

# A measure of personalism in dictatorships

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## Abstract

Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018) employ a time-varying measure of personalism throughout their book; Wright (2018) discusses the construction of the personalism measure and provides a detailed comparison of this measure of personalism with extant data. This document discusses the conceptual definition of the personalism in these projects, describes the variables used to construct the measure, and closes with a brief discussion of the measure's limitations and potential avenues for future research.

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## Introduction

In their book, Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018) (GWF, hereafter) describe personalism as the following:

We refer to dictatorships in which the leader has concentrated power at the expense of his closest supporters as personalist. The defining feature of personalist dictatorship is that the dictator has personal discretion and control over the key levers of power in his political system. Key levers of power include the unfettered ability to appoint, promote, and dismiss high-level officers and officials, and thus to control the agencies, economic enterprises, and armed forces the appointees lead. In such regimes, the dictator's choices are relatively unconstrained by the institutions that can act as veto players in other dictatorships, especially the military high command and the ruling party executive committee. Personalist dictators juggle, manipulate, and divide-and-rule other powerful political actors. Like all dictators, they need some support, but they can choose from among competing factions which ones can join or remain in the ruling elite at any particular time. Personalist dictators are thus powerful relative to other members of the elite, but not necessarily relative to society or to international actors.

Throughout the book, GWF, employ a time-varying latent measure of personalism to quantify this concept. We refer readers to Wright (2018) for an introduction to the larger data collection project, and a detailed discussion of the construction of the personalism measure. This document discusses the concept of personalism used in this project, describes the variables used to construct the measure, and provides a brief assessment of the measure's limitations and potential avenues for future research. We ask users of the personalism measure to cite Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018) and Wright (2018).

There are a few important points to note before beginning this discussion. First, in line with the GWF conceptualization of personalism, the measure does *not* attempt to capture the extent to which the state has a monopoly on violence within the country's borders nor does it measure the state's coercive power relative to other states' military power. Second, this definition of personalism (along with the coding questions for the manifest indicators and the historical information gathered for these indicators) is conceptually distinct from the following:

- observed state-led repression
- government coercive capacity vis-a-vis non-state actors
- leader legitimacy vis-a-vis citizens or elites
- leader rhetoric
- leader use of propaganda
- leader ideology
- individual character traits of the leader, such as charisma or attractiveness
- electoral campaign strategies
- distribution of legislative seats

- electoral rules that incentivize the cultivation of a ‘personalist’ vote
- leader time in power
- regime duration

### **Eight items measuring latent personalism**

To construct a latent personalism measure, we use variables from the GWF data set described in the book. Each variable takes a value of 0 or 1 so that we can use a logistic item-response theory (IRT) model.<sup>1</sup> The variables include:

1. Does access to high office depend on personal loyalty to the regime leader? (**high office**)
2. Did the regime leader create a new support political party after seizing power? (**create new party**)
3. Does the regime leader control appointments to the party executive committee? (**party exec committee**)
4. Is the party executive committee absent or simply a rubber stamp for the regime leader’s decisions (**rubber stamp party**)
5. Does the regime leader personally control the security apparatus? (**security apparatus**)
6. Does the regime leader promote officers loyal to himself or from his ethnic, tribal, regional, or partisan group, or are there widespread forced retirement of officers from other groups? (**military promotion**)
7. Does the regime leader create paramilitary forces, a president’s guard, or new security force loyal to himself? (**paramilitary**)
8. Does the regime leader imprison/kill officers from groups other than his own without a reasonably fair trial? (**military purge**)

Table 1 provides summary statistics for the 8 variables. Appointment to high office and personal control over the security apparatus are the most common, occurring in over 60 percent of observations. Creating a new party is the least common, occurring in only 17 percent of observations. These patterns will be borne out in the IRT model when we examine the “difficulty” parameters: variables that are more commonly observed are less “difficult” for observations to obtain, while variables that are less commonly observed are more “difficult” for observations to obtain.

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<sup>1</sup>Only one variable is ordinal: **military promotions**. We collapse the first two categories into one.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>
high office	0.647	0.478
create new party	0.165	0.371
party exec committee	0.319	0.466
rubber stamp party	0.304	0.46
military promotion	0.424	0.494
military purge	0.365	0.482
security apparatus	0.603	0.489
paramilitary	0.355	0.479

Table 1: Summary statistics for items ( $N = 4591$ ).

