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Authoritarian Power Sharing: Concepts, Mechanisms, and Strategies

Anne Meng,[1] Jack Paine,[2] and Robert Powell[3]

[1]Department of Politics, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA; email: ameng@virginia.edu

[2]Department of Political Science, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA; email: jackpaine@emory.edu

[3]Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, California, USA

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Abstract

We provide a unified language for studying power sharing in authoritarian regimes. Power-sharing deals entail not only sharing spoils between a ruler and challenger, but also establishing an enforcement mechanism. An arrangement does not truly share power without reallocating power to make it costly for the ruler to renege. Institutional concessions, such as delegating agenda control over policy decisions or empowering third-party enforcers, can reallocate power. However, weak institutions create a Catch-22 that inhibits credible commitment. When institutions are weak, self-enforcing power sharing is still possible if challengers have coercive means to defend their spoils. However, challengers can leverage their coercive capabilities to overthrow the ruler. This double-edged sword implies that a strategic dictator shares power only under specific conditions: challengers can credibly punish an autocratic ruler; if the ruler shares power, the challenger must willingly forgo taking harmful actions; and the ruler willingly acquiesces to diminished power and rents.

INTRODUCTION

No dictator is inherently secure in office. Autocrats face threats of removal from their own regime elites, opposition groups, and other societal actors. A central idea in recent research is that rulers must share power to retain the support of actors beyond their inner circle. Empirically, contemporary dictators use a wide array of institutions to distribute spoils and make policy concessions. **Figure 1** shows the fraction of authoritarian regimes with each of the following institutions: a ruling party, a legislature, multi-party elections, executive term limits, multiple ethnic groups appointed to cabinet positions, an appointed Minister of Defense, a civil war settlement that distributes cabinet positions or integrates rebels into the state military, or a regional autonomy deal. In **Table 1**, we cite recent research on these varied institutions.

We provide a unified language for studying authoritarian power sharing. We agree with recent research that studying institutions is fundamental for comprehending authoritarian regimes. However, we contend that three foundational questions remain underspecified. (*a*) Concepts:

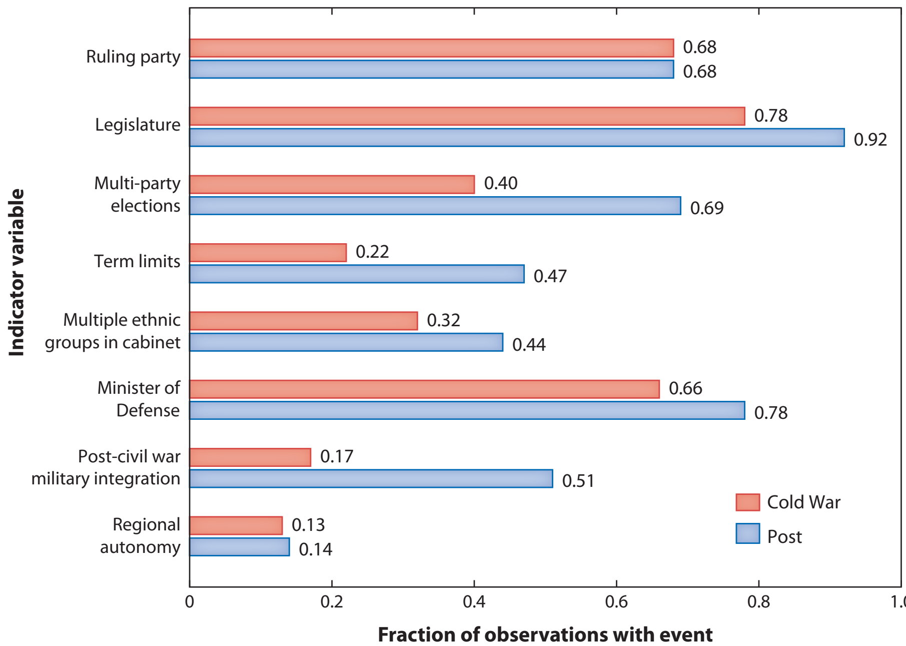

Figure 1

Each fraction in the figure is an average across all global authoritarian regimes (according to Boix et al. 2013) of a particular indicator variable, with time periods disaggregated as 1945–1989 (Cold War, *red bars*) and post-1990 (Post, *blue bars*). Ruling party: There is a ruling party (Miller 2020a). Legislature: There is at least one legislative chamber (V-Dem *Legislature bicameral*). Multi-party elections: National elections have occurred within the previous five years with multiple legal political parties (value of “Yes,” “Almost,” or “Constrained” on V-Dem *Elections multiparty*; Coppedge et al. 2022). Term limits: Constitution contains executive term limits (Elkins & Ginsburg 2022). Multiple ethnic groups in cabinet: Cabinet contains at least two ethnic groups with a power access status of “Junior Partner” or higher [Ethnic Power Relations (EPR); Vogt et al. (2015)]. We omit Latin American countries from this average. Minister of Defense: An individual (besides the executive himself) is appointed to head the Ministry of Defense (Europa Publications 1960–2005, CIA 2006–2017, Nyrup & Bramwell 2020). Post–civil war military integration: Civil war settlements include provisions for military integration. This is reported as a fraction of all civil war settlements for each time period (Hartzell 2014). Regional autonomy: At least one ethnic group in the country has a regional autonomy deal (EPR).

