# Perils of Personalism

## *Why Personalism is a Double-Edged Sword for Autocratic Survival*

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## Abstract

The following paper investigates regime personalization as a survival strategy for autocratic leaders. Previous research has shown that personalism reduces the probability that dictators are ousted from power by coups. However, this paper contends that although personalism may be an effective shield against threats from elite actors, it simultaneously increases dictators' vulnerability to mass-based threats. It argues that the same processes that reduce potential elite rivals' power vis-à-vis the dictator (e.g., patrimonial hiring practices in the military and the dismantling of formal political institutions) reduce the dictator's ability to effectively manage popular threats (such as mass protests or armed insurgencies). Accordingly, personalism is expected to increase the likelihood that dictators are ousted from power when such threats arise. This proposition is tested using a global sample of autocratic country-years for the period 1947-2007. The results support the proposition. Higher levels of personalism are shown to increase the likelihood that dictators are removed from power following incidences of mass mobilization. Conversely, and in line with previous research, higher levels of personalism are associated with a lower likelihood of dictators being removed when mass mobilization is absent. The results have important implications for the future stability of autocracies in a world that is characterized by increasing levels of personalism.

# Introduction

Despite the global surge of democracy (Huntington, 1991; Møller & Skaaning, 2013b) nearly 40 % of the countries in the world remain autocratic[1] (Boix, Miller, & Rosato, 2013).[2] However, the manner in which countries are autocratic is changing. Autocratic regimes are becoming increasingly personalized (Geddes, Wright, & Frantz, 2017; Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, & Wright, 2017; see also figure 1 below). Thus, more and more power is concentrated in the hands of the autocratic chief executive (i.e., the 'dictator') at the expense of formal institutions such as regime parties and military hierarchies. As power is shifting away from collective organs such as politburos and juntas, the dynamics of autocratic rule are changing. The incentives of such collective ruling bodies differ markedly from those of personalist rulers and so does their perceptions of and responses to potential threats (Geddes, 1999; Geddes, Wright, & Frantz, 2014; Weeks, 2014). However, why do dictators personalize their regimes (or at least attempt to do so)? And, even more importantly, what are the implications of the increasing level of personalism for the political stability of autocracies? While important attempts have been made to answer the former question (e.g., Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, & Morrow, 2003; Svolik, 2012), the latter question remains underexplored. The following paper attempts to fill this gap by investigating the effects of personalism on autocratic stability, using a state-of-the art measure of personalism in autocracies as well as different conceptualizations of autocratic stability.

Regime personalization – or "personalism" for short – refers to a specific arrangement of the governance structures in autocratic regimes. In personalist regimes, political power is centralized in the hands of the autocratic chief executive (colloquially referred to as the "dictator"). Accordingly, in personalist regimes, the dictator and his inner circle makes most political decisions, and career advancement in both the security apparatus as well as the civilian bureaucracy is determined by personal loyalty to the dictator (Geddes, 1999; Geddes et al., 2014). Personalist regimes thus stand in contrast to autocratic regimes governed by some type of collective body. However, while personalist regimes have previously been conceptualized as

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[1] Throughout the project description, I use the terms "autocracy", "authoritarian regime", and "dictatorship" interchangeably to refer to nondemocratic regimes.
[2] Based on figures from 2015, the latest year for which data is available.

a separate autocratic regime type, categorically different from other regime types (such as party regimes, military regimes, or monarchies), this paper uses a different conceptualization.

Building on recent work by Geddes et al. (2017), the paper conceptualizes personalism as a regime trait rather than a regime type (see also Svolik, 2012; Wahman, Teorell, & Hadenius, 2013). Additionally, personalism is conceptualized in a continuous rather than categorical fashion. Consequently, all autocratic regimes can be characterized according to their level of personalism, irrespective of whether the rulers have a civilian, military, or royal background. The level of personalism can range from complete to total absence of regime personalization. This conceptualization also implies that the level of personalism can rise (or fall) over the course of an autocratic regime's lifespan. An example of such a process is currently unfolding in China, where President Xi Jinping slowly and steadily is consolidating personal power – at the expense of the politburo – most notably illustrated by his successful elimination of presidential term limits as well as his extensive purging of elite rivals (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, & Wright, 2018; Kendall-Taylor et al., 2017). While Jinping's power grab does not constitute a breakdown of the autocratic regime in China, it is nonetheless going to alter the political dynamics of the country significantly (Frantz et al., 2018).[3]

This alternative conceptualization affects how we can study personalism. Much important work has studied personalism in a categorical sense by comparing personalist regimes to other types of autocratic regimes (e.g., Davenport, 2007; Escribà-Folch, 2012; Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2010; Fjelde, 2010; Geddes, 1999; Geddes et al., 2014; Peceny, Beer, & Sanchez-Terry, 2002; Reiter & Stam, 2003; C. Way & Weeks, 2014; Weeks, 2014; Wright, 2009). However, studies of personalism as at trait *across* autocratic regime types is sparse (for an important exception, see Song, 2018). Part of the reason for this paucity has been a lack of sufficiently fine-grained data (Wright, 2017). This is no longer a limitation, as Geddes et al. (2017) have developed a time-varying measure of personalism across autocratic regime types.

The present paper employs this new measure to study the effectiveness of regime personalization as a power maintenance tool for dictators. Specifically, the paper shows that although personalism is an effective way for dictators to protect themselves against threats from elite

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[3] For another example see Baturo and Elkink (2014, 2016), who demonstrate how Vladimir Putin has gradually amassed vast personal power in Russia while keeping the formal institutions of the regime intact.

actors, this regime trait simultaneously increases their vulnerbly to mass-based threats. Thus, while personalism may prolong some dictators' tenures, this institutional configuration is no panacea, as other dictators may find themselves jettisoned from power as a result of similar personalized political institutions.

The next section expands on this argument. It first presents what we currently know about the relationship between personalism and political stability in autocracies, after which it presents the theoretical rationale behind the above proposition.

## Theory

Much work has investigated the relationship between personalist regimes and political stability in autocracies. The general conclusion of this research is that personalism tends to be a cause of instability. Personalism has been associated with relatively short regime duration (Geddes, 1999; Geddes et al., 2014), higher levels of state repression (Davenport, 2007; Escribà-Folch, 2012; Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2010), a higher likelihood of both civil war (Fjelde, 2010) as well as interstate war (Peceny et al., 2002; Reiter & Stam, 2003; Weeks, 2014), and a higher probability of pursuing nuclear weapons (C. Way & Weeks, 2014). Moreover, personalist rulers have been shown to be especially unresponsive to Western actors' attempts to incentivize them to democratise their regimes, including both carrots (Wright, 2009) and sticks (Escribà-Folch, 2012; Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2010). And when personalist regimes do break down nonetheless, these transitions are predominantly brought about by force rather than negotiation (Geddes et al., 2014).

However, the findings above are all based on categorical conceptualizations of personalism. If we look at personalism as a regime trait instead, we see a somewhat different picture. Song (2018) investigates personalism as an autocratic coup-proofing strategy. Focussing on personalization of the security forces, he finds that higher levels of personalism reduces coup risk in autocracies. Specifically, personalism is associated both with a lower likelihood of dictators being removed by coups as well as with a lower likelihood that coups are even attempted in the first place. Accordingly, personalism is found to both reduce the incentives of elite actors to attempt coups as well as to reduce their ability to successfully carry out a coup once attempted. Personalism thus seems to be an effective 'coup-proofing' measure in both stages

of the coup process (see Powell, 2012) and thereby to be an important cause of autocratic stability in terms of elite-based threats to the dictator.

