

## **Democratic Authoritarianism: Origins and Effects<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** This review essay examines the burgeoning literature on democratic authoritarianism, which examines two related, but distinct questions about why authoritarian regimes adopt institutions conventionally associated with democracy, and how these institutions ironically strengthen authoritarian regimes and forestall democratization. The literature suggests that authoritarian regimes adopt and utilize nominally democratic institutions to strengthen regimes in five main ways: signaling, information acquisition, patronage distribution, monitoring, and credible commitment. I evaluate each of these mechanisms in this review essay, as well as the empirical challenges facing this research agenda in general, and offer several suggestions for how the field should proceed to overcome these challenges.

**Key Words:** authoritarian states; democracy; elections; parties; media

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## 1. Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the proportion of authoritarian states in the world has been steadily on the decline. Today, authoritarian regimes comprise only one-fifth of all states in the world.<sup>2</sup> Not only is the proportion of authoritarian states on the decline, but the proportion of authoritarian states that have institutions conventionally associated with democracy, like parties and elections, are on the rise. In the last decade, about 70% of authoritarian states held legislative elections and 80% held elections for the chief executive.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, more than three-quarters of authoritarian states in this period permitted more than one party to participate in these elections.<sup>4</sup>

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, which looks at both why authoritarian regimes adopt nominally democratic institutions, and what effect these institutions have on regime stability, suggests that these institutions are not an indication that countries are democratizing, but that these institutions ironically help strengthen authoritarian regimes and forestall democratization.

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

## 2. 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 in five main ways: signaling, information acquisition, patronage distribution, monitoring, and credible commitment.

### 2.1. Signaling

First, 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 in order to signal to potential challengers that opposition to the regime is futile (Geddes 2006, p.5; Weeden 2008; Magaloni 2008; Simpson 2013). Governments can win large margin of victories through electoral fraud

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<sup>2</sup> See: Monty G. Marshall and Benjamin R. Cole. 2011. *Global Report 2011: Conflict, Governance and State Fragility*. Vienna, VA: Center for Systemic Peace, p. 10. Authoritarian states are defined as those scoring -6 or below on the Polity Index.

<sup>3</sup> Figures calculated by author based on data from Svoboda (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Figures calculated by author based on data from Svoboda (2012).

(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, Barbara Geddes (2006, p. 6) shows that, on average, authoritarian regimes that hold regular elections last longer than those that do not. Magaloni (2008) offers more direct evidence of the signaling mechanism 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. Meanwhile, Alberto Simpser (2013), in addition to two case studies of Russia and Zimbabwe that illustrate qualitatively these regimes motivations for manipulating elections, shows cross-nationally that excessive electoral manipulation is significantly associated with lower voter turnout and with parties and leaders remaining in office longer.

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 it is the signal of a large margin of victory that is the source of the regime’s strength, or the actions that the government undertakes to produce this signal that gives the regime its strength, namely the intimation, threats, force, mobilization networks, et cetera. It seems more likely that the actions regimes undertake to produce these signals are more effective in cowing the opposition than the signal itself. In her own work, Magaloni 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 (2008, p. 108). 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 elections 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 and 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 these elections, triggering wide-scale protests and riots throughout the country, which eventually lead to his resignation.

## 2.2. Information Acquisition

Second, 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, which may become the basis for opposition to the regime in the future. Gandhi (2008) and Gandhi and Przeworski (2007) argue, for example, that authoritarian regimes adopt legislatures in order to diffuse opposition to the regime, and that authoritarian legislatures have this effect because they enable regimes to identify and respond to discontent expressed by politicians in these legislatures through policy concessions. In support of this argument, Gandhi (2008) shows that institutionalized regimes (i.e., multi-party legislatures) are more responsive to society, produce more public goods and perform better economically, than non-institutionalized regimes. Gandhi does not find statistically, however, that authoritarian states with legislatures last significantly longer than those without legislatures.

To explore the way in which authoritarian legislatures might be used to diffuse societal discontent, Malesky and 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 are another institution, which scholars argue that authoritarian regimes adopt in order to mitigate societal discontent. Multiparty elections help regimes identify discontent because votes for opposition candidates reveal to regimes the constituencies in which regimes have weak support (Magaloni 2006, Brownlee 2007). To undermine the backing of the opposition, Magaloni (2008) claims that 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, which is greater the more votes that the opposition wins. Cox (2009), who does not explain how regimes use this information to strengthen the regime, finds statistically that authoritarian leaders of multi-party regimes leave office peacefully significantly more often than leaders of non-electoral and one-party regimes.

