

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

Many contemporary autocracies display all the institutional trappings of democracy – parties, legislatures, elections, and courts – but these institutions often fail to serve as mechanisms of representation and accountability. Under dictatorship, institutions of majority rule can become institutions of authoritarian rule. In fact, many authoritarian regimes fail to democratize, at least in part, because their leaders appropriate nominally democratic institutions and use them to entrench their rule. Elections provide dictators with much-needed information about opponents and allies. Legislatures provide forums for co-optation. Pliant courts legitimate arbitrary political decisions.

But the nominally democratic institution that many autocrats find most useful is the political party. In many non-democracies, regime leaders share power with a ruling party, which can help generate popular support and reduce conflict among key elites. Such ruling parties are often called dominant parties. In other authoritarian regimes, leaders prefer to rule solely through some combination of charisma, patronage, and coercion, rather than sharing power with a dominant party. This book explains why dominant parties emerge in some non-democratic regimes, but not in others.

Regimes that rule with the aid of a dominant party are now the most common type of authoritarian polity. As Figure 1.1 shows, they have existed consistently in about half of all non-democracies since 1946.

The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Mexico, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in Malaysia, the National Democratic Party (NDP) in Egypt, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) in Uganda, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria, and United Russia in Russia are just a few of the 128 dominant parties that have existed since 1946 in 96 countries.

Yet, the puzzling thing about dominant parties is not their prevalence but rather their nonexistence in so many non-democracies. After all,

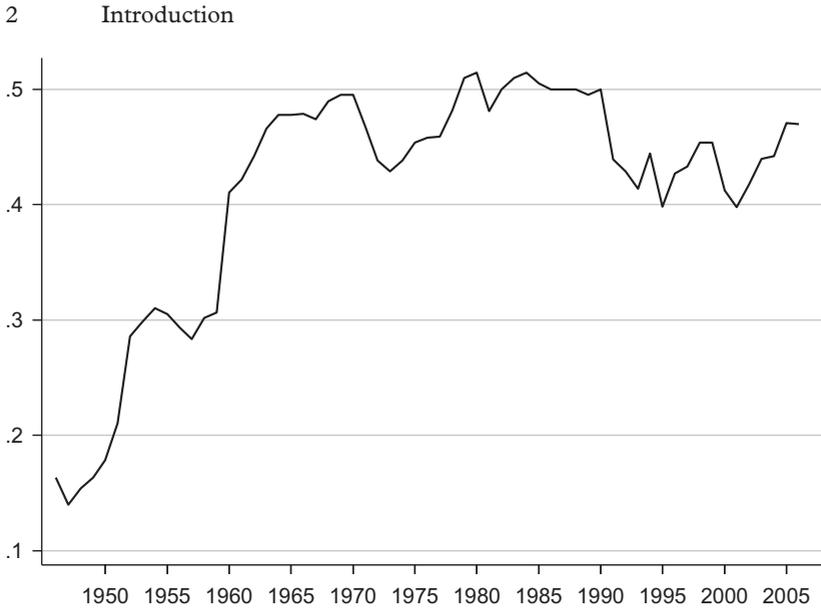


Figure 1.1 Proportion of authoritarian regimes with dominant parties: 1946–2006.

dominant parties are institutions – bundles of rules and norms – that reduce elite conflict by institutionalizing the distribution of careers and spoils among elites. In regimes with dominant parties, the distribution of spoils is determined, at least in part, by regularized norms and procedures embedded within the party. If party cadres remain loyal and serve the party, they have good reason to believe that they will continue to share in the benefits of office. This gives party cadres a vested interest in the regime. Indeed, many political scientists believe that dominant parties extend the life span of authoritarian regimes (Geddes 1999b, Brownlee 2007, Magaloni 2008, Levitsky and Way 2010, Svoboda 2012). And yet, in a little more than half of all authoritarian regimes – in settings as diverse as Libya under Muammar Gaddafi, Belarus under Aleksandr Lukashenko, Brazil under Getulio Vargas, and Ukraine under Leonid Kuchma – regime leaders fail to construct dominant parties. If dominant parties fortify authoritarian rule, why do many leaders eschew building them? Why do dominant parties emerge in some non-democracies, but not in others?

Dominant party formation is often stymied by a series of commitment problems between leaders and elites. In non-democracies, leaders – i.e. dictators, presidents, prime ministers, juntas, and the like – would like

to keep important elites loyal. Such elites may include powerful regional governors, caciques, warlords, strongmen, nobles, chiefs, bosses, landlords, or the directors of economic enterprises, among others. Leaders could achieve this goal by promising elites some share of the spoils from governing, but they have no way to make those promises credible. Leaders may announce that they will promote certain cadres or give elites special privileges, but dictatorships lack third-party institutions that can enforce these promises. Without a constraint on the arbitrary authority of dictators, elites can never be certain that leaders will not abuse them.

