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The Oxford Handbook of Authoritarian Politics

(In Progress)

Anne Wolf (ed.)

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198871996.001.0001>

Published: 2024

Online ISBN: 9780191983078

Print ISBN: 9780198871996

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CHAPTER

Quantitative Approaches

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198871996.013.10>

Published: 22 May 2024

Abstract

This chapter surveys quantitative empirical studies in the field of comparative authoritarianism, noting significant advances made over the last two decades. The chapter focuses on three major thematic developments and summarizes major global datasets used to study dictatorships. First, studies of leaders and regimes examine different ways in which elites share power as well as different regime types. Second, a large body of literature on authoritarian institutions focuses on the role of parties, legislatures, and elections in maintaining regime stability. Third, studies on conflict in autocracies center on the twin problems of power sharing and control. Methodological debates around the trade-offs of different measurement approaches are also highlighted, addressing the difference between regime typologies and authoritarian institutions, and the challenges of objective and subjective measurement. The chapter concludes with some recommendations for future research.

Keywords: [authoritarian politics](#), [quantitative](#), [regime typology](#), [institutions](#), [conflict](#), [measurement](#)

Subject: [Political Theory](#), [Politics](#)

Series: [Oxford Handbooks](#)

Collection: [Oxford Handbooks Online](#)

Introduction

The growth of a robust empirical literature has been one of the most important recent advancements in the field of comparative authoritarianism. Although dictatorships¹ have historically been the most prevalent form of government throughout history, political scientists traditionally did not examine authoritarian regimes with the comprehensiveness and rigor accorded to studies of democracies. As Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svobik (2016, 579) note, “Paradoxically, the oldest and most common form of political governance is the least studied with tools of modern social science.”

Happily, quantitative studies of authoritarian regimes have burgeoned in recent years, filling this lacuna. This chapter will summarize major findings and commonly used datasets in the following three themes: (1) leaders and regimes, (2) authoritarian institutions, and (3) conflict.

The first body of work on leaders and regimes reflects the key finding that autocracies vary widely in their regime structures. These differences generally stem from how the leader and ruling coalition took power, as well as the power-sharing choices they make once in office. Regime structures, in turn, affect autocratic stability and longevity. I review Barbara Geddes' canonical regime typologies dataset (Geddes 1999; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014), as well as other datasets on leaders, elites, and power sharing that reflect general differences across autocracies.

A second important body of work centers on authoritarian institutions. Departing from earlier studies that viewed formal institutions as simply window dressing, recent scholarship has refocused attention on the importance and functions of authoritarian institutions. Formal institutions, such as parties, legislatures, and elections, often play an important role in maintaining regime stability. For this topic, I summarize seminal datasets by Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010), Svobik (2012), and other studies that have codified a wide range of institutions in autocracies.

A third influential body of work on conflict in dictatorships reflects Svobik's (2012) important observation that dictators face twin problems of authoritarian power sharing (elite threat) and control (mass threat). Since leaders are most commonly overthrown via coups, they often share power in an attempt to retain support from their own ruling coalition. At the same time, the regime must also manage dissent from citizens, who increasingly have more influence in the age of multiparty elections. Datasets that document coups and civil wars are useful in studying how regimes manage threats from below and above. I also review other studies that examine regimes that originate in mass conflict, such as revolutions or rebellions.

Collectively, Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014), Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010), and Svobik (2012) represent some of the most widely used sources in the comparative authoritarianism literature.² They each have a distinctive approach to codifying the world of dictatorships. Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) use a mix of objective and subjective coding rules to create aggregate regime typologies. Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010) use objective criteria to produce a combination of regime typologies and disaggregated variables on institutions. Svobik (2012) rejects the use of typologies and uses mostly objective criteria to create disaggregated variables on institutions.

I discuss key trade-offs of these various measurement approaches in the remainder of this chapter. One main difference between regime typologies and data on authoritarian institutions is the level of aggregation. While regime typologies can capture broad categories of interest, mutually exclusive categories can also obscure more nuanced but important institutional differences.

