

**Legitimation in Non-Democracies:
Concepts, Theories and Empirical Evidence across Regime Subtypes**

Proposed panel for the
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PANEL ABSTRACT (300 words):

Legitimation has been a major concept for the comparative study of democratic politics, both in terms of (normative) democratic theory and empirical analyses. Its role for non-democracies remains, however, controversial. Do autocratic regimes need to legitimize their rule in order to maintain stability? How can the legitimation efforts of non-democracies be compared across contexts in a theoretically informed manner? How do the so-called ‘hybrid regimes’ that combine institutional elements of democracy with governing patterns of autocracy justify their entitlement to rule? Despite the recent resurgence of political science scholarship on autocratic resilience many questions remain unanswered about the role of legitimation in contemporary non-democracies and its relationship with neighbouring concepts like ideology, censorship, and consent. Efforts to reincorporate legitimation into explanations of contemporary authoritarian rule are nascent but promising, and this workshop aims to advance scholarship on the subject by considering papers that focus on concept formation, theory building, and empirical evidence across different subtypes of non-democratic regimes and at different time points in a regime's ruling spell. Papers that give attention to establishing conditions under which different legitimation claims and practices bolster or undermine non-democratic rule will help advance scholarship in this area.

Legitimation aims to secure active consent, compliance with the regime's rules, passive obedience, or toleration and resignation within the population. There are at least two major challenges to incorporating legitimation into the study of non-democratic regimes. First is the objection that legitimation is mere ‘window dressing.’ On this account, there is nothing substantive in the legitimation efforts of autocracies because they are epiphenomenal to the violence, coercion, or co-optation the regime is able to deploy. Second, even if it is agreed that legitimation is important to the maintenance of non-democratic rule, it is often argued that the conceptual and methodological difficulties associated with analysing it are insurmountable. These are important challenges to meet because all non-democracies seek to legitimate themselves in one way or another. The fact that they spend time and resources to that end suggests that there is something beyond epiphenomena at work. Understanding how, why, and with what effect non-democratic regimes aim to secure legitimation can illuminate numerous aspects of autocratic rule and its relative resilience.

OUTLINE OF TOPIC:

Autocracy remains a widespread form of governance. Depending on how one defines and measures democracy and non-democracy, roughly 40% of the world's countries can be defined as non-democratic while about 60% of the world's population can be said to live in either fully authoritarian or hybrid regimes (see, e.g. Polity IV; Freedom House 2014). Major powers such as China and Russia are ruled by autocratic regimes, while important regional powers such as Iran, Egypt, Vietnam, and Thailand display different degrees and forms of non-democratic rule.

Furthermore the spread of competitive authoritarian or electoral authoritarian regimes means that even states which may appear democratic on paper are governed in significant ways by autocratic means (Levitsky & Way 2010; Schedler 2006). New forms of regime hybridizations have also posed the question as to whether these regime forms are a distinct regime type and how long-lived and robust they are. While Huntington famously argued that such forms of liberalized authoritarianism are ‘not a stable equilibrium; the halfway house does not stand’ (Huntington 1991: 174-75), the empirical reality in the last twenty-five years tends to prove him wrong.

Because of these factors, the study of (softer and harder) forms of authoritarianism has burgeoned in the past 10 years. Numerous influential books have been published and articles in flagship disciplinary journals have appeared on a variety of aspects of non-democratic rule. Yet the problem of legitimation remains marginal to current understandings of the resilience of non-democratic forms of governance. In five recent review articles by respected scholars covering different aspects of research on autocracy, for example, legitimation is barely mentioned, let alone seriously considered as a causal factor in authoritarian resilience (see Brancati 2014; Geddes et al. 2014; Art 2012; Magaloni & Kricheli 2010; Gandhi & Lust-Okar 2009). Instead, contemporary understandings of non-democratic rule tend to revolve around institutional explanations and/or accounts centered on repression and violence. Besides some notable exceptions (e.g. Gerschewski 2013; Kailitz 2013), and some work from earlier periods of the discipline that emphasized ideology (e.g. Arendt 1951), legitimation receives short shrift in most contemporary accounts of autocratic resilience.

