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The Washington Quarterly
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwaq20

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Published online: 12 Mar 2014.

To cite this article: Andrea Kendall--Taylor & Erica Frantz (2014) How Autocracies Fall, The Washington Quarterly, 37:1, 35-47, DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2014.893172

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.893172

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Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz

How Autocracies Fall

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Because autocrats can rarely be voted out of power, most find themselves exiting office in far less conventional ways. Since the 1950s, the coup d'état—or the illegal seizure of power by the military—has been by far the most common.[1] During the 1960s and '70s, for example, about half of all autocrats who lost power did so through a coup. But fast-forward to the 2010s, and a different picture is emerging. The chain of protests during the Arab Awakening, which toppled four of the world's longest-standing rulers—Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen—led many political observers to rejoice in the masses' ability to unseat autocratic strongmen. But are these revolts evidence that autocrats are becoming increasingly vulnerable to the masses? Or are they short-term exceptions to a longer-standing rule of autocratic ouster?

Understanding how dictators tend to exit office is important for two reasons. First, by paying attention to how autocrats are likely to lose power—something dictators are surely attuned to—political observers can better foresee the tactics that autocrats and their surrounding elites are likely to employ to prolong their tenures. It also enables analysts to anticipate the consequences of these tactics for policy. Given that there are currently about 65 authoritarian regimes in power, governing almost 40 percent of the world's population, understanding these dynamics is significant for those involved in foreign policy.[2]

Second, the manner in which leaders exit office affects the political trajectory of the country once the leader has been deposed. There is a common assumption among political observers that when a longstanding autocrat falls, democracy will result. This assumption likely underpinned much

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The Washington Quarterly • 37:1 pp. 35–47
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.893172

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How leaders exit office affects the future political trajectory of the country.

of the initial optimism in the wake of the Arab Spring. A closer look at the data shows, however, that when dictators fall, they are most often replaced by new dictators. Only 20 percent of autocratic leader exits from 1950–2012 led to democracy. That being said, their mode of exit—whether via mass revolt or orchestration by regime insiders, for example—can tell us a great deal about the prospects for democratization post-ouster.

In this paper, we utilize recently updated data on authoritarian leaders to conclude that this is a new trend in authoritarian politics—autocrats are increasingly vulnerable to mass-led revolts and decreasingly susceptible to coups. Although a handful of studies have noted that coups have become less frequent since the end of the Cold War, particularly in Africa, no study to date has identified what modes of exit have replaced them.[3] We find that while most dictators still exit office as a result of actions or decisions of regime insiders—including coups, term limits, resignations, or the consensus of regime insiders in a politburo or military junta—revolts now unseat a greater proportion of autocrars than coups, marking a pronounced rise in the importance of mass politics for the survival of dictators.

No study, until now, has identified what modes of authoritarian exit have replaced coups.

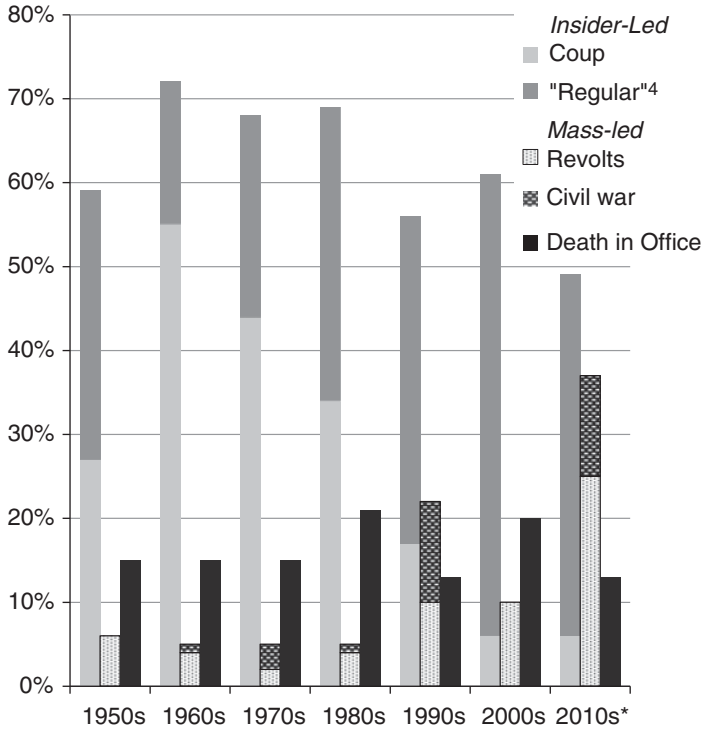
In addition, though mass overthrows occur less frequently than insider-led ousters do, mass overthrows tend to have far-reaching consequences when they do occur. Revolts are among the most likely mode of leader exit to sweep away not only the autocrat, but also the entire political regime (i.e., the leadership group and their imposed system of rules) and are more likely to result in democratization. Should these trends continue, the data suggest that autocratic survival is becoming increasingly complex as dictators have to contend not only with threats emanating from the elite, but increasingly from the people they govern.

