Strategic Power Sharing: Commitment, Capability, and Authoritarian Survival

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Abstract

Dictators can share power with threatening challengers, or marginalize them. Under what conditions do rulers share power, and does this strategy facilitate authoritarian survival? This article formally demonstrates that sharing power in the central government, opportunities for challenges, and authoritarian survival are strategically interrelated. Sharing more power exerts dual consequences: enhancing the dictator's commitment to future concessions by enabling the challenger to mobilize more frequently, and improving the challenger's capability to overthrow the ruler. Contrary to existing intuitions, infrequent mobilization does not trigger the challenger to fight, nor does the dictator necessarily share power to maximize political survival. Under opportunistic exclusion, low power sharing covaries with stable regimes. Under greedy exclusion, dictators exclude to maximize rents despite undermining long-term survival prospects. The ruler strategically shares power under narrow circumstances: voluntarily sharing power switches equilibrium bargaining from conflictual to peaceful without creating a high opportunity cost from lost rents.

Key words: Authoritarian politics, conflict, game theory, power sharing, social mobilization

Supplementary material for this article is available in the appendix in the online edition.

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Dictators can co-opt threatening challengers through power-sharing arrangements, which vary in form depending on who the ruler seeks to pacify. Dictators can use a legislature or cabinet positions to co-opt mass societal opposition organizations and members of different ethnic groups. Sharing power with elites may entail delegating decision-making authority to a ruling party or naming a rival general as Minister of Defense. Ostensibly, the goal of any power-sharing arrangement is to prevent violent overthrow, but is this strategy effective? Under what conditions do dictators share power, rather than marginalize challengers?

This article formally demonstrates that sharing power in the central government, opportunities for challenges, and authoritarian survival are strategically interrelated. I formalize a dictator's benefit to sharing power in a new way by modifying a key mechanism from Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) (see also Powell 2004), in which ruling elites interact with a mass challenger. If the challenger infrequently overcomes the collective action problems inherent to anti-regime mobilization, then they stage a revolution during rare and temporary "moments in the sun." Their opportunity to gain concessions is fleeting because the ruler cannot commit to concessions in future periods when the challenger lacks a coercive threat. Given this commitment problem, elites may need to transfer power to the masses (democratize) to prevent revolution.

I advance this mechanism to explain how dictators share power within an authoritarian regime. Sharing more power exerts dual consequences: enhancing the dictator's *commitment* to future concessions by enabling the challenger to mobilize more frequently, and improving the challenger's *capability* to overthrow the ruler. The commitment effect decreases the challenger's incentives to fight whereas the capability effect raises them, and both diminish the dictator's rents. Existing dynamic bargaining models do not incorporate either mechanism; for example, in Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), the frequency of moments in the sun and the opposition's probability of winning are exogenous.[1]

Sharing more power ambiguously affects regime survival. The dual consequences of power sharing imply that rare moments in the sun for the challenger covary with a low probability of winning and hence do not trigger conflict along the equilibrium path, contrary to existing models. Nor does an empowered challenger fight, as frequent mobilization facilitates sizable concessions—recovering existing intuitions. Only an intermediate-strong challenger initiates conflict in equilibrium.

[1]I also consider a more general setting than ruling elites versus masses, as the strategic logic is identical for various "challenger" actors mentioned in the first paragraph. The dictator may interact with an elite or a mass actor, and they might mobilize for an ethnic rebellion or a coup rather than a social revolution.

Two distinct considerations discourage power sharing. Marginalizing the challenger (a) maximizes authoritarian rents by diminishing the frequency with which the dictator must make concessions and (b) may not imperil political survival. If the challenger's baseline coercive capabilities vis-à-vis the ruler (i.e., absent any voluntary power sharing) are low, then refusing to share power does not trigger the challenger to fight despite their infrequent moments in the sun. The dictator gets a free lunch via *opportunistic exclusion*. In other circumstances, the challenger is strong enough that he fights the dictator absent institutional concessions. However, contrary to the common assumption that dictators maximize political survival above all other goals, the ruler may nonetheless choose *greedy exclusion* to protect rents—despite provoking a conflict they could have avoided by sharing more power. *Strategic power sharing* occurs under narrow circumstances: voluntarily sharing power switches equilibrium bargaining from conflictual to peaceful without creating a high opportunity cost from lost rents. I discuss empirical applications following the model analysis.

