Political Participation and the Survival of Electoral Authoritarian Regimes

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Abstract

Mass mobilization is an understudied topic in the recent literature on authoritarianism. In some autocracies, the masses are highly politicized and participate extensively in regime institutions. In other regimes, political apathy is the norm. This variation begs a question: are regimes where citizens are mobilized into politics more durable than those where passive acceptance is the norm? This paper sheds light on this question by examining how one important type of political participation— voter turnout—affects the survival of electoral authoritarian regimes. Recent neo-institutional accounts suggest that high turnout provides benefits such as legitimacy, information, and an image of invincibility, which should make regimes more durable. Meanwhile, an older, modernization-inspired literature on authoritarianism suggested that politicization would lead to demands for representation and accountability, which could undermine autocratic regimes. Using an original dataset on voter turnout in 576 authoritarian elections between 1972 and 2015, I find that voter turnout has little or no effect on the durability of electoral authoritarian regimes. The results suggest that neither of the existing theoretical perspectives is unambiguously correct. In the conclusion, I suggest that the relationship between electoral participation and regime durability is more complicated than existing accounts allow.

1   Introduction

Autocracies vary widely in the extent to which citizens are involved in politics. In some autocracies, the masses are politically mobilized. They participate in political organizations, vote in large numbers, attend rallies, and engage with political ideologies. Some regimes actively encourage such mobilization through agitation and propaganda.

In other regimes, however, political apathy is the norm. Voter turnout is low, politics is not animated by ideological debates, and membership in political organizations is limited. Many regimes encourage such apathy. As Linz put it, "Rather than enthusiasm or support, the regime often expects...passive acceptance" (1970, 259). Between these extremes there is considerable variation in the extent of mass mobilization in modern autocracies.

While the early literature on authoritarianism emphasized such distinctions, more recent literature has focused more on institutional and electoral differences. And there have been very few studies, old or new, that consider the effect of mass mobilization on regime durability. This paper takes up the question of mass mobilization's effects on regime stability. Specifically, it examines how one important type of political participation—voter turnout—affects the stability of electoral authoritarian regimes.

In order to elucidate the relationship between turnout and regime durability, I synthesize a number of theoretical perspectives. On the one hand, neo-institutional theories of authoritarianism suggest that high voter turnout should benefit autocrats and stabilize their regimes. High turnout confers legitimacy, demonstrates the regime's invincibility, and allows the regime to gather information on societal grievances.

These arguments are compelling, but the data on turnout appear to contradict some of these predictions. As this paper shows, levels of turnout vary widely in authoritarian regimes and turnout is often quite low. Indeed, turnout in authoritarian regimes is, on average, actually lower than in democracies.

An alternative perspective on the relationship between turnout and regime breakdown holds that a politicized electorate is dangerous for autocrats. This view is most prevalent in

the older literature on authoritarianism. Both proponents and opponents of modernization theory agreed that modernization could lead to the development of new demands and social fissures that autocrats would find hard to manage. Some thought that the rise of mass politics would lead to democratization (Lipset 1960, Lerner 1961), while others believed it would just lead to political instability (Huntington 1968). But both schools of thought agreed that autocracies were ill-equipped to deal with mass political participation. After all, when the masses are politicized they are more likely to demand accountability from the regime and are more likely to develop their own ideological preferences. For these reasons, Linz (1970) argued that many autocracies would prefer to sow apathy.

In order to examine these propositions empirically, I assemble an original dataset on levels of voter turnout in 576 authoritarian elections between 1972 and 2015. I use these data to investigate the cross-national relationship between voter turnout and regime durability. The findings indicate that voter turnout does not have a clear effect on the survival of electoral authoritarian regimes. While there is some suggestive evidence that high levels of turnout in legislative elections *may* make autocracies more robust, the association is weak and a conservative interpretation of the findings must lead to the conclusion that there is no effect. Importantly, these findings hold while controlling for the vote share of the regime, the prevalence of electoral manipulation, and several measures of regime competitiveness. Interestingly, these variables are only weakly correlated with turnout.

The findings suggest that neither the neo-institutional view nor the Linzian view is unambiguously correct. Either could be partially right or both could be wrong, but, on their own, neither paints a sufficiently nuanced picture of the relationship between electoral participation and regime durability. In the conclusion, I speculate on some extensions to existing theory that could help reconcile these approaches. Ultimately, this is one of the main contributions of the paper: to justify and reignite a research agenda on mass mobilization in modern autocracies.

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2 Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Autocracy

The literature on comparative autocracy has made great strides by disaggregating authoritarian regime type. For example, Geddes' (1999) classification of personalist, single party, and military subtypes has inspired a large and growing research program. Another fertile body of research is the neo-institutional literature on authoritarianism, which has noted important differences between regimes with strong horizontal institutions—such as ruling parties and legislatures—and those without (Gandhi 2008, Svolik 2012). Scholars have also made an important distinction between regimes that hold semi-competitive elections and those that do not (Levitsky and Way 2010). Each of these research areas has made significant contributions to our understanding of authoritarian regime stability.

However, one dimension of authoritarian politics that has received less attention is mass mobilization. Modern autocracies vary widely in the extent to which citizens participate in politics. At one extreme we have regimes where most citizens follow politics closely, vote in elections, attend public rallies, participate in political organizations, and engage with political ideologies. Often, though not exclusively, this happens in mobilizational regimes, which engage in extensive agitation and propaganda, propagate a coherent ideology or programmatic platform, and cultivate extensive grassroots organizational capacity. In such regimes, citizens are actively engaged—via recruitment, persuasion, cajoling, or compulsion—in the perpetuation of the regime. Most classical communist regimes fit this pattern, as do regimes such as Singapore, Venezuela, China and many post-colonial regimes in Africa.

In many other autocracies, rates of political participation are quite low. Citizens are apathetic about politics; they do not vote; and they shun political organization. Linz (1970, 259) depicts such regimes succinctly: "Membership participation is low in political and para-political organizations and participation in the single party or similar bodies, whether coerced, manipulated or voluntary, is infrequent and limited. The common citizen expresses little enthusiastic support for the regime in elections, referenda, and rallies." Often times, the regime actively promotes this state of apathy. It seeks to depoliticize the electorate

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and refrains from articulating a coherent ideology, relying instead on catch-all, clientelist, or personalist appeals. The regime does not require its subjects to be ardent supporters, just that they acquiesce. The "floating mass" doctrine of Suharto's New Order regime illustrates this approach well (Vatikotis 1998). Other examples include Mubarak-era Egypt, Salazar-era Portugal, modern Jordan and a number of former military regimes in Latin America.

Of course, between these two extremes, there is significant variation in both the mobilizational strategies used by autocrats and the rates of political participation that result. And yet, for the most part, recent scholarship does not pay much attention to this variation.[1] But this was not always the case. Mid-20th century scholarship on authoritarianism was heavily focused on the issue of mass mobilization. For example, in his classic treatment of authoritarianism, Linz averred that the most important distinction among autocracies was not the identity of the ruling group or its institutional configuration, but rather "the degrees of mobilization" that exist (1970, 260). This emphasis was also evident in modernization-based accounts of autocracy, which often hinged on the extent to which the ruling group was able integrate and channel newly mobilized political demands (e.g. Apter 1965, Huntington 1968). Area specialists were similarly focused on mobilization. Scholars of communist systems, for example, devoted enormous energy to understanding patterns of political recruitment and participation in those regimes (e.g. Friedgut 1979, Hough 1976) Similarly, many early studies of post-colonial Africa focused on mass mobilization by the new autocracies emerging there (e.g. Wallerstein 1961, Carter 1962 Zolberg 1964, Bienen 1978).