The Demise and Rise of Coups and Revolts

There are three general ways that autocrats leave office. First, they can be removed due to actions and decisions of regime insiders, including coups. Second, dictators can be forced out of office amid mass mobilization, including revolts and civil wars. Finally, autocrats leave office due to death from natural causes.

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Figure 1. How Autocrats Exit



Graph created by authors using data compiled from Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
*2010–2012

Between 1950 and 2012, there have been 473 autocratic leaders who have lost power. Figure 1 shows the overall trend, by decade, of each type of ouster, divided into insider-led (coup and other or "regular"[4]), outsider-led (revolt and civil war), and death in office.

As the information shows, *most* of these departures have been insider-led, with the coup d'état being one of the most prevalent modes of exit, encompassing roughly one-third (153) of all ousters since 1950. Coups are frequently carried out by senior military officers who are part of the regime's inner circle or disgruntled junior officers affiliated with the regime by virtue of their ties to the military apparatus. In Mali, for example, President Traore, the leader of that country for 23 years, was unseated in 1991 in a coup led by the commander of his presidential guard. While in Benin, a coup led by junior officers deposed General Soglo in 1967.

Regime insiders can also orchestrate the departure of autocratic leaders without the threat or use of force. These "regular" leader failures include

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elections in which incumbents lose, enforced term limits, resignations, and consensus decisions of regime actors such as a politburo or military junta.[5] Each of these modes of departure requires that elites are capable of constraining the decisions and behavior of leaders. When autocrats lose office via an election, for example, regime insiders must have agreed to hold elections that were free and fair enough for an incumbent to actually lose. Regular leadership failures make up about another third of all autocratic leadership transitions and have *increased* in frequency since the end of the Cold War. The rise in regular exits largely reflects the prominence of dominant-party regimes—those regimes in which a political party maintains substantial control over policy, leadership selection, and the security apparatus, as in Communist regimes such as China or Vietnam, or places like Mexico under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

The frequency of insider-led leader failures through coups and regular exits has led many scholars to conclude that the key threat to a dictator's survival comes not from the masses, but from within an autocrat's corps of elite supporters.[6] This realization, which has gained prominence in the last decade, has sparked an explosion of research on the importance of elite actors in understanding autocratic survival.[7] It has overwhelmingly found that looking at the nature of relationships between leaders and regime insiders is vital to understanding how autocrats will behave and the types of policies they will pursue, both when under duress and in more normal times.[8]

Take, for example, the presence of legislatures and elections in some autocracies. Scholars have recently posited that, while these institutions can enhance the international and domestic legitimacy of a regime, the primary reason an autocrat creates legislatures or holds multi-party elections is to maintain the loyalty and co-opt the support of regime insiders.[9] For example, scholars argue that one way dictators use legislatures is to incorporate opponents into the regime by giving them a stake in its continuance.[10] Legislatures can also provide an arena through which dictators can offer potential rivals policy concessions and negotiate the terms of such deals. Through legislatures, dictators can promise the country's elite a share of the spoils of office in return for their loyalty, while elites can use the legislature as a means of monitoring the dictator, and ensuring he is upholding his end of the bargain in a power-sharing arrangement.[11] The primary intended target of these institutions, in other words, is not the masses or the international community, but elite insiders.

While the autocratic survival literature has emphasized the ways autocrats bargain with regime insiders to lower the risk of ouster, the way that threats from mass revolt affect the decisions and policies of autocrats has received less attention.[12] Part of the reason is the infrequency with which mass discontent has historically translated into the ability of citizens to unseat autocrats. From 1950–2012, only 7 percent of autocratic leaders were deposed through revolt.

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Examples of such ousters include the Shah of Iran in 1979, President Ratsiraka in Madagascar in 1993, President Suharto in Indonesia in 1998, and President Bakiyev in Kyrgyzstan in 2010.