Another important debate concerns whether variables are coded using objective or subjective criteria. Objective variables are coded based on observational criteria and do not require the researcher to make judgment calls. Subjective criteria do not have unambiguous "correct answers," and consist of a combination of opinion and fact. Multiple coders may arrive at different conclusions when coding subjective variables.

Objective and subjective measurement strategies have distinct trade-offs. Objective indicators benefit from replicability but are often constrained to formal institutions or outcomes that are easily observable. Since expert-coded variables often do not face this kind of substantive limitation, they benefit from having wider geographic or time coverage, but subjective measures can be vulnerable to coder bias. An additional measurement challenge in the study of autocracies is that formal institutions do not always reflect how power is exercised.

In order to keep this review manageable, I will focus my attention on large-N statistical studies with global coverage and leave aside single-country or regional studies of autocracies.³ I will also focus on yearly data that includes Cold War and post-Cold War observations, and set aside single year cross-sectional studies. These choices are not a reflection on the importance or quality of non-global or cross-sectional studies. In fact, in-depth case studies often have several advantages, including theory generation and the ability to study individual-level outcomes or test more detailed mechanisms (Pepinsky, 2019). However, because the revitalization of the field of comparative authoritarianism was largely driven by large-N studies with global coverage, this approach continues to dominate much of the field, and hence will be the focus of my review. Finally, due to the sheer volume of work on democratization, this chapter will also put aside a rich and expansive literature on democratic transitions and authoritarian legacies (Grzymala-Busse 2007; Riedl 2014; Nalepa 2022).

Leaders and Regimes

The publication of Barbara Geddes' article "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?" (1999) catalyzed a new generation of scholarship on authoritarian regimes. Earlier generations of political science work generally focused much more extensively on studies of democracies or democratization. Huntington's (1993) proclamation that the "third wave" of democratization had arrived at the end of the Cold War further reinforced the idea that authoritarianism was a temporary condition.

By contrast, Geddes (1999) highlighted the important observation that differences within dictatorships needed to be taken seriously. She argued that it was impossible to understand regime transitions without paying attention to the structures of the nondemocracies that came before them. "Different kinds of authoritarianism differ from each other as much as they differ from democracy," and these differences "cause authoritarian regimes to break down in systematically different ways" (Geddes 1999, 121).⁴

This study was hugely consequential to the development of the field of comparative authoritarianism in two major ways. First, the collection of comprehensive global data allowed researchers to develop and test general theories of autocratic survival. Although previous scholarship had often examined specific mechanisms of autocratic rule via case studies, Geddes (1999) codified autocracies that allowed theories of regime survival and breakdown to be tested. Second, the important observation that autocracies varied widely in their regime structures and outcomes renewed interest in the topic and inspired a large literature on authoritarian institutions, survival strategies, regime durability, and transitions.

The Regime Typologies dataset

One of the most commonly used datasets in the field of comparative authoritarianism is the Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) (GWF) dataset, which extends and updates the original dataset by Geddes (1999). The data, which covers all countries from 1946 to 2010, identifies the start and end dates of all regimes and provides information about how each regime emerged and collapsed. The GWF data also classifies all autocracies into regime types: party, personal, military, monarchy, or hybrids of these categories. "These classifications refer to whether control over policy, leadership selection, and the security apparatus is in the hands of a ruling party (dominant-party dictatorships), a royal family (monarchies), the military (rule by military institution), or a narrower group centered around an individual dictator (personalist dictatorships)" (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2014, 318).

Countries are sorted into regime categories based on a set of questions that reflect party, personal, or military-based rule. These questions reflect a mix of subjective and objective criteria, such as whether the

party has local branches that do something “reasonably important” or whether the party predates the leader. Each country is then sorted into a regime type based on the following aggregate rule:

Each regime used in the data analysis receives a score between zero and one for each regime type; this score is the sum of “yes” answers divided by the sum of both “yes and no” answers. A regime’s classification into a nominal category depends on which score is significantly higher than the other two.