Table 1 Sample of existing research on authoritarian institutions

Institution	Selected references
General	Slater (2003), Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2005), Acemoglu & Robinson (2006), Myerson (2008), Svolik (2012), Ansell & Samuels (2014), Acemoglu et al. (2015), Dower et al. (2018), Geddes et al. (2018), Meng (2020), Paine (2021, 2022b), Powell (2021), Gieczewski (2021)
Ruling party	Geddes (1999), Smith (2005), Brownlee (2007a), Magaloni (2008), Greene (2010), Slater (2010), Gehlbach & Keefer (2011), Shih et al. (2012), Wright & Escribà-Folch (2012), Levitsky & Way (2013), Riedl (2014), Morgenbesser (2016), Reuter (2017), Donno & Kreft (2019), Miller (2020a), Meng (2021a)
Legislature	Bates & Lien (1985), Gandhi (2008), Wright (2008), Malesky & Schuler (2010), Blaydes & Chaney (2013), Cox (2016), Truex (2016), Gailmard (2017), Ochieng' Opalo (2019), Gandhi et al. (2020), Weipert-Fenner (2020), Gerzso & van de Walle (2022), Kenkel & Paine (2022)
Elections	Przeworski (1991), Blaydes (2010), Levitsky & Way (2010), Chacón et al. (2011), Fearon (2011), Hyde & Marinov (2014), Little et al. (2015), Luo & Rozenas (2018), Miller (2020b), Egorov & Sonin (2021)
Constitution	North & Weingast (1989), Weingast (1997), Ginsburg & Simpser (2013), Frye et al. (2014), Albertus & Menaldo (2018), Fearon & Francois (2021)
Succession and term limits	Brownlee (2007b), Kokkonen & Sundell (2014), Abramson & Rivera (2016), Ma (2016), Frantz & Stein (2017), Konrad & Mui (2017), Acharya & Lee (2019), Meng (2021b), Versteeg et al. (2020), Zhou (2021)
Courts	Moustafa (2007), Solomon Jr. (2007), Varol (2014), Wang (2015), Shen-Bayh (2018), Gailmard (2019)
Cabinet positions	Arriola (2009), Cheeseman (2011), Egorov & Sonin (2011), Cederman et al. (2013), Francois et al. (2015), Roessler (2016), Roessler & Ohls (2018), Woldense (2018), Paine (2019), Kroeger (2020), Beiser-McGrath & Metternich (2021), Wang (2022)
Military and police	Acemoglu et al. (2010), Besley & Robinson (2010), McMahon & Slantchev (2015), Greitens (2016), Hassan (2017), Sudduth (2017), Harkness (2018), Hassan (2020), Scharpf & Gläßel (2020), Mattingly (2022), Meng & Paine (2022), Nalepa (2022), Paine (2022a)
Civil war settlements	Sisk (1996), Hartzell & Hoddie (2003), Roeder & Rothchild (2005), Glassmyer & Sambanis (2008), Jarstad & Nilsson (2008), Mattes & Savun (2009), Martin (2013), Matanock (2017), White (2020), Nomikos (2021)
Regional autonomy	Chapman & Roeder (2007), Walter (2009), Cederman et al. (2015), Carter & Hassan (2021), Germann & Sambanis (2021)

What is power sharing? (*b*) Mechanisms: How do leaders commit to power-sharing deals? How can these deals backfire on the ruler? (*c*) Strategies: Under what conditions do leaders share power?

Throughout, we analyze the interaction between a ruler and a nonruling actor, denoted a challenger. The challenger(s) is conceptually broad and can encompass members of the ruling coalition, opposition groups, other ethnic groups, or military officials—anyone who can potentially challenge the ruler's authority.

First, we conceptualize a power-sharing deal between a ruler and challenger as meeting two distinct requirements. In addition to sharing spoils, the arrangement must reallocate power to make it costly for the ruler to renege. Existing research on power sharing in dictatorships focuses mainly on the first criterion. However, deals that entail pure spoils transfers without a credible enforcement mechanism do not reallocate power, and therefore do not constitute power sharing. The stakes of this conceptual distinction are high. Two deals can entail similar spoils-sharing provisions but carry very different consequences depending on their self-enforcement mechanisms, or lack thereof.

This conceptual distinction motivates our second contribution. We identify two broad types of enforcement mechanisms for power-sharing deals: institutional and coercive. Institutional concessions, such as delegating agenda control over policy decisions or empowering third-party enforcers, can reallocate power by imposing costs on the leader to renege. However, institutional power sharing can backfire by conceding too few or too many rents to a challenger. Weak institutions create a Catch-22 by undermining the credibility of promises to delegate policy influence through institutions. Conversely, if institutions are too strong, then initially small institutional concessions can create a snowball effect; eventually, the ruler gives away more rents and influence than desired. In either case, anticipation of an adverse outcome can prevent a deal from ever gaining traction.

When institutions are weak, self-enforcing power sharing is still possible, but only if challengers have coercive means to defend their spoils. Informal sanctioning mechanisms can stabilize institutional concessions. When challengers can leverage an institution to coordinate violent punishments against autocratic transgressions, the institution serves as a coercive enforcement mechanism. Institutional and coercive power sharing therefore overlap when coercive enforcement relies on institutions to succeed. Alternatively, the ruler can more directly share access to coercive means. Allowing rivals to control high-ranking positions within the state security sector or permitting rebel groups to retain their arms reallocates power toward challengers by giving away guns.

Power-sharing deals enforced by coercion create a double-edged sword for the leader. When confronting a coercively strong challenger, the ruler can commit to share more spoils and policy influence. Yet, coercive enforcement is a dangerous substitute for weak institutions because of a threat-enhancing effect. Challengers can leverage their coercive means to go on the offensive and overthrow the ruler, rather than simply to defend their prerogatives against autocratic transgressions.

The overall effect of sharing power on leadership survival is ambiguous because of these countervailing commitment and threat-enhancing effects. On the one hand, extensive scholarship on authoritarian stability usually stresses how sharing power facilitates regime survival by making the ruler's promises to distribute spoils to elites and social groups more credible. On the other hand, most research on conflict and civil–military relations views power sharing as dangerous for the ruler. These scholars assume that concessions such as delegating control over parts of the security apparatus confer minimal commitment. Instead, they emphasize how actors who receive such concessions become capable usurpers who can overthrow the ruler via a coup. In most real-life scenarios, the commitment and threat-enhancing effects are both at work. Thus, we need more theoretical guidance about the causes and consequences of power-sharing deals.

This gap in the literature motivates our third contribution, in which we analyze how rulers strategically react to the double-edged sword of power sharing. We describe three conditions that induce a strategic ruler to share power: challenger credibility (the challenger must be able to credibly punish a ruler who does not share power), challenger willingness (if the ruler shares power, the challenger must willingly forgo taking harmful actions), and ruler willingness (the ruler must willingly accept the constraints and lost rents imposed by a power-sharing deal). We conclude by discussing two points. First, how do we distinguish whether a particular power-sharing deal is enforced by institutions or coercion? Second, how does our framework illuminate considerations about power-sharing institutions in democracies?

