

Preliminary draft

**Authoritarian elections and leadership succession,
1975-2000***

by

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Abstract:**Authoritarian elections and leadership succession,
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Why do a substantial number of non-democratic regimes hold elections? In this paper, I exposit a model in which authoritarian rulers agree to positive levels of electoral risk primarily to reduce the threat of their violent removal from office via a coup d'état or revolution, or to lower the cost of managing that risk through secret police, press restrictions and the like. Using an extensive database on the world's leaders and how they exited from office, I provide evidence that elections do help authoritarian regimes to regulate succession to their top posts. Specifically, both regular and irregular exits vary systematically across the electoral cycle, with regular exits being more likely in election years and irregular exits being less likely in and near election years.

Authoritarian elections and leadership succession, 1975-2000

Why do a substantial number of authoritarian, semi-authoritarian and semi-democratic regimes hold elections? These elections are not cheap. The Soviets put literally millions of people to work in their elections, exerting real effort to attain near-100% turnout and approval figures (Swearer 1961, 147). A number of other authoritarian regimes have substantially manipulated their economies in the run-up to elections, including Mexico (Magaloni 2006, ch. 3), Latin America more broadly (Ames 1987), South Korea and Taiwan (An 2001), and Egypt (Blaydes 2007). Moreover, in addition to being costly, some authoritarian elections lead directly to the regime's removal from office, as illustrated by the fall of the KANU in Kenya (Magaloni 2006, 39); and other authoritarian elections lead first to fairer ones, and thence to the regime's defeat, as illustrated by the fall of the KMT in Taiwan (Chao and Myers 2000).

The literature suggests several hypotheses regarding why an authoritarian regime would hold elections, despite their sometimes substantial cost and their occasional risk of electoral defeat. Perhaps the regime believes it can gain legitimacy by erecting a façade of elections (cf. Linz 2000; Schedler 2002a). Perhaps the international community has offered aid, conditional on the regime holding elections, and so the regime offers the letter of elections while removing as much of the spirit as possible (Beaulieu and Hyde 2007). Perhaps the lower classes have extorted elections from a reluctant elite, which then emasculates those elections as much as possible (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). Perhaps regimes use elections to prevent intra-regime splits and foster extra-regime splits (Magaloni 2006; Geddes 2006).

In this paper, I begin with the supposition that non-democratic rulers envision three possible fates for themselves: continuance in office; removal from office by regular (non-violent) means; and removal from office by irregular (violent) means. Thus, non-democratic rulers are motivated by two sometimes-competing goals: the goal of staying in power as long as possible; and the goal of avoiding a violent removal from power, which often leads to imprisonment, exile, or death. I argue that, *absent international inducements, elections must be beneficial either in reducing the risk that the ruler will be violently removed from power, or in reducing the costs of staying in power (e.g., the costs of repression and bribery), or both*. For, if elections carry neither of these domestic benefits, nor any international benefits, non-democratic rulers should not establish them in the first place.

In what follows, I first review previous ideas concerning why non-democratic regimes hold elections and then present my own model. This leads to an investigation of the causal paths by which elections might be useful in reducing a ruler's risk of violent removal from office and the articulation of two testable propositions about when violent exits should occur, relative to the electoral cycle. Using data from Archigos and other sources, I then test those propositions for a class of non-democratic regimes, finding that (a) violent exits

are increasingly likely as the distance in years to the next expected election increases; and (b) the incidence of violent exits is depressed in the year after an election year.

Previous literature

Previous explanations of why non-democratic regimes hold elections can be placed under three main headings: elections are ruses intended to produce legitimacy; elections are extorted concessions; and elections are a way to avoid intra-regime and exacerbate extra-regime splits. I shall discuss each possibility in turn.

Among the many who have noted that elections may be ruses are Linz and Schedler. Linz (2000, 34) describes as “electoral authoritarian” those regimes where an electoral “façade” covers authoritarian realities. Schedler (2002a, 37) argues that the rulers of such regimes hope “to reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risks of democratic uncertainty.” While the legitimacy generated might redound to the *domestic* credit of the regime, another variant of the argument points specifically to the benefits of *international* legitimacy: western donors promise aid in return for democratic improvements (Joseph 1999; Beaulieu and Hyde 2007). Two natural follow-on questions have been explored. First, shouldn’t domestic oppositions be aware that rulers will wish to rig their elections and fight for electoral reform (cf. Schedler 2002b; Beaulieu 2006)? Second, shouldn’t international donors be aware that rulers will wish to rig their elections and act to limit that option—e.g., by sending teams of election observers (Hyde 2006)?

Among those viewing elections—or fairer elections—as extorted concessions are Acemoglu and Robinson (2006). In these models, electoral concessions are not simply shams intended to dupe domestic or international observers. Instead, concessions involve a real, even if small, risk of electoral defeat. That said, however, the regime is assumed willing to seize without qualms any opportunity to backtrack on its commitments. Thus, the difference between the concession theorists and some of the legitimacy theorists might be viewed as relatively small, with one side emphasizing the real costs and dangers of electoral concessions and the other side emphasizing the real opportunities that incumbent rulers have to circumvent any reforms they implement.

