Power of Persuasion:
Regime Legitimation During Authoritarian Elections

Christopher F. Patane
Department of Political Science
Sam Houston State University

Abstract

Legitimation, the ways governments seek to justify their rule, is becoming an essential component of our understanding of authoritarian regimes. This paper seeks to measure the changes in legitimation efforts around the time of elections in authoritarian regimes. It is well understood that authoritarian regimes can benefit from the process and image of elections, as long as they remain managed. But it is less clear how these governments justify the management of such elections, and whether they are accepted by the population. Relying on detailed events data measuring the frequency of certain legitimating government statements, this paper tests whether electoral authoritarian regimes increase their justifications for remaining in power or devote their efforts to undermining the legitimacy of opposition parties in order to reduce the uncertainty of electoral loss.

Despite the benefits in survivability and legitimacy that elections provide to authoritarian regimes, these events are still fraught with risk. Even when managed with manipulation or repression, election results may still turn against a government, and altering the results after the fact may harm the image of democracy that these regimes rely on (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Way 2010; Bhasin and Gandhi 2013; Schedler 2013). While other forms of authoritarian electoral manipulation have been well studied, less is known about how these governments talk about themselves during these contentious and risky periods.

This paper relies on recent theorizing about regime legitimation—the ways governments try to claim and appropriate political legitimacy—to test whether these claims change during election periods in autocratic regimes. I argue that because of the increased political risks associated with elections, governments will increase their efforts to construct their own political legitimacy and convince the population that the incumbent regime matches their conceptions of a legitimate government.

Regime Legitimation

Legitimation is defined as the attempts to shape public discourse in a way that achieves support from the public—or at least tacit acceptance. It does not make any claims about the actual perceived political legitimacy of the regime. Instead, it focuses on the efforts made by government actors to persuade the population that the governments structure and behavior is legitimate.

Within authoritarian politics, legitimation can be seen as one of three strategies governments can use to maintain power (Gerschewski 2013). Alongside violent state repression and the co-optation of elites and opposition groups, legitimation seeks to generate the perception of that government’s “right to rule” or, failing that, the acceptance of its authority (von Soest and Grauvogel 2017; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017).

When trying to gain this right to rule, authoritarian governments attempt to supply their own conceptions of political legitimacy and match those concepts already held by the population. Because the citizenry always has the option to ignore or dismiss the government's claims to its own legitimacy, some effort must be spent justifying regime structures and behaviors in the context of what is already held to be legitimate political activity. For example, an authoritarian regime may issue statements arguing that some opposition group is a national security threat in order to legitimate its manipulation of elections. However, if the holding of peaceful elections is considered by the population to be legitimate political behavior, then the government will be less able to use violence on election day against the opposition group lest it risk its image of political legitimacy.

While theoretical explanations for the incentives and payoffs of legitimation have gained recent attention, see von Soest and Grauvogel (2017) for the most recent framework, the empirical underpinnings of legitimation remain largely unexamined. In this context, I argue that the amount of legitimation matters. Just like governments change how frequently they repress or which elites to co-opt, they can choose the level to which they engage in legitimation. Autocratic regimes can talk more or talk less, and will do so depending on the situation in the rest of the political system.

Legitimation during Elections

Because elections represent times of uncertainty, legitimation is generally expected to increase during these times. As Schedler (2013) points out, while authoritarian regimes work to manage the risk associated with losing an election, there is always a chance that these measures are not sufficient. Increased mobilization, failure of institutions or actors responsible for repression and election manipulation, or information problems can all lead to failures in authoritarian election manipulation.

In this environment, legitimation claims become a mechanism to help further reduce the risk of electoral failure. They broadcast the reasons why the government is justified in its behavior, and

why that behavior is best for the country and people. Rather than try to physically alter election results or suppress opposition activity, they seek to drown out legitimization by opposition parties and candidates and persuade the population that the government is the best of all other possible outcomes.

During an authoritarian election, legitimization is expected to increase through several mechanisms. First, the perception of electoral uncertainty caused by the election will drive the government to attempt to reinforce its sense of legitimacy in the public's eyes, and mobilize supporters akin to a political campaign in consolidated democracies. Increased legitimacy claims will be generated in order to call attention to regime successes—such as increased economic growth or security. For the regime, the goal is to increase the presence of these successes in the minds of the voting population, thereby increasing their enthusiasm for the regime despite any authoritarian tendencies, and ensuring political survival.

Second, increased legitimization claims can seek to justify negatively perceived behaviors. During elections, it can be expected that opposition parties will be negatively framing regime behaviors and policy outcomes to maximize their chances of winning. These are designed to mobilize sympathizers against the regime, and there is no reason to expect a government to oppose this mobilization while simultaneously mobilizing its own supporters. In this regard, increasing positive statements about the government may directly counteract negative framing by the opposition.