CONCEPTUALIZING POWER SHARING

In our conceptualization, a power-sharing deal between a ruler and challenger must meet two distinct requirements: (*a*) sharing spoils between the parties and (*b*) reallocating power in a way that makes it costly for the ruler to renege.

Sharing Spoils

The first requirement is that a power-sharing deal shares spoils among the parties. Existing research agrees that this criterion is a key aspect of sharing power. In his work on authoritarian institutions, Svolik (2012, p. 89) describes "agreements over the sharing of the spoils from joint rule as authoritarian power-sharing." Analyzing the allocation of cabinet positions, Cheeseman (2011, p. 339) asserts, "Power-sharing refers to the creation of an inclusive government in which cabinet posts, and hence executive power, are shared by the major parties (although not always all of the parties) in a given conflict." In the context of civil war settlements, Nomikos (2021, p. 249–50) "define[s] postconflict power-sharing as a political arrangement following the end of a civil war according to which former combatants agree to share executive policymaking responsibilities at the state-level."

Formal institutions provide an opportune forum for distributing patronage. Dictators often use cabinet appointments as a means of distributing spoils to elites from their own ruling coalition, opposition parties, or various ethnic groups (Arriola 2009, Francois et al. 2015, Arriola et al. 2021). Cabinet ministers are paid lucrative salaries and often receive private luxury cars, houses, first-class travel, and control over government contracts that they can award to family members and supporters.

Ruling parties also enable rent distribution. "A party offers individuals willing to collaborate with the regime a vehicle for advancing their careers within a stable system of patronage" (Gandhi 2008, p. 77). In his analysis of United Russia, Reuter (2017, p. 159) notes, "For elites, the party provides access to spoils and lobbying opportunities and, importantly, reduces uncertainty over how those spoils are to be distributed." In 2006, for instance, special party commissions were created to determine the allocation of oil-funded social development projects. National Projects and Special Purpose Programs directed hundreds of billions of federal budget dollars toward favored local districts and clienteles (Reuter 2017, p. 167).

Similarly, authoritarian legislatures provide a venue for "controlled bargaining" in which the leader or ruling party can provide incremental policy concessions and rents to opposition parties (Gandhi 2008, p. 78). In Jordan, "once King Hussein offered the Muslim Brotherhood some influence over educational and religious policies, the group shifted from denouncing the regime on the streets to articulating its demands within the legislature" (Gandhi 2008, p. 80). Lust-Okar (2006, p. 460) characterizes legislative elections in Jordan as "primarily an arena of patronage distribution."

Civil war termination settlements frequently include provisions for rebels to access spoils via institutions such as national-level offices. For instance, quotas for different ethnic groups in the legislature ensure that "election results reflect some demographic balance and groups are not excluded from political power. In other cases, there are quotas for ministry positions in a shared government, though all groups are not guaranteed the ability to veto policies made by the chief executive" Nomikos (2021, p. 250). The Dayton Peace Accord was constructed so that the Bosnian Croat leaders extended some executive power to Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs (p. 252). Regional autonomy deals are also common in postconflict settings. Typical arrangements enable residents to control a disproportionate share of regional production, such as proceeds from natural resource exports, and to determine local language policies.

Reallocating Power

The second requirement is that a power-sharing deal reallocates power between the ruler and challenger. All the aforementioned examples meet our first criterion of co-opting challengers by distributing spoils. However, these deals vary in the extent to which the ruler's hands are tied against reneging. It is not difficult or costly for the ruler to renege unless the challenger has means to enforce the deal. In the following sections, we provide examples of institutional and coercive enforcement mechanisms. By contrast, we refer to a spoils-sharing deal as a pure spoils transfer, rather than as power sharing, if it lacks credible means for enforcement and therefore does not reallocate power between the ruler and challenger.

We illustrate the conceptual distinction with a theoretical model in which, in our conceptualization, the ruler buys off challengers with pure spoils transfers rather than true power sharing. In Bueno de Mesquita et al.'s (2005) selectorate model of coalition formation, an incumbent ruler and a challenger each offer private and public goods to members of a selectorate. Each seeks to outbid the other to build a larger winning coalition. If the incumbent succeeds, then his policies are implemented and he starts the next round as the leader. A new challenger is randomly selected, and the interaction repeats. The actions a ruler takes in one round to secure support do not constrain how he can attempt to buy support in the next round. Members of the winning coalition in one round do not gain any leverage to prevent the ruler from replacing them in future rounds. Therefore, co-optation in this model constitutes pure spoils transfers rather than power sharing.

Empirically, many oil-rich states in the Arabian Peninsula offer a clean example of pure spoils transfers that do not constrain the ruler. The core of the state–society bargain in countries such as Saudi Arabia is that citizens gain lucrative public sector jobs in return for forgoing political organization (Gause 1994). Similarly, in emerging democracies and electoral authoritarian regimes, political parties often hand out goods to voters in return for political support, but these transfers do not empower voters to challenge the regime (Helmke & Levitsky 2004, Stokes et al. 2013).

The stakes of our conceptual distinction are high. Two deals can entail a similar division of spoils but operate very differently in practice depending on how (and if) they reallocate power. Most existing conceptualizations of power sharing center on allocating spoils; few explicitly address enforcement mechanisms.

Enforcement is a critical component of power-sharing deals, but how can leaders credibly commit to a promised deal? In the following sections, we describe two general types of enforcement mechanisms: institutional and coercive.

INSTITUTIONAL ENFORCEMENT

Institutional concessions, such as delegating agenda control over policy decisions or empowering third-party enforcers, can reallocate power by imposing costs on the leader to renege. However, institutional power sharing can backfire. Weak institutions create a Catch-22 that inhibits credible commitment, and strong institutions can create a snowball effect whereby the leader gives away more rents than intended.