While legislatures and multiparty elections may serve these purposes, they are not the only, or necessarily the most effective institutions in this regard. Authoritarian regimes can manage societal discontent through other formal and informal institutions, including civil

society and the media.<sup>5</sup> According to Sheri Berman (1997), for example, the Nazis used civil society to capitalize on societal discontent in order to rise to power by using civil society to gain insight into the fears and needs of particular groups within the German bourgeois, to tailor new appeals to them, and to disseminate its 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. Vladimir Putin hosts annually live television call-in shows, much like the query sessions in Vietnam, in which Putin responds to questions by 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 on behalf of 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 from callers. Similarly, China allows criticism of the government on social media sites so long as it does not represent, reinforce, or encourage social mobilization (King, Pan, Roberts 2013).

Institutions, moreover, cannot effectively provide information about potential sources of opposition to the regime and mitigate this threat if they are fully democratic. In authoritarian regimes, election results do not provide regimes with a lot of information about where opposition to the regime lies because these results do not represent the will of the people, and because those sympathetic to the opposition may abstain from voting in authoritarian elections in high numbers. Cox 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, and so forth (2009 p. 12). 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 or not to hold an election are based on information that the autocrats already have about the military strength of the opposition, with the leader only holding elections when his rival is weak and likely to accept the elections. Therefore, it is not clear what additional information elections provide autocrats. Elections do not, moreover, provide a lot of information about the opposition's ability to launch a civil war, as Cox argues, since civil wars are often conducted by rebel groups whose existence is not based on societal

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<sup>5</sup> See: Milgrom, North, Weingast (1990) on the role of institutions in information acquisition.

grievances (Collier and Hoeffler 2002; Fearon and Laitin 1997), and whose capabilities are not derived from public support, but from foreign patronage (Regan 2002, Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006), natural resources (Ross 2004), and so forth.

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. Since 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 and 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, Schuler and Tran (2012) also find that legislators are less likely to participate actively in these query sessions the more knowledgeable citizens are of the proceedings of these sessions, while citizens are not more likely to reward legislators at the polls who actively participate in these sessions, suggesting that authoritarian legislatures are not responsive to citizens. Likewise, since 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 or not, and what issues on which governments can be questioned. Moreover, at times, query sessions, as well the legislatures themselves, are suspended when the legislators become too critical and too demanding of governments.

### **2.3 Patronage Distribution**

Third, scholars argue that authoritarian regimes create and use nominally democratic institutions, including parties and elections, to buy off support among political elites and citizens through patronage (Geddes 2006; Magaloni 2007; Lust-Okar 2008; Blaydes 2011; Svobik 2012). Geddes (2006, p.4) argues that political parties provide members with benefits, including jobs, connections, and other economic opportunities, which 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 so forth 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 (p. 8-9).

Lust-Okar 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 (2008). Lust-Okar (2008) shows that in Jordan people report in surveys that they vote for candidates whom they think can act effectively on their behalf and with whom they have personal connections, while candidates run due to 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 them, since 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, Svobik argues that elections are needed because they make receiving benefits contingent on prior costly service (2012, p. 164). 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 by providing people with goods and services. Blaydes hypothesizes why only some states use elections for this purpose, saying 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, due to the size and cohesion of the ruling regime (p. 232-236).

Blaydes' evidence is indirect. Blaydes hypothesizes that if elections are used to either reward or punish party members, there should be turnover in office so that members can move up through the ranks of the party. Turnover is also indicative of governments demoting party members that are not loyal and competent. Consistent with her claim, Blaydes finds that in Egypt under Hosni Mubarak, there was turnover in office, and that high quality candidates (i.e., those that defeat Muslim Brotherhood candidates) were rewarded with appointed posts. Svobik (2012, p. 195) argues that parties are necessary because dictatorships whose support base is limited to traditional elites—landed aristocracy or owners of capital—will not willingly give up the resources necessary for the party to effectively co-opt citizens. Consistent with his argument, Svobik (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 in countries as studies have shown (Wantchekon 2003; Calvo and Murillo 2004). However, the literature on democratic authoritarianism tends to underplay the instability present in patronage-based systems, and at times, in an ad hoc manner, claiming that the benefits of patronage must outweigh the dangers of it because regimes with legislatures last longer (Blaydes, p. 2; Geddes 2006, p. 6). Patronage carries with it certain risks. When the money undergirding this system dries up, instability can result, as Levitsky and Way (2010) point out was the case during crisis periods in post-Cold War Kenya, Malawi, Senegal, and Zambia (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, like Morgan Tsvangirai, who was a high-ranking member of 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 these bureaucrats 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 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, according to Magaloni, to the unity of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) (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 (Svolik 2010, p. 174).