Elite-based threats are, however, only one of two types of threats facing an autocratic incumbent, with the other type of threat originating from the masses (Svolik, 2012).[4] And while elite-based threats historically have been the primary cause of irregular leader removals in autocracies (Bove & Rivera, 2015; Svolik, 2012), mass-based threats are increasingly becoming a cause for concern for dictators (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Kim, 2017). Thus, while the negative association between personalism and coup risk suggests that personalism may be a politically stabilizing force in autocracies, this is only the case with regard to a specific – albeit important – subset of threats to a dictator's survival. And there is not much reason to believe that personalism exerts the same immunizing effect when it comes to mass-based threats to autocrats' grip on power.[5]

On the contrary, as I will argue below, it is far more likely that personalism has the opposite effect with regard to mass-based threats and thus increases rather than reduces dictators' vulnerability to these. If that is the case, this has major implications for autocratic stability in a world where both personalism and mass-based threats are on the rise. In fact, the rising level of personalism may be one of the reasons that autocratic leaders are increasingly being ousted from power by the masses rather than by elite rivals, notably illustrated by the recent major protest waves in the post-communist and Arab regions, respectively (Hess, 2016). Through their increasing success at consolidating personal power and limiting the size of their support coalitions – and thereby reducing the threat to their rule from regime insiders – dictators may inadvertently have shifted the threat to a new arena by instead increasing the ability of the masses to successfully challenge their grip on power.[6] This is not to say that personalism necessarily gives rise to a higher frequency of popular challenges, but rather that

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[4] For reasons of parsimony, this framework only includes threats from domestic actors. Thus, while foreign intervention also have been a non-negligible cause of irregular leader removals in autocracies (Goemans, Gleditsch, & Chiozza, 2009; Svolik, 2012), this third type of threat is disregarded here, as the argument of the paper concerns dictators' balancing of domestic threats.

[5] One study by Ulfelder (2005) partly addresses this question. And while he actually finds some evidence that personalist dictators are resistant to specific types of mass-based threats, his study is based on a categorical conceptualization of personalism, which furthermore is time-invariant within regimes (cf. the above discussion of how to best conceptualize personalism). Accordingly, based on his study, we cannot be sure that the effect is in fact driven by high levels of personalism rather than by another of the multitude of institutional characteristics that are associated with the personalist regime category.

[6] See Roessler (2011) for an example of such a shift in dictators' threat environments.

personalism limits dictators' ability to effectively manage these once they do arise, thus increasing the likelihood that they will be successful in ousting the dictator from power. Why this is expected to be the case is elaborated in the following section.

## Personalism and vulnerability to mass-based threats

Before laying out a comprehensive theoretical argument for how personalism increases dictators' vulnerability to mass-based threats while simultaneously reducing their vulnerability to elite threats, I start with a short description of the process of regime personalization. Subsequently, using the case of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, I illustrate how this process can result in a limited ability of dictators' to handle popular threats effectively once they arise. Building on the insights from this illustrative example, I then develop the general argument more formally.

### *What is personalism?*

The hallmark of personal rule is 'deinstitutionalization' of the regime, in the sense that formal governance institutions are either dismantled completely or transformed into mere window-dressing, whereas actual political power resides in informal institutions such as patron-client, ethnic/clan, or familial networks (Baturo & Elkink, 2014, 2016; Bratton & van de Walle, 1994; Geddes, 1999; Geddes et al., 2014, 2017). Importantly, these informal institutions are intimately tied to the autocratic chief executive, and personal loyalty to the dictator is the paramount criteria for advancement in the institutional hierarchies – with meritocratic credentials (and competence more generally) taking a back seat. Thus, aspiring members of the leader's inner circle usually go out of their way to demonstrate their unwavering loyalty to the dictator. Furthermore, as a legitimation strategy (see Gerschewski, 2013), personalist leaders tend to develop cults of personality around themselves (and to enforce these with an iron fist), as illustrated by the three generations of Kims who have ruled North Korea for the duration of the country's existence (Byman & Lind, 2010).[7]

This state of affairs does not come about overnight, and it certainly does not come about by chance. Rather, it is forged through a series of power grabs and purges of elite rivals (Baturo

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[7] Because the categorical regime classifications of Geddes et al. (2014) are time-invariant within regimes, North Korea is actually – in stark contrast to the prevailing view of most observers (e.g., Kendall-Taylor et al., 2017; Weeks, 2014) – classified as a party dictatorship under all three Kims by the authors. However, the time-varying measure from Geddes et al. (2017) provides a more accurate assessment of the regime, as it the country's personalism score increases from 0 to 0.78 (on a scale from 0-1) during the first 20 years Kim Il-sung's rule.

& Elkink, 2016; Svolik, 2012), each of which may turn out to be unsuccessful. An unsuccessful power grab is likely to backfire against the dictator, potentially resulting in him being removed from power by his disgruntled elite supporters (Svolik, 2012). Accordingly, the dictator's attempted subjugation of his essential supporters is a process that itself entails a considerable risk of him being removed power, thus explaining why many dictators never attain more than moderate degrees of regime personalization. However, those that do manage to attain high levels of personalism face only a very modest risk of being deposed by elite actors, who lack both the incentives and the ability to challenge the dictator (Song, 2018; Svolik, 2012).

### *Personalism, 'People Power', and the collapse of the Marcos regime*

Having described the personalization process and thus the way in which dictators minimize the threat from potential elite challengers, we can now turn our attention to how this process may at the same time increase dictators' vulnerability to mass-based threats. This definitely seems to have been the case for former Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos, who ruled the Philippines as a personalist dictator from his declaration of martial law in 1972, until he was toppled by a nonviolent popular uprising in 1986.

Several factors undoubtedly contributed to the downfall of Marcos. However, two factors intimately related to the personalist nature of his regime seems to have been crucial for the success of the People Power Revolution: 1) Marcos's inability to legitimise his rule using formal, pseudo-democratic institutions, which fuelled popular discontent with his regime, and 2) the organizationally incohesive and factionalized nature of his military, which ultimately led it to fracture in the face of popular resistance.

Regarding the first factor, research on authoritarian institutions strongly indicates that dictators can stabilize their regime and thus prolong their tenure by relying on nominally democratic institutions as a strategy for both intra-elite power-sharing and popular legitimation (Gandhi, 2008; Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014; Svolik, 2012). However, the deinstitutionalization associated with personalism was an apparent feature of Marcos's regime and limited his ability to draw on this source of regime stability. Although Marcos initially had been democratically elected, his declaration of martial law – which entailed suspending national elections, closing the legislature, and extending his rule indefinitely beyond the constitutional two-term limit – not only constituted a democratic breakdown but also allowed Marcos to

centralize political power and rule by decree for almost ten years. While this move gave Marcos wide executive powers, it also prevented him from drawing on the legitimacy associated with seemingly democratic elections (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2002) as well as from using a pseudo-democratic legislature as an arena for elite co-optation (Lust, 2009; Svolik, 2012). Thus, while Marcos may have been able to dominate the political arena, few mechanisms were in place to assuage the public and to ensure elite loyalty in the event that public discontent erupted into open revolt.

Concerning the second factor, high-level military defections and widespread refusal to employ repression against the nonviolent protestors is widely regarded as having been pivotal for Marcos's downfall (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Nepstad, 2011; Schock, 2005). While scholars from the civil resistance literature credits this outcome to the nonviolent nature of the protests (e.g., Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011), a significant part of the explanation is also to be found in the organizationally incohesive and factionalized nature of the Philippine military under Marcos, resulting from his deliberate stacking of crucial positions in the officer corps with officers from his hometown of Ilocos (Woo, 2010). This 'Ilocanization' of the military leadership may have been an effective strategy with regard to forestalling coup attempts against Marcos (as not a single attempt took place during Marcos's tenure[8]), but the resulting military factionalism was a major cause of the military's inability – and unwillingness – to present a united front against the protestors. Instead, several segments of the military decided to side with the opposition against the regime, thus leaving Marcos no choice but to flee into exile in Hawaii (Escribà-Folch & Krcmaric, 2017).