Magaloni (2006, 8-9) argues that authoritarian elections in general “are employed as means to distribute power among lower-level politicians” within the regime and to demonstrate invincibility—both useful in convincing the mass of regime politicians to remain loyal, rather than join the opposition and pose electoral threats. Geddes (2006) makes a similar argument, with more of an emphasis on coercive (non-electoral) threats. Magaloni also argues that authoritarian elections can help to keep the opposition divided, by inducing portions of it to compete in elections. Her argument here is similar to that of Gandhi and Przeworski (2001) regarding the utility of authoritarian assemblies.

My view of non-democratic elections borrows from each of these perspectives. I assume, as do Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), that electoral concessions increase the electoral risk that a regime faces—or its “electoral

exposure,” as I shall call it. Of course, the level of exposure conceded can vary continuously from nil to the level entailed by fully fair and free elections.¹

Given that non-democratic elections are costly and pose real, even if sometimes tiny, electoral risks, there must be a compensating benefit to the regime. I focus in particular on the benefit to the paramount leader in the regime. The thesis advanced here, put bluntly, is that non-democratic rulers agree to positive levels of electoral exposure only to reduce the threat of their violent removal from office via a coup d’etat or revolution, or to lower the cost of managing that risk through secret police, press restrictions and the like.²

In comparison to Magaloni’s theory, my emphasis is less on the threat that splits within the regime might lead to electoral losses (a kind of regular exit) and more on the threat that splits within the regime might lead to an irregular exit from office for the incumbent ruler. I thus share Geddes’ (2006) focus on rulers’ concern for their personal safety.

A model of authoritarian elections

In this section, I consider more formally how a non-democratic ruler might design an electoral system. Although I have in mind that the model might apply well into the category of semi-democratic or debatably democratic regimes, here I will refer to a hypothetical “autocrat” (using the male pronoun, as the vast bulk of autocrats are men).

The perspective is decision-theoretic. The autocrat chooses how fair to make the electoral process, anticipating how this decision will affect (a) the probability that s/he exits office regularly; (b) the probability that s/he will exit office irregularly; and hence (c) the probability that s/he will remain in office.

Regular exits can fall in various categories, including electoral exits, when the autocrat is denied re-nomination or defeated in the general election; legislative exits, when the autocrat is defeated in a vote of confidence or removed via impeachment proceedings; death by natural causes; or retirement (not taken under threat of violence). There may be other types of regular exit in a given regime—for example, exit due to losing support in a Politburo; or exit due to some more informal but still “regular” process characterizing the particular regime.

Irregular exits can also fall in various categories: removal via revolution or civil war; removal via coup; or retirement in the face of violent threats. The important point for present purposes is that irregular exits yield much lower payoffs than regular exits. The autocrat may thus be willing to take actions that will increase the probability of a regular exit, if this same action will also decrease the probability of an irregular exit.

¹ The notion of electoral exposure is similar in some ways to the notion of “liberalization” used by O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) and the notion of “institutional ambiguity” used by Schedler (2002b).

² One might interpret this as another way of saying that non-democratic rulers hold elections in order to increase their legitimacy. But note that legitimacy is usually thought of as having broader effects than the two identified in the text. For example, more legitimate rulers can expect their taxes to be paid and their laws to be obeyed. Yet, neither of these effects is highlighted in the model. Thus, I don’t view it as similar to the legitimacy theorists.

The autocrat's choice variables

There are many aspects of an electoral process that can be altered to make it more or less fair. Here, I imagine the autocrat chooses three broad features of the electoral process: a level, $\alpha_1 \in [0, 1]$, of exposure to defeat in the nomination process of the ruling party in the regime; a level, $\alpha_2 \in [0, 1]$, of exposure to defeat in the general election; and an inter-election period, $\tau \geq 0$, denominated in years (so $\tau = 2$ means holding elections every other year).

The autocrat's "electoral exposure," $\alpha = (\alpha_1, \alpha_2) \in [0, 1]^2$, is greater the fairer the nomination and general election processes are. Note that establishing a fair electoral process does not necessarily mean that the autocrat will face a high probability of electoral defeat: after all, he may be immensely popular. High electoral exposure simply means that, were the autocrat to become sufficiently unpopular with the selectorate, he would be denied re-nomination; and were he to become sufficiently unpopular with the electorate, he would be denied re-election. Electoral exposure, in other words, affects how the autocrat's popularity translates into exit risks.

When the autocrat chooses a particular level of electoral exposure, my interpretation is that he *credibly commits* to this level. Thus, α is not simply something the autocrat *says*; most autocrats seem happy to claim that their elections are honest and uniquely appropriate to the national spirit of which they are the uniquely qualified steward. Rather, α reflects something the autocrat *does*—such as extending the suffrage, legalizing opposition parties, removing restrictions on the press, inviting international teams to observe the elections, and so forth. While even such reforms can be undermined, I simplify by assuming that everyone understands the extent to which the autocrat will be able to undermine whatever reforms are offered.