Finally, elections constrain the ability of regimes to reward particular elites with patronage in order to build support since elections give citizens the authority to select representatives. This is consistent with Slovik (2012)'s 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 represses those that are most distant, because the former is less costly than the latter (p.182).

#### **2.4. Credible Commitment**

Fourth, scholars argue that authoritarian regimes adopt nominally democratic institutions because these institutions allow regimes to credibly commit not to expropriate foreign and domestic investment (Boix 2003; Wright, 2008; Gehlbach and Keefer 2012). Not all of these scholars explicitly link authoritarian legislatures to regime stability. However, authoritarian regimes have been shown to be more stable if they have strong economies -- high GDP, high growth, low inflation and low unemployment (Przeworski 1997; Brancati 2013).

Carles Boix argues, for example, that authoritarian legislatures limit expropriation by dictators by increasing the number of veto players in the political system that serve as checks against attempts by dictators to expropriate (2003, p. 210-213). Expropriation, Boix further argues, is lower when income inequality is lower, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of democratization. Consistent with his argument, Boix shows that corruption and the risk of expropriation are statistically significantly higher for regimes without legislatures than those with legislatures.

Joseph 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. Wright (2008) 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 while legislatures in personalist regimes and monarchies decrease growth (Wright, 2008). Joseph Wright and 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, Scott Gehlbach and Philip Keefer (2011, 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 been expropriated and, thus, allows authoritarian regimes to credibly commit not to expropriate investment by this group. Gehlbach and 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.

While strong property rights increase investment (Lee and Mansfield 1996), strong property rights 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, North and Weingast 1990; Root 1989; Jensen, Malesky and Weymouth 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 authorities, 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 from private actors, not the government. Statistically, they find that international investors do not perceive property rights to be stronger in authoritarian regimes with legislatures than those without them, but that the strength of authoritarian legislatures is associated with corporate governance rules.

## **2.5. Monitoring**

Fifth, scholars argue that authoritarian regimes adopt and utilize nominally democratic institutions so that upper-level regime elites can monitor dictators (Gehlbach and Keefer 2011, 2012; Svolik 2012), and so that dictators can monitor lower-level regime elites (Blaydes 2011; Lorentzen 2009). 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, Svobik argues, reassures elites that actual attempts by the dictator to usurp power will be caught before it is too late, and also prevents misperceptions about the dictator's actions from escalating into regime-destabilizing confrontations.

Some scholars argue, meanwhile, that a free media allows upper-level regime elites to monitor lower-level elites by enabling the former to identify corrupt and incompetent lower-level elites and remove them from office (Blaydes 2011, p.141-145; Lorentzen 2009). Public discontent with corrupt politicians can destabilize regimes if unaddressed. Using the case of China as an example, Lorentzen 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 when they are abundant in natural resources because they can buy off 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, and thus, does not fall squarely within the research agenda of democratic authoritarianism. Deliberative institutions, as Svobik has conceived them, can monitor dictators' behaviors without being democratic by increasing interactions among dictators and upper-level regime elites. Svobik also points out that deliberative and legislative institutions will not stabilize regimes unless there is a credible mechanism to punish transgression by the dictators.<sup>6</sup> This mechanism is not democratic, but demographic, according to Svobik. 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 (Svobik, chp. 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.

### **3. The Way Forward**

Empirically, the literature on democratic authoritarianism faces a number of changes in terms of functionalism, overidentification, and generalizability – some of which are easier to overcome than others.

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<sup>6</sup> See Shepsle (1986) on equilibrium institutions and monitoring.

### 3.1 Distinguish Motivation from Effect

Since it is not possible to identify the intentions of dictators directly, research within this agenda tends to infer the motivation of leaders for adopting these institutions from the outcomes they produce, with a few notable exceptions, i.e. Gandhi (2008), Wright (2008); Ginsburg and Simpser, forthcoming). One can make a strong case that the motivation for adopting these institutions does not matter, and that only the effect that they produce does. However, the democratic authoritarianism literature often claims to explain the former, not just the latter. One cannot infer, though, the intention of dictators from the outcomes that these institutions are associated with for a number of reasons.<sup>7</sup>

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 2006, Brownlee 2007). However, it is doubtful that governments allowed other parties to compete in elections for this purpose since 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 and Snyder 2011), while these institutions may have taken on new roles.<sup>8</sup> Also, as Geddes (2006) points out, dictators in creating institutions, like 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. A politician 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 (2011/12) 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 costs involved in dictators using parties and elections to solidify their regime, makes a functional argument in assessing the value of these risks. Geddes, for example, states that “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” (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,

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<sup>7</sup> See Bates (1988) on the problems of functionalism and institutions.