### Personalism and autocratic survival: a general argument

The case of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos is illustrative of a more general association between personalism and autocratic survival. While personalism increases dictators' resistance to elite threats, it simultaneously increases their vulnerability to mass-based threats. Song (2018) investigates the former effect and argues that personalism reduces elite threats by 1) linking the security elites' fates more closely to the leader's and 2) by increasing the informational advantage the leader has over the security elites. This paper investigates the

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[8] While some observers (e.g., Woo, 2010) refer to the actions of the opposition-aligned segments of the military as a coup, the collapse of the regime was ultimately caused the popular uprising. Accordingly, the military defections are most accurately viewed as an intervening variable rather than the actual cause. In line with this interpretation of the events, Powell and Thyne (2011) do not code Marcos's ouster as a coup in their dataset.

second effect. I argue that personalism increases dictators' vulnerability to popular threats through two mechanisms: 1) Personalism limits dictators' ability to rely on nominally democratic institutions, which have been shown to be effective tools both for legitimation of the regime as well as for broad-based co-optation of elite actors. 2) The process of regime personalization leads to an organisationally incoherent and factionalized military, which is likely to fracture when faced with broad-based resistance to the regime (Dahl, 2016). Additionally, those segments of the military that remain loyal to the dictator are likely to be ineffective at repressing the protestors, as the measures that reduce the military's ability to challenge the dictator also are likely to reduce the military's operational efficiency and thus its fighting capacity (Pilster & Böhmelt, 2011; Powell, 2012).

Regarding the negative effect on dictators' use of nominally democratic institutions, personalism undermines their two principal uses (co-optation and legitimation) in different, but related, ways. Concerning *co-optation*, an effective way to co-opt elite rivals (e.g., influential members of the opposition) is to grant them seats in a national legislature (Gandhi, 2008; Svolik, 2012). Such legislatures are usually not the primary law-makers in dictatorships, like they are in democracies. Rather, they function as a power-sharing device by giving elite supporters an arena in which they can obtain information about the dictator's intentions, where they can express their wants and grievances, and where the dictator can credibly commit to honouring promises made to the supporters (Gandhi, 2008; Malesky & Schuler, 2010; Svolik, 2012). Importantly, however, power-sharing in dictatorships is only effective if the elite supporters can credibly threaten to remove the dictator in case he reneges on promises made or attempts to usurp power from his supporters (Svolik, 2012). A high degree of personalism in an autocratic regime is closely related to what Svolik (2012) terms "established autocracy", which is a state of a affairs that arises when a dictator has consolidated so much personal power that his support coalition can no longer credibly threaten to remove him from power. Consequently, institutional power-sharing – and thus broad-based elite co-optation – tend to be ineffective in highly personalised autocracies. This, in turn, greatly limits the number of elite actors with a personal stake in the survival of the regime. In doing to, it also increases the number of elite actors that may potentially opt to side with the opposition in the event that a popular challenge against the regime arises, thereby increasing the likelihood that such a challenge will be successful (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011).

Concerning *legitimation*, personalism presents a somewhat similar problem. After the end of the Cold War, democracy has widely come to be viewed as 'the only game in town' (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Accordingly, most autocracies today adopt at least some of the trappings of democracy – such as regular elections, legislatures, and political parties – and thereby create a democratic façade for their nondemocratic rule (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014; Svolik, 2012). However, the ability to present this façade in a convincing manner varies a lot from autocracy to autocracy. Some autocratic regimes manage to stage convincing national elections that give the electorate the feeling of having a say in choosing their political leaders but do so without jeopardizing their political survival in any meaningful way. This was, for instance, the case for the PRI regime in Mexico during a majority of its more than 70 years in power (Magaloni, 2006). By contrast, some regimes hold elections that are widely known to nothing more than window-dressing. This, for example, is the case in Turkmenistan (although few Turkmens dare say so), where the current president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, was re-elected in 2017 with almost 98 % of the votes.

As suggested by the Turkmen regime – which is known for being one of the most personalized regimes in the world[9] – personalizing one's regime lowers the ability of dictators to rely on a pseudo-democratic legitimation strategy. This is so, because democracy usually is associated with, among other things, decentralized power as well as constraints on the executive's power (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002) – in other words, the exact opposite of what characterizes a personalized autocratic regime. Accordingly, while many personalist dictators certainly put on pseudo-democratic spectacles, these are generally much less convincing when not even other members of the political elite have interests at stake in the elections. Furthermore, an important part of the cults of personality that many personalist dictators develop is the image of overwhelming popularity among the public. Fostering and upholding such an image will most often entail winning elections with huge margins (such as 98 %), which are highly implausible to attain (even for genuinely popular candidates) in elections that are not rigged in one way or the other. Thus, feeding the dictator's cult of personality – which may otherwise be an effective power maintenance strategy (Byman & Lind, 2010; Svolik, 2012) – often comes at the expense of the regime's pseudo-democratic legitimacy.

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[9] In fact, in 2010 – the latest year for which data is available – the Turkmen regime (tied with Eritrea and Chad) receives the second highest personalism score in the world (0.87), only surpassed by Libya's score of 1.

Turning now to personalism's negative effect on the military's organizational coherence, and how regime personalization contributes to the development of military factions, both conditions are direct consequences of personalism's use as a coup-proofing strategy. As described by Powell (2012), dictators can reduce their vulnerability to coups by intentionally factionalizing the military. This is done by creating competing forces within the military that counterbalance each other, which both reduces the overall coordination capacity of the military as well as increases the probability that at least some segments of the military will remain loyal to the dictator in the event of a coup attempt and side with him against the coup conspirators (see also Belkin & Schofer, 2003). Creation of parallel military forces loyal to the dictator is a key feature of personalism (Geddes et al., 2017), and regime personalization is thus closely associated with this coup-proofing strategy. A further coup-proofing measure highlighted by Powell – which too is intimately connected with personalism (Geddes et al., 2017; Kendall-Taylor et al., 2017) – is implementation of patrimonial hiring practices in the military, where personal loyalty to the dictator is prioritized over military competence. However, while both these coup-proofing strategies are effective at guarding the dictator against coups (Powell, 2012), they also have the effect of undermining the fighting capacity of the military (Pilster & Böhmelt, 2011), which in turn reduces the ability of the dictator to fend off popular threats. In sum, personalism is closely tied to certain types of coup-proofing strategies that tend to increase resistance to elite threats while at the same increasing vulnerability to mass-based threats, thus highlighting why personalism is a double-edged sword for dictators who want to secure themselves in power.

In sum, the above discussion suggests that personalism conditions the effect of mass mobilization on autocratic survival. Owing to the symmetric nature of interaction effects (Berry, Golder, & Milton, 2012), this also suggests that mass mobilization conditions the effect personalism on autocratic survival. The discussion thus gives rise to the following hypotheses:

*H1: Mass mobilization increases the probability of autocratic leaders being removed from power, and this effect is enhanced by higher levels of personalism.*

*H2a: When mass mobilization is absent, higher levels of personalism reduce the probability of autocratic leaders being removed from power.*

*H2b: When mass mobilization is present, higher levels of personalism increase the probability of autocratic leaders being removed from power.*

The next section describes and discusses the research design and the data that are used to test the hypotheses.