But as Figure 1 shows, the relative predominance of leader exits precipitated by the masses has increased since the 1990s. In the 1960s and 70s (see Figure 1), almost 50 percent of all autocrats who lost office did so via coup. That number has fallen to less than 10 percent in the last decade. Concurrently, revolts accompanied for fewer than 5 percent of all autocratic ousters in the 1960s and 70s, and have more than doubled since. From 2010–2012, in fact, a quarter of all dictators who fell did so amid revolts. That is not to say that all large-scale protests always lead to autocrat ouster. For example, protests following the Belarusian election in 2010, in Russia following Parliamentary elections in 2011, and in Algeria and Jordan on the heels of the Arab Spring demonstrate that dictators can often ride out such movements. Nonetheless, as the data suggest, popular revolts are posing a growing threat to autocratic leaders.

This change in the way that autocrats are leaving power should lead scholars and political observers alike to ask: Are autocracies in the midst of a shift to a new way of doing business? Are masses increasingly empowered, leaving dictators more vulnerable, and therefore more accountable, to their demands?

Why the Shift?

Several potential explanations may account for the decrease in the proportion of leaders ousted by coups and concurrent rise in those ousted amid revolts. First, changes in the geopolitical agendas of Western powers following the end of the Cold War led to a decline in the number of military dictatorships worldwide, largely due to the dramatic cuts in economic and political assistance given to many of these regimes (particularly in Latin America).[13] Military dictatorships made up 38 percent of all autocracies between 1940 and 1990, but now constitute less than 10 percent of today's autocracies.[14] This decline affects the frequency of coups because coups have been the primary means of leadership turnover in these regimes. Previous research has shown that military dictators face a substantially greater risk of being overthrown by a coup than other types of authoritarian rulers, such as personalist autocrats or dominant-party dictators. In military dictatorships, shared military membership makes it easier for regime elites to coordinate, which is necessary to orchestrate such a risky endeavor. Moreover, greater access to and control over the security apparatus makes it easier to execute a coup.[15]

Recent research has also suggested that the end of the Cold War increased Western commitment to defend democracy, for example by punishing those who attempt to bring down elected incumbents. Since 1997, an act of Congress has bound U.S. presidents to suspend foreign aid if a recipient country experiences a

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coup. The European Union made a similar commitment in 1991. Research contends that these post-Cold War policies have led to a decline in the frequency of coups by lowering the payoffs that would-be coup plotters expect to gain by seizing power.[16]

Missing from this story, however, is a discussion of the reasons why mass actions, namely revolts, have become a more prominent way to oust autocrats. Just as the post-Cold War increase in international pressure for democratization marked the decline of military dictatorships, so too did such pressure create conditions conducive to mass mobilization in autocracies. The end of the Cold War ushered in a number of new regimes that combine electoral competition with varying degrees of authoritarianism. Termed "hybrid regimes," "semi-democracies," or "competitive authoritarian regimes," these countries tolerate political competition, but skew the playing field heavily in the incumbents' favor. Relative to other autocracies, however, these regimes allow more political and civil liberties, which improves the ability of citizens to coordinate and mobilize. Scholars have long recognized that those places which blend elements of authoritarianism with characteristics of democracy are unstable.[17] And indeed, the modest political opening in some post-Cold War autocracies has enabled citizens and the political opposition to unseat a growing proportion of autocrats in places like Georgia in 2003 or Ukraine in 2004.

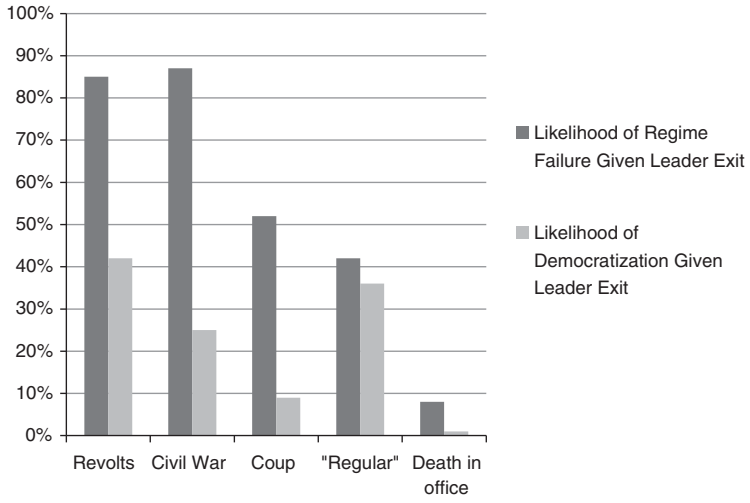
Finally, the rise of social media—a factor closely related to regime openness—has enabled publics to hold leaders more accountable paricularly since 2000. Revolts capable of bringing down a dictator are notoriously difficult to orchestrate. While coups require only a handful of individuals, revolts often entail the mobilization of thousands of citizens. Social media technologies reduce coordination costs, enable more citizens to make anti-regime preferences public, and widely publicize regime abuses that can serve as triggering events for widespread protest. This is not to say that access to social media is *causing* revolts. Indeed, such technologies may also be a tool that autocrats can use to maintain power—allowing dictators to track and target threatening opposition. Rather, access to social media opens up the possibility for people to make their discontent public, increasing the odds that others will join their cause, and, in conjunction with other methods such as radio or word of mouth, facilitate the organization of opposition movement events and increase their chances of success.

