

Reshuffles or Dismissals? The Logic of Elite Management and Autocratic Survival

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Abstract:

Co-optation and repression are central to understanding authoritarian power-sharing, but how autocrats implement these strategies with individual elites remains underexplored. We propose a theoretical framework conceptualizing dictators as managers of their ruling coalitions, who routinely appoint, dismiss, promote, demote, shuffle, or reappoint elites for a mixture of strategic, non-strategic, even mundane reasons. We argue that autocrats have agency in choosing between dismissals and reshuffles as general elite management strategies. In the process, they alter the information environment and elite incentives, with consequences for their own survival. While dismissals as a policy reduce elites' power, they also increase intra-regime conflict and uncertainty, with adverse effects on ruler's survival. In contrast, reshuffles prevent coordination but ensure elites have a stake in regime continuity. We test this argument using novel measures of dismissals and reshuffles in autocratic regimes and communist Politburos, also considering mechanisms and alternative explanations. Our findings suggest that autocratic survival relies on more mundane elite management than seen in predominantly conflictual accounts of authoritarian politics.

Key words: authoritarian politics; elites; survival in dictatorships; dismissals; purge; reshuffles

Introduction

How do autocrats reduce elite threats to their survival? Existing accounts of autocratic politics emphasize repression and co-optation as the two most effective strategies (Buono de Mesquita et al. 2003; Geddes et al. 2018; Svobik 2012). To study this, scholars rely on aggregate measures, such as the presence of institutions to co-opt elites, or purges to repress them (Chin et al. 2022; Gandhi 2008; Olar 2019). Yet, existing explanations and measures cannot capture the more specific strategies that autocrats use in their daily interactions with elites. Within institutions, autocrats can co-opt and repress by appointing, promoting, demoting, dismissing, shuffling, re-appointing, or replacing individual officials. What constitutes rewards and punishment (or neither) is not always clear in the process of autocratic human resource management. The terminology around dictator's actions is quite rich, and conceptually distinct strategies may be lumped together—such as purges *and* reshuffles (Svobik 2012, 79–80); less dramatic manifestations of the same strategies may be ignored in favour of more easily observable ones.¹ Intra-elite interactions also tend to be conceptualized in a conflictual logic (Escribà-Folch 2013; Svobik 2012; Sudduth 2017; 2021), yet authoritarian elite politics is often quite mundane and non-violent, indicating that some voluntary exchange is present in autocratic power-sharing (Gandhi 2008; Gill 2018).

Take the example of Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, who survived a wave of mass protests in the aftermath of a blatantly rigged 2020 election (Way 2020). With the regime on the brink, an unprecedented size and breadth of protests could have easily triggered elite defections (Chenoweth and Shay 2020; Grundholm 2020). Yet the regime withstood the test and no significant elite defections followed (except an ex-minister of culture) (Way 2020, 26).

¹ While a purge may contribute to and reveal dictator's power, autocrats may also accomplish the same goal by dismissing elites more gradually (Gill 2021).

Rather than explaining elite loyalty through uncertainty over the outcome or their fear of the autocrat (Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014; Svoboda 2012; Tullock 1987), we offer instead a more nuanced view that draws attention to how autocrats—such as Lukashenko—manage their subordinates over time, and how elite management strategies influence elites’ incentives and behavior (including during crises). Simply put, Lukashenko’s long-term strategy was grounded in his skillful and frequent reshuffle of civilian and security officials, which prevented elites from establishing strong power bases to challenge him. This also ensured their cooptation and loyalty, as he largely forsook dismissals, and (almost always) retired them for health or age reasons (Frear 2018).² Even in the midst of 2020 protests, with Lukashenko visibly shaken by the inability of his subordinates to foresee and prevent mass action, rather than purging those responsible, as many autocrats in fact routinely do (Makiya 1998), he merely moved them to other positions within the state administration.³

The case of Belarusian elites is neither *sui generis* nor an example of a weak autocrat having to accommodate powerful elites. Instead, as we show in this paper, it is representative of the way many—particularly long-lasting—autocrats manage their lieutenants. In turn, autocrats’ reliance on reshuffles or dismissals has consequences: even after accounting for

² Over 1994-2020 of the eight chiefs of the security police, the KGB, two were reshuffled into the positions of the Security Council secretary, one became the defense minister, two—ambassadors, and two more became heads of important state companies, with only one retiring. Among the nine chiefs of staff of the presidential administration, two were moved to the prime ministerial posts, one—senate speaker, one—foreign minister, and one—the Security Council secretary, while others were reshuffled into cushioned state companies or similar positions.

³ *Vedomosti*, September 4, 2020, “Alexander Lukashenko has reshuffled ‘power’ institutions”, see <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2020/09/03/838777-lukashenko-strukturi>.

different threat environments and other factors that may influence personnel decisions during *particular* episodes of authoritarian rule, or in *particular* ruling coalitions—such as following failed coups (Timoneda et al. 2023) or in more cohesive elite coalitions (Lachapelle et al. 2020)—we find that reshuffles enhance autocrats’ survival, while dismissals do not. Thus, we propose that Lukashenko and other long-lasting autocrats do not rely on reshuffles because they have already consolidated their power, face no threats and can afford not to dismiss their officials. Instead, we argue that autocrats who practice reshuffles as a *general* policy during their rule will survive longer as a result. We do not dispute that situations exist when the autocrats are better off after they have dismissed, or even purged, threatening elites; we attempt to control for such situations. However, autocrats routinely make personnel decisions, including dismissals, not only for strategic (i.e. power consolidation, ideology, etc.) but also non-strategic, even mundane (old age, whim, etc.) reasons. Our goal is to study the effects of different elite management strategies, while empirically controlling for relevant systematic factors, such as institutions, failed coups and other threats to the rule. Drawing from contemporary and historical examples indicating that autocrats have leverage in how they prevent elite coordination and incentivize their subordinates, we offer and test a novel explanation of autocratic survival centered on dictators acting as human resource managers of their coalitions. To that end, building on existing accounts of institutions as credible commitment devices (Gandhi 2008) and also drawing from industrial and organizational psychology (Ashforth 1994; Corgnet et al. 2015; Lazear 2000), we centre our theoretical explanation on the information environment and incentives of authoritarian elites who are subject to their autocrat’s personnel decisions.

Specifically, we distinguish between *vertical* and *horizontal* management strategies. The former takes the form of *dismissals* of individuals or groups of elites (i.e. purges) from the ruling coalition (Bokobza et al. 2022; Bove and Rivera 2015; Sudduth 2021). The latter takes

the form of *reshuffles* as dictators keep the composition of the ruling coalition intact, but they reassign, promote, or demote individuals to similar-ranked positions, without excluding them. We find that both strategies are quite common and similarly frequent: The median annual rate of dismissals and reshuffles in dictatorships is roughly one in seven of the top officials for each strategy. While both strategies are equally aimed at preventing coordination of elites against the dictator, they do so differently and have opposite effects on survival: dismissals increase the risk of the dictator's removal from office, while reshuffles decrease it. This is because the latter induces loyalty and assures elites of their continuing presence within the ranks while preventing their coordination and reducing defection incentives. Crucially, because management strategies are easily observed by the elites, they provide information that affects the elites' commitment to power-sharing.

We use several empirical strategies to test the observable implications of our theoretical explanations. First, we construct novel measures of dismissals and reshuffles in all autocratic cabinets (Nyrup and Bramwell 2020) between 1967 and 2020 to test their effect on dictators' survival and the mechanisms underlying them. Second, we rely on Politburo membership data (Matthews 2023) to see whether our explanations hold for ruling coalitions that practice collective rule. The latter data allow us to differentiate between elite exit types, providing a more direct test. For validation, we also trace whether elites who leave cabinets were in fact not dismissed but appointed to the Politburos instead. Third, we supplement the cross-national analyses with a descriptive case study of elite management under Putin in Russia using monthly-level data of dismissals and reshuffles beyond the cabinet in the full ruling coalition (Baturu and Elkink 2021). Our results show strong support in favour of our hypotheses. Since we rely on observational data—and neither dismissals nor reshuffles are randomized treatments but, in fact, observed in real politics—the relationship between them and autocratic survival cannot be unequivocally shown as causal. Still, the findings remain robust to accounting for

potential unobserved heterogeneity, to the inclusion of various measures of leader strength, elite group cohesion, and the possibility of reverse causality, among others. Furthermore, we also demonstrate *why* dismissals have negative effects by fitting two additional tests for the mechanisms linking elite management and authoritarian survival.

The paper makes two key contributions to comparative authoritarianism. While scholars have comprehensively studied the survival of dictators and its determinants (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Escribà-Folch 2013; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006), they relied on aggregated measures of institutionalized co-optation and repression. Because such measures are aggregated, they tend to be endogenous to dictator's own strength (Pepinsky 2013); they also cannot account for the different types and degrees of changes the dictators exert on their ruling coalitions. Yet co-optation and repression can take many forms beyond what can be gauged from a discrete elite purge or the existence of a legislature (Olar 2019). By focusing on dismissals and reshuffles *within* institutions, we illuminate previously underexplored tools of co-optation and repression available to autocrats. Contrary to the commonly held view that dictators resort to purges and dismissals in response to threats, thus rendering elite management strategies potentially endogenous, we emphasize that dictators just as often respond to *perceived* threats (Fitzpatrick 1979; Harris 2007; Kotkin 2017; Makiya 1998); likewise, just as equally, they can respond to threats through reshuffles (Woldense 2018; 2022). However, we stress that autocrats do not manage their elites *only* to survive—these strategies might also be driven by factors orthogonal or only indirectly related to survival (e.g., ideology, whim, policy objectives, etc). While all political leaders want to stay in office (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003), not every decision they make is directly aimed at survival, even if it may potentially have implications for it. To that end, we comprehensively control for opportunity structures, threats, and institutions, as well as dictators' personal background traits, in an effort to isolate the effects of elite management on survival. One important implication of this study—to which

scholarship needs to pay more attention—is that dictators have agency in how they shape their environment, including through elite management strategies.

