Playing the Enemy

Information, Deception, and Dictatorial Survival

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Abstract

What strategies do autocrats use to maintain power? Across three papers, I examine puzzling aspects of autocratic rule. These range from personalist dictators publicizing failed conspiracies to opposition involvement in and service provision informed through query sessions under competitive authoritarianism. Personalist dictators in hostile environments can cultivate a robust reputation for invincibility through public accusations. If successful, it fully deters any potential future rivals.

Competitive authoritarian regimes may grant opposition elites regular opportunities to publicly criticize the government during question times. It can discourage public dissent in situations where collective action against the regime would have succeeded, had no opposition deputies given public statements. Such biased question times are one option for autocrats to stabilize their rule through query sessions. Another is informational question times: partisan deputies with low affinities towards democracy are inclined to inform about grievances among society so autocrats can improve service provision.

Overall, this dissertation clarifies how and when autocrats can gather and manipulate information to maintain power, and what roles repression plays in this regard.

Sammanfattning på svenska

Vilka strategier använder autokratiska ledare för att behålla makten? I avhandlingens tre artiklar undersöker jag flera gåtfulla aspekter av autokratiskt styre. Dessa sträcker sig från personalistiska diktatorer som offentliggör misslyckade konspirationer, till att i elektorala autokratier utnyttja oppositionen under frågestunder i parlamentet för att få mer information om hur offentlig service ska förbättras. Personalistiska diktatorer kan använda sig av offentliga anklagelser fär att i hotfulla miljöer odla bilden av sig själv som oåtkomlig. Om de lyckas avskräcker det helt potentiella rivaler i framtiden.

Regimer i elektorala autokratier kan också ge eliter från oppositionen återkommande möjligheter att kritisera regeringen under parlamentariska frågestunder. Det kan minska risken för folkliga protester i situationer där sådana antagligen hade lyckats, om inte oppositionen fått tillåtelse att yttra sig. Sådana manipulerade frågestunder är ett sätt för auktoritära ledare att stabilisera sitt styre. Ett annat är informationsgivande frågestunder: Ledamöter från det styrande partiet med låg preferens för demokrati är mer benägna att berätta om missnöje i samhället så att auktoritära ledare kan förbättra offentlig service.

Sammanfattningsvis bidrar denna avhandling till att tydliggöra hur och när auktoritära ledare kan inhämta och manipulera information för att behålla makten, och vilken roll förtryck spelar.

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December 7, 1947. My great-grandmother was cultivating her field when she was shot dead. Her farmhouse was within a stone's throw to the west of the former inner German border, parts of her land even closer. The sniper was a border guard of the Soviet Military Administration that later became the German Democratic Republic.

For many, her farmhouse became a port of freedom. A rill flows from the eastern side of the border right into the family premises. It offered a loophole for numerous refugees seeking to escape the claws of the neighboring Communist regime. With no hesitation, my grandparents, who had taken over the farm after her passing, for decades, helped them cross; gave them shelter; smuggled goods for those left behind.

Born in West Germany shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, I have been privileged to live my entire life in prosperity and democracy. And yet, the shadows of Germany's past have shaped who I am today. When my grandma had a significant birthday in the 1990s, the number of guests exceeded our core family. Two distant relatives of the old guard, too, joined up—dressed in uniforms of the Wehrmacht. I was too little to make sense of it by myself but able to once being told. Still today, I can feel the anger soaring inside me in that very moment my elder brothers explained it to me. Who would endorse such a horrible regime? How can a handful few take hostage an entire nation? Why does authoritarianism prevail? The urge to grasp such things has culminated in this dissertation.

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Contents

1 Introduction **1**

2 Intentional Survival Mechanisms **9**

3 Theoretical Framework **25**

4 Methodology **31**
4.1 Game Theory 31
4.2 Empirical Tests in *Question Times II* 35

5 Substantive Synthesis **39**

6 Avenues for Future Research **43**

7 Papers I-III **55**

1 Introduction

Ever since Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, people have sought to understand how autocrats maintain power.[1] Earlier scholarship focuses on personalities and actions of dictators. It teaches us a great deal about how modern autocratic politics looks. For instance, autocrats attach great importance to an appearance of strength (Jackson and Rosberg 1982; Tullock 1987), perpetuate disorder (Chabal and Daloz 1999), constantly rotate personnel across posts (Jackson and Rosberg 1982; Migdal 1988; Wiarda 1968), sustain clientelist networks (Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Chehabi and Linz 1998; Jackson and Rosberg 1982), repress and terrorize (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1965; Migdal 1988; Wiarda 1968; Wintrobe 1998), develop personality cults (Chehabi and Linz 1998), uphold ideologies (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1965), and prioritize loyalty and cohesion (Herb 1999; Migdal 1988; Quinlivan 1999). It is less informative on *why* dictators act in these ways.

Previous scholars rarely suggest what Ashworth, Berry, and Bueno de Mesquita (2021, 53–54) call intentional mechanisms. They rarely make explicit what other actors dictators are interacting with in those situations, what dictators believe about the state of the world, what they hope to accomplish,

1. I build on Boix, Miller, and Rosato's (2013) minimal conception of democracy and autocracy. A country's leader as an autocrat if that individual (1) has not been directly or indirectly elected in free and fair popular elections, or (2) has been but either (i) no majority of adult men were eligible to vote or (ii) that individual has insulated themselves from being accountable to voters either directly or indirectly through a legislature. The terms *autocrat* and *dictator* are used interchangeably. So are *autocracy* and *dictatorship*.

and what alternative strategies they could use but do not. In other words, earlier contributions usually offer little intentional explanation as to why the strategies dictators choose maintain their power. To build upon this wealth of knowledge, I follow more recent scholarship of autocratic politics in using game theory when developing theoretical arguments in this dissertation.[2] Game theory is particularly suitable for intentional explanation.

Since Geddes (1999) exposed how little is still known about the persistence and transformation of autocratic rule,[3] research on autocratic politics has taken a neoinstitutionalist turn (Pepinsky 2014).[4] Unlike earlier work, recent research attests formal institutions particular importance for dictatorial

2. A broad review of the recent formal literature on autocratic politics is provided below.

3. See Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018) and Svolik (2012) for comprehensive accounts on the politics of autocratic rule. See Remmer (1989) for earlier scholarship with a particular focus on military rule.

4. Remarkable exceptions have examined state capacity (Slater 2010), multiethnic politics (Arriola 2012), the politics of redistribution (Albertus 2015), the politics of corruption (Yadav and Mukherjee 2015), coercive institutions (Greitens 2016), repression (Blaydes 2018), transparency effects (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018; Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2022), bureaucratic politics (Hassan 2020), civil society (Mattingly 2020), or class politics (Rosenfeld 2021) in the authoritarian context.

survival, especially regime parties,[5] elections,[6] and legislatures.[7] Many recent accounts use formal theory to advance intentional mechanisms through which they suggest specific formal institutions help dictators maintain power.

Yet, this body of literature still has research gaps. First, consider authoritarian legislatures. Most reasoning on how legislatures promote dictatorial survival is located at the macro level but remains inconsistent with qualitative accounts at the individual level of deputies (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 136–137). Despite some recent progress (Gandhi, Noble, and Svolik 2020; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Malesky, Schuler, and Tran 2012; Lü, Liu, and Li 2020; Noble 2020; Opalo 2019; Somfalvy 2020; Schuler 2020; Simison 2020; Truex 2016, 2020; Weipert-Fenner 2020), we still know little about the machinations within authoritarian legislatures, the roles of individual legislators, and how their practices may strengthen autocrats. I therefore devote two papers of this dissertation to the roles partisan and opposition deputies

5. See Smith (2005), Brownlee (2007), Magaloni (2008), Magaloni and Kricheli (2010), Boix and Svolik (2013), Reuter (2017), Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018, 129–153), and Meng (2021).

