

Essays on Domestic Instability and Uncertainty in Autocracies: Evidence From Contemporary China

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

This dissertation consists of three essays on domestic instability and uncertainty in autocracies with an empirical focus on contemporary China. In the first essay, I study the relationship between China's formerly institutionalized and routinized leadership transitions and interstate dispute escalation to test a theory on temporary policy allocation during periods of relative domestic instability. I show that China's leaders have a history of militarily escalating disputes with other states in the time directly preceding and succeeding leadership transitions. In fact, over 60 percent of incidents of escalation by China that occurred between 1989 and 2013 transpired around leadership transitions. I theorize that this previously unidentified pattern of escalation is motivated by concerns over domestic instability, and that it represents concessions to China's hawkish issue publics to shore up stability at critical junctures. I illustrate the logic of that strategy with a simple formal model. Using maximum likelihood estimation, I find that there is a significant positive relationship between interstate dispute escalation and leadership transition. Of note, it is generally accepted that China has favored win-win diplomatic solutions to its disputes with other states. Instances of escalation have thus been largely categorized as aberrant behavior. My identification of this pattern of escalation challenges this logic and suggests that the militarization of disputes has at times been a routine and strategic undertaking by the leaders of China's Communist Party.

In the second essay, I examine how elite uncertainty affects the allocation of public and private goods. Existing research has established that autocrats offer concessions to prevent ouster by their inner circle. I examine how those concessions are influenced by the relative uncertainty of an autocrat's inner circle about remaining in that favored body. I take as my starting point the formal model of political survival presented in Bueno de Mesquita et al.'s *The Logic of Political Survival*. I extend the model to account for variation in the relative uncertainty of an autocrat's inner circle. To make the math tractable, I dispense with convention and introduce comparative statics across two models with different formulations of uncertainty. This exercise reveals a set of conditions under which to expect an increase in the concessions offered by an autocrat with implications for development and democracy. Those findings yield a corresponding set of logical corollaries with potential to further our understanding of authoritarian politics, including an unexamined facet of the "dictator's dilemma" and related incentives for members of an inner circle to permit purges or act to destabilize their ranks. The models also identify a source of policy volatility not found outside of autocracies. Taken together, the findings suggest a need for more research on elite uncertainty in autocracies.

In the third essay, I develop a measure of political uncertainty in autocracies using evidence from China's formerly institutionalized and routinized leadership transitions and state-controlled media. Political uncertainty, defined as the lack of confidence with which government and policy outcomes can be predicted, has recently surged to unprecedented levels across the globe. Nonetheless, research on the subject is constrained by the absence of an objective measure. Existing solutions for the open problem of measuring political uncertainty necessarily measure it indirectly, with approaches that are not appropriate or applicable in autocracies. Toward a solution to the open problem for autocracies, I develop a measure of political uncertainty with evidence from China. I first locate a plausibly exogenous source of variation in political uncertainty, namely China's formerly institutionalized and routinized leadership transitions. I then exploit the Communist Party's tight control over the news media to reveal the internal dynamics of those leadership transitions. This entails identifying informative temporal and geographic patterns in Chinese archival news on the top candidates for "future" leadership positions, using statistical and machine learning-based anomaly detection methods, including epidemic change-point estimation via a penalized

cost approach, Bayesian detection methods, an unsupervised tree-based algorithm, and composite approach. From the identified patterns, I estimate the timing of leadership selection to approximate when the distribution of political uncertainty becomes less uniform, and subject to variation. Leadership selection changes the distribution of political uncertainty because future leaders are then known and the information can be disseminated. Information on the identities of future leaders at least marginally decreases political uncertainty as each leader has previous public service records and guanxi networks that are central to political transactions in China. To my knowledge, the distribution of political uncertainty has yet to be considered in previously developed measures. As a result, the measure of political uncertainty that I develop can reduce a longstanding source of bias in related research on autocracies, and China in particular.

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