Blame attribution in autocracies

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Blame attribution

1. Concept of **blame attribution**: **public attribution of responsibility** (**and blame** as the consequence) for government performance;

2. Idea of **blame avoidance** – **blame diffusion**, as a feature of the **nontransparent system** (not clear who is responsible – not clear whom to blame), and the basic **blame shift** and **responsibility assignment**;

3. Examples: Trump blames China for the coronavirus pandemic (Remnick, 2020), Putin assigns this task for the governors (Yaffa, 2020).

The relevance of research

1. *Authoritarian persistence* (Levitsky & Way, 2002)
2. *Third wave of autocratization* (Lührmann et al., 2020)
3. *New competitive regimes* (Levitsky & Way, 2020)
4. Most of the authoritarian regimes are the *electoral* ones (Schedler, 2007) and due to their past and/or external pressure they hold some democratic features:

   a) These autocracies hold elections (elections can be falsified at some point);

   b) These autocracies *somehow* care about the public opinion (Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

The relevance of research

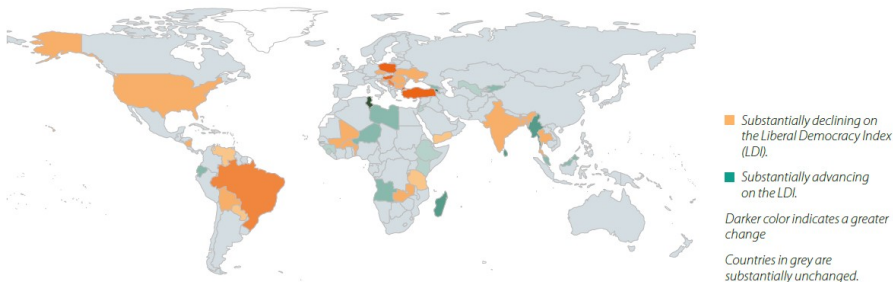FIGURE 2: COUNTRIES SUBSTANTIALLY DEMOCRATIZING OR AUTOCRATIZING, 2009–2019

Substantially declining on the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI).

Substantially advancing on the LDI.

Darker color indicates a greater change

Countries in grey are substantially unchanged.

Figure: 1, source: Lührmann et al., 2020

Problem statement

1. The puzzle is **the authoritarian persistence roots** and how **the logic of blame attribution helps to explain** it;
2. **Rational choice** and **formal game theory modelling**;
3. The **subject** of the paper – **electoral fraud**, driven by the blame avoidance motivations;
4. The question here is **which strategy would be the optimum** for the actors: self-blame avoidance or survival of the regime at large, and **how can this optic explain the persistence of authoritarian politics**, i.e. how stable would be the equilibrium?

Problem Statement

I **aim** to model **how the blame avoidance and the blame minimizing game** within inner regime actors **shapes authoritarian politics**. For these purposes:

1. Determine theoretical framework;
2. **I establish a formal model of** statistics and preference falsification, specifically by the example of **electoral fraud**
3. **I test the model predictions on two actual cases**

Existing research and theoretical framework

1. Blame attribution is about *whom to blame* for poor performance, if it is unclear who is responsible – the blame reduces (Hood et al., 2009; Powell & Whitten, 1993);

2. Dictators care about the blame (Beazer & Reuter, 2019; Williamson & Magaloni, 2020);

3. Autocracies provide elections to gain information (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009; Geddes et al., 2018);

4. Officials are falsifying the results to seem more competent and loyal (Boix & Svolik, 2013; Simpser, 2013).

Model setting an logic

There are *two strategic players*: **the autocrat, the appointed official** (Zakharov, 2016), and **the people** – *a technical player*.
The autocrat provides election to get information about the public preferences and to know if his official is good enough.
The official want to stay in office, so he can falsify the election and cheat.
The people's **blame is the difference between the expected and the observed quality** of government.

