

Autocracy: A Substantive Approach

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What defines an autocracy? Leading works answer this question in the negative: autocracies are non-democracies. We instead propose a substantive definition: autocracy is a regime characterized by “politically exclusive rule.” This definition better aligns the concept with the cases and arguments that dominate current studies on authoritarianism. It also removes several regimes that are currently considered autocratic from the population of substantive autocracies: anarchies, transitional orders, foreign occupations, limited franchise regimes and dominant faction regimes. Operationalizing this definition, we find that 20% to 35% of country-years in existing autocracy datasets are not substantively autocratic. Further, the remaining regimes are more repressive, less free and more bellicose than residual autocracies. The pre- and post-Cold War eras are less autocratic than normally portrayed, and concerns about recent “autocratization” are likely overblown. Finally, a replication of a prominent study on authoritarian breakdown suggests that important findings in the field may require rethinking.

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INTRODUCTION

The term “autocracy” conjures ominous images: political prisoners wasting away in dank cells, policemen with truncheons pummeling demonstrators, and sun-glassed strongmen addressing cowed audiences.¹ Archetypal autocrats such as Joseph Stalin, Rafael Trujillo, Mao Zedong, and Saddam Hussein are notorious reminders of the horrors that unchecked authority can breed. Because autocracy is such an oppressive form of politics, scholars have devoted considerable energy to understanding it (e.g. Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008; Geddes 1999; Geddes et al. 2018; Levitsky and Way 2010; Meng 2020; Svobik 2012). Yet, while comparativists have thought of autocracy as a distinct and deeply troubling type of regime, they have often measured a different concept.

By and large, scholars have operationalized autocracy in *negative* terms, treating the absence of

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¹In this paper, we use the terms “autocracy,” “authoritarian regime,” and “dictatorship” interchangeably.

free elections as the criterion for authoritarian rule (Alvarez et al. 1996; Gandhi 2008; Geddes 1999; Geddes et al. 2018; Przeworski et al. 2000; Svobik 2012). With procedural democracy as its foil, authoritarianism has become a residual category that contains the regimes of Trujillo and Hussein, but also a grab-bag of other political arrangements. Under such an extensive concept, the core problems that drive theoretical and empirical work on autocracy — concerns about unbridled authority and singular rule — become muddled, impeding analytic precision and theory development. A residual approach also hampers productive discussions about democratic backsliding, survival and breakdown. When an electoral democracy stops holding fully free and fair elections, it may become a non-democracy without becoming a full-blown autocracy.

To resolve these problems, this paper proposes substantive approach to autocracy rooted in a positive definition of what an authoritarian regime *is*. We define autocracy as “politically exclusive rule,” which entails two inclusion criteria. First, a group or leader must actually *rule*, that is, they must exercise consolidate control over the state an an effective monopoly of force within most of a country’s territory. Second, that group or leader must rule through *political exclusion*, i.e., by preventing all political opponents from contesting executive power and from formally influencing executive decision-making. This substantive definition does not rely on other criteria that have sometimes been used to distinguish authoritarianism, such as ideology, mobilizational capacity, legitimacy, repression and institutional constraints. These features are variables to be interrogated across regimes, not defining traits of autocracy (cf., Arendt 1951; Linz 1975).

We operationalize this substantive definition by removing from existing autocracy datasets all political systems that fail to meet the criterion of exclusive rule. The population of removed systems includes cases where no political authority actually rules — situations of anarchy, foreign occupation, and political transition — as well as two regime types that are neither democratic nor substantively authoritarian: limited franchise regimes and dominant faction regimes. We remove cases of non-rule, relying, in part, on Polity V’s -66, -77, and -88 measures. Next, we remove limited franchise and dominant faction regimes by identifying political systems where a degree of electoral competition exists, even if restrictions on political participation or electoral malfeasance render these contests “unfree” or “unfair”. We distinguish these regimes from substantive autocracies using a 70% incumbent

vote share coding rule. A regime in which the opposition is publicly allowed to garner 30% or more of the vote is not a situation of exclusive rule and therefore is not an autocracy.

We find that adopting substantive understanding of autocracy meaningfully changes the conventional wisdom on authoritarian regimes. First, depending on the dataset used, between 20% to 35% of the country-years currently considered autocratic are not substantive autocracies. Removing these country-years also results in a more coherent population of regimes that are less free, more repressive, more bellicose, and more militarized than those captured with a residual approach. Next, we see that certain periods of world history, such as the pre- and post-Cold War periods, were far less autocratic than typically believed. It follows that current concerns about an emerging trend of “autocratization” are likely overblown. Finally, core empirical relationships in the authoritarianism literature may need to be re-examined. When we replicate one major study on authoritarian breakdown — Brownlee (2009) — using our substantive autocracy dataset, the relationship between party-based autocracies and regime longevity weakens considerably.

We conclude that advancing a rigorous research agenda on authoritarianism requires embracing a substantive understanding of the phenomenon. It guarantees that the term “autocracy” denotes a class of regimes with shared characteristics, rather than a medley of heterogeneous political arrangements. It also brings the concept into alignment with the cases and problems that scholars routinely invoke when they theorize and write about autocracy. Further, a substantive approach to autocracy sharpens discussions on problems of democratic backsliding and breakdown (Bermeo 2016; Kaufman and Haggard 2019; Diamond 2019; Maeda 2010; Svobik 2015). Under a residual approach, where there is no conceptual space between democracy and authoritarianism, every case that slips below the procedural standard of democracy must be treated as if it were a full-blown autocracy. By contrast, under a substantive approach we can more reasonably code illiberal regimes like India under Narendra Modi and Hungary under Viktor Orbán as dominant faction regimes, which neither meet the criteria for electoral democracy nor for substantive autocracy. In this sense, a substantive approach to autocracy will aid students of authoritarianism as well as those interested in democratic survival and breakdown.

AUTOCRACY, THEN AND NOW: SUBSTANTIVE AND RESIDUAL APPROACHES

The study of authoritarianism has flourished in recent decades thanks to a popular and intellectual craving to understand how dictatorships emerge, rule, and fall. Research on the subject has become so prominent that it has inspired a six-part Netflix series, several non-fiction best-sellers, and a change in the name of the APSA Comparative Democratization section to the Democracy and Autocracy section. Yet, during this same period, research on autocracy has experienced a fundamental shift. Whereas early scholarship homed in on a delimited set of substantively similar regimes, in recent years research has analyzed a broader class of residual cases defined simply by a lack of democratic processes.

The original works on authoritarianism spotlighted a class of regimes with distinct characteristics that set them apart from democracy and totalitarianism (Arendt 1951; Freidrich and Brzezinski 1961). Exemplified by Juan Linz's study of Spain under Francisco Franco, authoritarianism was defined as a system of political rule:

“with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits (Linz 1964, 255, see also Linz 1975).”

While this initial definition lacked parsimony, it was refined in subsequent empirical work. Authoritarian regimes were understood to be oligarchic systems where interest groups depended on support from the ruling clique rather than operating independently (Purcell 1973a, 30, see also Tullock 1987 and Wintrobe 1998). Additional work in the 1970s further clarified this terrain by specifying which regimes qualified as genuinely authoritarian and which did not (Huntington and Moore 1970; O'Donnell 1973; Purcell 1973b, 1975).

Much of this scholarship focused on exemplary cases of one-party and no-party rule, including the latest slew of military juntas in Latin America. Yet, even as comparativists identified new variants of authoritarianism (e.g., O'Donnell's “bureaucratic authoritarianism,” (O'Donnell 1973)), they took care to justify why that label fit the regime in question (Collier 1979). Hence, the foundation of research on authoritarianism rested on a substantive conceptualization based on positive criteria that distinguished

autocracy from other forms of rule (e.g. democracy, semi-democracy, totalitarianism).

In the 1990s this substantive approach gave way to an alternative that framed autocracy in residual terms. Inspired by the torrent of democratization after the Cold War, scholars turned to quantitative measures to make sense of these political trends. A signal contribution came from Alvarez, Cheibub, Limongi and Przeworski, who developed a dataset categorizing the world's political systems either as "democracies or as dictatorships" (1996, 4). Their core criterion was "electoral contestation," defined as *ex ante* uncertainty and the reasonable prospect of alternation of executive power among multiple political factions.

Given that the authors' principal aim was to resolve debates about democratization, democratic survival, and breakdown, it was reasonable "to establish rules that disqualify a particular regime as democratic, without worrying about the nature of the regimes eliminated in this manner" (Alvarez et al. 1996, 6-7). Indeed, while Alvarez et al. spent considerable effort justifying their measure of democracy, they eschewed an equivalent discussion of dictatorships: "We treat dictatorship simply as a residual category, perhaps better denominated as 'not democracy.'" (Alvarez et al. 1996, 6-7).