Elites face a similar commitment problem vis-à-vis leaders. Elites want to gain dependable access to spoils and career advancement. Leaders might be persuaded to give them these if elites pledged their loyalty to the regime, but elites have no way of making this pledge credible. Elites may promise to support the regime's policy initiatives, mobilize votes for the regime, or quell social protest, but without a third-party institution that can monitor and enforce these commitments to the regime, leaders can never be sure that elites will remain loyal.

Mutual investment in a dominant party, with its institutional mechanisms for governing the distribution of spoils and monitoring behavior, could help ameliorate these commitment problems. But it is only part of the explanation for why dominant parties emerge, because it still does not explain why actors would choose to solve their commitment problem with a dominant party institution in some settings, but not in others. After all, these commitment problems are ubiquitous, but dominant parties are not.

To explain why dominant parties emerge in some settings but not others, I focus on how the relative balance of political resources between leaders and elites affects each side's incentives to cooperate with the other and invest in an institutional solution to the commitment problem. When leaders are very strong in resources – relative to elites – their incentives to seek the cooperation of elites are diminished and they are tempted to defect from any bargain with elites that would limit their freedom of maneuver. On the other hand, if elites are strong in autonomous resources – relative to leaders – they may be able to achieve their political goals on their own, and they will have strong incentives to defect from any agreement that would require them to relinquish their own autonomy. *Thus, dominant parties are most likely when elites hold enough independent political resources that leaders need to co-opt them, but not so many autonomous resources that they themselves are reluctant to commit to any dominant party project.*

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Much of the book examines this argument and its implications in the context of post-Soviet Russia. In a span of just more than twenty years, post-Soviet Russia has witnessed the failure of two ruling party projects and the emergence of a dominant party. In the 1990s, Russia's powerful regional elites – in particular, governors – eschewed any real commitments to the various pro-presidential parties of the time, preferring instead to focus on the cultivation of their own political machines. In turn, apparently fearing the costs of supporting a party that could not be sustained, President Boris Yeltsin undermined his own pro-presidential parties.

By contrast, in the early 2000s rising oil revenues, sustained economic growth, and the attendant popularity of Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, changed the balance of power between the Kremlin and regional elites. This readjustment in the balance of resources gave elites more incentive to cooperate with the Kremlin than they had in the 1990s. And yet, regional elites were still strong enough that the Kremlin would need to co-opt them if it wanted to win elections, pass legislation, maintain social quiescence, and govern cost-effectively. After all, the political machines that elites had built in the first post-communist decade still provided them with ample levers of influence over other elites and society. Because the Kremlin needed to co-opt these elites and elites were no longer so strong that they would necessarily be unfaithful partners, Putin could feel comfortable investing his own resources in a dominant party that could be used to co-opt them. In turn, the signals of commitment sent by the Kremlin emboldened elites to make their own commitments. This dynamic led both sides to invest their resources in a dominant party, United Russia.

Through an analysis of United Russia's rise, this book tells the story of how the current regime in Russia was built. It addresses questions such as why elites affiliate with the regime, what keeps elites loyal, and how the regime wins elections. I argue that United Russia has been an important, and often overlooked, pillar of regime stability. And by demonstrating the party's institutional role in perpetuating the regime, this study demonstrates some of the limits of personalism in contemporary Russia. In turn, by identifying the conditions that lead to the creation of such dominant parties this book enriches our understanding of why some countries transition to democracy, but others do not.

1.2 What Are Dominant Parties?

A dominant party is a political institution that has a leading role in determining access to many important political offices, shares powers over policy making and patronage distribution, and uses privileged access to

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state resources to maintain its position in power. Indeed, during elections dominant parties exploit state resources to such an egregious extent that one cannot speak of free and fair political competition. This distinguishes these regimes from democracies in which one party governs for long periods – such as Japan under the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Italy under the Christian Democrats, or Sweden under the Social Democrats – regimes that Pempel (1990) calls “uncommon” democracies. Thus, dominant parties are institutions that exist in *non-democratic* regimes.

