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CHAPTER

Conceptualizing Authoritarianism

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Abstract

Authoritarianism evokes phenomenal realities of different kinds: rules, behaviors, institutional settings, representations, dispositions, and attitudes. Given this lack of fixed meaning, the present chapter addresses conceptual issues by considering designs, tools, and argumentative frameworks centered on authoritarian regimes. This practical lens highlights five modes of conceptualization defined as ways of articulating a type of understanding with an approach and a focus. Cast in ethical terms, the *a priori* mode relates autocracy to the deprivation of collective choice and capacity. *Scale-based* approaches measure the degree to which features deemed definitional of democracy are absent or depleted. A *typological* approach sorts out authoritarian polities by categorizing ways of capturing and managing state power. When we shift to *dimensional* thinking, the focus is on regime attributes mapping a space of variation. A *generic* understanding conceptualizes the genus of authoritarian power as unconditional, temporally unbounded and unaccountable. Delineating these five modes of conceptualization brings into relief contrasts, challenges, and complementarities.

Keywords: [modes of conceptualization](#), [regimes](#), [scales](#), [typologies](#), [dimensions](#)

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Conceptualizing Authoritarianism

The problem with substantives that end in “ism” is that they take on multiple appearances and, in so doing, easily cover their tracks. “Authoritarianism” is no exception. The term has been around for quite some time. It appeared in some book reviews in the 1930s. The sociometric study that Adorno and his coauthors devoted to *The Authoritarian Personality* published in 1950 granted the term its apparent social-scientific credentials (e.g., Adorno et al. 1950: 52, 228, 232, 234, 246, 269, 560). Edward Shils (1954: 38–41) brought it forward in his critique of this study a few years later. In the mid-1960s, Juan Linz (1964: 293–294) invoked it to challenge the dichotomy between democracy and totalitarianism. Subsequently, it made its way to the cover pages of a few books on political regimes (e.g., O'Donnell 1973; Parming 1975; Malloy 1977; Germani 1978; Perlmutter 1981). Its academic visibility—as reflected for instance by article titles—remained roughly constant throughout the two following decades up to the turn of the century, when it started to undergo a dramatic expansion (see the Appendix).

This public recognition notwithstanding, the meaning of the notion remains primarily evocative. The brief genealogy sketched above suggests two broad threads. One denotes a set of dispositions and attitudes revealing a “need for order,” “intolerance,” “aggression,” and “submission” (Altemeyer 1996: 6; Hetherington and Weiler 2009: 34; Stenner and Haidt 2018: 182). The other thread gravitates around the notion of regime. Most often, this second thread is devoid of explicit definitional statements (see the Appendix). Absent definitions, references to the notion proceed through semantic glissandos. Behind the “ism” lurk indistinctly evocations of rules, politics, leaders, conceptions, systems, and proclivities, among others. Implicit references to practices, policies, settings, representations, and psychological profiles play a shadow game in the background. Authoritarianism in effect announces itself on multiple semantic scenes at once. As a result, it lacks a center of gravity that would hold it together.

To bypass this semantic indeterminacy and make the search for a clear concept more tractable, we could decide to substitute the attribute “authoritarian” for the substantive “authoritarianism.” Our troubles would not end there, however. “Authoritarian” has been assigned to a wide range of referents. To cite only a few: bodies, constitution, equilibrium, governance, institutions, leaders, Leviathan, modernization, organs, personality, regimes, rule, elections, and politics. With so many referents swirling around, it is unclear whether we can pin down a generic meaning that would at once encompass and synthesize the shimmering of connotations generated by this multiplicity of usages.

Given the embarrassment of riches, why not latch onto one referent sufficiently well delimited to lend itself to exercises of conceptual elaboration? “Regime” seems a reasonable choice for this purpose. Systematic empirical investigations have been devoted to “authoritarian regimes.” Furthermore, books that have “authoritarianism” mentioned in their title most often broach the issue of regimes. The empirical category “authoritarian regime” has thus received considerable definitional and empirical attention. As soon as we make this move, though, a profusion of methods, frameworks, and perspectives jostle at the door. Equally troublesome, the term “authoritarian” is frequently used to “refer to all non-democratic regimes” (Huntington 1993: 12; Alvarez et al. 1996: 6). Its meaning then is residual.

The present inquiry takes up the challenges posed by this multiplicity of outlooks, referents, and usages through an examination of conceptual practices as revealed by frameworks, tools, and argumentative logics. Five modes of conceptualization become discernable when we adopt this practical lens: *a priori*, scale-based, typological, dimensional, and generic. The *a priori* mode sets forth a principle of intelligibility of autocracy informed by an ethical perspective centered on the lack of collective capacity and autonomous choices. *Scale-based* approaches convey a gradual understanding of the authoritarian character of political regimes by gauging the extent to which democratic fixtures of various kinds (e.g., rights, freedoms, competitive elections, accountability, deliberation, and pluralism among others) are curtailed or absent. A

typological understanding accounts for authoritarian regimes' vast disparity in forms and content by categorizing power holders and their handling of state power. *Dimensional* analyses characterize authoritarian regimes in light of attributes mapping out a space of variation. A *generic* conceptualization relates the "authoritarian" character of a regime to a practice of state power presumed to be unconditional, temporally unbounded and unaccountable.

