Even Dictators Have Friends: Autocratic Cooperation in the International System

An International Studies Quarterly Online symposium

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INTRODUCTION

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In the 1990s and early 2000s, conflict scholars, especially those in the quantitative tradition, probed and prodded democratic peace theory and generally agreed that the phenomenon of peace (i.e., non-interstate war) to be an empirical reality for democratic pairs of states.[1] Understanding democratic state behavior is now a pillar of conflict research and includes examining crises behavior, war, foreign-imposed regime change, terrorism, intrastate war, and many other topics.

Although scholars explained where and when democracies increase or reduce conflict behavior, they paid comparatively less attention to autocratic states. In addition, the cooperative behaviors of certain regime types in the international system have often been treated as simply the *lack of conflict*. With democracy stalling or rolling back in both Latin America and the Middle East, understanding the external behavior of autocratic states is increasing in importance.

More recently, beginning with Barbara Geddes' path breaking work, scholars began to think about disaggregating the concept of autocracy and comparing both within and across regime types.

This symposium highlights a forthcoming *International Studies Quarterly* piece, "Autocracies and International Cooperation," (2014) by Michaela Mattes and Mariana Rodriguez that illustrates the development and extension of this important research area and deftly integrates insights from International Relations and Comparative Politics.

Our symposium includes some of the most outstanding scholars working on issues related to autocratic behavior both from an international and comparative perspective. Our first contribution is from Jessica Weeks, a scholar of international relations from the University of Wisconsin Madison, whose work has been featured in *International Organization* (2008) and the *American Political Science Review* (2012), as well as other top ranked journals. Additionally, she has a forthcoming book from Cornell University Press, entitled *Dictators at War and Peace* (2014). Weeks lauds Mattes and Rodriguez for moving the literature forward by focusing on the "cooperative aptitude" or qualities that make an autocratic state a more attractive partner. Weeks suggests, however, that we still do not understand the conditions under which autocratic states cooperate or how to best disaggregate autocracies.

Our second piece is from Jen Gandhi, a scholar in the comparative tradition from Emory University, whose articles have appeared in the *Journal of Politics* (Kim and Gandhi 2009), *Comparative Political Studies* (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007), and other prestigious journals. Gandhi's book, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (2010), is from Cambridge University Press. Gandhi also sees the forthcoming article by Mattes and Rodriguez as applicable across fields and important for considering autocratic behavior. Gandhi questions whether we can transport elements of theories from research on democracies to autocracies, especially assumptions about state preferences that are applied across regime type. Like Weeks, Gandhi is concerned with conceptualizing autocracy and then measuring

[1] Disagreement over why, however, has continued. See Moaz and Russett (1993), Owen (1994), Chan (1997), and many more.

it. While Geddes work is the foundation of this literature, both Gandhi and Weeks suggest a need for moving beyond it.

Our third piece is by Courtenay Conrad, a scholar from the University of California--Merced whose work straddles International Relations and Comparative Politics. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Politics* (Conrad and Ritter 2013), the *American Journal of Political Science* (Conrad and Moore 2010), and other top journals in the field. Conrad's contribution to the symposium is path breaking in its own right. She replicates Mattes and Rodriguez's statistical models, a practice that is sorely lacking in social science in general and international studies particularly. To probe the results, Conrad brings data on other institutions that can encourage or discourage cooperation not used in Mattes and Rodriguez's empirical analysis. She argues for how specific institutions influence cooperation and conflict rather than more general regime type distinctions. Her analysis is preliminary, but accomplishes two things. First, it suggests plausibility for future work on these and other political institutions. Second, her piece does what more quantitative work should do and probes and prods existing results. We hope this will become a standard for future symposia on quantitative papers.

Our final piece is a response by Mattes and Rodriguez to the three discussions of their paper. In sum, the authors are encouraged by the ideas offered by each piece. Mattes and Rodriguez suggest building on existing theory to identify which of the many dimensions of autocratic variation influences cooperative behavior and working harder in this research domain to match theoretical concepts to appropriate measures.