The other aspect of the electoral regime that I envision the autocrat choosing is the inter-election period—i.e., the maximum period that can elapse between elections. The fairness and frequency of elections may both reduce the risk of irregular exit; here, I focus on fairness's effects.

The autocrat's possible fates

Once the autocrat has chosen α and τ , a series of periods ensue. If the autocrat is still in power at the beginning of period t , then he begins the period by expending $c_t(\alpha, \tau)$ on "staying in power." These expenditures include those needed to run an electoral campaign and those involved in repressing opposition groups. Electoral costs presumably rise with electoral exposure, while costs of repression fall. However, I make no global assumption about how the sum of these two costs behaves as α and τ vary.

After his expenditures on staying in power in any given period have been made, one of three fates can befall the autocrat. First, he can stay in office, enjoying a utility flow during the period of u_s . Second, he can be removed from office by regular (or constitutional) means, yielding a terminal utility of u_r . Third, he can be removed from office by irregular (or violent) means, yielding a terminal utility of u_i .

Note that the payoffs u_s , u_r and u_i do not depend on the choice of electoral exposure or inter-election period. Among other things, this means that international actors have not offered aid conditional on improvements in the conduct of elections (which would make the payoff to being in office for one period, u_s , a function of α and τ).

The autocrat's maximand

Given his expected optimal investment in staying in power— $c_t(\alpha, \tau)$ —the probability that the autocrat stays in office in period t is $S_t(\alpha, \tau)$, the probability that he exits office regularly is $R_t(\alpha, \tau)$, and the probability that he exits office irregularly is $I_t(\alpha, \tau) = 1 - S_t(\alpha, \tau) - R_t(\alpha, \tau)$. The autocrat's choice of electoral exposure (α) and inter-election period (τ) thus sets up a series of "lotteries" in each period, with the price of entry in period t being $c_t(\alpha, \tau)$.³ As long as the autocrat has received the "stay in office" prize in all previous periods, he again plays a lottery in the next period. If he exits, either regularly or irregularly, he simply receives a terminal payoff (u_r or u_i , as the case may be).⁴

Given these assumptions, the autocrat's payoff in period t can be described as follows. First, if he begins the period out of office, then his period payoff is zero. Second, if he begins the period in office, then his period payoff is $\gamma_t(\alpha, \tau) = S_t(\alpha, \tau)[u_s + \gamma_{t+1}(\alpha, \tau)\delta] + R_t(\alpha, \tau)u_r + I_t(\alpha, \tau)u_i - c_t(\alpha, \tau)$. The first term indicates that, if the autocrat remains in power—which he does with probability $S_t(\alpha, \tau)$ —then he accrues the per-period utility u_s , plus the "continuation payoff" $\gamma_{t+1}(\alpha, \tau)$, the latter being discounted by the discount factor $\delta \in (0, 1)$. The second term indicates that, if the autocrat exits regularly from power—which he does with probability $R_t(\alpha, \tau)$ —then he accrues the terminal utility u_r . The third term indicates that, if the autocrat exits irregularly from power—which he does with probability $I_t(\alpha, \tau)$ —then he accrues the terminal utility u_i . Regardless of the outcome during the period, the autocrat will have invested an amount $c_t(\alpha, \tau)$ to stay in power. Letting $L_t(\alpha, \tau) = S_t(\alpha, \tau)u_s + R_t(\alpha, \tau)u_r + I_t(\alpha, \tau)u_i$, the autocrat's per-period payoff can be re-written as $\gamma_t(\alpha, \tau) = L_t(\alpha, \tau) + S_t(\alpha, \tau)\gamma_{t+1}(\alpha, \tau) - c_t(\alpha, \tau)$.

I assume that the autocrat chooses α and τ in order to maximize his discounted present utility:

$$\max_{\alpha, \tau} \sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \delta^t Q_t(\alpha, \tau) [L_t(\alpha, \tau) - c_t(\alpha, \tau)]$$

$$\text{where } Q_t(\alpha, \tau) = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } t = 0 \\ \prod_{k=0}^{t-1} S_k(\alpha, \tau) & \end{cases}$$

³ If the autocrat plans to retire in period t , then $c_t(\alpha, \tau) = 0$ and $R_t(\alpha, \tau) = 1$.

⁴ Thus, I assume that autocrats have no chance of returning to power, once removed from office. For the most part, this seems a defensible assumption. However, there are exceptions, such as Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua. Thus, an alternative interpretation is that any chance autocrats have of returning to office is impounded in the "terminal" payoffs.