These findings help to reconcile contradictions in existing research. Many link power sharing to durable regimes because lucrative concessions reduce incentives for challengers to fight for power via a coup (Svolik 2012; Meng 2020), ethnic rebellion (Cederman et al. 2013), or social revolution (Goodwin 2001). Yet others stress drawbacks of sharing power. Institutional concessions reduce a dictator's rents and provide resources for challenging the ruler (Paine 2020). Whereas marginalized societal groups lack opportunities to mobilize against the regime and must build a private military to challenge the government, bringing outsiders into the government or giving away the Ministry of Defense portfolio enhances rivals' ability to overthrow the ruler in a coup (Roessler 2016). The dual consequences of power sharing in my model explain why these divergent implications are not mutually exclusive; instead, many existing arguments characterize different parts of the overall parameter space. Appendix A.1 discusses related formal-theoretic contributions in depth.

1 Model Setup

A dictator D and a challenger C interact over an infinite horizon with time denoted by $t = 0, 1, \ldots$ They share a discount factor $\delta \in (0, 1)$. At the outset of the game, D makes a one-time power-sharing choice $p \in \left[p^{\min}, 1\right]$ that sticks for the rest of the game. The exogenous lower bound $p^{\min} \in (0, 1)$ expresses C's baseline coercive capabilities.[2] After D chooses p, the following interaction occurs in each period (if no

[2] After the model analysis, I motivate why dictators vary in their ability to marginalize challengers. Appendix A.3 discusses why p is a one-time choice. Appendix A.7 parameterizes an upper bound $p^{\max} \leq 1$.

prior conflict). With probability $\mu(p) \in (0,1)$, Nature allows C to mobilize (creating a "moment in the sun"), and with probability $1-\mu(p)$, C does not mobilize. In any period t that C does not mobilize, D consumes the entire per-period budget of 1, C consumes 0, and the game moves to a strategically identical period $t+1$. If C mobilizes in period t, then D offers $x_t \in [0,1]$, to which C responds by either accepting or fighting. By accepting, C consumes x_t, D consumes $1-x_t$, and the game moves to a strategically identical period $t+1$. Fighting ends the game. C wins with probability p, and D with $1-p$. The winner consumes $1-\phi$ in every period (including t) and the loser consumes 0. The costs of fighting are $\phi \in (0,\delta)$, as $\phi > \delta$ makes the interaction strategically uninteresting because then conflict cannot occur in equilibrium.

The power-sharing choice, p, exerts dual consequences. First, higher p raises C's probability of winning a fight. Second, higher p increases the percentage of periods in which C mobilizes. I assume an exponential functional form, $\mu(p) = p^{\gamma}$. Hence, higher p implies greater ability to mobilize, $\mu'(p) > 0$; a perfectly weak C never mobilizes, $\mu(0) = 0$; and a perfectly strong C always mobilizes, $\mu(1) = 1$. Finally, γ parameterizes the rate at which sharing power affects the frequency of mobilization, $\mu(p)$, relative to C's probability of winning, p; and $\gamma > 1$ ensures a strictly convex relationship. Appendix A.2 summarizes notation.

Three examples motivate why the dual consequences of sharing power coincide. First, differential logistics of coups and rebellions (Roessler 2016, 37). Factions with access to power in the central government (higher p) can use the existing military to stage a coup. This reduces costs of mobilizing against the regime (facilitating higher frequency) and raises their capabilities to overthrow the dictator relative to a faction excluded from power (lower p), who must create a private army and fight their way to the capital via a rebellion. Second, if the dictator names a high-ranking general (C) as Minister of Defense (high p), then C's control over military policy and troops increases how frequently they can coerce the ruler and their probability of succeeding in a coup attempt. Third, delegating power to an institutionalized party similarly creates more credible commitments by boosting the challenger's bargaining power (Magaloni 2008).

