Pathways to Dictatorship

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Book abstract. Authoritarian regimes vary widely in how long they survive, why they fail, and their prospects to democratize. We provide a new framework for studying autocracy, centered on the events and processes that establish particular regimes — the pathways to dictatorship. How a regime is born shapes the dictator's ability to successfully manage threats from both insiders and outsiders. We distinguish autocratic foundations along two key dimensions: whether power is acquired through armed or unarmed means, and whether those who establish the regime come from within or outside the state. The result is four pathways that, collectively, account for the origins of nearly all modern autocracies: rebellion, coup, foreign handoff, and incumbent takeover.

Our empirical findings are based on a new global dataset, which consists of every autocratic regime spell between 1946 and 2025. Among the more than 400 autocratic spells, roughly half originated in coups across the entire time period. However, the number of coup autocracies plummeted after the Cold War ended. Incumbent takeovers have recently become the most common form of autocracy, although the four autocratic types are now roughly equal in prevalence.

The distribution of autocratic pathways over time reflects key trends in regime survival and the mode of autocratic death. Rebel regimes and foreign handoff autocracies are best-positioned to install a favorable ruling coalition and gain foreign support, and consequently are the most durable. These founding events, despite their relative rarity, have therefore comprised empirically important types of dictatorship throughout the past eight decades. And when rebel regimes do fall, they often reproduce themselves; this is the only autocratic origin type more likely to end via rebellion than coup. Coup regimes and incumbent takeover autocracies, by contrast, face greater challenges from the state military and broader society. These autocracies typically die sooner, usually either to a coup or a democratic transition. Overall, the pathways to dictatorship influence how long regimes survive and how they end, including prospects for democratization.

Chapter 1

Introduction

"I was born this way."

—Lady Gaga

On September 5, 1973, the dictators of the world turned out in force. At the Palace of Nations outside Algeria's capital, the Non-Aligned Movement was convening for its 4th summit. For four days the leaders sat around a massive horseshoe table, deliberating over how to create a united front against the United States and the Soviet Union. But their collective resolve was not all that was on display. The occasion also served as a grand stage for a set of personalities as colorful and diverse as the robes, suits, and battledress they donned. Fidel Castro was there, dressed in his trademark rugged olive fatigues; the legendary rebel leader cried "imperialist sabotage" when the power went out during his speech. So too was Muammar Ghaddafi, who had recently taken power through a coup in neighboring Libya, and who heckled Castro during his speech. Castro also clashed with the Cambodian leader, Prince Sihanouk, who had been handed power by the departing French colonists after World War II (and had himself recently been ousted in a coup). Though these showboats captured most of the headlines, the summit was also attended by scores of other dictators from smaller nations, like Guyana's leader, Forbes Burnham, who had been democratically elected in 1964 but consolidated power four

years later.

The world's modern autocracies are no less diverse than this motley cast of characters. Autocracies all have one thing in common — their leaders are not selected through competitive multi-party elections.[1] But beyond this, autocratic regimes encompass a wide range of political arrangements, and their trajectories vary just as widely. Some are remarkably durable regimes that adeptly manage relations with military elites, navigate leadership succession, and remain in power for decades or even generations. Others are little more than a flash in the pan. They collapse within months, sometimes within weeks, and their would-be leaders are quickly forgotten. When these regimes fall, they also do so in different ways. Some are ousted by their own military commanders. Others succumb to armed insurgencies or popular uprisings by opposition forces who are tired of living under tyranny. And some initiate democratic transitions, accepting that their time is up and that they can no longer cling to power.

These wide-ranging trajectories speak to foundational questions in the study of comparative authoritarianism. Why do some dictatorships endure for decades while others collapse quickly? Why do autocracies fail in such different ways? Under what conditions do authoritarian regimes transition to democracy?

We answer these questions by explaining the *pathways to dictatorship*. Since World War II, nearly every new authoritarian regime has been formed by one of four regime-change events, which often constitute the culmination of a longer process. In December 2024, Syrian *rebels* abruptly stormed Damascus and overthrew the long-standing al-Assad dictatorship. In February 2021, the Burmese military seized power in a *coup*, ousting the country's nascent democracy; and in August 2023, the Gabonese military ousted the autocratic Bongo dynasty, which had reigned for over a half-century. In July 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seized the occasion of a failed coup attempt to engage in an *incumbent takeover* of a democratic regime by arresting political opposition leaders and amending the constitution. Decades

[1] Throughout this book, we interchangeably use the terms *autocracy*, *authoritarian regime*, and *dictatorship*.

earlier, in 1960, France granted independence to numerous African states, which constituted *foreign handoffs* to domestic leaders who established authoritarian regimes in countries including the Ivory Coast and Senegal.

Our framework, based on these four pathways to dictatorship, is theoretically informed, conceptually coherent, operationally transparent, and empirically predictive.

Theoretically, the process that founds a regime affects the composition of the authoritarian ruling coalition, the main threats to the new leader's survival, and the means available to defeat these threats. Distinct pathways generate divergent distributions of coercive capacity, elite alliances, organizational resources, and foreign backing. In response to these conditions, leaders differ in how they construct power-sharing arrangements, manage their coercive organizations, and control society. These factors ultimately shape regime durability and how it fails, including prospects for democratization.

Conceptually, our typology directly incorporates the definition of regime change, which occurs when a *discrete event* either replaces the ruling coalition or changes the leader-selection rules, specifically, establishing (or eliminating) a rule of selecting leaders via free and fair elections. The discrete regime-change event may constitute a sudden occurrence or represent the culmination of a longer process.[2] Our focus on founding events and processes enables us to construct a mutually exclusive and exhaustive typology, while appealing to a small number of discrete regime-change events.