For students of autocracy, equating dictatorship with non-democracy marked a sharp turn away from the substantive approach of Linz and his successors. If comparativists stuck with this residual approach and its data, they would necessarily be studying a broad and diffuse range of regimes.

Leading works on authoritarianism have preserved a residual approach, with meaningful consequences. Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland retained Alvarez et al.'s "dichotomous classification of regimes as democracy and dictatorship" without making "any change in the rules" for distinguishing between the two (Cheibub et al. 2010, 83). Similarly, Boix, Miller, and Rosato define autocracy as the absence of democracy, i.e. "meaningful electoral competition" and the extension of suffrage beyond a limited elite (Boix et al. 2013, 1524). Svoboda follows suit, defining a dictatorship as "a country that fails to elect its legislature and executive in free and competitive elections" (Svoboda 2012, 17). Finally, the highly influential works of Geddes, Wright and Frantz also define the phenomenon *ex negativo*: "The absence of fair, reasonably competitive elections through which citizens choose those who make policies on their behalf defines autocracy or dictatorship" (Geddes et al. 2018, 1n1).

The impact of these decisions has echoed through the recent literature on autocracy. What was once

understood as a coherent class of regimes with a common set of properties has become what Giovanni Sartori would call a “pseudo-class” of heterogeneous cases (Sartori 1991). This diversity is evident from the litany of adjectives used to describe modern autocracies (e.g. “electoral”, “competitive”, “conservative populist”, “informational” etc.). Moreover, attempts to delineate this conceptual space by specifying different types of non-democratic regimes has not resolved the problem. The category of hybrid regimes, for example, points to a space between democracy and autocracy, without clearly demarcating the end-points of either regime. Thus, “at the core is still a vacuum” (Brownlee 2010, 47), because the field has not aligned on a substantive conceptualization of what autocracy actually *is*.

THE CASE FOR A SUBSTANTIVE APPROACH

If scholars care about building knowledge on *autocracy*, they are best served by embracing a concept that captures what they mean when they invoke that term. As Sartori (1993) argued, research agendas and theory development are best served by concepts that describe a set of underlying phenomena with common features and characteristics.

However, in today’s scholarship on authoritarianism, this is not the norm. While the theoretical problems driving most works conceive of autocracy as a substantive phenomenon, research designs and analyses apply a residual approach to measure this concept (see Brooker 2014, 1; Brownlee 2007, 25-27; Geddes et al. 2018, 6; Gandhi 2008, 7-8; Magaloni 2006, 33). This discrepancy is evident in an examination of the examples that motivate autocracy scholarship — centering on the likes of Saddam, Stalin, Marcos, Pinochet, and Trujillo — and the cases that are used to study authoritarianism (including South Africa, Botswana, and post-war Japan).

This tension is also apparent in discussions about the problems of autocratic rule. A core premise is that dictators face a power-sharing problem within their narrow ruling coalitions, which they solve through a combination of patronage, surveillance, and institution-building (Boix and Svobik 2013; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Geddes et al. 2018; De Mesquita et al. 2003; Myerson 2008; Meng 2020). Furthermore, because such leaders exclude much of the opposition from decision-making, they must simultaneously guard against the threat of being ousted by revolution from below (Svobik 2012). These theoretical arguments are based on an understanding of autocracy as a particular form of rule in

which a single person governs in alliance with a small faction, to the exclusion of rival groups and large swaths of the population. They are, in other words, based on a positive understanding of a particular class of regimes with a distinct style of rule, rather than on a residual definition of political systems that all happen to lack elections.

Scholars have dealt with this mismatch in various ways, none of which are wholly satisfactory. The first, and most common, is simply to elide the difference and to go on drawing conclusions about substantive autocracy without acknowledging that a much broader class of regimes has been analyzed to reach those conclusions. Others address the problem by developing autocratic sub-types to capture regimes that do not look much like substantive autocracies — e.g., “oligarchy” to capture limited franchise regimes (Geddes et al. 2018) or “multi-party autocracies” to capture regimes that allow a fair degree of political pluralism (Wahmann et al. 2013; Magaloni et al. 2015). A third approach is simply to set aside the regimes that are not true autocracies while running analyses (e.g., Weeks 2014).

More recently, scholars have dealt with this mismatch by tracing a temporal shift away from “traditional” authoritarianism to newer forms of autocratic rule, e.g., “informational autocracy” (Guriev and Treisman 2019, 2022) or “electoral autocracy” (Matovski 2021). However, close scrutiny reveals that many of these new-age autocracies do not actually resemble the kinds of regimes that stand at the core of the authoritarianism literature. These works do not so much describe a shift in the nature of autocratic rule as a *decline in substantive autocracy* in the 21st century, and the rise of new forms of *non-democracy*. These new regimes are certainly worthy of study — but they are not autocracies, and we therefore would not expect existing theories of authoritarianism to explain their practices and trajectories.

Before turning to our definition, it is worth addressing one other alternative to a substantive approach to the study of autocracy: a continuous approach based on traits that vary along a spectrum. Prominent examples of a continuous approach include the Freedom House scale, ranging from 1-7, and the Polity scale, ranging from -10 to 10.

While continuous measures can convey useful information, scholars have lodged compelling criticisms about their utility for the analytical work attempted through categorical types. Sartori pointed out that democracy and dictatorship were “different in kind” (Sartori 1975, 24), suggesting that the

only reasonable way of placing them on a shared spectrum would be to identify some single dimension (“democratic-ness,” “autocratic-ness”) along which both regimes could be measured. Similarly, Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland contend that setting regimes along a continuous scale would invite farcical exercises in assessing degrees of democracy across highly repressive states (Cheibub et al. 2010, 78). Studies using latent variable analysis corroborate these insights, finding that there is no single characteristic that can be effectively used to classify regimes into different types (Treier 2022). We find these arguments convincing; categorical distinctions, with well-defined inclusion/exclusion criteria based on substantive definitions, are more helpful than continuous measures for delineating the different regimes of the world.

For all of these reasons, we propose a substantive, categorical approach to autocracy, based on a positive definition of what an authoritarian regime is. This is not an issue of mere semantics. A research community dedicated to making sense of authoritarianism needs a concept that actually describes the phenomenon they care about and seek to explain. Our approach builds upon elements of Linz’s idiographic scholarship while sharing the broad analytic ambitions of Alvarez et al., Geddes et al., and their peers. The following section lays out the substantive definition. In later sections we provide an operationalization for this concept and discuss its impact on existing findings.

WHAT AUTOCRACY IS

We define autocracy as *politically exclusive rule*. This definition is based on the highly concentrated nature of power in autocracies, where all opponents, challengers, or political alternatives outside of the ruling group are excluded from executive decision-making.² This core characteristic captures what we see as a latent consensus in the scholarship about the key problems facing authoritarian regimes (see the discussion on narrow ruling cliques and external threats above). It is also at the heart of what many find most troubling about autocratic rule — i.e., unchecked power and lack of accountability.

Our definition has two inclusion criteria: rule and political exclusion. By *rule* we mean that a

²The “auto-” prefix in autocracy derives from the Greek “autos” which means “by oneself” or “of oneself.” The term therefore implies governing by oneself — or without including one’s rivals or challengers (Gerschewski 2022).

single leader or governing coalition must exercise consolidated control over the state and effectively monopolize force within most, if not all, of the country's territory. A state that has collapsed and is riven by conflict between multiple rival factions is not an autocracy. Similarly, a country that is occupied by a foreign power or that is in transition, perhaps because it has recently experienced regime change and is governed by an interim leader, is not autocratic. In these circumstances, a single leader or group does not enjoy an established hold over the state; therefore the question of who wields power is unknown or open-ended. Because the rules and procedures for accessing power are undetermined, such political arrangements cannot be classified as consolidated regimes.³

The second criterion in our definition is *political exclusion*. By exclusion we mean that a single faction restricts access to executive authority to members of its own political elite. This faction can be a single leader, but more often comprises a leader and a coalition of elites who help that leader retain power, i.e., a “ruling coalition” (Svolik 2012, 63) or a “leadership group” (Geddes et al. 2014, 35). This ruling faction then prevents all political opponents from contesting executive office or formally influencing executive decision-making. The criterion of exclusion does not disqualify cases where ruling coalitions practice power-sharing within their clique; indeed these arrangements are essential to many authoritarian regimes. Further, when we say that the regime excludes political opponents, we mean groups that both self-identify as the political opposition and that the regime itself views as its political challengers.⁴

This definition is extensive (i.e., it covers many cases) without being overly intensive (i.e., demanding information-heavy judgments about characteristics) (Sartori 1991, 254). It retains some elements of Linz's original concept (e.g., the idea of limited pluralism), but it does not include as many qualifiers nor does it demand as much interpretation. Its relatively simple inclusion criteria ease the problem of identification, making it more conducive to cross-national research. Still, it is compatible with more intensive inquiry, including further sub-categorization of authoritarian regime types. For example, it

³According to Munck (1996) a political regime is a system of informal and formal rules that determine who has access to political power and how decisions are made (also Fishman 1990; Lawson 1993; Slater and Fenner 2011; Geddes et al. 2014; Djuve et al. 2020). Therefore, the same criterion of “rule” is also a constitutive feature of any type of regime, including democracies.

