Democracy and Autocracy

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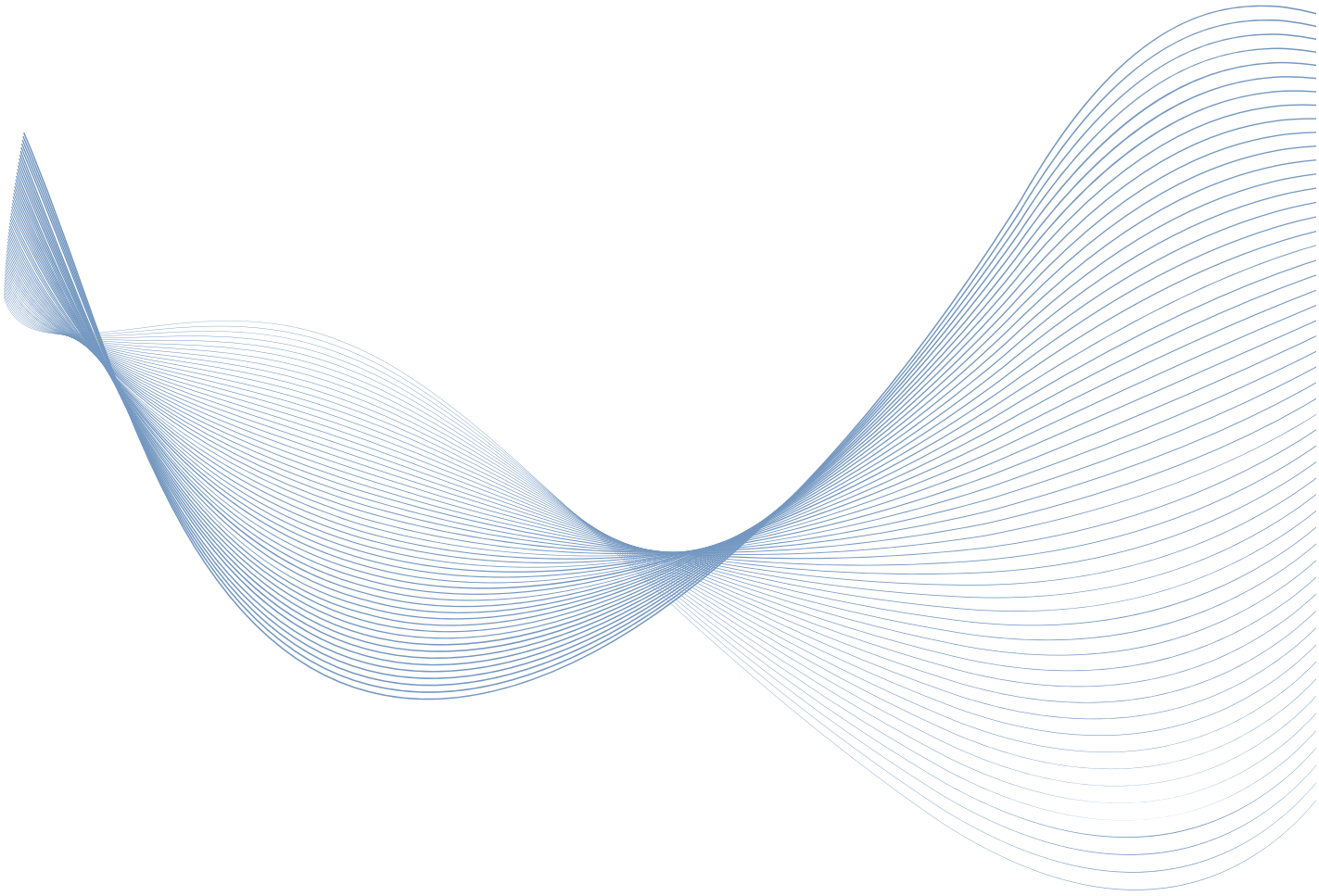
"Constraining Presidents"



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Watch the event recording here on Youtube.

Newsletter contributors Julia Azari, Kenneth Lowande, Anne Meng, Ken Opalo, and Allen Hicken joined William Howell (University of Chicago) on Nov. 10, 2020 over Zoom to discuss this issue's theme.

Editors' Introduction

***Allen Hicken**, Professor of Political Science, University of Michigan; **Rob Mickey**, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Michigan*

Scholars of American politics have always been concerned with how to constrain presidential power. Scholars of comparative politics have always been concerned with democratic breakdown and the power abuses of autocrats. We are at the perfect historical moment to bring these parallel concerns into direct conversation.

In this issue, contributors address issues related to executive power in both democracies and autocracies. The contributors include institutionalists who situate their work in an explicitly comparative context, as well as those who work primarily on the United States.[1] Together they offer a diverse set of perspectives on the contribution of presidential institutions to democratic backsliding, and the ways in which even autocratic presidents might be constrained.

Presidentialism and Democracy

The conversation between our contributors on presidentialism and democratic backsliding is, of course, grounded in a broader debate about the effects of particular political institutions on both democratic quality and regime stability. Perhaps no institution has been singled out for greater scrutiny than the type of executive, and no claim is better known than Juan Linz's argument that presidentialism is inimical to democratic stability.[2] The precise logic connecting presidentialism with weak and/or imperiled democracy varies by author, but often includes a claim that the incentives for cooperation and party discipline are weaker in presidential regimes,[3] and/or that presidentialism is more prone to conflict and deadlock than parliamentary regimes.

As persuasive as some of these arguments may seem, efforts to evaluate the "perils of presidentialism" claim

1 Most of the authors participated in a roundtable on Constraining Presidents organized by the University of Michigan's Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies on November 10, 2020. A recording of that roundtable can be viewed at https://myumi.ch/GkQgp.
2 Juan Linz. 1990. "The Perils of Presidentialism." *Journal of Democracy* 1(1): 51–69.
3 For more on the link between presidential institution and weak parties, see David J. Samuels and Matthew S. Shugart, *Presidents, Parties, and Prime Ministers: How the Separation of Powers Affects Party Organization and Behavior* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

have yielded mixed results at best. In a forthcoming review of the connection between institutions and democracy, Hicken, Baltz, and Vasselai find that less than thirty percent of the studies they reviewed find a direct, positive relationship between presidentialism and democratic breakdown; in fact, their own analysis reveals no systematic evidence supporting this argument.[4] In short, presidential democracies do not appear to be systematically more at risk compared to other regime types.

The contributions by José Cheibub and Kenneth Lowande underscore this point — Cheibub from a comparative perspective, and Lowande through an American politics lens. For these authors, there is nothing intrinsic in the nature of the institution that imperils democracy. Cheibub notes that presidential democracies are not the only ones facing the risks of backsliding. Elected presidents are not "intrinsic backsliders," and it is important to separate the institution from the preference of particular leaders and their supporters. In a similar vein, Lowande urges readers not to overreact to claims that U.S. presidents increasingly rule by decree or are paving the way towards a creeping authoritarianism. The president's ability to exercise unilateral control over policy remains limited, so while individual presidents may be authoritarian at heart, "[t]he presidency," he argues, "[does not] aspire to dictatorship."

However, even if we accept that presidential democracies are no more likely to die than their parliamentary counterparts, it might still be possible to identify the morbidity risks that presidential democracies tend to share. When Julia Azari, in her article on the U.S. presidency, refers to the deliberate expansion of presidential power in response to shortcomings in the political system, one can detect the echoes of Linz in her argument. A particular risk of presidential democracies is the possibility of protracted political stalemates. Azari is joined by Lowande and Cheibub in identifying the corrosive effects of poor government performance on democracy. Ineffective government understandably generates demands for better responsiveness, including empowering presidents to better tackle major problems. Azari also points out that, while an institution might work well in certain contexts, changes to that broader context can increase the risks associated with that institution. Azari argues that America's political institutions, whose mid-20th century variants were thought to operate well with strong, symmetric parties, are proving ill-equipped to operate in an environment characterized by weak, asymmetric ones. Cheibub sounds a similar caution. A number of scholars have echoed Linz's concern about the inherent risks of presidentialism, but Cheibub argues that reform efforts should be focused on helping existing institutions to function better, rather than undertaking riskier and potentially more costly efforts to replace presidentialism with parliamentary institutions.

Political Institutions in Autocratic Regimes

The second part of this issue is a discussion around two recent books on political institutions in authoritarian contexts involving Anne Meng and Ken Opalo, the books' authors, and Rachel Beatty Riedl. The two books share many similarities. First, each opens up the "black box" of autocratic institutions to describe both how they vary, and how they shape the preferences and capabilities of political actors. Second, both books tackle the question of institutions, focusing on why autocrats would choose to institutionalize their rule by creating an independent legislature (Opalo) or by ceding some power to a ruling cabinet (Meng). Third, both authors combine unique quantitative data and rich qualitative analysis, all drawn from cases in sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite their similar starting points, the authors come to very different conclusions. For Meng, only relatively weak leaders agree to cede power. She argues that strong leaders have no need to share power; even if they did, their power-sharing promises would not be credible. By contrast, in Opalo's account, it is only strong leaders who are secure enough to empower (semi-) independent legislators. Weak leaders keep the legislature on a short leash over fears of collective action on the part of rival elites. In their joint response, Meng and Opalo discuss some reasons why they reach different conclusions, while also highlighting three themes common across their books.

In her response, Riedl directs our attention to three sets of questions that find purchase in both authoritarian and democratic contexts. First, how do we better conceive of presidential "strength", and what are the varied sources of such strength? Second, what counts as institutional constraints, and how do different types of constraints shape the relative capabilities and incentives of both incumbents and opponents? Finally, when and how do intra-elite credible commitments, whether autocratic or democratic, break down?

4 Allen Hicken, Samuel Baltz, and Fabricio Vasselai. Forthcoming. "Political Institutions and Democracy." In Michael Coppedge, Amanda B. Edgell, Carl Knutsen, and Staffan Lindberg, eds., *Why Democracies Develop and Decline*.

Intrinsic Backsliders? Presidentialism and Democratic Backsliding

José Antonio Cheibub, *Texas A&M University*

We are all concerned with democratic backsliding these days, and with good reason. Leaders throughout the world are exploiting and nourishing a situation of increased polarization to push the limits of democratic norms and institutions. Yet, we seem to know less about the institutional bases of democratic erosion. Are there specific democratic institutions more or less likely to enable the dismantling of democracy?

The office of the chief executive is a good place to start the search for an answer. Given the widespread conviction that the concentration of executive powers in a single person represents too much of a temptation for those bent on getting rid of democracy, it makes sense to ask, Is presidentialism a cause of democratic erosion? The answer, in my opinion, is probably negative.

Yet, many scholars and pundits claim the relationship between presidentialism and democratic erosion is on average positive, and embrace its most logical implication, namely, that presidential constitutions should be replaced where they exist or not adopted in the first place. However, as I argue here, we cannot isolate the effect of presidentialism with confidence given available data and methods. On the one hand, it is hard to separate the effect of policies from those of institutions; on the other hand, we do not have enough evidence that switching constitutions would represent a net benefit with respect to backsliding. A satisfactory estimate of these benefits would require considering the downstream effects of switching and the opportunity costs given the multiple goals that any country pursues. Given the state of the discipline, I think we are far from being able to state with confidence that the benefits of institutional reform outweigh the risks and costs involved.