6. See Magaloni (2006), Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009), Blaydes (2010), Levitsky and Way (2010), Fearon (2011), Little (2012), Masoud (2014), Simpser (2014), Chernykh and Svolik (2015), Gehlbach and Simpser (2015), Rozenas (2015), Little, Tucker, and LaGatta (2015), Morgenbesser (2016), Rundlett and Svolik (2016), Ma (2020), Miller (2020), and Lueders (2021).

7. See Gandhi (2008), Lust (2009), Blaydes (2010), Malesky and Schuler (2010), Malesky, Schuler, and Tran (2012), Boix and Svolik (2013), Truex (2016), Opalo (2019), Woo and Conrad (2019), Gandhi, Noble, and Svolik (2020), Somfalvy (2020), and Weipert-Fenner (2020).

serve under competitive authoritarianism.[8]

Second, neoinstitutionalists usually interpret personalist rule—the type of rule earlier scholars were particularly interested in—as a dictator's wildest dream: uncontested reign. This interpretation has been dominant among neoinstitutionalists despite the fact that Geddes (1999) identifies personalist regimes as just another subtype in her pioneering typology of authoritarian regimes.[9] From their perspective, personalist dictators are autocrats who 'have acquired so much power that they can no longer be credibly threatened' (Svolik 2012, 6).[10] Consequently, personalist dictators need not institutionalize because nobody defies their rule.

However, this interpretation of personalist rule seems inconsistent with empirical evidence. A few personalist dictators seemed truly uncontested—at least from some point onwards. Yet, internal and external threats did recur and defy many others. Their rule was clearly contested. Neoinstitutionalist approaches offer little explanation as to why some personalist dictators survive in power in uncontested ways till their dying breath while others get

8. Under competitive authoritarianism, competition for power between regime adherents and opposition parties is 'real but unfair' (Levitsky and Way 2010, 3).

9. Personalist rule means that an individual leader or a narrow clique unilaterally govern through personal decisions on political matters (Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Chehabi and Linz 1998; Chin et al. 2022; Gandhi and Sumner 2020; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018; Jackson and Rosberg 1982; Meng 2020; Svolik 2012).

10. Svolik (2012) calls these autocrats *established* but equates them with personalist dictators. See Meng (2020) for a similar discussion.

ousted in violent coups or revolts.[11] In the third paper, I therefore examine how personalist dictators survive. In particular, I build upon the earlier literature and more systematically analyze why many personalist rulers publicize allegations of failed conspiracies—whether fake or real—against individual or a group of regime insiders or outsiders.

Overall, this dissertation continues to examine *what mechanisms autocrats use to maintain power*. Across three papers, I study public accusations—a shorthand I use in reference to allegations of conspiratorial action—under personalist rule and the behavior of legislators during question times under competitive authoritarianism to improve our knowledge in these regards. At a more abstract level, their synthesis offers a broader explanation for this overarching research question: *autocrats can gather or manipulate information to accomplish this goal*.

Consider each paper in brief. The first paper is referred to in the remainder of this kappa as *Personalist Rule*. It examines why personalist dictators publicize accusations. I argue that public accusations are a key survival strategy for personalist dictators. They serve two purposes: preventive repression and persuasion. Even poorly informed dictators can endogenously cultivate a robust reputation for being able to uncover and arrest conspiracies—a reputation for invincibility—through arbitrary public accusations. If successful, it fully deters any future threats. Remarkably, both poorly and well informed personalist dictators may deliberately seek to antagonize regime insiders and outsiders to create the scope conditions for this survival strategy to work when their reputation for invincibility is questionable.

11. Svolik (2009) argues that dictators can exploit uncertainty around their actions to accumulate more political power. If successful, they become personalist dictators. From this perspective, a dictatorship can be personalist only in hindsight.

The second paper is labelled *Question Times*. It examines why opposition deputies are granted regular opportunities to publicly criticize government performance under competitive authoritarianism. I argue that opposition involvement is part of a persuasion mechanism. Autocrats facing a credible threat of public dissent permit opposition elites to publicly evaluate the government. Simultaneously, they ensure that systematic but probabilistic repression may intimidate opposition deputies into concealing genuine disapproval. The resultant effect is a biased public signal. It discourages public dissent in situations where anti-regime action would have succeeded, had citizens observed no opposition deputies give public statements.

A puzzle arising from *Question Times* is examined in the third paper (*Question Times II*). *Question Times* implies that opposition deputies should lack incentives to help autocrats inform service provision. Yet, empirical accounts show that legislators are instrumental in service provision to their constituencies (Blaydes 2010; Lust 2009; Truex 2016; Zolberg 1964). In fact, opposition deputies are often argued to provide relevant information about grievances among society through question times by remonstrating on behalf of their constituencies (Gandhi 2008; Lust 2009; Truex 2016). I thus investigate which legislators meaningfully inform service provision and whose involvement in query sessions autocrats can exploit to discourage protests.

Although I formalize theoretical insights, *Question Times II* focuses less on theory than empirics. I distinguish partisan from opposition deputies and argue that their low affinity towards democracy induces partisans to participate in informational question times. Opposition elites with a high affinity avoid helping autocrats inform service provision but might still accept their involvement in biased question times. Two testable predictions are that, first, opposition deputies are more likely than partisans to convey approval because of repression effects and, second, public dissent decreases

in approval regardless of political affiliation. I confirm both predictions empirically using original data from a minimally supervised sentiment analysis of all questions raised during query sessions combined with protest data at constituency level in Zimbabwe between September 2015 through December 2019.

In the remainder, I embed my papers in the broader body of literature on dictatorial survival, provide an overarching theoretical framework, discuss game theory as my main methodology, synthesize my papers' insights, and sketch avenues for future research.

2 Intentional Survival Mechanisms

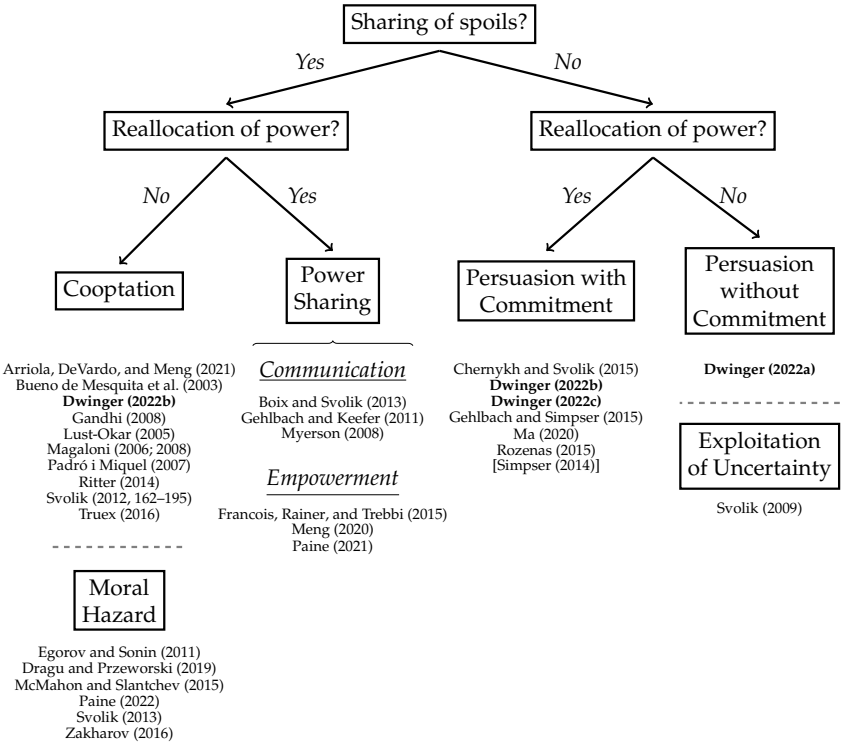
Figure 2.1 provides an overview of the main mechanisms through which modern autocrats are argued to maintain power.[1] The current debate focuses on power sharing. I thus use Meng, Paine, and Powell's (2022) conception of power sharing to develop a framework which distinguishes distinct mechanisms.