⁴For more on the concept of “political opposition” see Lust-Okar 2005; Holger 2013.

encompasses all of the most widely recognized authoritarian sub-types: military regimes, monarchies, personalist regimes, single-party regimes. All that matters is that the regime is controlled by a politically exclusive ruling group, whether it be a cabal of military officers, a personalist leader, or a single party.

WHAT AUTOCRACY IS NOT

In an effort to achieve a parsimonious definition, we set aside five criteria that are often associated with autocracy, or that appear in older definitions: participation, ideology, responsiveness, institutional constraints, and repression. First, our definition is agnostic to rules governing extension of the franchise. Many authoritarian regimes that hold noncompetitive elections permit universal suffrage. Conversely, regimes that allow for multiple political factions to compete but bar significant portions of the population from voting — as in the case of Switzerland before the enfranchisement of women — would not, by our criteria, be considered autocratic. While political participation is an important criterion for defining democracy (Dahl 1971), it is not an essential characteristic of autocracy.

Second, ideology does not figure into our definition. Although it may make sense in some historical periods — e.g., the inter-war years — to distinguish between totalitarian and conservative authoritarian regimes (e.g., Weyland 2021), in general ideology is best thought of as a characteristic that varies across autocracies, rather than one that defines them. Third, responsiveness to citizen demands is not an essential feature of autocracy. While many autocracies may be indifferent to their citizens' preferences, others do respond in meaningful ways to their citizens' demands and claims-making (Tsai 2007; Truex 2016).

Fourth, we do not define autocracy according to whether institutions exist to guide the decision-making processes of the executive. Though many authoritarian regimes rely on institutions like parliaments, councils, or politburos, others operate without them. Institutions are a potential tool for autocracies to maintain power and manage their coalitions, not one of their defining characteristics (Boix and Svobik 2013; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Magaloni 2008; Wright and Escriba-Folch 2012).

Finally, we do not define autocracies based on the amount of violence or repression they deploy (cf. Frantz 2018, 105). While enforcing political exclusion often requires the use of deadly force, not all autocrats use violence all the time. In fact, when citizens or rival groups come to view their

exclusion as natural, acceptable, or inevitable, autocrats may be able to sustain their rule with minimal use of violence (Gaventa 1980). We therefore leave violence as a variable to be interrogated across authoritarian regimes, rather than a component of the definition.

A NEW TYPOLOGY OF REGIMES

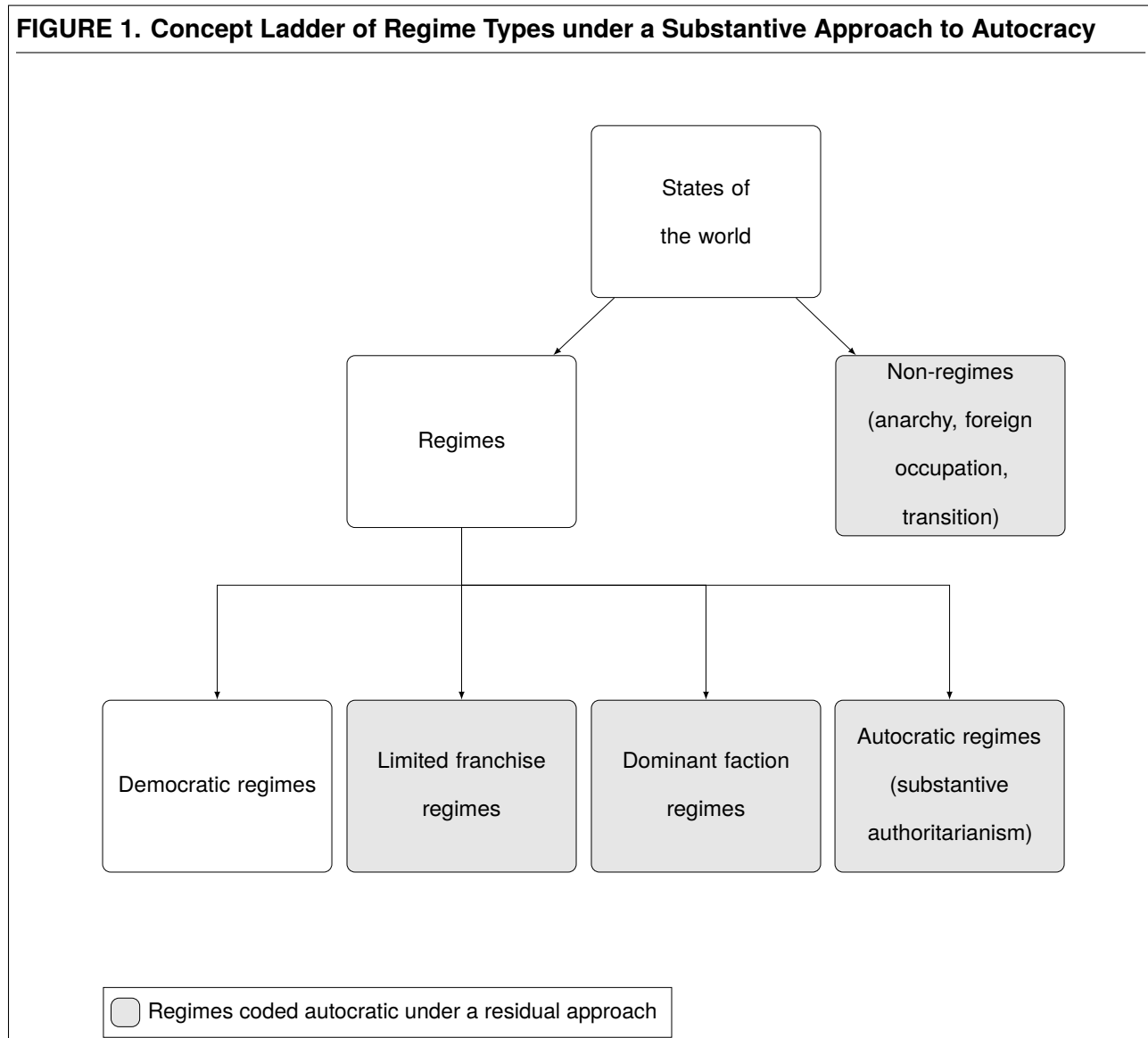
Because a substantive definition of autocracy cleaves the population of residual autocracies, it naturally produces a new classification of regimes (Figure 1).⁵ We identify five political arrangements that have been erroneously coded as autocratic under a residual approach: situations of anarchy, foreign occupations, transitional orders, limited franchise regimes, and dominant faction regimes. The first three are situations of non-rule, where no single faction has consolidated power and a regime cannot be said to exist. The final two categories capture regimes that do not meet the requirements of electoral democracy (i.e., free and fair elections) or the criteria of substantive autocracy (i.e., political exclusion).

The first set of political systems that we consider non-autocratic are situations of non-rule: anarchies, foreign occupations, and transitional orders. These systems are not authoritarian because no leader or group actually exercises *rule*. In countries experiencing anarchy, power is too diffuse for the executive to be considered autocratic; rival groups, warlords, and militias openly battle for control of the country. In the case of foreign occupations and transitional orders (e.g. the US military presence in Iraq from 2003-2011, or the transitional period following Egypt's 2011 revolution), the government is explicitly impermanent and, therefore, questions of who rules and how they rule are unanswerable. In all of these cases, power is not sufficiently consolidated for leaders to practice political exclusion. Indeed, because the "rules of the game" have yet to be determined, these systems are best classified as non-regimes.

Two further political systems are removed from the population of autocracies by our approach: limited franchise regimes and dominant faction regimes. Both of these systems qualify as regimes: there are established "rules of the game" dictating who governs and how decisions are made. But they are neither democratic nor substantively autocratic. In these regimes, power is not so exclusive as to amount to autocracy. At the same time, elections are not sufficiently open and contested that they

⁵For an alternative schematic representation of our regime typology, which is based on Dahl's (1971) framework for conceptualizing polyarchies, see the appendix.

qualify as democracies (Schumpeter 1942; Schmitter and Karl 1991).



Limited franchise regimes are those in which competitive elections between rival political groups exist, but where participation is restricted to a particular subset of citizens (e.g., 18th century England, Switzerland before 1971, the United States before 1965, Apartheid South Africa).⁶ These regimes clearly fall short of the minimal standards of enfranchisement to be classified as full democracies, but they are still places where serious competition between different factions exists, and therefore cannot reasonably be considered autocratic.⁷ Therefore, it is sensible to categorize these systems as limited franchise regimes, which are neither autocratic nor democratic.

