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Article *in* Contemporary Politics · March 2017

DOI: 10.1080/13569775.2017.1304319

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CONTEMPORARY POLITICS, 2017
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1304319

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Identity, procedures and performance: how authoritarian regimes legitimize their rule

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ABSTRACT

Constructing convincing legitimacy claims is important for securing the stability of authoritarian regimes. However, extant research has struggled to systematically analyse how authoritarians substantiate their right to rule. We analyse a novel data set on authoritarian regimes' claims to legitimacy that is based on leading country experts' assessments of 98 states for the period 1991–2010. This analysis provides key new insights into the inner workings and legitimation strategies of current non-democratic regimes. Closed authoritarian regimes predominately rely on identity-based legitimacy claims (foundational myth, ideology and personalism). In contrast, elections fundamentally change how authoritarian rulers relate to society. In their legitimacy claims, electoral authoritarian regimes focus on their 'adequate' procedures, thereby mimicking democracies. All regimes also stress their purported success in proving material welfare and security to their citizens.

KEYWORDS

Authoritarian regimes; claims to legitimacy; expert survey; identity; procedures; performance

Introduction

The current research on authoritarianism[1] has provided fundamental insights into the inner workings of non-democratic polities (for recent overviews see Art, 2012; Köllner & Kailitz, 2013; Pepinsky, 2014). However, even the growing body of research that differentiates between authoritarian subtypes focuses disproportionally on institutional features but largely ignores these regimes' different legitimation patterns (for an exception see Kailitz, 2013), despite the fact that 'even very coercive regimes cannot survive without some support' (Geddes, 1999b, p. 125). Only recently have studies examined authoritarian regimes' different legitimation strategies (Burnell, 2006; Kailitz, 2013).

Moreover, research on authoritarian regimes has tended to rely on general assumptions about autocrats' different claims to legitimacy that are insufficiently backed by systematic analyses. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, scholars have asserted that current-day authoritarian regimes have faced a fundamental 'crisis of ideology' (Linz, 2000, pp. 36–37), which, however, does not uniformly apply to all authoritarian regimes (see for example Holbig, 2013). Likewise, the claim that autocracies 'lack the procedures which link political decisions to citizens' preferences' and are thus 'structurally disadvantaged' to claim

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1304319.

procedure-based legitimacy (Croissant & Wurster, 2013, p. 7) could be oversimplified, particularly with respect to electoral authoritarian regimes (Schedler, 2006).

In order to address these gaps and to systematically study authoritarian legitimation strategies, we focus on regimes' claims to legitimacy as a domestic means – vis-à-vis the ruling elite, the general population and the opposition – of securing authoritarian rule. While studies examining the determinants of political support predominately address democracies (e.g. Almond & Verba, 1989; Booth & Seligson, 2009; Gilley, 2009; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Kaase & Newton, 1998), we are particularly interested in regimes that infringe upon civil liberties and political rights. We focus on legitimation as the *strategy used to seek legitimacy* rather than on legitimacy itself, thereby taking regimes' claims to legitimacy seriously. In doing so, we distinguish between six different legitimacy claims and present the results of a new Regime Legitimation Expert Survey (RLES) on non-democratic regimes in 98 countries worldwide between 1991 and 2010. It is the first survey of its kind to systematically assess and compare authoritarian regimes' legitimation strategies; previous accounts have predominantly been anecdotal or case-based.

Our analysis proceeds as follows: First, we outline the importance of claims to legitimacy for the study of authoritarian regimes and establish six different legitimacy claims. Building upon this discussion and the differentiation between types of authoritarian regimes, we investigate which regimes are more likely to use particular legitimation strategies. In the second section, we introduce the RLES and discuss its advantages compared to previous efforts at data collection, as well as the challenges it presents. We also outline our empirical strategy for assessing different authoritarian regimes' legitimation strategies. In the third section, we present the differences in the use of identity- and procedure-based legitimation strategies across closed and electoral authoritarian regimes, before discussing the implications of our results for further research in the conclusion.

Conceptual considerations

A regime's claim to legitimacy is important for explaining its means of rule and, in turn, its durability (Brady, 2009; Easton, 1965), because relying on repression alone is too costly as a means of sustaining authoritarian rule. In the tradition of Weber (1980), who introduced an empirical concept of legitimacy, we adopt an understanding of legitimation that refers to the process of gaining support. We conceptually distinguish claims to legitimacy 'made by virtually every state in the modern era' about their 'righteous' political and social order (Gilley, 2009, p. 10) from legitimacy itself, understood as 'the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society' (Lipset, 1959, p. 86). In contrast to much of the existing literature, which focuses on the popularity enjoyed by a regime (e.g. Dimitrov, 2009), we analyse the different foundations upon which various regimes claim legitimacy. Hence, we focus on the 'supply side' of legitimacy (von Haldenwang, this issue). For us, legitimation strategies or, in other words, claims to legitimacy[2] can be both instrumental manipulations to safeguard political power or genuinely held beliefs among the political elite. They are thus of strategic value and may also express elite members' true convictions about their perceived entitlement to rule.