Delegating Agenda Control

Allowing challengers to participate in institutions such as a legislature or ruling party usually delegates some agenda-setting powers over policy and the distribution of spoils. Sharing decision-making influence enables challengers to routinely gain rents, even when they do not pose an imminent coercive threat. Alternatively, holding regular elections and enacting term limits delegates (in expectation) some control to challengers. Institutional concessions reallocate power because the leader must exert effort to take back agenda control. This contrasts with a noninstitutionalized interaction in which the challenger must pay a cost to gain spoils—for example, mobilizing for a revolt to compel the leader to offer spoils.

Acemoglu & Robinson (2006) model the delegation of agenda control as follows. Rich elites who govern an authoritarian regime face periodic unrest and the threat of revolution by the poor masses, who desire more redistribution. Elites cannot commit to high levels of redistribution in any period in which the masses do not pose a revolutionary threat. Elites can gain commitment ability only by sharing power—specifically, by extending the franchise to incorporate the masses. Under an expansive franchise, the masses gain agenda-setting power over policy because their numerical superiority enables them to win elections. Therefore, the masses can enact high redistribution in every period—even when they are unable to mobilize for a revolution.

Acemoglu & Robinson (2006) also model the possibility that elites can renege on a power-sharing deal by staging a coup against democratically elected leaders. However, after giving away agenda control to the masses, elites must incur a cost of violence to reverse the deal. A high enough cost makes the institutional concession self enforcing.

Others build upon this framework to allow for partial electoral concessions within authoritarian regimes, as opposed to the all-or-nothing concession of full agenda control for the masses. For Castañeda Dower et al. (2018), power-sharing deals consist of elites specifying the frequency of periods in which the masses can set policy. They apply their model to explain Russia's Great Reforms in the mid-nineteenth century. In response to periodic unrest in multiple provinces, the Tsar "devolved substantial authority to previously excluded actors. Key among these reforms was the creation (over most of European Russia) in 1864 of the *zemstvo*, an institution of local self-government with the authority to assess taxes and allocate revenues to local public goods" (Castañeda Dower et al. 2018, p. 126). Ansell & Samuels (2014) explain how capitalist elites can pressure landed elites. Partial franchise expansion enables capitalist elites to protect their assets against expropriation and to target government spending toward public goods needed for industrial development.

England following the Glorious Revolution is a heavily studied case in which members of a formal institution gained agenda-setting powers that constrained the ruler. After 1688, Parliament reaffirmed old, as well as gained some new, privileges that prevented the Crown from financing the government absent cooperation with Parliament. Specific provisions included one-year budgets that did not default to the previous year's budget, embedding spending bills into statutes, regular parliamentary meetings, and parliamentary control over military funding (Cox 2016).

Third-Party Enforcers

Third-party enforcers such as courts can impose costs on rulers who renege. Even in regimes that are unambiguously authoritarian, courts sometimes rule against the executive. Although the ruler could simply ignore an unfavorable decision or disband the court entirely, this behavior is costly. Some semblance of the rule of law can stimulate economic investment and also confer legitimacy upon an otherwise oppressive regime (Varol 2014, Wang 2015).

Courts are even more important in subnational authoritarian regimes. For example, from the 1890s through 1960s, state governments throughout the US South were dominated by the Democratic Party, which maintained control by massive voter suppression, coercion, and gerrymandering (Gibson 2013, Mickey 2015). Yet, these subnational authoritarian regimes were still subject to the federal constitution and to decisions by the US Supreme Court. They faced prohibitively high costs to canceling elections outright or to disobeying judicial decisions that weakened Democratic rule, such as the *Smith v. Allwright* decision in 1944 that struck down White primaries.

Catch-22 of Weak Institutions

Institutional enforcement is not credible unless it is costly for the ruler to reverse institutional concessions. Empirically, reversals come in many forms. Leaders can shut down the national legislature or high court, and replace either with a body filled with lackeys. They can fire party leaders and turn the party into a personalist vehicle. Promises to hold elections can be undone by massively rigging them or simply canceling them, and rulers can override term limits by dubiously legal means. Any of these actions entail low costs if institutions are weak.

Consequently, a ruler who seeks to make institutional concessions may confront a Catch-22: Promises of institutional delegation are not credible precisely because institutions are weak. Powell (2021) illuminates how weak institutions can undermine power sharing. He conceptualizes power sharing as deals that enable the challenger to permanently consume a portion of the budget in future periods—but only if the deal goes through. A moral hazard problem generates friction. During any period in which the ruler proposes and the challenger accepts a power-sharing deal, the ruler cannot commit to refrain from exerting costly effort to prevent the deal from sticking. In equilibrium, the challenger will not accept a power-sharing deal if the probability that a subversion effort succeeds is sufficiently high, which Powell interprets as "weak institutions." Sudan's regime change in 2019 provides an example of weak institutions. The military promised to hold elections within 39 months, but the lack of institutional constraints on the military (which, as of 2022, has ruled the country since 1989) has impeded the credibility of the proposed power-sharing deal.

Empirically, many authoritarian institutions are not strong enough to impose a meaningful cost for reneging, which we discuss in the context of ruling parties. Earlier research highlighted the durability of regimes governed by a dominant party (Geddes 1999; although see Smith 2005). However, many autocratic ruling parties lack an independent institutional basis and fail to outlive the death of the founding leader (Meng 2021a). When a party's existence hinges entirely on the incumbent leader, it seems unlikely that the party can punish the ruler for reneging on deals or can facilitate intertemporal spoils sharing.

Recent research identifies scope conditions for strong authoritarian parties (Geddes et al. 2018, Miller 2020a, Meng & Paine 2022). Typically, parties created by an incumbent president are mere personalist instruments whereas parties created before a regime takes power comprise an independent power base. The institution constrains the ruler's decision-making autonomy in the latter but not the former case. Hence, authoritarian regimes with ruling parties differ in the extent to which they truly share power.

Snowball Effect of Strong Institutions

Alternatively, institutional concessions might backfire on a ruler by conferring *too much* agenda-setting power on challengers. An initially small institutional concession might create a snowball effect whereby the leader eventually gives away more power than desired.