Of course, long-lived governing parties in democracies often bolster their position with patronage distributed via clientelist linkage mechanisms (cf. Scheiner 2006). Indeed, the disbursement of state resources in order to forestall alternation in office places these regimes in a true “gray area” between democracy and authoritarianism. The list of states that complicate efforts to code regime type is full of such one-party dominant anomalies: Botswana under the Botswanan Democratic Party (BDP), South Africa under the African National Congress (ANC), Namibia under the Southwest Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO), India under Congress, and Guyana under the People’s National Congress (PNC) are only a few. The best one can do in discriminating between one-party dominant democracies and dominant party regimes is to assess the degree to which state resources are used to create an unbalanced playing field in elections. In well-known dominant party regimes the state places severe constraints on the ability of opposition parties to challenge the dominant party. Opponents may be jailed or repressed. Electoral fraud may be employed. State-controlled media determine the type of information that voters receive. State resources (contracts, subsidies, favors, and the like) are illegally deployed to favor incumbent politicians.

Dominant parties serve as institutions that organize political exchange among elites. The dominant party also regularizes the flow of patronage, careers, and spoils that runs from leaders to elites. Importantly, dominant party institutions ensure that these goods are distributed in a regularized fashion that is, at least to some degree, determined by norms or rules. Party loyalty is, more often than not, dependably rewarded with career advancement. A classic example of this can be found in the world’s communist regimes, where career advancement was determined by the *nomenklatura*, system in which prospective candidates to political office were ranked according to seniority, qualifications, and ideology (Harasmyiw 1984). In personalist regimes, by contrast, dictators are not constrained by any rules or norms embedded within party institutions; rather, spoils and careers are distributed arbitrarily at the behest of the leader.

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Dominant parties serve as forums where leaders can broker policy compromises with prominent elites and the opposition (Gandhi 2008). As institutions with some control over policy, dominant parties can promise influence over the national agenda. For example, Brownlee (2007, 130–137) describes how elite conflict in Mubarak era Egypt was mitigated because the ruling NDP could credibly promise policy access to potential defectors. In 2000, when prominent business leaders led by President Hosni Mubarak's own son, Gemal, threatened to start their own party, the NDP placated them with plum positions in parliament. While rewarding a group of upstarts left party stalwarts dissatisfied, the party successfully ameliorated potential conflict by informally increasing the number of candidates that would be elected to parliament with regime support.

Dominant parties also help the regime generate political support in society. As the site of coordination for many important elites, dominant parties join power holders and opinion leaders with the resources necessary to drum up support for the regime, whether at the ballot box or on the streets. Elites lend the party the use of their organizations, political machines, clientelist networks, economic leverage, and/or traditional authority. In electoral authoritarian regimes, a primary function of the dominant party is to coordinate the resources of elites toward the goal of winning elections.

In such regimes, dominant parties also help serve the vital function of coordinating expectations on the part of voters and candidates. Much of the literature on electoral coordination failures under authoritarianism focuses on the opposition; when two or more opposition candidates with similar political positions run against one another, they risk dividing the anti-regime vote and losing a contest that they might have won had they remained united. Authoritarian incumbents also confront such problems and must ensure that pro-regime candidates do not compete and risk dividing the pro-regime vote. In Russia's 1993 and 1995 parliamentary elections, pro-regime candidates from competing pro-presidential parties often divided the vote between them, opening space for Communist Party candidates to win in districts that they would not otherwise win. Dominant parties solve such coordination problems by coordinating elite and voter expectations about which pro-regime candidate or party will receive state support.

This definition of dominant party does not require that the party oversee an all-encompassing party-state, in which all, or even most, political decisions are made collectively by the party. Such an ideal type is approximated by few if any dominant parties in world history. Dominant parties exert some modicum of institutional influence. The extent

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of their institutional influence is a matter of degree, such that some parties exhibit more institutional control over policy, patronage, and careers than others. In Chapter 2 of this book, I discuss in greater detail the ways that dominant parties exert institutional control over these spheres, and, in Chapter 5, I discuss the extent of United Russia's role in Russian politics.

Nor does this definition require that dominant parties persist in power for long periods (Greene 2010). While institutional strength and duration may often be correlated, strong dominant parties may be short-lived for reasons that are unrelated to their organizational capacity, just as weak dominant parties may be long-lived for reasons that are unrelated to their institutional weakness. After all, the factors that lead to the formation of dominant parties may not be the same as the factors that cause their failure. Party strength and party duration are different concepts. Moreover, even if duration were a perfect indicator of dominant party strength, selecting a long duration criterion for defining dominance effectively truncates the dependent variable, preventing the analyst from utilizing (or analyzing) variation in the duration of one-party dominance. Studies that posit a link between authoritarian regime survival and the presence of dominant parties should not make party duration a criterion for identifying dominant parties. If they do, their models will be biased in favor of finding that dominant party regimes are more durable. All this is not to mention the fact that such a rule would disallow analysis of dominant parties that have emerged recently.