As can be seen, the autocrat discounts future payoffs ($L_t(\alpha, \tau) - c_t(\alpha, \tau)$) both because current consumption is preferred to future consumption (the δ^t term) and because he may not remain in office long enough to have a chance at enjoying those payoffs (the $Q_t(\alpha, \tau)$ term). The intuition behind the assumed maximand is simply that the autocrat chooses his electoral exposure with an eye to how it will affect not just his probability of regular exit but also his probability of irregular exit.

A word is in order regarding the options (choice variables) the autocrat has in order to manage his risk of violent exit. If the autocrat faced a known set of challengers with known fighting capabilities, he could bargain with them over the division of the rents of office. One might envision a model similar to Powell's (1999, ch 4), in which coups and revolts can always be deterred by the appropriate sharing offer (under complete information).

Although bargaining over the division of the regime's spoils is no doubt an important element in stabilizing authoritarian regimes, here I focus on the electoral process as a separate stabilizing element. If the autocrat has incomplete information about his potential challengers, then he may not be able effectively to deter coups by offering shares of the spoils of office. Some potential challengers may have amassed more (or less) power than he knows, and thus be "underpaid" (or "overpaid") in the current regime. Yet, they may not be able credibly to communicate their increased power. The autocrat may be able to use the electoral process to provide incentives to "underpaid" actors within the regime not to launch a coup, if that process offers them an alternative avenue into power (on which more below).

The autocrat's optimal choice

Given the assumptions previously made, the main result regarding the autocrat's choice is:

Proposition 1: If the autocrat chooses a positive level of electoral exposure (i.e., $\alpha_1 + \alpha_2 > 0$), then the chosen level of electoral exposure must either reduce the risk of irregular exit, or reduce the cost of staying in power, or both—relative to choosing nil exposure ($\alpha_1 = \alpha_2 = 0$).

Proof: See appendix.

The intuition behind Proposition 1 can be seen by first supposing that electoral exposure does *not* reduce costs. In this case, autocrats who choose to hold elections, of whatever level of fairness, *must* view their commitment to an electoral process as reducing their risk of being violently removed from office. For, an electoral process increases their risk of being removed from office regularly.⁵ Thus, if it also increased, or left unchanged, their risk of being

⁵ This does require that τ be small relative to the autocrat's expected remaining natural lifespan. If the autocrat promises to hold an election 1,000 years in the future, then this will obviously not increase his risk of losing office via elections, even if those elections will be completely fair.

removed from office irregularly, there would be no value in committing to elections to begin with.⁶ In other words, we should find that *higher electoral exposure reduces the frequency with which autocrats are violently removed from office*.

Turning things around, let us suppose that electoral exposure does *not* reduce the risk of irregular exit. In this, case the only reason for an autocrat to allow a positive electoral exposure would be that it reduces the autocrat's costs of repression, perhaps by increasing the regime's legitimacy.⁷

Of course, it may be that committing to higher levels of electoral exposure both reduces the risk of irregular exit and reduces the costs of staying in power. As the latter reduction is more difficult to detect empirically, because systematic data on the costs of repression are not available, I focus here on examining whether elections protect incumbents from irregular exits.

How does committing to elections reduce the risk of revolution or coup?

By what causal path would elections reduce the risk of irregular exit? The answer has to be that those who would launch coups or revolutions, absent elections, are convinced not to do so, given elections. There are at least three different ways in which this might happen.

First, committing to elections may reduce asymmetries of information between the various contenders for power, and hence lessen the chance of recourse to violence (cf. Fearon 1995). The metaphor here would be Spartan elections, in which the supporters of a particular candidate voted by yelling as loudly as they could, while clashing their spears against their shields (Staveley 1972). The utility of such elections in gauging the fighting spirit and ability of a candidate's supporters was obvious. With a commonly observed measure of the two sides' strengths, actual recourse to violence was less likely.

If it were common knowledge that vote totals were pure fabrications of the incumbent ruler, then election results could not be used to signal potential fighting strength. Thus, if an autocrat wishes to use election results to clarify support levels, and thereby reduce the probability of "bargaining failure" ending in his irregular exit, he must set up a vote-counting system that is at least minimally credible.⁸

Second, committing to elections may also offer an alternative route to power for those who might otherwise launch a coup or revolt. For this logic to be operative, challengers must believe either that they have a chance of wresting the regime's nomination from the incumbent (and then winning the general

⁶ Geddes (2006) makes a similar argument.

⁷ One can interpret the arguments just given in terms of legitimacy, if the primary effects of greater legitimacy are taken to be reducing the autocrat's costs of repression and his risk of violent removal from office.

⁸ Of course, it is possible that the election campaign itself can convey valuable information about the various sides' popular support—as when the opposition stages a larger-than-expected mass rally. Sending a signal via campaign rallies does not require accurate vote counting but does require widely disseminated and accurate reports of campaign activities.

election) or that they have a chance of winning the general election as an opposition candidate. The second belief (but not the first) requires that the incumbent must credibly renounce the ability to fabricate the election results out of whole cloth—else the offered alternative route to power will be recognized as illusory and no coups or revolts will be deterred.