The parameter γ determines the relative bite of each effect of p by determining the extent to which sharing power increases D's ability to commit to transfers. If γ is high, then raising p does not increase the frequency of mobilization, $\mu(p)$, by much, at least when p is low and we consider small increases in p (see Appendix Figure A.1). In weakly institutionalized countries, γ is high because their rulers exhibit low ability to commit to transfers unless they share considerable power. This is relevant because, as the appendix shows, high-enough γ is necessary for conflict to occur along the equilibrium path.

2 Non-Monotonic Effect of Power Sharing on Conflict

To solve the game, I first fix p and examine the subsequent bargaining interaction. Markovian strategies yield two possible paths of play. Along a *peaceful path*, in every period that C mobilizes, D makes the same offer x^*, which C accepts. Along a *conflictual path*, C fights in the first mobilization period. The relationship between the challenger's power p and whether equilibrium bargaining breaks down is inverted U-shaped. A weak challenger, formalized as $p < \underline{p}$, never fights because of their low probability of winning a conflict. A strong challenger ($p > \overline{p}$) also forgoes fighting because frequent mobilization enables the dictator to commit to lucrative concessions along a peaceful equilibrium path.

Does C accept when mobilized? Accepting yields consumption of x^* in the current period and in a fraction $\mu(p)$ of future periods. Successful fighting yields consumption of $1-\phi$ in all periods. Thus we need:

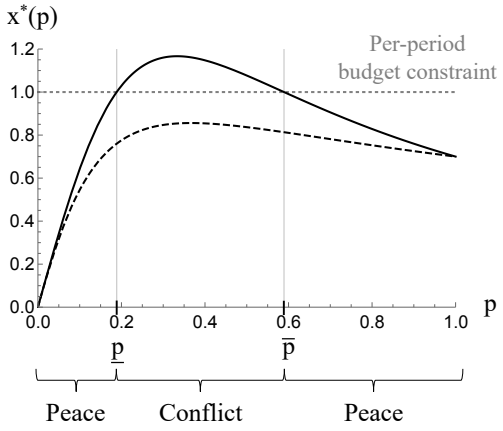
$$x^* + \frac{\delta}{1-\delta} \cdot \mu(p) \cdot x^* \geq p \cdot \frac{1-\phi}{1-\delta} \implies x^*(p) \geq \frac{p \cdot (1-\phi)}{1-\delta \cdot \big(1-\mu(p)\big)}. \tag{1}$$

If feasible, D satisfies Equation 1 with equality to make C indifferent, yielding all surplus saved from no conflict. Overall, power sharing exerts an inverted U-shaped effect on the optimal offer, $x^*(p)$.

$$\frac{dx^*}{dp} = \frac{1-\phi}{1-\delta \cdot \big(1-\mu(p)\big)} \cdot \Bigg[\underbrace{1}_{\text{Capability effect (+)}} \quad \underbrace{-\frac{\delta \cdot p}{1-\delta \cdot \big(1-\mu(p)\big)} \cdot \mu'(p)}_{\text{Commitment effect (–)}} \Bigg]. \tag{2}$$

Figure 1 depicts this relationship. Sharing more power enhances C's *capability* to win a conflict when mobilized. This effect is constant in p. Sharing more power also creates more frequent moments in the sun for C, i.e., higher $\mu(p)$. This enables D to *commit* to more frequent concessions, which lowers C's demand in each mobilization period (Appendix A.4 presents details for why). This effect increases in magnitude for larger p because $\mu(p)$ is convex. Equilibrium bargaining breaks down only for intermediate power sharing, $p \in \big(\underline{p}, \overline{p}\big)$. By con-

Figure 1: Power Sharing and Equilibrium Offer



Notes: This figure sets $\phi = 0.3$ and $\delta = 0.9$. For the dashed curve, $\gamma = 1.5 < \hat{\gamma}$ (see Lemma A.1), and hence fighting does not occur for any value of p, whereas the black curve satisfies $\gamma = 2 > \hat{\gamma}$.

trast, conflict does not occur if p is either very low (if perfectly weak, then C's probability of winning equals 0) or very high (if perfectly strong, then D can commit to pay C in every period). Appendix Proposition A.1 presents equilibrium bargaining strategies for fixed p. As Figure 1 suggests and as Appendix A.5 discusses in detail, steep-enough convexity, or high-enough γ, is necessary for the optimal offer x^* to exceed the per-period budget constraint of 1 for some values of p.