(Geddes 2003, 225–227)

Out of 280 authoritarian regimes coded by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014), 18 percent are party based, 18 percent are military, 36 percent are personalist, 7 percent are monarchies, and 18 percent are a hybrid of two or more regime types. These categories reflect Geddes’ (1999) original important observation that autocracies vary widely and researchers should acknowledge this variation when studying regime outcomes.

Other Datasets on Leaders, Elites, and Power Sharing

Other datasets document various features of authoritarian leaders, elites, and power sharing that also reflect important ways in which regimes differ. The Archigos Dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) provides leader-level data from 1875 to 2015, and includes information on the leader’s mode of entry and exit, and post-tenure fate. The Technocratic and Educational Dataset (TED) (Flores, Lloyd, and Nooruddin 2023) provides leader-level data from 1946 to 2015 on education and work experience. Both Archigos and TED provide demographic information about leaders, such as their birth date and gender.

Two additional leader-level datasets develop measures of personalism.⁵ Gandhi and Sumner (2020) use an item response theory (IRT) model to create a yearly measure that reflects the leader’s concentration of power in 134 dictatorships from 1946 to 2008. The IRT measure is constructed using two central concepts: freedom from military and party constraints; and control over political offices. Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018) and Wright (2021) also develop time-varying personalism scores for 120 autocracies from 1946 to 2010 based on the following three dimensions: party strength; military involvement; and whether the leader personally controls key appointments.

To capture executive constraints, Meng (2020) collected data on constitutional rules that limit presidential power in all post-independence autocracies in sub-Saharan Africa. This dataset was expanded into a global sample of 177 countries from 1980 to 2021 in Little and Meng (2024). The yearly data denotes whether the country had a constitutional rule designating (1) term limits, (2) succession procedures, and (3) rules for dismissing the leader. These kinds of constraints make it more difficult for the leader to concentrate power.

For a comprehensive list of regime elites, the WhoGov Dataset (Nyrup and Bramwell 2020) provides individual-level data on all cabinet appointments in 177 countries from 1966 to 2021. For every country year, the dataset provides a list of all cabinet members, including their name, position, gender, and party affiliation.⁶

The Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) Dataset (Vogt et al. 2015) provides annual data on ethnic groups and their political power in 181 countries from 1946 to 2021. For each country year, the dataset identifies all politically relevant ethnic groups, their size, and access to executive state power. Since power and identity are frequently recognized along ethnic lines in autocracies, the EPR Dataset is useful in identifying the distribution of power among various groups.

The Military Purges in Dictatorships (MPD) Dataset (Sudduth 2021) contains information on the dates and characteristics of military purge events in 116 authoritarian countries from 1965 to 2005. The data includes

the position and rank of the purged officer, potential motivations behind the purge, and how the purge was carried out.

Altogether, these datasets reflect the broader point that dictatorships vary widely in their regime structures and demonstrate the different ways in which leaders and elites share power.

Authoritarian Institutions

One of the defining features of the new generation of scholarship on comparative authoritarianism is the recognition that formal institutions can play an important role in facilitating regime stability. As Pepinsky (2014) notes, this “institutional turn” was, in part, an extension of renewed efforts to understand the ways in which authoritarian regimes differ. This emphasis on authoritarian institutions contrasted with previous generations of scholarship, which often assumed that parties or legislatures in dictatorship were largely window dressing. Furthermore, while these previous studies often assumed that “institutions ultimately undermined elites’ hold on power, the new literature on authoritarian institutions argues that elites purposefully create institutions that consolidate their hold on political power to foster durable authoritarian rule” (Pepinsky 2014, 631).

Recent work argues that ruling parties play a critical role in regime stability by providing a forum to manage intra-elite conflict and co-opt citizens via control over services and benefits (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008; Magaloni 2008; Gehlbach and Keefer 2011; Svobik 2012; Reuter 2017). Parties, legislatures, and elections can also “serve as a forum in which the regime and opposition can announce their policy preferences and forge agreements” (Gandhi 2008, xviii). These institutions allow the regime to co-opt opposition parties or broader segments of society (Wright 2008; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Blaydes 2010; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Hyde and Marinov 2012; Truex 2016; Ochieng’ Opalo 2019).⁷ It is important to note that although formal institutions such as parties or courts may appear democratic, autocracies often rely on these quasi-democratic institutions for repression, coercion, or citizen monitoring—functions that are fundamentally antidemocratic (Hassan, Mattingly, and Nugent 2022; Shen-Bayh 2018).⁸ Seemingly democratic institutions may be used as tools of control or cooptation in facilitating regime survival.