Third, committing to elections may decrease the expected utility of launching a coup just before or after an election. Consider the following passage from Geddes (2007, 14):

Military plotters usually avoid ... interventions that they believe would be opposed by mass demonstrations or a civilian uprising. Since the Russian Revolution, everyone has understood that ordering soldiers to fire on their fellow citizens is likely to lead to refusals to obey orders, desertions, and the disintegration of military unity.

If popular uprisings against coups are more likely in the run-up to, or aftermath of, an election, then proximity to elections should reduce the probability of a coup.

Testable implications

Assuming that all of these causal pathways are to some significant degree operative leads to several testable implications regarding how irregular exits are distributed across the electoral cycle. First, if elections communicate something significant about relative strength, then *violent ouster attempts should be deterred in the aftermath of an election*. If the incumbent has just won the election, then his victory will have provided fresh evidence that he has a substantial level of popular support (even if the results are discounted because the elections were not fully fair and free). If the challenger has just won the election, then his victory will show enough popular support to overcome whatever election-rigging the incumbent engaged in. Regardless of who has won, the incumbent and challenger are less likely to disagree about their respective chances in a violent ouster attempt after the election than before and, hence, more likely to settle up without fighting.

This prediction is of course probabilistic. Thus, although one can readily cite examples in which coups are launched by the losing side immediately after an election—e.g., Sierra Leone in 1967 or Dahomey in 1968—such examples do not invalidate the prediction unless they are sufficiently common. Moreover, one can also cite cases in which a “honeymoon” seems to exist. Consider, for example, Samudavanija’s (1982, p. 2) characterization of the cycle of coups that characterized Thai society prior to the 1980s:

The cycle comprises six recurring phases, namely (1) a military coup, followed by (2) the promulgation of a new or resurrected constitution, followed by (3) a period of politicking and elections, followed by (4) a “honeymoon” period of cooperation and all sorts of new legislation,

followed by (5) bitter arguing and stagnation among the governmental elite, followed by (6) a military coup d'etat to restore order and stability.

Second, if the chance at getting into power regularly rather than irregularly is what deters coups and revolts, then a smaller expected time until the next election should mean a smaller incentive for a coup or revolution. This is because the closer the next election is expected to be, the less a rival will discount the value of his or her next electoral opportunity, and thus the less likely he will be to launch a coup or revolt.⁹ All told, *the incidence of irregular exit should decline as the next election approaches.*

Finally, as noted above, if popular uprisings against coups are more likely in the run-up to, or aftermath of, an election, then proximity to elections should reduce the probability of a coup. Thus, *the incidence of irregular exit should decline with proximity to elections.*

Data and methods

To test the hypotheses advanced above, I use the Archigos dataset, which provides information on how the world's top leaders have exited office over the period 1875-2004.¹⁰ The unit of analysis is a country-year-leader. I code two dependent variables: *REGULAR_EXIT*, equal to 1 if a given leader in a given country-year exited office regularly, 0 otherwise; and *IRREGULAR_EXIT*, equal to 1 if a given leader in a given country-year exited office irregularly, 0 otherwise.¹¹

The main independent variables are coded using the World Bank's Database on Political Institutions (DPI2000, Keefer 2002), which includes the dates of elections in all countries. Using this information, I code for each country-year-leader the following two variables: *NEXTELEC*, equal to the *expected* number of years until the next election will be held;¹² and *POSTELEC*, equal to 1 if this is a non-election year immediately after an election year. As an alternative, I also code a dichotomous variable that measures the proximity of a given year to an election: *PROXELEC* equals 1 if the year under consideration is either an election year or immediately precedes or follows an election year. As the DPI2000 dataset covers 1975-2000, my analysis is restricted to these years. The final dataset is an unbalanced panel, with multiple years in which a regular or irregular exit might occur within each polity.

⁹ It remains possible, of course, that a rival will still discount his or her next electoral opportunity heavily—not because it lies in the distant future but because the elections are expected to be rigged. Thus, as usual, there is a *ceteris paribus* condition on the statement in the text.

¹⁰ For information on the Archigos dataset, see mail.rochester.edu/~hgoemans/data.htm.

¹¹ If systematic data were available on *attempts* to remove leaders violently, I would code a third dependent variable indicating such attempts. But, if leaders anticipate coercive risks properly, the electoral exposures they choose should influence their actual probabilities of violent ouster, not just the probabilities that someone attempts to remove them irregularly.

¹² Details on the coding of *NEXTELEC* are given in the appendix.

Results

Do elections increase the probability of regular exit?

A key assumption of the model is that greater electoral exposure means a greater risk that the ruler will be removed from office regularly, either by failing to be “re-nominated” or by being defeated in the general election. To illuminate this matter, I report results from a logit regression of *REGULAR_EXIT* on country fixed effects and a dummy variable indicating calendar years within which a national election was held (Table 1).¹³ This regression was conducted for three sets of countries: long-term democracies (those with consistent Polity scores of 10 from 1975 to 2000); possibly emerging democracies (those with average Polity scores above 5 but below 10); and autocracies (those with average Polity scores at or below 5). As can be seen, regular exits are more likely to occur in election years in all three subsets of polities.