One question that this earlier literature did not resolve was the effect of mass mobilization on regime stability. Are regimes with high degrees of mass mobilization more stable than those where apathy reigns? As the next two sections show, the answer is not immediately obvious. This paper sheds some light on this question by considering how one important form of political participation—voter turnout—affects regime stability. Since mass mobi-

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[1]One important exception is Kasza's (1995) comparative study of mass organization under autocracy

lization consists of many interrelated elements—grassroots organization and participation, contentious politics, ideology, and civil society, to name a few—the broader question of how mass mobilization affects regime stability is beyond the scope of a single paper. From a practical standpoint, it is much easier to measure electoral participation for a large sample of countries than it is to measure other types of mobilization. Still, a focus on electoral participation may provide a useful window into this broader question, because, as many studies show, electoral participation is well-correlated with other forms of political participation. Moreover, the mobilizational tactics of the regime are likely to be reflected in rates of political participation, such that mobilizational regimes, however operationalized, exhibit higher levels of electoral participation.

In the following analysis I focus on how turnout affects the longevity of electoral authoritarian regimes—regimes that allow opposition candidates to contest national elections. I exclude single party regimes from my analysis for both practical and empirical reasons. From a practical standpoint, there are only a handful of single party regimes left in the world. Most modern autocracies hold multiparty elections and the future of autocracy is clearly electoral autocracy. Empirically, data is sparse for many single party regimes, and those that do report turnout figures—mostly communist regimes—usually report 100% turnout. This makes 100% turnout perfectly collinear with with the inherent characteristics of single party regimes.

In electoral authoritarian regimes, meanwhile, levels of voter turnout vary widely. For this paper, I have assembled an original dataset on voter turnout in all national elections in electoral authoritarian regimes from 1972-2015 (discussed in more detail below). The data show that levels of legislative turnout range from 15% to 99%, with the average being 66%. In presidential elections, average turnout is only slightly higher at 69%. Figure 1 shows the wide distribution of turnout across all elections during this period.

In some regimes, such as Egypt, Nigeria, Azerbaijan, Zimbabwe, and Algeria turnout is consistently low. For example, in the six legislative elections held during the reign of Hosni

Figure 1: Distribution of Turnout in Electoral Authoritarian Regimes: 1972-2015

(a) 375 Legislative Elections | **(b)** 201 Presidential Elections

Source: IDEA and Author's Database
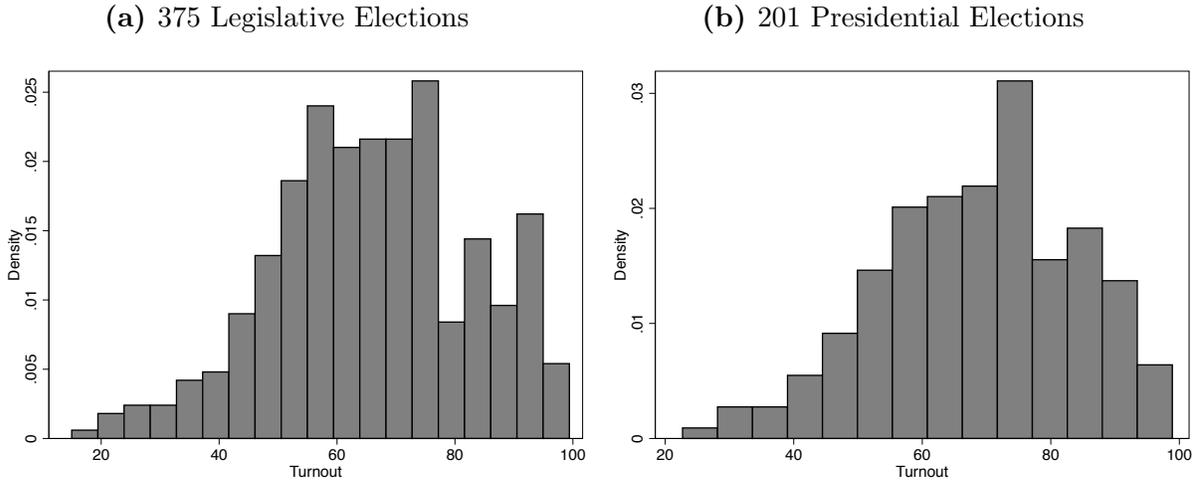
Mubarak turnout averaged just 40%. Similarly, in the four elections held under the PDP in Nigeria average turnout was just 45%. Other regimes with consistently low turnout include Azerbaijan under the Aliyevs, Zimbabwe, Gabon, Jordan, and post-civil war Algeria.

On the other hand, a number of electoral autocracies exhibit consistently high turnout, usually exceeding 85%. Some examples include Singapore, Ethiopia, Tunisia, and Uzbekistan. In still other regimes, such as Botswana, Mexico, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Burkina Faso turnout levels vary widely from election to election.

As these examples suggest, variation in turnout is determined by more than just world region. On average, legislative turnout is lower in Sub-Saharan Africa (60.6%), Central and Eastern Europe (64%), the Middle East (63%) and Central America (59%) than it is in East Asia (75%), Central Asia (78%) and South America (74%) but there is significant variation within each of these regions.

Moreover, turnout is not just a function of regime type. As Figure 2 shows there is a positive, but surprisingly weak (r =.11), correlation between levels of autocracy and turnout. It is not simply the case that more autocratic regimes have significantly higher turnout.[2] This

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[2]I find similarly weak correlations using two alternative measures of regime type: the Freedom House scores and V-Dem's polyarchy scale. And, as discussed in more detail below, there are also weak correlations between turnout and V-Dem's measures of electoral

is, I believe, an under-appreciated fact in the literature on autocracy.

Nor is turnout simply a proxy for the regime's electoral strength. As Figure 3 shows, legislative voter turnout is positively, but weakly, correlated (r=.13) with the share of the vote received by pro-regime candidates/parties.

Figure 2: Legislative Turnout and Level of Autocracy
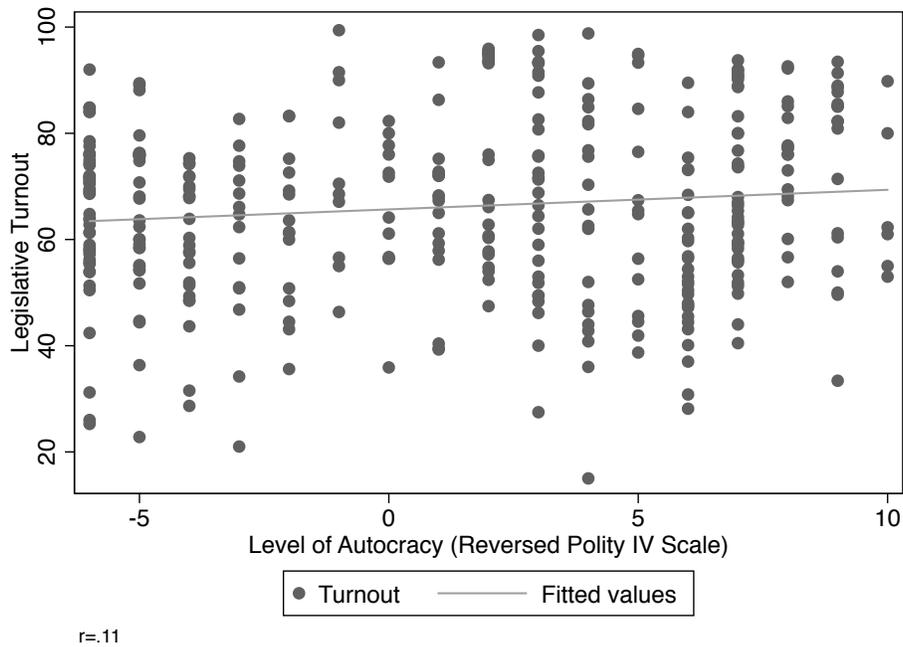
Source: Polity IV, IDEA, and Author's Database

A natural question that arises is how electoral participation affects regime stability. Does high voter turnout stabilize regime rule? Or does it perhaps create vulnerabilities? These are questions that the literature on electoral authoritarianism has not resolved. The next sections synthesize competing theoretical perspectives on the issue.