When it comes to suggesting institutional reforms, thus, I take a conservative position. Prudence is warranted, and focusing on changes that are more localized, less globally impactful is a better course of action. This is the gist of what I want to say. I will first argue that empirically, presidential democracies are not the only ones facing the risk of backsliding. I will then argue that, when it comes to establishing a head of state separate from the head of government, a directly elected president is essentially the only option available. I will then suggest that we must separate policies from institutional changes in evaluating the damages caused by certain executive leaders. I will conclude with some thoughts about institutional reforms. Overall, my argument is that directly elected presidents are not "intrinsic backsliders," and that institutional reforms should focus not on replacing the constitutional framework but on helping it operate more smoothly.

Forms of Government and Democratic Backsliding

It would be hard for anyone to claim that threats to democracy at the hand of executive leaders and political parties are exclusive to presidential democracies. The Democratic Erosion Event (DEED-AC) Dataset (Gottlieb et al 2020), probably the most comprehensive and systematic attempt to identify democratic erosion globally, coded events considered to be precursors and symptoms of backsliding for 101 countries covering the period 2000–2020. In the 94 countries for which classifying the constitution made sense, 41 had a presidential constitution and 53 had a parliamentary constitution. Countries with parliamentary constitutions are those in which the government must be at least tolerated by the majority in order to stay in power; of the 53 parliamentary countries, 26 had a directly elected president (also referred to as semi-presidential systems) while the remaining 27 had either a monarch or an indirectly elected president (also referred to as "pure" parliamentary systems). According to DEED-AC, the 94 parliamentary and presidential countries experienced 2,125 events considered to be symptoms and precursors of erosion. Fifty-three percent of these events occurred in countries with a parliamentary constitution, which represents 21 events per country (to be contrasted with 24 events per country with a presidential constitution). Among the countries with a parliamentary constitution, 57% of the events occurred in those with a "pure" system while 43% occurred in countries that also have a directly elected president.

Other datasets reveal a similar pattern, including the 2019 Global Party Survey (Norris 2019), which codes the presence of populist parties, and the Votes for Populists dataset (Grzymala-Busse and McFaul 2020), which identifies populist parties in 68 countries. In the latter, countries with presidential systems are less vulnerable to populism than parliamentary countries. Admittedly, populism is not the same as democratic backsliding. But since the two have been closely connected in the 21st century, the fact that we do not find a disproportionate number of presidents in countries with a significant vote for populists suggests that presidentialism itself is not the problem.

Heads of State and Directly Elected Presidents

Regardless of their intrinsic merits, directly elected presidents have been a popular institutional choice in the past few decades, particularly in countries that adopted a constitution requiring assembly confidence. This is so because of two ideas, which, together, make direct presidential elections almost inevitable. The first is the idea that countries with a parliamentary constitution must have a head of state separate from the head of government. Although rarely argued in positive or normative terms, this is almost taken as an axiom of constitution making. The second is the undeniable democratic legitimacy of directly elected presidents. In an era in which "democratic-ness" is probably the primary standard for evaluating institutions, it is natural that having direct elections for the head of state becomes the preeminent choice in constitution making.

The popularity of directly elected presidents beyond the sphere of presidentialism is notable: of the 53 countries with a parliamentary constitution in the DEED-AC dataset mentioned above, 27 had "pure" parliamentarism (where the head of state is a monarch or an indirectly elected president) and 26 had "semi-presidentialism" (where the head of state is a directly elected president). In the former group, only five constitutions were adopted since 1990; in the latter group, 19 were adopted over the same period.

If we accept that having "democratic legitimacy" is a requirement for contemporary heads of state, then directly elected presidents are in fact the only choice available to constitution makers. Existing parliamentary constitutions adopt three types of head of state: a monarch, an indirectly elected president (most commonly elected by parliament, not an electoral college), and a directly elected president. Given these alternatives, the last one becomes almost the default: monarchs are, for obvious reasons, no longer a viable choice; and indirectly elected presidents are also hard to justify.

If one argues that indirect elections do not matter because such presidents are meant to be mere figureheads, devoid of any significant power, then one can ask, What is the harm in letting "the people" choose them? If one argues that they are, in fact, important and that, in spite of intentions, it is hard to design an office that is purely ceremonial, then the same question may be posed: If it is a significant office, why prevent "the people" from choosing its occupant? The question becomes particularly relevant when governments, such as those in parliamentary systems, are formed one step removed from popular elections, on the basis of deals sealed behind closed doors, as Linz noted. This happens whenever parliament is composed of many parties, with no party receiving a majority of seats, a condition that characterizes most parliamentary systems.

The "choice" of having a directly elected president in parliamentary democracies, therefore, is not the result of a conscious and considered decision to adopt a specific type of constitution. I am not aware of any strong argument claiming the superiority of this institutional combination along any dimension. The "choice" of a semi-presidential constitution is the default response to the fact that the alternatives lack democratic legitimacy and, in the case of monarchs, have features that are not defensible in this day and age. Thus, focusing on switching a presidential system to a parliamentary one most likely implies adopting a constitution with a directly elected president, thus, ironically, retaining the institution that is often identified (albeit incorrectly as we have just seen) as the main threat to democracy.

Presidents, Policies and Institutional Backsliding

It is undeniable that many executive leaders are eroding democracy, mainly through interference in the judicial system and limitations on the freedom of the press, among other activities. But not all of them are able to do things that permanently shift a political regime away from democracy. In most cases these leaders are arrogant, vulgar, and vengeful, take appalling positions in all sorts of public controversies, espouse policies that violate any sense of human decency, and are able to push their opponents' buttons to the very limit of their sanity. But this does not necessarily imply lasting institutional and political consequences. These leaders break widely accepted conventions and instigate or perpetuate polarization, but there is a difference between breaking political conventions, violating norms, and changing the institutions that will remain in place after they themselves leave office. I believe this is a distinction that applies to many of these leaders, including two prominent examples, Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro.

Both Trump and Bolsonaro, but also a number of their peers around the world, have quite likely broken the law while in office. They did so in pursuit of private benefits, not in pursuit of policies that were supported by "the people" but blocked by "the elite." For the unlawful actions they have committed, they should be tried and sentenced. Additionally, both Trump and Bolsonaro, as well as several of their peers around the world, were responsible for policies that led to the

widespread physical and mental suffering and death of a large number of people. For these they should be politically punished by (at the very least) not being re-elected — as one has already been and others may eventually be. However, as bad and as cruel as these policies are, they will not have major implications for the future operation of the existing formal institutions, which were adopted according to the formal rules of the game and with the support of relevant, and sometimes large, legislative majorities.

"In most cases these leaders are arrogant, vulgar, and vengeful, take appalling positions in all sorts of public controversies, espouse policies that violate any sense of human decency, and are able to push their opponents' buttons to the very limit of their sanity. But this does not necessarily imply lasting institutional and political consequences."

Consider the Trump administration. To the extent that he was able to solidify a conservative majority in the Supreme Court and appoint conservative judges throughout the federal judiciary, he did it following the constitutional prerogatives of the presidency and knowing he could count on the active support of key senators to do so. If he was able to pass a regressive and self-serving fiscal reform in 2018, he did it because he could generate sufficient congressional support for it. Likewise, his frequent use of executive orders may have departed from what previous presidents have done, but they were not, for the most part, illegal or unconstitutional. When Trump's executive orders were found to be untenable, they were judicially challenged and sometimes blocked from being implemented. The fact that so many of his executive orders were either not challenged or were judged constitutional indicates that they were within the range of acceptability to both the courts and majorities in the two congressional chambers. As for Bolsonaro, one cannot really say that he is on par with Trump in the ability to do long-term damage with the necessary political support. From an institutional point of view, he will fortunately leave behind no legacy.

I am not claiming that the impact of policies enacted by Trump, Bolsonaro or other leaders are trivial or easily reversible. Some of their policies have absolutely irreversible consequences; thousands of deaths could have been prevented with a well-designed strategy to combat the spread of Covid-19. Neither am I saying that the example set by these leaders, their constant pushing against norms, their lack of compassion, or their open and endless pursuit of venal goals will simply disappear once they leave the scene. Rather, I claim that their actions did not amount to a successful affront to the institutional framework. Instead, they represent the use (and abuse) of this framework by an individual (and his accomplices) supported explicitly or implicitly by politicians deprived of all sense of decency and any restraints when it comes to pursuing personal ambition.

The previous paragraphs highlight two points, one related to ***institutional design*** and the other to the ***electoral support of populist politicians***. I will discuss the former in the next section. With respect to the latter, we should keep in mind the lessons from Graham and Svolik's (2020) analysis of voters' willingness to tolerate deviations from democracy in exchange for favorable policies. They show that in conditions of high polarization, such as in countries where leaders like Trump and Bolsonaro have come to power, incumbents act with the support of a sizable number of voters. They demonstrate that when polarization is high, voters do not find it hard to rationalize supporting a candidate who offers substantive policies they like, even if that candidate also proposes undemocratic measures. Thus, the leaders who cause the greatest concern about democracy are often truly popular. They can count on the support of voters and of their fellow partisans in the legislature, who often enthusiastically pass the measures they propose. It is this convergence with the substantive preferences of many of the people and with a legislative majority that helps such leaders — presidents or prime ministers — to secure power and stay there for some time.

The most politically successful leaders, in this vein, are those who have activated some relatively dormant cleavage that already existed in the political system. They propose to make Poland Catholic again, to remove immigrants and restore the purity of the Hungarian nation, to resist the anti-Islamic attacks from secularists in Turkey, to restore Russia's position on the world stage, to represent the indigenous populations in Bolivia and Ecuador, or to take care of those left behind by globalization in the US, France, or elsewhere. It might be possible to account for the political success of populist leaders and parties across the globe in terms of the degree to which the grievance they claim to represent rings true to voters. Those leaders and parties who mobilize around grievances that affect only a segment of the electorate, or who are unable to sustain the charade of their position (such as Bolsonaro's so-

called anti-corruption campaign), may find ephemeral electoral success, but they will not be able to consolidate their hold on power. In these cases, they will have to veer toward more open authoritarianism (e.g., Ortega in Nicaragua) or accept electoral defeat (e.g., Correa in Ecuador and, grudgingly, Trump in the US).

Institutional Reforms

When it comes to institutional reforms, I suggest caution. The first thing that often comes to mind when we think about improving democracy is reforms to constrain executives. Many believe that the key to material well-being and freedom is the successful constraining of executives, and the security of property rights that would come with it. Appealing as such arguments may sound, they often ring empty: What specific institutions can successfully constrain the executive? Moreover, even if we all agreed that imposing constraints on executives is the greatest institutional priority, we would still wonder about the optimal degree of constraint to be imposed on executives. We are all too familiar with instances of executive overreach and understandably seek ways to prevent it. But, as Posner and Vermeule (2012) have argued, not only is there little evidence that the fear of executive dominance has deterred executives from dominating; it has also prevented the search for and design of institutions that allow the positive use of executive power.