<sup>8</sup> For a contrary view on “institutional stickiness”, see North (1990) and Pearson 2004.

this may help explain why Gandhi does not find a statistically significant relationship between institutionalized legislatures and the tenure of dictators (2008, p. 177).

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 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 and Subramanian 2007) and leads politicians in power to engage in rent-seeking activities (Djankov, Montalvo, and Reynal-Querol 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 they produce, and analyze them separately.

### **3.2 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, though 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, arguing that civilian regimes need more cooperation than monarchies and militaries, 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), meanwhile, 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, that military regimes, like single-party (civilian) regimes, have more incentives to establish so-called binding legislatures than monarchies and personalist (civilian) regimes because they tend to rely on natural resources for wealth. Gandhi (2008) also uses natural resources to proxy for the need for cooperation, arguing that countries that have a lot of natural resources need less cooperation than those that do not, because they use rents to assure people's acquiescence to their rule, and are less likely, therefore, to have legislatures.

It is also difficult to distinguish among competing effects because many of the institutions examined are collinear, making it difficult to determine which institution, if any, contributes to regime stability. That is, 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 1945-2008 about 95% of legislative elections in authoritarian regimes involved at least one political party.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, it is difficult to

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<sup>9</sup> Figures calculated by author based on data from Svoboda (2012).

distinguish the effect of elections from the effect of legislatures because most authoritarian legislatures are elected. Between 1945-2008, only 13% of authoritarian legislatures were not elected.<sup>10</sup> This is even more challenging in single-country studies because there is often, little if any, 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 about how 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 those without it. Preliminary evidence suggests that parties do not play a role in mobilizing the populace against coup attempts. Between 2005-2011, 18 coup d'état attempts were made. In 6 of these cases, protests occurred against the coup. All 6 countries held multi-party elections prior to the coup d'état. However, so did all 12 countries where protests did not occur against the coup attempts.<sup>11</sup>

Some authors have successfully differentiated their arguments from others by measuring the micro-foundations of their arguments, but more needs to be done in this direction. Blaydes (2011), for example, argues 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 and Schuler (2010) argue that if legislatures are used to manage discontent, then contrary opinions should be expressed in legislatures, which they find occurs in Vietnam. Cox (2009) also attempts to tease out the implications of his argument in relation to election years, though, 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.

### **3.3 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, this literature has employed case studies – qualitative as well as quantitative (Magaloni 2006; Lust-Okar 2008; Blaydes 2011; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Malesky, Schuler, and Tran 2012; Levitsky and 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 -- Egypt (Blaydes 2011), Jordan (Lust-Okar 2008), Mexico (Magaloni 2006), and Vietnam

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<sup>10</sup> Figures calculated by author based on data from Svobik (2012).

<sup>11</sup> Figures calculated by author based on information about coups d'état from Powell and Thyne (2011) and pro-democracy protests from Brancati (2013).

(Malesky and Schuler 2010, Malesky, Schuler, and Tran 2012). The findings from these studies are not clearly generalizable, nor do these scholars necessarily claim that they are. Certain aspects of their arguments are based on particular features of countries that do not exist in other countries, like query sessions in Vietnam (Malesky and Schuler 2010, Malesky, Schuler, and Tran 2012) and formal and informal or normative guarantees of parliamentary immunity in Egypt (Blaydes 2011, p. 55). Some features of these countries may also make certain institutions more effective in some countries than in others, including presidential term-limits (Magaloni 2008) or a governmental monopoly over patronage (Lust-Okar 2008, p.93). They 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 in this program has to move to a broader conceptual-level while still retaining the nuanced evidence gained from the case studies. It should also seek to clarify the parameters under which particular arguments apply.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The democratic authoritarian research agenda is refreshing – unlike other programs, there is an abundance of new ideas in this literature. On the downside, there is a dearth of empirical evidence. One thing, though, this literature has accomplished already -- is to dispel the notion that these institutions -- 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, nor should anyone expect it to either. Nevertheless, the findings from this research program can still help shed light on the generally opaque operation of authoritarian regimes, and offer important insights into other related research agendas on institutions as well.

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