

The Deceptive Nature of Electoral Delegation in Autocracies: Unraveling the Paradox of Power Distribution and Regime Stability

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Abstract: This study investigates the paradoxical relationship between the expansion of electoral power and the entrenchment of autocracy in modern political systems. By examining the three foundational pillars of autocratic stability - legislation, repression, and co-optation - we provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the underlying reasons for autocratic regimes delegating authority to a broader electorate. We argue that this seemingly counterintuitive strategy ultimately serves to prolong the longevity of autocratic regimes by bolstering legitimacy, facilitating more precise repression, and enhancing the effectiveness of co-optation. By analyzing the complex interplay between these factors, we demonstrate how seemingly democratic gestures, such as expanding electoral power, can contribute to authoritarian regimes' persistence and resilience.

1. Introduction: The Paradox of Autocratic Stability and Electoral Delegation

In recent decades, scholars have observed an intriguing development in which autocratic rulers or ruling elites have delegated greater authority to the wider electorate. This strategy serves the ultimate purpose of prolonging the longevity of autocratic regimes. In the following analysis, I will explicate the underlying reasons for this phenomenon by examining its manifestation through the lens of the three foundational pillars of autocratic stability: legislation, repression, and co-optation.

Employing this conceptual framework to scrutinize the phenomenon offers two primary advantages. Firstly, it provides a comprehensive yet parsimonious perspective that accommodates the intricate nature of autocratic regimes, rendering it applicable to a diverse range of autocratic subtypes. Secondly, the framework integrates a static perspective in elucidating stability, emphasizing the salient stabilization mechanisms at play and facilitating both within-case and cross-case comparative analyses.

2. A Comprehensive Framework: Legislation, Repression, and Co-optation

As I proceed with the roadmap for this discourse, I will initially delineate pertinent concepts to establish a clear foundation for the subsequent analysis. Following the clarification of these definitions, I will explore the pillars of autocratic stability – legislation, repression, and co-optation – separately. Ultimately,

I will conclude by asserting that the primary objective of delegating power to a broader electorate is to ensure the persistence of autocratic regimes.

3. Clarifying Concepts: Definitions and Distinctions in Autocracies

To commence, it is essential to delineate key terms before delving into the analysis. In this context, I adopt the definition of dictatorship as proposed by Alvarez, who employed a procedural and minimalist approach to classifying regime types [1].

Accordingly, after accounting for and excluding periods of foreign occupation, state authority collapse, or civil war, a political system can be characterized as a dictatorship if it fails to elect its

legislature and executive through free and competitive elections. This distinction elucidates the inherent differences between authoritarian and democratic political systems.

4. Legislation: Legitimacy and the Weberian Approach

The first pillar of autocratic stability under examination is legislation. Critiques of legislation arise from three distinct perspectives: normative, substantive, and methodological. While some argue that the notion of a 'legitimate autocracy' is normatively oxymoronic, others contend that, substantively, legitimation is inconsequential to autocratic stability, as these regimes do not necessitate popular support. Gerschewski counters these critiques, proposing his interpretation of legitimation grounded in the empirical, Weberian tradition of legitimacy belief. In this view, legitimation is construed as a process of garnering support [2].

Weber's approach aims to classify political rule without resorting to normative judgments pertaining to the 'right rule.' Legitimation endeavors to secure active consent, compliance with established rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration among the populace. Gerschewski invokes Rousseau's famous dictum to counter substantive critics who question the significance of legitimation for maintaining stability, arguing that even the strongest must convert strength into right, as they could never possess sufficient power to maintain perpetual control. Gerschewski contends that a legitimate principle underlies every political order, suggesting that contemporary autocracies cannot solely rely on the unrestrained exercise of power. Instead, he posits that more complex interdependencies exist between rulers and their subjects.

Empirical cases from Mexico, the Arab world, and China provide systematic evidence for this argument, underscoring the critical importance of autocratic regimes to establish a robust legitimizing foundation. Although a comprehensive comparative study of legitimation in autocracies remains outstanding, these cases demonstrate its crucial significance. Gerschewski's analysis of North Korea and Cuba further indicates that autocratic regimes are more performance-dependent than commonly assumed, advocating for incorporating performance and output legitimation as alternative sources of legitimation.

Additionally, Gerschewski differentiates between "diffuse" and "specific support" within the concept of legitimation. Ultimately, he proposes methods for measuring legislation, asserting that, under the assumption that ruling elites must adhere to their ideological promises in autocratic contexts, a perceived discrepancy between these promises and social reality undermines the legitimizing foundation for the autocratic elite.

4.1 Autocracies and Elections: Bolstering Legitimacy

Expanding upon the perspectives presented, I shall elucidate the rationale for delegating power to a broader electorate within the context of autocratic regimes. Conferring increased authority to a broader electorate can bolster the perceived legitimacy of autocracies, thereby contributing to their endurance.