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fairness(*v2elfrfair*), V-Dem's measure of ballot box fraud (*v2elirreg*) and V-Dem's measure of electoral intimidation (*v2elintim*). For more on these variables see Coppedge et al (2017).

Figure 3: Legislative Turnout and Regime Vote Share
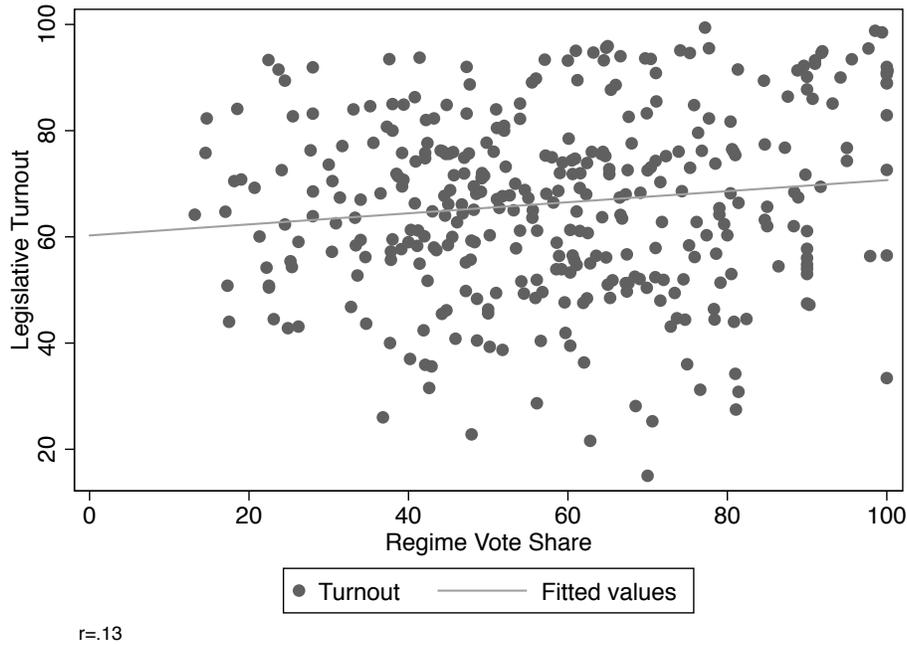
3 Electoral Participation and Regime Stability

While there are few explicit investigations of turnout's effect on regime longevity, it is possible to glean some insights from the existing literature on authoritarian elections. A number of scholars have suggested that elections provide dictators with certain benefits, and the logic behind some of these arguments suggests that high turnout should be beneficial for authoritarian leaders. Perhaps the most conventional argument is that elections provide the regime with legitimacy (e.g. Schedler 2002, Cornelius 1975, Norris 2014). Winning a popular mandate enables regime leaders to confer legitimate authority on their governing acts. In turn, if actors perceive that a government's acts are legitimate they are less likely to rebel against it. A similar argument was offered by students of Communist elections, many of whom argued that single-party elections served to psychologically reinforce the perception of unity between regime and subject (e.g. Karklins 1986, Gillison 1968). Both of these arguments imply that dictators should benefit from high turnout. The higher the

turnout, the more legitimacy an electoral victory confers. And if governments are deemed more legitimate by actors, they are more likely to avoid rebellion.

A second, more recent argument is that elections allow regimes to demonstrate their strength and invincibility. Winning elections by large margins demonstrates the regime's ability to orchestrate large-scale mass support (Wedeen 2003, Magaloni 2006). To the opposition, this demonstrates the futility of opposing the regime, and to regime insiders, it demonstrates that defection would be in vain. High turnout, then, allows the regime to convey an even stronger image of strength (e.g. Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009, 413)

A third line of argument suggests that autocrats use elections to entrap citizens into complicit relations with the regime. Some scholars of clientelism have suggested that elections allow autocrats to make citizens economically dependent on the regime (Blaydes 2011, Magaloni 2006, Lust-Okar 2009) When voters become economically dependent on a stream of benefits that flow from regime candidates they have little incentive to vote for the opposition. Thus, they may find themselves offering electoral support to the regime, even if they have no special affinity for it. If turnout were higher, this would necessarily suggest that more voters are entrapped in these relations.[3]

A final argument is that elections—especially multi-party ones—provide dictators with much-needed information on both the performance of cadres (Blaydes 2011, Reuter and Robertson 2012) and the distribution of support in society (Zaslavsky and Brym 1978, Miller 2015, Little 2017). Dictators need elections to provide information, because other means of gathering information, such as free media, are compromised.[4] Without good information on societal grievances, dictators do not know how to respond to social challenges. In turn,

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[3]However, the cost of clientelism mounts as the number of recipients increases. In even the most clientelist regimes, it is rare that all or even most voters receive clientelist appeals.

[4]These perspectives should be balanced against accounts which remind us of the myriad non-electoral ways that autocrats gather information (Dimitrov 2014, Lorentzen 2017, Bahry and Silver 1990. These include the secret police, citizen complaints, opinion polls, the internet, and limited protest actions. It is also worth noting that some question the quality of information provided by noncompetitive elections (Petrov, Lipman and Hale 2014)

inadequate responses to social grievances can lead to mass unrest. According to this logic, high turnout should be beneficial to autocrats because it provides more information on social preferences. Regimes where electoral participation is high will have better information, be better able to prevent mass unrest, and therefore be more durable.

These functionalist explanations for authoritarian elections suggest a central proposition about the relationship between turnout and regime longevity. Given all the benefits of high turnout, regimes with high turnout should be more robust. Such regimes should be deemed more legitimate, have better information, and find it easier to deter challengers. In addition to this central proposition, the specific arguments sketched above also suggest some conditions under which high turnout will matter more for regime stability. For one, high turnout should matter more in presidential contests. In almost all presidential autocracies, the president is the dictator, and as such, it is crucial to demonstrate the legitimacy and invincibility of his rule. Commenting on preparations for the 2018 Russian presidential elections, a prominent Kremlin-linked pollster recently offered the following sentiment, which illustrates this point well:

> The first risk [in these elections] is low turnout. The presidential elections are the only elections in Russia which have critical significance for the stability of the system. They are the main source of its legitimacy. The legitimacy of the system is determined not by the Constitution, or by laws, but by the popularity of the top leader. Therefore, low turnout is a blow to the system's legitimacy[5]

If legitimacy is an important benefit provided by high turnout, then we should also expect high turnout to matter less where the regime can rely on other sources of legitimacy. Theocracies that hold elections may not need elections to legitimate their rule, which is ordained by God. Similarly, monarchies that hold elections may not require high turnout because their legitimacy rests on traditional authority. As Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009) put it, "...in monarchies there is little linkage between the support for political parties and the

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[5]Interview with Valery Fedorov, General Director of VTsIOM, RBK Online. 23 January 2017. http://www.rbc.ru/interview/politics/23/01/2017/5880ae389a79473751d5a09e

legitimacy of the monarch. Monarchs appear to prefer that interest in elected parliaments does not disappear, but it need not be extraordinarily high"(413). Thus, we might expect the linkage between turnout and regime stability to be attenuated in tutelary regimes. Finally, if turnout is about providing good information, then turnout might matter more in regimes where the information environment is especially poor. Thus, we might expect that turnout will have more of an effect on regime longevity in regimes with especially unfree media.

