

Milan W. Svobik

Incentives, Institutions, and the Challenges to Research on Authoritarian Politics¹

The difference between dictatorship and democracy is a distinction central to many research questions in political science. Most of the continuing debates about regime types concern concepts and measurement: Is the difference between dictatorship and democracy one of kind or one of degree? How many political regime types are there? Should only procedural or also substantive indicators be considered?²

In this essay, I approach the contrast between dictatorship and democracy from a different vantage point. I discuss how differences between authoritarian and democratic politics shape and limit our efforts to map and explain the world authoritarian politics. I suggest that authoritarian politics is distinctive in two key ways: first, in dictatorships, no independent authority has the power to enforce agreements among key actors; and second, in authoritarian politics, violence is the ultimate arbiter of political conflicts. These features result in a number of challenges to theory building, inference, and measurement in the study of authoritarianism.

Consider the first of the two differences between authoritarian and democratic politics that I just previewed: Unlike democracies, dictatorships lack an independent authority with the power to compel key actors to comply with their commitments. Authoritarian high courts, for instance, although de jure supreme, are de facto subservient to the incumbent, rarely ruling against the rulers.³ This is because the presence of a formal authority with the power to bind key players in dictatorships would imply a check on the very powers that most of them aim to acquire. In turn, commitment problems abound. Whether it is the regime's promise to play fair in elections, the dictator's promise to share power with his allies, or the repressive agents' promise to remain loyal in the face of mass opposition, in authoritarian regimes, neither can be realistically expected to be enforced by a third party.

¹ Parts of this essay build on my recent book *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). I would like to thank José Cheibub and Bonnie Weir for comments and discussions.

² See e.g. Boix et al. (Forthcoming), Cheibub et al. (2010), Coppedge et al. (2011), Diamond (2002), Elkins (2000), Levitsky and Way (2010), Trier and Jackman (2008), Pemstein et al. (2010).

³ Ginsburg et al. (Forthcoming), Ginsburg and Moustafa (2008).

This concern is compounded by the prominent role that violence plays in resolving political conflicts in authoritarian politics. By my count, about two-thirds of all leadership changes in dictatorships between 1946 and 2008 were non-constitutional – they departed from official rules or established conventions. Furthermore, almost one-half of all leadership changes involved the military, and about one-third of them were accompanied by overt violence.⁴ Thus when formal rules and institution appear to govern authoritarian politics, it may not be because of their binding power but because the alternative of resolving political conflicts by brute force looms in the background.

These differences between authoritarian and democratic politics imply a number of distinct challenges in the study of authoritarianism. In theory building, the lack of an authority with the power to enforce commitments and the pervasive use of violence place a high bar on what reasonably counts as an “explanation.” When it comes to inference, these features of authoritarian politics exacerbate concerns about the endogeneity of presumed causes to their effects. And in measurement, the tentative binding power of institutions in authoritarian politics raises questions about which institutions and decision makers actually matter -- doubts that we rarely encounter in the study of democratic politics.

Consider theory building. When I say that dictatorships lack an authority with the power to enforce agreements among key actors and that violence is the ultimate arbiter of conflict in authoritarian politics, I am not suggesting that -- because of these two features -- all dictatorships resolve conflict violently, no promises will ever be kept, and formal institutions are irrelevant. Neither am I suggesting that the exact opposite holds under democracy. Rather, I propose that the lack of an authority with the power to enforce agreements and the pervasive use of violence imply a major difference in the assumptions that we can reasonably make when we build explanations of authoritarian politics.

In the study of democratic politics, institutions and rules that presumably allocate power can be realistically expected to do so. When Cox (1997) studies the coordination dilemmas that electoral systems create for voters and parties, he can safely assume that the rules that govern electoral competition indeed do so. Such a “partial equilibrium” analysis is warranted because the relevance of electoral rules for allocating power in democracies is rarely in question. By definition, any government that would circumvent a major constitutional provision would no longer be considered democratic.

⁴ This data can be accessed at <http://publish.illinois.edu/msvolik/the-politics-of-authoritarian-rule/>.