The structure of this chapter follows this short outline. Each section is devoted to the presentation and the discussion of one mode of conceptualization in the aforementioned order. A mode of conceptualization denotes a way of objectifying meaning. It encompasses a type of understanding coupled with an approach and a focus. We identify a mode of conceptualization by asking: which conceptual decision(s) orient and regulate the task of making sense of an object of inquiry? To gauge the ins and outs of each mode indicated above, the following sections adopt the same presentation template: first, a descriptive account of what the conceptual mode under consideration is up to; second, a review of premises and implications; third, an outline of contributions and challenges.

Why proceed in this fashion? Delineating modes of conceptualization highlights their contrasts with regard to the status of empirics, the use of residual categories, their ontological premises, and the centrality of explicitly stated research problematics. These modes for one thing differ with regard to the extent to which they are geared to the specification of empirical indicators. Further, some lean on residual categories. Others do not. In addition, their ontological assumptions can prove far apart. Last, explicit research questions have varying degrees of salience within their ranks. These contrasts in turn underscore contributions and challenges regarding the requirements of empirical assessments, the validity of ontological assumptions, the consistency between usages and premises, the indeterminacy of residual categories, and the demarcation of regimes.

A Priori

Let us start with the conceptual coordinates of an a priori understanding. To do so, the definition of autocracy set forth in Hans Kelsen's *General Theory of Law and State* is particularly apt. The key word in Kelsen's conceptual framework is "constitution." Defining regimes amounts to characterizing constitutions. From Kelsen's juristic point of view, a constitution stipulates legal norms, and classifying constitutions implies distinguishing the ways in which these constitutions "regulate the creation of a legal order" (Kelsen 1945: 283). The main dichotomy in this respect is between autocracy and democracy. This dichotomy rests on the "idea of political freedom" (Kelsen 1945: 284).

By "political freedom" Kelsen means the capacity to determine oneself through the laws of the polity. "Politically free is he who is subject to a legal order in the creation of which he participates" (Kelsen 1945: 284). Politically unfree is he who cannot partake in the creation of the legal order to which he is subjected. The distinction between autocracy and democracy thus hinges on how the citizens of a polity relate to its rules. "Democracy means that the 'will' which is represented in the legal order of the State is identical with the wills of the subjects. Its opposite is the bondage of autocracy. There the subjects are excluded from the creation of the legal order" (Kelsen 1945: 284).

Kelsen does not cite Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*. He cites Rousseau's theorizing the collective will (*volonté générale*). However, the Kantian subtext and the filiation between Rousseau and Kant are obvious enough so that, as Bobbio (1989: 102, 137) does not fail to point out, it makes sense to interpret the contrast between autocracy and democracy as the contrast between heteronomy and autonomy. "An individual is free if what he 'ought to' do according to the social order coincides with what he 'wills to' do. ... Political freedom is liberty, and liberty is autonomy" (Kelsen 1945: 284–285).

Insofar as this conception is indebted to a regulative idea abstracted from empirical assessments, it can be labeled “a priori.” In the present instance, the idea regulating the conceptual setup states that the nature of a regime reflects how those subjected to its rules relate to these rules. The opposition between autonomy and heteronomy informs the opposition between participation and exclusion. Underlying this approach is an ethical comprehension of politics, provided that we understand “ethical” according to the meaning that Spinoza vests in the concept: we enter the realm of ethics when we reflect on how relations affect individual and collective capacity (Spinoza 1951 [1670]: ch. XVI; Spinoza 1951: chs. II and III).

This ethical approach informs a political assessment of collective stakes. Herein lies its contribution to the conceptual comprehension of autocracy and, more broadly, political regimes. Recall Kelsen’s understanding of autocracy. Unless actors partake in the elaboration of the rules that regulate their behaviors, they cannot be deemed politically free. Thus, freedom is the regulative principle of democracy. Bondage, on the other hand, constitutes autocracy as a regime of interactions. Ultimately, what is at stake in a polity’s ability to have a say in the content of the legal order is its members’ capacity to assert their freedom. The intelligibility of regimes—their political significance—is to be found in this ethical assessment.

Kelsen’s *General Theory of Law and State* is of course not the only possible reference exemplifying the a priori mode. To indicate how wide, from a substantive standpoint, the range of arguments drawing on a priori understandings can be, let us mention Montesquieu’s identification of the ethical principles constitutive of the despotic, the monarchical, and the republican regimes in *The Spirit of Laws* (Part I, Book III). In despotic regimes, fear prevails, since despots do not feel bound by any law. In monarchies, the existence of rules structuring power mediates ambitions and the search for distinctions. The sense of honor has the upper hand. Republican regimes, on the other hand, rest on the exercise of virtue, since ultimately in these regimes law and order lie in citizens’ hands (Montesquieu 1989: 21–30). Closer to us, Hannah Arendt (1973: ch. 13) portrays terror and the systematic warping of truth through ideology as the principles that constitute totalitarian regimes.

The main challenge for an a priori conception concerns the empirics of its claims. How shall we determine the empirical content of the key terms around which Kelsen’s conceptual constellation revolves: constitution, freedom, heteronomy, and autonomy? We do not know how to apprehend heteronomy *en acte*. Nor do we know how to draw the line between autonomy and heteronomy. What shall we make of this distinction when for instance we are considering the case of parliamentary representation? Kelsen (1945: 289) states that a “true relationship of representation” requires that “the representative be legally obliged to execute the will of the represented, and that the fulfillment of this obligation be legally guaranteed.” In effect, the absence of a “legal obligation to execute the will of the represented” implies the possibility of heteronomy for the represented. Does this mean that political representation without imperative mandates fails the test of “political self-determination”? As we delve into the empirics of the claims, they become more indistinct.

