

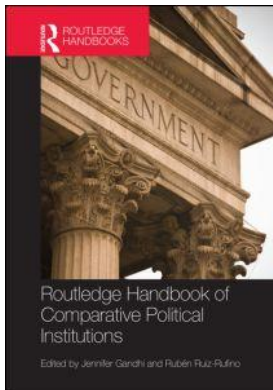
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AUTHORITARIAN INSTITUTIONS

Clara Boulianne Lagacé and Jennifer Gandhi

Introduction

In democracies, institutions are often taken as “given,” allowing us to examine the effects of those institutions on outcomes. Electoral rules influence the behavior of voters and parties, resulting in a variety of consequences for party systems (see Negretto, Chapter 9). Rules governing center-peripheral relations influence the economic policies of regional governments and the social and political demands of ethnic minorities (see Beramendi and León, Chapter 15). The internal organization of legislatures determines how legislation is proposed and voted upon, strongly influencing policy outcomes (see Alemán, Chapter 11). In all of these cases, scholars examine institutions-as-rules, or how institutions affect behavior which, in turn, determines outcomes.

In dictatorships, however, those same institutions—legislatures, parties, elections, courts, and federalism—exist, but usually at the discretion of rulers and their supporting elites. As a result, elections are sometimes postponed or cancelled; partisan activity is sometimes banned; the realm of legislatures and courts may be radically curtailed; and the autonomy of lower levels of government may disappear. And just as quickly, these institutions may be reinstated or changed in other ways. Because these institutions cannot be taken as “given,” any analysis of their effects often must deal with the prior question of why they exist in the first place. In this sense, scholars of authoritarianism often do not analyze institutions-as-rules alone, but also institutions-as-equilibria. Given the nature of authoritarian institutions, they must engage in full, not only partial, equilibrium analysis (see Svobik, Chapter 6).

Because of the focus on institutions-as-equilibria in dictatorships, we review the different functions institutions—elections, parties, legislatures, courts, and federalism—have been purported to serve. They enable autocrats to carry out some critical tasks, including information gathering, co-optation, credible commitments, conflict resolution, and signaling. In addition, institutions can help autocrats minimize future losses and diffuse responsibility. Thinking of institutions as solutions to problems faced by autocrats, however, leads to the emergence of deeper questions. For instance, many of the functions enumerated require that institutions actually be able to constrain dictators. But given endogeneity issues, can they ever really act as exogenous constraints? Further, institutions are often studied in isolation from each other, which means little has been done to understand how they might be either complementary or

redundant, and what these relationships say about the choices autocrats make. How do autocrats come to adopt “bundles” of institutions? Are institutions sometimes adopted as a solution to problems created by other institutions? This last question is also a reminder that while institutions can be solutions, they also carry their own risks. By discussing such issues, the second part of the chapter highlights tensions in our understanding of authoritarian institutions that deserve further inquiry.

Functions of authoritarian institutions

Information gathering

In order to maintain power (and possibly govern) effectively, dictators require information. They may need information about citizens’ electoral and policy preferences. National leaders also may want to keep tabs on local and bureaucratic officials. Due to circumscribed media and the costliness of secret police, dictators may use institutions, such as legislatures, parties, and elections, in order to obtain these different pieces of information.

Authoritarian leaders may seek information about the identity of their supporters in order to know the location and strength of their loyalist bases. Conversely, they may want information about opposition supporters in order to target suppressive efforts. Elections provide this information by revealing the geographical distribution of citizens’ preferences for (or against) the government, although it is not clear how this goal can be reconciled with the need to win elections through means that obscure the accuracy of this information (e.g. fraud, manipulation) (Malesky and Schuler 2011). The degree to which this trade-off is managed may depend on the type of fraud committed. Alternatively, incumbents may glean information on popular support in the presence of manipulative and fraudulent electoral practices if such practices remain stable over the course of multiple elections. Finally, notwithstanding fraud and the manipulation of rules, campaign rallies, illegal protests, and the size of crowds at polling stations are all publicly observable and should remain unaffected by electoral fraud and manipulation (Cox 2009: 12).