In the study of authoritarian politics, compliance with institutions is as much of a puzzle as are the consequences those institutions. When it comes to theory building, explanations of authoritarian politics must therefore examine the “full” rather than the “partial” political equilibrium: we must explain not only the political consequences of rules and institutions but also why, given their consequences, key actors have an incentive to comply with them. Put in the jargon of contemporary political science, both behavior *and* the institutions that presumably govern it must be self-enforcing.⁵

Take term limits. This institution is frequently studied in democracies but rarely in dictatorships.⁶ This is in spite of the fact that term limits – and more often their circumvention – have played a prominent role in the rise many autocrats. When the Chilean junta came to power in 1973, for instance, it aspired to a system of collective rule bound by term limits on the chief executive. The junta was initially supposed to govern by unanimous consent and its presidency was to rotate among its four members. Soon, however, Pinochet came to dominate: In 1974, he compelled other members of the junta to appoint him president, replaced unanimous decision making by a majority rule, and foreclosed any further considerations of rotation of the presidency. In 1978, Pinochet expelled from the junta Gustavo Leigh, the air-force representative and his most vocal opponent. From that moment on, according to Arriagada (1988, 37), Pinochet began to act as “the de facto, if not the de jure, Generalissimo of the Armed Forces.”⁷

Compare Pinochet’s Chile to contemporary China: Term limits have been a central feature the political machinery that has governed Chinese leadership politics since Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the 1980s. Under Deng's leadership, the newly revised Constitution of the People's Republic of China prohibited certain officials from serving concurrently in more than one leadership post, adopted mandatory retirement ages at various levels of the government hierarchy, and limited tenure at top government posts to two consecutive five-year terms (Baum 1997, Manion 1992). At the same time, norms

⁵ Przeworski (1991), Geddes (1999), and Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003) were among the first to emphasize the need for an “equilibrium analysis” of authoritarian politics and democratization in their study of self-enforcing democracy, authoritarian breakdowns, and selectorate theory, respectively.

⁶ For an exception, see Franz and Stein (2013).

⁷ For an account of Pinochet's consolidation of power within the junta, see also Constable and Valenzuela (1993) and Spooner (1999). According to Barros (2002), Pinochet never attained the absolute dominance commonly attributed to him.

developed according to which analogous term limits and retirement-age provisions applied to members of key Communist Party bodies. Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin, at first politically exploited mandatory retirement-age provisions when he invoked them to retire opponents within the leadership in 1997. Yet the same term and age provisions eventually came to limit Jiang Zemin's and his successor Hu Jintao's time in office when both were compelled to step down at the end of their second term. Likewise, Xi Jinping, the current "paramount" leader of China, is expected to relinquish all of his posts after two five-year terms in office.

At first sight, the implications of term limits appear obvious: a term limit on a leader's tenure amounts to a line in the sand. Its violation is easily observable and thus reveals a leader's true ambitions to both those within and outside the regime. Yet the most important political consequences of term limits, in my view, are more subtle and indicative of the reason why only few dictatorships establish effectively constraining term limits.

A term limit does not merely place a sharp limit on a leader's time in office. The political retirement of an authoritarian leader typically implies the departure of an entire generation of officials. Thus once in place, term limits coordinate the political horizons of multiple generations of authoritarian elites: They encourage ambitious political clients to invest their careers in their own generation of leaders rather than the current but only temporary cohort of elites. In turn, a dictator who is intent on overstaying an established term limit must anticipate opposition from not only his heir apparent but also from the multitude of clients who have invested their careers in patrons belonging to the next generation of leadership. This is why PRI-era Mexicans were able to retire their dictators every six years, as Brandenburg (1964, 141) eloquently put it.

Hence the primary reason why dictators do not like term limits is not because they fear breaking rules. Rather, the political bite of term limits is in their ability to coordinate over time the political investments of a large number of clients.⁸ The resulting incentives help us understand why binding term limits emerge only when power is distributed evenly among authoritarian elites: only then can the first generation of leadership facing term limits be realistically expected to step down and thus initiate the

⁸ Similar incentives may account for why most aging dictators avoid anointing a successor.

expectation of future alternations in power among the army of clients at lower ranks of the political hierarchy.⁹ In the case of China, the effective adoption of term limits was made possible by the even balance of power that emerged within the Chinese political elite after the departure of Mao's and Deng's revolutionary generation. Mao and Deng commanded personal authority grounded in revolutionary achievements and charismatic personalities that eclipsed any of their contemporaries. By contrast, Jiang, Hu, and Xi have been regarded as "firsts among equals" within two evenly balanced political coalitions in the Chinese leadership (Miller 2004, Huang 2008).