Additionally, publics can be expected to know that the regime is manipulating election structures in order to increase its chances of winning. As a result, the government can not claim to win a free and fair election and derive its legitimacy from that. In this case, legitimization during the election should become even more important. Instead, meddling in an election needs to be framed as an acceptable measure to ensure positive outcomes for the country as a whole. Since groups talking about any regime failures are likely to highlight a failure to hold free and fair elections, the government must justify doing so by referencing the positive side effects of such behavior.

Lastly, increases in legitimization may simply be attempts by governments to drown out that of the opposition. It is already understood that government actors, regardless of regime type, have easier access to media (Balmas 2014; Balmas and Sheafer 2014; Rice and Somerville 2016). Governments may use this access during elections to saturate media, and therefore the population, with their messages. This limits population access to alternative voices, and removes them from the field of messages that voters will be using for information before elections.

These messages are expected to be carried to the population through the public statements made by governments and associated actors about the positive behavior and results of the regime as a whole. It should be noted that none of this is an argument that legitimization itself will actually change voter opinions or reduce the effectiveness of opposition claims. This study is an early effort to explain how the government's *attempts* to generate legitimacy with the public change with the need to manage the uncertainty associated with hybrid or electoral authoritarianism. The following section lays out an initial cross-national quantitative examination of the factors expected to change the amount of legitimization claims made by an authoritarian government.

Research Design

Because I am interested in how authoritarian governments try to *claim* legitimacy rather than achieve it, data on actions themselves are required. For this, I rely on the Integrated Crisis Early Warning System machine coded event data (ICEWS) and regime classification data from the Authoritarian Regimes Data set (ARD) (Boschee et al. 2017; Wahman, Teorell, and Hadenius 2013)

ICEWS is ideal for this purpose because it records “who did what to whom,” which allows for the selection of statements made by governments that carry legitimization claims to the population. Although governments make many kinds of statements, the observation of source actor, target actor,

and specific type of statement allows for a cross-national measurement of the volume of legitimization claims made by governments.

These data are used to generate the dependent variable *Legitimation*, which is a monthly count of all statements issued by government actors regarding the rallying of support for the government, appeals to end dissident behavior, symbolic acts, and praise for domestic civilian actors. Events only count as legitimization if they are targeted at domestically located, non-governmental actors. Because this variable is a count of the number of such statements made by a government, it closely measures the volume of legitimization claims that I am concerned with testing.

For each country year identified in the ARD, I distinguish between several types of electoral structure. These data assign the labels of no party, single party, and multiparty to autocracies that carry out some form of electoral competition but vary by the number of parties that are allowed to compete for office. For each country year, a government receives a dichotomous indicator for either *Multiparty*, *Single Party*, or *No Party*. For completion, and to compare between electoral autocracies and democracies, all countries observed as democracies are also given an indicator variable. All regimes that do not carry out elections, such as monarchies or military regimes, are excluded from the analysis.

The ARD pose a challenge in that they do not record if the country-year is one where elections were held. At this stage, ICEWS is used to generate an indicator of elections. Two election related variables are generated from these data. First, *Promise Election* contains a country-month count of all the domestically targeted public statements where a government official agrees to hold an election. These are measured because this can be seen as the start of the period of electoral uncertainty that electoral authoritarians must face. Additionally, promises to hold elections may be the result of or be interpreted as concessions to the opposition. In order to prevent these concessions from undermining regime survival, they can be “spun” as meeting the demand legitimacy of the population.

Second, *Hold Election* contains the monthly count of all times an election was reported in the ICEWS source material. Regardless of level of government, this gives a count of all the elections taking place that month. At these times, then, it is expected that legitimation is at its highest since electoral uncertainty is also at its highest.

This measurement strategy for promised and held elections permits the capture of elections at national and regional levels, so legitimation changes will be related to more than the widely-viewed national elections. They also help to provide a more specific However, because ICEWS does not record what type of elections are being held, we cannot distinguish between election level or number of candidates.

Several necessary control variables are also generated using the ICEWS data. These are informed by the other behaviors or statements that may drive governments to change how heavily they seek to justify their behavior. *De-legitimation* controls for the number of *negative* statements made about political opposition in the country. During an election, governments are going to engage in trying to undermine the legitimacy and claims of their opposition, and could choose to do so without engaging in any extra legitimation themselves. Controlling for this ensures that the full range of electoral statements that can be made by a government will be accounted for.

Governments may go further than verbally opposing the framing carried out by political opposition. If the threat to political survival is higher than anticipated, governments may *Threaten State Repression*. This variable accounts for all the verbal threats to use violence against mobilized dissidents. Because threats of violence may undermine the perception of legitimacy of the government or election, and targets must be justified, a corresponding increase in legitimation activity is expected.