These arguments seem intuitive, but the data introduced above present a puzzle. If high turnout is so beneficial to autocrats, then why is it so often so low?[6] Indeed, turnout in electoral autocracies is actually *lower* than average turnout in democracies. According to data from IDEA, the average turnout in democratic elections since 1972 has been 73.5% in legislative elections and 71.5% in presidential elections. As noted above, the comparable figures for electoral autocracies are 66% and 69%. This is in addition to the considerable evidence showing that some autocracies actually try to depoliticize voters and depress turnout. The next section explores some alternative viewpoints on why high voter turnout might not lead to more durable authoritarianism.

4   Political Apathy and the Survival of Electoral Authoritarian Regimes

While most of the neo-institutional literature seems in agreement on the benefits of high turnout for regime stability, some of the older literature on authoritarianism is more equivocal. The best example comes from Linz. Linz drew a sharp distinction between so-called totalitarian regimes and what he called authoritarian regimes. One of the key features of the latter was low levels of mass mobilization. Linz believed that this was a result of both exogenous factors—e.g. social structure, the political context, and international factors—and the efforts of autocrats. Political apathy, he argued, served the ends of authoritarian leaders. High levels of mass mobilization could be dangerous because politicized masses can be hard

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[6]Brownlee (2011) notes a similar puzzle in his study of elections in the Middle East

to control. When electorates are politicized, they necessarily take on political preferences. Thus, the regime must constantly ensure that they retain an ideological preference for the regime, lest they turn to the opposition and/or become polarized. Indeed, even if the regime mobilizes the masses for its own purposes, it may find it hard to ensure that politicized voters remain committed to the regime. Stokes (1995, 33) and Stephens (1983) describe such a dynamic in Peru, where the military regime under Velasco actively encouraged the political incorporation of the labor movement and lower classes following its takeover in 1968. With time however, these sectors slipped out from the regime's control and fomented social unrest that precipitated the regime's overthrow.

Relatedly, politicization can also be dangerous because it creates accountability pressures. Politicized electorates are more likely to seek out political information, take note of government malfeasance and punish the regime for it. Linz believed that some autocrats would prefer apathy in order to "...avoid pressures to make good on the promises they made" (1970, 271). This view echoed debates from the time about modernization theory. Modernization theorists believed that socio-economic development would lead to social differentiation, which would lead to new conflicts and new political demands. Many thought this would lead to democracy (Lipset 1960, Lerner 1961), while others thought that it would just lead to political instability (Huntington 1968). Either way, the implication is that mass participation in politics places new demands on autocratic leaders and that these demands could undermine the regime.

Indeed a more recent literature has argued persuasively that large scale political participation undermines autocracy (Lussier 2016). Voting, in particular, has been associated with other types of civic engagement (Werfel 2017, Oser 2017). And while I am aware of no empirical studies on this topic, it seems intuitive that the act of voting might lead to demands for real democracy. One could argue, for example, that the Iranian protests of 2009 were the product of such a dynamic. Presidential elections in that year saw the highest voter turnout since the revolution. Facing the prospect of an opposition victory, the Ahmadinejad govern-

ment orchestrated large-scale electoral fraud. But high turnout signaled the politicization of much of the electorate and many felt that their votes had been stolen. These sentiments led to the largest anti-government protests in Iran since the revolution.

Mobilization comes with other costs as well. Programmatic mobilization requires the cultivation of an ideology which can limit the regime's freedom of maneuver, especially in times of crisis or value change. Clientelist mobilization, meanwhile, is materially costly and frowned upon by portions of the electorate. More heavy-handed methods, such as intimidation, can produce an even stronger backlash. What is more, outright fraud may be required to negate the votes of opposition voters, who are politicized as by-products of the mobilization process. Such fraud can lead to mass unrest, as evidenced by a number of recent protest waves in Africa and the post-communist world. This concern is illustrated well by a recent comment from an anonymous official in the Putin administration. Speaking about the Kremlin's management of the 2014 regional elections, the official said, "Efforts to drive up turnout lead to excesses, to administrative pressures. And this is worse than low turnout. If a politician is elected honestly, but with a low turnout, then this will be a legitimate campaign."[7]'

These perspectives suggest that regimes with high turnout might be more unstable than those where electoral apathy is the norm. Of course, the functional argument that turnout will always be low in electoral autocracies is challenged by the data just as the data challenges the functional argument that turnout will always be high. After all, levels of turnout vary widely across electoral autocracies. But whatever the causes of turnout, the empirical question is whether high turnout stabilizes or undermines electoral authoritarian regimes. The next sections offer a preliminary empirical examination of this question.

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[7]Qtd in "V pogone za legitimnost'yu: pochemu 'Edinuyu Rossiyu' ne bespokoit nizkaya yavka" Lenta.ru. 10 September 2014.

5 Research Design

5.1 Sample and Dependent Variable

The goal of this paper is to examine the association between voter turnout and the breakdown of electoral authoritarian regimes. My empirical approach uses cross-national data on voter turnout and regime breakdown in electoral authoritarian regimes. I include in the sample all electoral authoritarian regimes that have existed from 1972 to 2015. An electoral authoritarian regime is defined as an autocracy that allows opposition candidates to run in elections. To operationalize this concept, I begin by delineating a sample of authoritarian regimes. Following Howard and Roessler (2009), I consider regimes that have either a POLITY IV score of greater than 6 *or* a Freedom House Political Rights score of less than 3 to be minimally democratic. Authoritarian regimes are those countries with both a POLITY score less than 7 and a Freedom House Score greater than 2.5. The use of both Freedom House and POLITY helps ensure that the sample includes non-democracies on which there is some agreement about their regime type.[8]

With a sample of non-democracies established, I then exclude those autocracies that have not had a direct multi-party, legislative election in the past seven years.[9] These criteria are applied on January 1 for each country-year. I also created a separate sample, which includes only autocracies that had held a direct presidential electoral authoritarian regimes in the previous seven years. The presidential sample overlaps with the legislative sample for almost all country years—it is very rare that a regime holds direct multiparty presidential elections, but not legislative elections. The legislative sample is larger, however, because, in

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[8]Results are also robust using several of the V-Dem measures of regime type as sample delimiters

[9]I use the term 'multiparty election' as a shorthand for elections in which non-regime candidates are allowed to run. Most of these elections are truly multi-party elections, in that opposition parties run in the elections, but there are a number of electoral authoritarian regimes where only independent candidates are allowed to run or where the only opposition candidates are independents.

addition to parliamentary autocracies, there are a significant number of regimes where the chief executive is not elected in multi-party elections, but the legislature is (e.g. electoral monarchies). I identified election years using a combination of the NELDA dataset (Hyde and Marinov 2012) and the Database of Political Institutions (Keefer et al 2013).

