1 *A "Perfect Dictatorship?" The Puzzle of Electoral Authoritarianism*

One of the most ridiculous aspects of democracy will always remain . . . the fact that it has offered to its mortal enemies the means by which to destroy it.

- Josef Goebbels, Nazi propaganda minister, 1933–1945

"The perfect dictatorship," the Nobel-Prize-winning novelist Mario Vargas Llosa quipped in 1990, "is not the Soviet Union, but Mexico." Ruled by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) since 1929, Mexico had a regime that was not an overbearing totalitarian dictatorship, but an electoral autocracy: a hybrid system that embraced all the institutional trappings of democracy, including democratic constitutions, parliaments, and regular multiparty elections, but subverted them informally. The secret of electoral authoritarianism's success, according to Vargas Llosa, was that it could impose itself without the people even noticing – under the cloak of a popular mandate, won at the ballot box. Its core appeal was that it could avoid the excesses of both liberal democracy and unchecked dictatorship. In Mexico, PRI's electoral authoritarianism ushered in an era of unprecedented stability as it simultaneously curbed the country's factionalism and maintained a system of elections and term limits, which ingeniously avoided personal dictatorship by retiring its dictators at the end of their six-year presidential terms (Castañeda 2000).

Vargas Llosa's warnings about the malicious tenacity of electoral authoritarianism became prophetic soon after his famous remark. The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and Mexico's far less imposing dictatorship outlived it by another nine years, ruling continuously for seventy-one years until its demise in 2000. But more importantly, the electoral authoritarian model perfected in Mexico proliferated beyond anyone's wildest expectations. As I show in Figure 1.1 below, electoral autocracies were the only type of undemocratic regime that paralleled the unprecedented

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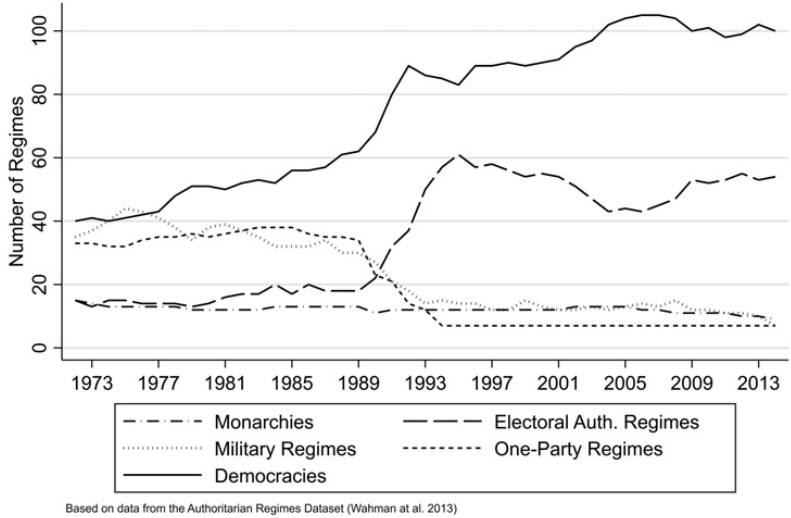

Figure 1.1 Regime types by year, 1973–2014

spread of democracies after the Cold War.[1] As traditional, unelected dictatorships have crumbled with breakneck speed across the world, the overwhelming majority of regimes that have remained authoritarian, and virtually all new autocracies that have emerged since 1989, have been electoral autocracies. Electoral authoritarianism has been stunningly successful where the seemingly far more robust and menacing totalitarian single-party regimes and military dictatorships have faltered. It spread not when democracy was in retreat, but during its greatest expansion.

The optimism spurred by the largest wave of democratization initially led scholars and commentators to discount the threat posed by these regimes. Electoral autocracies were dismissed as "democracies with adjectives"[2] – inherently unsustainable, transitional regimes, set to eventually become full democracies (Carothers 2002). By the

[1] This data is drawn from the updated Authoritarian Regimes Dataset (ver. 6.0, downloaded from https://sites.google.com/site/authoritarianregimedataset (accessed 05/25/2021); see Wahman, Teorell, and Hadenius (2013)).

[2] The most common referents for these regimes included "delegative democracies" (O'Donnell 1994), "illiberal democracies" (Zakaria 1997, 2007), "ambiguous" or "hybrid regimes" (Diamond 2002). Other less frequently used terms to describe these regimes have included "weak," "partial," "façade," "virtual," "pseudo," and "semi" democracy (Carothers 2002; Collier and Levitsky 1997).

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mid-2000s, however, it was clear that electoral authoritarianism was both far more durable and far more assertive than previously thought. As the number of electoral autocracies increased, the global rate of democratic transitions almost halved and dictatorships more than doubled their rates of survival (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014).

Then, in the aftermath of the 2009 global financial crisis and the mounting backlash against liberalism and globalization, electoral authoritarianism emerged as a full-fledged alternative to democracy and a mechanism for an authoritarian resurgence on a much greater scale than had previously been thought possible. In 2020, Freedom House (2020) registered fourteen straight years of consecutive decline of civil rights and political freedoms across the globe. The driving force of this democratic erosion was made up of popularly elected authoritarian incumbents who finagled democratic institutions and procedures to gradually dismantle checks and balances, curtail the freedom of the press, and extinguish the independence of the judiciary and the state administration. Some of the sharpest, and most sustained and malignant reversals toward electoral authoritarianism occurred in countries like Hungary and Poland – members of the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and seemingly permanent converts to democracy. Even the core Western democracies appeared to be vulnerable to the threat of backsliding into electoral authoritarianism, as populist authoritarian parties and leaders surged at the polls (Norris and Inglehart 2019), and incumbents willfully undermined long-standing democratic norms and institutions (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

How is this possible? How can autocracies that provide so many opportunities for their defeat by legalizing oppositions, allowing criticism, and holding elections, become so durable and menacing? This book argues that to address this puzzle, we must consider a paradoxical and disturbing possibility, largely unaccounted for in the current literature: that electoral autocracies may have a broad and *genuine popular appeal* in certain contexts. This appeal allows them to hijack the democratic process – to win favor among majorities or substantial pluralities and maintain power through the ballot box, and with minimal coercion. This is the same appeal, I argue, which made Mexico's electoral autocracy appear "perfect" to many of its citizens: the widespread perception that its alternatives – liberal democracy and closed dictatorship – were worse.

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The most distinctive and yet least appreciated aspect of electoral authoritarianism, as this book will show, is that it has appeared in the wake of the deepest crises in the countries that have been ruled by such regimes. Far more often than other regime types, electoral autocracies have emerged after periods of unmanageable conflict, state collapse, socioeconomic decline, and general political dysfunction, when societies are desperate for order and stability to be restored, and when other alternatives have become delegitimized. Rooted in collective traumas from unmanageable turmoil under these alternative systems, support for electoral authoritarianism is not a product of ideological indoctrination or cultural predispositions toward undemocratic rule among certain nations or social classes. Instead, the motives for consenting to electoral authoritarian rule are far more mundane. Ordinary people support these hybrid regimes for what they think are instrumental reasons, and often reluctantly: as the least objectionable governing option when all others have become exhausted.

Posing as tough, efficient, and popularly accountable "strongmen" (so far, in an exclusively masculine sense),[3] electoral authoritarian leaders – the likes of Vladimir Putin in Russia, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and many more – rise to power by taking advantage of such contexts and sentiments. These elected dictators attract genuine popular support by claiming they are uniquely capable of imposing order and addressing grievances in troubled societies because they combine the best and avoid the worst of both democracy and authoritarianism. They offer popular accountability without the divisions, conflict, and uncertainty of liberal democracy, and strong, uncompromising, and effective government without the arbitrary behavior and violence of unchecked dictatorship. I claim that this ability to compellingly justify their rule as a pragmatic solution for

[3] Throughout the book, I purposefully avoid a more gender-balanced description such as would be implied by the use of the alternative "strongwoman" label. This is because the appeal of electoral authoritarian incumbents that I describe has had a distinctive masculine, "macho," and even a misogynistic and homophobic connotation (O'Donnell 1994; Gudkov 2011; Sperling 2014, 2016; E. A. Wood 2016; Heydarian 2017; Michelutti 2017a). Moreover, leadership in dictatorships, including regimes of the electoral variety, has thus far remained a completely undisputed realm of absolute male dominance. To emphasize this pattern, I refer to these regimes and their leaders by using only the masculine, "strongman" label.

