

**When Can Dictators Go It Alone?  
Personalization and Oversight in Authoritarian Regimes**

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**Abstract**

Why are some autocrats able to personalize power within their regimes while others are not? Past studies have focused on the balance of power between the autocrat and his or her supporting coalition of peer or subordinate elites, but we find that often the crucial relationship is between the autocrat and the “old guard”—retired leaders, party elders, and other elites of the outgoing generation. Using an original data set of authoritarian leadership transitions, we argue that when members of the old guard retain *oversight capacity* over their incoming successor, he or she is less likely to overturn power-sharing arrangements and consolidate individual power. We illustrate this argument with a case study of three leadership transitions in China between 1989 and 2012. This study’s findings advance our understanding of elite politics and intergenerational conflict in authoritarian regimes.

**Keywords**

authoritarian regimes, personalism, oversight, old guard, China

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The emergence of powerful autocrats like Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman and Chinese president Xi Jinping has drawn renewed attention to the issue of personalism. Personalism—the condition of an individual leader having discretion over the access to and exercise of political power—can arise in party-based regimes, military regimes, monarchies, or in any other type of authoritarian political system.<sup>1</sup> While much of the current debate is rightly concerned with the potential consequences of authoritarian personalism, there is less discussion of an equally important question: What are its causes? What makes an authoritarian regime susceptible to the personalization of power by an ambitious autocrat?

Although personalism is neither new nor exceptional, it remains difficult to explain why it arises in particular regimes at particular times—why some autocrats are able to personalize power while others are not. Many personalists have been regime founders, as in newly decolonized Africa in the 1960s or in post-Soviet Central Asia in the 1990s; in other cases, would-be personalists had to buck established systems of collective rule. The Saudi and Chinese political systems were thought to have settled into some degree of consensus-based and collective leadership, making recent events surprising even for some veteran observers.<sup>2</sup> Explaining the origins of personalism is important because its consequences for regime behavior and durability can be dramatic. Compared to nonpersonalist authoritarian regimes, personalist dictatorships tend to be more violent toward domestic challengers, more vulnerable to succession crises, and more likely to end through collapse and violent transition rather than reform.<sup>3</sup>

Past studies have often explained personalism as the result of autocrats leveraging and building on initial power disparities between themselves and their supporting coalitions of peer or subordinate elites. For example, Milan Svoblik finds that the amount of power an autocrat holds initially relative to the ruling coalition will determine an equilibrium outcome as power

accumulates on the autocrat's side or the coalition is increasingly able to constrain him or her.<sup>4</sup>

According to Henry Hale, a consolidation from multiple centers to a single locus of power occurs when the leader successfully sets expectations that he or she will be the most lucrative patron for future loyalists, encouraging bandwagoning.<sup>5</sup> And Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz (hereafter GWF) argue that personalism “tends to develop after the seizure of power . . . when seizure groups are factionalized and lack discipline,” since in these moments elites are unlikely to act collectively to constrain the autocrat.<sup>6</sup>

Studies also suggest that if ruling elites are unified in constraining the autocrat, then personalization can be prevented and lasting power-sharing arrangements can be achieved.<sup>7</sup> This type of authoritarian power-sharing, in which no one individual dominates a regime or unilaterally controls its operations, can take varied forms. An autocrat's power may be constrained by a collective body—such as a political party or a junta—by laws or institutional norms, or simply by other individually powerful elites with their own areas of control and networks within the regime. In some cases, power-sharing is mediated by quasi-democratic institutions, such as semicompetitive elections or legislatures that allow some opposition party members, which fall short of democracy but still tie the autocrat's hands.<sup>8</sup> The norms of collective leadership that emerged within Communist Party–led regimes in Vietnam and China in the 1990s and 2000s are just one form of authoritarian power-sharing (although there were also difference between these two cases).<sup>9</sup> In this study, we use the terms *power-sharing* and *collective leadership* broadly to refer to the absence of personalism or to any arrangement that disperses political authority among a group. Power-sharing or collective leadership arrangements are often seen as a more sophisticated form of authoritarian rule that helps regimes avoid the worst excesses of personalist dictatorship.<sup>10</sup>

Our study builds on existing work on power-sharing and collective rule by focusing on the often-crucial relationship between the autocrat and a specific group of former elites representing the “old guard.” We define the old guard as the inner circle of retired regime leaders and elites who held key positions of authority in their administrations—typically including the premier or prime minister, vice president, head of the defense ministry or the military, the secretary of internal affairs, and the head of the foreign ministry. This definition builds on Herb’s specification of certain ministries as being key to maintaining political control and captures what older work on communist regimes referred to as “generations” of leadership.<sup>11</sup> What is critical about this group is their years of shared experience in the previous regime—as we detail in our theory, it is those years that provide this group with particular comparative advantages that bolster their ability to identify, constrain, or punish a would-be personalist. Not all members of the old guard will be equally powerful—in most cases the former leader retains the most authority to lead or coordinate them, as discussed below. The old guard, although not necessarily a unitary actor, share a common interest in checking the personalization of power by a new autocratic successor. An overly powerful successor, even one seen as an acolyte of the former leader, could end the political influence of the old guard, scapegoat them for economic and political problems, arrest them for past offenses (especially corruption), or upset a balance of power among elites that had kept the regime stable.

We argue that when members of the old guard retain *oversight capacity* over an incoming autocrat, he or she is less likely to consolidate individual power. We define oversight capacity as the potential held by previous authoritarian leaders and elites to monitor, constrain, and shape the political behavior of an authoritarian successor. When oversight breaks down, a new leader has more opportunity to overturn power-sharing arrangements, recruit loyalists, undermine rivals,

and take other steps to personalize power. In this way, weak or absent oversight does not directly cause personalization but serves as a permissive condition. Oversight matters regardless of whether the previous autocrat was a personalist or ruled through a power-sharing arrangement; personalization does not follow automatically from the past leader having been a personalist leader, as we demonstrate statistically later in this piece. Even autocrats inheriting a personalist system have to work to consolidate their own control of that system by outcompeting rivals and co-opting or replacing the old dictator's loyalists—work that oversight from the old guard could block. We identify three general mechanisms by which having oversight capacity can help the old guard to check personalization: elite coordination, information leveraging, and resource mobilization.

Because we trace the emergence of authoritarian personalism back to weaknesses in the old guard's oversight, we see autocrats who consolidate personal power as succeeding not due to exceptional individual political talent, as media commentators often presume, but rather because they were left with key windows of opportunity to exploit. Moreover, these windows of opportunity are opened not only by the elites who came to power alongside the autocrat but also by the outgoing elites who failed to supervise the new leadership. Our argument helps explain why regime founders so often personalize power, as the fall of the old regime usually undermines the oversight capacity of preexisting elites while the new regime's founders are still finding their feet. It also fits with data that show a staggered rollout of authoritarian personalism in different regimes over many decades, rather than a sharp rise in recent years, as oversight capacity fails periodically in different regimes rather than globally all at once.<sup>12</sup>

This study has a two-part empirical strategy. First, we examine the general relationship between oversight capacity and the emergence of personalism using an original data set of

authoritarian leadership transitions. The data set tracks three indicators of oversight capacity and four features of personalism in sixty-two leadership transitions between 1990 and 2018. We find that oversight is significantly and negatively associated with personalization, even when restricting our analysis to regimes that exhibited considerable personalization of power prior to transitions. Second, we illustrate our argument with a case study of three leadership transitions in China between 1989 and 2012. Taking advantage of within-country variation, we show how weakening oversight from Chinese Communist Party (CCP) elders in 2012 allowed incoming leader Xi Jinping to consolidate personal power, despite the regime's past collective leadership under Presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. While Xi's personalization of power is sometimes attributed to his assertive personality and smart tactics, such as purging rivals through an anticorruption campaign, it is important to note that he faced far fewer constraints from the CCP old guard than his immediate predecessors had at the start of their administrations. The Chinese case, along with several shorter vignettes from Vietnam, Russia, and Morocco, also illustrates the mechanisms by which oversight helps to check personalization.

This study and its findings contribute to our understanding of elite politics and intergenerational conflict in authoritarian regimes. First, this study formalizes the concept of oversight capacity. Although the idea of political influence from retired leaders is well known and commonly cited in individual country cases, we advance research on the phenomenon by providing a systematic, cross-national examination of its role in authoritarian politics. Second, our findings about the connection between oversight and personalization suggest the need to rethink the nature of power-sharing arrangements in authoritarian regimes; power-sharing is not only about the distribution of authority among elites who rule together but also often has an important intergenerational or temporal dimension. Third, and finally, our finding that

personalism is at least partly the result of factors beyond an autocrat's control cuts against the common notion—which autocrats themselves encourage—that only highly charismatic or cunning leaders can consolidate personal power.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the reverse may be closer to the truth; personalist leaders who have managed to consolidate power are able to launch propaganda campaigns to convince people that they are rare geniuses with tremendous popular appeal.

Following this introduction, this essay first explains how old guard oversight works to make personalization more difficult through three common mechanisms. We then lay out this study's methodological approach, including how we measure oversight and personalization. After that, we detail our findings from the large-n analysis and present the case study on personalization in China. The penultimate section goes beyond China to further illustrate our argument and proposed mechanisms in diverse authoritarian contexts. Finally, a short conclusion summarizes the findings and considers the study's broader contributions.

## **How Does Oversight Work?**

We identify three general mechanisms by which old guard oversight can constrain a successor: *coordination* among themselves, *information* about personalizing moves and what to do about them, and the *mobilization* of networks and constituencies.

Why these mechanisms? Existing research has already shown that regime elites can use coordination, information, and mobilization to prevent personalism, and that authoritarian institutions help elites exercise these strategies more effectively. We contend that old guards use the same strategies as other elites and can equally benefit from authoritarian institutions—but on top of that, old guards have comparative advantages that enable them to use these strategies even more effectively. Old guards enjoy advantages relative to other elites that make them better coordinators, information users, and mobilizers: they typically have a history of working

together, they have years of experience in the political system, and they have had the time to build up independent power bases. Any of these comparative advantages can help an old guard be more effective constrainers of personalists than other regime elites; no single strategy is necessary to do so, but each could be individually sufficient.

*Coordination* is about how elites can overcome the collective action problem required to balance against a would-be personalist. In existing theories of authoritarian rule, this collective action problem has been described as resistance to a divide-and-rule strategy, the “stag hunt” game, and a problem of “authoritarian power-sharing”<sup>14</sup>—it requires that all elites commit to rebelling against an attempt to consolidate power without any individual elite defecting to bandwagon with the would-be power-consolidator. According to Svobik, formal deliberative bodies like politburos and ruling councils solve this problem by preventing misperceptions between coordinating regime elites.<sup>15</sup> An old guard can also prevent misperceptions. In the same way that, as Levitsky and Way argue, revolutionary regime founders are bound together by common experience,<sup>16</sup> members of an old guard with years of common history governing together are likely to have high degrees of mutual trust and understanding that make them less likely to defect from an antipersonalization effort and less fearful that their collaborators will defect. New elites, without this common history of governing together, may be more vulnerable to misperceptions and mistrust when deciding whether to act collectively to constrain the autocrat.