Table 1: Are regular exits more common in election years?

Type of polity (number of polities)	Coefficient on Election Year Indicator (all statistically significant at .0005 level)	Increment in probability of regular exit in election years versus non-election years
Long-term democracies (21)	1.23	
Possibly emerging democracies (18)	1.59	
Autocracies (46)	1.58	

Note: Long-term democracies are those with a Polity score of 10 throughout the period 1975-2000. Possibly emerging democracies are those with an average Polity score greater than 5 and less than 10. Autocracies are those with an average Polity score no greater than 5.

There is a caveat to register about comparing the frequency of regular exits in election and non-election years: exits *during* an election year may not be *due to* the election. To see this, consider an autocratic regime in which it is possible for a leader to exit from office regularly for reasons other than electoral defeat—e.g., because he or she loses the equivalent of a vote of confidence. If, when autocratic leaders lose votes of confidence, their polity usually holds an election soon thereafter to give the new leader a façade of legitimacy, then the higher incidence of regular exits in election years will not reflect the causal process of primary interest here.

¹³ The dummy variable equals 1 in a year in which either a national legislative or national executive election was held, 0 otherwise.

Do elections lower the probability of irregular exit?

This section investigates the main predictions of the model—that there should be a post-election honeymoon period during which irregular exits are less likely; and that irregular exits should be less frequent as the time to the next expected election declines. To give a feel for the data, consider first how frequent irregular exits are in years that are proximal to election years (*PROXELEC* = 1) versus those that are not (*PROXELEC* = 0). For each of 50 authoritarian regimes that exhibited at least one irregular exit from office over the period 1975-2000, I computed the relative frequency of an irregular exit in election-proximal and election-non-proximal years. In four cases, there were no elections held at all, and hence there were no election-proximal years to compare to the election-non-proximal years. Of the remaining cases, 30 show a higher incidence of irregular exit in election-non-proximal years, while 16 show a higher incidence of irregular exit in election-proximal years. There is thus some suggestion that proximity to elections tends to depress the incidence of irregular exit.

Looking more closely at the results by region (Table 2), one can see some strong regional differences. In particular, of the seven middle eastern countries, three never held elections, three showed the “wrong sign”, and only one showed any tendency for irregular exits to be depressed by proximity to elections. Similarly, of the ten Asian countries (four from Southeast Asia, three from South Asia, three from the former Soviet republics), five show the expected pattern, four do not, and one held no elections. In contrast to these two regions, in the 24 African and 9 Latin American cases, irregular exits tend to be rarer in years that are proximal to elections.

Table 2: Does proximity to elections depress the incidence of irregular exits?

Region (number of cases holding at least one election and having at least one irregular exit)	Percent of cases showing a higher incidence of irregular exit in election- non-proximal years
Africa (24)	75%
Latin America (9)	67%
Asia (9)	56%
Middle East (4)	25%

To further explore the relationship between the electoral cycle and irregular exits, I conducted a logit regression of *IRREGULAR_EXIT* on country fixed effects, *POSTELEC* and *NEXTELEC*. This analysis allows each country to have its own baseline probability of irregular exit. It then pools information from all countries to estimate whether there is a post-election honeymoon during which

violent exits from office are less common; and whether irregular exits are less likely as the time to the next expected election diminishes. The information driving the coefficient estimates for *NEXTELEC* and *POSTELEC* is thus intra-country and cross-temporal. There are several points about this analysis that merit notice.

First, the analysis is confined to autocracies (defined as countries with average Polity scores at or below 5 over the period 1975-2000). The proportion of all country-year-leaders with an irregular exit in this subset is .076. Nothing hinges on the choice of 5 as the cutoff between emerging democracies and autocracies.

Second, the country fixed effects help to control for time-invariant features of each polity that might affect the incidence of irregular exit. At the broadest level, such time-invariant effects would include each country's political culture and the character of its civil society. At a more narrow level, time-invariant effects might include the nature of a country's military and its relationship with civilian leaders. All these factors—political culture, character of civil society, and civilian-military relations—have been frequently mentioned as possible contributors to how prone a given polity is to coups and revolts. It is hard to see how else one might control for them, other than via country-specific fixed (or random) effects. We should also note that, by including the country fixed effects, we ensure that what drives the coefficient estimates for *POSTELEC* and *NEXTELEC* are intra-country cross-temporal comparisons, rather than cross-sectional comparisons.