Authoritarian leaders may want information about citizens’ preferences over policies as well—in order to maintain the support of a sufficient proportion of the population. Parties are generally able to gather such information when they are institutionalized, and more specifically when they are organizationally complex and rooted in society (Huntington and Moore 1970). For instance, party cells are the most basic units of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and usually include 3 to 35 members (Koh 2006: 45). The information they gather, through close contact with the population but also through the election of party cell representatives, can then travel upward within the party structure and reach higher-level officials. In general, rootedness in society

allows the party to maintain constant dialogue with its constituents, which enables the organization to respond to needs at the grass roots effectively. In turn, constant feedback from the grass roots strengthens the party’s grip on power by ensuring that it is responsive to the members’ needs.

(Kuhonta 2011: 26)

Alternatively, legislatures can provide information about citizens’ preferences depending on how they are designed. Malesky and Schuler (2010) find that a higher proportion of local, full-time delegates who obtain their seats through more competitive elections to the Vietnamese

National Assembly increases the likelihood that they will provide information to the regime by acting as “real” representatives. Likewise, elections may provide information about the intensity of citizens’ views. Enough citizens willing to vote against the regime—even at the risk of losing their material benefits—serves as a signal to the government about the intensity of their dissatisfaction over certain policies (Miller n.d.).

Like democratic rulers, authoritarian ones must delegate tasks to local officials and bureaucrats, requiring monitoring of these agents in an effort to prevent or punish moral hazard. Local elections may serve as a venue in which citizens—through their electoral choices—provide national leaders with this information about their local agents (Landry 2009). If citizens suffer under corrupt or incompetent local officials, they can send information about this state of affairs to national leaders by voting their incumbent local leaders out of office. High turnover in legislative seats in Egypt, for example, enabled the Mubarak regime to determine which elites command the most popular support within their constituencies and require co-optation (Blaydes 2010). In Vietnam, the Communist Party has stated that centrally nominated candidates who fail to win more than 60 percent of the vote must undergo self-criticism, indicating the importance of information on delegates’ popularity (Salomon 2007: 203). Nonetheless, the evidence about whether and how authoritarian leaders use citizens’ evaluations to identify whom to promote and punish is at times contradictory. Malesky and Schuler (2013), using data on the 2007 Vietnamese National Assembly, argue that promotion to leadership positions has not been related to the electoral performance of delegates, but rather to whether or not the VCP had previously nominated them as electoral candidates. Similarly, Chinese authorities have devised a number of ways to subvert “disagreeable” electoral outcomes at the village level (Zhenglin and Bernstein 2004).

Alternatively, central government leaders may want information about how their agents perform in ways that are not a reflection of citizens’ evaluations, and both legislatures and elections can help in this regard. Legislatures can provide opportunities for delegates to signal their loyalty when they choose to speak less often and less critically of the regime (Malesky and Schuler 2013). Elections may serve as a test of local officials’ willingness and ability to deliver votes to the regime (Malesky and Schuler 2011; Blaydes 2010). In Russia, for example, the regime uses elections to gather information about the political loyalty of governors (Reuter and Robertson 2012). Governors who manage to deliver votes to the regime signal their political loyalty, and this information is, in turn, used by the regime for future appointments. Gathering information about both citizens and elites would seem to be a prerequisite for authoritarian institutions to perform other functions, such as co-optation.

Co-optation

In any authoritarian regime, there are three (sometimes overlapping) populations with whom autocratic leaders must manage their relations: the mass public, elites, and the opposition. People who are located outside of the regime and do not have access to significant resources constitute the mass public while elites are individuals with access to resources that give them some measure of power. Regime elites, for example, are a type of elite who derive (some of) their power from their participation in the regime. Finally, the opposition includes both elites and citizens who oppose the regime. Co-optation is a broad, general term that refers to “bringing people in” with any of these three populations being the target. And while co-optation can occur outside of institutional settings, it also occurs in distinct ways through parties, elections, and legislatures.