I also gathered full electoral results for all of the elections in the dataset. To my knowledge, this is the first complete data set on election results in electoral authoritarian regimes.[10] These results allowed me to determine whether non-regime candidates were permitted in the election.

The dependent variable for the analysis is regime failure. Regime failure may lead to democratization or the establishment of a new authoritarian regime. Instances of foreign-imposed regime change are censored, as are regimes that were still in existence as of December 31, 2015. To code regime breakdown, I follow the criteria used by Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2014). I use their codings of regime failure where the two samples of authoritarian regimes converge. Where they diverge, instances of regime failure were coded by the author and two research assistants.

5.2 Independent Variables

The main independent variable in the analysis is voter turnout in the most recent election held under the regime. A large portion of this data comes from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's (IDEA) voter turnout database. However, this dataset is missing turnout data for just under half the elections in my sample. I therefore consulted a number of sources—Dieter Nohlen's Election Data Handbooks, the websites of various central election commissions, and secondary sources—to compile a complete dataset of voter turnout in electoral authoritarian regimes. I was ultimately able to locate voter turnout figures for 375 of the 397 authoritarian legislative elections during this period. Turnout data on presidential elections is slightly more missing: 201 of 245 elections are non-missing in

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[10]This dataset built off an earlier dataset initiated by Jennifer Gandhi

the data. Where possible, I calculate turnout using the share of eligible/registered voters. However, I use the share of voting age population where only that figure is available.

The models also include a number of important analytic controls. One of the primary endogeneity concerns in this analysis is that turnout is simply a function of political support for the regime. Figure 3 gives some lie to this notion. After all, the correlation between regime vote share and turnout is only .11. But, nevertheless, the correlation positive and statistically significant. The goal of the analysis is to partial out the effect of regime support in order to recover the effect of generalized electoral participation on regime longevity. Thus, all models control for the share of the vote received by the regime in the most recent election.

For presidential elections, this quantity is simply the share of the vote received by the incumbent or regime-affiliated candidate during the most recent elections. For legislative elections, identifying the regime's share of the vote is slightly more difficult. Authoritarian regimes are rarely supported by just a single party. Even though many of these autocracies are supported by a hegemonic party, there are usually several other regime-affiliated parties as well. To calculate the regime's vote share in legislative elections I first coded each party in each election according to whether it supported the regime. I then summed the vote shares of all pro-regime parties to create an overall measure of *Regime Vote Share*. I use actual vote shares where available (65% of cases). When vote shares are unavailable, seat shares are used as a proxy.

Another concern is that turnout is simply determined by electoral fraud. To be sure, most authoritarian regimes employ fraud and, as such, official turnout and vote figures are likely upper bounds. At the same time, as multiple studies have pointed out, these regimes do not rely only, or even mostly, on fraud to win elections (e.g. Magaloni 2006, Levitsky and Way 2010, Blaydes 2011). Fraud is costly to organize and may elicit public backlash. By fabricating election results and repressing voters, autocrats deprive themselves of many of the benefits that elections confer (for example, co-opting the opposition, generating information, and garnering legitimacy).

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In fact, as Figure 4 indicates, there may be less of a correlation between fraud and turnout than commonly assumed. This figure shows the relationship between legislative turnout and V-Dem's expert coded measure of electoral fraud (*v2elirreg*). This measure taps the extent to which there were intentional irregularities and/or vote fraud in the election.[11] The correlation is actually (weakly) negative; higher turnout elections are associated with slightly less fraud. On the one hand, this is surprising. On the other hand, a number of studies show that perceptions of electoral integrity depress voter turnout (Simpser 2013, Birch 2010, Nikolayenko 2015). This makes sense; rational voters should not pay the costs of voting if they believe that their votes cannot affect the outcome.[12] Either way, it is important to control for electoral manipulation in the analysis. *Regime Vote Share* should accomplish much of this goal, since regime efforts to manipulate turnout figures will usually benefit pro-regime candidates, but it is useful to have a separate control. Therefore, I include V-Dem's electoral fraud measure in the main models. [13]

Since ballot box fraud is only one of the ways that autocrats manipulate election results I also include a broader measure of electoral competitiveness in the regressions. For the main models, I use Freedom House's political rights scale. This variable is called *Level of Autocracy* and higher values indicate lower levels of political rights/competitiveness.[14]

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[11]The specific question put to experts is: "In this national election, was there evidence of other intentional irregularities by incumbent and/or opposition parties, and/or vote fraud?" Coders are asked to evaluate this question on a 5-point ordinal scale. The interval scale used in both the figure and the models is based on a transformation of the ordinal scale produced by a Bayesian measurement model (see Pemstein et al 2015). In the original scale, higher values indicate less fraud. For ease of interpretation, I reverse the scale here. For more on this measure, see Coppedge et al (2017).

[12]Similarly, there is a well-established correlation between electoral competitiveness and turnout in democracies (e.g. Franklin et al 2004)

[13]The V-Dem data also provides expert coded measures of electoral intimidation and vote-buying. Both of these also exhibit weak correlations with turnout. Model results are substantively and statistically similar when using either of these in place of *Electoral Fraud.*

[14]The correlation between these two variables 08. In the appendix, I show models that use V-Dem's composite measure of electoral fairness (*v2elfrfair*), which is based V-Dem's

Figure 4: Legislative Turnout and Electoral Fraud

r=-.10
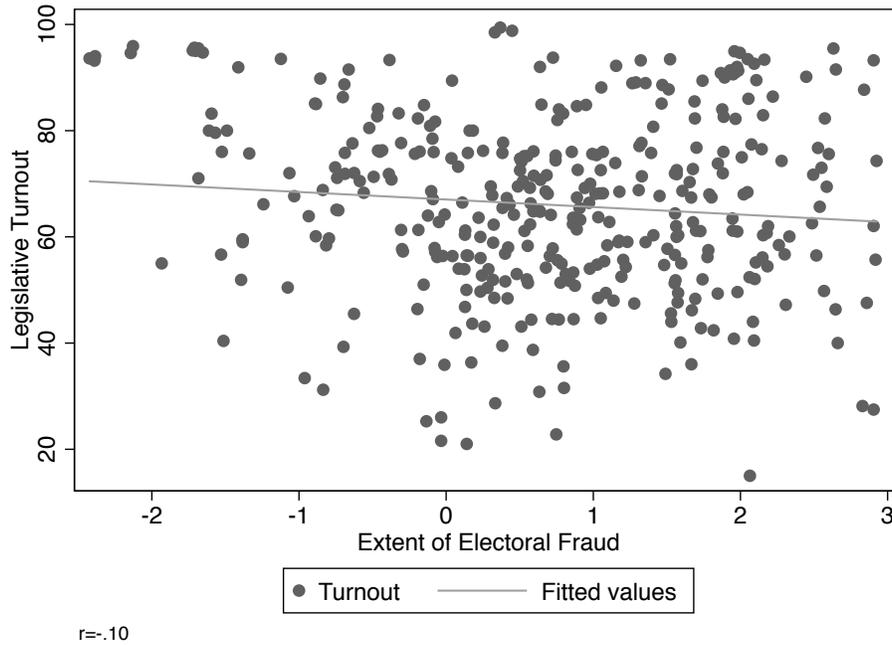
Note: Electoral fraud measure is V-Dem's *v2elirreg* variable. Scale is reversed so that higher values indicate more fraud.
Source:IDEA, Author's Database, and V-Dem (Coppedge et al 2017)

There are other endogeneity concerns as well. Regimes in countries with certain levels of turnout may be more prone to break down for reasons that are correlated with the structural causes of turnout. In the appendix, I model the determinants of voter turnout in electoral autocracies. These models include variables that are commonly found to be correlated with aggregate turnout in democracies (e.g. Blais 2006), as well as some factors that are more specific to autocracies.