Scale Based

Whereas ethical abstractions leave their empirics pending, scale-based approaches anchor themselves right in the thick of empirical appraisals. Here the elaboration of descriptive measures and the scales required for this purpose come first. No scale, no measurement. A “scale” in the present instance designates a numeral system that makes it possible to assess differences in degrees among the items of an empirical class (Duncan 1984: 126; DeVellis 2012: 7). Hence, a scale duly conceived is necessarily graded. “Nominal” and “binary” scales that do not satisfy this requirement are misnomers. That is, categorical distinctions do not constitute a scale properly speaking if the numerals that have been pegged on them do not measure a gradation.

However entrenched in the empirics of their cases scale-based approaches might be, they cannot but rely on the guidance of conceptual pointers if only because scale designers have to decide which phenomenal realities are to be measured in the first place. While regime indices partake in an understanding of authoritarianism as reflecting the absence or the depletion of features deemed constitutive of democracy, it is striking to observe how diverse their conceptual make-ups have been. The following overview, which does not claim exhaustivity, is telling.

At the center of the “Index of political democracy” are measures of “political liberties” and “popular sovereignty as represented by elections” (Bollen 1980: 373, 375). The polyarchy scale derived from Dahl’s (1971: 3) notion of polyarchy gauges access to information and the prospect of making meaningful choices through elections in addition to political rights and free and fair elections (Coppedge and Reinicke 1990: 53–54). Vanhanen’s (2000: 253) Index of Democratization combines measures of electoral participation with measures of electoral competition. Freedom House scores assess the extent of political rights and civil freedoms (Gastil 1991: 26, 32–33). The Democracy Barometer aims to operationalize the quality of democracy by distinguishing three “core principles” (freedom, control, and equality) and their respective components (e.g., transparency, participation, and representation in the case of equality) (Bühlmann et al. 2012: 521–529). The Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy differentiates regimes in light of the modalities, the institutional significance and the inclusiveness of elections (Skaaning, Gerring, and Bartusevicius 2015: 1496–1497). Polity5 indicators direct the focus to the competitive and regulated character of political participation, the selection of the executive, and the constraints on the latter’s power (Marshall and Gurr 2020: 42). V-Dem indices owe their *raison d’être* to five understandings of democracy adopted as reference frames: the electoral, liberal, participative, deliberative, and egalitarian conceptions (Coppedge et al. 2020: ch. 5). The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index includes in its conceptual scope assessments of the functioning of government and political culture in addition to measures of “electoral process and pluralism, political participation, and civil liberties” (Economist Intelligence Unit 2023: 3).¹

Given this range of conceptual make-ups, are we still entitled to speak of *one* mode of conceptualization? Underpinning the principle of construction of a graded scale is an understanding of families of regimes (democracy, autocracy) as “conceptually continuous” (*confer* Bollen and Jackman 1989: 613; Bollen 1990: 13; Vanhanen 2000: 257; Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton 2010: 431; Coppedge et al. 2020: 69). Absent the continuity assumption, scores could not pretend to capture differences in degrees. The postulate of continuity is thus a shared and distinctive feature of scale-based approaches as much as the epistemic priority granted to measurement. These two common denominators set scale-based approaches apart in modal terms. The continuity postulate furthermore explains why scales constructed to assess the democratic character of regimes—as the labels mentioned above indicate—can be used to appraise their autocratic character as well. Scores are amenable to both democratic and autocratic readings. These depend on which end point of the scale is taken as the reference.

One key implication of the continuity assumption is the lack of clear-cut empirical boundaries. Graded measures convey a diffuse representation of “authoritarianism” —in line with the vagueness of the notion—which blurs the boundaries between authoritarian and democratic regimes (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010: 73). In this representation regimes morph into one another as they move up and down the authoritarian scale. The authoritarian content of a regime by way of consequence has no precise contours (Vanhanen 2000: 257). It designates a reality that varies by degrees in several phenomenal realms at once: rights, freedoms, political participation, executive selection, executive power, the modalities and scope of elections, and various conditions of democratic life.

This diffuse representation points to some of the challenges scale-based approaches have been facing. One substantive critique rejects the claim that appraising the authoritarian–democratic distinction is a matter of degrees (Sartori 1991: 248–249; Alvarez et al. 1996: 21). Regimes are either authoritarian or democratic. They can be neither “half-democratic” (Alvarez et al. 1996: 21) nor “half-authoritarian.” The continuity

assumption is mistaken. Further, some scales include intermediate categories that, since they are intermediate, are difficult to interpret (e.g., the category “Intermediate 1” located between the “Parity” and the “Substantial” characterizations of “Constraints on Chief executive” in Marshall et al. 2002: 42). Additional problems of interpretation arise when contrasted institutional arrangements and political configurations receive the same scores (Gleditsch and Ward 1997: 367; Michalik 2015: 35). Differences in score values pose the same problem (Schedler 2006: 11; Way 2016: 2).

On the methodological front, objections pertain to the lack of clarity of operational choices; the possible disconnects between indicators and the phenomenal reality that they are presumed to measure (Bollen 1993: 1210); the reliability of coders’ subjective assessments; and the arbitrary character of aggregation rules, weight coefficients (in the case of composite indexes), and cutoff points (when practitioners dichotomize continuous indexes) (Munck and Verkuilen 2002: 22–26; Sartori 1991: 249; Treier and Jackman 2008: 202; Vanhanen 2000: 257).