Co-optation of the mass public can occur either when individuals are given benefits directly through regime intermediaries or when the regime provides diffuse benefits to the whole

population. Both give the mass public a vested stake in the continuation of the regime. For instance, focusing on economic growth can be one way for authoritarian regimes to generate support by providing widespread benefits to their population. A more direct form of co-optation of the masses occurs when intermediaries between the regime and the masses help procure and distribute the benefits to individuals. To the extent that these types of clientelistic programs and other types of policy concessions are enacted through law, legislatures are an important institution (Gandhi 2008; Kim and Gandhi 2010). Policy congruence between constituents and their public officials may occur through legislatures (Truex 2014a) or through elections (Manion 1996). The mass public can also be co-opted through mass organizations when these organizations are used to distribute benefits to their members.

Co-optation of the opposition usually occurs through the legalization of political parties and their participation in elections and the legislature, which may serve to create “insiders” who develop a vested interest in the maintenance of the regime (Lust-Okar 2005). For “insiders,” the boundary between opposition and regime elite often becomes progressively blurred. “Outsiders”—who have forgone the benefits of legalization—in turn become increasingly marginalized. The fact that legislatures increase the likelihood of authoritarian regime survival may be one direct consequence of this dynamic (Gandhi 2008; Wright and Escribà-Folch 2011).

Co-optation of elites is necessary to deter threats from among their ranks to create a stable basis for authoritarian rule. When no one in a nascent regime has enough power to rule alone, the initial recruitment of elites is critical for regime stability. In these circumstances, the ability of elites to act collectively often determines the regime’s chances of survival and the form it will adopt (Brownlee 2007; Slater 2010). The incentives for elites to act collectively depend on the distribution of material and coercive resources (Svolik 2012) and the presence of mass or external threats (Slater 2010). But once a coalition of elites supports the regime, institutions are critical in maintaining these alliances.

In maintaining elite cohesion, institutions are important for distributing rents. Legislatures serve this purpose (Truex 2014b; Lust-Okar 2006) along with regime parties (Geddes 1999; Magaloni 2006). For recruiting elites, legislative seats and positions within the regime party provide avenues for career advancement. To the extent that these institutions provide rules or norms about the criteria and procedure for promotion, they routinize the process, which generates stable expectations for elites (Svolik 2012; Reuter and Remington 2009). These institutions, however, must balance the demands for recruiting fresh members with new ideas, resources, and popular constituencies against the continuous cultivation of support among existing elites.

Credible commitments

Institutions that are independent of and constrain executive authority enable leaders to credibly commit to policies that are favorable to the interests of asset-holders. This argument has been made about institutions such as legislatures, courts, and central banks in democracies. The same argument has been made about institutions in autocracies. In military and party dictatorships, legislatures are able to bind autocrats so that the latter can make credible commitments that lead to higher investment and growth (Wright 2008). Courts with independent authority also indicate that the government is constrained and therefore capable of making a credible commitment (Moustafa 2009). Federalism can act in a similar manner when the central and regional governments constrain each other. When regional governments control some realms of economic policymaking and can operate competitively, “market-preserving federalism” provides incentives for agents to make growth-enhancing investments (Weingast 1995; Montinola *et al.*

1995).¹ Greater investment, in turn, can strengthen the ability of regional governments to serve as a check on the center (Malesky 2008).

The issue is that with institutions that cannot enforce their own decisions, let alone maintain their institutional integrity in the face of executive dominance, it is unclear just how credible are the commitments of dictators. In Egypt, for example, Sadat established an independent high court and Mubarak encouraged it in order to attract greater investment (Moustafa 2009). The government obeyed the court's rulings (even those that were against the government) until it decided that it no longer wanted to do so (e.g. in human rights and security cases). With the high court helpless in enforcing its rulings and unable to stop the executive from curbing its powers, to what extent could investors have found the court's existence as evidence of the government's credibility? The same is true for legislatures: if dictators do not like the actions or policies produced by assemblies, what would prevent them from curtailing their powers or closing them?