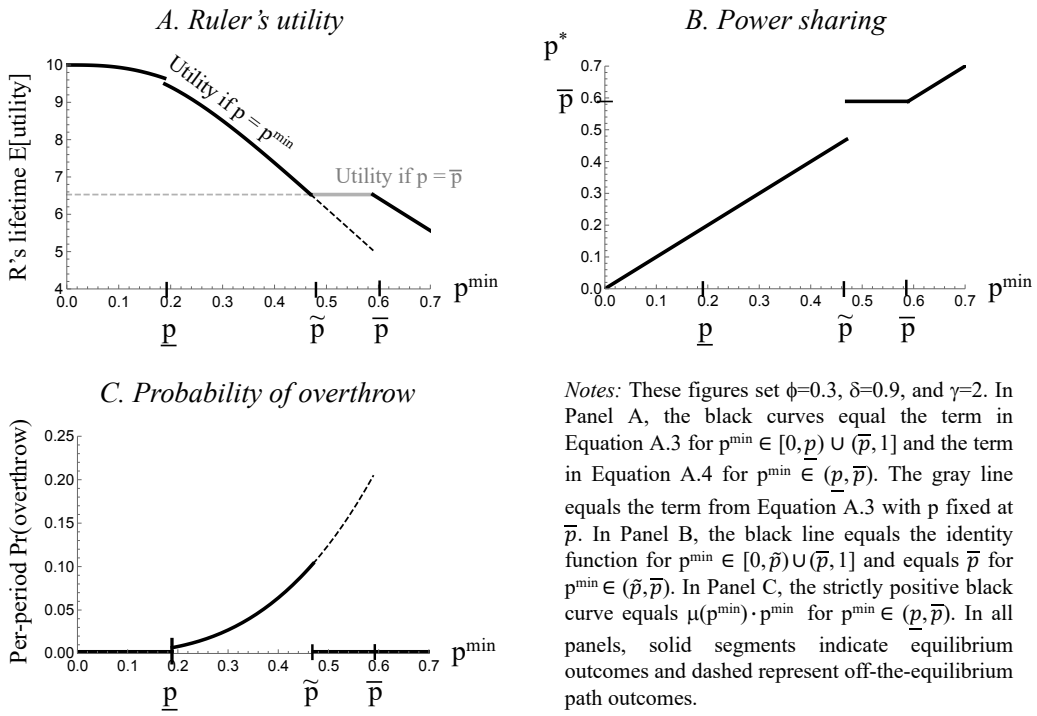
3 Equilibrium Power Sharing

The dictator chooses to share more power than the exogenous lower bound p^{min} under narrow circumstances: voluntarily sharing power switches equilibrium bargaining from conflictual to peaceful without creating a high opportunity cost from lost rents. Otherwise, D sets $p = p^{\text{min}}$ for one of three reasons: (1) C is too weak to punish D (opportunistic exclusion), (2) D chooses to maximize rents despite eventually facing conflict (greedy exclusion), or (3) exogenous constraints on D facilitate frequent mobilization by the challenger (exogenous power sharing). Appendix A.6 provides supporting technical information.

Figure 2 depicts how the main outcomes vary in p^{min}. Panel A plots in black D's lifetime expected utility to sharing $p = p^{\text{min}}$ (solid segments indicate when this is D's optimal choice, and dashed segments when not). Discrete jumps in the black curves occur at $p^{\text{min}} \in \{\underline{p}, \overline{p}\}$, the points at which small changes in power sharing determine whether equilibrium bargaining breaks down. To explain the intuition for the jumps, if we fix power sharing at some level p, D's lifetime expected utility is higher if that value of p induces peaceful rather than conflictual equilibrium bargaining. This result is standard; D makes the offers and conflict is costly. Additionally, *within* any of the three continuous ranges for the black curves, D's lifetime expected utility strictly decreases in p. D can benefit from sharing more power only if raising p shifts equilibrium bargaining from conflictual to peaceful. Lemma A.3 formalizes this intuition.