Responses to these various challenges have brought to the fore the pros of this mode of conceptualization. Consider the charge that a graded conception of regimes lacks validity. For some research topics, such as war initiations, graded measures appear to have more discriminatory power than categorical variables thanks to the fine-grained information about regimes they can provide (Elkins 2000: 296). These contributions give credence to a “pragmatic” stance regarding usage, which advises how to gauge the heuristic relevance of graded measures in light of how much explanatory grasp they yield given the research problem at hand (Huntington 1993: 11; Collier and Adcock 1999: 539; Haggard and Kaufman 2016: 6–7).

Also instructive is how practitioners have engaged methodological challenges head-on through technical refinements and further conceptual elaborations. The attempt to operationalize the authoritarian–democratic distinction within the framework of a graded scale requires clarifying the theoretical stakes at play in the determination of thresholds for specific regime facets (e.g., the right of suffrage and the right to compete in elections) (Munck 2006: 32–36). Latent variable analyses make it possible to probe reliability issues across coders and scales (Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton 2010: 427; Coppedge et al. 2020: 79–80). Reflecting on how the components of a scale such as elections, rights, and participation functionally relate to one another as necessary, sufficient, or substitutable conditions provides ways to substantiate the empirical meaning of differences in scores (Skaaning, Gerring, and Bartusevicius 2015: 1492–1500), and to analytically justify rules of aggregation (Coppedge et al. 2020: 97–101).²

Typologies

Typological distinctions proceed from an ontological understanding that in two respects is at odds with a gradation premise. First, a typology accounts for variation through categorical distinctions. The phenomenal reality of regimes that a typological approach purports to comprehend cannot therefore be conceived in continuous terms. Differences are in kind, not of degrees. Furthermore, in a typological framework these differences make sense if interpreted in configurational terms. Analysts could hardly set up, let alone theorize, distinct types if they did not assume that categorical distinctions reflected bundles of relations characterized by systemic logics.

Typologies of authoritarian regimes abound.³ Not all of them are analytically motivated or explicit with regard to the rationale presiding over their construction. For instance, Franz Neumann’s (1957: 236–244) distinction between “simple,” “caesaristic,” and “totalitarian” dictatorships is devoid of a research problematic. By contrast, Barbara Geddes (1999: 125–138) conceives the categories “single-party,” “military,” and “personalist” regimes as relevant to investigate authoritarian regimes’ differential capacity to last and, conversely, to be terminated through a coup, popular mobilization, or a peaceful transition. Underlying this line of work is the claim that categorizing the setup of state power, its organization, and its

structure provides a heuristically fruitful point of entry to analyze its dynamics and more broadly its life cycle (birth, duration, ending) (Geddes 1999: 131–134; Frantz and Ezrow 2011: ch. 2).

A further set of research questions tackles the connections between regime types and outcomes of different kinds, such as development (Przeworski et al. 2000), the propensity to go to war (Lai and Slater 2006; Frantz and Ezrow 2011: ch. 3; Weeks 2014) or the likelihood of policy changes (Frantz and Ezrow 2011: ch. 5). For instance, in order to probe authoritarian rulers' propensity for war making, Lai and Slater (2006: 115–116) construct a fourfold typology that refers to the degree of monopoly of state power (oligarchic versus autocratic) and the basis of the state's infrastructural power (party or military base) (Slater 2003: 83).

Whether a clearly stated research agenda motivates the adoption of a typological framework or not, typologies of authoritarian regimes in effect purport to categorize patterned ways of acceding to, and capturing, state power. To this end, they incorporate two interrelated foci. One identifies the “seizure group,” defined as the “small group from which leaders can come and determine who influences leadership choices and policy” (Roeder 1993: 28; Haber 2006: 696; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014: 314–315; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018: 7–13). Categories profiling the most prominent office holders (e.g., “monarchs, military rulers and civilian rulers”) (Gandhi 2008: 19) make this analytical emphasis explicit. The second focus expands the first one by drawing attention to the management and structure of political power (e.g., the existence of formal regulations, multiple loci of decision-making, and an organizational basis for mobilization) (Alvarez et al. 1996: 16–17).

Observations culled through the prism of a typology, however, are unlikely to be sound if the categories on which this typology rests (1) are not empirically traceable, (2) lack clear-cut boundaries, (3) fail to be mutually exclusive, and (4) do not constitute an exhaustive set, that is, a set such that all cases can be classified (Svolik 2012: 28–29). (1) At stake in the traceability requirement is the identification of reliable and observable indicators. (2) These should also help draw the boundaries between types. (3) Mutual exclusion and unambiguity go hand in hand. If, due to overlapping boundaries, cases can be alternatively assigned to one type or another, the typology cannot fulfill its prime classificatory mission. (4) Exhaustivity is the fourth requirement. Uncategorized cases are like lost souls (from a typological perspective).

A second challenge concerns the conceptualization of regimes that appear ambiguous or hybrid because they combine features of both the authoritarian and the democratic types (Diamond 2002: 27; Schedler 2002: 47). The competitive character of elections is a thorny issue in this regard (Schedler 2002: 36; Schedler 2006: 15–16; Schedler 2013: 5–6; Magaloni 2006: 32–34; Brownlee 2007: 12–13). From a procedural standpoint, the fact that contested elections determine who is entitled to exercise executive or legislative functions is enough to characterize a regime as democratic (Alvarez et al. 1996: 5–7; Przeworski et al. 2000: 14–18; Boix 2003: 66; Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010: 69; Svolik 2012: 22). More stringent conceptions, on the other hand, refer to a host of criteria in addition to contested elections such as the rule of law, political rights, civil liberties (Schedler 2002: 37; Ginsburg and Huq 2018: 10–13), the “absence of nonelected ‘tutelary’ authorities (e.g., militaries, monarchies, or religious bodies) that limit elected officials’ power to govern, and the existence of a reasonably level playing field between incumbents and opposition” (Levitsky and Way 2010: 5–6). Accordingly, the failure to fulfill one of these criteria is enough to classify a regime in the authoritarian category (Schedler 2013: 80).