An advantage of the study of authoritarian institutions is that formal institutions tend to be easily observable, even in the nebulous world of dictatorships. Data collection on authoritarian institutions has produced many datasets, which has generated a large literature examining the role of these institutions on regime durability.

The Democracy-Dictatorship dataset

A widely used dataset that provides yearly global information on authoritarian institutions is the Democracy-Dictatorship (DD) dataset by Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010), and this data was also used in Gandhi’s (2008) influential book, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*. The DD dataset includes variables that reflect the presence or absence of institutions, such as parties, elections, and legislatures. For example, the dataset reports the de jure and de facto status of parties: whether they are banned/nonexistent, one party, or multiple parties. In addition, DD covers the mode of executive selection: whether the leader is directly elected, selected by an assembly, or not elected. There are also several variables that reflect the status of the legislature, such as whether the legislature is elected, appointed, or closed, or the number of political parties represented within the legislature.

The DD dataset also presents an alternative classification of regime types: dictatorships are categorized as monarchic, military, or civilian. Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010, 84) argue that “dictatorships can be

distinguished according to the characteristics of these inner sanctums [where real decisions are made and potential rivals are kept under closer scrutiny]. Monarchs rely on family and kin networks along with consultative councils; military rulers confine key potential rivals from the armed forces within juntas; and civilian dictators usually create a smaller body within a regime party—a political bureau—to co-opt potential rivals.” These regime categories are coded using observational criteria: whether power is passed down via hereditary succession, and whether the leader is a current or past member of the armed forces.

An important feature of the DD dataset is that it is “strictly based on objective judgment and observational criteria—it relies on events, the occurrence of which are not difficult to ascertain: the holding of elections, the existence of more than one political party, and change in the leadership of government” Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010, 74). In addition, DD regime categories and institutional variables are mostly disaggregated and do not require complicated aggregation methods.

Although objective data do have some tradeoffs (as I will discuss below), DD’s emphasis on reliability and observational criteria was an important advancement in the field. Since authoritarian regimes are especially opaque, the quality and reliability of data can be most easily assessed for objective datasets.

The Politics of Authoritarian Rule dataset

A third commonly used dataset on authoritarian regimes is one that accompanies Svobik’s (2012) influential book *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. The Svobik dataset includes yearly global data from 1946 to 2008 on four key conceptual dimensions of dictatorships: military involvement in politics, restrictions on political parties, legislative selection, and executive selection.

To measure military involvement in politics, Svobik codes whether there is indirect, personal, corporate, or no military involvement. To measure whether there are restrictions on parties, Svobik notes whether the regime allows for none, single, or multiple parties. There are additional party variables, such as whether opposition parties have a presence in the legislature, or the seat share of the ruling party in the legislature. There are also variables that reflect legislative and executive selection. For these measures, Svobik distinguishes between regimes that have unelected officials, those with only one party or candidate, and whether the ruling party or executive is very dominant (i.e. controls more than 75 percent of seats).

Similar to Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010), Svobik collects data on authoritarian institutions that are largely based on observational criteria (although the military involvement measure requires more subjective judgment). However, unlike Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) and Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010), Svobik rejects the use of regime typologies in classifying autocracies. He argues that typologies “typically collapse multiple, conceptually distinct dimensions of authoritarian politics onto a single typology. The ‘types’ of dictatorship that emerge, in turn, (1) are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive and (2) require difficult classification judgements that weight incommensurable aspects of authoritarian politics” (Svobik 2012, 28–29). Svobik’s critique of regime typologies highlights an important advantage of data on authoritarian institutions: because these variables are typically disaggregated, researchers do not have to make subjective judgments about how to collapse several regime dimensions into one single category.