Administrative Sanctions accounts for all the limits on political behavior that a government can carry out short of using armed force. This includes imposing curfews on public assembly and administratively restricting the rights of opposition groups to participate in politics. Not only can this

be carried out in the course of an election to restrict the chances of the opposition of winning, it is likely to be accompanied by some form of legitimation—justifying why the restrictions are necessary or why a particular group is no longer permitted to engage in political activity.

Criminal Convictions covers the use of legal proceedings and criminal courts to punish the population. While these may not necessarily be political, governments often justify why some criminal punishment is acceptable. If the criminal case is important enough to be reported in media, then it is already likely to be followed by the public. When governments go to justify their behavior in the realm of criminal justice then, their statements would be picked up as legitimation. As a result, changes in legitimation caused by non-electoral activity need to be controlled lest they interfere with the influence of regime type and elections.

Use State Repression controls for the use of violence against mobilized protest activity. Because of the risks associated with state repression (see Davenport and Inman 2012) in terms of failure or backlash, we can expect legitimation to change a great deal when it is used. Since elections are times for uncertainty and active electoral opposition can generate the threat perception that drives repression, we can expect repression to increase during elections. Because of these risks, governments will increase their legitimation to try and justify the use of repression.

The same risks of state repression are also present for other non-protest uses of violence. *Physical Integrity Violations* accounts for ICEWS events that match physical integrity violations such as abductions and mass killings. Since these require justification, or may be perceived negatively by the population, it is likely that legitimation will increase as the number of these events also increase.

Protests and Riots account for peaceful demonstrations and violent events caused by civilian populations that can be expected to increase legitimation behavior. Because these are other events that may undermine the perceived legitimacy of the regime, it is reasonable to expect that governments will increase their legitimation claims in response. When politics become contentious and more

attention is being paid to regime failures, the government might have higher incentive to champion its successes—“reminding” the population of all the things that they should support the state for.

Because of the count nature of the dependent variable, the models presented in the following section are estimated with a time-series cross-sectional negative binomial regression. This covers all countries from 1995-2014, defined on its lower bound by the availability of ICEWS starting in 1995 and on its upper bound by the ARD data. Temporal dependence is controlled with a single month lag of the dependent variable.

Findings

Alone, elections themselves only appear to be weakly related to increases in legitimization activity. Table 1 compares all electoral autocracy types to democracies. Multiparty and no-party autocracies legitimate less frequently than consolidated democracies, while single party regimes are weakly associated with higher levels of overall legitimization. Throughout the entire sample, the promise to hold an election actually decreases legitimization activity while the holding of an actual election increases legitimization across the board. Table 2 compares electoral regimes to multi-party autocracies. Again, single party regimes appear unique in that they legitimate themselves more frequently than their multiparty counterparts.

Table 3 contains interactions between the electoral autocracy indicators and election promises or execution, providing the most direct tests of the expectation laid out above. While most electorally oriented autocracies seem to be less active in their legitimization than consolidated democracies in general, this changes when those regimes are faced with a promised or held election. In both cases, multiparty and single party autocracies increase the amount of legitimating statements broadcast when elections are promised and held. Because there were no instances where a no party autocracy held or

promised an election, these interactions were omitted and no conclusions about their election legitimization behavior can be made.

Table 1: Legitimation in Autocracies Compared to Democracies		
	(1)	(2)
Variables	Promise Election	Hold Election
Multiparty	-0.220*** (0.019)	-0.217*** (0.019)
Single Party	0.043* (0.056)	0.051* (0.056)
No Party	-2.382*** (0.506)	-2.378*** (0.506)
Promise Election	-0.057*** (0.011)	— —
Hold Election	— —	0.015* (0.012)
Delegitimation	0.023*** (0.002)	0.022*** (0.002)
Threaten State Repression	0.018 (0.051)	0.076* (0.047)
Administrative Sanctions	0.048*** (0.008)	0.045*** (0.008)
Criminal Convictions	-0.005*** (0.000)	-0.005*** (0.000)
Use State Repression	0.141*** (0.011)	0.132*** (0.011)
Physical Integrity Violations	0.030*** (0.003)	0.031*** (0.003)
Protests	0.010*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)
Riots	0.013** (0.006)	0.014** (0.006)
Legitimation _{t-1}	0.005*** (0.000)	0.005*** (0.000)
Constant	0.181*** (0.015)	0.181*** (0.015)
N	34,375	34,375

