Authoritarianism: Logics and Institutions

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Non-democratic regimes are not all alike, but there are many ways of conceptualizing how they vary and why this might matter. In this essay I contrast two broad approaches to thinking about variation across authoritarian regimes. The *institutions* approach focuses on the observable institutional structures that characterize the rulers of authoritarian regimes: whether they are military or non-military regimes, the existence of a legislature, the number of political parties, and others. The *logics* approach centers on the nature political conflict within the regime and the dimensions along which it varies, which may include factors such as the distribution of power across groups or factions, cleavage structures, ideology, and the embeddedness of the regime in society and the economy. I argue that each approach has an affinity for a different type of research into authoritarian rule, which suggests that they are complementary endeavors. However, reconciling them into a coherent paradigm is far from straightforward, and this makes such reconciliation the most important theoretical problem for the maturing literature on comparative authoritarianism.

The institutions approach dates to Geddes (1999), and has proven to be among the most productive areas of research in comparative politics in the past fifteen years (Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz forthcoming 2014; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010; Wahman, Teorell, and Hadenius 2013; Wright 2008). Institutions of particular relevance to authoritarian rule include legislatures, parties (either single parties or hegemonic/dominant parties), militaries, and succession procedures. One obvious benefit of institutional approach is that authoritarian institutions are observable: it is relatively straightforward to classify authoritarian regimes based on what sorts of institutions they have created to manage political opposition, share power, and structure succession. This need not

mean that it is *easy* to classify regimes: as Geddes, Wright, and Frantz recently remind us, "many autocracies hide the de facto rules that shape and constrain political choices behind a façade of formal democratic institutions" (forthcoming 2014: 5). However, institutional approaches begin with the assumption that institutions *do* capture *something*, and that something is both comparable and observable to the analyst—although perhaps with error—across cases.

The same is not true of the logics approach. Here, the point of departure is that political regimes that we observe are equilibria of strategic interactions among groups and/or individuals, and as a consequence, that the norms and formal and informal institutions that we do observe reflect those equilibria (Calvert 1995; Shepsle 2006). The structure of such political conflict can vary along countless dimensions, and there is no general reason to think that the axes of political conflict in one regime have analogues anywhere else. Two observations follow. First, the same institution (say, a legislature) will do very different things in different regimes. Second, generalizing about a single logic of authoritarian rule is difficult. Of course, there are some treatments of non-democratic rule in which generalizable logics are proposed. Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965) and Linz (2000) describe the basic logics of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. Wintrobe (1998) provides a general treatment of non-democratic rule in which regimes vary by what they attempt to maximize (wealth or power) and the degree of mass incorporation (high or low) to yield a four-fold typology of regimes: tyrannies, tinpots, totalitarians, and timocracies. More recently, Acemoglu and coauthors have analyzed the problem of political order in the absence of credible commitments (Acemoglu, Egorov, and Sonin 2008, 2012; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Acemoglu, Ticchi, and Vindigni 2010).

We need not overstate the differences between institutions and logics perspectives. Indeed, Geddes's foundational contribution held that authoritarian institutions either reflected the

logics of political competition within different types of regimes, or independently affected how groups compete (it is not exactly clear which; see Pepinsky forthcoming 2014). Gandhi and Przeworski (2006) begin with a spare model of conflict under authoritarian rule and derive predictions about the party institutions that emerge as a consequence. More broadly, institutional approaches to authoritarian politics must contain a logic of authoritarian rule that these institutions reflect or constrain in order to make predictions about how institutions matter. Still, the rapidly developing empirical literature on authoritarian institutions has conceived of institutions as either independent determinants of social, political, and economic outcomes, or as fully capturing whatever logics lie at the root of authoritarian rule, which obviates the need to study those logics (Pepinsky forthcoming 2014). And the works of Friedrich and Brzezinski, Linz, Wintrobe, and Acemoglu and coauthors have not yet generated a research program that supports broad cross-national comparative statistical work on varieties of authoritarian rule. It is unclear how one might classify authoritarian regimes for comparative analysis following the logics approach.

Neither logics nor institutions are the "correct" approach to the study of authoritarianism. Instead, each is a framework that clarifies certain aspects of authoritarian rule, and as such, each has an affinity for a particular kind of research enterprise in the study of authoritarianism.

The value of the institutions perspective lies in its generalizability. Specifying the differences among types of authoritarian regimes has yielded a bounty of cross-national findings about the salutary benefits associated with having quasi-democratic institutions. The proliferation and refinement of regime classifications allows for ever more careful studies of the consequences of variation in authoritarian regimes as captured by observable institutions. The

newest research explicitly recognizes the problem of causal identification in cross-national research (e.g. Miller 2013).

The value of the logics perspective is altogether different, and in my opinion, insufficiently recognized. Empirically, careful specification of the logic of political conflict under a given authoritarian regime has a natural affinity with close country studies. This is not a call for more descriptive analyses of the minutiae of authoritarian politics—precisely the opposite. To borrow from the language of generative grammar (Chomsky 1957), it requires looking beyond the "surface structure" of everyday politics to uncover the "deep structure" of authoritarian rule, and then specifying the rules that transform deep conflicts to surface politics. The logics perspective also has a natural affinity with within-country research designs that carefully specify the observable implications of the logics of rule and test them using hard-to-find data. Theoretically, formal theoretical work in the vein of Acemoglu, Egorov, and Sonin (2008, 2012) has provided rigorous microfoundations for the stability of social orders in the absence of institutions that can make binding agreements. Mapping those theoretical findings to empirical claims can be challenging, but illustrative evidence from actual cases can be illuminating (see Acemoglu, Robinson, and Torvik 2013 for one example).

The drawback of the logics approach is that it sacrifices cross-national comparability, which is why this perspective has not generated a cross-national empirical literature to support it. Moreover, as any comparativist with extensive country knowledge knows, it is all too easy to overstate the uniqueness or peculiarity of a particular social or political formation. Only comparison can rule out empirically the incidental features of authoritarian politics, and here, the value of the institutional approach shines. But the drawback of the institutional approach is that it

is uneasily wed to a theory of authoritarian politics that generates sharp predictions about how and why institutions should matter.

This problem of reconciling theoretically the logics and institutions of authoritarian rule will occupy the best new research on how authoritarian regimes vary (for a related argument, see Svolik 2013). Already there are recent contributions that push this theoretical literature on authoritarianism in the right direction (e.g. Little 2012; Svolik 2012). Merging these insights with careful single-country studies of authoritarian politics, and then scaling up from the country studies to the cross-national comparisons, represents a frontier for a truly cumulative research program.

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