Not unlike in democratic contexts, legitimation aims to secure active consent and compliance with the regime's rules, or at least passive obedience, or toleration and resignation within the population. There are at least two major challenges to incorporating legitimation into the study of non-democracies. First is the objection that legitimation is mere ‘window dressing.’ On this account, there is nothing substantive in the legitimation efforts of autocracies because they are epiphenomenal to the violence, coercion, or co-optation the regime is able to deploy. However, the fact that autocracies spend time and resources for justifying their entitlement to rule suggests that there is something beyond mere epiphenomena at work. Second, even if it is agreed that legitimation is important to the maintenance of autocracies, it is often argued that the conceptual and methodological difficulties associated with analysing it are insurmountable. Legitimation would seem involve some kind of voluntary acceptance or consent which is often lacking in coercive autocratic environments. The study of non-democratic legitimation is furthermore criticized because empirical verification for hypotheses is difficult to obtain. While studies of democracies can rely on a variety of surveys to evaluate citizens’ beliefs towards their polity, this route is often blocked or unreliable in non-democratic contexts.

Understanding how, why, and with what effect non-democratic regimes aim to secure legitimation can illuminate numerous aspects of autocratic rule and its relative resilience. This joint session workshop aims to facilitate papers that address questions legitimation in non-democratic regimes by refining concepts, developing theories, and testing arguments against the empirical record. The workshop seeks papers of any methodological approach provided that they address questions of processes of legitimation in contemporary non-democracies. Potentially productive lines in inquiry that would push the study of autocratic legitimation forward are suggested in the ‘types of papers required’ section of this proposal.

RELATION TO EXISTING RESEARCH:

As stated previously, legitimation as a causal factor in non-democratic regime resilience is largely

marginal to existing explanations. Most contemporary explanations of autocratic resilience emphasize how political institutions sustain authoritarian rule and/or how repression helps dictators maintain power. The absence of legitimation-based explanations is curious because they are not necessarily at odds with institutional or repression-centred accounts of authoritarianism.

In an important recent book Milan Svoblik (2012) divides the study of autocratic resilience into two distinct problems. The ‘problem of authoritarian control’ revolves around the conflict between the dictator and, broadly speaking, the people. The dictator employs the methods and tools at his/her disposal to keep the people from frustrating his/her intentions or ultimately overthrowing him/her. The ‘problem of authoritarian power-sharing’ concerns the ways in which the dictator coordinates between elite actors in the regime to avoid coups and internal mutinies. If the first problem is one of the regime-versus-people, the second is one of faction-versus-faction within the regime.

A focus on legitimation can add much to our understanding of both problems, yet many open questions remain. In the regime-versus-people portion of the autocratic resilience puzzle, we may want to know how regime elites construct and/or disseminate legitimating messages to encourage loyalty, or at least political quiescence. Here case study evidence centering on heavily ideological regimes like North Korea and China is robust but is sometimes less incorporated into cross-national theorizing or empirical assessment (see, e.g. Armstrong 2013; Kim 2010; Wang 2012; Shambaugh 2008; Holbig 2013). In addition to understanding the ways in which non-democracies craft and disseminate legitimating messages, empirical assessment of their effects would help illuminate an important aspect of the regime-versus-people problem, namely whether and under what conditions autocratic legitimation efforts ‘work’ to bolster the resilience of the regime. Some efforts to address this question use survey evidence (e.g. Kennedy 2009; Geddes & Zaller 1989), but even here it is difficult to specify the relationship between repression and legitimation. Given that the state is able to censor messages it deems threatening and repress those disseminating such messages (e.g. King, Pan, and Roberts 2013), the regime's legitimation statements are not allowed to compete on equal footing with all arguments and perspectives. It is difficult to know the true causal influence of legitimation in sustaining non-democratic rule absent the fear of repression, but given that autocratic leaders devote resources to crafting and disseminating legitimating messages we have good reasons to believe that they perceive those efforts to be worthwhile. Assuming that autocratic leaders would prefer to not use violent repression because of the costs it entails (Svoblik 2013), a compelling working hypothesis in this regard is that legitimation helps to squelch potential threats from the population before they are allowed to emerge by circumscribing and manipulating the ways in which citizens think about politics. This workshop aims to better specify and test theories that can account for these aspects of the regime-versus-people aspect of authoritarian control.

The second problem of autocratic rule, namely the task of coordinating among the regime elite to ensure sufficient stability, is one that institutionalist scholarship has addressed in detail by examining the role of non-democratic legislatures, parties, and elections (e.g. Gandhi & Przeworski 2007; Brownlee 2007; Svoblik 2012; Gandhi & Lust-Okar 2009). If sufficiently inculcated, legitimation in the form of an ideological program is thought to encourage regime unity and to be particularly useful in doing so during periods of uncertainty or which are thought to require repression (Levitsky & Way 2013; Pion-Berlin & Lopez 1991). Given that security force cohesion is particularly important for an authoritarian regime facing nonviolent protests from the citizenry (Chenoweth & Stephan 2011; Nepstad 2011), it is worthwhile to theorize and specify in more detail the causal impact of intra-regime legitimation during periods of direct challenge ‘from below.’ A further worthwhile line in inquiry is to expand on earlier insights that the perception of elite unity and cohesive power is crucial to a dominant group maintaining power (e.g. Wedeen 1999; Scott 1990). Thus if we take seriously the insight of institutionalist research on contemporary autocracy that the politics behind the scenes are considerably messier than previously thought, a non-democratic regimes still has incentives to present itself as a unified and powerful force to

discourage potential challenges. A focus on legitimation helps to specify the processes through which non-democratic regimes aim to bolster their perceived unity.

