Formal Theory:
Three Pillars of Authoritarian Power

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Abstract

An autocrat's power depends on pillars such as gaining support, repressing threats, and preventing the opposition from mobilizing. The language of game-theoretic modeling is designed specifically to study strategic interactions among rulers, regime agents and elites, and opposition actors. Consequently, in the past two decades, game theory has become an indispensable tool for studying authoritarian politics. Recent contributions in applied modeling have advanced our understanding of the main problems that autocrats confront, including commitment problems, agency problems, and coordination problems. We highlight canonical models, and very recent advances, to showcase how formal theory has produced insights into which tools autocrats use to handle these problems.

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