Second, we also unite two distinct literatures, on purges (Bokobza et al. 2022; Bove and Rivera 2015; Easton and Siverson 2018; Sudduth 2021; 2017) and reshuffles (Jackson and Rosberg 1982; Svolik 2012; Tullock 1987; Woldense 2018; 2022), in one general theoretical and empirical framework. Rather than examining dismissals and elite purges as a specific, coup-proofing strategy (Sudduth 2021; 2017) and treating reshuffles as an important mitigating strategy in the aftermath of coups (Woldense 2018; 2022), we underline that these are two general, and conceptually distinct, elite management strategies in the everyday politics of authoritarianism. Moreover, our analyses uses data and measures that closely mirror the logic of these elite management strategies to ensure we can illuminate the mechanisms driving the relationship under examination.

Vertical and Horizontal Elite Management Strategies

Political survival is the core problem driving authoritarian politics (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Escribà-Folch 2013; Geddes et al. 2018; Svolik 2012). Dictators' policies and decisions are generally driven by their need to counter and mitigate threats to their rule. Almost always, such threats can be managed as long as dictators maintain the support of their ruling coalitions (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Svolik 2012). To that end, managing elites and reducing potential threats from them is paramount. Generally, dictators manage their elites through co-optation—including them into power-sharing arrangements and offering various perks (Gandhi 2008)—and repression—carrying out a purge and eliminating them from the ruling coalition (Sudduth 2017; Timoneda et al. 2023).

Most accounts of authoritarian power-sharing explain the interaction between rulers and elites through a conflictual logic, under the shadow of impending violence (Bueno de

Mesquita et al. 2003; Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014; Svobik 2012; Tullock 1987), particularly through repression and purges (Quinlivan 1999; Sudduth 2017; 2021). Purges are generally understood as the removal of a significant number of elites from their institutional positions (Bove and Rivera 2015; Easton and Siverson 2018; Sudduth 2021; 2017). Most scholars agree that a successful purge benefits a dictator as it prevents elites from coordinating and establishing their own power base (Jackson and Rosberg 1982; Svobik 2012, 79). In fact, purges are one of the most drastic measures to prevent or reduce the likelihood of future coups, what Quinlivan (1999) coined coup-proofing, or recalibrating the regime following an attempted coup (Bokobza et al. 2022; Easton and Siverson 2018).

A dictator can practice exclusion in a variety of ways, however, not necessarily in a violent manner. Most of the time, and similarly to their democratic peers, autocrats make day-to-day personnel decisions that do not entail violence. Nor does the autocrat only co-opt the elite by establishing, and then maintaining a power-sharing institution (Gandhi 2008; Geddes et al. 2018). While co-optation and repression can take many institutional and non-institutional forms, one of the core and largely underexplored aspects is how autocrats ensure cooperation in terms of personnel decisions.⁴ Specifically, they do so by including, rewarding, and promoting their loyalists (Baturu et al. 2025; Shih et al. 2012) and demoting, dismissing, or worse— their opponents or those whose loyalty is questionable (Kotkin 2017). Dictators can remove elites to punish them for individual policy errors, for disloyalty, for age or health

⁴In regards to elite composition, scholars have examined their relative size (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003), group identities (Fearon, Kasara, and Laitin 2007) and the power-sharing of individual portfolios (Meng 2020), but have focused less on the specifics, and the consequences of elite management. But see Scharpf and Gläsel (2020) and Woldense (2022).

reasons, to vacate their office so they promote someone else, or seemingly randomly.⁵ Dictators can also avoid firing or demoting their subordinates by rearranging them horizontally, moving them into different positions (i.e., reshuffle them) (Svolik 2012, 79; Woldense 2018). But does the reliance of an autocrat on reshuffles or dismissals, as elite management policies, have consequences for an autocrat's own survival in office, and why?

We propose that it does. That is, rather than explaining under what conditions autocrats are more likely to opt for dismissals or reshuffles—we instead control for such conditions—we centre our explanation on the effects of such strategies on dictators' own survival. Specifically, while elites may respond to fear-based motivations, such as from the cues received following the dismissals of their peers, autocratic longevity in office is better assured by more positive inducement when the dictator's subordinates expect to retain their position in the ranks, even if the position may change—as it does when they are reshuffled. In turn, because elites' incentives influence the probability of coups and policy performance, reshuffles and dismissals of such elites have significant consequences for dictator's survival.

We emphasize how compulsion and voluntary exchange work from an elite management perspective, beyond the more commonly understood co-optation and repression strategies. To that end, we elucidate the dynamics of power-sharing in dictatorships by synthesizing findings not only from the comparative authoritarianism literature, but also management, industrial and organizational psychology (Ashforth 1994; Corgnet, Hernán-González, and Rassenti 2015; Lazear 2000). In the process, we attend to the largely unexplored question of how dictators, from a personnel manager perspective, address the problem of elite coordination and power accumulation, and how such dictators' personnel policy choices

⁵ Beyond dismissals, autocrats can also use “reprimands, warnings, cautions, and a panoply of other penalties” (Gorlizki and Khlevniuk 2020, 16).

influence their own longevity in office. Our theoretical approach rests on the premise that personnel changes alter the information environment and elite incentives, providing key information to the remaining elites about the dictator's commitment to power-sharing (Svolik 2012), which in turn affects their own commitment to such power-sharing,⁶ with consequences for the survival of non-democratic leaders.

The crucial assumption underlying our theoretical approach is that dictators do not merely react to changes in their environment so that they *have* to dismiss or purge when faced with threats. Or, alternatively, that they can *afford* reshuffles when elites do not present significant threats. Certainly, strategic situations do exist when autocrats have little choice but to purge disloyal elites, such as in the aftermath of failed coups (Timoneda et al. 2023). Likewise, dictators often eschew dismissals because of a stronger cohesion of, and their own affinity with, the ruling elite, such as in revolutionary regimes (Lachapelle et al. 2020). We instead propose that—controlling for such threat environments, opportunity structures, as well as institutions—dictators have significant agency in making such decisions. For example, following his inauguration for a new term in 2024, Vladimir Putin of Russia has dismissed very few elites, instead relying on reshuffles; even Sergey Shoygu, the defence minister, was not fired but reshuffled to an important position of the Security Council secretary: “Even as he removes people from the government, Putin rarely lets them leave” (Bloomberg 2024).

⁶ Because the institutional capacity of authoritarian parties—in turn, contingent on stable elite career paths, which can only be attained through job security when reshuffles, not dismissals, are practiced—is known to reduce the likelihood of popular rebellions, then the argument goes beyond power-sharing and also has implications for the logic of authoritarian control (Svolik 2012). This is a fruitful avenue for future research and we are grateful to the anonymous reviewer for making this point.

Therefore, this constitutes a long-term policy and known regime characteristic, as picked up by external observers. While some dictators resemble a “one-trick pony” when they reflectively and regularly dismiss their elites, others tend to reshuffle even facing significant threats. This occurs because dictators’ preferences regarding elite management strategies reflect not only real threats, but also perceived threats, as we discuss below. Because a comprehensive explanation for dismissals and reshuffles as the dependent variable requires a very different research design,⁷ here we attempt to isolate the effects of elite management strategies, and then explain how such strategies alter the information environment and incentives of elites, which is consequential for autocrats’ survival.

Dismissals as a vertical elite management tool

A purge is almost always understood as a discrete and rapid, sometimes violent, one-time event that affects a significant number of elites (Bokobza et al. 2022; Geddes et al. 2018, 79–80; Timoneda et al. 2023). However, a purge may also be seen as only a subset of a more general phenomenon of elite punishment through dismissals, which may be protracted, gradual, and not necessarily a violent event(s). That is, dismissing half of the cabinet in one day—a purge—or incrementally dismissing individual cabinet members over time—not a purge—may both achieve the same outcome from the dictator’s point of view (Acemoglu et al. 2008).

Purges are supposed to strengthen the leader’s power at the expense of elites by disrupting and destroying their capacity for coordination. Once the dictator has replaced rivals (Roessler 2011) or other (potentially) disloyal elites, the remaining members are likely to

⁷ An explanation likely requires grounding in the life biography and political psychology approaches. In addition to dictators’ own traits, for which we lack reliable psychometric measures, the cohesion of, and affinity between, the ruler and elites is however an important factor behind dismissals and reshuffles (see Tables A4, A20 and A21).

remain loyal for fear of being excluded from the ruling coalition (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, 135).⁸ After the purge, the dictator can keep the ruling coalition smaller so that the remainder will appreciate their position (Bueno de Mesquita et al 2003, 66). Dictators can also immediately replace old elites with new elites, or even with previously purged, now “rehabilitated” officials (Tullock 1987). Instilling negative—through the fear of being purged—loyalty may be welfare-improving for the autocrat: many individuals respond to fear-based motivations, such as fear of dismissals, showing better effort in their tasks, albeit short-term, as a result (Ashforth 1994; Lazear 2000). Due to coordination and information problems, elites are also generally on the back foot in regards to the dictator (Geddes et al. 2018; Svobik 2012). If elites remain uncertain regarding their future dismissal, and given the power imbalance vis-a-vis the dictator, relying on negative loyalty may work for the autocrat.

