

## What autocracies say (and what citizens hear): Proposing four mechanisms of autocratic legitimation

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**What Autocracies Say (and What Citizens Hear):  
Proposing Four Mechanisms of Autocratic Legitimation**

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**Abstract**

Autocratic governments make claims about why they are entitled to rule. Some autocracies are more talkative than others, but all regimes say *something* about why they deserve power. This article takes seriously these efforts by introducing and interrogating the concept of autocratic legitimation. After engaging in a definitional discussion, it traces the development of autocratic legitimation in modern political science by identifying major turning points, key concepts, and patterns of inquiry over time. Ultimately, this introductory article aims to not only argue that studying autocratic legitimation is important, but also to propose context, concepts, and distinctions for doing so productively. To this end, the article proposes four mechanisms of autocratic legitimation that can facilitate comparative analysis: indoctrination, passivity, performance, and democratic-procedural. Finally, the essay briefly introduces the five original articles that comprise the remainder of this special issue on autocratic legitimation. The article identifies avenues for further research and identifies how each article in the issue advances down productive pathways of inquiry.

**Keywords:** Autocracy; authoritarianism; legitimation; legitimacy; totalitarianism; elections

## **1. Introduction: How do autocracies legitimate their rule?**

Can an autocratic regime be called legitimate? Does it make sense to use the concept of legitimacy to describe a feature of non-democratic rule? Under what conditions does the concept apply? What are the constituent elements of the concept? And, how do autocracies legitimate their rule more concretely? These questions guide the research articles in this special issue. The contributions are dedicated to studying the concept of legitimacy in an unlikely context. The overarching thesis of this special issue is that autocratic legitimation has causal influence on numerous outcomes of interest in authoritarian politics. These outcomes include regime resilience, challenger-state interactions, the procedures and operations of elections, and the texture of everyday life in autocracies.

This introductory essay aims to map the conceptual terrain on which the articles operate by outlining the foundations and major turning points of the study of legitimation in autocracies. In doing so it will not only argue that studying autocratic legitimation is important, but also will propose contexts, concepts, and distinctions for doing so. More specifically, it proposes four mechanisms of autocratic legitimation that can organize research in this area: indoctrination, passivity, performance, and democratic-procedural. These mechanisms capture the conceptual content of a variety of legitimation claims across different regime types.

At the outset it is necessary to establish that it is acceptable to talk about autocratic legitimacy and legitimation. Etymologically, legitimacy referred to a form of political rule that was justified by the absence of despotism and tyranny and was, instead, characterized by the rule of law (Würtenberger, 1982, pp. 680–81). From its inception the term legitimacy referred therefore to just and right rule. In common language, it still describes a form of rule that is seen in the eyes of the observer as fair and good. These normative connotations make it understandable that the term has been used mainly to describe democratic regime forms. Legitimacy provides a vision for how rule should look and this normative question is most

often linked to democratic polities. With the ostensible triumph of democracy after World War II and the renaissance of democratic ideals and institutions (Keane, 2009, p. 648), legitimate rule was often equated with democratic rule such that even non-democracies felt they had to make some pretense of being democratic (Dahl, 1971, p. 5).

The conceptual foundation provided by Max Weber is useful for constructing analysis on comparative authoritarianism. His main idea was to ‘emancipate’ the social sciences from the study of what *should be* to the study of what *is*, of what we actually observe (Weber, [1922] 1978). With such an empirical view on social phenomenon, it is possible to use the term legitimacy belief even in non-democratic contexts. And indeed, for Weber, the legal-rational type of rule was only one of three types of legitimate rule. Charisma and tradition as the two other forms usually lack democratic foundations. On the contrary, the exceptionalism of a person or the rightfulness of tradition is not based on a democratic procedural understanding of legitimacy in which elections are the minimal core of the concept (Przeworski, 1999).

Systems theories in the social sciences also provide useful anchors for the current discussion on comparative authoritarianism. The distinction between ‘diffuse’ and ‘specific’ support (Easton, 1965) is open to all types of political systems, be they democratic or autocratic in nature. Systems theory also points to an important dimension, namely the effect of legitimacy – or the ‘support’ for legitimacy claims. Beetham has distilled three positive effects that legitimate rule brings about: enhanced order, stability, and effectiveness (Beetham, 1991, pp. 25–37). This holds true for both regime types. From an empirical standpoint all types of regimes, be they autocratic or democratic, need to justify their rule in order to maintain longevity (see Kailitz & Stockemer, 2015). No political regime can endure only on repression and co-optation. Legitimation is a third complementary ‘pillar’ that also sustains autocratic rule (Gerschewski, 2013). A leader can gain access to power by using repression, but in the long run, all types of political regimes need to legitimate their rule. Key

empirical questions thus become not *whether* but rather *how, to what extent, and with what effects* any given regime has been successful in procuring legitimacy (see also Beetham, 1991).