To be sure, many of the world's most prominent dominant parties have been long-lived. In Central America, the PRI ruled Mexico from 1929 to 2000. In South America, the Colorado Party helped Alfredo Stroessner govern Paraguay from 1954 until his death in 1989. In East Asia, the KMT led Taiwan from the state's inception in 1947 until 2000. In the Middle East, the Ba'ath Party has ruled Syria since 1963, much of that time in conjunction with the Assad political dynasty. In Africa, the Kenya African National Union ruled Kenya from independence in 1963 until the defeat of its candidate, Uhuru Kenyatta, in the 2002 presidential elections. One-quarter of all the world's dominant parties survived in power for more than 28 years.

At the same time, a little less than 24 percent persisted for fewer than 10 years including the Democratic Party (DP) in Turkey, which ruled that country from 1950 until it was dislodged by a coup in 1960; the Citizens Union of Georgia (CUG), which served as President Eduard Shevardnadze's ruling party from 1995 until 2003, when it collapsed amid massive elite defections; and the Socialist Party of Yugoslavia, which served as Slobodan Milosevic's electoral vehicle until he was dislodged

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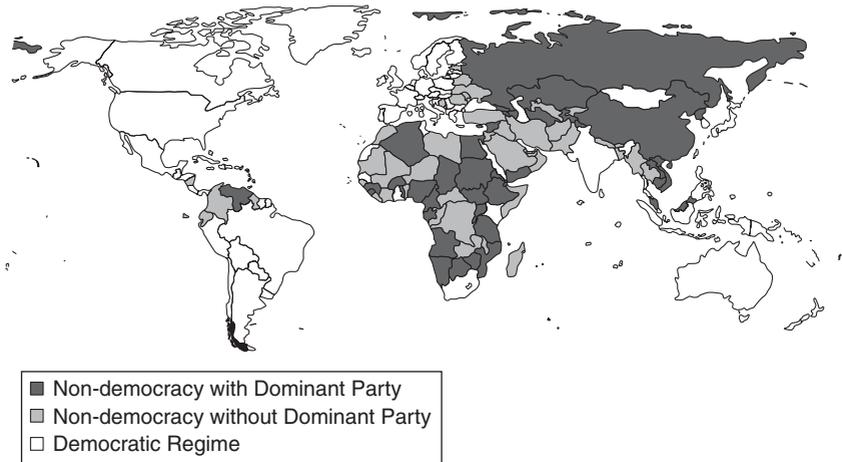


Figure 1.2 Dominant parties around the world in 2006.

amid anti-regime protests in 2000. As of 2006, there were 22 dominant parties in existence that emerged after 1990. Examples of recently emerged dominant parties include the PDP in Nigeria (1999), the Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR) (2003), and Fatherland (Nur-OTAN) in Kazakhstan (1999).¹ Figure 1.2 shows the distribution of dominant parties in the world as of 2006.

The dominant party concept, as I have described it here, subsumes what scholars call hegemonic parties (e.g. Sartori 1976, Magaloni 2006, Reuter and Gandhi 2011). Hegemonic party regimes are regimes in which a dominant party competes in elections against opposition parties. Historically, 53 percent of the dominant parties existing in any given year have been hegemonic parties. Hegemonic parties have been key institutions in some of the 20th century's most prominent authoritarian regimes. In Latin America, the world's most studied hegemonic party, Mexico's PRI, won regular, semicompetitive elections for almost 70 years (Magaloni 2006, Greene 2007). In North Africa, the NDP helped Egypt's presidents win elections for nearly four decades (Blaydes 2011). In Southeast Asia, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) has dominated Malaysia's multiparty parliamentary elections since independence in 1957.

¹ All facts and figures on dominant parties in this chapter are derived from an original operationalization of dominant parties that is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

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More recent examples can be found across the world as well. In Africa, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) has won elections for Ethiopia's ruling elite since 1995 and facilitated the transfer of power to Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn after the death of long-serving Prime Minister Menes Zelawi in 2012. In the Middle East, Yemen's presidents have relied, until recently, upon the General People's Congress (GPC) to help them win elections and manage elite conflict since unification in 1990. In Southeast Asia, Cambodia's former Communist Party reformed itself into the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and has handily won all elections in that country since 1998. In post-communist Europe, Russian Presidents Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev have depended on the United Russia (2001–) party to help manage relations with elites. These are just a few of the 37 hegemonic parties existing in the world as of 2006. This represents 84 percent of the world's dominant parties.