Operationally, we introduce a new global dataset, which consists of every political regime spell in the world between 1946 and 2025. We identify over 400 authoritarian regimes, nearly 300 democracies, and over 100 spells of other types, either provisional (temporary leader) or nonsovereign (foreign occupation or state failure). Following our pathways approach, we equate regime changes with the occurrence of particular discrete events, many of which are

[2]For example, inaugural elections are often planned years before they occur, rebels can fight for long periods before eventually gaining power, decolonization often proceeded for years if not decades before the actual sovereign handoff occurred, the punctuating event of incumbent takeover may follow earlier smaller steps to remove democratic constraints, and even coups are often planned months in advance.

straightforward to measure with coding rules that minimize subjectivity. For more ambiguous regime-change events, we introduce detailed coding rules that enable us to measure these processes as objectively as possible. Identifying regime spells based on regime-change events also reduces the need to rely on retrospective coding assessments, as the main components of our typology are determined *at the regime's outset*.

Empirically, we characterize new patterns and relationships among regime origins and outcomes. Across the entire time period, 47% of autocracies were founded by coups, 21% by incumbent takeovers, 14% by rebellions, and 13% by foreign handoffs.[3] However, these frequencies vary considerably across historical time periods, with coup autocracies predominating during the Cold War and incumbent takeovers becoming more common recently.

Regimes founded by rebellions and foreign handoffs tend to survive for long periods. Each type has greater than 50/50 odds of lasting at least two decades. By contrast, the other origin types are more brittle. Only one in four incumbent takeover autocracies lasts at least twenty years, as does only one in six coup regimes. Coup and incumbent takeover autocracies are also much more likely to democratize (roughly one in three), whereas this outcome is much rarer among rebel and foreign handoff autocracies.

Taken together, these patterns establish that how dictatorships begin matters for how they subsequently rule and survive. The events that establish authoritarian regimes are not merely episodes that precede "real" politics under dictatorship. Instead, the mode of birth yields enduring differences in the coalitions, coercive organizations, and political resources that dictators inherit. To understand authoritarian regime trajectories, we therefore need to start at the beginning: the pathways to dictatorship.

[3] A small fifth category — founded by electoral-autocratic handoffs — comprises the remaining 5% of autocracies.

1 An Origins-Based Approach to Studying Autocracy

1.1 Typology of Autocratic Origins

We identify the founding events of modern autocracies along two dimensions: how power is acquired and who acquires it. The first dimension distinguishes armed from unarmed founding processes. Armed origins involve either the use or credible threat of coercive force, whereas unarmed origins do not. The second dimension distinguishes among the political actors who establish the new regime: actors outside the state, actors inside the state, and the incumbent leader. These dimensions generate four primary pathways to autocracy, summarized in Table 1.1.

Rebellions occur when armed groups from outside the state overthrow the incumbent (or foreign occupiers) through insurgency or civil war. In China, for example, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) fought the incumbent Nationalist government through a prolonged civil war before seizing power in 1949. Similarly, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was an insurgent coalition that fought the Ethiopian state before overthrowing its military regime in 1991, and FRELIMO took power in Mozambique upon independence in 1975.

Coups occur when state insiders, typically members of the state's *own military*, use or threaten force to remove the incumbent and seize power. In Argentina in 1966, for example, commanders of the Argentine armed forces removed President Arturo Illia and installed General Juan Carlos Onganía as president. Similarly, in Pakistan in 1999, Army Chief Pervez Musharraf used the Pakistani military to depose Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and assume control of the government. In both cases, the armed actors who seized power were already part of the state's coercive apparatus, distinguishing coups from rebellions launched by armed groups outside the state.

Foreign handoffs occur when external powers relinquish authority and transfer control

Table 1.1: Typology of Autocratic Origins

	Incumbent	**State Insider**	**State Outsider**
Armed	Incumbent Takeover	Coup	Rebellion
Unarmed		Foreign Handoff	Electoral handoff

of the state to domestic political leaders. These elites usually comprise state insiders after having served in positions of authority — usually as domestic governing allies of the colonial or occupying power — while under foreign control. Across a range of historical settings, examples include the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan following the end of British rule, single-party regimes in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal after independence, North Korea following World War II, and the regimes established in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Incumbent takeovers occur when democratically elected leaders dismantle the competitive institutions through which they originally gained power. Examples include Alberto Fujimori's 1992 self-coup in Peru, when he dissolved Congress; Benin under Patrice Talon in 2021, when opposition was effectively barred from running in the presidential election; and Kais Saied's 2021 self-coup in Tunisia, when he suspended parliament. Some incumbent takeovers occur primarily through unarmed means, such as administering an unfair election. Others, though, actively use force (e.g., arresting and banning opposition leaders, ordering the military to shut down parliament) or a clear threat thereof, as incumbents already control the state and its coercive apparatus.

A fifth, and empirically rare, pathway consists of **electoral-autocratic handoffs**, which occur when power is transferred to members of a new ruling coalition through an election that fails to meet minimal democratic standards. For example, an opposition leader may prevail

in a rigged election, as did François Duvalier in Haiti in 1957, or an uncompetitive election may legitimate the transfer of power to a leader acceptable to outgoing autocratic elites, as in Nigeria in 1999. These cases are atypical because elections in which a challenger defeats the incumbent autocrat generally meet minimalist democratic standards. Conversely, when outgoing autocrats use elections to orchestrate a handoff, they typically permit sufficiently open competition to lend legitimacy to the transfer rather than rigging the contest in favor of a particular successor. Elections that both produce a change in the ruling coalition *and* fail to meet minimalist democratic standards are therefore rare.

Our typology is both mutually exclusive and exhaustive.[4] Since 1946, no autocrat has gained power via an event besides one of these five. Later in the book, we explain why events such as uprisings, foreign-imposed regime change, autocratic succession, or autocratic rule changes either do not (empirically) or cannot (by definition) constitute stand-alone regime-change events.

1.2 How Origins Shape Autocratic Rule

Any autocracy faces threats to its survival, which can come either from insiders (e.g., coups by the state military and high-ranking elites) or outsiders (e.g., uprisings, rebellions, elections). The founding process influences how dictators are able to manage these threats.