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.1, * p<0.5

Table 2: Legitimation in Autocracies Compared to Multi-party Autocracies		
Variables	(3) Promise Election	(4) Hold Election
Single Party	0.260*** (0.056)	0.265*** (0.057)
No Party	-2.163*** (0.506)	-2.162*** (0.506)
Democracy	0.217*** (0.019)	0.213*** (0.019)
Promise Election	-0.057*** (0.011)	—
Hold Election	—	0.015* (0.012)
Delegitimation	0.023*** (0.002)	0.022*** (0.002)
Threaten Repression	0.018 (0.051)	0.076* (0.047)
Administrative Sanctions	0.048*** (0.008)	0.045*** (0.008)
Criminal Prosecutions	-0.005*** (0.000)	-0.005*** (0.000)
Repression	0.141*** (0.011)	0.132*** (0.011)
Physical Integrity Violations	0.030*** (0.003)	0.031*** (0.003)
Protests	0.010*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)
Riots	0.013** (0.006)	0.014** (0.006)
Legitimation _{t-1}	0.005*** (0.000)	0.005*** (0.000)
Constant	-0.036** (0.017)	-0.033** (0.017)
Observations	34,375	34,375

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.1, * p<0.5

Table 3: Conditional Effects of Regime Type on Legitimation (Democracy Reference Category)		
Variables	(5) Promise Election	(6) Hold Election
Multiparty*Promise Election	0.238*** (0.032)	— —
Single Party*Promise Election	0.432** (0.172)	— —
Multiparty*Hold Election	— —	0.297*** (0.020)
Single Party*Hold Election	— —	0.111*** (0.013)
Single Party	0.044* (0.056)	0.057* (0.056)
Multiparty	-0.215*** (0.019)	-0.220*** (0.019)
Promise Election	-0.065*** (0.011)	— —
Hold Election	— —	-0.065*** (0.011)
Delegitimation	0.022*** (0.002)	0.023*** (0.002)
Threaten Repression	0.009 (0.052)	0.089** (0.046)
Administrative Sanctions	0.046*** (0.008)	0.044*** (0.008)
Criminal Prosecutions	-0.004*** (0.000)	-0.004*** (0.000)
Repression	0.139*** (0.011)	0.128*** (0.011)
Physical Integrity Violations	0.031*** (0.003)	0.032*** (0.003)
Protests	0.010*** (0.003)	0.014*** (0.003)
Riots	0.015** (0.006)	0.014** (0.006)
Legitimation _{t-1}	0.005*** (0.000)	0.005*** (0.000)
Constant	0.180*** (0.015)	0.183*** (0.015)
N	34,375	34,375

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.1, * p<0.5

Discussion and Conclusions

Although electorally oriented autocracies engage in less overall legitimation than their democratic counterparts, multiparty and single party autocracies increase how much legitimation they use when promising elections and when carrying them out. During these periods, the uncertainty associated with elections incentivizes these regimes to make extra efforts to convince the population that its behavior is politically legitimate. At these points, it is the only time that an electoral autocracy will legitimate its behavior more frequently than democratic governments. In addition, this “pillar” of authoritarianism exists alongside and changes with changes in violence and co-optation and the evidence presented here indicates that legitimation changes for strategic purposes as well.

At this stage, these models are initial evidence about the influences on the amount of legitimation used within the theoretical framework laid out by earlier research. Some avenues of further work will be helpful in clarifying this relationship. First, these models leave unexamined how legitimation changes over the course of a single election. We have evidence that election moments change legitimation’s use, but cannot interpret when it is at its most intense. It remains unclear whether legitimation is increased for the entire election cycle, or if it becomes its greatest closer to the day of the election itself. While this would require a highly fine-grained analysis, ICEWS does provide daily data, so it should be possible to build a case study during election and non-election years to allow the tracing of legitimation intensity as an election is promised and the campaigns proceed.

These data also require supplementation that incorporates the structure of the elections themselves. The combination of repression, manipulation, and legitimation that surrounds an election will interact with the overall legal structure that governs how parties take office. So, while legitimation increases across all electoral regimes, the regime specific reasons remain unclear. For

example, a multiparty autocracy may engage in increased legitimation that targets specific issues used in opposition party campaigns. The opposition criticizes regime behavior on some issue or policy, and regime legitimation responds with how that interpretation is untrue or incorrect. On the other hand, a single-party regime may focus on overall national level performance in order to help its candidate of choice win. Because all candidates are members of the same political party, legitimation will need to balance passing on the government's preferred message without undermining faith in the party as a whole and prevent calls for increased competition.

While these two avenues, and better data for this test, are left for future work, there is evidence here for legitimation taking place and changing when political conditions change. In addition, it provides such evidence at a cross-national level using a measurement process that can be easily applied across cases; contributing to the generalizability of legitimation theories and methods of examining its use.

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