Such claims have fundamental political repercussions as regards elite cohesion, regime popularity, and opposition activity. First, strong claims to legitimacy enhance elite cohesion (Barker, 2001; Krastev, 2011; LeBas, 2011). The more pronounced the process of legitimation, the more likely it is to create collective identification, which in turn increases bonds among the ruling elite (Cummings, 2006). Second, well-crafted claims to legitimacy make it more likely that an authoritarian regime will successfully steer the broader population's perceptions of legitimacy (Case, 1995, p. 104). Third, the respective legitimation strategies determine who can criticize the regime and in which ways (Alagappa, 1995, p. 4). This agenda-restricting function may serve to marginalize anti-government actors (Thompson, 2001). Claims to legitimacy hence enable a regime to maintain its entitlement to rule, particularly when facing periods of economic decline (e.g. Huntington, 1968; Magaloni, 2008, pp. 151–174). They therefore shape the way in which a regime implements its rule, and ultimately its susceptibility to internal crises and external pressure (Beetham, 1991, p. 103). The relationship between legitimacy claims and elite cohesion, opposition activity and a regime's popularity among the general population highlights the different audiences of such claims. Following Case (1995), the survey focuses on central legitimacy claims directed at a national audience.

Six claims to legitimacy

Many studies of legitimation strategies have underlined the concept's multidimensional nature (Alagappa, 1995; Burnell, 2006; Mayer, 2001). Based on two central heuristics by Easton (1965, 1975) and Weber (2004) as well as incorporating current research on the importance of international aspects of authoritarian rule (Burnell, 2006), we differentiate between six dimensions on which an authoritarian legitimation strategy can rest. Following Easton (1965, 1975), legitimacy claims can be output- and identity-based. We characterize the former as performance-based legitimacy claims, meaning a regime's claim of being successful at producing socio-economic goods or security for its citizens. In contrast, several dimensions can be subsumed under the notion of identity-based claims (see Table 1). In line with leading scholars (Alagappa, 1995; Burnell, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2013), we conceptualize a regime's foundational myth and its ideological claims, which stress the prospective societal order, the transcendental nature of the regime or simply the superiority of a nation as key identity-based elements. As the third identity-based element, we combine Weber's notion of charisma (the personal appeal of the ruler) and traditional authority (hereditary succession) into what we call personalism-based legitimacy claims that focus on the person of the ruler. In addition, we subsume Weber's third ideal type, rational-legal authority, under the procedural[3] dimension. Finally, recent studies highlight that a regime may also refer to its international engagement as part of domestic legitimacy claims (Kneuer, 2013; Schatz, 2006).

These six dimensions (see Table 1) represent interlinked but functionally different mechanisms. Real-world cases are typically characterized by 'highly complex variations, transitional forms and combinations of these pure types' (Weber, 2004, p. 34) and a single legitimation resource is rarely adequate in itself to ensure a regime's survival (Alagappa, 1995, p. 50). Invoking different dimensions at the same time strengthens the overall legitimacy claim, also because some dimensions may work as functional

Table 1. Six claims to legitimacy.

Types of claims
Identity-based:
(1) Foundational myth
(2) Ideology
(3) Personalism
(4) Procedures
(5) Performance
(6) International engagement

equivalents, thereby offsetting weaknesses in respect to other dimensions (Brusis, 2015). In the following, we introduce the six dimensions in more detail.

Foundational myth: Incumbents, ruling elites, and parties all refer to their role in the state-building process in order to legitimate their rule: 'historical accounts are significant and contentious precisely because of their relationship to the legitimacy of power in the present' (Beetham, 1991, p. 103). Particularly strong solidarity ties are established during periods of violent struggle such as war, revolutions, and liberation movements (Levitsky & Way, 2013, p. 5), which are often used as powerful legitimation narratives. Moreover, parties that emerge from a successful national liberation struggle often claim an entitlement to steer the country's future based on past achievements and a fusion of the (former) liberation movement and the state (Clapham, 2012; Schedler, 2013, p. 227). Hence, this dimension does not simply focus on the fact that the politicians or parties were involved in the establishment of a polity but their recurrent and prominent reference to it in order to boost their domestic legitimacy. Former liberation movements in Africa have, for instance, strongly invoked this foundational myth (Schatzberg, 2001).

Ideology: In line with Easton (1975), we understand ideology-based legitimacy claims as narratives regarding the righteousness of a given political order. In this sense, ideology denotes a belief system intended to create a collective identity and, in some cases, a specific societal order (Linz, 2000). The main point from this paper's perspective is not a specific content of the ideology invoked, but the regime's teleological proclamation of an 'official' belief system against which all political behaviour is assessed. This ideology can comprise 'macro' or 'micro' claims and also encompasses narratives other than grand ideologies such as communism. Ideological claims, as understood here, may therefore include references to nationalism and religion. Post-independence regimes often rely strongly on nationalism as a legitimation strategy (Linz, 2000, p. 227). Likewise, nationalism can be particularly pronounced following a change of government, with the new leadership seeking to strengthen national consciousness (Krastev, 2011). Religion (Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004; Wintrobe & Ferrero, 2009) is regularly discussed as a major source of legitimacy claims, also in conjunction with nationalism (Mansfield & Snyder, 1995; Razi, 1990).