Other Datasets on Authoritarian Institutions

There are many datasets that code the existence and content of various formal institutions. The Autocratic Ruling Parties Dataset (ARPD) (Miller 2020) covers all autocratic ruling parties in 154 countries from 1940 to 2015, and includes information on each party’s founding, how the parties gained and lost power, whether they allowed competition, and other characteristics.

The Database of Political Institutions (DPI) (Cruz, Keefer, and Scartascini 2021) provides yearly data on many institutional and electoral variables for a global set of 180 countries from 1975 to 2020. DPI includes data on incumbent and opposition parties, such as seat share, vote share, and party age. DPI also includes data on the electoral rules of the regime and the presence of checks and balances.

The National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) Dataset (Hyde and Marinov 2012) provides data on all election events (including executive and legislative) from a global sample of 196 countries from 1945 to 2020. A number of variables provide information on how the election was conducted or the circumstances surrounding the election. Some examples include whether the opposition was allowed to compete, whether the incumbent had reached the end of their term limit and had tried to extend it, or whether there were allegations of media bias. There are also many variables that reflect the outcomes of the election, such as whether the incumbent party lost, or whether there were riots or protests after the election.

The Comparative Constitutions Project (Elkins and Ginsburg 2022) provides comprehensive yearly data on constitutions in 224 countries and territories from 1789 to 2021. The dataset provides data on the structure and form of the constitution, such as mentions of certain rights or amendment procedures. It also includes information on constitutional rules regarding the executive, legislature, and judiciary.

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (Coppedge et al. 2018) also includes variables on elections, parties, legislative and judicial constraints on the executive, and many other indicators. An advantage of the V-Dem dataset is that it is very comprehensive in its coverage of a large number of variables. A drawback is that many of the V-Dem variables are subjective and require the expert coders to make a number of judgment calls when scoring the variables. The trade-offs between objective and subjective coding are discussed in more detail below.

Conflict

A third large body of work centers on the role of conflict in authoritarian regimes. Autocratic leaders face twin problems of power sharing and control (Svolik 2012). Leaders can be overthrown from above by members of their own ruling coalition, referred to as the “problem of authoritarian power sharing.” Alternatively, leaders can be overthrown from below via the masses, referred to as the “problem of authoritarian control.”

Due to the centrality of conflict in shaping authoritarian rule, datasets on coups and civil wars are frequently used in studies of dictatorship. Most autocratic leaders are removed by their own regime insiders: individuals from the dictator’s inner circle, the government, or the repressive apparatus. From 1946 to 2008, 68 percent of leaders were deposed via a coup. For the remaining leaders, 11 percent were overthrown by a popular uprising, 10 percent transitioned to democracy, 7 percent were assassinated, and 5 percent were deposed by a foreign intervention (Svolik 2012). Although coups have decreased in their frequency since the end of the Cold War (Singh 2022), they remain a common way in which dictators lose power.⁹

The Global Instances of Coups Dataset (Powell and Thyne 2011) identifies all global coup attempts from 1950 to 2022, including the date of each attempt and whether it was successful. The Colpus Dataset (Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021) identifies all military and non-military coup attempts in the world from 1946 to 2020. The data provides information on whether an attempt was successful, whether the plotters sought to achieve regime change versus leader shuffling, and their ranks. The dataset repository also provides helpful case summaries of 1,172 coup-attempt events.

Failed coups and popular uprisings often result in the outbreak of civil wars. Though a complete list of datasets covering inter- and intra-state conflict are too numerous to list here, the most commonly used sources include: Correlates of War's Intra-State Wars dataset (Dixon and Sarkees 2015), the Nonviolent and Violent Conflict Outcomes (NAVCO) Dataset (Chenoweth and Lewis 2013), and Fearon's 2003 civil wars dataset. These datasets provide information on the conflict, such as the start and end dates, location, sides, war type, outcome, and battlefield deaths.