Many dictators, however, carry out periodic purges even when elites do not constitute a threat (Svobik 2012, 80), or simply to indulge themselves (Kotkin 2017), or both (Makiya 1998). Purges may be driven, and legitimated by security or ideological reasons, but they may also be masked, and presented to the society as an anticorruption campaign (Griffin, Liu, and Shu 2022). They may also be determined by a mixture of motivations. For example, old cadres can be deliberately replaced for new, younger elites for several reasons simultaneously, including ideological considerations connected to social engineering - such elites would be more personally loyal to the autocrat who elevated them (Fitzpatrick 1979) -, or gross miscalculations regarding elite threats (Harris 2007). While a one-off successful purge that in fact counters an elite threat (Roessler 2011) may be important and necessary for leader

⁸ It may also create new job openings and opportunities for new recruits (Kotkin 2017, 603).

survival,⁹ frequent purges, or dismissals more generally, may have the opposite, adverse effect. This occurs through two mechanisms: an increase in defections and policy paralysis.

Consider the first mechanism. Institutions are crucial for power-sharing because they make information about such sharing more transparent (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, 28; Gandhi 2008; Geddes et al. 2018). Dictators also need to mitigate the risks of elite defection (Reuter and Gandhi 2011). If elite members are able to observe institutional dismissals of their peers on a regular basis, this reduces the uncertainty over their own future dismissal. In turn, it diminishes the incentives to cooperate and can lead to defections among the remaining elite. That is, rather than hindering elite coordination, dismissals may instead provide elites with important information regarding changes in the power balance, enabling them to overcome their collective action problem. While many authoritarian ruling coalitions are robust to shocks, the exit of important members often changes the dynamics dramatically so that coalitions cease to be self-enforcing (Acemoglu et al. 2008, 1003). Elite defections are risky because if dismissed, or soon to be dismissed, disgruntled elites may mobilize co-ethnics or other supporters, leading to the onset of a civil war or rebellion (Roessler 2011) or bring their organizational and other resources to the opposition, particularly during mass uprisings (Grundholm 2020; Gleditsch et al. 2023). Because outside career options are severely restricted in the majority of dictatorships, anticipated dismissals of influential elites may turn erstwhile

⁹ A purge can also result from a failure to manage elites in a cooperative manner through normal channels, which may, therefore, be a sign of weakness and a lack of capacity rather than strength. That there is a need for a purge in the first place may simply indicate the lack of elite cohesion as well as of the ruler's control over the elite.

supporters against the incumbent¹⁰ and even lead to an open rebellion.¹¹ Forward-looking elites may then attempt to pre-empt being dismissed by developing a credible rebellion threat and carrying it out against the dictator (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Geddes et al. 2018; Svobik 2009, 2012). After Nito Alves, one of the most influential Angolan officials, was dismissed as an Interior Minister in 1976 by President Agostinho Neto, the ruling party's Central Committee left the former minister in the top party ranks yet in limbo for several months, giving him time to coordinate with other disgruntled elites who anticipated a similar fate (Fauvet 1977). Then, six long months after his dismissal, Alves launched a well-organized coup, which only failed due to the forceful intervention of Cuban troops (Fauvet 1977).

This illustrates the first mechanism (i.e., defections) through which dismissals are likely to have adverse effects on leader survival: the rate of dismissals provides an important cue to elites about their own likely fate. Then, if elites become less uncertain about their own likely or inevitable dismissal, they have stronger incentives to coordinate for a pre-emptive coup. In

¹⁰ Ndong Sima, Prime Minister of Gabon in 2012-14, after his dismissal, was not offered any significant post, quit the ruling party, and ran against the president in 2016 and 2023. "Gabon: Raymond Ndong Sima claque la porte du parti au pouvoir", *Radio France Internationale*, 3 July 2015. This is in contrast to his predecessor in office, Biyoghe Mba, 2009-12, who in 2012 was appointed as President of the Economic and Social Council and in 2015 as the First Deputy Prime Minister, or to his successor, Ona Ondo, 2014-16, who was made President of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa. Neither of them defected.

¹¹ After President Mohamed Bazoum of Niger decided at a cabinet meeting on July 24, 2023, to dismiss the head of the presidential guard, Abdourahamane Tchiani, the latter launched the coup two days later, ousting the president. "Niger army general declares himself country's new leader," *Gulf News*. July 29, 2023.

contrast, forsaking dismissals (or employing them for age-retirement reasons) may instill the elites with confidence in their continuing presence in the ranks, which in turn increases their commitment to the regime. For example, in the Soviet Union following Khrushchev's exit, a consensus had emerged that personnel appointments could no longer be used "to build up the overwhelming power of one particular leader" (Gill 2018, 215). As a result, Khrushchev's successors — Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko—opted not to replace elites, contributing to the rise of gerontocratic rule (Bunce 1981) or the so-called stability of cadres (Breslauer 1982). In fact, the only replacements, whether in the Politburo or the cabinet, occurred for natural reasons, when elites died in office. Elite factions existed, yet they neither opposed nor wanted to remove party leaders (Gill 2018, 214). However, this has changed under Gorbachev. While the new leader resorted to reshuffles on occasion, such as when he moved the influential foreign minister Andrey Gromyko to a ceremonial post in the Supreme Soviet in 1985, he primarily relied on outright dismissals (Gill 2018, 259, 263), eliminating previously powerful officials from the top ranks. However, Gorbachev had a very short bench of his own genuine supporters to replace the old elites (Willerton 1992). Dismissals on a large scale, rather than strengthening the Soviet leader, weakened him instead. When in 1991 the head of the KGB and prime minister were informed about their pending replacement, they attempted a (failed) coup against the Soviet leader in August 1991, which ultimately heralded the end to Gorbachev's time in office (Gill 2018).

More generally, dismissals as a vertical elite management strategy leads to an increased precariousness of the remaining elites, which will affect not only their loyalty and time horizons but also their policy performance—our second mechanism. Here, we draw from insights in industrial and organizational psychology to understand the effects of personnel management decisions on incentives (Ashforth 1994). Scholars have argued that while some workers respond to fear-based motivation to impress their boss (Lazear 2000), on balance, the incentive

effects of firing threats are lower than positive motivations. Moreover, threats also require significantly more monitoring effort than those based on positive incentives; firms relying on negative incentives underperform those based on positive inducements (Corgnet et al. 2015). Fear of firing also tends to reduce team cohesiveness and group performance, increasing individual stress, and may lead to sabotage, passivity, and workplace silence, narrowing down the scope of potential solutions, which in turn dooms firms to failure (Bugdol and Nagody-Mrozowicz 2021).

We can extrapolate these findings to autocracies: if a dictator primarily relies on negative incentives as a long-term strategy of elite management, from the point of view of remaining elites, their own prospects of continuing survival in the ranks become less credible. As a result, they will be more likely to abstain from making important policy or political decisions to avoid costly errors (Wintrobe 1998). Elite dismissals can also be costly to dictators, as they may come at the price of military effectiveness—if military officers are targeted in particular (Pilster and Böhmelt 2011). Frequent dismissals and turnover of elites also make it difficult to implement policies for structural change,¹² in turn leading to economic crises (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, 313–19). Then, dismissals as a policy exacerbate policy problems and can lead to policy paralysis at the regime level, in addition to reducing elite loyalty and increasing the risk of defection. To that end, our first hypothesis is that:

Hypothesis 1: Elite dismissals decrease leaders' survival in office.

While dismissals are not risk-free from the perspective of autocratic survival, eschewing them altogether may enable the elite to establish powerful fiefdoms to challenge

¹² It may also increase incentives to rent-seek by shortening expected tenure in potentially lucrative offices.

their autocrat. Below, we turn to the second elite management strategy designed to reduce such risks.

Reshuffles as a horizontal elite management tool

Dictators need allies for effective governance, as they cannot rule alone (Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014; Gandhi 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006). Then, dictators can use reshuffles as a horizontal elite management strategy to prevent elite coordination and power accumulation, while mitigating the negative consequences of dismissals. This strategy also provides information regarding elites' future regime presence. That is, the positive effects of reshuffles on the survival of dictators primarily occur through two mechanisms: by mitigating the incentives to challenge the ruler, and by disrupting the opportunities to do so.

First, consider that reshuffles only entail exits from specific positions within the ruling coalition, not exits from the coalition altogether. While the threat of dismissals always looms large, there is also a significant degree of voluntary exchange in intra-elite politics in dictatorships. The incentives of elites are not necessarily incompatible with those of the ruler, and they are more likely to acquiesce to the dictator's rule if their continued survival in cabinet is credibly signalled. In turn, rulers cannot rely on violence alone as they need elite incentives to be (partly) aligned with theirs for governing effectively; they have to delegate some authority to the elites (Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014; Geddes et al. 2018, 95–128; Svobik 2009). To that end, they institutionalize their regimes and share power with elites (Gandhi 2008; Geddes et al. 2018). Many dictators in fact rule alongside strong elites embedded in institutions (Gill 2021; Meng 2020). From the point of view of authoritarian elites, their assured presence in the ruling coalition induces positive loyalty that reinforces their commitment to regime continuity (Corgnet et al. 2015; Huang et al. 2019). Dictators achieve this by sharing strategic posts with elites, giving them a stake in the system (Meng 2020, 111). Delegating and sharing power may, in fact, render dictators more powerful as a result (Gill 2021). While we agree with this

scholarship, we draw more specific attention to how such elite co-optation is ensured in practice through job security.