Personalism: Authoritarian regimes frequently focus on the person of the ruler to boost their appeal among both the population and the political elite. Personalism comprises two aspects: Weber (1980, pp. 133–136) refers to charismatic authority as an important source of legitimacy, which stems from the 'extraordinary personality' and leadership qualities of an individual. Charismatic leaders portray themselves as chosen 'from above' to fulfil a certain mission (Fagen, 1965, pp. 275–277) and as having traditional authority through hereditary succession (Brownlee, 2007; Herb, 1999). Personalism-based claims may also

represent a discursive mechanism that emphasizes the ruler's centrality to certain achievements such as the nation's unity, prosperity, and stability (Isaacs, 2010; Nelson, 1984).

Procedures: Attempts to create procedural legitimacy can be based on the carrying out of elections and other rule-based mechanisms for handing over power through 'orderly' process, be it nominally democratic through elections, hereditary power transfer (Yom & Gause, 2012), within a ruling party or based on mechanisms for the implementation of policies. This applies to more than just democracies. Bureaucratic–military authoritarian regimes, for example, go to considerable lengths to operate within a legalistic framework despite the many arbitrary elements in their exercise of authority (Linz, 2000, p. 186).

Performance: Our take on performance-related narratives is based on Easton's (1965) notion of specific support, which refers to regime legitimacy that stems from success in satisfying citizens' needs. We hence focus on the extent to which the regime either deliberately cites its achievements in fulfilling societal demands such as material welfare and security or, alternately, employs claims of achievements in the absence of real improvements (see Dimitrov, 2009 on economic populism). Hence, different components can comprise the notion of 'performance', among them the claim that the state organizes equal redistribution and access to certain public goods, such as healthcare and education (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015), as well as the presentation of a regime as a guarantor of stability, territorial integrity or state building after a civil war (Radnitz, 2012). Instead of, as is common practice, using proxies such as economic growth, inflation, and unemployment to measure a regime's performance-based support we ask to what extent a regime explicitly invokes such performance-related claims.

International engagement: Lastly, autocrats also use international engagement to bolster their domestic legitimation narrative. This has hardly been considered in a systematic fashion by the extant research on authoritarian attempts to gain legitimacy. In contrast to 'external legitimacy', i.e. recognition from other states (Burnell, 2006; Jackson & Rosberg, 1982), we focus on the extent to which a regime refers to its international role in order to legitimate its rule *domestically*. Disproportionate international engagement – for instance, in international negotiations or regional organizations but also in providing global public goods and acting as an ideological 'model exporter', as in the case of Venezuela or Iran (von Soest, 2015; Whitehead, 2015) – may serve to strengthen the legitimation of regimes, especially those that can hardly draw on domestic sources of legitimation (Schatz, 2006). Using the term 'externalization', Dzhuraev (2012, p. 2) describes how political leaders leverage their country's role in international arenas 'as tools in manufacturing domestic legitimation' (see also Koesel & Bunce, 2013). Furthermore, the need to defend the country against an external enemy can also be used to claim domestic legitimacy.

Different forms of authoritarianism and their claims to legitimacy

Authoritarianism is structured in various ways. Indeed, '[d]ifferent kinds of authoritarianism differ from each other as much as they differ from democracy' (Geddes, 1999a, p. 6). Our principal expectation is that the different types of authoritarianism also vary in a systematic fashion in their claims to legitimacy. Most important in this regard is the established differentiation between closed and electoral forms of authoritarianism. As we are interested in the difference between electoral and non-electoral forms of authoritarianism,

we refrain from using Geddes, Wright, and Frantz's (2014) well-known differentiation between personalist, military and party regimes.

While electoral authoritarian regimes are characterized by the existence of the nominally democratic institution of elections and – at least formally – allow open political contestation, closed regimes, for instance single-party regimes, forestall this public political contest. This does not mean, however, that there is no competition within dominating institutions in closed authoritarian regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Unlike closed authoritarian regimes, electoral authoritarianism in principle opens up political positions of executive and legislative power to elections. The institution of elections fundamentally changes how rulers relate to society and how they claim legitimacy. 'By establishing multiparty elections for highest office, electoral authoritarian regimes institute the principle of popular consent – even as they subvert it in practice' (Schedler, 2013, p. 121). Even if the elections are fraudulent, these authoritarian regimes allow citizens a stronger oversight than their closed counterparts. It can be assumed that electoral authoritarian regimes use the institution of elections as a key resource to strengthen their claim to legitimacy. We therefore expect that they focus more strongly on procedural claims to legitimacy than closed authoritarian regimes (expectation 1).