## Methods

The hypotheses are tested using a large-N time-series cross-sectional design. The analysis employs a global sample of autocratic country-years for the period 1947-2007.[10] As the outcome of interest (leader exit) is a dichotomy, using generalized linear models for binary outcomes (such as logit or probit) would have been a natural choice (Long & Freese, 2014). However, I estimate the models using fixed effects in order to control for unobservable, time-invariant factors (Green, Kim, & Yoon, 2001). If one estimates generalized liner models using fixed effects, this has the downside of dropping all panels in which the dependent variable does not change (Beck & Katz, 2001), in this case countries that do not experience the outcome. Accordingly, I use linear probability models instead. Such models have been shown to be suitable as substitutes for the generalized linear models (Hellevik, 2009), and they have the important benefit of not dropping country-panels with constant values on the dependent variable from the analysis.

In addition to the country-fixed effects, year dummies are included in all models in order to guard against potential time trends as well as various yearly 'shocks'. Moreover, all models include cubic polynomials of the number of years since the country last experienced the outcome, thus accounting for potential time dependence (Carter & Signorino, 2010). Lastly, all models are estimated using robust standard errors clustered on country in order to account for dependence between observations from the same country (Wooldridge, 2014).

### Dependent variable

I employ data from Goemans et al. (2009) to create an indicator variable for country-years where dictators are removed from power. After first limiting the sample to autocratic country-years, I use the "irregular leader exit" variable to capture instances where the chief exec-

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[10] Autocratic country-years are identified using the classification of Geddes et al. (2014).

utive (i.e., the dictator) is forcibly removed. This excludes instances where dictators leave office in a 'regular' manner, such as due to compliance with term limits (which, for instance, was a key feature of the PRI regime in Mexico (Magaloni, 2006)) or other types of established procedures for leadership rotation within the regime (e.g., the rotation of executive power between different branches of the military within some military juntas (Geddes, 1999)). Furthermore, retirement due to ill health, death by natural causes, and exit resulting from foreign deposition[11] are not counted as forcible removal of the dictator. The resulting variable accordingly takes on the value "1" for country-years where a dictator is removed from power by domestic actors in a manner that is not in accordance with the established rules of the regime and "0" for country-years where such an event does not occur.

## Independent variables

In order to measure the extent to which an autocratic regime is personalized, I rely on the recently developed measure of personalism in autocracies by Geddes et al. (2017). Geddes et al.'s measure is constructed by using factor analysis on eight indicators measuring different aspects of regime personalization, thus treating personalism as a latent regime trait to be estimated. The eight indicators (listed in table A1 in the appendix) are designed to capture two broader dimensions of personalism, where the first dimension (indicators 1-4) measures personalization of the dictator's support party and civilian personnel decisions, while the second dimension (indicators 5-8) measures personalization of the military specifically as well as the security apparatus more broadly.[12] However, while a conceptual distinction can be made between the two dimensions, the authors' factor analyses strongly indicate that all eight items are capturing a common latent regime trait, that is, personalism. Accordingly, the authors construct at single measure of personalism, which I employ in the analysis.

In order to give the reader a better empirical feel for the measure, figure 1 plots the distribution of latent personalism across the world's autocratic regimes over time. Additionally, the figure also illustrates the rising trend in the levels of personalism that has taken place since the end of the Second World War (and especially since the beginning of the 1960s) until 2010

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[11] Although foreign deposition of course is a forcible removal of the dictator, this paper is concerned with how dictators manage domestic – and not international – threats to their rule. Accordingly, the outcome variable only includes removals that are brought about by domestic actors.

[12] For a more detailed description of the eight items, see Geddes et al. (2017).

(the last year for which data is available). The average level of personalism has thus increased from 0.346 in 1946 to 0.473 in 2010 (i.e., 0.127 on a scale from 0-1, or an increase of 36.7 percent). By reaffirming the notion that personalism is on the rise globally, the figure accordingly also serves to emphasize the need to investigate the implications of this development for the political stability of the world's autocratic countries.

**Figure 1. Development in latent personalism since the end of the Second World War**
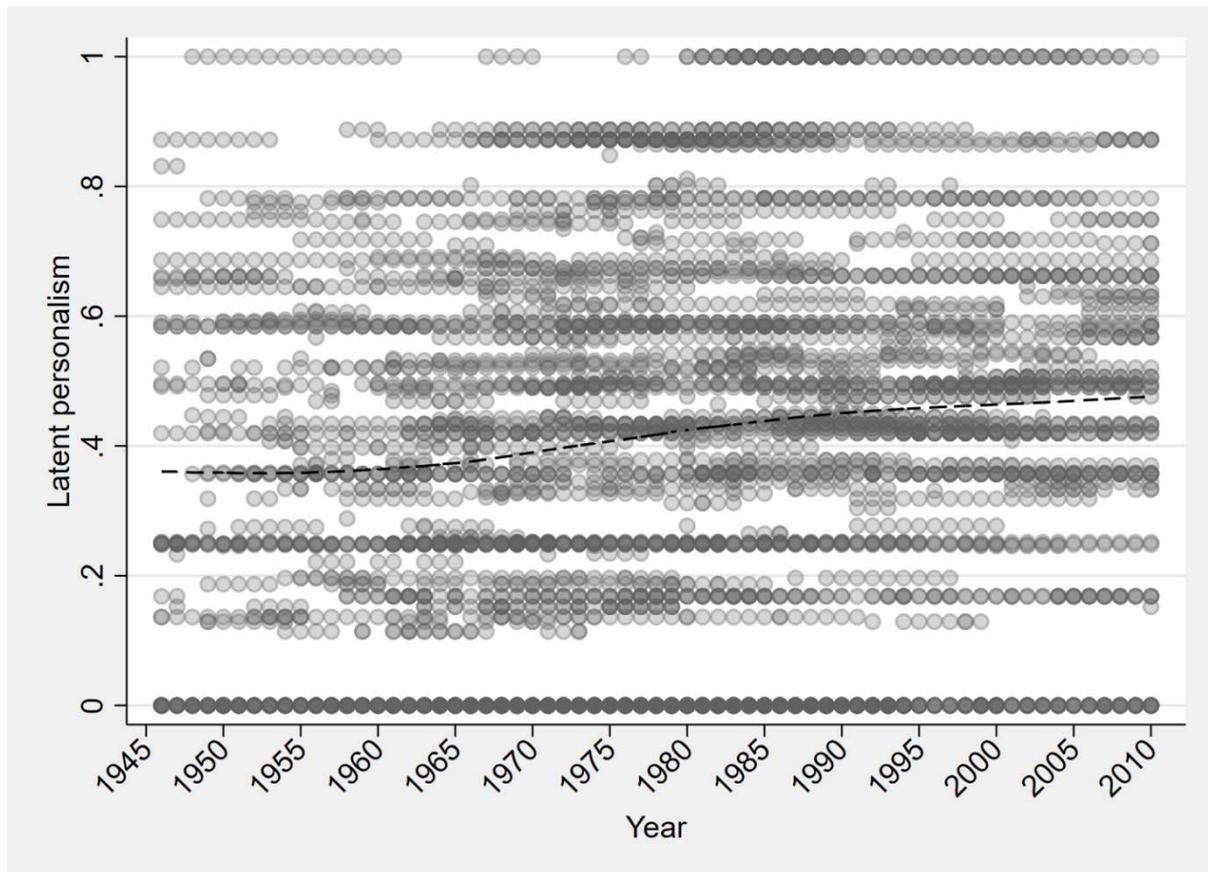


*Note: Scatterplot with Lowess curve. Less transparent dots indicate a higher number of observations with the respective value of latent personalism in a given year.*

To measure the presence of mass mobilization, I rely on the "NAVCO 2.0" dataset (Chenoweth & Lewis, 2013). However, as the NAVCO 2.0 data is originally in campaign-year format, I have recoded the data into country-year format. Specifically, I created an indicator variable that takes on the value "1" if one or more mass campaigns are ongoing in the country that year (including the years where campaigns started and ended, respectively), and zero otherwise. Both violent and nonviolent campaigns are included in the measure. A campaign is defined in the NAVCO 2.0 data as *a series of coordinated, contentious collective actions with at least 1,000 observed participants* (Chenoweth & Lewis, 2013). This fairly maximalist threshold for

inclusion of campaigns in the dataset ensures that the variable is capturing the presence of substantial popular threats against the dictator and his regime, rather than more limited and sporadic expressions of popular discontent.