The requirement that our explanations account for both the consequences of institutions and the compliance with them also highlights the challenges to the empirical evaluation of propositions about authoritarian politics. The need to model institutions as self-enforcing equilibria significantly limits the number of factors that can be considered exogenous. In democracies, major constitutional provisions – like whether the executive is bound by a term limit – can be considered both binding and given, at least in the short run. My discussion of term limits in dictatorships, by contrast, suggested that compliance with them is endogenous to the balance of power among the authoritarian elite. An empirical study of term limits in dictatorships that would ignore this endogeneity might naively conclude that their adoption in *any* dictatorship would automatically prevent the emergence of personal autocracy. The distinctive features of authoritarian politics thus amplify concerns about the endogeneity of presumed causes that we frequently encounter in other subfields of political science.¹⁰

The two distinguishing features of authoritarian politics – the lack of an independent authority with the power to enforce agreements among key actors and the pivotal role of violence – also complicate the measurement of the institutional make-up of dictatorships. A major dilemma in authoritarian politics is not only *whether* institutions matter for the conduct of authoritarian politics but also *which* institutions and leaders should matter in the first place.

By now for instance, it has become apparent that the effective head of the Russian government is neither the President of the Russian Federation nor its Prime Minister. Rather it is Vladimir Putin -- regardless of the official post that he confers upon himself. Putin's political transubstantiation has

⁹ This argument is developed in Boix and Svoboda (2013) and Chapter 4 in Svoboda (2012).

¹⁰ On endogeneity concerns in comparative politics and the study of authoritarianism, see also Przeworski (2009) and Pepinsky (Forthcoming).

parallels across the world of authoritarian politics. The Great Benefactor Rafael Trujillo formally led the Dominican Republic during only 18 of the 31 years of his de facto rule. Fearing criticism by the United States and the Organization of American States, he interspersed his years in power with four pliant substitutes, including his brother Héctor. Meanwhile Deng Xiaoping, who is universally regarded as the “paramount” leader of China between 1978 and 1992, avoided any titular confirmation of his powers in an attempt to distance himself from his domineering predecessor (MacFarquhar 1997, Vogel 2011).

Unfortunately, the nominal resemblance of many institutions in dictatorships -- especially legislatures, parties, and even some elections -- to institutions in democracies is poor guidance for their conceptualization in authoritarian politics. Consider again the case of term limits. When political scientists study term limits in the context of democratic politics, their focus is most often on how term limits affect electoral accountability and legislative representation.¹¹ By contrast, my earlier discussion suggests that the primary role of term limits in dictatorships is to reproduce a balance of power among the authoritarian elite that will prevent the usurpation of power by any single leader or faction – a very different and uniquely authoritarian concern. Likewise, rather than coordinate the political activities of like-minded citizens (see, e.g., Aldrich 1995), regime parties in dictatorships appear to instead co-opt the most capable and opportunistic among the masses in order to strengthen the regime. Thus while many institutions in dictatorships nominally mirror their democratic counterparts, their political ends may be distinctively authoritarian.

The questionable relevance and function of many political institutions in dictatorships is compounded by their diversity. By most definitions, the world of authoritarian politics ranges from cases like PRI-era Mexico, whose institutions posed as democratic in form, to traditional polities like the neofeudal Saudi Arabia, to idiosyncratic regimes like Iran with its overlapping system of republican and religious authorities, to contemporary China with its Leninist institutional hardware.¹² As Barbara Geddes concluded, “different kinds of authoritarianism differ from each other as much as they differ from democracy” (1999, 121).

This institutional diversity obtains partly because dictatorship is a residual category that contains all countries that do not meet established criteria for democracy and partly because of dictatorship’s richer

¹¹ See e.g. Besley and Case (1995) and Carey (1996).

¹² I am paraphrasing McGregor’s (2010) observation that contemporary China is still running on “Soviet hardware.”

and longer pedigree. Whereas democracy has historically followed a few institutional blueprints, dictatorship's richer and longer pedigree combines institutional models from multiple centuries and levels of development. Barbara Geddes's (1999) classification of dictatorships into personalist, military, and single-party types is one of the first and most productive efforts to map and organize the institutional make-up of authoritarianism. The wave of both substantive research on authoritarian politics as well as competing data collection efforts that followed Geddes's original work is evidence of the catalyzing effect that publicly shared data can have on comparative political research.¹³

In spite of this progress, however, our large-N data on authoritarian politics are mostly confined to the post-World War II period. This temporal limitation may be significantly biasing our conclusions about the political organization of dictatorships, the process of regime change, and the consequences of authoritarian institutions.