Normatively, it is understandable that there are objections and reservations about the usage of the term legitimacy in non-democratic contexts. ‘Legitimate authoritarianism’ might open avenues for politicized and relativist statements of any sort that might even go so far to defend and excuse the normative foundation of autocratic rule. Empirically, it is indeed debatable as to whether voluntary consent is an integral part of the definition of legitimacy. Do people need to be capable to choose freely between alternatives and explicitly approve principles in order to view a regime as legitimate? If the answer is yes, then legitimacy is the wrong concept to use for autocratic settings, and perhaps even for entrenched democratic systems. Alternative concepts like political culture, loyalty, or support might be more fitting if such a view is endorsed. However, we propose to follow a Weberian perspective and ask how regimes legitimate their rule and what people believe (for whatever reason) about those claims. In so doing, we assume that the concepts of the legitimacy claim of the rulers and the legitimacy belief of the people are the proper concepts for understanding autocratic legitimation. In this sense legitimacy is something that autocracies attempt to acquire or cultivate through their legitimation claims, symbols, narratives, and/or procedures. Whether, how, and to what extent the legitimation efforts of a given autocracy results in legitimacy is an empirical question that can (and should) be researched by political scientists. The remainder of this essay traces the intellectual history of these concepts, proposes a categorization of autocratic legitimation mechanisms, identifies potentially fruitful lines of research inquiry and suggestions for approaching them, and briefly introduces the articles that comprise the rest of this special issue.

## **2. Distilling four legitimization mechanisms**

A recurring question of comparative autocracy research is: how do non-democratic leaders gain followings among their people? In this section, we outline the career of ‘autocratic legitimacy’ in modern political science and – based on the conceptual discussion – distill four different mechanisms on how autocracies legitimate their rule: indoctrination, performance, passivity, and democratic-procedural.<sup>1</sup> From the 1940s to the 1960s, research on autocracies was dominated by the debate about totalitarianism. From this perspective, the ideological indoctrination of the people was the focus of scholarly debate. How could the Nazi regime in Germany, Stalinist Soviet Union, or Maoist China be so successful and why could they seemingly anchor their legitimacy so broadly in society? The research in the 1970s and 1980s then shifted its focus more on socio-economic conditions in (mostly) military regimes. Scholars emphasized the performance of autocratic regimes and how this performance induced quiescence in the population. Today’s research aims to understand how autocracies have sought new, much more subtle ways in securing their legitimacy vis-à-vis the ruled. By using elections and the image of responsiveness to the demands of the people they give themselves the pretense of a democratic-procedural legitimacy (see more detail in Gerschewski, 2014).

### *2.1 Totalitarianism, the role of political ideologies, and the indoctrination mechanism*

Major works during the first phase of modern research on autocratic regimes are the classic writings of eminent scholars like Hannah Arendt, Carl Joachim Friedrich, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Raymond Aron. From different perspectives, they sought to understand the nature and the rise of totalitarianism. While they differ in their approaches, they converge on the importance of political ideologies in consolidating and sustaining non-democratic rule. Arendt formulated a socio-philosophical attempt to understand the emergence and the essence of totalitarian rule. She argued that ideology and terror are the two essential features of these

regimes (Arendt, [1951] 1966). For her, totalitarian ideologies have three distinct features. Firstly, they aim at ‘total explanation of the past, the total knowledge of the present, and the reliable prediction of the future’ (Arendt, [1951] 1966, p. 470). Secondly, in addition to the omnipotence of totalitarian ideologies they become independent from empirical reality. Totalitarian ideologies develop a utopian millenarian promise that immunizes itself from any type of anchoring in empirical reality. Thirdly, Arendt argues that totalitarian ideologies present themselves as logical entities. Based on axiomatic premises, all else, including the course of history, can be logically deduced.

From a different viewpoint, Friedrich and Brzezinski also placed ideology as among the most important characteristics of totalitarianism. They aimed at explaining the inner stability and working mechanisms of totalitarian regimes and in their famous six-point catalogue, ideology is omnipresent in political and daily life (Friedrich & Brzezinski, 1956). The indoctrination and propaganda machines along with the supporting organizational structures might have been unparalleled in totalitarian regimes. They aimed at creating a *homo novus*, a new man. This type of all-encompassing exposure to political ideologies is indeed a very rare phenomenon. The open research question is, even today, to what extent the German, the Soviet, or the Chinese population were true believers, passive followers, opportunists, or just ordinary people trying minimize catastrophe for themselves and their loved ones during the high tide of totalitarianism in those states (for historical work that addresses these themes in each case see, respectively, Browning, 1993; Fitzpatrick, 1999; Dikötter, 2016).