With their 'contradictory mix of democratic procedures and authoritarian practices' (Schedler, 2013, p. 78), electoral authoritarian regimes occupy the middle ground between closed authoritarianism on the one hand and liberal democracy on the other (Morse, 2011, p. 164). If we focus on the level of openness and electoral competitiveness, the broad category of electoral authoritarianism can be further differentiated into hegemonic and competitive authoritarianism (Howard & Roessler, 2006; similarly Hyde & Marinov, 2012). The main focus herein lies on the strength of the opposition (Levitsky & Way, 2010). These categories, as well as the thresholds separating them, are disputed (e.g. Bogaards, 2009; Morse, 2011; Munck, 2006; Snyder, 2006). The most important aspect for this paper, however, is that electoral contestation is much more central in competitive than in hegemonic authoritarianism.

Both hegemonic and competitive authoritarian regimes hold regular elections under non-democratic conditions. Yet in the former category, any opposition activity is severely constrained due to the widespread intimidation of the opposition and severe electoral fraud. In these cases, elections are hardly more than an authoritarian façade (Diamond, 2002, p. 29; Schedler, 2002, p. 38). As a result, the dominant candidate or party wins the elections by wide margins (Simpser, 2013). In contrast, competitive authoritarian regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010, 2002)[4] allow for regular elections with more meaningful competition, even if the incumbent manages to create an 'uneven playing field between government and opposition' (Levitsky & Way, 2002, p. 53).

As a final point of reference, so-called electoral democracies come closest to liberal democracies, where the electoral process is free and contestation is not restricted in any meaningful way.[5] The boundaries between electoral, imperfect democracy and electoral authoritarianism are contested (Bogaards, 2009; Schedler, 2002). Most fundamentally, and in contrast to electoral authoritarian regimes, electoral democracies conduct free and fair elections. Deficiencies can be found with respect 'to checks and balances, bureaucratic integrity, and impartial judiciary' (Schedler, 2002, p. 37). Rulers in electoral democracies might therefore have the fewest problems in claiming that the procedural mechanisms

are fair. On the other hand, due to the existing deficiencies in their political processes, electoral democracies cannot be considered liberal democratic.[6]

In sum, hegemonic authoritarian regimes, competitive authoritarian regimes and electoral democracies can all be considered not (fully) democratic, but they vary with respect to the quality of their electoral processes, which should systematically influence the propensity to invoke certain claims to legitimacy. Accordingly, we expect competitive authoritarian regimes and electoral democracies to make stronger procedural legitimacy claims than hegemonic authoritarian regimes (expectation 2).

In contrast, closed authoritarian regimes attempt to preclude any opposition (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 7). Closed authoritarian regimes can therefore be defined as those 'in which a country's leaders are not selected through national elections, opposition political parties remain banned, political control is maintained through the use of repression, and there is little space for a free media and civil society' (Howard & Roessler, 2006, p. 367). (For a sub-differentiation of the institutionally 'heterogeneous' category of closed authoritarian regimes see Cassani, this issue). This also has implications for the regimes' legitimation strategies, as procedural claims should be less central for closed authoritarian regimes (Dukalskis, 2017, provides an analysis of legitimacy claims in the three closed authoritarian regimes China, Myanmar, and North Korea). Having said that, studies of paradigmatic cases demonstrate the importance of ideology – for instance, in contemporary China, where 'ideology still plays an indispensable role in the quest to legitimise authoritarian rule' (Holbig, 2013, p. 61). In addition, authors have repeatedly stressed that ideological foundations and references to the genesis of a – frequently new – nation and to a heroic 'father of the nation' remain particularly salient for those regimes that attempt to inhibit every opposition (Dimitrov, 2013; Levitsky & Way, 2013; Mayer, 2001). Hence, we assume that closed authoritarian regimes rely more on identity-based claims than do other types of non-democratic regimes (expectation 3).

Finally, according to various authors, all political systems, and authoritarian regimes in particular, need output legitimacy (material welfare, law and order, external security) to successfully claim their right to rule (Lipset, 1959; Miller, 2015; e.g. Przeworski & Limongi, 1993; most strongly Rothstein, 2009). This implies that rulers attempt to strengthen the belief in the economic, distributional and security performance of their regime (Easton, 1965). In short, according to Rothstein (2009, p. 313), 'legitimacy is created, maintained, and destroyed not by the input but by the output side of the political system'. Thus, we anticipate performance-based claims to legitimacy to be important for all authoritarian regimes (expectation 4).

Data and research design: the regime legitimation expert survey

Expert judgements can be a powerful tool for bridging informational gaps (Schedler, 2012). First, they allow for the collection of comparable data across a wide range of countries (Saiegh, 2009). Moreover, other ways of obtaining systematic information on legitimation strategies, such as direct elite surveys or opinion polls, are hardly feasible in authoritarian contexts (Bunce & Wolchik, 2010; Gerschewski, 2013). Accordingly, an expert survey is arguably an appropriate means to gather data on the claims to legitimacy made by non-democratic regimes worldwide and to complement existing case-specific literature.

