

Authoritarian Power Sharing: Concepts, Mechanisms, and Strategies

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Abstract

Power sharing is a central concept in studies of authoritarian regimes. Leaders must make concessions to actors who threaten their rule, and can do so through various formal institutions (parties, legislatures, elections) and appointments within the cabinet and military. We provide a unified language for studying authoritarian power sharing by summarizing and advancing the literature on three fronts. First, we conceptualize power-sharing deals as (a) sharing spoils between a ruler and challenger and (b) reallocating power in a way that makes it costly for the ruler to renege. Second, we discuss mechanisms that can make power-sharing mechanisms self-enforcing: delegating agenda control, allowing communication to facilitate coordination, and giving away guns. Although these mechanisms enable the ruler to credibly commit to a promised division of spoils, they also create a drawback: challengers can leverage their access to power to overthrow the ruler. Consequently, sharing power is a double-edged sword that can either promote or undermine leadership survival. Third, we incorporate these ambiguous consequences for regime survival to explain strategic motives for dictators to share power. Challengers must be able to credibly punish the ruler if she does not share power, and willing to forgo exercising their outside option if the ruler shares power; and the ruler must be willing to acquiesce to diminished power and rents.

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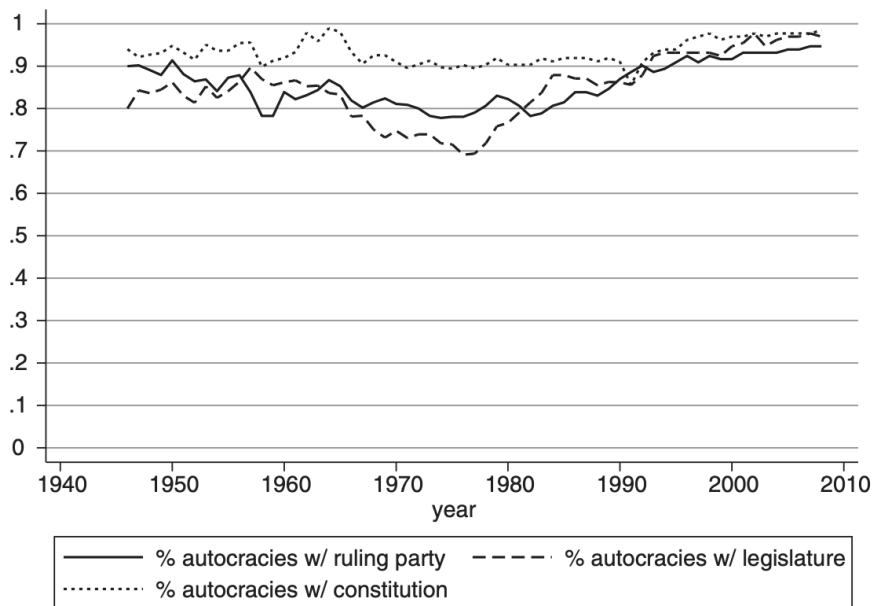
1 Introduction

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 formal and informal channels to distribute spoils and make policy concessions. Figure 1 (in progress) shows the large percentage of authoritarian regimes with ruling parties, legislatures, multi-party elections, semi-independent judiciaries, and executive term limits. The figure also demonstrates the prevalence of numerous less formal channels for distributing spoils, such as incorporating members of multiple ethnic groups into cabinet positions, naming a vice president, naming a Minister of Defense, civil war settlements that integrate rebels into the state military, and regional autonomy deals. In Table [1](#) we provide citations for recent research on these varied institutions.

In this review article, we provide a unified language for studying authoritarian power sharing. We agree with the general premise in recent research that understanding the role of these institutions (broadly speaking) is essential for comprehending authoritarian survival. However, we contend that three foundational questions remain underspecified. (1) **Concepts:** What is power sharing? (2) **Mechanisms:** How do leaders commit to power-sharing deals? How can these deals backfire on the ruler? (3) **Strategies:** Under what conditions do leaders share power? Throughout, we analyze the interaction between a *ruler* that makes a proposal and a non-ruling actor, denoted as a *challenger*, who decides whether to accept. 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. The arrangement must (1) *share* spoils between the parties and (2) reallocate *power* in a way that makes it costly for the ruler to renege. Existing empirical work on power sharing in dictatorships focuses almost exclusively on the first criterion. However, deals that entail pure spoils transfers without a credible enforcement mechanism do not constitute *power* sharing. Such arrangements do not alter the distri-

Figure 1: Authoritarian Institutions



bution of power because they do not create costs for the ruler to renege on the agreement or otherwise constrain the ruler. The stakes of this conceptual distinction are high. Two deals can entail similar spoils-sharing provisions, but carry very different consequences depending on their mechanisms of self-enforcement, or lack thereof.