## Control variables

In addition to controlling for time-invariant factors trough the country-fixed effects, time trends and yearly shocks through the year dummies, and temporal dependence in the outcome through the cubic polynomials, the models also include a number of time-varying factors as controls.[13]

Firstly, the models control for regimes' coercive capacity, as this is an important factor in terms of both autocratic survival (Albertus & Menaldo, 2012; Wang, 2014) as well as the likelihood that popular challenges will arise (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Slater & Fenner, 2011). Coercive capacity is proxied using the number of military personnel per capita, which is obtained from the Correlates of War Project's "National Material Capabilities" (v5.0) dataset (Singer, Bremer, & Stuckey, 1972). While this, admittedly, is a somewhat rough proxy, it is chosen due to its superior empirical coverage compared to alternative measures. Furthermore, Albertus and Menaldo (2012) have shown that the proxy is empirically valid as it correlates well with more fine-grained (but empirically restricted) measures of coercive capacity.

Secondly, the models control for the per capita value of countries' oil production, as revenues from oil production has been associated with both autocratic durability as well as the frequency of domestic conflict incidence (Ross, 2001, 2015). Data on countries' oil production value is obtained from the "Oil and Gas Data, 1932-2011" dataset (Ross & Mahdavi, 2015).

Thirdly, the models control for the extent to which the state – and thus the autocratic regime – controls the economy, as this factor too has been associated with autocratic durability and potential dissidents' incentives to challenge the regime (Seeberg, 2018; L. A. Way, 2012). Economic control is proxied using the "State ownership of economy"-indicator from the Varieties

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[13] The present discussion of potential confounding variables focuses on variables associated with mass mobilization and autocratic survival, respectively, as the causes of personalism are generally less well understood. This is by no means meant to imply that controlling for potential confounders related to personalism is not important. But doing so is made significantly harder by the fact that only limited theoretical knowledge exists that can be used to help identify such variables.

of Democracy (v8.0) dataset (Coppedge et al., 2018). I have reversed the indicator so that higher values reflect higher degrees of economic control.

Fourthly, the models control for countries' GDP per capita, which have been associated with both the incentives of citizens to challenge autocratic regimes (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010) as well as governments' ability to handle popular threats (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Data on countries' GDP, originally from the Maddison Project Database, is obtained from the Varieties of Democracy dataset.

Fifthly, a potential source of anti-regime mobilization is low "performance legitimacy" (see Gerschewski, 2013). An important parameter in this regard is regimes' economic performance (Andersen, Møller, Rørbæk, & Skaaning, 2014). Accordingly, the models control for the annual change in countries' GDP, using data from the Maddison Project Database, obtained from the Varieties of Democracy dataset.

Sixthly, in order to further control for differences in countries' probability of experiencing mass mobilization, the models control both for the total size of a country's population as well as for the country's level of urbanization, measured by the share of its population living in urban areas. On the one hand, countries with larger populations – and thus a larger pool from which potential dissidents can be drawn – have been shown to have a higher probability of experiencing various types of mass mobilization (Chenoweth & Lewis, 2013). On the other hand, more urbanized countries have more areas with high population density, which reduces the collective action problems of potential dissidents by facilitating communication and coordination among them (Brancati, 2016; Butcher & Svensson, 2016). The data on both population size and urbanization has been collected by Clio Infra, and it is obtained from the Varieties of Democracy dataset.

Lastly, the models control for whether one or more national elections took place in a country in a given year. Since the sample is limited to autocratic country-years, any such elections that may be held are by definition not free and fair (see Møller & Skaaning, 2013a). As highlighted by Beissinger (2007), fraudulent elections can serve as focal points that opposition leaders can mobilize resistance around. More generally, national elections have been shown to be a potential source of instability in nondemocratic settings (Seeberg, 2014). Data on national elections is obtained from the "NELDA" (v4.0) dataset (Hyde & Marinov, 2012).

All independent and control variables are lagged one year in order to ensure that their values are determined before those of the dependent variable. The variables for oil production value per capita, GDP per capita, and population size are all log transformed in order to reduce their skewness as well as to reduce the influence of outliers.

Table 1 below provides summary statistics for the included variables.

**Table 1. Summary statistics**

| Variable | Mean | Std. dev. | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Irregular leader exit | 0.047 | 0.213 | 0 | 1 |
| Regime failure | 0.055 | 0.229 | 0 | 1 |
| Ongoing campaign | 0.208 | 0.406 | 0 | 1 |
| Latent personalism | 0.423 | 0.274 | 0 | 1 |
| Military personnel/PC | 0.007 | 0.009 | 0 | 0.077 |
| Oil value/PC (ln) | 2.069 | 2.770 | 0 | 11.201 |
| Ownership of economy | 0.624 | 1.402 | -2.468 | 4.151 |
| GDP/PC (ln) | 7.976 | 0.921 | 5.855 | 11.451 |
| GDP growth (%) | 0.021 | 0.094 | -0.629 | 1.736 |
| Population size (ln) | 16.027 | 1.344 | 12.920 | 20.993 |
| Urbanization | 0.388 | 0.215 | 0.022 | 1 |
| National election | 0.213 | 0.410 | 0 | 1 |

*Note: Calculated based on the 3308 observations from models 1-4 (see table 2).*

Having presented the research design and the data, the following section now presents the results of both the main analysis as well as the robustness checks.

## Results

The results of the analysis are reported in table 2 below. Models 1 and 2 presents the main results, which employ irregular leader exit as the dependent variable. Model 1 presents initial results without the interaction term between ongoing campaign and personalism, whereas model 2 presents results with the interaction term. Models 3 and 4 are included as further tests of the empirical implications of the theory. They are structured similarly to models 1 and 2, but they employ the Geddes et al. (2014) measure of regime failure as the dependent variable instead. The models using the GWF regime failure measure are expected to produce

fairly similar results, as the fate of an autocratic regime as a whole is intimately tied to the fate of the individual dictator at high levels of personalism. Accordingly, if higher levels of personalism affects dictators' likelihood of staying in power, they should also affect the probability of autocratic regime survival.

Looking first at model 1, we see that ongoing campaigns have a positive and statistically significant unmoderated association with irregular leader exits, as expected. However, when the interaction term is added in model 2, this effect turns insignificant, which implies that the ongoing campaigns do not affect the probability of irregular leader exits in autocracies when the level of personalism is zero (i.e., when the regime exhibits the lowest possible level of personalization). More importantly, the interaction term is positive and statistically significant, which supports the expectation of an interaction effect between ongoing campaigns and personalism with regard to their effects on irregular leader exits. Specifically, it supports the expectation that irregular leader exits in autocracies are most likely when both mass mobilization and high degrees of personalism are present.

So far, the results are consistent with the hypotheses. Model 1 found evidence of a positive effect of ongoing campaigns, and model 2 found evidence that ongoing campaigns and personalism moderate the effects of each other. However, in order to facilitate the substantive interpretation of the interaction effect, I calculate the marginal effects of the two variables, conditional on each other (Brambor, Clark, & Golder, 2006). First, in figure 2, I test hypothesis 1 by illustrating the marginal effects of an ongoing campaign, conditional on the level of personalism. Then, in figure 3, I test hypotheses 2a and 2b by illustrating the marginal effects of personalism, conditional on whether an ongoing campaign is present. In addition to providing a test of all three hypotheses, calculating both sets of marginal effects allows for a more nuanced assessment of the degree of support for my theory (Berry et al., 2012). To obtain estimates of the marginal effects for the population as a whole (instead of for an 'average case'), the effects are calculated using the "observed-value approach", that this, the remaining covariates are held at their empirically observed values (Hanmer & Kalkan, 2013).