Our understanding of mechanisms for dictatorial survival has evolved from an earlier emphasis on *cooptation* and *moral hazard* via *power sharing* onto mechanisms involving *persuasion*. *Personalist Rule* and *Query Sessions* exclusively contribute to the latter (Dwinger 2022a, 2022c). *Query Sessions II* contributes to mechanisms involving persuasion but also cooptation (Dwinger 2022b).

Meng, Paine, and Powell (2022) argue that a dictatorial survival strategy must meet two requirements to be conceptualized as power sharing. An autocrat must offer a potential challenger a *share of the spoils* and *reallocate de facto power* to the latter. Sharing spoils means that the autocrat distributes tangible goods to a potential challenger's local area or concedes perks, rents, or privileges to them themselves. It can also involve policy compromises (Gandhi 2008, 74–77). If the negotiated deal stops at concessions, however, an autocrat's commitment is not credible. It can simply be undone in the future. Power sharing requires an enforcement mechanism which 'makes it costly for the ruler to renege' (Meng, Paine, and Powell 2022, 6).

1. My emphasis is on intentional mechanisms. This discussion thus focuses on formal contributions.

FIGURE 2.1: Mechanisms for Dictatorial Survival.



Power Sharing

My contributions illustrate that autocrats can maintain power without sharing spoils, and even with neither sharing spoils nor reallocating power. *Question Times* shows that autocrats can exploit personal interests of opposition elites to discourage public dissent. Opposition involvement is a deliberate choice by opposition elites. It yields no tangible goods but only improved expectations that they may be able to capitalize on it if the regime collapses. In fact, they know they may face repression if they so decide. Reallocation

of power occurs in the sense that autocrats relinquish control over the parliamentary agenda to opposition deputies during question times.

Dictators can leverage public accusations to discourage conspiracies in *Personalist Rule*. Public accusations can maintain a dictator's power through preventive repression but also persuasion, which can ultimately arrest any further conspiracies. This can be achieved without reallocation of power, let alone material concessions.

In contrast, Meng, Paine, and Powell (2022) identify two distinct enforcement mechanisms in the literature on dictatorial *power sharing*.[2] A first mechanism emphasizes the effects of formal institutions on *communication* among potential rivals. Boix and Svolik (2013) argue that deliberative bodies within regime parties and legislatures enhance transparency. It facilitates that ruling allies can hold an autocrat accountable.

Myerson (2008) argues that dictators face a commitment problem when promising concessions amid challenges to their rule. Agents whose support against a challenger is critical thus make no efforts unless the autocrat facilitates communication through courts or legislatures in which agents convene. Communication facilitates effective punishment: a transgression against a single agent becomes public knowledge and ultimately means a transgression against all (Meng, Paine, and Powell 2022, 11). This collective threat restrains a dictator. Gehlbach and Keefer (2011) make a similar argument about regime parties and expropriation.

Another enforcement mechanism is *empowerment*.[3] Empowerment means

2. In fact, they also identify *delegation* as a third enforcement mechanism. Although autocrats have ceded control over the policy agenda in some instances (Dower et al. 2018), this form of commitment is more pronounced in the context of democratization (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Ansell and Samuels 2015).

3. Meng, Paine, and Powell (2022) call this mechanism 'giving away guns.'

that autocrats cede control over parts of the security sector to potential rivals. It is less about institutional effects than actual shifts in the distribution of power. Francois, Rainer, and Trebbi (2015) and Meng (2020) argue that autocrats can assign cabinet posts to elites who threaten their rule, should they not share power. Key cabinet posts are the vice presidency or ministry of defence. These give assigned elites access to coercive power and material resources. Their positions also create focal points which other elites can rally around (4).

Paine (2021) reconsiders the conventional logic of power sharing under mass threats. He stresses the effects of elite entrenchment, elite affinity towards mass rule, and a dictator's capacity to coup-proof his rule.[4] The magnitude of the elite outsider threat has ambiguous effects on a dictator's incentives to share power. Autocrats who have not implemented strong coup-proofing mechanisms or face deeply entrenched elites curtail rather than expand power sharing. Moreover, elite affinity towards mass rule determines whether an additional external threat from the masses exacerbates or eliminates an autocrat's power-sharing dilemma.

A weakness of these theories is their focus on coups, or challenges more broadly, as means to deter dictatorial opportunism. This assumption at best reflects motivations behind a minority of coup attempts between 1946 and 2010. Kim and Sudduth (2021, 1600) show that 62.3 percent of them occurred because the perpetrators sought more political power.[5] *Personalist Rule* and

4. See Quinlivan (1999) for a discussion of coup-proofing.

5. Aksoy, Carter, and Wright (2015) distinguish between *regime-change coups* and *reshuffling coups*. The former seek a change in the rules for leadership selection and decisionmaking. Reshuffling coups are more consistent with the notion that key elites stage a coup to sanction dictatorial opportunism. Kim and Sudduth (2021) build upon this typology.

Question Times account for this, even though this notion is more implicit in the latter. *Question Times II* takes distinct origins of challenges even more seriously. Partisan elites are reluctant to mobilize ordinary people against the autocrat but would do so if no service was redelivered upon their hints at failed service provision during question times. In contrast, marginalized opposition elites get involved in biased question times because it gives them regular opportunities to become the vanguard of democratic change by mobilizing public dissent through tough stances on the regime. It can give them access to highest government offices.

Cooptation

A credible commitment distinguishes power sharing from *cooptation*. In cooptation theories, autocrats offer spoils or policy compromises but no enforcement mechanism.

Question Times II is partly consistent with arguments that involve cooptation. Legislators might have incentives to help the dictator improve service provision. Upon a legislator's public notification of failed delivery, the autocrat can redeliver a service to that legislator's constituency to forestall its participation in collective action. *Question Times II* still makes innovative contributions to the literature on cooptation. First, it shows that only partisan elites with low affinities towards democracy are inclined to inform service provision. It corroborates Svolik's (2012, 165) notion that 'dictatorships co-opt most effectively when they aim at the ideologically most proximate segments of the population rather than actual opposition.' Second, it shows that partisan elites may be seated in authoritarian legislatures not necessarily because they are those who must be coopted, but because their own pro-autocracy bias induces them to ensure that the regime gives ordinary people

no reason to mobilize against it. Hence, they primarily act as informants while their constituents are those being 'coopted.'

One version of cooptation is the selectorate theory (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). An incumbent distributes a ratio of private over public goods to their winning coalition. But its members hold no means to enforce their inclusion in any future rounds (Meng, Paine, and Powell 2022).

Gandhi (2008), Magaloni (2008), Svolik (2012, 162–195), and Truex (2016) offer similar accounts,[6] although they put more emphasis on institutional effects. They consider either legislatures or regime parties as devices for cooptation. Gandhi (2008, 78) stresses both policy compromises as a distinguished form of cooptation and the reduction of transaction costs when compromises are negotiated in a legislature. Truex (2016) permits individual legislators more agency and argues that they remonstrate within bounds on behalf of their constituencies. Autocrats can use this information for targeted service provision. Deputies benefit when the autocrat survives but find it costly to remonstrate.