Adoption of a parliamentary constitution is often proposed (implicitly or explicitly) as a way to prevent the emergence of executives who try to bypass representative institutions. This is done in the name of parliamentarism's intrinsic merits — the partisan nature of governments and the relatively higher degree of accountability and government responsiveness it affords, for example — but also because it helps constrain the executive. Yet, as we saw above, parliamentary democracies are not immune to backsliding. The adoption of a parliamentary constitution requires downstream institutional decisions, at least about how to choose and what powers to grant the head of government, about the system used to elect the parliament, and the structure of the legislative assemblies to which the government will be responsible, to name only a few. As we know, some of these choices may obliterate the differences we expect to observe between parliamentary and presidential systems (Cheibub, Elkins and Ginsburg 2012). But more importantly, these choices lead to institutional configurations that combine in distinctive ways, making it essentially impossible to estimate their effect on democratic backsliding with a reasonable degree of confidence.

Conclusion

To the extent that popularly elected presidents are here to stay, we should think about improving constitutions, be they presidential or parliamentary. Rather than replacing the entire constitutional framework, we could think, for instance, about designing better rules for electing presidents. Given the majoritarian nature of presidential elections, it is reasonable to require, for example, that they should identify a clear winner, one who has the support of the largest majority possible. In this respect, in the past forty years most countries that hold direct presidential elections have converged on a formula that, as Shugart and Carey (1992) pointed out some time ago, does just that: the two-round system. Here, the candidate who obtains more than 50% of the votes in the first round is declared the outright winner; if no candidate receives a majority, a second round of elections is held in which only the top two candidates are allowed to run. This forces voters who originally chose lower-placed candidates to transfer their vote to a candidate they can live with, thus leading to the emergence of an absolute majority winner.

A few countries still hold on to a simple plurality formula (the candidate with the highest number of votes wins), which can produce results that are less than desirable, such as when there is a majority of voters who would have preferred someone other than the winner. Amazingly enough, one country still holds on to something that is arguably one of the worst possible systems for electing a president: a system of indirect elections, held independently and with different rules in 50 jurisdictions; a system that is silent about glaring areas of potential indeterminacy, that provides no clear mechanism of resolution when conflict arises, and that more frequently than any system should do in this day and age, identifies as the winner the candidate with the second highest number of popular votes. This, of course, is the system that has been used in the United States since 1789. Reforming rules such as these is relatively easier and less risky than changing the entire constitutional framework; it does not imply a seismic change in the country's political institutions and, for this reason, has fewer downstream consequences than a change in the form of government.

There are many examples of institutional reforms that can achieve targeted changes in the institutional framework, often in response to salient events or situations. These, I suggest, have a larger chance of being successful than wholesale reforms that shake the very foundations of the institutional order.

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Does the Presidency Want to be a Dictatorship?

Kenneth Lowande, *University of Michigan*

Public commentators' concern about the autocratic aspirations of President Trump predate his administration. His quips about "negotiating" a third term, combined with public admiration for autocrats and public disdain for democratic institutions, did not help. While there was no second or third term, and a transition of power did eventually occur, the previous administration was a stark reminder of an important fact: elected presidents might aspire to be dictators.

Personal aspirations like these are important, but the rolling outrage about President Trump himself seems to have displaced a more critical conversation about the institution where those aspirations might find expression. Like any complex system, the presidency and the democracy it stewards has system-level *wants* that emerge from the behavior of individuals. A key fact is that these higher wants are not necessarily found in individuals. In other words, even if the president does not aspire to be a dictator, the presidency may aspire to dictatorship. What we need to know is whether the presidency, as an institution, wants to be a dictatorship — the way the U.S. economy wants skilled laborers or a colony of termites wants your home to collapse.

Scholars have been asking this question since before anyone with my last name lived in the U.S., so saying something new on the subject seems impossible. A basic contradiction in the Trump administration, however, raises a potential guardrail against autocracy. That is, while President Trump himself seemed to aspire to be a dictator, the ways in which the Trump administration functioned seemed totally at odds with that aspiration. Like every contemporary president, the administration featured numerous high-profile examples of the "rule by decree" — which has long been thought of as a symptom of democratic backsliding. For the previous three decades, these concerns have generated a large literature in American and Comparative politics on exercise of unilateral power (e.g., Carey and Shugart 1998, Howell 2003, Chiou and Rothenberg 2017). This work sees chief executives as first-movers who change the status quo by exploiting the inherent, institutional weakness of other constitutional veto players.
Despite this context and the actions of the Trump administration, on this dimension, I argue that the presidency has not inched any closer to dictatorship — for reasons I make clear below.

Put differently, the Trump administration is an extreme example of the basic fact that governing this way is hard. The hiring freeze from early in the administration was quickly ended (Naylor 2017). The Tiktok app was banned, but the ban would never be enforced (Elegant

2021). The administration did not control prescription drug pricing by allowing in cheap imports (Hiltzik 2021), and they did not distribute special payment cards to seniors for prescriptions (Weiland and Sanger-Katz 2020). During the pandemic, Americans did not get mass deployment of drive-through testing centers, nor did the administration follow through on a promised public-private partnership with big tech companies. All of these actions were announced with much fanfare, but little to no policy change actually happened.

This is not unique to the Trump administration. If we were to carefully examine a list of executive actions, the size and the scope of the goals within them might lead you to believe that the presidency had become a dictatorship (Lowande 2021a). Presidents seem to have used executive actions to touch nearly every aspect of government policymaking. But what is most remarkable is how few of these actions actually led to significant and lasting policy change. President Obama created or expanded national monuments on his way out of office. Several of these designations had no impact on the actual protections over these lands because the Bureau of Land Management had already protected them under other designations. President Obama signed other directives aimed at combating gun violence and funding research. He also signed a directive closing Guantanamo Bay. President Clinton signed directives on environmental justice and providing new protections to rivers. Each of these initiatives ultimately had little-to-no impact.

All that this demonstrates, of course, is that presidents often fall short of the goals they set, and that they do not yet have the authority or the capacity to dictate public policy. This seems plainly true. There is a large scholarly and popular literature on how presidents fail to meet the expectations of their office. What I would like to use this forum to suggest, however, is that this pervasive weakness itself demonstrates an overlooked way the presidency in a democratic system like the U.S. might be protected against aspirations to dictatorship.

Among the executive actions mentioned above, each followed a similar playbook. The President announces an action with a speech or signing ceremony, and the media covers it — usually on the front page of national news outlets. Later, experts reveal that the action had little impact. This follow-up reporting is read by fewer people, if it is read at all, and often takes years to be recognized. But the informational "damage" is done. Or, rather, presidents have already branded themselves as the person responsible for the policy. As I argue in a working paper, "The Presidency for Nihilists" (Lowande 2021b), whether policy change comes about, in other words, is secondary. But these kinds of "inch-deep" actions are often enough to appeal to the constituency they are cultivating. Often, they can build a political brand without resorting to the hard task of actually governing.

The fact that these actions are valuable independent of their actual effect on government action can be a release valve. Ongoing public and scholarly debates about putting institutional "guardrails" in place to constrain the behavior of future presidents are critically important and should continue (Howell and Moe 2020). But the best explanation for why the American president is not a dictator and likely will not become one is that presidents do not need to be. There are simply much easier ways to get re-elected and to be viewed as an effective leader. To explain further, I will use an example of this dynamic from the most recent three presidencies, then conclude with caveats.

Presidential Policymaking and Police Militarization

Back in the late 1990s, the federal government began a massive initiative to subsidize the acquisition of military equipment by local police departments. Enacted after a series of high-profile incidents in which police appeared to be "outgunned" by violent criminals, the program shipped weapons and equipment (along with things as benign as Stairmasters and tube socks) to agencies that requested them and could pay for shipping. To date, the total estimated value of shipped property exceeds $7.4 billion. Because of the secular increase in military spending, the program accelerated after the beginning of the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq — distributing assault rifles and other small arms, armored vehicles, bayonets, and grenade launchers to local police.

By 2014, the program attracted significant media attention after police departments in Ferguson, MO were photographed in full tactical gear, using weapons and vehicles acquired through the program. National news outlets submitted Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to the Department of Defense, key administrators of the program were called to testify before Congress, and politicians started discussing reform. This raises the question posed at the outset. What is the democratic way of handling a political scenario like this? And does it generate incentives for the presidency — regardless of its elected occupant — to become a dictator? The legislature enacted the program, while professionals in government administered it. No legislative reform, however, was politically palatable for chambers of Congress controlled by different political parties.

In this context, the program has become a typical case of "rule by decree" within a democracy. President Obama issued an executive order that placed restrictions on the program in early 2015. Among other regulations and recommendations, they recalled tracked armored

vehicles, bayonets, and grenade launchers — while also prohibiting the future distribution of .50 caliber weapons and specific types of camouflage uniforms. Predictably, the Trump administration revoked this policy in early 2017. As of this writing, the Biden administration was still contemplating reverting to the Obama-Era restrictions by signing yet another executive order.

All of these actions were signed to much fanfare. The Obama administration invited a diverse group of stakeholders to participate in the working group that developed the original restrictions. The order itself was seen as the administration's response to protests over policing in the U.S. The Trump administration announced the revocation of these policies before an assembly of the Fraternal Order of Police, which had endorsed Trump during the 2016 campaign. The Biden administration's potential order would be part of the policymaking theme of "equity" along with other actions related to racial justice. With each action, the president was on brand. Congress did not act, so the president stepped in. But to what effect?

The results of these actions were surprisingly small in scope (Lowande 2020). The release of the Obama administration's recommendations resulted in a reduction in the recalled property within a few months. But less than 5% of law enforcement agencies had an affected item in their inventory, so most weapons and equipment stayed in place. The Trump administration's action was even less consequential. The lifting of restrictions resulted in a few hundred bayonets being released, but no other equipment. It is, of course, impossible to know the impact of a Biden administration's action that has not yet occurred, but something efficacious and lasting would be a sharp turn from recent history.

Moreover, while these presidential actions resulted in meager changes to the inventories of police departments, whether they had any impact on crime, officer safety, racial equity, or anything else of interest is another issue entirely. This is because the actual use of the equipment is far outside the reach of presidents. How could it be otherwise? The Executive Office of the President, or any other federal bureau plausibly under the control of the president, has absolutely no ability to oversee the behavior of tens of thousands of police officers who might carry around or drive this surplus property. The agents are too decentralized, the principals are too uninformed. The challenge was significant, and presidents have largely failed to have a meaningful impact on the "doings of government" (Howell 2013). The operative question is whether that mattered in the slightest.

To return to my original question, did the presidency incentivize presidents to become a dictator? There is an important way that it did not. President Obama may not have been able to recall more property or police how police would use it, but signing that executive order had utility totally disconnected from the lack of impact. It signaled support for the protests in 2014–2015. President Trump may not have been able to get the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) to send more armored vehicles to your local sheriff, but signing the order and making a speech in front of a key interest group likely earned him most of the political benefit he would have gotten if the order had been effective.