⁶Another term for these regimes, put forth by Dahl (1971), is “competitive oligarchy.”

⁷Indeed, the common practice of classifying these regimes as autocracies has confounded quantitative measures

Second, dominant faction regimes, where one group or faction dominates the executive but does not fully exclude all of its opponents, cannot be considered autocratic. In these regimes electoral contests are biased heavily in favor of incumbents, but they still “offer an important channel through which the opposition may seek power” and access executive office (Levitsky and Way 2010, 52). This encompasses both dominant-party autocracies like the BDP in Botswana or the UMNO in Malaysia, as well as many of the regimes that Levitsky and Way (2010) call “competitive authoritarian.” In these regimes, the electoral playing field is skewed but incumbents lack either the will or the capacity to fully exclude the opposition from contesting their rule. Such regimes are certainly not full democracies, but they also are not autocracies.

One might suggest that other concepts already exist to describe the liminal terrain between electoral democracy and substantive authoritarianism, such as illiberal democracy, semi-democracy, competitive authoritarianism, anocracy, and hybrid regimes. Yet none of these terms allows researchers to grasp the full range of political regimes, nor do they help in delineating the boundary between substantive autocracy and non-autocracy.

For example, the concepts of illiberal democracy, semi-democracy, and hybrid regimes are “diminished subtypes” (Collier and Levitsky 1997), in that they maintain some, but not all, of the characteristics necessary to be considered democracies. While they usefully define the boundary between democracy and non-democracy, they are less helpful in specifying boundaries on the other side of the spectrum. Similarly, the concept of competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010) covers only part of the space between authoritarianism and democracy, and does not make clear where competitive authoritarianism ends and substantive authoritarianism begins (or if the two concepts overlap).

Finally, Polity’s concept of anocracy covers a broad array of regimes, with many combinations of traits — a function of the way in which Polity scores aggregate a variety of components that measure different variables. There are, in other words, multiple ways in which a regime can end up in the “anocracy” category, such that it is not clear what the defining characteristics of these regimes are, and and empirical research. Analysts either have to make dubious calls (like labeling the United States an autocracy until 1965) or establish coding rules that are difficult to square with widely-held definitions (like setting franchise thresholds for democracy at a small share of male citizens).

how they are distinct from other types (Vreeland 2008).

The categories of limited franchise regimes and dominant faction regimes address these shortcomings: they cover the full regime space beyond democracy and substantive autocracy, and, because they are based on our substantive definition, they clearly demarcate the boundary between substantive autocracy and non-autocracy.

OPERATIONALIZING SUBSTANTIVE AUTOCRACY

Having advanced a substantive definition of autocracy as politically exclusive rule, we now explain how we operationalize this definition in practice. We begin with the universe of residual autocracies. We then remove all regimes that do not adhere to our substantive criteria: rule and political exclusion. This strategy entails two steps. First, we remove country-years where no group can be said to exercise rule (i.e., anarchy, foreign occupation, and transitional order). Second, we remove regimes that hold at least semi-competitive executive elections, even if the competition is unfree or unfair (i.e. limited franchise and dominant faction regimes).

We draw on the dataset compiled by Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018), and its recent extension by Lachepelle et. al (2021). These data cover all independent states from 1900 to 2020 with more than one million inhabitants. We selected this dataset because Geddes et al. exclude anarchies, foreign occupations, and transitions from their concept of autocracy, and thus leave out many (but not all) of these country-years from their data. We identified additional country-years in which these political arrangements were present with the assistance of Polity V's codes for foreign interruptions (-66), interregnum (-77), and transition (-88).

Second, we excise all regimes that have sufficiently competitive executive elections that rule cannot be considered “politically exclusive.” We employ a 70% electoral threshold to define this boundary. When the incumbent regime wins 70% or more of the vote in an executive election, we designate the regime as autocratic.⁸ This enables us to remove both regimes with competitive elections but serious

⁸In coding “executive elections” we use results of first-round elections. In presidential systems we use the results of the first-round election for presidential candidates. In parliamentary systems, we use the vote share for the largest party in parliament (as the prime minister comes from this party). Regimes with no elections are

franchise restrictions (e.g. limited franchise regimes) and those with semi-competitive elections that favor incumbents but do not entirely exclude oppositions (e.g. dominant faction regimes). Country-years are coded according to the results of the most recent election, and remain coded as such until the next election (or until the onset of a regime-change event, e.g., coup, autogolpe, invasion, revolution, etc.).

Some may take issue with the use of a seemingly arbitrary threshold to distinguish substantively autocratic regimes. We respond to this critique with three points. First, we do not claim that falling below this threshold makes a regime democratic. In many of these cases, elections are flawed and competition is skewed to favor incumbents. However, we are not using these numbers to measure democracy; we are using them to distinguish between substantive autocracies and non-autocracies. If an incumbent allows an election result to be released in which the opposition obtains 30% or more of the vote, then sufficient political pluralism exists such that we cannot call the regime an autocracy. In this sense, we place primacy on a leader's *proven ability* to exclude rivals from political competition, not his desire or intent to do so. Even though the incumbent may have exerted considerable effort to rig the vote and tilt the electoral playing field, the fact that he has not been able to prevent the opposition from publicly obtaining a 30% vote share suggests that he does not exercise exclusive rule, and that the possibility exists, in principle, for him to be replaced by his rivals.

Second, our 70% rule is, in fact, not arbitrary, but grounded in prior research and existing scholarly traditions. Threshold-based rules are routinely used in political science to make categorical distinctions among regimes — for example, scholars use suffrage levels to determine whether a regime qualifies as a democracy. Prior research on autocracy has also embraced election-based thresholds to classify regimes. For example, Levitsky and Way argue that a 70% threshold is a good way of distinguishing competitive authoritarian regimes from non-competitive autocracies: “As a rule of thumb, regimes in which presidents are re-elected with more than 70% of the vote can generally be considered noncompetitive” (Levitsky and Way 2002, 55). Similarly, Howard and Roessler use a 70% incumbent vote-share rule to distinguish hegemonic authoritarian from competitive authoritarian regimes (Howard and Roessler 2006, 368; see also Wantchekon 2003).

Third, in case readers believe that a 70% threshold is set too low, we also constructed our dataset automatically coded autocracies.

using three higher thresholds — 75%, 80%, and 85% — and ran our analyses with these alternative measures. These analyses are included in the appendix; they do not fundamentally change any of our findings.

These coding rules enable us to weed out all cases of non-autocracy, leaving a new dataset of substantively authoritarian regimes. This dataset includes 5,455 autocratic country-years from 1900-2020. Comparing our data with existing autocracy datasets,⁹ we see that our measure significantly changes the picture of authoritarianism in the world (Table 1). Depending on the dataset used, roughly 20% to 35% of countries considered “autocratic” with a residual approach are not substantively autocratic — that is, they fail to meet the conditions of politically exclusive rule that motivate much of the literature on authoritarianism.

TABLE 1. Autocratic vs non-autocratic country-years in six datasets

	Substantively autocratic	Non-autocratic	% Non-autocratic
BMR	5,053	1,831	26.2%
CGV	3,617	912	20.1%
GWF	4,117	1,026	19.9%
HTW	2,376	985	29.3%
MCM	3,689	1,084	22.7%
VDEM	5,306	2,835	34.8%

EMPIRICAL IMPLICATIONS OF A SUBSTANTIVE APPROACH

How does our picture of the world change once we embrace a substantive approach to autocracy, rather than a residual one? This section presents empirical implications of adopting our substantive approach. We discuss important regimes that end up re-coded as non-autocratic. We also show that when it comes to characteristics of prototypical autocracies, our measure captures a more coherent group of regimes than do existing datasets. Finally, we lay out descriptive trends, which reveal that basic knowledge

⁹The six datasets employed in our comparative analyses are Boix et al. (2013); Cheibub et al. (2010); Geddes et al. (2014), Wahmann et al. (2013), Magaloni et al. (2015), and V-Dem Regimes of the World. Following previous works, we refer to these datasets according to the initials of their authors or their institutional acronym: BMR, CGV, GWF, HTW, MCM, and V-Dem.

about the historical share of autocracies worldwide, as well as the distribution of autocratic regime types, may need to be revised.

Autocracies and non-autocracies: Some prominent examples

Which regimes are included in the universe of substantive autocracies, and which ones are left out? Here we discuss some prominent examples. These cases can bolster confidence that the measure is doing a good job of capturing true autocracies.¹⁰ All of the best-known dictatorships of the 20th century — Iraq under Saddam Hussein, the Soviet Union under Stalin, China under Mao Zedong, Chile under Pinochet, Haiti under ‘Papa Doc’ Duvalier, and Germany under Adolf Hitler — remain autocracies according to our approach. The same applies to most of the world’s prominent contemporary autocracies: e.g., Saudi Arabia (and the rest of the Persian Gulf monarchies), Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Iran, China, Vietnam, North Korea, Kazakhstan, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Eritrea.