The empirical heterogeneity of a residual category, if any, poses a third challenge to a typological mode of conceptualization. It is not rare for typologies of political regimes to include a residual type. This observation applies in the first place to dichotomies that set authoritarian regimes in contradistinction with one or several definitional features of democracy (Svolik 2012: 17, 90). The meaning of “authoritarian” then becomes relative to, and conditional on, the meaning of “democratic.” As the defining characteristics of democracy become more demanding and the empirical category that they delimit more restrictive, the universe of authoritarian regimes expands. Polychotomous typologies of authoritarian regimes rely on

residual categories as well. Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010: 89) characterize the “civilian” authoritarian type derived from Gandhi (2008) as the category encompassing all the cases that cannot be adjudicated to the “monarchical” and “military” types. Similarly, Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014: 317) present the “personalist” type of authoritarian regimes in residual terms.

A residual category provides a convenient and easy way of dealing with the exhaustivity requirement of a typology since it closes the circle—so to speak—and, as a result, makes the classification unassailable from a logical standpoint (assuming that the other categories are mutually exclusive). The problem, however, is that residual categories have no content of their own. Whichever the meaning they inherit, this meaning is second hand, defined by reference to negative properties (Gandhi 2008: 7; Levitsky and Way 2010: 15; Svobik 2012: 17). They acquire it by derivation. Typologies thus face the following dilemma: either they rely on a residual category to make the typology unassailable as a classification tool, or they rest on types that, as a set, are unlikely to exhaust all the cases under consideration. While spelling out the content of a residual category by distinguishing subtypes infuses the category with positive content, making one of these subtypes the negative of the others simply shifts the challenge one step further down levels of analysis.

Dimensions

Since typologies might find themselves caught between the Charybdis of residual categories and the Scylla of inconsistent classifications, does conceptualizing regimes as sets of dimensions offer a way out of the straits? A dimensional approach differentiates the elements of an empirical class in light of a set of attributes. These owe their analytical relevance to a perspective of investigation motivated by a problematic. Specifying dimensions thus has the potential of fleshing out a category that is residual. A case in point is Svobik’s (2012) two-step account of authoritarian regimes. The first step defines authoritarian regimes in residual terms. In a second step, four dimensions substantiate the empirical content of this residual category: “military involvement in politics, restriction on political parties, legislative restriction, and executive selection” (Svobik 2012: 32–339). Motivating the focus on these attributes is an analytically informed investigation of the “political organization of dictatorships” (Svobik 2012: 32).

The dimensional mode provides the opportunity to devise a space of variation in which different authoritarian regimes can be located and contrasted. Unsurprisingly given this possibility, analysts at times invoke dimensions to describe regime types. For instance, Linz (1964) contrasts authoritarian with democratic and totalitarian regimes in light of four attributes: (1) limited political pluralism, (2) a lack of ideology but a “distinctive mentality,” (3) a lack of intensive or extensive mobilization, and (4) the absence of well-defined limits to the exercise of state power (Linz 1964: 297–323). Schedler (2013) argues that “hegemonic” and “competitive” electoral autocracies differ on the “institutional uncertainty” dimension. Whereas autocrats in hegemonic regimes enjoy “the certainties of institutional equilibria,” their counterparts in electoral autocracies are confronted with the “uncertainties of weak institutionalization” (Schedler 2013: 107). Along different comparative lines, Zimmerman (2014) spells out the distinction between competitive authoritarian, full authoritarian, and totalitarian regimes by considering the “status of core democratic institutions” (“respected, violated, façade-like, and nonexistent”), the political capacity of the opposition if any, the size of electorate, and regime goals (Zimmerman 2014: 5).

Likewise, the components of a scale can be interpreted in dimensional terms when a line of questioning and inquiry undergirds their elaboration. Compare the components of the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index with those of the V-Dem liberal score. The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index is based on disparate measures: good government and political culture coexist with electoral process and pluralism, political participation, and civil liberties (Economist Intelligence Unit 2023: 3). Which analytical and investigative perspective informs this syncretic selection remains unclear. By contrast,

critical to the elaboration of the V-Dem liberal score is a perspective of investigation centered on the “protection of individual and minority rights.” This problematic provides the rationale for measuring three components that, given this analytical baseline, are amenable to a dimensional interpretation: (a) equality before the law, (b) judicial constraints on the executive, and (c) legislative constraints on the executive (Coppedge et al. 2020: 105–107).

These few considerations shed light on the challenges facing a dimensional inquiry. Consider Linz and Stepan’s (1996: ch. 3) categorization of authoritarian, totalitarian, post-totalitarian, and Sultanistic regimes in light of four “characteristics” broadly framed: pluralism, ideology, leadership, and mobilization (Linz and Stepan 1996: 42–45). This account provides no justification for paying attention to these four characteristics rather than, say, infrastructural power or power concentration. Shall we assume that these four dimensions are the most significant for differentiating authoritarian regimes? Which considerations would justify this assumption?