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their nations' acute problems is the most fundamental tool of power for elected autocrats. Above all, it allows these regimes to win and maintain power through democratic means and with relatively little coercion, defusing resistance and criticism about their authoritarian nature.

This account sheds a very different light on the nature of electoral authoritarianism from how it is currently understood. These regimes do not subvert democracy by simply *faking democracy*, as is commonly assumed. Instead, the secret of their success lies in the ability to *hijack democracy* in societies beset by turmoil and despair. This is a crucial point. Electoral authoritarianism did not blossom after the Cold War just because the spread of democracy forced dictatorships to hide behind a democratic façade. Instead, as I show in the chapters that follow, these regimes were boosted, more than anything else, by the spread of instability and the proliferation of new, fragile, crisis-prone countries. This backdrop enabled autocrats to turn democracy against itself: to attract real popular support by posing as guarantors of order and justice, and to claim democratic legitimacy won at the polls.

This ability to usurp democracy is a defining feature of electoral authoritarianism, and sets it apart from all other forms of dictatorship. It is also the key reason why these autocracies were the only ones that thrived in the era of unprecedented democratization, when traditional, closed dictatorship crumbled. Their foundation – the appeal of popularly endorsed strongmen in troubled societies – not only allows these regimes to win elections and pose as democracies, but also enables them to behave as autocracies. It empowers authoritarian incumbents to repress their political opponents with impunity, censor the media, bend and break laws, and ride roughshod over legislatures and courts – all in the name of the supreme imperative of restoring order and justice in their troubled societies.

These coercive tactics have a strong tendency to backfire when used by unpopular regimes. However, they can have the opposite effect when deployed by electoral autocrats who have compellingly justified their rule as a response to a national emergency. Majorities that believe that authoritarian rule is necessary to impose order or to address their grievances would not only condone the use of violence and coercion by these regimes; they might also become more supportive of their rulers after such tactics are employed, as their strongman leadership is keeping the promise of tough-mannered, effective rule. Thus, while a dictatorship cannot coerce people into liking it, an elected

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dictatorship, which the voters genuinely like for its hard-line tactics, can coerce with impunity – and become even more popular for it. A widely supported electoral autocracy can become, in other words, a repressive dictatorship of the most insidious, popularly mandated sort, resembling the tyranny of the majority foreseen by James Madison (1787).

For this reason, I argue that the popular appeal of electoral authoritarian regimes has a massive confounding influence on all other aspects of electoral authoritarian rule. For one, popularity is absolutely essential for these regimes' ability to rise to power, before they have the coercive and other resources to control their populations. And once they assume control of the state, the "strongman" popular appeal of elected autocrats enables them to stay in power by democratic means even as they use coercion against their opponents. Hence, we must, at a minimum, develop a basic understanding of this legitimizing strategy and control for its effect. We must shed light on the origins and inner logic of this appeal, the background circumstances that enable it, and the mechanisms through which it affects popular opinion and the trajectories of electoral authoritarian regimes. This book is an attempt to make a step in this direction.

What Is Electoral Authoritarianism?

> [T]he approach of democracy appeared a chaotic storm against which a dam had to be built[.]
>
> Carl Schmitt (1988)

Electoral autocracies have been broadly defined as regimes that adopt democratic institutions, like regular multiparty elections, legislatures, and judiciaries, but sabotage these in practice to rule in an authoritarian fashion (Schedler 2006). The key distinguishing feature of these regimes is that political "[c]ompetition is . . . real but unfair" (Levitsky and Way 2010a, 5). They therefore easily stand out from traditional closed dictatorships, like monarchies, single-party regimes, and military juntas, which do not provide institutionalized means for contesting power. The main difficulty in identifying electoral autocracies, as well as in identifying their appeal, is to distinguish them from democracies (Kailitz 2013, 46). This, to a large degree, is because part of the purpose of these regimes is to mislead: to act as "democracy's doubles,"

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claiming genuine popular legitimacy to defuse domestic and international pressures for democratization (Krastev 2006).

The key conceptual challenge here is that the tactics electoral autocracies use to masquerade as democracies – their "menu of manipulation" (Schedler 2002) – vary significantly across regimes and over time. While some regimes use crude and direct methods of electoral falsification, like ballot stuffing or vote buying, others rely on more sophisticated and surreptitious methods to reduce the opposition's competitiveness *long before* the ballots are cast. They use administrative leverage to deny their oppositions funding and media access, they gerrymander electoral districts or otherwise tweak the electoral rules in their favor, and so on. Also, electoral autocracies resort to different manipulative strategies over time. Some might use cruder, more direct tactics at the beginning of their rule and become more sophisticated later. Other regimes may follow the opposite pattern, often because an unexpected oppositional mobilization compelled them to use all available means to cling on to power. Ultimately, all electoral autocracies change their "menu of manipulation" as they learn from each other's experiences, adopting new tactics that have proven effective elsewhere and abandoning those that have failed.

The only constant feature of electoral authoritarianism, in other words, is that it constantly changes the ways in which it pursues a single underlying goal: limiting democracy. A few, or even one of these manipulative tactics, if employed systematically, may be *sufficient* to identify a regime as electoral authoritarian. But none of them is individually *necessary* for a regime to be identified as such. This is why electoral authoritarianism is such an elusive concept: there are great many different ways in which it manifests itself. To paraphrase Tolstoy's oft-cited maxim, while all democracies are democratic in the same way (by meeting the same basic standards of democracy), each electoral autocracy is authoritarian in its own way (in terms of how exactly it subverts democratic institutions).[4] Hence, to be valid and consistent, a measure of electoral authoritarianism must be both

[4] Svolik (2012) makes a similar argument about all types of nondemocratic regimes, including closed autocracies, arguing that each is necessarily different because it departs from democratic norms of governing in its own way. However, unlike military dictatorships, single-party regimes, and monarchies, which have relatively fixed repertoires for subverting political competition, electoral autocracies have much broader "menus of manipulation."

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comprehensive and *versatile*: it must consider a very broad array of tactics that can be used to substantially curb democracy, and it must recognize that their many different combinations all amount to electoral authoritarianism.

I employ these criteria to select the most appropriate indicator of electoral authoritarianism. I do so by adjudicating between two broad regime classification schemes. The first distinguishes electoral autocracies from democracies, based on the presence or absence of a minimal set of fixed institutional criteria for a country to be considered democratic. In what is perhaps the most commonly used dataset crafted in this "minimalist" tradition, Boix, Miller, and Rosato (2012) employ a dichotomous measure where democracy is distinguished by the presence of free and fair elections, and a minimal level of suffrage (see also Miller (2017)). Another popular measure in the minimalist tradition, developed by Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010), similarly identifies democracies based on the presence of multiparty elections, but instead of attempting to judge their fairness directly, it employs an alteration in power criterion, whereby a regime is classified as democratic (often retroactively) if ruling parties and candidates have lost elections and have been replaced by the opposition.

The downside of both minimalist approaches is that their narrow focus on the bare-bones essentials of democracy and on the integrity of the electoral process misses the more subtle manipulations of broader democratic principles which are increasingly prevalent in electoral autocracies. Due to the learning mechanism I mentioned earlier, most of today's electoral authoritarian regimes do the "heavy lifting" in suppressing democratic competitiveness outside of the electoral process – by abusing the administrative and economic resources of the state, manipulating the judiciary and the legislative process, establishing control of the media, and other nonelectoral machinations that degrade the capacity of autonomous social actors to compete, long before the ballots are cast (Schedler 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010b; Bermeo 2016). As one authoritarian regime connoisseur put it: "[t]oday, only amateurs steal elections on election-day" (cited in Bermeo 2016). Against this backdrop, a minimalist, election-focused indicator of democracy is prone to misclassify many electoral autocracies that have adopted sophisticated ways of masquerading as democracies.