In her study of why some leaders initiate intra-state conflict and others not, Weeks (2014) creates a regime typology centering on whether the leader was civilian or military, and whether they are constrained. The four regime types are machine, junta, boss, and strongman, covering a global sample of conflicts from 1956 to 2000.

Finally, recent studies have also examined how origins in conflict can influence elite cohesion and regime durability. These studies of revolutions and rebellions provide several datasets, though each have a distinct definition of the term. Lachapelle et al. (2020) provide a list of global social revolutions from 1900 to 2015. They define a social revolution as "the violent overthrow of an existing regime from below accompanied by mass mobilization and state collapse, which triggers a rapid transformation of the state and the existing social order" (Lachapelle et al. 2020, 559). Beissinger (2022) provides a global list of revolutions from 1900 to 2014. He defines a revolutionary episode as "a mass siege of an established government by its own population with the aim of displacing the incumbent regime and substantially altering the political or social order" (Beissinger 2022, 5 [of codebook]). This definition of a revolution is broader than that of La Chapelle et al., so while Beissinger's dataset includes 345 revolutionary episodes, La Chapelle et al. identify only 18 social revolutionary regimes. Colgan and Weeks (2015) provide a list of global revolutionary regimes from 1945 to 2000. They define a revolutionary regime as one having come to power using armed force (including coups), and having implemented radical domestic change.

Methodological Tradeoffs and Challenges

The datasets surveyed in the previous section reflect many different methodological approaches and measurement decisions. In this section, I focus on two main debates: (1) regime typologies versus disaggregated variables, and (2) objective versus subjective measurement. No single approach is perfect. Instead, it is important for researchers to acknowledge the trade-offs associated with various measurement strategies and continue to improve on all types of data collection.

Regime Typologies versus Disaggregated Variables

Regime typologies have been used widely in studies of authoritarianism, since they provide simple and intuitive categories that underscore differences across dictatorships. Categories such as party, personal, and military regimes reflect concepts researchers care about, and meaningfully capture differences in the institutional setup across autocracies. As Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014, 319) argue, "We see a tradeoff between simplicity and capturing concepts of interest. Because we want to be able to explore theories about bargaining within the dictator's inner circle, we use a more complicated coding scheme that better captures traits of the leadership group than coding a single trait of the dictator's."

However, there are several drawbacks associated with the use of regime typologies. First, regime typologies place autocracies into single, mutually exclusive categories. This can give the impression that all regimes within the same category have uniformly strong institutions (Svolik 2012; Meng 2020; Wright 2021). For instance, Tanzania under the ruling party TANU/CCM and Guinea under the ruling PDG party are both coded as single-party regimes. Yet, TANU/CCM has survived multiple leadership transitions and is still in power

today, while the PDG was disbanded in a coup following the death of the founding leader. At the same time, mutually exclusive categories also give the impression that different regime types are more different than they really are (Gandhi and Sumner 2020; Wright 2021). In reality, most authoritarian regimes have degrees of personalism, military involvement, and ruling-party activity. In sum, nuances are lost when regimes are placed in mutually exclusive categories.

A second trade-off of regime typologies is that they are time invariant, which disguises institutional change over time (Meng 2021b; Wright 2021). Different leaders within the same regime often make very different institutional choices. For instance, the CCP in China is coded as a single-party regime since coming into power in 1949. Yet China under the founding leader, Mao Zedong, was significantly more personalist compared to later leaders such as Hu Jintao or Xi Jinping. Tunisia under Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) is coded as a single-party regime, despite becoming much more personalist in later years (Wolf 2023).

Third, the aggregation rule used by Geddes (1999) and Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) combine several different concepts, preventing researchers from knowing the particular questions or concepts that were most consequential for assigning regimes in one category and not another. "For example, if a dictatorship is coded as party-based we do not know whether that is due to factors related to the organizational structure of the support party, to rules governing leader succession, or to both equally" (Wright 2021, 3).¹⁰

Regime typologies were incredibly important in reviving the field of comparative authoritarianism, and providing the important insight that dictatorships vary widely across regimes. Due to some of the trade-offs discussed above, recent research has largely shifted toward using disaggregated variables, such as constitutional rules or cabinet appointments. In fact, disaggregated variables is the approach used in Geddes, Wright, and Frantz's most recent book, *How Dictatorships Work* (2018).