### The eight items are inter-correlated

Table 2 reports results from calculating Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ , which is a measure of scale reliability or inter-correlation among the items.<sup>2</sup> The test scale is 0.76, indicating that the eight items share some of the same dimensionality and are therefore highly inter-correlated. The individual items most highly correlated with the estimated scale are: **high office**, **security apparatus**, and **military purge**. Items with the lowest correlation with the scale are: **create new party** and **paramilitary**.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Item-test correlation</i>
high office	0.6893
create new party	0.4849
party exec committee	0.6319
rubber stamp party	0.6178
military promotion	0.6163
military purge	0.6502
security apparatus	0.6522
paramilitary	0.5586

Table 2: Item-test correlations from Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ .

### Personalism varies substantially across time within regimes

Using the IRT measure of personalism developed in Wright (2018) and used in Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018), Figure 1 shows how the personalism estimates vary over the duration of a regime for different categories of regime (Party, Military, Personalist, and Monarchy), as outlined in Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2014). The top half of Figure 1 contains plots for each

<sup>2</sup>Wright (2018) explores the full data collected for the project Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018), uses exploratory factor analysis to examine latent dimensions in the data, identifies manifest items for measuring personalism, introduces an item-response theory (IRT) measurement model of personalism, assesses the validity and reliability of this measure, and in doing so offers a detailed comparison of the personalism measure with extant data.

regime category. The horizontal axes plot regime duration in years, while the left vertical axes capture the number of observations stratified across regime during. The shaded gray bars show the distribution of regime duration.

First note that the frequency of regimes in each category varies substantially. Regimes in the Party category are numerous (roughly 70) and many endure as long as 25 years (roughly 40). Military regimes are also numerous but far fewer are long-lasting; only a handful live beyond 20 years. Personalist regimes are the most common, but many do not survive as long as Party regimes. Finally, Monarchies are rare but long-lived. The steepness of the decline in the distribution of duration time (shaded grey) is a rough proxy for the hazard rate: steep declines mean the hazard rate is high and regimes are relatively short lived.

The solid (dash) lines in Figure 1 show the mean (median) levels of Latent personalism, with corresponding levels depicted on the right vertical axes, for each duration-year in each category of regime. Note that the vertical axes are scaled identically to facilitate visual comparison. In Party regimes, personalism is roughly -0.5 – on average – in the first years of the regime, rising to about 0 after 10 years and remaining constant afterwards. In Military regimes, personalism scores are very low – on average – in the first years of the regime but increase substantially over time. Though only a few regimes in this category last beyond 15 years, those that do tend to have high personalism scores. Personalist regimes have middling levels of personalism early in the regime but this increases substantially over time: long-lived Personalist regimes tend to have very high personalism scores. Finally, monarchies have middling levels of personalism that remain relatively constant over time.

The plots in the top half of Figure 1 reveal that much of the “within” variation occurs in regimes categorized as Military or Personalist in Geddes (1999) and GWF (2014). This also means that categorical indicators of “regime type” used in prior research<sup>3</sup> mask considerable variation over time in the level of personalism within regimes.

The bottom half of Figure 1 shows a similar set of trends but measures average personalism over leader tenure (or duration) instead of regime duration. These patterns reveal that the level of personalism increases, on average, as leaders last longer in power – but not in Monarchies. Further, the (positive) slopes of the lines differ in the other regime categories: the slope is steepest in Military regimes and more gradual in Party regimes. This indicates that using leader duration – as Wahman, Teorell and Hadenius (2013) propose – is a poor proxy for the level of personalism, at least as we have measured it here. For example, during their first years in power, Military regime leaders have relatively low personalism scores (on average) compared with Personalist regime leaders. Similarly, after 15 years in power leaders in Party regimes and Monarchies have, on average, middling levels of personalism (roughly 0) while leaders in Military and Personalist regimes have much higher levels (approaching 1).