Why Cooperate? Authoritarian Cooperation in the International System

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International Relations scholars have recently started to build on a growing literature in Comparative Politics to ask how different forms of authoritarian rule affect international behavior. While much of the first wave of studies focused on military conflict[2], Michaela Mattes and Mariana Rodriguez in "Autocracies and International Cooperation" make an important and welcome move by asking not just when authoritarian states refrain from fighting, but when they actively cooperate.

Mattes and Rodriguez (M&R) emphasize what they call "cooperation aptitude": attributes that make autocracies attractive partners. They argue that since a state that adjusts its own policies leaves itself vulnerable to exploitation, cooperation requires a belief that the other party will uphold its commitments. Three domestic attributes are particularly important in assuaging other countries' concerns: leader accountability, constraints on executive decisionmaking, and transparency. M&R differentiate regimes using Barbara Geddes' authoritarian regime typology (Geddes, et al. 2013) and conclude that single party regimes (like democracies) have advantages on these three dimensions, making them the most attractive partners for cooperation (see also: Geddes 1999). Personalist regimes score low on these attributes and thus make the least popular partners, and military regimes lie somewhere in between.

Mattes and Rodriguez's arguments about states' ability to attract partners in cooperation are persuasive, and their empirical analysis shows convincingly that certain kinds of regimes do indeed cooperate more often. But in focusing on one question—when do autocracies make appealing partners?—they unearth many new ones.

Who Wants to Cooperate?

The most pressing question, in my view, is when do nondemocratic states ***want*** to cooperate? M&R focus on aptitude and how this increases the supply of willing partners, basically assuming that all countries want to cooperate as long as they can find partners with the right institutional characteristics. Yet as they conclude from their analysis of personalist regimes, a state's own desire to cooperate clearly matters as well. Why do some autocracies want cooperation, while others avoid it? This underscores a more general need in the IR literature to focus not just on (institutional) constraints on behavior, but on the underlying preferences of important actors.

[2] e.g. Peceny et al. 2002, Lai and Slater 2006, Weeks 2008, Debs and Goemans 2010, Pickering and Kisangani 2010, Weeks 2012 and 2014. Though see also work on authoritarian responses to international policy tools like economic sanctions (Escriba-Folch and Wright 2010) and foreign aid (Wright 2009).

One way forward could be to focus on who wins and loses from cooperation. Lai and Slater (2006), for example, argue that certain kinds of authoritarian regimes find international conflict instrumental in creating domestic legitimacy. According to this logic, low demand for cooperation could be a byproduct of high demand for military conflict. Fravel (2008) has however suggested that cooperation—not conflict—is best for regime stability. One might therefore wonder why personalist or military regimes, which tend to be less stable domestically, don't cooperate *more* (Ezrow & Franz 2011). As von Stein shows, personalistic leaders like Gaddafi and Mubarak have sometimes taken this tactic in signing human rights agreements. But what are the tradeoffs? Why isn't this a more common strategy?

A related avenue could involve focusing on variation in the preferences of individual leaders and powerful domestic interests. For instance, my own research on autocracies and war (2014) suggests that personalist regimes not only feature fewer constraints on leaders, but that personalist rule also selects for individuals with more expansionist and belligerent preferences. Similarly, military officers are more likely to favor using military force than civilians. Colgan (2013) has similarly highlighted the preferences of revolutionary leaders and Horowitz and Stam (2014) have studied those with military and rebel experience.

Of course, domestic politics can lead to counterintuitive predictions; for example Schultz argues that it can be harder for dovish leaders to sell cooperation at home, and Hollyer and Rosendorff (2011) argue that signing and then flaunting human rights agreements is a way to signal strength to domestic opponents. More generally, when different actors have competing preferences, this can create divergent incentives (see for example Conrad 2012 and Vreeland 2008).

Disaggregating Issues and Regime Characteristics

As the above discussion suggests, it is important to recognize that the incentives to cooperate could vary according to the particular issue area. Mattes and Rodriguez group together various forms of cooperation, but does it matter whether we are talking about alliances, arms control agreements, trade agreements, environmental treaties, human rights treaties, or other issues? Both the incentives to cooperate and the risks of defection could vary greatly according to the characteristics of the specific issue area (Jervis 1982).