Several findings stand out. First, presidential turnout appears much more idiosyncratic than legislative turnout. The reasons for this are not clear. For legislative turnout, several variables are statistically significant. First and unsurprisingly, turnout is lower when one or more major opposition parties boycott the election. Therefore, I include a control for

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measures of electoral fraud, election administration integrity, vote buying, election violence, and electoral intimdiation. The correlation between this variable and turnout is -.06 and results are unchanged. Similar results are also obtained using V-Dem's polyarchy measure.

Opposition Boycott in my main models.[15]

Consistent with the literature from democracies, the models also show that turnout is higher in when legislative elections are held concurrently with presidential ones. I therefore include a control for *Concurrent Elections*. Turnout is also higher in the *First Multiparty Elections* held by a regime and I include a control for this.[16] Finally, in contrast to Miguel, Jamal, and Tessler (2015) I find that turnout is lower when economic performance is good. In the models, I include a control for *Lagged Economic Growth*.

I also control for levels of development—*Log GDP/Capita* and *Urbanization*—and *Compulsory Voting*, although these variables do not appear to be correlated with turnout. Since turnout may also be determined by the organizational capacity of the regime, I also include a control for whether there is a single *Dominant Party*. And since turnout patterns may differ in regimes with non-elected chief executives, I also include a control for *Tutelary Regimes*.[17] Finally, all models include controls for world region and, as a function of the modeling approach (see below), the age of the regime.

No observational research design can establish precise causal effects. This one is no different. Unfortunately, instrumental variable approaches also seem infeasible in this setting, as most of the factors found to be correlated with turnout would clearly violate the exclusion restriction. As a second-best option, the approach taken in this paper is to identify and condition on as many plausible confounders as possible.

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[15]This variable is from Hyde and Marinov 2012. It is updated for years after 2012 by the author.

[16]In the data, these often occur when a single-party regime holds its first multi-party elections. Such elections are only included in the analysis if the regime remains in control of the electoral process and competes in the election. In other words, founding elections in which the regime abdicates prior to the election or agrees to hold competitive elections under the supervision of interim government are excluded

[17]Tutelary regimes include monarchies, theocracies (e.g. Iran), and military regimes that only hold legislative elections

5.3 Modeling Strategy

The unit of analysis in the models is the country-regime-year. Every year of a given regime's lifespan is included in the analysis. All observations for a given regime are assigned a value of zero up until the year in which regime breaks down. Failure years receive a value of one. Thus, the data format is binary time-series, cross sectional (BTSCS) and logit models are used for estimation. To model duration dependency in BTSCS data Carter and Signorino (2010) recommend including a linear time variable as well as its quadratic,and cubic terms. This is the approach used here; the age of the regime is included as a regressor, along with its square and cube. It is worth noting that this modeling strategy is mathematically analogous to survival analysis (Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998).

To account for unit-specific heteroskedasticity and serial autocorrelation, I cluster standard errors on country. Almost half the countries in the sample contain only one electoral authoritarian regime, so the use of fixed effects to account for unit heterogeneity would drastically reduce the sample size. Moreover, using country fixed effects would eliminate the ability to draw inferences about important cross-country differences in breakdown patterns. Unit heterogeneity could also be modeled using random effects, but a key assumption of the random effects approach is that unit effects are uncorrelated with model regressors. This is unlikely to be the case here.[18]

The main independent variable and many of the control variables in the analysis are election-specific. Election years are assigned values from that year's election. Values from a given election are then carried forward for subsequent years until the next election. For example, turnout in the 1985 legislative elections in Mexico was 52%. In the data, 52% is the value for *Turnout* in 1985, 1986, and 1987. In 1988 new legislative elections are held and *Turnout* takes the turnout value for those elections in that year. Results are unchanged when using a lagged value of *Turnout* and other election-specific variables.

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[18]Random effects models are shown in the appendix. Results do not differ significantly

6 Results

Table 1 shows the results from models that examine the effect of legislative turnout and on regime breakdown in regimes that hold legislative elections. The first model is a baseline model that includes on the right hand side only *Turnout*, region fixed effects, and regime age polynomials. Models 2 and 3 add important measures of regime strength and competitiveness, while Model 4 estimates the fully specified models with all the controls discussed above. While the first model shows that *Turnout* has a statistically significant negative effect on regime breakdown, the coefficient drops below conventional levels of statistical significance when crucial analytic controls are included. In Model 4, the p-value on *Turnout* is 0.116. Given that this sample of electoral authoritarian regimes is the population of electoral autocracies for the entire world in the modern era, one could make an argument for accepting this finding as evidence that, in the modern era at least, regime breakdown is less likely in regimes with high levels of electoral participation. At the same time, as with any cross-national regression, there is significant error in the model estimates and the coefficient is well outside conventional bounds of statistical significance.

Figrure 5 shows how the predicted probability of regime breakdown in a given year changes across levels of *Turnout*. The quantities this figure are based on Model 4. When *Turnout* is 43% (the 10th percentile in the data), the probability that an electoral authoritarian regime will breakdown in a given year is 7%. When *Turnout* is at the high at 90% (the 90th percentile) the probability of regime breakdown drops to 4%. Given that the probability of breakdown in any given year is already low, this is a significant effect size. However, given the large standard errors on *Turnout*, we should interpret this finding with extreme caution. We cannot be confident that the effect size is different from zero. In sum, to the extent that there is any evidence that high legislative turnout has an effect on regime survival it likely makes electoral authoritarian regimes more stable. But the evidence for this conclusion is weak, and it is very possible that there is no effect.

Table 1: Results: Legislative Elections

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Turnout	-0.0008**	-0.0005	-0.0006	-0.0006
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)
Regime Vote Share		-0.0013***	-0.0012***	-0.0011***
		(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)
Level of Autocracy			-0.0201***	-0.0217***
			(0.0070)	(0.0075)
Electoral Fraud			-0.0088	-0.0186***
			(0.0063)	(0.0068)
Opposition Boycott				0.0122
				(0.0171)
First Multiparty Elections				-0.0338
				(0.0285)
Compulsory Voting				0.0041
				(0.0234)
Concurrent Elections				-0.0164
				(0.0153)
Tutelary Regimes				-0.0364*
				(0.0217)
Dominant Party				-0.0185
				(0.0174)
Log GDP/Capita				-0.0327***
				(0.0101)
Lagged Economic Growth				-0.0025***
				(0.0008)
Urbanization				0.0000
				(0.0006)
Observations	1,616	1,610	1,596	1,576
Log Likelihood	-327.1	-309.4	-298	-274.6
Number of Regimes	146	146	144	142