First, dictators must manage relationships within the ruling coalition itself. The founding process determines who is included in this coalition, the balance between civilian and military elites, and the nature of the ties among them. Perhaps most important, the mode of birth shapes the extent to which dictators can manage the *guardianship dilemma*: the challenge of sharing power with military leaders without empowering them to overthrow the regime through a coup. Some founding processes produce highly cohesive ruling coalitions with strong ties between

[4] Although successful decolonization wars relate to two of our categories, these events form rebel regimes because the accession to power occurs via forcible seizure as opposed to a foreign *handoff*.

Figure 1.1: Authoritarian Origins and Outcomes

political and military elites. By contrast, others generate narrow and fragmented coalitions whose ties to military leaders are weak or tenuous.

Second, origins shape the dictator's ability to control society. Founding events endow regimes with different kinds of coercive, organizational, and symbolic resources that can be used to repress or co-opt opponents. Some dictatorships emerge from violent conflicts that produce hardened armed organizations capable of suppressing dissent. Others inherit broad political organizations or nationalist legitimacy that facilitate societal control through nonviolent means. Still others inherit weak coercive structures and fragmented political coalitions that make it difficult to dominate society. In short, the manner in which rulers seize power shapes both their ability to manage elite insiders and their ability to control popular outsiders. Figure 1.1 summarizes the key mechanisms linking founding pathways to outcomes.

The distinct pathways from our typology yield four qualitatively different worlds of authoritarian politics. Founding processes shape who is in the ruling coalition, their relationships with the military, and the resources they have to control society.

Rebel regimes are highly durable because they neutralize insider threats, which also positions them to counter outsider threats. Rebel organizations that successfully seize power have typically survived prolonged armed conflict, requiring political leaders and military commanders to cooperate, share authority, and build strong organizational ties. These wartime rela-

tionships help rebel regimes overcome the guardianship dilemma. After replacing the extant state military with their own, armed elites enter power within the same organization as political leaders. Their past experiences in combat stabilize expectations about how authority will be shared. At the same time, successful rebellion leaves rulers with a hardened coercive organization capable of confronting challenges from society. In Mozambique, for example, FRELIMO entered power with both a cohesive leadership forged during the liberation struggle and an experienced military organization extending across the country. This enabled the regime to withstand a decades-long insurgency funded by hostile neighboring states. Rebel origins thus provide unusually favorable conditions for managing threats from both within and outside the regime, making rebel-founded autocracies among the most durable forms of authoritarian rule.

Coup leaders, by contrast, are highly vulnerable to insider threats. Coup plotters, like rebels, are armed actors. However, coup leaders typically comprise only a narrow faction of the state's military and, unlike rebels, lack an easy opportunity to transform the military. Other factions of the armed forces remain outside the ruling coalition but retain the coercive capacity to challenge it, making the guardianship dilemma particularly acute. Repeated military seizures of power have produced regimes plagued by distrust among officers, and recurrent coups have occurred in countries such as Argentina, Burkina Faso, Syria, and Thailand. The need to manage threats from within and the difficulties of repurposing the military bureaucracy to govern effectively also creates impediments to controlling society. Coup regimes are therefore poorly positioned to manage threats from within and outside the regime, making them one of the weakest forms of autocracy.

Foreign handoff regimes are generally well positioned to manage both types of threats. The process of transferring power provides two important advantages: opportunities for political consolidation before independence and continued foreign support afterward. First, external powers typically identify and empower favored domestic elites before formally relinquishing

control, giving these leaders time to build political organizations, marginalize rivals, cultivate ties to the coercive apparatus, and establish authority over society before assuming sovereign power. In Tanzania, for example, Julius Nyerere and the Tanganyika African National Union built a dominant political organization during the transition to independence, winning overwhelming electoral victories and entering independence with few organized political rivals. Second, foreign support often persists after the handoff. Former colonial powers and other external patrons can provide new regimes with military assistance, economic resources, diplomatic backing, and other forms of support that help leaders manage both elite and societal threats. These two mechanisms reinforce one another: pre-independence consolidation provides a favorable domestic foundation, while post-independence external support sustains it. These same advantages also help to manage the ruling coalition, and thus explain the high durability of foreign handoff regimes.

Incumbent takeover regimes face significant threats to their survival, in particular from outsiders, because they emerge from previously competitive political systems. Even after incumbents dismantle democratic institutions, opposition parties and other forms of mobilized opposition do not immediately disappear. Organized opposition leaders can continue to challenge the new regime through protests and popular uprisings, as occurred in the Philippines in 1986 despite over a decade of authoritarian rule. Thus, elected autocrats confront greater outsider threats compared to foreign handoff leaders, who are able to consolidate power under the umbrella of foreign control. Incumbent takeover regimes also may lack firm control over their military, as the leader himself neither emerged from this organization nor necessarily had the chance to reshape it before the takeover. This makes incumbent takeover regimes more prone to coups than rebel regimes while also making their leaders less able to repress pressing societal threats.

Taken together, our theory generates clear expectations about the durability of regimes founded through each pathway. Rebel and foreign handoff regimes should be especially

durable because their founding processes leave new leaders well positioned to manage both their ruling coalitions and threats from society. Coup and incumbent takeover regimes, by contrast, begin from much weaker foundations and should be substantially more fragile.

2 Autocratic Origins and Regime Trajectories

Given these theoretical expectations, we now introduce our new dataset of authoritarian regimes and highlight the main empirical patterns connected to our theory.

2.1 A New Dataset of Political Regimes

The empirical basis of our book is an original dataset that identifies every political regime spell in the world between 1946 and 2025. Our main innovation is to conceptualize and measure regime change in terms of observable events, including five distinct origin events that can initiate an autocratic spell.

A political regime is defined by two elements: 1) a particular set of de facto or de jure *rules* that govern the selection of the leader, and 2) a particular set of domestic *people* who participate in the selection of the leader, sometimes referred to as the selectorate.[5] Specific regime types are determined by particular configurations of rules and people.