**Table 2. Effects of personalism and mass mobilization on autocratic survival, 1947-2007**

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Outcome | Irregular leader exit | Irregular leader exit | Regime failure | Regime failure |
| Ongoing campaign | 0.0489** | -0.0107 | 0.0946*** | 0.0225 |
| | (0.0148) | (0.0217) | (0.0221) | (0.0274) |
| Latent personalism | -0.0463 | -0.0888** | -0.0321 | -0.0789* |
| | (0.0299) | (0.0304) | (0.0329) | (0.0375) |
| Ongoing campaign X | | 0.154*** | | 0.182** |
| Latent personalism | | (0.0418) | | (0.0635) |
| Military personnel/PC | 0.597 | 0.566 | -0.187 | -0.191 |
| | (0.975) | (1.041) | (0.928) | (1.012) |
| Oil value/PC (ln) | -0.00315 | -0.00332 | -0.000703 | -0.00102 |
| | (0.00531) | (0.00527) | (0.00583) | (0.00572) |
| Ownership of economy | -0.00540 | -0.00433 | -0.0116 | -0.0106 |
| | (0.00794) | (0.00776) | (0.00770) | (0.00754) |
| GDP/PC (ln) | -0.0128 | -0.0114 | -0.0169 | -0.0148 |
| | (0.0159) | (0.0159) | (0.0174) | (0.0170) |
| GDP growth (%) | -0.0759† | -0.0738† | -0.0839† | -0.0809† |
| | (0.0446) | (0.0438) | (0.0427) | (0.0424) |
| Population size (ln) | -0.0171 | -0.0144 | -0.144* | -0.142* |
| | (0.0464) | (0.0457) | (0.0578) | (0.0578) |
| Urbanization | -0.0774 | -0.0698 | 0.0473 | 0.0538 |
| | (0.0941) | (0.0946) | (0.101) | (0.105) |
| National election | -0.00939 | -0.00936 | -0.00873 | -0.00872 |
| | (0.00836) | (0.00823) | (0.00911) | (0.00898) |
| Constant | 0.668 | 0.620 | 2.396* | 2.366* |
| | (0.797) | (0.784) | (0.966) | (0.967) |
| N (n) | 3308 (102) | 3308 (102) | 3308 (102) | 3308 (102) |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.016 | 0.021 | 0.034 | 0.040 |

*Note: † $p < 0.1$, \* $p < 0.05$, \*\* $p < 0.01$, \*\*\* $p < 0.001$. N = country-years, n = countries. Fixed effects linear regression. Unstandardized regression coefficients with robust standard errors (clustered on country) in parentheses. All models include cubic polynomials and year dummies. Included variables are lagged one year.*

Figure 2 provides strong support for hypothesis 1. In line with expectations, the effect of ongoing campaigns increases with the level of personalism. At low levels of personalism, the effect is statistically insignificant, which implies that mass mobilization does not increase the probability of dictators being removed from power in very non-personalized regimes. Conversely, at the highest level of personalism, ongoing campaigns have a strong, positive, and statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.143$), which implies that ongoing campaigns increase the probability of irregular leader exits by almost 15 percentage points in autocracies where the dictator has attained extreme degrees of regime personalization. Importantly, as the underlying histogram in the figure shows, both extreme values of personalism have considerable empirical coverage in the sample, which ensures that inferences about the effect of ongoing campaigns at these values can be drawn without having to extrapolate.
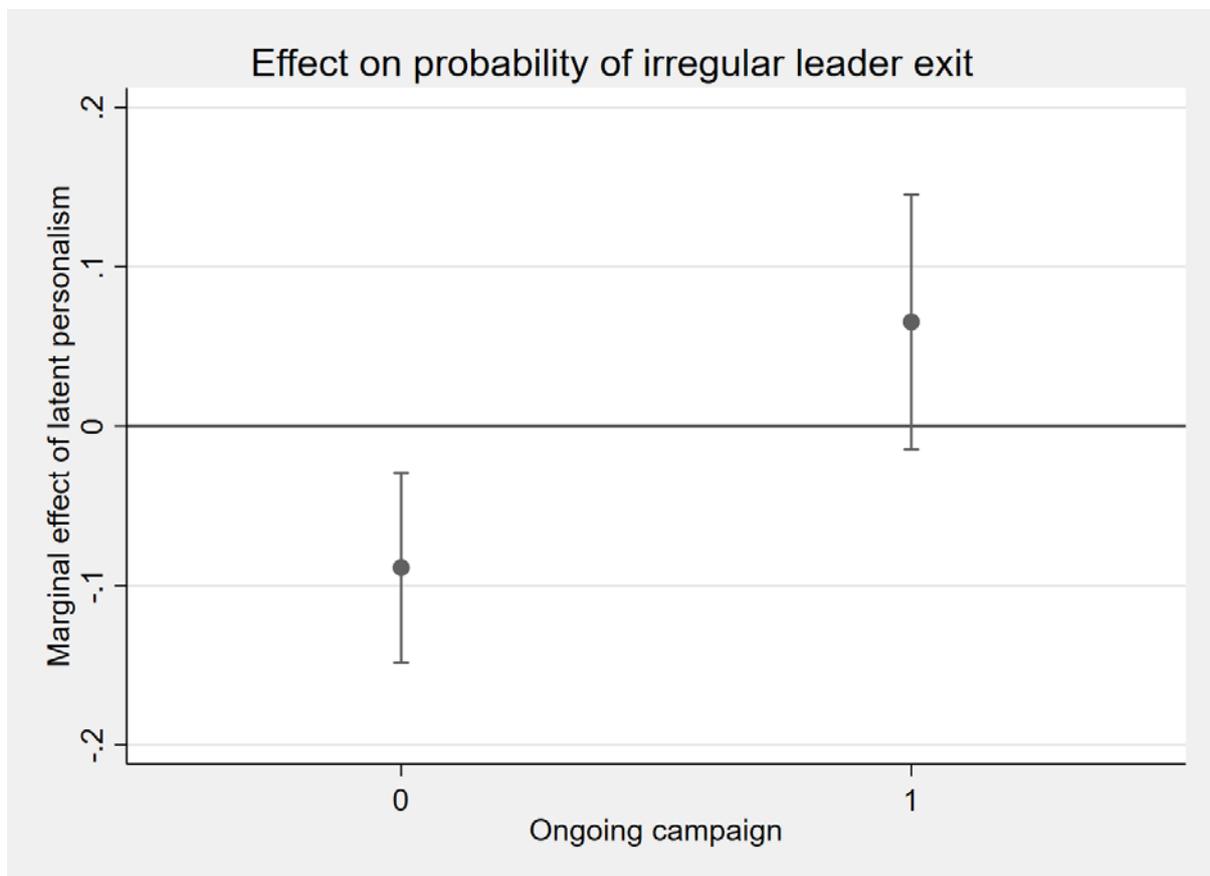
**Figure 2. Marginal effects of ongoing campaign**
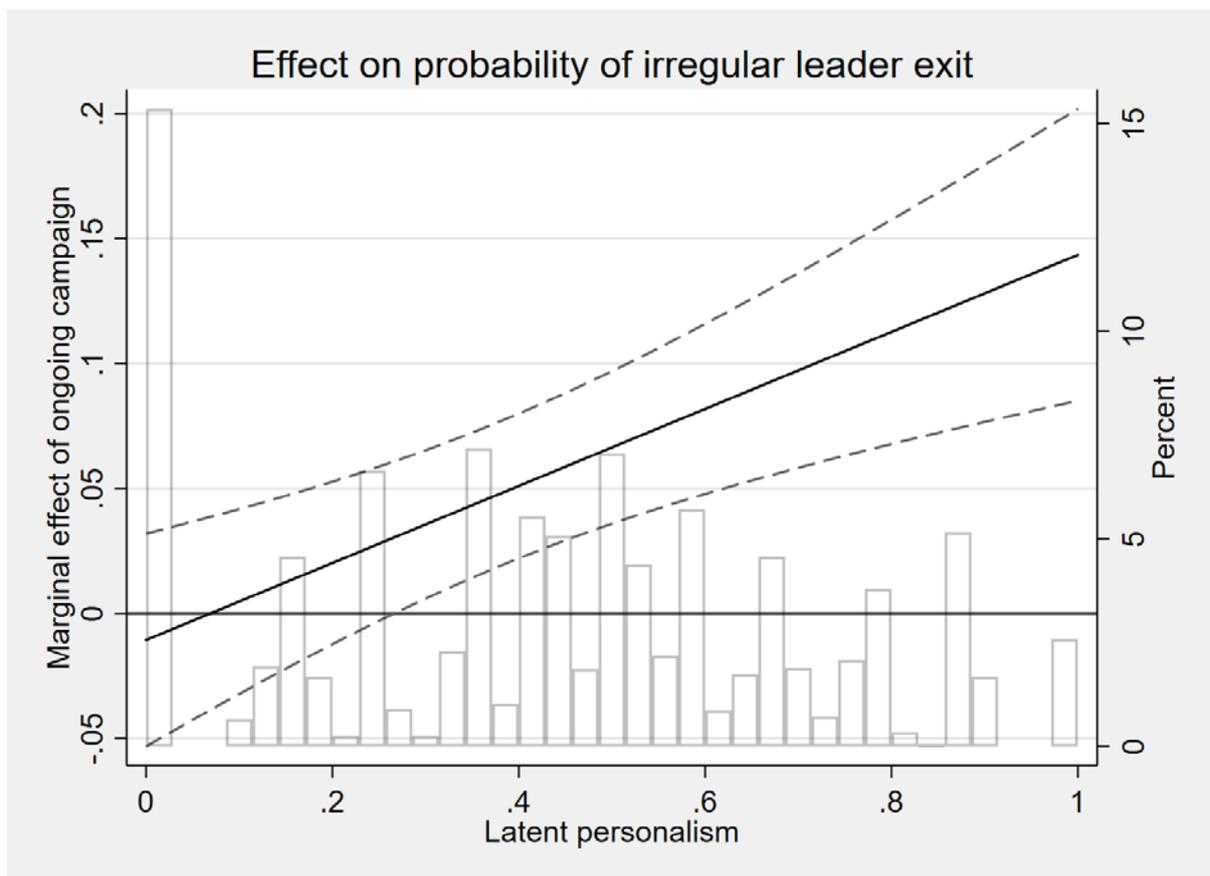