For example, in 2008, Vladimir Putin reached his presidential term limit and stepped down into the prime minister’s office—a position that, in Russia’s “super-presidentialist” system,<sup>17</sup> was very weak in formal powers. At the time, a significant camp of Russia watchers anticipated that the new president, Dmitri Medvedev, had a credible opportunity to dramatically



reshape the regime in his own image.<sup>18</sup> Yet Putin was able to rely on some key allies: the powerful elites he had surrounded himself with during his presidency and who remained in Medvedev's administration—in particular the *siloviki*, such as the then deputy prime minister Igor Sechin and the then presidential chief of staff Sergei Ivanov, with whom Putin shared a career in the former Soviet security services and in city government before appointing them to powerful positions during his presidency. While it may seem impossible in hindsight, this was a moment when the *siloviki* could have transferred their loyalties, and without years of common experience with the former president, they might have.

Old guard members also have an advantage in leveraging *information* against an ambitious successor. After a regime transition, all posttransition elites have incomplete information about the intentions of the new leader,<sup>19</sup> but some such information is necessary to recognize and punish actions that would threaten collective rule. Boix and Svobik show how institutions that monitor the autocrat help regime allies detect potential renegeing from the power-sharing agreement,<sup>20</sup> and Gelbach and Keefer show that institutions that promote transparency in autocratic parties help economic elites identify and punish expropriation by the autocrat.<sup>21</sup> These theories require that regime elites be able to recognize an action that would threaten collective leadership and know how to punish it effectively. Old guard members, who have years of experience playing the game of authoritarian politics, may better understand when a personnel shift, a change to the policy portfolio, or a political favor threatens to tip the balance of power within a ruling coalition in favor of the autocrat. Old guard elites should also possess deeper knowledge about rule changes and other tricks that can anticipate and stymie such personalizing moves, counter them once they have occurred, or deter the autocrat from making them in the first

place. New elites, without this knowledge and experience, may be more likely to miscalculate and let a personalizing move slip by.

One example of this mechanism comes from Vietnam, where a troika of former Vietnamese Communist Party leaders used information about the ambitious general secretary Le Kha Phieu (1997–2001) to hinder his attempt to consolidate more power. In January 2001, the three former leaders proposed a measure in the Central Committee that would lower the age limit for officials who could be reappointed, which had the effect of barring Phieu from a second term as general secretary.<sup>22</sup> Cleverly, this move could be framed in a neutral way that followed party tradition and addressed the oft-raised policy goal of generally keeping the leadership in the party from getting too old. Had this troika of former party leaders not had years of experience manipulating the complex “nomenklatura” system of appointments, they may not have found such an effective means of constraining Phieu without inviting a stronger backlash.

Finally, an old guard with oversight capacity may be well positioned to *mobilize* against a would-be personalist. As Svobik and Boix and Svobik both show, as important as authoritarian institutions may be, their benefits are limited by the underlying distribution of power among regime elites and their capacity to mobilize a credible response to personalization.<sup>23</sup> The presence of old guard elites, who during years in the regime may have built their own power bases and been the public faces of politics, means that those in position to recognize and coordinate against a power grab also have the political resources to meaningfully deter or derail efforts at personalization. Old guard elites, especially when they remain in positions of authority, may retain networks of obligation and influence that include powerful symbolic, economic, or coercive elites outside the ruling group, or they may retain constituencies of popular support.<sup>24</sup> Such networks and constituencies can be used to obstruct new policy

proposals that would centralize power in one pair of hands,<sup>25</sup> to convince other elites outside the old guard that bandwagoning with the would-be personalist is likely to fail,<sup>26</sup> or to deter the would-be personalist herself from radical power-grabbing moves like monopolizing a policy domain, purging a bureaucracy, or removing officials affiliated with other factions.<sup>27</sup> In each of these ways, by keeping a “hand on the wheel,” old guard elites maintain networks of power or popular constituencies that they may have built during their years in public office—networks and constituencies that new elites may lack.

Despite being forced from the top job in 2014, former Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki retained the position of vice president, from which he was able to maintain a network of close personal supporters in the Islamic Dawa Party that he had built during his time in office. This network continued to wield power in the Iraqi Parliament, and through this network, al-Maliki continued to pose a challenge to his successor, Haider al-Abadi, for years after leaving the prime minister’s office. Al-Maliki demonstrated his influence by mobilizing this network to force out key members of Abadi’s cabinet, including the ministers of defense and finance, by holding a series of anticorruption hearings coordinated with supporters in Parliament.<sup>28</sup> Had al-Maliki not been a member of the old guard, he would never have had the opportunity to build a network capable of challenging the new prime minister this effectively.

None of these strategies is a guarantee, but members of the old guard are more likely than other elites to deploy them successfully because their years of experience governing together endow them with comparative advantages in the mutual trust that facilitates coordination, the political savvy required to exploit information, and the networks or constituencies necessary to mobilize against a personalizing autocrat. When old guards stay off the sidelines by maintaining positions of oversight capacity, their advantages in any one of these strategies can make

personalizing power more difficult for autocrats. Inversely, weak or absent oversight does not guarantee that personalism will emerge, but it does open a window of opportunity and gives the new leader a freer hand to break norms and consolidate power.

## **Methodological Approach**

To examine the general relationship between oversight and personalization in authoritarian regimes, we constructed a data set covering fifty-nine leadership transitions between 1990 and 2018, including indicators of whether the old guard had oversight capacity and whether the new leader went on to personalize power.<sup>29</sup> Our data cover all instances in which a chief executive or regime leader of an authoritarian regime succeeded a politically affiliated leader and completed at least one year in office.

To construct this data set, we begin with Svobik's definition of authoritarianism: any country which "fails to elect its legislature and executive in free and competitive elections."<sup>30</sup> We then take Svobik's data set of authoritarian leadership transitions and extend it beyond its endpoint in 2008 to include all countries that continued to lack free and fair legislative or executive elections through 2018.<sup>31</sup> For 1990–2008, we rely on Svobik's identification of rulers succeeding politically affiliated predecessors; for the 2008–2015 time period, we follow Svobik in identifying leader transitions using the Archigos database of political leaders; and for a small number of post-2015 transitions, we rely on secondary sources and our own case knowledge (following Goemans et al.'s approach to the Archigos data set).<sup>32</sup>

With this global sample, we capture considerable variation across authoritarian subtypes: from highly neopatrimonial to ideal-type party-based regimes, from monarchies to military juntas, and from oil-rich rentier states to the state-run economies of Leninist dictatorships. These data cover the ideal cases for testing our theory: negotiated transitions from one leader to another

in a fully authoritarian regime. We therefore exclude from our main analysis leaders who come to power via coups, invasions, civil wars, or competitive elections (although including other forms of transition does not substantively change our results).<sup>33</sup> The purposes of this large-n analysis are to demonstrate generalizability and to determine if any deviant cases disconfirm the theory. We first show the simple bivariate relationship between oversight capacity and subsequent personalization; we then explore deviant cases qualitatively; finally, we perform robustness checks to be sure that the relationships we observe are not artifacts of the data-collection process.

### *Measuring Oversight*

We choose a conservative operationalization of oversight that likely undercounts cases where oversight is present, especially when the old guard exercises less formal means of influence, but in exchange is less susceptible to measurement error. When we observe *any one* of three possible indicators of oversight amid an authoritarian leadership transition, we can be reasonably certain that existing pretransition elites are well positioned to constrain a successor. These characteristics are assessed only at the moment of transition in order to minimize the risk that later events sway our determination of whether oversight capacity was present or not. The three indicators are as follows:

- 1) The former chief executive remains in a high office.
- 2) The former chief executive is formally out of office but remains politically active and has a close ally or loyalist in a high office.
- 3) The former chief executive is no longer politically active, but a close family member of his or her generation (spouse, sibling, brother, etc.) remains in a high office.

The logic behind the first characteristic is that former leaders who continue on for months after the handover of the top spot as head of the military, “special advisor,” vice president, or in some other formal office likely retain enough behind-the-scenes influence to monitor and, if need be check, their successors. In Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev’s decision in March of 2019 to retire from the presidency while retaining leadership of the Kazakh security council is an archetypical example of this form of oversight. The second characteristic reflects a similar version of this dynamic: a well-known phenomenon in which retired autocrats continue to influence politics through allies or loyalists who stayed on while formally “retiring.” In Myanmar, Senior General Than Shwe retired in March 2011 and was succeeded by Thein Sein as president. But Than Shwe continued to wield influence that could check Thein Sein, if necessary, through his ally Min Aung Hlaing, who took over as head of the military. There are always some holdovers in a leadership transition, but we assume that those in top positions are the most likely to be able to continue to check a new leader. The third characteristic takes into account the power of family members of autocrats, which matters not only in regimes with royal families but in other authoritarian regime subtypes as well. The brothers of the late king Fahad (ruled 1982–2005) continued to guard their “fiefdoms” within the Saudi state against full control by his successor and half-brother, King Abdullah.<sup>34</sup> Together, these characteristics suggest who in the old guard can wield oversight capacity: the former chief executive; elites from the past administration, if the former chief executive can coordinate them; and certain family members of the former chief executive regardless of whether the latter is still alive or politically active.

One concern about measurement validity may be that we might only observe elites exercising oversight capacity when a new leader challenges it, as through an attempted purge of the former leader’s cronies. However, we choose a measurement strategy that deliberately avoids

this type of measurement bias. We assess oversight based simply on who occupies which offices at the moment of transition: on whether the former leader retains high office, whether the former leader remains politically active and has cronies who retain high office, or whether a family member of the same generation retains high office regardless of the former leader's political status. This method of assessment does not require any information from after the leadership transition, and it should capture oversight capacity regardless of whether it is put to active use or not.

Our study's argument also raises important concerns about endogeneity: maybe strong successors weaken the old guard. Our theory does not rule out the ability of strong successors to overcome constraints postsuccession; old guards enjoy advantages in coordination, information, and mobilization that empower them to constrain a personalizing successor but do not guarantee that they are always successful in doing so. Overcoming oversight capacity is not inconsistent with our theory—we expect oversight capacity to correlate with limited moves toward personalization on average, but not without exception in all cases.

For this reason, we pay careful attention in our measurement strategy to distinguish oversight capacity (or lack thereof) from subsequent efforts at personalization. We assess oversight capacity only at the moment that leadership transition occurs, as a snapshot view of power dynamics between the old guard and a new leader at the moment of transition. This is similar to the approach taken by Svobik and GWF, who examine “initial” power distributions among ruling coalitions or seizure groups to explain whether a new leader will be able to personalize power over time.<sup>35</sup> In the case of our study, if a new leader does succeed in removing oversight capacity and personalizing power, then this is a violation of our theoretical expectations. For example, Kim Jong-un assassinated his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, as part of

consolidating personal power. We interpret this not as personalism arising in the absence of oversight capacity but as personalism arising despite the presence of oversight capacity; for Kim Jong-un, it is not that oversight capacity never existed, but that it did exist and was overcome. Purges and other power moves that occur after the new leader comes into office cannot reach backward in time to affect oversight capacity as we measure it—that is, whether oversight existed at the moment of the handoff or not.

A separate category of endogeneity concerns the possibility that unobservable attributes of a successor may affect whether oversight existed to begin with. More skilled or savvy individuals might be systematically better able to weaken the old guard as part of their path to power, engineering a lack of constraint on their powers *ex ante*; we would then misinterpret this as a lack of oversight failing to constrain a successor. This issue poses a greater threat to the validity of our theory because it suggests that we might observe oversight capacity merely as a by-product of a would-be successor's inability to personalize. It is reasonable to assume that would-be successors jockeying for future power have already exploited every political opportunity within their reach at the point of succession. To address this potential source of confounding, we include several observable successor attributes (measured at the point of succession) in follow-up quantitative analyses. However, observing and measuring political "skill" directly and *ex ante* across a universe of cases is not an option due to the opaque nature of autocracies and the heterogeneity of behind-the-scenes jockeying for influence within different regimes. For this reason, to provide further evidence that oversight capacity is distinct from successor "skill," we process-trace the role of oversight, successors' actions, and other potential factors in case studies of authoritarian successions in China, Vietnam, Russia, and Morocco.