This motivates our second contribution, in which we provide details on mechanisms that can make power-sharing deals *self-enforcing*. Enforcement mechanisms enable the ruler to credibly commit to promised spoils-sharing provisions. One possibility is to delegate control over the policy agenda to challengers (e.g., within a legislature or ruling party). However, such arrangements raise a deeper question: what prevents the leader from taking it back? In most dictatorships, institutions are not established by long-standing norms or third-party enforcers, and challengers need independent means to enforce the deal. One mechanism is information dissemination within institutions: if disparate challengers can communicate, they can coordinate to punish transgressions by the ruler. Another mechanism is to give away guns to challengers (e.g., controlling various branches of the security sector), which they can use to enforce the deal. In either case, the ruler shifts coercive capabilities toward the challenger.

Yet enhanced commitment ability is not the only consequence of the enforcement

mechanisms embedded into power-sharing deals. The same means by which the challenger can prevent the ruler from reneging can also empower the challenger to renege. When institutions are weak, challengers can use their enhanced coercive capability to overthrow the ruler via a coup. Alternatively, challengers can leverage initially small institutional concessions to create a slippery slope whereby they accrue more privileges than the ruler originally intended.

The overall effect of sharing power is ambiguous for leadership survival 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*. They view concessions such as delegating control over parts of the security apparatus as conferring minimal commitment. Instead, they emphasize how such actors become dangerous and capable usurpers that can overthrow the ruler via a coup. Yet if both mechanisms are at work, we need more theoretical guidance about the causes and consequences of power-sharing deals.

This gap motivates our third contribution, in which we address how rulers strategically navigate the dilemma of power sharing. We describe three conditions that facilitate the strategic creation of power-sharing arrangements. (1) *Challenger credibility*: the challenger must be able to credibly exercise an outside option if the ruler does not share power. (2) *Challenger willingness*: if the ruler shares power, the challenger must be willing to forgo their outside option. (3) *Ruler willingness*: the ruler must be willing to accept the constraints and lost rents imposed by a power-sharing deal.

Table 1: Existing Research on Power Sharing in Authoritarian Regimes

Institution	Selected references
Ruling party	Huntington (1970); Geddes (1999); Magaloni (2008); Magaloni and Kricheli (2010); Gehlbach and Keefer (2011); Levitsky and Way (2013); Morgenbesser (2016); Reuter (2017); Miller (2020a)
Legislature	Bates and Donald Lien (1985); Gandhi and Przeworski (2006, 2007); Gandhi (2008); Blaydes and Chaney (2013); Cox (2016); Gailmard (2017); Ochieng' Opalo (2019); Kenkel and Paine (2022); Weipert-Fenner (2020)
Elections	Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009); Blaydes (2010); Levitsky and Way (2010); Chacón, Robinson and Torvik (2011); Fearon (2011); Little (2012); Hyde and Marinov (2014); Little, Tucker and LaGatta (2015); Matanock (2017); Luo and Rozenas (2018); Miller (2020b)
Constitution	North and Weingast (1989); Weingast (1997); Elkins, Ginsburg and Melton (2009); Ginsburg and Simpser (2013); Tushnet (2014); Albertus and Menaldo (2018); Fearon and Francois (2020)
Succession and term limits	Herz (1952); Brownlee (2007); Kokkonen and Sundell (2014); Abramson and Rivera (2016); Frantz and Stein (2017); Konrad and Mui (2017); Acharya and Lee (2019); Zhou (2019); Meng (2020b); Versteeg et al. (2020)
Courts	Solomon Jr (2007); Varol (2014); Wang (2015); Shen-Bayh (2018a,b); Gailmard (2019)
Cabinet positions	Arriola (2009); Cheeseman (2011); Roessler (2011, 2016); Roessler and Ohls (2018); Cederman, Gleditsch and Buhaug (2013); Francois, Rainer and Trebbi (2015); Wucherpennig, Hunziker and Cederman (2016); Bormann (2019); Paine (2019); Beiser-McGrath and Metternich (2020); Christensen and Gibilisco (2020)
Military	Finer (1962); Horowitz (1985); Acemoglu, Ticchi and Vindigni (2010a,b); Besley and Robinson (2010); Svolik (2013); McMahon and Slantchev (2015); Talmadge (2015); Greitens (2016); Sudduth (2017); Harkness (2018); Boutton (2019); Meng and Paine (2021); Paine (2021b)
Civil war settlements	Hartzell and Hoddie (2003); Glassmyer and Sambanis (2008); Jarstad and Nilsson (2008); Mattes and Savun (2009); Martin (2013); Nomikos (2021); White (2020)
Regional autonomy	Chapman and Roeder (2007); Walter (2009); Cederman et al. (2015); Carter and Hassan (2020); Germann and Sambanis (2020)
General	Boix (2003); Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2005); Acemoglu and Robinson (2006); Myerson (2008, 2015); Svolik (2009); Boix and Svolik (2013); Ansell and Samuels (2014); Dower et al. (2018); Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018); Luo and Rozenas (2019); Meng (2020a); Paine (2021a, 2022); Finkel and Gehlbach (2020); Powell (2020)

Notes: This table provides a sample of research on each institution. It does not aim to be comprehensive. Instead, we mainly highlight pieces that discuss power sharing in some form.