Today, only North Korea comes close to this totalitarian type (Scobell, 2005; Armstrong, 2005; Dukalskis & Hooker, 2011). It exemplifies what we call the ‘indoctrination’ mechanism insofar as the North Korean government goes to great lengths to ensure that its citizens believe its legitimization claims (see, e.g. Hassig & Oh, 2009, pp. 133-170). The state attempts to thoroughly control the media, school curricula, public visual space, and the private

time of citizens to create what a United Nations Commission of Inquiry called an “all-encompassing indoctrination machine that takes root from childhood to propagate an official personality cult and to manufacture absolute obedience...effectively to the exclusion of any thought independent of official ideology and State propaganda” (United Nations, 2014, para. 27).

Even so, North Korea has undergone significant social change since the mid-1990s that complicates its image as a totalitarian state (Armstrong, 2016; Choi, 2013; Lankov, 2013; Armstrong, 2011). Recent survey research shows that the North Korean people have become increasingly aware of how to critically evaluate their leadership (Haggard & Noland, 2011). Potentially oppositional spheres like shadow markets have emerged that can under some circumstances challenge totalitarian control (Dukalskis, 2016; Joo, 2014). There are still many unknowns in the case of North Korea and the thrust of recent research suggests that while the totalitarian model may have some analytic utility, the reality is more complex than some classic formulations suggest. However if one understands the totalitarian ideal in Mussolini’s sense of ‘everything within the state, nothing outside the state, and nothing against the state’ as a goal of the North Korean state and not an achieved reality, then the category is more straightforwardly applicable.

Even if this form of autocratic rule is extreme and relatively rare in today’s world, it marks one important pole in the spectrum. It shows that a political ideology imposed from above can influence the population with the aim to create a feeling of belonging among the ruled. Manichaeism, quasi-religious millenarian promises, revolutionary appeal, maybe even seemingly scientific accuracy, and interpretive autonomy can produce a behavioral following – and a cognitive legitimacy belief among the indoctrinated people. Given that autocratic regimes which emerge out of a revolutionary struggle and emphasize revolutionary totalitarian ideologies that are often reinforced by external enemy-at-the-gates and external scapegoat rhetoric tend to have long life-spans (Levitsky & Way, 2013), it is important to



retain this sort of ‘indoctrination’ mechanism in analysis of contemporary autocratic legitimation.

## *2.2 Shifting to authoritarianism: performance and passivity mechanisms*

However, most contemporary autocracies do not work like this any longer. The era of almost exclusive and comprehensive ideological mass indoctrination seems to be by and large gone. Ideocratic regimes that posit a utopian ideology still do exist, but have become rarer (Backes & Kailitz, 2016) . But modern autocratic regimes still contain traces of these extremes so that it is helpful to keep in mind the historical experiences to understand the inner working mechanisms of contemporary regimes. The scope and force of indoctrination is limited and the legitimation methods and instruments appear to be much more subtle and are exercised with more finesse.

By the 1960s one could observe a tendency to shift attention away from the overly ideological regimes to a stronger emphasis on socio-economic conditions. This had much to do with the changing empirical reality in which totalitarian regimes became increasingly crowded out and replaced by what Linz termed in 1964 ‘authoritarian regimes’ (Linz, 1964). These regimes were non-totalitarian non-democracies and occupied subsequently the place in the middle between the poles of democracy and totalitarianism. When Linz took stock a decade later, he had established that authoritarian regimes are not characterized by ideological appeal, but are rather ruled by what he vaguely called ‘mentalities’ (Linz, 1975). Despite subsequent criticism of the term, the direction was clear. These regimes do not intend to mobilize the masses by referring to an ‘exclusive, autonomous, and more or less intellectually elaborate ideology’ (Linz, 1975, p. 191), but to more apolitical sentiments and apathy among the people. If totalitarian regimes sought to mobilize the entire population and shape the daily lives of their citizens, authoritarian regimes were more content to depoliticize the population and leave them alone provided they did not obstruct the regime’s goals.