The second major approach to identifying electoral autocracies is to separate them from democracies on the basis of composite democracy

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indices – such as those provided by Freedom House and the Polity Project – which record adherence to much broader set of democratic norms, ranging from various institutional prerequisites to respect for the rule of law, freedom of the press, and individual liberties. In this scheme, regimes are dichotomously classified as democratic when their score on these composite indices is above some particular predefined cutoff point, usually justified by empirical comparisons with other classifications. The most prominent regime dataset using this approach was developed by Wahman, Teorell, and Hadenius (2013), and it defines electoral autocracies as regimes that hold elections in which oppositions are allowed, but whose average combined Freedom House and Polity IV scores fall below a threshold of 7.0.

The main issue with this classification is that it uses a cutoff point for separating electoral autocracies from other regimes that is somewhat arbitrary, rather than strictly derived from substantive criteria (Bogaards 2010; Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010). Another critique of this approach is that a specific ranking on a multicomponent democracy score cannot be attributed to any consistent set of components of democracy. For instance, two countries may have the same score because they satisfy the same number of disparate democratic norms (K. S. Gleditsch and Ward 1997).

While these criticisms are valid, the flaws they detect are, in fact, advantages when it comes to identifying electoral autocracies. First, the composite index regime classifications are much better able to register the shifting strategies used to subvert democracy, precisely because they are based on a broad range of different democratic standards that are weighed equally. For instance, when an electoral autocracy shifts its tactics from ballot stuffing to more subtle approaches like media control or abuse of the judiciary, the seeming improvement in one area (integrity of the electoral process) will be compensated for by the decline in another (freedom of the press or rule of law), and the composite index measure will still accurately classify this regime. A minimalist, election-centric classification scheme, on the other hand, will be more prone to miscategorizing this regime as a democracy.

Second, even the minimalist measures of democracy, which are presumably based on a consistent standard of election integrity, are, in practice, affected by potentially significant biases, subjectivity, and arbitrariness. This, to a large degree, is because these indices directly or indirectly draw their core conclusions from interpreting election

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reports, which as a rule lack a common standard of coverage and are often inconclusive, or skewed for political reasons (Hadenius 1992; Kelley 2009). By virtue of its greater breadth, the composite index score classification is, on the other hand, less prone to be swayed by the biases inherent in any of its individual components, or the sources used to construct them (on this, see Bollen and Paxton 2000). From the same vantage point, the seemingly arbitrary numerical threshold for democracy in the composite scale may – again paradoxically – ensure better measurement consistency across cases. Because it is uniformly applied across the board, the numerical-cutoff-point measure of democracy may suffer from fewer subjectivity and interpretation biases than the minimalist alternative, which attempts to size up each regime's adherence to democratic standards individually, on a case-by-case basis.

Based on these considerations, as a key dependent variable for this book's empirical analyses, I use the composite index regime indicator from the Authoritarian Regimes Dataset (ver. 6.0) of Wahman, Teorell, and Hadenius (2013), covering the 1960–2014 period.[5] Despite its potential drawbacks, this measure satisfies both the comprehensiveness and versatility criteria for accurately identifying electoral authoritarian regimes better than the alternative. As such, it provides the best match with the definition of electoral authoritarianism as a political system that rules within a democratic constitutional framework but subverts it informally, using many different combinations of manipulative tactics that can shift over time.

The Strongman Appeal of Electoral Authoritarianism Regimes

> In a crisis, you don't need governance by institutions. What is needed is somebody who tells the people that risky decisions must be taken . . . and who says to them follow me . . . Now strong national leaders are required.
>
> Viktor Orbán, Hungarian Prime Minister
> (cited in Lendvai 2017)

Electoral autocracies come from backgrounds that seem so incomparably diverse that searching for a single common factor, explaining their

[5] Although the Authoritarian Regimes Dataset documentation states that it covers the 1972–2014 period, it has a starting year of the regime variable that goes back to 1960. I use it to extend the regime measures to the 1960–2014 period, achieving greater coverage in this fashion.

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rise and persistence, looks like a fool's errand. These regimes have emerged in countries as dissimilar as Singapore and Nigeria, Venezuela and Hungary, Peru and Turkey, and Russia and Zimbabwe. Their institutional underpinnings have varied between highly personalistic arrangements, like that under Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, to anti-personalistic, party-based dictatorships, such as the one in Mexico under the PRI. Their leaders and ideologies have ranged from the flamboyant leftist populism of Hugo Chávez to the steely nationalistic anti-populism of Vladimir Putin; from Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's religious-based appeal in Turkey to the impassionate, technocratic style of Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew. And as I have argued in the previous section, each of these regimes tends to be electorally authoritarian in its own way, relying on its own, custom-made "menu of manipulation" to keep democracy at bay.

Yet despite this bewildering diversity of electoral authoritarian rule, there is something strikingly familiar in the way in which these regimes have conducted themselves. All these regimes, without exception, have projected an image of a strong-armed, but popularly elected party or leader, who can provide the stability and efficient governance their country needs. And they have all framed their tough image as a response to their countries' most severe crises and periods of instability.

The regimes in the electoral authoritarian "Hall of Fame" have all religiously adhered to this legitimation strategy. The basic appeal of the PRI regime in Mexico – the world's longest-lasting electoral autocracy – laid in its ability to restore order after the country's bloody revolution and then maintain an unprecedented degree of political and economic stability for a Latin American country, all while being broadly representative and minimally coercive (Castañeda 2000).[6] Similarly, the world's second-oldest (and still thriving) electoral autocracy in Singapore established and sustained its rule on a promise to end the bitter class and ethnic strife in a divided society. Both before and after it delivered Singapore's "economic miracle," the primary appeal of the People's Action Party (PAP) regime was the extraordinarily stable order it created with minimal coercion (Slater 2010, ch. 8).

[6] Showcasing its image as an indispensable guarantor of order, the PRI was referred to in public by regime representatives and supporters as the "party of the state" in Mexico (Dominguez and McCann 1998).

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Among the post–Cold War electoral autocracies, the core appeal of the Russian electoral autocracy under Vladimir Putin has been based on his promise to usher in a new era of stability after the disastrous post-Soviet decline in the 1990s – an image reinforced by successes in reining in the restive province of Chechnya and the country's unfettered oligarchs, improving the economy, and restoring Russia's standing on the world stage (Treisman 2011a; Matovski 2020). Putin sustained his impressive popularity using slogans such as "raising Russia from its knees," "a strong leader for a great country," and "strong president – strong Russia." In the wake of the bloody collapse of Yugoslavia, Serbia's strongman Slobodan Milošević justified his electoral authoritarian regime as the only force that could protect his compatriots at home and abroad. The appeal of Milošević's Socialist Party was summarized by its pithy campaign slogan: "With us, there is no uncertainty" (Gagnon 2004). Peru's Alberto Fujimori achieved unprecedented popularity and electoral dominance based on his pledge to dismantle the "false democracy of elites," deemed responsible for his country's deep structural crisis in the 1980s, and on his government's successes in taking on the brutal Shining Path insurgency (Levitsky and Cameron 2003). Venezuela's Hugo Chávez fashioned himself as a popular *caudillo* who would rescue his country from economic decline, rising inequality, and the corruption deemed to be caused by the neoliberal politics of the mainstream parties and "American imperialism" (Hawkins 2010; Corrales and Penfold-Becerra 2015).

Since the 2000s, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has cast himself in the role of Turkey's strongman "savior" by taking advantage of the country's long stagnation under its previous secular establishment, and by exploiting anxieties about the Kurdish insurgency, the war in neighboring Syria, and the failed military coup against his rule (Cagaptay 2017). In the crucial 2014 presidential election which entrenched Erdoğan's power, his party rallied support with a blunt message: "if you want bread, vote for Erdoğan" (Brookings 2014). In Egypt, the legitimation strategy of the NDP party under Hosni Mubarak – propped up by perpetual emergency rule and justified by foreign and domestic security threats – was best condensed in its austere campaign slogan: "continuity for the sake of stability" (Singerman 2002). Egypt's next strongman, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, exploited fears of chaos after the Arab Spring to rally popular support for a military coup and to establish another ham-fisted electoral authoritarian regime. "At least we are

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not Syria!" has been the most salient catchphrase of the Sisi regime – and is the best explanation why Egyptians have put up with it, despite the dire economic situation (*The Economist* 2015a). Even beyond these (in)famous cases, one would be hard pressed to find an exception to this pattern: an electoral autocracy that *does not* primarily justify its rule as a tough, decisive and popularly mandated response to a political, economic, and security crisis, or latent instability. This legitimation strategy makes electoral autocracies appear remarkably similar. Indeed, as I demonstrate in Chapter 4 of this book, it is so ubiquitous that we could reliably identify these regimes based on their rhetoric alone.