We find that weakened oversight—meaning former leaders, family members, or cronies retain no high office at the point of transition—often results from factors that would-be successors have little influence over. In some cases, the former leader is deceased, too infirm to command political loyalty, or has no family members of his or her generation who could credibly hold high office. Another possibility is that major policy failings have delegitimized the predecessor, lessening the former leader’s credibility, authority, or leeway to participate in politics (directly or through proxies) after a new leader is chosen. Russian president Boris Yeltsin suffered something like a delegitimization in the late 1990s and faded remarkably quickly after leaving power in 2000 as a result. In these cases, leadership transition creates a popular narrative that the “new blood” should be given space to make bold changes. Finally, if a former leader has been out of office for a substantial number of years, this may create a leadership generation gap that weakens his or her coordination and information advantages. For example, after having been out of office for a decade during the Hu years, former Chinese president Jiang Zemin’s influence over incoming elites in the new Xi administration (2012–), even former allies, was significantly eroded.

### *Measuring Personalism*

We define personalism, following GWF, as an authoritarian subtype in which “the leader has concentrated power at the expense of his closest supporters” and “the dictator has personal discretion and control over the key levers of power in his political system.”<sup>36</sup> To operationalize this in cases, we judged an autocrat to have personalized power if we observe *at least two* of four characteristics:<sup>37</sup>

- 1) Were there purges of high-level officials, such as the prime minister, defense minister, interior minister, or ranking officers in the armed forces and intelligence services?

- 2) Does access to high office depend on personal loyalty to the chief executive?
- 3) Does the chief executive monopolize policymaking power across multiple domains? Or does he or she have to contend with other centers of power?
- 4) Is there a cult of personality around the chief executive?

If this condition was not met, then the autocrat should be described as sharing power to some significant degree. While our coding is based off of GWF's definition, it is consistent with various definitions of neopatrimonialism, sultanism, and personalism. This includes Bratton and Van de Walle's sense of pervasive "relationships of loyalty and dependence" in neopatrimonialism; the ability of rulers to set policy through "arbitrary personal decisions;" the purge of potential rivals as a means of maintaining this monopoly on policymaking; and the prevalence of cults of personality around "established" personalists.<sup>38</sup> Each of these four characteristics was found in about 30–40 percent of regimes in the data, except for cults of personality, which were found in about 16 percent of regimes.<sup>39</sup>

Although they address related topics, these indicators are not collinear. Cuban leader Raul Castro, for example, was able to purge some potential rivals from high office yet still had to cede policy authority to counterparts who had no particular loyalty to him.<sup>40</sup> In Angola, João Lourenço was able to personalize power to some degree after succeeding President José Eduardo dos Santos in 2017, stripping the former leader and his family of power and privilege while still offering policy concessions to placate other groups of elites.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, purges may seem endogenous to the existence of an old guard, but even in the absence of an old guard autocrats always face other potential rivals.

Our determinations of rulers' personalization of power tracks relatively well with the binary classifications in GWF,<sup>42</sup> agreeing in twenty-nine of the thirty-nine cases (74 percent) that

appear in both data sets.<sup>43</sup> The cases that GWF code as personalist but we do not include Cuba in 2006, Russia in 2008, and Syria in 2000. While in each case a successor takes over from a personalist regime, we do not observe these successors personalizing power.<sup>44</sup> We assess each leader's personalization or lack thereof individually. Cases where we observe personalism where GWF do not include monarchies that exhibit personalization of power, such as Jordan and Morocco in 1999, and in Iraq under Nouri al-Maliki in 2006 (which GWF code as under foreign occupation).<sup>45</sup>

Do all autocrats want to personalize power? We assume that most, although of course not all, autocrats want more power. Our argument is that a lack of oversight from the old guard will tend to make personalization of power easier for an ambitious autocratic successor, not that it guarantees personalization of power. One reason the autocrat might not personalize power is indeed a lack of desire to do so, whether because of personality type, a moral objection, or adherence to ideological or religious principles. If we could determine *ex ante* that certain authoritarian leaders would never want to personalize power and rule them out, then the observed positive relationship between weak oversight and personalization should be even stronger.

### **Establishing a General Relationship: Large-n Findings**

Based on the above coding of oversight capacity and personalization, we find that forty-five (76 percent) of the leadership transitions we examine are consistent with our theory—rulers personalizing where oversight is absent and failing to personalize in the presence of oversight.<sup>46</sup> In the thirty-one transitions where oversight capacity was present, only three successors managed to personalize power—a crude “personalization rate” of around 10 percent. By contrast, in the



<b>Total</b>	39	20	59
	66.1%	33.9%	100%
Chi-squared = 14.9, p < 0.001			

Of the fourteen cases that are not consistent with our theory, eleven are simply nonconfirmatory—rulers do not personalize (for whatever reason) despite having the opportunity to do so. In one group of “failures to personalize,” oversight from political parties appears to have constrained subsequent rulers even in the absence of a holdover leader, as we might expect per Magaloni and Svolik.<sup>47</sup> This describes successors who failed to personalize power in Mexico (1994) and Ethiopia (2012). In another group of cases that did not produce personalization, military leaders ruled collectively despite transfers of power, such as in Algeria (1994) and Mauritania (2009). This trend may be connected to the exceptional preference of many military regimes to stay in power only temporarily, as a means of securing limited political aims, rather extending their tenure to consolidate power.<sup>48</sup> This may explain why our theory performs less well in regimes led by military juntas, which scholars have noted often willingly return to the barracks.<sup>49</sup> Following the assassination of Algerian president Mohamed Boudiaf in 1992, for example, the Algerian military’s organizational cohesion enabled it to rule the country collectively under a series of individual leaders until a stage-managed transition to civilian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 1999.<sup>50</sup> Some cases are harder to explain. In Syria (2000), evidence suggests that elites from the old regime were able to coordinate around and constrain efforts by Bashar al-Assad to personalize rule after the death of his father, despite the most relevant family members and cronies of Hafez al-Asad having died or been executed or exiled prior to the transition.<sup>51</sup>

Only three cases—North Korea in 2011, Saudi Arabia in 2015, and Angola in 2017—are disconfirmatory in that rulers did personalize power even in spite of observed oversight constraints. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un was able to leverage an exceptional cult of personality around the Kim family line to purge his uncle-in-law, Jang Song-thaek, as well as

hundreds of other elites after coming to power in 2011. Likewise, despite Angolan leader José Eduardo dos Santos retaining powerful positions within the ruling MPLA party and securing key government positions for his children, his successor, João Lourenço, was able to force his predecessor's departure from politics while stacking the party Politburo with loyalists.<sup>52</sup> Saudi Arabia is a difficult case to code, given that considerable commentary has pointed to the personalization of power under current crown prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), to the point of referring to him as the *de facto* ruler of the country—consolidating policymaking power within his hands, purging rivals, and establishing loyalty to his person as the ultimate criteria for holding high office.<sup>53</sup> Formally, King Salman's half-brother, Muqrin bin 'Abdul-Aziz, held the high office of deputy crown prince prior to King Abdullah's death, becoming crown prince immediately upon King Salman's succession to the throne. Despite this, and contrary to suggestions that the royal family might act collectively to prevent the crown prince from accumulating too much individual power, a combination of actions by King Salman and MBS left the latter widely considered the Kingdom's "de facto" ruler.<sup>54</sup>

To summarize, the majority of cases in the data confirm our theory; we observe personalization in over half of transitions *without* oversight capacity, but in just three out of thirty-one transitions *with* oversight capacity.

We conducted three robustness checks to account for three potential sources of bias in our data: preexisting levels of personalism within regimes, right-censoring of data, and our coding of personalism.

First, personalist leaders might simply be more likely to beget personalist successors, either because they have eliminated many key rivals or because ruling elites come to trust that a new ruler will abide by old promises and guarantees.<sup>55</sup> GWF data, for example, typically code

successors in a personalist regime as personalist themselves, even when the successor does not clearly personalize power themselves. We therefore split our sample according to whether regimes are classified as personalist prior to transitions in GWF typological codings (Geddes et al. 2014), to test whether oversight is simply a function of the regime already being highly personalized at the point of transition.<sup>56</sup> Our sample includes cases of GWF-personal regimes that nevertheless exhibit oversight during transitions (five out of seventeen cases); we ultimately find that transitions in thirteen out of seventeen GWF-personalist regimes (76 percent) and thirty-one out of forty nonpersonal regimes (78 percent) are consistent with our theory.<sup>57</sup>

Second, given that some leaders in our data set are right-censored before we observe a full five years of potential personalization, our data might be biased against observing eventual personalization among rulers. We therefore repeat our comparison assuming that *no* censored leader free from oversight personalizes power (having not already done so) and assuming that *all* censored leaders subject to oversight *do* personalize power. Even if we thereby amend our data as far as possible against our theory, this still leaves us with thirty-nine cases (66 percent) that our theory explains well, with a chi-squared test still rejecting the null hypothesis of no connection between oversight and personalization at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

Finally, it is reasonable to wonder whether our particular “cut point” to identify cases of personalization—that is exhibiting at least two out of four indicators—is driving our results. To account for this, we compare our results with those that obtain if we code for personalization on the basis of regimes exhibiting a single indicator of personalization or at least three out of four possible indicators. Allowing a single indicator to indicate personalization results in forty-four cases well predicted by our theory (p-value  $< 0.001$  in a chi-squared test), albeit with eight cases (14 percent) directly contradicting our theory by offering evidence of personalization despite



clear oversight capacity. Requiring observation of any three indicators again leaves forty-four cases (75 percent) well predicted by our theory, with only two cases (3 percent) directly contradicting our theory. Thus, while different standards of what constitutes personalization in authoritarian regimes affect our interpretation of particular cases, our broad conclusion—that the presence of oversight capacity is an important indicator of consensus-based authoritarian rule amid leadership transitions—stands.

### *Alternative Explanations*

Our main results display a strong association between lack of oversight capacity and personalization within autocracies. Still, comparing only case outcomes through chi-squared tests may overlook other, underlying factors that affect the likelihood of personalization. To assess whether this is the case, we conduct a series of OLS regressions (with standard errors clustered by country) of personalization outcomes on oversight capacity as well as a series of control variables.