Third, one might worry that there may be some reverse causality at work. Specifically, if those who come to power by irregular means postpone any elections that had been planned by the previous leader, then the calculation of *NEXTELEC* needs care. To see why, suppose that there is an irregular exit in year y in a particular country. If the ousted leader had planned elections at $y+1$, then the proper value of *NEXTELEC* would be 1. If the incoming leader actually holds elections at $y+5$, then the value of *NEXTELEC* that one would code, were one to look only at the elections actually held in the country, would be 5. Thus, a case that actually shows the ineffectiveness of a looming election in preventing a violent ouster, might appear to support the idea that elections deter irregular exits. To deal with this problem, the value of *NEXTELEC* is determined by researching when each irregularly ousted leader had planned to hold elections, rather than by seeing when each incoming leader after an irregular exit actually held elections.

Fourth, by including both *POSTELEC* and *NEXTELEC*, the analysis allows one to explore the post-election honeymoon effect (one expects the estimated coefficient on *POSTELEC* to be negative) and the pre-election anticipation effect (one expects the estimated coefficient on *NEXTELEC* to be positive) separately. In contrast, the previous analysis using *PROXELEC* could address only the combination of these effects.

Turning now to the results in Table 3, one sees a decrease in violent exits in post-election years. Substantively, a leader facing a .05 risk of exiting irregularly in a particular year would have a risk of .011 were that year to follow

an election year. One also sees an increase in violent exits as the time to the next expected election increases. Substantively, a leader with a .02 risk of exiting irregularly one year before the next election would have a .03 risk two years before. These findings are consistent with the notion that authoritarian elections are designed, not to give the people a voice, nor to give the opposition a fair chance of winning, but rather to lessen the probability of a coup or revolt.

Table 3: Irregular exits and the electoral cycle

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error
POSTELEC	-1.47*	.41
NEXTELEC	0.44*	.07

* Significant at .0001 level.

Conditional fixed-effects logistic regression. Country fixed effects not reported.

Number of observations = 1,338, all from authoritarian regimes (average Polity score ≤ 5).

What if one splits the sample into the four regions identified in Table 2—Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America—and runs the analysis separately for each region? All four regions exhibit a post-election honeymoon but the effect is statistically significant only in Latin America and Africa. Similarly, in all four regions, the longer it is expected to take until the next election is held, the more likely an irregular exit is to occur. This effect is statistically significant at the .10 level in the Middle East (150 observations), at the .05 level in Asia (229 observations), and at the .0005 level in Latin America and Africa (292 and 668 observations, respectively). Thus, the main results show up in all four regions, being noticeably weak in the Middle East.

Different exposures for different risks

A further point should be noted about the *kind* of exposure that an autocrat might prefer, depending on the source of the risk of violent overthrow. If the risk of overthrow is primarily from rivals within the regime, then the most effective combination of exposures is $\alpha_1 > 0$ and $\alpha_2 = 0$. That is, the autocrat should allow a real possibility of his removal via nomination politics but a nil possibility that the regime's nominee will be defeated in the general election. A potential rival within the regime then values the opportunity to remove the incumbent in the nomination process maximally, and is hence maximally deterred from resorting to violence.

Many autocratic regimes do in fact seem to fall into this pattern, with some nomination exposure but very little general election exposure. At least two factors contribute to the stability of this institutional configuration. First, it will help attract the most ambitious politicians of each new generation into the regime's party. Second, the influx of talent into the regime will increase intra-regime competition for advancement¹⁴ and thus maintain pressure on the incumbent to continue allowing some nomination exposure, while at the same time not creating

¹⁴ This point is similar to the general proposition that one-party states push competition into the nomination stage (Key 1964, Cox 1997).

pressure for an increase in general-election exposure (as extra-regime forces are deprived of leadership).

PRIista Mexico provided an extreme example (Magaloni 2006). With the president ineligible for re-nomination ($\alpha_1 = 1$), there was always hope of further advancement within the regime. With routinely large victory margins and low general-election exposure, advancement to the top within the PRI led virtually automatically to the presidency.

In contrast, if the main threat of violent removal comes from outside the regime—as in Acemoglu and Robinson (2006)—then it will be necessary to offer some meaningful general-election exposure, because nomination exposure alone will be worthless to opposition forces. One might view the distinction between hard-liners and soft-liners within an authoritarian regime as hinging on their differing views about the optimal level of general-election exposure.

Conclusion

If non-democratic leaders hold elections, then they must either view the costs of not holding elections as too high or see some positive benefits in the electoral process. Perhaps non-democrats fear that suspending the electoral process will either (a) result in such a loss of legitimacy that the costs of staying in power will increase unacceptably; or (b) result in a large loss in foreign aid. Alternatively, perhaps they believe that holding elections lowers their risk of being violently removed from office, even as it raises their probability of being regularly removed from office, and the former effect outweighs the latter. It is on the last of these possibilities that I have focused here.

How would holding elections lower a ruler's risk of violent exit? Three possible causal paths were suggested above. First, elections may reduce asymmetries of information about the ruler's power and support—leading to a post-election “honeymoon effect” (a depressed incidence of irregular exits in the immediate aftermath of elections). Second, elections may offer an alternative route to power—leading to an “electoral distance effect” (irregular exits are more likely, the more distant the next expected election is). Third, coup plotters may be deterred from launching a coup near an election, because they believe street protests would then be more likely.