Magaloni (2008) and Svolik (2012, 162–195) argue that regime parties create structural incentives for loyalty to the regime among party members because they hierarchically assign costly services and benefits.[7] This logic is built on the notion that retirements and promotions occur at a constant rate and higher offices come with more perks and privileges.

6. See also Magaloni (2006).

7. Magaloni (2008) frames her argument in the language of power sharing. However, her survival mechanism does not meet Meng, Paine, and Powell's (2022) criteria for power sharing. It only entails sharing of spoils along a hierarchical scheme.

Ritter (2014) reconsiders the interrelationship between cooptation and repression. Her framework reveals that autocrats become less inclined to use repression and engage in cooptation instead when they become more secure in power. Yet, the scope and coerciveness of any realized repression becomes more severe.

Arriola, DeVardo, and Meng (2021) and Lust-Okar (2005) show how autocrats can resort to cooptation in order to divide and rule the opposition. Arriola, DeVardo, and Meng (2021) argue that autocrats can offer opposition elites cabinet posts. This offer is a poisoned chalice because it fragments the opposition. Lust-Okar (2005) illustrates how cooptation of moderate outsiders induces them to develop stakes in regime survival. These incentives partly result from fears that more radical excluded groups will marginalize them too, should their insurgency succeed. The extremist threat ties more moderate groups to the regime and makes it more likely to persevere.

Padró i Miquel (2007) accentuates these politics of fear in divided societies. Autocrats can elicit support from a sizeable share of society with only marginal goods provision. Their own groups support autocrats regardless if they must fear that an equally inefficient and venal ruler who favors another group takes over otherwise.

Cooptation theories lack the notion of an autocrat's commitment. The literature on power sharing has built upon this. Although this lack has been considered the main weakness of cooptation theories, *Question Times II* resuscitates the pure notion of cooptation by showing that it can be self-enforcing even if autocrats are unable to fully commit to informed service provision. Autocrats have incentives to renege from that arrangement occasionally. Partisan elites still accept it and mobilize their constituents every so often to enforce redelivery of services as much as possible. A pro-autocracy bias of partisan elites is key, however, for this arrangement to materialize.

Another issue with material cooptation is economic recessions. In times of

economic downturn, rents shrink or dry up entirely. This is a problem when dictatorial survival rests on a autocrat's ability to distribute spoils, especially when the dictator has an informational advantage about the available pie to be shared (Boix and Svolik 2013). The persuasion mechanism in *Question Times* provides autocrats with more flexibility because it does not rely on rent distribution. Even if an economic recession worsens their reputation for service provision, autocrats can still improve their odds to survive by adjusting the probability of repression. It also reveals the vulnerability of autocrats during economic crises because a lower reputation for service provision may compel them to reduce the probability of repression.

Moral Hazard

A flip side of cooptation is that potential rivals could use their rents or returns from office to turn against the autocrat. It defies the notion that autocrats usually aim to 'prevent [potential] rivals from developing their own bases' (Bratton and van de Walle 1997, 86). This aspect has been overlooked in the literature on cooptation. *Personalist Rule* takes *moral hazard* into account in the sense that neither rents nor gunpower are shared in the first place. Instead, autocrats manipulate beliefs of potential challengers about their prospects of success.

The notion of moral hazard features even more strongly in *Question Times*. In fact, it is baked in the arrangement between an autocrat and opposition elites. The former's entire survival strategy rests on the idea that the latter accept it only because biased question times may offer regular opportunities for opposition elites to capitalize on criticism and become the vanguard of democratic change.

The literature on civil-military relations is particularly explicit about problems of moral hazard. It provides an important corrective to the limits of

both cooptation and power sharing despite its focus on the guardianship dilemma. The guardianship dilemma means that autocrats who empower guardians to protect their rule also enable those guardians to turn against themselves (McMahon and Slantchev 2015, 297). The conventional logic implies that an autocrat's acceptance to tolerate the risk of guardianship increases in the severity of an external threat. Egorov and Sonin (2011) and Zakharov (2016) argue that this dilemma induces autocrats to prioritize loyalty over competence when hiring guardians.

Svolik (2013) shows that autocrats seek to keep resources for security agencies low relative to the level of external threats. Guardians, on the other hand, tend to exploit their informational advantage and exaggerate threats. These politics of 'push and shove' (Svolik 2012, 136) can ultimately trigger overt interventions of guardians into politics. Dragu and Przeworski (2019) argue that the odds of autocrats to survive improve when guardians can only intervene in politics but not engage in corrupt activities. Opportunities for corruption can undermine an autocrat's rule because they induce guardians to divert resources away from investments in security.

McMahon and Slantchev (2015) reconsider the conventional threat logic. They emphasize that the threat environment also shapes incentives for guardians to intervene in politics. They must be powerful enough to both stage a successful coup and fend off other challengers. This dual challenge can induce loyalty. Paine (2022) adds defection to a guardian's set of strategies. He argues that autocrats fear competent guardians not so much because of their potential to turn against them. They fear them because they likely survive intact after overthrows. It can compromise a guardian's loyalty to the dictator when a serious threat materializes.

The discussion of moral hazard in the context of dictatorial survival has barely reached beyond the realm of civil-military relations. This is a shortcoming because survival strategies autocrats use regarding other potential

threats seem prone to moral hazard too. *Question Times* and *Question Times II* broaden this literature by showing how autocrats can even exploit adverse interests of opposition elites to maintain power. *Question Times II* also suggests that the issue of moral hazard is mitigated in terms of cooptation because only partisans would accept informational question times to begin with. Their interests are fairly aligned with an autocrat's.

Persuasion with Commitment

Personalist Rule and *Question Times* contribute to a burgeoning body of literature which implicitly or explicitly argues that autocrats need not necessarily share spoils to promote their political survival. Autocrats can seek to dissuade potential rivals instead. Each contribution's mechanism involves but goes beyond repression to achieve this goal.[8] Deterrence primarily results from information manipulation.

Question Times advances a survival strategy which entails *persuasion with commitment* (Dwinger 2022c). It entails a credible commitment because rulers of competitive authoritarian regimes relinquish formal control of the parliamentary agenda to opposition elites during question times. At the same time, they ensure that opposition deputies face occasional threats of violation of their physical integrity in case they criticize the government. The resultant effect is a biased public signal. It can discourage public dissent in situations where collective action against the regime would have succeeded, had regular citizens not observed this biased public signal. *Question Times II* establishes more general conditions under which autocrats combine opposition

8. See Escribà-Folch (2013) for a discussion of repression as a core survival strategy. Davenport (2007) provides a typology of different forms of repression.

involvement with repression to manipulate information as opposed to informational question times, which rest on partisan elites who inform service provision to help autocrats stabilize their rule.

The argument is innovative even within the literature on persuasion with commitment. Other scholarship focuses on elections and electoral manipulation. Rozenas (2015) argues that autocrats with insecure office employ at varying degrees electoral manipulation prior to election day to improve their odds of survival.[9] Electoral manipulation can confuse opponents about an autocrat's popularity and thus dissuade them from instigating civil unrest.

Gehlbach and Simpser (2015) offer a similar argument according to which autocrats manipulate elections to induce bureaucratic compliance. When bureaucrats make efforts on behalf of the autocrat, opposition supporters might not only discard a revolution but even reward the authoritarian government. However, this is possible only if the autocrat can persuade bureaucrats that his grip on power is secure, which he signals through manipulated elections.