Reshuffles not only reduce the incentives to rebel against the ruler, they also reduce the opportunities to do so effectively. That is, the second mechanism behind the positive effect of reshuffles on survival is that horizontal rotation of elites has the capacity to disrupt patronage networks and power bases. We therefore argue that rulers can mitigate intra-elite coordination while keeping the risks of defection low by relying on horizontal individual transfers (i.e., reshuffles). Authoritarian leaders are known for practicing various ‘shuffling’ strategies, through which officials are frequently or periodically demoted or rotated from one position to another.¹³ Yet, in contrast to dismissals that fire elites from the ranks altogether and make the remaining elites fear for their survival, reshuffles assure them while reducing the potential for coordination at the same time. Then, reshuffles are a form of co-optation. For instance, in the late 1960s, the Soviet Union’s elite management turned “into something of an art form,” which required leaders to “combine political expulsion with co-optation” (Gorlizki and Khlevniuk 2020, 275). The decline in dismissals following Khrushchev did not mean that Brezhnev or his successors eschewed the need to curb elite power; rather, they turned to accomplishing their goals through reshuffles instead, allowing elites “to hold on to a tranche of nomenklatura benefits” (Gorlizki and Khlevniuk 2020, 276).¹⁴

¹³ Leaders also establish duplicate, counterbalancing institutions (Pilster and Böhmelt 2011). New institutions counterbalance the old ones, which the autocrat may be reluctant to intervene in with elite changes; they provide “some protection against local failure”, so that if “the first underboss and his outfit let you down, the second or third might be better” (Colton 2008, 419).

¹⁴ Among the 62 *obkom* secretaries (regional governors) who were replaced in 1965-76, 59 were in fact reshuffled, and many received highly desirable transfers to Moscow. Even those

Following the general logic of rewards and punishment under authoritarian power-sharing, the guarantee of job security, cash transfers, rents, and other perks are the benefits that ensure elite cooperation. Then, reshuffles are a separate, distinct strategy of elite management, as opposed to being a low-scale type of dismissal. In the management literature, job rotation is also recognized as a distinct human resources strategy of transfers between different departments and tasks that is associated with better individual and organizational performance (Kampkötter et al. 2018).

Elites are assured that the dictator is committed to power-sharing when they are appointed to institutions (Gandhi 2008; Geddes et al. 2018). Moreover, intra-elite commitment problems may be mitigated by behavioural cues received from the past treatment of elites by the same ruler. Even though dictatorial politics is known for the absence of third-party enforcement (Svolik 2012; Tullock 1987), research has shown that long-term relationships may emerge endogenously even in the absence of enforcement. This is determined by the length of the relationship, as workers' efforts are higher in longer-term relationships while firms are more reluctant to fire workers with whom they transacted more often in the past (Brown et al. 2004, 749). Similarly to workers, if elites observe that the ruler abstains from purging over time, they are more likely to commit, growing in assurance of their own presence in the ranks. They will provide the ruler with loyalty and service, anchoring and rendering the dictator more stable as a result. In contrast, when the autocrat systematically dismisses elites, it will be at the cost of lower effort and shorter policy horizons, which in turn makes the regime less stable long-term. This also weakens the very individuals on whom he has to rely in order to face external threats or fight against a mass uprising (Grundholm 2020).

dismissed from high party posts tended to retain their Central Committee posts (Gorlizki and Khlevniuk 2020, 276).

For instance, even though individual ministers averaged only 10 months in their positions under Augusto Pinochet, on exit almost all were provided with other governmental positions, which contributed to strong elite unity in Chile (Huneus 2007, 92–93).¹⁵ Scholars of democratic politics have also proposed that cabinet reshuffles address the adverse selection and agency loss problems that arise when ministers remain in their posts for longer. This happens because the officials are able to harness the resources of their ministries for their own goals, as they also get co-opted by civil servants to prioritize the interests of their departments over the cabinet’s interests (Indridason and Kam 2008). More generally, as managers increase their task knowledge and become more capable of making value-enhancing decisions, their performance improves. However, the longer they remain in their positions, the more powerful they become (Hambrick and Fukutomi 1991, 732).

Similarly, in authoritarian politics, reshuffles reduce or destroy the informational gains that individual officials develop in their positions; crucially, reshuffles also undermine patronage networks and departmental loyalty that elites gain when they remain in the same position for a long time. A dictator “may shift officials out of jobs for which they are well suited into jobs for which they are not well suited simply because it is safer for him” (Tullock 1987, 49). Reshuffles may be driven not only by dictators’ own survival concerns, but also by considerations to prevent policy-making ossification that happens when elites are too secure in their institutional positions (Bunce 1981). Similar to democratic politics, through reshuffles, dictators reduce agency loss by changing elite control over departments, ministries, or regions.

¹⁵ Bermukhamedov of Turkmenistan has reshuffled the chiefs of his security service seven times in 15 years, six times—ministers of interior and prosecutors general each, and five times—defence ministers. See <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/86449>.

The regime of Mobutu in Zaire is frequently mentioned for its exemplary practice of reshuffles (Svolik 2012, 79). Having eliminated potential elite threats in the first couple years of his rule through bloody purges, Mobutu then turned to a very different management strategy. Under Mobutu, “systematic rotation of high office was practiced. As a co-optative resource, a pool of vacant high offices was sustained through the continuous pensioning of former collaborators into lucrative business opportunities” (Young and Turner 1985, 397). Very soon, elites understood “that only presidential grace kept them there, and that the principle of rotation was unlikely to leave them in place very long” (ibid, 398). In order to address the problem of control, regional “commissioners were kept on a short leash by the simple expedient of shifting them very often” (Young and Turner 1985, 225). Having appointed eight commissioners in January of 1967, five of them were replaced in August, and “then additional rotation at least annually” (ibid, 225). Over time, his cabinet was reshuffled an unprecedented 60 times, yet in return for loyalty, cabinet members “knew that regardless of their inefficiency and degree of corruption, they could re-enter the government” (Kisangani 2016, 356). In summary, because reshuffles reduce the incentives to defect as well as the opportunities to accumulate sufficient power bases,¹⁶ our second hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 2: Elite reshuffles increase leaders’ survival in office.

¹⁶As we explain in the Analysis section, the mechanisms behind the positive effect of reshuffles on survival are either (1) psychological - making it difficult to identify observable implications, or (2) can only be measured at the level of individual elites - in terms of the importance of their policy portfolios, patronage opportunities, and resources that are disrupted as a result of reshuffles. Since we lack data for these factors, therefore, we can only test for the mechanisms behind dismissals, while also testing the observed implications behind reshuffles.

Data and Research Design

We test our expectations using two different datasets. First, we test the effect of management strategies of cabinet elites on leader survival in 206 autocratic regimes (402 leaders) from 109 countries between 1967 and 2020 (Geddes et al. 2018; Chin et al. 2022). Our analysis is at the country-year level, as the individual data are observed in July of each year (see Bramwell and Nyrup 2020). Second, while cabinet members are typically the most important elites across authoritarian regimes, in party regimes, many politburo members may not occupy a formal position within the cabinet (Rigby 1970). Therefore, we extend the study to politburo elites in communist regimes between 1919 and 1991, at the leader-year level (Matthews 2023); we provide further details in a section that follows.

Outcome variable

We explain the survival in office of autocratic leaders, taking account of whether they are in power in July of each year (Bramwell and Nyrup 2020).¹⁷ The dependent variable takes a value of 1 in the last year in which a leader is in office, and 0 otherwise. In total, there are 321 leader exits in the full estimation sample.

Measuring elite management strategies

We measure yearly dismissals and reshuffles using the *WhoGov* data (Bramwell and Nyrup 2020) with a total of 25,745 individual autocratic elites. First, to eliminate the possibility of capturing leader exit in both the dependent and independent variables, we omit dictators from the individual-level data. Second, for each country-year observation, we count the number of individuals and the positions they occupy. Third, the share of the cabinet, dismissed over the past year, is then measured by subtracting from 1 the number of individuals that are new to the

¹⁷ We adjust all our measure for 1970 when the data is observed in January.

cabinet at time t , divided by the total number of cabinet members. Because we lack full data on individual elite members' ages or deaths in office, we make the assumption that while some absences may be due to their age-retirement¹⁸ or death in office¹⁹, the predominant majority of dismissals are made by incumbent leaders in their role as managers of their ruling coalitions.

In turn, the share of reshuffles is measured by dividing the number of individuals who occupy *new* positions at time t (compared to $t-1$), as well as those who have been brought back to the cabinet—by the total number of individuals in the cabinet.²⁰ Both indicators range from 0 to 1, as they capture the share of the cabinet that has been reshuffled or dismissed compared to last year, with higher values indicating higher rates of dismissals or reshuffles.

We categorize those that leave the cabinet and never reappear again as dismissed. However, if a former minister is dismissed from the cabinet, but then they reappear in that cabinet after a spell, we interpret it as meaning that they are likely to have been appointed to another institution for which we do not have the data, and we treat it as a reshuffle. Therefore, all those that reappear across multiple spells are treated as reshuffled (until their final exit,

¹⁸ See Magni Berton and Panel (2017) for the logic of gerontocracy under dictatorship. To control for the average age of elites, we account for the dictator's age, as most leaders eschew selecting much younger individuals (Gill 2018, 234).

¹⁹ For robustness, we account for natural deaths among the Politburo elites for which we have such data. 65 individuals, or less than one percent of annual observations, are categorized as deaths in office. Elites are 57 years old at the time of their dismissal, while those who stay in office are 63 on average.