First, several economic factors might afford successors a greater opportunity to personalize power. Because economic stagnation might undermine the popularity of the outgoing leadership, we code for whether regimes have experienced an *economic crisis* (negative growth of 2 percent or more in the five years leading up to the transition) while also controlling for per-capita *GDP* (presented as a logged value).<sup>58</sup> We also control for whether new rulers with access to natural resource rents (logged values of natural gas and oil wealth per capita) are better able to monopolize power through access to state largesse.<sup>59</sup>

Second, given the literature's growing focus on the role of quasi-democratic institutions in structuring politics under authoritarianism, we include measures of formal institutional

arrangements to assess whether stronger constraints are associated with a lack of personalization under authoritarianism. Institutions such as legislatures, judiciaries, and formal constitutions outlining the executive's role are all associated with leaders and regimes "tying their hands" with respect to potential rivals or targets of expropriation.<sup>60</sup> We include measures of *judicial* and *legislative constraints* on the executives from the Varieties of Democracy database; as an alternative measure, we utilize POLITY IV's *XCON* measure of constraints on the executive, although this incorporates constraints from a much wider range of "accountability groups."<sup>61</sup>

Third, we control for three broader characteristics of authoritarian regimes: existing levels of personalization of power, past experiences with democracy, and duration. While we conceive of new leaders as facing a struggle to accumulate personal power anew following their succession, the degree of personalization under a previous leader might make it easier to personalize power under a new leader.<sup>62</sup> We therefore control for the preexisting extent of personalization with GWF's continuous (0 to 1) measure of personalization taken from the year prior to a given transition; while GWF's data set only extends to 2010, we project scores forward to successions that take place after 2010.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, pre-1990 periods of democracy might encourage new leaders to return to a more "collegial" style of rule marked by elite bargaining rather than the personal accumulation of power. We therefore code for whether a given regime was a *democracy* at any point in the country's post-1945 history per the dichotomous classification of regimes as democracy or dictatorship by Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland.<sup>64</sup> Likelihood of personalization may also be associated with regime *duration*, regardless of the specific existence of oversight capacity. Norms of power-sharing may become ever-more deeply ingrained among the country's ruling elite through repeated interactions;<sup>65</sup> alternatively, the

passage of time may open up new opportunities for rising leaders to claim a greater share of power.<sup>66</sup>

Fourth and finally, we include two leader-specific attributes: the age of successors and whether or not successors attended Western universities for tertiary education.<sup>67</sup> Younger autocrats with longer time horizons might be more willing to risk personalization once in office yet conversely might lack the political experience necessary to outmaneuver would-be rivals. Furthermore, age represents an ascriptive characteristic that is most comparable across leaders within our data set, with wide variation: from twenty-nine (Kim Jong-un) to eighty-one (King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia). In addition, autocratic leaders with Western university educations have been more likely to initiate or at least tolerate democratization under their rule; this might plausibly extend to favoring a less personalized style of rule, regardless of the opportunities to personalize.<sup>68</sup>

Table 2 shows the results of OLS regressions with these control variables. Economic conditions (Models 3 and 4) do not hold much direct explanatory power over personalization outcomes. In Model 5, measuring institutional constraints using V-DEM scores produces the expected sign on greater judicial constraints (negatively associated with personalization) but not for legislative constraints (positively associated); neither is significant at the ( $p < 0.01$ ) level.

**Table 2.** OLS Regressions of Dichotomous Measure of Personalization on Oversight and Various Control Variables

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Oversight	-0.51*** (-0.13)	-0.53*** (-0.13)	-0.50*** (-0.14)	-0.53*** (-0.12)	-0.51*** (-0.11)	-0.49*** (-0.11)	-0.43*** (-0.13)	-0.49*** (-0.11)	-0.63*** (-0.10)	-0.44*** (-0.12)
GDP per capita (logged)			0.04 (-0.05)	0.03 (-0.05)						
Growth			0.002 (-0.01)							
Economic Crisis			0.08 (-0.13)							
Fuel rents per capita (logged)				0.002 (-0.02)						
Judicial Constraints					-0.3 (-0.34)					
Legislative Constraints					0.27 (-0.27)					
XCON						-0.06 (-0.05)				
Prior Personalism							0.36 (-0.23)			
Prior Democracy								-0.12 (-0.11)		
Duration									0.01** (-0.003)	
Successor Age										-0.01 (-0.01)
Western Education										-0.21* (-0.11)
Constant	0.61*** (-0.12)	0.43*** (-0.12)	0.25 (-0.43)	0.34 (-0.41)	0.63*** (-0.11)	0.74*** (-0.14)	0.44*** (-0.15)	0.62*** (-0.09)	0.49*** (-0.12)	1.05*** (-0.28)
Regional controls?	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Observations	59	59	59	59	58	59	53	59	59	59
R <sup>2</sup>	0.29	0.42	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.31	0.32	0.3	0.34	0.34
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.28	0.34	0.25	0.26	0.26	0.28	0.29	0.27	0.31	0.3
Residual SE	0.41 (df=57)	0.39 (df=51)	0.41 (df=54)	0.41 (df=55)	0.41 (df=54)	0.40 (df=56)	0.41 (df=50)	0.41 (df=56)	0.40 (df=56)	0.40 (df=55)

**Note:** Standard errors clustered by country of transition. Number of observations is lower for some regressions with missing data for covariates. Dependent variable = Personalization (dichotomous).

\* p < 0.1, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01.

We observe expected signs on prior personalization (Model 7, positively associated with successors' personalization) and past experience with democracy (Model 8, negatively associated with successors' personalization), but neither is significantly different from 0 at the ( $p < 0.1$ ) level, perhaps due to our limited number of observations. Greater regime duration (Model 9) is positively associated with the likelihood of personalization at the ( $p < 0.05$ ) level. Regarding leader characteristics (Model 10), age and Western education are both negatively associated with the likelihood of personalization, but only Western education achieves statistical significance at the ( $p < 0.1$ ) level. These results show that the association between oversight capacity and personalization is robust to the inclusion of a wide range of control variables. Across all model specifications, the coefficient on oversight capacity is consistently negative, substantively large (between  $-.40$  and  $-.56$ ), and statistically significant at the ( $p < 0.01$ ) level. In the appendix, we further show that our results are not substantially changed either by modeling personalization using a logistic regression (Table A1) or by using a continuous measure of personalization (Table A2).

### *The Origins of Oversight*

An additional concern is that several of these factors might affect the likelihood that both oversight capacity exists and personalization occurs—potentially introducing a spurious correlation between oversight and personalization. We therefore assess whether oversight capacity is consistently associated with either economic variables (as a proxy for the previous leadership's popularity), formal institutional constraints, regime attributes, or successor attributes (Table A3).

We find no association between formal institutional constraints and the existence of oversight capacity, in line with work that is skeptical of the ability of such institutions to directly constrain autocrats.<sup>69</sup> We do observe a consistent relationship between other factors and oversight, however. A recent, major economic crisis ( $-2\%$  growth or worse in the past five years) is notably associated with a lower likelihood of the existence of oversight capacity at the ( $p < 0.01$ ) level. Likewise, prior personalization, perhaps unsurprisingly, is negatively associated with the existence of oversight capacity at the ( $p < 0.01$ ) level; prior experience with democracy is likewise negatively associated with the presence of oversight at the ( $p < 0.1$ ) level. Older regimes and incoming leaders are also both associated with a greater likelihood of the presence of oversight at the ( $p < 0.01$ ) level.

Together, these associations do not necessarily threaten the validity of our argument; poor economic performance, for example, might undermine the old guard's hold on power in some cases without oversight capacity merely being a proxy for economic performance or popularity. Still, while we cannot fully rule out a spurious correlation quantitatively through observational data, we can further assess the association between oversight capacity and personalization by stratifying our sample according to these potential confounders.<sup>70</sup> We therefore repeat regressions in Table 3 on paired subsamples: cases where regimes had undergone an economic crisis (22) or not (37) and had no prior experience with democracy (50) or at least some (9); cases where regimes score less than, or at least, the median values of duration (33 years) and personalization (0.41, on a 0 to 1 scale); and cases where successors are younger than, or at least as old as, the median age in our sample (56 years old). Across all subgroups, the coefficient on oversight remains negative and substantially large. The coefficient also remains statistically significant at the ( $p < 0.1$ ) level in nine out of ten subsamples, with the

coefficient being statistically indistinguishable from a null finding only within cases of prior democratization (a mere nine cases)—still, even within this subsample the coefficient remains comparable in sign and magnitude to that obtained in other subsamples. This provides further evidence that oversight capacity is not simply a proxy for these underlying factors. Oversight capacity is associated with a reduced likelihood of postsuccession personalization in regimes with weak performance records and strong performance records (Models 1 and 2), more and less “personalist” regimes (Models 3 and 4), countries without prior democratic experience and those with (Models 5 and 6), older and newer regimes (Models 7 and 8), and for younger as well as older successors (Models 9 and 10).

**Table 3.** OLS Regressions of Dichotomous Measure of Personalization on Oversight, Stratified by Potential Confounders

	Economic Crisis		Prior Personalism		Prior Democracy		Duration		Successor Age	
	No Crisis (1)	Crisis (2)	Low (3)	High (4)	None (5)	Some (6)	Short (7)	Long (8)	Young (9)	Old (10)
Oversight	-0.50*** (-0.17)	-0.46** (-0.22)	-0.34* (-0.18)	-0.55*** (-0.17)	-0.49*** (-0.14)	-0.5 (-0.44)	-0.55*** (-0.15)	-0.61*** (-0.17)	-0.52*** (-0.18)	-0.46** (-0.18)
Constant	0.58*** (-0.16)	0.62*** (-0.14)	0.40** (-0.17)	0.75*** (-0.11)	0.62*** (-0.12)	0.5 (-0.44)	0.55*** (-0.15)	0.75*** (-0.16)	0.65*** (-0.13)	0.55*** (-0.17)
Observations	37	22	27	26	50	9	29	30	25	34
$R^2$	0.3	0.17	0.18	0.29	0.25	0.44	0.28	0.35	0.24	0.26
Adjusted $R^2$	0.28	0.12	0.15	0.26	0.24	0.36	0.25	0.33	0.2	0.23
Residual SE	0.37 (df=35)	0.48 (df=20)	0.37 (df=25)	0.44 (df=24)	0.43 (df=48)	0.27 (df=7)	0.43 (df=27)	0.38 (df=28)	0.45 (df=23)	0.38 (df=32)

**Note:** Standard errors clustered by country of transition. Dependent variable = Personalization (dichotomous).

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

## **Case Study: Leadership Transitions in Reform-Era China**

Having demonstrated that oversight capacity has a broad cross-national negative relationship with personalization, and having identified deviant cases, we now walk through three leadership transitions in the Chinese case to leverage over-time variation in oversight capacity and illustrate how it shaped the eventual personalization under Xi Jinping. We find that oversight by party elders during the 1989 and the 2002 leadership transitions helped maintain collective leadership, whereas a decrease in oversight in 2012, although not of Xi's making, gave him a window of opportunity to consolidate individual power.