As a result, institutions probably play a more modest and nuanced role in enabling credible commitments. Svobik (2012) argues that they play an important, albeit partial, role in enabling autocratic leaders to credibly commit to power-sharing with elites. A leader follows through on his commitment to share power only when he faces a credible threat of punishment from elites, and the credibility of this threat depends on the extent to which elites can collectively act to punish the leader for any defection from the power-sharing bargain. Formal deliberative, decision-making institutions do two additional things. First, regular interaction within institutions such as politburos, advisory councils, and legislatures increases transparency, enabling elites to monitor what the leader is doing. The ease of monitoring, in turn, "reassures the allies that actual attempts by the dictator to usurp power will be caught before it is too late" (90). Second, formal rules about membership, jurisdiction, and procedures enable the dictator and elites to have a shared understanding of what constitutes a transgression of the power-sharing agreement. As such, institutions facilitate detection of the dictator's non-compliance (easing the collective action among elites à la Weingast's 1997 argument) and prevent misperceptions of the dictator's actions from escalating into conflict. Svobik (2012) applies this argument to legislatures and Reuter and Remington (2009) evoke a similar idea when it comes to the creation of dominant parties. Institutions facilitate power-sharing, but on their own, they are not enough for dictators to be able to make credible commitments since elites still need to punish transgressions themselves.

Conflict resolution

Institutions or rules that govern the relationship among elites within the regime may also prevent costly conflicts that potentially can destabilize regimes. In Chile, the rules that governed the operation of the junta allowed for the regularized processing of conflicts among the junta members since its members frequently were not united in their policy preferences (Barros 2002). Institutions may simply enable for smoother, more regularized division of the spoils among regime elites. Regime parties provide multiple opportunities for advancement and rules for obtaining them so that elites need not view the fulfillment of career ambitions as a zero-sum game (Geddes 1999; Reuter and Remington 2009). In Mexico under the PRI, for example, those who were not chosen to become successor to the outgoing president were given important party positions (Castañeda 2001). Rules within dynastic monarchies diminish the likelihood of internecine conflict about succession, enabling these regimes to avoid the Achilles' heel of many autocracies (Herb 1999). What these examples suggest is that whether dealing with policy, spoils, or succession, in the absence of rules and institutions, elites would engage in costly conflicts.

Signaling

Authoritarian institutions also provide signals to a variety of different actors about particular attributes of the regime. Most important is the ability of institutions to convey government credibility. Legislatures and courts, for example, may signal to investors that executive power is constrained enough so that they need not worry about expropriation. Similarly, institutions may make the actions of governments in the international arena more credible. Weeks (2008) argues that party and military regimes (as opposed to personalist ones) face credible audience costs in that regime elites have the means and incentives to coordinate to punish the leader for backing down. Critically, other states can observe these mechanisms for domestic accountability and hence will take them into account when dealing with threats made by these autocracies. Similarly, even flawed elections can provide costly and confirmatory signals of resolve to international actors. As pro-incumbent bias in an election declines and the likelihood that incumbents transfer *de facto* political power increases, the more credible the signal of resolve becomes (Kinne and Marinov 2013). Not only do more competitive elections demonstrate higher audience costs, but when opposition parties that have an incentive to disagree with the government actually support its positions, elections also show that the strength of public opinion in favor of the government's position must be high. Domestic institutions also signal how likely a government is to renege on cooperative agreements made with other states (e.g. trade, security). Because of domestic constraints on power and their visibility to other states, party and military dictatorships cooperate mostly with other states that also have less flexibility to renege on agreements (e.g. other party and military regimes as well as democracies) (Mattes and Rodríguez 2013).

Institutions also can signal regime strength to the population and the opposition. For example, elections are sometimes used by authoritarian regimes to show their strength and deter challenges when they are won by wide margins (Simpser 2013; Magaloni 2006). In a similar fashion, the mobilization capacity of parties can be used to organize large protests that are a show of regime strength.

Minimizing future losses

Authoritarian leaders sometimes consider conceding or losing office. When they do so, institutions can help them minimize potential losses in influence once they are out of power by either binding successors or serving as insurance. One way of doing so is to put in place institutions that are designed to constrain the options available to successor governments. This seems to be a practice most commonly used by military governments that plan a return to civilian rule. In Chile, the military junta increased the autonomy of the central bank in an effort to insulate it from "the vicissitudes of the democratic political process" (Boylan 1998: 444). The junta also wrote the 1980 constitution and agreed to put as much of it into operation as possible in an effort to legitimize the document (Barros 2002). Indeed, military governments often adopt new constitutions when they seek to entrench broad political, economic, or social transformations (Negretto 2014).²