More interesting are the regimes that many datasets code as autocracies but that our approach codes as non-autocratic.¹¹ Some are examples that we have invoked above, and are unlikely to be controversial. For example, Lebanon is a country that many datasets code autocratic, but that our dataset considers a non-autocracy based on there being either relatively competitive elections between rival factions, a state of civil war/anarchy, and/or a foreign occupation. Another example is Apartheid South Africa, which we cited as an example of a limited franchise regime. This political system surely does not qualify as a democracy — which is why all six of the other regime datasets code it autocratic. However, it should not be considered a substantive autocracy, where power is concentrated in the hands of a single political group. Despite the fact that it excluded a vast proportion of its citizens from political participation, Apartheid South Africa nevertheless featured meaningful competition among parties representing the country’s white population.

We also code a number of regimes non-autocratic because of a protracted period of anarchy or state breakdown. Cases that fit this description include El Salvador from 1979 to 1983, Somalia from 1991

¹⁰The appendix provides a full list of the autocratic regime spells in our dataset.

¹¹The appendix also includes a list of regime spells that exist in at least one autocracy dataset but that we code non-autocratic.

to the present, the Ivory Coast from 2002 to 2010, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) from 1992 to the present, and South Sudan since independence in 2011. Similarly, a range of transitional governments that came into power following civil wars or revolutions are coded non-autocratic, e.g. post-revolutionary transitional governments in Iran (1979-1980), Sudan (1986-1988), and Egypt (2011-2012). Even though these transitions were eventually hijacked by autocratic forces, the transition period involved substantial contestation between revolutionary and regime factions. No single group ruled these countries exclusively. A similar argument can be made about the post-conflict transitions in the Ivory Coast (2007-2009), Liberia (2003-2005), Chad (1993-1995), the DRC (2003-2005), Burundi (2001-2004), Ethiopia (1991-1995), and Angola (1993-1996).

Some of our most substantial re-codings are of dominant faction regimes, where a hegemonic party consistently wins by less than 70% of the vote. In these countries, one faction certainly dominates, but it does not wholly exclude opposition groups from competing and making their voices heard. Prominent examples include Malaysia under UMNO, which we code as non-autocratic for most of the 20th century (the exception being the state of emergency from 1969 to 1971). While it is true that UMNO used gerrymandering to guarantee itself victories, opposition groups were still allowed to operate and compete (Crouch 1996, 4). For similar reasons, Singapore is coded non-autocratic starting in 1984, when elections became more competitive and the People's Action Party (PAP) began winning by less than 70%. Botswana is also coded non-autocratic for most of its post-independence existence, despite uninterrupted governance by the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP).

The re-coding of dominant faction regimes as non-autocracies also has implications for whether and when we code a series of autocratic regime breakdowns. For example, a series of well-known autocratic breakdowns are dated earlier than in existing datasets, because "breakdown" can be the point when the regime begins to hold elections with some level of contestation, which is not necessarily the moment when the incumbent faction loses power.

For instance, our dataset dates the breakdown of the PRI autocracy in Mexico to 1988, when PRI-backed candidate Carlos Salinas officially won with only 50.7% of the vote while opposition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (who secured 31.1%). Most autocracy datasets count Mexico as autocratic through 2000, when challenger Vicente Fox won a plurality (43.4%). While the 1988

election was not free-and-fair, the fact that non-PRI candidates were allowed to garner nearly half the country's votes suggests that the PRI was no longer fully excluding alternative factions from competing for executive authority. Other prominent examples coded via the same logic are: Kenya (1992 rather than 2002); Ghana (1992 rather than 2000); Senegal (1993 rather than 2000); Taiwan (1991 rather than 2000); Brazil (1978 rather than 1985); and Nicaragua (1984 rather than 1990). Importantly, in some of these cases the "breakdown" elections were actually considered quite free and fair — i.e., the incumbent faction's candidate won legitimately. But because many datasets require political alternation to code a transition to democracy, they continue to code these cases autocratic until the opposition takes power. While we agree that turnover is a good criterion to use when coding democracy, we believe it is too stringent for coding an autocratic breakdown.

Another implication of the coding scheme is that it allows autocracy to emerge and break down even while the same incumbent remains in power. Many autocracy datasets tie regime spells closely to individuals. For example, the regimes of Omar al-Bashir in Sudan and Park Chung Hee in South Korea are coded continuously as autocratic throughout their rule. But regimes are institutions, not individuals, and both of these leaders oversaw periods of liberalization and institutional opening that we consider non-autocratic. For example, Sudan saw a liberal opening from 2010 to 2014, with elections that allowed for a degree of contestation and opposition candidates winning a combined 32% of the vote. Similarly, Park Chung Hee won what many consider to be a competitive election in 1963 (followed by two subsequent elections with some degree of contestation). These systems were not exclusive until leaders closed elections to factional competition in 2015 and 1972, respectively.

Finally, our approach sets a higher bar for transitions *from* democracy into autocracy than do existing datasets. In recent years there has been legitimate concern over the erosion of democratic norms and institutions in a number of high-profile and well-consolidated democracies: e.g., Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Brazil, India, and even the United States. Some scholars have gone so far as to claim that these countries should now be considered autocratic (Scheppele 2022). We disagree. All of these countries are non-autocratic by our measure, though we do not dispute that some of them may no longer be democracies. These are all cases where serious political opposition exists, where elections continue to occur in which opposition candidates compete and win large shares of the vote, and, therefore, where

no single faction can be said to rule exclusively.

Characteristics of substantive autocracies

One way of examining the validity of our approach is to evaluate whether the regimes captured by our substantive measure are more “authoritarian” than residual autocracies, according to a range of characteristics often associated with authoritarianism. As we explain above, we do not use criteria like bellicosity, violence, or civil and political freedoms to *define* authoritarian regimes. Yet, if substantive autocracies do represent a set of political arrangements with more coherence than residual autocracies, we would expect them to have more consistent and extreme values on these measures.

On the whole, we find support for this claim: substantive autocracies are less free, more repressive, more bellicose, and more militarized than are residual autocracies. A range of measures commonly deployed in research on political regimes demonstrate this case. The figures below show the average value (and 95% confidence intervals) of each measure for substantive autocracies (denoted SA) and for residual autocracies as captured in the six other datasets (for further discussion of these measures and analyses, see the appendix).

We begin with political rights, using two indices that capture a country’s level of political and civil freedoms (i.e., freedom of movement, freedom of speech, workers’ rights, etc.): the CIRI Empowerment Rights Index (Cingranelli et al 2014) and Freedom House’s Freedom in the World Index (a combination of its Civil Liberties Index and Political Rights Index). As Figure 2 reveals, substantive autocracies on average score about half a point worse on these measures than do residual autocracies.

We also find that substantive autocracies are more repressive and tyrannical than residual autocracies. For measures, we use data on political killings and political prisoners collected by Guriev and Treisman (2019; 2022). As Figure 3 shows, substantive autocracies have, on average, 5,000 to 7,000 more political prisoners and 250 to 500 more political killings per year than residual autocracies. These trends are confirmed by alternative measures of political imprisonment such as CIRI’s Political Imprisonment Index (see appendix).

Finally, we find that substantive autocracies are more militarized and more bellicose than residual autocracies (Figure 4). We capture militarization using the military personnel per capita variable