And finally, while using the Geddes typology is a useful starting point, different theories of cooperation will require different ways (Wilson 2013; Wahman et al. 2013) to think about differences among authoritarian regimes. How do specific features of authoritarian regimes —like legislatures (Gandhi 2008), elections (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; see also Kinne and Marinov 2012), and quasi-democratic competition in general (Levitsky and Way 2010) —affect both the supply of and demand for cooperation?

In sum, Mattes and Rodriguez have taken an important first step in understanding the domestic politics of authoritarian cooperation. Hopefully, future work will pick up where they left off.

THE STATE OF AUTOCRACY RESEARCH IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS

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Mattes and Rodríguez add to a growing literature that takes seriously the idea that domestic politics within non-democracies exhibits important differences and that these differences are likely to influence states' conduct on the international scene. Their strongest argument is that party dictatorships should be more likely to engage in cooperative behavior in comparison to personalist regimes. This is because under party rule, leaders are accountable to a larger set of elites, possess less policy flexibility, and operate under greater transparency than their personalist counterparts. Their empirical analysis largely confirms these propositions.[3]

Their theoretical arguments and findings raise two big questions for International Relations and Comparative Politics scholars who study authoritarian states.

1. Can our theories be seamlessly applied to the politics of democracies and non-democracies?

In democracies, for example, leaders are more likely to sustain cooperative behavior because they fear that their large winning coalition will punish them for reneging. Analogously, leaders in party dictatorships should have similar incentives because the group of people to whom they are accountable is relatively large (in comparison to military and personalist rulers). The argument relies on two critical assumptions: first, that whoever is in the winning coalition prefers cooperating over reneging in the international arena and second, that preferences for international cooperation should be correlated with the size of the winning coalition. So citizens in democracies prefer cooperation, and by extension, elites within the winning coalition in party dictatorships should, too.

Jessica Weeks (2008), for example, makes a compelling argument for why elites in non-democracies and citizens in democracies should have similar views about leaders backing down after having made a threat. Backing down results in costs to the state's reputation that are born by mass and elite actors alike. The case is potentially trickier with the broad category of international cooperation. Reneging from agreements likely entails similar reputational costs. But depending upon the type of agreement, there may be additional costs and benefits that may affect mass and elite actors differently. For example, breaking a free trade agreement may hurt the public's material interests by resulting in higher prices for consumer goods, but it may be supported by elites who want protection for their favorite domestic industries. In fact, much of the literature in Comparative Politics that focuses on regime elites – whether they are termed "oligarchs," "cronies," or "allies" – assumes that their interests (especially their economic ones) are different than those of ordinary citizens. To the extent that international cooperation produces public goods or is itself regarded as a

[3] The theoretical expectation is that military rulers fall somewhere in between although the empirics show that they behave very similarly to leaders in party regimes.

public good, according to this view, regime elites would prefer defection if it resulted in more private goods.[4]

Mattes and Rodríguez acknowledge that future work on "preferences and incentives regarding international cooperation would be beneficial." Absent the ability to observe and measure the preferences of members of any winning coalition, however, scholars will continue to make assumptions about them. The question is whether an assumption made about the preferences of winning coalitions in democracies can be made for coalitions in autocracies. The degree to which the preferences of winning coalitions across regimes are similar may depend on more than just coalition size.

2. Can autocratic regime types capture all of our theoretical mechanisms of interest?

Barbara Geddes' classification of regimes has enabled us to learn a great deal about autocracies. The classification is based on a very specific dimension of authoritarian politics: who controls policy and appointments. Subsequent scholars use these regime types to proxy other attributes of non-democratic politics. Mark Peceny and colleagues (2002) argue that party, military, and personalist regimes may be distinguished by their military capacity, their capacity for narrow or broad policy responses to threats (Wilson and Piazza 2013), and the size of their winning coalitions. How coalition size maps onto regime types is unclear, however: the ordering of regimes by coalition size may be military < personalist < party (Wright 2009) or personalist < military < party (Mattes and Rodríguez, Pickering and Kisangani 2010). Mattes and Rodríguez also point out that these regimes should vary by their policy flexibility and their transparency.