Military regimes also may preserve their power after a transition by influencing the composition of constituent assemblies (Wright and Escribà-Folch 2011). In Myanmar, for example, the 2008 constitution adopted under military rule stipulates that 25 percent of parliamentary seats must be reserved for military officers. In this way, institutions serve as insurance, providing a means by which to remain politically active and influence policy, particularly after democratic transitions. Regime parties can also act as insurance mechanisms for outgoing authoritarian

leaders and elites. If parties are well institutionalized and have extensive reach and capability in mobilizing voters, they can be used to win elections even after a transition to democracy. Wright and Escribà-Folch (2011) show that when dominant party regimes democratize, all former regime parties are competitive, winning at least the second largest seat share in at least one legislative election after the transition. After the transition, regime parties act to protect the former elite's interests, making them more likely to support a democratic transition in the first place. Such regimes, after all, care first and foremost about ruling, and not necessarily about remaining authoritarian (Slater and Wong 2013). While insurance might not be the original reason why autocratic leaders and supporters create a regime party, it becomes an important purpose when regime change is on the horizon and a critical factor in determining when change is likely to occur.

Diffusing responsibility

When authoritarian regimes make decisions without consulting the population, they alone shoulder the blame if their decisions turn out to have negative consequences. However, when regimes share decision-making power, blame attribution becomes more ambiguous. For example, when the legislature includes members of the opposition or even independent candidates, the policies proposed or supported by the opposition are no longer strictly regime policies. Therefore, in the face of public discontent, the regime will not be weakened relative to the opposition if they both supported the same policies. If the policies were actually suggested by the opposition, public discontent can actually provide the regime with an opportunity to blame and weaken the opposition. As such, one of the advantages of political liberalization is that the opposition becomes implicated in the painful policies sometimes required to solve domestic problems. Such policies, “when implemented, can now be blamed on the legislature as well as state leaders” (Lust-Okar and Jamal 2003: 343). Allowing the opposition to be represented in the legislature is not the only way in which authoritarian leaders can diffuse responsibility. Writing about modes of participation that have deliberative dimensions in China, such as citizen evaluation forums and local elections, He and Warren (2011) mention that one of the benefits of deliberation is that the people themselves now share in the responsibility of decisions.

Are institutions always solutions?

Institutional bundles

Autocrats clearly face multiple problems of governance, and they have a variety of institutional means by which they can address them. Why do they often appear to have multiple institutions to address the same problem? For instance, if autocrats can obtain information about citizens' preferences from the grassroots extensions of a regime party, do they also need elections? One answer may emerge in looking more closely at the many dimensions of information provision. Elections provide information only periodically, while parties and legislatures are arenas in which information flows continuously. Likewise, parties and legislatures are better suited to give information about policy preferences than elections, while the secrecy of the ballot might encourage a more sincere expression of regime support, making the information gathered more accurate. Autocrats might adopt different institutions for the same purpose because there is variation in how these institutions actually serve this purpose. Thus, we might pay closer attention to how the problems we outlined actually have multiple dimensions—only some of which will be addressed by a specific institution.

Conversely, it could be that autocrats sometimes adopt an institution because of its potential to solve multiple problems. For example, are elections so attractive because they are a mechanism by which information about citizen preferences can be aggregated and spoils can be distributed to both elites and voters? Alternatively, it may be that an institution solves some problems, but creates others, requiring another institution as a “patch.” Having inquisitive legislators may produce information for autocrats, but making sure that those same legislators do not become too rebellious requires strong nomination procedures within the regime party (Malesky and Schuler 2010). Decentralization may enable the central government to extend its infrastructural power to the peripheries, but then local agents must be monitored, which can be done through the use of local elections (Landry 2009). While studies of individual institutions such as elections, legislature, and parties have produced many compelling arguments about why and how dictators use them, we understand less about the institutional bundles with which autocrats govern. It may be that scholars of individual institutions need to converse more with each other (Schedler 2009), or that as they delve into the details of these institutions, they would benefit from what the deep literature on democratic institutions has to say.