2 Conceptualizing Power Sharing

We conceptualize a power-sharing deal between a ruler and challenger as meeting two distinct requirements. The arrangement must (1) *share* spoils between the parties and (2) reallocate *power* in a way that makes it costly for the ruler to renege.

The first requirement is that a power-sharing deal divides spoils among the parties. Existing work agrees that this criterion is a key aspect of sharing power. In his work on authoritarian institutions, Svolik (2012, 89) describes “agreements over the sharing of the spoils from joint rule as authoritarian power-sharing.” Analyzing the allocation of cabinet positions, Cheeseman (2011, 339) asserts that “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, 249-50) “define[s] post-conflict 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.”

Autocratic institutions provide an opportune forum for distributing patronage. Leaders 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; Arriola, DeVaro and Meng 2021; Francois, Rainer and Trebbi 2015). Cabinet ministers are paid lucrative salaries, and often receive private luxury cars, houses, first-class travel, and control over government contracts that they can reward to family members and their own 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, pp. 77). In his analysis of United Russia, Reuter (2017) notes that “For elites, the party provides access to spoils and lobbying opportunities and, importantly, reduces uncertainty over how those spoils are to be distributed” (pp. 159). In 2006, for instance, “special party commissions” were created to determine the allocation of oil-funded social development projects (called the National Projects and the Special Purpose Programs) in which hundreds of billions of federal budget dollars were directed towards local districts and clienteles (pp. 167).

Similarly, authoritarian legislatures provide a venue for “controlled bargaining” in which the leader or ruling party can provide incremental policy concessions to opposition parties. 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, pp. 80). Analyzing legislative elections in Jordan, Lust-Okar (2006) argues that “elections are primarily an arena of patronage distribution” (pp. 460).

Civil war termination settlements frequently include provisions for rebels to access spoils via institutions such as state-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, pp. 250). The Dayton Peace Accord were constructed so that the Bosnian Croat leaders extended some executive power to Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs (pp. 252). Regional autonomy deals are also common in post-conflict settings. These arrangements often enable residents to control a disproportionate share of regional production, such as proceeds from natural resource exports, and to control local language policies.

The second requirement of a power-sharing deal is that the arrangement contains some form of enforcement mechanism, which reallocates power between the ruler and challenger. A ruler shares *power* with coalition members only upon taking actions that make it more difficult or more costly for the ruler to renege on promises to share spoils. Thus, a true-power sharing deal must contain *enforcement provisions*. Enforcement can come from allowing participation in institutions that reduce the ruler’s discretion over how to allocate spoils, and putting actors in positions that enhance their capabilities to coerce the ruler. We expand on these mechanisms in Section 3.

The requirement for an enforcement mechanism distinguishes power-sharing agreements from pure patronage deals. Offering spoils to secure the support of challengers does not necessarily constitute sharing power. If the concessions do not constrain the ruler’s future actions, then they entail *pure spoils* transfers rather than power sharing. To

illustrate the difference, consider Bueno de Mesquita et al.'s (2005) selectorate model of coalition formation. In our conceptualization, the actions in this model constitute pure spoils transfers rather than power sharing. An incumbent ruler and a challenger each offer private and public goods to members of a selectorate. Each seek to outbid the other to build a larger winning coalition. If the incumbent succeeds, then their policies are implemented and they start the next round as the leader. A new challenger is randomly selected, and the interaction repeats. Crucially, given our distinction, the actions a ruler takes in one round to secure support *do not constrain* how they can attempt to buy support in the next round. For example, members of the winning coalition in one round do not gain any sources of de facto power that would prevent the ruler from choosing someone other than themselves in future rounds.

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 and Levitsky 2004; Stokes et al. 2013).

The stakes of our conceptual distinction are high. Two deals can entail similar spoils-sharing provisions, but carry very different consequences depending on their mechanisms of self-enforcement, or lack thereof. Although most existing conceptualizations of power-sharing have centered on the allocation of spoils, few require an enforcement mechanism.

3 Enforcement Mechanisms and Credible Commitment

Enforcement is a critical component of power-sharing deals, but how does it work? How can dictators credibly commit to promises to share spoils? How can power-sharing arrangements become self-enforcing? In this section, we discuss three enforcement mechanisms, which are not mutually exclusive: delegating agenda control, allowing communica-

tion to facilitate coordination, and giving away guns. The first mechanism relies on strong institutions. By contrast, with the last two, the ruler shifts coercive capabilities toward the challenger. We conclude this section by discussing how many empirically common authoritarian institutions lack strong enforcement mechanisms.