The timing of the game

$t = 0$: **The nature** randomly chooses quality of the autocrat and the official;

$t = 1$: **The public** observes the total quality of government and **votes**.
The official observes the total quality and the people's vote and **chooses** whether to **steal the election** or not. After that he reports the final vote;

$t = 2$: **The autocrat's turn**. He observes the reported vote. If the election was lost he can either **give up power** or **call of the election**.
Regardless of the vote, the autocrat **chooses if he replaces the official** or not.

Utilities functions

The autocrat is minimizing the blame towards himself and maximizing overall quality of government under condition of staying in power:

$$U_{auto} = \begin{cases} q_{total}(1 - blame_{auto}) & |stays\ in\ power \\ 0 & |loses\ power \end{cases}$$

The official's goal is to hold his office:

$$U_{off} = \begin{cases} 1 & |stays\ in\ office \\ 0 & |loses\ office \end{cases}$$

And people are maximizing quality of government: $U_{people} = q_{total}$

Results of the baseline model

1. In autocracy the appointed official can only choose *the portraying loyalty* strategy;

2. The official has incentives to falsify the results to satisfy two conditions:
   1. Elections are won;
   2. The results is *good enough* and his estimated quality is satisfactory.

3. The game regardless of initial conditions comes for **the equilibrium where both the autocrat and the official stay in power** (proof at the appendix)

«Strict» assumption: excessively high blame leads to revolt:

$$the\ autocrat\ stays\ in\ power = \begin{cases} vote_{reported} > 0.5 \\ blame_{total} < \theta | \theta = 1 \end{cases}$$

Note, that this restriction does not change the official's strategy (figure 9) and does not change the autocrat's strategy significantly (proof at the appendix).

The game with blame limitation: results

1. The revolt is possible if both the regime actors are incompetent and fraud was redundant;

2. If at least one of the regime actors is competent the autocrat can reduce the blame by the replacement of the official;

3. Possibility of people's revolt leads to an increase of the expected total quality of government.
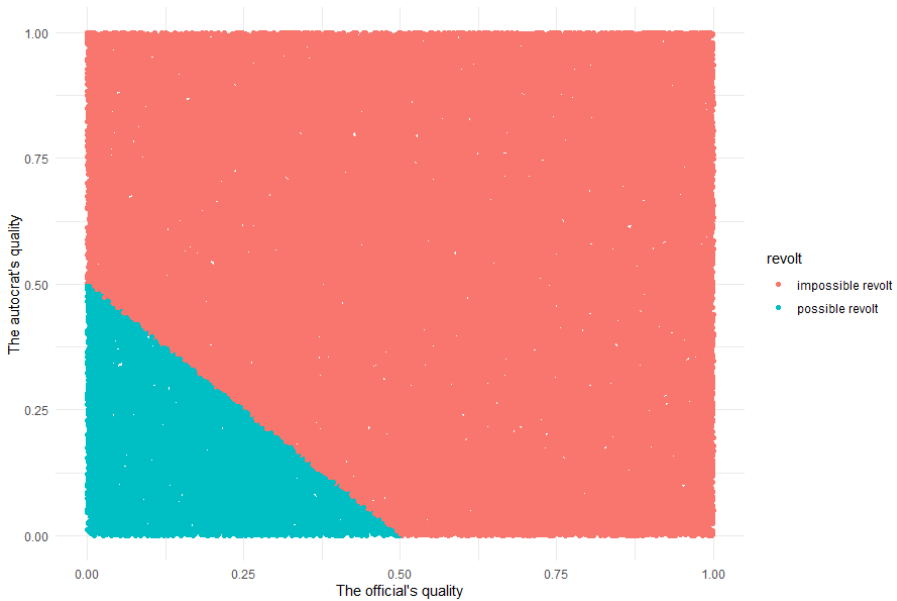
Features of the IRP rule taken from (Magaloni, 2006):

1. The **IRP regime was supported** more i**n the underdeveloped regions**

2. The **main rivalries for the regime were primary party members**, who have not chosen loyalty.

3. **IRP was forced to give up power not after a massive fraud** in 1988 but after an observed election in 2000.