Institutions as constraints

That dictators choose and modify institutions at will, depending on the types of problems they need to solve and the severity of those problems, raises the specter of functionalism. It also casts legislatures, parties, elections, courts, and federalism as institutions-as-equilibria, which has more thought-provoking implications than the functionalist critique—namely, the tension between institutions-as-equilibria and institutions-as-rules (Przeworski 2004; Pepinsky 2013). To the extent that these institutions are an outcome of the choices that autocrats make, they are the product of other factors. Yet if institutions are endogenous, then to what extent do they serve as exogenous constraints that incentivize behavior and “cause” other outcomes? For example, if a dictator can establish a regime party to share power with elites only when the balance of power between them is equal, then to what extent is the absence of conflict within the regime a function of the party or of the balance of power that gave rise to the party in the first place?

On some level, the problem needs to be addressed by research design so that we can ensure that the causal effect we ascribe to institutions has empirical verification. But the tension also needs to be addressed by theory insofar as we carefully specify what institutions are doing and how. Institutions under authoritarianism may be more than epiphenomenal, but they may end up playing a somewhat “modest” role in authoritarian regimes. In and of themselves, legislatures and parties, for example, do not constrain rulers or force them to share power. Rather they may enable the transparency and monitoring necessary to preserve power-sharing bargains between leaders and members of their support coalitions (Svolik 2012). Alternatively, they simply serve as a forum in which the dictator and the potential opposition may hammer out concessions (Gandhi 2008). In neither of these accounts do institutions themselves constrain rulers.

Institutions may indirectly constrain dictators to the extent they preserve the distribution of power that allowed them to be stable in the first place. If an equal distribution of power is what enables the creation of strong ruling parties, for example, these institutions can help ensure that the distribution of power remains somewhat equal in the future. Under PRI rule, the fact that presidents could not remain in office for more than one mandate clearly helped avoid a progressive concentration of power in the hands of a single individual (Magaloni 2006). Another example is the use of divided-executive constitutions to prevent the concentration of power in the hands of the executive in transitioning countries (Hale 2011). Maybe institutions do not

constrain power directly, but they can help maintain a balance of power in which some actors are powerful enough to credibly threaten to punish the dictator and thus constrain him.

Risks and trade-offs

Even if we accept that institutions play this more ambitious, constraining role, they result in the following conundrum: In order to survive in power, dictators use institutions to address certain problems, and these institutions are solutions only to the degree to which they constrain dictators. But constraints enable challenges to their rule which, in the end, may contribute to their losing power. When autocrats do not use their “menu of manipulation,” they risk losing elections (Schedler 2002). When they comply with legislation and judicial decisions that run counter to their preferences, they enable the emergence of institutions that can become the site of greater political contestation. Therefore, scholarship on authoritarian institutions is increasingly examining how institutions can pose risks to authoritarian incumbents.

The most fundamental risk associated with authoritarian elections is obviously the risk of losing them. Elections can provide the opposition with an opportunity to use a bundle of strategies that can lead to their victory (Bunce and Wolchik 2010). Similarly, Howard and Roessler (2006) show that liberalizing electoral outcomes take place when the opposition manages to form a pre-electoral coalition, which channels votes to a single opposition candidate and raises the cost of fraud and manipulation. The emphasis these authors put on the opposition’s strategy shows that, ultimately, whether elections are won or lost can be out of the authoritarian ruler’s hands. In addition, fraud and manipulation carry their own risks, since they can provide a focal point for the opposition and masses to rally around after elections take place, thus facilitating opposition coordination after the fact (Tucker 2007). Alternatively, Reuter and Robertson (2012) suggest that rewarding officials who deliver votes is another way to deal with the necessity to win elections. This strategy nonetheless carries its own risks, since competence is no longer the basis for rewards, and rewarding loyalty instead of competence can have long-term negative consequences such as hindering growth.