3.1 Delegating Agenda Control

A ruler can credibly distribute spoils over time by allowing challengers to control the policy agenda. Acemoglu and Robinson (2000; 2001; 2006) model this mechanism as follows. A rich elite that governs the country faces periodic unrest and the threat of revolution by the poor masses, who desire more redistribution. Under a dictatorship, elites cannot commit to high levels of redistribution in any periods in which the masses cannot mobilize a revolutionary threat. Elites can gain commitment ability only by sharing power: extending the franchise to incorporate the masses. Under democracy, the masses gain agenda-setting power over policy because their numerical superiority enables them to win elections. This enables them to enact high redistribution¹

Dower et al. (2018) extend this framework to allow for partial electoral concessions within authoritarian regimes. 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 created “a new institution of local self-government—the *zemstvo*” (128). These institutions provided peasants with the “opportunity to influence policy,” which constrained the autocratic state. In Ansell and Samuels (2014), capitalist elites can pressure landed elites. Political incorporation enables capitalist elites to protect their assets against expropriation and to target public spending toward public goods needed for industrial development.

¹Strictly speaking, this is not a model of authoritarian power sharing because the choice over institutional reform concerns democratization. However, we discuss this model because it is widely influential and their mechanisms pertain directly to core issues of authoritarian power sharing, as the next example shows.

England following the Glorious Revolution is a well-studied case in which members of a formal institution (here, Parliament) gained agenda-setting powers that constrained the Crown. After 1688, Parliament gained (or reaffirmed) numerous privileges that made the Crown unable to finance 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).

3.2 Communication and Coordination

Arrangements in which a ruler delegates agenda control over policy raise a deeper question: what prevents the leader from taking it back? In most dictatorships, institutions are not established by long-standing norms or third-party enforcers, and challengers need independent means to enforce the deal.

A commonly theorized mechanism is that rulers can make concessions self-enforcing by allowing actors to use an institutional forum to communicate, either explicitly by using their position within the institution or implicitly by using the institution as a focal point. Doing so enables them to coordinate against transgressions by the ruler. Words written on a piece of paper (e.g., a constitution, promising elections at fixed intervals) can constrain a ruler if they create self-enforcing beliefs about appropriate behavior (North and Weingast 1989; Weingast 1997; Myerson 2008; Fearon 2011; Gehlbach and Keefer 2011; Boix and Svolik 2013; Ginsburg and Simpser 2013).

Myerson (2008) presents one way to formalize this mechanism. 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 are tempted to renege on promised payments after the agents perform their task. Because agents can anticipate renegeing, an unconstrained ruler cannot induce agents to exert costly effort to

protect the regime. Thus, rulers can benefit from constitutional constraints, which Myerson models by 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. Agents' ability to act collectively facilitates credible punishments against transgressions by the ruler. Anticipating such punishment, the ruler's promises to deliver promised payments are self-enforcing. Thus, agents are willing to exert costly effort to protect the regime.

Empirically, it is difficult to know when this mechanism is at work. If the institutional rules are known and accepted, then threats of sanction lie *off the equilibrium path*. Thus, it may be observationally equivalent whether an arrangement is stable because actors have truly internalized the behavioral norms consistent with upholding the institutional rules, or because the proper checks and balances are in place to prevent transgressions that actors would otherwise commit. Thus, the most important attribute of a particular power-sharing deal might receive little or no attention in historical accounts because, empirically, we do not observe it²

3.3 Giving Away Guns

Another enforcement mechanism is to put challengers in positions in the regime such that they, quite literally, give away guns. This can entail allowing actors besides the ruler's cronies to control various branches of the security sector, such as naming a separate Minister of Defense. This decision contrasts with eliminating the Minister of Defense position, keeping the position vacant, or the ruler naming *himself* as the Minister of Defense (Meng 2020a; Meng and Paine 2021). Like other high-ranking cabinet ministries in dictatorships, the Minister of Defense gains numerous perks of office. Yet the Minister

²This consideration relates to Przeworski's (1991, ch. 1) discussion of why people obey traffic lights.

of Defense 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 is the highest-ranking military position in the regime. They determine the creation and implementation of military policy, including the appointment, management, and mobilization of all security forces. Consequently, they have a credible threat to stage a coup if the ruler tries to displace them.

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, and how much patronage to give to each minister. This institutional arrangement constitutes power sharing because an elite included in the government has greater coercive capabilities. Specifically, actors have a better chance to depose the leader as insiders (through a coup) than when out of government, which would require them to organize an insurgent movement to overthrow the government.

There is no institutional commitment effect in this model. Cabinet ministries are simply the means of distributing patronage. If a ruler makes it through a given round, what she did in that round to secure support has no constraining effect on what she can do to buy support in the next round. Thus, unlike in the Acemoglu and Robinson models, the set of cabinet ministers at one period of time lack any agenda-setting powers in future periods. Instead, in Francois et al.'s model, power sharing occurs solely by shifting coercive capabilities. This shift in de facto power enables them to defend their claim to spoils, which they would have lacked if excluded from the winning coalition.

Giving away guns is not mutually exclusive from the aforementioned mechanisms. For example, in Acemoglu and Robinson's models, it is not impossible for elites to reverse their choice to expand the franchise. They model the possibility of elites staging a coup to re-take agenda control from the masses. However, the elites' earlier concession of franchise expansion is conceptually equivalent to giving away guns to the masses. Elites only periodically have the ability to use force, and coups are costly. Hence elites are

restricted in their ability to renege on the deal because of their weakened coercive power.