FIGURE 2. Political rights in substantive and residual autocracies

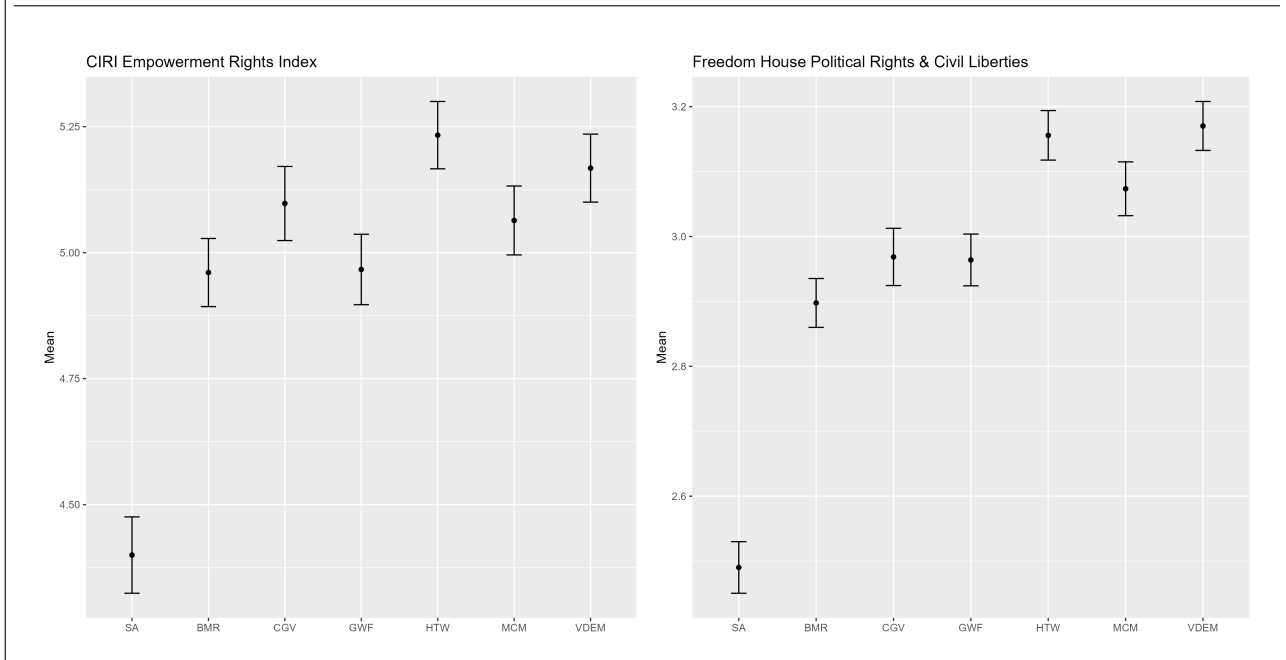
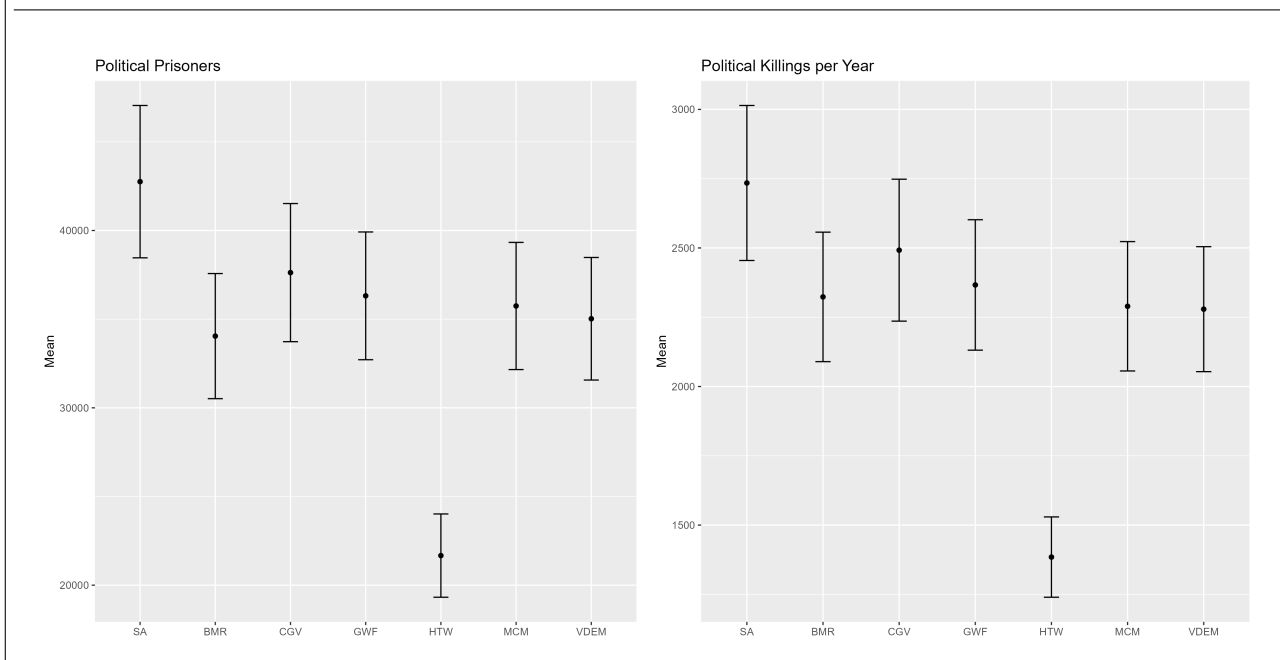
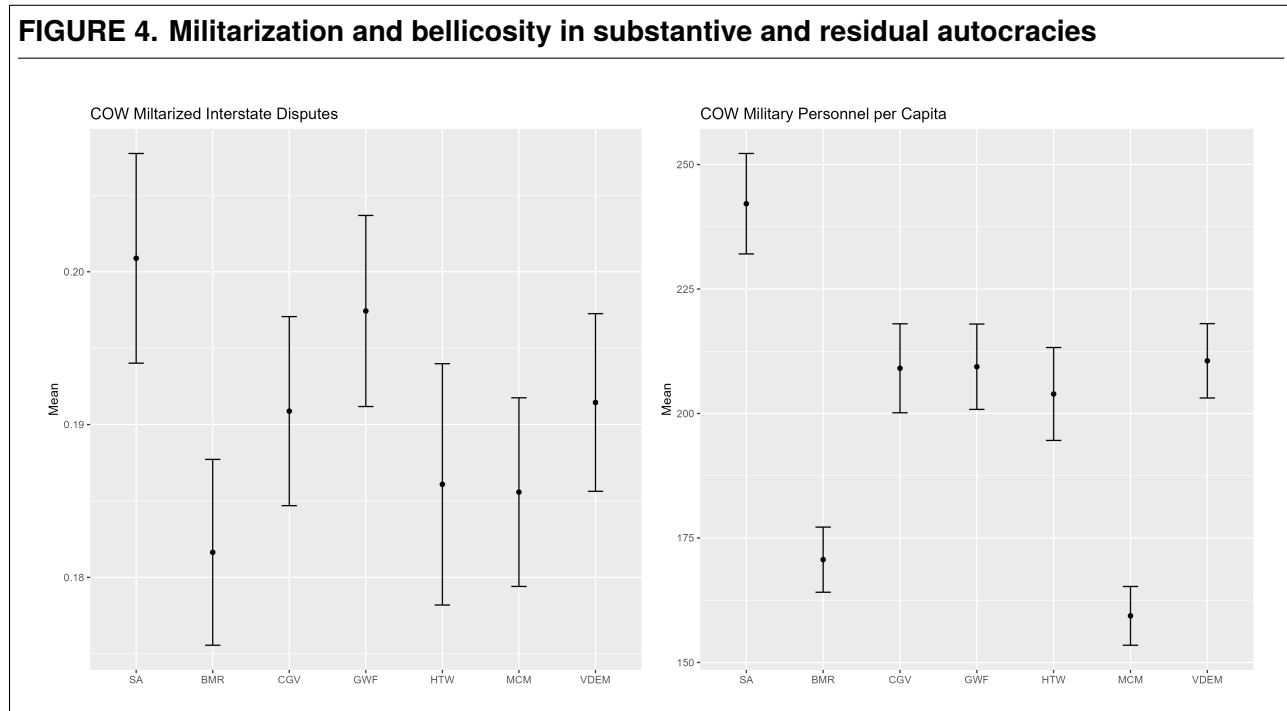


FIGURE 3. State violence in substantive and residual autocracies



from Correlates of War's (COW) National Material Capabilities dataset. According to this measure, substantive autocracies have roughly 240 military personnel per capita, versus 160 to 210 for residual autocracies. Bellicosity is measured using COW's Militarized Interstate Disputes dataset, with a variable capturing whether a state initiates an inter-state dispute in a given year. Though the differences here are not as great as in the earlier figures, substantive autocracies do on average initiate more disputes than residual autocracies.



These figures offer confidence that our strategy for identifying substantive autocracies is robust. In contrast to the residual approach, which includes a grab-bag of heterogeneous political systems, a substantive approach captures a more coherent set of regimes with a consistent set of characteristics that we normally associate with tyranny and singular rule.

Temporal trends

How does the picture of authoritarianism through history change when using a substantive definition of autocracy? Figure 5 depicts the proportion of country-years considered autocratic from 1900 to 2020 under a substantive understanding (denoted SA) and using the six datasets that embrace a residual approach. As the figure makes clear, the pre-World War II period is far less autocratic than is normally

believed. In contrast to the V-DEM dataset, which codes fully 88% of country-years authoritarian before 1939, we find that only half of those country-years are substantively autocratic. Examining these results by region (Figure 2A, in appendix), we find that the residual approach vastly overestimates the number of autocracies in Europe and the Americas during this period, most likely due to the classification of limited franchise regimes (like Switzerland and the United States) as autocracies.

Second, the substantive measure identifies a much more dramatic decline in autocratic regimes following the end of the Cold War than do residual measures. From 1989 to 2000, the proportion of autocratic country-years decreased by 26%, representing a 3 to 13 percentage point difference from other regime datasets. This difference primarily comes from the classification of dominant faction regimes in sub-Saharan Africa and, to a lesser extent, Asia as autocratic during the so-called “reverse-Third wave” (Huntington 1991; Diamond 1996; Levitsky and Way 2010). To be sure, electoral contests in many of these regimes were hardly “free and fair” (see van de Walle 2002, 68, for elaboration on this point). But the persistence of meaningful contestation between incumbents and opposition groups means that they also cannot be considered instances of politically exclusive rule.