Fearon & Francois (2021) apply a variant of this mechanism to study elite-led democratization. Similar to Acemoglu & Robinson (2006), they examine the interaction between elites and masses. Fearon & Francois (2021) depart by assuming that elites can, upon delegating agenda control to the masses, write a biased constitution that preserves key prerogatives for themselves (see also Alberts et al. 2012, Albertus & Menaldo 2018). But the question remains of whether the masses will honor the biased constitution when in power, rather than replacing it with one more favorable to themselves. As long as elites retain a credible threat of a coup, they can compel the masses to uphold the deal. However, if elites lose too much influence within the coercive apparatus following lengthy periods out of power, the threat of a coup becomes toothless. Consequently, an initially small institutional concession may snowball over time, yielding more influence for the masses than the elites originally intended. Anticipation of this outcome makes elites unwilling to negotiate a transition in the first place (see also Acemoglu et al. 2015 and Gieczewski 2021 for a more general theoretical elucidation of the snowball effect).

COERCIVE ENFORCEMENT

When institutions are weak, self-enforcing power sharing is still possible, but only if challengers have coercive means to defend their spoils. This scenario is typical in authoritarian regimes. Svolik

(2012, p. 2) posits two foundational premises for authoritarian regimes: "First, dictatorships inherently lack an independent authority with the power to enforce agreements among key political actors. Second, violence is an ever-present and ultimate arbiter of conflicts in authoritarian politics."

One possibility is for informal sanctioning mechanisms to stabilize institutional concessions. When challengers can leverage an institution to coordinate violent punishments against autocratic transgressions, the institution serves as a coercive enforcement mechanism. Alternatively, the ruler can directly share access to coercive means. Allowing rivals to control high-ranking positions within the state security sector or permitting rebel groups to retain their arms reallocates power toward challengers by giving away guns.

Power-sharing deals enforced by coercion create a double-edged sword for the leader. When confronting a coercively strong challenger, the ruler can commit to share more spoils and policy influence. Yet, coercive enforcement is a dangerous substitute for weak institutions because of a threat-enhancing effect. Challengers can leverage their coercive means to go on the offensive and overthrow the ruler, rather than simply to defend their prerogatives against autocratic transgressions.

Coordinating Punishments via Institutions

We have discussed how, after a leader makes an institutional concession, reversing the concession requires the leader to exert concerted effort and pay a cost; yet, often, these costs are low because institutions are weak. However, coercive sanctioning mechanisms can stabilize institutional concessions and facilitate credible commitment. Institutional and coercive power sharing therefore overlap when coercive enforcement relies on institutions to succeed.

A commonly theorized mechanism that raises the cost of reneging is that challengers can use institutions to communicate. This can occur directly within the institutional forum or indirectly by using the institution as a focal point. This mechanism enables challengers to coordinate against and to coercively punish transgressions by the ruler, which in turn facilitates credible commitment. Words written on a piece of paper can constrain a ruler if they create self-enforcing beliefs about punishment. Existing research examines this mechanism within the context of promises to hold elections at fixed intervals, or constitutional provisions more broadly (North & Weingast 1989, Weingast 1997, Myerson 2008, Fearon 2011, Gehlbach & Keefer 2011, Ginsburg & Simpser 2013).

Myerson (2008) presents one way to formalize the coordination mechanism of coercive enforcement. A ruler's survival hinges on agents exerting costly effort on behalf of the regime, such as to defend against invaders. Unconstrained rulers face a moral hazard problem because they will renege on promised payments after the agents perform their task. Knowing this, agents will refuse to exert costly effort to protect the regime. Thus, rulers can benefit from constitutional constraints. In Myerson's model, this entails allowing agents to communicate via a court or parliament. Communication creates common knowledge among agents. Because of these institutional prerogatives, a transgression against a single agent is, in effect, a transgression against every available agent. Collective action enables agents to punish transgressions by the ruler. The ruler can anticipate such punishments, which makes credible their commitment to deliver promised payments. In sum, power-sharing deals backed by coercive enforcement induce agents to exert costly effort to protect the regime.

Giving Away Guns

More bluntly, rulers can permit challengers to directly control guns. Their coercive power can enforce a power-sharing arrangement and facilitate credible commitment.

Within the central government, actors besides the ruler's cronies can control various branches of the security sector. For example, the ruler can name a separate Minister of Defense (MoD). Naming a MoD contrasts with eliminating the position, keeping it vacant, or the ruler naming himself as MoD (Meng 2020, Meng & Paine 2022). Like other high-ranking cabinet ministries in dictatorships, the MoD gains numerous perks of office. Yet, the MoD also gains the de facto means to prevent the ruler from transgressing upon these spoils in the future. This minister controls the armed forces and holds the highest-ranking military position in the regime. The MoD determines the creation and implementation of military policy, which includes the appointment, management, and mobilization of all security forces. Furthermore, when an elite is appointed as the MoD, that means the Ministry of Defense, rather than the ruler personally, has direct contact with the highest-ranking officers who exercise operational control over troops. This direct access to coercive power provides the MoD and his allies with a credible threat to stage a coup if the ruler tries to displace them.

In the context of civil wars, ceasefires or peace treaties that permit rebel groups to keep their arms or attempt to integrate them into the state military constitute a coercive enforcement mechanism. Fearon & Laitin (2007) make the stark assumption that institutional concessions are inherently incredible, and thus the ruler cannot share power without allowing rebels to retain their arms. Glassmyer & Sambanis (2008, p. 365) build on this premise by noting "the time-inconsistency of peace settlements in civil wars: once the rebels demobilize, they lose bargaining power and the government can renege on its promises. A self-enforcing agreement could prevent this, but it is difficult to create such agreements." This motivates their study of the effectiveness of military integration provisions. Integrating former rebels into a new national army allows rebels to retain their guns, albeit within a centralized body rather than a nonstate organization.

Francois et al.'s (2015) model provides an example of sharing power by giving away guns. A leader chooses how many cabinet ministries to give to members from various ethnic groups as well as how much patronage each minister receives. This institutional arrangement constitutes power sharing because including actors in the government bolsters their coercive capabilities. Specifically, an actor has a better chance to depose the leader as an insider (through a coup) than when out of government, which would require organizing an insurgent movement to overthrow the government. This coercive enforcement mechanism enhances the ruler's commitment to provide spoils.