Objective versus Subjective Measurement

A second methodological consideration is whether to pursue an objective or subjective measurement strategy. Objective variables are constructed based on observational criteria, as opposed to subjective measures, which require the researcher to make judgment calls or code the variable based at least partially on their opinions. Objective variables can be more easily replicated: if multiple researchers independently coded the same variable, they would reach the same conclusions.

Objective measurement and replicability is central to the Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010) approach. They state: "The Democracy and Dictatorship (DD) measure of political regimes is minimalist. The coding is clear and stark, so that precise information is conveyed by the coding of each observation, and the coding involves no subjectivity, so it is easily reproducible" (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010, 71). For example, the dataset includes a variable on the legal status of parties: whether they are banned, only one party is allowed, or multiple parties are allowed. This variable can be unambiguously coded based on the constitution and laws of the regime. Most of the variables in Svobik (2012) are also objective coded, such as rules regarding executive and legislative selection.

The GWF regime typology is constructed based on a mix of subjective and objective indicators. For instance, two criteria used to evaluate the single-party regime category include "Did the party exist prior to the leader's election campaign or accession to power?" and "Does the party have functioning local-level organizations that do something reasonably important, such as distribute seeds or credit or organize local government?" (Geddes 2003, 225). The first question is objective and can be coded based on an observable criterion – whether or not the party predated the leader. By contrast, the second question is much more subjective because there is not a clear, indisputable answer to the coding question. Even well-informed

researchers may disagree over what constitutes a “functioning” local-level organization or “reasonably important” tasks.

While no approach is perfect, it is important for researchers to recognize the trade-offs of using subjective versus objective measurement strategies. The biggest weakness of subjective measures is that they may be vulnerable to coder bias or inconsistently applied criteria (Little and Meng 2024). The fact that subjective measures are difficult to replicate further hinders researchers’ abilities to check the accuracy of the data. One potential path forward for hand-coded variables that are more subjective is to rely more on disaggregated variables that are as specific as possible, as opposed to very broad based criteria that are open to multiple interpretations.

Another possible remedy is to consider whether there are objective indicators that reflect, at least in part, the central concept that the researcher would like to measure. Take, for example, the concept of leader control over appointments. Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018) includes a variable called *appointments* to assess the “dictator’s control over appointments to important offices in the government, military, and ruling party” (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2018, 81). To code this item, the authors rely on secondary literature that discusses the appointment process, including the frequency with which cabinet members are rotated or purged. Instead of relying on second-hand accounts, an alternate or supplemental coding strategy could be to use data on cabinet appointments (Nyrup and Bramwell 2020) or purges (Sudduth 2021) to verify the extent to which elites are shuffled in important offices. Although personnel data does not reflect the entire appointment process, these objective data can be used to complement and corroborate more subjective variables.

Although objective measures have the advantage of being more reliably coded, the biggest challenge lies in their interpretation and whether the measures accurately capture concepts the researcher cares about. This dilemma also reflects one of the central challenges of conducting research on authoritarian institutions: de jure rules may not necessarily reflect de facto power.

Take, for instance, data on the existence of parties in authoritarian regimes. A widely used variable from Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010) is the status of parties in the regime: whether they are banned, there is one party, or multiple parties. However, most authoritarian regimes have ruling parties, therefore focusing on the existence of parties does not necessarily capture important institutional differences. From 1946 to 2008, 87 percent of autocracies had a ruling party (Meng 2020). Opposition parties have also become commonplace, especially after the end of the Cold War. From 1945 to 2020, 74 percent of autocracies allowed multiple parties to exist; after 1990, this figure increases to 91 percent (Hyde and Marinov 2012). In sum, the vast majority of authoritarian regimes maintain a ruling party and allow opposition parties to exist.