Implications for Democratization

The rise in the proportion of autocrafts exiting office amid protests and decrease in those ousted by coups is particularly important because the *way* a leader exits office influences the subsequent political trajectory of a country. Specifically, it affects both the likelihood that the regime falls with the leader, and the chances that democratization will ensue. To illustrate, the "color revolutions" that swept

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Figure 2. When Do Autocratic Regimes Change?



Graph created by authors using data compiled from Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

through the post-Soviet space in the early 2000s ushered in greater democracy in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine. Although some of those advances have been rolled back in places like Ukraine, these revolutions did—at least initially—improve the democratic credentials of those places. And while it is too early to tell whether stable democracy will take root following the departure of the leaders ousted by the Arab Spring, these ousters have at least opened the door for the emergence of new political elites, particularly in Tunisia and Libya.

Contrast these countries' political trajectories to those of places where autocrats are ousted via insiders. Roberto Viola, the president of Argentina during its military dictatorship, for example, was overthrown in a December 1981 coup by the Commander in Chief of the Army, Leopoldo Galtieri. Though Viola was tossed out, the regime itself persisted until 1983, when the military was forced to step down after its defeat in the Falklands War. Similarly in China, Xi Jinping's relatively seamless succession of Hu Jintao in 2012 did little more than change the top leadership post, as the inner circle of regime elite remains much the same.

As these examples suggest, when mass-led actions like revolts accompany autocratic leader ousters, the ramifications for the political system are much greater than when leaders exit via insider-led actions. As Figure 2 shows, in about 85 percent of cases in which leaders have fallen victim to a revolt, the political regime—or the main players and the rules they follow—has been swept away with them, typically ushering in a new way of doing business. In contrast, when coups oust leaders, the same general system persists about half the time—prompting some observers to compare this mode of leadership transition to votes

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of no confidence in parliamentary regimes.[18] Finally, when leaders exit via "regular" means such as resignations or term limits, the chances for substantial political change are even smaller. When an autocrat loses power via regular means, someone from the incumbent leadership replaces him, and the regime persists in 58 percent of cases.

The fact that revolts so commonly lead to wholesale regime change can partially be explained by the type of regime in which these events tend to occur. Leaders ousted amid protests historically have been most common in personalist regimes, such as Hussain Ershad in Bangladesh or Askar Akayev in Kyrgyzstan. In these regimes, leaders typically dismantle institutions that could constrain them or serve as power bases for challengers, and they tend to maintain a narrower base of support than leaders of other autocratic regime types. Therefore, when leaders of personalist dictatorships are removed, the relatively fragile underpinnings of their systems are likely to collapse. Insider-led exits, in contrast, occur most frequently in more institutionalized regimes, such as military and dominant-party regimes, where institutional arrangements designed to ensure power-sharing help the regime endure leader transitions.

Perhaps most importantly, the mode of leader exit can shape prospects for democratization. As mentioned above, the departure of an authoritarian leader infrequently results in democracy. However, the increasing frequency of revolts relative to coups bodes well for democratization. When leaders are toppled by revolts, democracy follows almost 45 percent of the time. Successful coups, in contrast, have historically ushered in democracy only 10 percent of the time. Interestingly, since the end of the Cold War, coups have become more likely to lead to democracy. More specifically, out of the 141 coups that occurred prior to the Cold War, only 9 (about 6 percent) resulted in democracy; from 1990 to 2012, of the 17 coups that occurred, 5 ushered in democracy. Although a greater proportion of coups have resulted in democracy, the prospects for democratization by coup in the post-Cold War period still remain relatively low at 30 percent.