3.4 Weak Enforcement Mechanisms

Recent scholarship posits that nominally democratic institutions routinely act as power-sharing devices. Given our more stringent conceptualization and the requirement of an enforcement mechanism, we contend that the notion of *power* sharing has been applied too broadly. Empirically, many authoritarian institutions are not strong enough to impose a meaningful cost for renegeing, which we discuss in the context of ruling parties.

Many autocratic ruling parties lack an independent institutional basis and fail to outlive the death of the founding leader. Following the first leader’s death or departure, 61 percent of ruling parties collapse within a year. Even among cases in which the first leader experienced a nonviolent exit from power, 52 percent of ruling parties do not survive the peaceful departure of the founding leader (Meng 2021). When a party’s existence relies on the leader, it seems unlikely that the party can punish the ruler for renegeing on deals or facilitate inter-temporal spoils sharing.

Scholars often rely on regime typologies (e.g., Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2014) to indicate institutional strength. However, 32 percent of ruling parties coded as part of a single-party regime failed to survive beyond the departure of the founding leader. For instance, the *Parti Democratique de Guinee* (PDG) under the rule of Ahmed Sékou Touré in Guinea is coded as part of a single-party regime. Yet the PDG lacked institutionalized rules and permanent structures. Upon Touré’s death, the military seized power in a coup and the PDG was immediately disbanded (Adamolekun 1976; Camara 2005). Similarly, the ruling Nigerien Progressive Party (1960-1974), which is also coded as part of a single-party regime, *amplified* rather than constrained the leader’s power. “Power was centralized under [the leader] Diori, who controlled ministerial appointments without parliamentary scrutiny, could appoint and dismiss civil servants and military officers

and could decree and veto laws” (Geddes, Wright, Frantz 2012, 82). The regime was overthrown by a coup led by the Army Chief of Staff who ousted the civilian government.

Typically, parties created by an incumbent president are mere personalist instruments whereas parties created before a regime takes power comprise an independent power base. In the latter case, the institution constrains the ruler’s decision-making autonomy, but not in the former case. Hence, authoritarian regimes with ruling parties differ in the extent to which they truly share *power* (Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2018; Miller 2020a).

4 Double-Edged Sword of Sharing Power

Enhanced commitment ability is not the only consequence of the enforcement mechanisms embedded into power-sharing deals. The same means by which the challenger can prevent the ruler from reneging (i.e., defending their prerogatives) can also empower the challenger to renege (i.e., going on the offensive). When institutions are weak, challengers can use their enhanced coercive capability to overthrow the ruler via a coup. Consequently, the overall effect of sharing power is ambiguous for leadership survival because of these countervailing *commitment* and *threat-enhancing* effects. Alternatively, challengers can leverage initially small institutional concessions to create a slippery slope whereby they accrue more privileges than the ruler originally intended.

This perverse consequence of sharing power (from the ruler’s perspective) has received less attention than the commitment-enhancing effects. Yet the ideal-type case in which institutional concessions solely enhance the credibility of promises without also bolstering offensive capabilities would seem to be empirically rare. For example, if coercive agents can coordinate to enforce salaries that the ruler promised to them, they may also be able to coordinate to stage a coup—even if the ruler does not renege on promised spoils. 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. A Minister of Defense

may be satisfied with the spoils that his post conveys, or he may leverage this platform to dethrone the ruler. An exception is cases of very strong institutions that prevent renegeing by either side without severe sanctions. However, even in such cases, it is still possible for certain initial concessions to create a slippery slope of adverse institutional reform.

4.1 Threat-Enhancing Effect

To illustrate how shifting coercive capabilities makes sharing power a double-edged sword, we review theoretical considerations from four literatures: (1) ethnic conflict, (2) the guardianship dilemma, (3) leadership succession, and (4) regional autonomy. This discussion also establishes that the core mechanisms developed in these disparate research agendas exhibit greater similarities than previously recognized.

First, [Roessler \(2011, 2016\)](#) studies ethnic conflict and posits that rulers trade off between preventing coups and preventing civil wars. 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. These actions distribute spoils to challengers and, at least in some settings, provide the institutional means by which to defend these prerogatives in the future.

Yet sharing power also provides opportunities for violence specialists and other power brokers to construct a network of followers. This enhances their coercive capabilities, which creates a fear that they will use these capabilities to take offensive actions against the ruler. 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” ([Roessler 2016](#), 37). In his formulation, sharing power

creates an internal security dilemma because neither the ruler nor incorporated elites can commit to not striking against the other.

