Credibility restoration, common enemies, and player elimination: a toolkit for long-term autocrats

A59004718

Abstract

I argue that the Debs [1] framework to explain authoritarian leaders' choices considering their post-tenure fate is incomplete because it simplifies the authoritarian leader decision-making process. Particularly, I argue that Deb's framework should incorporate a key piece of evidence from neuroscience: power makes the leader more prone to use violence. As a result, the main problem for an authoritarian leader consists in detecting potential challengers and attacking them by reducing the cost of violence.

Background

Debs' game theory model [1] suggests that the advantage for violence is granted arbitrarily to a particular player who is competing for the leadership position. This advantage for violence allows a player to offer the spoils of office or to eliminate another player. As a result, if the advantage for violence is not held by the leader, she decides to divide the spoils of office with the associated uncertainty of being rejected by the challenger. An important implication of this framework: military autocrats have short tenures given their violent methods. As a result, these autocrats are more likely to democratize in the expectation of severe punishment. Therefore, for Debs, a rational leader will limit his capacity for violence in expectation of his post-tenure fate.

This rationality of not using violence contradicts the evidence provided through behavioral science: the cognitive effects of being powerful and violent limit the capacity of a leader for being rational; a leader who has been exposed to a position of absolute power and is successful at using violence to preserve her dominion or in general to get rewards, is more likely to continue using violence with more intensity regardless of its associated costs. As a result, Debs'

framework should analyze the survival of the leader when using violence irrationally and when this creates violent challengers. Furthermore, Deb's framework does not explain how the leader recognizes himself as disadvantaged in his capacity for violence relative to other competitors. Even in a scenario where the leader has enough information to acknowledge his military disadvantage, why is she willing to accept the uncertainty of being killed by stepping down? Could it be better to use the surprise factor to eliminate a powerful challenger before it becomes a credible threat? Perhaps these questions are relevant ex-ante a decisive confrontation where both the challenger and leader can understand totally the capacity for violence of each other.

Debs' model weakness

Based on Debs, the post-tenure fate of a dictator depends on the extent to which she represents a threat for a challenger. In this sense, "the greater a leader's capacity for violence, the more likely he is to be eliminated upon his ouster". A leader uses violence depending on its associated costs and if she has the advantage for violence. I agree with Debs regarding the rationality of not engaging in violence when a leader aims to increase her probability of remaining in office or at least not to be killed. However, Deb's proposed framework assumes that the leader is willing to hand over the reins of her kingdom considering only her post-tenure fate. A more realistic approach would incorporate behavioral evidence of how holding the power affects the discerning capacity of an authoritarian. I propose an approach where the leader does not always judge correctly the cost of violence or acts irrationally trying to defend her position. As a result, our authoritarian leader will likely face situations where her winning coalition or a "John Doe" will consider killing her because of her lack of refrain from using violence. Under this scenario, the leader's main problem implies finding mechanisms to reestablish her credibility once she has already irrationally used violence, but also to target the challenger avoiding a confrontation. These mechanisms for reestablishing the leader's credibility are strategies to

reduce the likelihood of a violent post-tenure, but more importantly to conserve her capacity of eliminating players over time.

An irrational usage of violence is considered as the norm and nature of an authoritarian leader. In this sense, if the authoritarian leaders were rational most of the time they would declare democratization, and their fate would not carry a severe punishment. However, these transitions from one autocracy to another are relevant considering that:

> "...yet in the nearly 75 years since World War II, only about 45 percent of leadership changes in autocracies led to regime change, and more than half of regime breakdowns were transitions from one autocracy to another. In other words, fewer than one-quarter of leadership changes resulted in democratization" [2]

This proportion of more than a half of regimes transitioning from one authoritarian to another could suggest that the ousted regime was considered a threat for the challenger; this is supported by the insight provided on image No.1: in most of the regime types, the consequences for the ousted leader were severe and frequent.

Image No. 1.
Autocratic leaders' post-exit fate by regime type
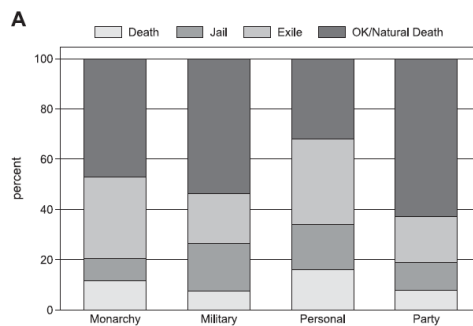
Source: [2]

With exception to the party regime, the consequences for leaders in monarchies, military, and personal regimes were extreme: death, jail, or exile. Therefore, why would an authoritarian leader accept rationally its surrender or share the spoils of the office if her fate is likely to be grim?

In the following chapters, I argue why Debs' framework should include the behavioral effects of being a powerful and violent authoritarian leader. Accepting that the leader will use violence more frequently centers the formal modeling efforts in explaining more accurately how a leader can survive. Afterward, I proceed to explain how Debs' framework can be completed by not only incorporating an irrational violent autocrat in the model, but also how this leader can correct this irrationality by restoring credibility, creating common enemies, and continuing using violence.

Power as a factor of behavior conditioning

The neurological effect of power can be compared to suffering a traumatic brain injury. According to Keltner [3], an individual who experiences a status of absolute power becomes: "more impulsive, less risk-aware, and, crucially, less adept at seeing things from other people's point of view". Complementary, Rodhan [4] shows the combined effects of power and violence when violence brings immediate rewards like eliminating a threat or getting information. This rewarding cycle exposes the brain to a long-term change as a product of the interaction between two key neurotransmitters, serotonin, and dopamine.