All of these dimensions of authoritarian politics are important. The question is whether they all map onto the original dimension and each other so neatly. Are party dictatorships not only the regimes in which a dominant party controls policymaking and appointments, but also the ones with professional and civilian-controlled military, greater capacity for broad policy responses, less policy flexibility, greater accountability of their leaders to larger winning coalitions, stronger ideological commitments, and greater openness? Similarly, are personalist rulers the ones with the tightest control over policy and appointments, the most corrupt militaries, the greatest policy flexibility, less accountability to small or medium-sized winning coalitions, and the least transparency? Besides the obvious issue of concept-stretching, these claims call for empirical testing. Mattes and Rodríguez do a nice job of trying to determine whether regime types neatly map onto their theoretical concepts and are upfront about the fact that the results are mixed. Comparing regime type to Uzonyi, Souva, and Golder's (2012) ACC measure, they find that party rule generates the highest accountability scores, but personalist leaders have higher accountability scores than military rulers. Similarly, according to Freedom House, party and personalist regimes seem to have higher levels of press freedom than military dictatorships. It is hard to know whether the problem is the noisiness of the other measures or the mapping of concepts onto regime types. The individual indicators used to create the regime type classification (Geddes, Wright, and Franz 2014) will answer some of these questions, but scholars also should think more about collecting information on the aspects of authoritarian states that more accurately captures our theoretical concerns.

[4] This should hold regardless of the size of the elite group.

Dictatorships & International Cooperation

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In "Autocracies and International Cooperation," Mattes & Rodriguez (2014) provide an important contribution to the literature on domestic political institutions and international cooperation, arguing that some dictatorships are as good at cooperation as their democratic counterparts. They argue that the domestic institutions found to be beneficial for cooperation between democracies can also encourage international cooperation between dictatorships. Because single-party dictatorships have institutions that generate accountability, policy-making consistency, and transparency, they are likely to be advantaged at international cooperation compared to personalist dictatorships, which lack these characteristics.

In their empirical analysis, Mattes & Rodriguez use a regime typology originally created by Barbara Geddes and recently updated in Geddes et al. (2014). Using this typology, Mattes & Rodriguez investigate the international cooperation behavior of democracies as compared to single-party dictatorships, military dictatorships, and personalist dictatorships, arguing that the domestic mechanisms encouraging international cooperation in democracies—leader accountability, policy flexibility, and transparency—are more prevalent in single-party dictatorships than their personalist counterparts.

Although Mattes & Rodriguez find in support of their main hypothesis and add to our understanding of how domestic institutions influence international cooperation, their results do not allow us to distinguish *between* the causal mechanisms suggested in their paper —accountability of leaders to domestic groups (e.g., Weeks 2008), policy-making flexibility (e.g., Ezrow & Frantz 2011), and transparency of the regime (e.g., Peceny & Butler 2004). Future work on this topic could make use of other recent data on dictatorial institutions—like legislatures and parties (e.g., Cheibub et al. 2010) and domestic courts (e.g., Linzer & Staton 2011)—to shed additional light on the domestic institutions that facilitate international cooperation.

Dictatorial Institutions & International Cooperation

As an example of such an analysis, I modified the replication data provided by Mattes & Rodriguez. My dependent variable—the Goldstein (1992) Cooperation Scale—is based on the 10 Million International Dyadic Events data from 1990 to 2004 and came directly from Mattes & Rodriguez's replication data.

The independent variables in my model differ from those used by Mattes & Rodriguez. Instead of using the typology of regime type from Geddes et al. (2012) to generate dyads, I use two alternative classifications of countries as my key independent variables. First, using the LPARTY variable from Cheibub et al. (2010), I created three dummy variables. NO LEGISLATURE is coded 1 when there is no legislature, or all of the parties in the legislature are nonpartisan (i.e., when LPARTY = 0) and 0 otherwise. REGIME LEGISLATURE is coded 1 when there is a legislature with only members from the regime

party (i.e., when LPARTY is coded 1) and 0 otherwise. MULTIPARTY LEGISLATURE is coded 1 when there is a legislature with multiple parties (i.e., when LPARTY is coded 2) and 0 otherwise. Based on these variables, I created variables based on the classification of each country in a given dyad: NO LEGISLATURE - NO LEGISLATURE DYAD, REGIME LEGISLATURE - REGIME LEGISLATURE DYAD, MULTIPARTY LEGISLATURE - MULTIPARTY LEGISLATURE DYAD, as well as all the other combinations thereof. MULTIPARTY LEGISLATURE - MULTIPARTY LEGISLATURE DYAD is the reference category in the models below.