Second, the widely studied “guardianship dilemma” entails a similar tradeoff between guarding against insider coups versus outsider threats. Rulers that face severe external challengers, such as a foreign invasion or a mass uprising, need a strong military that can defend the regime. Thus, rulers can gain an advantage by sharing power with competent, qualified generals and limiting costly coup-proofing measures, as opposed to recruiting exclusively among personalist supporters (e.g., family members, trusted co-ethnics) and fracturing lines of communication among generals. However, a military strong enough to guard a regime against external threats is also strong enough to pose an insider threat and remove the ruler from power via a coup d’état due to its high capabilities. This coup threat constrains the ruler from renegeing on promises to the military.

Yet various frictions can inhibit a ruler from committing to sufficient concessions for a powerful military, and hence they can threaten regime survival. A large military might strike because they anticipate their coup threat declining over time (Besley and Robinson 2010). Possible reasons for such a shift in power over time could arise because an ongoing civil war ends (Acemoglu, Ticchi and Vindigni 2010a) or the regime democratizes (Acemoglu, Ticchi and Vindigni 2010b). Alternatively, rulers and military elites may face contracting problems over policy decisions (Svolik 2013). Competent militaries also face greater incentives to defect in the face of mass anti-regime movements (Paine 2021b).

Third, a similar dilemma arises when an autocrat contemplates naming a successor (Herz 1952; Kokkonen and Sundell 2014; Konrad and Mui 2017; Meng 2020b). On the one hand, not appointing a successor creates a high likelihood of chaos and elite in-fighting after the current ruler dies or retires. Chaos ensues as different challengers vie to become the next ruler, absent the ability to coordinate around a designated successor. Anticipation of post-succession in-fighting creates incentives for a pre-emptive coup, hence imperiling the incumbent’s survival. Thus, naming a successor alleviates prospects for

chaos by helping to solve the coordination problem of who rules afterwards. This effect, in essence, enables the ruler to more credibly commit to delivering spoils to members of the ruling coalition (by eliminating the costs of fighting).

On the other hand, naming a successor creates a “crown prince effect.” Creating the expectation that the designated successor will eventually take over, in effect, enhances his offensive capabilities. The crown prince might use his empowered position to strike preventively in anticipation that the ruler will retract his decision to name a successor (Zhou 2019). 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 because the coordination problem entailed with deciding who will rule next is already solved.

Fourth, beyond sharing power in the *central* government, a ruler can grant *regional* privileges through autonomy deals or federalist institutions. These concessions can make separatist conflict either more or less likely because of the countervailing effects highlighted here. On the commitment side, regional autonomy deals enhance the physical security of the challenging group over their territory as well as the survival of their ethnonational identity. Hence, “protection helps mitigate the commitment problem that is endemic to state-government relations by making it harder for the state to renege on its promises” (Cederman et al. 2015 355).

Yet regional autonomy deals also enhance the ability of 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. 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 627). However, at times when the central government was vulnerable (e.g., after 1991 and 2003 following wars with the United States), an already-established government and military in Kurdistan facilitated de facto secession.

4.2 Slippery Slope of Institutional Concessions

Challengers can also renege in a different way. Rather than violently overthrow the leader, they can instead leverage their initial institutional concession to accrue even more spoils for themselves and away from the ruler. [Fearon and Francois \(2020\)](#) apply a variant of this mechanism to study elite-led democratization. Similar to Acemoglu and Robinson, they study the interaction between a ruling elite and the out-of-power masses. They depart by assuming that if elites relinquish power to the masses, they can write a biased constitution that reserves key prerogatives for elites. The problem for elites is that the masses can abrogate this constitutional arrangement in the future. Soon after the initial handover of power, elites should be able to enforce the deal because they can credibly threaten to stage a coup. However, this threat diminishes over time as they lose their influence within the coercive apparatus. Consequently, elites might be unwilling to negotiate a transition even when a constitutional arrangement exists that would make both elites and the masses better off than in a violent, authoritarian status quo. The slippery slope of institutional concessions implies that the elite-biased constitution may not be self-enforcing.

Other scholars develop the slippery slope mechanism in a more general theoretical setting. In a series of articles, [Acemoglu, Egorov and Sonin \(2008, 2012, 2015\)](#) study a dynamic model in which, in each period, every member of a club votes on the membership for the club in the next period. Thus, decisions in one period carry consequences for the future because any members brought in now can vote on membership later. Suppose that the ruling elite prefers a franchise that includes members of the middle class over the autocratic status quo. Nevertheless, they might refrain from franchise expansion because of the slippery slope: members of the middle class may, in the future, leverage their position within the institution to broaden the franchise even more.

However, [Gieczewski \(2021\)](#) establishes theoretical conditions under which the slippery slope effect is insufficient to deter rulers from making small initial concessions. Even

though they internalize future consequences, rulers are willing to make concessions that move them closer to their ideal point, despite knowing that conditions will change beyond that point in the future. They simply make smaller initial concessions than they otherwise would at the outset, which causes policy to drift more slowly over time.