The typical activities that are part of an authoritarian leader--for example "acquiring resources, dominance status, or revenge" [4] -- are associated with low levels of serotonin- this neurotransmitter works as an aggression inhibitor facilitating cooperative social interaction. Low levels of serotonin produce an enhancement for aggressiveness, and if the action produces an immediate benefit for the leader, this creates dopamine. The latter will push the individual to use impulsive violence frequently without weighting its associated costs.

These behavioral factors matter for modeling an authoritarian leader's post-tenure expectations and decisions. If the conditional probability of using violence given a highly rewarding experience like being Mao, and this violent impulsiveness grows over time in the leader's behavior, then the present actions of a military leader should focus on correcting the negative

impacts of the irrational use of violence. So, a frequent question for an authoritarian leader is: who is my enemy after killing the wrong person?

Threatened by important people

Using Debs's framework, a leader would be irrational if she decides to use violence when instead she can signal cooperation with an incoming incumbent with greater capacity for violence. As a result, authoritarian leaders could be irrational at using violence because the next challenger would not doubt in killing or using other ways of violence against the leader. What should be the next steps for an irrational leader? I draw my recommendation based on two key events in Mao's life as a chairman who was able to perdure in power purging his inner circles.

- **Scanning for challengers**

  From Debs' perspective, the advantages of an authoritarian leader in the first stage of a game are two: the possibility to divide the spoils of the office or the possibility to eliminate a player if nature has granted him the advantage for violence. However, the imperfect information regarding the dictator's next moves should be considered as part of the advantage attributed to the leader [5]. In other words, supposing that the leader possess privileged information regarding who is a credible challenger (or a challenger with greater capacity for violence), in this case, the only possible move for the leader's survival would consist in eliminating this credible challenger without a confrontation with those who are supporting his claim. Consequently, it is essential for an authoritarian leader to successfully identify potential challengers by creating a scenario that allows them to understand who might be a credible threat.

  An important insight of how to create these scenarios for scanning potential threats can be provided by Kuran [5]. For this author, an authoritarian leader has genuine supporters

and private enemies. In relationship with those detractors, Kuran explains that cues happen when:

> "...some people who were previously falsifying their preferences decide to make their anti-regime preferences public (perhaps because of a new grievance) and the distribution of discontent in the society is such that a bandwagoning effect occurs"

In this sense, the strategy used by Mao during the "hundred flowers campaign"--where oppositors were publicly allowed to express their discontent-- offers an example of a useful scenario for scanning credible threats and effectively eliminating them without confrontation. The main attributes of these "scanning" scenarios are: one, they required to offer a credible space for expressing dissent or engaging in other anti-regime acts, 2) these credible spaces for dissent should offer an important benefit to the potential challengers like the possibility of appealing to the masses, and 3) those spaces offering the opportunity to express unrest should have a limited impact over the masses or its impact should be minimized by using narratives that label these discontent expressions as the masses' threat.

- **Creating a common enemy and credibility restoration**

    Based on Pantzov [6], In March of 1966, Mao encouraged the Chinese youth to assume leadership in a "genuine cultural revolution". This increased the amount of public disorder in important urban centers like Pekin considering the visibility of the student mobilization. Mao's influence legitimized the youth to attack the authorities in what Pantzov calls an "epidemic of *dazibao"*. Mao intentionally orchestrated this situation of internal disorder, seeking the perfect trap for whom he considered his main challengers: Liu and Deng. In the words of Pantzov, the chaotic situation created by the social order was aimed to:

" ...to provide his (Mao's) 'enemies' an opportunity to emerge in the open. He acted according to the old principle 'Let everything repulsive crawl completely out since if they come out only halfway, they can hide again.'"

Both Deng and Liu tried to understand what Mao considered as the right action to restore the social order controlling the masses. However, Mao was noncommittal and provided only an ambiguous course of action. Deng an Liu proceeded properly trying to control the social disorder by terminating the academic year and sending work teams to restore order in the universities. These decisions in favor of restoring the order were used by Chairman Mao as the perfect scenario to label both Deng and Liu as enemies by suppressing the masses. In synthesis, using Debs terminology, Chairman Mao created a scenario of chaos that allowed him to label two potential enemies to engage in actions that can be classified as public enemies of the revolution. Once Liu and Deng were considered as public enemies, Mao reduced the cost of applying violence against them, but also that signaled to all possible challengers that he was dealing with a common enemy. The creation of a common enemy strengthened the popular support for somebody who, a couple of years ago, was responsible for one of the greatest famines in world history.

In synthesis, by creating a common enemy, an authoritarian leader is able to use violence against some challengers who would be untouchable without the label of "enemies of the people/revolution".

Conclusion

The framework proposed by Debs allows us to understand the logic of authoritarian failure. Basically, a leader with a capacity for violence can fight successfully against many threats, but at some point violence has an associated cost not only in terms of war costs, but also for the post-tenure fate of the leader. In this sense, the same skills that allowed a leader to climb the

ladder of a regime are the same forces behind his destruction. However, Debs' framework does not include a realistic attribute that comes from an association among three important elements of his framework: power, violence, and behavior. An authoritarian leader is conditioned behaviorally to use more frequently violence once this method has offered immediate rewards. As a result, the most likely scenario, in reality, is a violent authoritarian leader facing credible threats as a consequence of her conditioned behavior. In this case, I argue that the best moves for this leader consist in identifying who is this credible threat by offering a space for expressing discontent publicly. Once this has happened, the uncertainty of the leader's next moves constitutes an advantage that can be used to eliminate a potential threat without a confrontation with its supporters. Complementary, another mechanism that an authoritarian leader can use once he recognizes a credible threat consists in creating a common enemy for a larger proportion of the winning coalition and the selectorate. This strategy has as main advantage the possibility of reducing the cost of violence at the moment of purging an important enemy.

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