This is a key component of this variety of executive policymaking in the U.S. The media environment around presidents portrays them as changing the status quo and conveys the surface-level impression that they are dictating public policy, even when they are not. The consumptive value of these actions may be a release valve that prevents presidents from investing in the kind of administrative centralization and unilateral policymaking characteristic of dictators. In the case of police and military surplus, presidents' actions could be labeled as credit-claiming. They effectively conveyed responsibility for policy change, and built up the president as either sympathetic to protestors or law enforcement. Presidents did not invest in the kind of actions that would smack of autocracy. They did not throw out public processes, confiscate all objectionable military surplus, or ship every police department an armored vehicle. Signing the orders, having a ceremony, and then moving on worked pretty well.

Discussion

There are, of course, important caveats to this kind of release valve. First and foremost, I have focused on presidents exercising unilateral control over government policy. This is a very particular component of dictatorship, and arguably, not the most important one. Much of the concern voiced in this newsletter and elsewhere about democratic backsliding relates to other categories of behavior on display by President Trump and others over the previous four years.

There is, of course, base corruption and the apparent impunity of chief executives. This kind of corruption is not new in American politics, but the blatant use of the office of the presidency for the private enrichment of the Trump Organization and its affiliates is. The use of the pardon power to free friends of the president has a few precedents, but the flagrant abuse of this constitutional authority in service of dozens of friends and corrupt politicians is new. The use of the office

of the presidency to aid re-election campaigns is not new — however, no prior administration has displayed total contempt for laws preventing public officials from working toward re-election, or attempted to retain office despite losing an election. None of what I have argued diminishes these political developments in importance, nor should the conversation begun around reforming the presidency cease.

However, it is important to distinguish this behavior from system-level flaws that would lead the presidency to trend toward dictatorship. Though I am open to being wrong, I cannot see how the presidency itself ***wants*** corruption or the end of democratic elections — or how it incentivizes presidents to pursue either. If the president wants either, it is a moral flaw, not an institutional one.

"The use of the office of the presidency to aid re-election campaigns is not new — however, no prior administration has displayed total contempt for laws preventing public officials from working toward re-election, or attempted to retain office despite losing an election."

But a more important, second challenge is that even if one buys into the idea that presidents can get away with not being dictators, their repeated inability to solve major policy problems might have long term, corrosive impacts on democratic government. This is related to the concerns raised by William Howell and Terry Moe (2016, 2020) in their work about reforming the American presidency. Ineffective government, they argue, leads to circumstances that allow populist demagogues like Donald Trump to rise to power. The people see problems. The politicians promise solutions, but for one reason or another, they fail to deliver. A person like Donald Trump then takes advantage of the failure. Unable to solve these problems himself, he blames the remaining democratic institutions — and the death spiral continues.

Applied to presidential policymaking with limited effects, this argument might say that though some actions may aid presidents in the short term, the fact that they are ineffectual may actually push the U.S. on a downward slope. Put differently, you can only dupe the public for so long, or forestall the apparent resolution of major problems like climate change, immigration, crumbling infrastructure, or racial inequity. The weakness of the solutions offered by past presidents may eventually motivate popular demands for the kind of president that will destroy the guardrails for good. Or, less dramatically, each failed policy may be used to justify ever more expansive intrusions of the executive into unilateral policymaking. It is difficult to dismiss this kind of scenario, and proponents of this view may well be right. But it is worth considering reasons why the death spiral might not operate.

The most important is that the evidence that the general public is in fact demanding solutions to major policy problems from its government is not as strong as some say. It is worth noting that of the list of important policy problems I mentioned, the fact that they are a problem that needs solving is itself politically contested. More generally, effectiveness, problem-solving, policy valence — and other similar terms used by political scientists to mean some dimension of policy that all players value in common — are all difficult to define independent of ideology, or some zero-sum dimension of winners and losers (McCarty 2020). The status quo in immigration or climate change policy is a win for a non-trivial proportion of the public. This means, at the very least, that on many important policy problems, the voice clamoring for something to be done is far from unified.

More generally, the idea that ineffective government contributes to the rise of demagogues is somewhat at odds with how citizens actually engage with government. Public trust in government and opinions about the direction of the country are far more responsive to the party of the president in power and events like 9/11 and the Capitol insurrection than they are to government policymaking. Though there are downward slopes in these indicators since the high watermark in 2001, it will not surprise anyone that when Democrats are in power, Democrats tend to trust in the government and like the way things are going. Partisans do not seem to have caught wind of the fact that their own parties have totally failed to deliver. In my view, political scientists tend to overstate the importance of the abject failure of government to address many of these important issues because they are paid to spend all day thinking about them. Most people live their lives just fine without worrying about these problems.

This is the point, and it is not without irony. The idea that citizens clamor for more effective government and enable a truly effective, populist demagogue to rise to power actually posits a political agency relationship that is usually thought of as good. But in this case, if it does not work well, and is actually quite shallow,

that is good. This is because this avenue of democratic backsliding sees the public as its own worst enemy. The obscurity of government action, the lack of public knowledge, and the presence of short-term thinking are all protective. The presidency does not want to be a dictatorship because it does not need to be.

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Is the U.S. the Exception to Presidential Perils?

***Julia Azari**, Marquette University*

The Problem

Scholars of comparative politics have long linked presidentialism with democratic instability. Scholars of American politics have, rightly or not, seen the U.S. as the exception to this particular problem. While critics of the "imperial presidency" have taken aim at the growth of war powers and the security state, they have not associated these matters with instability or threats to fundamental aspects of democracy such as the peaceful transfer of power. Some of this response, of course, likely reflects a boiled-frog effect and public adjustment to an extensive security apparatus, helped along by the politics of the war on terror. However, it also reflects the complicated nature of the checks on presidential power. The politics of constraining the executive in the United States has worked along three tracks that have operated according to different logics, sometimes in tension.

The study of the presidency is always a delicate balancing act between cataloging the choices of individual leaders and tracing the conditions created by the office itself. Much of the writing around the war on terror and the earlier genre of imperial presidency critiques focused on the office. Political scientists, in contrast to historians and journalists, have been especially eager to stress the institutional features of presidential excess. But the past four years in the United States have shone light on the importance of individuals. Let us be perfectly clear: we are discussing the question of democratic backsliding in the U.S. because of the presidency of Donald Trump. Abraham Lincoln, Lyndon Johnson, George W. Bush, Barack Obama — these presidents also pushed at the boundaries of institutions in the arena of war powers, and more recently, in domestic affairs. But all of these leaders, however misguided or power-hungry, had some appreciation for the basic principles of legitimate opposition and the meaning of their Constitutional oath.

Each knew at least to go through the constitutionally prescribed motions in service of these goals.

Trump's words and actions do not reflect such an understanding, and this problem grew worse, not better, over the course of his tenure. Institutions and committed individuals have prevented the worst of these impulses from overwhelming the system and ending the American experiment. However, the story of the presidency is also one of the deliberate expansion of its power as a means of solving specific problems in American democracy. Trump stepped into this extended and empowered office, and took advantage of the ways in which presidential power has grown while the power of other institutions has atrophied.

Two Types of Constraints: Individual and Institutional

One of the central concerns about the creation of the presidency was the concentration of power in a single individual. Objections to a single executive included the possibility that such an office would be, in the words of constitutional convention delegate Edmund Randolph, "the fetus of monarchy." These objections were met with a series of arguments about the constraints placed on the presidency — fixed terms, a qualified veto, and the impeachment process.

Even as the power of the office has grown, various institutional safeguards have been somewhat successful in limiting the power of a single individual. Only one president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, ignored the informal rule proscribing more than two terms, and the Constitution was subsequently amended as a result. A handful of presidents, including Trump, have been able to inflict their less civically-oriented outlook on the entire country. Andrew Johnson and Richard Nixon — and perhaps also Bill Clinton — allowed their personal insecurities, vindictiveness, and lack of personal restraint to drag down their presidencies. And while none were removed from office by impeachment, Nixon resigned, Clinton was term-limited, and Johnson lacked political support to seek another term. Trump was defeated in his reelection bid. The complexities of the system have thus far prevented the country from being held hostage in the long term to the personal failings of its chief executive. The passage of the 22nd Amendment and the rise in use of impeachment — though not yet successful in removing a president from office — illustrate that these kinds of limitations on individuals have increased slightly over time. The Constitution and the political system have not necessarily been successful in limiting the damage that such individuals are able to inflict, but they have kept them from serving for long.

The second facet of executive constraint in American politics concerns institutional encroachment, and has been the biggest target of critics of the "imperial presidency" or the growth of unilateral power. In some respects, we could say that such constraints have been a terrible failure, and that presidents now enjoy an enormous amount of unilateral power over both foreign and domestic policy. Policy-making through executive order became a focal point for political debate when Barack Obama issued orders on major policy issues, such as Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals.

Congress and the courts have pushed back on executive encroachment throughout American history, though these efforts have been uneven and marked by a lack of agreement even between these two institutions about whose job it is to delineate these boundaries. Congress has at times asserted its constitutional prerogative against the president — legislators bristled, for example, at an early encroachment on Congressional war power by James K. Polk when he asked for a declaration of war against Mexico. In creating the apparatus that allowed for expanded presidential power over policy, FDR had to twice face down Congress as it rejected his initial proposal for executive branch reorganization. The courts also limited Abraham Lincoln's war powers, albeit after the fact, and issued mixed rulings about George W. Bush's prosecution of the war on terror. Historically, the other branches have seen fit to draw boundaries around executive power, fighting off its expansion at least some of the time.

However, the politics of Congressional abdication has become the story of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Congress has increasingly ceded decision-making power to the president when it comes to war and peace. The politics of foreign entanglements illustrate why. No longer limited to major global conflicts, the American way of war has expanded to a wide range of operations, sometimes against non-state enemies. The 2001 Authorization of the Use of Military Force has proven to be one such expansionary document, allowing presidents to engage in a variety of conflicts that they have linked to the spread of global terror. This legislation has been used by both the Obama and Trump administrations to engage in military action. The reason for this development lies partly in the nature of these conflicts, and partly in the nature of Congress itself. Real deliberation about these conflicts would require time, nuanced positions that might cut across party lines, and insulation from the political costs of casting a vote vulnerable to attack ads. In an age of both primary challenges and perpetual competition for majority control of the legislature, there are few incentives for members of Congress to want

to engage in these debates. A highly charged partisan environment, driven by symbolic politics, offers lots of downsides to getting involved in a debate about what the U.S. should do in Libya or Syria. The politically rational thing for members of Congress to do is to let the president bear responsibility for those decisions.

This state of affairs in foreign policy can be traced back to the late Cold War, but the abdication of Congressional involvement in ***domestic*** policy is a more recent development. Several arguments exist to explain this situation: the unwillingness of either party to hand the other side a victory under closely divided circumstances (Lee 2018); the genuine policy disagreements between the two parties on questions of social safety nets, tax policy, health care, and immigration (to name just a few); and the preoccupation of the Republican Party with ideological appeals at the expense of policy achievements (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). Whichever explanation is correct, the trajectory of presidential unilateral power suggests that the problem is not strictly with institutional design, but with the way these institutions align with modern political incentives.