Many of these regimes were dominated by the military. Military regimes typically justified (and still do today) their need to intervene in domestic affairs in order to restore political order, revive the economy, and protect the nation (Nordlinger, 1977; Perlmutter, 1977). This is a recurring frame across decades of military involvement in politics in different regions. The military's right to rule is derived from being the guarantor of stability, order, and national interests. In his classic study, O'Donnell argues that for cases like Brazil after 1964 and Argentina after 1966, the military not only took power, but also formed a coup coalition with the technocratic elite to seemingly fix the country and establish a 'bureaucratic authoritarianism'. This coalition followed a managerial leadership style (O'Donnell, 1979). The South Korean regime of Park Chung Hee from 1961 to 1979 exemplified the combination of economic development to restore national glory, harsh repression of leftist and pro-labor forces that would challenge the regime's project, and the promise of protection from both internal and external threats (Kim & Vogel, 2011).

Around the same time, the concept of the 'rentier state' gained prominence (Luciani, 1987; Skocpol, 1982; Mahdavi, 1970). These autocratic states are not characterized by ideological indoctrination, but rather by satisfying the needs of the people and rendering them passive. By relying on rents, mostly from oil and other minerals, these regimes aimed to deliver prosperity in exchange for acquiescence. 'Allocative co-optation' remained a major explanation for the sustainability of autocratic rule in the Middle East and North African region (Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004, pp. 382–83). Painting with a broad brush, the argument is that there exists a hidden social contract between the ruled and the ruler that as long as the regime delivers and provides public and private goods, there is no need for the ruled to protest and attempt to change the political situation (Ross, 2001).

What is important for the purposes of this essay is that both the focus of the legitimacy claim of the regime and the nature of the legitimacy belief of the people appeared to change after the high tides of communist and fascist totalitarianism. While totalitarianism was

characterized by ideological claims and by mobilizing people to turn them into ‘new men,’ subsequent authoritarian regimes claimed to be economically successful and aimed to foster passivity and political indifference among most of the population. In terms of the mechanisms discussed thus far, these types of regimes emphasized the mechanisms of ‘passivity’ and ‘performance’ more so than the ‘indoctrination’ mechanism prevalent in totalitarian regimes.

### *2.3 Modern autocracies and the democratic-procedural legitimation mechanism*

In the 2000s research on non-democratic rule underwent a renaissance after two decades in which scholarship concentrated on explaining different trajectories of democratization. In a recent review Pepinsky (2014) argued that this resurgence in research on autocracies was characterized by an ‘institutionalist turn’. In this new wave of research, questions of legitimation were of secondary importance, if they featured at all. Scholarly reviews on the state of the art in general (Art, 2012; Brancati, 2014; Pepinsky, 2014), on military rule (Geddes, Frantz, and Wright, 2014), on one-party regimes (Magaloni & Kricheli, 2010), and on the role of elections in authoritarian regimes (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009) barely reference legitimation. The research has instead concentrated on explaining durability, persistence, and stability through a focus on the delicate balance between intra-elite cohesion on the one hand and the usage of coercive instruments and tactics on the other hand. Institutions like parties, parliaments, courts, and elections are discussed mainly insofar as they provide the autocratic regime with functioning avenues for co-optation and repression (Brownlee, 2007; Gandhi, 2008; Magaloni, 2008; Svolik, 2012).

The idea that autocratic regimes aim to create a following among the people or that they are able to legitimate their grip to power is rarely taken into account except with reference to co-optation or material interest. Only recently has some nascent scholarship begun to consider autocratic legitimation on its own terms (e.g. Kailitz, 2013; Kailitz & Stockemer, 2015). Case-based research has pioneered this new strand, most prominently for

the cases of China and Russia (e.g. Gill, 2015; Gill, 2011; Holbig, 2013; Su, 2011; Shue, 2010), but also in cases as disparate as Kazakhstan (Schatz & Maltseva, 2012), Singapore (Morgenbesser, 2016b), and Cuba (Schedler & Hoffmann, 2016). Such research has yielded valuable insights into how autocracies aim to legitimate their rule.

Given its size, economic importance, longevity, attractiveness as a governance model, and tactical sophistication, China is first among equals when it comes to autocratic legitimation. Although there is a common perception that the CCP's legitimation claim rests mostly on performance, it is clear that there are more subtle processes at work. Holbig and Gilley (2010, p. 414) find empirical evidence for an 'unusually agile, responsive, and creative party effort to maintain its legitimacy through economic performance, nationalism, ideology, culture, governance, and democracy as defined in terms of popular sovereignty under the leadership of the party.' Examples like the inner-party circular known as Document Number 9 indicate that the CCP perceives many Western ideas as threatening to party rule and thus deserving of denigration or censorship (ChinaFile, 2013). More subtly, even if orthodox propaganda has lost its ability to inspire many Chinese citizens, its ubiquity in school curricula and on TV functions as a signal that the party-state is strong and that resistance to it will fail (Huang, 2015). As will be discussed in more detail below, China has also been adaptive and flexible in legitimating itself online and in censoring alternative perspectives.