Coefficients are average marginal effects.
Standard errors, clustered on country, in parentheses.
Regime age polynomials and region dummies omitted
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 5: Effect of Legislative Turnout on Regime Breakdown
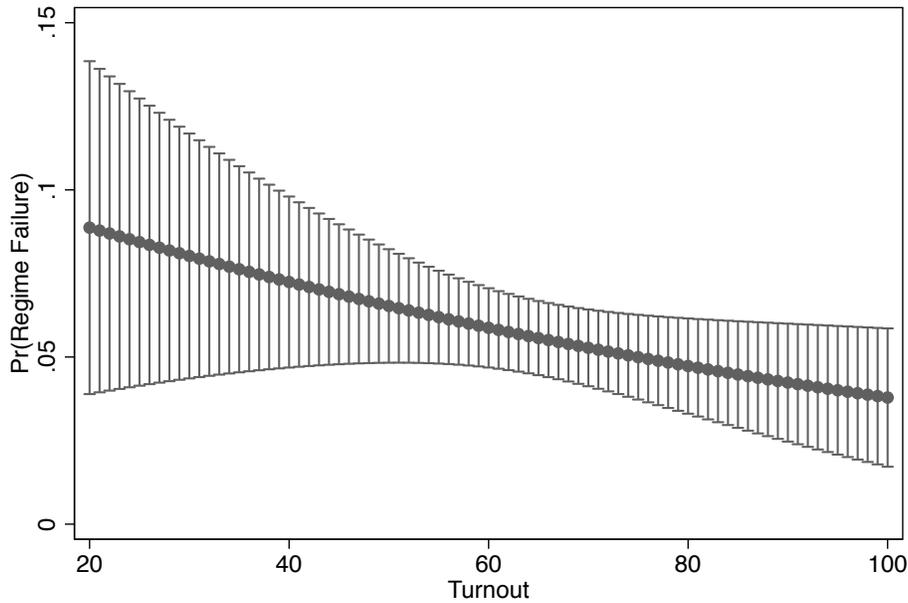
Note: Generated on the basis of Table 1, Model 4

Table 2 shows results from models that examine the effect of *Turnout* in elections for the chief executive on regime survival. *Turnout* in these regressions refers to turnout in presidential elections if the regime is presidential and to parliamentary elections if the regime is parliamentary. As in the legislative models, *Turnout* has a negative and statistically significant effect on the probability of regime breakdown in Model 1, which contains no controls. However, when important controls are included the effect size decreased dramatically and does not approach conventional levels of statistical significance. In the set of legislative models, we might be justified in concluding that there is some *weak* evidence of *Turnout*'s effect on regime survival, but we can make no such claims for the effect of turnout in elections that determine the chief executive.

Results on some of the control variables are worth discussing as well, especially since this is, to my knowledge, the first ever quantitative study of regime breakdown in electoral authoritarian regimes. Unsurprisingly, regimes that use more fraud, are more autocratic, and

Table 2: Results: Chief Executive Elections

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Turnout	-0.0009**	-0.0001	-0.0002	0.0001
	(0.0004)	(0.0005)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)
Regime Vote Share		-0.0026***	-0.0026***	-0.0022***
		(0.0005)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)
Level of Autocracy			-0.0160**	-0.0198**
			(0.0078)	(0.0081)
Electoral Fraud			-0.0172**	-0.0232***
			(0.0076)	(0.0073)
Opposition Boycott				0.0251
				(0.0237)
First Multiparty Elections				-0.0519*
				(0.0296)
Compulsory Voting				0.0366
				(0.0265)
Concurrent Elections				-0.0370*
				(0.0191)
Dominant Party				-0.0017
				(0.0160)
Log GDP/Capita				-0.0245**
				(0.0103)
Lagged Economic Growth				-0.0026***
				(0.0010)
Urbanization				-0.0005
				(0.0006)
Observations	1,395	1,393	1,392	1,381
Log Likelihood	-307	-270.6	-257.9	-235.4
Number of Regimes	132	131	130	127

Coefficients are average marginal effects.

Standard errors, clustered on country, in parentheses.

Regime age polynomials and region dummies omitted

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

garner higher shares of the vote are less likely to breakdown. It is also not surprising that poor economic performance appears to undermine electoral authoritarian regimes. What is perhaps more surprising is that wealthy electoral authoritarian regimes are less likely to breakdown. However, these particular regressions do not include a control for natural resource wealth, so the correlation could be spurious.

The results above do not provide good evidence that electoral participation has an effect on regime survival. But perhaps it has an effect in particular circumstances? Perhaps, following the arguments sketched above, turnout has a larger effect on regime breakdown when the regime has a particular need for high turnout. We can already dispense with one such argument. The results indicate that low turnout in presidential elections does not have a larger effect effect on regime breakdown than does low turnout in legislative elections. If anything, the opposite is true. Contrary to arguments in the literature, it does not seem to be the case that presidents benefit significantly from the supposed displays of legitimacy that high turnout provides.

Table 3 explores two of the other arguments about causal mechanisms discussed in Section 3. In Model 1, *Turnout* is interacted with *Tutelary* to test the proposition that turnout should have a larger effect on breakdown in regimes with a stronger need for legitimacy–i.e. those where the chief executive does not have an alternative source of non-electoral legitimacy. The insignificant coefficient on the interaction term indicates that the effect of turnout does not vary, in a statistically significant way, according to whether the regime has a non-elected chief-executive. It is, however, worth noting that in non-tutelary regimes the effect of turnout on regime breakdown is negative and statistically significant at the .1 level (p=.066). There is some slight, though weak, evidence that high legislative turnout is associated with regime durability in non-tutelary regimes, which are the vast majority of the sample.[19]

Another argument is that electoral participation is beneficial because it improves the

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[19]Presidential regimes are, by definition, not tutelary, so I do not estimate this interaction for presidential elections

Table 3: Exploring Conditional Effects

	(1)	(2)
Turnout	-0.0007*	-0.0002
	(0.0004)	(0.0012)
Tutelary Regimes	-0.1136	-0.0145
	(0.0975)	(0.0200)
TurnoutXTutelary	0.0012	
	(0.0014)	
Media Freedom		0.1345
		(0.1063)
TurnoutXMedia		-0.0001
		(0.0016)
Regime Vote Share	-0.0011***	-0.0010***
	(0.0004)	(0.0003)
Level of Autocracy	-0.0214***	-0.0143*
	(0.0076)	(0.0084)
Electoral Fraud	-0.0186***	-0.0140*
	(0.0069)	(0.0075)
Opposition Boycott	0.0131	0.0219
	(0.0164)	(0.0166)
First Multiparty Elections	-0.0361	-0.0363
	(0.0273)	(0.0290)
Compulsory Voting	0.0024	0.0084
	(0.0240)	(0.0234)
Concurrent Elections	-0.0153	-0.0138
	(0.0153)	(0.0148)
Dominant Party	-0.0183	-0.0096
	(0.0172)	(0.0165)
Log GDP/Capita	-0.0323***	-0.0311***
	(0.0101)	(0.0105)
Lagged Economic Growth	-0.0024***	-0.0022***
	(0.0008)	(0.0008)
Urbanization	-0.0000	0.0001
	(0.0006)	(0.0006)
Observations	1,576	1,576
Log Likelihood	-274.1	-267.3
Number of Regimes	142	142

Coefficients are average marginal effects.
Standard errors, clustered on country, in parentheses.
Regime age polynomials and region dummies omitted
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

information content of elections. Thus, perhaps high turnout helps extend regime survival only in settings where alternative sources of information are not available. As a proxy for an autocrat's ability to gather non-biased information, I use V-Dem's composite index of alternative sources of information (*v2xmealtinf*).[20] Model 2 interacts this variable with *Turnout.* The insignificant interaction term indicates that the effect of turnout does not vary according to the opacity of the information environment [21]

7   Concluding Discussion: Interpreting These Results

The results above suggest that voter turnout does not have a simple, linear effect on the durability of electoral authoritarian regimes. There is some suggestive evidence that high levels of turnout in legislative elections *may* make autocracies more robust, but the association is weak and a conservative interpretation of the evidence leads to the conclusion that there is no effect.

