

Castling the King: Institutional Sequencing and Regime Change

Ph.D. Dissertation by Matthew Charles Wilson

Summary

The question that this dissertation seeks to answer is the following: What conditions determine the timing of political institutions in authoritarian regimes? An increasing focus in the comparative research on modern autocracies is on the institutions by which different forms of authoritarianism govern. In terms of formal political institutions—the rules and expectations by which politics is conducted and society operates—non-democracies have displayed a remarkable diversity and survivability. The thesis attempts to explain the relative benefits of authoritarian institutions—particularly the legislature—in situations with high uncertainty. Recent work has highlighted major differences between modern autocratic institutions, such as parties and legislatures, which seemingly “go together.” In contrast, this study addresses antecedent conditions that predict the turn to neither, to one, or to both. I argue that historical patterns of state building show a common trend in which contestation precluded participation, and that this trend helps to explain the timing and success of institutions in authoritarian regimes.

Noting that a majority of non-democracies have legalized legislatures but are not based on a political party, and that leaders who adapt institutions are more likely to allow a legislature than to encourage parties, I draw on a real-world example in which a dictator confronted issues of power-sharing to better understand the attractiveness of an authoritarian legislature. A prime example of power-sharing problems is nineteenth century Mexico, during which a federal government was being forged out of protracted post-independence conflict between multiple parties with different ideologies. The administration of Porfirio Díaz—roughly, 1876-1911—maintained relative stability in the absence of modern political parties and with a regularly meeting Congress. I demonstrate that regional bosses emerged after Independence and Reform as a consequence of local violence patterns, and that their capacity to contain regional politics earned them a say in the formation of law. The problems facing Porfirio Díaz therefore differed from those facing post-Revolutionary leaders, which explain the timing of legislative and party institutions in Mexico.

Using a cross-national dataset on levels of executive recruitment and political competition for 1800-2013, I examine whether there are ‘modal’ patterns of institutional development. I find that transitions that firstly involved regularizing contestation characterize the bulk of countries in my sample. In turn, this state positively predicts regime type, ethnic diversity in party leadership, and the survival of authoritarian regimes. The results suggest that the emergence of modern authoritarian institutions is conditioned by conflict and unrest, and that particular institutional arrangements provide distinct solutions to different problems related to governance. Though applied to a modern sample, the historical case and the tested logic encourage scholars to further consider whether there exist distinct paths of institutional development. The research supports comparative research by considering the long-term temporal dimension of institutional change, utilizing the richness of experiences in Latin America to explain political transitions, and adding nuance to the study of authoritarian parties and legislatures.