More broadly, the soundness of a dimensional approach is open to question in the absence of an explicitly stated research question—one clear enough so that hypothetical claims about possible sources of variation can be stated: e.g., the factors affecting authoritarian leaders’ likelihood to wage wars (Lai and Slater 2006: 113; Weeks 2014: 10), the institutional effects of collective leadership in authoritarian regimes (Ermakoff and Grdesic 2019: 564) or authoritarian rulers’ ability to “organize certainty” (Gerschewski 2023: 3–25).

A further challenge concerns formal consistency. This challenge is two-pronged. Analysts have to probe, first, whether the dimensions under consideration are measurable and nonoverlapping and, second, whether the empirical operationalization of each dimension leaves no case out. Going back to Svobik’s dimensional framework: each dimension is operationalized through categorical distinctions set up in such a way that they are bound to be mutually exclusive and exhaustive. For instance, three configurations — “parties banned, single party and multiple parties” — operationalize the dimension “restriction on political parties” (Svobik 2012: 32).

A third challenge relates to the prospect of causal diagnoses. Imputing effects to characteristics of regime types becomes a daunting task when these characteristics synthesize multiple dimensions (Gandhi 2008: 8; Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010: 73) or when definitions incorporate explananda (Ermakoff 2017: 129; Møller and Skaaning 2013: 42). This critique explains Przeworski et al.’s (2000: 33–35) decision to explore correlational patterns by drawing on a minimal concept of democracy defined in light of the electoral dimension. It also invites us to clearly distinguish the descriptive from the explanatory usage of the concept of an authoritarian regime.

Generic

At the origin of the generic mode of conceptualization is the attempt to identify the root meaning of the predicate “authoritarian” beyond the disparate assortment of referents to which it has been affixed. Recall the referents listed in the introduction: bodies, constitution, equilibrium, governance, institutions, leaders, Leviathan, modernization, organs, personality, regimes, rule, and politics. Bodies, leaders, and organs designate actors. Constitution and institutions denote settings. Governance points to actions. Equilibrium is an outcome. These four empirical classes—actors, settings, actions, and outcomes—are obviously incommensurable. Actors and actions imply agency. Settings and outcomes are devoid of it. Yet, and this is the intriguing part, they have all been depicted as authoritarian.

This simple observation motivates the search for a common denominator. Let us start with actors whom analysts have qualified as authoritarian: leaders, rulers, officers, governments, organs, and bodies. The only plausible justification for making them belong to the same genus is their exercise of power. Similarly, the

reason why we attach the label “authoritarian” to various settings (e.g., regimes, rules, institutions, and politics) is to indicate that, somehow, these settings enhance, or are conducive to, the exercise of power that authoritarian actors are fond of. The same connections can be made regarding actions and outcomes: it is because they reflect a certain practice of power that we qualify them as authoritarian.

Power can be defined as a relational or a system-level property. As a relational property, the notion commonly designates an actor’s ability to have other people conform with behavioral requests (Dahl 1957: 203). Translated in more operational terms, the “power of actor A” can be assessed in light of “the amount of resistance on the part of [actor] B” which actor A can overcome (Emerson 1962: 32). As a system-level property, “the power of [an] actor resides in his control of valuable events,” that is, events in which the other actors have an interest (Coleman 1990: 133). Whether we conceive of power as a relational or system-level phenomenon, actor A’s power is actualized when the addressees of A’s requests agree to transfer the control over their actions to her (Coleman 1990: 35–36).

If power is the phenomenal reality that, ultimately, we are pointing to when we invoke the predicate “authoritarian,” how shall we characterize an authoritarian exercise of power? To tackle this question, paradoxically, the most informative leads are procedural definitions of democracy. Shedding light on the *modus operandi* of power relationships, they provide directions for analysis. From a procedural perspective, the defining characteristic of democratic regimes is the formal institution of periodic, open-ended, and competitive electoral contests in order to select who is entitled to executive and legislative decisional capacities (Przeworski 1991: 10). Three points in this characterization are of relevance for our understanding of the exercise of power. They pertain to (1) the modality of the transfer of control, (2) its temporality, and (3) its possible consequences (Ermakoff 2018: 50).

(1) The democratic procedure of periodic, open, and competitive electoral contests makes the constituents’ transfer of control to office holders a conditional one. The constituents agree to transfer control over their action to an office holder conditional on their reassessment of their consent at regular intervals of time. (2) An electoral mandate acquired according to democratic procedures is necessarily bounded in time (Przeworski 1991: 10). Office holders cannot expect to hold their office indefinitely, and they cannot act under this presumption. This means that neither office holders nor constituents can presume that the latter indefinitely transfer control over their actions to the former. (3) As they expose themselves to the possibility of an electoral defeat, elected office holders in effect acknowledge the prospect that they might be held accountable for past or present decisions (Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999: 10).

On all three counts, the authoritarian practice of power is the mirror image of democratic power. First, authoritarian office holders proceed as if constituents had unconditionally transferred to them the right to control their actions. The presumption of an unconditional transfer of control is the arch principle of authoritarian power. Second, office holders exercise their decisional capacity as if it could not be temporally bounded. By the same token, their practice of power reveals that they view the constituents’ transfer of control as indefinite as well. Third, office holders act under the presumption that they are accountable to no one. They are their sole masters.

The authoritarian versus democratic dichotomy thus hinges on a practice of decision-making. This practice is deemed democratic when incumbents (1) agree to make it conditional on the constituents’ endorsement certified by electoral contests, (2) apprehend their mandates as temporally bounded, and (3) take into account the possibility that they may have to justify their decisions. In stark contrast, the authoritarian mode of power rests on the incumbents’ belief that they owe their decisional capacity to themselves only, that no temporal limit can be set *a priori* to this capacity, and that it cannot be put on the stand.