1. **Dependant lower-level officials allow the consolidation of the regime**. Putin's **regime consolidated** (figure 3) at the same time **the direct governors elections were cancelled** (Sharafutdinova, 2010);

2. **The basic blame avoidance strategy** for the autocrat in case of poor quality of government is **to replace the official**. **The central government** in contemporary Russia **hires governors in any case of poor performance and bad public opinion about the government** (Zubarevich, 2017).
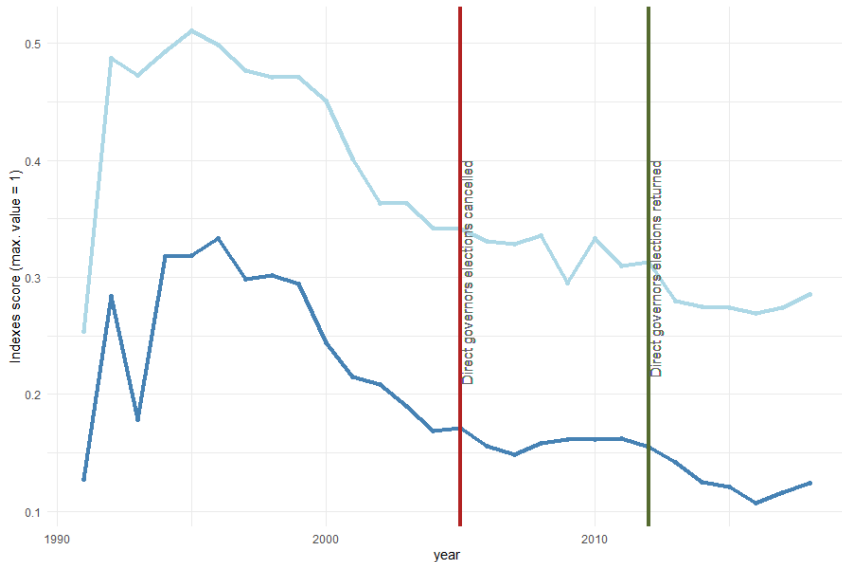
Figure: 3 Liberal democracy (dark blue line) and polyarchy (light blue line) indexes scores for Russia, data from the Varieties of Democracy dataset ("V-Dem [Country–Year/Country–Date] Dataset v10", 2020)

1. Preassigned blame distribution between the autocrat and the official;
2. Media bias which affect the blame distribution;
3. Loyalty-competence dilemma;
4. Government can affect the expected (by the people) quality of government (and thus affect the blame);
5. Further empirical tests are necessary.

Conclusion

1. The baseline model can be applied for various statistics falsifications, the game brings the equilibrium with **all the upcoming information falsified enough** and the regime stays stable;

2. If the **revolt is possible** and both the autocrat and the official are incompetent the **expected quality of government increases**;

3. However, **the revolt is still not likely**. That explains **the stability of the electoral autocracies** under a certain leader, who changes the appointed officials.

The End
Thanks for your attention!

Based on figure 5 the only way for the official to stay in office is two satisfy the two following conditions:

1. $vote_{reported} > 0.5 \Leftrightarrow fraud > 0.5 - vote_{people}$
2. $\hat{q}_o > 0.5 \Leftrightarrow fraud > \dfrac{0.5 - q_o}{2}, vote_{reported} > q_a + 0.25$

Which means:

$$fraud = max(0.5 - \frac{q_a + q_o}{2} + \gamma; \frac{0.5 - q_o}{2} + \gamma)|\gamma > 0$$

The official is able to satisfy these condition for all given qualities (proof in the appendix), back to text.