As for legislatures, the main concern is that they can empower the opposition by giving it a voice. However, this risk can be mitigated in a number of ways. Malesky and Schuler (2010) mention that while the VCP provides some delegates with incentives to speak up by increasing the proportion of local, full-time delegates, the vast majority of delegates are still selected in a way that ensures upward accountability. Another risk is the potential loss of autonomy, as in cases in which a regime fails to win the legislative supermajority required for constitutional amendments. In Malaysia, the Barisan Nasional (BN) failed to win the two thirds of seats required for constitutional amendments in 2008 and 2013, making it impossible for the regime to make major institutional changes at will. This can be problematic since the power to modify the constitution is what allows authoritarian rulers to modify institutions so they can serve them better in all the ways outlined.³ Further, legislatures can pose a risk by increasing voters’ confidence in the opposition. Once they win seats, opposition members can start giving them more information about how they would actually govern and the policies they support. Likewise, if they are associated with the adoption of popular policies, opposition members can improve their reputation. As blame can be shared, so can merit. Last, other institutions may help mediate the risks posed by legislatures. Ruling parties mitigate these risks by providing authoritarian leaders with stable legislative majorities (Reuter and Remington 2009).

But parties come with their own risks as well. For one, they can facilitate elite collective action and help them coalesce into an opposition, since parties increase interactions among elites and are not monitored as heavily as legislatures (Wright and Escribà-Folch 2011).

Moreover, parties may provide an opportunity for factions to emerge and fight. This becomes problematic when parties cannot mediate this conflict internally and factions leave the party to contest elections (Reuter and Gandhi 2011). This happened in Malaysia in 1987, when Razaleigh challenged the incumbent Mahatir for the UMNO presidency. Ultimately, UMNO split, with Razaleigh and some of his supporters leaving to form their own party. Alternatively, parties also carry a risk for authoritarianism because they can increase the likelihood of democratization by helping authoritarian elites maintain some measure of power and secure their interests in the context of democratic transitions (Wright and Escribà-Folch 2011). By helping authoritarian rulers preserve their interests, even in a democratic context, they diminish the need for authoritarianism itself.

Similarly, decentralization helps solve problems faced by authoritarian leaders while carrying its own risks. That some authority is given by the central government to regional governments requires the relinquishing of some control over the regions. As localities are able to cultivate their own sources of revenue, they may further assert their independence from the center, as is the case of regional governments in Vietnam that manage to attract significant foreign direct investment (Malesky 2008). Why might local governments deviate from the preferences and mandates of the center? In some cases, it may be that local officials—especially if elected—care more about their constituents than the central government. In China, the elected village committee chairperson sometimes heeded the wishes of his constituents, challenging the authority of the village party branch (Zhenglin and Bernstein 2004). Unhappy with such popular challenges to the party, the central government now requires that village party secretaries also compete in elections for the position of village committee chairperson to avoid policy conflicts between them. Last, once the center has a way of monitoring the local agents empowered by decentralization, how should it deal with those who underperform? Demotion would create a group of disgruntled elites who may pose a danger to the regime. As a result, in China, for example, mayors who underperform (as determined by the measurable criteria set by the center) are rarely demoted (Landry 2009). They are instead left in place rather than given promotions.

That authoritarian institutions pose risks for their creators helps the voluminous literature on how autocrats use institutions to solve problems of governance distance itself from the problem of functionalism. But it also raises the question of whether authoritarian legislatures, courts, parties, elections, and decentralization are open-and-shut cases of “institutions-as-solutions.” They are solutions to some problems, but they also seem to create others. Under what conditions do these risks emerge? When creating or maintaining institutions, are autocrats aware of such risks? If they are aware of the risks and proceed with these institutions, are they myopic, making mistakes, or simply managing trade-offs? Or were they not aware of such risks because they adopted these institutions for other reasons?

To the extent that institutions serve multiple purposes, they may force dictators to live with certain risks in order to minimize others. Legislative elections, for example, may be a means both to fairly distribute spoils among regime elites and to obtain information about citizen preferences. So when the opposition unites and draws significant popular support, autocrats may have to live with such risks because they need legislative and electoral institutions to satisfy elite demands for patronage. If potential opposition or mass actors are sufficiently threatening, autocrats may need institutions such as parties to contain them even if these institutions create other types of risks. In other words, dictators may face multiple problems of governance. To the degree that institutions address multiple problems, they create trade-offs for autocrats.