We distinguish four main types of political regimes. A **democracy** is a regime in which the leader selection rule is multi-party elections that meet minimalist standards of freeness and fairness, and the selectorate (i.e., franchise) encompasses a majority of the adult population.[6] In an **autocracy**, leaders are *not* selected by free and fair multi-party elections; instead, the selectorate usually consists of a narrow stratum of elites who surround the dictator. A **provisional** regime is defined by the absence of a *permanent* leader, which is a core criterion for the

[5] Shirk 1993; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2005.

[6] We also distinguish two diminished subtypes of democracy to encompass cases of small franchises or in which a democratically elected leader is either installed or restored following an autocratic interlude.

above regime types. In a provisional regime, the leader was not involved in the initial seizure of power and is handed authority with an explicit mandate to hold free and fair multi-party elections in the near future. A **nonsovereign** regime is defined by the absence of a domestic selectorate (i.e., a set of domestic actors who select the leader).[7]

A regime-change event must result either in a qualitatively new ruling coalition or the introduction (or elimination) of competitive elections. This approach tightly links our measures to the underlying concept of political regimes, reduces the subjectivity of coding decisions, and allows us to classify autocracies according to their founding events. We avoid an important source of selection bias by including short-lived regimes; the only requirement is that the regime survive more than seven days in power. Given our focus on understanding regime durability, it is crucial to not truncate the sample by requiring that a regime survive a longer period of time or exist at the beginning of a calendar year.

In total, we identify 834 regime spells across 202 countries, including 429 authoritarian regimes, 295 democracies,[8] 89 provisional regimes, and 21 nonsovereign spells. Among autocracies, 47% were formed by coups, 21% by incumbent takeovers, 14% by rebellions, 13% by foreign handoffs, and 5% by electoral-autocratic handoffs.

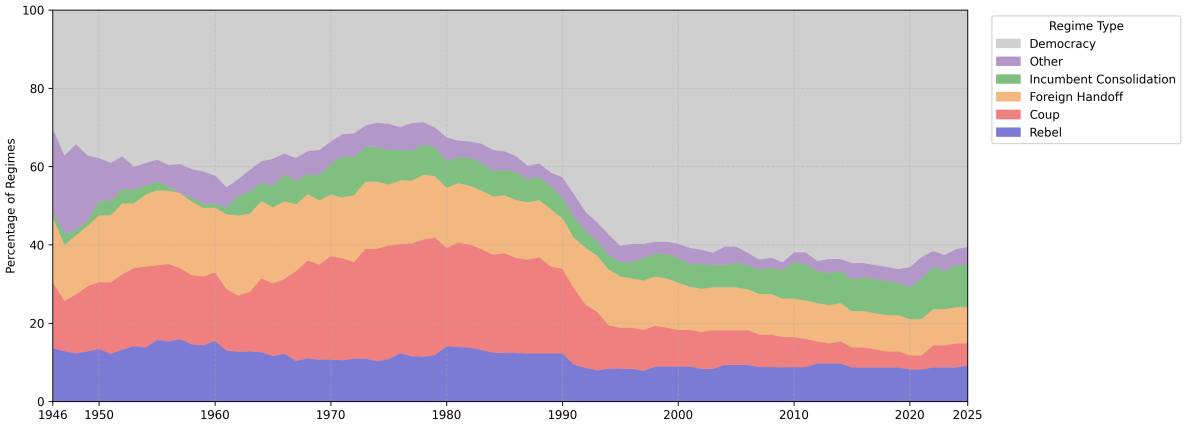
2.2 Empirical Patterns

We uncover several important empirical patterns about the origins, durability, and trajectories of authoritarian regimes. First, authoritarian regimes — as distinguished by their origins — are distributed highly unevenly across time and space. Figure 1.2 illustrates the distribution of all political regimes from 1946 to 2025. Coups are the single most common pathway to autocratic rule across the full period, accounting for roughly half of all authoritarian regimes. Yet

[7]There are two conditions of nonsovereignty. In *foreign occupations*, foreign actors choose the leader. In situations of *state failure*, no authority exercises sovereignty over the country's territory (and thus there is no discernible leader in the first place).

[8]This count includes 19 diminished subtypes of democracy.

Figure 1.2: Distribution of Regimes, 1946–2025



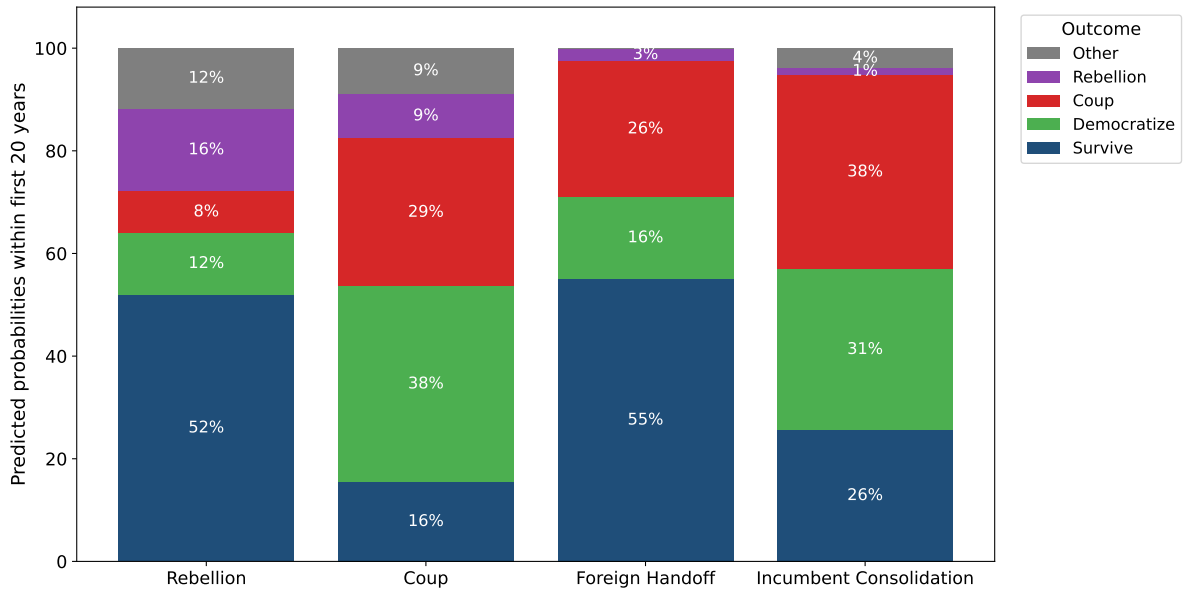
Notes: The Other category encompasses electoral-handoff autocracies, diminished subtypes of democracy, provisional regimes, and nonsovereign spells.