5 Strategies of Sharing Power

Do rulers want to share power? The answer is non-obvious because of the double-edged sword of sharing power. We describe three conditions that facilitate power sharing. (1) *Challenger credibility*: the challenger must be able to credibly threaten to exercise an outside option if the ruler does not share power. (2) *Challenger willingness*: if the ruler shares power, the challenger must be willing to forgo their outside option. (3) *Ruler willingness*: the ruler must be willing to accept the constraints imposed by a power-sharing deal³

5.1 Challenger Credibility

To induce the ruler to share power, the challenger's threat of punishment must be credible. This punishment can entail either revolting or exiting. When challenger credibility fails, the ruler would prefer to concentrate rents and decision-making power in their own hands. Why *not* marginalize the challenger if doing so carries no discernible penalty?

In [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2000, 2001, 2006\)](#), challenger credibility holds when the masses can credibly threaten to revolt. Two factors can make the revolt threat credible. First, economic inequality is high. Then the masses desire high levels of redistribution, which enhances their desire for an expansive franchise. Second, the masses are rarely able

³We formalize these incentive-compatibility constraints in related articles. [Kenkel and Paine \(2022\)](#) label these respective conditions as elite credibility, elite willingness, and ruler willingness. [Paine \(2022\)](#) refers to the failure of each respective condition as opportunistic exclusion, strategic exclusion, and greedy exclusion.

to mobilize within an authoritarian regime. In this scenario, they can compel elites to offer temporary concessions only infrequently. In either scenario, the masses cannot be induced to accept temporary concessions under the incumbent regime, and hence they can credibly threaten to revolt. Consequently, to prevent a violent revolution, the ruling elite makes the significant power-sharing concession of giving away agenda control to the masses. By contrast, when challenger credibility fails, elites prefer to buy off the masses with temporary concessions.

Others develop a similar logic to explain why some dictators create personalist regimes whereas others impose institutionalized constraints. Meng (2020a) assumes that rulers are vulnerable early in their tenures. Absent intervention from other elites, de facto power will eventually shift toward the ruler over time as they consolidate their grip on power. Consequently, rival elites face an incentive to stage a coup early on to prevent power consolidation. If the ruler is initially weak, then he has no choice but to share power to prevent a coup attempt. Hence challenger credibility holds, which cases like post-independence Cameroon exemplify.

By contrast, if the ruler is initially strong, then elites pose a weak coup threat and challenger credibility fails in Meng's (2020a) theory. This emboldens the ruler to govern without constraints. Rulers may begin strong for various reasons. Some headed a mass independence movement and were viewed as "founding fathers" of their country, as in post-independence Cote d'Ivoire. Geddes, Wright and Frantz (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.

The size and location of the challenger's support coalition also matters. Roessler and Ohls (2018) posit that members of 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 such conditions.

To this point, we have considered how the challenger can punish the ruler by using physical coercion. An alternative possible outside option is “exit.” This can entail hiding productive assets from the state, forgoing potentially lucrative investments, or the physical migration of persons or capital. Thus, if the challenger’s assets are mobile or hard to monitor, challenger credibility can hold because they will exit unless the ruler shares power.

Existing research considers how the exit option can induce various types of power-sharing arrangements. [Bates and Donald Lien \(1985\)](#) analyze the rise of parliaments in medieval Europe. Rising urban trade and populations engendered bargaining over communal rights and parliamentary representation, in return for permitting the ruler to collect trade taxes that could be “highly lucrative [but] easily avoided” (55).

[Gailmard \(2017\)](#) studies the emergence of separation-of-powers institutions in colonial America. In the continental United States, settlers on family farms would not invest in intensifying their agricultural techniques absent protection against exploitation from colonial governors. Alternatively, potential settlers could refuse to migrate overseas at all. Settler representation in the lower house of colonial assemblies became a means to protect against this exit option. These institutional concessions were necessary to make the American colonies profitable to English corporations, proprietors, and the Crown.

[Gehlbach and Keefer \(2011\)](#) discuss modern ruling parties. To induce lucrative economic investments, party cadres need to be able to communicate to coordinate against transgressions by higher-ranking regime elites. They apply this mechanism to understand reforms by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1980s. Similarly, in his study of legal reforms in China, [Wang \(2015\)](#) argues that rulers respect the rule of law when they need the cooperation of organized interest groups that control valuable and mobile assets. He finds that in China, the rule of law is better enforced in regions that are dominated by foreign rather than Chinese investors.

5.2 Challenger Willingness

Challenger willingness poses the converse problem as challenger credibility. If the ruler shares power, is the challenger willing to forgo exercising their outside option? This condition holds only if the commitment effect is large in magnitude relative to the threat-enhancing effect. When challenger willingness fails, the ruler will not share power with the challenger even if conflict is likely.