Soon after Mao Zedong's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping led the CCP in reforming the chaotic one-man rule of the late Mao era into a more mature political system emphasizing collective leadership. Deng reflected on the damage Mao's personalization of power had inflicted on the country and the party and, rather than create his own cult of personality, chose to promote the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) as the key organ of joint rule.<sup>71</sup> While his revolutionary credentials and strong backing from the military made Deng a leader with tremendous authority, he allowed Jiang Zemin, his hand-picked successor, to take over in 1989. Deng and a few other trusted party elders, who shared a long history together in the regime, also picked Jiang's successor, Hu Jintao, and installed him as the youngest member of the PSC ten years before he would take over in 2002.<sup>72</sup> Jiang and Hu ruled primarily by elite consensus, accepting members of rival party factions into the PSC and allowing a "separation of responsibilities and spheres of authority" within the regime overall.<sup>73</sup> Scholars who theorize the emergence of a "China model" of politics often point to the reform era's collective leadership, as well as its meritocratic promotion system, responsiveness to public demands, and policy flexibility.<sup>74</sup>



In both the Deng-Jiang transition (1989) and the Jiang-Hu transition (2002), oversight by party elders helped maintain collective leadership in the new administration. Both transitions employed “staggered retirement,” in which the outgoing leader retained powerful secondary positions, such as chairmanship of the Central Military Commission, to oversee the new administration.<sup>75</sup> Former leaders retaining high office is, as mentioned, one of the key indicators of oversight capacity. Informally, Deng remained popular and authoritative within the party, despite his lethal response to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, and was often consulted on major decisions up until close to his death in 1997. Even then, Jiang himself “never became powerful enough either to remain in power once his two terms were over or place one of his cronies in power.”<sup>76</sup> Still, Jiang himself retained his position as head of the Central Military Commission after stepping down as general secretary and president. Like Deng, Jiang had a “long goodbye.”<sup>77</sup> Even after relinquishing his last major position in 2005, Jiang continued to exert influence in the Hu administration behind the scenes as a power broker and through his Shanghai Gang faction—a power base that Jiang enjoyed thanks only to his many years in the party. Hu was arguably “never able to accumulate enough power to become *yibashou* [the boss].”<sup>78</sup>

Oversight in these two transitions operated through the old guard retaining strengths in *coordination* and *mobilization*. Deng served as the leader and coordinator among party elders with whom he shared a long history for key decisions, such as selecting Jiang’s successor. This put pressure on Jiang to accept that his rule would be limited and that Hu would be taking over, even after Deng died. Deng’s ability to mobilize popular support, built through years as a public face of the party, across the country also made it difficult for the Jiang administration to go against his wishes on major policy decisions. The most dramatic instance of this was Deng’s

Southern Tour in 1992, during which his unofficial but very public proreform speeches inspired the country to embrace private enterprise and assured the future of his economic policy line against growing conservative influence in the Jiang administration. Two days after the media reported Deng saying that “whoever is against reform must leave office,” Jiang took the hint and gave officials in Beijing new instructions to quicken the pace of reform.<sup>79</sup> After the Jiang-Hu transition in 2002, Jiang was able to use his own continued formal positions and informal ties to coordinate among high-level officials and oversee the Hu administration. Remaining politically active and having close allies in high office, like retaining high office oneself, is a key indicator of oversight capacity. In this case, prominent members of the new administration had just served under Jiang and in some cases owed their career advancement to him, especially First Secretary of the Central Secretariat Zeng Qinghong and other members of the Shanghai Gang.

However, oversight decreased significantly during the transition to the Xi administration. Unlike his predecessor, Hu gave up the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission and all other key posts promptly at the end of his two terms.<sup>80</sup> Nor was this a case of trading formal for informal power—Hu made a relatively “complete withdrawal from politics,” or a “naked retirement” as it is sometimes called.<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, Jiang retained no high office and saw his influence through loyalists weakened after having been out of power for a decade.

Why did Hu Jintao, despite his inability to consolidate personal power, not retain positions of power from which he might have overseen the Xi administration? It is hard to know for certain, but one factor was the broad disappointment and even disillusionment with his leadership in the party. Hu was widely seen as not up to the policy challenges China faced.<sup>82</sup> Critics term the 2000s the “lost decade,” pointing to the administration’s “stagnation” and lack of progress on issues like corruption, the environment, political and legal reform, and even

inequality—supposedly a signature issue.<sup>83</sup> Hu’s perceived ineffectiveness contributed to party members gravitating toward bolder leaders, such as the party secretary of Chongqing and then-rising star Bo Xilai. Widespread hope for sweeping reforms, in which Hu evinced “little interest,” created pressure for Hu to step aside more completely than his predecessors had.<sup>84</sup> Although Xi took advantage of Hu’s prompt retirement, there is no indication that he was somehow the one who brought it about.

The more authoritative Jiang Zemin might have led the old guard in constraining personalization under Xi, but his years out of office created a leadership generation gap that weakened his influence over former loyalists and left him with no direct levers of control. Already by the second term of the Hu administration, the Shanghai Gang’s influence was at a fraction of its former strength, with core members such as Zeng Qinghong retired, Chen Liangyu under investigation, and Vice Premier Huang Ju deceased.<sup>85</sup> Jiang was eighty-six years old in 2012 and had reportedly suffered heart failure the previous year.<sup>86</sup> His health problems sparked rumors, which would recur, that he had died. While age alone is no disqualifier from leadership, patron-client relations only give patrons power over clients if the patron has resources to distribute and the clients are reasonably confident that the patron will be around for the foreseeable future, which was less and less the case for Jiang.<sup>87</sup> Bo Xilai, for example, while not a Shanghai Gang member, was supposed to have been a Jiang ally. But an ally would not have broken ranks to launch a dramatic and party-damaging bid for power during the ascension of Xi, whom Jiang supported as Hu’s successor.<sup>88</sup> In sum, unlike his predecessor, Xi faced only weakened oversight by the old guard in late 2012 likely because of a combination of Hu’s weakness and unpopularity on the one hand and Jiang’s attenuated connection to positions of power and infirmity on the other.

Once in office, Xi consolidated his personal power through moves both common in other authoritarian regimes and grounded in CCP history. Early on, he took not only the leadership positions atop the party, state, and military that Hu had held, but also key positions “in several central leading groups for important functional areas such as foreign affairs, finance and the economy, cybersecurity and information technology, and military reform.”<sup>89</sup> Through his unprecedentedly wide-ranging anticorruption campaign, Xi further monopolized power and purged or scared off potential rivals. By having “Xi Jinping Thought” written into the constitution—an honor no other post-Mao leader has received while still in office—Xi and his supporters seem to be raising him to Mao’s level of ideological importance for the regime. Alongside formal ideology, state media are churning out depictions of a friendly “Uncle Xi” that have fanned a minor cult of personality. And in a move that has attracted tremendous international attention, Xi has done away with the two-term limit on the presidency. Xi’s consolidation of power confounded some early predictions around 2012 that he would be a weak leader and would rule by consensus.<sup>90</sup> All in all, “it is incontrovertible that Xi is no longer first among equals, as with his predecessors Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Instead he is supreme leader and . . . the ‘core’ of the CCP central apparatus.”<sup>91</sup>

One interpretation of the Hu-Xi transition may attribute Xi’s success in personalizing power to his own tactics—in particular his broad anticorruption campaign. However, the strength of Xi’s anticorruption campaign in bringing down elites, including potential rivals, should be seen as a mechanism or consequence of the power personalization process, not a cause. Anticorruption campaigns and purges are not a new tactic in Chinese politics. Jiang and Hu, while generally accepting collective rule, also carried out anticorruption campaigns (including in 1993, 1995, 2005, and 2009) and used accusations of corruption to bring down rivals, as in the

cases of Politburo member and mayor of Beijing Chen Xitong in 1995 and Politburo member and Shanghai party boss Chen Liangyu in 2006. It could be argued that Xi is a more skilled political operator than Hu, but Jiang is widely regarded by analysts inside and outside China as having been a masterful political tactician.<sup>92</sup> The key question, then, is what initial conditions permitted Xi to launch an anticorruption campaign that has been so much broader and stronger than its predecessors. We contend that Xi benefited from a window of opportunity presented by the relative absence of meaningful oversight from retired leaders and party elders.

**Table 4.** Summary of Oversight Capacity and Personalization Outcomes in China, 1989–2012

Transition Year	Exiting Leader	Entering Leader	Oversight at Moment of Transition?	New Leader Personalizes Power?	Theoretical Expectations?
1989	Deng Xiaoping	Jiang Zemin	Yes (Deng retains high office as head of the Central Military Commission)	No (Jiang accepts collective leadership)	Confirms
2002	Jiang Zemin	Hu Jintao	Yes (Jiang retains high office as head of the Central Military Commission)	No (Hu accepts collective leadership)	Confirms
2012	Hu Jintao	Xi Jinping	No (Hu discredited and neither Hu nor Jiang retain high office)	Yes (Xi removes term limits and monopolizes policymaking power)	Confirms

## Secondary Cases: Going Beyond China

China in some ways has a unique political system, but the mechanisms of oversight capacity can also be seen in a variety of other authoritarian contexts, with incumbent elites variously succeeding and failing to monitor, coordinate against, or mobilize support in opposition to a would-be personalist. We examine a case of attempted personalization thwarted by oversight (Vietnam) and two cases of personalization in the absence of oversight (Russia and Morocco). In the former, an ambitious successor took the top job and made several personalizing moves but was nevertheless unable to push the old guard aside. In the latter two cases, successors were able to exploit windows of opportunity that they had done little to create ex ante.

### *Oversight Restrains Personalization: Vietnam*

The Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) has a strong tradition of collective leadership.<sup>93</sup> Since the late 1980s, power in the VCP has been balanced among the occupants of three positions: the party general secretary, the president, and the prime minister.<sup>94</sup> In addition, the Central Committee has been more important in policymaking than in China, which favors the smaller Politburo.<sup>95</sup> Vietnam navigated leadership transitions in 1986, 1991, 1997, 2001, and 2011 without any leader upending this power-sharing system. Maintaining collective leadership in Vietnam has required thwarting autocrats who sought to break with it, such as General Secretary Le Kha Phieu (1997–2001).

Phieu came to power as a compromise candidate without an independent base of support, but was “inordinately ambitious” by VCP standards and openly campaigned for reelection in a political system opposed to such brazenness. Phieu sought to “consolidate his power . . . by changing Communist Party statutes so that he could concurrently assume the position of President and party General Secretary.”<sup>96</sup> Phieu wanted a free hand to lead bold policy reforms, including against corruption. “Phieu launched a two-year ‘regeneration drive’ of criticism and

self-criticism in May 1999 to restore the party’s soiled image,” expelling hundreds of party members and disciplining thousands more for graft and other economic crimes.<sup>97</sup>

But Phieu’s power consolidation ran afoul of the “former leadership troika”: former general secretary Do Muoi, former prime minister Vo Van Kiet, and former president Le Due Anh.<sup>98</sup> Even after stepping down from leadership, the troika formally remained advisors to the Central Committee and could intervene in policymaking. That the former regime leader Do Muoi and others retained high office after retirement is a clear indicator of the presence of oversight capacity. From their influential perch as advisors, the troika worked in concert “to unseat” the would-be personalist.<sup>99</sup> These three were not the closest of allies—in fact there were factional and ideological differences among them—but they shared years of experience serving in the regime together and a common interest in making sure that no one leader monopolized power in the VCP.<sup>100</sup> A monopolization of power could mean an end to their policy input as advisors, which Phieu threatened, but also to a radical shift in or even destabilization of the nature of the regime.<sup>101</sup> In 2001, before even the end of a normal five-year term, Phieu was removed from the post of general secretary.

