Dear CPW Participants,

Thank you for taking the time to read this paper. I’m currently working on developing the theory for my dissertation and conceptualizing all the terms and ideas that I think are important for explaining when leadership and/or regime change are most likely to occur. I’m thinking more about the bottom-up perspective at the moment, but I ultimately want to include mass and elite perspectives in a single model. I’m interested in hearing about places where my explanations are confusing or where there seems to be too much fuzziness or hand-waving. I’m also very interested in hearing suggestions about how to go about measuring “revolutionary threat” or “opposition strength” empirically. I have some ideas, but I think they’re kind of half-baked at the moment.
Leadership Change in Authoritarian Regimes

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Authoritarian leaders face fewer institutional constraints than their democratic counterparts. As a result, they are often able to manipulate rules and resources to ensure their continued political dominance. Leadership change in authoritarian regimes is relatively infrequent. When it does occur, it often happens unexpectedly and through unconstitutional means, such as coups or revolutions. Under what conditions is leadership change most likely? What must challengers do to successfully depose the incumbent leader?

Essentials of leadership

Much of the literature on authoritarian regimes identifies strategies that successful leaders use to stay in power. These include managing the flow of political information (Lohmann 1994), creating single-party institutions and rigged electoral systems (Brownlee 2007, Magaloni 2008), and repressing or coopting the opposition (Wintrobe 1998, DeNardo 1985). A key theoretical
proposition in the literature is that the tools of authoritarian control can be wielded only with the support of key members of society. The primary task for leaders, according to this view, is to construct a coalition of loyal supporters who will invest some of their resources in sustaining the leader in power. Bueno de Mesquita and coauthors (2004) propose a selectorate model in which the amount of support a leader needs varies depending on regime type. Democratic leaders require support from a large proportion of the population, while autocratic leaders require support from a smaller group of actors from within the aristocracy, the military, or the ruling party (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2004). In what follows, I discuss the key features of selectorate theory and argue for a revised model that focuses on resources rather than people.

Selectorate theory is based on the idea that in any regime, some group of people, the selectorate, is given the task of choosing the leader. The selectorate might be the members of the aristocracy in a monarchy, the top military leaders in a military junta, or the whole of the voting population in a democratic regime. Within the selectorate, those people who support the leader are defined as the leader’s support coalition. Within the support coalition, only a select group of individuals are critical to the leader’s success. These individuals form the winning coalition; or “a subset of the selectorate of sufficient size such that the subset’s support endows the leadership with political power over the remainder of the selectorate as well as over the disenfranchised members of the society” (52). These people are so important to the success of the leader that the leader finds it worthwhile to use state resources to essentially buy their loyalty. Since rewarding everyone’s loyalty is prohibitively expensive, a leader must choose to include some supporters in the winning coalition and exclude others. Notably, any grouping of the correct size will suffice as a winning coalition. A key assumption of selectorate theory is that members of the selectorate are essentially interchangeable. The leader values each person’s loyalty equally and can expect to
pay the same amount for the loyalty of each person he selects to be in his winning coalition. In selectorate theory, the leader must maintain the loyalty of a specific proportion of the selectorate; it is the number of people who are loyal to him that matters.

While selectorate theory produces a number of important insights, the assumption that people are the key unit of analysis is problematic. In each of the empirical examples provided by the authors, what appears to be at stake is not so much people as resources. For example, in 12th century England, kings depended on barons to support their claim to the throne. However, it was not the number of barons that mattered, but the knight’s fees those barons controlled. The king needed to control a majority of knights to maintain order and prevent rivals from mounting successful challenges. The barons may have formed the selectorate, but the value of their support derived from the value of the resources they controlled, and some barons controlled many more knights than others. “Just how many barons were needed depended on the specific mix included in the winning coalition” (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2004, 52). Some barons were worth more than others as members of the winning coalition.

Similarly, in a military junta, “the winning coalition often requires support from among fewer than half of the senior officers who collectively control a majority or more of the nation’s soldiers and arms” (52). In this regime type, the number of senior officers in the winning coalition is unimportant. What matters is the extent to which they control the country’s military resources. [Provide details about a specific case here]. It appears that in this example as well, some members of the selectorate are more valuable than others.