Appendix 1: proof for the baseline model

Taking $q_a, q_o = \alpha, \omega \in [0, 1]$

Thus $q_t = \dfrac{\alpha + \omega}{2}$, $blame_t = 1 - \dfrac{\alpha + \omega}{2}$, $vote_t = \dfrac{\alpha + \omega}{2}$

Based on figure 5 the official's task:

$$fraud = max(0.5 - \frac{\alpha + \omega}{2} + \gamma; \frac{0.5 - \omega}{2} + \gamma)|\gamma > 0$$

$$vote_{reported} = \frac{\alpha + \omega}{2} + max(0.5 - \frac{\alpha + \omega}{2} + \gamma; \frac{0.5 - \omega}{2} + \gamma)$$

$$vote_{reported} \geq \frac{\alpha + \omega}{2} + 0.5 - \frac{\alpha + \omega}{2} + \gamma = 0.5 + \gamma > 0.5$$

$$vote_{reported} \geq \frac{\alpha + \omega}{2} + \frac{0.5 - \omega}{2} + \gamma = \frac{\alpha + 0.5}{2} + \gamma$$

$$\hat{q}_o = 2vote_{reported} - \alpha = \alpha + 0.5 + 2\gamma - \alpha = 0.5 + 2\gamma > 0.5$$

So both conditions are satisfied $\forall \alpha, \omega \in [0, 1]$; back to text.

The equilibrium outcome's total amount of blame:

$b_t = 1 - q_t + fraud$, $blame_{total} < \theta = 1$

$$max(0.5 - \frac{\alpha + \omega}{2} + \gamma; \frac{0.5 - \omega}{2} + \gamma) = \begin{cases} 0.5 - \dfrac{\alpha + \omega}{2} + \gamma & |\alpha \leq 0.5 \\ \dfrac{0.5 - \omega}{2} + \gamma & |\alpha > 0.5 \end{cases}$$

So for $\alpha \leq 0.5$:

$$\begin{cases} b_t \geq \theta = 1 & |\dfrac{\alpha + \omega}{2} = q_t \leq 0.25 \Leftrightarrow \omega \leq 0.5 \\ b_t < \theta = 1 & |\dfrac{\alpha + \omega}{2} = q_t > 0.25 \end{cases}$$

For $\alpha \geq 0.5$:

$$\begin{cases} b_t \geq 1 & |\omega = 0 \\ b_t < 1 & |\omega > 0 \end{cases}$$

back to text

$t = 0$: **The nature** randomly chooses quality of the autocrat and the official: q_a, q_o uniformly distributed $\in [0, 1]$;, which are independent variables

back

$t = 1$: **The public** observes the total quality of government $q_t = (q_a + q_o)/2$ and **votes**, the people's vote if the function from blame $v_p = 1 - blame_t$. Whereas $blame_t = E(q_t) - q_t$ $|E(q_t) = 1$; the people's vote $vote_p$ is known by the people and observed by the official, but not by the autocrat.

The official observes q_t and $vote_p$ and **chooses** whether to **steal the election** or not: if the election was stolen $vote_r = vote_p + fraud$, $vote_r$ is published and becomes a public information;

$fraud \in [0, 1]$ is basically the share of votes that were stolen;

$t = 2$: **The autocrat's turn**. He observes v_f. If the election was lost $vote_{reported} < 0.5$ the autocrat can either **give up power** which will end the game or **annul election results**, thereby addressing the blame towards the autocrat himself. Regardless of the vote, the autocrat **chooses if he replaces the official** or not. If the official was removed the blame declines, so $\Delta blame_t, \Delta blame_a < 0$.

back

Appendix: the official's turn

The people vote: $Vote_p = q_t$
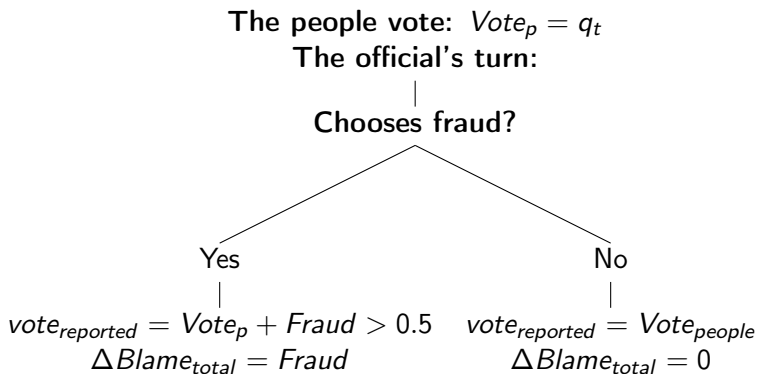
The official's turn:

|

Chooses fraud?