Specifically, elections establish legitimacy for autocrats both domestically and internationally [3]. Even though elections in autocratic contexts may be susceptible to manipulation or wield limited political influence, they still convey signals to domestic and international audiences, indicating that the regime's establishment is predicated on a pervasive willingness. Consequently, when power is conferred to an expanded electorate, a more significant number of individuals may "lend" their votes to reinforce the legitimacy of autocracies, ultimately promoting their persistence. Schedler's perspective further substantiates this argument, as he asserts that "by opening the apex of state power to multiparty elections, authoritarian electoral regimes establish the primacy of democratic legitimation... [electoral authoritarian] regimes institute the principle of popular consent, even as they subvert it in practice." [4].

5. Repression: High-Intensity and Low-Intensity Coercion

Shifting our focus to the second pillar of autocratic regime maintenance, repression, it is essential

to analyze its role and impact on the longevity of autocracies.

Gerschewski posits that repression is crucial in autocratic regimes, potentially even defining their nature. However, it is essential to note that repression alone cannot ensure the long-term stability of autocracies, as its implementation can be costly and resource-intensive.

Davenport characterizes repression as the actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against individuals or organizations within a state's jurisdiction to impose costs on targets and deter specific activities. The primary function of repression is to manage public demands in relation to the political system, ensuring that these demands do not jeopardize the regime's stability. Levitsky and Way classify repression into two categories based on the targeted individuals or institutions and the type of violence employed: high-intensity and low-intensity coercion.

High-intensity coercion is typically conspicuous and directed at prominent individuals or organizations, such as opposition leaders or groups. This type of repression often involves brutal measures, like suppressing mass demonstrations or conducting assassinations. In contrast, low-intensity coercion is generally less visible and employs more subtle tactics, such as low-level physical harassment, intimidation, and non-physical forms of coercion, including denial of employment or educational opportunities.

5.1 The Informational Function of Elections in Autocracies

At first glance, repression may appear unrelated to power distribution among the broader electorate. However, I add that empowering the broader electorate can contribute to more precise repression, which can help sustain autocratic regimes. In particular, elections can serve an informational function, allowing regime incumbents to identify their support bases and opposition strongholds [5]. With this knowledge, autocratic regimes can target opposition areas by reducing government support, purchasing loyalty, or intimidating opponents into changing allegiances or abstaining from voting in future elections. Consequently, the more power vested in, the broader electorate, the more accurate information autocrats can obtain, which may ultimately enhance their ability to maintain control.

6. Co-optation: Integrating Selectors into the Winning Coalition

The final pillar contributing to autocracies' longevity is co-optation, which can be understood as the capacity to incorporate strategically relevant actors or groups into the regime elite. As proposed by Mesquita, members of the "selectors" must be integrated into the "winning coalition." This necessitates persuading these actors to utilize their power and resources in alignment with the ruling elite's demands rather than opposing them. The function of co-optation in this context is primarily inclusive, ensuring not only intra-elite cohesion but also the mentoring capacity of political elites. For the stability of authoritarian regimes, the political elite must maintain a balance between competing subordinate actors and prevent excessively powerful actors by incorporating all relevant power sources.

6.1 Elections as a Tool for Co-optation and Fragmenting Opposition

In considering co-optation, I contend that expanding power to a broader electorate enhances the effectiveness of co-optation, thereby contributing to the endurance of autocracies. Elections can be viewed as an institutional tool that dictators use to co-opt elites, party members, or larger societal groups [6]. Specifically, elites may perceive elections as an efficient or fair method of resource allocation, as their attainment of political office and associated benefits is contingent upon individual efforts to court and persuade voters. In this manner, autocrats can ensure that popular elites are allied with the regime and remain committed to advancing its objectives. Furthermore, elections assist incumbents in maintaining their connections with elites by discouraging defection among ruling coalition members. Autocratic regimes can employ various tactics, such as vote-buying or intimidation, to compel voter support. Overwhelming electoral victories ultimately signal to elites within the regime that opposing the regime is futile.

In addition to co-opting elites, elections can also serve to co-opt opposition forces. By permitting

non-regime-sponsored candidates and parties to participate in local and legislative elections, dictators offer a pathway to political office that can bestow benefits and influence decision-making capacity. By doing so, autocratic regimes use elections to fragment opposition forces, further solidifying their control.

7. Conclusion: The Paradox Resolved - Delegation for Autocratic Endurance

In light of the analysis above, I argue that although the expansion of power to a wider electorate in an authoritarian regime may initially appear to be a democratic gesture, the reality is that the overall level of democracy is progressively diminishing. The three critical pillars of autocracies—legitimation, repression, and co-optation—are instrumental in preserving the stability and longevity of authoritarian regimes. As demonstrated in the preceding discussion, elections within such contexts effectively reinforce these pillars.

In conclusion, the primary objective of extending power to a broader electorate within an autocratic system is to bolster the three foundational pillars of autocracies, thereby significantly contributing to the endurance and resilience of authoritarian regimes. This seemingly paradoxical relationship between expanded electoral power and the entrenchment of autocracy underscores the complexities of political systems and the often counterintuitive strategies authoritarian regimes employ to maintain control.

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