So, it appears that as a general rule, the leader need not have the support of a particular number of individuals. Rather, he needs the support of a mix of individuals who collectively control a particular portion of politically relevant resources. Even Bueno de Mesquita and
coauthors acknowledge that “how many supporters are required to form a winning coalition depends on the mix of qualities required for membership in the winning coalition and on the degree to which those qualities relate to lumpy or broadly distributed characteristics within the selectorate” (51). Treating members of the selectorate as identical and interchangeable simplifies the formal model, but obscures an empirical reality that very likely has important implications for leadership outcomes in authoritarian regimes. The concept of a winning coalition is a useful one, but less emphasis should be placed on the size of the group. Instead, it makes sense to think about the particular composition of the group and the variety and quantity of resources that the group members control. Shifting the focus from people to resources requires further consideration of the types of resources that are important to sustaining authoritarian rule.

*Leadership resources and resource politicization*

In any polity, leadership requires active support from members of the winning coalition. However, a more essential condition of leadership is some level of acquiescence from those people who are not part of the winning coalition. Essentially, the leader needs to persuade some people to use their resources to provide political support to the regime and to persuade most of the remainder of the people not to use their resources for political ends at all. Authoritarian rule depends in a fundamental way on depoliticized resources.

Citizens of all types control some resources, including their time, their labor, and their material wealth. They can utilize these resources in pursuit of economic gains or other nonpolitical goals, or they can politicize their resources by participating in a rally or protest, supporting a political party, or otherwise actively supporting or opposing the regime. In Russia in the 1990s, for example, Michael Khodorkovsky was an extremely wealthy businessman
concerned primarily with economic objectives. His resources were largely non-politicized until 2003, when he took control of an anti-Kremlin newspaper and began making large donations to opposition political parties. President Putin found it necessary to arrest and imprison Khodorkovsky to prevent his substantial resources from being utilized in support of the opposition [needs citation]. Similarly, at the mass level, unions exist for the purpose of collective bargaining with employers, but they can also use their organizational resources to achieve political goals, such as attaining increased political freedoms [need concrete example here]. Leaders have incentives to limit the total stock of political resources, at both the elite and mass levels, so that they can survive without breaking the bank to maintain political control.

Leaders must find direct or indirect means to compel the majority of individuals who might like to participate in politics to eschew active political opposition. People who are indifferent to politics or who worry about their day-to-day survival and have no resources to spare are unlikely to engage in politics in any meaningful way. On the other hand, those who have the desire and the means to oppose the regime must be actively managed. Some can be bought off with the promise of a good job or special access to private goods. Others can be bullied into submission through coercive action. Still others will overtly oppose the regime despite any incentives (or disincentives) provided up by the regime. The larger this group of politically active dissenters, the less control the leader has and the more precarious his position is. In selectorate theory, the disenfranchised masses are essentially irrelevant. In a resource-based theory, the masses must be actively managed to prevent them from investing their resources in opposition success.

The leader’s primary task, then, is to expend resources to manage potential opposition through payoffs and repression. Sometimes the material resources of the state can be brought to
bear on the problem directly. At other times, members of the winning coalition provide the leader with indirect control over additional resources, such as those of the police and the military, the mass media, and the party and government bureaucracies. The crucial importance of the winning coalition derives from its ability to provide the leader with indirect control over the resources that are necessary to maintain general order and keep challengers at bay.

The winning coalition must be able to assist the leader in limiting political opponents. What matters for leaders, then, is not merely the proportion of resources controlled by the winning coalition, but the proportion of all politicized resources under their control. In other words, leaders need supporters only to the extent that they face overt opposition from other elites and the population in general. Imagine a country in which everyone is either so poor or so happy that they never challenge the leader. In this situation, the leader would need no supporters to maintain power. If one challenger arose and the population was still uninterested in politics, then the candidate with the better resources would win. It is only when individuals choose to politicize their resources in favor of one candidate or the other that support from a winning coalition becomes necessary. If a handful of people support the challenger, the incumbent needs a group of people with superior resources to keep the challenger’s people from deposing him.