Finally, the figure suggests that anxiety about rising authoritarianism in the early twenty-first century may be overstated. Since the crest of the Third Wave in the 1990s, scholars have aired concerns about a decline in the number of global democracies, citing this as evidence of an “authoritarian resurgence” (Foa 2018; Walker 2015) or a new reverse “wave of autocratization” (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). However, the data indicate that under a substantive understanding of authoritarianism these concerns are likely unwarranted. Although we do note a slight increase in the proportion of autocracies in 2018, this growth is neither as large nor as worrisome as some accounts imply.

Globally, the proportion of autocracies has actually decreased over the past decade, from 25% in 2010 to 19% in 2020. The autocratization trend cited by some scholars is in fact a nominal 2 percentage point increase in 2018 from a floor of 21% in the previous year. Thus, while it may be true that some countries have recently fallen below the minimal standards for democratic governance, they have not (yet) become truly authoritarian.

Autocratic regime types

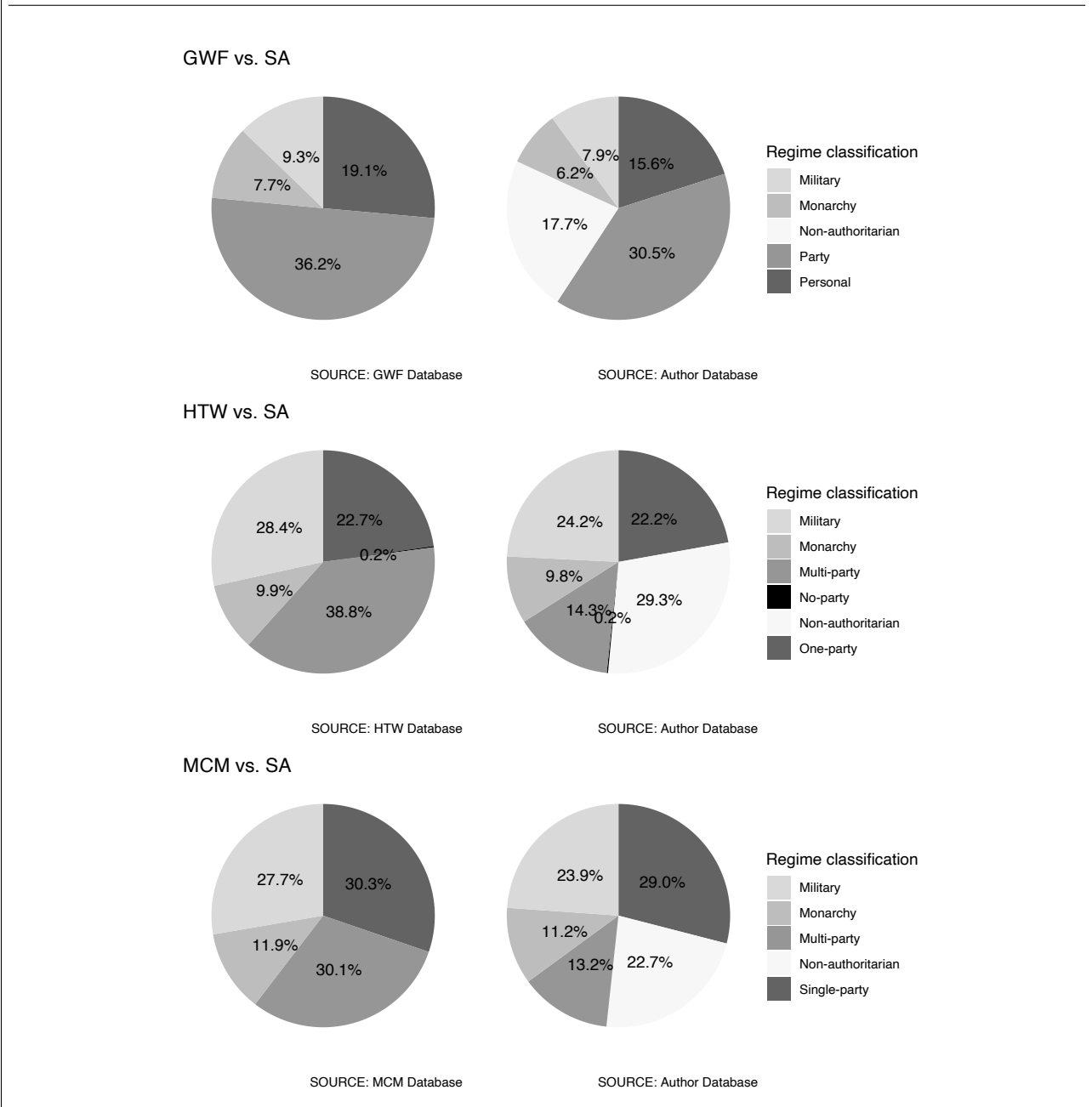
Finally, adopting a substantive measure of autocracy changes what we know about the types of autocracies that dominate the world. Figure 6 compares the distribution of authoritarian regime types before and after non-autocratic country years are removed, using the typologies in three of the datasets above — Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2014), Hadenius, Teorell and Wahmann (2013) and Magaloni, Chu and Min (2015). On the left are the distributions in the original datasets. On the right are the same distributions, but with regimes that do not meet the substantive criteria for autocracy classified as “non-authoritarian” (in the lightest grey).

The figure reveals that regimes based on political parties, particularly those in which multiple parties exist, comprise a far smaller share of substantive autocracies than current datasets suggest. In GWF, the share of regimes classified as “party-based autocracy” fall by 10 points once non-autocracies are removed. In HTW, the proportion of multi-party autocracies decreases by 25 points, while for MCM it decreases by 17 percentage points. Military regimes, to a lesser extent, were also affected by our re-codings; their share of total autocracies declines by anywhere from 2 to 4 percentage points. By contrast, the proportion of monarchies remained relatively unchanged across the three datasets.

These changes make intuitive sense. If exclusive rule is the defining feature of autocracy, then monarchies, whose leaders necessarily come from a delimited political elite and do not allow others to compete for the throne, are clearly autocracies. Conversely, multi-party regimes — which in datasets like HTW account for more than a third of all autocratic country-years — are generally regimes with a degree of pluralism, in which various opposition parties are allowed to contest executive power. These regimes may not be democracies, either because they do not allow full suffrage or because their elections are not completely fair, but they should not be considered autocracies. It is also important to note that such multi-party autocracies are precisely the type of regimes that have drawn attention in recent years for supposedly representing a new and distinct form of authoritarianism — i.e., “informational autocracies” (Guriev and Treisman 2022) or “electoral autocracies” (Matovski 2021).

In sum, the evidence suggests that adopting a substantive definition of autocracy meaningfully changes our understanding of the nature and prevalence of authoritarian regimes. Substantive autocracies constitute a more coherent population of regimes: they are more repressive, less free,

FIGURE 6. Autocratic regime sub-types



and more bellicose than residual autocracies. Moreover, certain periods of history have been far less autocratic than previously assumed. Finally, when we delineate autocracies by regime type, we find certain regimes (e.g., multi-party autocracies) are more likely to be mis-specified than others.

AUTHORITARIAN REGIME TYPE AND BREAKDOWN: A REPLICATION

In this section, we conduct a replication analysis to demonstrate that our more focused conceptualization of autocracy not only changes descriptive trends and patterns, but also may alter certain core findings in the authoritarianism scholarship. We examine one of the most salient findings in this literature — the positive impact of authoritarian institutions on authoritarian regime durability. Research has shown that party-based autocracies tend to outlast their non-party peers, particularly military and personalist regimes (Geddes 1999, 22, see also Brownlee 2007; Boix and Svobik 2013; Magaloni 2008). Geddes (1999) found that military regimes are the least durable form of autocracy, with an average life-span of just nine years; personalist regimes are moderately resilient, lasting 16.5 years; and single-party regimes are the most enduring, with a mean tenure of nearly thirty years (1999, 22). In subsequent survival analyses, these differences remained: in a given country-year, single-party regimes were the least likely to break down, even after accounting for economic development, region, and time in office.

Replications and extensions of Geddes' analysis arrived at broadly similar conclusions. With a somewhat revised dataset that added the category of monarchy and extended coverage to 2004, Brownlee (2009) found that the main relationships endured: military regimes remained less stable than personalist regimes, which were less stable than single-party regimes. Additionally, monarchies emerged as the most stable of all subtypes (Brownlee 2009, 524-527).