## Paths forward

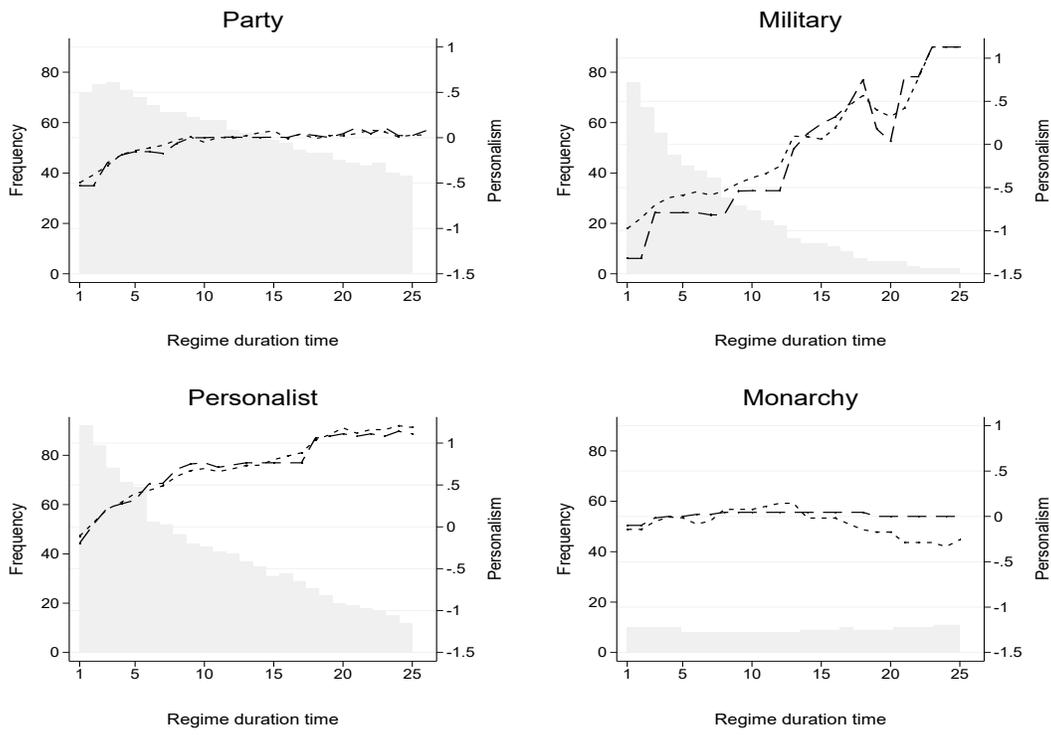
The latent measure of personalism introduced in the book combines information from real-world political events.<sup>4</sup> The events themselves are objective; the process of determining whether the event

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<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Peceny, Beer and Sanchez-Terry (2002), Weeks (2008), Wright (2009), Gurses and Mason (2010), Aksoy, Carter and Wright (2012), Conrad, Conrad and Young (2014), Wilson and Piazza (2013), and Frantz and Kendall-Taylor (2017).

<sup>4</sup>For example, in North Korea in 1966 the regime leader, Kim Il Sung, used the October Party Congress to reorganize the Korean Worker’s Party (KWP) leadership structure, resulting in his de facto control over the party