Threat-Enhancing Effect

Enhanced commitment ability for the ruler is not the only consequence of power-sharing deals backed by coercive enforcement mechanisms. The means by which the challenger can prevent the ruler from reneging are a double-edged sword. Coercive capabilities enable challengers not only to defend their privileges, but alternatively to go on the offensive and violently overthrow the ruler—the threat-enhancing effect. The overall effect of sharing power on leadership survival is ambiguous because of the countervailing commitment and threat-enhancing effects.

In research on authoritarian stability, the threat-enhancing effect of sharing power has received less attention than the commitment effect. Yet, the ideal-type case in which sharing power solely enhances the credibility of promises without also bolstering offensive capabilities would seem to be empirically rare. If elites can use a legislature or party to coordinate to punish transgressions by the ruler, then they may also be able to coordinate to overthrow the ruler even absent a transgression. MoDs or rebels incorporated into the state military may be satisfied with the spoils that their posts convey or they may leverage their platforms to dethrone the ruler.

To illustrate how coercive enforcement mechanisms make sharing power a double-edged sword, we review theoretical considerations from research on ethnic conflict, regional autonomy, and leadership succession. This discussion also establishes that the core mechanisms developed in these disparate research agendas exhibit greater similarities than previously recognized.

In ethnically polarized societies, rulers trade off between preventing coups and preventing civil wars (Roessler 2016). If a ruler creates an ethnically exclusive regime, then members of excluded ethnic groups face incentives to organize a private army and rebel against the regime. To mitigate these incentives, rulers can co-opt the opposition by offering positions in the cabinet, legislature, and military (commitment effect). Yet, because of the double-edged sword, sharing power also provides opportunities for violence specialists and other power brokers to construct a network of followers. Challengers can take advantage of their enhanced coercive capabilities to mount offensive actions against the ruler (threat-enhancing effect). In Roessler's (2016, p. 37) account, coup conspirators "leverage partial control of the state (and the resources and matériel that comes with access to the state)." By contrast, "rebels or insurgents lack such access and have to build a private military organization to challenge the central government and its military." Consequently, "coups are often much more likely to displace rulers from power than rebellions" (p. 37). Wang (2022) contends that emperors in imperial China faced a qualitatively similar "sovereign's dilemma": A coherent elite class that could act collectively to strengthen the state was also capable of revolting against the ruler, which led many emperors to deliberately fragment elite actors.

Beyond sharing power in the central government, a ruler can grant regional privileges through autonomy deals or federalist institutions. Because of the double-edged sword of sharing power, these concessions can either lower or raise incentives for conflict over territory. Cederman et al. (2015, p. 355) explain how regional autonomy deals enhance the physical security of the challenging group over their territory and preserve their ethnonational identity (commitment effect). Yet, regional autonomy deals also enable rebel leaders to recruit along ethnic lines by reinforcing divisive ethnic identities, and provide groups with resources that they can use to pressure the state (threat-enhancing effect). For example, Iraqi governments have periodically struck regional autonomy deals with the oil-rich northern Kurdistan part of the country. The Kurds' Peshmerga militia raised the costs for the center to renege on the deal, hence enhancing credibility (Powell 2012, p. 627). However, at times when the central government was vulnerable, such as after 1991 and 2003 following wars with the United States, an already-established government and military in Kurdistan facilitated de facto secession.

The double-edged sword of sharing power also influences authoritarian succession (Kokkonen & Sundell 2014, Konrad & Mui 2017, Meng 2021b, Zhou 2021, Kokkonen et al. 2022). Designating a specific successor helps to solve the coordination problem of who rules next. Diminished prospects for a costly contest over the throne yield greater total surplus (commitment effect). For example, in authoritarian Mexico under the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, each president served a single six-year term and then hand-picked his successor (Helmke & Levitsky 2004). This informal institution eliminated violent succession conflicts. However, naming a successor also creates a threat-enhancing effect, which this literature terms the "crown prince effect." The designated successor has greater offensive capabilities because of the common expectation that he will rule next—whether his ascension occurs before or after the incumbent retires or dies. The crown prince might leverage his empowered position to strike preventively in anticipation that the ruler will retract his decision to name a successor. Alternatively, in the case of negative shocks about the leader's health or the quality of his policies, the crown prince is well-positioned to remove the ruler.

STRATEGIES OF SHARING POWER

Do rulers want to share power? The answer is nonobvious because the countervailing commitment and threat-enhancing effects make sharing power a double-edged sword. We describe three conditions that induce a strategic ruler to share power.

1. Challenger credibility: The challenger must be able to credibly punish a ruler who does not share power.
2. Challenger willingness: If the ruler shares power, the challenger must willingly forgo taking harmful actions.
3. Ruler willingness: The ruler must willingly accept the constraints and lost rents imposed by a power-sharing deal.

These conditions draw from ones developed in various formal models. Kenkel & Paine (2022) label these respective conditions as elite credibility, elite willingness, and ruler willingness. Paine (2022b) refers to the failure of each respective condition as opportunistic exclusion, strategic exclusion, and greedy exclusion.

Challenger Credibility

To induce the ruler to share power, the challenger's threat of punishment must be credible. Punishment can entail either revolting or exiting. When the challenger cannot credibly threaten punishment, a strategic ruler prefers to concentrate rents and decision-making power in his own hands. Why not marginalize the challenger if doing so carries no discernible penalty?

Revolt. According to Acemoglu & Robinson (2006), the masses can credibly threaten to revolt against authoritarian elites when economic inequality is high and the masses are rarely able to coercively mobilize within an authoritarian regime. In this circumstance, the masses clamor for large-scale redistribution and greatly desire an expansive franchise; but under authoritarian rule, they frequently have to endure low-redistribution policies favored by elites. However, if the masses have lesser preferences for redistribution or if they can frequently mobilize to compel concessions, then they cannot credibly threaten to rebel if elites refuse to expand the franchise. Instead, when challenger credibility fails, the elites can buy off the masses with temporary policy concessions. Elites prefer temporary concessions over sharing power because expanding the franchise grants permanent agenda-setting power to the masses.