What should we conclude about the existing literature given these results? The neo-institutional literature on authoritarianism is unequivocal in its prediction that higher turnout should make electoral authoritarian regimes more durable. And yet, the data are much more equivocal. It may be that high turnout does not convey legitimacy and invincibility because voters believe that elections are manipulated. Or perhaps the importance of gathering information through elections has been overstated, since dictators actually have many alternative sources of information. But the data show that the Linzian view is not strictly correct either. Modern autocracies are not more stable when political apathy is high.

Another way to interpret the findings is that they are consistent with the dissonance in the literature. Both the neo-institutional perspective and the Linzian view may contain elements of truth. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that autocrats themselves equivocate

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[20]The question behind this measure is "To what extent is the media (a) un-biased in their coverage (or lack of coverage) of the opposition, (b) allowed to be critical of the regime, and (c) representative of a wide array of political perspectives?" Coppedge et al (2017)

[21]I also estimate this interactive model for chief executive elections (not shown) and find no significant interaction effect

about whether they prefer passive acceptance or fervent support. Again, the contemporary Russian case is instructive. Since 2001, the regime's mobilizational strategy has oscillated in a seemingly schizophrenic way from election to election—and often even *within* election campaigns. During the 2007 State Duma election campaign, the Kremlin invested heavily in voter mobilization. United Russia engaged in extensive agitation and filled the airwaves with campaign commercials. The active campaign and an extensive get-out-the-vote operation led to the highest Duma turnout since 1995 (64%)

The 2011 campaign was quieter, but the regime still took measures to encourage turnout, such as developing specific turnout planks that regional governors were supposed to achieve. After the elections, however, the regime adopted an explicit strategy of depoliticizing election campaigns. Regional campaigns between 2012 and 2016 were largely devoid of ideological content and policy debates. In contrast to previous elections, regional governors were *not* instructed to generate high turnout in their regions and there were few high-profile get-out-the-vote campaigns.[22] The 2016 State Duma elections were moved from December to early September, so that the campaign would occur in the late summer, a traditionally apolitical time in Russia when many voters are at the *dacha*. Turnout in the 2016 elections was a record low 48%.

Yet by early 2017 the regime seemed poised for a return to a high turnout strategy. In December 2016, vice head of the Presidential Administration, Sergei Kirienko, called a meeting with regional vice governors to discuss the 2018 presidential elections and reportedly told the gathering "the main candidate' in those elections should win with a high turnout, over

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[22]For more on the regime's efforts to discourage turnout during this period see "Osobennosti Predvyborinyi Agitatsii, Izmeneniya v Sostave Zaregistrirovannykh Kandidatov i Partiinykh Spiskov na Regional'nkh i Federal'nykh Vyborakh 18 Sentyabrya 2016" Analytic Report. Committee for Civic Initiatives. `https://komitetgi.ru/analytics/2956/`, Kynev, Alexander 2016. "Persushennaya yavka. V chyom riski inertsionnogo tsenariya vyborov" Moscow Carnegie Center. `http://carnegie.ru/commentary/64441.`, "Rossiskoi Vlasti ne nuzhna vysokaya yavka na vybori" *Vedomosti* 13 September 2016.

70%, and with 70% of the vote."[23] What became known as the '70/70 strategy' envisioned a multi-pronged get-out-the-vote strategy that, in addition to traditional methods would include schemes such as the extensive use of social media, as well as online dating apps, election-day lotteries, concerts, festivals and sweepstakes. However, soon after the strategy's unveiling a vigorous debate erupted among Kremlin strategists, many of whom questioned the wisdom behind the plan. And, by late summer, it appeared that the 70/70 strategy had been abandoned.[24].

One might conclude from this anecdote that autocratic political operatives intuit the quantitative findings above: they are unsure about whether turnout has a positive or negative effect on regime stability. Another interpretation is that the effect of turnout on regime stability depends on circumstance. The simple linear arguments sketched in Sections 3 and 4 lack the nuance to fully explain how political apathy affects regime durability. It may be beneficial under certain circumstances, but not others.

Future research could profit by exploring such nuances. For instance, the effect of turnout may depend on the regime's ability to channel and control mass mobilization. Regimes without strong party organizations and a well-articulated ideology would likely find it harder to manage a politicized electorate. Conversely, it could depend on the characteristics of the opposition. Where the opposition has strong grassroots organizational capacity or where civil society is well developed, politicization could prove more dangerous to the regime. Lastly, while turnout may not have a universal effect on regime stability, it may effect *how* the regime breaks down. For example, if regimes with low turnout really do have worse information on social grievances, then such discontent could brew beneath the surface and periodically explode into unanticipated mass protest. By contrast, regimes with politicized

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[23]V Kremlye obsudili polucheniye 70% za svoyevo kandidata na vyborakh" RBK Online. `http://www.rbc.ru/politics/26/12/2016/58600eff9a794781b168ae26`

[24]For an excellent discussion of this see, Pertsov, Andrei. 2017. "Yavki ne budet. Pochemu vlasti otkazalis' ot proekta 70/70" Moscow Carnegie Center. `http://carnegie.ru/commentary/72870`

electorates may be more prone to transition at the ballot box.

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Supplementary Appendix

Table A1: Determinants of Legislative Turnout

| | (1) |
	Turnout
Regime Vote Share	0.125**
	(0.053)
Electoral Fraud	-2.113
	(1.513)
Level of Autocracy	2.173*
	(1.273)
Opposition Boycott	-5.562**
	(2.319)
First Multiparty Elections	10.112***
	(2.905)
Compulsory Voting	0.004
	(6.127)
Concurrent Elections	5.168*
	(2.607)
Tutelary Regimes	2.103
	(3.573)
Dominant Party	1.743
	(2.334)
Log GDP/Capita	-0.609
	(1.351)
Lagged Economic Growth	-0.281**
	(0.123)
Urbanization	0.019
	(0.092)
Constant	46.802***
	(10.466)
Observations	356
R-squared	0.262

Cell entries are unstandardized OLS coefficients.
Region dummies omitted
Robust standard errors, clustered on country, in parentheses
*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

This supplementary appendix contains some additional tables referenced in the text. Tables A1 and A2 show the results from OLS regressions that model the determinants of voter turnout in authoritarian elections.

Table A2: Determinants of Presidential Turnout

VARIABLES	(1) Turnout
Regime Vote Share	0.118*
	(0.067)
Electoral Fraud	1.606
	(1.687)
Level of Autocracy	0.569
	(1.353)
Opposition Boycott	-2.161
	(2.268)
First Multiparty Elections	15.836***
	(4.687)
Compulsory Voting	1.123
	(3.946)
Concurrent Elections	2.355
	(3.072)
Dominant Party	-0.724
	(2.451)
Log GDP/Capita	-0.487
	(1.378)
Lagged Economic Growth	0.144
	(0.155)
Urbanization	0.137
	(0.095)
Constant	49.649***
	(11.399)
Observations	203
R-squared	0.275

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$