The Presidency and Partisan Consolidation

While founding concerns about the presidency led to questions about individuals and encroachment, a completely distinct political logic has also emerged around the presidency, party politics, and nationalization. How we should situate these changes in time is much debated. The idea of the president as the representative of the nation against a parochial Congress is identified with Andrew Jackson. However, the fuller expression of that impulse came around the turn of the twentieth century with the Progressive presidents. Several features of this development are important to understand. First, proponents of Progressive presidential power saw the office as a solution to the problem of a national government that was often mired in local concerns or patronage schemes. An empowered presidency could, according to Woodrow Wilson, focus on major problems facing the nation, discern public opinion, and expand responsive national governance. Theodore Roosevelt similarly saw the presidency as a site of involvement in national concerns. These ideas developed partly in response to a national government that lacked direction. The New Deal changes brought about by Franklin Roosevelt represented the culmination of this movement and its ideas about how the presidency could be a vector of government responsiveness. As a result, the growth of presidential power has been, in part, by design in the American context.

"A crowded Republican field was dominated by a reality TV star with no political experience, a tenuous grasp if not outright rejection of core democratic values, and a demagogic and xenophobic set of talking points. Republican leaders distanced themselves from this rhetoric but stood unable to prevent his nomination."

The second development that matters is the relationship between presidents and parties. Prior to the twentieth century, decentralized political parties were in the driver's seat, with presidents ultimately needing to stay in their party's favor in order to be re-nominated and run for reelection. In the decades prior to the Progressive policy innovations of Wilson and Roosevelt, presidents like Grover Cleveland and William McKinley began to cultivate distinct bases of support separate from these local parties (Klinghard 2005). Over time, national parties have weakened as forces distinct from the presidents whom they help elect every four years. Some state and local parties have maintained strength and influence, but at the national level, parties have become increasingly focused on the presidency and presidential candidates (Galvin 2020; Milkis and Rhodes 2009; Milkis and Rhodes 2007; Milkis, Rhodes and Charnock 2012).

In 2016, at a moment of inflection in the American political system, party weakness relative to the presidency was evident. On the Democratic side, the more moderate establishment wing and a left insurgency, convinced that the system was rigged against them, were unable to consolidate around a nominee. A crowded Republican field was dominated by a reality TV star with no political experience, a tenuous grasp if not outright rejection of core democratic values, and a demagogic and xenophobic set of talking points. Republican leaders distanced themselves from this rhetoric but stood unable to prevent his nomination.

What happened next tells us even more about the president-party relationship in American politics. Previously skeptical leaders fell in line behind the Trump candidacy, and then the Trump presidency. Even at moments when the president broke with various norms and democratic values — the rejection of international agreements, the reversal of party policy on trade, the willingness to accommodate white supremacist perspectives in August 2017 — Republican leaders, particularly in Congress, proved unwilling

to meaningfully push back against the forty-fifth president. When it came time for Trump's reelection campaign in 2020, many states cancelled their Republican primaries, and the party declined to issue a platform, instead endorsing the president's reelection agenda. The lack of internal competition, despite Trump's low popularity and flawed record, illustrates the weakness of contemporary parties.

That said, the events after Trump's loss in the 2020 election illustrate the extent and limits of Trump's partisan consolidation. Trump was successful at politicizing the departments of Justice and State, but only to a point. State and local Republican officeholders charged with certifying election results resisted the president's urging to overturn the results or alter the process after the fact, as did the courts (including many Trump-appointed judges). But Trump's views held sway among Congressional Republicans, a substantial number of whom agreed to contest the Electoral College votes on the floor, made equivocal (or worse) statements about election integrity, and voted against certifying results in two states even after an insurrectionist mob stormed the Capitol. The attempts to reject democracy and rule of law after the 2020 election were facilitated by the growth of presidential partisan power, wielded at a time when partisanship is strong but national parties are weak.

Party Asymmetry

Trump's actions are unlike anything undertaken by any past president, Republican or Democratic. However, because they were so closely linked to the president's status as the partisan mouthpiece of a weak party, it makes sense to ask whether this works similarly for both of the major parties. In their study of political behavior and political parties, Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins characterize the difference between the parties as a "fundamental asymmetry" between a coalition of groups (Democrats) and an ideologically motivated movement (Republicans). Lilliana Mason observes that "social sorting" by race and religion means that in practice, the Democrats form a much different, and more diverse, coalition than Republicans. These differences have the potential to shape how presidents and Congress approach politics and policy.

Adding to the complexity of this question are the arguments from scholars that Republican presidents have, in theory and in practice, made more extensive use of the unilateral powers of the executive (Skowronek 2006; Milkis and Rhodes 2009). This difference flows logically from the coalition differences we observe; Democrats are likely to be more skeptical of hierarchy (Freeman 1986) and more reliant on a broad coalition represented through many voices in Congress. A more ideological Republican coalition can instead find its voice in the use of executive action.

This institutional formulation, however, relies on an assumption that the two parties share similar goals. The Trump years, and importantly, the period leading up to them, tell a different story — one of a Democratic Party more invested in programmatic policy outcomes, and a Republican Party organized around identity appeals with few concrete policy goals. This allows Republicans to take advantage of the national institutions as they find them. Congress lends itself well to obstruction of major policy change, and the presidency is an effective mouthpiece for ideological claims. The goals of the Democrats position the party differently. A far-ranging coalition must wrangle over legislation; executive action is, as a result, a necessary option for policies on the environment, LGBT rights, and immigration, as well as extensions of the social safety net. In other words, Democrats find themselves in a version of the old Progressive-era dilemma in which the presidency appears the best option for active and majoritarian governance (Arnold 2009). Governing through unilateral presidential action is hardly ideal. But if the legislature is beholden, through geographical representation and Senate procedures, to conservative forces, then proponents of change look to the executive branch.

This doesn't mean that a political coalition won't form with the goal of limiting the president's power to politicize the executive branch. Such reforms might include clarification of the special prosecutor law (Bauer and Goldsmith 2020) or the assurance of independence in the Department of Justice. However, neither party has much incentive to dial back the president's role, nor do the politics of either party suggest that the presidency-dominated nature of national parties is likely to change.

In sum, there are three facets of presidential constraint in American politics. The first two, constraining the excesses of individual leaders and constraining institutional encroachment, have ebbed and flowed, reflecting political conditions, institutions, and will. However, the ability of presidents to wield political power and shape policy through their parties and their executive position — partisan consolidation — has been expanded by deliberate design to respond to other shortcomings in the political system. Our system was not designed for this, and the institutions that might have helped to safeguard against it — namely, parties — have instead been allowed to atrophy.

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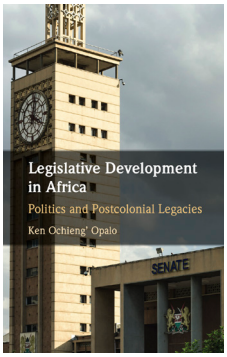
Author Exchange



Legislative Development in Africa: Politics and Postcolonial Legacies. By Ken Ochieng' Opalo. Cambridge University Press, 2018. 296p. $31.99 paperback.

Review by Anne Meng, Assistant Professor of Politics, University of Virginia

In *Legislative Development in Africa*, Professor Ken Opalo tackles two questions that are foundational to the study of comparative political institutions. First, what explains the observed variation in legislative strength in autocratic states? Second, under what conditions can democratic legislatures emerge from their autocratic foundations? Opalo argues that the strategic calculations of self-interested leaders shaped the organizational development of Africa's legislatures in the first three decades of independence. Strong leaders who were secure in their rule could afford to cede a "modicum of independence" to fellow elites in the legislature without risking rebellion from newly empowered elites (page 6). Weak leaders, on the other hand, avoided granting any real legislative independence to elites due to their fears of being overthrown if regime elites had the opportunity to collectively organize. These decisions had long-term effects. As Opalo succinctly argues, "organizationally strong autocratic legislatures begat strong democratic legislatures" (13). Opalo uses an impressive and effective combination of evidence to demonstrate his argument: detailed case studies of Kenya (strong legislature) and Zambia (weak legislature) and 50 years of original time-series data that reflect various dimensions of legislative independence.

Opalo's excellent book is a must-read for scholars, especially those interested in institutional development, African politics, authoritarian regimes, and democratic transitions. In particular, I would like to highlight three key contributions. First, the book takes ***institutional variation*** seriously — both in the African context and in the study of authoritarian institutions. I cannot underscore enough what an important contribution this is. Most scholarship on African politics has traditionally written off institutions, such as legislatures, as uniformly ***weak***, unimportant, and un-institutionalized, especially during the authoritarian period. Interestingly, the scholarship on authoritarian institutions has largely

developed in the opposite way: theories focusing on the role of authoritarian parties and legislatures in promoting regime stability have largely assumed that parties and legislatures are uniformly ***strong*** and can always carry out regime stabilizing functions. On the contrary, Opalo shows that both of these characterizations are incomplete: legislatures in Africa vary widely in the extent to which they are independent and institutionalized, and this variation exists both during the authoritarian era as well as the post-Cold War democratic transitions.

A second key contribution of the book is that it grapples seriously with the role of ***legacies*** and ***path dependency*** in institutional development. Institutions do not emerge in a vacuum, and Opalo deftly traces the role of colonialism in the development of post-independence authoritarian legislatures, as well as how the legacies of autocratic rule continue to make an imprint on legislatures in newly democratic or democratizing nations. A third important contribution: the book takes measurement seriously. Data on autocratic institutions is not easy to collect, and we lack good measures that capture the organizational strength of institutions such as parties and legislatures. Opalo constructs careful time-series measures of legislative independence in Kenya and Zambia by triangulating between various indicators such as budget information, the number of annual legislative sessions, and bills proposed.

Opalo's book raised some questions in my mind, which I think are fertile ground for future research. First, why would a strong leader who is already secure in their rule bother making any concessions to elites? Interestingly, this theoretical argument is where our two books sharply diverge; in fact, I make the opposite prediction in my book. In *Constraining Dictatorship*, I argue that initially weak leaders are forced to make concessions to elites in order to maintain their support of the regime. By contrast, initially strong leaders have the ability to remain in power regardless of whether or not they offer an olive branch to elites. Since sharing power with elites (in Opalo's account, granting legislative independence) hinders the leader's ability to make unilateral decisions, strong leaders who do not need to coopt elites will not voluntarily do so.

Second, the book clearly lays out the tradeoffs of granting legislative independence to leaders. The book argues that the ***benefit*** of independent legislatures is that the institution can be used as a mechanism for credible intra-elite commitment. However, the book also highlights the weakness of post-colonial legislatures: European powers purposefully created strong and "overdeveloped" executives and subservient legislatures. Furthermore, the book discusses how "African presidents that could not control legislatures simply disbanded them" (8). If legislatures were organizationally weak and could be removed by autocratic leaders, then how would they serve as ***credible*** power-sharing devices?

On the other hand, Opalo argues that legislative independence also comes at a cost to leaders: when elites can coordinate within the legislature, they have the ability to oust the leader. However, leader removal during the authoritarian and multi-party periods differ tremendously, and I wonder if the theory may benefit from disaggregating these two time periods. During the authoritarian period, African leaders were almost always ousted via coups. The coup threat came from the military and sometimes the cabinet, not from legislatures. During this period, the vast majority of coup leaders were military officials and some were the president's Minister of Defense. Although sometimes coup leaders would be aligned with MPs, legislators did not pose the greatest risk for the leader in terms of coups. During the multi-party period, however, the most common method of incumbent removal shifted from coups to the loss of ***electoral*** support. In the post-Cold War era, independent legislatures posed a much more striking threat to incumbents, consistent with Opalo's discussion of the risks associated with allowing elites to organize outside of the regime executive. While these questions point to some avenues for future research, they do not undercut the important theoretical and empirical contributions of Opalo's book.