Other theories incorporate ideas about challenger credibility to explain why some dictators create personalist regimes whereas others enact institutionalized constraints. Meng (2020) assumes that rulers are most vulnerable early in their tenures. Absent intervention by other elites, the ruler will inevitably become more powerful over time as he consolidates control. The desire to prevent power consolidation creates a motive for rival elites to stage a coup early on. An initially weak ruler has no choice but to share power to prevent a coup attempt. Challenger credibility holds under these conditions, as exemplified by cases like Cameroon in which the first president, Amadou Ahidjo, entered office lacking broad support and was vulnerable to being deposed.

By contrast, if the ruler is initially strong, then elites always pose a weak coup threat and challenger credibility fails in Meng's (2020) model. This emboldens the ruler to govern without constraints. A ruler can begin strong for various reasons. Some rulers headed a mass independence movement and were viewed as "founding fathers" of their country, such as the first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, of Cote d'Ivoire. Geddes et al. (2018, ch. 4) discuss the converse consideration: Some rulers are born strong because the elites that comprise the ruler's seizure coalition are fragmented. This is often the case when regime elites, prior to gaining power, lacked a party or occupied low-ranking positions in the state military, which undermines challenger credibility.

The size and location of the challenger's support coalition also affect challenger credibility. Roessler & Ohls (2018) posit that ethnic groups are well positioned to revolt when they are numerically large and located close to the capital. By contrast, challenger credibility fails for many groups that lack favorable ethnic geography.

Exit. Another way in which challengers can punish a ruler for refusing to share power is to exit, which we conceptualize broadly. Exit can entail hiding productive assets from the state, forgoing potentially lucrative investments, or the physical migration of persons and capital. Thus, if assets are mobile or hard to monitor, challenger credibility holds because the challenger will exit unless the ruler shares power.

Existing research considers how exit options can induce rulers to share power, both historically and in contemporary regimes. Bates & Lien (1985) analyze the rise of parliaments in medieval Europe. Rising urban trade and populations created new, lucrative forms of wealth. Challenger credibility held because mobile assets were easy to hide from the state (p. 55). Consequently, many monarchs granted communal charters and parliamentary representation in return for levying trade taxes. Gailmard (2017) studies the emergence of separation-of-powers institutions in the British American colonies. White settlers on family farms would not invest in intensifying their agricultural techniques absent protection against exploitative colonial governors. Alternatively, potential settlers could refuse to migrate overseas at all. Conceding settler representation in the lower house of colonial assemblies mitigated incentives to exercise these exit options. Challenger credibility meant that institutional concessions were necessary to make the American colonies profitable to English corporations, proprietors, and the Crown.

Analyzing the role of exit-induced challenger credibility also helps to explain contemporary reforms by the Chinese Communist Party. Gehlbach & Keefer (2011) propose that political reforms in the 1980s were needed to induce party cadres to make lucrative economic investments. Without the ability to communicate, and hence to coordinate against transgressions by higher-ranking regime elites, party cadres would exit in the sense of forgoing risky investments. Wang (2015) finds that the rule of law is better enforced in regions of China dominated by foreign rather than Chinese investors. Assets held by foreigners are more mobile, and hence subject to exit if party officials do not respect the rule of law. Thus, various forms of exit can facilitate challenger credibility.

Challenger Willingness

Challenger willingness poses the converse of the challenger credibility problem. If the ruler shares power, is the challenger willing to forgo taking actions that harm the ruler? Challenger willingness requires that sharing power bolsters the ruler's commitment ability significantly more than it enhances the coercive threat posed by the challenger. If instead the threat-enhancing effect outweighs the commitment effect, then the challenger takes harmful actions even under a power-sharing arrangement. This, of course, dissuades a strategic ruler from sharing power in the first place.

Has sharing power deterred violent challenges and stabilized regimes in postcolonial Africa? Roessler (2016) and Meng (2019, 2020) share a core assumption that relates to our discussion of coercive enforcement mechanisms: Sharing power bolsters the offensive capabilities of challengers by better positioning them to stage a coup. However, they make divergent assumptions about the credibility of the ruler's commitments, which yield differing implications about challenger willingness and prospects for stability. Roessler assumes low commitment ability, which yields an omnipresent internal security dilemma. Incorporation into the central government yields greater spoils for members of rival ethnic groups, but these gains are inherently tenuous and not credible over time. Hence, in our terminology, challenger willingness fails. By contrast, according to

Meng, sharing power eliminates the internal security dilemma by shoring up the position of challengers within the regime. Certain institutional concessions prevent the ruler from consolidating autocratic powers, which enables challengers to capture a cut of future spoils. High commitment ability ensures that challenger willingness holds. In sum, Roessler (2016) anticipates that sharing power breeds conflict whereas Meng (2019, 2020) contends that sharing power ensures stability.

This debate raises the question: Under what conditions should we expect challenger willingness to hold in postcolonial Africa? Why is commitment ability higher in some regimes than others? This is largely unexplored research terrain, although Paine (2019) proposes one factor. He argues that commitment ability was typically low after independence in countries with large precolonial states due to a history of precolonial wars and slave raiding, colonial indirect rule, and fractured decolonization parties. These conditions often engendered failed power-sharing arrangements and conflict. By contrast, in countries without major precolonial states, sharing power via cabinet positions usually yielded credible spoils sharing without triggering an internal security dilemma. In these cases, challenger willingness held.

Ruler Willingness

The final condition needed to facilitate power sharing is ruler willingness. Perhaps surprisingly, a strategic ruler might refuse to share power even if doing so is necessary and sufficient to prevent challengers from taking harmful actions. This is particularly striking when challengers have a viable option to revolt. Many theories presume that dictators prioritize political survival above all other goals (e.g., Magaloni 2008, p. 717; Bueno de Mesquita & Smith 2010, p. 936; Roessler 2016, p. 60). However, simply surviving in office is not lucrative if the ruler is severely constrained from enjoying spoils. The drawback of sharing power is that the ruler constrains himself and bolsters the coercive capabilities of challengers, which necessitates giving away more rents. Under the premise that dictators maximize their expected lifetime stream of rents, rather than survival per se, we can see why rulers might be unwilling to share power—regardless of the consequences.

