them. Preliminary evidence suggests that parties do not play a role in mobilizing the populace against coup attempts. Between 2005 and 2011, 18 coup d'état attempts were made. In 6 of these cases, protests occurred against the coup. All 6 countries held multiparty elections prior to the coup. However, so did all 12 countries where protests did not occur against the coup attempts.⁶

⁵ Figures calculated by author based on data from Svobik (2012).

⁶ Figures calculated by author based on information about coups d'état from Powell & Thyne (2011) and pro-democracy protests from Brancati (2013).

Some authors have differentiated their arguments from others by developing tighter measures. Blaydes (2011), for example, reasons that if legislative elections are used to distribute patronage, then we should observe turnover in party ranks and high-quality candidates being rewarded with posts, which she observes in Egypt. Malesky & Schuler (2010) argue that if legislatures are used to manage discontent, then contrary opinions should be expressed in legislatures, as they find in Vietnam. Cox (2009) also attempts to tease out the implications of his argument in relation to election years, although the direction of the relationship is not clear—on one hand, authoritarian leaders may be more likely to lose power in election years because governments should only hold elections when they are uncertain about the opposition's strength; on the other hand, authoritarian leaders may be less likely to lose power in election years (through a violent struggle with the opposition) because elections themselves reveal information about the strength of the opposition and lower the risk of violence.

Generalizability

The trade-off between generalizability and theory development is acute in this literature. To understand the effect of these institutions on the longevity of regimes, scholars have employed case studies—both qualitative and quantitative (Lust-Okar 2008, Magaloni 2008, Blaydes 2011, Malesky & Schuler 2010, Malesky et al. 2012, Levitsky & Way 2010)—as well as cross-national statistical analyses (Geddes 2006, Gandhi 2008, Wright 2008, Svobik 2012).

Most of the research on democratic authoritarianism that provides micro-level analysis of the logic by which institutions strengthen authoritarian regimes are single-country studies. Countries studied include Egypt (Blaydes 2011), Jordan (Lust-Okar 2008), Mexico (Magaloni 2008), and Vietnam (Malesky & Schuler 2010, Malesky et al. 2012). The findings from these studies are not clearly generalizable, nor do these scholars necessarily claim that they are. Certain aspects of their arguments rely on particular features of countries that do not exist in other countries, such as query sessions in Vietnam (Malesky & Schuler 2010, Malesky et al. 2012) and formal and informal or normative guarantees of parliamentary immunity in Egypt (Blaydes 2011, p. 55). Some features may also make certain institutions more effective in some countries than in others, such as presidential term limits (Magaloni 2008) or a governmental monopoly over patronage (Lust-Okar 2008, p. 93). Particular features may even make these institutions more desirable in the first place, as in the case of natural resource wealth (Gandhi 2008, Wright 2008).

Going forward, this research program needs to combine the insights from the micro-level analyses to collect more nuanced, cross-national measures of the mechanisms by which institutions are thought to prolong the lifespan of authoritarian regimes. To do so, research has to move to a broader conceptual level while still retaining the detailed evidence gained from the case studies. This literature should also seek to clarify the parameters under which particular arguments apply. One condition that frequently arises is the presence of natural resource wealth, which is seen as limiting the need for government to cooperate since dictators can buy the support they need (Blaydes 2011, Gandhi 2008, Egorov et al. 2006).

CONCLUSION

The democratic authoritarian research agenda is refreshing. Unlike in some other programs, there is an abundance of new ideas in this literature. Some of these ideas suggest that (so-called) democratic institutions function the same way in authoritarian regimes that they do in democracies. This is true of arguments related to information acquisition, patronage distribution, and credible commitments. Ideas that also require these institutions to act as if they are democratic, as in the case of information acquisition and credible commitment, are on weaker theoretical



ground than those that do not, since these institutions are embedded in environments that are anything but democratic.

On the downside, there is a dearth of empirical evidence in this literature. The democratic authoritarian literature is beset by its inability to distinguish cause from effect, by various measurement issues that make it difficult to differentiate among competing effects, and by issues of generalizability. One thing, though, this literature has accomplished already is to dispel the notion that institutions commonly associated with democracy—parties, elections, legislatures—are exclusive to democracies, and to stimulate an exciting debate on this topic.

This literature is unlikely to ever provide evidence for the effect of these institutions on par with the kind of evidence provided about institutions in advanced democracies, and no one should expect it to. Nevertheless, the findings from this research program can help shed light on the generally opaque operation of authoritarian regimes and offer important insights into other related research agendas on institutions as well.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks Elise Giuliano, Lisa Blaydes, Elise Giuliano, Eddie Malesky, Alberto Simpser, and Joe Wright for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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