Moreover, we know that some autocrats, at the first sign of trouble, modify or close institutions. In the Philippines, Marcos declared martial law and assumed absolute power in response

to rising opposition. In Algeria, the military cancelled second-round elections and closed the legislature after an opposition party won a majority of legislative seats in the first round. So identifying the conditions under which autocrats choose to modify or close institutions in the face of these challenges is important. This line of inquiry leads to the more complicated project of understanding institutional change in authoritarian regimes. It also implies that the degree to which autocrats can modify institutions should influence just how much these institutions actually solve some types of problems (Pepinsky 2013). If authoritarian incumbents are free to modify and close institutions whenever these rules and structures pose risks, it seems doubtful that the institutions will be able to perform certain functions that logically speaking require constraining executive power. For example, if institutions allow for credible commitments only when the balance of power is relatively equal (Svolik 2012), then under these circumstances, it is doubtful that they could be closed without dire consequences for the ruler, given that elites should be able to punish him for doing so.

Conclusion

Autocrats adopt institutions typically associated with democratic regimes: elections, parties, legislatures, courts, and decentralization. These institutions often are more than mere window-dressing, instead serving multiple functions that facilitate their rule. They can be used to gather important information about regime support, popular preferences, and the performance of regime officials, all of which are crucial in dealing with challenges before they become serious threats. Further, institutions can help autocrats co-opt the mass public, the opposition, and elites, giving them a vested stake in regime continuation. Under some conditions, institutions may also facilitate the constraining of autocrats in addition to sending signals to relevant audiences and resolving conflicts. Institutions can also help autocrats minimize future losses by constraining democratic and authoritarian successors alike, while ruling parties can even be used to remain in power after a transition. Lastly, when institutions become arenas in which power is shared with regime outsiders, they can allow autocrats to diffuse responsibility by blaming others for their mistakes.

There is an equally large and growing literature on the effects of these institutions on a variety of outcomes, ranging from economic performance and democratization to interstate conflict. Yet in tackling the question of how institutions influence behavior and outcomes, it is difficult to evade the question of why such institutions exist in the first place. As a result, the focus of the recent literature on authoritarian institutions has been the reason for these institutions and the conditions under which they arise. This focus on institutional choice has been fruitful, but also raises more questions for which we currently have few answers. To begin with, more attention needs to be paid to institutional configurations as a whole rather than to single institutions in isolation. In addition, given that these institutions sometimes entail risks for autocrats, it would be useful to better understand whether autocrats are aware of such risks and how they manage these trade-offs.

Finally, while our concentration here has been largely theoretical, we do not mean to ignore the empirical challenges that should naturally emerge with greater theory development. The focus on how the existence of these institutions helps autocrats rule has enabled scholars to test their arguments using data that are collected based on clear, objective criteria. Elections are held, or they are not. Legislatures exist, or they do not. Parties operate, or they are banned. At this point, it may be fruitful to investigate not only whether such institutions exist, but also how they operate—their internal organization and rules. Analyzing these institutional features may allow us to make greater progress in understanding the reasons for these institutions as well as

their effects. But for this, we will need more efforts to collect such detailed information. In addition, to the extent that the effect of institutions are underpinned by non-institutional factors (e.g. balance of power between rulers and elites, collective action capacity of elites), we will need to consider how to operationalize such concepts. This task requires not only significant man-hours, but also creativity. But only until we have better measures of such concepts can we verify whether formal institutions indeed have significant effects.

Notes

- 1 See Cai and Treisman (2006) for an illuminating discussion of the Chinese case.
- 2 It is also possible that institutions can be used not only to bind democratic successors, but also authoritarian successors. Svolik (2012), for example, argues that the institutional reforms implemented by Deng Xiaoping would probably not have been able to overcome his personal authority but did manage to bind his successors (86). Bunce and Wolchik (2010) also mention that institutions can be used to constrain the autonomy of authoritarian successors. When authoritarian rulers face term limits, one possible strategy is to select an ally as successor and to implement institutional reforms to constrain that ally at the same time. Putin and Medvedev are an example of this strategy.
- 3 In Mexico, for example, the PRI frequently used this strategy and modified the constitution in its favor nearly 400 times (Magaloni 2006: 15).

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