Yes

|

$vote_{reported} = Vote_p + Fraud > 0.5$

$\Delta Blame_{total} = Fraud$

No

|

$vote_{reported} = Vote_{people}$

$\Delta Blame_{total} = 0$

Figure: 4: the official's game tree

The official reports the final vote

$vote_r > 0.5$
The autocrat estimates the official's quality:
$\hat{q}_o = 2vote_r - q_a \Leftrightarrow vote_r > \frac{0.5 - q_o}{2}$

$vote_r \leq 0.5$
The official anyway is replaced:
by the autocrat (to shift blame)
or due to regime change

$\hat{q}_o \geq 0.5 = E(q_o)$
The official stays
Estimated quality better
than expected

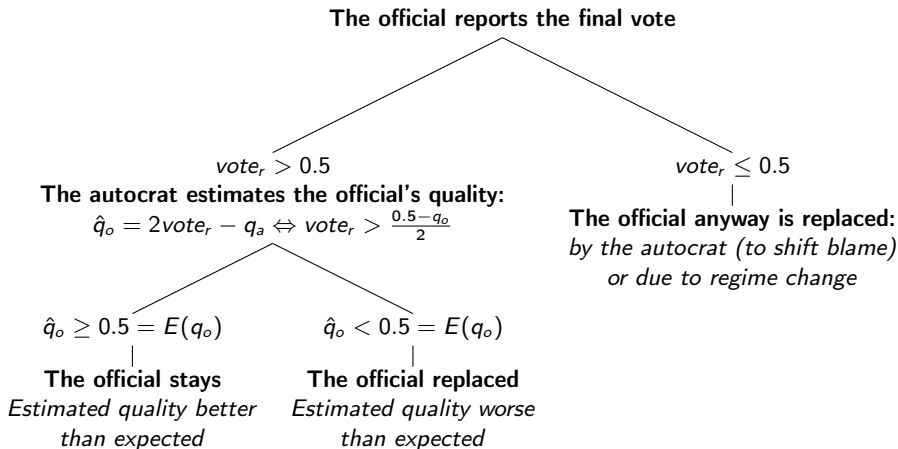$\hat{q}_o < 0.5 = E(q_o)$
The official replaced
Estimated quality worse
than expected

Figure: 5 the official's game tree with outcomes; back to text

The official reports the final vote: $vote_{reported} > 0.5$
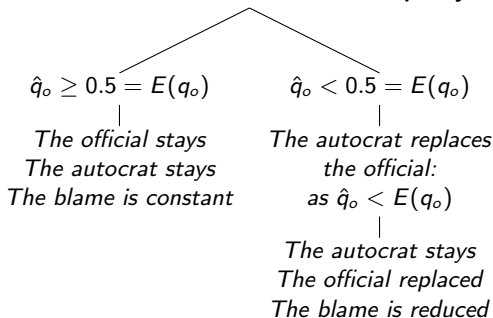**The autocrat estimates the official quality:**

$\hat{q}_o \geq 0.5 = E(q_o)$ $\hat{q}_o < 0.5 = E(q_o)$

The official stays   *The autocrat replaces*
The autocrat stays   *the official:*
The blame is constant   *as $\hat{q}_o < E(q_o)$*

The autocrat stays
The official replaced
The blame is reduced

Figure: 6 the autocrat's game tree if the election was won

The official reports the final vote: $vote_{reported} \leq 0.5$
The autocrat calls off the election?

No

The regime gives up power:
Both the official and
the autocrat replaced

Yes

The autocrat replaces the official?