Response from Ken Opalo

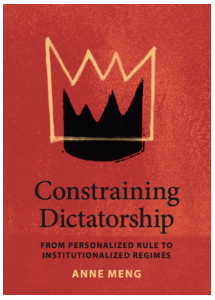
I thank Professor Anne Meng for a very thoughtful review of my book. In her review, she also raises three very important questions about the nature of executive-legislative relations in both autocracies and (emerging) democracies. First, why do leaders who are secure in their rule bother making concessions to elites? In the case of governing with legislatures, I contend that two reasons drive this decision. The first is historical. Once the Montesquieuian norm of three branches of government became ubiquitous, rulers in the newly independent states that are the subject of *Legislative Development in Africa* could not but accept this arrangement in order to appear as part of the modern state system. Thus, it became difficult to undo the "default" expectations of representative government that were cultivated in the late colonial period. Indeed, in many countries the anti-colonial movement was predicated on increasing representation in colonial legislatures. Second, elite organization in legislatures was more credible than in private organizations

like parties or military councils. Therefore, even in countries with strong parties dominated by presidents, legislatures provided an added layer of credibility to the established system of regulating access to governance rents among intra-elites.

Meng's second question is a perennial challenge to the idea of autocratic institutions. If autocratic legislatures are, by construction, dominated by autocratic leaders, how can they serve as a credible means of intra-elite power sharing? This is a great question that will continue to motivate research on autocratic institutions. To a large extent, *Legislative Development in Africa* assumes that autocrats are structurally predisposed to govern with a set of widely common institutions such as legislatures (see above). Therefore, the question is seldom ***whether*** to govern with legislatures, but how much power to delegate to them.

Other scholars in the literature (e.g., Roger Myerson and Jennifer Gandhi) have explicitly addressed this question by arguing that autocratic institutions are credible because of the benefits they provide the autocrat. My book leans on these works to argue that legislatures help autocrats manage intra-elite distributive politics, acquire information about the popularity of fellow elites, establish an electoral "queue" system to access governance rents, and project popular regime legitimacy. Therefore, because the autocrat needs the institution for these functions, a breakdown of executive-legislative relations would be a signal of veering off the established equilibrium path of intra-elite power sharing.

Finally, Meng's excellent last set of questions requires more research. Can legislatures remove presidents from office? And how do these dynamics vary across regime types? In *Legislative Development in Africa*, my theoretical point of departure is that the credibility of legislatures comes from the ability of elites acting collectively to guarantee the autocrat's fidelity to intra-elite bargains (in line with other works on autocratic institutions). At the limit, elites can oust the autocrat. And importantly, the credibility of legislatures is built on the fact that a collapse of executive-legislative relations comes with the risk of regime collapse. The book backs this theoretical stance with examples from Benin, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Ghana, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Uganda, where the collapse of executive-legislative relations precipitated (self) coups. In these cases, inter-branch conflicts involving legislators sparked significant elite instability and/or mass protests in a manner that provided a pretext for the respective militaries to seize power. This was true in both the autocratic and democratic eras (during and after the Cold War, respectively). Admittedly, these examples are not exhaustive, thereby necessitating more research on the role of legislatures in coups.



Constraining Dictatorship: From Personalized Rule to Institutionalized Regimes. By Anne Meng. Cambridge University Press, 2020. 256p. $37.35 paperback.

Review by Ken Opalo, Assistant Professor, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University

In *Constraining Dictatorship*, Professor Anne Meng makes an important contribution to our understanding of political development under autocracy. Why do some autocrats institutionalize while others do not? And under what conditions do autocratic institutions matter for political outcomes such as autocratic stability and peaceful leadership turnover? To answer these questions, Meng develops a formal model of autocratic institutionalization and tests the observable implications of the model using evidence from 46 African states. She collects an impressive array of data on African constitutions and presidential cabinets from 1960 to 2010, and develops measures of intra-elite power sharing through cabinet appointments and the existence of formally-designated successors to the ruler.

To answer the first question, she argues that autocrats are more likely to constrain their own actions "when they enter power vulnerable and highly susceptible to being deposed" (p. 17). In other words, the context and manner in which autocrats enter power have a strong bearing on levels of regime institutionalization. On the second question, Meng argues that there are heterogeneous effects of autocratic regime institutionalization. Under strong autocrats, there is little to no effect of institutionalization on regime stability. However, regime stability is significantly boosted by institutionalization under weak rulers. Finally, on leadership turnover, Meng finds that only those forms of institutionalization that alter the intra-elite distribution of power have an effect on the likelihood of peaceful transfer of power.

Meng presents both qualitative and quantitative evidence to support these arguments. A comparison of Cameroon and Cote d'Ivoire illustrates the dynamics of autocratic institutionalization in the real world. The former's weak founding ruler institutionalized his rule, while the latter did not. This difference, according

to Meng, explains the differences in elite political stability between Cameroon and Cote d'Ivoire. Large-N statistical analyses covering 46 African countries further support the claims that strong leaders are less likely to institutionalize their rule, and that forms of institutionalization that actually empower fellow elites are better predictors of the existence of autocratic constraints and peaceful transfer of power.

Constraining Dictatorship makes four important contributions. First, Meng unpacks the black box of autocratic institutions. Much of the literature on autocratic institutions focuses on demonstrating that they are not mere window-dressing, but influence political and economic outcomes. Meng goes further, and examines the sources of variation in levels of autocratic institutionalization. In doing so, she develops measurements of autocratic institutionalization (cabinet appointments and clear succession rules) that are readily comparable across cases. Second, she endogenizes autocratic institutionalization. A standard approach in previous works has been to assume that autocrats always want to institutionalize their rule in order to benefit from regime stability. Meng challenges this view, and shows that, unlike their weak counterparts, strong autocrats face no incentives to institutionalize.

Third, the large-N analyses of 46 African states over fifty years upends assumptions about the preponderance of personalist rule in Africa, especially before the end of the Cold War. Meng brilliantly illustrates that even during the era dominated by single party rule, there was significant variation in levels of regime institutionalization in African states. Finally, her rich array of data is itself an important contribution to the study of African politics (especially between 1960 and 1990), and is likely to stimulate more empirical analyses of political development in the early postcolonial period.

As a scholar of legislative development under autocracy, I really enjoyed reading *Constraining Dictatorship*, especially because Meng's core claim is the direct opposite of the one I make in my book, *Legislative Development in Africa*. While Meng argues that strong leaders are unlikely to cede power to fellow elites in the cabinet, I argue that such leaders are more likely to govern with moderately autonomous legislatures.

The source of our different theoretical points of departure may be due to the definition of a "strong" leader and the locus of power sharing under study. First, Meng defines leadership strength on the basis of intra-elite distribution of power at the point of their accession to office (founding presidents or coup leaders), while I define leadership strength as the ability to monitor and balance fellow elites. In our definitions, Meng's leaders are always either strong or weak, while I allow for leaders to vary in their strength. This raises the question: how does initial institutionalization impact intra-elite politics ***over time***? And how do parties, legislatures, and state administrative capacity impact leadership strength and the willingness to institutionalize rule and delegate power? Time is an important dimension in political development. For example, leaders like Nkrumah (Ghana) or Kaunda (Zambia) rose to power amidst the euphoria of independence, but soon faced challenges to their authority in ways that weakened them. This forced them to de-institutionalize their rule ***over time*** through the use of their respective ruling parties. Kenyatta (Kenya) presents the obverse case. He rose to power with a limited following within the independence ruling party, but found strength in the provincial administration. Nkrumah and Kaunda infamously hoarded power, while Kenyatta "reigned," presiding over relatively more open intra-elite politics.

Second, sharing powers with a legislature makes different demands on the leader than sharing power within a cabinet. A president can always fire a disloyal cabinet member, or keep them as titular heads of ministries but install loyal bureaucrats as their underlings. Legislatures often mean there are dozens more elites to monitor while providing the institutional mechanism for collective action among a wider array of elites. The selection of cabinet members also differs from the election of legislators. Appointing cabinet members presents fewer sources of uncertainty than managing dozens if not hundreds of legislative electoral contexts. Cabinets often adhere to the principle of collective responsibility, while legislators can express their views openly and, in some cases, enjoy immunity from prosecution for these views. More broadly, because of the structurally contentious politics of executive-legislative relations, managing the threats of adverse selection or moral hazard is more demanding in the legislature than in the cabinet.

This raises questions about selection to the cabinet. What kinds of politicians get appointed as Vice Presidents and Defense Ministers? Furthermore, given that at the outset regimes typically try to cultivate popular legitimacy by "playing by the rules," how should we think about autocratic regime institutionalization over time? I was also interested in seeing more discussion of intra-elite autocratic politics over time. Given that political power waxes and wanes, how does the structural distribution of power

impact everyday intra-elite politics? These questions do not directly challenge the core contributions of *Constraining Dictatorship*, but highlight potential avenues for increasing our understanding of autocratic institutionalization. And in that regard, Meng has produced a book that is guaranteed to fuel future research and scholarly debates on political development and its measurement in autocracies and democracies alike.

Response from Anne Meng

Professor Ken Opalo raises a number of excellent questions in his review of my book, and I thank him for his thoughtful and generous review. His first point highlights an extremely important question in the study of authoritarian politics that, in my view, warrants much more theoretical and empirical research: How should we think about leader strength, and what is the best way to measure it? In my book, I focus on leader strength relative to the strength of regime elites — a leader is weak if there is a high likelihood that regime elites can successfully overthrow him, and strong if the likelihood of being deposed is low. Opalo astutely points out that leaders face different kinds of challenges from different ***types*** of elites; therefore, a leader may be strong vis-à-vis cabinet elites but weak relative to legislative or military elites. These distinctive relationships result in different patterns of institutionalization across the regime. In Cameroon, for instance, Ahidjo shared power with regime elites through cabinet appointments, but personalized his control over the military. It would be useful for future work to consider the different types of challenges leaders face from different kinds of elites, which would paint a more nuanced picture of regime institutionalization.

Opalo also highlights some important questions about measurement — how should leader strength be operationalized? This is a crucial empirical question that needs much more research. Even though the distribution of power between leaders and elites is frequently discussed in theories of authoritarian stability (and especially in formal models), we still lack good measures of the concept. Existing work often relies on access to oil and natural resources as a proxy for leader strength, but this is a problematic measure, because oil, while expanding the leader's total revenue, is also thought to drive civil conflict and institutional weakness. In my book, I argue that the ways in which leaders come to power (for instance, whether the leader was a "founding father" after independence) can serve as a proxy for the initial distribution of power between leaders and regime elites. However, as Opalo points out, this measurement strategy simplifies the concept into a dichotomous variable: the leader is either strong or weak at the start of the regime (my model conceptualizes leader strength on a continuous spectrum, but the empirics use a dichotomous version of the variable). Opalo also emphasizes another important point — leader strength likely changes over time. This is certainly true as leaders age or as the initial "euphoria of independence" declines over time. Future research should consider the conditions under which leaders may de-institutionalize ***or*** need to offer additional power-sharing agreements as their authority waxes and wanes.