To illustrate this point, it is useful to contrast the differing implications of Roessler's (2011, 2016) and Meng's (2019, 2020a) theoretical frameworks applied to post-colonial Africa. In both accounts, sharing power is assumed to bolster the offensive capabilities of challengers, specifically, by better positioning them to stage a coup. However, they derive opposing implications for how power sharing affects regime survival: Roessler predicts a negative effect, and Meng a positive effect. The reason is that they, implicitly, impose different assumptions about the extent to which sharing power bolsters the ruler's ability to commit to future spoils. Roessler assumes that the internal security dilemma is omnipresent. Incorporating rival ethnic groups into the central government yields greater spoils for them, 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. By preventing the ruler from consolidating autocratic powers, they can ensure themselves a cut of future spoils. Thus, the commitment effect of sharing power is high in this account, and challenger willingness holds.

Paine (2019) proposes one empirical factor that affected in which post-colonial African countries challenger willingness held. He argues that commitment ability was typically low in countries with any ethnic groups organized as a pre-colonial state, leading to failed power-sharing arrangements and conflict. By contrast, other countries largely avoided the perils of weak formal institutions because sharing power via cabinet positions yielded

credible spoils sharing without triggering an internal security dilemma.

Other research proposes alternative reasons that challenger willingness could fail. In [Powell \(2020\)](#), the key consideration is the strength of institutions. 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 a 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 such an 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 has ruled the country since 1989) impedes the credibility of the proposed power-sharing deal.

[Kenkel and Paine \(2022\)](#) study the failure of challenger willingness within the context of historical European parliaments. During the Military Revolution (1500–1650), parliaments across the continent became less willing to fund wars proposed by the ruler. Wars had become more expensive relative to earlier periods. This created greater costs for elites if the ruler reneged on a spoils-sharing agreement. Furthermore, the credibility of monarchs’ commitments diminished because professional armies became the leading form of military technology. Rulers could use their standing army not only to prosecute external wars, but also to coerce recalcitrant elites for more funding, as occurred in Brandenburg-Prussia in the 1650s. Anticipating high prospects for reneging, many parliaments simply refused to provide funding. In response to the failure of challenger willingness, many monarchs across the continent stopped asking parliaments for tax grants or refused to call them at all, leading to the Age of Absolutism.

5.3 Ruler Willingness

Perhaps the most surprising condition is ruler willingness. Even if sharing power is necessary and sufficient to prevent a challenger from exercising their outside option, the ruler still might refuse to share power. This is particularly striking in cases where the outside option is revolt. Many theories presume dictators prioritize survival above all other goals (e.g., [Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2010](#), 936; [Magaloni 2008](#), 717; [Roessler 2016](#), 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 ruler willingness might fail.

[Paine \(2022\)](#) analyzes a stark setting to isolate the tradeoff between rents and survival. The ruler can guarantee political survival *forever* if she shares enough power with the challenger. By contrast, exclusion can breed conflict and overthrow—if the challenger has ability to coerce the ruler even when excluded from power, perhaps because they belong to a numerically large ethnic group located closed to the capital (see [Roessler and Ohls 2018](#)). Yet to maximize authoritarian rents, the ruler might *still* choose to exclude the challenger. 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.

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 assuming strategic miscalculations by the ruler, this mechanism provides strategic underpinnings for why a dictator would *deliberately* pursue a policy that raises prospects for revolution.

In Acemoglu and Robinson’s models, challenger willingness is always satisfied because democratization grants full control over future policy to the masses. However, ruler willingness may fail for precisely the same reason: the ruler has to give up so much to prevent revolution. Consequently, rulers might choose to exert costly repression against the masses when challenger credibility is met.

Finally, 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 because this would lessen their own influence and because they despise the idea of associating with individuals who killed their comrades. This resistance creates a barrier to implementing military integration provisions even if 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 play the role of veto players.

Veto players may also impede power-sharing arrangements in countries where the ruling group is bolstered by a long-standing ideology of ethnic dominance. Individuals that believe in their cultural superiority and right to rule the country may be willing to tolerate costly civil wars in an attempt to maintain their 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 also causes ruler willingness to fail.

6 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. The

present framework also poses several challenges that all studies of authoritarian power sharing must meet. First, they must discuss the enforcement mechanisms underpinning an institution and explain how the institution constrains the authority of the ruler. Second, the theoretical framework must address both the commitment and threat-enhancing effects, and explain under what circumstances we expect one to dominate the other.

We conclude by proposing three considerations for future research on power sharing. First, recent research advances our understanding of power-sharing provisions in democracies (Graham, Miller and Strøm 2017). How similar are considerations of power sharing in dictatorships to those in democracies? Do power-sharing institutions help to make democracies self-enforcing? How different is a constrained authoritarian regime (e.g., competitive authoritarian regime) from a democratic one with extensive countermajoritarian institutions that blunt the ability of majorities to rule? Second, we know more about why rulers *initiate* power-sharing deals than why they sometimes reverse them later in time. What explains episodes of “autocratization,” such as the removal term limits on the presidency in China in 2018? Third, why do authoritarian rulers ever make a full transition to democratic rule and hand over power? Why is partial power sharing under continued authoritarian rule not sufficient to buy off the opposition? Despite an enormous literature on democratization, existing scholarship does not confront this question directly. These types of questions should animate future research on authoritarian power sharing.

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