Strictly speaking, Chernykh and Svolik (2015) and Ma (2020) provide no models of Bayesian persuasion with commitment. But their arguments can be interpreted in this way. Chernykh and Svolik (2015) examine the effects of electoral commissions, courts, and observers on electoral manipulation and post-election protests. They show that both the incumbent and the opposition accept such third parties, even if they have a moderate pro-incumbent bias, because they mitigate costly post-electoral confrontations after narrow electoral victories. Ma (2020) argues that autocrats can disqualify opposition candidates from an election without knowing the actual scope of their support base. It can confuse voters and advantage an autocrat.

9. See Simpser (2014) for a similar argument.

Question Times is also innovative because it allows legislators agency. Opposition elites actively decide whether to, first, get involved in biased question times and, second, report their genuine level of approval if they do participate. Thus, the behavior of individual deputies arises endogenously in equilibrium and is not imposed upon actors by exogenous assumptions. In most other accounts, the effects of legislatures, let alone the behavior of individual legislators, are simply assumed.[10] For instance, Gandhi (2008, 79–80) postulates that regime and opposition deputies hammer out policy compromises without undue public scrutiny. Boix and Svolik (2013) assume that legislatures enhance transparency around a dictator's actions.

Persuasion without Commitment

Personalist Rule suggests that personalist dictators can also promote their own political survival through *persuasion without commitment*. In this sense, it enters entirely new terrain concerning dictatorial survival mechanisms. I argue that poorly informed personalist dictators in hostile environments can cultivate a robust reputation for invincibility using arbitrary public accusations. Their purpose is twofold: on the one hand, they serve repressive ends. Personalist dictators who expect conspiracies to be lurking but cannot verify their suspicions can arbitrarily accuse insiders or outsiders in an attempt to arrest these threats. On the other hand, public accusations aim to dissuade future potential rivals from conspiring in the first place. Although I assume that potential rivals benefit to some extent under a dictator's rule, it does not necessarily imply that the latter shares spoils with them. *Personalist Rule* does not meet the second criterion of power sharing either: a personalist dictator

10. Truex (2016) provides a refreshing exception.

makes no credible commitment which reallocates *de facto* power to potential challengers.

Exploitation of Uncertainty

Svolik (2009) makes an argument related to mine in *Personalist Rule*, although his is more about accumulation of power. His suggested mechanism is best described as *exploitation of uncertainty*. In a nutshell, Svolik (2009, 493) argues that dictators can acquire more political power at the expense of their ruling coalition by exploiting 'the secrecy that generally characterizes dictatorships,' even though they seek to arrest such dictatorial opportunism by threatening to stage a coup. Secrecy around power grabs is key for this argument to work.

Personalist Rule can explain power grabs in plain sight. Personalist dictators may accumulate power amid the turmoil around public accusations if the risk of a ruling coalition's collective punishment is lower than their potential gains from a power grab.

Further Contributions

My papers make four additional contributions. First, they reconsider the interpretation of violence and repression in modern autocracies. Repression becomes a means to an end. Autocrats do not substitute but combine repression with persuasion to maintain power. Other accounts perceive of violence as an 'ultimate arbiter of conflicts' (Svolik 2012, 2). Both autocrats and challengers seek to avoid its costs,[11] but are prepared to engage in violence if the

11. Escribà-Folch (2013) provides a noteworthy exception.

other defies their interests.

A main insight from *Question Times* and *Question Times II* is that autocrats combine opposition involvement with covert repression to manipulate information. *Question Times II* further clarifies the conceptual triangle of cooptation, information manipulation, and repression. Information manipulation is a substitute for cooptation; covert repression is essential for information manipulation. This insight is important because other accounts treat both information manipulation and cooptation as gentler substitutes for repression overall.[12] This interpretation only applies to overt repression, however, as *Personalist Rule* suggests.

Second, *Personalist Rule* emphasizes that dictators may also prolong their rule, in part, by making their environments more hostile. They may deliberately feed resentments because a hostile environment is a necessary condition for public accusations to work as a survival strategy. Theories of cooptation and power sharing only examine how dictators can appease potential challengers to stave off attacks.

Third, my papers follow Gehlbach and Simpser (2015) and Rozenas (2015) in acknowledging that both autocrats and challengers can simultaneously face uncertainty about the true state of the world. Unlike challengers, however, autocrats can exploit their position to manipulate public signals about this state. Information structures in most other theoretical accounts on dictatorial survival advantage either the autocrat or the challenger.[13] No actor

12. Tyson and Smith (2017) explicitly examine the relationship between cooptation and repression.

13. Autocrats enjoy an information advantage in Boix and Svolik (2013), Chernykh and Svolik (2015), Gehlbach and Keefer (2011), Myerson (2008), and Svolik (2009). Challengers enjoy an information advantage in Egorov and Sonin (2011), Francois, Rainer, and Trebbi (2015), Gandhi (2008), McMahon and Slantchev (2015), Paine (2022), Svolik (2013), and Truex (2016).

faces uncertainty or lack of information bears minor relevance in another set of arguments.[14]

Fourth, *Question Times II* advances our knowledge about the compatibility of different survival mechanisms. It shows that autocrats can use informational question times—arguably a cooptation mechanism—and biased question times—a mechanism of persuasion with commitment—within the same query session. The compatibility of survival mechanisms is a major research area but has not received much attention yet. To fully grasp how dictators survive, it is essential to understand what mechanisms they can combine both simultaneously and sequentially. *Question Times II* takes first steps in that direction.

14. See Arriola, DeVardo, and Meng (2021), Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003), Dragu and Przeworski (2019), Lust-Okar (2005), Magaloni (2006; 2008), Meng (2020), Paine (2021), Padró i Miquel (2007), Ritter (2014), Svolik (2012, 162–195), and Zakharov (2016).

3 Theoretical Framework

The papers share an overarching theoretical framework. Each theoretical account features an *autocrat* and one *chief challenger* as the main actors. Across all three papers, the autocrat's only interest is survival in office. This is a standard assumption in models of dictatorial survival.[1] I remain agnostic as to why autocrats want to maintain power. They may just enjoy calling the shots. They may want it because this sunshine spot comes with the utmost stream of rents. They may also want it to ensure that they can implement their most preferred policies.

The papers feature different chief challengers. In *Question Times* and its companion paper *Question Times II*, the chief challenger is a citizen from an opposition stronghold. This citizen is dissatisfied with government performance and considers to defy the autocrat. Her main motivation is to erect a democracy.

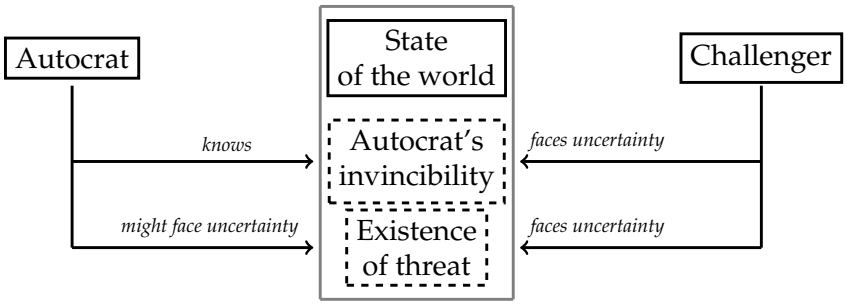
A personalist dictator's chief challenger is structured as a disloyal agent. However, this name tag can refer to an individual or group of insiders or outsiders alike. She ideally wants to be the dictator herself. I remain as agnostic about her motivations as I do about the dictator's.

Across all three papers, both the autocrat and the chief challenger face uncertainty about key aspects of the true state of the world. *Question Times* and *Question Times II* feature the simpler information structure, as Figure 3.1

1. Autocrats may feature additional interests. For instance, Gandhi (2008), Svolik (2012, 162–195), and Truex (2016) suppose that dictators also have policy preferences.