Despite the prevalence of this behavior, the possibility that electoral authoritarian parties and leaders sustain their rule by appealing for popular support – much like their democratic counterparts – has been routinely overlooked in political science.[7] There are several reasons for this. The first is practical: popular appeals and mass attitudes are notoriously difficult to study in authoritarian settings, and until fairly recently, there were few resources and opportunities to explore their impact. The second obstacle is normative: there is a strong, instinctive bias against the notion that popular support for authoritarianism can be a product of anything other than intimidation, brainwashing, and bribery. We cringe at the idea that ordinary people may willingly consent to authoritarian rule, because thinking otherwise would give legitimacy to such regimes.

The third key reason why the strongman appeal and other legitimation strategies of electoral autocracies have not been seriously considered is conceptual. Quite simply, the rhetoric of elected strongmen does not resemble any recognizable ideological and programmatic platforms observed in either traditional, closed dictatorships, or democracies. Unlike their democratic counterparts, strongman electoral authoritarian incumbents do not regularly vie for votes based on policy proposals or issue stances. And unlike their totalitarian predecessors, they do not seek to attract popular support with utopian ideologies. Instead, electoral autocracies have primarily relied on what looks like a hodgepodge of relatively shallow nationalist, religious, and populist platforms, designed to take advantage of particular grievances in their

[7] On this issue, see Burnell (2006), Gerschewski (2013), Kailitz (2013), Mazepus et al. (2016), Dukalskis and Gerschewski (2017), Kailitz and Stockemer (2017), von Haldenwang (2017), and von Soest and Grauvogel (2017).

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countries, and to appeal to the lowest common denominator. Seen from the standpoint of the traditional campaign and legitimation theories, these appeals seem too superficial to attract stable popular support. Discounted as the most "ideologically homeless" regime type (Schedler 2013, 55), electoral autocracies are generally not considered to have a coherent and compelling popular appeal which could sustain their rule.

I argue that this interpretation is wrong for two reasons. First, it overlooks the unique circumstances in which electoral autocracies rise, and how these contexts shape political competition and legitimation. A central empirical finding of this book is that at a far greater rate than any other regime type, electoral autocracies have emerged in the wake of the greatest political, economic, and security crises in their countries' histories. These are periods when societies reject traditional ideological and programmatic appeals, and put a premium on strong-armed, but popularly accountable leadership, which promises to restore national unity and stability by all means necessary. To put it differently, electoral autocracies emerge when the rules of legitimation are inverted: when substantive platforms and ideologies are shunned, and tough, decisive, and pragmatic leadership, unburdened by partisan dogmas or allegiances, is seen as the only reliable source of authority. The standards for evaluating these regimes' legitimation strategies must, therefore, be reversed too.

Such scenarios seem to squarely fit Max Weber's insight that in times of great strife, the charismatic authority of individual leaders and parties becomes a more stable form of legitimacy than that of well-defined policies, ideologies, and laws. According to Weber, when unprecedented disasters strike, doctrines and principles that have guided societies in the past tend to offer neither answers nor solutions. Faced with uncertainty and despair, societies abandon established ideas and follow "ideal" leaders, who appear to have the skill and vision to somehow transcend the current problems (Weber 1946).

The appeals of elected strongmen, from this standpoint, are mistakenly assumed to be "formless" not because they lack a firm set of guiding principles, but because they believe that traditional political ideologies and platforms stand in the way of effective government, which is necessary in their troubled countries. As Shevtsova (2003) shrewdly observed in the Russian case, electoral autocracies are defined by the view that their beleaguered societies do not need fixed ideologies,

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policies, or even rules of politics; what they do believe is needed are strong, competent, and decisive "fixers."

This is why the strongman appeal of electoral authoritarian regimes cannot be discounted as "cheap talk." Instead, I claim that it is a fully fledged legitimation formula and governing doctrine. And this legitimation script and doctrine is based on much more than Weber's pure, personality-driven charisma. Even in highly personalistic electoral autocracies, the core pillar of legitimacy is not the current leader's personal charm, but the *argument* that dysfunctional societies should be governed by tough, uncompromising leadership, empowered to impose order and justice by any means necessary. Elected strongmen take advantage of the wide appeal of this doctrine to justify their rule as a form of emergency rule: a popularly mandated suspension of democracy to deal with an unmanageable crisis. The state of emergency rationalization,[8] exemplified by Viktor Orbán's statement quoted at the beginning of this section, transforms what might otherwise appear as naked personalized tyranny into a compelling governing philosophy and mandate. From this standpoint, the "charisma" of any particular strongman is not much more than a bit of personal flair attached to this legitimation formula – something that may multiply its appeal but can never replace it.

Electoralism is the other core pillar of this strategy for justifying authoritarian rule. It allows strongmen to credibly commit to staying accountable to the majorities they vie to protect. This distinguishes electoral autocracies from other dictatorships that claim to rule in the name of the people and to defend them from grave danger.[9] For as long

[8] This legitimation strategy has also been made explicit in cases when electoral autocracies have resorted to formally declared emergency rule. The most extreme case is that of Egypt, which has been under emergency rule for much of its postcolonial history (Singerman 2002; Brown and El-Sadany 2017), and it has also been deployed to significant effect in Turkey, after the failed coup against Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2016 (EU 2018). However, most electoral autocracies have by and large avoided the explicit use of constitutional state of emergency provisions – preferring to use the supreme emergency justification for rule rhetorically, but to exercise unlimited executive power informally.

[9] In particular, the state of emergency justification has been a core legitimation strategy of dictatorships since the Roman republic (Nicolet 2004). Napoleon Bonaparte was the first modern leader who established an autocracy justified as emergency rule through a series of plebiscites, staking a claim that it legitimately represented the will of the people (Woloch 2004, 42). Later, the Nazi and many other dictatorships relied on this legitimation strategy to establish absolute rule of

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as they hold regular multiparty elections, autocrats are fundamentally limited in how much they can rely on coercion and manipulation to compensate for the lack of genuine popular support. Above all, allowing people to vote in a regime that is unpopular defeats the purpose of authoritarianism: instead of suppressing discontent and opposition, elections provide focal points for mobilizing it (see e.g. Tucker 2007).

But elections cannot constrain dictatorships that are *popular*. Instead, they enable them. A strongman regime that is genuinely supported by majorities as an indispensable provider of order and justice can break institutional norms, restrict freedoms, and repress its opponents with far greater impunity than an unelected dictatorship. This, I argue, is the key "missing link" in current understandings of electoral authoritarianism. If most people are convinced that the violations of democratic principles in the name of order, stability, and justice are acceptable, and signal their beliefs at regular elections, then the regime overseeing this state of affairs cannot be easily resisted, or even branded as undemocratic. Electoral legitimation transforms popular personalistic or party-based dictatorships into majority tyrannies: a far more sinister and resilient threat to democracy.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the mass appeal of electoral autocracies is a key systematic explanatory factor, and not just an idiosyncratic feature of these regimes. The campaigning strategies of elected strongmen are more than a jumble of populist overtures, rabble-rousing statements, and personal bravado. Instead, they reflect a fully fledged legitimation formula and governing doctrine. They do not simply call for strong, charismatic leadership in times of crisis, but also explain: (1) what charismatic leadership is in such circumstances (tough, effective, and uncompromising party or leader); (2) how it should be selected and replaced (through regular elections); (3) how it should govern (through the forceful use of executive power, unhindered by checks and balances); and (4) why it is the best alternative for nations recovering from deep crises (it is the most benign and pragmatic choice between democracy and complete dictatorship).

a single ruler or party (see Schmitt 2014, Fraenkel 2017, and Ullrich 2017, ch. 14). But unlike today's electoral autocracies, these regimes never adopted *regular multiparty elections* to signal continued popular approval for this form of rule. Electoral autocracies, in other words, are the only kind of authoritarian regime to sustain the (quasi) emergency rule legitimation of dictatorship within a nominally democratic institutional framework.