Panel A also plots (in gray) D's lifetime expected utility at $p = \overline{p}$, which is constant in p^{min}. This is the relevant benchmark because $\overline{p}$ is the lowest amount of power sharing that moves D out of the intermediate conflict region. Thus, if D does not prefer $p = \overline{p}$ over $p = p^{\text{min}}$ (or if $\overline{p}$ is not a feasible choice), then she prefers $p = p^{\text{min}}$ to any $p > p^{\text{min}}$. Panel B plots D's optimal power-sharing choice, p^*. Panel C plots in solid black the per-period probability with which C overthrows D along the equilibrium path. If D's optimal power-sharing choice p^* induces peaceful equilibrium bargaining, then this probability equals 0. If p^* induces conflict, then this is the probability that C has a moment in the sun and wins a conflict, $\mu(p^*) \cdot p^*$.

Figure 2: Equilibrium Outcomes



Notes: These figures set ϕ=0.3, δ=0.9, and γ=2. In Panel A, the black curves equal the term in Equation A.3 for $p^{min} \in [0, \underline{p}) \cup (\overline{p}, 1]$ and the term in Equation A.4 for $p^{min} \in (\underline{p}, \overline{p})$. The gray line equals the term from Equation A.3 with p fixed at $\overline{p}$. In Panel B, the black line equals the identity function for $p^{min} \in [0, \tilde{p}) \cup (\overline{p}, 1]$ and equals $\overline{p}$ for $p^{min} \in (\tilde{p}, \overline{p})$. In Panel C, the strictly positive black curve equals $\mu(p^{min}) \cdot p^{min}$ for $p^{min} \in (\underline{p}, \overline{p})$. In all panels, solid segments indicate equilibrium outcomes and dashed represent off-the-equilibrium path outcomes.

The dashed curve expresses $\mu(p^{\min}) \cdot p^{\min}$ for values of $p^{\min}$ such that (counterfactually) setting $p = p^{\min}$ would yield a conflictual path, but, instead, D optimally shares $p^* = \overline{p}$ to avoid conflict.

D refuses to voluntarily share more power than $p^{\min}$ in three distinct ranges of parameter values. If $p^{\min} > \overline{p}$, then the commitment effect facilitates frequent mobilization regardless of D's choice in this *exogenous power sharing* range. As in Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), equilibrium bargaining is peaceful because the challenger often experiences moments in the sun. Sharing more power than $p^{\min}$ would simply diminish D's rents by allowing C to mobilize—and gain concessions—more frequently.

However, some rulers can avoid conflict even with low commitment to future concessions, contrary to existing intuitions. If the lower bound is quite low and D sets $p = p^{\min}$, then equilibrium bargaining is peaceful—despite infrequent mobilization by the challenger—because C's coercive capabilities are so low. This *opportunistic exclusion* range, $p^{\min} < \underline{p}$, highlights the importance of studying the dual consequences of power sharing: the same power endowment that influences the frequency of moments in the sun also affects the probability of conflict success.

In the intermediate range, $p^{\min} \in (\underline{p}, \overline{p})$, D cannot drive down C's power enough to achieve opportunistic

exclusion. This creates a tradeoff between survival and rents. Minimizing power sharing by setting $p = p^{\min}$ maximizes expected periods until C can mobilize. D consumes the entire budget of 1 in every period before C's first moment in the sun, when a conflict occurs. By contrast, bumping power sharing up to $p = \overline{p}$ induces peaceful bargaining in mobilization periods. D benefits from avoiding the surplus destroyed by fighting, although she must make concessions more frequently.