Second, I used a measure of judicial effectiveness from Linzer & Staton (2011). Linzer & Staton use a heteroskedastic graded response IRT model to combine information from eight existing measures to create a latent measure the judicial effectiveness. The final continuous measure ranges from 0 to 1, where higher values on the scale indicate higher levels of effective- ness. I created four binary measures of judicial effectiveness by using cutpoints at the quartile: VERY EFFECTIVE COURT, EFFECTIVE COURT, INEFFECTIVE COURT, VERY INEFFECTIVE COURT. As above, I created dyadic variables based on the classification of each country and its potential partner. VERY EFFECTIVE COURT - VERY EFFECTIVE COURT DYAD is the reference category in the models below.

Following Mattes & Rodriguez, I estimated a Generalized Estimating Equation (GEE) model and included controls for distance, major power status, dyad wealth, dyad stability, and dyadic alliance ties. The results using Legislature Composition as the main independent variable are shown in Table 1, and the results using Judicial Effectiveness as the main independent variable are shown in Table 2. Note that these empirical results are only intended as illustrative.

Table 1: Legislature Composition & International Cooperation

	Goldstein Cooperation Scale
No legislature - No legislature dyad	0.037*
	(0.023)
Regime legislature - Regime legislature dyad	-0.108***
	(0.018)
No legislature - Regime legislature dyad	-0.043***
	(0.015)
No legislature - Multiparty legislature dyad	0.026***
	(0.008)
Regime legislature - Multiparty legislature dyad	0.015**
	(0.008)
Jointly wealthy dyad	0.176***
	(0.018)
Jointly stable dyad	0.020***
	(0.005)
Shared alliance	0.205***
	(0.022)
Distance	-0.170***
	(0.003)
Major Power	0.768***
	(0.025)
Constant	1.499***
	(0.052)
N	178,207

Notes. Multiparty legislature - Multiparty legislature dyads are the baseline. Cells contain estimated coefficients and robust standard errors clustered on dyads in parentheses. Significance tests are two-tailed. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, *p<0.10).

In Table 1, nearly every combination of potential cooperation partners (as defined by their legislative structure) is statistically less likely than two countries with multiparty legislatures to engage in international cooperation. Based on previous work on domestic institutions and international cooperation (including that of Mattes & Rodriguez) this is perhaps unsurprising. But there is one exception. Two countries, each with no legislature, are more likely ($p<0.10$) to cooperate internationally than two countries, each having a multiparty legislature. Although these results should be taken with several grains of salt, they can potentially provide fodder for future theorizing about the relationship between domestic legislatures and international cooperation.

Table 2: Judicial Effectiveness & International Cooperation

	Goldstein Cooperation Scale
Effective Court - Effective Court dyad	-0.035*
	(0.024)
Ineffective Court - Ineffective Court dyad	-0.118***
	(0.021)
Very Ineffective Court - Very Ineffective Court dyad	-0.143***
	(0.022)
Very Ineffective Court - Ineffective Court dyad	-0.127***
	(0.030)
Very Ineffective Court - Effective Court dyad	-0.138***
	(0.021)
Very Ineffective Court - Very Effective Court dyad	0.075***
	(0.022)
Ineffective Court - Effective Court dyad	-0.076***
	(0.021)
Ineffective Court - Very Effective Court dyad	-0.051**
	(0.021)
Effective Court - Very Effective Court dyad	-0.015
	(0.033)
Jointly wealthy dyad	0.132***
	(0.017)
Jointly stable dyad	0.010**
	(0.005)
Shared alliance	0.200***
	(0.022)
Distance	-0.173***
	(0.007)
Major Power	0.750***
	(0.025)
Constant	1.809
	(0.060)
N	176,207

Notes. Very Effective Court - Very Effective Court dyads are the baseline. Cells contain estimated coefficients and robust standard errors clustered on dyads in parentheses. Significance tests are two-tailed. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, *p<0.10).