LIKELY PARTICIPANTS:

The workshop aims to engage scholars with a substantive interest in the role of legitimation in contemporary non-democratic regimes. Approaches rooted in historical or sociological enquiry are welcomed but should be clearly linked to contemporary political science research on autocratic resilience and fragility. The panel is methodologically ecumenical: all methods are welcomed, including but not limited to qualitative, quantitative, interpretive, and formal, provided that they address substantive issues of contemporary non-democratic resilience/fragility.

TYPES OF PAPERS REQUIRED:

This workshop aims to advance theoretical, conceptual, and empirical knowledge on the role of legitimation in contemporary non-democratic regimes. The workshop welcomes any theoretically-informed and empirically rigorous papers that address this topic. Some potentially rich avenues for research are noted below. Although this list is by no means exhaustive or exclusive, many of these areas remain relatively 'open' for researchers concerned with advancing understanding non-democratic legitimation:

- Concept formation and theorizing. How should researchers concerned with non-democratic legitimation understand the relationship between concepts such as legitimation, ideology, censorship, and propaganda? Scholars may wish to build on or challenge recent approaches that address one or more of these concepts (e.g. King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Bueno de Mesquita & Smith 2010).
- Inter-elite legitimation. How can an approach emphasizing non-democratic legitimation supplement, specify, or challenge currently dominant institutionalist approaches to authoritarian politics (e.g. Svoboda 2012; Gandhi & Przeworski 2007)? How might legitimation help present a unified elite vis-à-vis the population and with what effects?
- Cross-national comparisons. How should the legitimation strategies of autocracies be compared across cases? Papers that attempt to do so with qualitative and/or quantitative methods may wish to consider the comparison of non-democracies with substantively different legitimation messages. Scholars may wish to build on, refine, or challenge existing efforts at cross-national typologies of autocratic legitimation (e.g. Kailitz 2013).
- Relatedly, understanding legitimation across sub-types of non-democratic regimes. How should legitimation patterns be understood within subtypes of autocracy like one-party rule, personalist or military regimes? Do different institutional configurations lead to (or result from) different legitimation formulas?
- Conceptualizing, measuring, and assessing legitimation in competitive authoritarian and hybrid regimes. These regimes are thought to legitimate themselves on procedural grounds similar to democracies (e.g. Levitsky & Way 2010; Schedler 2006). To what extent is this true? How can scholars differentiate the legitimating messages from the 'regime' and the

political party that enjoys power in a competitive authoritarian regime? Are there empirical commonalities across these regimes that have causal effects?

- The impact of prior legitimation efforts on post-authoritarian contexts. How long is the temporal ‘tail’ of non-democratic legitimation and how does it influence transitions away from autocracy? What are the challenges (and successes) of legitimating democracy in post-authoritarian contexts? This question has been addressed in prior ‘transitions from authoritarian rule’ literature (e.g. O’Donnell & Schmitter 1986) but re-evaluations in light of advances in research that takes autocracy on its own terms would be welcomed.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES:

Alexander Dukalskis, PhD (University of Notre Dame), is a Lecturer at the School of Politics and International Relations at University College Dublin. He is also a 2014-15 East Asia Institute Fellow on Peace, Governance, and Development during which he is conducting and presenting research in China, Korea, and Japan. Previously he taught at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and was a visiting scholar at Columbia University and he has degrees from the University of Notre Dame, the London School of Economics, and Willamette University. His research and teaching broadly focuses on contemporary autocracies, international human rights norms, Asian politics, and transitional justice. His work is forthcoming or has been published in *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *Human Rights Quarterly*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *International Studies Review*, *Communist & Post-Communist Studies*, and *Democratization*.

Johannes Gerschewski, PhD (Humboldt University Berlin), is a research fellow at the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB) where he co-directs a research project on crises and survival of autocratic regimes in a worldwide comparison. In 2014, he has been a visiting scholar at the Transatlantic Program of Harvard’s Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. His research focuses broadly on understanding autocratic rule and explaining their endurance. He has previously published among others in *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* and *Democratization*, which awarded him in 2013 with the Frank Cass Prize for Best Article by a Young Scholar.

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