Does D always willingly share enough power to prevent conflict? In my model, the dictator's objective to maximize lifetime expected utility does not necessarily align with the standard presumption that dictators maximize political survival. For $p^{\min}$ close to $\underline{p}$, the opportunity cost from lost rents is too high for D to jump to $p = \overline{p}$. In the *greedy exclusion* range, $p^{\min} \in \left(\underline{p}, \tilde{p}\right)$, D excludes maximally despite knowing that she could have shared enough power to guarantee survival. Thus, in this range, conflict occurs in equilibrium (see Panel C of Figure 2). Of course, D cannot consume rents if she loses power. But if D can set p low—and therefore does not expect to face a conflict until far in the future—then she prioritizes the rents accrued in the meantime despite eventually suffering the costs of conflict.

By contrast, for $p^{\min}$ closer to $\overline{p}$, sharing enough power to prevent conflict entails a lesser opportunity cost. D *strategically shares power*, i.e., sets $p > p^{\min}$, only for $p^{\min} \in \left(\tilde{p}, \overline{p}\right)$. Comparison to the greedy exclusion range highlights that small differences in $p^{\min}$ can yield large divergences in equilibrium outcomes, as shown by the discontinuities at $\tilde{p}$ in Panels B and C of Figure 2. In the strategic power sharing range, the lost rents from bumping power sharing up to $\overline{p}$ are small relative to the benefits from preventing conflict, given the exogenous lower bound that prevents D from dropping p further. The dashed curve in Panel C of Figure 2 shows that the per-period probability of overthrow would be quite high if, counterfactually, D refused to share power in this range. Proposition 1 summarizes how $p^{\min}$ influences power sharing and conflict.

Proposition 1 (Optimal power sharing and equilibrium conflict)**.**

Part a. *If $\gamma > \hat{\gamma}$, for $\hat{\gamma}$ defined in Lemma A.1, then in equilibrium:*

- ***Opportunistic exclusion.*** *If $p^{min} \leq \underline{p}$, then $p^* = p^{min}$ and conflict does not occur.*
- ***Greedy exclusion.*** *If $p^{min} \in \left(\underline{p}, \tilde{p}\right)$, then $p^* = p^{min}$ and the per-period probability of overthrow equals $\mu(p^{min}) \cdot p^{min}$. The proof defines a unique $\tilde{p} < \overline{p}$ that makes D indifferent between $p = p^{min}$ and $p = \overline{p}$.*
- ***Strategic power sharing.*** *If $p^{min} \in \left(\tilde{p}, \overline{p}\right)$, then $p^* = \overline{p}$ and conflict does not occur.*
- ***Exogenous power sharing.*** *If $p^{min} \geq \overline{p}$, then $p^* = p^{min}$ and conflict does not occur.*

Part b. *If $\gamma < \hat{\gamma}$, then $p^* = p^{min}$ and conflict does not occur.*

4 Empirical Implications

Equilibrium actions and outcomes vary in $p^{\min}$, the challenger's baseline coercive capabilities vis-à-vis the dictator (i.e., absent any voluntary power sharing). Table 1 summarizes empirical examples of substantively interesting parameter ranges.

Table 1: Empirical Examples of Parameter Ranges

Parameter range	Examples
Opportunistic exclusion	African founding fathers (Guinea), revolutionary regimes (China)
Greedy exclusion	Narrow ethnocracies (Syria)
Strategic power sharing	Challenger has high threat capabilities (Benin)
Strategic exclusion	Military integration, nascent democracies

Opportunistic exclusion corresponds with strong dictators who can survive long periods despite minimizing opportunities for the opposition access to power. For example, African countries such as Guinea gained independence amid a mass decolonization movement headed by a "founding father" who became president after independence. These broad movements encompassed would-be opposition groups, but often devolved little institutionalized power because the ruling party was a hollow organizational shell. Thus, the opposition lacked an independent power base from which they could mobilize against a popular ruler (Meng 2020, 140-45). A different type of example is communist regimes that gained power via violent rebellion. In cases like China, the party monopolized power by overhauling the military to make it a reliable tool of repression that destroyed alternative centers of power (Levitsky and Way 2013).

Most dictators cannot achieve this free lunch. If they do not voluntarily share power and boost their commitment to the challenger, then conflict occurs because the challenger's baseline capability, $p^{\min}$, is moderately high. This generates a tradeoff: bumping power sharing up to $\overline{p}$ prevents conflict, but allowing more frequent mobilization diminishes the dictator's rents, which derive from kleptocratic economic controls such as government-owned monopolies, property confiscation, and restricting access to essential services.