The former leadership troika was able to exercise such strong oversight over Phieu because they were well informed about Phieu’s actions and commanded the influence necessary to coordinate and mobilize resistance among other elites, especially from their positions as advisors to the Central Committee. Muoi, Kiet, and Anh remained privy to insider information because they continued to attend high-level policy meetings, as well as because Muoi actually retained his workspace in the VCP headquarters.<sup>102</sup> They knew, for example, that some Central Committee members had not supported Phieu’s plan to shift power from the Secretariat to the more easily controllable Politburo Standing Board in April 2000.<sup>103</sup> To coordinate resistance to

Phieu's power grabs, the troika wrote an unprecedented joint letter to members of the Central Committee attacking Phieu's "failings in party and state management" in October 2000.<sup>104</sup> Then, as mentioned earlier, the troika proposed in the Central Committee to lower the age limit for certain officials, effectively barring Phieu from a second term unless he could secure an exemption. This is an example of former leaders using their experience in navigating party politics to effectively leverage information against a successor. After the fact, Kiet was "blunt" about his role in lowering the age limit and the role of the troika behind the scenes of this power play.<sup>105</sup> Phieu fought back with the aid of the Politburo, which voted in April to recommend that he be reappointed. However, the troika had by now successfully mobilized opponents of Phieu in the Central Committee and made it clear that both conservative and reformist party elders supported decisively checking Phieu's ambition. The Central Committee overturned the Politburo's recommendation.<sup>106</sup>

Strong oversight by the troika was not the only reason Phieu's bid for power failed. He also made bad economic decisions, lacked broad support, and faced resistance from provincial leaders. But it was an important mechanism by which the VCP themselves maintained collective leadership. After leaving office, Phieu expressed his sense of frustration at the constraints of the Vietnamese political system and his inability to achieve his goals while in power.<sup>107</sup>

### *Personalization in the Absence of Oversight: Russia and Morocco*

In Russia in the early 2000s, President Vladimir Putin built a personalist regime around a new generation of oligarchs, *siloviki*, loyal governors, extensive patronage institutions, and a soft but notorious cult of personality.<sup>108</sup> His predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, was in no position to exercise oversight—neither personally capable of coordinating behind the scenes nor leaving behind any meaningful following to mobilize into the political arena. One indicator of the absence of



oversight capacity is that Yeltsin did not retain high office after leaving the presidency. Yeltsin withdrew from politics suddenly and completely after leaving the presidency in 1999 (much like Hu Jintao's "naked retirement" in China), quietly retiring and refusing to comment on his successor's personalizing politics. In the late 1990s, Yeltsin's authority was undermined by a single-digit approval rating, poor health, and widespread demands for new, strong leadership to reverse the economic crises, rampant inequality, and widespread criminality of Russia's "wild 1990s."<sup>109</sup> After Yeltsin's exit, the powerful oligarchs of the 1990s no longer had a figure to coordinate around and increasingly fought among themselves, as exemplified by Boris Berezovsky's famous rivalries. Once in power, Putin was able to buy many of them off, as with Roman Abramovich, and exile or jail others one by one, as with Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, and Mikhail Khodorokovsky, on his path to personalizing power.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, the absence of Yeltsin or his infamous family from Russian politics left little in the way of regime allies that could defect and mobilize a constituency in opposition.<sup>111</sup> The absence of close allies of the former regime leader in high office is another indicator of a lack of oversight capacity.

Could Putin have sidelined the oligarchs, Yeltsin, and his family because he was already a strong personalist, prior to coming to power? The case history suggests this is unlikely—Putin came to the prime minister's office having been plucked from obscurity by Berezovsky himself to be an "electable successor" to Yeltsin. It was only after Yeltsin and his family left Russian politics that Putin began to make personalizing moves.

In Morocco, after the death of King Hassan II in 1999, some observers speculated that his son and successor, Muhammad VI, would not be able to establish the same degree of personal dominance within the regime.<sup>112</sup> The crown prince played little public role in the years prior to the succession; he was "something of an unknown quantity . . . [with] a public role of limited

independence,” due in no small part to Hassan II’s domination of the political system.<sup>113</sup> It is therefore unlikely that Mohammed VI himself played a key role in engineering a lack of oversight prior to his succession: “Unlike his father, who was heavily involved in the policy-making process way before he assumed power in 1961, Mohamed VI was relatively inexperienced in statecraft [at the time of succession].”<sup>114</sup>

However, King Hassan II’s death undermined the power of his remaining cronies among the political elite, clearing an opening for his son to put in place his own loyalists and consolidate personal power. Close allies of the former regime leader retaining high office can be an indicator of oversight capacity, but, as we argue, only if the former leader remains politically active and able to coordinate them. In describing influential figures at court, for example, a Central Intelligence Agency estimate portrayed Interior Minister Driss Basri in 1982 as “probably . . . the only cabinet member [outside of the military] who might have strong influence with [Crown Prince Muhammad]” in the event of a sudden succession.<sup>115</sup> Through his position, Basri continued to create “a reservoir and network of influence” throughout the 1980s and 1990s by distributing patronage in the form of appointments to any number of local positions in municipal governments and public corporations overseen by his ministry.<sup>116</sup> Yet even these assessments cautioned that Basri’s power derived largely from his connection to the reigning monarch, not due to an independent base of power. Despite Basri’s considerable experience in affairs of state, he could neither impose his policy preferences on nor even defend his position and privileges from the new king and was dismissed from office just a few months after the succession.<sup>117</sup> Mohammed VI would go on to empower “a new generation of elites” of his own choosing, “guaranteeing his predominance in politics” during his reign.<sup>118</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This study has advanced our understanding of the origins of authoritarian personalism by drawing attention to the important but often overlooked relationship between an incoming autocrat and the outgoing old guard of former ruling elites. We introduced the concept of oversight capacity to formalize the well-known phenomenon of old guard politicians supervising their successors. We then used it to argue that when the old guard retains oversight capacity at the moment of leadership transition, it is more difficult and therefore less likely for the incoming autocrat to be able to personalize power. The absence of oversight, by contrast, leaves a window of opportunity for—although no guarantee of—personalizing power. This argument builds on past research pointing to the importance of the initial distribution of power between an autocrat and his or her supporting coalition of peer or subordinate elites. Empirically, the negative relationship between oversight capacity and subsequent personalization was observable in our global data set of authoritarian leadership transitions, including across a wide range of model specifications. In the case of China, we found that CCP elders played an important role in maintaining norms of collective leadership for two decades before oversight weakened and gave President Xi Jinping a clearer path to maximize individual power in a way not seen before in the reform era. We identified three mechanisms by which oversight operates—coordination, information, and mobilization—and illustrated them in the Chinese case as well as in minor case studies of Vietnam, Russia, and Morocco. Despite a heavy focus in the existing literature on the agency and actions of individual autocrats in personalizing power, these case studies further suggest that most openings for personalization are not made—they come.

For those interested in forecasting where and when the next personalist autocrat will emerge, the takeaway from our argument is that while individual leaders' characteristics and experiences may matter, it is also important to account for their relationships with the old guard

they replace. The personalization of power by Xi surprised some well-informed commentators and even China experts; in 2012, for example, some China analysts were suggesting Xi would be “a very weak leader” who would “need to compromise.”<sup>119</sup> Behind the scenes, however, weakened predecessors left the door open for an ambitious autocrat to walk through. As Cold War Kremlinologists and Pekingologists knew, we can learn a lot from careful biographical analyses of politburos, ruling families, party elites, and governing coalitions.

Although focused on cases of within-regime leader transition, our argument also helps explain why founders of authoritarian regimes—such as autocrats who come to power in coups or revolutions—are so often able to personalize power. The replacement of one regime with another almost always cuts the old guard out of power in ways that eliminate oversight of the new leader. So, it is unsurprising that so many personalist leaders emerged in new authoritarian regimes in East Asia in the two decades after World War II (such as China, North Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan), in newly independent African regimes in the 1960s and 1970s (such as Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Malawi), or in new regimes in post-Soviet states after the end of the Cold War (such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan). Of course, oversight is not the only factor here; regime founders may also be individuals who are unusually skilled at politics.

In the long run, whether authoritarian regimes build and maintain power-sharing or fall to personalist ambitions has important consequences for regime durability, breakdown, and potentially democratization. While the domination of the political scene by one powerful individual can create an appearance of grim stability, in the medium and long term, personalization of power often undermines institutions that may have mediated elite conflict, smoothed successions, and bolstered regime durability.<sup>120</sup> A personalist autocrat who has made

numerous enemies by consolidating power may (rightly) fear the prospect of exit and cling to power to the bitter end.<sup>121</sup> When the personalist finally does leave office, many elites who have been waiting “their turn” are likely to fight hard to seize power in a contest with no rules. In other words, the succession problem common to all authoritarian regimes is especially acute in personalist ones, and transitions out of personalism are more likely to be volatile and messy. Scholars and commentators worried by the rise of authoritarian strongmen around the world in recent years should keep in mind that the institutional consequences of power personalization may return to haunt these “strong” leaders in the long run.

Finally, the concept of oversight capacity and its relationship to personalism suggest pathways for future research on authoritarian regimes. In what other ways does oversight from former leaders and older-generation elites influence successor autocrats? Does it help successor autocrats weather economic or political challenges by managing intra-elite conflict? Do authoritarian “elder statesmen” guide successor autocrats to greater policy continuity or wiser policy decisions? Or, does the prolonged influence of former leaders delay much-needed reforms, as successor autocrats often claim? All in all, the old guard deserves more systematic analysis as a powerful force shaping elite politics in authoritarian regimes.

## Appendix

**Table A1.** Logistic Regressions of Dichotomous Measure of Personalization on Oversight and Control Variables

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Oversight	-2.67** *	-3.58** *	-2.71** *	-2.84** *	-2.68** *	-2.63** *	-2.30** *	-2.58** *	-3.75** *	-2.47** *
	(-0.77)	(-0.77)	(-0.91)	(-0.84)	(-0.83)	(-0.73)	(-0.78)	(-0.75)	(-0.93)	(-0.75)
GDP per capita (logged)			0.27 (-0.34)	0.24 (-0.39)						
Growth			0.01 (-0.05)							
Economic Crisis			0.48 (-0.73)							
Fuel rents per capita (logged)				0.002 (-0.15)						
Judicial Constraints					-1.94 (-2.25)					
Legislative Constraints					1.75 (-1.9)					
XCON						-0.34 (-0.32)				
Prior Personalism							2.19 (-1.4)			
Prior Democracy								-1.1 (-1.12)		
Duration									0.04** (-0.02)	
Successor Age										-0.05 (-0.04)
Western Education										-1.49* (-0.83)
Constant	0.44 (-0.49)	-0.58 (-0.49)	-2.11 (-3.01)	-1.61 (-3.07)	0.6 (-0.59)	1.24 (-0.83)	-0.55 (-0.75)	0.52 (-0.41)	-0.28 (-0.54)	3.68* (-2.1)
Regional controls?	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Observations	59	59	59	59	58	59	53	59	59	59
Log likelihood	-28.62	-23.39	-28.05	-28.26	-27.94	-27.88	-25.17	-28.15	-26.55	-26.35
Akaike Inf. Crit.	61.23	62.78	66.1	64.52	63.89	61.75	56.34	62.3	59.1	60.69

**Note:** Standard errors clustered by country of transition. Dependent variable = Personalize (dichotomous).

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table A2.** OLS Regressions of Dichotomous Measure of Continuous Measure of Personalization (Four 0/1 Indicators Averaged to Create a 0–1 Measure) on Oversight and Control Variables

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Oversight	-0.41*** (-0.1)	-0.41*** (-0.1)	-0.40*** (-0.1)	-0.42*** (-0.1)	-0.41*** (-0.09)	-0.39*** (-0.09)	-0.33*** (-0.1)	-0.39*** (-0.09)	-0.51*** (-0.08)	-0.35*** (-0.1)
GDP per capita (logged)			0.03 (-0.04)	0.04 (-0.04)						
Growth			0.004 (-0.01)							
Economic Crisis			0.08 (-0.09)							
Fuel rents per capita (logged)				-0.01 (-0.02)						
Judicial Constraints					-0.41 (-0.26)					
Legislative Constraints					0.33 (-0.21)					
XCON						-0.05 (-0.04)				
Prior Personalism							0.39** (-0.17)			
Prior Democracy								-0.12 (-0.09)		
Duration									0.005** (-0.002)	
Successor Age										-0.01 (-0.005)
Western Education										-0.12 (-0.09)
Constant	0.53*** (-0.09)	0.36*** (-0.09)	0.24 (-0.34)	0.21 (-0.35)	0.57*** (-0.09)	0.65*** (-0.12)	0.34*** (-0.11)	0.54*** (-0.07)	0.42*** (-0.09)	0.86*** (-0.27)
Observations	59	59	59	59	58	59	53	59	59	59
$R^2$	0.28	0.43	0.3	0.29	0.32	0.31	0.34	0.3	0.34	0.32
Adjusted $R^2$	0.27	0.35	0.25	0.25	0.28	0.28	0.32	0.27	0.32	0.28
Residual SE	0.33 (df=57)	0.31 (df=51)	0.33 (df=54)	0.33 (df=55)	0.33 (df=54)	0.33 (df=56)	0.33 (df=50)	0.33 (df=56)	0.32 (df=56)	0.33 (df=55)

**Note:** Standard errors clustered by country of transition. Dependent variable = Personalization (continuous).  
\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .



**Table A3.** OLS Regressions of Existence of Oversight on Control Variables

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
GDP per capita (logged)	0.05 (-0.04)	0.13*** (-0.04)						
Growth	0.002 (-0.01)							
Economic Crisis	-0.37*** (-0.09)							
Fuel rents per capita (logged)		-0.02 (-0.02)						
Judicial Constraints			0.25 (-0.26)					
Legislative Constraints			0.14 (-0.21)					
XCON				0.06 (-0.04)				
Prior Personalism					-0.57*** (-0.17)			
Prior Democracy						0.30*** (-0.09)		
Duration							0.01*** (-0.002)	
Successor Age								0.01*** (-0.005)
Constant	0.2 (-0.34)	-0.48 (-0.35)	0.40*** (-0.09)	0.37*** (-0.12)	0.73*** (-0.11)	0.48*** (-0.07)	0.16* (-0.09)	-0.29 (-0.27)
Observations	59	59	58	59	53	59	59	59
R <sup>2</sup>	0.169	0.052	0.029	0.02	0.11	0.046	0.242	0.137
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.124	0.019	-0.007	0.002	0.093	0.029	0.229	0.122
Residual SE	0.471 (df=55)	0.499 (df=56)	0.506 (df=55)	0.503 (df=57)	0.481 (df=51)	0.496 (df=57)	0.442 (df=57)	0.472 (df=57)

**Note:** Standard errors clustered by country of transition. Dependent variable = Oversight Capacity.

\* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 115–44. Personalization of power can also occur in a democratic regime, although it signals democracy’s end.

<sup>2</sup> Fang Yuan, “Xi To Be ‘Weak’ President,” trans. Luisetta Mudie, *Radio Free Asia*, November 12, 2012, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/xi-jinping-11122012110129.html>; David Roberts, “Breaking the Saudi Rules of Succession,” *Washington Post* [Monkey Cage blog], May 27, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/27/breaking-the-saudi-rules-of-succession/>.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Bratton and Nicolas Van de Walle, “Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa,” *World Politics* 46, no. 4 (1994): 453–89; Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999); Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, “Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 2 (2014): 313–31. The same holds for dynastic monarchies, marked by consensus rule, compared with more “personalized” forms of family rule.

<sup>4</sup> Milan W. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 19–53.

<sup>5</sup> Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 19–39.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Geddes, Joseph G. Wright, and Erica Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Jason Brownlee, “Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies,” *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (2007): 595–628; Regina Smyth, Anna Lowry, and Brandon Wilkening, “Engineering Victory: Institutional Reform, Informal Institutions, and the Formation of a Hegemonic Party Regime in the Russian Federation,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2007): 118–37; Beatriz Magaloni, “Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule,” *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (2008): 715–41; Andrej Kokkonen and Anders Sundell, “Delivering Stability—Primogeniture and Autocratic Survival in European Monarchies, 1000–1800,” *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 2 (2014): 438–53; Erica Frantz and Elizabeth Stein, “Countering Coups: Leadership Succession Rules in Dictatorships,” *Comparative Political Studies* 50 (2017): 935–62.

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<sup>8</sup> Magaloni, “Credible Power-Sharing”; Carles Boix and Milan W. Svobik, “The Foundations of Limited Authoritarian Government: Institutions, Commitment, and Power-Sharing in Dictatorships,” *Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (2013): 300–316.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew J. Nathan, “China’s Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience,” *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 6–17; Carlyle A. Thayer, “Political Legitimacy in Vietnam: Challenge and Response,” *Politics & Policy* 38, no. 3 (2010): 423–44; Susan L. Shirk, “China in Xi’s ‘New Era’: The Return to Personalistic Rule,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 22–36.

<sup>10</sup> Nathan, “China’s Changing of the Guard”; Hu Angang, *China’s Collective Leadership* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2015). 胡鞍钢, 《中国集体领导体制》(北京: 中国人民大学出版社).

<sup>11</sup> Herb, *All in the Family*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Geddes et al., *How Dictatorships Work*, 318.

<sup>13</sup> For example, analyses of Adolf Hitler’s rise have often emphasized his remarkable “charisma.” See Laurence Rees, *Hitler’s Charisma: Leading Millions into the Abyss* (New York: Vintage, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> On power-sharing, see Svobik, *Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. On the stag hunt, see Smyth et al., “Engineering Victory.” On divide and rule, see Daron Acemoglu, Thierry Verdier, and James A. Robinson, “Kleptocracy and Divide-and-Rule: A Model of Personal Rule,” *Journal of the European Economic Association* 2.2, no. 3 (2004): 162–92.

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<sup>15</sup> Svolik, *Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.

<sup>16</sup> Levitsky and Way, "Beyond Patronage," 871–72.

<sup>17</sup> Steven M. Fish, *Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Gordon M. Hahn, "Medvedev, Putin, and Perestroika 2.0.," *Demokratizatsiya* 18, no. 3 (2010): 228–59; Henry E. Hale and Timothy J. Colton, "Russians and the Putin-Medvedev 'Tandemocracy': A Survey-Based Portrait of the 2007–2008 Election Season," *Problems of Post-Communism* 57, no. 2 (2010): 3–20.

<sup>19</sup> Svolik, *Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 55, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Boix and Svolik, "Foundations of Limited Authoritarian Government."

<sup>21</sup> Scott Gehlbach and Philip Keefer, "Investment without Democracy: Ruling-party Institutionalization and Credible Commitment in Autocracies," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 39, no. 2 (2011): 123–139.

<sup>22</sup> Zachary Abuza, "The Lessons of Le Kha Phieu: Changing Rules in Vietnamese Politics," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24, no. 1 (2002): 135.

<sup>23</sup> Svolik, *Politics of Authoritarian Rule*; Boix and Svolik, "Foundations of Limited Authoritarian Government."

<sup>24</sup> Hale, *Patronal Politics*, 34–38; Svolik, *Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 54–56.

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<sup>25</sup> Joshua Stacher, *Adaptable Autocrats: Regime Power in Egypt and Syria* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 86–93; Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 61–83.

<sup>26</sup> Herb, *All in the Family*, 45–49.

<sup>27</sup> John P. Willerton Jr., “Patronage Networks and Coalition Building in the Brezhnev Era,” *Soviet Studies* 39, no. 2 (1987): 175–204; Philip G. Roeder, *Red Sunset: The Failure of Soviet Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 66–93.

<sup>28</sup> Renaud Mansour, “Iraq after the Fall of ISIS: The Struggle for the State,” research paper, Chatham House (July 2017), 18.

<sup>29</sup> We choose to code leadership transitions rather than country-years for three reasons. First, leadership transitions are the correct unit of analysis according to our theory: our argument is that oversight capacity is most important for constraining would-be personalists after succession. Second, coding transitions rather than country-years helps avoid bias induced by reverse causality, because it allows us to maintain clear sequencing: we can code oversight exclusively at the moment the successor comes to occupy executive office and then code personalization only after the moment of succession (which we would not do using a country-year format). Third, coding country-years would threaten measurement validity: one of our key indicators of personalism is the existence of purges, which are a reliable indicator of personalization after succession but may not be a reliable indicator of continuing personalism across country-years, since a regime may remain personalist even after purges have ended.

<sup>30</sup> Svoblik, *Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 17.

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<sup>31</sup> Within this data set, some countries that are included in Svobik's data set held free and fair elections for the executive or legislative branch as a transition out of authoritarianism and so are dropped from consideration. Paraguay, for example, while still governed by an authoritarian regime in the early 1990s, elected its president through competitive elections beginning in 1993 and so is dropped from the Svobik data set beginning in that year (as well as from this study in its entirety). Svobik's data set also excludes regimes that governed a total population of less than one million, such as Fiji. We include only three authoritarian transitions in authoritarian regimes outside of countries included in this data set: Iraq in 2006 and 2014 and Venezuela in 2013. We base these inclusions on expert assessments of the nondemocratic circumstances of executive appointments in Iraq during this time period (Toby Dodge, "State and Society in Iraq Ten Years after Regime Change: The Rise of a New Authoritarianism," *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 [2013]: 241–57) and in Venezuela (Javier Corrales "The Authoritarian Resurgence: Autocratic Legalism in Venezuela," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 2 [2015]: 37–51). Results presented here are robust to the exclusion of transitions in these two countries.

<sup>32</sup> Henke E. Goemans, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Giacomo Chiozza, "Introducing Archigos: A Dataset of Political Leaders," *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 2 (2009): 271.

<sup>33</sup> Adding in coup transitions, for example, would bias results in favor of our theory by including cases where successors clearly attain high office by eliminating oversight capacity directly. We find no evidence of oversight in the twenty-two instances we identify of a new leader seizing power by force and lasting at least one year in office; of these leaders, fourteen (65%) exhibited two or more indicators of personalization.

<sup>34</sup> Hertog, *Princes, Brokers and Bureaucrats*, 63–65.

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<sup>35</sup> Svolik, *Politics of Authoritarian Rule*; GWF, *How Dictatorships Work*.

<sup>36</sup> GWF, *How Dictatorships Work*.

<sup>37</sup> We code personalization as a binary variable based on these indicators in order to clearly test whether we see diverging outcomes between transitions where oversight is present and absent. The intensity of personalization no doubt varies among cases. Geddes et al., *How Dictatorships Work*.

<sup>38</sup> For neopatrimonialism, Bratton and Van de Walle, “Neopatrimonial Regimes,” 458; for arbitrary decisions, H. E. Chehabi and Juan José Linz, *Sultanistic Regimes* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 9; for purges, Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization?,” 122; Svolik, *Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 53–57; for cults, Chehabi and Linz, *Sultanistic Regimes*, 13–15; Svolik, *Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 80–81.

<sup>39</sup> We looked for personalization in the first five years after a leader took power. In the rare event that personalization began more than five years after a leader took power, we judge oversight to still have checked personalization but note that the autocrat successfully waited it out. For rulers still in office but who have been in power for fewer than five years by December 31, 2018, we code based on the available posttransition record.

<sup>40</sup> Ramón I. Centeno, “The Cuban Regime after a Decade of Raúl Castro in Power,” *Mexican Law Review* 9, no. 2 (2017): 99–126.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin Augé, “Angola under João Lourenço: Who Are the New Players of the MPLA State?,” *Notes de l’Ifri*, Ifri, December 2019, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/angola-under-joao-lourenco-who-are-new-players-mpla-state>.



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<sup>42</sup> GWF, “Autocratic Breakdown.”

<sup>43</sup> The remaining, unshared cases are after GWF’s time cutoff of 2010 or are under their population floor (e.g., Qatar). Expanded data from GWF, *How Dictatorships Work*, likewise end in 2010.

<sup>44</sup> In the Russia case, GWF code Russia in 2008 based on the former leader continuing to wield de facto power (Putin) rather than the de jure chief executive (Medvedev). We focus instead on the de jure chief executive, for two reasons: to avoid having to make case-by-case decisions about who holds de facto power, and because informal power outside executive office, when retained by a member of the old guard, is part of our independent variable at work.