Beyond China, subtle processes of autocratic legitimation and manipulation now increasingly sit alongside ostensibly democratic institutions. 'Electoral' and 'competitive' authoritarianism are today among the most widespread form of non-democratic rule (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006a). Here democratic institutions are permeated with authoritarian praxis and what emerges is authoritarianism with adjectives. In his eminent work, Andreas Schedler (2013) has argued that authoritarian rulers face an uncertain environment in which they cannot know for sure the security of their grip on power. In this situation, many authoritarian rulers admit limited, multiparty competition. Due to external and

internal pressure that is moreover catalyzed by globalized information flows that are increasingly difficult to control, non-democratic leaders feel compelled to make compromises and hold elections.

The introduction of multiparty elections, despite being manipulated, gives the authoritarian ruler the pretense of democratic legitimacy. This is what we call below the ‘democratic-procedural’ mechanism of autocratic legitimation. Schedler argues that the step to open up multiparty competition is one in which authoritarian regimes ‘establish the primacy of democratic legitimation’ (Schedler, 2006b, p. 13). Of course, this is a dangerous game and can backfire for the ruling regime because elections can serve as critical junctures around which the opposition can mobilize its supporters. Yet, by pledging that democratic procedures and norms are followed so that the seemingly true and unfiltered will of the people is respected, the authoritarian ruler attempts to create the appearance of a fairly elected leader (Morgenbesser, 2016a). The election results demonstrate the popularity and the power of the ruling regime. While the ‘menu of manipulation’ (Schedler, 2002) has increased and covers all forms of pre- and post-electoral fraud, it has also developed to such an extent that the playing field is uneven in very subtle and refined ways that are difficult to detect. As such, authoritarian rulers have added an important instrument of creating a legitimacy belief within non-democratic rule. Yet, the authoritarian ruler also needs to persuade the citizenry that democratic procedures have by and large been respected. One way this can occur is through external election observers even if they are sometimes, as Debre and Morgenbesser argue in their contribution to this special issue, instruments of manipulation. Regardless, the intended message is clear: the authoritarian leader has the support of the people.

Even so, authoritarian regimes suffer from informational deficits. The ‘dictator’s dilemma’ is always prevalent (Wintrobe, 1998). The ruler does not know the true preferences of the ruled because the latter have incentives to hide their true beliefs for fear of repression. This is an old dilemma as exemplified by classic stories of the emperor mingling with the

common people to learn what they actually think. The dictator's dilemma has spawned much innovative research. For example, it has recently been shown that the Chinese leadership is eager to show more responsiveness to the demands of the citizens (Chen, Pan, and Xu, 2016), that delegates to the Vietnamese National Assembly are sometimes responsive to their constituents (Malesky & Schuler, 2010), and that authoritarian parties which suffer an electoral shock sometimes change their policy programs (Miller, 2015). Officially organized venues for citizen deliberation have proliferated in China that provide the government with information and with the public appearance of listening to citizen preferences (He & Warren, 2011).

Besides pre-empting protest by gathering information, responsiveness (or the appearance of responsiveness) also helps create an image of a legitimate authority that respects the will of the people. The innovative work of Martin Dimitrov uncovers one forerunner to this kind of responsiveness in communist regimes. By making use of archival material, he argues that communist autocracies were eager to collect information on people's opinions in order to detect social problems and track corruption. In explorative studies, he finds that (voluntary) citizen complaints were a major information channel in Bulgaria and China (Dimitrov 2014; Dimitrov, 2013). These citizen complaints and their contemporary online equivalents provide autocracies with information for the regime to uphold an image of a responsive and hence legitimate authority. Besides the rational-legal legitimacy of (seemingly) democratic elections, the responsiveness dimension provides a procedural component to the legitimacy formula of modern autocracies.

A last point that deserves attention and that is the subject of ongoing research is the online dimension of autocratic legitimation (e.g. Gunitsky, 2015; Greitens, 2013; Lynch, 2011). Again, although these dynamics can be found in other autocracies, the global trendsetter is China, which has developed a highly elaborate online infrastructure that censors only certain types of messages (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013). The Chinese authorities do

allow for oppositional statements so that social media serves as a safety valve for some issues in which criticism can be voiced (Hassid, 2012; Yang, 2009). However, the party attempts to censor content that might pose a danger of collective action (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013). By so doing, it forestalls offline social mobilization that negatively affects the legitimation efforts of the regime. Additionally, the Chinese government has been eager to influence online content by creating the ‘fifty-cent army’, so called because of the widespread belief that users receive some material benefit for writing positive posts about the Chinese government (Han, 2015a). When this praxis came under growing criticism domestically, a ‘voluntary fifty cent army’ emerged that uses an array of rhetorical tactics to undermine critics of the party (Han, 2015b). Ultimately the content of the government’s guided social media posts suggests that the aim is to the distract attention of those skeptical of the party rather than to directly convince them of the CCP’s merits (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2016).