Using an extensive database on the world's leaders and how they exited from office, I provide evidence that elections do help a wide range of non- and semi-democratic regimes regulate succession to their top posts. Both regular and irregular exits exhibit an electoral cycle, with regular exits being more likely in election years and irregular exits being less likely in and near election years.

Appendix

Proof of Proposition 1

I assume that

(A) *Increasing exposure increases the risk of regular exit in an election year.* If t is an election period, then $\frac{\partial R_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_1} > 0$ for all α ; and $\frac{\partial R_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_2} > 0$ for all α .

Conceivably, assumption (A) could be false in a particular regime if the autocrat's gesture in granting fairer elections produced a large increase in popularity or a large reduction in the risk of regular exit via non-electoral means (e.g., impeachment). The assumption essentially declares such cases of negligible importance.

Lemma 1: Let α^* be the lowest optimal level of electoral exposure for the autocrat. If $\alpha_j^* > 0$, then it cannot be the case that $\frac{\partial S_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_j} \leq 0$ and $\frac{\partial I_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_j} \geq 0$

and $\frac{\partial c_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_j} \geq 0$ for all α, t .

Proof: If $\frac{\partial S_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_j} \leq 0$ and $\frac{\partial I_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_j} \geq 0$ and $\frac{\partial c_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_j} \geq 0$ for all α, t , then there is no (α, t) for which increasing α_j increases the autocrat's expected payoff. Thus, $\alpha_j^* = 0$, a contradiction. QED.

Lemma 2: Given (A), if $\alpha_j^* > 0$, then either (a) $\frac{\partial I_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_j} < 0$ for some α, t ; or (b)

$\frac{\partial c_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_j} < 0$ for some α, t .

Proof: If $\sim(\frac{\partial I_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_j} < 0$ for some $\alpha, t)$ and $\sim(\frac{\partial c_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_j} < 0$ for some $\alpha, t)$ and (A),

then, since $S_t(\alpha, \tau) + R_t(\alpha, \tau) + I_t(\alpha, \tau) = 1$ for all α, t , $\frac{\partial S_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_j} \leq 0$ and $\frac{\partial I_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_j} \geq 0$

and $\frac{\partial c_t(\alpha, \tau)}{\partial \alpha_j} \geq 0$ for all α, t , and hence $\alpha_j^* = 0$, a contradiction via Lemma 1.

QED.

Coding of NEXTELEC

NEXTELEC describes the expected amount of time until the next election. If the incumbent leader eventually exits regularly, then NEXTELEC equals the

observed time to the next election, or 5, whichever is smaller. Thus, a value of 5 indicates that the next election is *at least* five years in the future. If the incumbent leader eventually exits irregularly, then NEXTELEC is coded according to what the incumbent leader's intentions appear to have been, rather than according to his or her successor's practice. For a nation with a history of regular elections, or with credible constitutional term limits, one can calculate when the next regularly scheduled election would have occurred, had the irregular exit not occurred, and use this as the value for NEXTELEC. In cases where rules governing the frequency of elections are obscure or appear not to have been binding, NEXTELEC is given the arbitrary value of 5, indicating that the next election was expected to occur at least 5 years in the future. **The coding of this variable has not yet been finalized.**

Summary Statistics

The table below gives the means of the four main variables, broken down by region.

Variable	Africa	Asia	Latin America	Middle East
REGULAR_EXIT	.042	.118	.137	.013
IRREGULAR_EXIT	.073	.096	.079	.053
NEXTELEC	2.64	2.36	2.15	3.07
POSTELEC	.136	.162	.216	.120
N of observations	667	229	292	150

The table below shows how frequently the various possible values of NEXTELEC occur in the data.

NEXTELEC	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
0	293	21.90	21.90
1	204	15.25	37.14
2	191	14.28	51.42
3	166	12.41	63.83
4	118	8.82	72.65
5	366	27.35	100.00
Total	1,338	100.00	

List of countries included in analyses

Africa	Asia	Latin America	Middle East
Algeria	Afghanistan	Argentina	Egypt
Burkina Faso	Azerbaijan	Bolivia	Qatar
Burundi	Bangladesh	Guatemala	Saudi Arabia
Cent. Af. Rep.	Cambodia	Haiti	Tunisia
Chad	*Georgia	Honduras	Yemen (AR)
Comoro Is.	Laos	Panama	Yemen (PDR)
Congo	Myanmar	Paraguay	
Cote d'Ivoire	Pakistan	Peru	
Eq. Guinea	Tajikistan	Uruguay	
Ethiopia	Thailand		
Gambia			
Ghana			
Guinea			
Guinea-Bissau			
Lesotho			
Liberia			
Madagascar			
Mauritania			
Niger			
Nigeria			
Rwanda			
Sierra Leone			
Sudan			
Uganda			

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