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While pure charisma is a unique and inimitable product of extraordinary personal appeal, this doctrine of strongman authority provides a general legitimation formula, which can be emulated by different leaders and parties in different countries.

To succeed, however, this legitimation strategy also needs favorable conditions and a captive audience. This is the second key insight of this study. A strongman legitimizing doctrine, no matter how compelling, is not enough, because under normal circumstances, societies are too divided by various particularistic interests, outlooks, and allegiances for a majority-backed strongman regime to emerge (see Dahl 1963, 132–133, 146). Only shared collective traumas from unmanageable crises can neutralize this diversity of opinions and interests and make electoral authoritarianism a compelling choice across society.[10] Without these painful experiences of turmoil and existential insecurity under alternative regimes, there is nothing to ensure that the supply of strongman electoral authoritarian leadership is met by broad popular demand for it. Or to put it simply: no crises, no autocracy-sustaining strongman appeal.

Other Analytical Approaches to Electoral Authoritarianism

This book is an attempt to address a fundamental gap in the current understanding of electoral authoritarianism: the failure to appreciate the role of these regimes' distinct popular appeal in their rise and persistence. It is useful, from this perspective, to briefly trace how this omission has shaped the literature on electoral autocracies.

All efforts to understand electoral authoritarianism, as I have argued earlier, must resolve its central puzzle: why are autocracies that legalize oppositions, hold regular multiparty elections and rule in a democratic institutional framework more durable than closed, tightly controlled dictatorships? There have been three major approaches to this issue. The first and most influential one has argued that paradoxically,

[10] Slater (2010) makes a similar point that the strongman appeal of autocracies is only convincing when populations have traumatic experiences of turmoil under a democratic order. According to Slater (2010, 14): "[a]ll dictatorships may attempt to construct a shared sense that democracy equals chaos while authoritarianism equals stability, but only some possess the historical raw material [in the form of experiences of unmanageable upheaval under a more democratic order] to succeed at making such claims broadly credible."

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adopting nominally democratic institutions can actually stabilize dictatorships. Studies in this tradition have underlined that multipartyism, legislatures, and elections increase incentives for various elite and opposition groups to participate in the authoritarian system and to be co-opted by the regime (Brownlee 2007; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007): they defuse violent and subversive oppositions (Schedler 2013, 35), compel key constituencies to compete for patronage within the institutions of the system (Lust-Okar 2008), and provide mechanisms through which autocrats can credibly commit to deliver it (Boix and Svolik 2013). Through more transparent institutions and controlled pluralism, autocracies can better monitor the elites (Blaydes 2008) and the population (Morgenbesser 2016), as well as the performance of their subordinates (Gehlbach and Simpser 2015). Such institutions therefore allow dictatorships to better pinpoint their opponents and to repress them far more selectively, avoiding the potential backlash from indiscriminate coercion (Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014). And by winning elections with big margins, autocracies compellingly demonstrate their unparalleled dominance and firm grip on society, deterring current and future challenges to their rule (Magaloni 2006).

The core idea of this neo-institutionalist approach (Gerschewski 2013), in other words, is that democratic institutions enable authoritarianism to use its coercive tactics better – to better bribe, brainwash, repress, and intimidate their societies into submission. Electoral autocracies, from this point of view, are not resilient because they are more legitimate or genuinely popular, but because adopting nominally democratic institutions allow them to deceive many into believing so, and to more effectively subjugate the rest. For all the emphasis on quasi-democratic institutions, they are little more than a clever façade; the true force that sustains authoritarianism is still coercive power.

At the macro-level, this line of thought implies that electoral autocracies will thrive in environments that give them maximum leverage to control their population through clientelism, propaganda, repression, and similar tactics. In particular, low levels of economic development are assumed to be especially conducive to the rise of electoral authoritarianism, as such contexts make impoverished populations more dependent on patronage (Magaloni 2006; Miller 2017). Similarly, access to substantial resource rents and other non-tax revenue like foreign aid could allow electoral autocracies to survive by maintaining

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robust patronage networks (see e.g. Ross 2001 and Morrison 2009). And where such clientelistic inducements are insufficient, states with greater repressive capacity can better sustain electoral authoritarianism by deploying overpowering violence and intimidation against their oppositions (Albertus and Menaldo 2012).

The second major approach to electoral authoritarianism argues that electoral autocracies are more likely to thrive where societies and oppositions lack access to external influences and resources that can help them to mobilize and overcome these regimes' manipulative and coercive power. In this regard, Levitsky and Way (2010a) point out that the rise of electoral authoritarianism is best predicted by a country's "linkage" to the West, in the form of political, economic, social, and cultural ties, as well as its exposure to Western "leverage" – pressure aimed to promote democratic behavior.[11] Sensitivity to such external pressures, as other studies have shown, tends to be geographically and temporally clustered (K. S. Gleditsch and Ward 2006), and driven by waves of democratic diffusion and retrenchment (Beissinger 2007; Bunce and Wolchik 2011). The driving force behind the success or failure of electoral autocracies, from this perspective, is the exposure of these regimes to the external influence of other democracies. The domestic determinants of electoral authoritarianism, such as the oppositional structure and mobilization potential, play an important but secondary role, mediating the impact of these external factors (Waldner and Lust 2018, 106).

The third explanation of electoral authoritarianism ties the persistence of these regimes to their strong economic and other performance. This performance legitimacy argument is the only one that explicitly tackles the possibility that electoral authoritarianism can enjoy genuine majority support. This popular consent is rooted in an "authoritarian bargain": societies trade in their political freedoms for strong economic growth delivered by these regimes (Desai, Olofsgård, and Yousef 2009). A notable example of this line of reasoning is provided in Treisman (2011a), who argues that the

[11] On this, see also Brinks and Coppedge (2006), Hyde (2007), Djankov, Montalvo, and Reynal-Querol (2008), Wright (2009), and Kelley (2012). Conversely, contexts that create bonds of mutual assistance and cooperation between authoritarian regimes has been used to help "diffusion-proof" electoral authoritarianism against democratization (Koesel and Bunce 2013; von Soest 2015).

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impressive popular support of Vladimir Putin's electoral authoritarian rule during his first two terms in office was owed to Russia's sustained economic recovery in this period. The performance legitimacy mechanism has also been applied comparatively, in relation to other regime alternatives and on the international level. Miller (2015b) and Cassani (2017b), for instance, argue that electoral autocracies can claim greater performance legitimacy than closed dictatorships because on average, they have been more successful in delivering various economic and social benefits and services. Miller (2016), in turn, shows that the attractiveness of authoritarianism relative to democracy has grown when such regimes are perceived to have a superior record of economic performance. From this comparative point of view, examples of electoral authoritarian overachievers such as Singapore influence people to support similar regimes in their own countries.

Despite their valuable insights, these paradigms have been unable to account for several key aspects of electoral authoritarianism. First, the arguments that electoral autocracies are sustained by their more nuanced, efficient, and institutionally channeled coercive power or by their superior economic performance cannot explain how many of these regimes rise to power, before they have access to the patronage, propaganda, and repressive resources of the state, and before they have clear records of economic achievement. In particular, the idea that authoritarian regimes secure popular consent with repression, propaganda, and clientelism runs counter to the fact that the vast majority of electoral autocracies today have entirely nonviolent and democratic origins. Unlike military dictatorships and other closed autocracies, contemporary electoral authoritarian regimes have overwhelmingly emerged without any use of coercion whatsoever. They are established *after* elected incumbents – many of whom were outsiders with few allies and resources – have gradually dismembered democracy through the democratic process itself – often with substantial popular support (Svolik 2013; Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). The external influence paradigm, in turn, has a problem explaining why some of the most striking cases of backsliding toward electoral authoritarianism in recent years have emerged in countries like NATO and EU members Hungary and Poland, where Western influences and democratic pressures are very high.