<sup>45</sup> GWF code Jordan and Morocco as monarchies, which is accurate but does not prevent them from having personalized rule. Iraq is coded by GWF as under occupation during the 2006 election of Prime Minister al-Maliki. In Rwanda, Paul Kagame’s considerable personal authority is evident in his control over policymaking and large purges of elites. See Colin M. Waugh, *Paul Kagame and Rwanda: Power, Genocide and the Rwandan Patriotic Front* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004); Moses Khisa, “The Institutional Transformation of Africa’s Personalist Regimes: A Comparative Analysis of Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, and Uganda” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2016).

<sup>46</sup> We counted leadership transitions that occurred up to December 31, 2018, not the end of 2019 when we stopped collecting data on personalization, because we do not score personalization as successful or not for leaders who are in power for less than a year.

<sup>47</sup> Magaloni, “Credible Power-Sharing”; Svoboda . . .

<sup>48</sup> Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization?”; Geddes et al., “Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions”; George Derpanopoulos, Erica Frantz, Barbara Geddes, and Joseph Wright, “Are Coups Good for Democracy?,” *Research & Politics* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1–7.

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<sup>49</sup> There are relatively few regular transitions under regimes coded as “military” by GWF. Of the six such cases in our data set, four are inconsistent with our theory—all of them instances where new leaders have failed to personalize despite a lack of oversight. Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization?”; Barbara Geddes, Erica Frantz, and Joseph G. Wright, “Military Rule,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 147–62.

<sup>50</sup> Steven Cook, *Ruling but Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 38–41; William Quandt, “Algeria’s Uneasy Peace,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 4 (2002): 20–21.

<sup>51</sup> Stacher, *Adaptable Autocrats*, 86–93.

<sup>52</sup> Augé, “Angola under João Lourenço.”

<sup>53</sup> Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed bin Salman* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2020), 277–84.

<sup>54</sup> David Roberts, “Breaking the Saudi Rules of Succession,” *Washington Post* [Monkey Cage blog], May 27, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/27/breaking-the-saudi-rules-of-succession/>; Stig Stenslie, “The End of Elite Unity and the Stability of Saudi Arabia,” *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2018): 70–71.

<sup>55</sup> Scott Abramson and Carlos Velasco Rivera, “Time Is Power: The Noninstitutional Sources of Stability in Autocracies,” *Journal of Politics* 78, no. 4 (2016): 1279–95.

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<sup>56</sup> To minimize the number of cases that are dropped because of a lack of GWF codings (as our data extend beyond the 2008 conclusion date of this data set), we assume that regimes retain the same typology up to the point of succession so long as the regime does not otherwise change—for example, that North Korea is still a “party-personalist” regime on January 1, 2011, despite the last available data point from this data set being from 2008. This leaves us with fifty-seven cases for which we have a GWF-personal coding.

<sup>57</sup> Chi-squared tests do not disprove the null of no association between oversight and personalization for GWF-personalist regimes (chi-squared = 2.4, p-value = 0.11), potentially owing to the small number of cases within this category, but do so for nonpersonalist (GWF) regimes at the  $p < 0.001$  level (chi-squared = 11.3).

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Daniel Treisman, “Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin,” *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 3 (2011): 590–609.

<sup>59</sup> Matthew D. Fails, “Oil Income and the Personalization of Autocratic Politics,” *Political Science Research and Methods* 8, no. 4 (2020): 772–79.

<sup>60</sup> Nathan J. Brown, *Constitutions in a Nonconstitutional World: Arab Basic Laws and the Prospects for Accountable Government* (New York: SUNY Press, 2002); Magaloni, “Credible Power-Sharing”; Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats,” *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 11 (2007): 1279–301; Carles Boix and Milan W. Svoblik, “The Foundations of Limited Authoritarian Government: Institutions, Commitment, and Power-Sharing in Dictatorships,” *Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (2013): 300–316; Yuhua Wang, *Tying the Autocrat’s Hands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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<sup>61</sup> Monty G. Marshall, Keith Jagers, and Ted Robert Gurr, "Polity IV Project: Dataset Users' Manual" (College Park: University of Maryland, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Joshua Stacher, "Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria's Hereditary Succession," *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 2 (2011): 197–212; Scott Abramson and Carlos Velasco Rivera, "Time Is Power: The Noninstitutional Sources of Stability in Autocracies," *Journal of Politics* 78, no. 4 (2016): 1279–95.

<sup>63</sup> We code only the first transition after 2010. Results are not markedly different if we drop all transitions after 2011.

<sup>64</sup> José Antonio Cheibub, Jennifer Gandhi, and James Raymond Vreeland, "Democracy and Dictatorship Revisited," *Public Choice* 143, no. 1 (2010): 67–101.

<sup>65</sup> Abramson and Rivera, "Time Is Power."

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Kalyvas's discussion of gradual decay within one-party systems, creating openings for would-be authoritarian reformers as well as would-be democrats. Stathis N. Kalyvas, "The Decay and Breakdown of Communist One-Party Systems," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 323–43.

<sup>67</sup> Daniel Krmaric, Stephen C. Nelson, and Andrew Roberts, "Studying Leaders and Elites: The Personal Biography Approach," *Annual Review of Political Science* 23 (2020): 133–51.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas Gift and Daniel Krmaric, "Who Democratizes? Western-Educated Leaders and Regime Transitions," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 3 (2017): 671–701. We broaden the authors'

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definition of “Western education” to include any university in Europe outside of the former Eastern Bloc (e.g., universities in France and Finland but not Yugoslavia) as well as the United States and Canada.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Pepinsky, “The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism,” *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (2014): 631–53.

<sup>70</sup> This represents a “conventional approach to control for confounding,” particularly where we are not concerned with estimating a precise average treatment effect for a particular variable. See Maria M. Glymour, Jennifer Weuve, and Jarvis T. Chen, “Methodological Challenges in Causal Research on Racial and Ethnic Patterns of Cognitive Trajectories: Measurement, Selection, and Bias,” *Neuropsychology Review* 18, no. 3 (2008): 197–98.

<sup>71</sup> Li Cheng, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 13.

<sup>72</sup> Wang Zhengxu and Anastas Vangeli, “The Rules and Norms of Leadership Succession in China: From Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping and Beyond,” *China Journal* 76 (2016): 33.

<sup>73</sup> Nathan, “China’s Changing of the Guard,” 11.

<sup>74</sup> Hu, *China’s Collective Leadership*.

<sup>75</sup> Alice Miller, “The New Party Politburo Leadership,” *China Leadership Monitor* 40, no. 1 (2013): 12.

<sup>76</sup> Fewsmith and Nathan, “Authoritarian Resilience Revisited,” 175.

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<sup>77</sup> Kerry Brown, *Hu Jintao: China's Silent Ruler* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2012), 49.

<sup>78</sup> Fewsmith and Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience Revisited," 175.

<sup>79</sup> Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2013), 670.

<sup>80</sup> Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*, 13.

<sup>81</sup> Wang and Vangeli, "The Rules and Norms of Leadership Succession," 39.

<sup>82</sup> Fewsmith and Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience Revisited."

<sup>83</sup> Ruth Kirchner and Simon Bone, "Looking Back at 'China's Lost Decade,'" DW, March 13, 2013, <https://www.dw.com/en/looking-back-at-chinas-lost-decade/a-16667956>; Shi Jiangtao, "President Hu Jintao's Legacy Seen as One of Stability but Stagnation," *South China Morning Post*, September 7, 2012, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1031120/president-hu-jintaos-legacy-seen-one-stability-stagnation>.

<sup>84</sup> Ian Johnson and Keith Bradsher, "On Way Out, China's Leader Offers Praise for the Status Quo," *New York Times*, November 8, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/09/world/asia/hu-jintao-exiting-communist-leader-cautions-china.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers* (New York: Harper, 2010), 149–53.

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<sup>86</sup> Edward Wong and Jonathan Ansfield, “Jiang Zemin Re-Emerges in China,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/10/world/asia/jiang-zemin-re-emerges-in-china.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Hale, *Patronal Politics*. Long-retired leaders at such an advanced age usually retain influence based on the authority that comes with their revolutionary or military credentials—which Jiang lacked—as Deng did in the 1990s or Fidel Castro did in Cuba in the 2000s.

<sup>88</sup> Susan Shirk, “Age of China’s New Leaders May Have Been Key to Their Selection,” *ChinaFile*, November 15, 2012, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/age-chinas-new-leaders-may-have-been-key-their-selection>.

<sup>89</sup> Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*, 12.

<sup>90</sup> Fang, “Xi To Be ‘Weak’ President”; Li Cheng, “The Powerful Factions among China’s Rulers,” *BBC News*, November 5, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-20203937>.

<sup>91</sup> Victor Shih and Jude Blanchette, “Xi Takes Charge: Implications of the 19th Party Congress for China’s Future,” 21<sup>st</sup> Century China Center briefing (October 2017), 27, [2017\\_xi-briefing-web.pdf \(ucsd.edu\)](https://www.ucsdc.edu/2017_xi-briefing-web.pdf).

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Bruce Gilley, *Tiger on the Brink: Jiang Zemin and China’s New Elite* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

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<sup>93</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam’s Anti-Corruption Campaign,” *Background Briefings by Thayer Consultancy*, December 22, 2017.

<sup>94</sup> Edmund Malesky, Regina Abrami, and Yu Zheng, “Institutions and Inequality in Single-Party Regimes: A Comparative Analysis of Vietnam and China,” *Comparative Politics* 43, no. 4 (2011): 408.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*,” 402.

<sup>96</sup> Abuza, “Lessons of Le Kha Phieu,” 134.

<sup>97</sup> Zachary Abuza, *Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 222.

<sup>98</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam in 2001: The Ninth Party Congress and After,” *Asian Survey* 42, no. 1 (2002): 81.

<sup>99</sup> Abuza, “Lessons of Le Kha Phieu,” 135.

<sup>100</sup> David Koh, “The Politics of a Divided Party and Parkinson’s State in Vietnam,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23, no. 3 (2001): 533–51.

<sup>101</sup> Thayer, “Vietnam in 2001,” 81.

<sup>102</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “Political Developments in Vietnam: The Rise and Demise of Le Kha Phieu, 1997–2001,” in Lisa B.W. Drummond and Mandy Thomas, eds., *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 2003), 30.



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<sup>103</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam in 2000: Toward the Ninth Party Congress,” *Asian Survey* 41, no. 1 (2001): 183.

<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Abuza, “Lessons of Le Kha Phieu,” 136.

<sup>105</sup> Abuza, “Lessons of Le Kha Phieu,” 135–36.

<sup>106</sup> Thayer, “Vietnam in 2000,” 82.

<sup>107</sup> Bill Hayton, *Vietnam: Dragon Rising* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 111.

<sup>108</sup> On oligarchs, see Stanislav Markus, “The Atlas That Has Not Shrugged: Why Russia’s Oligarchs Are an Unlikely Force for Change,” *Daedalus* 146, no. 2 (2017): 101–12. On *siloviki*, see Daniel Treisman, “Putin’s Silovarchs,” *Orbis* 51, no. 1 (2007): 141–53. On loyal governors, see Henry E. Hale, “Eurasian Politics as Hybrid Regimes: The Case of Putin’s Russia,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 19–39. On patronage, see Smyth et. al., “Engineering Victory.” On the cult of personality, see Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics, & Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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<sup>110</sup> David E. Hoffman, *Oligarchs: Wealth And Power in the New Russia* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008).

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