When leaders are toppled by revolts, democracy follows almost 45 percent of the time.

It is also worth noting that when leaders die in office, the regime almost always remains intact, and democracy rarely follows. Of the 77 autocrats since 1950 who have died in office, democratization resulted in only one case (when Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan died in 1988). This provides potential insight into the most likely political trajectory of countries such as Venezuela. The death of Hugo Chavez in March 2013 gave rise to early optimism that Henrique Capriles could defeat Nicolas Maduro, Chavez's chosen successor, in

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subsequent elections, ushering in greater democracy. Consistent with past trends, however, Maduro and many of the elites who surrounded Chavez have maintained control and are taking steps to consolidate their dominance over the political system.

In sum, the ouster of autocratic leaders infrequently results in democracy, but the rise in the predominance of revolts relative to coups can be considered a good news story for the future of democracy. Although the citizens who put their lives at risk to protest would probably be surprised that their efforts to oust unwanted leaders in exchange for democracy are likely to succeed only about half the time the dictator is successfully ousted, this path remains one of the more promising means to such ends. The challenge lies in finding ways to increase those odds.

Harnessing the Power of the Masses

Recent scholarship has sought to identify factors that increase chances that revolts will topple leaders. Professor Erica Chenoweth and U.S. State Department strategic planner Maria Stephan, for example, find that the ability of movements to attract widespread and diverse participation, develop strategies that allow them to maneuver around repression, and provoke defections, loyalty shifts, or disobedience among regime elites and/or security forces are key to a movement's success.[19] Professors Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik highlight the importance of novel tactics, or what they term "the electoral model"—the opposition's use of sophisticated, intricately planned, and historically unprecedented strategies to support public protests demanding a change in leadership.[20]

However, as our data indicate, even when protest movements succeed in bringing down a leader—which in and of itself is no small feat—democracy is far from certain. If the trend we highlight here continues and revolts become an increasingly common mode of ousting autocrats, scholars and practitioners should devote greater resources to identifying factors that enable opposition leaders to harness the power of the masses in ways that can increase the odds that democracy will follow.

Greater resources should be devoted to identifying factors that enable democracy to follow revolts.

In the meantime, a handful of studies provide some initial guidance. Studies have recognized that the *extent of violence* that accompanies autocratic regime failure affects prospects for democratization.[21] The more violent the fall of the regime, the less likely democracy will follow.

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These studies suggest, for example, that prospects for democracy following the ouster of Ben Ali in Tunisia, where the level of violence was moderate, would be greater than in Libya or Yemen, where protests were more violent. Policies aimed at reducing the risk that protests are met with violence, therefore, should increase the prospects of democratization following revolts.

The more violent the fall of the regime, the less likely democracy will follow.

Other research has found that the extent of violence that accompanies a regime failure is influenced by two factors. First, a leader's expectation about his possible fate after leaving office is likely to affect how vigorously and violently he clings to power in the face of opposition, including protests.[22] Leaders who expect to be killed or imprisoned, for example, are more likely to respond to protests with violence than those who can expect to retire peacefully. Offering a safe exit to those dictators at risk of a costly post-exit fate, therefore, should increase the prospects of a peaceful exit and thus democratization following revolts.

Second, as Professor Eva Bellin argues, policies that promote the "institutionalization" of a country's security apparatus decrease the chances of violent responses to protests.[23] An institutionalized coercive apparatus is one that is rule-governed, with established paths of career advancement and recruitment, and where promotion is based on performance, not politics. In such cases, security actors have an identity separate from the state and can typically envision a career regardless of leadership turnover, rendering them less willing to pursue actions—such as cracking down on protesters—which could tarnish their standing with prospective leaders and the public. By contrast, security actors in a coercive apparatus organized along patrimonial lines are less certain of their ability to ride out the leader's departure and are therefore more willing to employ violence at an autocrat's bequest. Bellin cites the security forces in Egypt and Tunisia as examples of the former, and those in Syria and Jordan as examples of the latter. Policies that encourage the development or improve the institutionalization of a country's security apparatus should, therefore, decrease the prospects of violence in the face of protest and support a country's subsequent democratization.

A New Way of Doing Business?