For the survey, we contacted approximately 800 leading country experts. They were selected on the basis of their publication records,[7] their local expertise and their prior work for high-quality country-based indices such as the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), research institutes such as the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA) and high-profile think tanks including Chatham House. In other words, a theoretical sampling technique, also referred to as purposive non-randomized sampling, was applied (Goldstein, 2002; Tansey, 2007, p. 770); this was supplemented by snowballing based on previously contacted experts' recommendations. Two-hundred and seventy-six online questionnaires were completed for a total of 98 countries, amounting to a response rate of 34 per cent, which is fully in line with that of other expert surveys (e.g. Huber & Inglehart, 1995; Staats, Bowler, & Hiskey, 2008).[8] As potential memory biases make it unadvisable to rely on judgements regarding issues that took place too far in the past (Gervasoni, 2010), we collected expert assessments of the most recent non-democratic regime in the period 1991–2010 (see Online Appendix A for the regime spells) in countries with a population of more than one million. To determine whether or not a regime was democratic, we followed Wahman, Teorell, and Hadenius (2013). They use a combined Freedom House and Polity IV measure to compensate for the individual shortcomings of the two indices (Hadenius & Teorell, 2005). According to the most current classification, a country is regarded as non-democratic in a certain year if its score is lower than seven on their 10-point index (Wahman et al., 2013).[9]

The survey comprised questions covering the strength of a regime's six legitimation strategies, as introduced above, and the overall legitimation narrative based on a six-point scale ranging from zero to five (see Online Appendix B); in addition, it was possible to write comments. Moreover, a question on the respondent's level of confidence regarding their answers was included. Each country assessment is based on at least two expert responses with a minimum confidence level of three on a scale from zero to five, with five indicating the highest level of confidence.[10] More than 50 per cent of the country values build on three assessments or more. Larger expert surveys in the field, such as the Varieties of Democracy project (Coppedge, Gerring, & Lindberg, 2012), work with a minimum of five country experts, but we are convinced that the RLES, the first survey of its kind, provides solid information on the legitimation strategies of current authoritarian regimes worldwide.

Despite the strengths of expert surveys, this method also involves challenges with respect to reliability, validity and transparency. In the following, we demonstrate how we have addressed these potential shortcomings. First, the reliability of expert assessments can be problematic due to information collection challenges and the inability of experts to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information (Bollen & Paxton, 2000). In the RLES, this difficulty is mitigated because the experts assess the regimes' legitimacy claims on the basis of their own empirical research. In addition, our careful selection of experts, which was based not only on their general country expertise but also on their knowledge in our specific area of interest, minimized this threat to reliability (see also Schedler, 2012). According to Hooghe et al. (2010), such familiarity with the topic strongly increases the reliability of expert assessments. Another potential reliability problem is represented by reporting asymmetries, which arise if experts are asked to evaluate phenomena across different countries including those they know less (Saiegh, 2009). Following the approach developed by the BTI, the RLES minimizes this pitfall by including assessments

from experts based inside and outside the evaluated country. Their assessments are largely identical (see Table 2).

The reliability of a survey is a necessary but not sufficient condition for its validity (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994, p. 25). The validity can be undermined by random and systematic errors, with systematic errors being particularly problematic (Marks, Hooghe, Steenbergen, & Bakker, 2007; McDonald, Mendes, & Kim, 2007). They arise when misperceptions are replicated by various experts in a similar fashion. For instance, experts may mix up claims to legitimacy and the acceptance of these claims, which is a frequent problem of most legitimacy research. Similarly, they may confound a regime's rhetoric and its behaviour in their assessments (Marks et al., 2007). However, our focus on *claims to legitimacy* was clearly stated in the survey questions, and the pre-test as well as the experts' comments indicated that the experts indeed focused on authoritarian regimes' *claims* to legitimacy.

We cannot entirely eliminate the risk that the experts' assessments regarding the strength of the different claims to legitimacy were influenced by a regime's duration. Experts might have ascribed stronger legitimation strategies to long-lasting regimes. As previously noted, the RLES survey addresses the legitimation strategies pursued by each country's most recent authoritarian regime. This period was conveyed to the experts on the basis of the data set by Wahman et al. (2013), but adjusted based on country-specific literature. However, the fact that the relatively short-lived regimes in, for example, Thailand, Haiti, Turkey before Erdoğan, and Bhutan were described as making strong claims to legitimacy with respect to three or more dimensions whereas long-lasting regimes such as Azerbaijan were characterized as only making weak claims to legitimacy suggests that experts were clearly able to differentiate between a regime's duration and the strength of its respective claims to legitimacy.

Finally, a review of the survey's external validity through a comparison with similar data sets was not possible (Bollen & Paxton, 2000) because the RLES is the first expert survey of its kind to focus on the legitimacy claims of non-democratic regimes. Therefore, we describe the procedure for conducting this exploratory expert survey in a particularly transparent manner. In addition to providing information on the number of experts, their selection and their response rates, we also report on their confidence levels in Online Appendix A.

As outlined above, we differentiate between four groups of non-democratic regimes according to their openness and level of electoral contestation. Closed authoritarian regimes are the most repressive, leave 'little space for a free media and civil society' and, most importantly, do not hold national elections (Howard & Roessler, 2006, p. 367). Accordingly, we have assessed, based on the National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) data set (Hyde & Marinov, 2012) and country-specific literature,

Table 2. Comparability of expert assessments.