FIGURE 3.1: Information Structures in the Three Papers.

(A) Question Times and Question Times II.



(B) Personalist Rule.

illustrates. Their states of the world refer to a legislator's level of approval of government performance. The legislator represents another constituency than the citizen resides in. In *Question Times*, the legislator belongs to the opposition. In *Question Times II*, she might also be a partisan. A dictator's lack of information about grievances among different parts of society is a prominent assumption in the literature on cooptation (Gandhi 2008; Truex 2016). A citizen's lack of information about discontent in other constituencies integrates in reduced form a coordination dilemma among potential challengers who must act collectively to oust the dictator. Coordination dilemmas prominently feature other models of dictatorial survival too (Arriola, DeVardo, and Meng 2021; Boix and Svolik 2013; Gehlbach and Keefer 2011; Myerson 2008).

The information structure is more involved in *Personalist Rule*. The autocrat has private information about his own ability to uncover conspiracies. Depending on his type, he might face uncertainty over the existence of a third actor potentially threatening his rule. The chief challenger faces shares

the autocrat's uncertainty over the existence of another rival but is also uncertain over the autocrat's ability to uncover conspiracies. A dictator's information advantage over potential challengers is most pronounced in Boix and Svolik's (2013) and Svolik's (2009) accounts. A partly shared uncertainty about the existence of another potential challenger is a novel assumption in the literature on dictatorial survival.[2]

Another commonality is that *active additional players* are key in each mechanism. An opposition deputy shapes a disgruntled citizen's beliefs about the prospects of successful public dissent through public statements in *Question Times*. In *Question Times II*, it may be either an opposition or a partisan deputy. Moreover, these statements may be biased because a repressive agent potentially intimidates an opposition legislator into concealing her genuine disapproval.[3] In *Personalist Rule*, uncertainty over the existence of another potential challenger and her interaction with the others shapes equilibrium behavior of both the autocrat and the chief challenger.

The game-theoretic models share methodological key aspects. They each comprise what can be interpreted as a formal model of Bayesian persuasion.[4]

2. In some theories, the chief challenger is typically an insider but another external threat is lurking. The autocrat and the chief challenger either share uncertainty about the realization of this threat (Dragu and Przeworski 2019; Paine 2021), or the latter has an informational advantage (Egorov and Sonin 2011; McMahon and Slantchev 2015; Paine 2022; Svolik 2013; Zakharov 2016).

3. In *Question Times II*, the repressive agent is no active player. Parts of its model best reflect the baseline model in *Question Times* with more generalized payoffs for the legislator.

4. In *Question Times II*, the formal model of Bayesian persuasion is but one subgame.

TABLE 3.1: Methodological synthesis at a glance.

		Personalist Rule	*Query Sessions*	*Query Session II*
Mechanism		Persuasion & repression.	Persuasion.	Persuasion or information.
Commitment		No.	Yes.	Yes.
Information		Autocrat informed about his type.	Autocrat uninformed about his type.	Autocrat uninformed about his type.
Signal	*Costs*	Conditionally costly.	Costless.	Costless.
	Creation	Endogenous to interaction with third actor.	Commitment to probability distribution over signals.	Either as in *Question Times* or purely the legislator's signal.
	Manipulation	Autocrat can manipulate.		It depends on the subgame.

Note: Personalist Rule: How Do Personalist Dictators Survive? *Question Times*: Questions for Dictators. *Question Times II*: Question Times under Competitive Authoritarianism.

Broadly speaking, they follow the tradition of signalling games (Crawford and Sobel 1982; Kono and Kandori 2021), but differ in important ways.

Table 3.1 synthesizes their methodological key aspects. Recall that all three models involve more than two actors. In fact, the two models in *Personalist Rule* and *Question Times* each entail two actors who convey and two actors who receive signals.[5] For simplicity, the discussion focuses on the interaction between an autocrat as *Sender* and the chief challenger as *Receiver*.

5. In *Personalist Rule*, agent A conveys a signal to dictator D and dictator D sends to agent B another signal resulting from his interaction with agent A. In *Question Times*, autocrat A conveys a signal to citizen C through the interaction between repressive agent R and legislator L. This latter interaction comprises a signal from repressive agent R to legislator L.

Personalist Rule reflects a *formal model of Bayesian persuasion without commitment*.[6] An interaction between the Sender with a third actor generates a public signal which the Receiver observes. This signal is conditionally costly for the Sender depending on his choice of action. The Sender can manipulate the public signal through his interaction with the third actor. Moreover, the Sender is informed about his own type when making his choice. Finally, the Receiver's action has payoffs relevance for all actors involved in the game.

Question Times comprises a *formal model of Bayesian persuasion with commitment* (Kamenica and Gentzkow 2011). *Prior to* the realization of the true state of the world, the Sender commits to a probability distribution over signals for every possible state. In technical terms, he permits an opposition elite (neutral pronoun) to convey information about its own type. It can report truthfully or not. Before sending this message, it might get intimidated by the Sender's repressive agent. The probability of intimidation is endogenous to the Sender's choice. In other words, the Sender manipulates through occasional repression the public signal about the state of the world. The signal itself is costless. The Receiver's action entails payoffs relevance for all actors.

Question Times II comprises both a subgame of Bayesian persuasion with commitment and a standard signalling subgame (Crawford and Sobel 1982; Kono and Kandori 2021). An information mechanism applies in the latter. The public signal either materializes as in *Question Times* or is the legislator's pure message.[7] It is costless in either case. In the signalling subgame, however, the Sender can intervene through a costly action. Overall, the Receiver's action may have payoffs relevance for all actors.

6. It also entails preventive repression as another interwoven mechanism.

7. In the standard signalling subgame, the original Sender (autocrat) becomes another receiver. A third actor (legislator) conveys the signal.

4 Methodology

I leverage different methodological tools to develop and test my arguments. My main methodological tool is game theory. I discuss game theory as a methodology in the first part of this section. Its second part elaborates on additional methodological choices in *Question Times II*, the focus of which is more upon empirics than theory.

4.1 Game Theory

Across all three papers, I employ game theory. The methodology of game theory supposes that 'people rationally pursue goals subject to constraints' (McCarty and Meirowitz 2007, 6). These constraints are imposed by the expected behavior of other actors, physical resources, or structural contexts. Rationality simply means that an actor's preferences are complete and transitive and that she pursues her goals according to these preferences. Completeness requires that an individual can determine whether she does not prefer x over y, does not prefer y over x, or does not prefer either when confronted with two options x and y. Transitivity requires that an individual, who does not prefer y over x and does not prefer z over y, must also not prefer z over x when confronted with three options x, y, and z.

Game theory is one variant of formal theory. As a methodology, it features two key components. Its first component is a logical structure. It determines the key actors, their available strategic options, payoffs, and information when taking an action in a given sequence of play. Its second component is an interpretation of that logical structure (Rubinstein 2012).

Consequently, a game-theoretic analysis comprises two steps. Its first inquiry is purely formal and detached from the social phenomenon at issue. Its second part aims at explaining and assessing the target of inquiry in the real world (Morgan 2012).[1]

The primary purpose of formal theory is to identify mechanisms (Elster 1998; Hedström and Swedberg 1998).[2] Game theory is no exception. Game-theoretic models are crafted to explain *why* a social phenomenon materializes the way it does (Ashworth, Berry, and Bueno de Mesquita 2021, 45). In this dissertation, I use game theory to examine why personalist dictators publicize conspiracies, why autocrats permit opposition elites to criticize them, and why legislators help autocrats inform service provision.