²⁰ Individuals new to the cabinet are considered to not have been reshuffled and are assigned a value of 0 while summing individuals with new positions, while those that have re-entered the cabinet after a previously observed dismissal are considered to be reshuffled.

which is coded as a dismissal). Still, elites may not know at that time whether and who will be brought back to office; such individuals might also have been purged or arrested and then reappeared after they were freed.²¹ An example is Nguza Karl-i-Bond, foreign minister of Zaire, who was arrested and receiving a death sentence in 1977, which was then commuted and he was made foreign minister again in 1979 (Young and Turner 1985, 74). Treating those who reappear as being dismissed every time they exit the cabinet does not alter our core findings.²²

While the average annual rate of dismissals across dictatorships is slightly higher than that of reshuffles: 0.22 and 0.18, respectively, the rates among autocrats who survive over ten years are 0.18 and 0.20, in contrast to 0.32 and 0.18 observed among surviving shorter than 10 years (see Figure A4). Since our aggregate measures give a “bird’s eye” view as some cabinet dismissals may be unobserved demotions to lower positions outside the cabinet—but not promotions—we conduct additional validity tests. First, we examine dismissals in the Politburos, cross-checking between the cabinet and Politburo data. We find that only three percent of ex-ministers were not dismissed but promoted to Politburos. Secondly, we include an illustrative case study of all elites in a representative authoritarian regime (i.e., Russia under Putin).

²¹ In Section A2 of the Appendix we highlight the validity of our measures using examples of three dictatorships with documented history of such practices. Model A3.1 in Table A3 includes alternative measures where those who are dismissed, even if they re-appear after an interim period, are measured as dismissed, not as reshuffled.

²² This further reinforces the argument that dictators’ management strategies and possible breakdowns in power-sharing (i.e., dismissals) are consequential for whether the dictator can hold on to power. See Table A3 for the results with the alternative operationalizations.

Control variables

We include several control variables to account for the possibility that observed dismissals and reshuffles are determined by other factors, such as institutional arrangements and rules of alternation in power, structural factors, leader characteristics, or various threats to the leader. Therefore, we control for the leader's age, GDP per capita, GDP growth, population size, status of the legislature, regime type, type of mobilization (violent vs. nonviolent), failed coup attempts, and cubic polynomials of the leader in office. Section A1 of the Online Appendix provides a longer discussion of the reasoning for including these variables, their sources, and summary statistics. Below, we also report a battery of robustness tests to ensure our results are not driven by alternative explanations, unobserved heterogeneity, or reverse causality.

Empirical Analyses

Cabinet dismissals and reshuffles

We use logistic regression models with standard errors clustered at the country level to estimate the effect of dismissals and reshuffles on leader survival. Table 1 reports the results of specifications with the independent variables included incrementally to demonstrate that our results are not sensitive to particular controls. First, across all specifications, higher dismissal rates are associated with a higher likelihood of dictatorial exit, therefore strongly supporting *Hypothesis 1*. The negative effect of dismissals is not affected by the inclusion of variables that account for regime governability, threats, or institutions (Model 6). Importantly, it remains robust to the inclusion of protest measures, but also *Failed coup* (Model 7), expected to increase the likelihood of purges, and, thus, dismissals (Timoneda et al. 2023). In turn, the results in Models 2-7 show that higher reshuffle rates reduce the likelihood that a leader departs, giving strong support for *Hypothesis 2*.

Because the effects of predictors are non-linear, it is more intuitive to interpret the results visually. Drawing from Model 7 in Table 1, Figure 1 (left subplot) shows that

controlling for regime governability, institutions, and the threat environment—factors that may make dismissals more likely—as leaders get to dismiss more officials from their cabinet, their probability of losing office increases from a low of 6.5 percentage points to a maximum of

Table 1. Reshuffles, dismissals and autocratic leaders’ survival, 1967-2020.

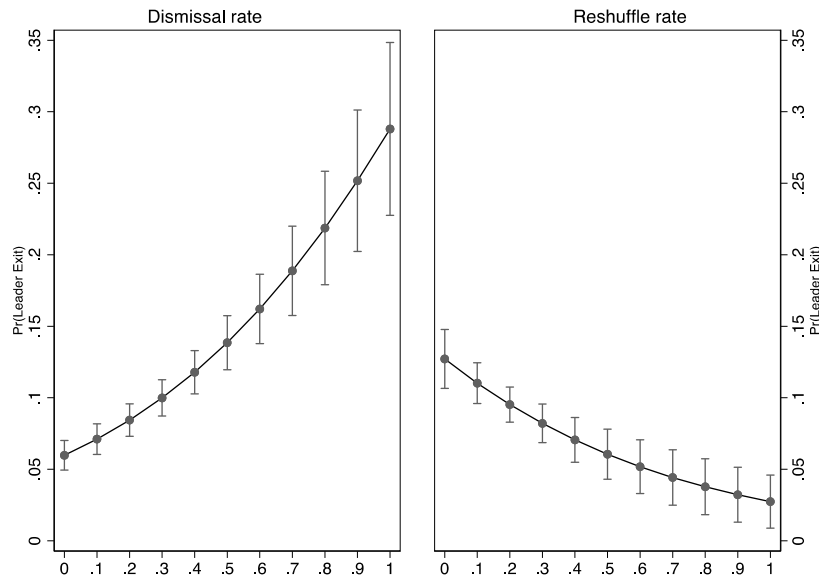
	(Model 1) Leader exit	(Model 2) Leader exit	(Model 3) Leader exit	(Model 4) Leader exit	(Model 5) Leader exit	(Model 6) Leader exit	(Model 7) Leader exit
Dismissal rate t-1	1.680*** (0.255)	—	1.795*** (0.255)	1.912*** (0.257)	2.022*** (0.244)	1.838*** (0.247)	1.597*** (0.247)
Reshuffle rate t-1	--	-0.896** (0.360)	-1.491*** (0.421)	-1.339*** (0.430)	-1.847*** (0.424)	-1.577*** (0.420)	-1.465*** (0.412)
Leader age	--	--	--	0.0283*** (0.00532)	0.0318*** (0.00549)	0.0303*** (0.00628)	0.0288*** (0.00621)
Ln GDP/capita t-1	--	--	--	--	-0.196*** (0.0508)	-0.124* (0.0663)	-0.176*** (0.0631)
GDP growth t-1	--	--	--	--	-0.00393 (0.00936)	-0.00670 (0.0102)	-0.00296 (0.00971)
Population in 1000s t-1	--	--	--	--	-6.49e-07*** (1.47e-07)	-5.12e-07*** (1.82e-07)	-7.92e-07*** (2.66e-07)
Open legislature t-1	--	--	--	--	--	-0.343** (0.143)	-0.293* (0.155)
Monarchy t-1	--	--	--	--	--	-0.450* (0.252)	-0.410* (0.247)
Personalistic regime t-1	--	--	--	--	--	-0.0722 (0.179)	-0.106 (0.180)
Military regime t-1	--	--	--	--	--	0.730*** (0.196)	0.724*** (0.195)
Nonviolent mobilization t-1	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.944*** (0.185)
Violent mobilization t-1	--	--	--	--	--	--	-0.0816 (0.187)
Failed coup t-1	--	--	--	--	--	--	-0.117 (0.353)
Constant	-2.104*** (0.263)	-1.091*** (0.201)	-1.965*** (0.267)	-3.565*** (0.371)	-2.490*** (0.442)	-2.929*** (0.436)	-2.573*** (0.471)
Cubic polynomials	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,945	4,062	3,945	3,945	3,306	3,306	3,306

Note: logistic regression models with standard errors clustered at the country level. Clustered standard errors in parentheses: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

about 23.5 percentage points. In turn, the right subplot shows that as the rate of reshuffles increases, the probability of leaders losing office drops from a high of 12 percentage points to a low of 4 percentage points. To put it simply, more reshuffles lead to a 3-fold *decrease* in the

probability of losing office, while more dismissals have the opposite, almost a mirror-like 3-fold *increase* in the risk of losing office.

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of leader exit by elite management strategy, 1967-2020.



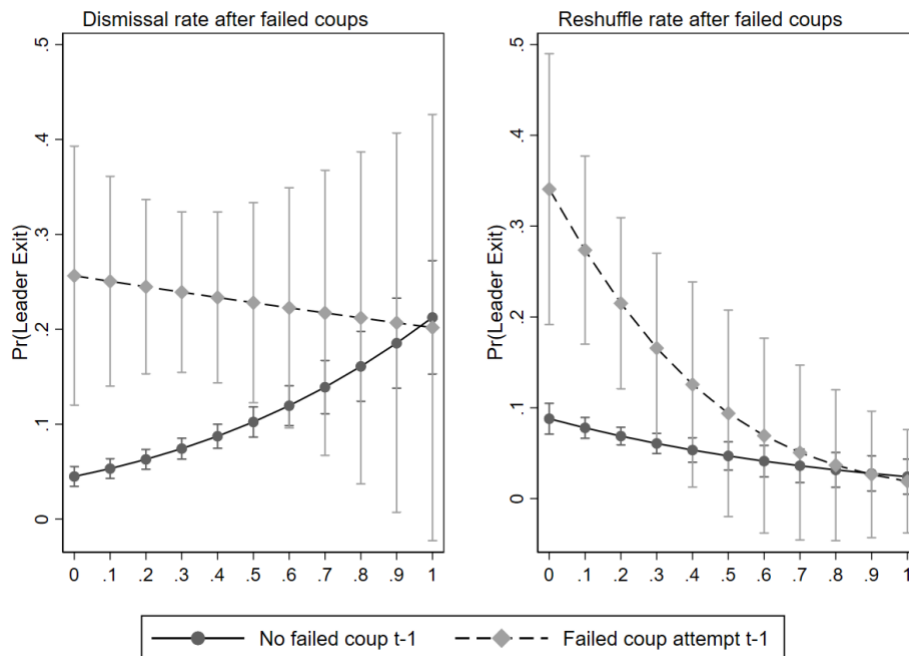
Note: Predicted probabilities of exit are estimated following Model 7, Table 1.