Dimension	Average RLES value	Average RLES value without experts from the regions
Foundational myth	2.95	2.98
Ideology	2.76	2.77
Personalism	2.82	2.73
Procedures	3.53	3.53
Performance	3.43	3.41
International engagement	2.05	2.00

whether national elections take place and whether they serve to select the head of state or government.

Following Roessler and Howard (2009, p. 112), our operationalization takes into account the regime's Freedom House (FH) and Polity IV values and the winner's share of votes or seats in the previous election, which we assess on the basis of the Database of Political Institutions (DPI) (World Bank, 2012). More precisely, hegemonic authoritarian regimes are defined by an FH value of more than two or a Polity IV score of less than six and the election winner receiving 70 per cent or more (Howard & Roessler, 2006, p. 368),[11] whereas competitive authoritarian regimes are characterized by the same FH or Polity IV scores, with the incumbent receiving less than 70 per cent in national elections. Finally, electoral democracies hold elections that are generally free and fair, but pluralism, freedom and the rule of law are not fully guaranteed. Put differently, these regimes have an FH value of at least two or a Polity IV score of six or higher (see Table 3).[12] As a robustness check, we have controlled the results for this differentiation between types of authoritarianism with four groups of authoritarian regimes that are based simply on their combined FH and Polity IV scores (Hadenius & Teorell, 2007; Wahman et al., 2013, see Online Appendix D).

Results: the importance of identity, procedures and performance

Before disentangling the diverging legitimation strategies of non-democratic regimes, we report on the averaged RLES expert assessments regarding the six different dimensions across all countries to shed light on their relative importance on a global scale (see Table 4 below). Two legitimation strategies are invoked most strongly: the average for procedure- and performance-based claims to legitimacy is 3.46 and 3.36, respectively, on a scale from zero to five.[13] In contrast, most non-democratic regimes appear not to stress their international engagement in a pronounced fashion, something which is illustrated by an average of 1.96 across all countries. The identity-based strategies emphasizing a regime's foundational myth, ideology or the leader's extraordinary charisma and capabilities are applied neither in an extraordinarily pronounced nor a particularly weak fashion, with average assessments of 3.01, 2.77, and 2.84. Hence, ideology has not lost its importance as a source of legitimacy since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Dimitrov, 2013; Holbig, 2013; Mayer, 2001) but it does not constitute the single most important cornerstone either.

In order to move beyond the average values and to provide a more nuanced, yet still descriptive, picture of the legitimation strategies employed by different regimes with democratic deficits, we combine the assessments and comments provided by the survey experts[14] with insights from the secondary literature. A multivariate analysis

Table 3. Operationalizing authoritarian regimes.

Regime type	Measurement criteria
Closed authoritarianism	No multi-candidate national elections for selection of executive
Hegemonic authoritarianism	FH $\geq$ 2 and Polity IV < 6 and winner received $\geq$ 70% of the vote or seats in previous elections
Competitive authoritarianism	FH $\geq$ 2 and Polity IV < 6 and winner received < 70% of the vote or seats in previous elections
Electoral democracy	FH < 2 or Polity $\geq$ 6

Source: Adapted from Roessler and Howard (2009, p. 112).

Table 4. Average importance of legitimation dimensions.

	Foundational myth	Ideology	Personalism	Procedures	Performance	International engagement
Average RLES assessment	3.01	2.77	2.84	3.46	3.36	1.96

incorporating further factors might be conducted in the future. As our first finding, the explorative analysis suggests that the focus on procedure-based legitimation strategies is fundamentally stronger in electoral authoritarian than in closed authoritarian regimes (expectation 1) (see Table 5). In this context, it is important to stress that the experts clearly distinguished (a) between claims and their acceptance as well as (b) between preconditions – such as the mere existence of regular elections – and the extent to which these were incorporated into a regime's legitimation strategy. First insights drawn from the RLES show that hegemonic and competitive authoritarian regimes not only possess key characteristics for claiming procedure-based legitimacy, as they regularly hold elections, but also take advantage of these preconditions in crafting their legitimation strategies. In Rwanda, for example, the regime referred to the 2001 local elections as an important step on its alleged road to democracy. More generally, the notion of consensual democracy has become a cornerstone of the party's legitimation strategy (Reyntjens, 2004). Hence, in a systematic manner, the RLES provides initial empirical evidence of Schedler's (2006, p. 13) proposition that, irrespective of electoral fraud, '[b]y opening the peaks of state power to multiparty elections, electoral authoritarian regimes establish the primacy of democratic legitimation'.

Second, the explorative analysis of the RLES demonstrates that competitive authoritarian regimes are characterized by an even more pronounced emphasis on procedural claims to legitimacy than hegemonic ones (expectation 2). For example, elections constituted the main reference point for claiming procedure-based legitimacy in Mexico during the rule of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (RLES), with some authors suggesting that they were in fact '*instituted* to bolster the [regime's] questionable legitimacy' (Solinger, 2001, p. 31 emphasis added). Hegemonic authoritarian regimes, in contrast, appear to leverage their procedure-related legitimacy claims more carefully because they – given the severe nature of democratic infringements – are aware of the pitfalls of such a legitimation strategy. One way of dealing with this challenge is to integrate procedure-based claims into a broader narrative. In Kazakhstan, where 'every move toward autocracy was covered by procedural mechanisms' (RLES), this narrative was underpinned by a wider discourse promoting a 'Kazakhstani way' of democratization.