Yes

The blame is reduced

No

The blame is constant
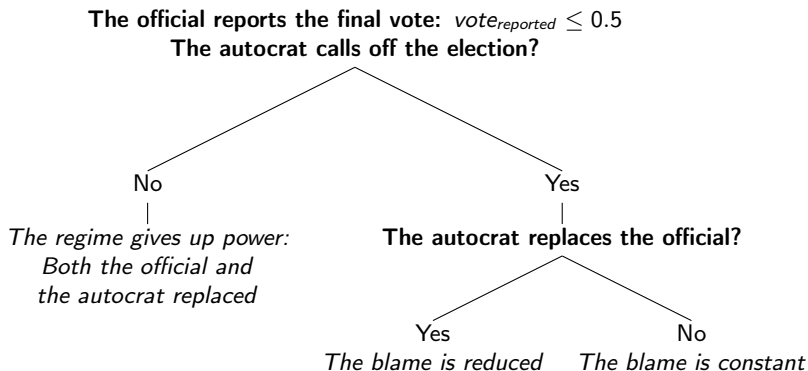
Figure: 7 the autocrat's game tree if the election was lost

Appendix: the autocrat's turn
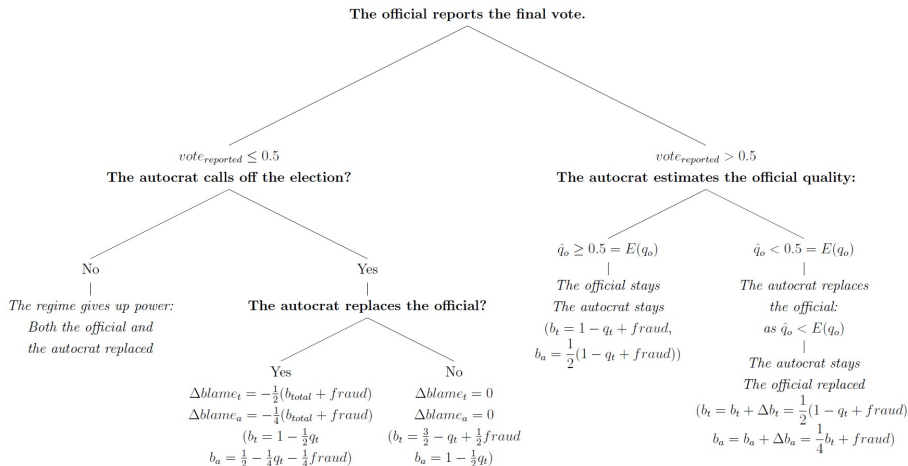
Figure: 8 full the autocrat's game tree

The official reports the final vote

$vote_r > 0.5$
Estimated quality q_o satisfactory?
$\hat{q}_o = 2vote_r - q_a$

$vote_r \leq 0.5$

Replaced

Yes
$\hat{q}_o \geq 0.5 = E(q_o)$
b_{total} **exceeds threshold?**

No
$\hat{q}_o < 0.5 = E(q_o)$

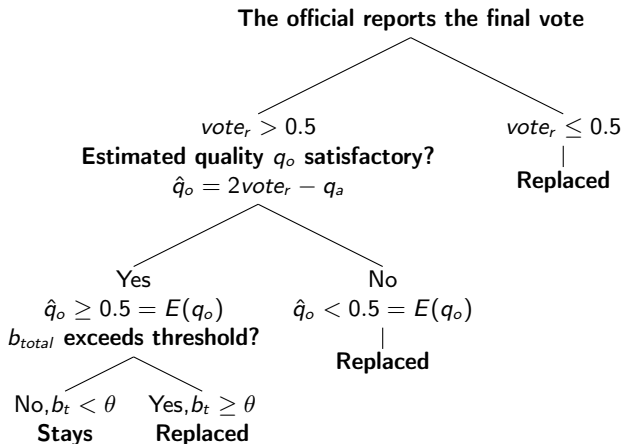**Replaced**

No, $b_t < \theta$
Stays

Yes, $b_t \geq \theta$
Replaced

Figure: 9 the official's game tree with outcomes