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Second, the neo-institutional, performance legitimacy, and external influence accounts of electoral authoritarianism cannot fully explain the collapse of these regimes. Here too, the issue is simple: if coercion and manipulation, economic performance, and isolation from democratization pressures are central to keeping incumbents in power in electoral autocracies, why are they unable to prevent or crush the popular revolts that unseat them? The standard response in the existing literature is that electoral autocracies collapse when economic crises diminish these regimes' resources and capacity to control their populations with clientelism and repression, or insulate them from foreign influence (see e.g. Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, and Weingast 2003, Magaloni 2006, and Greene 2007).

However, this argument cannot account for the opposite paradox: why have many prominent electoral authoritarian regimes stubbornly persisted in the wake of catastrophic economic crises and an increasingly urban, educated, middle-class citizenry? The world's longest-lasting electoral autocracy, that of the PRI regime in Mexico, for instance, retained its popular support for years despite its failing performance and credibility.[12] Serbia's strongman Slobodan Milošević maintained electoral dominance for more than a decade, despite inflicting several disastrous wars and crippling international sanctions on his population (Palairet 2001; Gagnon 2004). The "Bolivarian" electoral autocracy of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela has long outlived its charismatic founder, although it failed on its promise of bringing welfare to the poor, squandered the country's oil wealth, wrecked the economy, and presided over incessant blackouts, shortages of basic goods, and staggering crime rates (Rodriguez 2008; Corrales and Penfold-Becerra 2015; *The Economist* 2017a). Zimbabwe's ailing electoral autocrat Robert Mugabe doggedly clung on to power until he was ninety-two years old, surviving rising opposition and succession struggles, and presiding over record-breaking hyperinflation and the complete devastation of the country's economy, law and order, and public services (Bratton and Masunungure 2008; *The Economist* 2017b). Such

[12] As Greene (2007, 19–20) points out, "76% of voters evaluated the PRI's economic performance negatively beginning more than a decade before it lost power; however, during the 1990s, up to 57% of voters who were the most dissatisfied with the PRI's performance still planned to vote for it." Morgenstern and Zechmeister (2001) find similar results as late as in 1997, three years before the PRI's electoral defeat.

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stunning cases of regime survival completely defy performance legitimacy explanations. They also cannot be fully attributed to more efficient clientelism, as these resource-strapped regimes increasingly lacked the means to reward even their loyal supporters. Similarly, legions of suffering citizens cannot be reliably kept in line with selective repression alone.

In the ultimate analysis, accounts centered on manipulation and coercion struggle to explain not just the rise and downfall of electoral authoritarianism, but also how these regimes reach and stay at the height of their power. In this sense, the most successful and robust electoral autocracies, as the literature admits, are the ones that need not resort to repression, clientelism, propaganda, and vote fraud to win the ballots. Dubbed *hegemonic* electoral autocracies, these regimes are genuinely popular, regularly win oversized majorities of 70–75 percent of the vote, and are long-lasting (Roessler and Howard 2009; Schedler 2013). Hegemonic regimes use coercive tactics as a last resort or to boost their already high vote margins (Magaloni 2006, 11; Simpser 2013; Gehlbach and Simpser 2015). On the other hand, the electoral autocracies that collapse do so in spite of, and indeed because of, their heavy reliance on authoritarian tactics like coercion, patronage, and vote fraud. These so-called *competitive* electoral authoritarian regimes do not command strong popular support; they are unstable and more likely to serve as stepping stones to democracy than as precursors of robust authoritarianism (Hadenius and Teorell 2007, 150–153). This contrast between hegemonic and competitive electoral autocracies indeed demonstrates that coercion and the stability of electoral authoritarianism generally have a negative, *inverse* relationship. The more a regime relies on clientelism, propaganda, repression vote fraud, and so on, the weaker it is.

In a similar vein, relatively high economic performance seems to have undermined, rather than stabilized electoral autocracies in many cases. This has been especially true for hegemonic electoral autocracies. The first major protest wave against Vladimir Putin's reign in Russia, for instance, was led by the biggest beneficiaries of the economic recovery under his reign – the educated urban middle class – and took place during a period of relatively robust growth (Treisman 2014; Dmitriev 2015). Similarly, the ruling PAP party in the world's top-performing electoral autocracy in Singapore has been experiencing a consistent decline in its vote share relative to the opposition since the early

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2000s. This shift has been occurring despite – or as some would argue, because of – the fact that Singapore's economic performance in this period was so high that the country overtook the United States in terms of GDP per capita (*The Economist* 2015b). These and other examples suggest that the relationship between sustained economic achievement and electoral authoritarian resilience has been more in line with modernization theory – that societies turn against authoritarianism as their income, education, and urbanization levels increase (Inglehart and Welzel 2009) – than the performance legitimacy argument.

To summarize, there are at least three paradoxes of electoral authoritarianism that the existing literature cannot resolve. First, electoral autocracies typically emerge and consolidate their power with little or no coercion and manipulation, without an impressive record of economic and other achievements, and often in places with substantial exposure to external democratization pressures. Second, electoral autocracies that struggle and ultimately collapse often do so in spite of their vast coercive and manipulative capacity, relatively solid economic performance, and isolation from Western influence. Third, relying even on sophisticated forms of coercion and manipulation tends to be an indicator of weakness – not strength – of electoral authoritarianism. The regimes that most heavily use these tactics tend to be the most vulnerable ones. The most robust electoral autocracies, on the other hand, rule with very little resort to coercion and manipulation, and by winning in relatively clean elections.

This obvious mismatch between institutionalized coercion, economic performance, international influences, and authoritarian stability strongly suggests that there is a crucial omitted variable lurking in the background: the popular appeal of electoral authoritarian parties and leaders. When this appeal is high, fledgling authoritarian leaders like Alberto Fujimori in Peru or Hugo Chávez in Venezuela have won elections against long-established competitors and ushered in electoral authoritarianism before they had meaningful coercive power under their control. Other popular autocrats, like Hungary's Victor Orbán, have set up electoral authoritarian regimes at the heart of the EU and NATO, effectively negating their countries' exposure to Western influences and democratization pressures. Once in possession of the considerable coercive and remunerative resources of the state, popular electoral autocracies, like Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia during

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his first two presidential terms, have had relatively little use for them. As long as their popular appeal has persisted, these regimes have dominate their societies through the polling booth and with minimal use of force and forgery. And once the tide of popular opinion has turned against them, even the most robust and long-lasting electoral autocracies, like the PRI regime in Mexico, have eventually collapsed, despite of – or indeed because of – their heavy reliance on institutional manipulation, and the repressive, clientelistic propaganda and other resources still at their disposal.

The Confounding Influence of the Popular Appeal of Elected Strongmen

The previous discussion is not meant to suggest that institutionalized coercion, economic performance, and foreign influences do not play meaningful roles in these regimes. Quite the contrary, they are both defining features of electoral authoritarianism and crucial "force multipliers" which enable authoritarian forces to achieve a much greater margin of control than they could muster with their popular appeal alone. And in some critical junctures, when opposition threatens to snowball, these mechanisms – the strategic use of coercion in particular – play the role of the proverbial finger in the dike, protecting authoritarianism from being easily swept away.

However, as the current literature admits, no regime can be sustained by coercion and manipulation alone over the long run – or for that matter, its economic performance and relative isolation from foreign influences – unless it retains some degree of sincere popular support by satisfying the broader aspirations of its citizens (Wintrobe 1998, 2018; Geddes 1999; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). Thus, at any given point in time, the impact of coercion and institutional manipulation – as well as of external influences and economic performance – is shaped by preexisting mass attitudes toward the regime. The main purpose of propaganda, clientelism, repression, vote fraud, and similar tactics from this standpoint is to boost or to fill gaps in the popular appeal of authoritarian incumbents. Their effectiveness, particularly when used systematically over the long term, is limited by what people are predisposed to believe and justify, and by the potential for

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popular backlash.[13] Because coercive power operates in a social milieu supplied by mass sentiments and the legitimizing appeal of electoral authoritarianism, these attitudinal factors condition its effects on the rise and survival of these regimes.