Finally, Opalo raises some fascinating questions about the ***characteristics*** of cabinet appointees. ***Who*** gets appointed as Vice Presidents and Defense Ministers? I address these questions in some newer work, and I find that leaders will often strategically appoint weak elites (for instance, someone who belongs to an ethnic or religious minority) as their Vice President in order to avoid the Crown Prince Problem. This is precisely the approach Kenyatta took when he appointed Moi as his Vice President and constitutional successor. In a different study, I find that leaders of rebel regimes often appoint former co-combatants as their Defense Ministers — these military elites are often the most capable of overthrowing the leader, and therefore are brought into the regime under a power-sharing agreement. Although these studies start to address the question of selection into appointments, more research on the characteristics of cabinet ministers is an important direction for future work.

Joint Conclusion from Meng and Opalo

We thank the editors for the opportunity to engage with each other's work. In this joint response, we identify three main themes that emerge from our books and discuss avenues for future research. First, our studies highlight the importance of ***taking institutional variation seriously.*** While the first generation of scholarship on dictatorships generally wrote off authoritarian institutions as meaningless window dressing, research that emerged in the 2000's provided an important corrective to this view that "institutions ***can*** matter" — even in dictatorships. Our books take the next step and go beyond the recognition of the importance of autocratic institutions, to understanding variation in their strength and levels of institutionalization. Importantly, we both stress that ***institutionalized autocracy is a continuous variable, not a dichotomous one***. Furthermore, we recognize that the institutional choices leaders make are ***strategic***, and that institutional change is often endogenous.

Second, our books challenge a number of stylized facts about African politics. We deviate from existing accounts that generally portray all post-independence regimes in the region as highly personalist and weakly institutionalized. Instead, we both show that African regimes actually exhibited a lot of variation in the strength and levels of institutionalization in the executive and legislative arenas — and that this is true even during the most authoritarian periods.

Third, our books stress the importance of understanding institutional development ***over time***. Since the 1990s, most African countries have introduced multi-party elections. Although some of these countries have undergone meaningful democratic transitions, others merely witnessed the institutionalization of electoral autocracy. Both books demonstrate that to understand these divergences, one needs to examine institutional development in individual African states ***in historical perspective***.

Moving forward, we recommend that scholars continue to examine the causes and consequences of institutional development in authoritarian and transitioning countries. Importantly, there is a need of more research on how leaders build and strengthen different ***types*** of institutions (for instance, cabinets, parties, legislatures, courts, the military) and how these institutions interact with each other. Perhaps institutional strength in one aspect of the regime can complement or substitute for the personalization of power on another dimension of the regime. The historical record suggests that when leaders cannot control important institutions, they often seek to make important the institutions that they can control.

Response to Author Exchange by Rachel Beatty Riedl, Cornell University

Two excellent new books emphasize the importance of institutions under autocratic rule in Africa, and this is to be celebrated! Prof. Ken Opalo and Prof. Anne Meng both seek to understand the ways in which autocratic regimes develop strong or weak institutional constraints on the leader, and what effects those institutions have on regime stability, peaceful turnover of leadership, and the potential for democratization. These scholars combine substantively important questions with rigorous methodological approaches and expansive new data — and the results help us to understand broad dynamics of autocratic rule, institutionalization, and regime transitions.

There are several key questions that arise from the authors' decisions about conceptual categories and measurement, and these should stimulate future research. The first, as Prof. Opalo notes in his response, is the question of what is presidential "strength"? Both authors here categorize it as elite-based and relational. For Meng, founding presidents derive strength from the concentration of power among regime elites that coup leaders, by contrast, lack. For Opalo, leadership strength is based on the ability to monitor and balance fellow elites. In both cases, the distribution of power among elites at key moments of institutional formation is critical. But there are still other ways of thinking about leader strength. Such strength might reside in public popularity, legitimacy, and deep roots in society that would make it difficult even for powerful counter-elites to contemplate and orchestrate any overthrow. Strength may also be based on material resources. As Meng points out, this is often confused by measuring strength as access to oil and natural resources, which introduces other links to institutional weakness. But a leader's ***relative*** resource control as compared to counter-elites is a more fundamentally important category, and can be derived from state marketing boards and agricultural controls, port taxes, para-statals, or a variety of other mechanisms of consolidating economic hegemony. Leader strength is also relative to the coherence and professionalization of other sources of coercive power, such as the military. Further exploration into how varied bases of leader strength might affect their institutional strategies is an area ripe for discovery.

The second is what counts as autocratic institutional constraints. Prof. Opalo measures the strength of the legislature, whereas Meng focuses on cabinet appointments and clear succession rules. There are also other types of institutionalization that may be significant, including the formation and role of the judiciary, electoral candidate selection processes, party membership and leadership rules, and constitutional reform processes. This is not an exhaustive list, but it raises the question of whether the types of institutionalization have different mechanisms and relations to elite power distribution (whether strong or weak leaders, and concentrated or distributed power arrangements). It also raises the question of whether these varied types of institutionalization have similar effects for autocratic stability, peaceful leadership turnover, and the possibility of democratization. As Opalo suggests, sharing power within a legislature has different demands on the leader than sharing power within a cabinet. I would add that each realm offers distinct opportunities for other elites to accrue resources and alternative sources of support and social following. Legislative elections versus presidential

cabinet appointees also offer different ways of letting off steam and diminishing pressure from would-be opposition. Rising elites who are brought into the presidential cabinet are incorporated, whereas legislative autonomy provides an independent base for expression and expanding a personal following. And as Meng mentions in the example of Cameroon, Adhidjo shared power with regime elites through cabinet appointments but personalized his control over the military. This suggests that not all institutionalization or power distribution strategies are equal in their effects for the outcomes of study: regime stability and peaceful leadership turnover.

These two books will serve as pillars for our understanding of autocratic institutionalization. But they also speak to the other side of the coin: democratic resilience and stability. As Meng notes, Opalo's book argues that the benefit of independent legislatures is that the institution can be used as a mechanism for credible intra-elite commitment. The puzzle of democratic resilience in highly challenging environments hinges on the same calculation: how to ensure intra-elite commitment to maintain the same set of elite and generally the same distribution of power amongst them. The bounded uncertainty of democracy is often viewed by these elites as guaranteeing them a degree of access to state resources, power, and economic opportunity, and thus maintaining the iron law of oligarchy. So the very question of autocratic institutionalization that Opalo and Meng both pose has a parallel in understanding democratic stability: how and when are the elite power distribution arrangements of democracy credible intra-elite commitments, and when can they be easily disbanded — often through attempts to concentrate power and dismantle democracy? One key bonus for democratic elite power distribution stability is that the threat to life is also bounded, whereas in autocracy, threats can be total. A fuller understanding of how such intra-elite credible commitments break down (as the authors call for, change over time) — across autocracies and democracies alike — is a crucial research agenda for our contemporary era of democratic backsliding.

Meet the Authors

Julia Azari is Associate Professor and Assistant Chair in the Department of Political Science at Marquette University. She holds Ph.D., M.A. and M.Phil. degrees in political science from Yale University, and a B.A. in political science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research and teaching interests include the American presidency, American political parties, the politics of the American state, and qualitative research methods. Her research has been supported by the Marquette University Regular Research Grant, the Harry Middleton Fellowship in Presidential Studies, the Gerald Ford Presidential Library Foundation Travel Grant, and the Harry Truman Library Institute Scholars Award. She is a regular contributor at the political science blog *The Mischiefs of Faction*. Her work has also appeared in the *Washington Post*'s Monkey Cage blog and in *Politico*.

Kenneth Lowande is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and Public Policy (by courtesy) at the University of Michigan and a faculty associate in the Center for Political Studies at the Institute for Social Research. Before coming to Michigan, he was a fellow in the Department of Political Science at Washington University in St. Louis, and then at the Center for the Study of Democratic Politics at Princeton University. He studies American political institutions, with particular interest in presidential power, congressional oversight, and bureaucratic policymaking.

Anne Meng is an Assistant Professor in the Politics Department at the University of Virginia. Her research centers on authoritarian politics, institutions, and elite powersharing. Her new book, *Constraining Dictatorship: From Personalized Rule to Institutionalized Regimes*, examines how executive constraints become established in dictatorships, particularly within constitutions and presidential cabinets. Her new work focuses on autocratic backsliding and executive aggrandizement in non-democracies. She has also published articles on authoritarian ruling parties, term limit evasion, and leadership succession. She received her Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley.

Ken Opalo is an Assistant Professor in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. His research interests include legislative politics, subnational administration and local government, electoral politics, and the political economy of development in Africa. His first book, titled *Legislative Development in Africa: Politics and Post-Colonial Legacies* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), explores how the adaptation of inherited colonial legislative institutional forms and practices continue to structure and influence contemporary politics and policy outcomes in Africa. He is a member of *EGAP* (Evidence in Governance and Politics), *gui2de* (Georgetown University Initiative on Innovation, Development, and Evaluation) and a non-resident fellow at the Center for Global Development. Ken earned his BA from Yale University and PhD from Stanford University.

Rachel Beatty Riedl is the Director and John S. Knight Professor of the Einaudi Center for International Studies and Professor in the Government Department at Cornell University. Riedl is the author of the award-winning *Authoritarian Origins of Democratic Party Systems in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) and co-author of *From Pews to Politics: Religious Sermons and Political Participation in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). She studies democracy and institutions, governance, authoritarian regime legacies, and religion and politics in Africa. A former Kellogg Institute visiting fellow at the University of Notre Dame, Yale Program on Democracy Fellow, Faculty Fulbright Scholar, Chair of the APSA section Democracy and Autocracy, and Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study (Nantes), she holds a PhD from Princeton University.

José Antonio Cheibub is the Mary Thomas Marshall Professor in Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University. His research and teaching interests are in comparative politics, with a focus on the emergence and effects of democratic regimes and specific democratic institutions. He is a co-editor of a recently published special issue of the *Journal of Theoretical Politics* on revisiting electoral personalism. His current project is about the emergence of representative institutions in Europe and Latin America. The paper "Constitutional Parliamentarism in Europe, 1800–2019," forthcoming in *Western European Politics*, is part of this project.

Editorial Team

Executive Editors

Dan Slater specializes in the politics and history of enduring dictatorships and emerging democracies, with a regional focus on Southeast Asia. At the University of Michigan, he serves as the Ronald and Eileen Weiser Professor of Emerging Democracies, the Director of the Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies, and Professor of Political Science. Previously, he served for 12 years on the faculty at the University of Chicago, where he was the Director of the Center for International Social Science Research, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, and associate member in the Department of Sociology.

Rob Mickey is Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan. His research focuses on U.S. politics in historical perspective. He is interested in American political development, political parties, racial politics, and policy responses to inequality.