*Note: Estimated marginal effects with 95 % confidence intervals. Calculated based on model 2, table 2. Other covariates are held at their observed values. Histogram shows the sample's distribution of latent personalism.*

Turning now to figure 3, this provides slightly more ambiguous support for the theoretical expectations. On the one hand, the association between personalism and irregular leader exits is negative ($\beta$ = -0.089) and statistically significant ($p$ = 0.004) in the absence of ongoing campaigns, which provides support for hypothesis 2a. On the other hand, while figure does show the expected positive association ($\beta$ = 0.065) between personalism and irregular leader exits in the presence of one or more ongoing campaigns, the estimated effect does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p$ = 0.109). Accordingly, the results provide only scant support for hypothesis 2b.

**Figure 3. Marginal effects of latent personalism**



Note: *Estimated marginal effects with 95 % confidence intervals. Calculated based on model 2, table 2. Other covariates are held at their observed values.*

In sum, the results provide strong support for the expectation that personalism increases dictator's vulnerability to mass-based threats. The results thereby support the core argument of my theory. In line with previous research, the results also suggest that personalism is effective at mitigating elite threats, as personalism is negatively associated with irregular leader exits in the absence of mass mobilization. However, while this negative association turns positive

in the presence of mass mobilization, the estimated effect is not statistically significant. Thus, while personalism no longer increases dictators' likelihood of staying under these circumstances, there is insufficient evidence to support the notion that personalism increases the likelihood of dictators being removed from power (other than by enhancing the effectiveness of the popular challenges). A plausible interpretation of this result is that although personalism increases the probability that dictators are removed from power by the popular uprising, it may still serve to ward off challenges from other elites, who tend to attempt to capitalize on the political instability that accompanies mass mobilization (Johnson & Thyne, 2018).

## Robustness checks

Models 3 and 4 show that the results are very similar if one exchanges irregular leader exits with GWF's measure of regime breakdown. Model 3 shows that the unmoderated effect of ongoing campaigns remains positive and statistically significant, while model 4 likewise shows that the interaction term remains positive and statistically significant. These results serve to increase confidence that the results from models 1 and 2 are not just an artefact of using irregular leader exits as a measure of dictators being removed from power.

If one looks at the estimated marginal effects for regime breakdown as the dependent variable (reported in the appendix), they shown a very similar picture, albeit with one important exception. Looking first at the marginal effects of ongoing campaigns (figure A1), the picture is exactly the same as it was in the main analysis. The marginal effect of ongoing campaigns is statistically insignificant at low levels of personalism, whereas it is strong, positive, and statistically significant at high levels of personalism. However, if we look at the marginal effects of personalism (figure A2), the results differ slightly from those of the main analysis. While the estimated effect of personalism is still negative and statistically significant in the absence of mass mobilization, the estimated positive effect of personalism in the presence of mass mobilization is statistically significant in this specification ($p = 0.045$). In addition to supporting both hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2a, which was supported in the main analysis as well, the robustness checks thus also support hypothesis 2b, which only received limited support in the main analysis. Accordingly personalism may be even more damaging for autocratic survival in the presence of mass mobilization than the main results indicate.

## Conclusion

This paper has contributed to our knowledge of regime personalization as an autocratic power maintenance strategy. By building upon previous research on the topic, which shows that personalism is an effective strategy for managing elite threats, the paper argued and found that personalism is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the results of the analysis corroborated the finding of previous studies by suggesting that personalism indeed is an effective tool for managing elite threats. On the other hand, however, the analysis also showed that personalism increases dictators' vulnerability to mass-based threats. Thus, the choice to (attempt to) personalize one's regime faces the dictator with a trade-off: By reducing his vulnerability to elite threats, he simultaneously increases his vulnerability to mass-based threats. Vice versa, if he decides not to personalize his regime – and thereby retains a low vulnerability to mass-based threats – he increases his risk of being deposed by an elite challenger.

This dilemma – in addition to the difficulty and great risk associated with the process of regime personalization (Svolik, 2012) – may be the reason why personalist regimes have historically been less predominant than other autocratic regime types (Geddes et al., 2014). However, personalism is on the rise globally, and this development can be expected to change the political dynamics of many modern autocratic regimes profoundly. While many of these changes will most likely not be for the better, the coupling of this development with the recent major protest waves gives reason for cautious optimism. If such protest waves continue to erupt, we may see an increasing number of the world's more personalized autocratic regimes fall. What kinds of regimes that will arise in their stead is, however, an open question.