This special issue connects to the studies discussed in this section and can be read not only as providing new impetus for the debate, but also as exemplifying the wide range of research themes that are subsumed under the legitimation efforts of autocracies. As of now, we lack deeper conceptual discussions, more encompassing datasets, and, above all, more comparative work to better understand how (and how successfully) autocracies legitimate their grip on power. This special issue advances the debate in all three of these areas. Before discussing those contributions, we make explicit the four mechanisms of autocratic legitimation that have been referenced throughout this introduction and four areas deserving of future inquiry.

#### *2.4 A Summary: Proposing Four Mechanisms of Autocratic Legitimation*

The developments reviewed thus far illustrate that today’s authoritarian regimes have considerably increased their legitimation toolbox. To organize inquiry we would posit four broad mechanisms for analyzing contemporary autocratic legitimation: the indoctrination

mechanism, the passivity mechanism, the performance mechanism, and the democratic-procedural mechanism. Autocratic regimes differ in the emphasis that they place on these mechanisms.

First, the old indoctrination of totalitarian regimes in which an exclusive and omnipresent political ideology is implanted in the hearts and minds of the ruled might today only be detected in lighter shades. The excesses of totalitarianism are mostly phenomena of the past. However, it can be useful to keep this mechanism in mind as we observe today's shaded variants of it. There is also no guarantee that such regimes are decisively in history's dustbin. The fact that we still observe fringes that explicitly draw on imagery and rhetoric from totalitarian regimes suggests that a rehabilitation of the indoctrination mechanism is at least possible.

Second, and perhaps more subtle is what we would label the passivity mechanism. Here the autocratic ruler is less interested in mobilizing the population than in demobilizing potential challengers. The aim is to foster a sense of resignation to the regime's rule by conveying its power, cohesion, and unassailability (Schedler & Hoffmann, 2016). Echoing James Scott's work on institutions of domination, there is great power in a regime making itself appear inevitable because it renders overt, declared opposition irrational (Scott, 1990, p. 220). Passivity is often induced by displays of regime power, but can also take the form of distraction, discrediting political alternatives as unrealistic or, in Wedeen's words, disseminating government ideology that 'clutters public space with monotonous slogans and empty gestures, which tire the minds and bodies of producers and consumers alike' (Wedeen, 1999, p. 6). The passivity mechanism is difficult to measure because its effect is meant to be negative (i.e. forestalling opposition action) but it is reasonable to surmise that passivity for at least some portion of the population is a goal for all autocratic regimes.

With the rise of socio-economic considerations and promises to fix the country, a third legitimization mechanism makes an appearance, namely performance legitimization. Broad



segments of the population might accept or even support non-democratic rule if it is perceived as performing well (Geddes & Zaller, 1989). As long as the regime is able to deliver, less participation is accepted and sacrificed for the sake of order, stability, and growth. While the theoretical origins can be traced back to the rentier state debate in the 1970s, we can observe an increasing number of autocratic regimes beyond the resource-rich countries that rest their legitimization efforts on such a reciprocal social contract between the ruler and the ruled.

Fourth and finally, in recent incarnations of authoritarian rule we observe that democratic institutions like elections play a larger role in legitimization. Holding semi-competitive multi-party elections can be instrumentalized to demonstrate – both to a domestic and an international audience – that the regime follows the will of the people. Moreover, procedural components like deliberative venues or showing responsiveness to citizen's demands might become also more important in the near future.

While all of these mechanisms may appear in a given regime, we can observe a time trend with regard to their prevalence. While the first mechanism was dominant in totalitarian regimes, it is today only observed to a lesser extent while the democratic-procedural and the performance-based mechanism have gained in prominence. Furthermore these two mechanisms interact with one another, as Cassani's contribution to this volume discusses.

### **3. Future Avenues**

This special issue brings together innovative articles that work on the pressing questions of how authoritarian rulers make legitimization claims, the extent to which they are able to secure a following, and with what effect. Besides using repression and co-optation, autocrats need to build a legitimacy basis in order to transform power into longer-lasting and more robust rule. What we have learned from the short review of the career of the concept can be summarized and extended in the following points. Future research might pick them up and

enrich the burgeoning debate. Indeed, the papers that follow begin to pick up on these themes in various ways.