The same could be said about the effects of adopting nominally democratic institutions in autocracies, which according to neo-institutionalist accounts, allow these regimes to monitor, coerce, and coopt their societies in a more selective, efficient, and targeted fashion. Because multipartyism, parliaments, and elections create opportunities for oppositional mobilization long before they provide such benefits for authoritarian incumbents, the decision to adopt these institutions is bound to be endogenous to the preexisting strength of the regime (see Negretto 2013, Pepinsky 2014, and Knutsen, Nygård, and Wig 2017) – particularly its ability to control their populations without much resort to coercion. Hence, a large portion of

[13] The case in point is the use of repression by electoral autocracies. As Wintrobe (2018) observes, electoral authoritarian incumbents resort to systematic violence to strengthen their genuine popularity, not to compensate for the lack of it. They tend to repress certain *disliked minorities* – ethnic, racial, religious, and other ostracized social and opposition groups – as a way to win the support of popular majorities. For this strategy to work without undermining the regime, these minorities must obviously be small enough. The majority, in turn, must either be hostile toward these groups and approving of their treatment, or, at a minimum, it ought to be apathetic about their plight – sentiments that clearly depend on preexisting opinion patterns that strongmen seek to exploit. Similarly, the study of clientelism and patronage strongly suggests that the scope and effectiveness of these tactics depends on the preexisting appeal of their regimes. As vote buying and patronage tend to only sway passivized regime supporters, weak opponents, and undecideds (see e.g. Stokes 2005, Bratton 2008, Nichter 2008, Calvo and Murillo 2013, and Gutiérrez-Romero 2014), a sufficient number of people must remain in these categories for the clientelistic appeal of autocracies to make a meaningful difference. The most common effect of clientelism, for these reasons, is to increase the vote margins of incumbents that would likely prevail without relying on this tactic. In the same vein, the studies of vote fraud show that the electoral autocracies with the greatest capacity for falsification are those that do not need it to win; their overwhelming popularity is the key factor that convinces countless bureaucrats to rig the ballots – signaling that the regime will remain in power after the elections to reward their loyalty and to protect them from punishment (see Simpser 2013, Gehlbach and Simpser 2015, and Rundlett and Svolik 2016). Finally, the effectiveness of propaganda has also been shown to depend on favorable mass dispositions toward the regime. It tends to backfire when it does not play on people's preexisting sentiments, and generally mobilizes entrenched sympathies for the regime or the opposition, instead of changing people's opinions (see e.g. Mickiewicz 1999, 2008, Gehlbach 2010, Knight and Tribin 2018, and Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018).

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what appears like an independent effect of institutions may in fact be a product of the original appeal of the regimes that have adopted them (on this, also see Smith 2005). In the extreme, institutions and coercive strategies are only the most easily observable symptoms of the social forces that sustain authoritarianism (see Pepinsky 2014, 650), which have little independent causal effect of their own. At a minimum, background factors are bound to have a strong moderating influence on the influence of authoritarian institutions, as well as on the coercive power channeled through them.[14]

This book's key point of departure is that the existing literature correctly identifies many key drivers of electoral authoritarianism but overlooks the most fundamental background factor that ties them all together: the genuine popular appeal of these regimes in troubled societies. In the analytic framework I propose, coercive power still plays an essential role, and pseudo-democratic institutions also help autocracies apply it with greater efficiency and precision. Electoral authoritarian regimes are still propped up by their economic performance, as well as by their resilience to democratic diffusion and external pressures. However, these factors operate in a broader context, defined by the distinct appeal of elected autocracies as guarantors of order and justice in troubled societies. When this appeal is salient and these

[14] In electoral autocracies, there are at least three strong indicators that institutions are shaped by the popular appeal of these regimes at least as much as those regimes are shaped by them. First, when they have sufficient support, electoral authoritarian regimes have proved supremely capable of ignoring institutions that were supposed to constrain their behavior (Pepinsky 2014, 635). Second, when armed with supermajorities, electoral autocracies have routinely manipulated institutions – they have redrafted constitutions, packed the courts, and changed laws on libel, campaigning finances, and so on – to gain tactical advantages over their oppositions (Magaloni 2006). Third, the claim that adopting nominally democratic institutions like elections, multipartyism, and parliaments has a stabilizing role on authoritarianism does not square with the findings of cross-national empirical studies, which have shown that regimes that exhibit high institutional inconsistency – electoral autocracies in particular – tend to be the least stable regimes on average (Gates et al. 2006). In other words, as far as the institutional effects registered at the aggregate level are concerned, adopting democratic institutions should make autocracies *less*, not more stable. But that is clearly not the case in many electoral autocracies (Knutsen, Nygård, and Wig 2017). What drives this discrepancy? Clearly, looking at institutions alone cannot address this question. To determine the independent causal effect of authoritarian institutions, we must control for the confounding influence of social consent, which might have produced the electoral authoritarian regime – as well as its institutions – in the first place.

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factors are aligned with it, their effects are greatly amplified. When the strongman appeal is diminished, the use of coercion, high economic performance, and resistance to democratization pressures have weak or negligible impact, at best. At worst, they may be counterproductive and hasten the downfall of electoral authoritarianism.

Not accounting for this contingent relationship creates a significant blind spot, limiting our understanding of these regimes. Even more troublingly, it severely biases the existing accounts of electoral authoritarianism, because the factors that keep elected autocrats in power, according to the current literature, are not independent of these regimes' mass appeal. In particular, popular support confounds the effects of coercive and manipulative tactics in two fundamental ways. I depict these in the directed acyclic graphs[15] in Figure 1.2 below.

Seasoned observers of electoral authoritarian politics will find the pattern in the left panel of this figure very familiar. Deep systemic crises increase the attractiveness of strongman parties and candidates, promising to restore order and address injustices. This genuine popularity among crisis-weary and aggrieved populations, in turn, gives authoritarian political actors a direct route to win elections – without any use of repression, clientelism, propaganda, and vote fraud – a paradox that is largely unaccounted for in the current literature. At the same time,

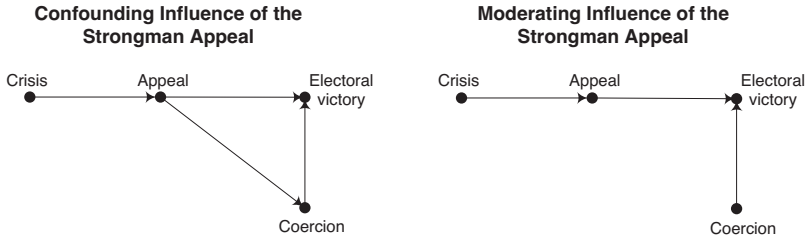

Figure 1.2 The relationship between crises, "strongman" popular appeal, coercion, and electoral victory of authoritarian parties and leaders

[15] Directed acyclic graphs (DAG) are a versatile, nonparametric tool for specifying causal relations between variables (see Pearl 2009). Quite simply, the nodes in the DAG graphs represent variables, and the directed vertices among them capture the hypothesized causal relationships. These graphs are "acyclic" in that they do not allow for simultaneous causation and reciprocal relationships (i.e. two variables cannot be connected with arrows going in both directions). For an excellent introduction to the use of DAGs in the social sciences, see Morgan and Winship (2007).

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the strongman appeal and mandate to restore order and prosperity justifies and encourages these regimes' use of coercion and manipulation – tactics they can abuse to stymie their opponents further and win with larger electoral margins. Thus, by affecting the outcome both directly as well as indirectly (through the repressive tactics and other machinations it enables), the strongman appeal confounds the relationship between coercion and securing electoral victory. What we typically attribute to the coercive power of electoral autocracies, might, as a result, be an indirect consequence of these regimes' popular mandate to restore order, or address grievances and dysfunction.

Even if the effects of repression, clientelism, propaganda, and other coercive strategies are independent of the strongman appeal of electoral autocracies, they are bound to be moderated (i.e. made stronger or weaker) by it – a relationship I depict in the right panel of Figure 1.2. The logic is straightforward: if broad swathes of the population genuinely support an electoral authoritarian regime as their only "savior" from turmoil and dysfunction, they are more likely find its propaganda believable, its repression justified, and to accept its use of clientelism, vote fraud, and other machinations as "necessary evils." And where these regimes enjoy genuine majority support, social pressures to conform might convince even citizens who would otherwise be critical to back the strong-armed policies of incumbents.[16] In all these cases, the degree of social control commonly attributed to pure coercive power is, in fact, largely catalyzed by the overwhelming popularity of strongman incumbents in troubled societies.[17]

This framework improves upon current understandings of electoral authoritarianism in at least two crucial regards. First, it challenges the prevailing view that electoral autocracies are largely sustained by a more sophisticated use of coercive instruments like clientelism, repression, and propaganda, as well as by institutional manipulations. Instead, I highlight the intersection between crises, popular opinion, and the mass appeal of authoritarian rulers as the most basic pillars of electoral authoritarianism. These previously omitted variables not only

[16] On this topic, see Noelle-Neumann (1984), Manaev, Manayeva, and Yuran (2010), Kalinin (2016), and Hellmeier and Weidmann (2019).