their prevalence has declined substantially over time. During the Cold War, coups dominated authoritarian regime formation, particularly in Latin America, Africa, and parts of the Middle East. In recent decades, however, incumbent takeovers have replaced coups as the most frequent origin, as elected leaders erode democratic institutions from within. But the shift in type of autocracy has not led to a precipitous rise in authoritarianism itself worldwide, contrary to the suggestions of many contemporary accounts.[9] Democratic backsliding has become more visible in recent years and has resulted in a slight uptick in the proportion of autocracies since 2020, but the overall prevalence of authoritarianism globally remains substantially below its Cold War highs.

Second, authoritarian origins are strongly associated with regime durability. As illustrated in Figure 1.3, rebel regimes and foreign handoff regimes are the most durable forms of authoritarianism, whereas coup regimes and incumbent takeover regimes are substantially more fragile. The substantive differences are striking. After twenty years, rebel regimes and foreign handoff autocracies each have greater than 50/50 odds of surviving. By contrast, only about one in four incumbent takeover autocracies, and only one in six coup regimes, survives at

[9]Nord et al. 2026; Freedom House 2026.

Figure 1.3: Authoritarian Regime Outcomes



Notes: The outcomes reflect predicted probabilities from our statistical models (presented in Chapter 4), calculated over the first twenty years of a regime's existence. The democratization outcome additionally encompasses cases in which the authoritarian regime cedes power to an interim provisional regime, which subsequently yields a democratic transition.

least that long. Nor can these findings be reduced to a simple distinction between military and civilian rule. Foreign handoff and incumbent takeover regimes are both usually civilian-led, yet exhibit dramatically different survival prospects. Likewise, the military is central in both rebel and coup regimes, but their long-run durability differs sharply.

Third, authoritarian origins shape not only how long regimes survive but also how they die, as Figure 1.3 also shows. Coup and incumbent takeover regimes frequently democratize, roughly one in three within the first twenty years of their founding. For the military, this usually reflects a more voluntary electoral handoff (although initiated because they realize the weakness of their rule), whereas incumbent takeovers are often pressured by popular uprisings or the military to cede power. But, if either coup or incumbent takeover regimes attempt to withstand pressures to democratize, they are instead usually toppled by a coup. In this regard, they resemble foreign handoff autocracies. Thus, coups are by far the most common form of

armed autocratic death, although rebel regimes depart from this pattern. Rebel regimes are highly durable, but often succumb to subsequent rebellions upon failing.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that focusing on the events that bring regimes to power reveals new patterns that are fundamental to understanding authoritarian politics. Divergent pathways to dictatorship shape the composition of ruling coalitions, the relationship between political leaders and coercive elites, the organizational foundations of authoritarian rule, the types of threats regimes are most vulnerable to over time, and the likelihood that autocracy will give way to democracy.

3 From Institutions to Origins

Our focus on regime origins constitutes a major shift from the dominant approach to studying authoritarianism. For the past twenty-five years, research on authoritarianism has focused primarily on the institutions through which dictators rule.[10] A key argument is that institutions help dictators to survive in power: parties can organize elites, legislatures can structure bargaining, and elections can manage the opposition while providing information to the regime. Institutions also became the dominant way of typologizing autocracies. The most influential framework, first introduced by Geddes and later refined by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (GWF), divides regimes into four categories: single-party, personalist, military, and monarchical regimes.[11] Operationally, they classify every autocratic spell between 1946 and 2010 as belonging to one of these institutional types. Other influential studies focused on the workings of a particular autocratic institution, such as competitive-authoritarian elections,[12]

[10]This paradigm revised an earlier consensus that authoritarian institutions are either mere window dressing or actively undermine authoritarian survival. For a brief survey of earlier approaches to studying dictatorship, see Svolik 2012, 28.

[11]Geddes 1999; Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2014.

[12]Levitsky and Way 2010.

legislatures,[13] and ruling parties.[14]

The institutions paradigm, though, confronts numerous important critiques. The relationship between institutions and authoritarian outcomes is ambiguous in certain key ways. At a theoretical level, it is difficult to tell whether institutions simply reflect deeper political realities or independently determine them.[15] Institutions only help rulers solve the core dilemmas of authoritarian politics when they are themselves strong and effective.[16] But institutional strength is often produced by the very political and organizational conditions that institution-centered arguments seek to explain. In some cases, authoritarian institutions are not strategically designed at all, but inherited from the processes through which rulers come to power. Rebel regimes, for example, often emerge from armed struggle already possessing disciplined ruling parties and cohesive coercive organizations forged during insurgency. Incumbents who lead takeovers inherit electoral parties, legislatures, and bureaucratic structures from the democratic systems they dismantle. In other cases, institutions are adopted to appease critical foreign audiences — a dynamic that has been particularly common since the fall of the Soviet Union, and that helps to explain why most autocracies today have embraced electoral institutions.

Institutions-centered approaches also confront important conceptual and measurement problems involving subjective judgment, changes over time, and the non-mutual exclusivity of categories. Determining which institutions are dominant or meaningful within a given autocracy is often a matter of highly subjective judgment. This is particularly true when conflating multiple distinct attributes of authoritarian regimes, in particular the extent to which personal power is concentrated in the leader.[17] These judgments are made even more complicated by the fact that dominant institutions change over time, particularly for long-lasting regimes.