### *1. Legitimacy claim and legitimacy belief*

It is useful to clearly distinguish between what the ruler claims about an entitlement to rule and what the population (or different segments of the population) actually believe. Only when the claims are met by the respective beliefs can we speak of a legitimate rule. It is not only the empirically observable Weberian legitimacy belief of the people that counts, but we can also learn from Beetham's work that rule needs to be justified in the eyes of the people (Beetham, 1991). This distinction mirrors to some extent the supply and the demand side of the concept discussed by von Haldenwang in this special issue. An open question, however, is when and how claims to legitimacy matter in the absence of evidence for widespread belief in their content. For example, legitimization claims can help repressive agents select particular targets for violence even if wide swathes of the population do not believe or are indifferent to those claims (Pion-Berlin & Lopez, 1991). Indeed it is even possible to begin from the assumption that autocracies approach legitimization strategically such that their leaders may not necessarily believe in the regime's legitimization claims.

### *2. Different sources of legitimacy*

When it comes to the different sources of legitimization, we should not only limit our thinking to the grand political ideologies of the past (Burnell, 2006). While some research focuses on the broader realm of international dimensions of autocracy and legitimization (e.g. Burnell & Schlumberger, 2010; Bader 2015; Tansey 2016), this special issue concerns itself with the domestic level where macro ideologies are today less prevalent. International dimensions of autocratic legitimization were prevalent during the Cold War as the communist and capitalist

blocs attempted to cultivate and bolster client states (see, e.g., Westad, 2007), but today it is more difficult to detect a cleavage along grand ideological lines. Instead, we should think of multidimensional and eclectic legitimacy formulae in which (amalgams of) nationalist sentiments, politicized religion, ethnic divides, historical events, and potential enemies at the gates can be used to create smaller-scale ideational frames and narratives that serve the same purpose. Indeed, a fruitful strategy may be to focus on the underlying structure and effects of legitimization claims rather than their content as such (Dukalskis, 2017).

### *3. Relationship to Censorship*

Censorship is part of what makes the concept of autocratic legitimization so difficult to analyze. The legitimating claims of an autocratic regime are not allowed to compete on an even playing field with all ideas. Of course democracies also engage in censorship, but autocracies more routinely and systematically censor information perceived to intellectually threaten their legitimization claims. Censorship amplifies the legitimization claims of the autocracy and marginalizes the voices of regime critics, which renders the question of belief in legitimization claims a thorny one. This echoes the discussion above about the extent to which people need to be able to freely choose between political ideas in order to be said to possess a legitimacy belief. The issue can be mitigated by clarifying when legitimacy belief and legitimization claims are being analyzed as well as by research designs on the former that carefully take into account the role of censorship.

### *4. Measurement*

One of the biggest challenges in this research area is still how to measure the concept. It is an open challenge to future research even though previous efforts are suggestive of fruitful approaches (e.g. Gilley, 2009). When it comes to legitimacy claims measurement might be more manageable, although our second point about the nimble and tactical approach

that autocracies take toward legitimation means that it is by no means easy. Discourse and text analysis offer systematic, valid, and reliable routes to assess the content of official claims. Surveys and case narratives that make use of insights in secondary literature can be used (Grauvogel & von Soest, 2014; Kailitz, 2013). In this special issue von Soest and Grauvogel present an innovative expert survey to systematically assess the legitimacy claims of contemporary autocracies.

The bigger challenge lies in finding out what people actually believe. Preference falsification plagues all kinds of survey research, but is even more embedded when researching non-democratic environments (Kuran, 1997). Behavioral indicators like protest behavior and migration patterns – or ‘voice’ and ‘exit’ (Hirschman, 1970) – might be another route but are often confounded as they might be driven by other variables. While constituting a challenge, there exist innovative attempts to circumvent this problem (e.g. Gilley, 2009; Kern & Hainmeuller, 2009; Haggard & Noland, 2011; Dimitrov, 2014). Sometimes it is fortuitous timing that matters such as a window of opportunity in which new research options become possible. Thyen and Gerschewski could, for example, rely on a survey that was taken in the brief phase of political liberalization in Morocco and Egypt after the Arab Spring protests (Thyen & Gerschewski, in preparation). In this light, we should be eager to embrace a variety of approaches such as natural experiments (e.g. Kern & Hainmeuller, 2009), use of archival documents (e.g. Dimitrov, 2014), online participatory observation (e.g. Han, 2015a; Han 2015b), surveys (e.g. Mazepus, this issue; Kennedy, 2009; Geddes & Zaller, 1989), semi-structured interviews (e.g. Dukalskis, 2017), and quantitative text mining (e.g. King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013). The arsenal of social science methods is broad and making use of the full spectrum to study autocratic legitimation will yield new insights.