Table 5. Different authoritarian regimes and legitimation strategies.

	Closed authoritarian	Hegemonic authoritarian	Competitive authoritarian	Electoral democracy
Foundational myth	3.65	3.18	2.59	2.84
Ideology	3.38	2.91	2.55	2.27
Personalism	3.14	3.41	2.70	2.15
Procedures	2.98	3.52	3.75	3.41
Performance	3.48	3.71	3.35	3.01
International engagement	2.17	2.50	1.79	1.45
N	22 regime spells	19 regime spells	37 regime spells	20 regime spells

Electoral democracies also refer to procedure-based legitimacy claims in a rather pronounced fashion, as Table 5 shows. In contrast to our expectations, however, their procedural legitimation strategies are – on average – slightly weaker than those of electoral authoritarian regimes. One explanation for this surprising outcome of the RLES could be that electoral democracies, which come closest to liberal democracies, do not stress their procedural credentials as much as competitive autocracies because these are questioned less extensively (see Bunce & Wolchik, 2010, p. 59 on the particular vulnerability of competitive authoritarian regimes). However, this aspect warrants further systematic research.

Third, we find tentative evidence that closed authoritarian regimes focus heavily on identity-based claims to legitimacy (expectation 3). For instance, North Korea's communist regime strongly invokes '[a]nti-Japanese, anti-US, 'anti-traitorous' South Koreans' sentiments as a foundational myth and propagates its 'Juche and 'military-first' ideology' (RLES). Moreover, its leaders Kim Il Sung (1948–1994), Kim Jong Il (1994–2011) and Kim Jong Un (since 2001) have always been central pillars of the regime's legitimation strategy. This combination of foundational myth, ideology and – to a lesser degree – personalism is also invoked by the Syrian regime. Its claim to legitimacy is directly linked to a foundational myth: the Ba'th revolution of 1963 and the Corrective Movement, i.e. Hafiz al-Assad's takeover of power to become president in 1970 (RLES). In terms of ideology, the ruling Ba'th Party has moved from promoting its own version of Arab socialism to a dominating 'anti-posture against Israeli and Western domination of the Middle East' (RLES). The omnipresent personality cult developed under Hafiz al-Assad in the 1980s and 1990s (Wedeen, 1999) was subsequently replaced by the – somewhat less central – portrayal of Bashar al-Assad as a 'more modern and somewhat more accessible leader' (RLES). This varying importance of personalism is also reflected by the survey, according to which personalism is actually invoked in a slightly more pronounced fashion by hegemonic rather than closed authoritarian regimes (see Table 5 above).

Finally, performance-based legitimation strategies seem to be particularly important for all authoritarian regimes (expectation 4). The 10 regimes with the most pronounced performance claims include closed, hegemonic and competitive authoritarian regimes as well as electoral democracies (see Online Appendix A). In other words, regimes as diverse as hegemonic Uzbekistan, the electoral democracy Malawi and the one-party regime in China have all focused strongly on their allegedly positive socio-economic and political performance in order to substantiate their rule (RLES). Again, real-world accomplishments in these areas make it easier for regimes to rely on this legitimation strategy, but 'successful economic performance can translate into claims for legitimacy only when the regime is framed as being in the pivotal role to having achieved this success' (RLES on China). Conversely, regimes do refer to their performance despite questionable records. Turkmenistan, for example, is presented as the only country in the world to provide its people with water and electricity free of charge, even though these services are rationed, i.e. not available on a regular basis (Schmitz, 2004, p. 74). Such output-based legitimation strategies are not limited to growth and development. Non-democratic regimes also ground their legitimation narratives in their performance with regard to securing *political* stability (Bunce & Wolchik, 2010, p. 61). Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, for instance, frame their countries as islands of stability and emphasize the regimes' abilities to secure peace and stability (RLES).

How authoritarian regimes systematically differ in their claims to legitimacy

In this article, we have conceptually differentiated claims to legitimacy from the broader and more commonly used notion of legitimacy. In addition, we have introduced a novel expert survey which we used to systematically assess whether different authoritarian regimes are particularly likely to rely on specific legitimation strategies. This systematic approach towards claims to legitimacy provides new insights into the – different – inner workings of authoritarian regimes.

Most fundamentally, closed authoritarian regimes, which constitute almost a quarter of the overall sample, rely predominantly on identity-based legitimation strategies – namely, references to the regime's ideology, its foundational myth and/or the person of the ruler – in constructing the mix of legitimation dimensions they draw on. This calls into question previous research suggesting that – with a few notorious exceptions such as China, North Korea and Vietnam – modern autocracies hardly claim ideology-based legitimacy (Croissant & Wurster, 2013, p. 7).[15] Second, the RLES corroborates the proposition that institutions, and most importantly elections, are more than window dressing for authoritarian regimes. In addition to serving as a key device for co-optation (e.g. Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006), the regular holding of elections also fundamentally affects the basis on which authoritarian regimes claim legitimacy. According to the survey, procedure-based legitimation strategies are particularly relevant for electoral authoritarian regimes. This finding underscores the value of systematically disaggregating non-democratic regimes with respect to their claims to legitimacy.