We argue here that, although regime insiders continue to play a dominant role in determining the tenure of autocrats, autocratic survival is becoming more complex as leaders increasingly must contend with threats not only from their

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elite, but from the masses. While it is true, as current theories suggest, that autocrats must be attuned to the preferences of regime insiders, the data we present here shows that they cannot ignore the masses. If revolts continue to represent a growing threat to autocratic regimes, these leaders are likely to shift their "survival strategies" and place greater emphasis on addressing threats from mass protests. Such a strategy shift poses new challenges for existing theories of autocratic regime dynamics and for those working to improve the human rights records and prospects for democratization in these regimes.

A recent study helps us understand some of the potential implications of leaders paying greater attention to threats from the masses. It contends that leaders who believe they are at risk of revolt are likely to respond in one of two ways.[24] Some leaders may choose to increase their repression of civil liberties, such as freedom of speech and assembly, thereby reducing the public's ability to coordinate. Other leaders may opt to increase their provision of public goods, such as roads and running water, reducing citizens' desire for change. An autocrat's access to resources—which include both natural ones, such as oil, as well as foreign aid—are key in determining which path an autocrat chooses. Those leaders with access to resources are more likely to increase repression than leaders who lack other resources, and must therefore rely on taxation of their citizens to generate income. Suppression of civil liberties would contract economic productivity and reduce government revenue, which are less problematic for leaders with access to mineral wealth or aid. This would suggest that as leaders feel increasingly threatened by the prospect of revolt, allocating foreign aid to those countries most at risk could have the unintended consequence of enabling autocrats to more effectively repress their citizens.

It is difficult to forecast whether protest will become a more common form of autocratic ouster. On one hand, if people come to view protest as an ever-more viable means to political change, we would expect to see a growing number of autocrats swept away by the masses they rule. On the other, if autocrats become attuned to this threat and are able to learn from the past mistakes and successes of their colleagues, the rise in the predominance of revolts as a form of autocratic ouster may be short-lived. But for the time being, it appears that autocrats should not ignore the importance of mass audiences. And perhaps, neither should researchers and observers of authoritarian politics.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, data throughout this study come from Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), who identifies the manner through which all leaders left office through 2008. We updated Svolik's data set through 2012, using two coders to ensure accuracy. The updated data

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are available upon request. To classify countries as autocratic, we relied on Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," *Perspectives on Politics* 12 no. 1 (2014): forthcoming.

2. Calculated using data from the World Bank World Development Indicators (as of 2012), and Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *op. cit.*
3. See for example, Nikolay Marinov and Hein Goemans, "Coups and Democracy," *British Journal of Political Science*, August 28, 2013; Philip Roessler, "The Enemy Within: Personal Rule, Coups, and Civil War in Africa." *World Politics*, 63 no. 2 (2011): pp. 300-346; and Posner, Daniel N. and Daniel J. Young, "The Institutionalization of Political Power in Africa." *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 3 (2007): pp. 126-140.
4. This term comes from Hein Goemans, Kristian Gleditsch and Giacomo Chiozza, "Introducing Archigos: A data set of political leaders," *Journal of Peace Research* 46 no. 2 (2009): pp. 269–283.
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6. See Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Erica Frantz and Natasha Ezrow, *The Politics of Dictatorship: Institutions and Outcomes in Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2011); and Milan Svolik, "Power Sharing and Leadership Dynamics in Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science* 53 no. 2 (2009): pp. 477-494.
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10. Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, "Authoritarian institutions and the survival of autocrats," *Comparative Political Studies* 40 no. 11 (2007): pp. 1279-1301.
11. CarlesBoix and Milan Svolik, "Non-tyrannical autocracies,"unpublished manuscript, April 2007.
12. Notable exceptions include Bruce Bueno De Mesquita and Alastair Smith "Leader Survival, Revolutions, and the Nature of Government Finance," *American Journal of Political Science* 54 no. 4 (2010): pp. 936–950.
13. Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions."
14. Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles*; Erica Frantz and Natasha Ezrow, "State Institutions and the Survival of Dictatorships." *Journal of International Affairs*, 65 no. 1 (2011b).
15. See, for example, Frantz and Ezrow 2011a.
16. Marinov and Goemans, 2013.
17. See for example, Jack A. Goldstone, Robert H. Bates, David L. Epstein, Ted Robert Gurr, Michael B. Lustik, Monty G. Marshall, Jay Ulfelder and Mark Woodward, "A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability," *American Journal of Political Science* 54 no. 1 (2010): pp. 190-208 and Scott Gates, Havard Hegre, Mark Jones and Havard

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24. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, "Leader Survival, Revolutions, and the Nature of Government Finance," *American Journal of Political Science* 54 no. 4 (2010): pp. 936-950.

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