#### **4. The Contributions**

The following five articles in this special issue make excellent progress in advancing our understanding of autocratic legitimation. They each address a different portion of the conceptual terrain discussed throughout this introductory essay. This final section will briefly introduce the central themes addressed in the contributions to this special issue.

Conceptualizing legitimacy and legitimation in precise terms is a key task of work in this area. This introductory essay has attempted to contribute in this regard, but Christian von Haldenwang's article goes further and deeper. It is an important contribution that not only identifies shortcomings in research on legitimation but also proposes a novel framework for analysis. It is a useful counterpoint to arguments that social scientists should jettison the concept of legitimacy (e.g. Marquez, 2016). He identifies two cycles of legitimation that correspond to the 'supply' provided by political elites and the 'demand' generated from society. From this heuristic von Haldenwang provides an assessment of the possibilities and constraints of measuring and analyzing each dimension of legitimacy. The result is a rigorous but flexible framework that will be of use to researchers approaching questions of autocratic legitimation.

Picking up explicitly on the first avenue for future research identified above, namely the legitimacy claim versus legitimacy belief distinction, the contribution by Christian von Soest and Julia Grauvogel empirically maps the claims of contemporary autocracies. They focus explicitly on legitimation claims instead of legitimation beliefs, or as they put it 'legitimation as the strategy to seek legitimacy rather than legitimacy itself.' In an innovative advance on previous research, the authors have conducted an expert survey to create a typology of autocratic legitimation strategies. Their preliminary analysis reveals typological patterns that are useful for researchers, such as that closed authoritarian regimes rely disproportionately on identity-based claims while competitive regimes more often deploy procedural legitimation claims. This research will be useful for scholars attempting cross-

national comparisons as well as those interested in locating their case in a larger universe of autocratic legitimation.

One can also reverse the optics by examining not claims by elites, but beliefs of the population. This requires progress on the fourth point for future research identified above, namely careful measurement. Honorata Mazepus crosses the regime-type divide by presenting research that compares ideas about legitimacy in both democratic and non-democratic regimes. Drawing on over 1,000 respondents in five countries – Ukraine, Russia, Poland, France, and the Netherlands – she is able to challenge the idea that citizens in democracies and non-democracies think radically differently from one another about what makes political rule legitimate. Some surprises emerge that will be of interest to scholars, such as the Russian sample ranking elections as a highly important element of legitimacy or the French respondents largely disregarding honesty and fairness in their assessments. But the main message is perhaps even more important and suggests that the legitimacy beliefs of democratic and non-democratic citizens are perhaps not as alien to one another as one might assume. This has implications for the four mechanisms outlined above insofar as procedure may be responsive to legitimacy beliefs while the importance of fostering passivity increases if there is not a match between citizen belief and regime claims.

Even so, the procedural-democratic mechanism relies to some extent on external validation. Skeptics may be unwilling to believe that autocracies run clean elections and so election observation is one tool of validating the procedural-democratic mechanism of legitimation. Maria Debre and Lee Morgenbesser train their focus on an unusual empirical phenomenon – shadow election observers, or SOGs – and unwind its theoretical relevance for the study of legitimation in autocracies. SOGs are façade organizations that presumably will authenticate an election for a price or a return favor. They function to validate autocratic elections and cast doubt on the assessments of more reputable professionalized election observer groups. The presence of SOGs, as the authors demonstrate in the cases of

Cambodia, Zimbabwe, and Egypt, allows autocracies to simulate compliance with election standards so that they may manufacture procedural legitimacy.

Similarly, claims to performance legitimation may also require some degree of correspondence with objective realities. It is therefore useful to understand patterns of certain policy outcomes within autocracies. Focusing on social service provision, Andrea Cassani's contribution to this issue provides a rigorous test of the performance of different regime types in their quest to secure performance legitimation. Comparing military and one-party regimes on the one hand with electoral autocracies on the other, Cassani finds that electoral autocracies deliver better results in terms of education and health care. Hereditary monarchies perform on a similar level as electoral autocracies in these two areas. The actual ability to perform is a key dimension of performance legitimacy and the article adroitly explains the importance of these results. Scholars interested in the performance of different types of autocratic regimes and the ways in which they leverage success in delivering public goods to legitimate their rule will find this article to be a rich contribution.

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<sup>i</sup> We would like to highlight that we focus in this article on four mechanisms on how autocracies legitimate their rule. This should not be confused with the approach of Christian von Haldenwang (in this issue) who refers to four different ways of operationalization and concrete measurement.