Do these findings hold up when we examine only those regimes that are substantively autocratic? As we explained in the previous section, many party-based regimes are in fact not substantively autocratic, but more accurately coded as dominant faction or limited franchise regimes. It is therefore possible that the results in these analyses are a function of this mis-specification. To explore this possibility, we replicate Brownlee's main analyses using his original population of authoritarian regimes (based on a residual approach) and a revised population based on a substantive approach, which removes 425 non-autocratic country-years (19.9% of the original sample). We retain the original

classifications in Brownlee (2009): military, personalist, single-party, military-personal, party hybrid, personal/single-party/military, and monarchy.¹²

Table 2 presents the results from Brownlee's original tests of authoritarian breakdown (Models 1 and 3) and from the replication using only substantive autocracies (Models 2 and 4). As the table shows, measuring autocracy in substantive terms alters many of the core conclusions in Brownlee's analysis. Several of the most important coefficients shrink and are no longer statistically significant at normal levels. Military regimes continue to be statistically more likely to end in a given year than personalist regimes. But single-party regimes are no longer found to be significantly more durable than personalist regimes, with the coefficient on that variable dropping by half. Instead, monarchies emerge as clearly the most durable form, with the coefficient nearly doubling. And the three-party hybrid regime type (personal/single-party/military) also appears highly durable, with a coefficient that is now twice as large — and statistically significant.

These results raise pointed questions about the idea that ruling parties function as hedges against authoritarian demise.¹³ The main finding in Brownlee's original analysis was driven by the inclusion of a set of mildly competitive, civilian regimes that did not meet the substantive requirements for autocracy. While fully explaining this finding is beyond the scope of this paper, it may be that these more plural regimes were able to survive precisely because they abandoned political exclusion and allowed for a degree of competition and power-sharing. These may be viable methods of political survival, but they are not strategies available to a true autocrat, who must figure out how to survive while maintain exclusive control of power (the problem at the core of much of the authoritarianism scholarship). A study that includes regimes whose survival is based on *giving up* political exclusion muddies the waters.

The larger point from this replication is that some of the knowledge that has been accumulated in the

¹²In the models, personalist regimes are the omitted reference category. Coefficients for the other subtypes thus represent the relative difference in the likelihood of breakdown between that subtype and personalist regimes.

¹³Other scholars have also raised questions about this finding, cautioning that the existence of parties in autocracies may be endogenous to antecedent variables that better account for regime strength (Smith 2005; Gandhi 2008). Once these conditions are taken into account, parties may prove epiphenomenal to autocratic survival (see also Pepinsky 2014; Lachapelle et al. 2020).

TABLE 2. Replication test of authoritarian subtypes and regime breakdown

DV = End of regime	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Electoral authoritarian	-0.240 (0.294)	0.319 (0.276)		
Hegemonic authoritarian			-0.402 (0.404)	0.162 (0.355)
Competitive authoritarian			-0.146 (0.311)	-0.485 (0.312)
Military regime	1.128** (0.372)	0.915* (0.397)	1.120** (0.371)	0.896* (0.401)
Military-personalist	0.437 (0.372)	0.286 (0.341)	0.479 (0.372)	0.339 (0.333)
Party hybrid	-0.110 (0.404)	-0.182 (0.383)	-0.112 (0.409)	-0.197 (0.388)
Single-party	-0.889* (0.377)	-0.479 (0.285)	-0.866* (0.385)	-0.456 (0.290)
Personal/military/single-party	-0.724 (0.688)	-1.553* (0.653)	-0.688 (0.658)	-1.559** (0.608)
Monarchy	-1.224 (0.665)	-2.568* (1.114)	-1.197 (0.645)	-2.556* (1.114)
Prior liberalization	1.195*** (0.274)	0.811** (0.283)	1.176*** (0.277)	0.799** (0.283)
Per capita GDP (logged)	-0.349* (0.137)	-0.190 (0.142)	-0.354** (0.136)	-0.200 (0.141)
Lagged GDP/capita growth	-0.036** (0.012)	-0.018 (0.012)	-0.036** (0.012)	-0.019 (0.013)
Middle East	0.043 (0.411)	-0.330 (0.441)	0.104 (0.428)	-0.252 (0.441)
Central and Eastern Europe	1.050*** (0.280)	0.518 (0.307)	1.043*** (0.283)	0.507 (0.309)
Age of regime	0.047 (0.065)	0.032 (0.052)	0.048 (0.065)	0.038 (0.051)
Age²	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)
Age³	0.00001 (0.00002)	0.00001 (0.00002)	0.00001 (0.00002)	0.00002 (0.00002)
Post-cold war	0.501 (0.290)	0.400 (0.277)	0.494 (0.292)	0.398 (0.278)
Constant	-1.182 (1.220)	-1.676 (1.142)	-1.163 (1.218)	-1.656 (1.136)
Observations	2,132	1,707	2,132	1,707
Log-Likelihood	-381.804	-369.799	-381.549	-369.369

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001. Two-tailed tests. Robust standard errors in parentheses

authoritarianism literature may need rethinking once a substantive approach is applied. We certainly do not expect every finding to be overturned; in fact, we imagine that many will hold up. But where key findings stem from variations that correlate with the differences between substantive autocracy and non-autocracy (as in the example above), we do expect there to be some need for revision.

CONCLUSION

The comparative study of authoritarianism is motivated by a concern with political systems where the many live under the exclusive rule of a few. These regimes have been responsible for some of history's most catastrophic wars and most shocking atrocities. In recent years, a growing number of social scientists have dedicated themselves to uncovering how such regimes work and how they might be reformed or replaced. This quest for answers, however, has been hindered by blurry concepts and blunt metrics.

Since the end of the Cold War, researchers have measured autocracy as the absence of democracy. We argue that this approach produces a heterogeneous set of regimes with little underlying coherence, ultimately obscuring what is meant when social scientists invoke the phrase "autocracy." Furthermore, we believe that this class of regimes does not accurately represent what scholars actually are trying to address when they talk about autocracy. The leading works tend to cite cases and practices exemplified by a smaller and more related population of regimes.

A collective research agenda on the problems of authoritarianism requires concepts that match what students mean to study with what they actually study. To this end, we have introduced a substantive definition of autocracy as politically exclusive rule. This definition includes two criteria — rule and political exclusion — which allow us to excise political systems that are not substantively autocratic (but are also not democratic). These political systems fall into five categories: anarchies, foreign occupations, transitional orders, limited franchise regimes, and dominant faction regimes. A series coding rules (including a 70% electoral threshold) and existing datasets helps separate substantive autocracies from limited franchise and dominant faction regimes.

The analyses based on a substantive approach challenge several impressions from prior work on authoritarianism. First, we find that 20-35% of the country-years considered autocratic in existing

datasets are not substantively autocratic. Second, substantive autocracies are less free, more repressive, more bellicose, and more militarized than autocracies produced by a residual approach. Third, crucial periods of world history are less autocratic than typically assumed — the post-Cold war period, for example, has roughly 26% fewer autocratic country-years. Fourth, current datasets overstate the prevalence of certain autocratic sub-types, particularly multi-party regimes.

We also demonstrate the potential implications of adopting a substantive approach through a replication of one prominent study on authoritarian breakdown, which shows that party-based autocracies are not as durable as previously believed. Further research will be required to determine whether other findings in the field also require revision.

One recent argument that may warrant some rethinking is the idea that a new and upgraded form of authoritarianism has emerged in recent years, replacing the uglier and more brutal autocracies of the 20th century (e.g., Guriev and Treisman 2019, 2022; Matovski 2021). While these accounts may be correct in identifying and theorizing a new form of political rule, we reason that many of the regimes under discussion are not substantively autocratic. These non-autocracies are certainly worthy of study — deserving, even, of their own separate research agendas. But they are not likely to function according to the logics and practices of substantive autocracies (an insight that appears to be born out in these works' arguments).

Finally, our findings suggest that recent debates about democratic backsliding, breakdown, and erosion would benefit from a substantive approach. What we are witnessing with the rise of illiberal governments in Hungary, India, and elsewhere is not so much a “third wave of autocratization” but the emergence of new dominant faction regimes. This finding echoes the work of other scholars, who highlight the correlation between democratic decay and “grey zone” regimes or “semi-democracies” (Diamond 2015; Levitsky and Way 2020; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2015; Way 2015). A substantive conceptualization of autocracy gives us new language to discuss these regimes, and examine how they differ from both electoral democracy and true authoritarianism. At the same time, it better equips us to analyze “deepening autocratization” (Sinkkonen 2021); that is, the move from competitive political practices (whether or not they are free and fair) towards a more exclusive and singular form of rule.

In closing, the main contribution of our work is to underline what is at stake when political scientists

define their concepts and make measurement decisions. As our analyses demonstrate, the answers scholars find when treating autocracy as non-democracy may differ greatly from what they will discover when studying autocracy as political exclusion. Knowing this, it is important that academics be clear with their audiences about what their concept of autocracy entails and whether or not their findings are robust to alternate approaches. Only then can we answer theoretical and policy-relevant questions about the politics and persistence of authoritarian regimes.

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