# Appendix

**Table A1. GWF (2017) latent personalism indicators**

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Does access to high office depend on personal loyalty to the regime leader? |
| 2 | Did the regime leader create a new support political party after seizing power? |
| 3 | Does the regime leader control appointments to the party executive committee? |
| 4 | Is the party executive committee absent or simply a rubber stamp for the regime leader's decisions? |
| 5 | Does the regime leader personally control the 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? |
| 7 | Does the regime leader create paramilitary forces, a president's guard, or new security force loyal to himself? |
| 8 | Does the regime leader imprison/kill officers from groups other than his own without a reasonably fair trial? |

**Figure A1. Marginal effects of ongoing campaign**
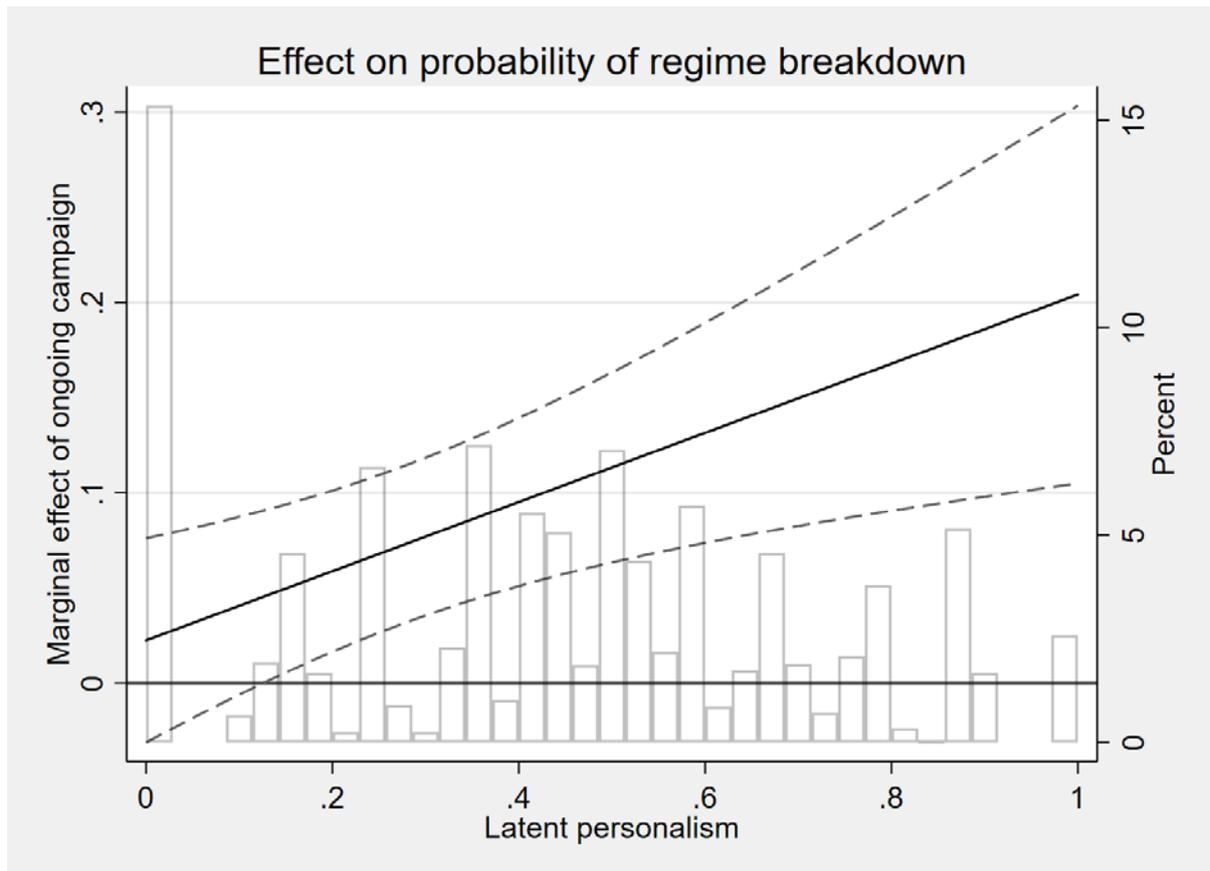


*Note: Estimated marginal effects with 95 % confidence intervals. Calculated based on model 4, table 2. Other covariates are held at their observed values. Histogram shows the sample's distribution of latent personalism.*

**Figure A2. Marginal effects of latent personalism**
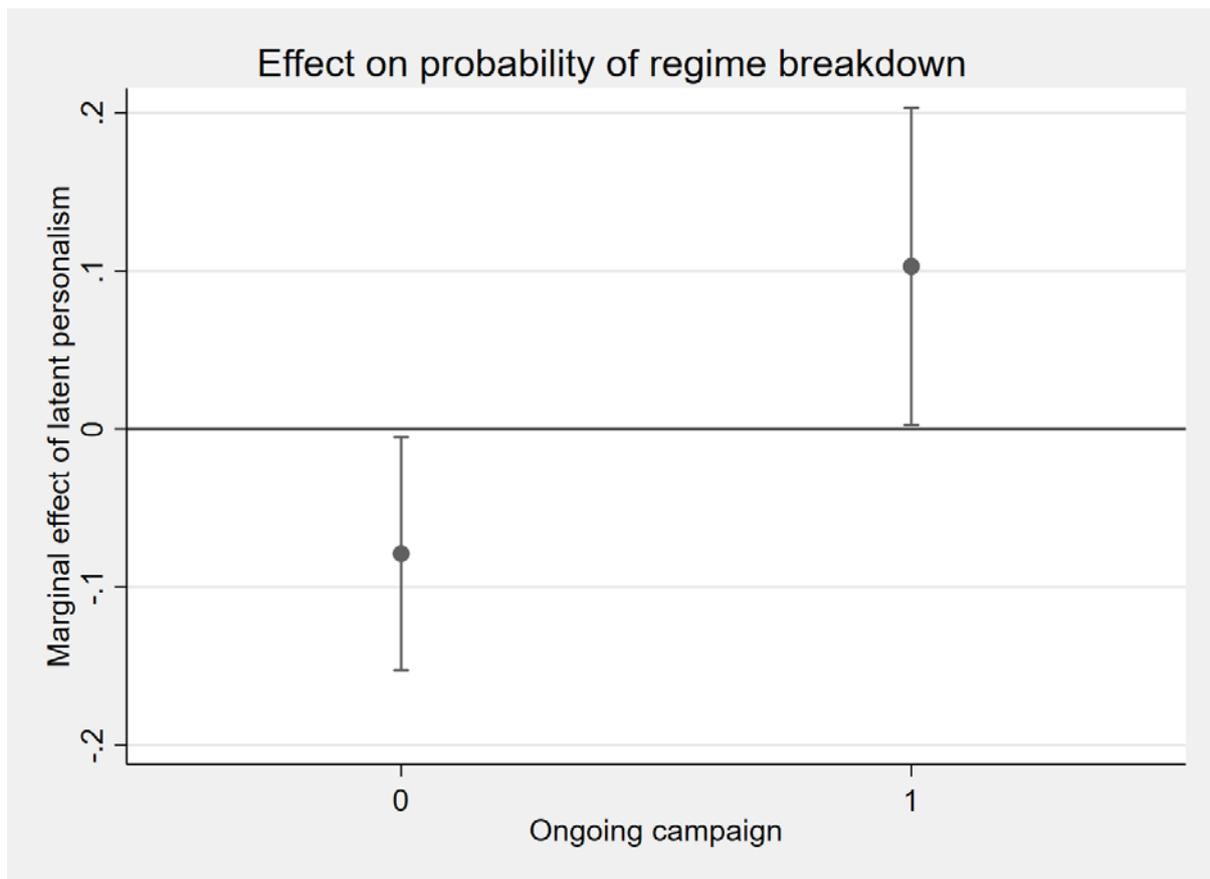


Note: Estimated marginal effects with 95 % confidence intervals. Calculated based on model 4, table 2. Other covariates are held at their observed values.

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