Perhaps more interesting are the results about the effect of judicial effectiveness on international cooperation shown in Table 2. As compared to dyads where both countries have a very effective domestic court, only dyads where one country has a very effective court and the other has an effective court are equally likely to cooperate. As soon as both countries have effective courts, and especially when one of the countries has an ineffective court, dyads are significantly less likely to cooperate than dyads where both countries have very effective courts. Although these results are intended as merely illustrative, disaggregating domestic institutions in this way may help us to better understand the mechanisms influencing international cooperation.

A Response from the Authors

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We would like to thank ISQ for providing a forum to discuss our work further, Joe Young for hosting the discussion, and the contributors for their thought-provoking insights. Courtenay Conrad, Jennifer Gandhi, Jessica Weeks raise important issues scholars need to think about when further pursuing research on authoritarian international politics in general and international cooperation more specifically. Two main themes emerge from their contributions: First, we need to think more about how incentives of domestic actors in different autocratic regimes shape the demand for international cooperation. Second, we need to pay close attention to the causal mechanisms that drive differential cooperation (and other international) behavior of autocracies and to the ways we measure these mechanisms.

Regarding the demand for cooperation, Gandhi and Weeks consider different frameworks to think about autocratic preferences. Gandhi warns that the straightforward application of Selectorate Theory (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003) to autocratic cooperation preferences is problematic since members of autocratic winning coalitions (even if these are relatively large as in single-party regimes) might prefer private goods generated by defection to public goods produced by international cooperation. This prompts us to think more about whether international cooperation should be thought of as producing primarily public goods or whether they generate important private goods as well. It would seem that often cooperation (e.g. economic and military) can generate private goods by helping to enrich those that control major industries and by bolstering the elites' coercive power relative to domestic opponents. As Weeks points out, this raises the puzzling question of why we see the lowest levels of cooperation in those regimes that would benefit the most from stabilization (i.e. personalist and military dictatorships). To understand this we need to investigate further who gains/loses from cooperation/defection and how winners and losers map onto who holds power versus who is on the outside. Like Weeks, we believe that to be able to predict autocratic cooperation preferences it will be imperative to distinguish different types and areas of cooperation.

Further research on when and why different nondemocratic regimes ***want*** to cooperate is certainly a fruitful way forward from our study. However, it is important to note that unlike some other international behaviors that can be the result of unilateral action (e.g. the initiation of conflict, policies towards terrorists) international cooperation is fundamentally dyadic. The desire to cooperate may be a necessary condition for cooperation but it is not sufficient: only countries with (institutional) characteristics that make them attractive partners will find willing cooperators.

This means that additional research on which institutional characteristics of autocracies account for the different cooperation patterns we observe is also called for. Conrad suggests that it would be particularly interesting to see which of the three characteristics that we emphasize (accountability, flexibility, transparency) is most important to understanding autocratic international cooperation. Our sense is that it may not be possible to disentangle

this fully because of the ways these characteristics are interlinked and mutually reinforcing. However, it is certainly useful to think about how to tease apart these causal mechanisms empirically and to look at the effect of related institutional variation on international cooperation, along the lines of Conrad's investigation of legislative institutions and judicial effectiveness.

Conrad, Gandhi, and Weeks all advise scholars to consider whether other institutional differences affect cooperation behavior and they suggest that it may be necessary/useful to move away from the Geddes typology. In our paper, we focused on what we perceive to be the central dimensions of institutional variation relevant to international cooperation that have been highlighted in the cooperation literature and these dimensions seem to be captured quite nicely in Geddes' framework. The key to moving forward will be 1) to build or rely on strong theories of the dependent variable, international cooperation, to guide us at to which of the many dimensions of autocratic variation scholars have identified may also be relevant for understanding cooperation patterns and 2) to match theoretical concepts to appropriate measures. The Geddes typology can be a very useful way to classify regimes, but scholars need to think carefully about whether the regime categories map underlying theoretical concepts and, to the extent possible, scholars should test whether these categories reflect the theoretical concept(s) in a meaningful way. The contributors' caution in this regard is well taken.

After a long period of virtually ignoring heterogeneity in nondemocratic regimes, we have reached a point where many scholars are thinking more systematically about how authoritarian regimes differ and how this variation manifests itself in different domestic and international policies. It will be exciting to see the progress in this rapidly growing field of research over the next few years.

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