In summary, the results indicate the two elite management strategies have divergent effects on leaders' ability to survive in office. While elites' dismissals as a policy tool tend to destabilize the equilibrium of the power-sharing agreement between the dictator and elites—reducing leaders' ability to hold on to power—reshuffles appear to be a survival-enhancing elite management strategy. This does not preclude a situation when autocrats have to purge (such as a failed coup), when elite management strategies may have a different effect on their survival (Roessler 2011; Timoneda et al. 2023). In Figure 2 below²³ we show that the negative effect of dismissals after a failed coup attempt disappears, thus highlighting their survival enhancing effect in such strategic situations. Dismissals that do not follow failed coups remain detrimental to survival. In turn, reshuffles have a much more pronounced survival enhancing

²³ The full results of this model can be found in Table A13 in the Online Appendix.

effect as they reduce the risk of exit for leaders—by disrupting elites’ networks—particularly after failed coup attempts.

Figure 2. Leader exit, elite management strategies and failed coup attempts, 1967-2020.



Robustness tests

To ensure our results are robust to potential reverse causality, alternative explanations, confounding measures, and unobserved heterogeneity, we have conducted a battery of robustness checks. In the interest of space, these are included in the supplementary appendix. Here we provide a summary of the most important analyses.

First, if stronger leaders—who also survive longer—tend to reshuffle and dismiss elites at higher rates, then the results included in Table 1 may be driven by reverse causality. Therefore, we reverse the causal arrow and estimate the effect of leader tenure on dismissals and reshuffle considering factors associated with leader strength—including whether the leader is a founder of a nation (Meng 2020), entered office via coup (Svolik 2012; Sudduth 2017) or headed a revolutionary regime (Lachapelle et al. 2020)— and various leader background information. We find that these factors neither exert a statistically significant effect on elite

management strategies (Table A4) nor alter the results when included as control variables in the main specification (Table A5). We however find evidence that more exclusive ruling coalitions are less prone to dismissals (A4.1 and Tables A20-21), but the main results remain robust to the inclusion of such factors.

Second, we address the possibility that dismissals and reshuffles may instead be driven by regular, institutionalized changes in the ruling coalition induced by holding elections (Hyde and Marinov 2012), leader's term limits (Hyde and Marinov 2012), or a transition from one autocracy to another (Geddes et al. 2018), which would dislodge the leader and some of the elites. Similarly, we control for the effect of successful coup types (i.e. regime changing or reshuffling) (Chin et al. 2021) on leader survival as elite management strategies might also be a function of changes in the ruling coalition after successful coups. Accounting for these alternative explanations does not alter the results (see Tables A6, A16-A19).

Third, we also eliminate the possibility that the results are merely proxying for instances of military purges as a mean to consolidate power by including such purges as a control variable (Sudduth 2021). Furthermore, using several alternative measures of military dismissals and reshuffles, we show that the main measures exert effects independently from those of military purges (see Section A3 and Table A7). We also control for levels of repression as a proxy for a more general strategy of the leader to assert control over the country, but the results remain substantively identical (see Table A18).

We also use several methods to eliminate the possibility of potentially unobserved heterogeneity, which may correlate with both leaders' ability to stay in office and their reliance on reshuffles and dismissals. We use the method proposed by Altonji, Elder, and Taber (2005) and examine how large the bias from unobserved covariates needs to be for the true coefficient

to be 0. We find that our estimates are highly robust to omitted covariates.²⁴ We also account for country and regime unobserved heterogeneity by re-estimating the models from Table 1 using a Penalized Maximum Likelihood Estimation model (Cook et al. 2020), and a fixed effects linear probability model (Timoneda 2021). The results remain substantively identical (see Table A8). This also suggests that the results are not merely a function of cross-country differences in political stability and other factors, but rather that autocrats' survival—when facing similar structural strategic environments—can indeed be explained by their elite management strategies. Finally, we also estimate the effect of dismissals and reshuffles on leader exits via natural death (see Model A3.2 in Table A3). If other omitted factors exist that explain reshuffles and dismissals, then such factors will influence the likelihood of exit through dying by natural causes. Otherwise, a leader's age should be the only covariate that explains when autocrats are more likely to die in office (Svolik 2012). We find that reshuffles and dismissals have no effect on exits via natural death, while age does, which reinforces the confidence that the findings are not driven by unobserved heterogeneity (see Model A3.2).

In summary, the additional analyses included in the supplementary appendix—which also provides further specifications and details—strongly support our explanation.

Testing the mechanisms

To validate the theory further, we examine the two mechanisms behind the negative effect of dismissals on autocratic survival by testing their direct observable implications (King et al.

²⁴ The negative coefficient of -8 indicates that the key coefficient estimates in the specification with covariates (Model 7 from Table 1) exceed in magnitude the estimates in the restricted models (Model 3 from Table 1). This means that the bias from unobserved covariates would need to go in the opposite direction for the bias from the omitted observables to drive the coefficient estimates to 0.

1994, 47). Specifically, frequent dismissals will have a negative effect on leaders' survival because, first, they alienate the remaining elites, thereby also increasing the likelihood of coup attempts (Easton and Siverson 2018). Second, because elites prefer to avoid costly mistakes so as not to become the targets of dismissals, frequent dismissals lead to policy paralysis, in turn increasing the likelihood of ineffective economic policy and crises (Reuter and Gandhi 2011). We test these mechanisms by first, estimating the effect of dismissals and reshuffles on coup attempts and second, on economic performance.²⁵

Table 2. Dismissal, reshuffles and coups in autocracies, 1967-2020.

	(Model 8) Coup attempt	(Model 9) Coup attempt	(Model 10) Coup attempt	(Model 11) Coup attempt
Dismissal rate	1.402*** (0.360)	--	1.389*** (0.364)	1.051*** (0.386)
Reshuffle rate	--	0.422 (0.446)	0.266 (0.480)	-0.341 (0.476)
Constant	-2.603*** (0.296)	-1.805*** (0.198)	-2.634*** (0.297)	0.0991 (0.730)
Cubic polynomials	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Control variables	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	3,945	4,062	3,945	3,306

Standard errors in parentheses: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

²⁵ Because the theoretical mechanisms behind the positive effect of reshuffles on survival is predominantly psychological, we cannot identify an observable implication. Still, we include reshuffles to eliminate the possibility that the observed effects are confounded by another, unobserved, within-elite dynamic. If reshuffles exert a similar effect to that of dismissals, this could potentially indicate that the chosen measures proxy for some other unobserved mechanism(s) driving the effect of management strategies on survival. However, reshuffles have no statistically significant effect on coup attempts and development (Tables 2 and 3), which indicates we can reject the possibility of an unobserved mechanism.

Table 2 shows the effect of dismissals and reshuffles on coup attempts in autocracies.²⁶ Based on the average marginal effect, dismissals increase the likelihood of coup attempts (i.e., elite defections) by about 4.5 percentage points, while the effects of reshuffles remain statistically insignificant. Therefore, the results give support for the observable implication of the first mechanism as to why dismissals reduce autocrats' survival.

To test the second mechanism of policy paralysis, we estimate the effect of dismissals and reshuffles on economic development. Specifically, we fit a full dynamic model explaining GDP per capita (natural logarithm) with a full set of country fixed effects to absorb the impact of all unobserved factors on GDP, with annual fixed effects included (Acemoglu et al. 2019). Moreover, the inclusion of country-fixed effects gives us the within-unit effect of elite management strategies on economic development, thereby allowing us to test the mechanism directly. The specification also includes various lag structures²⁷ of GDP per capita to account for autoregressive dynamics under the assumption that autocracies that dismiss or reshuffle more do not follow a different GDP trend compared to other autocracies (Acemoglu et al. 2019). In addition to the dynamic linear model, we include the Generalized Methods of Moments (GMM) specification developed by Arellano and Bond (1991), which accounts for

²⁶ We use the same specification as in Table 1, except we remove failed coups as a covariate to avoid collinearity with attempted coups (see Table A8).

²⁷ Following Acemoglu et al. 2019, we include one-, two-, four-, and eight-year lags of the GDP per capita. The assumption behind the dynamic linear model is that past dismissals, reshuffles, and GDP levels are orthogonal to contemporaneous and future shocks to the GDP and that the error term is serially uncorrelated. The inclusion of sufficiently many lags of GDP per capita eliminates the residual serial correlation in the error term.

the potential bias resulting from the failure of strict exogeneity in dynamic models (Nickell 1981).²⁸ In Table 3 above, we report the main specifications, with and without control

Table 3. Dismissals, reshuffles and economic development in autocracies, 1967-2020.