Since, as the previous sections underline, the authoritarian qualification of a regime is usually defined negatively by reference to a democratic standard, the first merit of the generic mode of conceptualization is

to vest this qualification with positive, that is, nonresidual, content. Second, the focus on power practices complements the distinction of regime types and dimensions by highlighting the extent to which the organizational and institutional makeup of state power shapes, and reflects, its exercise (e.g., Chehabi and Linz 1998: 7–19). Third, the generic mode duly operationalized may help dispel the ambiguity of hybrid cases. Insofar as the genesis and implementation of policy decisions reveal an exercise of state power that office holders presume to be unconditional, temporally unbounded and unaccountable, the authoritarian classification from a generic standpoint applies. The fourth merit of the generic mode bears upon the dynamic analysis of processes of regime transition. It becomes easier to systematically document and investigate shifts in power practices once the modalities of these practices have been conceptualized.

A generic understanding of authoritarian power has to deal with two main challenges. First, it can hardly deliver its promises unless it can be traced empirically. We are best positioned to probe how an incumbent exercises his or her decisional capacity when we can document this incumbent's motivations and rationales. Often, this type of information is difficult to cull. The fallback consists in focusing on formal—that is, explicitly stated—constraints for the purpose of appraising which ones have a regulative grip on office holders' expectations. Second, documenting the incumbents' agency supposes that we can empirically delineate the category “incumbents.” This task poses different empirical challenges depending on whether state rulers implement a patrimonial conception of their office, rely on party organizations to assert their control, and nominally preside over collective bodies of decision-making.

Conclusion

This chapter has delineated the modes of conceptualization—that is, the ways of articulating a type of understanding with an approach and a focus—on which analysts draw when they investigate, or reflect upon, authoritarian regimes. Five modes of conceptualization have been distinguished: *a priori*, scale-based, typological, dimensional, and generic. Apprehending conceptual frameworks along these lines brings into relief contrasts, challenges, and functional relations. Herein lie the initial payoffs of a modal approach.

Modes of conceptualization of authoritarian regimes appear contrasted in several respects. For one thing, they differ with regard to the status they grant to the empirics of definitional statements. At one end stands the *a priori* mode. Its abstractions shun empirical markers. At the other end, scale-based measures exemplify an extensive use of indicators. A second contrast pertains to ontological premises. The gradualist representation of regimes implied by ordinal and interval scales is at odds with the understanding of political phenomena as patterned realities which the distinction of ideal types entails. A third contrast reflects the extent to which an explicit problematic or research question motivates the conceptualization at play. While the construction of scales and *a priori* characterizations appear often agnostic on this score, typological and dimensional conceptualizations have been more upfront about the research agendas motivating their elaboration. Residual categories point to a fourth contrast. Typologies make great use of them. A generic understanding is also akin to defining contrary categories in residual terms. *A priori* and scale-based approaches, for their part, do not have to deal with residual sets.

Contrasts point to challenges. For the *a priori* and generic modes, the difficulty consists in translating abstract claims into empirical terms. Graded scales have to confront the empirical significance of scores and intermediate categories, the justification of aggregation setups, and the arbitrary character of cutoff values. When we shift the focus to typologies, residual categories stand in the way. On this front, a dimensional approach does help if it fleshes out the empirical content of residual sets by distinguishing their constitutive facets. For a dimensional approach, formal consistency, exhaustivity, and analytical grounding are the most pressing issues.

A taxonomy of modes of conceptualization furthermore helps disclose how they functionally relate to one another. Scales constructed by differentiating various aspects of regimes de facto incorporate a dimensional approach. The same remark holds for typologies when regime types are defined by reference to some variables. Conversely, operationalizing dimensions (e.g., restriction on political parties) through categorical distinctions (e.g., parties banned, single party, and multiple parties) amounts to a typological exercise. Last but not least: a generic understanding of authoritarian power as a practice of decision making geared to be exclusive and unaccountable highlights the selection and conceptualization of regime dimensions.

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Appendix

Three indicators shed light on the academic popularity of the term “authoritarianism” over time: the frequencies of article titles that display the term, the frequencies of articles that mention it irrespective of its functional location (title, abstract, text), and the frequencies of books with the term on the cover page. The overviews provided by these indicators outline three phases (Figures A1): (1) an overall lack of visibility before World War II until the end of the 1940s, (2) a modest presence with an increase in the number of articles drawing on the category in the second half of the 1990s, and (3) a surge in popularity starting in the mid-2000s.