Paine (2022b) analyzes a stark setting to demonstrate how the trade-off between rents and survival can cause ruler willingness to fail. For parameter values in which challenger willingness holds, the ruler can guarantee permanent political survival upon sharing enough power with the challenger. If, additionally, the challenger is coercively strong, then challenger credibility holds. This implies that refusing to share power will eventually breed conflict and the possibility of overthrow. Yet, to maximize authoritarian rents, the ruler might still choose to not share power. Although the ruler cannot consume rents upon losing power, denying political access at the center and weakening the challenger as much as possible pushes the anticipated conflict far into the future. Consequently, the ruler may prioritize the rents accrued in the meantime despite eventually suffering the costs of conflict. In this circumstance, ruler willingness fails. Empirically, this logic may help to account for exclusionary authoritarian regimes that leave “no other way out” than social revolution for the opposition (Goodwin 2001). Yet, rather than assume miscalculations by the ruler, this mechanism provides strategic underpinnings for why a dictator would deliberately pursue kleptocratic policies that raise prospects for revolution.

In Acemoglu & Robinson’s (2006) account, ruler willingness may fail because the power-sharing choice in their model is so stark: Franchise expansion grants full control over future policy decisions to the masses. Consequently, when the criterion of challenger credibility is met, the ruling elite might respond by exerting costly repression rather than sharing power with the masses.

Alternatively, ruler willingness can fail because of agency problems within the ruling coalition. White (2020) studies military integration deals to end civil wars. Integrating former rebels into the state military co-opts and shares power with an external challenger. However, incumbent generals within the state military are typically opposed to incorporating former rebels. Military integration not only lessens their own influence but also compels generals to associate with individuals who killed their comrades, a prospect they despise. Resistance by the existing officer corps creates a barrier to implementing military integration provisions even if challenger willingness holds—that is, the rebels can credibly commit to not leverage their new position in the state military to stage a coup against the regime. Instead, internal challengers serve as veto players, which undermines ruler willingness.

Veto players also impede power-sharing arrangements in countries where the ruling group is bolstered by a long-standing ideology of ethnic dominance. Individuals who believe in their cultural superiority and right to rule the country might tolerate costly civil wars as the price of maintaining ethnic dominance (Wimmer 2012). Even if the ruler himself would prefer to cut a deal to end a civil war, other members of the regime might block this action. Alternatively, the ruler may himself believe in the myth of cultural superiority, which provides another reason that ruler willingness can fail.

SUMMARY AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This article surveys and reorganizes the literature to provide a unified language for studying authoritarian power sharing. We aim to help scholars from diverse fields to better comprehend core concepts, mechanisms, and strategies related to power sharing by offering three main contributions.

First, we conceptualize power sharing as meeting two distinct requirements: the arrangement must both share spoils and reallocate power to make it costly for the leader to renege.

Second, we identify two broad types of enforcement mechanisms for power-sharing deals: institutional and coercive. Institutional concessions, such as delegating agenda control over policy decisions or empowering third-party enforcers, can reallocate power by imposing costs on the leader to renege. However, institutional power sharing can backfire. Weak institutions create a Catch-22 that inhibits credible commitment and strong institutions can create a snowball effect whereby the leader gives away more rents than intended. When institutions are weak, self-enforcing power sharing is still possible if challengers have coercive means to defend their spoils. However, empowering challengers carries a risk: They can use their coercive capabilities to overthrow the ruler.

Third, given this double-edged sword of sharing power, we identify conditions that facilitate power sharing: (*a*) challenger credibility—the challenger must be able to credibly threaten the ruler; (*b*) challenger willingness—if the ruler shares power, the challenger must be willing to forgo taking actions that harm the ruler; (*c*) ruler willingness—the ruler must be willing to accept the constraints imposed by a power-sharing deal.

By disentangling the spoils-sharing and enforcement-mechanism components of power-sharing deals, we highlight vital issues for future research. "Formal" and "informal" institutions for sharing power might work more similarly than realized. Formal institutions such as legislatures and elections can provide a coordination device to violently combat autocratic transgressions. But this means the enforcement mechanism is qualitatively similar to the means of coercive enforcement inherent in power-sharing deals that, on their face, look very different, such as naming a MoD or permitting rebels to retain their arms.

Among formal institutions, drastically different mechanisms can enforce seemingly similar institutional arrangements. On the one hand, the fear that transgressions will be met by coercive punishment can compel institutional stability. On the other hand, the rules can become so well-accepted among all parties that following them effectively becomes a norm. For example, in some contexts, the costs of ignoring court decisions are perceived as prohibitively high. Empirically, it is very difficult to disentangle these two possibilities. If a power-sharing deal is stable, then coercion—if this is indeed the primary enforcement mechanism—lies off the equilibrium path. Overall, we encourage research on power-sharing institutions to scrutinize enforcement mechanisms.

A related question that remains unanswered is whether actors within authoritarian regimes can transition from enforcing agreements primarily via armed threats to relying entirely on institutional rules themselves as sufficient to ensure credible commitment. Often, coercive power provides the foundation for credible power sharing when a regime or leader first takes power. Yet, over time, expectations regarding institutional arrangements can stabilize. Under what conditions can peaceful power sharing become institutionalized over time? How do we know when formal institutional rules displace the barrel of a gun as the primary enforcement mechanism?

Finally, our framework may illuminate considerations about more democratic settings in which leaders gain office by competitive elections. Power-sharing institutions in democratic contexts include ethnic quotas, federalism, and judicial review. These distortions to majoritarian rule are typically justified by their ability to lower the stakes of winning and to promote democratic buy-in from all factions. However, their track record for promoting democratic survival and preventing conflict recurrence is, at best, mixed (Graham et al. 2017). The factors we discuss for authoritarian regimes may help to explain why. Often, the dominant faction often cannot credibly commit to retain institutions that dilute its influence. The Catch-22 of weak institutions can lead to democratic breakdown via incumbent entrenchment or can trigger disfavored factions to fight the government. Alternatively, actors who enjoy institutional privileges may leverage their favored position to further tilt institutions in their favor—the snowball effect of strong institutions. For these reasons, it may be fruitful in future work to jointly analyze power sharing in democratic and authoritarian regimes.

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