	Within estimates		GMM estimates	
	(Model 12) GDP/capita ln	(Model 13) GDP/capita ln	(Model 14) GDP/capita ln	(Model 15) GDP/capita ln
Dismissal rate	-0.0752*** (0.0167)	-0.0821*** (0.0248)	-0.0707*** (0.0183)	-0.0817*** (0.0275)
Reshuffle rate	0.00987 (0.0243)	0.0278 (0.0211)	-0.00209 (0.0321)	0.0181 (0.0266)
Ln GDP/capita t-1	0.924*** (0.0642)	0.916*** (0.0361)	0.882*** (0.0700)	0.880*** (0.0378)
Ln GDP/capita t-2	-0.0185 (0.0442)	-0.0297 (0.0344)	-0.0155 (0.0404)	-0.0364 (0.0388)
Ln GDP/capita t-3	-0.0501 (0.0360)	-0.0491 (0.0382)	-0.0513 (0.0354)	-0.0498 (0.0382)
Ln GDP/capita t-4	0.0362 (0.0319)	0.0376 (0.0275)	0.0271 (0.0251)	0.0261 (0.0214)
Constant	0.628*** (0.180)	0.716*** (0.253)	--	--
Control variables	No	Yes	No	Yes
Cubic polynomials	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,909	2,846	2,772	2,713
R-squared	0.932	0.932	--	--
Number of countries	105	105	105	104

Standard errors in parentheses: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

²⁸ This bias is usually present in cases of high numbers of units (N) and low numbers of time periods (T). Since T is quite large in our sample—each country is observed on average over 41 time periods—there is a lower likelihood that our analysis suffers from this bias.

variables.²⁹ As it is apparent from the results, while controlling for other potential factors of political and policy instability that influence economic performance (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003), higher dismissal rates are strongly associated with decreases in GDP per capita. These results are consistent with the observable implications of the policy paralysis mechanism. Moreover, reshuffles do not exert a statistically significant effect on GDP per capita in any of the models.

In summary, while reshuffles and dismissals have the opposite effect on leaders' survival, as seen in Table 1, the analyses in this section further underline the mechanisms through which they occur. Specifically, dismissals undermine elite loyalty and increase policy paralysis, which in turn leads to attempted coups and economic downturns.

Politburo elites' dismissal and leader survival

While autocratic cabinets are the key elite institution in the majority of dictatorships, in some party-based regimes, particularly in Leninist regimes, the cabinet is usually subordinate to the party executive institution, the Political Bureau (Politburo) (Rigby 1970; Roeder 1993). The Politburo consists of full-voting and non-voting candidate members, with some members simultaneously occupying cabinet posts as ministers. Yet it is their Politburo position that determines the elite's place in a regime hierarchy.³⁰ While the Politburo appointments and dismissals are often subject to collective leadership decisions, in practice, members "can be appointed and removed" by the party leader (Roeder 1993, 51).

We supplement our core analyses of cabinets with the analyses on politburo elites from former Communist countries between 1917 and 1991 from Matthews (2023). The data

²⁹ The fully specified models, with alternative lag structures, are included in Tables A10-11.

³⁰ The executive of the Central Committee, the Secretariat, is also important; in practice, top secretaries of the Secretariat are also Politburo members (Rigby 1970).

categorize the types of exits, which allows us to perform a placebo test in which we calculate how many elites die while in the politburo to see whether our measure of dismissal is not confounded by individuals simply dying rather than being dismissed. The trade-off is that we cannot adequately estimate the effect of reshuffles on leader survival as politburo full voting membership positions tend to be fairly equal in weight, with the possible exception of the second secretary. Plus, the Politburo policy portfolios are either determined by individuals' state positions—among those who also hold posts in the state hierarchy—or assigned by the Politburo decisions (Gill 2018; Rigby 1970). While we are unable to capture yearly differences in the portfolios or positions that these individuals hold in the politburo, we can still capture

Table 4. Politburo dismissals and leader survival, 1917-1991.

	(Model 16) Leader exit	(Model 17) Leader exit	(Model 18) Leader exit	(Model 19) Leader exit	(Model 20) Leader exit
Dismissal rate t-1	7.469*** (1.240)	--	--	--	--
Placebo (die in office)	--	7.270 (6.421)	--	--	--
Dismissal rate (recoded) t-1	--	--	9.720*** (2.283)	--	9.735*** (2.274)
Reshuffle rate t-1	--	--	--	-0.453 (5.906)	-1.128 (6.865)
Leader age	-0.000129 (0.000281)	0.000616** (0.000243)	0.000528** (0.000254)	0.000580** (0.000252)	0.000518** (0.000263)
GDP/capita ln t-1	0.487* (0.251)	0.910*** (0.311)	0.497* (0.301)	0.885*** (0.302)	0.487 (0.314)
GDP growth t-1	-8.568* (4.900)	-8.566* (4.463)	-7.585* (4.384)	-8.837* (4.669)	-7.691* (4.501)
Population size ln t-1	0.135 (0.251)	-0.0277 (0.189)	0.190 (0.223)	-0.00766 (0.182)	0.197 (0.219)
Nonviolent mobilization t-1	1.209* (0.640)	1.395*** (0.482)	1.611*** (0.537)	1.294*** (0.471)	1.615*** (0.537)
Internal conflict t-1	-0.0636 (0.620)	-0.0895 (0.486)	-0.101 (0.501)	-0.103 (0.459)	-0.120 (0.476)
Constant	-6.198*** (2.155)	-3.609** (1.538)	-6.092*** (1.957)	-3.609** (1.527)	-6.112*** (1.924)
Cubic polynomials	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	442	442	442	442	442

Clustered standard errors in parentheses: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

dismissals by dividing the sum of demotions, expulsions, and resignations each year over the total number of individuals in the politburo for that year.³¹ As a robustness test, we were able to categorize 25 officials as reshuffles, that is, who return to the Politburo after a brief interim term, or who are appointed to positions of similar standing, even if coded as demoted in the data³². The majority of dismissed members, however, are either pensioned off or relegated to much lower ranking posts, such as factory managers. We include a similar set of control variables as above that cover the entire period of the politburo data³³ and we use logistic regression models with the unit of analysis at the leader-year and clustered standard errors at the same level. Altogether, there are 34 leader exits.³⁴

Table 4 presents the results of the analysis and shows the negative, consistent effects of politburo dismissals on leader survival. The average marginal effect, going from the minimum to the maximum value, of dismissal rates in politburos is 40 percentage points. Moreover, a placebo test (Model 17) on the rate of individuals dying in office shows that our measure of dismissal is not spurious to capture individuals that die in office³⁵ as being dismissed. While

³¹ The data detail the date of exit from office for each individual, which allows us to ensure that the dismissal happened before the leader exited office. In Table A12, we show that disaggregating between these variables yields substantively identical results.

³² For example, Jozef Lenárt, upon leaving Czechoslovakian (KSČ) Presidium, became the 1st secretary of Slovak communist party (KSS). We regard this (and similar cases) as reshuffles.

³³ We omit failed coups because the data are only available from 1950 and are perfectly collinear with exits. We rely on the internal conflict (*e_miinterc*) from Coppedge et al. (2021) as the violent mobilization from NAVCO 1.3 is perfectly collinear with the outcome.

³⁴ We further updated the data on leaders as some leaders' tenures were not recorded.

³⁵ The data on elites' death dates is heavily missing in the *WhoGov* dataset.

the coefficient on reshuffles has the expected direction of effects, it is however not statistically significant due to the sparsity of this indicator in the Politburo data (Models 18-20). In summary, these results are consistent with our theoretical explanation, despite capturing an elite co-optation institution different from the cabinet.

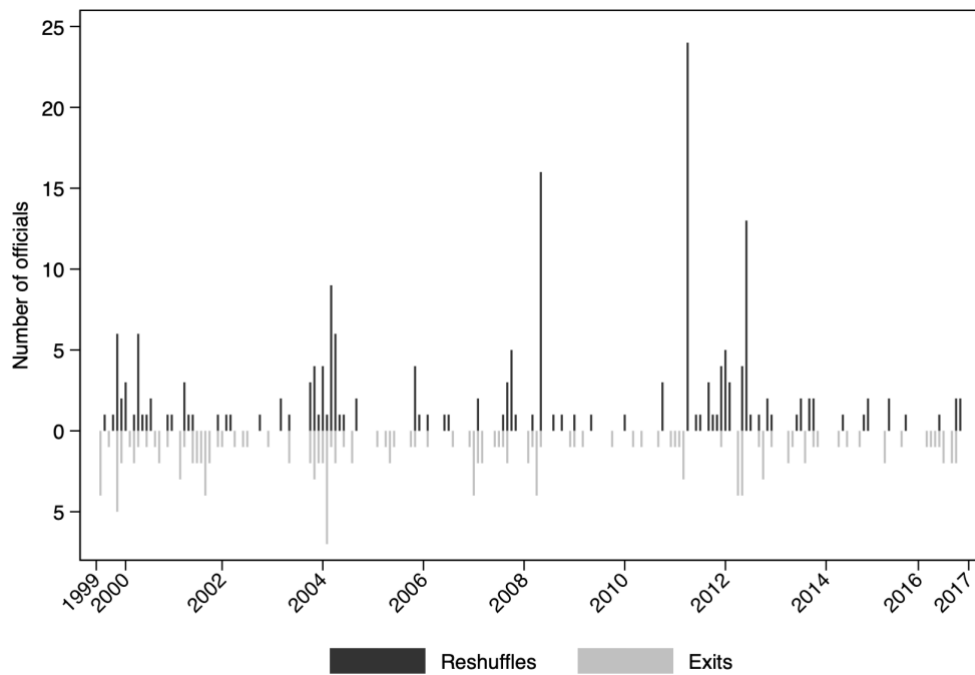
Dismissals and reshuffles under Putin in Russia

For an additional validation of our approach on the importance of reshuffles, we apply a finer-grained study of elite management strategies in Russia under Vladimir Putin, using data from Baturo and Elkink (2021). This approach also serves to validate our measurement strategy because the data includes both cabinet and non-cabinet elites, to capture dismissals and reshuffles over the full range. The data, at monthly intervals, spans back to 1999, when Putin was appointed as the head of government (Hale 2015, 267-291). Putin has survived in office for 25 years, which is well above the average duration of 9.5 years and in the top ten percentile for personalist leaders (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018). Furthermore, in the face of unprecedented sanctions from 2022, Putin's regime has proven more resilient than anticipated. As of the end of 2024, no senior official from the administration, cabinet, federal agencies, regional government, the military, or civilian ranks, including the widely assumed liberal economic block, has openly protested or exited, including during the mutiny of Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2023 (Bloomberg 2024).