Third, the RLES supports and further specifies previous research on the importance of output legitimacy for authoritarian regimes (Croissant & Wurster, 2013). Without running into the problems that research on the performance of autocracies has encountered as a result of missing or imprecise data (Roller, 2001), the RLES results show that performance-related claims are of great importance to all authoritarian regimes. Effectively, this legitimation strategy displays the least variation in strength across the different authoritarian subtypes.

The explorative analysis of the expert survey on claims to legitimacy provides new insights into how rule is exercised in non-democratic regimes. For such regimes, claims of legitimacy are a double-edged sword: On the one hand, they enable the exercise of power. Yet on the other hand, they also restrain it, as such claims make a regime vulnerable when the disjuncture to reality becomes too stark and adjustment fails (Krastev, 2011). Procedure-based legitimacy claims, for example, may spur demands for real democratic change, because 'if leaders use the forms of democracy, publics come to expect the substance' (interview, cited in Bunce & Wolchik, 2010, p. 59). Whether and how claims to legitimacy are successfully adjusted to such real-world challenges should be explored further.

To be sure, claims to legitimacy related to identity, procedures and performance are clearly not the only means to safeguard authoritarian rule. In addition to making use of legitimation strategies, autocracies also rely on repression and co-optation to increase their chances of staying in power (inter alia Gerschewski, 2013; Wintrobe, 1998). While repression is costly, it has the potential to successfully contain regime-threatening protest (DeNardo, 1985; Koopmans, 1997). Moreover, many regimes seek to 'buy'

support – either from key constituencies or from broader segments of society (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, & Morrow, 2003; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006). How authoritarian regimes calibrate this mix of survival strategies could be assessed by systematic research in the future.

Notes

1. We use the terms authoritarian, non-democratic and autocratic interchangeably throughout this paper.
2. For better readability we use both terms interchangeably.
3. Compare Scharpf's (1997, 1999, chap. 1) understanding of *input* legitimacy as a core function of democratic legitimacy that focuses on institutional arrangements and governing processes. Relatedly, *throughput* legitimacy signifies the actual integration of people in decision-making processes (Schmidt, 2013). We refer to such claims to legitimacy as procedure-based (Beetham, 1991).
4. To be sure, Levitsky and Way (2010, p. 16) prefer the concept of competitive authoritarianism to the broader notion of electoral authoritarianism. Schedler (2002, p. 47) himself subsumes 'competitive' and 'hegemonic' authoritarian regimes under the broad category of electoral authoritarianism.
5. For want of a better term, we follow the terminology used by Diamond (2002), Howard and Roessler (2006) and Freedom House. As Diamond (2002, p. 22) affirms, these electoral regimes 'fail to meet the substantive test', particularly when it comes to safeguarding civil liberties.
6. The Wahman et al. (2013) data set, used in this paper to separate authoritarian from liberal democratic regimes, is also based on a broad understanding of authoritarianism and a high threshold for liberal democratic regimes (they use a combined measure of Freedom House and Polity IV).
7. For the identification of country experts based on their prior publication record with respect to the countries and issue in question, we relied on the leading comparative politics journals, including *Comparative Politics*, the *Journal of Democracy*, and *Democratization*. In addition, we also searched the key area studies journals for each region.
8. We very much appreciate the invaluable responses of these experts as well as their extensive and extremely helpful comments.
9. In earlier versions, Hadenius and Teorell (2005, 2007) used a 7.5-point threshold.
10. The only exception is Singapore.
11. We work with the original thresholds of 2 and 6; in their 2009 version (Roessler & Howard, 2009), Howard and Roessler used thresholds of 3 and 5.
12. In contrast to Howard and Roessler, who examine authoritarian elections, our unit of analysis is the regime spell. For details on all regime spells, see Online Appendix C.
13. The three dimensions are significantly correlated at $p = 0.01$ as follows: foundational myth–ideology = 0,643380711, foundational myth–personalism = 0,410285827, ideology–personalism = 0,360149604.
14. Only verbatim quotes and major points of information from the survey are explicitly referred to as coming from the RLES. Due to the assessments' sensitive nature, the list of experts cannot be made publicly available. Many experts only participated because their anonymity was guaranteed.
15. Note again that we use a broad understanding of ideology.

Acknowledgements

Reverse alphabetical order, both authors contributed equally. We would like to thank André Bank, Alexander Dukalskis, Johannes Gerschewski, Maria Josua and the participants of the 2016 ECPR

Joint Sessions workshop 'Legitimation in Non-Democracies: Concepts, Theories and Empirical Evidence across Regime Subtypes' in Pisa for their valuable comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung [grant number: 10.11.1.155].

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