Identification of the mechanism behind a social phenomenon requires intentionality (Ashworth, Berry, and Bueno de Mesquita 2021, 53–54). Making sense of their behavior is possible only if the goals, available strategies, constraints, and beliefs of key actors are specified. This is not to say that

1. See also Ashworth, Berry, and Bueno de Mesquita (2021, 47).

2. Paine and Tyson (2020) distinguish *phenomenonalist* from *experimentalist* approaches. Phenomenonalist models seek to explain descriptive empirical patterns. Their assumptions should map onto tradeoffs and constraints which real-world decision makers face. Sign predictions from comparative statics should match statistical relationships in empirical cases. Experimental models are argued to isolate mechanisms. Parsimonious assumptions are key to yield conceptual clarity in experimental approaches. Comparative statics are used to isolate channels through which one statistical estimate affects another estimate of interest. Ashworth, Berry, and Bueno de Mesquita's (2021) interpretation of formal theory resembles the phenomenonalist approach despite their emphasis on mechanisms. The discrepancy arises because Paine and Tyson's (2020) experimental approach seems better treated as a particularly stylized form of inquiry than a distinct approach.

nonintentional explanations as to why social phenomenons materialize do not exist. However, social phenomenons usually result from interactions between different actors. It is thus imperative to clarify their microfoundations to truly understand each actor's intentions (Dray 1957, 128).

The principles of rational-choice frameworks serve this purpose particularly well because they 'demand that models be built with the elements of an intentional explanation' (Ashworth, Berry, and Bueno de Mesquita 2021, 54). For a compelling intentional explanation, a model's key features must meaningfully reflect key aspects of the target of inquiry in the real world. Ashworth, Berry, and Bueno de Mesquita (2021, 13) thus call them representational features. In contrast, auxiliary features are invoked for the sake of tractability or simplification.

Personalist Rule offers an illustrative example of representational and auxiliary features. In this model, I consider a personalist dictator who faces uncertainty about current and future threats. To capture a current threat, one potential challenger with private knowledge about her intentions moves first and decides whether to conspire. The dictator moves next and decides under uncertainty whether to eliminate her—a common way of dealing with conspirators. Should the dictator survive, another challenger moves and decides whether to conspire. It captures the future threat. Both challengers, too, face uncertainty about the dictator's ability to uncover conspiracies. This sequence, each actor's strategic options, and their knowledge about the state of the world comprise representational features.

Consider two auxiliary features. First, the number of potential challengers is restricted to two. It keeps the analysis tractable. Second, the second agent has a disloyal type with certainty. Thus, the dictator knows that another threat is lurking. In the real world, a dictator's signal of invincibility is sent to the unknown and he is uncertain as to whether another conspiracy is in the making. Certainty about the second agent's type is a deliberate model

choice. It ensures examination of the mechanisms at play—preventive repression and persuasion—in the most stylized way possible. This takes priority for uncertainty over the second agent's intentions does not alter relevant equilibrium plays substantively.

Game theory also shares additional virtues of formalization. First, its reliance on mathematical concepts enhances transparency and reproducibility in theory building (Svolik 2019, 41). Second, its analytical rigor helps scholars avoid mistakes of logic. Third, game theory forces researchers to distill the complexity around social phenomenons to its barest essentials. It promotes a common vocabulary across research areas and improves the comprehensibility of theoretical arguments.[3]

Another virtue of formal theory is its usefulness for empirical research designs. First, its explicit statements about the microfoundations of social phenomenons promote transparency and help scholars 'assess external validity limitations in empirical research' (42). Second, its analytical clarity facilitates the development of commensurable research designs (Ashworth, Berry, and Bueno de Mesquita 2021).[4] At the very least, it permits researchers to eschew hypotheses resulting from logical flaws (Cameron and Morton 2002). Third, formal theory can reveal alternative avenues for testing theoretical arguments because it helps identify other empirical quantities useful to assess

3. See Ashworth, Berry, and Bueno de Mesquita (2021, 57–58) and Svolik (2019, 42) for discussions on the benefits of shared vocabularies and concepts of mechanisms.

4. Ashworth, Berry, and Bueno de Mesquita (2021, 16) argue that the commensurability of theory-driven research designs increases in the overlap between 'the relationship in the target being described by the theory and the relationship in the target being described by the empirics.'

them (Ashworth, Berry, and Bueno de Mesquita 2021, 28).

Development of empirical research designs should thus be preceded by formalization of proposed mechanisms. I therefore interpret *Personalist Rule*, *Question Times*, and *Question Times II* as first steps of entire research agendas.

Finally, formal theory can provide powerful insights into social phenomenons hard to test empirically. Contextual factors or ethical concerns may not permit experimental or quasi-experimental research designs; opportunities for natural identification are often rare.[5] These issues are particularly pronounced in research on autocratic politics where anecdotal evidence is often as good as it gets.

4.2 Empirical Tests in *Question Times II*

I provide the most systematic empirical tests of theoretical implications in *Question Times II*. It might be feasible to test as to whether a legislator's public statement affects the propensity for dissent among citizens in survey or lab-in-the-field experiments (Meng, Pan, and Yang 2017; Young 2019). But the location of most interactions in the formal model at the elite level renders unfeasible any experimental research design that can address core insights about legislative and dictatorial behavior. Even if it was, ethical concerns about intimidation as a treatment would likely preclude any experimental test of the persuasion mechanism.

The data structure precludes most research designs which allow causal inference from observational data. For instance, the lack of sequences in which

5. See Angrist and Pischke (2009), Dunning (2008), Imbens and Rubin (2015), and Rosenbaum (2017) for discussions of experimental and quasi-experimental research designs or natural experiments.

an individual legislator raises a question per each sessions—let alone the requirement that multiple such legislators are needed for the same sequence—makes a difference-in-differences design with panel data impossible (Imai, Kim, and Wang 2021). Moreover, almost all control variables are binary. It impedes a resort to two-way fixed-effects regression models (Angrist and Pischke 2009, 221–247).[6]

Other such avenues are blocked due to the lack of available data. For instance, the theoretical model in *Question Times II* implies that threats of violation of a legislator's physical integrity should be more pronounced in opposition than regime districts. In theory, a regression discontinuity design with electoral outcomes at district level as running variable might lend itself nicely to test this insight (Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik 2019). In practice, it requires the collection of data on intimidation and outright assaults of individual legislators. Their cooperation and willingness to share is necessary because the actual number of unknown cases of targeted acts of intimidation may be higher than is known.[7]

These limitations restrict the set of feasible research designs. Only statistical inference on associations between different quantities of interest is possible. Specifically, I focus on Zimbabwe between September 2015 through December 2019 as a typical case and test two theoretical implications. First, opposition deputies should be more likely than partisan deputies to approve

6. See Imai and Kim (2020) for a discussion of two-way fixed-effects regression models for causal inference with panel data.

7. A less strict interpretation might permit a resort to geocoded survey data. Subjective beliefs of respondents about repression at the district level might serve as a proxy for threats of violation of a legislator's physical integrity.

during question times. Second, the likelihood of public dissent in other constituencies should decrease in the approval of individual legislators regardless of their political affiliation.

Both hypotheses require measuring approval. For the sake of replicability and transparency, I employ a minimally supervised sentiment analysis (Rice and Zorn 2021). It is a particularly apt method in situations where language is specialized and its use changes over time (Rice and Zorn 2021, 34). Both applies to question times. To examine the first hypothesis, I leverage a simple comparison of means, pooled linear regression models, and random-effects linear regression models (Greene 2012, 51–65, 386–388). I find empirical support for the second hypothesis using pooled and random-effects Poisson regression models to account for the peculiarities of counts as outcome variable (Greene 2012, 842–869).