Yet the existence of parties is not a good indicator of the strength of institutionalization of the party organization. As Meng (2021a) demonstrates, most ruling parties fail to outlive the death of the founding leader, 57 percent of all ruling parties fail to survive more than a year after the first leader’s death or departure from power. Even conditioning on cases where the first leader experienced a nonviolent exit from power, 52 percent of ruling parties do not survive this transition. While parties may be common in autocracies, strong parties are not.

In sum, when collecting data on authoritarian institutions, scholars should consider whether data on de jure rules adequately reflect the de facto power of actors. One way forward is to collect data on the content of rules and institutions, rather than simply documenting whether these institutions exist or not. Doing so can help capture variation in institutional strength in addition to measuring the distribution of power between leaders and elites. For instance, some variables that would be informative for capturing the strength of the

ruling party could include documenting whether the party established leadership succession protocols or whether the party survived multiple leadership transitions.¹¹

Finally, since no single approach is perfect, scholars can also use mixed-method approaches or triangulate between several different measurement strategies. Multiple approaches can be most easily adopted by book-length projects, which tend to have more space to tackle the same problem from different angles.

The Path Forward

I conclude with some broad suggestions for future research. First, I argue that scholars should continue to produce more global datasets on authoritarian regimes and institutions. Some datasets, such as NELDA or DPI, have been updated to current or recent years, but many other global datasets on autocracies end in 2010 or 2015. Given the changing nature of authoritarian strategies in recent decades (Guriev and Treisman, 2022), it is imperative that empirical studies and datasets keep up with current dictatorships. Doing so will allow scholars to continue to shed light on global patterns of dictatorship that can complement single-country or regional studies that focus more on particular cases.

Second, when studying formal institutions, scholars should consider how *de jure* rules affect *de facto* power. Thinking of ways to measure and collect data on the strength and influence of authoritarian institutions is especially important, as the existence of a formal institution does not necessarily constrain leaders or reshape power. Future research should focus efforts on collecting data on the content of institutions, beyond the simple existence of parties, legislatures, and elections. To address the heavy emphasis on formal institutions, scholars can also consider examining the role of informal institutions or norms.

More attention should also be paid to the endogenous adoption of institutions. Whether and how autocratic institutions become self-enforcing is critical to understanding their effects on regime stability (Pepinsky 2014; Meng 2020). To this point, the literature on authoritarian regimes is severely lacking in measures of power! How should scholars measure the distribution of power between leaders, regime elites, the opposition, and the general population?

Finally, scholars of comparative authoritarianism can also consider extending domestic theories of autocratic rule to a broader set of research questions in international relations. A small number of studies have, for instance, examined why dictators differ in their propensity to initiate inter-state conflict (Weeks 2012) or whether attempts to guard against internal coup threats affect a regime's external battlefield performance (Talmadge, 2015). By extending our studies beyond domestic politics, scholars of comparative autocracies can also contribute to understanding a wider set of regime outcomes, such as civil war outbreak, inter-state war, coups, and terrorism.

Acknowledgments

For helpful feedback, I thank Jack Paine and Anne Wolf.

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Notes

- 1 In this chapter I will use the terms authoritarian regime, autocracy, and dictatorship interchangeably.
- 2 These publications have over 1,300, 2,800, and 2,400 citations, respectively.
- 3 My focus on global samples thus excludes some regional datasets such as De Bruin (2020); Meng and Paine (2022);

Harkness (2022).

- 4 See also Chapter 5, “Regime Varieties.”
- 5 See also Chapter 8, “The Rise of Personalist Leaders.”
- 6 Data on constitutional rules by Meng (2021b) and cabinet appointments by Nyrup and Bramwell (2020) can also be considered part of the institutions literature.
- 7 See also Chapter 22, “Legislatures”; Chapter 23, “Elections”; and Chapter 25, “Parties.”
- 8 See also Chapter 51, “Legality” and Chapter 52, “Violence, Coercion, and Repression.”
- 9 See also Chapter 24, “The Military.”
- 10 The regime typology proposed by Cheibub et al. (2010) is not sensitive to this last concern since they do not use an aggregation rule to produce their regime categories of monarchy, military, and civilian.
- 11 See also Chapter 47, “Succession.”