The dominant party concept also subsumes what some call single parties: ruling parties in regimes that only allow one party to exist and/or compete in elections. Such parties are now rare. As of 2006, only six single-party regimes existed in the world – the Communist Parties in Laos, Cuba, North Korea, China, and Vietnam, and the Democratic Party in Turkmenistan – and since 1980, only one new single-party regime has emerged in the entire world (the Democratic Party in Turkmenistan after the fall of the Soviet Union). Well-known historical examples of single-party regimes include KANU in Kenya, which barred all opposition parties from 1969 until 1992; the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria from 1962 to 1991; and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), which ruled that country from 1917 until 1991.

Figure 1.3 lays out the terms and classifications used in the book.

I use the term “ruling party” somewhat loosely, to refer to the largest pro-regime party in an autocracy, dominant or otherwise. Thus, in my terminology, all dominant parties are ruling parties, but not all ruling parties are dominant. There are, of course, many authoritarian regimes without any ruling party. Saudi Arabia since independence, Chile under Augusto Pinochet, and Myanmar under the military junta are examples of regimes without any sort of ruling party. In many electoral authoritarian regimes, meanwhile, regime leaders support multiple or weak regime parties that never become dominant – e.g. Ukraine under Kuchma, Uzbekistan under Karimov, Pakistan under Musharraf, or Morocco since 1977. By examining the conditions under which dominant parties emerge, this book also seeks to understand why dominant parties do *not* emerge, both in regimes without any ruling party and in regimes that support nondominant, pro-regime parties.

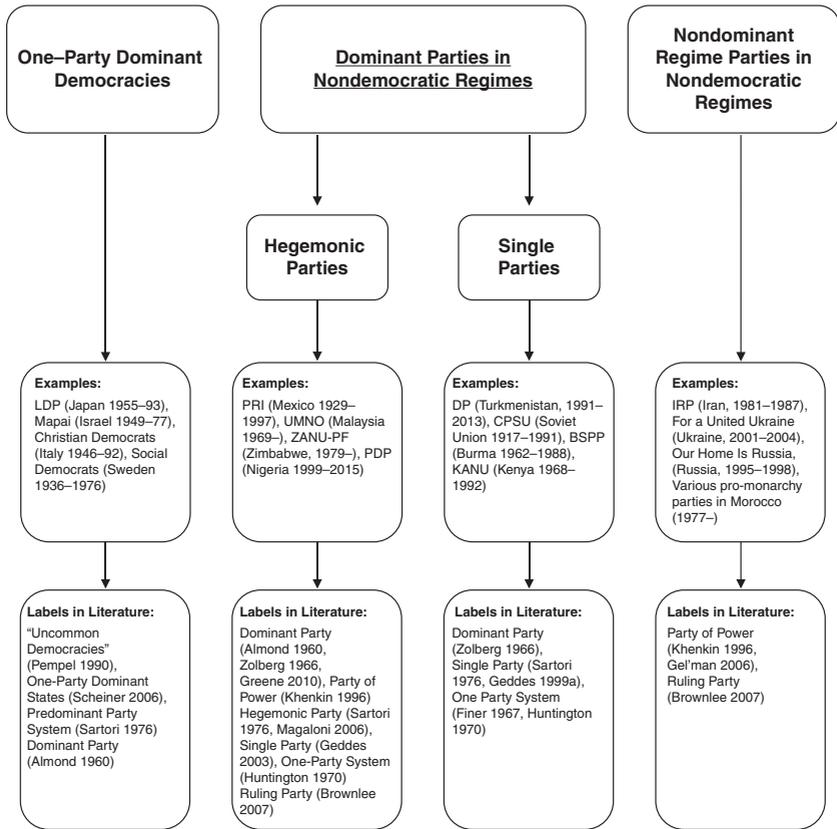


Figure 1.3 Conceptual map of terms.

1.3 Authoritarian Survival and the Puzzle of Dominant Party Formation

Dominant party regimes defy popular stereotypes of authoritarian regimes as highly personalized political systems. In contrast to personalist dictatorships, where all political decisions are subject to the arbitrary will of a single despot, dominant party regimes are characterized by the presence of party institutions that regulate certain types of political exchange. The first scholarship on dominant party regimes in political science described how these party institutions operated in equilibrium. Scholars of communist systems, to take but one world region, devoted enormous energy to understanding the workings of these parties. Through the nomenklatura system, communist parties routinized political recruitment