I propose that the foremost task of authoritarian leaders is limiting the total stock of politicized resources by neutralizing active resources and preventing the activation of latent resources. The second task for leaders is dealing with failure at the first task; leaders must attract supporters who will agree to use their own coercive and economic resources to counterbalance opposition resources. Understanding the dynamics of accomplishing each of these tasks requires thinking about the strategic interactions the leader enters into with both regular citizens (people
with limited resources) and elites (people with lots of resources), in light of the total stock of resources that have been politicized or might become politicized in the future.

Regular citizens and bottom-up change

Any minimally sophisticated leader will recognize that he is engaged in a strategic relationship with the people he rules over. The severity of the revolutionary threat is typically modeled as an exogenously determined factor. [Review different ways of conceptualizing revolutionary threat here, with citations]. Importantly, most theories of bottom-up regime change suggest that all the interesting moving parts start moving only when the revolutionary threat becomes severe. For example, Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) argue that democratization occurs when masses achieve enough de facto power to threaten to overthrow the existing regime. The regime then agrees to institutional changes as way of committing to long-term policy concessions and thereby appeasing the opposition. The theory has interesting things to say about when the regime is likely to succumb to mass demands, but the “de facto power” that sets the process in motion is unexplained. For Acemoglu and Robnison, de facto power results from external circumstances such as a military conflict or a budgetary shortfall. But not all security and economic crises result in serious bottom-up threats to the regime. So we require a better understanding of the conditions under which such political sparks are most likely to fuel major political conflagrations.

Two variables are typically thought be related to the level of revolutionary threat: the severity of opposition grievances and the availability of opposition resources. Acemoglu and Robinson focus on grievances without really addressing the ways in which resources might matter in determining the de facto strength of the population. Inglehart and Welzel (2008), by
contrast, focus on the stock of resources available in the population. They argue that as people become wealthier, they worry less about physical survival and place a higher priority on self-expression values such as autonomy and political and civil rights. In addition, people in wealthy societies develop a stock of “action resources,” such as education and skills, which enable them to gain increasing control over their own lives. According to this perspective, “modernization tends to bring both cognitive mobilization and growing emphasis on self-expression values. This in turn motivates ever more people to demand democratic institutions and enables them to be effective in doing so as elites watch the costs of repression mount” (2008, p. 134). The notion of “action resources” might shed some light on the level of latent political resources in society. For instance, while a majority of people were depoliticized in the Soviet Union, they commanded far more resources than the depoliticized people of, say, medieval Europe. In both cases, the number of people with little hope of joining the winning coalition was quite large. However, the level of resources available for future politicization was much higher in the Soviet Union.

Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2010) use public goods as an interesting theoretical proxy for revolutionary threat. If public goods provision is very high, people will not feel sufficiently aggrieved to mount a revolution. If public goods provision is very low, they will lack the resources they need to coordinate against the incumbent. This approach gets at both grievance and resource considerations, but it fails to account for the full variety of grievances that might spur revolutionary action and the full arsenal of resources that individuals can employ against the regime. A more comprehensive approach to conceptualizing and operationalizing these aspects of revolutionary threat is still needed.

Furthermore, while grievances and resources are certainly important in determining the level of revolutionary threat, we also need to understand the conditions under which aggrieved,
resource-possessing people are most likely to actually invest in political campaigns. Measuring revolutionary threat requires thinking about the political resources that are in play, the stock of latent political resources that might exist, and what it would take to reallocate or activate resources in service of the opposition. Specifically, when will regime supporters withdraw their support, and when will people with previously depoliticized resources attempt to activate their resources to coordinate around a challenger?

Elite resources and top-down change

[Discuss coups and other forms of elite participation in overthrowing incumbent leaders. Not sure where this fits in the structure of the paper.]

Coordination and leadership change

The literature on leadership and regime change suggests that coups and revolutions are entirely different affairs. But coups and revolutions have fundamental similarities. The difference is that a coup is a political challenge using concentrated resources controlled by the few and a revolution is a political challenge using diffuse resources controlled by the many. Ultimately, leadership change is about forming coalitions that collectively control lots of resources. It therefore seems possible to develop a comprehensive theory of leadership change that treats coups and revolutions as variations on a single theme. Both coups and revolutions require a challenger and his supporters to successfully overpower the resources of the incumbent.