[13] Gandhi and Przeworski 2007.
[14] Miller 2020.
[15] Pepinsky 2014.
[16] Meng 2020.
[17] Svolik 2012.

Nor are institutional categories mutually exclusive, as many regimes simultaneously possess strong military, party, and personalist features. One solution has been to generate hybrid or hyphenated regime types (e.g., party-personalist).[18] These hybrid categories, though, complicate theorizing because predictions about autocratic durability and other outcomes are derived from the specific characteristics of each distinct institution. For example, if parties make regimes strong and military juntas make them weak, then what should we expect of military-party regimes? Perhaps because of these conceptual and measurement ambiguities, the empirical evidence linking institutions to autocratic strength is surprisingly mixed.

These critiques, though, have not yet produced a comprehensive alternative to institutions-focused typologies. In response, this book proposes a shift in focus to the *origins* of autocracies rather than their institutions. An origins-based framework has several advantages. As explained above, the founding origins of autocracies are theoretically meaningful for explaining subsequent regime trajectories. Indeed, as we show in later chapters, some origins are determinative of the institutions through which leaders rule. Origins also represent discrete and observable founding events, rather than ambiguous and evolving institutional forms. This makes the resulting regime categories more transparent to measure, easier to replicate, and more amenable to empirical analysis.

We are not the first to center origins in explaining authoritarian rule. In fact, a long tradition in political science theorizes about the unique characteristics of regimes emerging from particular founding processes, including social revolutions,[19] armed rebellions,[20] counterrevolutionary victories,[21] and coups.[22] Indeed, some of these origins-centered accounts have

[18] In the GWF dataset, 22% of regimes are classified as hybrid. Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2018 updates their approach by measuring personalism on a distinct dimension while distinguishing between whether a seizure group gained power via a party or the military. However, they assess correlates of authoritarian survival while using the same set of regime spells from their earlier work, as distinguished by institutional type.

[19] Huntington 1968; Skocpol 1979; Levitsky and Way 2022.

[20] Gurr 1988; Meng and Paine 2022; Clarke, Meng and Paine 2026.

[21] Slater 2010; Slater and Smith 2016.

[22] Finer 1962; Nordlinger 1977; Stepan 1988.

been developed, in part, as rejoinders to the institutionalism scholarship.[23] Yet these studies typically isolate a particular type of origin and compare it to a residual category of regimes founded in other ways. Studies of revolutionary regimes, for example, demonstrate their exceptional durability relative to non-revolutionary regimes, but do not distinguish among the very different origins contained within the residual category. As we show, this residual category includes other origins that also produce unusually durable regimes, as well as origins associated with much greater fragility. Thus, while existing studies demonstrate the importance of particular founding processes, they stop short of systematically comparing the full range of autocratic origins.

We build on these earlier studies by mapping the *full* spectrum of ways in which autocratic regimes come to power. Our framework therefore allows us to compare origins systematically and identify what distinguishes more durable pathways from more fragile ones. In this sense, we seek to systematize the study of autocratic origins, much as GWF did for authoritarian institutions.

Finally, our book also represents a return to a more Hobbesian way of understanding authoritarian politics. For decades, institutional arguments emphasized the subtle arts of authoritarian rule — how dictators could stay in power through manipulating interests, controlling information, and balancing rival factions. But in this book, our arguments about why origins shape durability are grounded in an older tradition that viewed authoritarian politics through the prism of violence and coercion.[24] In particular, we emphasize how each pathway to dictatorship determines the extent to which new leaders can control coercive organizations and suppress societal opponents. While dictators may also draw on softer tools to help them survive, ultimately our arguments center on their ability to keep those who wield arms at bay.[25]

[23]For example, Smith 2005 and Levitsky and Way 2022 each challenge the finding that ruling parties facilitate durability, and instead argue that strong parties are a function of earlier founding processes.

[24]Huntington 1968, 1957; Finer 1962; Linz 1975; Nordlinger 1977; Stepan 1988; Chehabi and Linz 1998; Bellin 2004.

[25]In re-centering these dynamics of coercion and violence, we join recent work on authoritarian politics that places the military and other coercive organizations at the center of their theorizing. These include works

4 Rethinking Autocratic Types

Most existing work prompts us to think about institutions such as parties, elections, and military juntas. Other work focuses on origins, but on founding events distinct from ours. Each of our four pathways offers new insights into particular types of dictatorship.

4.1 Rebel Regimes

Most successful rebel groups come to power with a political wing to their movement. But the set of coalitions that come to power after having already created a party is much broader than just successful rebels. Most incumbent takeover regimes also come to power with a pre-existing party, yet tend to survive for much shorter periods. We must look elsewhere to explain the durability of rebel regimes.

Another approach isolates a specific type of rebel regime, those formed by social revolutions. Recent research emphasizes the exceptional durability of regimes forged by ideological and transformative social revolutions, particularly communist revolutions.[26] We show, however, that these social revolutions belong to a much broader category of rebel regimes. Once we examine the full universe of autocracies founded through armed rebellion, the durability associated with social revolutionary rule appears less tied to social transformation itself than to the coercive structures and elite ties forged through insurgency. At the same time, our broader framework reveals greater heterogeneity among rebel regimes than prior work has recognized. Many rebel regimes are highly durable, but others confront persistent armed opposition and eventually fall to subsequent rebellions.[27]

on the so-called "guardianship dilemma" (McMahon and Slantchev, 2015; Greitens, 2016; De Bruin, 2020; Paine, 2022; Mattingly, 2024), the resurgence of authoritarianism in the Middle East following the 2011 Arab Spring (Bou Nassif, 2020; Grewal, 2023; Clarke, 2025), and the origins of authoritarian militaries (Slater, Way, Lachapelle and Casey, 2023).

[26]Lachapelle, Levitsky, Way and Casey 2020; Levitsky and Way 2022.

[27]For our earlier related work, see Meng and Paine 2022; Clarke 2023, 2025; Clarke, Meng and Paine 2026. For other recent research on rebel regimes, see Lyons 2016; Liu 2024; Ashley 2024; Martin 2025; Thaler 2025.