Consider how the Cold War affected the political organization of dictatorships: In much of Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa, the institutional infrastructure of authoritarianism followed the Leninist single-party blueprint. When it wasn't directly dictated from Moscow, the Leninist blueprint was encouraged as a part of the Soviet package for prospective Third World clients and even managed to inspire a few Baathist copycats. Meanwhile, the emergence of the highly bureaucratic, conservative, and exclusionary military regimes among many U.S. clients was a parallel reaction to Lenin's, Mao's, and Castro's improbable revolutions.¹⁴

In turn, our conclusions about the distribution of regime types, their longevity, and the process of regime change may be unduly shaped by the limits of our data. The emergence and demise of single-party and military dictatorships may have as much to do with Cold War geopolitics as with the intrinsic features of these regimes' political organization.¹⁵ Meanwhile, when Diamond (2002), Levitsky and Way

¹³ As of April 2013, Geddes's 1999 article, which is the primary reference for her data, has been cited more than 650 times. Subsequent and alternative sources of data on authoritarian politics include Gandhi (2008), Geddes et al (2013), Magaloni and Kricheli (2010), Przeworki et al (2000), and Svoboda (2012).

¹⁴ See also, Boix (2011). For a parallel argument about how the Cold War affected the nature of civil wars, see Kalyvas and Balcells (2010).

¹⁵ On authoritarian parties, see e.g. Boix and Svoboda (2013), Brownlee (2007), Geddes (2008), Gehlbach and Keefer (2008), Greene (2007), Levitsky and Way (2010), Magaloni (2006), Magaloni and Kricheli (2010), Malesky and Schuler (2010), Smith (2005), and Svoboda (2012, Chapter 6). On military dictatorships, see e.g. Debs (2009), Geddes (1999), Remmer (1989), Rivero (2011), Rouquié (1987), and Svoboda (2012, Chapter 5).

(2010), Bunce and Wolchik (2011), and Schedler (Forthcoming) observe the rise of hybrid regimes after the end of the Cold War, they may be correctly identifying a shift in the distribution of regimes in the post-Cold War period but at the same time mischaracterizing its unprecedented nature. By most historical accounts, the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century was replete with competitive dictatorships and defective democracies. Hence rather than new and exceptional, hybrid regimes may be the historical norm, and rather than representative, the sharply delineated single-party and military dictatorships of our existing data may be an aberrant institutional byproduct of the Cold War.

To recapitulate: I have argued that -- compared to democratic politics -- authoritarian politics takes place under distinctively toxic conditions. In dictatorships, no independent authority has the power to enforce commitments among key actors and violence is the ultimate arbiter of conflicts. While neither of these concerns is unique to authoritarian politics, their combination and severity amplifies many of the challenges to theory building, inference, and measurement that we encounter in other areas of political science.

I suggested that when we propose explanations of authoritarian politics, we must examine the “full” rather than the “partial” political equilibrium -- we must explain why both behavior and the institutions that presumably govern it are self-enforcing. This is because for every institutional resolution of a political conflict under dictatorship, there is a crude alternative in which force plays a decisive role. In turn, when we evaluate our claims empirically, we cannot take authoritarian institutions as given and confront concerns about endogeneity in causal inference.

Meanwhile, the questionable relevance of formal political institutions in dictatorships results in distinct challenges to measurement and data collection. Because of the potential disconnect between formal institutions and de-facto power, which authoritarian institutions and leaders matter is frequently far from obvious. In many dictatorships, the man who gives orders may not reside in the presidential palace but rather across the street from it.¹⁶

A final challenge arises out of the limited scope of our large-N data on authoritarian politics. Today’s oligarchs of the United Russia Party and the anti-liberal populists of Latin America may be closer to the

¹⁶ I am paraphrasing a saying about Plutarco Calles's continuing influence after he resigned from the Mexican presidency; see Krauze (1997, 430).

aristocratic republics of the 19th century and the imperfect democracies of the interwar years than the Leninist single-parties and reactionary juntas that we so often encounter in our existing data. The latter may be the byproducts of the Cold War and thus distorting our image of authoritarianism.

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