In the selectorate model, incumbency advantage comes from the fact that while both leaders and challengers can promise rewards to supporters, only an incumbent can make his promises credible. Those who support an incumbent have been rewarded for their support in the
past and can therefore expect that the leader will continue to reward their loyalty in the future. A challenger, on the other hand, might make promises to many more supporters than he actually needs in an attempt to ensure a successful challenge. The challenger will reward only as many supporters as he needs to keep his hold on power. So supporting the incumbent is a more reliable source of income for anyone who is part of the winning coalition. And, because the people in the winning coalition control some plurality of politicized resources that is sufficient to keep the leader in power, the theory predicts that leadership change basically never happens. However, when we allow for the possibility of latent political resources become politicized, it becomes possible challengers to organize strong support coalitions of many potential sizes and varieties. For the leader, preventing the politicization and coordination of unfriendly resources must be a top priority.

From the perspective of the opposition, overthrowing the leader requires finding a challenger who can articulate new political identities that facilitate coordination and collective action. Challengers can make promises to supporters credible by drawing circles around feasible opposition groups. A feasible opposition group must have sufficient resources to overcome the incumbent and a sense of interests or identity in common to provide a reason to cooperate. When people have a clear sense about what types of individuals will receive resources and how many individuals will receive resources if they succeed in overthrowing the incumbent leader, coordination becomes more likely. Credible promises help people to make good guesses about what types of rewards the challenger will provide to them as individuals and whether the communicated incentive structure will inspire a sufficient number of people to participate in the challenge to make success likely.
Opposition identity

One strand of the literature on regime change takes a structural approach and suggests that large-scale historical transformations push societies toward political liberalization by realigning groups in society. Opposition actors may work to accelerate the forces of history and authoritarian leaders may work to forestall change, but the gradual and faceless evolution of social structures ultimately determines when long stretches of regime stability will be punctuated by moments of sharp institutional change (e.g., Marx and Engels 1848, Arendt 1963, Moore 1966, Skocpol 1979). In this view, revolution has “little, if anything, to do with the willful aims and purposes of men” (Arendt 1963, 44) and depends more on evolving class and social structures. This work gives no agency to dissidents, but it does suggest that certain social structures are particularly conducive to liberalizing change. In this view, group identities evolve over time in tandem with the forces of history; political entrepreneurs cannot articulate new identities or force change before its “time” has come.

Structural theories can provide valuable insights into the structures and institutions that are conducive to forms of social coordination. Ethnicity, language, and religion also make coordination easier under some circumstances. Furthermore, new political identities can be constructed by talented political entrepreneurs. A key argument I will make going forward is that political identities of all types facilitate coordination most effectively when the rules for membership are clear.

In the selectorate model, leaders choose members of the winning coalition based on “affinity orderings.” Challengers must also communicate information about their affinity orderings to reassure supporters that they will not be cast aside after the challenger comes to power. If a challenger’s affinity orderings are based on some unknown “friend” algorithm,
people will have no way of knowing whether they qualify as true friends. If the challenger simply tells certain people they are friends, there isn’t much to make the statements credible. However, if he publicly reveals his system for determining affinity orderings, people can figure out for themselves who will actually be included in the winning coalition and how big that group will be. If the system is transparent and the attributes of “friends” are clearly defined and easy to identify, then appeals to friends will be much more credible.

Directions for future research

Going forward, I intend to survey the literature and provide a review of the types of resources that are considered to be most politically relevant and the extent to which resources are fungible—what does it cost to reinvest non-politicized resources in political projects?

I intend to think more about how to conceptualize “politicized resources.” What counts as political support vs. mere compliance? Are some resources easier to politicize than others?

I hope to use various types of data to model the baseline level of (latent and active) political resources in various countries. I also want to look at some case studies to determine what the winning coalition looks like and what types of politicized resources undergird various types of winning coalitions.

Then, I intend to develop a theory about the conditions under which various groups in society (could be masses, elites, or a mix) are most likely to identify common grievances and overcome coordination and collective action problems to pose successful challenges.