5 Substantive Synthesis

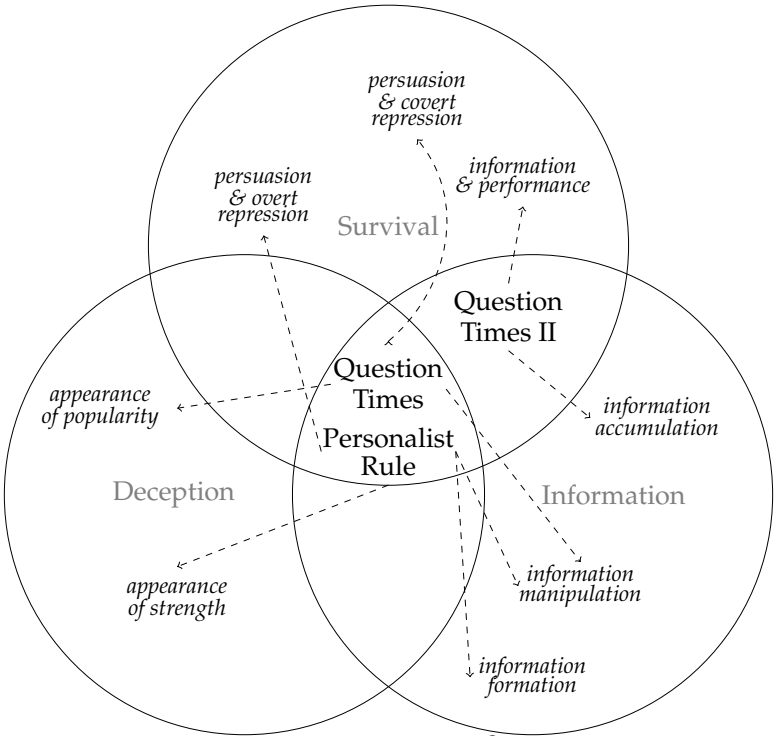
Overall, all three papers are about information, deception, and autocratic survival. Figure 5.1 provides a substantive synthesis. The Venn diagram's upper circle summarizes how autocrats survive in threatening environments. The three papers distill two broad ways through which autocrats can improve their prospects to survive.

Question Times II advances an information mechanism. It shows that competitive authoritarian regimes, in part, do not work much differently than democracies. Autocrats preferably gather relevant information to improve their performance records. However, only partisan elites whose interests fairly align with a dictator's can be expected to help autocrats inform service provision and stabilize their rule. This information mechanism involves neither repression nor deception.

Autocrats cannot fully commit to informed service provision. They are inclined to redeliver services only if citizens credibly threaten to mobilize against them otherwise. But this threat vanishes if citizens must expect an autocrat to redeliver each time a legislator reports failed service provision. Consequently, autocrats redeliver services only so often and citizens mobilize times and again because of the autocrat's moral hazard.

Autocrats also maintain power using a persuasion mechanisms. *Personalist Rule* and *Question Times* offer particular guidance in this regard. Personalist dictators resort to public accusations. Public accusations serve preventive repression: personalist dictators who expect a threat lurking but fail to locate it precisely allege arbitrarily and punish the alleged ruthlessly. These repressive acts occur in plain sight. This publicity is meant to convey invincibility.

FIGURE 5.1: Substantive synthesis at a glance.



Note: Personalist Rule: How Do Personalist Dictators Survive? *Question Times*: Questions for Dictators. *Question Times II*: Question Times under Competitive Authoritarianism. The focus of *Question Times II* is upon the information mechanism regarding partisan deputies. The persuasion mechanism regarding opposition deputies in *Question Times II* is fully covered by *Question Times*.

Thus, another purpose of public accusations is to dissuade future potential rivals from conspiring in the first place.

Under competitive authoritarianism, autocrats combine persuasion with covert repression. They regularly allow opposition elites to criticize government performance. Simultaneously, they occasionally intimidate opposition deputies into concealing genuine disapproval. The resultant effect is a biased public signal. It can discourage citizens from collective action in situations where they would have succeeded, had opposition elites given no public

statements about government performance.

Personalist Rule and *Question Times* entail a remarkable insight into the various purposes of political violence. Personalist dictators ruthlessly punish alleged perpetrators of conspiracies not only to suppress lurking threats but also to convey invincibility. Autocrats who intimidate opposition elites not only suppress different opinions but also abuse them to confuse the broader public about their popularity. Thus, violence not only serves repressive ends. Autocrats also use violence to persuade.

Consider the lower left circle in Figure 5.1. It summarizes two forms of deception dictators use. *Personalist Rule* suggests that poorly informed personalist dictators can cultivate a reputation for invincibility endogenously using public accusations. Surviving an arbitrary cycle of times of serenity and violence signals strength and can eventually insulate personalist dictators from any further threats, even if they lack ability to uncover conspiracies. Unlike personalist dictators, *Question Times* shows that competitive authoritarian rulers combine opposition involvement with systematic but probabilistic repression to appear popular. An appearance of popularity can discourage public dissent.

The lower right circle in Figure 5.1 summarizes how dictators use information. The information mechanism in *Question Times II* solely relies on information accumulation. From like-minded partisan elites, competitive authoritarian regimes gather information about grievances among society to stabilize their rule. *Question Times* shows that they also combine opposition involvement with repression to manipulate information, thereby seeking to confuse regular citizens about their popularity. Public accusations also aim to manipulate beliefs of potential challengers. Moreover, *Personalist Rule* shows that personalist dictators may deliberately antagonize regime insiders and outsiders. They actively form and shape information environments to create conditions for public accusations to work as a survival mechanism.

6 Avenues for Future Research

This dissertation covers a wide range of aspects of autocratic rule. It examines public accusations in personalist dictatorships and question times under competitive authoritarianism. It also discusses the roles of information in survival strategies of modern dictators. My overarching argument is that autocrats either gather or manipulate information to maintain power. At an abstract level, this is why personalist dictators publicize failed conspiracies or opposition elites are allowed to criticize the government under competitive authoritarianism. It also explains how partisan elites in legislatures can help an autocrats stabilize their rule.

This dissertation also clarifies the purposes of repression. For autocrats, violence can be a means to an end, not just an ultimate arbiter of conflicts. Overt repression can convey information about a personalist dictator's ability to uncover and arrest conspiracies. Under competitive authoritarianism, covert repression is key for information manipulation which rests on opposition involvement.

To conclude, I want to highlight two avenues for future research. First, autocrats often face environments in which different threats operate on them simultaneously. Most scholarship focuses on either internal or external threats. Little is therefore known about how autocrats survive in dual-threat environments.[1] Moreover, origins and motivations for threats can differ. For instance, some threaten a coup to hold a dictator accountable, others seek more

1. Greitens (2016) and Paine (2021) have taken first steps in filling this gap. See also Casper and Tyson (2014) and Tyson and Smith (2017).

political influence (Aksoy, Carter, and Wright 2015; Kim and Sudduth 2021). It seems plausible that dictators must confront distinct threats with different means. However, survival strategies that appease the former can embolden the latter. Future studies of dictatorial survival strategies must take more seriously that various threats can exist simultaneously.

Second, future research should endogenize an autocrat's choice of survival mechanisms. My review above identifies four distinct mechanisms.[2] What mechanisms work best in which contexts? Which are compatible? At what point is cooptation not enough any more and a credible commitment required to appease potential challengers? To what lengths can dictators persuade without commitments? Future research should address these questions thoroughly.

2. Moral hazard relates to cooptation, exploitation of uncertainties to persuasion without commitment.

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7 Papers I-III

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