Putin's durability can be explained by his careful elite management, centered on cultivating elite loyalty (Hale 2015, 267--291; Levitsky and Way 2010, 186--201). Putin has acquired control over key institutions by slowly and incrementally making strategic appointments, avoiding dismissals, and rewarding loyalty (Zygar 2016). In fact, Putin has largely eschewed dismissing elites from the ruling group, even those who committed political or policy errors (Ledeneva 2013). He only had them retire under exceedingly rare

circumstances, preferring to keep elites “in house.” Putin avoided antagonizing them and kept all those willing within the ranks, gaining a reputation that he “does not betray his own people” as a result (Ledeneva 2013, 25). Instead, he has consistently relied on regular reshuffles to ensure elites are unable to develop strong institutional and patronage bases to challenge him.

Figure 3. Reshuffles and Dismissals in Russia, 1999-2017



Note: Monthly number of reshuffles and exits among 95 top-ranked officials, as explained in text.

The rates of reshuffles and dismissals within Putin’s ruling coalition over time are shown in Figure 3 using elite data of over five hundred highest-ranking officials³⁶ based on their institutional affiliation each month. The average tenure in office is 5.7 years, and each official is reshuffled at least three times over their time within the ruling coalition. For example, Sergey Naryshkin, from his position in the presidential administration in 2004, is appointed to

³⁶ All cabinet ministers, highest-ranking members of the presidential administration, heads of major security services and other federal agencies, as well as governors of the ten most important regions, among others (Baturu and Elkind, 2021, 185-188).

the cabinet as minister; in 2007, he becomes deputy prime minister; in May 2008, he returns to the administration as chief of staff. In late 2011, he made another lateral move, becoming the speaker of the lower legislative chamber. Then, in September 2016, he was made chief of the foreign intelligence service. In total, Naryshkin has been reshuffled six times, each time moving across very distinct institutions. The data in Figure 3 underlie the fact that reshuffles have been a constant feature of elite management in Russia, while dismissals have been rare. At the level of the ruling coalition, there are an average of twelve reshuffles per year. The rate was particularly high in late 2011 in the aftermath of mass protests when Putin aimed to reshuffle officials in the presidential administration, some of whom have advocated for Medvedev's second term (Baturu and Elkink 2021, 71), but only very few have been purged after turnover.³⁷

In contrast, the rate of occasional dismissals has never amounted to a purge. The majority of exits, in fact, are driven by age-retirement reasons (Baturu and Elkink 2021, 105). Even considering the fact of a gradual replacement of Yeltsin's elites for Putin's loyalists, there have been only 7 exits on average per year, among 150-170 distinct individuals each year, or about 5 percent rate. Dismissals among members of Putin's personal network (those with a professional or personal shared background with him) have been extremely uncommon, with

³⁷ Even those under suspicion of disloyalty were not dismissed. Thus, the first deputy chief of administration, Vladislav Surkov, who fell out of favor for his support for Medvedev, was first reshuffled into the post of deputy prime minister in 2011, then appointed as an assistant to the president in 2013. *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2013, "Russian Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov Resigns Following Putin Reprimand." <http://wapo.st/18u1AhR>.

only 1.5 individual exits on average per year. Even those who had clearly transgressed the norms, provoking his anger, were kept within the ranks.³⁸

In summary, a low rate of dismissals, in combination with a relatively high and frequent rate of reshuffles, has ensured that no official was able to develop an independent power base from which to challenge Putin, yet all were assured of their position in the system (Baturu et al. 2025). When Dmitry Medvedev, as president, has gradually grown in ambition (Hale 2015, 276), he was “reshuffled” prior to the end of his four-year term, 3 years and 4 months into his office.³⁹ Yet Medvedev remained in the ranks and, subsequently, despite policy and managerial errors, served first as prime minister, then in 2020 was reshuffled into the security council.

Conclusion

The existing literature has prioritized the conflictual logic of intra-elite interactions (Bokobza et al. 2022; Svolik 2012; Sudduth 2017; 2021; Woldense 2022). This paper has shown that many long-lasting autocrats equally rely on less conflictual tools by practicing infrequent dismissals and inducing loyalty through reshuffles instead, whether in autocratic cabinets, party politburos, or Putin’s Russia. Our approach sheds new light on the logic of power-sharing, indicating that there also exists significant room for voluntary exchanges between the dictator and elites. While authoritarian politics generally occurs under the shadow of violence, dictators also need to ensure elites’ policy support and implementation (Gill 2018, 2021; Meng 2020; Scharpf and Gläsel 2020). Against this background, we have conceptualized dictators in their

³⁸ Viktor Cherkesov, who angered Putin for publicly revealing elite infighting in 2007, was not purged but moved from his post as head of the antidrugs agency into the military procurement agency. See *Moscow Times*, May 13, 2008. “Old Faces Follow Putin to New Jobs.”

³⁹ Putin was nominated for the 2012 elections instead of Medvedev on September 24, 2011.

role as human resource managers who deploy a combination of dismissals and reshuffles to meet the concomitant goals of political survival, elite cohesion, and policy implementation.

Using two novel measures of dismissals and reshuffles, we have found strong support for our theoretical propositions. Moreover, having tested the observable implications of the two mechanisms associated with frequent dismissals—defections and policy paralysis—we find that in line with theoretical expectations they increase coup risk and hinder economic performance. Given the observational nature of the data and the unavailability of quasi-experimental treatments, to increase confidence in the results, we rely on the battery of additional and alternative specifications, as well as using the two different empirical domains: in Communist politburos and in Russia's regime. Because the findings hold following robustness tests, including fixed effects estimations, we are confident that the survival differences across dictators are not merely driven by the unobserved governability problems or instability of their regimes, but in fact have something to do with elite management strategies practiced by such dictators.

Our paper brings several contributions to the literature. First, it moves beyond the institutional focus on autocratic power sharing by illuminating previously underexplored tools of co-optation and repression at the individual, elite level. Second, it unites the literature on purges (Bokobza et al. 2022; Bove and Rivera 2015; Sudduth 2021; 2017) and reshuffles (Jackson and Rosberg 1982; Svobik 2012; Tullock 1987; Woldense 2018; 2022) in one general theoretical and empirical framework. Rather than treating dismissals and purges as a specific coup-proofing strategy and reshuffles as a mitigating strategy after coups, we underline that these are two conceptually distinct strategies of power-sharing.

If reshuffles are beneficial for dictators, the next question to ask is: why do not all of them follow this strategy? Throughout, we have found that neither threats nor institutions nor dictators' own background traits are able to contribute to the explanation. This does not

necessarily imply that elite management strategies are haphazard. For once, we know that dictators often respond not to threats per se, but to perceived threats (Harris 2007; Wintrobe 1998); many conduct purges even when they apparently do not have to do so (Fitzpatrick 1979; Kotkin 2017; Makiya 1998). This calls for the need for new psychometric measures of ruthlessness, insecurity, and other psychological traits to enable future research to bring the effects of leadership back to the study of authoritarian politics. Second, our third empirical test has shown that the rates of dismissals among the officials with stronger affinity with Vladimir Putin were even lower than the general rates. Furthermore, the fact that leaders of revolutionary regimes, as well as those ruling alongside more exclusive support groups, are less likely to conduct dismissals as a policy—which we report in the appendix—indicates that more attention to and better measures of the cohesion of launching organizations are required; we hope future research will be able to explore these venues.

In their role of human resource managers, autocrats also differ from “democratic HR managers.” Democratic elites, but also leaders, are known to return to political office in the future; they also retain outside career options (Baturo and Mikhaylov 2016). Former dictators do not return to office (only very few do, after a democratic transition). That is, the stakes of losing office are much lower for both democratic leaders and elites. Second, the main threat to dictators is from elite coups (Svolik 2012), and we contribute to this explanation by showing why reshuffles are a better strategy for staying in office, while democratic leaders do not face such a constraint. In fact, most democratic leaders are replaced by the electorate; what they do to elites therefore does not directly threaten their own survival. Perhaps counterintuitively, this allows for higher cabinet dismissal and lower reshuffle rates under democracy—0.32 and 0.16, respectively—than under autocracy (also see Indridason and Kam 2008, 640).

Our approach also has implications for the study of personalization (Geddes et al. 2018; Meng 2020; Svolik 2012; Timoneda et al. 2023). We know that many authoritarian power grabs

result from subtle, incremental steps (Svolik 2012, 60). Because of the information imbalance, elites are assumed to be unable to observe the dictator's intentions; they miscalculate and succumb to personalization as a result (Svolik, 2012, 61). Yet one of the keys to the endogenously evolving power balance is how the autocrat's management strategies alter the information environment for the elites, who will then either defect or cooperate, depending on the observed rates of dismissals or reshuffles.

Dictators manage elites by selecting and deselecting specific individuals; they contribute to institutionalization by *not* replacing individuals in important offices, and to personalization—by occupying such offices themselves (Jackson and Rosberg 1982; Meng 2020). While we have focused on survival in office, future research may therefore examine the causal relationship between elite management strategies on the one hand and institutionalization and personalization, on the other. Also, as the more complete datasets of authoritarian elites become available in the future, scholars may be able to expand the analyses of elite management and its consequences across multiple authoritarian institutions in finer-grained detail and examine more complex management strategies, such as reshuffles combined with demotions, or account for power, prestige, and monetary payoffs associated with different appointments, *inter alia*.

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