(a) Regimes



(b) Leaders

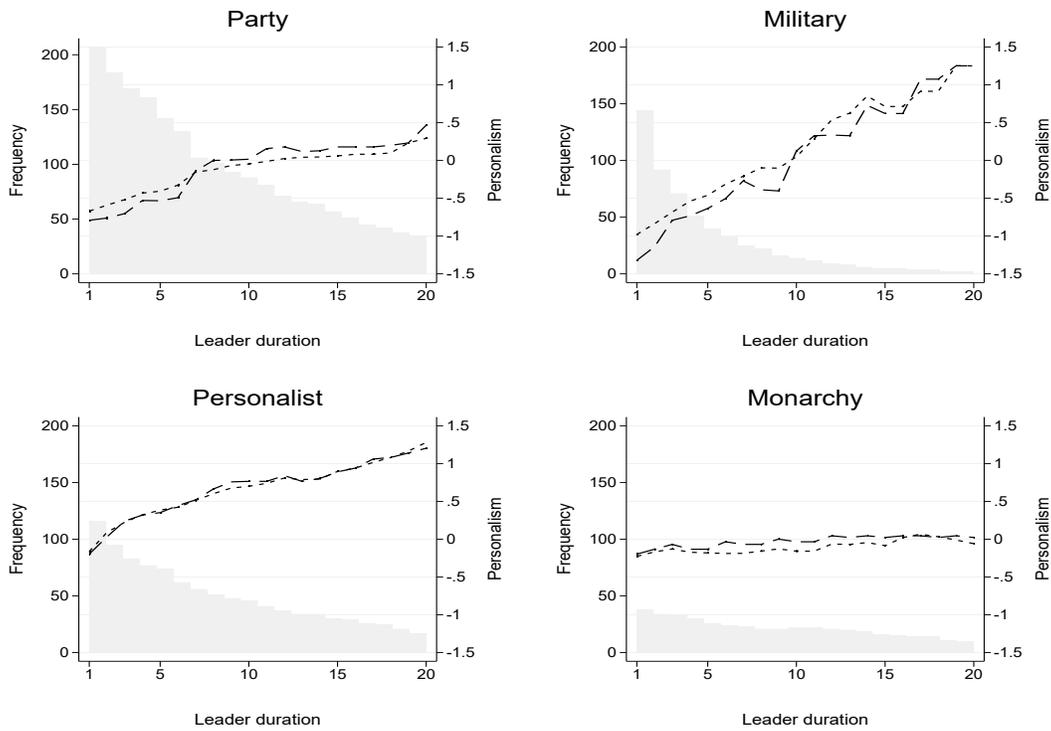


Figure 1: *Latent personalism over regime duration, by categorical type.*

qualifies as an indicator of an attribute of personalism is less so.

The GWF data collection entailed reading a substantial amount of material to organize and systematize information that exists in case studies, biographies, and news reports. In this respect, it differs from recent research that aggregates either existing off-the-shelf data sources (Gandhi and Sumner, 2016) or the subjective assessment of a concept from multiple human experts (Coppedge et al., 2016). The human hours required to compile the GWF data set were many but remain uncounted; the data collection process lasted over eight years. This measure of personalism is therefore extremely costly to create, but we hope provides researchers with new variation to explore in empirical analysis. This is perhaps particularly important given evidence suggesting a rise in personalism around the globe (Kendall-Taylor, Frantz and Wright, 2016, 2017).

We see three potential paths forward in this research agenda. First, future research might explore using more sophisticated methods for aggregating the existing data. It could probe the local independence assumption using dynamic latent models, or consider other techniques such as nonlinear dimensionality reduction. Directly modeling structural missingness may also be a fruitful way forward.

Second, future research might explore other approaches to collecting similar data. For example, scholars could aggregate multiple subjective (human) perceptions of the concept of personalism to produce a consistent scaled measure. Another approach is to employ machine learning that uses a corpus of texts to quickly find (real-world) textual information that is then combined to approximate the measure of personalism we have constructed (Bieler, Ulfelder and Wright, 2017; Minhas, Ulfelder and Ward, 2015). This approach requires an existing measure with which to train the learning algorithm but can relatively cheaply and quickly process new information to extend coding into more recent periods (our coding ends in 2010). Finally, researchers with substantial financial resources might explore using paid country experts – including academics, journalists, and independent researchers – to collect objective information pertaining to a concept from the case study literature. Using country experts would greatly speed up the data collection process without jeopardizing data quality (Wright, 2015; Morgenbesser, 2017).

Third, scholars might extend the conceptual exercise to more narrow and distinct dimensions of non-institutionalized politics. For example, (Song, 2017) uses measures of personalism related to the military and security sector from the GWF data to construct a latent estimate of this sub-dimension of personalism as conceptually distinct from the leader’s power relative to the support party.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, new research could, for example, extend measures of personalism to measure the leader’s family’s penetration of key economic sectors. Finally, the data collection effort might be extended to more narrow units in time (Wright, 2015). This might, for example, entail coding historical events that meet the coding criteria for manifest indicators of personalism on a monthly basis rather than on a yearly basis. Doing this for periods in the ancient past (the 1950s!) might be too difficult but doing so for the contemporary period might be realistic.

Other researchers, having read this far, will undoubtedly have many new ideas of their own.

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executive committee. By 1968, Kim “faced no further challenges from within the KWP” (Buzo, 1999, 34); the party had become a rubber-stamp for Kim’s decisions.

<sup>5</sup>See Song and Wright (2018) as well.

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