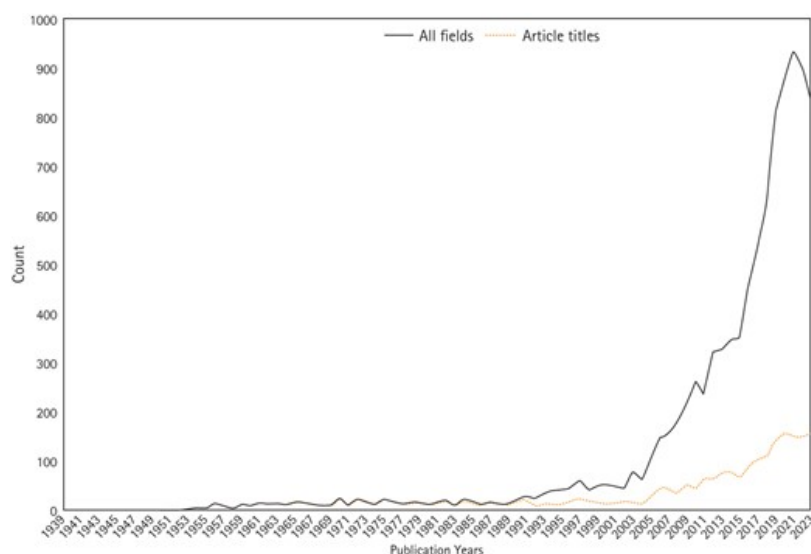


Figure A1 Frequencies of articles referring to authoritarianism

Source: Web of Sciences database

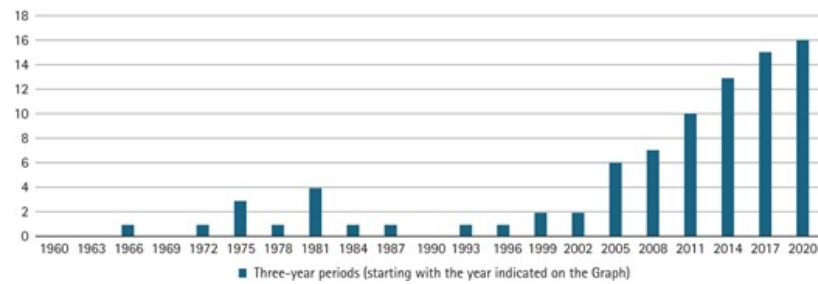


Figure A2 Frequency of book titles referring to authoritarianism

Sources: Web of Sciences, JSTOR

Regarding books with “authoritarianism” on the cover page: ninety-six of them were recorded for the purpose of the present chapter. A probe of the introductory chapter of fifty-two of them indicates that only thirteen explicitly state what they mean by the term. Four define it in attitudinal terms (Altemeyer 1988: xviii; Hetherington and Weiler 2009: 34; Stenner and Haidt 2018: 182; Moghaddam 2019: 17)). The other nine relate it to the politics of regime writ large: e.g., “rule of the few in the name of the many” (Perlmutter 1981: 2); “regime in which no viable channels exist for opposition to contest legally for executive power” (Levitsky and Way 2010: 6–7); “the power to rule is not a subject in the competition between governments and opposition” (Albrecht 2013: xxii); “a political system in which a single center of power was able to make sovereign decisions without legal limitations” (Lewis 2020: 3). A few definitions characterize authoritarianism with an adjective: “electoral” (Schedler 2006: 2–3, 8, 16; 2013: 7), “contentious” (Chen 2011: 6), “competitive” (Bogaards and Elischer 2016: 7), and “responsive” (Heurlin 2016: 3). Introductory chapters without explicit definitional statements drift from one referent to another (for instance: rule, government, leader, regime, movement) (e.g., Germani 1978: 2; Frantz 2018: 23; Corrales 2023: 12) or rely on an implicit understanding of authoritarianism as opposed to democracy (e.g., Michalik 2015: 33; Albertus and Menaldo 2018: 3, 21; Arat and Pamuk 2019: 2–9).

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Notes

- 1 Attempts to infer measures from latent class analyses, whether these are performed on a set of variables (Treier and Jackman 2008: 203; Coppedge, Alvarez, and Maldonado 2008: 644) or a set of scales ("unified democracy scores" in Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton 2010: 429), are also indebted to a conceptual understanding of what is to be measured. A further conceptual issue is whether the underlying reality that these measures seek to tap should be conceived in uni- or multidimensional terms (Bollen and Grandjean 1981: 652–653; Treier and Jackman 2008: 205; Coppedge, Alvarez, and Maldonado 2008: 632, 635; Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton 2010: 431).
- 2 To overcome the critique that the composition of aggregated scores entails arbitrary operational choices, scale designers have also proceeded to specify aggregation rules in light of correlation patterns across indicators, and to assess the extent to which an index is "sensitive" to the choice of aggregation weights and rules (Coppedge et al. 2020: 102, 109, 116, 123).
- 3 Suffice to mention: "simple, caesaristic, and totalitarian" (Neumann 1957: 236, 244); "bureaucratic, populist and traditional" (O'Donnell 1973: 108–110; "single-party, military, and personal(ist)" (Huntington 1993: 110; Geddes 1999: 121); "authoritarian, totalitarian, post-totalitarian and Sultanistic" (Linz and Stepan 1996: 40–54); "mobilizing versus exclusionary," "divided versus monolithic," and "bureaucratic versus autocratic" (Alvarez et al. 1996: 16); "Sultanism, authoritarianism and totalitarianism" (Chehabi and Linz 1998); "ambiguous, competitive, hegemonic electoral, politically closed" (Diamond 2002: 26); "electoral" and "closed" (Schedler 2002: 47; Schedler 2013: 78); "party machines, bossism, junta, and strongman" (Slater 2003: 86; Lai and Slater 2006: 115; Weeks 2014: 17, 39–40); "monarchic, military, no-party, one-party and limited multiparty" (Hadenius and Teorell 2007: 148; Wahman et al. 2013: 27); "electoral-autocratic, authoritarian and constitutional-oligarchic" (Wigell 2008: 236); "monarchs, military rulers, and civilian rulers" (Gandhi 2008: 19; Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010: 83–89); "military, monarchic, single-party, and dominant-party" (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010: 124–125); and "competitive authoritarian, full authoritarian and totalitarian (mobilizational)" (Zimmerman 2014: 6). Roeder (1993: 26 draws a typology of authoritarian state rulers by examining whether they are accountable to any group and the characteristics of the group to whom they are accountable.