Guest Editor

Allen Hicken is Professor of Political Science, a Research Professor at the Center for Political Studies, and Faculty Affiliate at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Michigan. He studies political parties, institutions, political economy, and policy making in developing countries, with a focus on Southeast Asia. He has carried out research in Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Timor Leste and Cambodia and is the author of a book on parties and elections in Thailand and the Philippines, entitled, *Building Party Systems in Developing Democracies*, by Cambridge University Press. He is the editor of *Politics of Modern Southeast Asia: Critical Issues in Modern Politics*, (Routledge) and coeditor of *Party and Party System Institutionalization in Asia* (Cambridge) and *Electoral Dynamics in the Philippines: Money Politics, Patronage and Clientelism at the Grassroots* (NUS).

Managing Editor

Derek Groom is an Academic Program Specialist with the Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies. In this role, he manages the programming, administration, and research/outreach activities of WCED. Before coming to U-M, Derek worked in Washington, DC at American Councils for International Education, administering the Overseas Flagship Programs and Flagship Language Initiatives in Eurasia and Africa. In 2013, Derek completed the Russian Overseas Flagship Program in St. Petersburg, Russia as a Boren Scholar.

About *Democracy and Autocracy*

Democracy and Autocracy is the official newsletter of the American Political Science Association's Democracy and Autocracy section (formerly known as the Comparative Democratization section). First known as *CompDem*, it has been published three times a year since 2003. In October 2010, the newsletter was renamed *APSA-CD* and expanded to include substantive articles on democracy, as well as news and notes on the latest developments in the field. In September 2018, it was renamed the *Annals of Comparative Democratization* to reflect the increasingly high academic content and recognition of the symposia.

About WCED

Housed in the International Institute at the University of Michigan, the Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies (WCED) began operation in September 2008. Named in honor of Ronald and Eileen Weiser and inspired by their time in Slovakia during Ambassador Weiser's service as U.S. Ambassador from 2001-04, WCED promotes scholarship to better understand the conditions and policies that foster the transition from autocratic rule to democratic governance, past and present.

Section News

Matthew R. Cleary *(Associate Professor of Political Science, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University)* and **Aykut Öztürk** (*Postdoctoral Research Fellow, School of Social & Political Sciences, University of Glasgow)* published the following article. Aykut also started his position in Glasgow this past fall, after earning his Ph.D. from Syracuse University.

> Cleary, M., & Öztürk, A. (2020). "When Does Backsliding Lead to Breakdown? Uncertainty and Opposition Strategies in Democracies at Risk." *Perspectives on Politics*, 1–17. doi:10.1017/S1537592720003667

Paula Clerici *(Political Science, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella-CONICET)* published the following article:

> Clerici, Paula. 2021. "Legislative Territorialization: The Impact of a Decentralized Party System on Individual Legislative Behavior in Argentina." *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 51(1): 104–130. https://doi.org/10.1093/publius/pjaa036

Michael Coppedge *(Professor of Political Science, University of Notre Dame)* is spending the spring semester at Vanderbilt University, as a Visiting Professor of Political Science and Senior Scholar at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions.

James L. Gibson *(Sidney W. Souers Professor of Government in Arts & Sciences, Washington University in St. Louis)* has been elected to the Academy of Science of South Africa as an Honorary Foreign Associate. In South Africa, Gibson holds the position of Professor Extraordinary in Political Science at Stellenbosch University. He has studied and written extensively about South African politics. Gibson's three award-winning books — *Overcoming Apartheid*, *Overcoming Historical Injustices* and *Overcoming Intolerance* (co-authored with Amanda Gouws) — collectively trace the evolution of South Africa's democracy in the post-apartheid era.

Honorary Foreign Associates are outstanding scientists and scholars, currently based in a foreign country, whose work has contributed significantly to science and scholarship in South Africa, which in turn as benefited the public. To qualify, Associates must either have been born in South Africa or have performed a significant part of their work there.

Sebnem Gumuscu *(Assistant Professor of Political Science, Middlebury College)* had the following chapter recently

published:

Gumuscu, Sebnem. 2020. "Dominance and Democratic Backsliding Under AKP Rule in Turkey." In Cavatorta, Storm, and Resta (eds) *Routledge Handbook on Political Parties in the Middle East and North Africa*.

Stephan Haggard *(Lawrence and Sallye Krause Distinguished Professor, School of Global Policy and Strategy, University of California San Diego)* and **Robert R. Kaufman** *(Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Rutgers University)* are excited to announce their new book in the Cambridge Elements Series entitled *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*. The book and abstract are available on the Cambridge Elements website. In addition to the book itself, they produced an online appendix consisting largely of case studies of the 16 backsliding countries covered in the volume. This is available here.

Alexis Lerner *(currently Presidential Data Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Western Ontario)* has accepted a position as Assistant Professor of Political Science at the United States Naval Academy.

Jennifer McCoy *(Professor of Political Science, Georgia State University)* and **Murat Somer** *(Professor of Political Science and International Relations, Koç University)* have two new publications from their ongoing research program on pernicious polarization:

Somer, Murat, Jennifer McCoy and Russell Luke. 2021. "Pernicious Polarization, Autocratization and Opposition Strategies." *Democratization*, published online, January 12.

McCoy, Jennifer and Murat Somer. 2021. "Overcoming Polarization." *Journal of Democracy* 32(1): 6–21.

Anne Meng *(Assistant Professor, Department of Politics, University of Virginia)* published the following article:

Meng, Anne. 2020. "Winning the Games of Thrones: Leadership Succession in Modern Autocracies." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*.

Austin M. Mitchell *(Visiting Assistant Professor, Texas A&M University at Qatar)* has been awarded a Postdoctoral Fellowship by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science for his project, Comparative Political Economy of Modern and Historical Autocracies: Meiji Japan and Beyond. He will conduct this research with Associate Professor Masaaki Higashijima at Tohoku University during 2021–2023.

Gerardo K. Munck *(Professor of Political Science and International Relations, University of Southern California)* and **Sebastián L. Mazzuca** *(Assistant Professor of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University)* published the following book:

Mazzuca, Sebastián L. and Gerardo L. Munck. 2020. *A Middle-Quality Institutional Trap: Democracy and State Capacity in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press [Series: Cambridge Elements, Politics and Society in Latin America].

Cheryl O'Brien *(Associate Professor of Political Science, San Diego State University)* recently published the following article with **Summer Forester** *(Assistant Professor of Political Science, Carleton College)*:

Forester, Summer and Cheryl O'Brien. 2020. "Antidemocratic and Exclusionary Practices: COVID-19 and the Continuum of Violence." *Politics & Gender*, October: 1–8. DOI: 10.1017/S1743923X2000046X

Heiko Pleines *(Head of the Dept. of Politics and Economics, Research Centre for East European Studies, University of Bremen)* is excited to announce that Discuss Data is a new open repository for storing, sharing and discussing research data with a focus on the post-Soviet region. Launched in November 2020, its first focus is on data collections related to the topics of corruption and public protests, but data on other topics are also available.

Discuss Data goes beyond ordinary repositories and offers an interactive online platform for the discussion and quality assessment of research data. Our aim is to create a space for academic communication and for the community-driven publication, curation, annotation and discussion of research data on the post-Soviet region. Through assigned digital object identifiers (DOI), that serve as permalink, citation source, and assertion of authorship all in one, Discuss Data increases transparency, visibility, and accessibility of research data.

With this call for data we encourage scholars to submit their research data related to the post-Soviet space to Discuss Data. Data can be interdisciplinary, quantitative or qualitative, in any digital formats, as long as copyrights and standards of good scientific practice are not violated.

For more information regarding data submission, please check our guidelines.

We are able to offer grants to support the preparation of

data collections for open access publication on Discuss Data.

Contact Dr. Pleines at pleines@uni-bremen.de.

Emilia Simison *(Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science, MIT)* has published the following article on supporters and opposition in Congress during the last Brazilian dictatorship:

Simison, Emilia. 2020. "Supporters and Opposition in Authoritarian Legislatures." *The Journal of Legislative Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/13572334.2020.1847375.

Milada Vachudova *(Associate Professor of Political Science, Jean Monnet Chair of European Integration, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)* is proud to share her new article (free access) exploring the puzzles surrounding why and how democratic backsliding is taking place in central Europe. She is also proud of all of the innovative, ground breaking work, especially by female scholars, drawn on in this piece!

Vachudova, Milada Anna. 2020. "Ethnopopulism and Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe." *East European Politics* 36(3): 318–340.

Kurt Weyland *(Mike Hogg Professor in Liberal Arts, Department of Government, University of Texas at Austin)* published the following book in February:

Weyland, Kurt. 2021. *Assault on Democracy: Communism, Fascism, and Authoritarianism During the Interwar Years*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Members of the **Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute** at the University of Gothenburg published the following peer-reviewed articles. You can also view the impressive list of recent working papers written by V-Dem members here on their website.

1. Sebhatu, Abiel, Karl Wennberg, Stefan Arora-Jonsson, Staffan I. Lindberg. 2020. "Explaining the Homogeneous Diffusion of COVID-19 Nonpharmaceutical Interventions Across Heterogeneous Countries." *PNAS: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. (Impact Factor 2020: 9.412). Online first: https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2010625117

2. Lindberg, Staffan I. and Juraj Medzihorsky. 2020. "Data for Politics: Creating an International Research Infrastructure Measuring Democracy." *Cell: Patterns* 1(4).

3. Mechkova, Valeriya and Ruth Carlitz. 2020. "Gendered Accountability: When and Why do Women's Policy Priorities get Implemented?" *European Political Science Review*: 1–9.

4. Gafuri, Adea and Meltem Muftuler-Bac. 2020. "Caught Between Stability and Democracy in the Western Balkans: A Comparative Analysis of Paths of Accession to the European Union." *East European Politics*.

5. Popovic, Milos, Erin K. Jenne and Juraj Medzihorsky. 2020. "Charm Offensive or Offensive Charm? An Analysis of Russian and Chinese Cultural Institutes Abroad." *Europe-Asia Studies* 72(9): 1–23.

6. Hellmeier, Sebastian. 2020. "How Foreign Pressure Affects Mass Mobilization in Favor of Authoritarian Regimes." *European Journal of International Relations*: 1–28.

7. Lachapelle, Jean. 2020. "No Easy Way Out: The Effect of Military Coups on State Repression." *The Journal of Politics* 82(4).

8. Altman, David, Federico Royas-de Galarreta and Franciso Urdinez. 2020. "An Interactive Model of Democratic Peace." *Journal of Peace Research*: 1–15.

9. Lührmann, Anna, Kyle Marquardt and Valeriya Mechkova. 2020. "Constraining Governments: New Indices of Vertical, Horizontal and Diagonal Accountability." *American Political Science Review* 114(3): 811–820.

14. Tannenberg, Marcus, Michael Bernhard, Johannes Gerschewski, Anna Lührmann, Christian von Soest. 2020. "Claiming the Right to Rule: Regime Legitimation Strategies from 1900 to 2019." *European Political Science Review* 13(1): 77–94.

15. Leroi, Armand, Ben Lambert, Matthias Mauch, Marina Papadopoulou, Sophia Ananiadou, Staffan Lindberg, and Patrik Lindenfors. 2020. "On Revolutions." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 6(4): 1–11 (earlier version published as V-Dem Working Paper Series No. 63).

16. Lindenfors, Patrik, Matthew Wilson and Staffan Lindberg. 2020. "The Matthew Effect in Political Science: Head Start and Key Reforms Important for Democratization." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7(106).