Regimes in Syria and Benin provide contrasting responses to this tradeoff. Syria's narrow ethnocratic regime exemplifies *greedy exclusion*. The al-Asad family has stacked the military with co-ethnic Alawites to create a reliable tool of repression—as in revolutionary regimes. However, the regime's control over society is inherently more tenuous than in cases like China. Alawites are a small minority group (12% of the country's population), which simultaneously binds them to the al-Asad regime but also limits the total manpower they can use to dominate society (Quinlivan 1999). This lowers $p^{\min}$ enough to induce the regime to maximize

rents, but it cannot prevent a revolt entirely, as suggested by the long-running civil war that began in 2011. In reality, the al-Asad regime also worries that broadening access to power would create coup risk, but this consideration makes the present theoretical mechanism more striking: I isolate a greed effect whereby the dictator chooses to exclude and faces conflict even though sharing power would eliminate any risk of violent confrontation. By contrast, Benin's post-colonial regimes exemplify *strategic power sharing*. Roessler (2016, ch. 10) argues that multiple ethnic groups in Benin have high "threat capabilities," that is, sizable population and reside close to the capital city. High risk of center-seeking civil war (i.e., relatively high $p^{\min}$) compels dictators to share power with members of other ethnic groups.[3]

Appendix A.7 highlights another path to minimal power sharing by parameterizing an upper bound on power sharing, $p^{\max} \leq 1$. If $p^{\max} < \overline{p}$, then maximal power sharing does not prevent conflict, hence eliminating the strategic power sharing range. If, additionally, $p^{\min} > \underline{p}$, then no feasible choice of power sharing prevents conflict, which induces *strategic exclusion*. Applicable cases are a newly elected party defeating the incumbent dictator, or a dictator settling a civil war with military integration provisions. Popular pressure to implement transitional justice measures against members of the old regime, or resistance from the existing army to integrating rebel soldiers, constrains how much power a ruler can share with challengers. Perversely, greater ability to eliminate rivals (i.e., lower $p^{\min}$) would enhance regime survival.

In sum, this article examines a model in which power sharing affects the dictator's commitment ability (by altering the frequency of anti-regime mobilization) and the challenger's fighting capabilities. Contrary to existing intuitions, rare moments in the sun do not trigger the challenger to fight, nor does the dictator necessarily share power to maximize political survival. My approach complements recent formal models that highlight countervailing effects of sharing power with other elite actors (Meng 2020, ch. 2; Paine 2020), and provides new insights by modeling dynamic anti-regime mobilization and by characterizing

[3] Another possible motivation for high $p^{\min}$ is that, at independence, some rulers inherited regimes with "split dominance" in which members of different ethnic groups dominated political (D) and military (C) positions. The challenger's inherited access to the center elevated $p^{\min}$ because they could stage a coup if the ruler attempted to reduce their influence in the military (Harkness 2018). Even higher values of $p^{\min}$ that lie in the *exogenous power sharing* range could arise in countries highly dependent on Western aid during times, such as the immediate post-Cold War period, in which Western countries—in return for aid—demanded power-sharing reforms such as legalizing opposition participation in elections.

novel motivations to marginalize challengers. Yet although the interaction in the present model occurs over an infinite time horizon, the power-sharing choice is one-shot. A natural next step would be to combine insights from the present approach with models in which the government's main choice is a dynamic state variable (e.g., Gibilisco 2020 for repression and Luo and Przeworski 2020 for power consolidation by elected incumbents). By allowing strategies to evolve over time, this setup would enable studying intermediate steps that many dictators pursue to concentrate power. For statistical tests, my findings underscore the need to account for endogenous institutions when estimating effects on authoritarian survival (Pepinsky 2014; Meng 2020, 190-92). Depending on the distribution of $p^{\min}$ in a particular data set, equilibrium rates of power sharing and leadership removal can correlate either positively or negatively, as Figure 2 summarizes. The present theoretical findings can guide future empirical tests of this relationship.

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