[17] This moderating effect of popular appeal also operates in the opposite direction. The use of coercion and manipulation by electoral autocracies that are widely despised by their populations is particularly ineffective and prone to backfire (see e.g. Hale 2014 and Tucker 2007).

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allow authoritarian incumbents to win and maintain power thorough the ballot box, but also enable them to effectively employ coercive tactics and manipulate institutions to further reinforce their dominance.

Second, accounting for the underlying popular appeal of electoral authoritarian regimes, as well as the circumstances that enable it, allows us to develop an overarching theory of electoral authoritarianism that explains the entire trajectory of these regimes: (1) their origins; (2) their durability; and (3) their demise. Specifically, considering the popular appeal of elected strongmen allows me to address four key unexplained paradoxes of electoral authoritarianism: (1) how electoral autocracies rise and become hegemonic with minimum coercion and manipulation; (2) why many of them persist despite their abysmal performance, exposure to democratization pressures, and diminishing coercive capacity; (3) how electoral autocracies collapse despite their substantial coercive power, isolation, and robust economic performance; and (4) how these regimes are able to engage in blatantly authoritarian behavior without losing domestic support.

Research Design and Chapter Outline

In the chapters that follow, I develop a full theoretical framework which argues that electoral autocracies are, to a large degree, products of popular demands for strong-armed, effective rule, which emerge in the wake of profound political, economic, and security crises. To validate these claims, I employ a three-pronged empirical strategy. First, using an extensive cross-national regime transition and survival analysis, I test the core macro-level implication of this book's analytic framework: that electoral autocracies are the most likely regime type to emerge and persist in the wake of acute crises and decay. Second, to verify whether electoral authoritarian parties and leaders have a distinct and consistent "strongman" appeal, designed to take advantage of the collective traumas and fears of crisis-weary majorities, I perform a comparative content analysis of the campaign rhetoric of incumbents in electoral autocracies and democracies. Third, to show that the strongman appeal of these regimes allows them to achieve dominance at the polls with minimal resort to coercion, I perform a multilayered comparative analysis of popular opinion patterns and voting behavior before and after the rise of electoral autocracies.

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This last component of the empirical strategy is a combination of: (1) an in-depth study of mass attitudes and electoral behavior in the Russian electoral authoritarian regime since the 1990s; and (2) a cross-national analysis of the corresponding mass opinion patterns in electoral autocracies and democracies from across the globe. The focus on the Russian case has several unique advantages. First, in the decade since the Soviet collapse, Russia experienced the steepest peacetime decline in history – a socioeconomic cataclysm twice as intense as the Great Depression of the 1930s (Mitra and Selowsky 2002; Eberstadt 2010). Studying the Russian case therefore offers particular leverage to examine how such traumatic crises shape popular sentiments and regime preferences. Second, since Vladimir Putin's rise in 2000, Russia has become an archetype of hegemonic electoral authoritarianism, which many other electoral dictatorships from across the world have strived to emulate (see e.g. Caryl 2015, 2018). Hence, the Russian case not only represents the phenomenon of interest for this book with the greatest conceptual clarity, but the fact that it has served as a global template of robust electoral authoritarianism also implies that its key features are broadly generalizable. Third, due to its size and military and economic power, Russia has been less susceptible to external democratization pressures than most other electoral autocracies. A focus on Russia is thus, in effect, a way to control for these external factors, isolating the endogenous dynamics of systemic crises, popular opinion, and electoral authoritarianism. Finally, compared to other electoral autocracies, Russia offers an unparalleled variety of high-quality popular opinion data and other resources, allowing for a particularly detailed tracing of the interplay between mass opinion and regime trajectories.

Following this research strategy, this book's analysis proceeds in several steps. Chapter 2 fully develops the overarching theoretical framework of the book. It first specifies a comprehensive theory as to why electoral authoritarianism tends to be the most preferred remedy for popular majorities living in troubled societies. It then moves on to define the specific rhetorical template and campaign strategy – what I describe as the elected strongman appeal – that authoritarian incumbents use to press their advantage and win favor among electorates distraught by turmoil. Finally, Chapter 2 develops a full theory of electoral competition in societies that have experienced deep, traumatic crises. This segment traces how justifying electoral authoritarianism as

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a strong-armed response to a national emergency enables authoritarian parties and leaders to achieve a genuine popularity advantage over their opponents, and to secure power through the ballot box and with minimal coercion.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed empirical test of the central macro-level implication of this book's analytic framework: that electoral autocracies tend to emerge in the wake of deep security, economic, and political crises – circumstances that allow such regimes to compellingly justify their rule as necessary in order to preserve order and stability. Based on a comprehensive cross-national analysis of regime transition and survival patters for 1960–2014, this chapter demonstrates that socioeconomic and security crises are the best predictors of transitions to electoral authoritarianism. The analysis also demonstrates that those electoral autocracies that are preceded by the deepest economic crises, and that subsequently manage to make the greatest progress toward restoring prosperity, have the lowest risk of democratization.

Chapter 4 challenges the prevailing view in the current literature that electoral authoritarian regimes rely on a hodgepodge of inconsistent legitimizing strategies, opportunistically drawn from various disparate platforms and ideologies. Using cross-national data from the Comparative Manifestos Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2016), this chapter shows that the campaign strategies and rhetoric of electoral autocracies have instead followed a remarkably consistent pattern. Practically without exception, they have embraced the elected strongman appeal, which justifies their rule as a popularly mandated response to a national emergency.

In Chapter 5, I begin to trace the popular opinion patterns in electoral autocracies with a comparative analysis of the paradigmatic case of Russia. The chapter first outlines the scope and consequences of Russia's catastrophic post-Communist cataclysm, and how this traumatic experience prompted ordinary Russians to place an absolute premium on restoring order and stability – outlooks that enabled the rise of Vladimir Putin and made his tough-mannered style of governing incredibly popular. Using a uniquely rich dataset of 418 surveys for the 1993–2011 period produced by the Levada Center – Russia's leading independent polling organization – this chapter demonstrates that in societies traumatized by upheaval, the strongman appeal trumps ideological, programmatic, and value orientations, and aligns mass opinion

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and political competition along a new cleavage: the choice of accepting or rejecting electoral authoritarianism as a regime that can restore order. I show that the choices imposed by this cleavage inhibit and divide the opposition and highlight its shortcomings, allowing even weakly performing autocracies to retain power through elections.

Chapter 6 tests the generalizability of the book's analytic framework beyond the Russian case. Examining cross-national opinion data from forty-two electoral autocracies in the 1981–2014 period, drawn from the European and World Values Surveys (EVS 2011; WVS 2014) – the broadest available comparative dataset on popular sentiments about politics – I find that just as in Russia, electoral authoritarian incumbents from across the globe have exploited traumas rooted in unmanageable turmoil to reconfigure mass opinion and political competition in their favor. Chapter 6 also shows that this cleavage structure and logic of vote choice differs from the patterns we observe in stable Western democracies, confirming again that the advantages electoral autocracies enjoy at the polls are largely owing to the extraordinarily subversive power of the elected strongman appeal in troubled societies.

Chapter 7 summarizes the book's findings and discusses its implications. It underlines the most essential limitation of the appeal of electoral authoritarianism: these regimes become superfluous both when they succeed and when they fail to deliver stability. To maintain popular consent, electoral autocracies must therefore manufacture the types of crises that justify their existence. This paradoxical dynamic has profound implications for their domestic and international behavior, as recently demonstrated by the aggressive posture of electoral autocracies from across the globe, ranging from Vladimir Putin's Russia, through Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey, to the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte.

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