We also improve upon an important measurement problem in existing datasets: minimal agreement regarding what counts as a successful (i.e., regime-founding) rebellion.[28] For our standard, a successful rebellion is an organized armed campaign involving at least twenty-five battle deaths carried out by a challenger group outside the state that directly contributes to either (1) displacing an incumbent government from a country's capital city, or (2) establishing an autonomous government over a delimited territory or region. This definition encompasses successful center-seeking rebellions, independence rebellions that displace a colonizing or occupying foreign power, and secessionist rebellions that establish a newly sovereign government over territory that formerly belonged to an existing state. Furthermore, because of our specific focus on regime-founding events, we can sidestep thorny questions about when civil wars start or end generally, while instead focusing solely on whether rebels found a new regime.

4.2 Coup Regimes

Scholars have long argued that military regimes are short-lived because they fall prey to violent removal or choose to hand power back to civilians.[29] Our category of coup regimes, though, differs from comparable categories in leading datasets. In particular, the GWF coding scheme truncates both the shorter and longer tails of coup-founded regimes. On the short end, they exclude any regime that does not exist on January 1 of a calendar year. This approach truncates

[28]This claim is based on the source datasets used to construct the list of rebel regimes in Clarke, Meng and Paine 2026, which are Dixon and Sarkees 2015; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Kalyvas and Balcells 2010; Levitsky and Way 2022; Beissinger 2022; Meng and Paine 2022; Martin 2022; Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2018.

[29]Geddes 1999; Debs 2016. Other work, though, treats the distinction between coups and other forms of violent seizure as less important, and thus coups are not analyzed separately. For example, Roessler 2011 highlights dangers posed by any coercive co-conspirators — "the armed actors who led, organized, or executed the *coup d'état or rebellion* that deposed the old regime" (p. 328; our emphasis). Similarly, Colgan and Weeks 2015 distinguish regimes by their revolutionary ideology but do not distinguish the type of coercive origins: "[r]evolutionary leaders are therefore a strict subset of all leaders that come to power as a result of the use of force — such as *coups, assassinations, and revolts*" (p. 166; our emphasis). Nor do Marinov and Goemans 2014 distinguish between coups and rebellions when discussing armed seizures of power.

the set of coup regimes. We identify 82 regimes that survive less than one year — nearly 10% of our regime spells — including 38 coup regimes.[30] On the long end, the use of overlapping dimensions of authoritarian decision-making in the GWF typology is particularly problematic for studying coup regimes. Many coup leaders who survive in power for long periods are able to eliminate rivals and consolidate personalist power. The GWF dataset would usually characterize such regimes as personalist, thus obscuring their coup origins.

By shifting attention from institutional form to founding process, we show that coup regimes constitute a much larger and more heterogeneous group of autocracies than previously recognized — but that, overall, they tend to be even more short-lived than shown in existing work.

4.3 Foreign Handoff Regimes

Our two other pathways, foreign handoffs and incumbent takeovers, have not been addressed systematically in existing work on either institutions or origins. Our findings for each of these types, though, differ from characterizations in relevant literatures.

Our findings about the durability of foreign handoff autocracies differ from characterizations in the literature. When existing research discusses regime change with a foreign element, it is usually in the context of *foreign-imposed regime change*. Interventions in recent decades by the United States in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Panama exemplify such cases. A leading argument is that regimes installed or supported by foreign powers (whether autocratic or democratic) should be weak because they lack domestic legitimacy and societal roots.[31] Furthermore, in many cases of foreign-imposed regime change, the foreign power intervenes amid an active civil war or triggers one with the occupation, and does not remain in control long enough to stabilize the government they sponsor.

[30] Our approach also captures short-lived provisional governments and (ultimately) failed incumbent takeover attempts, which are central to understanding political instability. Our main source for identifying successful regime-change coups is the Colpus dataset (Chin et al., 2021), which provides a list of short-lived coup regimes.

[31] Enterline and Greig 2005, 2008; Downes and O'Rourke 2016; Downes 2021; Brownlee 2024.

By contrast, we find that foreign handoff regimes are among the most durable forms of authoritarianism in the modern era. This discrepancy arises because existing analyses focus exclusively on foreign impositions against *already sovereign* countries. However, the overwhelming majority of global countries gained their *initial independence* from a foreign power (usually European) within the last few centuries, with many of these handoffs occurring after 1945. The decolonization process generally differed from the types of hasty interventions in conflict-torn countries common among more recent cases of foreign-imposed regime change. Colonizers faced pressure to decolonize after World War II, but nonetheless usually did so in a manner in which rival organizations were displaced by a single party or monarchy, whose leaders then continued to receive foreign support after gaining independence. Thus, even though most foreign handoffs occurred more than a half century ago (albeit with another post-communist wave in the early 1990s), these types of autocracies remain highly relevant even today. No study of which we are aware documents the durability of foreign handoff autocracies writ large, among which decolonization cases vastly outnumber more recent cases of foreign-imposed regime change.[32]

We also provide a more consistently coded list of foreign handoff autocracies than can be gleaned from existing datasets. In particular, we use more concrete standards for determining which regimes were democratic at independence: the domestic leaders to whom the foreign occupier handed off power were chosen in free and fair, multiparty elections held under colonial occupation *and* multiple parties held legislative seats and otherwise remained viable political actors until the period of independence. Existing datasets do not explicitly address this measurement issue, which results in substantially different lists of which countries were democratic at independence.[33]

[32]Some research examines which postcolonial countries became democratic (Gerring, Apfeld, Wig and Tollefsen, 2022; Owolabi, 2023; Lee and Paine, 2024), but not the durability of postcolonial autocracies. Consistent with our findings but contrary to the general thrust of research on foreign-imposed regime change, Casey 2020 finds that foreign support generally promotes authoritarian stability.

[33]Later we compare codings from Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland 2010; Svolik 2012; Boix, Miller and Rosato 2013; Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2014; Coppedge et al. 2026.

4.4 Incumbent Takeover Regimes

Democratic backsliding is a topic of intense contemporary interest. In recent decades, incumbent takeovers have supplanted coups as the primary means of democratic reversals.[34] Nonetheless, we know little about this distinctive form of dictatorship. Our innovation is to treat incumbent takeovers as a distinct type of *autocracy*, rather than as a mere byproduct of *democratic backsliding*. Our perspective highlights a new pattern and an important silver lining: incumbent takeover autocracies are often short-lived and end with a renewed democratic episode. Because these regimes emerge out of prior democratic systems, they often confront organized opposition parties, active civil societies, and populations accustomed to electoral competition, all of which can facilitate the restoration of at least minimalist democracy. More broadly, the recent rise of incumbent takeover regimes is itself tied to the post–Cold War proliferation of democracies, as democratic breakdown can occur only where democratic institutions already exist.

Of our four authoritarian origins, incumbent takeover is the most difficult to measure. Democratic backsliding often occurs in gradual steps, whereas our approach requires identifying concrete events that distinguish democracies from dictatorships. Existing regime datasets do not tend to offer adequately detailed coding rules to determine when democratic backsliding ends democracy, rather than merely degrading a system that nonetheless still meets minimalist democratic standards. We specify clear and objectively measured violations of democratic competition, including blocking electoral transitions, banning opposition parties or candidates, ruling by decree beyond constitutional limits, severely unfair elections, and dissolving legislatures or courts through extra-constitutional means.[35]

[34] Maeda 2010; Svolik 2015, 2019; Bermeo 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Brownlee and Miao 2022; Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, Wright and Wright 2024; Stokes 2025. For other recent and relevant datasets on executive aggrandizement, see Baturo and Tolstrup 2023; Goldsmith 2024; Djuve 2026.

[35] One common approach is using the continuous democracy scores provided by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem; Coppedge et al. 2020, 2026) dataset to identify thresholds of democratic backsliding that constitute a full-blown democratic reversal (e.g., Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). However, such approaches necessarily rely on specifying arbitrary thresholds on a continuous scale. Moreover, the V-Dem measures incorporate highly

The contemporary relevance of incumbent takeover regimes highlights another important contribution of our data: it spans the entire 1946–2025 period. The main existing alternative for measuring autocratic spells, the GWF dataset, ends in 2010. New trends over the past fifteen years are pivotal for understanding the world of autocratic politics today.

5 Conclusion

This book offers a new framework for studying authoritarian regimes — how they emerge and consolidate power, whether they survive, and how they fail. The pathways to dictatorship matter because they determine who will rule and how they do it. Origins shape the composition of ruling coalitions, the relationship between political and military elites, the organization of coercive power, and the types of threats that emerge. Our framework is based on four distinct pathways: rebellions, coups, foreign handoffs, and incumbent takeovers. The typology is powerful because — as we demonstrate in the rest of the book — its four categories are conceptually clear and empirically measurable, while also being theoretically meaningful and strongly associated with the outcomes they seek to explain.

Our origins-based approach also offers a needed framework to make sense of autocracy *today*. Interest in authoritarianism has risen over the past decade among scholars, policymakers, and the broader public, with concerns driven by perceptions that global autocracies are becoming more prevalent. Prominent, public-facing work describes the present period as the "unraveling of the democratic era" and the "growing shadow of autocracy."[36] Comparatively, though, this perception is false, as shown in Figure 1.2. The fraction of global autocracies decreased considerably after the Cold War ended. Despite a slight uptick over the last half decade, their share remains roughly where it was in the year 2000 — which was generally

subjective measures like the degree of media bias as rated by experts, which raises concerns about consistency and measurement error (Little and Meng, 2024; Bush and Platas, 2025).

[36]Nord et al. 2026; Freedom House 2026.

considered to be a very favorable period for global democracy. Instead, much anxiety stems from the rise of a handful of populist would-be autocrats in countries like the United States that still, at least for now, satisfy minimalist standards of democracy.

Nonetheless, concerns about elected autocrats *are* tied to a discernible trend. As our framework and data capture, the proportion of authoritarian regimes founded by incumbent takeovers has risen markedly since 2000. For decades, incumbent takeover was the least common founding event among our four types. Today, by contrast, more autocracies are founded by incumbent takeover than any other event. And yet, despite the proliferation of research on democratic backsliding and autocratization over the last decade, we still know little about the unique dynamics of this distinctive form of dictatorship. Our book offers the needed theoretical tools.

The book also offers insight into another puzzling dynamic in authoritarianism today. Incumbent takeover regimes are on the rise, but a distinct group of autocracies should arguably prompt even more concern. Some highly durable autocracies — including China, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Cuba, Zimbabwe, and Uganda — defied the "end of history" and survived the fall of the Soviet Union. Our book provides a framework for making sense of their surprising tenacity, as all these autocracies were founded either by armed rebellions or foreign handoffs.

In short, this book offers powerful theoretical and conceptual tools for the scholarly study of authoritarianism. But it is *also* a book that can help us wrestle with the puzzling and disturbing manifestations of dictatorship that we are witnessing and living with today.

The chapters that follow lay out our framework, arguments, data, and findings. In Chapter 2, we introduce readers to the state of authoritarianism worldwide, both then and now. After introducing our dataset, we unveil historical and global trends among different regime types. We characterize the distribution of regime types worldwide since 1946, how democracies and autocracies begin and end, and how long each type of dictatorship typically survives.

Next, in Chapter 3, we develop a theory to explain these patterns, which proposes that each pathway to dictatorship brings with it a distinct set of relationships, resources, and challenges. The result of the different founding events is four distinct worlds of authoritarian politics. Chapter 4 then presents statistical analyses that support and extend these arguments. Finally, in Chapters 5 through 8, we home in on each of our four types of dictatorship. We examine specific cases that explicate our core mechanisms as well as present additional analyses that explain variation and alternative pathways within each type.

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